

overSEAS 2024

This thesis was submitted by its author to the School of English and American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. It was found to be among the best theses submitted in 2024, therefore it was decorated with the School's Outstanding Thesis Award. As such it is published in the form it was submitted in **overSEAS 2024** (<http://seas.elte.hu/overseas/2024.html>)

DIPLOMAMUNKA

Lestár Loretta

Anglisztika MA

Angol kultúra
specializáció

2024

DIPLOMAMUNKA

Áldás vagy átok: A fegyenc korszak megjelenítése Kate Grenville 'The Secret River' című művében.

Blessing or Curse: Representation of the Convict Era in Kate Grenville's 'The Secret River'

Témavezető:

Gall Cecilia
nyelvtanár

Készítette:

Lestár Loretta
Anglisztika MA
Angol kultúra
specializáció

A HKR 76. § (2) pontja értelmében:

„... A szakdolgozat a hallgató önálló munkája, melyben be kell tartani a jelen Szabályzat 74/A–74/C. §-okban foglalt rendelkezéseket. A szakdolgozat feltöltésekor a hallgatónak nyilatkozatot kell tennie, amelyben kijelenti, hogy ez az önálló szellemi alkotása megfelel a jelen Szabályzat 74/A–74/C. §-okban, valamint a (3) bekezdésben foglalt rendelkezéseknek...”

SZERZŐSÉGI NYILATKOZAT

Alulírott **Lestár Loretta** (név) **XNB3ZP** (Neptun-kód) ezennel kijelentem és aláírással megerősítem, hogy az ELTE BTK **anglisztika** mesterszakján **angol kultúra és társadalom** szakirányon/specializáción írt jelen szakdolgozatom saját szellemi termékem, amelyet korábban más szakon még nem nyújtottam be szakdolgozatként, és amelybe mások munkáját (könyv, tanulmány, kézirat, internetes forrás, személyes közlés stb.) idézőjel és pontos hivatkozások nélkül nem építettem be.

Budapest, 2024.04.11.

Lestár Loretta s.k.
a szakdolgozat szerzőjének neve

Abstract

This paper focuses on depicting the life of the convicts in Australia after being taken from England with the question of analysis being whether transportation to New South Wales was a blessing or a curse for the criminals. The thesis is based on historical data and theoretical concepts to determine the nature of these offenders and the crimes they committed. In addition, it also examines *The Secret River* (2005) written by Kate Grenville with the aim of analysing the reports of a fictitious convict who is transported to Australia. In order to facilitate comprehension, the thesis constantly compares the factual events with the plot of the book to have a clearer perception of the arguments presented. Life in the new settlement was not without hardships due to the staggeringly insufficient amount of knowledge concerning the new land; nevertheless, the paper concludes by arguing for the extraordinarily fortunate circumstances convicts lived in since most of them were liberated only a few years after arriving on the continent.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Biography of Kate Grenville and <i>The Secret River</i>	2
3. Historical Background	4
3.1. Industrial Revolution	4
3.2. Social Changes and Distribution of Power	5
3.3. Structural Changes and the Emergence of Slums	7
4. Theoretical Background	9
4.1. Robert Hughes' Criminal Class	9
4.1.1. Implications in Kate Grenville's <i>The Secret River</i>	12
4.1.2. Evolution of the Prison System	13
4.2. Edward Soja's Spatial (In)justice	16
4.2.1. Implications in Kate Grenville's London	17
5. Transportation and Arriving in Australia	18
5.1. The Voyage	19
5.2. The New Land	22
6. Becoming the Forger of One's Destiny	25
6.1. Ticket-of-leave and Pardons	26
6.2. "Myth of the Good Pioneer" ¹	28
7. Thornhill's Point and First Conflicts with the Aboriginals	30
7.1. Taking up the Land	32
7.2. Terra nullius	33
8. "From Victim to Perpetrator" ²	35
9. Conclusion	39
Works Cited	41

¹ Herrero 90.

² Herrero 87.

1. Introduction

Australia has always been defined by its diversity both in terms of its history and population. Its first inhabitants arrived on the continent thousands of years ago, yet it was only publicly discovered when the Europeans arrived in the seventeenth century. In 1770 James Cook, the commander of the British naval forces, set foot on the Australian continent and claimed the land for the British Crown as *terra nullius*, an uninhabited land, even though Australia had long been occupied by its Aboriginal population. This date marks the beginning of an undoubtedly intriguing period of Australia's past since the arrival of the British brought substantial alterations both in the life of indigenous communities and the landscape. From then on the British, on the one hand, started colonizing the territory, and on the other hand, established penal colonies as well and transported the unwanted British convicts to the continent from 1788. Even though it was considered to be a quite serious punishment for criminal offenders, after a few years of hard work, most of the convicts earned their freedom and were able to live a life that would have been unimaginable if they stayed in their mother country. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the convict experience in Australia by analysing the life of the protagonist in Kate Grenville's bestseller titled *The Secret River* and focuses on solving the following research question: whether living in the Australian colonial settlements was a blessing or a curse for the convicts transported from England.

The thesis consists of eight chapters, out of which the first two elaborate on the historical and theoretical background providing an in-depth analysis of the most crucial events and concepts that are vital for examining the given period. The rest of the paper focuses on drawing parallels between the factual information and the events depicted in *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville in order to objectively determine the circumstances prevailing in Australia at that time and how the convicts tackled the obstacles they found there. It is anticipated that by the

end of this thesis, an impartial and indisputable conclusion can be drawn on the realities of life in the Australian settlement.

The main source of this thesis is a bestseller novel written by Kate Grenville in 2005 titled *The Secret River* which depicts the life of William Thornhill, a young Englishman who is transported to Australia after being caught for stealing. The novel provides a useful account of what it was like living at first in the slums of London and then in the new Australian settlement called New South Wales. Even though it is regarded as a fictitious work, Grenville's book is based on the life of Solomon Wiseman, an ancestor of Grenville who was also transported to Australia, which makes the work a semi-fiction. The second most important source included in this thesis is *The Fatal Shore* written by Robert Hughes in which he provides a comprehensive analysis of the period during which English convicts were transported to Australia. These works proved to be the most useful mostly due to their ability to provide an explicitly detailed description of the topic. Other sources include mainly journal articles or shorter books written either about the historical period or the literary piece which provided useful arguments concerning the viewpoint of this paper.

2. Biography of Kate Grenville and *The Secret River*

Kate Grenville is one of the most prominent authors in Australian literature whose name is associated with many successful works. Being born in 1950 in Sydney, Grenville spent her youth in Australia and studied at the University of Sydney. After graduation, she spent several years working in London and Paris after which she studied in the United States where she gained a master's degree in creative writing at the University of Colorado. She returned to Australia in 1983 and started focusing on her literary career. She published her first work titled *Bearded Ladies* which established her reputation as a writer. Her contemporaries received this work positively and she continued writing other works out of which the most famous ones are *Lilian's Story* (1985), *The Secret River* (2006), and *The Lieutenant* (2008).

Her most well-read book, which is investigated in this thesis, is titled *The Secret River* and was published in 2006 with the aim of depicting the colonial past of Australia. The beginning of the story is set at the turn of the nineteenth century in London. The main character is William Thornhill, a poor Englishman who is living in the worst neighbourhoods of the capital and tries to survive by committing thieveries. One day, however, he is caught stealing timber from his employer and is sentenced to death which is later transmuted to transportation to New South Wales. The rest of the book describes his life in the Australian settlement. Even though transportation was originally intended to be a punishment, Thornhill recognizes the great potential provided by the new territory and after receiving his pardon, he constantly works on creating the best possible conditions for himself and his family. Therefore, on the one hand, the work portrays the hardships encountered by the protagonist in the new and unfamiliar land but on the other hand, it depicts how Thornhill manages to turn the landscape to his own advantage.

In her memoir titled *Searching for the Secret River* Grenville gives an insight into the research behind creating her bestseller book and also her intentions while writing the novel. Despite being a fictitious work, the initial aim of Kate Grenville was to write a non-fictitious work based on her research conducted on one of her ancestors, her great-great-great-grandfather Solomon Wiseman (Grenville, *Searching* 145). Wiseman was born in England in the latter part of the eighteenth century and was working as a lighter man on the Thames until he was caught stealing wood from his employers (Parsons). As a result, he was sentenced to death which was then transformed to transportation for life to New South Wales in 1805. Only seven years after arriving in Australia, Wiseman was given a pardon in 1812, became a successful merchant and died as a wealthy and influential Australian in 1838 (Grenville, *Searching* 77). Although Grenville changed her mind about the fictionality of her book, the resemblance between

Wiseman and Thornhill is quite marked; therefore, it provides an intriguing dichotomy in Kate Grenville's literary work.

3. Historical Background

Firstly, since Kate Grenville's novel depicts the hardships of a lower-class young man trying to survive in the overcrowded slums of London, it is inevitable and vital to examine the historical period in which the protagonist lives, namely the turn of the 19th century. During this time, England was going through substantial social and economic changes, all of which can be traced back to the appearance of machinery, in other words, the Industrial Revolution; therefore, the following sections of this thesis will examine the role of industrialization in shaping English social relations.

3.1. Industrial Revolution

Stemming in mid-eighteenth century Britain, the term 'Industrial Revolution' refers to a drastic transformation of the economy, the spread of "machine manufacturing" and the recession of agriculture ("Industrial Revolution"). England, which was originally overly dependent on its rural and agrarian capabilities, soon was struck by the advancement of industrialization that resulted in a change in the country's economic climate. This transition was not only responsible for the declining importance of crop and livestock production but also resulted in drastic alterations in the working atmosphere. Considering the fact that the economy was largely dominated by the growing demand for products made up of newly emerging raw materials such as cotton and coal, serving the needs of the consumers became of crucial importance and so manufacturing started to rely heavily on mass production ("Factory"). As a result, England became a nation filled with factories which were using the latest developments in machinery; however, these factories needed to be filled with a workforce for which a restructuring of English labour was fundamental (Nardinelli 739). In his article, Weitzman discusses in great length how the appearance of industrialization was responsible both for

reallocating the workforce and for changing the society and structure of London at its core. According to him, the British capital became a popular destination not only among people of “rural England”, but also amongst foreigners coming from Ireland or France among other foreign countries (Weitzman 473). People decided to put faith in living in London because all major social institutions – the royal court, the Parliament, major ports and financial centres – were found there; moreover, with the newly emerging job opportunities people hoped for their professional progress by moving to the capital (“British Society by the Mid-18th Century”). Evidently, due to the arrival of the essential manpower, the change in the social composition of London could not be avoided, and as a quite distant result, the “real costs of industrial expansion was the making of the slums” (Dyos 27). This idea will be discussed in the latter part of this thesis, but, at first, it is essential to depict the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution, namely the further widening gap between different social classes.

3.2. Social Changes and Distribution of Power

Regardless of providing the much-needed workforce, this huge influx of people contributed to the alteration of London in its roots: the social transformation of the capital was inevitable. According to census information, the population of London was quite steadily growing until the middle of the eighteenth century, when with the appearance of machinery, the population of the capital nearly doubled in fifty years and reached 1,096,784 inhabitants in 1801 (“The Proceedings of the Old Bailey”). Perkin in his article elaborates on the social consequences brought on by the Industrial Revolution and claims that despite providing a physical improvement in the working industry, the technological development also started a “social revolution” since it drastically altered the composition of London’s inhabitants (123). On the whole, the pyramid-like structure of English society prevailed with the aristocracy at the top and the working class at the bottom; however, the gap between the richest and the poorest grew severely. In his article, Hay acknowledges this viewpoint since, by examining the social

distribution of the English population, he claims that the wealthiest inhabitants only contributed to 3 per cent of the total population; nevertheless, they were considered to be “legally entitled” to practice justice and legislation (46). This group included the aristocracy and members of the political atmosphere and so they were the ones who could exercise true power over the majority of the population. The rest of the society was simply regarded as the working class and they could be further divided into “the labouring poor” or “the mob” depending on their behaviour (Hay 46). They were the majority of the nation; nonetheless, they were unable to break out from their unfortunate situation because they could not exercise any political power. Here arises the paradoxical nature of the late eighteenth-century British society: regardless of the higher social circles being the numerical ‘minority’, they managed to exercise power and were able to oppress the real, social minority by simply being the only party capable of practising legislation. Nevertheless, at this point of the thesis, it is worth discussing where the power of the higher social circles came from.

In most cases, power is associated with money, yet in late eighteenth-century Britain, the source of wealth was not a question of irrelevance. Even though at this point the economy had shifted from agrarian qualities to industrialization, land ownership remained a vital part of establishing power. According to Perkin, social hierarchy and power were “wholly determined by” the quality and the quantity of the property someone owned (129). Needless to say, members of the aristocracy were the greatest landowners who gained their income from their properties; therefore, they were the privileged individuals exercising power. However, they were not the only group who possessed wealth. Members of the middle class such as “great merchants, bishops and judges” were also capable of making immense fortunes; nonetheless, there was a sharp distinction between them and the peerage (Perkin 128). The source of their indifference lies in the following fact: eighteenth-century mentality dictated that prosperity coming from traditional sources, such as landownerships, was more respectable than actually

earning it from modern forms of work, and, as a result, they were considered unequal. Moreover, there was another dispute concerning the wealth of the middle class, especially of the tradespeople and merchants, because, with the growing importance of overseas trade and the spread of slave labour, the nature of their affairs often became questionable (Weitzman 473). Hence, higher classes started to be suspicious of their businesses making it almost impossible for the middle classes to gain legislative power. Naturally, the working class owned little or no property, besides, they worked for extremely low wages so they were at the bottom of the social ladder having absolutely no power in shaping their own lives and the future of their children. In conclusion, the ever-existing social hierarchy remained a commanding driving force behind English society; nonetheless, inequality has grown to an unprecedented extent making it inaccessible for the middle class to rise to true power and for the lower class to break out from their misery.

3.3. Structural Changes and the Emergence of Slums

The growth of the population was not only responsible for altering the social roles but also resulted in structural malformation within London. Referring back to the previous section of the thesis, property determined one's place in society, and as a consequence, the less property someone owned, the worse circumstances they lived in. Weitzman also aims to describe how the structure of London drastically changed with the arrival of its new inhabitants: new working-class districts were established in the capital resulting in the appearance of "segregated neighborhoods" that would separate different social classes even more distinctly (473). These districts are nowadays commonly referred to as slums.

In his study, H. J. Dyos aims to research the living conditions in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slums of London by examining the reasons for their establishment and the written records on slum experience. Right at the beginning he claims that investigating the "character of the poor" is not an uncomplicated task: their condition is not a common subject

of examination, besides, data on the impoverished inhabitants of London are more thoroughly hidden than that of those who lived in rural or even in other urban settings (Dyos 7). He also aims to provide a working definition of the term; nevertheless, after examining several studies on this topic, he concludes that a universal definition cannot be provided since slums and poverty are “relative things”, therefore, they cannot be interpreted similarly everywhere (Dyos 9). However, a general description should be given in order to be able to imagine living conditions in London at the turn of the nineteenth century. Cambridge Dictionary defines slums as highly overcrowded areas that are usually found in urban settings and are characterized by their poor conditions and dirtiness (“Slum”). This situation describes the circumstances of the impoverished districts of eighteenth-century London as well. St. Giles, Drury Lane and the East End became the most underprivileged parts of the capital where families were crammed together in extremely tiny living accommodations (Dyos 14). Nonetheless, it was not only their living conditions that determined whether they were living in slums or not, but also their immediate environment. Dirty and overcrowded factories, “gas-works, [...] or an open sewer” were common indicators of impoverished neighbourhoods, the places in which people of higher social classes would not have even wanted to be seen (Dyos 25). Inhabitants of slums occupied such a low grade on the social ladder that no jurisdiction or charity was willing to enter into these places; hence, structural unevenness also represents the severely altered social hierarchy (Dyos 17). Therefore, his article also reinforces the abovementioned ideas by claiming that there is a crucial cause-and-effect relationship between the structural and the social composition of a given city. Thus, at this point, it is important to include some theoretical terms that explain the mentality of eighteenth-century London and were responsible for social inequality.

4. Theoretical Background

4.1. Robert Hughes' Criminal Class

Until this point, it has been discussed that the lower class people were living in such ill-fated conditions that were unprecedented before. However, it should also be elaborated on that these individuals were so underprivileged that such existential questions as starvation had also arisen. Therefore, thievery was not an uncommon phenomenon among the poorest to be able to provide food for themselves and their children. Thus, the following chapter will focus on determining whether they can be stereotyped as criminals just because they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy or if their actions can be justified for their survival.

In his best-seller book titled *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes aims to provide an extensive study and research on the British convict system and the history of transportation to the newly-discovered continent, Australia. He divides his book into several chapters in which he mostly depicts the hardships of the new settlers in the unknown and harsh circumstances of Australia, but he also provides an insight into the conditions of England at the turn of the nineteenth century. In a chapter titled 'Who Were the Convicts?' he discusses in great length the circumstances in the poverty-stricken English cities and how their inhabitants tried to exist in such conditions. As it was examined in previous paragraphs, the poorest souls of London were living in such grievous conditions in the slums that most people of the working class were forced to live outside of the law to ensure survival. When discussing the nature of criminal activities, Hughes claims that there was no precise tendency to describe English offences; however, by stating that "poverty begets theft" he implies that many convicts committed thievery (163). By enlisting the types of larcenies performed, one can claim that most crimes were aimed at gaining food or money to ease hunger; nonetheless, as "a reminder of how ill-clothed the English poor were", Hughes claims that 6 per cent of the offenders stole clothing materials because they could not afford to buy themselves proper attires (163). Only a negligible

percentage of offences involved political felonies or crimes committed against another person. As a result, one might argue that because of their appalling circumstances, the crimes the most impoverished people of England have committed can still be justified; regardless, people of other social circles were neither forgiving nor hesitant to categorize criminals into a separate social class, namely the criminal class.

The criminal class is defined as a “group of offenders allegedly drawn to crime because of moral degeneracy” and the members of this class were the urban poor (Beier 499). According to Hughes, this idea emerged in the late eighteenth century when criminal activities reached unprecedented levels and the authorities needed to find a reason for this quite unusual phenomenon; thus, they claimed that there was a distinct group responsible for producing crime (165). However, it was not uncomplicated to decide who the members of the group were, since people of higher social circles had hardly ever been in impoverished neighbourhoods, so they knew very little about the living conditions and the agony of the labouring poor. Therefore, they believed that all underprivileged areas were dangerous and so they regarded their inhabitants as people who were prone to criminal activities. (Weinberger 125). Such biased ideas of the criminal class were difficult to overcome, yet there were still some people who believed that not all of the impoverished were members of this disgraced class, and so there were some crucial distinctions made amongst the underprivileged based on their activities and characters. In his study, Dyos also explores the question concerning the existence of the criminal class and argues that not everyone in the lower social circles is a part of this group. He argues for the existence of the “deserving poor”, those working-class people who were diligent and hard-working, and so they were considered respectable and worthy of saving or looking after (Dyos 18). On the other end of the scale stood the “undeserving” poor, who were characterised by their unwillingness to pursue respectable jobs and so it became a common belief that criminality stemmed from this group (Hughes 165). Unfortunately, these people were seen as a disease

amongst the lower classes threatening to spread throughout the deserving poor and so the government was obliged to find a solution to remove the “bad apples” from this social class before they would corrupt the respectable ones (Hughes 168). The great problem derives from the fact that there was no distinction made based on the seriousness of criminal activities committed in England since at the turn of the nineteenth century almost all offenders were punished with death. In other words, authorities did not make a distinction between crimes such as stealing a chicken or killing another person; therefore, contemporary working-class people were living in cursed circumstances in which they faced either starvation or hanging, there was no golden mean.

However, not all studies argue for the existence of the criminal class; there is another belief claiming the presence of innocent convicts in London at the turn of the nineteenth century. In her article, Herrero thoroughly examines the peculiarities of Kate Grenville’s bestseller titled *The Secret River* on which this thesis is based and claims that the life of Thornhill both in London and in Australia represents how his ever-changing living and working conditions alter his personality and attitude. According to her, Grenville’s novel elaborates on three distinct Australian myths and all of them appear gradually as Thornhill progresses in his life; the three myths are “the myth of the good convict, of the good pioneer, and stories of first contact” (Herrero 90-91). Concerning his life in London, the myth of the good convict is worth elaborating on in this chapter. As it was stated previously, many contemporary Londoners were living in such miserable conditions that they were forced to break the rules and the case of Thornhill is quite similar: his life in London is far from ideal and to ensure his survival he is must find another solution for increasing his income. In her paper, Herrero also incorporates the idea of injustice claiming that socially and legally England is characterized by its inequalities and it is again the lower class who suffers the most even though their sole crime is them being the utter poverty (91). Moreover, as a quite paradoxical idea, she states that sending

these good convicts to Australia evidently results in the establishment of a morally more improved and unprejudiced country (91). Therefore, in her reading, Thornhill, and the others who commit only smaller larcenies, are innocent convicts whose actions are justified since they are not able to survive in the slums unless they find less than honest means.

The other two myths of Herrero will only be analysed in a later part of this thesis; nevertheless, the stories of the first contact between the white settlers and the Aboriginals will provide such a change in Thornhill's character that by the end of the discussion one might argue for a change from the originally cursed situation of Thornhill in Australia to a blessed narrative where he is no longer a survivor but in control of his fate.

4.1.1. Implications in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*

The abovementioned concept of the criminal class is omnipresent in Kate Grenville's literary piece since, right from the beginning of the novel, it is unquestionable that the Thornhill family is living in the worst slums of London where criminal activities are the most frequent. In the first few pages of the book, their hardships in life are prominently displayed claiming that their everyday survival is something to be fought for; as a result, the family commits thieveries in order to provide proper nutrition for themselves. Thus, it can be argued that the protagonist is a member of the criminal class, hence this chapter will discuss this viewpoint.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged, that stealing was not the first solution of the family to solve their problems. The main provider is Thornhill's father who tries his luck in many workplaces, but, according to Thornhill, he works "nowhere for very long", most probably because of the horrible working conditions and the insufficient income eighteenth-century London could offer (Grenville, *Secret River* 13). Besides, his mother does not even have a job, so there is no steady income for the family; accordingly, the family is forced to get off the honourable path and find another solution for themselves. As a somewhat questionable thought, it is revealed from very early on that Thornhill and the rest of his family commit a series of

petty crimes such as stealing turnips, chestnuts and even books to sell them for food. However, when he is around thirteen years old he loses his parents and ever since his two older brothers have already moved out of the family home, Thornhill is forced to find a job to support his siblings. He starts working in a factory which is just as miserable as his immediate environment: he cannot stand “the cotton dust [...] and the pounding of the machines” (Grenville, *Secret River* 21); moreover, one day he witnesses a child being crushed by the factory machines and so he decides to find another employment. He keeps on changing his workplaces until the day when Mr Middleton, his close friend Sal’s father, decides to give him a job besides himself to make a respectable man out of Thornhill. Slowly but surely, Thornhill becomes an honourable man and marries Sal; they seem to be living in comfort, however, with the death of his parents-in-law, he once again finds himself in an unfortunate situation. In his desperation, he decides to find dishonest alternatives for gaining more money; nevertheless, he is caught and sentenced to death, yet he is shown mercy and his punishment is transmuted to “being transported to [Australia] for the term of his sentence” (Grenville, *Secret River* 73-74). Up until his transportation to Australia, one might argue that Thornhill is not inherently an immoral person since he is “decent at heart”, he is merely a victim of eighteenth-century English circumstances and only steals from others to ensure the survival of his family. Therefore, there are two conflicting ideas represented in the character of Thornhill: one claims that he is an innocent convict whose actions are justified, and the other argues for the existence of the criminal class of which Thornhill is a member and, therefore, he is rightly sentenced to death.

4.1.2. Evolution of the Prison System

In order to understand why the protagonist is sentenced to death for thievery and how he is pardoned on the condition that he is transported to the then newly-discovered continent of Australia, it is worth discussing how the English penitentiary system worked at the turn of the nineteenth century. Referring back to the previous chapters when the structural and social

changes of the English capital and the types of offences were discussed it can be claimed that with the growth of London, the number of criminal activities committed in the city has grown also to an unprecedented extent. In his article, Beattie aims to answer the question of whether the number of criminal activities rose in the eighteenth century. He claims that even though there is an insufficient amount of data provided on English criminals, one might reasonably argue for the growth of offences just by analysing the changes in criminal law: the number of capital offences was about fifty in 1689 and in about a century later this number was somewhere between 200 and 220 (47-48). According to the authorities, the reason behind the increase in the number of capital offences was that the number of such crimes had also escalated dramatically over the years (Beattie 48). Thus, it can well be stated that crime, in general, became more widespread; however, it is worth discussing why the punishment became almost exclusively capital.

In his article, Hay aims to explore the reasons why the English government was eager to raise the number of capital offences and states that one of the reasons behind this phenomenon is that there was no police system as such in England at the turn of the nineteenth century (51-52). This was an immense problem and a threat to the existence of the government since without an effective police force there was no authority protecting those who made the laws. Therefore, as a solution for maintaining power, they decided to extend the number of capital offences and by making hangings visible to the public, the government hoped that these occurrences would deter people from committing crimes (Hay 51). Otherwise, the English police would have not been able to apprehend criminals and retain order. Another, more practical reason, for the spread of capital punishment was the unfit state of English prisons in that century. According to Hitchcock, English prisons were “ill-designed for long term incarceration” and with the rising number of criminal activities, there was no capacity for accommodating all offenders (54). Even though the main form of punishment was not

imprisonment but hanging, convicts had to wait somewhere until their sentences were carried out. Therefore, English prisons became extremely overcrowded which led to the spread of unsanitary and unhealthy circumstances, and, with the lack of enough policemen, these institutions became entirely uncontrollable (Hitchcock 57-58). The unbearable conditions in the penitentiary system and the elevated amount of capital offences resulted in discussions on introducing another practice of discipline, transportation.

Transportation as a form of punishment, however, was not a new phenomenon at the turn of the nineteenth century. The practice stands for the removal of criminals from their home country to another location where they would work under close supervision without the possibility of returning to their mother country. Convicts had been transported to the American colonies for a long time before England lost them in 1783 as a result of the American War of Independence. This “well-established system of justice and punishment” was ended abruptly and so the government faced a difficult situation of not being able to place its convicts into appropriate accommodations (Hitchcock 54). As a result, there was an “extraordinary range of hanging crimes” to handle the overcrowding of the penitentiary system; however, as an act of mercy and to handle the aversion of the public, the government decided to convert most capital sentences to transportable ones (Hughes 160). In other words, the abovementioned more than two hundred capital offences were reduced almost only to cases of murder and other crimes became transportable violations. However, the English government was obliged to find a new destination for placing its convicts after losing its American colonies; after James Cook claimed the newly discovered land of Australia to the British crown, plans for its colonization emerged almost immediately including using the continent for installing penal settlements. In addition, colonizing Australia had another beneficial consequence for the government: it provided a stronghold for British sea powers in the eastern hemisphere (“History of Australia”). Therefore, the English penitentiary system transformed from a structure which almost always employed

capital punishment to one which took advantage of a geographical opportunity and adopted transportation as a form of pardon.

4.2. Edward Soja's Spatial (In)justice

In his book, Soja extensively deals with the problems of spatial justice and divides his work into two parts: the first discusses the theoretical background of the issue, while the second part tries to provide a practical solution to this problem (Davies 382). Soja actively deals with providing a working definition of justice and claims that there are several definitions of the concept depending on the context we use them. He declares that justice is a complex notion combining laws for regulating the rights of inhabitants and the “quality of being just or fair”, and is applied in almost all fields of society (Soja 20). Consequently, if one is given a bit more justice than the other, then insurmountable differences will most probably arise. Soja's work is revolutionary in the sense that he provides a geographical element to the issues concerning justice. He argues that spatial unevenness is another aspect of social injustice that is omnipresent within a given society (Soja 71). Nevertheless, injustice and geography have an interdependent relationship since injustice is written into our geography but geographical unevenness always stems from the hierarchy of and the inequalities between different social classes; in other words, one is responsible for producing the other (Soja 71). Regardless of being conscious of our actions and trying to reduce social injustice, the activities we engage in determine the spatial circles in which we live and it certainly will be different for everyone. These geographical circles we create are mostly visited by people of the same social group; therefore, they will stand as an embodiment of social unevenness and we tend to attribute certain but distinct characteristics to these areas that inevitably enhance inequalities between people. Favouring a “position in front of the television set or [...] finding a good school” are just a few implementations that Soja enlists; since they are all part of our everyday lives it means that spatial injustice can be found in the commonest of places (72). In *The Secret River*, the

protagonist and his family also live in greatly unfavourable circumstances; therefore, the concept of spatial (in)justice is crucial to discuss before analysing the literary piece.

4.2.1. Implications in Kate Grenville's London

Soja's concept can well be applied to *The Secret River* since the life of the main character, William Thornhill is determined by the social unevenness he is born into; as a result, the following chapter will discuss this viewpoint. Right from the beginning it is evident that the Thornhill family lives in extremely underprivileged conditions: according to the narrator, they are crammed in a place so small that it is impossible to "move an elbow without hitting the wall or the table or a sister or a brother" (Grenville, *Secret River* 9). Concerning the children, the Thornhill family has quite a few of them and, unfortunately, they increase the number of hungry people in an already miserable family. Moreover, quite early on Thornhill admits that he is always starving in an extremely heart-breaking manner: he claims that there is always a "gnawing feeling in his belly" and whenever the family has some food, there is always a fight about who is getting the most (Grenville, *Secret River* 11-12). Thus, it can be argued that the living conditions of the Thornhill family only reinforce the image of the terrible housing situations in contemporary London.

As for their neighbourhood, it can be stated that it is not much better either: they live in Southwark, an area of London south of the Thames which is well-known for its poverty. Southwark did not grow as fast as the rest of the metropolis since, due to a lack of bridges, it could not be reached. Its inhabitants were mostly working-class people; besides, unfortunately, several prisons were located in this area and they also contributed to the spread of the area's bad reputation ("London Lives"). Essentially, based on the description of Thornhill and historical data, it was an area where the poverty-stricken souls of London lived and worked. Thornhill illustrates his neighbourhood as an overcrowded and cramped space with walls and houses very close to one another resulting in it being "dimmed even on the brightest day"

(Grenville, *Secret River* 9). Furthermore, the roads are covered in dirt and their house is surrounded by tanneries and factories so it creates a space in which the inhabitants feel like there is no way out. Undoubtedly, they are living in the most regrettable conditions of English slums because crowdedness, dirt and smell are some of the main symbols of slums (Dyos 5). Unfortunately, there is no way out for such families as the Thornhills since their geographical position is determined by their social situation and vice versa; their lives will forever be determined by geographical and social unevenness. In his book, Soja also argues that city-dwellers are characterized by their “distance-minimizing behaviour”, meaning they will only move in predetermined circles and will be quite unlikely to be found in places that are outside of their spheres (72). Social unevenness in eighteenth-century London is, therefore, inevitable since people from higher social circles are less likely to engage in activities in poorer districts; thus, they turn a blind eye towards the problems arising in such neighbourhoods. Consequently, it is argued that spatial injustice determines the fate of the Thornhill family: they are living in the slums of London, and ever since they cannot change their place on the social ladder, they are incapable of escaping from their surroundings.

5. Transportation and Arriving in Australia

As it was discussed in the previous chapters, the circumstances of lower-class people in London were devastating and thus many people chose to go astray and commit various crimes. Unfortunately, after living many years in the most impoverished conditions, the main character in Kate Grenville’s book, William Thornhill is also arrested for stealing timber from his employer. When the protagonist is sent to prison, Thornhill realizes that “people [are] packed tight in stone cells with hardly enough room” hence the book further also argues for unsatisfactory prison conditions by claiming that these places are overcrowded (Grenville, *Secret River* 61). Thornhill is devastated in prison and the only way of escaping the situation is provided by his wife. At this point of the novel is the first time the reader can feel that Sal’s

behaviour changes drastically: she takes charge of the situation and invents a story to prove the ‘innocence’ of her husband. It even surprises Thornhill claiming that he loves his wife “for her wit” and after their encounter, he becomes more optimistic regarding his future (Grenville, *Secret River* 63). However, all his hopes are shattered on the day of his trial: as were so many others during this period, he is also quickly sentenced to death by hanging. At a later point in the novel, when they are already in Sydney, one of his friends Thomas Blackwood also claims that his conviction was foul play and someone must have told on him (Grenville, *Secret River* 97). Nevertheless, as an “erratic mercy of the courts” Thornhill also receives forgiveness and, as a result, his sentence is converted into transportation to the Australian colonies for the term of his life (Hughes 160). As a conclusion to his life in London, one might question whether the homeland or the unknown is the preferable outcome for Thornhill. Unfortunately, his fate is predetermined from his birth: he is unable to survive from a decent job, so it is only a matter of time before he is caught and the punishment for which is clear. London has never provided him with anything other than suffering and suppression; therefore, regardless of committing a crime or not his circumstances are cursed without a question. In conclusion, nothing can be worse for Thornhill than staying in England, even though he does not know anything about the place he is being transported to.

5.1. The Voyage

Although transportation to Australia stood for a new opportunity and escaping from death, travelling there was not always without any hardships, besides the voyage itself proved to be even deadly in some cases. In his book, Robert Hughes also discusses the peculiar features of the journeys to Australia. Considering the numbers, in the roughly 80 years of the existence of the transportation system, 825 ships were sent to the new continent carrying around 200 convicts per shipload (Hughes 143). However, the number of vessels varied greatly from year to year depending on the contemporary public and international circumstances. Yet for the

purpose of this thesis, the conditions of how people were living on board are worth discussing in further detail.

In his book titled *Australia: A Cultural History*, John Rickard aims to provide a framework for Australian cultural history by analysing the evolution of its inhabitants, values and customs. In a chapter where he discusses the early stages of immigration, he also examines the transportation of convicts to Australia. According to Rickard, when the government was debating over where to take its prisoners, the newly discovered Botany Bay was obviously in a disadvantageous position since transporting convicts to such a distant land was not a cheap pursuit (23). People opposed the advancement of Australia as a new place for settlement; nevertheless, after realizing that the “cost of building penitentiaries” was more expensive than transporting prisoners to Botany Bay, the government decided to reduce the costs of the voyage to make it more acceptable for the public (Gillespie 365). Trimming the expenses was a gladly received idea, nonetheless, it also resulted in the fact that the voyage was less carefully planned and hence the conditions on board were often unsuitable. Lack of proper nutrition and the spread of various diseases were not uncommon once entering the ship, thus it was not exceptional for many people to die along the journey. However, regardless of being organised in a relatively rushed manner, the journey on the First Fleet was far from disastrous. This fleet was overseen by naval forces who took precautionary care in planning the journey: people on board were kept in less overcrowded circumstances, hence their living conditions were more sanitary and they were less likely to contract fatal diseases (Hughes 144). Nonetheless, after setting the essential guidelines for organizing such a voyage, the navy returned to their traditional duties and the task of transportation was left to private contractors who, in some cases, were not able to reach the previous standards.

The reason why the nature of the voyages often altered radically was that the hired contractors were paid by the head count. According to Gillespie, they “received between £20

and £30” for each convict, hence the more criminals these contractors transported, the more profit they earned (362). As a result, in order to maximize their income, contractors aimed at cramming as many people on these voyages as they could. Unfortunately, the more people there are, the easier it is for diseases to spread and this evidently led to the increased number of death cases (Gillespie 362). Therefore, for these contractors, the number of convicts being transported was more crucial than the conditions they provided on board. An unfortunate consequence of this shift was the next two fleets, out of which the Second Fleet ended up being the deadliest of voyages with approximately one in every three convicts dying either on board or after landing as a result of their horrifying living conditions on board (Hughes 145). Once the reports of these two tragic journeys reached England, the government decided to make improvements by restricting the requirements on which these contractors received payment: from then on, around one-fourth of the contractors’ income depended on whether these convicts arrived in Australia in acceptable health (Hughes 147-148). Such regulations were implemented in order to improve the conditions on the voyages and, fortunately, the circumstances changed for the better and the number of fatal cases fell steadily over the years. In conclusion, the method of transportation changed drastically while the system was in force and even though the early stages were proved to be less developed, later on, it was worth travelling to Australia regardless of not knowing the conditions the new land provided. After all, everything was an improvement compared to being a convict in England.

Despite being transported on such a voyage, the protagonists in Kate Grenville’s novel do not encounter grave fates like illnesses, at least it is not elaborated on in the literary piece. Separation is the only negative aspect of transportation they encounter since throughout the whole journey men and women are being held separately. Fortunately, they all survive the journey to Australia and from then on, their lives and ordeals in the new land are being depicted.

5.2. The New Land

As it was mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the organization of the transport system was executed in a hasty manner and it not only resulted in unfortunate conditions on the voyage but also meant that the English government knew very little about the land they were about to occupy. Before the arrival of the First Fleet, only a handful of people had seen the new continent and studies regarding its peculiarities were even fewer. According to Hughes, people were still thinking about the Pacific Ocean as an “obscure and unimaginable” area in the 1780s, thus the outline of Australia had not even been marked by the time the First Fleet arrived on the continent (43). Accordingly, once Governor Philip’s fleet reached the land they immediately realized that they had under-calculated their equipment. Moreover, they were not only short of supplies but also of skilled labour. Gillespie claims that settlers were in lack of “overseers, agriculturists or mechanics” who would have been able to discipline the convicts or to provide a solution for surviving in this vast, unfamiliar territory (362). Once they settled on the continent, it became evident to Governor Philip that the land was entirely different from the one James Cook described in his inquiry. Most of the soils were infertile and even those that could have been cultivated lost all their crops because of the harsh climate of Australia which the settlers had never encountered before. Hence, the inhabitants of this new settlement found themselves in a troublesome situation since the First Fleet had only brought food for two years and because they could not harvest sufficient amounts of crops, all they hoped for was the arrival of a new fleet carrying further supplies (Hughes 96). In addition, Hughes also states that a ration system was introduced to make the food last longer; however, it was not evenly distributed and so this also contributed to less than fortunate circumstances that the convicts found themselves in during the early years (96). Therefore, in the first few years, the new settlers and convicts in Australia could have certainly thought that their new life was doomed for a bad ending since they often faced hopeless situations and even starvation. Nevertheless, later on, as they were

getting used to the new landscape they realized it had unexpected possibilities, so from then on, not only was their survival certain, but also that their lives had the potential to be better than in England.

Such conditions can be witnessed in Kate Grenville's novel as well. Through the eyes of Thornhill, one can easily detect how unknown this vast territory is for an Englishman. Regardless of arriving twenty years after the First Fleet, Thornhill still claims that this new land is still like a "half-formed temporary sort of place"; moreover, he also admits that this settlement is like a huge pot for people who have been excluded from and rejected by British society (Grenville, *Secret River* 77). Right from the beginning the extent to which the British government felt obliged to care for the convicts is evidently represented: the Thornhills are only provided the basic necessities for their survival such as an inadequate amount of food and a primitive hut on a crowded hill. Otherwise, their survival depends entirely on themselves. Besides, the question of food is still unresolved because the cultivation is not yet effective and so the new settlement is still relying on the help of the mother country (Grenville, *Secret River* 84). However, even though they are not provided much by the government, the Thornhills are in a more fortunate situation because the wife arrives as a free settler. As a result, Thornhill is assigned to his wife as her slave whose employment is entirely dependent on the will of his master. Since they are a family, Thornhill is not forced to do a job that is not sufficiently paid, so he can work for his own good and keep his entire income. Besides, Thornhill claims that if it were not for Sal, he would be chained up in barracks deprived of his freedom just like the convicts who arrived alone, yet now he is living relatively unrestricted (Grenville, *Secret River* 86). From this point of view, one might certainly claim that the Thornhills are in a more blessed position since this is the first time in his life that Thornhill can be the forger of his own destiny as opposed to London, where his life was always characterised by vulnerability.

However, regardless of being in a more favourable status, the new challenges Thornhill has to face become apparent during his first night on the continent: his relationship with the Aboriginals of Australia. On this night, Thornhill goes for a walk due to his inability to fall asleep and he meets with a native. This encounter immediately raises his first concern, namely the visible differences between Aboriginals and the white settlers. Thornhill questions the existence of the man since when he elaborates on the list of the differing physical attributes he claims that he must be “something only imagined” (Grenville, *Secret River* 5). Hence one might even argue that it is the first act of dehumanization in the book since Thornhill deprives the Aboriginal of his humanity (Herrero 99). Thornhill demands the native to leave, but he realizes that there is also a language barrier between him and the Aboriginal because the native only repeats what Thornhill has said. In her article, Pes recognizes the importance of this meeting by claiming that it represents the “impossibility to [...] establish a relationship between invader and colonized” since the differences between them will always be insurmountable (8). Moreover, the language barrier will always contribute to miscommunication between the two entities, making it even more difficult to establish a relationship that is not based on fear or hatred (Pes 8). The native eventually disappears but Thornhill is left mortified by this encounter which essentially contributes to defining his later relationship with the Aboriginals; however, this will be elaborated on in a later part of this thesis when Thornhill is already a successful trader. Therefore, it can be stated that the meeting reinforces Thornhill’s prejudiced opinion on the Aboriginals which will eventually result in the complete disregard of the Aboriginal rights in the colonies.

It is not only the Aboriginals who are unfamiliar for the Thornhills, but also the environment they are transported into. In terms of weather, they are astonished at how different the rainfall is here compared to London since they are used to the “gentle breeze”, yet here they encounter “lightning and thunder loud as cannon-fire” (Grenville, *Secret River* 90). Moreover,

they are confused by the reversed seasons, meaning that Christmas, which is supposed to be cold in their interpretation, is now the most heated time of the year. The animals are another source of amazement for the settlers because they have never seen egg-laying mammals, amphibians or other such species that are native in Australia. In his chapter describing the environmental peculiarities of the continent, Rickard states that these inherent dissimilarities have all developed an “antipodal inversion”, in other words, a different way of thinking about a foreign environment (48). These inversions became a way of describing the particularities of Australia to the British people, a new approach of interpretation to popularize the continent among foreigners (Rickard 48). However, Sal Thornhill is unable to “stop seeing the differences” between Sydney and London and get used to the atmosphere, which will be a source of conflict between her and Thornhill later on in the novel. Therefore, Thornhill has to face the unprecedented conditions Australia provides and he must get used to this new environment in order to establish prosperity for himself and his family.

6. Becoming the Forger of One’s Destiny

As it was established in previous chapters, Thornhill can be regarded as a fortunate figure since he is not in a subordinate position like other convicts who are the servants of another settler; Thornhill is a servant of his wife, therefore, he is allowed to become the master of his own fate and can work for whomever he wants to. On his first day, he starts working for Mr King transporting various goods around Sydney Cove; however, it is immediately revealed that it is not necessarily a legal activity. According to Thornhill, his job is to smuggle alcohol into the settlement without being apprehended by the “Master of Customs” (Grenville, *Secret River* 85). Apart from the nature of his job, Thornhill works persistently to support his growing family and to gain his freedom. When meeting a long-time friend Blackwood, Thornhill realizes that with hard work a convict can become a free man of Australia since Blackwood has been already given a pardon and now owns his own business (Grenville, *Secret River* 97). From then on,

Thornhill works relentlessly to show his improved character, which is a requirement for obtaining pardon; however, one might claim that his personality becomes somewhat ambivalent in his first years since even though he is working tenaciously to become a free man, his job is illegal and if he is caught he can lose everything he fights for.

6.1. Ticket-of-leave and Pardons

At this point of the thesis, it is vital to examine how a convict could become a free man in Australia, in other words, the workings of the ticket-of-leave and pardon system. According to Thornhill, the ticket-of-leave system is a “peculiarity of New South Wales”, something that makes it worth coming to Australia rather than remaining in London (Grenville, *Secret River* 86). He claims that after one year of honourable work, a convict can apply for this ticket that makes convicts free people, so they can own land and work for whoever they want; the only restriction is that these emancipated men cannot leave the settlement (Grenville, *Secret River* 87). Another condition for the ticket-of-leave is that the master would testify to the servant’s good behaviour; however, it is not an insurmountable task for Thornhill, as his wife is his master. Unsurprisingly, Thornhill is given a ticket after living in the colony for one year and from then on their circumstances are constantly improving; as a result, after four and a half years, Thornhill is absolutely pardoned by the Governor. Regardless of being transported for “the term of [his] natural life”, Thornhill is freed from serving after less than five years and now he is capable of doing whatever he wants, including moving from Sydney (Grenville, *Secret River* 118). Therefore, it is not impossible to argue that many convicts were forgiven within a few years after arriving in Australia and from then on they could work on creating a life that would have been unimaginable if they had stayed in England. Thus, at this point of the thesis, it is inevitable to analyse the characteristics of the system in reality and why have so many people been pardoned in the Australian settlement.

In order to have a basic understanding of the emancipation system in contemporary Australia, it is essential to provide a working definition for the ticket-of-leave and the pardon system. The ticket-of-leave system was introduced by Governor King in 1801 and receiving such a ticket meant that convicts were no longer obliged to perform compulsory labour; however, they were not allowed to leave the colony or own a property (Kercher 548). These tickets were given as a form of reward for good behaviour, consequently, they could have been withdrawn if someone had committed a crime again. For this reason, Thornhill is forced to leave his employment at Mr King since he has stolen some goods from his employer during his journeys and if he is caught again he could lose his ticket. The peculiarity of this system was, however, that these tickets were given to convicts much earlier than their original sentence would have expired. Gillespie states that convicts sentenced to seven years of transportation could receive their tickets after four years, those sentenced to fourteen years could receive one after six years, and those who were sentenced to “transportation for life” could obtain a ticket after eight years (364). Consequently, one might claim that transportation, as a form of punishment, was not for life and if the convicts behaved well, they even had a chance of obtaining full pardon. If one was given a pardon, it meant that they could own lands which from then on became their own property (Kercher 565). Hence, these emancipated convicts became full members of society and were left unbothered as long as they followed the rules. Thus, it can be claimed that after only a few years spent in Australia ex-convicts were regarded as equivalents to the free settlers as if they were given a fresh start in their lives.

According to Thornhill, at the time he is pardoned, the Governor is “handing out pardons as if they were two a penny”, however, the necessity for these pardons is yet to be discussed (Grenville, *Secret River* 116). In his article, Kercher aims to examine the legal background of convict labour in Australia and in his arguments, the ticket-of-leave system is portrayed as a crucial element. One of the reasons for the introduction of such a system was that it provided

economic relief for the government. In other words, they were no longer required to provide the basic necessities, such as clothing or food, for these emancipated people in order to survive in the settlement (Kercher 548). The other reason for giving pardons was to boost the otherwise novice economy of the settlement. Once people were given the ticket-of-leave, convicts were given the opportunity to work for their own interests “instead of serving another” which undoubtedly made them more inspired to succeed (Gillespie 363). It was not only in the interest of the convicts but also of the government since working for one’s own profit made settlers more motivated to work which increased the economy of the settlement. Kate Grenville’s novel also describes this reason in detail claiming that a free workforce is the key to developing the sustainability of the colonial economy; however, it does not make convicts “free enough” to leave the settlement, which is the interest of the government (Grenville, *Secret River* 86). In conclusion, it can be stated that the ticket-of-leave and pardon system was mutually beneficial for both the government and the criminals, as the aim of the government was development, while the convicts were able to achieve far greater freedom than they could have ever dreamt of.

6.2. “Myth of the Good Pioneer”³

As it was discussed in previous chapters, the work of Herrero intends to disclose how the character of Thornhill changes throughout the book by analysing three Australian myths concerning the white settlers. The myth regarding the innocent convict has already been examined, now it is vital to explore the second, namely the myth of the pioneer since Thornhill has become an emancipated man of Australia. According to Herrero, the path that led to the liberation of Thornhill is fraught with difficulties which makes him worthy of gaining pardon (91). The protagonist undoubtedly entails the qualities of a pioneer, considering the fact that he is working relentlessly in order to secure his prosperity in a vast and unfamiliar territory. As a

³ Herrero 90.

result, even before obtaining his pardon, Thornhill manages to create better living conditions for his family: he is proud to be able to provide “meat three times a week” or even a cake for the birthday of his son (Grenville, *Secret River* 100). After gaining his freedom, Thornhill decides to move from Sydney Cove and settles in a land along the Hawkesbury River that he calls Thornhill’s Point. This area is untouched by the settlers and it is only due to the determination and perseverance of Thornhill that a habitable environment is created there. Herrero praises this quality of the main character claiming that at this point of the novel, the story recalls the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, a true pioneer who manages to tackle the hardships of the unknown territory and, indeed, Thornhill can also be regarded as a “self-made” hero whose progress depends entirely on his courage and persistence (91). Therefore, the pioneer myth is quite suitable for describing the advancement of the protagonist since he is not only able to survive in a hostile environment but also succeeds in creating such fortunate conditions for himself that he would have never been capable of doing if he had stayed in his mother country.

The myth, however, is not only crucial in terms of analysing Kate Grenville’s literary piece but also in terms of examining the national identity of Australia. One chapter of his book titled *Whose History?* Grant Rodwell aims to depict the national character of Australia by investigating key ideas in Australian history. Considering the convict past of the country, Rodwell claims that this period was not something to be proud of up until the end of the twentieth century hence the pioneer legend had been created so as not to idealize the convict identity (197). The glorification of the pioneer became a widely appreciated phenomenon because fighting the hostile landscape in order to turn it to one’s own advantage is a character trait to be valued in Australian society. Once arriving on the new continent, it became apparent that not only the land but also its inhabitants were “threatening and merciless” (Rodwell 196); needless to say, these thoughts also contributed to the creation of a prejudiced attitude white

settlers had about the Aboriginals. Besides, as it was discussed previously, the British government knew barely a thing about Australia before settling on the continent; therefore, they were entirely overwhelmed when they realized that most lands were infertile and the climate was different from what they were used to. According to Rodwell, surviving on such a land was the hallmark of heroic qualities, not to mention if a person could thrive in these circumstances (197). Thus, even though Australians are proud of their convict ancestry today, it can be argued that the pioneer legend is an important component of Australian culture in contemporary society since determination, endurance and fighting upcoming challenges are key elements of Australian national identity.

7. Thornhill's Point and First Conflicts with the Aboriginals

It has already been stated in a previous chapter that Thornhill and his family decide to settle in a remote place; however, it is crucial to examine the obsession of the protagonist with settling in such a place and the Aboriginal problems with taking up the lands that are supposed to be theirs. On one of their trips, Blackwood takes Thornhill to a place he has never been before, namely the Hawkesbury River. According to Thornhill, this place is beyond imagination, a “fierce landscape of chasms and glowering cliffs” that soon becomes a compulsion of his (Grenville, *Secret River* 104). Moreover, it is not only that he admires the landscape, but he can also imagine living here with his family. Being able to own something for the first time in his life fills him with obsession and desire to actually reach his goal of having his own place that he would call Thornhill's Point (Grenville, *Secret River* 110). One may argue that it is a complicated matter for an ex-convict to take up land, especially one of his own choosing, but based on Thornhill's report it is more accessible than it might be thought. Regardless of supposedly being required to obtain an official document for land ownership, the “Governor [turns] a blind eye” towards the actions to acquire land since the interest of the government is to spread English dominance over the Aboriginals in this vast territory

(Grenville, *Secret River* 125). Therefore, after gaining his freedom, Thornhill and his family move to the desired land and start shaping it to be suitable for European norms: they build a tent to provide shelter, define the boundaries of their property and start farming to become self-sufficient. However, it is soon revealed that the Thornhills are not alone on this land but are surrounded by Aboriginals with whom their first conflict arises quickly.

The first signs of indigenous presence are provided when Thornhill decides to find a spot where he can plant his seeds. His son notices that the land around their property has already been dug up; however, Thornhill quickly dismisses the idea of Aboriginal activity and claims that it must have been the work of hogs or moles (Grenville, *Secret River* 144-145). Nevertheless, the truth soon becomes apparent because as soon as he starts working on the soil he realizes that he is being watched by natives. Thornhill is shocked by their presence since it is only the second time that he is confronted by Aboriginals. An old native man begins to talk to Thornhill at great length, however, due to the language barrier, Thornhill does not understand a word he says which is by all means intimidating for a white settler who is supposed to be the dominating party in such conversations. As a result, Thornhill becomes angry and tries to make the natives realize that this place is now his and they can have “all the rest” (Grenville, *Secret River* 149). Seemingly a generous gesture from the settler, nonetheless, it completely disregards any possible Aboriginal land rights which will be a great source of conflict between the natives and white settlers. This contact ends with the Aboriginals leaving Thornhill’s territory, nevertheless, it is obvious that it is not the last time they see each other. It is undisputed that there is an enormous division between the colonial and Aboriginal mindset; however, the basis of the radically different perceptions concerning land ownership is yet to be discovered.

7.1. Taking up the Land

When it comes to describing how white settlers obtained lands in Australia, many sources report that they took up a piece of land of their choosing and lived on it as if it had never been owned by someone else. In *Searching for the Secret River* Kate Grenville also elaborates at great lengths on what the term ‘taking up’ means since whenever she asked a family member to talk about the life of Wiseman, this concept always arose to describe how the ancestor gained his lands. When explaining the biography of Wiseman to one of her friends, Grenville realizes the concept is a mere “trick” used to disguise an essentially questionable act as a harmless one (Grenville, *Searching* 28). Previously, she had never given any second thoughts about the land acquisition of Wiseman until this friend pointed out that the action was not so innocent. As a result, in her memoir Grenville starts critically analysing the phrase and claims that ‘take up’ means to pick up something from the ground or to start doing hobbies; however, ‘take’ itself can also mean seizing someone else’s property (Grenville, *Searching* 28). When acquiring land, this deceit was quite essential since it gave the illusion as if Europeans were the first people on the continent who simply found the place and claimed it as theirs and, as a result, many people never thought that from an indigenous point of view, this meant that Aboriginals were deprived of their properties. Essentially, white settlers could frame the action of obtaining lands as their right, even though these properties were owned by Aboriginals for thousands of years.

Consequently, this action of the European colonists also led to conflicts between them and the natives of Australia. According to Colomba, the basis of misunderstanding between the natives and the white settlers was the “complete incomprehension [...] of the fundamental concept of owning a land”, and indeed it is the main source of conflict between the two groups in Kate Grenville’s novel as well (86). As it was explored in a previous paragraph, the first form of dispute occurs as soon as Thornhill arrives in the territory in question and it arises from the

different thoughts concerning land ownership. From the point of view of the white settler, the indigenous way of life is entirely alien and seemingly lacks any “sense of belonging to a place”; however, the Aboriginal relationship to the land is more complex since they experience a spiritual rather than materialistic connection to the land (Colomba 86). In contrast, the natives cannot comprehend the reason why there is a need for white settlers to markedly define their territories since the European sense of ownership is not part of their cultural understanding (Colomba 86-87). Thus, the reason for this contradiction stems from the inability to understand the perception of the other culture. These crucial “ideological and cultural barriers” lead to a further escalation of hostilities and bitterness, which eventually climaxes in physical assault at the end of Kate Grenville’s novel (Colomba 94-95). Therefore, the concept of ownership is entirely dissimilar in the two cultures and since they fail to comprehend the perspective of the other, it creates insurmountable differences between the European colonists and the Aboriginals. Accordingly, at this point of the thesis, it is also crucial to clarify what made the white settlers think that they had a right to take lands that had already been owned by the Aboriginals of Australia for thousands of years.

7.2. Terra nullius

When James Cook arrived in Australia in 1770, he settled on the continent as if he had landed on an unoccupied land, a *terra nullius*. The term *terra nullius* can be defined as a territory that is owned by nobody and, at the time of the British discovery of Australia, it provided the legal framework justifying the occupation of the land (“Challenging Terra Nullius”). The concept not only implies that the territory is uninhabited but also that there is no evidence of ever being occupied by humans, and, as a result, any societies that might have been indigenous in these areas were completely disregarded (Colomba 88). In his article, Banner explores laws concerning property ownership in the early years of the Australian settlement and intends to describe why Australia was regarded as *terra nullius* when European colonisers arrived on the

continent. One might think that in order to declare land as *terra nullius*, it would be necessary that the first arrivals should not find inhabitants. However, James Cook was aware of the presence of the indigenous communities since he made contact with Aboriginal groups and even made descriptions of them. Nevertheless, mostly due to their primitive lifestyle, Aboriginals were not considered to be occupants of the territory. Banner claims that the main reason why James Cook could claim the continent for the British crown as *terra nullius* is that land ownership was strongly linked to agriculture at the turn of the nineteenth century (102). Farmers made their living by cultivating their own land, so they had to settle on one land which made their land right indisputable. However, since Aboriginals were hunters and gatherers, they constantly migrated in the hope of more food and, for that reason, they did not settle in a particular place, hence they were not regarded as landowners according to the European legislation. Moreover, Aboriginals did not even possess any other symbols that would have been indicators of modern civilization: they did not have any proper clothing, lived in only primitive shelters and showed no interest in trading with the British colonisers (Banner 100, 103). Even though the mere fact that the indigenous communities did not share any of the characteristics of modern civilisation should not have caused them harm, the lack of interest from the Europeans in learning about other civilisations placed them in an inferior position. Therefore, the British could conveniently claim to have been the first to set foot on the continent according to the standards of the European framework since Aboriginals were not part of this ideological structure and hence were regarded as less than human.

It is also worth examining how Kate Grenville's novel tackles *terra nullius* since everything that is done by the settlers to advance in life is based on this principle. On the day of their arrival, the Thornhills are assigned a "hut up on the hillside" where many other convict families are living (Grenville, *Secret River* 80). It seemingly provides only the essential necessities for a family who arrives without any possessions; however, it also has to be

considered that the government only has a right to give living spaces to the convicts because they have forcefully seized those territories from the Aboriginals before. Therefore, it becomes an acceptable and commonplace phenomenon for newcomers which they will also continue to do once they are emancipated. As it was elaborated on in a previous chapter, once Thornhill is given his freedom, he moves to the land he has been dreaming of and starts forming it for his own preferences. When he encounters a group of Aboriginals on the territory he claims as his own, Thornhill ardently declares that it is “[his] place now” and treats Aboriginals as if they were the ones who intruded on his land (Grenville, *Secret River* 149). Nonetheless, it is just the other way around but such was the European mentality at the beginning of the nineteenth century that they completely disregarded Aboriginal land rights. Therefore, settlers were in a far more advantageous situation in Australia than in England, since, after gaining their pardons, ex-convicts could settle wherever they wanted while if they had stayed in England, they would have never been able to break out of poverty.

8. “From Victim to Perpetrator”⁴

The last chapter of this thesis will elaborate on how Thornhill becomes a successful merchant and landowner, but it will also examine that for him to live in such blessed circumstances, he must commit acts that are treacherous for others. Up until this point of the novel, it might be argued that Thornhill – and other convicts in Australia – can comfortably be regarded as victims who only committed crimes in order to survive in the harsh conditions of the English slums. However, when Thornhill moves away from Sydney Cove it marks the beginning of his drastic character change. According to Herrero, this is the time when the third national myth arises, namely the “stories of the first contact” between the white settlers and the Aboriginals, and this completely demolishes the first two myths which argued for the innocence and good nature of the settlers. (91). As it was elaborated on in a previous chapter, Thornhill’s

⁴ Herrero 87.

first meeting with the Aborigines is quite crucial since, on the one hand, it predestines their relationship as the novel progresses, and on the other hand, it marks the quintessential dissimilarities between the two groups. Thornhill describes the Aboriginal way of life as primitive and their behaviour as irrational and, according to Herrero, this narration is vital for establishing the status of the natives as the “inferior and dangerous Other” who cannot be left unrestrained and thus has to be made obedient (92). The creation of this subordinate Other is fundamental in the novel since this enables Thornhill to use the diversity between them to secure his superior position. Moreover, it is also crucial for creating a sense of security because by making indigenous people the subjects of the settlers, Europeans can project all the undesirable characteristics onto these groups who will then be rejected from society in order to make the settlers disassociated from the objectionable qualities (Herrero 94). Therefore, although Thornhill is entirely familiar with the vulnerability of being at the bottom of the social ladder, he does not even hesitate to push others into that position just to improve his own prospects.

It is not only that Thornhill treats Aborigines harshly, but also that he behaves as superior to those two convicts who were assigned to him. After moving to Thornhill’s Point, Thornhill is given the opportunity of being assigned two convicts as servants, Dan and Ned, the same way as he once was the servant of his wife. Regardless of knowing exactly how vulnerable this position is, Thornhill immediately forces his servants into a subordinate position and even though he knows Dan from the time he was living in London, Thornhill does not show even a shred of compassion. He immediately demonstrates that being a servant of his is not pleasant: he refuses to give his convicts a break after working long hours in extremely hot because “felons [have] to work during daylight hours” (Grenville, *Secret River* 186). However, more distressing is the fact that Thornhill finds pleasure in having his own convicts working for him: he enjoys obtaining such power over their servants that the Thornhills can control the destiny of their

convicts (Grenville, *Secret River* 183). Nevertheless, according to Herrero, this is essential for Thornhill's progress since he only rises to a higher social position when he starts adopting the same superior attitude that he suffered from in London (94-95). Undeniably, in order to become an equal member of society surrounding the Hawkesbury River, Thornhill has to embrace those habits that the others in the upper classes have, whether or not this means excluding those who are his inferiors.

It is also crucial to examine Thornhill's relationships with his neighbours on the Hawkesbury River for the fact that they are able to develop their own justice system since they are not affected by the legal framework of New South Wales. Ever since it is a frontier area that is yet to be discovered and regulated, Thornhill and other settlers are almost allowed to do whatever they want and it applies to their contacts with the Aboriginals. The treatment of natives can be divided into two groups: those who treat them harshly and those who are fairer towards the indigenous communities. Smasher is the advocate for applying severe punishments for Aboriginal actions: whenever Smasher catches native people stealing from him, he mutilates them and keeps the body parts as trophies of his triumphs over his enemies (Grenville, *Secret River* 107). On the other end of the scale stands Blackwood who is much more welcoming towards the natives and has a relationship with an indigenous woman with whom he has a child (Grenville, *Secret River* 216). Somewhere in the middle stands Thornhill who is shocked when he encounters the brutality of Smasher, however, due to his prejudices against Aboriginals he does not participate in the attempts to get closer to the natives like Blackwood. This state only changes after a group of Aboriginals burns a mutual friend Sagitty's house who dies as a result. Driven by flaring tempers and enraged by Smasher's anger, a group of white settlers decide to take revenge on the natives which culminates in the massacre that provides the climax of Kate Grenville's novel. Participating in an action aimed at killing Aboriginals is the ultimate indicator that Thornhill, who was once a hopeless Londoner living his life in utter humility, has

now become the perpetrator of oppression and forgotten how it is to be living defenceless. Thus, the ability to live his life freely from the power of the justice system in the Australian settlement will create an unprecedented blessed state for Thornhill as he will no longer be required to explain his actions to any higher power and will be the one to dictate the rules.

Therefore, at the end of the book, it is worth examining whether Thornhill and the other settlers are victims or whether they have become the perpetrators they once despised. According to Collingwood-Whittick, Australians of non-Aboriginal ancestry have the tendency and eagerness to think about themselves as victims, arguing that they had to cope with the hostile territory while trying to provide shelter for their terrified families (4-5). That is a valid argument when one takes into consideration the life of the Thornhill family after arriving in the Australian settlement: they are provided only the basic necessities and they have to work vigorously if they want to survive in the new territory. However, as a contrasting argument, Herrero states that the formation of the group of white settlers along the Hawkesbury River is the manifestation of perpetrators since most of them – at least the louder members – share the same views about the natives and try to justify their actions taken against the indigenous communities which is again a characteristic of perpetrators (97-98). Both are powerful claims, nevertheless, based on the outcome of the book, one might suggest that the second argument prevails. Even though the life of Thornhill is characterized by endless misery when he is living in London, after being transported to Australia this state persists only for a couple of years, after which Thornhill is allowed to live his life without any restrictions. Therefore, it may be claimed that after the initial phase of misfortunes and vulnerabilities, the life of a convict in Australia changes for the better to such an extent that one might even argue that their transportation was a blessing compared to their circumstances in England. Regardless of having to fight the unknown territory that initially caused many curses to those who arrived in Australia, after obtaining their pardons, most ex-convicts managed to build a successful life for themselves, almost as if they were given

a fresh start without any contempt since most of society was made up of people who had committed criminal acts before.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main aim of this thesis was to determine whether the convicts who were transported to Australia as a form of punishment from the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century actually found themselves in circumstances that amounted to punishment or got off lightly with a few years' work that was in most cases followed by a life of freedom and prosperity. The thesis started with a detailed analysis of the historical circumstances of the period in order to depict the miserable conditions the lower classes were forced to live in, especially in larger industrial cities of England, which contributed to their exclusion from contemporary society. Moreover, as many were trying to make a living by committing thieveries, they were even more despised by the general public. The following chapter described the theoretical background of the period concentrating on two main aspects of why lower-class people were omitted from society: the first was the theory of the criminal classes claiming that certain social groups are more prone to criminal activities than others, and the second was the concept of spatial (in)justice which argues that spatial location in the city greatly influences the role one fulfils in society. After establishing these crucial historical and theoretical cornerstones of the thesis, the other half of the paper focused solely on the literary piece chosen to be the backbone of this work, namely *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville. The thorough examination of the protagonist, William Thornhill serves to portray a typical lower-class Englishman who, after committing a series of crimes, is transported to Australia and aims to illustrate how much a convict could achieve once he was taken to New South Wales.

Therefore, after critically examining both the historical events and the narrative of the book, it can be claimed that convict life in Australia was all in all prosperous, at least compared to their lives in England. After arriving at the new settlement, convicts were provided their own

accommodations if they were transported with their spouses and families. Regardless of the duration of their sentences, most criminals were given a ticket-of-leave or a pardon before the expiration of their punishment, after which they were allowed to live their lives freely in New South Wales. They could secure lands for themselves and start their own businesses, almost as if they had never committed a crime before. The only challenge that stood between them and success was the Australian frontier; however, if they were able to triumph over the hostile environment, their lives would become more fortunate than ever. To conclude, although at first the transportation seemed to be a curse due to the continent's unfavourable nature, the exile of the criminals to Australia was a blessing beyond imagination because it allowed them to rise to such prominence they could never have reached if they had stayed in their homeland.

Works Cited

- Banner, Stuart. "Why Terra Nullius? Anthropology and Property Law in Early Australia." *Law and History Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2005, pp. 95–131. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30042845>.
- Beattie, J. M. "The Pattern of Crime in England 1660-1800." *Past & Present*, no. 62, 1974, pp. 47–95. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650463>.
- Beier, A. L. "Identity, Language, and Resistance in the Making of the Victorian 'Criminal Class': Mayhew's Convict Revisited." *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2005, pp. 499–515. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1086/429703>.
- "British Society by the Mid-18th Century." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom/British-society-by-the-mid-18th-century.
- "Challenging Terra Nullius." *National Library of Australia*, www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/senior-secondary/cook-and-pacific/cook-legend-and-legacy/challenging-terra.
- Collingwood-Whittick, Sheila. "The Haunting of Settler Australia: Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*." *Postcolonial Ghosts* (2019): n. pag. Print.
- Colomba, Caterina. "History and Fiction: Kate Grenville Explores the Murky Depths of Australia's Past in 'The Secret River'." in A. Riem, MR. Dolce (eds.), Bernard Hickey, *A Roving Cultural Ambassador: Essays in His Memory*, Forum, Editrice Universitaria Udinese, Udine (2009): 85–100. Print.
- Davies, Andrew. "(Un)Just Geographies? Review of Dorling's 'Injustice' and Soja's 'Seeking Spatial Justice.'" *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 177, no. 4, 2011, pp. 380–84. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41475780>.

- Dyos, H. J. "The Slums of Victorian London." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1967, pp. 5–40. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3825891>.
- "Factory." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 25 Jan. 2024, www.britannica.com/technology/factory.
- Gillespie, James Edward. "The Transportation of English Convicts after 1783." *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1922, pp. 359–81. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1133932>.
- Grenville, Kate. *Searching for the Secret River*. Canongate Books, 2006.
- Grenville, Kate. *The Secret River*. Canongate, 2018.
- Hay, Douglas. "Crime and Justice in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England." *Crime and Justice*, vol. 2, 1980, pp. 45–84. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1147412>.
- "History of Australia." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/place/Australia/History#ref1293814.
- Hitchcock, Tom. "The London Vagrancy Crisis of the 1780s." *Rural History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2013, pp. 53-66. doi:10.1017/S0956793312000210.
- Herrero, Dolores. "Crossing 'The Secret River': From Victim to Perpetrator, or the Silent / Dark Side of the Australian Settlement / Cruzando 'The Secret River': De Víctima a Verdugo, o El Lado Silenciado / Oscuro de La Colonización Australiana." *Atlantis*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2014, pp. 87–105. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43486083>.
- Hughes, Robert. *The Fatal Shore*. Vintage, 2003.
- "Industrial Revolution." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 8 Feb. 2024, www.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution.
- Kercher, Bruce. "Perish or Prosper: The Law and Convict Transportation in the British Empire, 1700-1850." *Law and History Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2003, pp. 527–84. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3595119>.

- “London Lives 1690 to 1800.” *Background - Southwark - London Lives*,
www.londonlives.org/static/SouthwarkLocalGovernment.jsp.
- Nardinelli, Clark. “Child Labor and the Factory Acts.” *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1980, pp. 739–55. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2119999>.
- Parsons, Vivienne. “Solomon Wiseman (1777–1838).” *Biography - Solomon Wiseman*,
 Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 2, 1 Jan. 1967,
adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wiseman-solomon-2809.
- Perkin, H. J. “The Social Causes of the British Industrial Revolution.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 18, 1968, pp. 123–43. JSTOR,
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3678958>.
- Pes, Annalisa. "Telling Stories of Colonial Encounters: Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*,
The Lieutenant and *Sarah Thornhill*." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2016.
- Rickard, John. *Australia: A Cultural History*. Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1996.
- Rodwell, Grant. “Key Themes in Australian History and Their Reflection in Historical
 Novels.” *Whose History?: Engaging History Students through Historical Fiction*,
 University of Adelaide Press, 2013, pp. 183–230. JSTOR,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.20851/j.ctt1t304sf.18>.
- Soja, Edward W. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- “Slum.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/slum.
- “The Proceedings of the Old Bailey.” *London History - A Population History of London -
 Central Criminal Court*, www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Population-history-of-london.jsp.
- Weinberger, Barbara. “The Criminal Class and the Ecology of Crime.” *Historical Social
 Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 15, no. 4 (56), 1990, pp. 121–39. JSTOR,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20754533>.

Weitzman, Arthur J. "Eighteenth-Century London: Urban Paradise or Fallen City?" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1975, pp. 469–80. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708657>.