

HIGH GROUND

STUDY GUIDE

THE INDIVIDUAL WITHIN A CULTURE

Amongst the clashing of cultures and the brutal conflicts that arise, High Ground also examines what it means to be an individual within the context of a larger culture, with its traditions, attitudes and expectations. Characters must question their allegiances to others and contemplate their ability to act outside of what is expected of them. Such inner turmoil allows viewers of the film to further query the conflict of cultures and how people look to align themselves and identify themselves through the larger group or culture that they are a part of.

By opening the film with a wide shot of the landscape before a close up of a young Gutjuk walking through the country, Johnson provides a sense of belonging for the character. Young Gutjuk is told to “watch and learn” before Baywara speaks of the young man’s destiny to “one day...be a hunter.” With the atrocities that play out following this opening, Johnson is able to exhibit the brutality of the imposing white culture amongst the indigenous people. With Gutjuk (named ‘Tommy’ by those on the mission) raised by Claire, he comes to be a young man born into one culture and then moulded by another. The complexities of his allegiances and loyalties become one of the key conflicts of the film as it becomes clear that a peaceful resolution between Moran’s men and Baywara’s group will be possible. The audience are left to question loyalty, allegiance, revenge and justice and just how an individual is expected to act on behalf of those to whom they feel connected. Tellingly, the film offers no clear resolution to this. Baywara’s actions are not absolved or endorsed, however the brutality of colonialism hangs over all events of the film and the true depravity of some characters is shown as a result of their abhorrent attitudes toward the Aboriginal people.

“

“Would you keep him safe?”

“I’d do my best.

That’s all I’ve got.”

”

No one character can embody the attitudes and beliefs of an entire culture of people and whilst characters such as Moran and Eddy are emblematic of a self-righteous and dismissive colonial approach, they each represent different parts of the culture. As viewers, we are led to question the power that one can have against the expectations of those with whom they share a cultural

identity. Travis' rejection of Moran and the authorities' approach is exhibited through his leaving of the force. However, Johnson does not portray him as the hero of the story who is able to restore justice and peace. Rather, Travis is conflicted between a loyalty to his "spotter", Eddy and his role in the police force, and his sense of morality as the men under his charge engage in unprovoked slaughter.

As an audience, we can draw our own conclusions as to the power held by Travis to stand against his former employer and do 'what's right'. We can also question whether his actions are enough, and whether his condemnation of the massacre and acceptance of becoming an 'outsider' sees him as the moral centre of the story or as a person who should have done more to achieve justice for those killed. The length to which Travis may be able to actively bring an end to the bloodshed is questioned within the film during the following exchange:

“

"You know what they're going to do. And you're just going to let it happen?"

"I'm not gonna make it easy for them."

”

Through this we can query whether Travis can truly stand up to Moran and bring to light the atrocities of the past, or whether his best efforts can only merely stall the progress of white Australian settlers and their disregard for the original inhabitants of the land.

“

"I'm not sure anyone gets to choose what kind of man they're going to be."

”

Midway through the film, Travis tells Gutjuk of his time as a sniper in the army, revealing that Eddy was his spotter. The canned food that he eats becomes a focus of the scene as Gutjuk brings him a bush plum. Johnson then transitions to Eddy eating the same canned food, alluding to the habits that both men have kept since returning from war. In this moment, Travis and Eddy's shared history is revealed and further context is provided as to how they came to be the men they are. Travis also shares somewhat of an 'outsider' status in a similar fashion to Gutjuk. Gutjuk being taken from his people and raised within another culture and language and Travis choosing to turn his back on his colleagues by refusing to continue to be a part of their regime. It is telling then that Johnson uses this moment of quiet reflection to have Travis advise Gutjuk that who some "choose[s] what kind of man they're going to be" is not always a matter of choice, but of fate and circumstance. The individual only holds so much power within the cultures in which they are born into.

THE BRUTALITY OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Given its release date of 2021, *High Ground* allows a contemporary audience the opportunity to consider the brutality of Australia's history and the treatment of First Nations people. Some critics have described the film as following the tropes of a traditional 'western'. 'Westerns', films centred around the conquest of the American west and the battles between 'cowboys and Indians', told stories of revenge and of heroes in battle, doing whatever necessary to advance their cause. Where *High Ground* is unique is that it is not told from one solitary perspective, and no clear hero emerges from the text. Australia's history is littered with violence and dispossession. Johnson offers no perfect solution, nor justification for the past. Rather, the audience is left with the discomfort of the futility of the violence, with no clear resolution reached come the end of the film. Johnson depicts the horrors of massacres in an overt fashion, displaying the violence and the horrors of the murders carried out at the beginning of the film. Such a devastating scene creates an uneasy experience for viewers, with Johnson raising questions of the brutality of the past and the inherent violence of those who looked to 'settle' the land.

“

“You know how civilisation's built, son? Bad men. Bad men doing bad things, clearing the way for the others to follow. Bad men like me and you. Whatever made you think you could change who you are?”

”

A modern Australian audience can consider the brutality of Australian history whilst examining the attitudes of characters such as Moran and Eddy. Eddy is seemingly unaffected by the massacre, reminding Travis that “they're dead” and “what matters is that we act as a unit”. This is emblematic of a cavalier and indifferent attitude, further exhibited through his exclamation that “you can't share a country”. Further exploration of how one could come to feel such indifference to other human beings is examined as Eddy angrily challenges Travis, asking if he “blame[s]” him and whether the massacre, “all of it”, is his “fault”. Through this exchange, the audience can question the extent to which an individual can be held accountable for the prevailing attitudes of a larger group, or whether it is the willingness of individuals to carry out such abhorrent behaviour that allows groups such as the European settlers to impose themselves upon another culture so aggressively and arrogantly.

What is clearly conveyed is the desire to 'settle' the land and the dismissal of the Indigenous Australians and their way of life. Moran looks to justify his attitude and the behaviour of the men working under him as a necessary function of settlement. Through his ceremonial uniform, and the taking of various photographs, Moran is dedicated to weaving a narrative of the white settlers

creating a life for themselves amongst a hostile land. He believes that it is the “responsibility of those who make history to record it”, a statement that fails to acknowledge the existence of the first Australians who had lived on the land for thousands of years previous.



Did you notice?

The presence of wildlife, particularly birds, is prominent throughout the film. There is a peaceful tone established in the opening of the film, with Gutjuk and his family living harmoniously amongst the land and its fauna. The shots ringing out across the landscape are symbolic of the intrusion of white culture upon this land, with Johnson creating a soundscape that transitions from peaceful to violently loud within seconds.

The allusions to bird life could be representative of a range of ideas. The birds are impartial to what occurs below them; free of the complex human thought process that leads to such violent episodes. Danger is also closely linked with the call of birds, as characters are warned by their calls as dangerous news or people approach. Ultimately, the prominent visuals shown and the natural sounds of animals creates an awareness of country throughout the film, leading to many questions to be raised regarding those who inhabit, and also those who look to dominate others within it.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN AND ALLEGIANCES TO CULTURES

It is worth considering how such a strong division between cultures is represented in this film and what Johnson is saying about one's loyalty and allegiance to a culture. The indifference towards the Indigenous people is exhibited through the language choices of Eddy, who consistently speaks of a 'them' and 'us' situation; an attitude that leads to him proclaiming that "you can't share a country". Eddy speaks of the massacre in a passive manner, stating that "they're dead" and that "what matters is that we act as a unit." When Moran later states that "they crossed a line" by killing a "white woman", the defensive side of the group is shown, with complete indifference to the lives which they have taken.

Travis' rejection of such an attitude, coupled with the disbelief as to his motives, further highlights the manner in which the white authority figures have a clear allegiance to those of their race and the world they wish to create. The reference to the war, an experience which the men got "through...by sticking together", provides an insight as to their attitudes towards the treatment of the Indigenous groups of the area. The setting up of the mission and the mistrust and indifference shown to the indigenous groups is emblematic of a crusade of sorts; a quest to conquer a land and its original inhabitants to a shared European vision. Travis' lack of "duty" and "sense of loyalty" is seen as a "problem" for Men like Moran and Eddy, who are completely ignorant as to his concerns about the massacre and refusal to not speak the truth of what really happened.



Did you notice?

As Claire holds a young Gutjuk, Johnson frames them in the middle of the shot, with the expanses of the landscape surrounding them. As she turns her back on Travis, Gutjuk is turned to face him. The figure created in this moment is of two people from two cultures, standing as one but unable to look in the same direction. Given the complexities of Gutjuk's allegiances later in the film, this serves as an ominous sign of what is to come and the clear distinctions that are observed and bolstered by those in the film.

ARROGANCE AND HYPOCRISY - 'TERRA NULLIUS'

When translated from Latin, the term 'Terra Nullius' is understood as 'nobody's land' or 'the land of no one'. The term was used by the British Empire to justify their 'settlement' of colonies upon the land of Australia. Such a term speaks to the attitude held towards the inhabitants of the land and the arrogance of those who so indifferently dispossessed them of it. With the dominance of the white culture being such a prominent factor in the events of the film, there is scope for us to consider how such arrogant and hypocritical attitudes came to flourish.

We twice see Moran record moments in time through the use of photography, curating scenes to show the 'taming' of the land and the work that he's carrying out. Moran regards himself as a major part of the making of history, hence his strong desire to record it. Through this, Johnson is able to examine the dominance of European culture, ignorant and dismissive of the history of Indigenous Australia and purely focused on their own conquest. The attitude of White Australia is encapsulated through Moran's words to Travis:

“

"You know how civilisation's built, son? Bad men. Bad men doing bad things, clearing the way for the others to follow. Bad men like me and you."

”

What's intriguing about these words is Moran's admission to being a "bad" man doing "bad things". He sees the massacre of the Indigenous population and the taking of land as a mere necessity in building a civilisation. With this in mind, viewers can question the motives of characters such as Eddy and Travis and whether they're motivated by hatred, arrogance or even reluctance.

“

"You stand for justice?"

"Then you give us our justice for the men who killed our family."

”

There is a clear hypocrisy shown in the value of human life as seen by the white authority figures. The massacre is seen as a “mess” from which those responsible are able to move on from, however the actions of Baywara see him regarded as a “murderer”. Racism flourishes in an environment where such clear distinctions are made by people in the value that they put upon another’s life. The killing of a “white woman” is perceived as the “cross[ing]” of a line, from which justice must be delivered. Johnson is able to highlight the absurdity of Moran’s attitude through the retort of Grandfather Dharrpa who reminds the audience of the lack of consequences for those responsible for the massacre that drives the narrative of the film. By not telling the story of the film from one solitary perspective, Johnson is able to condemn the absurdity of racism and the hypocrisy and arrogance that form a major component of how such abhorrent actions were carried out throughout Australia’s history.



Did you notice?

Johnson shoots multiple sequences through the ‘crosshairs’ of a sight of a rifle, providing the audience with the point of view of someone using such a weapon. Travis initially sights Gutjuk’s family through the crosshairs in the opening of the film and we are then later shown shots of animals such as crocodiles through the same crosshairs. Such a parallel brings with it the feeling of how the original people of the land are viewed - either as part of the fauna or as prey that are hunted from the higher ground. Whilst there are many examples in the dialogue where the dominance and racism of the white characters are shown, this is an element of the film that Johnson uses to subtly carry out a similar implication.

POWER AND CONTROL

As Travis refers to the film's title in his lesson to Gutjuk, the audience are drawn into a central concern of the film, that of power and control. "When you've got the high ground", Travis instructs Gutjuk, "you control everything." Of course, the literal high ground that he refers to gives way to the more figurative meaning of the statement. Characters and groups are wrestling for control and a sense of power and agency throughout the film. Conflicts arise when this control is threatened. Travis is unable to control the actions of the men that he is charged with leading, just as he is unable to control the continued violence of his peers. Baywara aims to wrestle control from those who took his family from him through anger and revenge, whereas Grandfather Dharrpa demands to have his own power when it comes to dealing with the actions of his son. The yearning for power and agency over one's life often proves to be impossible for the characters which brings into question the lack of control that they experience and how this comes to be. For one to be powerless, there must be someone or something that keeps this from them. This is perhaps best illustrated through Claire's exchange with Moran, where after simply saying "no", she is reminded that "it's not really your choice is it?" This is yet another example of those who refuse to cooperate with those in power having little impact upon changing the status quo.

Power can also be analysed in the film by considering who has it at various stages and what gives them this impression. Travis believes to be "in control" when telling Gutjuk that he can save Baywara's life, however he is subdued twice, by both Moran and Baywara. Grandfather Dharrpa "wants to know" if Travis has "got any power", an acknowledgement of the hierarchy that is clearly evident to those observing. The meeting of Dharrpa and Moran brings two men who represent a culture; seen through the ceremonial dress and use of framing by Johnson, who creates clear distinctions between the two sitting groups. Moran's belief that he is "duty bound" to uphold the law of "the King" is expressed with a sense of self-righteousness. Gutjuk's translation undercuts Moran's sense of authority whilst showing the inability for either culture to recognise the authority of the other:

“

“See that shiny thing on his hat? Makes him think he’s the boss.”

”

Through this interaction, the audience can consider how power is bestowed, how it is recognised and exerted by individuals. As Johnson concludes the story with no clear ‘winner’ or hope for a peaceful resolution, the nature of power is questioned. Those who seek control are challenged or have it taken from them brutally. Given the brutality of Australian history towards its First Nations people, High Ground is able to exhibit the cost of a culture looking to control another, particularly when their attitude is a ruthless and uncompromising one.

SAMPLE PARAGRAPHS

■ Paragraph A

"It's not really your choice is it?"

'There is a clear distinction in the film between those who have power and those who do not.'

Discuss.

Of the many factors that separate the powerless from those who exert their power, the distinction drawn between men and women is one of the most prominent. Johnson portrays the male characters as active in their pursuits and certain of the dominion they hold, whilst the female characters have little power and few choices in how they can follow their moral compass. Although she plays a vital part in the running of the mission, Claire holds very little power in regards to the decisions made in regards to the treatment of the Indigenous Australians and the brutal ways of the police officers. Despite her objections, she is reminded that it is "not really [her] choice" and that her protest is meaningless to Moran. Ironically, whilst Claire does not support the violence and the attitude towards the Indigenous people, she still plays a role in the process of separating them from their culture and their families. What she does actively control is harmful; a part of the process of "bad men doing bad things", yet she is helpless to change anything about the process. Johnson uses the other prominent female figure of the film, Gulwirri, as a further demonstration of how males exerted power over females. Outlining a past where she was perceived as "owned" and able to be "given" to others, Gulwirri takes action through the only manner she comes to understand as useful - violence and revenge. Gulwirri's past of abuse, being completely robbed of agency and power, leads her to be left with only anger. Thus, she comes to embody the gaining of power through violence and physical strength. Ultimately, Johnson depicts a setting in which women are given very little choice or power and are often at the mercy of their male counterparts who abuse their power. Women are thus forced to either remain powerless or resort to ruthless attitudes in order to get by.

■ Paragraph B

'The film exposes loyalty as a character trait that is more of a flaw than it is a virtue.'

To what extent do you agree?

Loyalty is presented as something that is expected of all characters, determined by their race and history and allegiance to their people. Whilst there are moments in which the connection to family and tradition is seen as honourable, Johnson also examines how loyalty can blind characters to justice and compassion for other human beings. Following the massacre, Eddie's chilling statement that "they're dead" and what "matters is that we act as a unit" exemplifies the manner in which loyalty can so easily create enemies of those of differing cultural backgrounds. The belief that a shared history of fighting in war and a shared purpose in 'settling' the land binds the men together is shown as powerful, as Travis is viewed as a traitor for his rejection of his former colleagues' ways. Such is Eddie and Moran's devotion to their cause, as both policemen and white Australians looking to establish themselves as a colony, that they are oblivious and ignorant to the pain and suffering they cause. Travis leaving does not lead to self-reflection from the others, it rather sees them label him and having "no sense of duty...no sense of loyalty." Thus, when one has established loyalty, be it to another person, to an ideal or to the "King" of an empire, they are not just emboldened in those views, but come to see anything outside of those views as irrelevant. The dichotomous environment that this creates is criticised by Johnson as he exhibits the cycle of violence and revenge that occurs when groups view themselves as enemies of each other. Eddie's statement to Claire that one "can't share a country" speaks to the division caused by blind loyalty. Ultimately, even though it is expected of individuals within a culture, loyalty is exhibited as a weakness of character when it comes at the expense of others and causes irrevocable harm.

QUOTE BANK

I The Individual Within A Culture



"Just watch and learn."

"Don't watch"

"One day your time will come to be a hunter." (said in language)

"Would you keep him safe?"

"I'd do my best. That's all I've got."

"I'm not sure anyone gets to choose what kind of man they're going to be."

"You know what they're going to do. And you're just going to let it happen?"

"I'm not gonna make it easy for them."

"You know how civilisation's built, son? Bad men. Bad men doing bad things, clearing the way for the others to follow. Bad men like me and you. Whatever made you think you could change who you are?"

I The Brutality of Australian History



"They're dead. What matters is that we act as a unit."

"So, you blame me? This is my fault? All of it?"

"It's the responsibility of those who make history to record it."

I Distinctions Between and Allegiances to Cultures



"They're dead. What matters is that we act as a unit."

"they crossed a line. They killed a white woman."

"Your mess" "Since you deserted us"

"We got through the war by sticking together...now we'll get through this together"

"Travis has no sense of duty. No sense of loyalty. That's a problem."

"He kills his own."

"Can't share a country, Claire."

"Finally!" Moran as Travis overpowers Gutjuk.

■ Arrogance and Hypocrisy - 'Terra Nullius'



"It's the responsibility of those who make history to record it."

"they crossed a line. They killed a white woman."

"You stand for justice?"

"Then you give us our justice for the men who killed our family."

"You know how civilisation's built, son? Bad men. Bad men doing bad things, clearing the way for the others to follow. Bad men like me and you. Whatever made you think you could change who you are?"

"Boss thought he owned me."

"He killed them all and gave me to his men."

"That's why you have to stay angry and keep fighting. Your anger is all you have."

"He is a murderer."

■ Power and Control



"Would you keep him safe?"

"I'd do my best. That's all I've got."

"No"

"It's not really your choice is it?"

"When you've got the high ground, you control everything."

"You've got one chance to save your uncle's life now, while I'm in control. You understand?"

"When you get back, tell Moran the plan's changed. From now on I'll do things my way."

"My grandfather wants to know if you've got any power."

"...that is the law that I am duty bound to uphold."

"See that shiny thing on his hat? Makes him think he's the boss."

"Boss thought he owned me."

"He killed them all and gave me to his men."

"That's why you have to stay angry and keep fighting. Your anger is all you have."