Comparison of Thomas Keneally’s novel
*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and its Film Version

Bachelor’s Diploma Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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**Introduction**

Film adaptations of celebrated novels have always attracted attention from the public, as well as from the critics, reviewers, and scholars. Nevertheless, the position of a film based on a well-known book tends to be complicated by the fact that the audiences come to see it with certain – biased or not – expectations. In fact, the spectator (who has also read the book) cannot help but to constantly compare the images that the novel inspired in them with those appearing on the screen. Thus it becomes much harder to arrive at any objective evaluation because a lot of misleading factors come into play.

Firstly, there is the general assumption that a film can never reach the quality of a book. Perhaps it is seen as a more superficial medium that cannot equal the depths and complexity of a novel. There are exceptions to this but not enough of them to uproot this fixed scepticism. The second problem arises when the spectator starts to think about the adaptation’s fidelity to the original. Sometimes it almost seems as if they were waiting for the moment where they can catch out the film-maker altering the storyline, omitting particular scenes, or introducing new characters non-existent in the novel. In the eyes of the spectator, the film-maker has thus failed to reproduce the original faithfully, and such a “fault” often results in an overall disappointment of the spectator. In other words, if the director had chosen to work with a film script yet unknown to the audience, it would have been much more probable that they were tolerant and ready to appraise his creativity at various levels. The issue of fidelity is a treacherous one, and one should always keep it in mind before elaborating their review or a critique of a film adaptation.

The aim of my thesis is to find objective methods of evaluating a film adaptation. Besides listing them and providing a theoretical background to the study, I will attempt to put them in practice. As the topic of my thesis I have chosen a contrastive approach to a novel written by the Australian writer Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, and its
film version. The film adaptation is regarded as faithful to the original text, yet the initial response of the audiences, mostly in Australia, was not entirely positive. I have chosen to examine this particular work partly for this reason: because it demonstrates that the issue of fidelity is not definitive.

The first chapter is devoted to a theoretical background which proves fundamental in order to achieve an objective novel to film comparison. I have drawn mostly on the study guide of Brian McFarlane¹ who proposes a modern film theory methodology and offers a systematic account of transposing a novel into film.

In the second chapter I will introduce the book, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, and my intention will be to study in detail Jimmie’s identity crisis which I consider the central – and most complex – theme of the novel.

In the third chapter I will concentrate on the film version of *The Chant*, first analysing its structural patterns and then pointing out the film’s chief innovation, the symbolic aspect of Nature and the Australian land. The film was criticized by some reviewers for its plain episodic character (“Teaching”), but I believe that by introducing the motif of Nature and landscape within the storyline, the director found a way for his own artistic expression as well.

The final chapter is devoted to the comparison of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in a novel and a film. I will apply the methodology and terminology introduced at the beginning, and thus attempt a balanced comparison of the two media. My main concern will be particularly with transfer, enunciation, and narrative functions.

The intention is to offer a possibly objective case study without losing sight of the specificity of the two media. They will firstly be examined separately, and then subjected to a more detailed comparison with the aim to highlight their weaknesses and strengths.

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1. Transposing of Novel into Film

It is highly improbable that any visual adaptation of a literary work in the last seventy years has been left without immediate response from a wide critical public and media. Novels and the written word trigger our imagination while their film representation provokes our curiosity to know what happens when the characters appear alive in front of our eyes. Every spectator who goes to see a film based on a book they have read has certain expectations based on their own understanding of the original text or the emotional response to it.

Besides that, many critics, publicists, writers, and scholars dedicate themselves to a more systematic study of the two media and their comparison. A valuable review is not so much a question of personal likes and dislikes, but rather requires an academic approach. Nonetheless, as McFarlane forewarns in his book, a systematic study has not always been preferred despite the relatively long history of film adaptation criticism. The problem that seems difficult to get around is the fact that the majority of critics are overly preoccupied with the issue of fidelity, i.e. how much of the original work has been transferred in the adaptation and whether any alternations have been introduced (194-197). The most frequent aspects examined by the proponents of rigid transformations are the omission of scenes or characters, reformulating of dialogues, and the credibility of the cultural and historical context (McFarlane 8).

However, considering the common length of a film, it is obvious that the scope of a novel does not always allow its complete transcript into a visual medium. Such a task requires “a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood [of the novel]” (DeWitt Bodeen qtd. in McFarlane 7). There is always a link between the source text and its adaptation no matter whether the director chooses to adhere closely to the original text or uses it only as an inspiration. Unfortunately, the audiences as well as the critics often limit themselves to judge the issue of fidelity, and the director’s or scriptwriter’s
creative contributions or changes in the film are therefore undervalued instead of appreciated. McFarlane points out that “adaptation is an example of convergence among the arts, perhaps a desirable – even inevitable – process in a rich culture” (10). His idea is to propose that the director should be given a chance to use the book as a resource and at the same time make another work of art from it – without necessarily losing the appreciation of the audience.

Moreover, every film adaptation is primarily based on the sole interpretation of the few people who work on the script. Hence, there is always the risk of not meeting the spectator’s expectations or failing to reproduce the novel in the way that others have understood it (McFarlane 9). Sometimes, a different point of view may be inspiring, other times disappointing.

On the other hand, being faithful to the source text can by no means guarantee a better adaptation than one that only draws on the ‘essence’ of the work while allowing various alternations. The two media have different possibilities and limits, and what works well in one may become an obstacle in the other. I will clarify what this represents while I examine a particular case study, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith in a novel and a film later on in this thesis.

Meanwhile, in order to understand the process of transferring a novel into a film, it may be useful to take a closer look at the particular issues that come into play. Both of the media have one common base, and that is the narrative. “If the filmmaker is a writer, the film, by implication, is a text” (Stam 20). I may supplement the definition by saying that novels tell and films show, but the basis is, in fact, the same. One produces images in the reader’s mind, thus making them actively imagine what is going on, the other lets the viewer passively receive the results of the film-maker’s imagination (whether they like it or not). Stam observes: “Both media share a common nature as discourse, écriture; both are textual and intertextual; both can foreground their constructed nature; and both can solicit the active
collaboration of their reader/spectator” (xii). The novel may be more challenging in terms of the demands it places on the reader, nonetheless, the film as “a ready-made material” attracts the audiences even more because people want to compare their own images with those of the film-maker.

There are two basic issues that need to be considered in the process of transposing a novel into film: the distinction between transfer and adaptation proper and the analysis of the narrative functions, both of which will be discussed in the following sections.

1.1 Transfer and Adaptation Proper

The distinction between transfer and adaptation proper is a crucial starting-point when approaching a film adaptation of a novel. In order to work with these terms throughout the thesis, I will now explain their functions in the literary film theory. For the most part, I will draw on the methodology presented by McFarlane in his *Novel to Film*.

Transfer

The question of what can be transferred from a novel to a film first involves drawing a line between narrative and enunciation. *Narrative* covers all the transferable elements of the novel. However, even within such specification, the film-maker can decide for themselves until what point will they will cling to the original and where they will move away. *Enunciation*, on the other hand, means all that cannot be transferred due to the different creative potentials of the two media in question (20).

Hence if I look at a narrative, a distinction made by Shklovsky may come in useful. He distinguishes between a story and a plot. The former represents a temporal succession of events, the latter a creatively deformed way in which the story is being told (qtd. in Hawkes 65). In other words, every story has a beginning and an end, but neither the writer nor the
director is obliged to observe the time sequence of the events. They adapt the plot to fit their creative vision by introducing flash-backs, skipping insignificant periods (or even the significant ones, but always with a purpose), or moving back and forth in time as they wish. Such strategies result in creating suspense and tension, or in restricting the understanding of the story which is, however, intentional.

Another aspect worth exploring within the category of transfer is the function of characters in the story as well as the qualities of the characters individually (McFarlane 24). The role that the characters play is essential in terms of correct reading and interpreting of a novel and a film. One way of depicting the characters is making them representative of a certain quality or vice. Propp distributes their functions among seven “spheres of action” corresponding to their “respective performers” as follows:

1. the villain
2. the donor (the provider)
3. the helper
4. the princess (a sought-for person)
5. the dispatcher
6. the hero
7. the false hero. (qtd. in Hawkes 69)

Propp suggests the following formula: “Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale” (Propp 21). However, the character roles are not always evident and the writer or the film-maker may opt for a more complex personality (as in the case of Jimmie Blacksmith). Besides, the film-maker may as well redefine the characters’ functions since it always depends on him or her to what extent they choose to retain the character roles designated by the writer.
Adaptation Proper

The term adaptation proper refers, in a general sense, to enunciation which has already been mentioned above. It contains those elements that will always make the film version of a novel distinct from its source. In this case, however, it is not because such was the intention of the film-maker but because some expressional functions of a book and a film are incompatible (McFarlane 26).

An example of adaptation proper is the construction of a mise-en-scène in a film. A novel is set up in a way that all the information we are to know about a scene is being revealed to us gradually, as we read word by word. A film, on the other hand, uses frames that are visually complex and give many pieces of information at once. There are, of course, methods that restrict the viewer’s knowledge, like frame compositions or close-ups, but in general, there is much more to observe in a frame than there is to read in one paragraph (26-27). At the same time, while the writer may dedicate a whole chapter to a dialogue or a psychological study of his characters, the film-maker has to present the same scene in a broader context. He has to elaborate the scene within a real setting, keeping in mind the respective costumes, habits, background, soundtrack etc. All these elements may not always be clearly stated in the novel, while in the film they are fundamental for making up the mise-en-scène.

However, McFarlane names even more extra-cinematic parameters, including language and non-linguistic sound codes and, as mentioned above, cultural codes. By language codes he means different regional accents that represent the class system, reveal the origin of the character or the time period, or simply become a humorous aspect for the audiences. Non-linguistic sound codes involve music and aural codes other than words, e.g.

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2 Mise-en-scène is everything that appears before the camera, namely: the setting, the costume and make-up, the use of figure, expression and movement by actors, and the lighting (from Wikipedia).
animal sounds, creek gurgling, door smashing etc. Cultural codes refer to how people lived and who they were (29).

1.2 Narrative Functions

According to Barthes, every narrative is made up of functions which he categorizes in two main groups: cardinal functions (or nuclei) and catalysers. *Cardinal functions* play a fundamental role in the development of the story because they create links between events. “The actions they refer to open up alternatives of consequence to the development of the story; they create ‘risky’ moments in the narrative and it is crucial to narrativity [...] that the reader recognizes the possibility of such alternative consequences (qtd. in McFarlane 13).” Every time there is a turn in the story or a situation appears that has an impact on its continuation, we talk about a cardinal function. In fact, cardinal functions form the basic plot and if the film-makers choose to omit or change some of them, they run the risk of annoying the audience by being unfaithful to the original framework of the story. On the other hand, even if they respect the cardinal functions strictly, it does not necessarily imply that they cannot embed their creative potential in the film. Directors can assure that their work be original by introducing the so called catalysers, those seemingly unimportant actions that complement but do not challenge the storyline. Their function is to fill out the areas that lack constructive plot, or in other words, “the catalysers lay out areas of safety, rests, luxuries” (McFarlane 14). Their task is to make the action real and true by providing it with existent setting and characteristic background.

It has been indispensable to explain this set of terms because I will use them in the following chapters dealing with the case study of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and leading to a comparison of the novel and the film.
2. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith: The Novel*

The book that I have chosen to analyse is *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, written by the Australian writer Thomas Keneally and published in 1972. The story deals with the delicate topic of Aboriginality that Australia has been resolving (or not) since the first settlement was established in 1788. The purpose of this thesis is not historical but it should be known that a basic understanding of the historical background is essential for correct interpretation of Keneally’s work as much as the role of his main character, Jimmie Blacksmith. The novel is based on a true story, a set of events that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, and the reason Keneally rediscovered it a few decades later was the boom of interest in the Aboriginal problem that came forth in Australia in the sixties (Healy 245).

Besides, what makes the story interesting for some and offensive for others is the fact that Keneally wrote it from the perspective of the Aborigines, in spite of himself being a white Australian. Scholars like Adam Shoemaker or J. J. Healy have emphasized the complexity of the issue and cast doubt upon the limitations that white Australian authors surely encounter when trying to gain insight into a culture that is not theirs in the first place. Shoemaker states that “aboriginality is a very difficult theme for a White Australian dramatist to express in a persuasive way, especially when the author falls short of his or her ambitiousness” (250). Healy goes even further by suggesting reconsidering the value of Keneally’s work which he reproaches for “the violence of shallowness and misconception on a subject of great moral significance in itself and of great political significance for Australian culture” (248). However, to Keneally’s credit, he himself admitted the difficulties he has encountered: “I feel I should have done more on the aboriginal side; Jimmy seems fairly remote from the readers” (qtd. in Healy 248). In an interview with Robin Hughes he declares: “If I was writing *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* now I would not presume to put myself in
the mind of a tribalised half-Aboriginal half-European. […] I would now tell [sic] the story from the point of view of an observer” (tape 10).

On the other hand, even though Keneally has been criticised for his inability to penetrate the Aboriginal worldview, his book was highly acclaimed and won him the Royal Society of Literature Award\(^3\). Readers and later also film-goers were touched by this story of Jimmie Blacksmith born a half-caste who embodies the constant struggle of a man caught between two races and two very different cultures.

Regardless of the reactions that the book aroused in readers, scholars and critics, I will now examine its narrative structure and the main character in more detail, and thus prepare ground for the comparison of the novel and its film counterpart that will conclude this thesis.

### 2.1 Story and Narrative Structure

As I have mentioned above, the story is centred on Jimmie Blacksmith, a man born to an Aboriginal mother and a white European father, but in fact brought up by a Methodist missionary, Mr Neville, who attended in the Brentwood blacks’ camp. He and his wife inculcated Jimmie with Christian values, or in fact, white values. They did so with a good intention in order to ensure Jimmie’s happiness, because they recognized at his early age that he might be different from his kinsmen and strive higher than them, whose aspirations where slowly being reduced to alcoholism and fornication. However, it was not an easy task – besides being quite irresponsible – to indoctrinate someone else with the principles of another one’s culture and way of thinking. Jimmie suffered beyond doubt for suppressing his Aboriginal background and pursuing instead the symbols of ‘white success’ represented by honest work, owning a property and marrying a white woman. “He [Jimmie] had always

presumed that to marry a white raised a person in the community. […] To have a white wife and a good reputation for work – these must combine for a man’s good” (Keneally 53).

Nevertheless, and regardless of what it had cost him to come at least close to his “white aspirations”, once he reached them, in the eyes of the whites he still remained a despised and untrustworthy black. Deep down, he wished for their acknowledgement of his achievements and, if possible, for equality, but he never managed to shake off the negative stereotypes applied to the Aboriginal society and rooted wrongfully in the thinking of whites. The blacks were regarded with contempt and treated with scorn which was very painful for Jimmie to understand in the contrast of his hard work, effort and self-repression.

Eventually (as it had happened in Australia in the factual case of Jimmy Governor at the break of the twentieth century), all the mockery, ill-treatment and exploitation that Jimmie experienced turned back at its inciters (Healy 247). In a fit of violent rage, Jimmie, accompanied first by his maternal uncle Jack Smolders Tabidgi and later by his half-brother Mort, performed a series of brutal killings, all of them having white women as targets. One would wonder why these women and not their husbands who were much more responsible for abusing Jimmie’s rights. The answer is simple. Jimmie was irritated by the farmers’ wives, first, because they “represent[ed] access to respectability, acceptance and property and [were] the symbols of white ownership” (Keane), and second, because the white woman he married had – contrary to his hopes and aspirations – failed to become such symbol.

In the time between the violent killings, the Blacksmith brothers were out in the open, fleeing from justice, and only the voice of conscience was catching up with them. Nevertheless, the events took their inevitable course and the story ends with the death of all the three Aboriginal men, including Jimmie’s uncle Tabidgi. In a way, and maybe to a surprise, their deaths are not presented dramatically but with a detached approach. This may have been Keneally’s intention because it reflects the subsiding interest of the Australian
public in the previously widely discussed case of the horrific crime. However, we must not forget that Australia at that time was mostly preoccupied with politics, since the course of historical events took a new direction, and early in 1901, Federation was proclaimed. Tabidgi’s and Jimmie’s hangings were in the margin of the celebrating public’s interest that had no thoughts for the Aborigines at all (“Teaching”).

When I examine Keneally’s narrating techniques it becomes clear that he opted for the perspective of an omnipotent narrator who knows and sees all, and whose voice is guiding the reader through the fifteen chapters of his novel. On the other side, it remains questionable whether this third-person narrator stays completely objective or not. I am pointing it out because as one reads on and on, they become convinced that Jimmie’s murders are justifiable, in the sense that the targets of his slaughter deserved it for their maltreating and persistent abuse of Jimmie’s rights. In order to provoke such conviction in the reader, the writer has to employ certain narrative methods that will achieve the desired result. Keneally as a narrator creates some sort of ironic distance that affects the interpretation of events, dialogues and characters’ thoughts. Moreover, it ensures a common emotional response in the readers (Stitson). Already in the first chapter, the narrator comments with an ironic undertone: “The European who had impregnated giddy Dulcie Blacksmith must have been of a pensive nature; a man who perhaps hated the vice of sleeping with black women yet could not master it” (Keneally 3). From the beginning of the novel, the narrator presents the white society as dominant and exploitative, and its individual representatives as arrogant and ignorant hypocrites.

Interestingly enough, Keneally also introduces various letters in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith that have an implicit role in the story. However, there are also other letters, which seem redundant, and whose contents have no effect upon Jimmie’s life or the story itself. For example in the penultimate chapter, after Jimmie had left his brother Mort and went on alone,
he found a number of love letters in a school teacher’s residence where he spent a night. They had, however, little to do with the story’s general theme, and the concerning episode was – probably for the same reason – omitted in the film. On the contrary, the letter of Mr Neville at the end of the book, where he confessed that he had carried responsibility for Jimmie Blacksmith’s brutal acts, is of a crucial importance. In the novel it says that his letter was never published in newspapers – it did not suit the prevailing Christian point of view. Still, Keneally includes it in the novel. The fact that the writer presents this honest admission through the voice of one of his characters is by no means accidental. He is not commenting, appraising or judging Mr Neville’s words, but he uses this kind-hearted character to convince the readers (if they are not already) that Jimmie’s original values were in fact disrupted by his white Christian education. To read such confession directly from Mr Neville’s pen provides the reader with a sense of an even more reliable source that the omnipresent narrator is capable to secure.

There is yet another example that reveals Keneally’s subjective attitude towards the half-caste and that – I would say – manipulates our understanding of the text. However, it has more to do with Jimmie’s internal struggles hence I shall return to this matter when discussing Jimmie’s search for identity.

2.2 Jimmie Blacksmith in Search for Identity

From early childhood, Jimmie was torn between two worlds that ran parallel to him – the truth of Mr Neville and the truth of Emu-Wren (Keneally 6). Knudsen claims that “belonging to the spirit of one camp, but knowing the ways of both camps, is a strength that should be turned to advantage – but the implications are complex” (305). Jimmie was born a half-caste. Nevertheless, just as his skin was neither black nor white, so was his culture. Jimmie was different, and it was this particular reason that made his aspirations surpass the
boundaries and dreams of other blacks. Not so their possibilities, however, which reflects the tragic reality of a world corrupted by racism and a semblance of white superiority.

Jimmie was educated by Mr Neville, a Methodist missionary living for a time in the blacks’ camp, who together with his wife served as role models of respectability for Jimmie. They educated him and wished that he escaped the stereotype of a resigned Aborigine drinking and hanging around the camp. The couple soon convinced the half-caste that the secret of success laid in honest work and marrying a white girl because then his grandchildren would only be “one-eight caste, scarcely black at all” (Keneally 7). Jimmie was indoctrinated with traditional Christian values that were largely ignored – if not alien – to the rest of the community. While having sex with a black woman was a common practice of the whites, marrying a white woman was rather unthinkable – and not even desired so – by the blacks. That explains why Jimmie’s uncle Tabidgi Jack Smolders was taken by surprise when he heard that Jimmie had married a white girl off a farm. Jack immediately set out to find Jimmie and “lay a tribal claim on him [because] to his mind people should continue to wed according to the tribal pattern” (1).

Jimmie, however, had long before begun “by his own insight and under the Nevilles’ influence to question [tribal manhood’s] value” (7). The Reverend’s instructions might have been well-intentioned, but certainly naïve. It did not take long and Jimmie adopted white values and ambitions that were slowly killing the Aborigine in him. Still, no such inner transformation could make him white for the outside world. And that was something Mr Neville did not foresee and that led Jimmie to revolt against white injustice. It should be mentioned though, to the Reverend’s credit, that he eventually became fully aware of his responsibility for Jimmie’s crimes and confessed the background story in a letter sent to the Editor of the Methodist Church Times. He admitted: “There was almost certainly some white provocation of the young half-caste, especially in the matter of his marriage to a white girl”
(Keneally 176). Then, almost apologetically, he explained that he was “lacking any definite instruction on how to proceed in the management of a mission camp” (175).

The question whether society was ready to accept the ambitious Aborigine received a painfully negative answer. Had the society at that time comprised of men like Rev Neville who had understanding for the blacks and encouraged their integration, it is highly probable that no such atrocities as those committed by Jimmie would have occurred. However, every if is now just a speculation incapable of changing the tragic course of events.

Notwithstanding, it would be premature to assume that Jimmie’s life was shaped solely by the education received from the Reverend, because the particular circumstances and Jimmie’s character played an equally important role. The truth is that the historical and political background of the period did not favour the situation of the Aborigines in any way. The whole country was swept by discussions about the Federation and the possible birth of a unified Australia, dividing the inhabitants in two camps of Federationists and Conservatives. Since the Aborigines did not have the right to vote, it is to no surprise that they were left out from such debates. Their claims for land and necessities of life would not be considered (Ward 187-230). Although the Federation has a key place in the novel (Keane), it is hardly ever put in direct connection with the half-caste. Jimmie’s preoccupation was not being nationalist or conservative, but being black or white. His biggest dilemma was that he decided to pursue values of a society that rejected him and never even took him seriously. “Jimmie’s criteria were: home, hearth, wife, land” (Keneally 15). Nonetheless, a black man with white aspirations could only become a target of mockery at that time.
2.3 Crime as Punishment

It seems rather probable and almost inevitable that a man forced to tolerate too many insults and abuses will not miss an opportunity to engage in a violent and fatal encounter with his oppressors. Jimmie felt that he had suffered enough white ill-treatment and finally the time came for him to declare war on them (Keneally 86). The intention here is not to hint that Jimmie’s crime was excusable but to make clear the motivations that stood behind it. Jimmie was torn between alienation and a false sense of belonging – he in fact belonged nowhere. His kinsmen did not understand him. Their natural instinct and loyalty kept them together, but “the thought of kinsmen lost amidst strangers” (27) (i.e. Jimmie living away on a white man’s farm), worried them. Jimmie felt alienated from his own tribe and despised the drunken crowd of blacks wasting their time in Verona, yet he never cut off the ties with his kinsmen. He accepted – despite being upset – to hand in his modest wages to the tribe knowing the money would be exchanged for alcohol. At the same time, he proved incapable of expelling Tabidgi, when he (Jackie) had settled close to Jimmie’s hut, and had become a pretext for the complications that Jimmie was to face later.

Jimmie dreamt that one morning “he would wake up ‘Mr. Blacksmith’” (Keneally 32). It is a sad paradox that it was not until Jimmie’s first killing at the Newbys that the narrator’s voice recognized him as Mr.4 He had been referred to as Jimmie or Jimmie Blacksmith all throughout the book until he turned from a submissive black into a revengeful criminal/victim. This sudden change should not go unnoticed to the reader’s eye because it implies Jimmie’s long desired social advancement of status and a hint of equality with the white race. I say ‘a hint’ because physical dominance – besides being cowardly – is only temporary and can be by no means mistaken for equality. Even after all the committed

4 In the previous section, I have made a remark about this technique that Keneally uses as the omnipotent narrator to shape our understanding of Jimmie’s character according to his will. It is a play of words which conveys a deeper meaning. See Stitson, “When Crime is a Punishment”.
murders, it remained clear that Jimmie’s frustration could not be reconciled. He could hurt the
whites, threaten, and punish them but he would never win their recognition. Before, they
scorned him without respect, but then they feared him; thus their respect was out of question
for ever.
3. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*: The Film

The film version of Keneally’s novel (which bears the same name) was released in 1978, six years after the book’s publication. It earned a favourable response, above all outside Australia, and made *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* a particularly celebrated work. Fred Schepisi, the director, started his career with a film called *The Devil’s Playground* (1976), which turned out to be quite successful and Schepisi was then able to raise money for his second project, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. The film’s production was relatively expensive, with a budget of about 1.3 million dollars, which was an extraordinary sum for a film at that time. However, Schepisi was delighted to transpose this particular novel into film, and since he already knew Keneally from before, their cooperation went smooth (“Teaching”). A curious peculiarity is that Schepisi cast Keneally as a cook in the film, so every attentive spectator may spot the writer himself right on screen.

3.1 Structural Patterns

The first thing that strikes those who have both read the novel and seen the film is that the film is rather rigorously faithful to the original text as far as the succession of basic events is concerned. Schepisi – as the director, producer and scriptwriter in one person – followed the linear structure of the novel and retained the majority of characters. The dialogues, too, are either transcriptions of the exact wording used in the book, or they are reconstructed from reported speech. The director introduced only minor changes into the dialogues that had no impact on the storyline. For example, when Jack Tabidgi set out to find his nephew after he had married the white girl, he carried with him Jimmie’s initiation tooth that was supposed to keep Jimmie safe. In the film, he carries a sacred stone instead. The reason for this change

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5 The film premiered at Cannes Film Festival in 1978 (“CAAMA Production”).
was that little space was reserved in the film for depicting tribal rituals and Jimmie’s initiation was only hinted at. The spectator would thus find it hard to understand what the initiation tooth was about.

Looking at how the film is structured, it is evident that the events are shown rather than told. By this I mean that the film is full of action, that it is epic rather than lyrical (although the lyrical scenes play their part as well). By all means, it would be an interesting experiment to consider the film’s silent version, or one that is accompanied only by a soundtrack. Although some amount of information would be lost, I believe the film would still convey its central meaning very plausibly. Jimmie (Tommy Lewis)\(^7\) is clearly half-white and half-Aboriginal, which is obvious as much to the film-goers as it is to the whites who mistrust him from the moment he steps on their property. The whole story draws on this racial precondition, which turns out fatal for Jimmie’s life. All of this, as I have stated before, is visible in the film in the true sense of the word. The white characters – the oppressors – not only are mean but they also look mean. “There was always mockery in the corners of his eyes” (52) is how Mr Newby is described in the novel, and other white actors achieved the same “mean effect” by using particular body-language and facial expressions. In fact, even if they were not talking, the spectator could still recognize their dominance and wicked behaviour. It is worth mentioning that Ray Barrett, who was casted as Senior Constable Farrell, won the Best Actor prize in a Supporting Role Award for his performance.\(^8\)

### 3.2 The Symbolic Aspect of Nature

Nature is one of the most controversial motifs in the film and its depiction is very subjective. The scenes alter rapidly, while the countryside keeps emphasizing the individual

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\(^8\) ibid.
events and mental stages that Jimmie goes through. Trying to describe the land that opens up in front of the spectator’s eyes would result in an abundance of contradictory adjectives. Schepisi has achieved a situation where he makes his audience doubt whether the scenery they see is beautiful, harsh, wild or peaceful.

There are moments in the film where he lets feast one’s eye on magical Australian scenery when all of a sudden two very small figures appear as silhouettes contrasted against a vast horizon – it is Jimmie and his brother Mort, fleeing from the scene of crime. Our perception of the land is immediately deconstructed. The scenery is not pleasant but hostile, disturbed by human presence, “swallowing” the two figures in its vastness and restoring its prior supremacy.

European perception of the land is slightly different to the Australian and the Aborigine for whom it represents “an objective unseen reality”:

Whereas the Western view sees the individual as isolated and apart from the landscape, a living self against a dead objective background, the Aboriginal conception places the landscape in the centre of everything: at once the source of life, the origin of tribe, the metamorphosed body of blood-line ancestors, and the intelligent force that drives the individual and creates society. (Tacey qtd. in Knudsen 236-237)

The Aboriginal people lived in close contact with the land and Nature; they were in fact dependent on their surroundings not only for food and shelter, but also because of their tribal history and tradition. In The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith our perception of the land is challenged throughout the half-caste’s evolution. It reflects Jimmie’s changing attitudes towards his origin, and his consequent decision to acquire new (white) values.

In the beginning of the film, Nature is still presented as the Aborigines’ “home”. Jimmie is taught to hunt and survive in the wilderness during his initiation, and the audiences get to feel that there is a link, an inseparable connection between the Aborigines and their (?)
land. Without it, nothing will stay the same (which is a warning statement with respect to the Aboriginal position even nowadays). When Jimmie gets his first job and works for the Irish farmer Mr Healy, his task is to dig post holes and make fencing. This job is very indicative of Jimmie’s gradual rejection of the black tradition and his desire to be equal with whites. He leaves behind his initially intimate relation with the land and struggles to master it. The fence that he has built stands as a symbol of a growing division between Jimmie and his kinsmen (Thomas). In the film, there is a horse standing behind the fence which I see as a cruel metaphor of the half-caste doing the same to the animal what the white men have done to the Aborigines.

White people came to Australia as invaders; they took the land from the tribes, began to cultivate it, and built colonies. As I have said before, their relationship with the land cannot be compared to that of the Aborigines. For the whites the land was a servant or a tool, whereas for the tribes it was the centre of all. Ward compares it to the Christian Holy Trinity, saying that “the tribe, its people and its territory belonged to each other so completely that Aboriginal Australians saw the three as one entity” (14). He also explains that the idea of a large piece of country belonging to a single man, let alone a chief of some tribe, was inconceivable to the Aboriginal mind. It was natural and unquestioned that “the land belonged to the whole tribe but no more firmly than the whole tribe belonged to its land” (13).

The director of the film brought this concept even further by introducing images in the film that were completely absent in the novel. They served the purpose of showing Jimmie’s alienation from the land, as if Nature was turning her back at him for the path he had chosen. Those images were detailed close-ups of various insects, two close-ups of reptiles, and one of a chicken’s head being cut off. They appeared randomly, regardless of what action was taking place, and thus breaking the linearity of the motion picture frames. All of them offered

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9 For more information about the distribution of land after the arrival of white discoverers, see Ward, “Black and white discoverers”: 1-45.
unpleasant sights accompanied by sounds of intense buzz and whir. The insects (e.g. a moth, a dragonfly, or a worm) might not have been as scary, were they not so magnified and disproportioned in comparison to other scenes.

Schepisi’s use of this cinematographic technique was by no means accidental. He used constant oppositions of dimension and space, and furthermore reversed the real sizes of objects on the screen, making the humans small as ants and the ants enormous like monsters. The visual effect that such deconstruction of measures had on the audiences was viewing the humans – in this case the fleeing brothers – as something subordinate to Nature, something completely lost in the wilderness, and threatened by hostile animals/monsters (Thomas).

Jimmie, tragic as his fate had already been, was not only an outcast from the white society but also from the land which used to be his home and his protection. He then sought cover in the woods and the fields but the land was no more his intimate ally. The landscape was portrayed as hostile, harsh and endless in the sense that it did not offer any comfort or security. It emphasized the inhuman horror of it and a sense of alienation. The scenes were set up with the landscape in direct opposition to the humans (Thomas), as if they were two contrastive forces fighting against each other and incapable of harmony.
4. Novel and Film: The Media Compared

I will open this chapter with a statement by Victor Shklovsky who proclaimed: “One [attitude toward art] is to view the work of art as a window on the world. Through words and images, these artists want to express what lies beyond words and images” (qtd. in Hawkes 80). When Keneally was searching for a theme for his novel he looked into the past to find a model of the present, or some allegory that would continue to appeal to the readers of his time. He felt that the Aborigines were still in crisis at the turn of the twentieth century, as they are today. Keneally believed that the story of Jimmie Blacksmith would speak to the readers and the film-goers regardless of the time that has passed meanwhile (Hughes, tape 9). The sixties monitored a boom interest in the Aboriginal problem (Healy 245), and that was the right moment to open the door that has been locked under a key for a considerably long period. Shklovsky would probably say that Keneally used his work of art as a window on the world. And the view he had was not a pleasant one. Schepisi as a film director intended to present the image in true colours and bring Jimmie’s character back to life, at least on the screen. Keneally’s strength laid in words, while Schepisi counted on the power of images. The audiences might have been shocked by the irreversible course of events, brutal scenes and an ending without any kind of consolation. However, such was the reality, and even if the authors were not utterly successful in their artistic attempts, they at least had the courage to show the world what it preferred not to see.

In the beginning of this thesis I introduced a set of terms that will come in useful now that I will compare the two media on the particular example of The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith. It is a difficult task to detach oneself from the subjective point of view but no serious comparative study can be accomplished without such attempt. My aim is therefore not to tell which of the two works is better. In fact, if I did so, I would only draw on my subjective interpretation, which is certainly a treacherous source. Besides, our “reading” of
literature and films is conditioned by many other independent factors such as cultural background, the quality of language translation, the actors’ performance, the photography of the film etc. Hence, I will attempt to make a more systematic study and concentrate on the strategies of cinematographic adaptations, i.e. transfer, enunciation and narrative functions. I will comment upon the differences between the two versions of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and try to classify them within relevant categories.

4.1 Transfer and Adaptation Proper in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

First of all, I will examine how the narrative elements of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* were transferred and the aspects of enunciation adapted. One of the strategies that permit an objective appraisal of the transposition from one media to another is Shklovky’s distinction between the story and the plot that has been commented upon in the beginning of this thesis. The fact that the novel is committed “to narrative, to movement in and through time, makes it an essentially dynamic and active entity” (Hawkes 65). *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in the novel and the film share the same story but the plot strategies are different. An example of this appears already in the first chapter. The novel opens up with Jackie Smolders (Tabidgi) who set out to Wallah disturbed by the news of Jimmie’s marriage to a white woman. It occurred in June 1900. One of the novel’s hinge-points is thus revealed to the reader at the very beginning, and then the story turns back in time to Jimmie’s initiation. The narrator explains that “it is necessary to take cognizance of Jimmie Blacksmith’s experience from the day of this initiation to the time in 1900 that Jackie Smolders went to Wallah” (Keneally 2). In the film, however, all the scenes are presented linearly; there is no advancement in time, no flashbacks, and no memories. Hence the audiences know nothing in advance about Jimmie marrying a white girl or about Tabidgi setting out to find him. Schepisi places all the episodes and scenes in a clear, cause-and-effect sequence because film as a
visual medium faces considerable difficulties with moving back and forth in time. In general, the storyline is much harder to follow for the spectator, if the events do not occur in a direct temporal order. Unless it was the director’s intention to make the plot more complicated, he would preferably choose to eliminate any kind of temporal diversion.

As far as adaptation proper, or enunciation, is concerned, there are two main issues that require attention in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Enunciation is concerned with those areas of the text that are not eligible for a direct transfer. I have already mentioned that reading presumes “the gradual accretion of information about action, characters, atmosphere [and] ideas” (McFarlane 27), whereas frames provide visually complex information immediately. However, adaptation proper also refers to various codes and to the distinction made between telling and presenting (McFarlane 28). The codes represented in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* are above all language and cultural codes. Since the story is located in Australia, the direct speech constantly switches between standard (British) English, Australian English on the formal and informal level, and the Aboriginal language. Besides, not only grammar but also pronunciation is capable of conveying a certain meaning. In chapter 2 of the novel, there was a political quarrel between two white clerks in the Department of Agriculture, and while Keneally needed to point out that one of them spoke upper-class English (15), in the film it was clear from the moment the clerk began to speak. Since language codes are very often stereotyped, the clerk’s language and pronunciation reveal to the audiences much more about him than the mere content of his words. With the assumption, of course, that the audiences are familiar with the particular code in question. The same applies to cultural codes, i.e. if the spectator fails to recognize them, they may misinterpret the scene or miss a crucial point in the plot (McFarlane 29). Thus, when a director constructs a scene which has to do with the way people speak, live or look, he or she counts on the audiences’ prior knowledge of these codes.
The last issue that I want to mention relative to enunciation is the distinction between telling a story and presenting it. As McFarlane comments in his analysis: “The film’s story does not have to be told because it is presented. The loss of the narrational voice may, however, be felt as the chief casualty of the novel’s enunciation” (29). This is particularly the case of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* where the narrator clarifies much of Jimmie’s actions by letting the reader see what goes on in Jimmie’s head, what his thoughts, ambitions, fears and motivations are. The film, deprived of the narrator’s insight, is by no means capable of such psychological analysis. Everything that is not told directly in the dialogues or understood from the mise-en-scène needs to be transmitted through the actors’ performance and the technical use of the camera including angle, distance, and length of shot. Therefore, if the film-maker chooses to adapt a novel that is primarily conceived as a psychological drama, they always run the risk of losing the abstract part of the story, the reflections and meditations of the characters usually revealed through the voice of the narrator. Apropos, it was exactly this problem of the film’s episodic nature that Keneally saw as the major shortcoming of Schepisi’s adaptation.\(^\text{10}\)

### 4.2 Narrative Functions in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

For the purpose of a closer examination of the narrative functions employed in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, I will put down the major cardinal functions which represent the key points of the novel and serve as sensible links between the individual chapters (or scenes). They may be listed as follows:

1. Jimmie’s tribal initiation →
2. Rev Neville canes him as a punishment for his absence at school →

\(^{10}\text{See section “4.3 Limitations of the Film as a Visual Medium”}.)
3. Jimmie leaves with the Nevilles to Muswellbrook and they instruct him to find a job and marry a white girl →

4. He gets drunk on a Saturday night and ends up in jail →

5. Mr Neville comes to pick him up because he believes in him →

6. Jimmie is grateful and promises he will never do it again and that he will start working →

7. Mr. Neville gives him a reference to get a job →

8. Jimmie leaves and starts working for Mr Healy making a forest fence →

9. Mr Healy cheats him, hits him, and Jimmie looks for another job →

10. Jimmie’s brother Mort arrives, soon they return together to Brentwood →

11. Jimmie only stays two days, then gets a job as a tracker for Constable Farrell →

12. Jimmie finds the black murderer (Harry Edwards) of a white guy in Verona →

13. Farrell gets drunk, and then he abuses and kills Edwards while he is in prison →

14. Jimmie has to cover the traces of Farrell’s crime, soon after he leaves disillusioned →

15. Jimmie finds a job as a sweeper and makes love to Gilda, a white girl and Hayeses’ kitchen-maid →

16. She becomes pregnant and Jimmie decides to marry her →

17. He starts working for Mr Newby and gets married to Gilda →

18. She gives birth to a white child that is obviously not his and Jimmie is disillusioned again →

19. Tabidgi, Mort and Peter arrive at Jimmie’s home bringing him his initiation tooth to protect him, since he has married a white woman →

20. Mr Newby refuses to go on supplying Jimmie’s family with groceries with the excuse that the place has turned into a blacks’ camp →
21. Jimmie gets angry at hearing the news and takes his uncle Tabidgi to negotiate with the
Newbys →
22. Mr Newby does not back off, he is willing to starve them →
23. Jimmie turns into a violent rage and slaughters all the Newby’s women except the
small baby in a cot →
23. Jimmie, Mort, Tabidgi, Peter, Gilda and her baby all flee from the scene of crime →
24. Tabidgi, Peter, Gilda and the baby are left behind; the two brothers stay together and
continue the flight →
25. Dowie Stad, Miss Graf’s fiancé, goes after the Blacksmith brothers; Mr Hyberry, the
public hangman, gets the news about the murders; meanwhile Jimmie and Mort reach
Healy’s house and kill all the family, Mort stays shocked →
26. Jimmie promises Mort that he will not kill any more women →
27. Jimmie and Mort visit a black woman called Nancy, seeking her comfort →
28. Police arrives at the camp and the two brothers run away, killing Tobban, who steps in
their way →
29. Jimmie confesses to Mort that he killed women at the Newbys and no men; Mort gets
very upset with Jimmie →
30. They steal some blankets from an old couple but do not kill anyone →
31. They take McCreadie, a school teacher, as a hostage and flee with him →
32. McCreadie has respiratory problems and holds them up; they lose five miles every day
→
33. McCreadie serves as a mediator for the two brothers; he takes them to a sacred centre
of another tribe, where he urges Jimmie to leave Mort who has suffered enough for what
Jimmie has done →
34. Next morning Jimmie is gone, Mort takes Mr Creadie to some farm, and he himself prepares for death →

35. Mort is shot by white farmers, Jimmie is hurt from a shot, too – they hit his upper cheek while he crosses a river swimming →

36. He escapes but stays badly hurt and falls into a deep hallucinatory sleep in a country convent →

37. He is found after four days by a nun, and brought to jail →

38. Mr Neville sends a letter confessing that it was him who had encouraged white ambitions in the half-caste →

39. Jimmie is hanged by Mr Hyberry two days after his uncle Tabidgi who was found guilty as well.

In the face of this listing, I shall repeat that in terms of major cardinal functions, Schepisi transferred almost everything from the novel except some minor functions which were omitted, while other ones were added. The only major cardinal function that was skipped in the film was number 30, i.e. Jimmie’s encounter with the old man whose fortitude saved him and his wife from death. The man’s strong spirit and the way he dealt with the Blacksmith brothers were astonishing, and the scene would have certainly deserved the filmmaker’s attention. Jimmie started to look back at what he had done and was even close to feeling remorse: “Jimmie felt weak with the thought of this newer injustice: that an old man should occur now and suck their fibre, when he might have occurred earlier, barring the way to Newby’s, saving a man from madness” (Keneally 123).

The order in which the cardinal functions are listed here is the same for both the novel and the film, except number 29. In the film, Jimmie’s confession came earlier – soon after the slaughter at Healy’s house. Nonetheless, it does not disrupt the overall meaning.
The fact that Schepisi modified neither the content nor the succession of the cardinal functions does not suggest that his adaptation was an uninventive work or a creativity failure. There are other strategies, for example the so-called catalysers, which can transform any rigorous adaptation into an original piece of art. Drawing on Barthes’s categorization, catalysers are implemented in areas between the individual cardinal functions where constructive plot is missing, and where enough unexploited space for the film maker’s creative potential is found (McFarlane14). In the film version of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, two such moments are present (both absent in the novel): The first one occurs when Jimmie gets hired by Mr Healy for his first job. As soon as the agreement is made, the two men shake hands. However, as soon as Jimmie turns his back on the farmer and leaves, Healy washes his hands in a sink, as if a handshake with a half-caste was something filthy. It is a sad yet painfully real demonstration of the white men’s attitude towards the Aborigines at that time.

The second example of a catalyser employed in the film is when Gilda gives birth to their child. Jimmie is outside, still unaware that the baby was born white, and he starts to dance a tribal dance proud of being a father. Yet no such behaviour was described in Keneally’s novel. Jimmie was constantly repressing his Aboriginal origin in him up to a point where he wished to cut any connection with his kinsmen and forget all about the traditional tribal practices.

**4.3 Limitations of the Film as a Visual Medium**

As I said before, the film version of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* adheres closely to the original text, i.e. it is structured around the same major cardinal functions. Does it mean one can substitute reading the book by watching the film, and enjoy the same experience? Certainly not. Although the novel and the film share the narrative as a common base, they are
quite different in nature. Keneally himself comments upon this issue:

In the book I’m able to trace Jimmie Blacksmith’s anger and then the onset of self-questioning and the mental tricks he plays to protect himself against self-questioning because if he begins to question what he’s done, he’s finished. He has nowhere to go. He has to surrender himself. And in the film you can’t show that psychological transition. And the film thus probably had a slightly more episodic quality than the book. (Hughes, tape 9)

This problem of the film’s episodic nature is a common obstacle for most films based on novels. However, it does not necessarily imply that the director has failed to make a plausible interpretation. Films simply do not have the same capacity for presenting inner thoughts and motivations of their characters, sometimes up to the point where the spectators merely observe the characters’ actions without getting to know what lies behind them. In Australia, Schepisi’s film was criticized on this matter; some critics found it deprived of a deeper psychological background that would have made Jimmie’s character more intelligible to the audiences (“Teaching”). The spoken dialogue in the film is rather symbolic and scarce, and the narrator’s voice is naturally lost. In the novel, Keneally was able to portray Jimmie as a more complex character, whereas in the film this complexity is lost due to the nature of visual media and the elimination of context information. Some significant characters have either been completely omitted (the old man who faced the Blacksmith brothers without fear), or not given enough space in the film so that the importance they enjoyed in the novel was greatly reduced (Miss Graf).

On the other hand, the film is capable of showing in a single shot what a writer has to explain in many paragraphs. There is a self-explanatory phrase which illustrates the poetic relationship between the two media: “A novel uses a story to create images, whereas a film
uses images to create a story” (Flippin). Generally, if a director is sensitive to details and makes a good choice of actors, his film may become a respectable counterpart of the novel.
Conclusion

The aim of my thesis was the comparison of Thomas Keneally’s work *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in a novel and a film. Since I was not looking for a subjective evaluation of the novel and its film counterpart, I opted for a more academic approach drawing mostly on the modern study guide on novel to film adaptations by Brian McFarlane. First, I included some theoretical background, and then drew on the relevant terminology in the succeeding chapters. Nevertheless, the scope of this thesis has only allowed me to focus on a limited number of issues concerning the process of transposing a novel into film such as transfer, adaptation proper and narrative functions. My selection of these categories was influenced by the character of the novel and the film in question.

As to the story itself, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is neither easy to read nor pleasant to watch. Nevertheless, this has more to do with the topic than with the two media. The Aboriginal problem presented in a shocking way, associated with humiliation, abuse and brutal violence, was a tough piece to swallow for the general audiences. In the novel, however, Keneally had the advantage of an omnipresent narrative voice. It allowed him to portray Jimmie’s contradictory character with his innermost thoughts, feelings, experiences, and beliefs – something much harder to achieve in a film.

The lack of a deeper psychological analysis of the characters is probably the most striking weakness of Schepisi’s adaptation. Jimmie had a complicated personality, and once the audiences lost insight into his motivations, the director ran the risk of turning a psychological drama into episodic storytelling and scenes of violence. Nonetheless, Schepisi did not *show* anything that was not *told*.\(^{11}\) He decided to retain the majority of characters and dialogues, and followed the linear structure of the novel very closely. Hence if we regarded

\(^{11}\) with two minor exceptions, see section “4.2 Narrative Functions in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*”
the issue of fidelity as fundamental, his work would be appraised for being remarkably faithful to the original. Yet nowadays the tendency in the theory of adaptation is to move away from these rigid principles and to make space for new artistic and creative potentials. The director should no longer be seen as one who merely transforms words into images, because film-makers, too, are artists whose expression shall not be limited.

I concluded that the issue of fidelity is not absolute and that in the case of The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith it did more harm than good. Schepisi transferred almost all the cardinal functions into the film but he did so at the expense of a credible psychological portrayal of the characters. The abstract idea of the story was thus overrun by its episodic nature. By all means, it should be remembered that the film was made in late seventies when the issue of fidelity was much more appreciated (if not preferred).

The film’s major artistic contribution, I believe, was the camera work and the photography. The conscious insertion of shots with monster-like insects and the use of dimensional oppositions were intended to show that Jimmie was losing his connection to Mother Nature (something that Keneally was implying throughout the novel). Schepisi introduced these suggestive images to make up for the otherwise plain episodic scenes. His strength laid in visual metaphors while Keneally counted on the power of words.
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