Australian rules is set in a small rural town, where the relationships between the white townspeople and the Aboriginal people on the mission are complex, conflicted and marred by deeply entrenched racism. The local football team in many ways serves to represent the town, it reflects the conflicted relationship between the white people and the Aboriginal people- we begin to understand this as the film unfolds. Other themes inherent in the film are themes of family, love, loyalty and violence- the secrecy of domestic violence and the more overt forms of racial violence that spill out onto the public spheres of the football field and the pub.

The opening narration informs us that half the football team is Aboriginal and that there would not be a football team without the Aboriginal players, therefore we understand how the town team relies on the talent and number of the Aboriginal players. We then witness the contradiction of the white and Aboriginal boys playing side by side as team members followed by the social segregation between the members after the match. This segregation is highlighted by Blacky (a white boy from town) and Dumby (an Aboriginal boy who is the best player on the team) whose friendship transcends these borders and we also witness ways that this segregation between the white teenager and Aboriginal teenagers is culturally imposed by certain adults.

In one of the beginning scenes, just after a football match, Dumby and Blacky want to 'hang out' together, but Dumby is taken back to the mission by an older friend and Blacky cannot follow. Blacky, Clarence and Dumby all call out to each other ‘Nukkin ya’ and this use of Aboriginal language between two Aboriginal teenagers and Blacky the white boy signifies the level of their friendship and mutual acceptance. Pickles’ comment to Blacky that ‘now he even talks like one’, symbolises the town’s disapproval of such respect for Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal people.

The character of Pretty, Dumby’s older friend from the mission, plays an important role in the film. He was once a talented football player himself but no longer ‘kicks goals for whitefellas’ and he is significant because he is the main character to verbalise that Aboriginal people are treated differently and unfairly. He is somewhat aggressive in his approach, expressing bitterness and resentment, yet it is implied that his approach is reactionary to the way he has been treated, and his statement overlooked by the white coach- are significant examples of changing responses to uneven power dynamics.

For example the white coach tells Dumby to make sure all the Aboriginal team players turn up to the next match and Pretty interjects stating that it doesn’t work that way anymore, his metaphor of ‘yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir’, clearly refers to the history of Aboriginal people being used as servants and points out that the coach’s approach of ordering Dumby around is no longer appropriate. Unfortunately the coach does not take this message on and rather than acknowledging the Aboriginal boys as talented, valuable and indeed essential team players, he nervously treats them as unreliable boys who may destroy the team’s chances by not turning up.

This attitude of relying on Aboriginal talent, whilst refusing to appropriately acknowledge this talent is made explicitly clear during the award giving ceremony that takes place after the team win the finals. Pretty is made to leave the ceremony after he disputes the truth of a speech about the egalitarian nature of football ‘where you can be anyone, from anywhere, and receive the recognition you deserve’. Pretty is immediately proved to be right when the awards are given only to white boys, and Dumby, who is obviously the most talented player on the team is left completely unacknowledged. There is a direct shift in Dumby’s response and he becomes more like Pretty, demonstrating anger and resentment, rather than his normal cheerful, co operative self. This gives us insight into Pretty’s character and how he may have developed the attitude that he has towards white people. Pretty and Dumby’s break-in to the pub that very night can be interpreted as a direct response to the unfairness of the award
ceremony- although there are characters, such as the coach, who are not willing to see the connection. The fact that Dumby is then murdered by Blacky’s father is a complicated event with many layers of meaning. The insights we have been given about Blacky’s father prior to the shooting is that of a man who dominates his family, puts down his sons for showing vulnerability and who physically abuses his wife. There are instances in which we can see links between the violence he demonstrates towards his family and the verbal and physical violence he feels justified in displaying towards Dumby, and then later towards Dumby’s sister, Clarence. There is a scene in which the father physically attacks Blacky and forces Blacky to declare loyalty to him (regarding the shooting), meanwhile verbally abusing Clarence with racial slurs and ordering her to get out of his house. During this scene the camera pans onto the faces of the Blacky’s mother and siblings and we see how domestic and racial violence become enmeshed, that the father’s attack on Blacky for being with Clarence is an act of violence that hurts his whole family. Interestingly it is Clarence who is the least cowed in this scene, she does not show fear and walks out with dignity. In this way we can see how control and domination is a particular pattern in this family, but is not taken on by Clarence.

In many ways, the shooting, and the following events, are catalysts for great changes, both in the town, and more specifically in Blacky’s family. Blacky rejects his parent’s demands to maintain loyalty to his father and instead Blacky remains loyal to his friendship with Dumby. Blacky’s rejection of his father’s authority instigates other members of the family, such as his mother and next youngest brother who subtly take Blacky’s side. The scene where his brother urges him to get up and face his father, (when his father beat him to the ground), symbolises the request of his family for Blacky to represent them all and challenge the father’s authority. The resolution of the film sees the father gone, leaving Clarence and Blacky happily together but planning to this town ‘that has nothing for them’. The fate of the town is not so happy, the boys from the mission won’t come to town and there is no longer a football team.

In many ways we can see how Australian rules reflects the complexities of human relationships- of love and loyalty and hatred and violence, and clearly demonstrates how deeply entrenched racism hurts everyone. The town, through its racism has destroyed the tentative trust of the Aboriginal people and has lost its ‘glory’- its winning football team. Its seems empty, a place only good for leaving.