



Research Paper

Lawson's Drover's Wife: a Feminist Critique

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Abstract

Henry Lawson's story "The Drover's Wife" was originally published as a book in the collection entitled *While the Billy Boils*. It is a wonderful story that portrays the hardship of life in the Bush of Australia from a woman's perspective - quite unusual for Australian writing of the period. This is probably Lawson's best-known work, very popular in anthologies of Australian short stories.

Keywords: Drover, anthologies, bush, hardship

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We have here the story of a woman who is suffering from identity crisis. She is identified as the wife of a drover who is away 'droving' while she is left alone in the bush to fend for herself and her children. The story revolves around her life, the problems she faces in the bush while her husband, an ex-squatter whose property has failed, is away and how she deals with the present danger of the snake. Hers is a life of hardship. She has had to deal with villainous looking sundowners, death, and childbirth all by herself. Also grassfires, mad bullocks and threatening dams have to be encountered. Yet life has little to offer and life in the bush is monotonous with very little to do except maybe take a walk. There are no opportunities to socialize as there are no people that she can meet here, her hopes and dreams have been lost in the Bush and her husband who is mostly away may even forget that he is married.

Lawson's objective here is not merely to document the place and the incident with the snake, nor is it merely to demonstrate the bravery of Australian pioneer settlers and the nature of the hardship they endured in the outback. Notice the way in which Lawson introduces his characters in a brief and detailed manner:

The drover, an ex-squatter is away with sheep. His wife and children are left here alone. . . Four ragged, dried-up looking children are playing about the house. Suddenly one of them yells: snake! Mother. here's a snake. . .¹

This description introduces the reader to the characters in the story. We also get the impression from the description of their dressing and physical appearance that they are a poor family struggling against the odds to survive. This is the author's style of building up his stories. In spite of the hardships we see the drover's wife as strong loving, brave and resilient. In fact she appears to be the quintessential mother. We get a powerful description of her in the story:

"She has few pleasures to think of as she sits here alone by the fire on guard against a snake. . . All days are much the same to her. This bushwoman is used to the loneliness of it. As a girl-wife she hated it, but now she would feel strange away from it. . . She seems contented with her lot. She loves her children but has no time to show it."²

The episode of the snake defines life, the strain of waiting. Yet there is something more than stoicism or fatalism here - the full weight of responsibility falls on the woman while the reader is being told that the bush is indeed "no place for a woman"; he is at the same time also depicting the heroic deeds of the woman in the outback. From the story we get a sense, a feel of the boredom and monotony of the environment: There is

nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind. unless you are a bushman. This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees – that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ships can sail - and further.

If a man cannot endure such a place, then surely it is not a place for woman to persevere here. Yet Lawson describes in the story how the drover's wife is able to fend for herself and her children despite these hardships. Notice how the writer subtly brings up this point rather indirectly without hailing to lecture to the reader. She is also portrayed as the fiercely protective mother of her children.

The bush is also described at the very beginning: "Bush all around – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat" It is this view of vast distance along with the emptiness that causes frustration and, as Moore suggests, "[...] it was sometimes so powerful that it induces strains of madness". Lawson often utilizes this fact. The figure of the drover's wife is a good example. Though there is nobody in the bush who would appreciate her effort, she takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. She creates her own world, since she wants to escape the routine, because not only all days are much the same to her" in the bush, but also because there is nothing to see, [...], and not a soul to meet. On the other hand, the expression of madness shows her desire to live an ordinary live in an ordinary place. Though all her girlish hopes and aspiration have long been dead, this desire is deeply embedded in her mind and is revealed by her initiative to make her life unusual. By dressing up herself and all the children, she feels again like that girl with those "usual castles in the air" which she used to have as a young woman. Her youth and womanhood are also emphasized by mentioning the Young Ladies' Journal, in which she finds all the excitement and recreation she needs. It keeps her realizing that there is still a world outside the vast emptiness, which is more shiny and colorful than the gloomy bush.

She takes care of her household in the unforgiving outback while her husband, the drover, is away, the bushwoman is left in a strange position. She tries to maintain certain aspects of femininity that only have real importance in a societal context, like getting dressed up to push a perambulator through the outback every Sunday and reading the Young Ladies' Journal. At the same time, she is often forced to take on the role of a man to care for her family. Her circumstances push her into a much more ambiguous gender role than she would regularly occupy, as "her surroundings," Years in the bush and months of being alone make her used to her contemporary situation. The time spent in such conditions strengthens her in the sense of developing masculine attributes. Even Schaffer points out that "[...] Lawson suggests that 'the bush woman can stand in place of her husband, lover or brother and take on masculine attributes of strength, fortitude, courage and the like in her battle with the environment'"³ Here Lawson may be suggesting that women in odd circumstances can equate men. Lawson tells the reader, "are not favourable to the development of the 'womanly' or sentimental side of nature." By depicting the traditionally masculine endeavors the bushwoman handily undertakes, Lawson implicitly rejects rigid stereotypes that would underestimate his protagonist on the basis of gender.

She manages to handle the life without a husband in such an inhospitable place, there are other dangers hidden in the bush. In the current story of her life the biggest one is the threat of the snake. Depicted as a "black brute", it is obvious that in this symbol of the snake harm is hidden. It is not only the black color, which is usually "associated with fear and the unknown (black holes)" and "usually has a negative connotation", but also the word **brute**, which is a very uncomplimentary description of an animal likely to present a danger. The symbolism here goes much deeper. But the same way the drover's wife manages to deal with the absence of the male character, the presence of the threat in the embodiment of the snake does not represent a big problem for her. She takes care of her children, prepares the kitchen for spending a night and is awake all night on duty to guard her family in case the snake appears. As Sayer points out, "Lawson allows her to assume a masculine role in order to survive and by the time she kills the snake, with the help of her son and dog, she has overcome danger and has become heroic".⁴ Because she lives in a harsh natural setting, the bushwoman must constantly do things that are not in line with traditional gender roles. When her house catches fire, for instance, she is forced to put on her husband's pants to fight it properly. The "sight of his mother in trousers greatly amused Tommy," Lawson writes, "who worked like a little hero by her side, but the terrified baby howled lustily for his 'mummy.'" The children's reactions highlight how the drover's wife must ironically become nearly unrecognizable as a woman in order to be a good mother and protect her family. Though "she loves her children," she also "has no time to show" tenderness towards them. This suggests that beyond donning the outward trappings of masculinity, she is forced to reject stereotypically feminine sentimentality because of the harshness of her surroundings. Simply surviving takes priority over behaving in a way that society would deem proper for a woman.

Her ability to survive in the bush is expressed by another symbol. The presence of the “she-oaks” in the story stresses the woman’s capability of survival. She, as well as the tree, stands in the middle of the bush. And she, as well as the tree, fits into this environment, though the common view may be different. The strength hidden inside is much bigger than it may seem. At this point, Lawson shows the possibility of the self-confident and self-contained woman. He also shows that a woman can equate a man and at the same time try to preserve her womanly behavior, which is represented by the dressing up and by *Young Ladies’ Journal*. Even as the ways that the bush woman deviates from traditional female gender roles, however, Lawson emphasizes the power of such roles by showing how strongly people cling to them even when far removed from society. One of the bush woman’s “few pleasures” consists of dressing up herself and her children to take long walks with a stroller every Sunday, taking as “much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city.” This implicitly presents gender as a performance, one that entails putting on a costume of sorts and flaunting it before an audience. Even without “a soul to meet” in the wilderness, the bush woman seeks to remind herself of her femininity. This, coupled with the fact that the bushwoman occasionally cries after particularly draining experiences trying to protect her family, complicates the story’s rejection of gender roles by suggesting that there perhaps is something innate about femininity or masculinity; on the other hand, the complicated character of the bush woman might suggest that neither role in rigid isolation can entirely encompass the human experience.

Ultimately Lawson highlights the artificial nature of gender roles while also making clear that, however socially constructed, gender stereotypes still have the power to shape behavior—and can have concrete consequences for women. Despite the clear absurdity of adhering to gender expectations in the outback, the bushwoman is still limited in certain ways as to what she can do and what she can expect from her life because she is a woman. While her husband goes off for months at a time and “may forget sometimes that he is married,” she is stuck in the house with the children—because of her sex, her freedom is automatically restricted. She also faces certain dangers because of her gender that women face regardless of whether they live in cities or in complete isolation: sometimes a dangerous man will come by her house and, to protect herself from potential intrusion or assault, she has to lie that “that her husband and two sons are at work below the dam.”

Lawson's portrayal of gender is complex, as he makes clear that life in the Australian outback forced early white European settlers into situations that they would never encounter in towns or cities. By showing how the bushwoman defies traditional gender expectations, as well as depicting how out of place certain performative practices of gender seem in the outback, Lawson illustrates the socially constructed nature of gender and highlights women’s potential when freed from restrictive stereotypes. At the same time, the bushwoman's interest in the *Young Ladies’ Journal*, her Sunday walks, and relative sentimentality suggest her interest in maintaining femininity. Her tears at the end of the story could suggest the stress of being forced into a more masculine role; that Tommy, upon seeing his mother cry, promises never to be a drover could also suggest the importance of moving to a more equitable distribution of labor regardless of gender in the future.

A man as a head of the family and its breadwinner and a woman as a housewife and a mother were stereotypical views that appeared in majority of Western societies. While a man could hold any position in the society, a woman had her place at home. In Australia, the created myth of the bush and the bushman made the position of women even harder, since the typical Australian was constructed as a man. The analysis of the drover’s wife stories showed that women were perceived through various stereotypes concerning their subordination to men and their emplacement at home, where they were supposed to take care of their family and the household.

The image of the drover's wife subverts the stereotype of the woman as a helpless, clinging creature who needs to be protected by the powerful male. And even though in the story she is referred to as the drover's wife, she is a powerful character in her own right.

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