

"The Drover's Wife": Australian National Writing

Kaiyuan Lyu

School of Foreign Languages, East China Normal University, Dongchuan Road 500, Shanghai, China
10194401414@stu.ecnu.edu.cn

Abstract: *"The Drover's Wife" is an iconic embodiment of the typical Australian character within the country's esteemed collection of representative figures. It narrates the story of a courageous bushwoman's struggle against a snake to protect her children. Juxtaposing the snake-killing story and the Eden myth, Henry Lawson imbues the process of Australian early pioneers overwhelming the bush with a religious interpretation. In terms of narration, Lawson creates a world of binary opposition by devaluing nature as "the other", which is perilous and hostile. Humans must overcome "the other" to survive and thrive. This bush mythology undoubtedly succeeds in inspiring the Australian people's unity and self-confidence. Additionally, Lawson highly commends hardworking, brave, loyal, and supportive Australian national spirit and mateship, which are precisely built in the process of white settlers' fighting against the harsh and severe bush living conditions—"the other". At the end of the 19th century, Australia saw the rise of national independence. His national image writing responds to straightly the need for newfound patriotism in Australia and nationalism in the literature domain.*

Keywords: "The Drover's Wife", Henry Lawson, Australian national identity, Nature, "The Other".

1. INTRODUCTION

"The Drover's Wife" is a short story written by the well-known Australian writer Henry Lawson. The presence of a snake is the central issue confronting the protagonist, a bushwoman. While her husband is droving, she is left alone with her four children for months. Late one day, she witnesses a venomous snake disappear under the hut's bedroom floor. She escapes to the kitchen, where there is a dirt floor rather than a slab floor to prevent the snake from drilling through it. The wife builds up the fire, with Alligator accompanying, a faithful dog, keeping vigil throughout the night to wait for the snake. In filmed flashbacks, she recalls her experiences since she got married while sitting by the fire. Eventually, she kills the snake with the assistance of Alligator, thereby preventing it from harming her four young children. In this process, Lawson illustrates an ultimate assertion of the white settlers' inevitable dominion over the natural world, as demonstrated by the protagonist's victory over the snake. Additionally, he demonstrates his imagination of Australian national identity by praising the tenacity of white settlers when confronted with natural hazards in the Australian outback.

2. RELIGIOUS IMPLICATION OF STRUGGLE

In "The Drover's Wife", the snake represents the threat of natural forces to the drover's wife or white settlers in the Australian bush. Likewise, the kangaroo, the mad bullock, the drought, the flood, and the bushfire all embody similar meanings. On the other hand, the snake also contains a biblical symbolic nature, as Lawson suggests that "[Alligator] shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind"[1]. Since the Snake in the Genesis of Bible tempts Eve into transgression, it has served as a potent emblem of trickiness and the ruination of mankind in Western culture for thousands of years. As the snake in the article takes the initiative to attack the woman, readers may recall the snake in the Garden of Eden that also tempts Eve to violate God's will aggressively. In addition, distinct from other animals such as the mad bullock, crows, and eagles, the snake is extremely tricky. The Bible states, "Now the serpent was subtler than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made"[2]. The snake in this essay crawls under the floorboards and hides cunningly, which poses an invisible but fatal menace. To sum up, the snake symbolizes a natural hazard with religious connotations.

The environment where the drover's wife lives is no longer the Eden Garden. It is a bushy area with no horizon except for a shanty on the main road apart from nineteen miles. She is an outcast Eve, who has been expelled from the Garden of Eden to the bush. Yet she intends to return to the Garden of Eden by reclaiming the wasteland. The snake aims to hurt her once again. This time she still faces two different consequences. If the snake bites her and her children, that represents the second "Fall of Man" – physical death, failure of Eden regression, and the white settlers' failure to tame nature. If she defeats the snake, then this represents the white settlers' success in rebuilding Eden and conquering nature.

The struggle is time-consuming between the snake and the drover's wife (or between nature and the white settlers). Lawson proves this by stretching this struggle over the entire story, as well as interrupting it with stories of other difficult battles against nature that she has gone through. Meanwhile, the struggle is not smooth as it is characterized by unexpected failures. For example, despite her best efforts, she is unable to prevent a flood from destroying a dam that has taken her husband years of labour to construct. She also cannot protect her best cows from pleuropneumonia.

However, the victory is predictable in that the bushwoman has wisdom and reinforcements. On the one hand, even though life in the bush is full of dangers and challenges, she always saves the situation by virtue of wisdom in the end. "But a woman's cunning is greater"[3], Lawson implicitly praises the wit she owns. Using an old shotgun that she makes by herself, she shoots the mad bullock. During the battle with the crows and eagles, she aims a broomstick at the birds like a gun to scare them. When

suspicious-looking strangers approach her, she lies that her husband and sons are working below the dam to protect her family. She can utilize elements of nature. The most evident manifestation is the domesticated dog, Alligator.

Moreover, her wisdom is reflected in her attitude toward life – optimism. Even though reality has worn away her girlish hopes and aspirations, she can still take pleasure in the fashion plates in the *Young Ladies' Journal*. On Sunday afternoon, she dresses herself, tidies the children, and goes for a lonely walk to get rid of the monotony in the bush temporarily. She has a keen sense of interesting stories, even if she feels hurt after being deceived by an aborigine. She expects that one day she will amuse bushmen with the story that she pokes her eyes with her bare fingers because of the holes in the worn handkerchief. On the other hand, the reinforcements are those who live in the bush and combat nature like her. These people will help each other in times of trouble, such as the four bushmen who save her family in a bush fire.

For both crucial reasons above, although the process is arduous, the woman ultimately defeats the snake. This implies that the white settlers are assumed to eventually triumph over the native Australian environment and return to the Garden of Eden. By juxtaposing the snake-killing story and the Eden myth, Lawson imbues the process of Australian early pioneers overwhelming the bush with a religious interpretation. Additionally, he employs the simple present tense to relate the story and never mentions the drover's wife by her name. This means that every white settler undergoes identical events in Australia every day. A great deal of eulogization has been offered to the Australian white settlers muchly who toiled away in poverty and isolated conditions to create a new frontier for the colonial nation and new prospects for the younger generation and the growing nation. It is their hard work that ensures the continued dominance of the white settlers over the natural world.

3. "THE OTHER" AND NATIONAL WRITING

To achieve such narrative effects, Lawson creates a world of binary opposition by devaluing nature as "the other", which is perilous and hostile. It is clear from the opening chapter that he does not depict the Australian bush landscape objectively, but recreates and portrays it as an ugly "imagined enemy":

Bush all round – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek[4].

Essentially, this quoted passage reflects the exclusive ideologies with which the white settlers are attempting to forge their Australian national identity[5]. Because it is precisely in the process of fighting against the harsh and severe bush living conditions – "the other", that a hardworking, brave, loyal, and supportive Australian national spirit is shaped and mateship which is unique to the Australian people is built. For instance, the main character's relative visits once a month with provisions; the four bushmen do not hesitate to rescue her and her children; Alligator, the dog, aids her in guarding the whole family. That is why the protagonist calls the dog "He" instead of "It".

At the end of the 19th century, Australia saw the rise of national independence. As a nationalist novelist, Lawson shoulders his responsibility by expressing his imagination of the Australian nation, hoping to establish Australia as an independent nation enshrined with bush ethos[6]. His national image writing responds to straightly the need for Australia newfound patriotism and nationalism in the literature domain[7]. As exemplified in "The Drover's Wife", he not only expresses his great sympathy and appreciation for Australian white settlers but also hopes for a brighter Australian future through the metaphorical story between the bushwoman and the snake. At the same time, he creates distinctive Australian literature with national characteristics shaped in the bush.

REFERENCES

- [1] H. Lawson, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, Good Press, 2021.
- [2] M. D. Coogan (Ed.), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, UK: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.
- [3] H. Lawson, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, Good Press, 2021.
- [4] H. Lawson, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, Good Press, 2021.
- [5] Z. Xu. (2021). The Truth under the Text's Appearance: The Implied "Other" in Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*. *Journal of Literature in English*, (02), pp. 141-153.
- [6] J. Zhang. (2021). Lawson, the Bush and Realism: Bush Images and Australian National Imagination in Lawson's Work. *Studies in English and American Literature Series*, (01), pp. 335-348.
- [7] Y. Hou, & F. Shi. (2022). Australian Writing of Lawson's Poetry: "Bushman" and National Spirit. *Journal of Mianyang Normal College*, (07).