



The Hierarchy of the Bush: A Close Reading of Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*

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Abstract— Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife* (1892) occupies an ambivalent position in Australian literary history. The short story is celebrated as a portrait of bush resilience; however, it operates within a deeply patriarchal framework. This article conducts a systematic close reading to identify the interlocking sexist mechanisms within the narrative. The story seems to erase the wife's persistent feminine subjectivity, framing adult female responsibility as the renunciation of "girlish" desire. At the same time, the wife's achievements are transferred to male figures, including her absent husband, her young sons, and other bushmen, thereby denying her autonomous agency. Furthermore, the narrative genders emotional expression as weakness, which denies the wife legitimate grief while normalizing male neglect and potential infidelity. The article argues that *The Drover's Wife* does not celebrate female strength so much as contain it. The bush setting naturalizes a hierarchy in which masculine presence, even when absent, remains the ultimate source of legitimacy and security.



Keywords— Australian identity, bush myth, female desire, gendered hierarchy, masculine identity, subjectivity

I. INTRODUCTION

Henry Lawson's short story *The Drover's Wife* first appeared in *The Bulletin* magazine on July 23, 1892, and was later collected in *While the Billy Boils* (1896). For over a century, it has been anthologized, taught in Australian schools, and celebrated as an iconic representation of bush life. The title alone has become culturally resonant, later inspiring Russell Drysdale's famous 1945 painting, though Drysdale's image does not illustrate any specific scene from Lawson's narrative (Moorhouse 12). The image depicts an isolated woman, who became the archetype of the bush woman. At first glance, *The Drover's Wife* appears to celebrate female resilience. The protagonist, never named and always defined by her husband's occupation, lives alone with her four children in a remote slab hut. She manages floods, bushfires, sickness, and predators while her husband is away for months at a time. A superficial reading might even claim the story as proto-feminist, a rare nineteenth-

century portrait of a woman functioning without male protection. Yet, this reading collapses under closer examination. The same story that seems to admire the wife's toughness also systematically undermines her agency, mocks her femininity, justifies her husband's neglect, and credits her survival to male intervention. Contemporary rewritings make this tension explicit. Ryan O'Neill's *99 Interpretations of The Drover's Wives* (2018) offers dozens of parodic, critical, and sympathetic retellings. Murray Bail's (1975/1986) contribution, told from the perspective of the husband (who turns out to be a dentist whose wife left him for a drover), satirizes the original's masculine assumptions. Barbara Jefferis's (1980/1991) version functions as a feminist manifesto, granting the wife interiority and rage. As Frank Moorhouse argues, the proliferation of rewrites signals that Lawson's original is not a closed text but a contested one, a story that raises questions it cannot answer (Moorhouse 7).

This article argues that *The Drover's Wife* contains systematic sexist elements that operate at three levels: ideological, lexical, and narratological. Ideologically, the story naturalizes the subordination of female desire to domestic responsibility; lexically, it deploys a vocabulary that codes femininity as either deficient or duplicitous, and narratologically, it consistently attributes the wife's successes to male figures. Recognizing these mechanisms does not require us to discard Lawson, but to read him more critically and to understand why so many later writers have felt compelled to answer him back.

II. DISCUSSION

2.1 The Bush as Gendered National Symbol

The Australian "bush" was not a neutral backdrop. In the late nineteenth century, as the colonies moved toward Federation, artists, poets, and painters were explicitly tasked with forging a distinctive Australian identity (Taylor 130). The bush became the chosen symbol, i.e., sparsely populated, rugged, and distinct from both Indigenous Australia (which was erased) and the more "civilized" coastal cities. The bushman, characterized as hardworking, laconic, independent, and tough, became the archetypal Australian (Ward). Lawson was a central figure in this project, known even today as the "Bush Poet". His work helped romanticize the bush as the crucible of national character. But in this romanticization, women were assigned a specific, subordinate role. The bush was where men proved themselves; women were either absent or present only as a supportive character to men. *The Drover's Wife* is unusual precisely because it puts a woman at the center. Yet, it does so only to demonstrate that her centrality is contingent, temporary, and ultimately dependent on men.

Lawson describes the bush as "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 farther" (Lawson 135). The subject of this sentence is "a man". The bush's emptiness and monotony do not confine him; rather, they generate a restless desire for movement. The desire for escape and travel is typically associated with masculine traits. The wife, by contrast, is described as having adapted to stasis: "But 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" (Lawson 135). The narrative thus establishes a gendered division. Men yearn for freedom and abandon their families to pursue it; women learn to endure confinement.

2.2 The Persistence of Feminine Desire

The narrator claims that the wife has outgrown her youthful longings. Yet, the text provides persistent counter-evidence. For instance, every Sunday afternoon, "she dresses herself and the children in their best clothes and goes for a walk" (Lawson 135). This ritual is described without commentary, but it is deeply suggestive as a woman's desire to have a little control over her monotonous life. The act seems to be for its own sake, a maintenance of selfhood and self-love, a reaching toward a life that is not merely survival. Another striking detail is that, "She finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the YOUNG LADIES' JOURNAL, and, Heaven help her! takes a pleasure in the fashion-plates" (Lawson 131). The *Young Ladies' Journal* was a British publication featuring fashion, embroidery patterns, romantic fiction, and advice on being a proper lady. It was the opposite of Bush's idea of stoicism. The fact that the wife reads it and studies fashion plates indicates that her "girlish" desires are not dead. She still imagines herself as a subject of beauty and romance, and not merely a mother and housekeeper. However, the narrator refuses to portray the wife as having such desires and merely conveys them as curiosities, remnants of a self she has supposedly shed. The implicit message is that to be a responsible woman, she must kill the girl who loves fashion. This is a profoundly sexist logic. No equivalent demand is made of the drover. He may "forget sometimes that he is married" (Lawson 131), but this is presented as a minor fault, not a character flaw requiring him to renounce his masculine pleasures; however, the wife must renounce hers.

2.3 The Lexicon of Sexism

The story's sexism also operates at the level of word choices. For the crows, the narrator says, "they are cunning, but a woman's cunning is greater" (Lawson 134). On the surface, this seems to complement the wife's intelligence, but "cunning" is a loaded word. It implies deception, manipulation, and slyness, traits traditionally associated with negative stereotypes of femininity. It is a moralized term that suggests a willingness to achieve ends through dubious means. Moreover, the narrator uses the same word for the drunk stalker who "always cunningly enquires for the boss" (Lawson 134). The parallel is unmistakable as female intelligence is implicitly compared to male predation, showcasing that both are forms of threat. The shared vocabulary hints at an underlying hypocrisy as female agency, even when beneficial, is coded as slightly dangerous and untrustworthy.

2.4 The Justification of Male Absence

The drover has not been heard from in six months, and this seems to be a routine as "She is used to being left alone" (Lawson 131). During his absences, the wife had faced

bushfires, floods, pleuro-pneumonia, mad bullocks, predatory crows, and dealt with a stalker. She had done all of this while pregnant, nursing, and caring for her children. One might expect the narrative to criticize the husband, but instead it offers excuses for him: "He is careless, but a good enough husband" (Lawson 131). The phrase "good enough" lowers the standard for male behavior to an almost vanishing point. Another striking instance of excusing his behavior is: "He may forget sometimes that he is married; but if he has a good cheque when he comes back he will give most of it to her" (Lawson 131). To "forget" that one is married is a striking euphemism. In the context of a drover's life, moving away from home for a long time strongly implies infidelity. Yet, the narrator does not condemn this. He mentions it in an almost dismissive way, signaling that male infidelity is not a serious matter. The implication is that male sexual wanderlust is natural, even expected. Women, meanwhile, are confined to the hut, their sexuality invisible, unmentioned, and certainly unindulged. This double standard is not accidental. It reflects the ideological work of the Bulletin school, which Peter Wall describes as deliberately crafting a positive image of bushmen despite their often violent, drunken, and philandering behavior (Wall 25). The aim was to promote the idea that women should be grateful for whatever men provide. Lawson's story seems to comply fully with this ideology.

2.5 The Transfer of Agency to Male Figures

The most systematic sexist mechanism in the story is the way the wife's achievements are repeatedly credited to men. During the bushfire, the wife fights the flames alone, putting on "an old pair of her husband's trousers" to protect her legs (Lawson 133). Firefighting is coded as masculine; hence, she must adopt male clothing to perform the labor. The trousers are a disguise, a sign that she can only be a protector if she comes out of her feminine sphere and takes up a masculine form. The story follows, "The fire would have mastered her but for four excited bushmen who arrived in the nick of time" (Lawson 133). This implies that she was only able to beat the fire with the help of four bushmen who arrived at the last minute. This erases the hours she fought before their arrival, suggesting her own effort was insufficient. Similarly, during a flood, the wife saved her children, her livestock, and most of her possessions, but she seemed more worried about the dam that was built by her husband over many years. "She stood for hours in the drenching downpour, and dug an overflow gutter to save the dam...But she could not save it" (Lawson 133). Her efforts are rendered invisible and insufficient as the narrator states, "There are things that a bushwoman cannot do" (Lawson 133). Even her grief is not for her own losses but for her husband's: "...she

thought how her husband would feel when he came home and saw the result of years of labour swept away. She cried then" (Lawson 134).

Towards the end of the story, the same pattern of denouncing the wife's efforts is visible. The wife stays up all night, watching the floorboards to see where the snake has disappeared, while her children sleep nearby. At dawn, the snake emerges, and she kills it. This proves she is a protector with patience, courage, and precision. Yet, the narrator immediately undercuts it by not dwelling on it much: "She lifts the mangled reptile on the point of her stick, carries it to the fire, and throws it in" (Lawson 138). There is no celebration or reflection. The story ends not with her victory but with her exhaustion and sadness at being left alone. Her tears are presented as if she is sad for being a helpless woman, not as a strong woman who has been surviving and taking care of her children all this while by herself. In the end, her son sees her tears and says that he will never go 'drovin'. The emotional ending appears to be a loving moment between mother and son; however, it depicts the son viewing his mother as a helpless woman rather than the strong figure who has been protecting them. His promise to 'never go drovin' transfers the protective instinct to her son, again overshadowing the wife's struggle. Her heroism is normalized to the point of erasure.

2.6 The Denial of Grief and the Gendering of Emotion

Even the feelings and emotions of the wife have been given a sexist side to them. Throughout the narrative, she is placed in situations that would justify tears, such as loneliness, fear, exhaustion, and the memory of her dead child. But every time she almost cries, something intervenes. So, again, the author tried to separate a woman's emotional or sensitive side from that of being tough and responsible. Showing love is counted as womanly, and being sentimental is associated with women and their weaknesses. The author, in a way, targeted the debate about what a 'womanly' behavior is supposed to be. The choice of being a sensitive and caring mother or being a tough survivor comes into question. While focusing on survival, she had to put on a masculine facade and reject stereotyped feminine sentimentality, raising questions about the distinction between womanly and masculine traits, associating crying and loving with only womanly expressions. This is not a neutral observation but a prescription. The story valorizes the wife's stoicism while implicitly condemning emotional expression as a sign of weakness; however, the husband is never expected to suppress his desires or his wanderlust. He is free to "forget" his marriage. The wife, by contrast, must forget her grief. She must become an 'honorary man', i.e., tough,

silent, and uncomplaining, while still performing all the labour of mothering and homemaking as a good wife. Barbara Jefferis, in her feminist retelling, directly challenges this aspect of the original story. She notes that the drover's wife had experienced other, more painful situations than the snake night, including the death of that infant. However, in her version, Lawson, as a character, thought the snake story was "more appropriate to be told" and finally shows the wife tearing up (qtd. in Moorhouse 56). The choice of which trauma to narrate is itself a gendered editorial act. The male author selects the dramatic, external crisis (the snake) over the quiet, internal one (infant death).

III. CONCLUSION

There are clear instances of sexist elements throughout Lawson's story. While the author attempts to portray a strong bushwoman, the narrative never overlooks the importance of a man in a household and a woman's life. The wife is depicted as a woman who has lost her feminine desires and has claimed a masculine persona in order to take on family responsibilities. As a result, sensitivity and womanly desires are depicted as flaws in a woman, and she has had to give up her feminine desires in order to be responsible and strong. The wife in the story dealt with countless calamities and difficulties on her own, yet all of her struggles and hard work were minimized in some way, giving credit to a masculine figure, in the face of her absent husband, her two sons, or sometimes even male villagers. Lawson's bush ideology promises freedom, toughness, and self-reliance as the foundations of Australian identity. But for women like the drover's wife, that ideology delivers only containment, isolation, and the lesson of grateful submission. Therefore, *The Drover's Wife* is not a celebration of female resilience but a document of patriarchal containment disguised as bush realism.

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