

# Australian English and the perception of “Australianess” in Henry Lawson’s short stories<sup>1</sup>

## O inglês australiano e a percepção da identidade nacional nos contos de Henry Lawson

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**Abstract:** Henry Lawson (1867-1922) occupies a central position in the so called “Australian bush tradition”. Lawson’s poems, essays and short stories have contributed to the specific perception of “Australianess” that famously characterised the 1890s but has left its marks in the way Australians see themselves today. This work examines the phenomenon of the appropriation of the English language by Lawson and his expert use of local aspects of English in short stories such as “The Drover’s Wife” and “A Love Story”. That appropriation can be verified in the author’s adoption of “Australianisms” as well as in his writing style and the rhythm of his sentences, where the influence of popular literary modes, such as the “bush ballad” and the “yarn” can be detected. The combination of local themes and modes of expression with an objective, almost journalistic style outbalances mere provincial or parochial tendencies and makes of Lawson a precursor of the language of the modern short story even before it became mainstream in the rest of the world.

**Keywords:** Henry Lawson. Short stories. Australian identity. Australian English.

**Resumo:** Henry Lawson (1867-1922) ocupa posição central na chamada “tradição rural australiana”. Seus poemas, ensaios e contos, contribuíram para uma percepção específica de identidade australiana que marcou a década de 1890, mas que deixou vestígios no modo como os australianos ainda hoje veem a si mesmos. Este artigo examina o fenômeno da apropriação da língua inglesa por parte de Lawson e a habilidade com que o autor trabalhou com aspectos locais do inglês em contos tais como “The Drover’s Wife” e “A Love Story”. Essa apropriação pode ser verificada na adoção de “australianismos”, bem como no estilo da escrita de Lawson e no ritmo de suas frases, nas quais se pode detectar a influência de modalidades populares da literatura, tais como a das “baladas rurais” e dos “causos”. A combinação de temas e modos de expressão locais com um estilo objetivo e quase que jornalístico supera tendências provincianas e bairristas, fazendo de Lawson um precursor da linguagem do conto moderno mesmo antes desta se tornar uma tendência preponderante no resto do mundo.

**Palavras-chave:** Henry Lawson. Contos. Identidade australiana. Variante australiana do inglês.

<sup>1</sup> A more comprehensive version of this article, comparing Henry Lawson’s use of English to José de Alencar’s treatment of the Portuguese language in nineteenth century Brazil can be found in SCHEIDT, Déborah. A ficção rural-sertanista na formação das literaturas brasileira e australiana: um estudo de José de Alencar e Henry Lawson. Thesis (PhD degree in Literary Studies) – UFPR, Curitiba, 2014. p. 32-82. Available at <http://dspace.c3sl.ufpr.br/dspace/bitstream/handle/1884/35957/R%20-%20T%20-%20DEBORAH%20SCHEIDT.pdf?sequence=1> Accessed on 12 Nov. 2014.  
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As a result of the extensive British diaspora that took place between 1800 and 1876, when, according to Elizabeth Gordon and Andrea Sudbury (2002, p. 67), more than four million migrants officially left the British Isles towards the southern hemisphere, the language spoken in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa became the youngest variants of English in the world. Despite their late period of development, however, the peculiarities of Australasian and African Englishes are as heavily marked as earlier forms of the language and emphatically reflect the singular conditions of adaptation of those populations to their new environments.

Ken Inglis (1993, p. 65) remarks the speed with which the several strands of English brought to Australia by people from different parts of Britain and belonging to diverse social contexts were mingled together. The resulting linguistic blend tended towards hybridity and egalitarianism, as, in the colonies, according to Bruce Moore (2008, p. x), the new variety was passed on to former convicts and free migrants alike, in a process of levelling.

From the outset, Sidney Baker (1963, p. 103) points out, the differences between Australian and standard British Englishes have been mostly lexical and semantic as opposed to morphological or syntactic. Later on, phonetic distinctions would also become more obvious. According to Arthur Delbridge (1988, p. 49-50), rather than the more radical break from the British norm implemented by North Americans, a focus on diversity has always prevailed in Australia. Corroborating that assertion, Moore (2008, p. 104) notes that, unlike what occurred in the USA, there has never been an official spelling reform in Australian linguistics.

That might explain why, in general terms, Australian creative writers have tended to adopt a moderate stance regarding their language. Delbridge (1988, p. 50) mentions the writers’ feeling of uneasiness regarding the use of vernacular in their writings, and the common practice of adding glossaries to the texts, as a concession to foreign (mainly British) readers and editors. This was a tendency even in the 1890s, a period that became known in Australian history for its nationalistic fervor<sup>2</sup>. Despite their patriotic agendas, Australian end-of-century writers often felt torn between their desire for nationalistic expression and linguistic innovation, on the one hand, and their sense of indebtedness to the reader and to the demands of publishers and critics, on the other.

Henry Lawson (1867-1922), one of Australia’s most successful writers in the period, was not immune to this dilemma and two passages from Lawson’s short stories are quoted by Delbridge (1988, p. 57) to demonstrate that. The first one is in “Water Them Geraniums”, a short story published during Lawson’s stay in England. In “I always had a pup that I gave away, or sold and didn’t get paid for, or had ‘touched’ (stolen) as soon as it was old enough” (LAWSON apud. DELBRIDGE, 1988, p. 57),

<sup>2</sup> The so-called “1890s” saw the implementation of the federative system and several other political, social and labour changes. The decade can, in fact, be stretched from the 1880s to the beginning of World War I, according to some critics (WALLACE-CRABBE, 1982, p. 53; GREEN, 1968, p. 347).

Lawson highlights the Australianism by adding inverted commas, as well as by providing a definition in brackets.

It is only occasionally that Lawson adapts spelling to vernacular speech. This is the case of “And old Peter was set down as being an innercent sort of ole cove”, closing sentence for “The Fire at Ross’s farm”(LAWSON, apud DELBRIDGE, 1988, p. 57), where Lawson attempts to represent the long utterance of some Australian vowels. The fact that Lawson’s narrator had adopted standard English up to that point emphasises the ironic effect of the ending (the conclusion that old Peter was not as innocent as everyone believed), besides bringing the educated narrator closer to the main character, an uncouth bushman.

G. K. W. Johnston (1970, p. 199) points out that in most of his narratives, Lawson demonstrates a high degree of linguistic self-consciousness, when compared, for instance, to Rolf Boldrewood, a precursor of the fictional use of vernacular in Australian literature and an author Lawson admired. *Robbery Under Arms* (1882-83) was a western-style novel adapted to the Australian context and narrated in first person by the bushranger Dick Marston. Boldrewood’s relevance lies in his innovative use of an Australian voice, which appears in the novel, as Harry Heseltine (1986, p. 6) puts it, as an “integrated organic element in the very form and substance of fiction”, although in terms of content the novel can be disappointing, in providing a mere “romantic gloss on native experience”.

Elizabeth Webby (2000, p. 64) observes that a similar narrative approach to Boldrewood’s was about to appear in the USA, with Twain’s 1884 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Unlike Boldrewood and Twain, however, Lawson only occasionally adopts vernacular in his dialogues, whereas his narrators rarely employ colloquial speech and are sometimes rather formal.

The matter of the vernacular use of English has been addressed by Australian literary criticism from its very beginning. In the famous 1856 essay “Fiction Fields of Australia” Frederick Sinnett (2013, online) argues that local writers lacked the ability to provide the “artistic treatment” of dialogues inspired by everyday life, something that “old world” writers since Shakespeare would have no difficulty in achieving. For him the “glory and freshness” of Australian nature could easily lead writers to consider that a direct representation of the environment, without the mediation of art, would be sufficiently literary. The banality and monotony of everyday life, on the other hand, would also contribute to the problem:

Most of us have had more than enough of positive Australian dialogue, but we have never read an Australian dialogue artistically reported. We have heard squatter, and bullock driver, and digger, talk, and we think it would be very uninteresting, no doubt; and a verbatim report of the conversation of Brown, Jones, and Robinson, in the old world, would be equally

uninteresting, but we know by experience that genius can report it so as to be interesting – yet to leave it the conversation of Brown, Jones, and Robinson still. The first genius that performs similar service in Australia will dissipate our incredulity, as to this matter, for ever (SINNET, 2013, online).

Sinnet died young and never came to witness the advent of the vernacular “genius” in literature, which would happen in the 1890s, supported by the growing popularity of Australian newspapers and magazines.

The most famous, controversial and long-lasting periodical in Australia was the *Bulletin Magazine* (1880-2008). For Marjorie Barnard (1962, p. 418), the *Bulletin* “brought together and made vocal those who were reaching out towards a practical patriotism and who looked to the world about them for their inspiration and allegiance.” The extent of its reach was also remarkable: the *Bulletin* made its way to very distant and isolated communities, and even to illiterate people, as group reading was a common practice in itinerant workers’ camps.

On the one hand the magazine, with its mottoes “Australian for Australians” and “Australia for the white man”, was famously xenophobic, racist and misogynist. Its democratic role, on the other, was in welcoming poems, short stories, yarns and comments from ordinary people, in a language very close to that used in their daily life. On the pages of the magazine these contributions appeared, as Barnard (1962, p. 673) notes, side by side with those from professional writers as well as with anonymous folk literature, such as the traditional bush ballads<sup>3</sup>. Baker (1976, p. 410-411) claims that no other periodical is comparable to the *Bulletin* in terms of records of Australianisms (there were specific sections of the publication devoted to them) and bush lore.

<sup>3</sup> Bush ballads are folkloric rural-themed songs that tell a story.

The *Bulletin* also “discovered” and sponsored several of the writers who would become part of the Australian literary canon. Those did not tend to forget or abandon their popular roots. Before moving to Sydney and becoming a regular contributor to the *Bulletin*, Lawson had spent his childhood and part of his adolescence in the Australian interior. By the age of 13 he had already left school to help his father look after their small plot of land. His autobiographical writings mention the deficiencies of his education “in an old bark school”, taking lessons from a teacher whose weaknesses were spelling and grammar (LAWSON, 1984, p. 8).

These hardships, allied to the fact that all his life he fought against poverty, chronic hearing problems, depression and alcoholism, made Lawson uneasy in relation to the quality of his writing and highly sensitive to criticism. “I don’t know about the merit or value of my work”, he wrote, “all I know is that I started a shy, ignorant lad from the Bush, under every disadvantage arising from poverty and lack of education, and with the extra disadvantage of partial deafness thrown in” (LAWSON, 1984, p. 676).

From a linguistic standpoint, John Barnes (1986, p. 5) argues that much of what Lawson considers as drawbacks can be actually seen as advantages. His poor schooling, for instance, would have led him to mould his style into the language of the people around him. He adopted the vernacular because it was the only language he truly mastered. Very few authors were as successful in infusing their narratives with the same “naturalness”. For A. A. Phillips (1970, p. 74), Lawson’s representation of Australian rhythms is at the same time precise and subtle and his writings reproduce the relaxed undertones of the bushman’s speech, while avoiding the “irritating syntax and a brittle staccato” of many of his contemporaries in attempting to convert speech to writing.

As an example, Phillips quotes a passage from “Brighten’s Sister in law” in which the narrator, Joe Wilson, “chats” to the reader about the anxiety of witnessing a child having a convulsion: “You never saw a child in convulsions? Well, you don’t want to. It must be only a matter of seconds, but it seems long minutes; and half an hour afterwards the child might be laughing and playing with you, or stretched out dead” (LAWSON, apud PHILLIPS, 1970, p. 104). Phillips (1970, p. 105) considers that this utterance does not exceed the level of articulation expected from a bushman like Joe Wilson, but manages, at the same time, to add the right amount of emotional tension to the narrative. For Phillips, Lawson’s technique would be so subtle that “perhaps only an Australian reader can hear the rightness of Joe Wilson’s pace”.

Reflexions like those are relatively new to Australian criticism and could only occur after the standardisation of the Australian variety of English. In the first years of the colony the linguistic debate had been centred on the difficulty, or even on the impossibility, as Turner puts it, of the full adaption of a language that not only had been created in the northern hemisphere, but that was (and to a lesser degree still is) fed by oral and printed material from abroad, notably from Britain, although more recently, as in all the English-speaking world, the USA has become an important source of linguistic models (Baker, 1976, p. 398).

Two classic examples of the gap between the perception of the Australian space and its linguistic representation are the words “river” and “lake”. The images of European-style flowing rivers and crystal clear lakes would probably come to the mind of many urban Australians of the 1890s when those words were mentioned. These mental references would be informed by the overseas references (fairy tales, nursery rhymes, ballads, poems, novels and even school textbooks) that composed the average Australian’s cultural background, more than by the meagre, muddy and frequently dry or interrupted bodies of water that constitute rivers and lakes in several parts of the Australian territory, especially in dry seasons.

Until the 1890s, fiction had made indiscriminate use of these and other terms of the English tradition. Moore (2008, p. 37) considers the

forced adaptation of European words to the Australian environment in colonial times as a way of taming the immensity and primitiveness of the land, by "marking out [the colonizers'] ownership with the language of mastery, control, and boundaries". In fiction that strategy is very clear in *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859), a novel by Henry Kingsley, an Englishman who, inspired by his five-year stay in Australia wrote, having in mind a British public, a novel that Leonie Kramer (1981, p. 7) considers an "extravaganza" of local colour and narrative action.

Besides the obvious convict in the role of villain, the plot includes the mishaps that used to excite the European imagination regarding life in the Antipodes: drought, floods, bush fires, searching expeditions for children lost in the bush and aboriginal attacks. The protagonists, English immigrants and their offspring, on the other hand, display courage and heroism to face those adversities, living a leisurely life that is closer to that of British gentry than to the daily struggle of farmers against the harshness of the Australian outback.

Also the budgerigars, cockatoos, koalas, kangaroos and so many other native elements that make up the background of the novel are "domesticated" by Kingsley through his lexical choice of a scenery also made of "lakes", "rivers" and dozens of other terms even more markedly British, such as "glens", "woods", "fields" and "meadows", many of those sanctioned by the English romantic literature. Land appropriation is thus, doubly marked by the colonizers' merit as well as by the subjection of nature to European linguistic standards.

It might be a challenge for early authors to admit that Her Majesty's subjects could have difficulty in controlling the colonial space. Patrick Morgan (1988, p. 246) observes that

[...]life in the open plains did not suit the intricate and exotic Victorian imagination, which could no longer take shelter in the wooded valleys of the ranges. Nor had the arcadian ideal worked. Large stations, struggling selectors and the nomadic life of outback workers fitted in with neither. The real problem was neither human villainy (as in Kingsley) nor natural disasters like flood, fire and drought (as in the squatting novels) but something more elusive. People came to Australia and to the bush full of high hopes and excitement, but purpose and meaning quickly drained away. Human life and human society seemed not to have taken root here.

In other words, Morgan concludes that Victorian fiction, based on abundant physical action and the transposition of conventional obstacles prior to the achievement of a "happy ending", could not deal with the actual harshness, monotony and tediousness of Australian rural life.

By adopting conciseness and a certain degree of linguistic self-awareness, end-of-century authors set out to react against this Eurocentric

view of Australia. In Turner's (1972, p. 171) view, the writers of the period are ready to

use the local words and welcome the local flavor, to cultivate a nationalist school of writing, to be, as Furphy put it, "offensively Australian" and proud of it. This proves very difficult in practice. For one thing, there is no separate language, only Australian elements in a predominantly English language. Unless a good deal of Australian vocabulary can be used, the few Australianisms will be as obtrusive as bowyangs worn with an English suit.<sup>4</sup>

Lawson's fictional, poetic and critical production frequently addresses these matters and is "offensively Australian" both in terms of form and content. In the article "Some Popular Australian Mistakes" he includes, among other problematic terms for the Australian imagination, "lake" and "river": "A river is not a broad, shining stream with green banks and tall, dense eucalypti walls; it is more often a string of muddy water-holes" and "an Australian lake is not a lake; it is either a sheet of brackish water or a patch of dry sand" (LAWSON, 1984, p. 274).

"Lake Eliza" is a poetic/comic version of the same perception. During an exhausting walk through the outback in December, the speaker of the poem and his mate are told to camp next to the so-called lake. That brings about the prospect of spending Christmas among "green and shady banks" and "pleasant waters". Their arrival, however, is completely anticlimactic:

A patch of grey discoloured sand,  
A fringe of tufty grasses,  
A lonely pub in mulga scrub  
Is all the stranger passes.  
He'd pass the Lake a dozen times  
And yet be none the wiser;  
I hope that I shall never be  
As dry as Lake Eliza. (LAWSON, 1984, p. 269)

Similarly to Lawson's strategy in "The Fire at Ross's Farm" mentioned above, here Lawson adopts informal standard English all along, adding a subtle Australian touch in the last line, as "Eliza", according to Robyn Burrows and Alan Barton (2009, Kindle edition), would be pronounced "Eliser" in broad Australian English (providing the rhyme with "wiser").

The poem is also offensively Australian in its (self)critical tone. It mocks the European tradition of "white Christmas" and rejects the quiet dignity of the English romantic poets' approach to nature and to the people who live close to the natural world. This anti-romantic tendency manifests itself not only in the ugliness of the scenery, but also in the cunning intent

<sup>4</sup> "Bowyangs" are pieces of leather or other material tied to rural workers' trousers to protect them from dirt or from insects or snakes that might find their way up their legs while working in the fields.

of the bushman who advises the travellers to camp by the lake, in the credulity of the speaker, an urban dweller unfamiliar with the outback, and even in the allusion to the author’s own alcoholism, if the poem is viewed from a (plausible) autobiographical standpoint.

Drawing inspiration from the huge and dry extensions of land of the Australian interior and the human types who lived, worked or journeyed there, as well as from popular modes of literature, Lawson became one of the most relevant authors in the so called “Australian (bush) tradition” of the 1890s, which, not coincidentally, also came to be known as “the Lawson tradition”. However, his position is very peculiar within that tradition, as its main subject matter – the Australian bush – does not go through the usual mythicising process that enlarges it in a hyperbolic manner.

In sharp contrast to the treatment that most of his fellow authors – the most famous one is Banjo Paterson – give to rural Australia, in the majority of Lawson’s poems and stories, “the bush” and “the outback”<sup>5</sup> are not bucolic fantasies, but inverted idyls, or even anti-hyperboles. Brian Matthews (2009, p. 347) perceives that when Lawson looks at his own land, he sees the opposite of “A new heaven and a new earth!”, Henry Kingsley’s well-known sentence to define Australia in *The recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*. For Matthews, the change of focus that his “anti-paradise” requires, also goes through linguistic innovation: “different words; different rhythms; sparser, tougher, more pared back formulations”.

Palmer (1954, p. 11) observes that, at the same time that Lawson is “indubitably a fresh voice, not raised to an unnatural pitch to catch the ears of people overseas” he is also a traditional story teller who “yarn[s] in an intimate way to a familiar audience”. The short story is the suitable medium to express these movements of innovation and continuity. Phillips (1966, p. 1) considers the development of the Australian short fiction at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be a true revolution in the literatures in English language, so much so that it started to present modern characteristics even before its European or North American counterparts.

The fact that the main medium for those stories were, initially, newspapers and magazines rather than books, had great impact on their stylistic development. Green (1968, p. 531) observes how editors insisted that the stories submitted to periodicals should be

on the average the shortest of all short stories: sentences had to be brief and words must not be wasted; descriptive and explanatory matter must be cut to a minimum. Other requirements were simplicity, directness, realism and dramatic force.

As the *Bulletin* was the most popular of the 1890s magazines, those requirements became known as the “*Bulletin* style”. Lawson’s 130-word

<sup>5</sup> The word “bush” comes from the Dutch expression “bosch”. It originally referred to lands covered in native vegetation and not yet explored or prepared for cultivation in South Africa. During the Australian colonization, the expressions “woods” and “forests” gradually gave way to “the bush”. Later on the word became a general term to refer to rural areas closer to the coast, as opposed to “the outback”, which is drier and located further inland, although there are no official boundary lines and those expressions are frequently interchangeable.



“A love story”, published in the *Bulletin* in 1893 is a paradigm for the term, so short that can be fully transcribed below:

“He went up-country and was reported dead,” said the traveler to his mate, as they sat down on their swags.

“He was reported to have been drowned while trying to swim his horses across a billabong. His girl broke her heart – and mended it again; then he turned up alive, and drier than ever, and married her, and broke her heart for certain. And – she died.”

He spat in the dust and scraped it impatiently with his foot.

“She was – she was an old sweetheart of mine,” he said, speaking low and as if to himself.

He rested his long arm listlessly on his knee, and absently scraped a cross in the dust, between his feet, with the blade of a pocket knife.

“Ah, well – never mind... The billy’s boiling, Joe.” (LAWSON, 1984, p. 300)

Brian Kiernan (1984, p. viii) considers this a precursor of the style modernists – Hemingway specifically comes to his mind – would make famous half a century later. The ingenious title at the same time frustrates the reader’s expectations and points to “emotional depths beneath the laconic surface”. Lawson’s skill in treating oral discourse lies in hiding the “love story” in the pauses, the moments of hesitation (strategically marked in the dialogues) and even in the narrator’s puzzling actions (what would be the significance of the drawing on the floor?). For Colin Roderick (1985, p. 78), the story is “a miracle of compression”, as it creates, with a few words, “a world of imaginative reconstruction”.

Lawson also distinguished himself for his expert use of Australianisms. For Green (1968, p. 546), in Lawson’s writings “the bush idioms are not dragged in, as with some Australian writers, but occur naturally”. “A love story” reproduces a yarn narrated around a campfire. Australianisms (a “swag” is the bundle, usually a rolled-up blanket, in which the bushman carries his belonging and a “billabong” is a small branch of river) are skillfully included in the opening and closing sections of the narrative, as a sort of frame to establish the atmosphere of “mateship” among travellers, “while the billy boils”, i.e., the bushman’s common practice of making tea over a campfire in a kind of tin with a handle. The contrast between the physicality of the rough, male environment and the brief, enigmatic and lyrical recollection is one of the strong points of the story.

Lawson’s ability to use the English language and its local particularities to produce a certain state of mind while emphasizing the Australianess of the environment is also very visible in “The Drover’s wife”. Published originally in the *Bulletin* in 1892, it has become, according to Bennet (2002, p. 60), the most frequently anthologised Australian short story ever.

From the first line the Australian rural setting is presented as a determining element. The opening paragraphs evoke the immensity, the loneliness and monotony that characterise Lawson's peculiar view of the Australian bush:

The two-roomed house is built of round timber, slabs, and stringy-bark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, veranda included.

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 she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization – a shanty on the main road.

The drover, an ex-squatter, is away with sheep. His wife and children are left here alone (LAWSON, 1984, p. 238).

Green (1968, p. 547) considers these sentences "jerky and disconnected", and the style "rough and bare as slabs of adzed hardwood". Those turn out to be positive traits, however, as form "matches the raw, rough crudity of the subject matter and is instinct with grim force." Indeed, if we observe the pauses indicated by the semantic sections in certain parts of the story, the short segments with few adjectives – "Bush all round – / bush with no horizon / for the country is flat. / No ranges in the distance" – sound almost like verses, but a coarse kind of poetry, resembling axe strikes and making the reader uncomfortable.

Lawson's lexical choices highlight the close relationships between the domestic and the wild domains. The materials that compose the drover's wife's house – "round timber, slabs, and stringy-bark" – have all been taken from the vicinity, having been transplanted, without much processing, to the domestic environment. The human dwelling is, thus, almost blended into the surrounding wilderness.

This is especially clear in the second paragraph, with the expression "Bush all around", followed by a listing of the desolate characteristics of such scenery. Significantly, the human elements of the story are also characterised in terms of their relationships with the environment. The absent "drover" (a person who drives herds of cattle or sheep) is a former "squatter" (a large property owner) who has been defeated by the lack of rain. The four children are "dried-up-looking". The wife is described as "gaunt, sunbrowned". Wild features are attributed to the older boy – "an urchin of eleven" – and even to the brave snake-hunting dog who, ironically in such a dry land, is called Alligator.

The "action", properly, is minimal: as a storm approaches, a poisonous snake enters the house and hides under the floor. While, as a safety measure, the children sleep on the kitchen table, the protagonist,

armed with a piece of wood, faces a long night of vigil and reminiscence. In the morning the snake is captured by Alligator and killed by the woman.

The scarcity of physical action is balanced by the highly suggestive character of the narration, which reaches its climax with the killing of the snake:

Thud, thud comes the woman's club on the ground. Alligator pulls again. Thud, thud. Alligator gives another pull and he has the snake out – a black brute, five feet long. The head rises to dart about, but the dog has the enemy close to the neck. He is a big, heavy dog, but quick as a terrier. He shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind. The eldest boy wakes up, seizes his stick, and tries to get out of bed, but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron. Thud, thud – the snake's back is broken in several places. Thud, thud – its head is crushed, and Alligator's nose skinned again. (LAWSON, 1984, p. 243)

The alternation between narration and description reproduces textually the noise and roughness of the scene, also evoking its violence, at the same time that the comic touch of the onomatopoeias moderates the tone.

The psychological action of the story is also related to the harshness of life in the Australian outback. In such a night when wilderness is especially bound to invade the domestic sphere – not only through the presence of the snake, but also through the storm that, from time to time, lightens up the gaps on the walls, the wind that threatens to extinguish the candle flame and the noise of the opossums that comes from outside – the protagonist recollects several other critical moments, some of them even more serious than the one she's going through, which she had to face single-handedly: a bush fire, the breaking of a dam during a flood, cattle diseases, the attack of a mad bull, suspicious-looking men knocking at her door, the time when the doctor did not arrive in time to assist her in child labour or when she herself had to carry the body of a dead child to the nearest village.

For Adrian Mitchell (1981, p. 70) this story reflects a particularity of Lawson's talent in using language to “aggravate the conditions of bush experience, to generate a particular effect, sometimes a mood, sometimes an outer landscape to explain, or precipitate, an inner crisis.” Such exacerbation of the rural experience is a new way to conceive the Australian rural life, at a time when most Australian literature consisted of novels that either followed Victorian models or were little less than “instruction manuals” to attract immigrants. Lawson's themes and style were a lot closer to what his public saw and heard about them, despite his intrinsic pessimism and occasional sentimentalism. The former was compensated by the empathy he felt for the people of the bush and the latter by the ironic touches that frequently break the more melodramatic parts.

Early Lawson critics, possibly shocked by his “offensive Australian” treatment of the English language, claimed that Lawson’s success would be due to his accurate perception of vernacular and a certain opportunism towards anecdotal situations of popular taste, merely thrown on paper without much thought. Phillips (1966, p. 2) argues that, although the quality of his production as a whole is highly uneven, Lawson’s critics tended to underestimate his skill not because of his lack of craftsmanship, but because his technique was so well-developed and self-assured that it became imperceptible to the naked eye.

Besides challenging the received relationships between the perception and representation of space, an important contribution of Lawson was to add a new perspective to literary Australianess. Australian elements, in Lawson’s work, even when viewed from a critical perspective, were always seen as worthy of constituting the raw material for a literary tradition. However, for G. A. Wilkes (1958, p. 23), Lawson’s literary expression is original and superior to his contemporaries’ because the environment is taken for granted, thus allowing the author to

get on with the story. He does not give the effect of self-consciousness, found in so many of his contemporaries – the impression that they must have lain awake thinking how “Australian” their work should be. If Lawson has put on record for ever the Australia of the track, the shanty, the shearing-shed and the camp fire, he has done so largely by assuming them as part of the world with which his stories deal.

In his stories, Lawson used the familiarity and affection that his contemporaries felt for their popular literature to his advantage. He also took his chances at giving, with different degrees of success, the “artistic treatment” to the speeches of farmers, herd drivers and miners that, half a century before, Sinnet (2013, online) had perceived as one of the factors hindering the development of a more spontaneous and genuine type of Australian literature.

Using words sparingly and exploring the rhythms of phrases, Lawson manages to evoke the feeling of “Australianess” in literature, associating it to the peculiar characteristics of rural areas as well as to his characters’ inner lives. When he successfully combined the popular influences of bush ballads and yarns to an objective and journalistic style, Lawson also overcame parochial limitations, becoming a precursor of the modern short story language even when it was still embryonic in other parts of the world.

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