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94

99 REINTERPRETATIONS OF

THE DROVER'S WIVES

HENRY LAWSON'S AUSTRALIAN CLASSIC

83

82

81

80

79

77

RYAN O'NEILL

WINNER OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S LITERARY AWARD FOR FICTION

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RYAN
O'NEILL

 **brio**
BOOKS

The Drover's Wife	xi
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1. Table of Contents	1
2. Hemingwayesque	3
3. Tanka	7
4. A Year 8 English Essay	8
5. List of Ingredients	11
6. A Cryptic Crossword	12
7. A Child's Drawing	17
8. An Agony Aunt Column	18
9. Sporting Commentary	20
10. A Disease	26
11. Lipogram	28
12. Freudian	30
13. A Mixtape	31
14. A 1950s Children's Book	32
15. McCarthyesque	35
16. Parable	38
17. Editorial Comments	39
18. A Children's Toy	42
19. Elizabethan	43
20. Lecture Slides	48
21. A Gossip Column	54
22. Glaswegian	56
23. A Self-Published Novel Cover	58
24. Cento	59
25. A Pop Song	62
26. A Fine Wine	65
27. A 1980s Computer Game	66
28. Yoked Sentences	70
29. A Dance	73
30. A School Play	75
31. Cosmo Quiz	79
32. Political Cartoon	83
33. A Fable	84

34. Emojis	85
35. Backwards	87
36. A Card Game	89
37. Horoscope	91
38. Clichés	92
39. Tweets	95
40. A Question Asked by an Audience Member at a Writers' Festival	99
41. Verbless	102
42. An Amazon Book Review.	104
43. A Choose Your Own Adventure Book	106
44. Limerick	114
45. An Abstract Painting	115
46. An Insurance Claim	116
47. A Real Estate Advertisement	118
48. Songs from a Broadway Musical.	119
49. Pangram	121
50. A Comic Strip.	122
51. Sensory	124
52. Interrogative	128
53. Stream of Consciousness.	131
54. Onomatopoeia.	133
55. Chronological	135
56. A Reality TV Show.	138
57. Epic	145
58. Maths Problems	148
59. An RSPCA Report.	151
60. A Letter to the <i>Daily Telegraph</i>	153
61. A Movie Review	154
62. Wordcloud.	159
63. Hangman.	160
64. Monosyllabic	161
65. Meme	163
66. A Golden Age Detective Novel	164
67. Imagist.	171
68. Ocker.	172
69. A Self-Help Book	175
70. A Spam Email.	177
71. Punctuation.	180

72. Conditional	181
73. An Absurdist Play	183
74. N + 7	187
75. Endorsements	188
76. Scratch and Sniff	191
77. TV Guide	192
78. Spoonerisms	195
79. Contemporary	197
80. Lovecraftian	199
81. Abecedarian	202
82. Imperative	204
83. Internet Comments	206
84. Fill in the Blanks	210
85. Finnegans Wife	212
86. Classifieds	214
87. Bar Graph	218
88. Trivia Questions	219
89. Academese	221
90. Bush Ballad	225
91. Biographical	228
92. Univocalic	234
93. Wordsearch	236
94. A Crass American Sitcom	237
95. Postmodern	247
96. Bibliography	250
97. Index	252
98. A Note on the Type	255
99. Paint Swatches	inside cover

The Drover's Wife

by Henry Lawson

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.

Four ragged, dried-up-looking children are playing about the house. Suddenly one of them yells: 'Snake! Mother, here's a snake!'

The gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman dashes from the kitchen, snatches her baby from the ground, holds it on her left hip, and reaches for a stick.

'Where is it?'

'Here! gone into the wood-heap!' yells the eldest boy

— a sharp-faced urchin of eleven. 'Stop there, mother! I'll have him. Stand back! I'll have the beggar!'

'Tommy, come here, or you'll be bit. Come here at once when I tell you, you little wretch!'

The youngster comes reluctantly, carrying a stick bigger than himself. Then he yells, triumphantly:

'There it goes — under the house!' and darts away with club uplifted. At the same time the big, black, yellow-eyed dog-of-all-breeds, who has shown the wildest interest in the proceedings, breaks his chain and rushes after that snake. He is a moment late, however, and his nose reaches the crack in the slabs just as the end of its tail disappears. Almost at the same moment the boy's club comes down and skins the aforesaid nose. Alligator takes small notice of this, and proceeds to undermine the building; but he is subdued after a struggle and chained up. They cannot afford to lose him.

The drover's wife makes the children stand together near the dog-house while she watches for the snake. She gets two small dishes of milk and sets them down near the wall to tempt it to come out; but an hour goes by and it does not show itself.

It is near sunset, and a thunderstorm is coming. The children must be brought inside. She will not take them into the house, for she knows the snake is there, and may at any moment come up through a crack in the rough slab floor; so she carries several armfuls of firewood into the kitchen, and then takes the children there. The kitchen has no floor — or, rather, an earthen one — called a 'ground floor' in this part of the bush. There is a large, roughly-made table in the centre of the place. She brings the children in, and makes them get

on this table. They are two boys and two girls — mere babies. She gives them some supper, and then, before it gets dark, she goes into the house, and snatches up some pillows and bedclothes — expecting to see or lay her hand on the snake any minute. She makes a bed on the kitchen table for the children, and sits down beside it to watch all night.

She has an eye on the corner, and a green sapling club laid in readiness on the dresser by her side; also her sewing basket and a copy of the *Young Ladies' Journal*. She has brought the dog into the room.

Tommy turns in, under protest, but says he'll lie awake all night and smash that blinded snake.

His mother asks him how many times she has told him not to swear.

He has his club with him under the bedclothes, and Jacky protests:

'Mummy! Tommy's skinnin' me alive wif his club. Make him take it out.'

Tommy: 'Shet up, you little ——! D'yer want to be bit with the snake?'

Jacky shuts up.

'If yer bit,' says Tommy, after a pause, 'you'll swell up, an' smell, an' turn red an' green an' blue all over till yer bust. Won't he, mother?'

'Now then, don't frighten the child. Go to sleep,' she says.

The two younger children go to sleep, and now and then Jacky complains of being 'skeezed.' More room is made for him. Presently Tommy says: 'Mother! listen to them (adjective) little possums. I'd like to screw their blanky necks.'

And Jacky protests drowsily.

'But they don't hurt us, the little blanks!'

Mother: 'There, I told you you'd teach Jacky to swear.' But the remark makes her smile. Jacky goes to sleep.

Presently Tommy asks: 'Mother! Do you think they'll ever extricate the (adjective) kangaroo?'

'Lord! How am I to know, child? Go to sleep.'

'Will you wake me if the snake comes out?'

'Yes. Go to sleep.'

Near midnight. The children are all asleep and she sits there still, sewing and reading by turns. From time to time she glances round the floor and wall-plate, and, whenever she hears a noise, she reaches for the stick. The thunderstorm comes on, and the wind, rushing through the cracks in the slab wall, threatens to blow out her candle. She places it on a sheltered part of the dresser and fixes up a newspaper to protect it. At every flash of lightning, the cracks between the slabs gleam like polished silver. The thunder rolls, and the rain comes down in torrents.

Alligator lies at full length on the floor, with his eyes turned towards the partition. She knows by this that the snake is there. There are large cracks in that wall opening under the floor of the dwelling-house.

She is not a coward, but recent events have shaken her nerves. A little son of her brother-in-law was lately bitten by a snake, and died. Besides, she has not heard from her husband for six months, and is anxious about him.

He was a drover, and started squatting here when they were married. The drought of 18 — ruined him. He had to sacrifice the remnant of his flock and go

droving again. He intends to move his family into the nearest town when he comes back, and, in the meantime, his brother, who keeps a shanty on the main road, comes over about once a month with provisions. The wife has still a couple of cows, one horse, and a few sheep. The brother-in-law kills one of the latter occasionally, gives her what she needs of it, and takes the rest in return for other provisions. She is used to being left alone. She once lived like this for eighteen months. As a girl she built the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead. 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.

Her husband is an Australian, and so is she. He is careless, but a good enough husband. If he had the means he would take her to the city and keep her there like a princess. They are used to being apart, or at least she is. 'No use fretting,' she says. 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. When he had money he took her to the city several times — hired a railway sleeping compartment, and put up at the best hotels. He also bought her a buggy, but they had to sacrifice that along with the rest.

The last two children were born in the bush — one while her husband was bringing a drunken doctor, by force, to attend to her. She was alone on this occasion, and very weak. She had been ill with a fever. She prayed to God to send her assistance. God sent Black Mary — the 'whitest' gin in all the land. Or, at least, God sent King Jimmy first, and he sent Black Mary.

He put his black face round the door post, took in the situation at a glance, and said cheerfully: 'All right, missus — I bring my old woman, she down alonga creek.'

One of the children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child.

It must be near one or two o'clock. The fire is burning low. Alligator lies with his head resting on his paws, and watches the wall. He is not a very beautiful dog, and the light shows numerous old wounds where the hair will not grow. He is afraid of nothing on the face of the earth or under it. He will tackle a bullock as readily as he will tackle a flea. He hates all other dogs — except kangaroo-dogs — and has a marked dislike to friends or relations of the family. They seldom call, however. He sometimes makes friends with strangers. He hates snakes and has killed many, but he will be bitten some day and die; most snake-dogs end that way.

Now and then the bushwoman lays down her work and watches, and listens, and thinks. She thinks of things in her own life, for there is little else to think about.

The rain will make the grass grow, and this reminds her how she fought a bush-fire once while her husband was away. The grass was long, and very dry, and the fire threatened to burn her out. She put on an old pair of her husband's trousers and beat out the flames with a green bough, till great drops of sooty perspiration

stood out on her forehead and ran in streaks down her blackened arms. The sight of his mother in trousers greatly amused Tommy, who worked like a little hero by her side, but the terrified baby howled lustily for his 'mummy.' The fire would have mastered her but for four excited bushmen who arrived in the nick of time. It was a mixed-up affair all round; when she went to take up the baby he screamed and struggled convulsively, thinking it was a 'blackman;' and Alligator, trusting more to the child's sense than his own instinct, charged furiously, and (being old and slightly deaf) did not in his excitement at first recognize his mistress's voice, but continued to hang on to the mole-skins until choked off by Tommy with a saddle-strap. The dog's sorrow for his blunder, and his anxiety to let it be known that it was all a mistake, was as evident as his ragged tail and a twelve-inch grin could make it. It was a glorious time for the boys; a day to look back to, and talk about, and laugh over for many years.

She thinks how she fought a flood during her husband's absence. She stood for hours in the drenching downpour, and dug an overflow gutter to save the dam across the creek. But she could not save it. There are things that a bushwoman can not do. Next morning the dam was broken, and her heart was nearly broken too, for she thought how her husband would feel when he came home and saw the result of years of labour swept away. She cried then.

She also fought the pleuro-pneumonia — dosed and bled the few remaining cattle, and wept again when her two best cows died.

Again, she fought a mad bullock that besieged the

house for a day. She made bullets and fired at him through cracks in the slabs with an old shot-gun. He was dead in the morning. She skinned him and got seventeen-and-sixpence for the hide.

She also fights the crows and eagles that have designs on her chickens. Her plan of campaign is very original. The children cry 'Crows, mother!' and she rushes out and aims a broomstick at the birds as though it were a gun, and says 'Bung!' The crows leave in a hurry; they are cunning, but a woman's cunning is greater.

Occasionally a bushman in the horrors, or a villainous-looking sundowner, comes and nearly scares the life out of her. She generally tells the suspicious-looking stranger that her husband and two sons are at work below the dam, or over at the yard, for he always cunningly inquires for the boss.

Only last week a gallows-faced swagman — having satisfied himself that there were no men on the place — threw his swag down on the veranda, and demanded tucker. She gave him something to eat; then he expressed his intention of staying for the night. It was sundown then. She got a batten from the sofa, loosened the dog, and confronted the stranger, holding the batten in one hand and the dog's collar with the other. 'Now you go!' she said. He looked at her and at the dog, said 'All right, mum,' in a cringing tone, and left. She was a determined-looking woman, and Alligator's yellow eyes glared unpleasantly — besides, the dog's chewing-up apparatus greatly resembled that of the reptile he was named after.

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; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. 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. 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 ship can sail — and farther.

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.

She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children.

She seems contented with her lot. She loves her children, but has no time to show it. She seems harsh to them. Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the 'womanly' or sentimental side of nature.

It must be near morning now; but the clock is in the dwellinghouse. Her candle is nearly done; she forgot that she was out of candles. Some more wood must be

got to keep the fire up, and so she shuts the dog inside and hurries round to the woodheap. The rain has cleared off. She seizes a stick, pulls it out, and — crash! the whole pile collapses.

Yesterday she bargained with a stray blackfellow to bring her some wood, and while he was at work she went in search of a missing cow. She was absent an hour or so, and the native black made good use of his time. On her return she was so astonished to see a good heap of wood by the chimney, that she gave him an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy. He thanked her, and left with head erect and chest well out. He was the last of his tribe and a King; but he had built that wood-heap hollow.

She is hurt now, and tears spring to her eyes as she sits down again by the table. She takes up a handkerchief to wipe the tears away, but pokes her eyes with her bare fingers instead. The handkerchief is full of holes, and she finds that she has put her thumb through one, and her forefinger through another.

This makes her laugh, to the surprise of the dog. She has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous; and some time or other she will amuse bushmen with the story.

She had been amused before like that. One day she sat down 'to have a good cry,' as she said — and the old cat rubbed against her dress and 'cried too.' Then she had to laugh.

It must be near daylight now. The room is very close and hot because of the fire. Alligator still watches the

wall from time to time. Suddenly he becomes greatly interested; he draws himself a few inches nearer the partition, and a thrill runs through his body. The hair on the back of his neck begins to bristle, and the battle-light is in his yellow eyes. She knows what this means, and lays her hand on the stick. The lower end of one of the partition slabs has a large crack on both sides. An evil pair of small, bright bead-like eyes glisten at one of these holes. The snake — a black one — comes slowly out, about a foot, and moves its head up and down. The dog lies still, and the woman sits as one fascinated. The snake comes out a foot farther. She lifts her stick, and the reptile, as though suddenly aware of danger, sticks his head in through the crack on the other side of the slab, and hurries to get his tail round after him. Alligator springs, and his jaws come together with a snap. He misses, for his nose is large, and the snake's body close down in the angle formed by the slabs and the floor. He snaps again as the tail comes round. He has the snake now, and tugs it out eighteen inches. 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.

She lifts the mangled reptile on the point of her

stick, carries it to the fire, and throws it in; then piles on the wood and watches the snake burn. The boy and dog watch too. She lays her hand on the dog's head, and all the fierce, angry light dies out of his yellow eyes. The younger children are quieted, and presently go to sleep. The dirty-legged boy stands for a moment in his shirt, watching the fire. Presently he looks up at her, sees the tears in her eyes, and, throwing his arms round her neck exclaims:

'Mother, I won't never go drovin'; blarst me if I do!'
And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush.

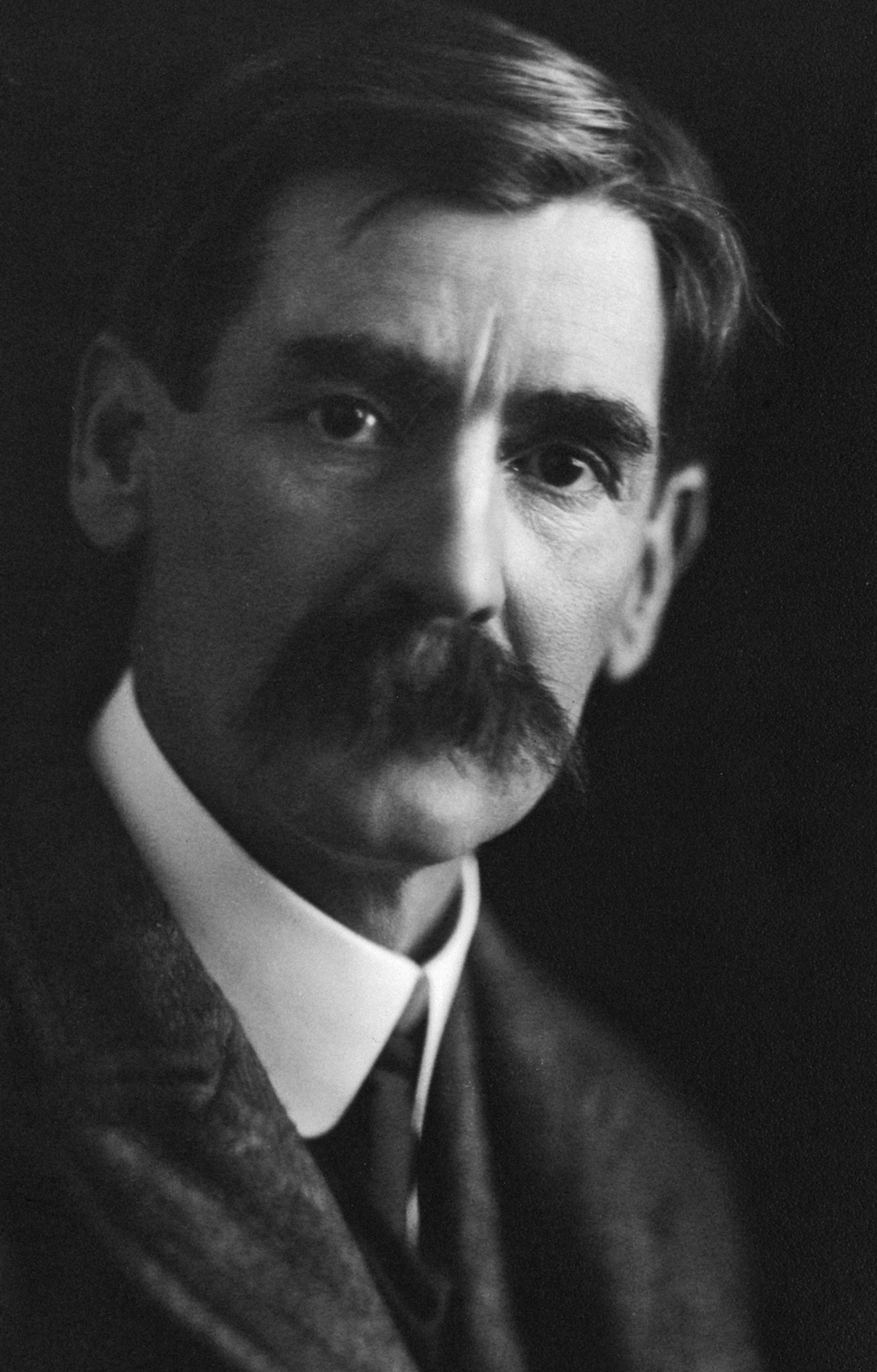


Table of Contents

Chapter I: In which the scene is set, namely an out-of-the-way shack in the Australian bush in the dying years of the nineteenth century

Chapter II: Wherein some child's play is most rudely interrupted by a malevolent interloper

Chapter III: In which both our villain, the black snake, and our heroine, the drover's wife, are introduced, and the manner of their first meeting

Chapter IV: Of the indignities suffered by Alligator the dog in pursuit of his *bête noire*

Chapter V: In which thunder is heard and lightning is seen and a thunderous decision is not lightly made

Chapter VI: Of the meal the family enjoyed, and its aftermath

Chapter VII: In which the manifold demerits of (adjective) little possums are discussed

Chapter VIII: In which are contained several memories and opinions on the absent drover, by his wife

Chapter IX: Of how the drover's wife passed her nighttime vigil

Chapter X: Which treats of our heroine's melancholy reminiscences, including and not limited to, her early married life, Black Mary, King Jimmy, bushfires, floods and mad bullocks

Chapter XI: Wherein our heroine discovers she has been cheated, and of how weeping can turn into laughter

Chapter XII: In which an old adversary reappears, and battle is joined once more

Chapter XIII: Of the vanquishing of the snake, and its fiery aftermath

Chapter XIV: Wherein the ties of family are reaffirmed

Chapter XV: In which the day begins anew

Hemingwayesque

He was a young boy who lived in a shack in the bush and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a snake. The five of them lived in the shack: the boy, his mother, his younger brother and his two little sisters. It was very hot and the children played in the dust while the woman washed up inside. There was bush all around with hills like red kangaroos in the distance. On most days the boy looked out there for a snake and on other days he looked out there for something else. But he didn't like to think about that.

'Say, Tommy,' his brother said.

The boy took a swig from the tin cup of water and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

'Yeah?'

'I saw somethin' move over there. Across the creek and into the trees.'

'Sure you did.'

'But I—'

'Scram!'

'Alright, Tommy. Alright. I didn't mean nothin''

His brother grinned nervously. The boy waited a moment, shrugged, and went round the corner of the house. A snake was basking in the sun. It was black

and long and it looked up at him with dead eyes. The boy swore, and took two slow steps backward. There was a stick on the ground they had been using to play 'Soldier's Home' and he squatted down for it.

'Snake, Ma! Here's a snake!'

It was his brother shouting. A moment later the woman appeared, highball in hand. She might have been pretty once, but that was a long time ago.

'Well, well. What have we here?' she said.

'Oh, cut it out,' he said. 'You know what it is. Let me kill it.'

'Alligator!' the woman called. 'Oh, Alligator!'

'He'd let me kill it,' the boy said, and he spat.

The woman looked amused. 'He's not around,' she said.

The dog came from his kennel. It was black with yellow eyes and old. The boy loved it and now he was afraid for it and ashamed of his fear. The dog growled and snapped at the snake and the snake disappeared under the house.

'Well, isn't this too wonderful?' the woman said.

'Would you do something for me now?' the boy asked.

'I'd do anything.'

'Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?'

—

It was dinner-time and they were all sitting around the kitchen table pretending that nothing had happened. The kitchen was a clean, well-lighted place and through the window they could see the clouds gathering.

'I'm going to lie awake all night so I can smash that goddamn snake,' the boy said.

'How many times have I told you not to curse?' the woman said.

She put the children to bed.

The boy had his club with him under the bedclothes.

'Ma, Tommy's skinning me alive with his club. Make him take it out.'

'Shut up, you little louse! Do you want to be bit by the snake?'

His brother shut up.

'If you get bit,' said the boy, 'you'll swell up, and smell, and turn red and green and blue all over till you bust.'

'Now then, don't frighten the child,' the woman said and she went and fixed herself a whiskey.

'Will you wake me if the snake comes out?' the boy said. He wondered if he had succeeded in keeping the pleading from his voice.

'Yes. Go to sleep,' the woman said.

She blew out the candle. After a while his brother said, 'I can't stand to think about her waiting in the room and knowing she's going to get it. It's too damned awful.'

'Well,' the boy said, 'you'd better not think about it.'

—

He was awake. The dog was barking and the boy leapt up, grabbing his club. His mother struck at the snake. The boy ran to help her, but she held him back. The boy knew then what guts meant: grace under pressure.

She lifted the snake on the point of her stick and threw it in the fire and watched it burn. The boy and the dog watched too. After a moment he looked up at her and saw the tears in her eyes.

'Mother, I'll never go droving. To hell with me if I do.'

The dog raised his ears.

'Yes,' she said. 'Isn't it pretty to think so?'

And she embraced him and kissed him as the sickly sun also rose.

Tanka

A snake approaches.
The woman and children run
And hide in the house.
Through the long night she watches –
Shedding memories like scales
And the snake burns with the dawn.

A Year 8 English Essay

What narrative techniques does Lawson use to shape the reader's perception of the drover's wife?

'The Drover's Wife' by Henry Lawson (2005) is an Australian novel set in Australia featuring the wife of a drover. It is a historical story. Most historical stories take place in the past, and so does this one. A drover, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is 'one who drives sheep' and a wife is 'a married woman' so as we can see, the themes of sheep and marriage run deep throughout the story. Henry Lawson uses lots of multiple narrative techniques throughout the novel which shape the reader's perception of the drover's wife. For example, flashbacks, description, humour and sadness.

The first technique Lawson uses to shape the drover's wife is flashbacks. The story is set a long time ago with the wife looking back on her life and when a black snake viscosly attacked her children. On page three of the story she thinks back to floods and bush-fires and being attached by Aboriginal people. She also thinks about her husband who always treats her like a 'princess.' (Lawson, p.3, 2005). As we can see from

this quote, the writer shows us lots of things about the drover's wife's past so we will know more about her past.

Secondly, there is description like 'He is not a very beautiful dog, and the light shows numerous old wounds where the hair will not grow.' (p.5) Here they are talking about their dog Alligator, who has bravely fought the snake and got bit and so his hair is falling out. The quotation, 'Her husband is an Australian and so is she' is also vital, as it lets the reader know that the story is set in Australia, and not America, for example. Finally, an 'evil pair of small, bright bead-like eyes' demonstrates that the snake is evil. Thus, description is an important narrative technique in the book.

Humour is furthermore a vital part of the novel. The drover's wife's children have Asperger's and are comic relief. They say things like 'I'd like to screw their blanky necks' and 'Blarst!' which makes the wife laugh and the reader. Also, the dog is called Alligator, which is a funny name for a dog. And the wife pokes herself with her finger and laughs. These examples clearly demonstrate that the drover's wife is funny.

On the other hand, sadness. There are several very tragic parts of the book such as when the wife cries after touching the blackfellow's wood. And when she is missing her drover, who is far away in Ireland. And also when there was a flood and a bushfire and the snake. But at the end after killing the snake, the drover's wife has a cuddle with her son and feels better, so it is not all sad.

In conclusion, the drover's wife in 'The Drover's Wife' is well portrayed by flashbacks, description,

humour and sadness, and marks Henry Lawson as one of the greatest living Australian writers.

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Henry Lawson's short story 'The Drover's Wife' is an Australian classic that has sparked interpretations on the page, on canvas and on the stage. But it has never been so thoroughly, or hilariously, reimagined as by Ryan O'Neill, remixing and revising Lawson's masterpiece in ninety-nine different ways. You'll be amused, delighted and surprised by a Year 8 essay, a sporting commentary, a pop song, a cento, a dance and many more. Inventive and unexpected, this is laugh-out-loud literature from one of Australia's finest satirists.

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'stunningly original ...
a bravura literary game'

Frank Moorhouse



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