Henry Lawson's women: the angel/devil dichotomy

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Recommended Citation
HENRY LAWSON'S WOMEN: THE ANGEL/DEVIL DICHOTOMY

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree

Master of Arts (Honours)

from

The University of Wollongong

by

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Department of English
1991
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the members of the English Department of the University of Wollongong who encouraged and assisted me during the writing of this thesis. In particular, I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor James Wieland, and Gill Churchill for her tireless and competent word-processing.
ABSTRACT

This study analyses the angel/devil dichotomy in Henry Lawson's short stories and determines the reasons underlying this divided image. Written from a feminist perspective, the female characters are the focus of the work. Initially, the investigation discovered that women feature in substantially more of his stories than has hitherto been acknowledged. Secondly, it is established that these women can be categorised into discrete groups under the headings which title the chapters: "Little Girls", "Faithful Wives", "Haggard Women" and "Fallen Women". Within these groups, his women are represented as either "angels" or "devils", the stereotypical images of women in post Victorian fiction. Although this is fundamentally the case, frequently, his women are, at one and the same time, both "angels" and "devils", giving rise to the angel/devil dichotomy.

Organised into five chapters, Chapter One defines and describes Lawson's ambivalent attitudes towards women, the reasons for this ambivalence and its influence on his writing. In particular, his relationships with his mother, Louisa, and his wife Bertha, and their influence on his representations of women, are analysed.

Chapters Two to Five examine the angel/devil phenomenon in each of the categories of women, revealing the way in which Lawson's attitudes to each type, is reflected in his presentations of them. Finally, his lifelong love/hate obsession with women, is revealed.
INTRODUCTION
This study focuses on the female characters in Henry Lawson's short stories. A close reading of Lawson's prose fiction, exposed the presence of a number of women who featured, either centrally or peripherally, as the imagined or remembered characters of bushmen's tales. This discovery contradicted the traditionally held opinions of his critics that Lawson was a writer of stories about men, more specifically, about bushmen, about the bush and about 'mateship', defined as an expression of male solidarity which rigorously excluded women.\(^1\) It is out of this seeming contradiction that the thesis developed, for it was apparent that the importance of women in Lawson's writing and their representation, had been only marginally addressed. Supporting this contention, a little known writer about Lawson, commented that "members of the 'female sex' have important roles to play in many of Lawson's stories, indeed, some fortysix or so, and receive mention in many more".\(^2\)

A review of critical opinions dating back to Lawson's earliest published works, established a body of evidence in support of the contention that, for the most part, women in Lawson's stories have been overlooked. There are some notable exceptions, the most important being the drover's wife in the much lauded story of that name. Writing for the *Lone Hand* (1909), Emile Saillens, a French Professor in the school of English at the Sorbonne who translated a number of Lawson's stories into French, included a comment, typical of the pattern of response from both readers and critics alike, which has perpetuated for at least half a century:

> Bushmen are almost without exception the heroes, or, rather, the passive personages of his unexcited stories. Women figure but rarely in his pages, and their characters are seldom consistent.\(^3\)
Furthermore, Saillens noted the absence in Lawson's writing, of "passionate love", the prime cause of psychological complications in Latin countries. He suggests that: "In the Australian bush live mostly men, and life affords other occupations than to study the psychology of Woman...."\(^4\) Saillens also perceives that, in the order of things, love holds a very low place in bushmen's lives. On this point Lawson is essentially faithful to the conventions of the middle class and their Anglo-Saxon puritanism. Consequently, the figures of women in his writing are described by Saillens as being caricatures or shadows.

The observation that the images of women are shadowy or unreal is consistent with the nationalist mythology that emerged in Australia in the late nineteenth century, which rigorously promoted masculinity while marginalising the role of women. These issues are embodied in the thesis as is the nature of the Australian legend, which, at the time, was a celebration of the one powerful and unique national figure produced in the land, the Bushman. The origin of the legend was posited in the bush stories of Lawson and thereafter, his writings have become a touchstone for any discussion of the "Australian Tradition".

*The Bulletin* was prominent in expounding the separatist model of masculinity which lay at the heart of the eulogies to the Bushman, while at the same time, women were denigrated. *The Bulletin* stereotype caricatured them as wowsers and puritans and indeed, at times, all women were seen to be conspiring towards an ideal of "Domestic Manhood", to tame men and deny their pleasures.\(^5\) The enigma of Lawson's writing is that while demonstrating the ideal of the Bushman-as-hero, he nevertheless, also acknowledges the heroic qualities of the Australian Bushwoman.
In 1975 and 1976 respectively, Anne Summers' and Miriam Dixson's inaugural studies, Damned Whores and God's Police and The Real Matilda, attempting to rewrite the history of women in Australian society, focused attention on the status of women in society. Dixson points out that in the writing of Australian history, because the writers have been mainly males, what they uncover tends to concern the lives and achievements of males. Their work is a kind of unacknowledged affirmation of their present identity through a celebration of their past selves. Therefore, "women figure as pygmies in the culture of the present and are almost obliterated from the annals of the past".

So, too, do the critics of the 1890s and the twentieth century fail to acknowledge the presence of women in their national literature. This issue is addressed in the discussion of Lawson's women. Vance Palmer, discussing the emergence of literature in Australia in the 1890s and the extent of Lawson's influence on the contemporary scene, argues that Lawson "founded a tradition of democratic writing that has affected the work of nearly all who have come after him. The feature of it is a natural acceptance of human equality, a tendency to look at life through the eyes of the swagman as well as the squatter...".

Palmer's statement underlines Dixson's allegation that women are excluded from the national discourse. While discussing the pervasive influence of "human equality" in Lawson's writing, Palmer leaves out of account the place of women in that "equality". Apart from a brief mention of "The Drover's Wife" as a story of exceptional merit, Lawson's women remain the hidden figures in the literary landscape.

The legend has endured as the representation of an authentic Australian identity. The definitive texts of the twentieth century beginning with Nettie Palmer's Modern Australian Literature (1924), W.K. Hancock's history, Australia (1930), continuing through cultural studies such as Vance Palmer's The Legend of the Nineties (1954), A.A. Phillips' The Australian Tradition...
(1958), all present an image of the bushman-as-hero, as the 'ideal type' who represents the national ethos of mateship. Moreover, wherever one looks – in the *Bulletin* of the 1890s, in the stories of Henry Lawson, in the commentaries on *The Bulletin* and Henry Lawson, in the studies referred to above, or in the writings of literary critics, historians and sociologists throughout the twentieth century – the texts are notable for the absence of reference to women. When women are mentioned as in Manning Clark's *History of Australia* (1973), he continues the tradition, supporting the "Legend", of idealising those women who lived and bore children in the remote wilderness, glossing over the hazards they encountered.8

It was not until 1972 with the publication of Brian Matthews' *The Receding Wave* (1972) that attention was focused on the female protagonists in Lawson's writing. However, Matthews does not set out to examine the female characters as such, instead, as his book is an existential study, he delineates the balance between "the emotional forces in the author and emotional needs arising in the characters from the circumstances which they inhabit".9 It is significant that he explores the relationships between men and the women in Lawson's stories, revealing a consciousness of the importance of their presence in Lawson's work.

Prior to Matthews' book, H.J. Oliver, writing in Geoffrey Dutton's *The Literature of Australia* (1964), reveals an awareness, if unwitting, of women in Lawson's stories. While praising Lawson for his "gift" of basing his stories on things remembered and seen, Oliver illustrates his comments with quotations from works which feature women. To illustrate the harsh and bare terrain, common in Lawson's outback stories, Oliver chooses a passage from "The Selector's Daughter" which includes a description of the female character.10 Furthermore, apart from the adulation of "The Drover's Wife", the women Oliver cites, from "'Water Them Geraniums'" and "Brighten's Sister-in-Law", are
selected from "the other men and women whom Lawson sees as making
survival possible...however eccentric they may be...". The connotation is that
Oliver's perception of women in Lawson's stories is an unconscious
recognition of their significance, hitherto ignored because of male prejudice.

Sparked by a vigorous controversy surrounding the 'tradition' in the late
1970s, Lawson's writings were scrutinised by historians and critics alike. *In
Search of Henry Lawson* (1978) written by Manning Clark, instigated the
writing of a number of texts in response to the contentious claims about
Lawson, in his book. Colin Roderick's *The Real Henry Lawson* and Brian
Kiernan's *The Essential Henry Lawson* were both published in 1982. But not
one of these publications altered the firmly entrenched opinion that Lawson's
writing was central to the Australian tradition which embodied the
marginalisation of the role of women. In fact, Manning Clark's *In Search of
Henry Lawson* is condemned by Docker in a review of his book as
"androcentric, anti-feminist, and slightly weirdly misogynist". Criticising
Manning Clark's harsh treatment of Lawson's women, Docker claims that
because Clark focuses on values, he ignores the influence of a major
phenomenon of Lawson's time, women's economic dependence on men. He
cannot see that, for the contemporary feminist movement, there were sound
economic reasons why married women might be fearful of drinking and
gambling. These issues are addressed in this study.

A burgeoning interest in Australian writing, allied to the growth of
Feminist literary scholarship in the 1980s, initiated an era of re-readings of
established authors from a variety of perspectives. As 'founding father' of the
Australian tradition, Lawson was a natural target for reassessment. Shirley
Walker's collection of essays *Who Is She?* (1983) was a significant
contribution to the unveiling of women in Australian writing. These essays
proved to be an illuminating inquiry into the ways in which a selection of
Australian prose writers, both male and female, had dealt in their fiction with feminine figures and concepts of the feminine. Given the task of examining Lawson's female characterisations, Brian Matthews brought to light in his fascinating essay, "Eve Exonerated" that Lawson's women are portrayed "as creatures to be looked up to, creatures with capacities, awarenesses and merits which men can and should admire but which, in the nature of things, they can never emulate...the unspoilt and loving girl, the unregenerate, unworthy man, summarise, somehow, all Lawson's portrayals of woman, and of man in self-exile from her in sure knowledge of his own unworthiness."^14

Matthews' perceptive essay is a landmark in Lawsonian criticism. By drawing attention to hitherto barely known female characters and the complexity of their relationships with men, Matthews was instrumental in influencing the shape of future criticism. It is this essay in particular and Xavier Pons' psychoanalytical study Out of Eden (1984), in addition to my own awareness of the presence of a significant number of women in Lawson's stories, that were the motivating forces for this study. An even more powerful incentive was the fact that nothing could satisfy my curiosity as to why these women remained overlooked for so long. Furthermore, while men such as Matthews and Pons were attempting to explore this area, it seemed to me that what was needed to accomplish this successfully, was a reading from a female perspective.

A number of significant essays by feminist critics in 1985 and 1986 were a confirmation that this study was timely. In her article "'Temper Romantic, Bias Offensively Feminine': Australian Women writers and Literary Nationalism"^15 Susan Sheridan challenged the democratic spirit of literary nationalism put forward most recently by John Docker and others, by analysing the absence of women from the literary canon of the 1890s. Delys Bird, discusses the historical and ideological reasons that account for the
displacement and devaluation of woman and repression of the feminine in Australian life, both literal and symbolic, in "Writing Women/Reading Women", (1986). She argues that, "defined as 'other', and therefore deviant in relation to the values of the patriarchal order, colonial Australian women were further distanced from participating fully in their culture by emergent masculine ideologies such as mateship and myths like the bush, which operated – and still do – as excluding practices and discourses to position and construct woman as a silent or invisible cultural entity". The feminine, then, is effectively devalued and silenced within Australian history and culture.

In 1986, the feminist historian Marilyn Lake also used the stories of Henry Lawson to support her arguments concerning the positioning of women in the nationalist tradition. Lake contends that the dominance of the Bulletin style of masculinity endorsed men's rejection of domestic responsibilities and had profound implications for women and children for whom there were particularly injurious consequences. The domestic consequences of the bohemian/bushman lifestyle form the theme of Lawson's Mitchell stories.

As I neared the completion of this study, Kay Schaffer's Women and the Bush was published in 1988. To quote from the cover:

Schaffer applies the insights of feminist scholarship and of literary analysis to examine the national character. She looks at how the concept of 'the typical Australian', and the woman who stands in relation to him, has evolved across a range of cultural forms, including historical and literary texts, film and the media. She concentrates in particular on the writings of Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton.

Helen Thomson reviewed this densely argued, challenging and provocative study. She determined that, as Schaffer proceeds to deconstruct generally accepted views of Australian nationalism, this dismantling of texts and their context of assumptions, reveals not merely the absence or marginalisation of
women, but paradoxically, the metaphoric and linguistic idea of woman embedded in the very land itself. In her chapter "Henry Lawson: The People's Poet", Schaffer argues that a common element can be detected in Lawson's diffident constructions of himself in the autobiographical writings and in the ambivalent constructions of 'Henry Lawson' by critics and biographers throughout the twentieth century – that is, the naming of Woman as the source and origin of man's (Lawson's and/or the national character's) failings. Schaffer's arguments give credence to my own contentions concerning his ambivalent attitudes towards women, and the radical changes which occurred after 1903. She determined that Lawson's women were idealised in his nationalist days of the 1890s when he was inclined to represent women as symbols of the revolutionary ferment of the times. Post 1903, the period of his physical and emotional decline, searching for the source of his wretchedness, he turned against women whom he accused of "sucking the life blood out of him and destroying his creative gifts". Furthermore, Schaffer states that the "idea of Woman, idealised into a symbol of hope or objectified into a figure of failure, permeates Lawson's writing." While the focus of Schaffer's study is the place of 'woman' in the Australian tradition, her exploration of Lawson's writing touches on arguments expounded in my own study of Lawson's women, reinforcing these convictions.

What has emerged from this re-reading of Lawson's stories which has been consistently overlooked, is that his female characters can be categorised into several discrete groups under specific headings drawn from the text itself: "Little Girls", "Faithful Wives", "Haggard Women" and "Fallen Women". These headings become the titles of the chapters. Moreover, within these groups, the issue that Lawson's women are presented as distinctly good or evil, a phenomenon considered to be of some significance to psychologists, is discussed. Critics and biographers, aware of the dichotomy in Lawson's view
of women, worried around the edges of the problem and, except for the detailed psychoanalytical study of Xavier Pons, left the question unanswered. It is this dichotomy of woman as innocent or evil, madonna or whore, as Janus-faced angel and devil, emerging so strongly in his writing that becomes the central focus of this thesis.

In fiction, the Victorian ideal of womanhood is one that is well documented. The title character of Charlotte Bronte's novel *Shirley*, comments on the male ideal of woman: "their good woman is a queer thing, half-doll, half-angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend". Patricia Stubbs also states that in the 1880s and 1890s and into the twentieth century, in spite of an active feminist movement and the expansion of opportunities for women outside the home, the novel showed no signs of evolving a different framework for even some of its women characters. Victorian literature continued to reflect images of woman as the pure, chaste virgin of respectable fiction who will duly blossom into the model wife and mother, the "angel in the house", whose charms are strictly domestic. Lawson's writing reflects the conventional social attitudes towards women. Yet, at the same time, while positioning woman in her traditional domestic sphere, Lawson's predilection for authentic representation led to the emergence of the distinctive Australian woman. He moves away from the idealised Victorian heroines of his virginal "little girls", to the gaunt, sun-browned, spare, asexual figures that are representative of his "haggard women".

This study is approached from a feminist perspective, bearing in mind the statements made by Greene and Kahn that literary criticism, like history and the social sciences, has traditionally asked questions that exclude women's accomplishments. Feminist scholarship undertakes the dual task of deconstructing predominantly male patterns of thought and social practice, and reconstructing a female experience previously hidden or overlooked.
Feminist scholarship then, has two major concerns: to revise the traditional paradigm and restore the female perspective. Showalter refers to a revisionary reading of the canon as the 'feminist critique', "a historically-grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena...[including] the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history." Moreover, feminist criticism questions the values implicit in the "Great Works" – in this instance we substitute the works of Henry Lawson – investigating the tradition that canonised them and the interests it serves. It exposes the collusion between literature and ideology, "demanding that we understand the ways in which [structures of primarily male power] have been – and continue to be – reified in our literature and by our literary criticism".

Furthermore, feminist criticism is alert to the omissions, gaps, partial truths and contradictions which ideology masks; it attends to the silences. In this, it is allied with the deconstructive criticism advocated by Barthes and Macherey, for such criticism seeks out "the lack in the work, what it is unable to say" – what is "unspoken". It enables the 'silences to speak'. And listening for the silences is, as Adrienne Rich suggests, difficult and essential in understanding women's experience:

...listening and watching in art and literature, in the social sciences, in all the descriptions we are given of the world, for the silences, the absences, the unspoken, the encoded – for there we will find the true knowledge of women.

It is for all these reasons that I have chosen a revisionary rereading of Henry Lawson.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION


CHAPTER 1

HOW LAWSON “CAME” TO WRITE ABOUT WOMEN
This chapter defines and describes Lawson's ambivalent attitudes towards women, examining the reasons behind this ambivalence, and assessing the influence of these attitudes on his writing. As stated previously, in any study of Henry Lawson's work, a discussion of his personal life, particularly his relationship with his mother, Louisa Lawson, and his wife, Bertha, as explanatory background and spiritual stage-setting for his fiction, is essential. Moreover, his relationships with other women who featured prominently in his life, namely, Hannah Thornburn and Isabel Byers, and any influence they may have had on his writing, are discussed. The marriage relationship between Lawson and Bertha is explored in some depth and the consequences of the crisis in his marriage and its effects on his writing, is addressed. In particular, the parent-child relationship between Lawson and his mother is examined and an assessment of this influence on his writing is attempted.

For Henry Lawson, one of the most familiar figures in Australia's literary history, the man considered by many Australians as the "Apostle of Mateship", women were an enigma. As Manning Clark wrote of Lawson: "he was never to know peace, or ecstasy or lasting happiness with any woman."¹ Torn by the need for the love and understanding of women, yet unable to achieve the perfection he sought, Lawson developed an ambivalence towards them, a divided image of woman as both "angel" and "devil". A close reading of his prose fiction discloses, not surprisingly, that women are a major preoccupation in many of his stories, albeit that Lawson has been regarded as a writer about bushmen and the bush. In order to determine how he "came" to write about women, firstly, his relationship with his mother will be examined.

As Freud and other psychoanalysts have shown, the adult personality is to a large extent shaped by childhood experiences and, more especially, by
relationships with parents and siblings. By far the major part in this process is played by the mother, who normally makes the child feel secure by providing love and by responding to the child’s needs. If she fails in this task, then the child is exposed to severe psychological hazards. There is every reason to believe that Lawson’s mother Louisa, did not acquit herself adequately in her mothering role, according to Winnicott’s criteria.

In his recent work, *Out of Eden*, Xavier Pons identifies and traces the origins of what is referred to as Lawson’s “narcissistic wound”, resulting from an inadequate early relationship with a frustrating mother and a failure to find compensation in a strong father image. Such subjects are forever craving affection, admiration and love, to recompense them for their “wounds”, a statement to which Lawson’s unhappy and anguished life gives credence. The fact that figures of fathers who are absent, mothers whom conditions have hardened, made less affectionate, less motherly, proliferate in Lawson’s stories and poems, supports the evidence that he was deeply affected by this aspect of his childhood experiences.

Few women have been so thoroughly reviled as Louisa Lawson. In Manning Clark’s portrait of her, she is resentful, blaming her husband “for reducing her to the life of a slave to the wash tub and the kitchen sink.” Colin Roderick confirms that Louisa was, by nature and necessity, a woman of domineering personality and her influence upon Lawson was profound and significant, intensified by the frequent absences of his father. Pons argues that “Louisa left in Henry’s unconscious, the image of a “bad” mother, a phallic and castrating figure who rejected him and deprived him of love.” Moreover, it is this rejection and deprivation of love in childhood which was to affect Lawson’s relationships with women throughout his life and was to account for the ambivalence with which he depicts women in his stories.
In defense of Louisa, it must be remembered that she was an educated and aspiring writer when she married Niels Larsen. Wooed by the promise of a better life which she hoped would enable her to cultivate her talents, instead, she found herself yoked to a man afflicted with incurable gold-fever, whose prospecting forays inevitably ended in disaster, leaving the family all but destitute. Rebelling against the hardships of their nomadic, primitive existence, Louisa demanded some stability for her family. In order to acquire the rudiments of a real home – books, pictures, even an organ – she established and maintained a barely viable farm and shop for fifteen years. During this time, Larsen was absent frequently for long periods of time, depriving the young Lawson of the essential need of identification with the father-figure. Although Henry testifies to loving his father: “He was the hardest working, kindest hearted man I ever knew,” by contrast, his father was indifferent to him. Preoccupied with problems concerning work, money, and his marriage, Larsen did not respond to the child’s intense need of affection. Pons argues that the father’s lack of concern is interpreted by the child as proof that he is not loved and, therefore, is unworthy of love, consequently destroying his self-esteem. According to Freud, “a child feels inferior if he notices that he is not loved.” Whereas Larsen was indifferent, Louisa was, at times, aggressively inimical towards him, overwhelming him with a sense of rejection, alienating him and inflicting a permanent and serious psychological wound.

His experiences at school reinforced this alienation. Not pre-disposed to the so-called “masculine pursuits” of robust games, or excelling in the “male domain” of mathematics, the hyper-sensitive Lawson recoiled at the derogatory nickname accorded him by his schoolmates of “Barmey ‘Arry”, driving him further into solitariness and isolation. Of this period he recalls: “Strange to say there were periods during my childhood when I seemed to live
alone: when my Mother and brothers but not so often Father, seemed to go completely out of my life."\(^1\) Partial deafness, the result of a childhood illness, accentuated Lawson's isolation and loneliness, inhibiting his ability to relate to others. Of his deafness Lawson wrote: "it was to cloud my whole life, to drive me into myself, and to be, perhaps, in a great measure responsible for my writing."\(^1\)

The conviction that he was unloved, even more so, unworthy of love, turned his boyhood and adolescence into a joyless experience:

I was painfully shy and extremely sensitive about my deafness, my lack of education, my surroundings, my clothes, slimness and paleness, my...handwriting, grammar, pronunciation (made worse by deafness) — everything almost. I was terribly shy of strange girls, and if a girl I knew took any notice of me I would reckon that she was only either pitying me or laughing at me.\(^2\)

Such are the utterances of a person devoid of all self confidence. Louisa's rejection of her son is considered to be the prime cause not only of his lack of self esteem but, of even greater moment, the reason for the ambivalence Lawson exhibited in his behaviour towards women. Melanie Klein\(^3\) explains that the phenomenon originates from the repeated frustrations endured by the child, reinforcing the ambivalence of the child's feelings towards the mother: "the oscillation between love and hatred", which produces intense feelings of guilt. This sense of guilt which engendered ambivalence, Lawson was to carry with him throughout his life.

Despite Louisa's inadequacies as a parent, she was influential in the shaping of Lawson's literary career. In his childhood he was introduced to the works of Dickens, Defoe, and Edgar Allan Poe, amongst others, thus moulding his literary sensibility, a point often overlooked by those critics who believed Lawson to be literary naif. Louisa encouraged his first tentative efforts at
writing, continuing to support him when he professed a serious interest, later in life. Furthermore, she was instrumental in the publication of his first volume of work, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse* (1894), printing it on her own printing press. But, overall, Louisa's influence was essentially negative at a personal, emotional level. His more regrettable characteristics, his puritanism, his eccentricity, his morbid temperament and his predisposition to neurosis, all have their origins in Louisa's attitudes, fostered by the inadequate rearing of her son.\(^4\) Those psychological problems which were to lead him to the brink of insanity and suicide, inevitably played a significant part in the fashioning of his literary work which was, fortunately for him, an outlet and a protection against mental disintegration.\(^5\)

When Lawson commenced working in Sydney, he was subjected again to the pain of rejection by his peers. But it was at this critical point in his life that he was to discover the anodyne, alcohol, with all its destructive consequences. With its assistance, he found the courage and the audacity which enabled him to shed his inhibitions, and to forge bonds of mateship with his companions: "We were drinking mates together." While his relationships with men improved, he remained shy and diffident in the company of women. Lawson says of himself that "whenever he became aware of a woman something always checked him."\(^6\) Not that he was uninterested in women and sex; on the contrary. A letter written by Lawson's friend, Vance Marshall, points out that women were of considerable interest to him: "Lawson liked to talk about women, about their sex life and all its complications." But, Marshall added that Lawson "had a definite frustration complex - (sic) sex-starved by his shyness, largely caused by deafness."\(^7\)

Nevertheless, biographical evidence shows that Lawson fell in love several times before his marriage and again, afterwards. Another of Lawson's friends, Bertram Stevens, maintains that he fell in love soon after meeting Mary
Cameron (later Gilmore), who, while professing affection and admiration for him, refused his offer of marriage.\(^\text{18}\) Lawson underwent a further rebuff from Bridget Lambert, a selector's daughter from his childhood home of Eurunderee, heightening his feelings of inadequacy and rejection. The intensity of the angst engendered by his rejection is expressed in some lines from the poem "Rejected" which he wrote at the time (1893):

\begin{center}
You long and hope for nothing but the rest that sleep can bring,
And you find that in the morning things have brightened up a bit;
But you're dull for many evenings, with a cracked heart in a sling,
When you're hit, old man – hard hit. (41-44)\(^\text{19}\)
\end{center}

This fear of being rejected, of one's self-esteem being undermined by rejection, is manifested in any number of Lawson's bushmen as diffidence.

The assumption that marriage to a woman who truly loved him would be the anodyne for his psychological wounds, proved to be erroneous. None of the women in Lawson's life was ever able to make him completely happy and, ironically, it was his wife Bertha, who was to elicit from him the most intense suffering. The fitful happiness experienced by Bertha and Lawson in the early days of their marriage is recalled by John Le Gay Brereton:

\begin{center}
She did her best for Lawson, encouraging him in his moods of depression, and guarding him against himself and others. And, in those old days, he understood and was grateful. No one who saw them in their home could doubt the love that bound them. He spoke to me with deep gratitude of her staunchness and self-sacrifice.\(^\text{20}\)
\end{center}

Staunchness and self-sacrifice, those qualities which Lawson considers essential for the love of a wife of her husband, are influential in his writing about women. They are the very qualities exhibited by his "haggard women", his "drover's wife", his "faithful wives", and his lonely "little girls". All these
"good" women display an unquestioning loyalty and even more importantly, a forgiveness of their lovers' or husbands' behaviour. It is this unqualified acceptance by women that Lawson sought, fruitlessly, all his life.

In spite of their early happiness, it was not long before Bertha, like Louisa and Mary Cameron before her, noting the adverse effects of alcohol on his behaviour, exhorted him to refrain from drinking. He was made to feel guilty about his disreputable drinking habits, yet resented the fact, knowing of his inability to reform. It was the uncompromising expectations that aroused the ambivalence in his attitude to women in life, which is consequently, reflected in his stories. As Manning Clark comments: "He saw them sentimentally as saviours, and yet bitterly as punishers, calling on men to give up their 'weaknesses'."²¹ Lawson's dichotomous feelings of love and hate, of guilt and resentment, are reflected in the remarks about women in the "Mitchell" stories in which woman-as-enigma is the central theme.

Numerous critics, of whom A.A. Phillips is one, have suggested that the world of Lawson as it appears from the bulk of his fiction is a womanless one, a world of bushmen, selectors, drovers and shepherds, in which women are mostly confined to the background except for a few, rare instances.²² A closer examination of his stories, however, reveals that there are a significant number in which women play a much more prominent part than has previously been acknowledged. If not present physically, they are the theme of many of the yarns exchanged between mates on the track.

Nor are his stories as sexless as they seem at first glance. The sexual theme is often present, although it is treated in an indirect way. In his early works, Lawson reveals a prudishness about sex and had nothing but apparent scorn for those authors who did not throw a thick veil over sexual matters,
commenting that the fashionable or popular Australian short story which did not do so, would have a short life:

Here is a plan for a fashionable, or popular short story: Write about three inches of marriage, and put some stars underneath; then write about a foot of adultery, making it as dirty, or ‘racy’, as you dare, or as the law allows; put some more stars, and finish up with an inch or two of divorce. Then that ‘little thing of yours’ will be read, and thought a good little thing, and you'll be considered a very clever writer. But your work won't live longer than the issue of the paper in which it appears.²³

By his very excess of puritanism regarding sex, Lawson reveals that it was indeed a preoccupation, for, according to psychological evidence, puritanism is, quite frequently, a neurotic reaction to sexual frustration. Lawson’s apparent prudishness concerning women was really a pose or a mask: it was a matter of inhibition, not indifference.²⁴

David Martin, commenting on Lawson’s writing, states that: “...our (Australian) writing has suffered from a masculine fear of the inner world and a repugnance towards expressing the erotic element in life.”²⁵ This point of view is supported more recently by Chris Wallace-Crabbe who argues that one of the three characteristics of literary practice in Australian writing, one of the three neglected realms, is “that of romantic love in our fiction.” It is replaced in our literature by what Wallace-Crabbe refers to as “eroded persistence”, an ability to “carry on”, to see things through, a quality he sees mostly in the leading female characters rather than in their male counterparts who are apt to be “feckless even when hard-working as well.”²⁶

These sentiments mirror the world of Lawson. It is reminiscent of his own background – a “feckless” father and a mother who was forced to carry on with “eroded persistence”. The influence of this experience can be seen in his stories where “feckless” male characters are in abundance, but it is in the most
well known of all his stories, "The Drover's Wife", that Lawson demonstrates the quality of "eroded persistence" of the bushwoman, idealised for her strength, stability and powers of endurance.

David Martin argues that in Lawson's work there are no intimate glimpses of love – no Madame Bovarys or Anna Kareninas – and little real penetration into women's psychology. Martin terms Lawson's depiction of women as illustrations or "photographs" of women who suffer because of the responsibilities they bear. But, within the conventions of the time, Stephen Murray-Smith believes that Lawson exhibits a greater feeling for women and their role in society than almost any other Australian writer. However sepia-toned Lawson's "photographs" of women may be, sex was a preoccupation, the more so because his inhibitions kept him a frustrated man. Coupled with his inability to establish satisfactory relationships with those around him, Lawson's problems magnified as he grew older. In order to cope, he resorted to his imagination, turning fact into fantasy (as in the case of Hannah Thornburn), transmuting his frustrations and heartaches into literary works.

His relationship with Bertha began to deteriorate soon after their return from New Zealand in 1898. Lawson, it seems, had already experienced enough of the constraints and restrictions of family life. Writing from New Zealand to Le Gay Brereton, Lawson's feelings concerning marriage were expressed with the same ambivalence that prevailed throughout his life:

> The wife is well. She's a gem. Matrimony is good and right, but, as Kipling or (Gadsby) say, Oh, Jack! 'it plays hell with your notions of duty' – to your chums...I think the creed of the Chaps, Coves, and Fellows is the grandest of all.28

This conflict of attitude, so typical of Lawson, forms an undercurrent throughout many of his stories in which the theme of disillusionment with marriage is a
recurring one. Emphasising this conviction, he returns again and again in his verse to the pleasures of the "careless, roaming life" and the nobility of the love between men encountered on the track, a love named mateship. In "The Vagabond", he represented the family man as a fool, supporting the theory espoused by the *Bulletin* which ridiculed family life and denigrated women:

Sacrifice all for the family's sake,
Bow to their selfish rule.
Slave till your big, soft heart, they break,
The heart of the 'family fool'. (45-48)²⁹

Lawson's relationship with a girl called Hannah Thornburn possibly played a part in his growing estrangement with Bertha. According to Bertram Stevens,³⁰ Lawson is said to have turned to Hannah, a young woman who worshipped him, at a time when Bertha was finding it difficult to cope with his increasingly irresponsible behaviour. Hannah, it seems, supplied the flattery and encouragement that was withheld by his wife. In his biography of Lawson, Denton Prout comments on the reasons for the deterioration of their marriage, indicating that Lawson's behaviour was the primary cause:

His urge to drink was strong, and every chance he got he was out with his Bohemian friends, drinking and skylarking, far into the night. Bertha bore this bravely for as long as she could, but she was a highly emotional woman. The time came, when, worn down with the cares of her family and her fears for the future, she could no longer accept Lawson's irresponsibility and his drinking as sympathetically as she had done in the past.³¹

In fact, within five years of their return from New Zealand, Bertha was to initiate an official separation from him.

In search of literary fulfilment which he believed was unavailable to him in Australia, Lawson spent a restless two years before embarking with his family to further his career in England. It was during their sojourn here that
Bertha was to tell Mary Gilmore "how badly Henry was treating her" and that "nothing on earth would make her live with him again once she got away".32 Soon after their return from England (1903), Lawson and Bertha were officially separated.

During the decade following this event, Hannah Thornburn was to be transfigured in Lawson's imagination into the one great love of his life, but it was not until after her premature death in 1902, that he felt safe to release her into romantic fiction. In actuality, very little is known about their relationship. Prout states that "a heavy curtain of Victorian reticence lies (sic) over the whole episode."33 The fact that he knew her well in 1899 is confirmed by the copies of his books, While the Billy Boils and The Days When the World Was Wide,34 inscribed to her as Christmas gifts, on the eve of his departure to London. Bertram Stevens believes that Lawson first met Hannah about 1897, but he did not become emotionally involved with her until after his return from New Zealand. Roderick suggests that there is enough circumstantial evidence to reinforce the conviction that there was a love affair between Lawson and Hannah, substantiated by some lines from the poem entitled "Hannah Thornburn" (1905):

There was never a church that could marry,
For never a court could divorce
In the season of Hannah and Harry
When the love of my life ran its course. (13-16)35

Although Lawson scholars differ over the details of the alleged relationship between Hannah and Lawson, the accumulated evidence suggests that, while in London, Lawson learned of Hannah's death from a friend working in Melbourne and that, as Mary Gilmore relates, he stood at the grave where she was buried at Kew.36 As Lawson tells it: "She died in Melbourne Hospital the day before I reached Melbourne - per express - from Adelaide - and
In actual fact, Lawson did not reach Melbourne until six weeks after Hannah’s death, nor was his ship delayed as he maintains, all of which supports the theory that he may have distorted the facts in order to romanticise the relationship. The one certain fact in the mass of conjecture is that Lawson was deeply affected by her death, so much so that he was to write several poems in her memory: “To Hannah” (1904), “Hannah Thornburn” (1905), “The Lily of St. Leonards” (1907), “Do They Think I Do Not Know” (1910).

Fulfilling an intense psychological need, his feelings for Hannah after her death, were transfigured into an intense and rarefied passion, “the fantasies of desire”. In psychological terms, Lawson’s behaviour can be explained as a reaction against Bertha’s rejection of him. Destitute at the loss of her affection, Lawson sought solace in an imaginary world where Hannah was exalted into an ethereal being, a “spirit girl”, the one true love of his life. His idealised vision of her as all purity and innocence is expressed in “The Lily of St. Leonards”:

O Lily of St. Leonards!
   And I was mad to roam –
   She died with loving words for me
   Three days ere I came home.
As fair as lily whiteness,
   As pure as lily gold,
   And bright with childlike brightness,
   And wise as worlds of old.
Her heart for all was beating,
   And all hearts were her own –
   Like sunshine through the Lily
   Her purity was shown. (9-20)38

In “Hannah Thornburn” Lawson writes of “love that was pure as a Star”, defining the paradox of his ideas concerning love and sex, ideas that are translated into his short stories. True love is represented as something chaste and spiritual, devoid of any sexual manifestation which would sully it. The assumption is that Lawson, along with many of his peers in late Victorian
society, adhered to a Christian/Puritan ethic that regarded sexuality as unclean. Brian Matthews identifies "Joe Wilson's Courtship" as a story of innocence and experience which exemplifies this point. Lawson, he argues, uses courtship and marriage to symbolise fresh innocence as opposed to the "tarnished" knowledge of marriage. This is why Joe Wilson exclaims: "Make the most of your courting days, you young chaps, and keep them clean, for they're the only days when there's a chance of poetry and beauty coming into this life...". Even the knowledge of experience in marriage is invariably imagined as being "tarnished". In "Joe Wilson's Courtship", Joe expresses Lawson's point of view:

A married man knows all about it – after a while; ...And when he knows all this, how much better or happier is he for it? Mark Twain says that he lost all the beauty of the river when he saw it with a pilot's eye – and there you have it.

Sex, it seems, from Lawson's perspective, is necessarily a sordid, immoral affair, for the Hannah Thornburns, "girls as God made them", are invested with a Madonna-like quality, pure and undefiled, removing them from the world of reality. The "other-ness" of women is acknowledged.

For a decade the figure of Hannah was, for Lawson, a symbol of purity and innocence, of selflessness and the sacrifice of love. She was the image for all his "little girls", his angels, until recollections of her began to fade and meld into the images of other sweethearts who had captured his affection in his youth. These images are scattered throughout his stories. Lizzie, in "An Unfinished Love Story", exemplifies his idealistic view of women. Like Hannah, Lizzie personifies Innocence. She is not simply sexually inexperienced, but radiates a childlike, pristine quality which transcends the story.
Lawson portrays his morally "good" characters like Lizzie, as pure and virginal, who will willingly die for the men they love. Rarely does their love end in happiness (which would imply an eventual acceptance of sex) and so, typically, some tragedy befalls them. Bertha Bredt in "The Story of the Oracle", is an exemplary case:

She was that sort of girl who can love a man for six weeks and lose him forever, and yet go on loving him to the end of her life – and die with his name on her lips.41

Or the story finishes while there is still only tenderness and shining purity, as is the case in "Some Day". In this story, Mitchell tells of the "one little girl" he was "properly struck on":

Of course, I never thought she'd look at a rough, ugly, ignorant brute like me... I thought...she pitied me because I was such a rough, awkward chap. I was gone on that girl and no joking..."42

The idea that man fancies himself as unworthy of the girl he loves, or is unworthy, as in "The Unfinished Love Story", is a recurring theme. It is a reflection of Lawson's own experiences with girls, traceable to his childhood feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness or lack of self-esteem, arising from Louisa's rejection of him. In his later stories this conviction of man's unworthiness and his corrupting influence on the idealised image of woman was to become more than a major preoccupation, it was to become an obsession.

The reasons for Lawson's adulation of purity and innocence in women, can be attributed, on the one hand, to his puritanism (instilled in him by Louisa) concerning the morals and decency expected of late Victorian society, and, on the other, to his unconscious distaste of female sexuality, derived from
his "rejection complex", which evoked a deep uneasiness in him. Bertha's rejection and subsequent separation left Lawson deprived of the sexual gratification he desired. He projected his frustrations onto women, condemning them bitterly for apparently flaunting their sexuality too blatantly, in the misogynistic article "The She Devil": "Tight corsets, high-heeled boots, premature development, sexual starvation, morbid or abnormal sex-consciousness..."43

The women Lawson values, the pure and ethereal, "girls as God made them", can only but be tarnished if they enter the world of men, even if that world is entered through marriage. In his vision of idealised womanhood, no man is worthy of her. Man inhabits the "evil" world of reality and if woman enters this world, she must inevitably pay the price of decay and decline. Descending into the world of men, Lawson's women, even the most admirable of them, decline and disintegrate into sexless, defeminised characters, of whom his "Haggard Women" are the best known example. They are desexualised because they have entered the male domain "where women worked like men". Lawson has difficulty with the representations of these women. Because they do not fit neatly into the stereotypical role of wife and mother, but also "work like men", he finds it easier to present them as defeminised beings, thus enabling them to be positioned more easily, on the edge of the male domain.

In Lawson's eyes, they are good women (therefore "Angels"), for in the absence of their men, they suffer all kinds of hardships and terrors, loneliness and isolation, yet they carry on without complaint, embodying those qualities of staunchness and self-sacrifice which Lawson identifies earlier, as essential qualities in the character of a woman. The "Drover's Wife" is an exemplary case. The connotation is that these are the qualities that Lawson not only desired from women, but expected. Reflecting Victorian social attitudes
towards marriage, the ideal relationship, as he saw it, embodied the notorious
double standards of morality which condoned freedom for men within the
confines of marriage, while condemning women to chastity and bondage
within the home. Trapped by economic dependency, restricted to the
“Domestic” sphere, the woman, wife or sweetheart, was forced to wait, lonely
and long, for the return of her menfolk. These theories, expounded by the
Bulletin, promoting the freedom from “Domesticity” of men, while emphasising
the confinement of women to the “Domestic” sphere,\textsuperscript{44} are encapsulated in
Lawson’s poem “The Bush Girl”:

\begin{quote}
So you rode from the range where your brothers select,
Through the ghostly, grey Bush in the dawn –
You rode slowly at first, lest her heart should suspect
That you were so glad to be gone;
You had scarcely the courage to glance back at her
By the homestead receding from view,
And you breathed with relief as you rounded the spur,
For the world was a wide one to you. (1-8)\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

The world was, indeed, a “wide one” for Lawson. It was not long before he
became disillusioned with marriage and its constraints. He could not live
happily with the restrictions that marriage imposed upon him.

Disillusionment with marriage or the relationships between man and
woman in marriage, is a significantly recurring theme in his stories. In "The
Sex Problem Again", the narrator tells Mitchell:

\begin{quote}
Well, he married a girl...He loved her, and she loved him:
but after they’d been married a while he found out that
although \textbf{he} understood \textit{her}, \textbf{she} didn’t and couldn’t
possibly ever understand \textbf{him}. (My emphasis.)\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Again, in "The Story of ‘Gentleman-Once’", although there is sympathy for “the
poor little wife”, the suppressed “Other”, she is denigrated, depicted as lacking
the intellect to understand her husband:
He discovered, or thought he did, that he and his wife could never have one thought in common; that she couldn't possibly understand him... Besides having found that they couldn't have a thought in common, he ceased to bother to talk to her. (My emphasis.)

In these and many other stories, the connotation is that if a marriage fails, then inevitably, the fault lies with the woman, whereas the husband is blameless. This point of view that men and women cannot "understand" each other, particularly, that husbands will never understand their wives, is consistent with the Australian bush myth at the time, concerning marriage which entrenches the sex role stereotyping that feminists are questioning today. Lawson's preoccupations with the problems of sex and marriage, "the woman problem", are evident in the many discussions on these matters mostly through the medium of Mitchell: "Mitchell on Matrimony"," Mitchell on the 'Sex' and Other 'Problems'"," Mitchell on Women", and "The Sex Problem Again". The vacillations of Mitchell emphasise the uncertainty and contradictions of opinion held by Lawson. It is in the Joe Wilson stories that the pattern which dominates his fiction whenever he deals with love between men and women, is clearly delineated. Brian Matthews comments that: "Lawson needed the sharp stimulus of personal experience and emotion and the clear outlines of actual events to give substance to his own rather shy art. He found these necessary resources anew in the experiences, difficulties, fleeting joys and elusive disquiets of his own early married life".

Drawing on these experiences and those of his parents, Lawson's romantic vision of love disintegrates almost as soon as it begins. Joe Wilson says:

But I think the happiest time in a man's life is when he's courting a girl and finds out for sure that she loves him and hasn't a thought for anyone else...They're the days
that the wife will look back to, anyway, in the brightest of
times as well as in the blackest...49

The assumption is that with marriage, the warmth and spontaneity of love in
courtship is dulled. Communication breaks down. Joe and Mary's marriage,
despite moments of tenderness and intimacy, is a process of decay and
decline. The gradual disintegration of his own marriage while in England, the
final, irreparable alienation, was without doubt, the source of his pessimistic
treatment of marriage in the Joe Wilson and other stories. Bertha's account
that Joe and Mary Wilson were very much herself and Harry (as she called
him), substantiates this point: "It tells of our lives, our courtship and family
affairs."50 Further evidence is contained in a letter from Lawson to Beaumont
Smith in which he says:

Mrs. Joe Wilson was, in face and figure, a portrait of Mrs.
Henry Lawson (as I idealized her then). Joe Wilson, in
the Joe Wilson stories, particularly "The Double Buggy at
Leahy's Creek" was my uncle by marriage, Job
Falconer...My father and myself (with intervals of many
years) were also Joe Wilsons of strenuous moments.51

John Barnes also contends that there are recurring preoccupations,
emphases, and authorial asides in his stories which reflect, very directly,
Lawson's own experiences.52 His pessimism about the marriage relationship
is apparent in the most pessimistic of the stories he wrote in England,
"Barney, Take Me Home Again" (1901-2). In this story the narrator directs a
scathing attack against wives, who, although powerless, nevertheless, do not
submit to their husbands' authority with meekness or humility, thereby
subverting the dominant male ideology. The animosity with which Lawson
writes, suggests that it was an internalised emotion, arising from his
experiences with Bertha in England. Roderick substantiates this claim
observing that the narrator is voicing what Lawson observed in his wife:
This is a sketch of one of the many ways in which a young married woman, who is naturally thick-skinned and selfish – as most women are – and who thinks she loves her husband, can spoil his life because he happens to be good-natured, generous, sensitive, weak or soft, whichever way you like to call it. (My emphasis.)

Lawson blamed Bertha, her unhappiness in England and her serious illness for his failure to achieve the success he had anticipated. But, for a short time, his creative endeavours were acknowledged, his work receiving high critical acclaim. He acquired a reputable agent in London, J.B. Pinker, who readily sold his stories to prestigious literary journals such as Blackwood's "Maga". Blackwood also accepted an outline of the Joe Wilson series for future publication. Lawson was undoubtedly optimistic, but the future was clouded by Bertha's serious illness.

Although he continued to write Joe Wilson and His Mates, Lawson wrote in a letter to David Scott Mitchell: "I was ill and nearly mad with worry all the time I was writing it." Bertha's illness cost him a great deal of money and he was forced to send to Australia for more. The unforeseen expenses and the disruption to sustained work caused his own health to suffer and consequently his writing deteriorated in standard. Blackwood rejected "'Water Them Geraniums!'", and, thereafter, only two further stories were published. Blackwood's refusal to publish a second collection of his work, following the extremely poor sales of Joe Wilson and His Mates, virtually put an end to his London career as a professional writer.

Most biographers have drawn only a shadowy figure of Bertha Lawson and the course of her relationship with Lawson. The generally accepted view of the English period (1900-02), is that Bertha's mental illness was caused by the strain of coping with an irresponsible husband who was, once again, drinking heavily and this was the cause of the disintegration of their
Lawson, however, blamed Bertha entirely – more precisely her mental illness – for the breakdown of their relationship. But, as Colin Roderick states: “Bertha’s condition may have been a contributing factor. Lawson’s brittle temperament certainly was.” Whatever the conjecture, (what happened between them after her recovery was never publicly revealed) when they returned from England they were estranged. It is essential, therefore, that the relationship between Bertha and Lawson is explored in some depth because of the important role that marriage played in the shaping of both his life and his literature.

In her biography, *My Henry Lawson*, Bertha gives her own account of their circumstances in London. According to Bertha, Lawson’s entry into the Bohemian life of London proved to be disastrous. After a period of abstinence, he began drinking heavily again, leaving Bertha on her own for days at a time. She was forced to move from their cottage in the country into a cramped attic flat in London, with barely enough money to buy food for the family. Already suffering mental stress from Lawson’s alcoholic bouts, she was unable to withstand the loneliness and anxiety. Accounts of Lawson’s irresponsible behaviour when affected by alcohol, his morbidity, his depression, and his irrationality, all symptoms of the alcoholic, have been well documented by his biographers. It is, therefore, logical to assume that life with an alcoholic was intolerable and it is not in the least surprising that Bertha’s own mental stability was undermined. Consequently, she suffered a severe mental breakdown, necessitating three months treatment in a Mental Hospital before fully recovering. During the months of her illness, Lawson completed the stories for *Joe Wilson and His Mates*. Mrs. Spicer, in “"Water Them Geraniums”", is portrayed as a woman in the process of disintegration. She has gone beyond the stages of physical separation and alienation from her husband and is close to madness. This portrayal of a personality alienated from her innermost
self, perhaps owes a great deal to Lawson’s enforced observation of Bertha’s mental disintegration.

Soon after their return from England, despite several attempts at reconciliation, Bertha sought an official separation (1903). Lawson had continued to drink heavily, and “Bertha tried unsuccessfully to have him admit himself to an inebriates’ home for six months.” Finally, fearing for her safety, Bertha made a complaint under oath that she was forced to leave her residence “under reasonable apprehension of danger to her person...” Lawson was summoned to answer her complaint and on the same morning he was found lying injured by the water’s edge at Manly, apparently having fallen eighty feet from the cliffs above. (The fall has to be considered as a possible suicide attempt.)

Resentment at Bertha’s actions smouldered into bitter hatred when he was forced to serve several terms of imprisonment because of an inability to meet the maintenance orders issued by the courts. The humiliation of these experiences aggravated his narcissistic wound, deepening his sense of loneliness, of lovelessness, of unworthiness. He remained, in the throes of his depression, an unhappy, ageing, embittered man for whom, henceforth, women were objects of scorn. His “angels” were henceforth transformed into “she-devils”.

As previously mentioned, these events were critical in the shaping of both Lawson’s life and his attitudes towards women in his writing. His immediate reaction of intense hatred, not only towards Bertha but to all women, was blazoned in the misogynistic diatribe entitled “The She Devil” (1904) in which he denounced women who leave or divorce their husbands, referred to as: “unfortunate men”, who are accused, wrongfully, of brutality or adultery: “The evil [wrongful charges brought by women against their husbands] is growing to
alarming proportions. It has become a national danger, a national crime, and it may become a national shame and a by-word for the nation.\textsuperscript{64} His personal gibe directed at Bertha is vindictive in the extreme:

Insane women as a rule turn against those who should be nearest and dearest to them; some apparent exceptions may be only cunningly hiding their dislike – the cunning of these might amaze and scare most men if they had an idea of the extent, depth, and astounding foresight of it. Before they lose hold of themselves they often try to prove others insane, and sometimes succeed to a certain extent...The insane woman mostly sets down her "illness" to any other than the real one – temper or drink or drugs or natural selfishness, viciousness, etc. She sets it down to ill-treatment by relatives, employers, and a husband by preference if she has one. A common story, told with simple directness, is that her husband pulled her out of bed and jumped on her while she was pregnant.\textsuperscript{65}

(The supposition that this was the treatment meted out to Bertha cannot be dismissed, considering the evidence already presented.)

Dating from this period, a significant change in the representation of women in Lawson's stories is discernible. There are many bitter references to women, and, in particular, wives are portrayed with hostility, as selfish, treacherous, deceitful, and exploitative of their husbands' goodwill. Close to the end of his life, the preoccupations which obsessed Lawson are crystallised in the representation of Mrs. Johnson in "The Reformation of Johnson" (1919). Shaped with vindictiveness and malice, she is depicted as "a woman without a soul", reinforcing the conviction that the animosity engendered by Bertha's "betrayal" possessed him always.

Following his separation from Bertha, Lawson's life was a descent into degradation and remorse. His psychological instability was aggravated by the sense of persecution he experienced from 1905 to 1910, as a consequence of his imprisonment on numerous occasions for arrears of maintenance.\textsuperscript{66} He
continued to drink heavily, while much of his daily life was spent in a seemingly aimless wandering of the streets of Sydney. His haunted fear of failure and a developing sense that his life was becoming desperately out of control, enters increasingly into his fiction in the form of male characters who “damn the world”, turn to drink, make a virtue of failure and who deceive, disappoint or irrevocably wound their loyal women. By 1909 Lawson’s conviction of his personal unworthiness, his self-hatred, had developed to the point where he adopted the pseudonym, John Lawrence. His fiction comes to a pathetic culmination in "The Man Who Was Drowned", in which Lawson/Lawrence returns from the depths of degradation, a “new man”, once more a brilliant writer. The story not only emphasises the extent of Lawson’s self-hatred but also testifies to the persistence of his views about the impossibility of relationships with women ever prospering. Moreover, there is an implied criticism of the role that married women play in the destruction of marriage. This passage is laced with cynicism towards wives:

John Lawrence was separated from his wife, but that should go without saying: a mere unimportant detail – a matter of very minor importance. Except amongst the working people, married folk live less together every year: and they’ll end up by not living together at all – only marrying and getting separated and divorced for the excitement or notoriety of the thing... It was John Lawrence’s fault, of course (though he was a teetotaller at the time). It always is. (My emphasis.)

Although distressed by prison life, contact with the derelicts of humanity provided him with a fresh source of inspiration. In the lock-up, courts and gaols in which he spent much of his time between 1904 and 1914, he became familiar with the “sinners” and, in particular, “the disreputable ladies” of Sydney society. He perceived the prostitute as a victim of an unjust and corrupt society which compelled her to sell herself in order to live, but, as she had not chosen a life of sensuality, she was, therefore, within reach of
redemption. Lawson's early poems, depicting the prostitute in a conventionally romantic light, accentuate this point of view.

His sympathetic treatment of "fallen" women in his stories, owes much to his close personal association with them. The assumption is that he esteemed "fallen women" because he recognised them as fellow travellers. Furthermore, unlike the moral women he knew, they made no judgments of his character or behaviour; he felt neither rejection nor guilt in their company. They understood, accepting him without question. In his depressed and degraded state, he acknowledged only their finer qualities, elevating them in his estimation to the status of "angels".

In support of this contention, Lawson wrote of their loyalty and devotion with admiration in "The Rising of the Court" (1907), and again, in "The Reformation of Johnson" (1919):

> They are not like their sisters of the upper or superficial world who lie incessantly about each other and each other's people in a superficial way...They are mostly true to each other and their - males, this Sisterhood...68

Lawson was to find this same unqualified acceptance, tolerance and understanding in the personality of Mrs. Byers, the other woman in his life who, in his latter days, influenced his representations of women. He met Isabel Byers, a diminutive, kind-hearted landlady, shortly after his separation from Bertha when he was at his lowest psychological ebb, spending much of his time in cheap boarding houses, in a state of depression. Isabel was twenty years his senior but, in spite of the difference in their ages, they were to spend almost twenty tolerably happy years together.

The few lines scribbled to his friend Robertson, after his decision to live with Mrs. Byers: "I can't live without her anyhow. I can't live without a woman
messing about me”, 69 emphasises the characteristic ambivalence, the
dichotomous love/hate that tormented Lawson throughout his life, for, at the
moment of most intense hatred towards women, paradoxically, he sought
solace with yet another woman. Like Hannah Thornburn, to whom he turned
for solace in the past, Mrs. Byers, through her admiration, provided the
essential consolation necessary to bolster his flagging self-esteem. Indeed,
the “Little Landlady” as he affectionately called her, was all things to him.
According to Bertram Stevens, she was “a devoted admirer, wife, mother,
nurse, champion and business agent combined – but she could not keep him
straight and perhaps did not try.” 70 The success of their relationship can be
attributed, in part, to Mrs. Byers’ acceptance of Lawson’s alcoholism, for, in
fact, without her ministrations he could not have lived as long as he did. Sister
MacCallum, (Sister-in-charge of the Mental Hospital, Darlinghurst, where
Lawson voluntarily admitted himself many times, broken despairing and ill),
wrote of Mrs. Byers’ devotion to Lawson and how she had rescued him, from
actual destitution, on numerous occasions. 71

Her influence on his writing is seen, not in his representations of women
– Bertha’s influence was too firmly etched in his mind for that – but, the way in
which he “wrote” her into his stories. There is no doubt that the “Little
Landlady” in the series, Previous Convictions (1919-21), is an accurate
portrayal of Isabel Byers. In a letter to George Robertson, Lawson wrote of her
obsession for dogs, cats and fowls. This obsession is transferred directly into
the story of “The Doormat” (1921): “so she (the L.L.) fed the dogs, cats, and
fowls, and got me my breakfast in record time....” 72 Published shortly after
Lawson’s death in 1922, “The Doormat” is clearly a belated token of gratitude
for all that Isabel had done for him and his mates in the past. The doormat into
which Isabel’s initials have been woven with blood-soaked twine, however
melodramatic, is intended as a token of reparation from Previous. In essence, it is a parable expressing Lawson's own reparation.

His relationship with Isabel, seemingly idyllic, was, at times however, less than tranquil. Even the patience of his devoted companion occasionally deserted her. What is significant, is that the pattern, typical of Lawson's past relationships with women, also emerges in his relationship with Isabel. Lawson was aware of this pattern and points it out in a letter to Robertson:

By a cruel irony of fate I've been having a similar time with Mrs. B. to that which I had with Mrs. Lawson the last year or so of our conjugal life.... It seems strange that three of the four women I was closely connected with should develop into the Brute, so to speak.... Added to the Mater's natural bent as a selfish, indolent, mad-tempered woman, she was insanely jealous on account of my "literary success". Mrs. L. was, of course, an insane Prussianized German, by birth on both sides, by breeding, and by nature. Mrs. B. seems to have been developing into a combination of the two;.... I'm full up of the third instalment of my Woman-Hell-Made-Life.... (My emphasis.)

As Xavier Pons clarified, the tendency to never question his own behaviour, never admit that he might be responsible in any way, that other people were always to blame, is indicative of the paranoid tendencies detectable in Lawson's personality. These lines serve to summarise his condemnation of women, emphasising his inability to cope with the "woman problem", accusing them, as Kay Schaffer points out, of being the source and origin of all his failings, all his wretchedness.

Still, in his saner moments, the divided image of woman as "angel" as well as "devil", continued to surface, reaffirming the persistence of his love/hate attitude towards women. In the sketches based on his experiences in the Yanco Irrigation Area where, ironically, Lawson was sent to dry out, his final summation was that women are special creatures with special qualities;
creatures to be looked up to and to be admired, but whom men can never emulate: "They are very brave, and very strong in faith, and very kind and very gentle in illness or trouble."^76

In subsequent chapters attention will be given to hitherto barely known female characters, releasing them from their anonymity, attending to their silences and interpreting what is unspoken, what the work is unable to say, masked as it is by male ideology. To follow a logical sequence, the first chapter discusses the role of Lawson’s “little girls”, young, unmarried bush sweethearts, who proliferate in both his poems and stories. For the stereotypically virginal bushgirl in the literature of the late Nineteenth Century, there are three possible outcomes. Either she may die of grief from loneliness and neglect, or she may become a young wife with all the possible ramifications. If she survives the hardships of childbirth, of isolation, of desolation, she will suffer the transition to the “haggard bushwoman”. The thread of destiny, joining all three implicitly, leads naturally to the virginal “little girls” as a starting point.
NOTES

CHAPTER 1


34 Colin Roderick, *The Real Henry Lawson* 89.


36 Colin Roderick, *The Real Henry Lawson* 112.


43 Henry Lawson, "The She Devil", *Autobiographical and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Roderick 274.


54 Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: Commentaries on His Prose Writings* 270.


58 Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: Commentaries on His Prose Writings* 270.

59 Bertha Lawson, *My Henry Lawson* 74.

60 Denton Prout, Manning Clark, Colin Roderick, John Barnes.


63 Manning Clark, *In Search of Henry Lawson* 102.

64 Henry Lawson, "The She Devil", *Autobiographical and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Roderick 274.

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CHAPTER 2

LAWSON'S "LITTLE GIRLS"

And she faded like a flower
And she died, as such girls do...
Henry Lawson, "The Shakedown on the Floor".
The unspoilt and loving girl, child-like and undefiled, is a prevailing image in Lawson’s stories. Pure and ethereal, for the most part Lawson’s “little girls” are idealised, not creatures of flesh and blood, but, as he often wrote of them, “girls as God made them”, their transcendent qualities distancing them from the real world which Lawson represents as the corrupt, fallen world of man. Their depiction reproduces the traditional stereotype which dominated the Victorian novel. Introduced into the English novel by Richardson and Goldsmith, the fragile heroine, pure and innocent, more attached to virginity than to life itself, prevailed until the late nineteenth-century. Furthermore, in her discussion of the images of women in the novel, Susan Gorsky describes the stereotype of the “innocent” in Victorian novels as being generally in her late teens:

Innocent, unformed and naive, often self-effacing and unsure, the Ingenue is at the mercy of the adults – especially the men – who enter her life. In her innocence she has implicit trust in man, who is as likely to lead her into a ruinous affair as to offer her marriage; the only socially acceptable goal.

Situated within this model, Charles Dickens’ heroines are essentially child-like and idealised for their purity and innocence. Dickens apparently believed strongly in childish innocence and sexual purity, thus his preference for young, virginal heroines. In his study of Dickens, Mark Spilka expresses the opinion that Dickens was “unable to connect sex with goodness in depicting adult life”. Such a view would explain his predilection for child-like heroines.

The influence of Dickens in the shaping of Lawson’s writing is well documented by his biographers, and, in “A Fragment of Autobiography”,
Lawson also comments on his fascination with the works of Dickens and their lasting impression upon him.\textsuperscript{4} It is feasible then, that Dickens' influence, so apparent in the social themes that concerned Lawson in his early writing, is also reflected in his insistent presentation of young women as child-like: "a strategy" Spilka says, "for minimizing the element of sexuality".\textsuperscript{5} For these reasons, as well as his own predisposition for puritanism, Lawson presents love between his "little girls" and men as something chaste and spiritual, devoid of any sexual manifestation which may sully its purity. The tragic choice between purity and death, found for the first time in Richardson's novels, is predominant in Lawson's representations of his angelic young heroines.

Edie Brown, in "Some Day", Lizzie in "An Unfinished Love Story" and Bertha Bredt in "The Story of the Oracle" are typical of Lawson's idealised image of young womanhood. In order to maintain this unsullied, idealised image, rarely do their love affairs achieve fulfilment, which would imply an eventual acceptance of sex. Eternally pristine, their love affairs are brief moments of innocent hope and tremulous anticipation. Inevitably, some tragedy befalls them or the story finishes while there is still only tenderness and shining purity. Mitchell, in "Some Day", tells of Edie, the "one little girl" he "was properly stuck on":

She was the best little girl that ever lived, and about the prettiest. She was just eighteen, and didn't come up to my shoulder; the biggest blue eyes you ever saw...of course I didn't think she'd look at a rough, ugly ignorant brute like me...I was gone on that girl, and no joking:... But I wouldn't let her know that, for I felt sure she'd only laugh.\textsuperscript{6}

Edie is depicted as physically beautiful in the traditional Victorian sense. Her skin is likened to lilies and roses; she has the lustrous hair and the large blue eyes of the Victorian beauty. Her innocence and purity is implied by the
repetition of the term “little girl”, with its connotations of childish innocence and sexual purity. An angelic quality is conveyed by the image of her skin, “like lilies and roses”, with its evocation of the pristine pink and whiteness of a cherub. Edie personifies innocence.

Recognising Mitchell’s feelings for her, Edie endeavours to sit near the bushman at meal times, engaging him in conversation in an attempt to break through his natural reserve, but Mitchell believes she does so only “on account of her good nature” and because she pities him. Mitchell’s reticence is typical of Lawson’s Bushmen: “rough, ugly ignorant brute[s]”, who are too constrained to bring themselves to approach such innocent creatures. So pure are they that “they silence the coarse lusts of men, who feel too guilty or too unworthy to approach them”. There is also an implied fear of ridicule from their peers, as well as the objects of their affection, if they were to reveal the state of their emotions. Mitchell says: “I knew they’d laugh at me, and maybe she’d laugh at me more than all”. This is the kind of situation with which Lawson was familiar, drawing on his own experiences in life.

Mitchell takes the expected course of action – flight: “Stopping around where she was only made me miserable”. For her part, Edie suffers as a consequence of the unnatural actions she is forced to take in an attempt to restrain Mitchell from abandoning her, without a realisation of the relationship which, she believes, exists between them. Overcoming what is depicted as her natural demureness, Edie makes a declaration painful to her pride, revealing her feelings for him. Mitchell rejects her plea, but not without remorse: “There are some things a man doesn’t want to joke about.... Damn the world, say I!”

As powerful as the bushman’s love may be for his sweetheart, the nationalist bush mythology of the 1890s makes it impossible for their union.
Man is out of place at home, and the bush is no place for a woman. Courtship between bushmen and their sweethearts is, of necessity, a momentary encounter, as they are bound to go in different directions. As Lawson’s poem, “The Sliprails and the Spur” elucidates, bushmen’s sights are set on distant horizons, while the sliprails represent the boundary of her world, beyond which she can go no further:

She gasped for sudden loss of hope,
As, with a backward wave to her,
He cantered down the grassy slope
And swiftly round the darkening spur.
Black-pencilled panels standing high,
And darkness fading into stars,
And blurring fast against the sky,
A faint white form beside the bars. (21-28)¹²

In the poem, Mary dies of grief and is buried beside the spur. The outcome for Edie is left to conjecture but, in all likelihood, she would have suffered a similar fate, pining for Mitchell’s return, “some day”, as the title infers. As Sue Rowley argues in her paper about bush sweethearts: “With her death, the possibility of the bushman’s entrapment is laid to rest. He need no longer feel a responsibility to return and establish a home and family life”.¹³ He may spend the rest of his life with her memory to torture his quieter moments, but freedom is a preference for which he must suffer. Her suffering arises from the intensely painful, eternal vigil of waiting.

Like Edie, Lizzie, the “little girl” in “An Unfinished Love Story”, is destined to suffer in a similar fashion. As a consequence of a brief love affair, she also undergoes a painful experience. Abandoned by her sweetheart, Brook, she is left deeply hurt, yearning for his promised return. Her grief is stated explicitly: “They say, Lizzie broke her heart that year”.¹⁴ In many instances, Lawson’s “little girls” are forced to take humiliating courses of action, contrary to their natural behaviour, in the hope of securing the love of their erstwhile
sweethearts. Such is the fate of Lizzie. Torn by despair, she writes a pleading letter to Brook, begging him to return to her, but inevitably, fate intervenes, the letter goes astray and her life is ruined irrevocably.

Exemplifying Lawson's idealised image of young womanhood, Lizzie is the personification of "Innocence", in contrast to Brook who represents "Experience". Unlike the bushman Mitchell, Brook is not one of Lawson's readily identifiable characters. He is a city-hardened man ("Brook had been fifteen years in cities") who returns briefly to the country, where he experiences only feelings of contempt for his wretched bush origins. After a brief interlude in which Brook attempts to take advantage of the inexperienced farm girl, he returns to the city, leaving a bereft Lizzie and the promise of a love story unfulfilled.

Although not autobiographical, the story draws on Lawson's experiences at Eurunderee during his visit there in 1891. The memories that Brook recalls of "that hungry, wretched selection existence", reflect the image that lingers with Lawson of the "old fashioned, unhappy boy" that he was in the past. Brook's father, like Lawson’s, is dead and a tenant occupies the old selection, while Lizzie, the tenant's niece, resembles Bridget Lambert, the niece of the selector who leased the Eurunderee property from Peter Lawson in 1883. Lawson identifies Bridget Lambert as his model for "the Drover's Sweetheart" and "The Free Selector's Daughter", both written in 1891 and, it is believed that Bridget had broken off an engagement between them in the same year.

Brook is depicted as being shallow and calculating in his relationship with Lizzie, whom it is always obvious he will abandon. Brook acknowledges that he was attracted to her simply because of her purity and naivety, knowing that she would take everything he said seriously, and that "he trifled with her in
a most cruel and heartless manner". By contrast, Lizzie's innocence is carefully established. It is not simply her sexual inexperience or ignorance which is explored, but what seems to be an inherent pristine innocence. Although she has never loved anyone, she believes that, instinctively, she knows what love is. Her characteristics of inexperience and uncertainty are in direct contrast to Brook's worldliness. She is portrayed as reflective, even solemn. Her essential innocence is communicated by this reflectiveness, suggesting that she lacks experience of both love and life. Moreover, the impression of an innocent and unspoilt mind is enhanced by Lizzie's pensiveness before answering Brook's questions:

Lizzie – Lizzie! Do you know what love means? She pondered over this for some minutes, as a result of which she said she thought she did.\(^\text{16}\)

Characteristically, Lizzie's behaviour is, at all times, submissive and passive, reflecting the social expectations for young women at the time. She is obedient and compliant to Brook's overtures. When he slips his arm around her waist, she accepts his attentions without demur "just as a frightened child might". While Brook urges Lizzie to meet him each evening, at no time is there a suggestion of sexual experience, and for her, "the first love of her life" – pure and untarnished – leaves her with a sense of wonder.

The depiction of Lizzie lingers on her simple, child-like image. She is:

a short, plain, thin girl of nineteen, with rather vacant grey eyes, dark ringlets, and freckles; she had no complexion to speak of; she wore an ill-fitting print frock, and a pair of "men's 'lastic sides" several sizes too large for her.\(^\text{17}\)

This representation of Lizzie is of twofold significance, an understanding of which is essential to an understanding of Lawson's portrayal of women. Spilka's comment that Dickens uses a "strategy for minimizing the element of
sexuality” in his writing, is equally applicable to Lawson’s writing. Firstly, it would appear that he deliberately desexualises his women in order to avoid the realities of sex. The ill-fitting garments that Lizzie is wearing, strips her appearance of any apparent sensuality. Always inhibited when dealing with female sexuality, Lawson masks their sexual features as he does with Lizzie, hiding their flesh beneath shapeless garments. It is only when dealing with “fallen women”, barmaids/prostitutes, that Lawson shows no restraint in describing their physical features or in the explicit rendering of a sensual scene.

Secondly, the description of Lizzie is significant since, in it, lies the emergence of the Australian “bush girl” image. Banished are the lilies and roses that characterised Edie in the traditional Victorian sense. This is not the first occasion that Lawson tries to ‘Australianise’ a bush girl. He does this most effectively with Mary in "The Selector’s Daughter", but the authenticity of the treatment of Lizzie underlines one of the finer qualities of Lawson’s writing; the gradual merging of traditional ideology and reality, culminating in representations of distinctively Australian women exemplified, in particular, by his “Haggard women”.

Lizzie is Lawson’s idealised heroine, an “angel” in every sense of the word, despite her bush image. It is in the sequel story, "Thin Lips and False Teeth", that the ambivalence of his attitudes and feelings towards women is underlined. Brook, who had sought refuge in the sleazy underworld of a private bar when he deserted Lizzie, has, again, spent a night of debauchery in the “private parlour” of a bar. He is disturbed by a dream about the interlude with Lizzie, now two years in the past:

He was sitting, in the twilight, on a log among some saplings, with the selector’s niece – a country girl of nineteen – by his side...next he was on his knees in the dirt before the log, with
his arms folded on top of it, and his forehead resting on his wrists. He seemed crushed down by some horrible load of trouble. A light girlish hand was laid gently on his bowed head... She understood, then! She understood! The simple, innocent bush girl! O God!...\textsuperscript{18}

In his dream, the simple, innocent bush girl becomes the “Angel” of redemption who will save him from his life of dissipation. This dream of the redeeming “angel” is consistent with the ideal of Victorian womanhood in her role as the guardian angel of morality. Françoise Basch, discussing the role of women in Victorian society, states:

Woman was evoked in the form of an angel by Coventry Patmore and Tennyson, a madonna by Ruskin, the Virgin Mary by Sarah Ellis, representations which sum up the contemporary [Victorian] ideal: chastity, humility and transcendance.\textsuperscript{19}

Learning that Lizzie had written him a “pathetic little missive” some two years earlier, declaring the love she had been unable to confess to him, Brook is filled with disgust for the dissolute life he has been leading. He longs for the rest and peace he believes he would find in an atmosphere of innocence. Filled with remorse, he determines to see Lizzie who had pleaded: “You said you were coming back, Jack, and you never came. I have waited, Jack. Oh, you don’t know how I have waited.”\textsuperscript{20} It is pertinent to note that since 1891 Lawson had been living the life of the Bohemian freelance in Sydney, dossing in cheap lodging houses and drinking heavily, living a life of debauchery and promiscuity.\textsuperscript{21}

Characteristically, the bush sweetheart pays dearly for her constancy. Brief moments of joy turn into long months, stretching into years, of lonely waiting. Lawson constructs his characterisations of women along classical models (like Ulysses’ wife Penelope), foregrounding their virtue and chastity, and their patience. These women wait, enduring all manner of hardships and
sorrows for husbands or lovers who may or may not return from their wanderings. The drover's wife is the best known example of the patient wife's long, lonely vigil, while Lizzie's waiting turns to heartbreak.

Through an internal monologue with "Reason", Brook acknowledges that he was attracted to Lizzie only because of her purity and lack of worldly experience. She was, in every way, the opposite of his barmaids. But, in this moment of self-revelation, he admits that:

Her simplicity would bore you. She has nothing in common with you. Her childishness would drive you mad.... She might be happy and contented, would be for a while, but you wretchedly and hopelessly lonely. You would take long walks by yourself in the dark and be the most miserable man that ever the Lord created - or you would drink. Then - another woman, and you would neglect your wife and quietly, carelessly break her heart. Such a marriage is the most wretched mistake a man can make. (My emphasis.)\(^{22}\)

Written in 1894, two years before his marriage to Bertha Bredt, Lawson's feelings about relationships with the 'ideal' girl and marriage are a remarkable foreshadowing of the events of his own marriage and its disastrous outcome. "Reason" is speaking the truth as Lawson knew it but he obviously hoped for better things. Like Brook, he stopped listening to "Reason" when she says: "God help the poor girl that gets you!"\(^ {23}\)

This extract concerning marriage is seminal to Lawson's work. The ideas emerging become major preoccupations in his later stories. What Lawson implies about the kind of relationship that would develop between Brook and Lizzie forms a significant undercurrent running throughout his writing, culminating in the *Joe Wilson* stories. It is in those stories that Lawson begins exploring in detail, the reasons for the failure of the marriage of Joe and Mary Wilson: the lack of communication, the lack of understanding and the loneliness that can exist within marriage.
The relationship between Edie and Mitchell in "Some Day", is representative of the dilemmas that confront Lawson's bushmen in their encounters with women. The desire to love and be loved by a young, virginal heroine is countered by another even stronger desire transcending their mortal loves, the lust for freedom and mobility. There is always a reason for leaving the girl they love. Mitchell "had to go, for [he] was hard up." Although he was "gone on that girl, and no joking," there is an underlying assumption that he preferred to escape, to remain free from the constraints and restrictions that a relationship would impose. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that Mitchell never attempts to return to Edie. Despite his bitterness over the useless life he has led on the track, lacking ambition or hope, there is tangible proof of an ironic contentment for the freedom that this kind of "animal" existence affords a man who is not confined by the demands of women and society.

The French critic Emile Saillens, writing of Lawson (1910), discerned the wandering nature of Lawson's men. Attachments to wives or the life of a settled community are crippling ties from which Lawson's wanderers flee, at any cost. Saillens perceives this element as being clearly in line with the European literary tradition of Böll, Byron, Brennan, Voltaire and Verlaine, who sing of the sombre pleasures of the solitary rover, romantically summed up in the words from Schubert's song: "There where thou art not, there is happiness." Saillens believes that no-one has sung the fatal nature of the wanderlust and its grandeur, with more precision that Lawson in these lines: "I'm at home and at ease on a track that I know not; and restless and lost on a track that I know". Emphasising this point of view, the refrain in "The Sliprails and the Spur" expresses succinctly, that which Mitchell would find too difficult to articulate, or, would be unable to discern of his own complex psychological needs:
And he rides hard to dull the pain
Who rides from one that loves him best;
And he rides slowly back again
Whose restless heart must rove for rest. (My emphasis.)

Brian Matthews contends that in "Some Day" and "An Unfinished Love Story", Lawson begins to worry around the edges of a conflict between woman as ideal and a world, a reality, in which, as Lawson clearly realises, that ideal cannot continue to exist without some deterioration from its pristine original. Almost invariably, Lawson's women – the ones that he values – are tarnished by entering "the evil world" that men inhabit. Lizzie's "sense of wonder...as if something had come into her life which she could not realize," is brutally destroyed, leaving her broken-hearted and, although we do not hear about Edie, the intensity of her reactions suggests that she will suffer as a result of their relationship.

So intense is the suffering for Bertha Bredt, in "The Story of the Oracle", that ultimately, despairing of her lost love, she dies. This portrayal of Bertha conforms to the stereotypical category of "Angels, Saints and Martyrs", prevalent in the Victorian novel, who are characterised as being "above earthly concerns, generous to the point of self-sacrifice, quiet, forgiving, and capable of absolutely selfless love." Frequently, their saintly nature is discovered and revealed, partly as the result of an unhappy experience in love. Moreover, their subservience and self-effacing love allows them to subordinate their own needs and wishes to the men they love, or even to help a lover in his relationship with another woman.

Most of the "Angels" are unbelievably and monotonously good. George Eliot's Mirah in Daniel Deronda and Dinah Morris in Adam Bede are so self-effacing, gentle and saintly that they become abstractions of an ideal rather than characters who realistically represent human beings. Some women earn
the title of martyrs, "a special sub-division of the Angel category", traditional sufferers, who bear the indignities and tortures of their life with the self-sacrificing grace and patient fortitude of a Griselda, and whose life ends in pain or early death. As one who sacrifices her own happiness for others, Bertha Bredt fits neatly into this category.

"The Story of the Oracle" follows a similar pattern to "Some Day" and "An Unfinished Love Story". The unworthiness of man results in tragedy for the heroine, but, in this story, the hero also suffers through the betrayal of another woman and his own misplaced sense of justice. Bertha melodramatically dies from "brain fever or broken heart". Patricia Spacks argues that although men apparently have all the "public power" in the novel in Nineteenth Century England, men command women, but they cannot, in a deeper sense, control them. The "declines" in which Victorian heroines display their disappointments in love by dying, if necessary, reveal the lengths to which women will go to escape domination. Men can refuse to love them, but cannot force them to live. Granted the ultimate universal freedom to die, this particular mode of dying seems peculiarly and significantly feminine, a dramatisation of passivity which declares the woman's perfect virtue and perfect acceptance in the very act of defiance.

The Oracle, (young Tom Marshall in those days), "for the first time, got what you called, 'properly gone on a girl'." Her name was Bertha Bredt. She is not physically described to the reader, rather, it is her saintliness and martyrdom that are her distinguishing characteristics:

...she was "a girl as God made her" – a good true womanly girl – one of the sort of girls that only love once... As far as the girl was concerned, I think it was a case of love at first sight. They only knew each other for about six months, and were only 'courting' (as they called it then) for three or four months altogether; but she was that sort of girl that can love a man for
It can be argued that the portrayal of Bertha as saint and martyr is a wish fulfilment for Lawson, who, consciously or unconsciously, causes his “little girl” heroines to suffer because of the men they love. These heroines are imaginary figures, a vision of the kind of angelic creature he desires, who will love him with such intensity and devotion that, like his heroine Bertha, they will pine away and die for his sake. Paradoxically, Lawson’s “angels” are in complete contrast to the women he knew and was attracted to in real life (such as Mary Cameron) who, like his mother Louisa, was a vigorous and strong-willed woman.

Prior to the writing of "The Story of the Oracle" (1895), Lawson’s attempts at romance had ended in rejection, seriously damaging his self-esteem. I have argued that Lawson’s creation of female characters and his attitudes towards sex were significantly influenced by his personal associations with women. I have also suggested that Lawson employed a technique for dealing with female characters in his fiction in order to avoid a confrontation with them as objects of sex and love, distancing them, by presenting them as desexualised stereotypes. As commented on previously, Lawson was not alone in desexualising both women and love in nineteenth century fiction. Charles Dickens, of whom Lawson wrote: “I have read Dickens over and over again, and can read him now at any time,”³³ is frequently maligned for his failure to create believable female characters instead of the caricatures and stereotyped figures that are common in his novels. Patricia Stubbs observes that “perhaps the most arresting aspect of Dickens’ women is their now famed desexualisation.”³⁴ It has also been said of Dickens, that the insistent presentation of young women as childlike heroines, is a strategy for minimising the element of sexuality. So it may be said for Lawson.
Furthermore, the marginalisation of his female characters led David Martin to say: "In Lawson...while there are illustrations ("photographs") of women, there are no glimpses of love (unlike Gorki) and little real penetration into women's psychology ("portraits"). This is certainly an accurate account of Lawson's early attempts at the portrayal of the young and innocent, "the little girls" who are shadowy images beside the more fully developed male characters of Brook, in "Thin Lips and False Teeth", and Marshall, in "The Story of the Oracle".

Returning to a discussion of the story, Bertha Bredt embodies all the qualities that characterise the saint and martyr. She is forgiving, generous to the point of self-sacrifice, displaying an absolutely selfless love. Her own desires and happiness are subordinated in order to help her lover, Tom Marshall (the Oracle), in his relationship with another woman. Tom receives a letter from the girl on the goldfields whom he knew before meeting Bertha. She pleads with him to marry her, naming him as the father of the child she is bearing, claiming her people have abandoned her, leaving her almost destitute.

Tom confides in Bertha who "...was only a girl – but the sort you could go to in a crisis like that." Bertha agrees he must "do the right thing" and, exhibiting an unrealistically divine quality, "loved him all the more for it." In essence, Bertha transcends all earthly concerns. She is Lawson's quintessential "Angel", a resurrection of the pure and saintly image of his baby sister Nettie, around whom he wove a fabric of fantasy. Although Nettie died when only a few months old, his love for her is confirmed by his other sister Gertrude:

Nettie wove the tendrils of her love around Henry's lonely heart and her dimples and prattle brought a smile from his serious features...
This love lasted throughout his life, Lawson wore a lock of her hair until the end of his days. His idolisation of Nettie and his eternal mourning for a child he barely knew indicates a pathological element in Lawson’s worship. His childhood yearning for affection surges to the surface whenever he thinks of his dead sister Henrietta. These lines from “Eurunderee”, written in 1914, years after her death, are an affirmation of her psychological significance to him:

Would my sad heart have now been light; would none for me have grieved?
Ah, would my life have different been had Henrietta lived?
A sister’s influence and her tears, – a brother’s stubborn pride –
She’s dead these eight and thirty years, ’tis very well she died.38

But because she died so young, he was able to focus on her and recreate her image as he pleased, projecting all sorts of fanciful conceptions onto her. She was of considerable importance in his “phantasmic” biography.

As André Maurois points out, “it is from two essential elements –his mother and his first love – that an artist fashions his image of woman”:39 For Lawson, it is clear from the evidence, that his first love was his baby sister Nettie, whose attributes of innocence and purity he reproduced in his “little girls”. His account of Nettie’s brief existence underlines the impact she had upon him at a period in his life (aged 10) when he felt seriously alienated from his mother, in particular, and the world in general:

The little stranger, one of twins, was the first and last creamy-skinned blue-eyed baby in our family. She only stayed a little while – long enough for us to call her “Nettie”...40
It is significant that Lawson describes only one of the twins, the blue-eyed creamy-skinned Nettie, indicating the intensity of the effect this angelic “little stranger” had upon him. In an undated fragment of manuscript, Lawson also wrote of her:

She died young and pure. Well out of it say I – The sister that would have stuck to me. [My emphasis.]41

We attend to the allusion of Nettie’s purity. It is evidence of the importance of this quality to Lawson. Like Dickens, he obviously believed in childish innocence and sexual purity and was “unable to connect sex with goodness in depicting adult life.” Such a view underlines Lawson’s predilection for childlike heroines. Bertha, like Nettie, dies young and pure but not before she has undergone considerable suffering.

After much torment, Tom Marshall determines that he must marry the barmaid only to discover, in due course, that he is not the father of the child. The effect of this revelation on Bertha, is left unstated, at least, until the very end of the story. It is obvious that there is a great deal of sympathy for the “unfortunate” girl (the barmaid), knowing how badly she will be treated by her more moral, but less humane sisters. The attitudes of church and society concerning sexual misdemeanours informs the discourse of this social comment:

...there is no mercy, at least as far as women are concerned, for the poor foolish girl, who has to sneak out the back way and round by back streets and lanes after dark, with a cloak on to hide her figure.42

This judgment is consistent with contemporary attitudes, and Lawson exhibits his perceptiveness concerning women’s behaviour. His sympathy towards prostitutes and fallen women (which will be discussed at length in a
later chapter) is in striking contrast to the limited sympathy meted out to the "little girl" the Oracle professes to love. Admittedly, the Oracle has little choice in his decision, given the Victorian attitudes towards virtue, chastity and pregnancy outside of wedlock. But the elevation of the Oracle to a symbol of self-sacrifice, in atonement for the wrongs of all men against women, is difficult to accept. The Oracle is an ordinary and very human bushman, which is substantiated by his lapses in behaviour, therefore it is unrealistic of Lawson to portray him in the role of a "saint". Rather, it seems, that Lawson has allowed the influence of Dickens to intrude into his work, with the result that the nobility of a Sidney Carton is impressed upon the character of the Oracle:

He thinks that, as most men would deceive women if they could, when one gets caught, he's got no call to squeal about it; he's bound because of the sins of men in general against women, to make the best of it. What is one man's wrong counted against the wrongs of hundreds of unfortunate girls? [My emphasis.]

As the story unfolds, the question that arises is why the Oracle does not return to his "Gippsland girl" after the real father of the child returns. The Oracle has done his duty and more, marrying the barmaid and remaining with her for more than a year, knowing he is not the father of the child. The connotation is that he is content with this woman, content enough to have stayed, and to have saved sufficient money to enable him to extricate her from that place of censure.

The reality of the situation mirrors the dilemma of Lawson's life. The illusion of the angelic and the pure fascinates him but, in truth, the bold and the not so pure, "the fine lump of a blonde, and pretty gay," who has been having affairs with many men, satisfies his needs, freed from any feelings of guilt. The problem, inherent in Lawson's attitude to pure and virginal women, whom he
does idolise, is his belief that the moment they are exposed to the realities of life with men, they will be tarnished by the contact.

The news that the Oracle has left the barmaid, eventually reaches Bertha who has languished for several years waiting to hear from him. Like her predecessors, Lizzie and Edie, Bertha’s suffering manifests itself in actions humiliating to her. She writes a dozen or more letters to the Oracle. He answers only once, but that is sufficient for Bertha:

Then, what must the girl do but clear out from home and make her way over to Sydney – to Aunt Bob’s place, looking for Tom.44

The tone of this sentence is not sympathetic, but rather, one of condemnation and rebuke. This is not the behaviour expected of a passive, submissive young woman. It is out of character to display her emotions so publicly, although such public devotion would be very appealing to Lawson, who yearned for similar attention in his own life.

As I have discussed formerly, the Oracle’s attitude towards Bertha is complex, but his behaviour is typical of the wandering pattern of Lawson’s bushmen, who rarely, if ever, return to once trodden pastures. It can be argued that this unpredictable behaviour by the Oracle is a reflection of Lawson’s own uncertainty and ambivalence towards women. Lawson had been married for only 3 years when "The Story of the Oracle" was published in 1899, but already his marriage was faltering. The inference is that for Henry and the Oracle alike, a little of marriage is enough! The anguish that Bertha suffers as a result of such a point of view, brings her to her deathbed. Lawson does not attempt to explore Bertha’s emotions during her years of abandonment, yet the assumption drawn from her emotional state when she reaches Sydney in an attempt to find Tom, suggests that she has suffered a
severe psychological trauma from which she does not recover: "She took ill - brain fever or a broken heart". Although loneliness, insanity, and death were a common outcome for the traditional martyr such as Bertha, these stereotypical conditions, when examined in the context of the sufferer, can be seen to have their origins in reality. Consider the example of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. An injury to her back sustained in a riding accident when she was 15, led to years of ill-health that isolated her to an invalid's couch. Yet, after the first and momentous meeting with Browning when both were shaken with emotion – her white face, “spirit pure”, and her dark poetical eyes struck Browning – she made a remarkable recovery venturing forth and overcoming her weakness. As for Bertha, living as she does in an isolated corner of the Gippsland district: “it was rough country, and there were no roads”, the assumption is that she would have endured intense loneliness.

As Lawson makes quite clear in stories such as "The Drover’s Wife", life on a “wretched selection” was “cruelly dull and dreary”. For a woman: “there was hardship and poverty, squalor and misery...” Historian Francis Adams comments on the females in the families of small farmers in the 1890s: “The life of their women is pitiable.” In all probability, very few, if any eligible young men would have wandered into Bertha’s life after Tom’s departure. It is justifiable to surmise that the isolation and hardships of Bertha’s existence, combined with her loneliness and very real anguish at the deprivation of her lover, would have affected her sanity.

This point is reinforced by later stories, in particular, The Joe Wilson series. In these stories Lawson begins to explore the effect on women of life in the bush: the hardships, the fear, the loneliness and the disintegration of marriage (for which read loss of love). Mrs. Spicer, one of Lawson’s “Haggard Women” (the subject of a later chapter), exemplifies the woman who has gone beyond the stages of physical separation and alienation from her husband.
and has reached the point of ultimate alienation from herself and the world – madness.

"The Story of the Oracle" demonstrates the manner in which Lawson controls the image of his women, keeping them, in these early stories, all but silent. In this way, the male dominates the female, forcing them into a subordinate role. In a story of some 3,000 words, Bertha is allowed to speak just 16 of these and then, they are words of despair and desolation. She begs for one last look at the man who has rejected her, but whom she still loves: "I want to see him! I want to find Tom! I only want to see Tom!"\(^{48}\) By way of this technique, Lawson marginalises his women, emphasising their subjugation and subservience and embodying the male domination of society in the 1890s. It can also be argued that Lawson consciously chose to portray these "ideal" women as silent, in possible rebellion against the women he had known in his life who were anything but silent. His life, up to this time, had been one of domination by his mother and humiliation and rejection by the young women he favoured. It is a justifiable assertion that Lawson achieved psychological satisfaction by reversing the situation in his prose, so that the women were dominated by men.

An examination of the portrayal of Ruth Wilson in "The Hero of Redclay", Lawson's most ambitious short story,\(^{49}\) is essential to any discussion of Lawson's "little girls." But, before embarking on such a discussion, it is necessary for the sake of clarity, to recount the sequence of events which led to the eventual publication of the story. In 1896, Lawson toyed with the idea of writing a novel, a melodrama, entitled *The Hero of Redclay*, based on the stereotypical Victorian theme of the chivalrous ne'er-do-well who chooses to go to gaol rather than dishonour the fair young lady. This he announced as coming "shortly", in the back of his book of verse, *In the Days When the World Was Wide*, but it failed to eventuate. Instead, Lawson commenced the
composition of a “long poem” based on the same theme. Again, this did not eventuate until 1902 and then it appeared under the title “Ruth”. However, in 1898, Lawson completed his only play, initially entitled *Ruth*, then changed later to *Pinter's Son Jim*, using the same theme and characters. It was from this manuscript, declared unplayable because of its length, that Lawson developed the themes and characters for his later sketches and verses, notably the short story “The Hero of Redclay” (1899) and the poem “Ruth”.

It is significant that Ruth Wilson in the play *Pinter's Son Jim*, is cast as “A girl as God made her”, emphasising Lawson’s predilection for the pure and ethereal. While Ruth in *The Hero of Redclay* conforms to the stereotype of the “angel” in a number of ways: she is submissive, passive and would choose death before dishonour. It is clear that Lawson was intent on individualising this heroine. She is educated, intelligent, and a person of quality:

> It was Miss Wilson strolling along the bank in the sunset, all by her pretty self. She was a slight girl, not very tall, with reddish frizzled hair, grey eyes, and small, pretty features. She spoke as if she had more brains than the average, and had been better educated. Jack Drew was the only young man in Redclay she could talk to, or who could talk to a girl like her;50

Although “not-quite-red-hair” was considered a warning of individuality of characterisation in the Victorian novel (like Vixen in Mary Braddon’s novel of that name),51 it is clear that Lawson individualised this heroine for very different reasons. The striking aspect about Ruth Wilson is that her description bears a remarkable resemblance to Hannah Thornburn, the young woman with whom Lawson fell in love in 1898. Hannah’s description reads thus:

> ...about 5 feet 4 inches tall – fair of complexion, grey-eyed, with reddish-gold hair resembling her mother’s. She had lips that appeared to pout but did not. Constitutionally she was not robust, but slender. Her beauty was of the gentle, attractive type; she was not handsome or animated or striking.52
Colin Roderick confirms that the figure of Ruth was drawn from Hannah Thornburn. He states: "that Lawson identified Hannah with Ruth, the heroine of the ballad so called: a revised and personalised version of "The Hero of Redclay"." He also draws attention to the poem "Hannah Thornburn" (1905), in which we find this description of her:

Her hair was red gold on head Grecian,  
But fluffed from the parting away  
And her eyes were the warm grey venetian  
That comes with the dawn of the day.  
No fashion or fad could entrap her,  
And a simple print work dress she war.  
But her long limbs were formed for the "wrapper"  
And her fair arms were meant to be free. (17-24)

Mary Gilmore's biographical note and poem, also entitled "Ruth", determines beyond her doubt the truth of the relationship between Hannah and Lawson. Mary Gilmore's poem "Ruth" was inspired by Lawson's account of Hannah:

"..."She loved me!...O in my dark life,"
He said, "She was, if ever woman was, my wife.
So patient, she! So sweet, so kind!
From her dear lips I heard no scorn
Of folly out of suffering born;
She had no bitterness of mind
That morning noon and night
Clacked out its petty spite;
No egotism bit; no boarded taint
Touched where her lovely soul stood saint!
So from the rancour of my daily hell
Storm-driven I ran to her, and like a spell
Peace stilled me even ere my head
Against her gentle breast I laid..."

In a letter to Robertson after Lawson's death, Mary Gilmore wrote (1923):

He told me what her real name was... She is Ruth, and that is enough. He chose the name Ruth because it meant ruth, and sorrow and suffering, and because it was a name of innocence. (My emphasis.)
Hannah Thornburn is the quintessence of all Lawson's "angels". His adoration of her innocence and purity is conveyed in his poem entitled "Hannah Thornburn":

They lifted her out of a story  
    Too sordid and selfish by far;  
They left me the innocent glory  
    Of love that was pure as a star;  
They left me all guiltless of "evil"  
    That would have brought years of distress  
When the chance to be man, god or devil,  
    Was mine, on return from Success. (1-8).  
(My emphasis.)

The poem also stresses the Lawsonian fixation with the need for "love that was pure as a star". It is this conflict between illusion and reality that is central to an understanding of Lawson's images of his ideal woman: his "little girls", his "angels".

Constantly he was wanting to set women on a pedestal, while just as constantly conceding that they could not and would not stay there: reason dictated this. That is why so many of his women are portrayed, initially in idealised terms, and then come to grief and decay, loss and rejection, as does Ruth Wilson. Ruth steps off her pedestal into the arms of Jack Drew "a blackguard who'd taken advantage of a poor unprotected girl because she loved him." Because of her love, Ruth enters the "real" world of men and, as a result of that entry, she suffers greatly. Her sanity is affected and ultimately she dies in delirium: "waiting and listening for [Jack]."

Faithful to the themes of Victorian melodrama, Ruth is depicted as a poor young orphaned heroine, adopted by her aunt who forces her to work as a servant for the family. Compensating for her harsh treatment, she becomes a favourite of all the men in town: "most of the single men – and some of the married ones, perhaps – were gone on her...." But it is Jack Drew she loves
and trusts. Believing that matrimony is implied from their relationship, she allows him into her bedroom, one night when the family is away. Caught leaving the premises by the unexpected return of her uncle, Jack protects Ruth's honour, pretending he was intent on robbing the bank. But Ruth, believing she has been compromised, falls immediately into a swoon, never to learn that Jack has protected her honour, and does so, even after her death.

There is in the death of Ruth from “brain fever” an uncanny prefiguring of events that were to occur only a few years later in Lawson's own life, with the untimely death of Hannah Thornburn (1902). In much the same way as he did after the death of his baby sister Nettie, Lawson melded fact and fantasy, transfiguring Hannah, in his imagination, into the one great romantic love of his life, whose death he was to mourn for many years afterwards.

Composed in London (1901), "That Pretty Girl in The Army" confirms the theory that Lawson's thoughts dwelt increasingly on Hannah. This is not surprising as it was during the two years in London that Henry and Bertha's marriage disintegrated irretrievably. Considering their mutual antagonism, it is understandable that Lawson turned to memories of Hannah who worshipped him and who "supplies the flattery and encouragement he did not get from his wife". Hence, his concern to focus the story on a fictitious character modelled on Hannah Thornburn. Although not a member of the Salvation Army, she was a constant churchgoer and Sunday School Teacher and a devoted reader of the Scriptures.

In this story, the "pretty girl" is actually given the name Hannah Thornburn and her description fits the real Hannah, precisely:

She was a little girl, nineteen or twenty, I should judge, the prettiest girl I ever saw in the Army, and one of the prettiest I've ever seen out of it. She had the features of an angel, but her expression was wonderfully human, sweet and sympathetic.
Her big grey eyes were sad with sympathy for sufferers and sinners, and her poke bonnet was full of bunchy red-gold hair. (My emphasis.)

Although embodying the qualities of purity and innocence, Hannah deviates from the traditional stereotype in a number of ways. She is a more fully rounded character invested with the qualities of passion, courage and determination. She “stamped her pretty foot on the gravel,” and flashed her eyes before delivering a stinging sermon to a group of drunken Bushmen gathered outside the pub in Bourke. This “little girl” has been given a voice and uses it to avail:

‘What sort of life is this you lead? Drinking, and gambling, and fighting, and swearing your lives away...’ It’s – it’s wicked. Great big men like you, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.’

It is pertinent to remark that Lawson’s crusading mother, Louisa, most probably would have behaved in just such a fashion as might his wife, Bertha, who was of a similar inclination. Therefore, it can be assumed that the more mature Lawson now acknowledges the assertive female role and depicts her accordingly. This “angel” is no stereotype. Hannah represents the coming of age of Lawson’s “little girls”, emerging as individuals with their own distinctive characteristics. This marks a noteworthy development in his depiction of women, setting the pattern for a more realistic treatment of them in his later stories.

It is Hannah who has caused the rift between Jack and herself but she does not languish, as have the previous heroines, waiting hopelessly for their lost lovers to return. She is a girl of spirit and determination who joins the Salvation Army to pursue her sweetheart, Jack Moonlight, to Bourke. Nor does she die of grief or brain fever or a broken heart, instead she manages to make a marked impression on the menfolk of the town:
Drunks quieted down or got out of the way if they could when the Pretty Girl appeared on the scene, fights and games of “headin’ em” were adjourned, and weak, ordinary language was used for the time being, and that was about all... most of the chaps were in love with that Pretty Girl in the Army — all those who didn’t worship her privately.\(^6\)

Hannah is reunited with her sweetheart, Jack Moonlight, who eventually trudges into town, with his swag on his back. Their reunion is remarkable for its paradoxes. Hannah chastises Jack for abandoning her, and then, for failing to write to her. A mystified Jack expostulates that Hannah had ordered him to leave and, therefore, he had never contemplated writing a letter. In this situation, Hannah is the dominant personality, although she is made to succumb to the frailties vested upon women, fainting when she first sees Jack. The outcome for this “little girl” appears to be one of fulfilment, but the story is left open-ended. Mitchell’s closing remark as narrator, to his mate Donald: “with a man, it’s love and the devil both, sometimes,”\(^6\) infers that man’s weakness may mar the future for Hannah.
NOTES

CHAPTER 2


28 Susan Gorsky, "The Gentle Doubters" 35.

29 Susan Gorsky, "The Gentle Doubters" 35.


41 M.L. DOC 1718.


49 Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: Commentaries on His Prose Writings* 159, 161, 162.


51 Susan Gorsky, "The Gentle Doubters" 33.


53 Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: Commentaries on His Prose Writings* 162.


CHAPTER 3

FAITHFUL WIVES

"Seems to me that a good many men want to make angels of their wives without first taking the trouble of making saints of themselves"

Henry Lawson, "Triangles of Life".
No discussion of Lawson's women would be complete without a detailed examination of the attitudes towards sex and marriage manifested in his stories. On close analysis, it is apparent that Lawson's view of married women is especially ambivalent for a number of reasons which will be explored in this chapter. The angel/devil dichotomy, the central focus of this thesis, is predominant in Lawson's representation of wives.

Influenced by the Victorian ideology of the wife and mother as "custodians of the moral conscience, the repository of all virtue," whose place is in the home, "the symbolic centre of the moral values", Lawson confines his wives to their traditional domestic roles. Yet, at the same time, he compels them to perform rigorous masculine tasks, reinforcing the contradiction between woman's ideal role and her actual position in society. Patricia Stubbs supports the theory that in literature:

no matter what part in society individual women in fact play, traditional images focus on their domestic and sexual roles.²

The assumption is that Lawson was simply one of many writers at the end of the Nineteenth Century who were victims of the dislocation between traditional ideology and reality. Later in this chapter, arguments concerning gender relations and the national tradition put forward by Marilyn Lake, will be addressed.

However, in his early writings up to 1902, Lawson portrayed wives, for the most part, as "angels". That is, they fulfilled the traditional role of wife and mother, as moral guardians of the hearth and home. Furthermore, these women embodied the standard virtues of endurance and passivity as they stoically await the return of their nomadic husbands. (Lawson's 'Drover's Wife' is the archetypal image of the bush mother in Australian literature.) What is
more, these women suffer vicariously as a consequence of the criminal or irresponsible behaviour of husbands or sons, until, pushed beyond the limits of their endurance, they become, like Mrs. Spicer in "Water Them Geraniums", "past carin". Moreover, the deceived wives, Jack's wife in "He'd Come Back", Mrs. Baker and, in particular, Mary Wilson of the Joe Wilson stories, are all depicted as "angels"; that is, good, respectable women, in the traditional sense of loving and caring for their husbands and children. Characteristically, they are represented as being morally superior to their feckless husbands.

A significant change in the direction of Lawson's sentiment is obvious in the stories written after 1903. As I have suggested, they contain many more bitter references to women than in his earlier collected writings and, in fact, wives are portrayed with unqualified hostility, as selfish, treacherous and deceitful, intent on exploiting their husbands' benevolence. Baby, in "Their Mate's Honour", is an exemplary case and expressions of animosity towards wives who use their husbands heartlessly, occur in a number of stories in this later period, namely, "Triangles of Life" (1905-6) and "The Man Who Drowned" (1910), while Mrs. Johnson in "The Reformation of Johnson" (1919), is a manifestation of his obsessional antagonism towards them. She is portrayed with bitterness, vindictiveness and malice, as "a woman without a soul", while Dotty's wife in the Previous Convictions stories, drives him to drink. All these representations of wives are indications of Lawson's jaundiced opinion of them, and evidence that antagonism towards women obsessed him until the end of his life.

As I have discussed previously, the background to his hostility stems from the circumstances of Lawson's life and his psychological state of mind after Bertha left him in 1903. Their official separation at Bertha's request destroyed his self-esteem irrevocably, leaving him a broken, desolate man. Anguish at
his rejection smouldered into bitter, irrational hatred towards Bertha and, what he regarded as her betrayal. Resentment towards her was exacerbated by the law suits she brought against him for failure to pay maintenance, which resulted in several terms of imprisonment. This period culminated with Lawson writing out his bitterness in his most vituperative article reviling women, "The She Devil" (MS 1904). Obsessed by hatred and vindictiveness, his grievances assumed wildly exaggerated proportions. He attacked women who left their husbands or divorced them, condemning them for wrongfully charging the "unfortunate" men with brutality or adultery, in order to have them gaoled and so be liberated from them:

The she-fiend comes in all womanly guises and no man knows where, how or under what circumstance he might meet her.... There are cases too, in this land of hysteria, ill matched couples and mad hasty marriages, where the husband is afraid to live alone with his excitable wife, lest she, in a fit of uncontrollable temper, and in the absence of witnesses, might charge him with common assault or even attempted murder;...

Interestingly, perhaps the most bitter portrayal of a wife, Emma, in "A Child in the Dark", was written in 1902, well before the other stories, while Johnson's wife has many colleagues, Dotty's wife, Mrs. Pritchard and the women of "Our Area" who are all packed into a relatively small number of stories. Yet, even earlier than the representation of Emma, the seeds of his animosity towards wives are discernible in the depiction of the earlier Johnson's wife of "Barney, Take Me Home Again" (1901), where it is implied that her selfishness is the cause of his eventual downfall. Actually, the woman, a migrant from England, cannot adjust to the rawness of pioneering life, and the account of her dissatisfactions is the substance of the first part of the story. As with many of Lawson's male protagonists, Johnson is portrayed as good-natured and generous to the point of weakness where his wife is concerned.
The accusatory nature of this story is announced didactically by the author in
the first lines:

This is a sketch of one of the many ways in which a young married woman, who is naturally thick-skinned and selfish — as most women are — and who thinks she loves her husband, can spoil his life because he happens to be good-natured, generous, sensitive, weak or soft, whichever you like to call it. (My emphasis.)

There is much of interest in this story revealing Lawson's attitudes towards wives and marriage, but it is the authorial comment that is of immediate concern: "If we saw our married lives as others see them, half of us would get divorced". This is the kind of comment implicit in the majority of his stories about wives, which gives an insight into the author's opinions concerning marriage. In a letter from New Zealand to his friend Brereton, soon after his marriage to Bertha, an uneasy ambiguity, and a sense of conflict in his relationship with her, can be detected. Though conceding that matrimony is "good and right", and that his wife is "a gem", he confesses that marriage interferes with "notions of duty" to his chums. His preference is emphasised in the words: "I think the creed of the Chaps, Coves and Fellows is the grandest of all." The poems written at this time also illuminate something of Lawson's state of mind. "Written Afterwards", discloses a disturbing undercurrent of restlessness and vague discontent with marriage:

So the days of my riding are over,
And the days of my tramping are done —
I'm about as content as a rover
Will ever be under the sun. (1-4)

This expression of discontent at the curtailment of freedom and immobility imposed by marriage is reinforced by Lawson's droving yarns and ballads which celebrate these ideals. Freedom for the bushman meant freedom from the constraints of marriage, a theme which Lawson returns to again and again
in his prose and poetry. This theme is present in “The Vagabond” where the family is represented as a tyranny and the family man as a fool:

Sacrifice all for the family's sake,
Bow to their selfish rule!
Slave till your big soft heart, they break –
The heart of the 'family fool'. (45-8)

In her discussion of gender relationships at the end of the nineteenth century, Marilyn Lake states that in the men's press of late nineteenth century Australia, the carefree roaming life was elevated to an heroic status. Families “put the hobbles” on men. Clearly many husbands and fathers had no choice but to travel to search for work, but equally clearly, there were powerful cultural endorsements for their rejection of domesticity. The Bulletin promoted a particular model of masculinity in which men, whether married or not, enjoyed the pleasures of “bachelordom”. It was the most influential exponent of the “separatist model” of masculinity which lay at the heart of the eulogies to the Bushman. The Bulletin expounded the theory that home life trammelled a man's spirit and emasculated him. It robbed him of his independence.

These theories of the pleasures of the “careless, roaming life” are embodied in the themes of Lawson’s stories. The domestic consequences of this lifestyle form the themes of Lawson’s Mitchell stories which endorse the bush mythology that man is out of place at home and that women are spoilers of men’s pleasures. The Bulletin caricatured women as “vain, snobbish, conservative, parson-worshipping killjoys”. The message was emphatic: marriage was a state to be avoided or abandoned. The wife may be “a gem”, but she’ll play hell with your notions of duty to your chums! It is this dilemma, which caused men to regard women as both “angels” and “devils” in marriage.
One of the earliest of the Mitchell stories, "On the Edge of a Plain" (1893), conveys the attitudes associated with family life, the smothering, confined atmosphere, from which characters like Mitchell, and bushmen like him, inevitably flee. Mitchell, the narrator (a version of the author), talks to his unnamed mate about the time he returned home after an absence of eight years, unaware that he has been reported dead just a few days previously. The reflective Mitchell is revealed through his talk. The critic, John Barnes, discussing Lawson's short stories, believes that "On the Edge of a Plain" is Lawson's most subtle and delicate story which uses the yarn or oral narrative technique. By this method, Barnes considers that he gives to his prose the feel of a man talking with his equals, sharing his experiences. This, of course, is the art of Lawson's writing.

Through Mitchell's summary account of the ensuing reunion runs a persistent hint of possessiveness, of constriction. The suffocating nature of the family's reactions to Mitchell is intensified by the knowledge of the contrast with his nomadic, freewheeling existence. His mother and sisters symbolise the oppression of domesticity. Their actions, the gripping of his hand, the imprisoning, stifling embrace, emphasise the constraining influence of women who expect men to comply with the conditions of family life. Mitchell remarks: "the old woman wouldn't let go my hand for three mortal hours," and further:

The girls came rushing down...and then they all tried to get hold of me at once - nearly smothered me... Mother and the girls made me swear never to go away any more....

Mitchell is at his most laconic when he tells how he swore to stay with his parents while they are alive but, yawning to suggest a lack of real concern, he admits that he broke his promise after a week because the family were no longer welcoming. Mitchell's brief taste of domesticity ends, inevitably, in flight.
from the complexities of family life when he is pressured to look for work. The constriction, confinement and responsibility associated with domesticity is anathema to Lawson’s idealisation of the bushman whose goal is freedom, especially from women.

Written from a masculine perspective, the female response to the constrictions, confinement and responsibilities from which Mitchell flees is not a consideration for the author. The women have no voice in the text. On the contrary, they are blamed for the oppression of their menfolk, yet it is the women who are the real victims of oppression, imprisoned by a patriarchal society dominated by men and by loveless marriages. In direct contrast to the freedom for men extolled by the Bulletin and exemplified by Mitchell, women are habitually confined: confined to the home, locked into economic dependency, confined by pregnancies, births and child-rearing, not to mention the drudgery of household duties.

Written in the same year as “On the Edge of the Plain”, “He’d Come Back” endorses Lawson’s perception of the antipathy of bushmen towards marriage. The protagonist, Jack, is emblematic of the feckless bushman who, although willing to try the anticipated comforts of marriage, is unwilling to forgo the traditional pleasures of Australian masculinity: drinking, gambling and sexual indulgence. Discussing the roles of men and women in the family in the 1890’s, Marilyn Lake states that within the family context, masculinist cultural practices could take on dramatically new meanings. If men chose to spend a large proportion of their earnings on drinking, gambling and women, the result might be a deprived diet for their family and barefooted children. Whatever the reasons, wives suffered, as does Jack’s wife in “He’d Come Back”. 
Recurrent themes prevail in many of Lawson’s stories. Frequently the husband is compelled to abandon his wife and family. For pressing economic reasons, he is forced to seek work in far distant places. Inevitably, the man falls victim to alcohol and women, causing him to remain adrift for long periods of time. Such is the case in “He’d Come Back”. True to the stereotype, Jack leaves his nameless wife to seek work after a brief but apparently happy relationship. The narrative reveals, however, the eagerness with which Jack escapes from his wife and domestic life. The dry sardonic mood of the narrator is conveyed in an idiom which echoes that of the characters who form his audience and support his opinions:

I had to jump at the first chance of a job, and leave her with her people... (My emphasis.)

and

As true’s God hears me I never meant to desert her in cold blood... (My emphasis.)

The implication is clear. Jack seizes the opportunity to escape to the freedom of “the careless roaming life”. In terms of the Bulletin masculinist theory, the home may offer the bushman comfort and solace, but it is also stultifying and confining. Lawson’s poem “Break o’ Day” expresses the bushman’s relief at his flight:

You may love me dear, for a day and a night,
You may cast the world aside,
But as sure as the morning star shines bright,
With the break of day I’ll ride. (17-20)

Jack manages to absent himself for five years or thereabouts, becoming entangled with another woman and alcohol, with scarcely a thought for his deserted wife or children. Jack’s conscience goads him to seek his family
only when he learns that his wife “had broken her heart” because of him. Eventually, he discovers them living in poverty, struggling to survive on a small pittance left by her father. Realising the hardships they have endured, Jack remains with his family for one year but, true to form, deserts them again, this time, permanently. Regardless of their economic dependence upon him, Jack is unwilling to bear the responsibility of his now “careworn” wife and children. There is an overtone of bravado on Jack’s part, eschewing any feelings of guilt, while there is a disturbing lack of awareness of the more profound implications, in the future, for his deserted dependents.

The woman who is “much too good” for her husband or sweetheart is another recurring figure in Lawson’s stories. Jack’s wife fits into this category:

She was a beauty, and no mistake; she was far too good for me. I often wondered how she came to have a chap like me.20

The inference drawn from this kind of remark is that women are revered for their goodness and respectability. Bushwomen, in particular, are seen to be heroic in their respectability in the face of such enormous odds as total isolation, poverty and hardship. In a word they are “angels”. But respectability was not valued in men as it was in women. Men, therefore, found in their own unworthiness a convenient rationalisation, a plausible excuse, for the desertion of their women. Men did not want to live up to the expectations of their women, hence the impulse was there to remove themselves from the pain and complications of guilt.

“Mitchell on Matrimony” (1897) is a meandering homily on “the woman problem” in which, Brian Matthews believes, Mitchell has become a mere mouthpiece for Lawson’s pronouncements in the discursive or philosophising mode. He considers that these stories fail, by comparison with the earlier
Mitchell stories, because there is an "absence of detachment" on the part of the author who is too involved. Nevertheless, Mitchell's revelations about women provide an important insight into the author's opinions and attitudes. Discussing women with his mate Joe, while preparing to return home after a season of shearing, Mitchell acknowledges that the institution of marriage is deeply troubled. Men and women are represented as cultural aliens, between whom no understanding can pass. Mitchell comments on this alienation:

"I don't think we ever understood women properly..." "I don't think we ever will – we never took the trouble to try, and if we did it would only be wasted brain-power...and woman'll be extinct before you've learnt her..."22

In the early years of marriage the hope that men and women can live side by side in harmony is tempered by disillusionment. Men and women remain estranged by the separation of the domestic sphere from the world. The estrangement of husbands and wives is reflected in their inability to communicate. Mitchell and his mate maintain an easy intercourse because they are presumed to be alike but, between men and women, there is no such understanding. Words fail them. This deep sense of alienation between men and women is expressed by Mitchell:

I read in a piece of newspaper the other day about how a man changes after he's married, how he gets short, and impatient, and bored (which is only natural), and sticks up a wall of newspaper between himself and his wife when he's at home; and how it comes like a cold shock to her, and all her air-castles vanish... (My emphasis.)23

The connotation is that women are restricted to their domestic sphere not only physically, but also psychologically, by man's failure to admit them, even in conversation, to the world beyond the hearth.
In “Telling Mrs. Baker”, written in England (1901), Mrs. Baker is representative of Lawson’s “angelic wives”: good, loyal, respectable women, whose husbands succumb to the enticements beyond the hearth, of “the carefree, roaming, life”. Written as a celebration of the “Bush religion” of mateship, the story reinforces the *Bulletin* model of masculinity which was such a powerful influence over Lawson. Stereotypically, Baker is ruined by drought and is forced to take up droving. As “Boss drover” he is absent from home for long periods of time. The story has parallels with “The Drover’s Wife” but, unlike that archetypal maternal figure, Mrs. Baker lives in a township and does not suffer from isolation or social deprivation. She is depicted as cheerful, loving and happy, in the traditional domestic role of wife and mother. In the judgment of the narrator, Mrs. Baker is “the sort of woman that is contented with housework and the children and with nothing particular about her in the way of brains.”

But, demonstrating a perceptiveness which belies this comment, she elicits from Andy, one of her husband’s fellow drovers, a promise to keep Baker away from alcohol during the drove. Andy’s words reiterate the recurrent theme of the woman who is “too good” for her husband:

> She was always a damned sight too good for the Boss, but she believed in him. (My emphasis.)

The essence of the story lies in this paradox. On the one hand, Mrs. Baker is portrayed as the idealised, loving wife and mother, the embodiment of loyalty, trust, faith and devotion. Her blind faith inhibits her ability to perceive the truth about her husband, of whom, true to convention, she believes only the best:

> But he’d never think of anything but me and the children. He promised he’d give up droving after this trip, and get something to do near home. The life was too much for him – riding in all weathers and camping out in the rain;
and living like a dog. **But he was never content at home.** It was all for the sake of me and the children. He wanted to make money and start on a station again... He only thought of me and the children! (My emphasis.)

The telling line, "but he was never content at home", is an intrinsic quality of most of Lawson’s married men, be they bushmen or city dwellers.

On the other hand, representative of the wandering, freedom-loving bushman, Baker, is unfaithful to his wife as well as being a hopeless alcoholic who spends all his earnings in the process. Obsessed by a barmaid, he sinks further and further into vice and degradation, eventually dying a terrible death from the effects of alcohol:

> Sometimes, towards the end, he’d be sensible for a few minutes and talk about his ‘poor wife and children’; and immediately afterwards he’d fall a-cursing me, and Andy, and Ned, and calling us devils. He cursed everything; he cursed his wife and children, and yelled that they were dragging him down to hell. He died raving mad. It was the worse case of death in the horrors of drink that I ever saw or heard of in the bush. (My emphasis.)

It is this bitterness that illuminates the author’s concerns that wives and families are a burden. Embodied in the quotation, are Lawson’s ambivalent attitudes towards women – the angel/devil dichotomy – for they are, at one and the same time, a source of necessary strength and stability, and yet, a source of oppression, denying them the carefree, roaming life.

"Telling" Mrs. Baker of her husband’s death is the task of his two mates, Andy and Jack, from whose point of view the action is presented. It is a test of their ability to keep the faith, to do their duty by their mate in accordance with the ethics of “Bush religion”. To protect her from the truth about her husband’s dissolute character and the circumstances of his death, Andy and Jack fabricate an elaborate story which enables her to remember him as her “poor, dear, kind, dead husband”. More importantly, the careful and concentrated
lying enables the two bushmen to protect their mate’s honour. Andy’s comment emphasises that the protection of their mate’s honour is of foremost importance:

And anyway, even if she is a sensible woman, we’ve got a dead mate to consider as well as a living woman.28

Andy’s tale comforts Mrs. Baker and assuages her sense of loss but Lawson does not consider the moral implications of their action, nor does he think very deeply about the character of Mrs. Baker.29 He is excited by the image, in the abstract, of the simple-hearted protective male, common in Lawson’s stories, relieving the distress of a “weak woman”, the loving wife and mother who has become “like a ghost of herself” as the result of her husband’s death. The inference is disparaging to Mrs. Baker who is revealed as a woman of considerable strength of character, “one of the right sort”. Although absent from the text, it is implied that she is a source of strength and stability, supporting her family through hardships and crises that are an integral part of normal family life.

Consistent with Mrs. Baker’s depiction, Mary Wilson in the Joe Wilson stories, is also “one of the right sort” but, unlike Mrs. Baker, her qualities are stated explicitly. The tragedy for Mary is that she suffers from the effects of psychological alienation from her husband Joe. The Joe Wilson stories, in this discussion, are significant for a number of reasons. Mary and Joe are represented as a genuinely loving young couple whose marriage founders, not because of long periods of separation, or of hardship, but simply because the love that is experienced in courtship gradually withers within marriage. Courtship is a moment of innocent hope and joyful, tremulous anticipation, recalled nostalgically by Joe:
But I think that the happiest time in a man’s life is when he’s courting a girl and finds out for sure that she loves him, and hasn’t a thought for anyone else. Make the most of your courting days, you young chaps, and keep them clean, for they’re about the only days when there’s a chance of poetry and beauty coming into this life.30

Marriage, it seems, brings only disappointment and resignation. For Mary Wilson her castles in the air soon vanish.

In *The Essential Henry Lawson*, Brian Kiernan states that the four *Joe Wilson* stories are generally regarded as the peak of Lawson’s artistic development. In them, the move towards the more expansive form of the magazine story, while still retaining the “authenticity, the austerity and edge, of the earlier sketch stories, reaches its full elaboration.”31 With controlled assurance, the author behind the narrator brings out the story cycle’s theme of the precariousness and transience of all happiness. Lawson is at one with Thomas Hardy whose novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* ends with the quotation:

Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.32

The course of Mary and Joe Wilson’s marriage is charted by an increasing lack of communication and estrangement. The four long stories about the pair of young settlers, shows the destructive effects on marital relationships of economic hardship and the struggles of the life of the small settler in the bush. The theme is there not only in Joe’s and Mary’s marriage but is also reinforced in the lives of the few neighbours, the Spicers and the Brightens whose marriages are characterised by their barrenness. This state towards which Mary’s own marriage is drifting, is symbolised by her journey to the selection at Lahey’s Creek in “Water Them Geraniums”, where she travels along a lonely, dreary, hopeless track, without a horizon, in which creeks have run dry, the earth is parched and the trees are stunted and
gnarled. While Joe Wilson hopes to rekindle the promise of courtship, for them to be sweethearts again, he also recognises that they had become strangers to each other, "and had parted, and had never really met since".33

Early in their marriage, Mary is conscious of Joe’s inability to communicate. His silent anxiety over problems concerning their mutual livelihood and Mary’s complaint, of which Joe is aware, that he takes too little notice of their child, prompts Mary to voice her concern:

Why don’t you talk to me, Joe? Why don’t you tell me your thoughts, instead of shutting yourself up in yourself and brooding – eating your heart out? It’s hard for me: I get to think you’re tired of me, and selfish. I might be cross and speak sharp to you when you are in trouble. How am I to know, if you don’t tell me?34

Joe’s response, “But I didn’t think she’d understand”, reinforces the themes and preoccupations embodied in the Mitchell stories that men and women are estranged by the separation of the domestic sphere from the world beyond the hearth. Mary reveals her anguish again in “A Double Buggy at Lahey’s Creek”, before Joe’s moment of triumph as he awaits the sound of buggy wheels. Mary sums up the substance of Joe’s ill-humour:

“Why don’t you talk, Joe?” asked Mary. “You scarcely ever speak to me now; it’s like drawing blood out of a stone to get a word from you. What makes you so cross, Joe?”
"Well, I’ve got nothing to say."35

Joe is aware of his problem, and is irritated by it but is unable to find a remedy for his malaise, his isolation, and enter into the two-way communication of sympathy and support, that both he and Mary need.

As a wife, Mary is “a gem”, an “angel” in every sense of the word. Joe draws what little strength of character he has from Mary despite his inability to
communicate and, although Mary is alienated by her exclusion from Joe’s innermost thoughts, she never loses her loyalty towards him; but becomes progressively more withdrawn herself. From the outset, it is Mary who has the strength, resilience and realism that Joe recognises he lacks. He admits that before he met Mary his behaviour was irresponsible:

Before this, whenever I made a few pounds, I’d sink a shaft somewhere, prospecting for gold; but Mary never let me rest till she had talked me out of that.36

She soon discovers Joe’s lack of decision in organising his life, but learns to live and cope with this. She succumbs, however, to a moment of weakness the night they moved to the hut at Lahey’s Creek, overcome by the loss of hope and utter desolation at the recognition of her situation:

“It’s only this,” she said suddenly, “I can’t stand this life here; it will kill me”.37

This is a momentary lapse for Mary who readily regains her self composure. She turns her attention to the practicalities of everyday life within the domestic sphere, transforming the bare hut, with a little imagination and some well loved ornaments, into the semblance of a cosy home.

The tragedy for Mary is that, in spite of Joe’s genuine concern for the welfare of his family and his depth of affection for them, he is too withdrawn to articulate his feelings. More importantly, he is never able to succeed at the personal level in the intimate relationship of marriage. Mary, in “Drifting Apart”, is estranged to the point of indifference. Her “air castles” have never been realised except for the token gesture of the double buggy. When Joe achieves success in a material sense, his indecisiveness robs Mary of her hopes for a real home of bricks and mortar, until finally, with a resignation borne of many disappointments, she ceases “bothering” Joe. Resignation leads to
disillusionment and finally, alienation. But, like the archetypal mother figure, the drover's wife, Mary accepts her fate as Joe's wife, carrying out her responsibilities with perseverance and endurance, steadfastly facing the future, whatever it may hold.

Following this sympathetic and tender portrayal of Mary Wilson, a distinct change is perceptible in Lawson's attitude towards women. Emma, of "A Child in the Dark and a Foreign Father", is the single most bitter portrayal of woman in Lawson's stories. Reflecting the author's growing animosity towards women, Emma is represented as a selfish, ungrateful, slatternly wife and mother. Composed and dated in Lawson's hand, October 1902, the story was begun in England and completed on his return to Australia. The circumstances of Lawson's life at the time of writing, that is, Bertha's mental breakdown and enforced treatment in an asylum, suggests that Lawson drew on Bertha's behaviour to fashion the character of the neurotic wife Emma and, although this sketch centres on the mental and physical suffering of the child, Emma is much more than an incidental character. She is responsible for most of his suffering by creating those cruel and shameful scenes which had made his childhood so painful.

As a wife and mother, Emma is a failure. Unlike the mother figures in Lawson's earlier stories, Mrs. Spicer, Mrs. Baker, Mary Wilson and the drover's wife, who are admirable in the face of hardship and adversity, striving to keep their meagre homes clean and respectable, Emma is a lazy slattern. Her housekeeping is non-existent. The hut in which she lives with her husband and children is in a constant state of neglect and filth. On the table:

There was a jumble of dirty crockery on one end, and on the other, set on a sheet of stained newspaper, the remains of a meal – a junk of badly-hacked bread, a basin of dripping (with fat over the edges), and a tin of treacle. The treacle had run down the sides of the tin
In spite of her slovenliness, Emma is depicted as feeling ill-used by her husband. She berates him for neglecting her during the preceding two days she has spent in bed, sleepless and helpless with a headache. Yet her description as she sleeps belies her condition: “She was a big, strong, and healthy-looking woman with dark hair and strong, square features”.

The alternative readings embedded in the text are a point for discussion, for, through this description, the narrator is suggesting that Emma’s illness may be feigned. But the effects of emotional stress can be severely debilitating, causing symptoms similar to those suffered by Emma. Moreover, her character is maligned even further, by the emphasis on the fact that the father and son between them, carry out all the domestic duties in the house; the son in the face of weakness and ill-health, the father at the end of a long day’s work. As a wife, Emma displays hostility and aggression towards her husband. She is demanding, complaining irrationally over his every action in spite of his efforts to please her:

He hurried up the kettle – she calling every few minutes to know if ‘that kettle was boiling yet’. He took her up a cup of tea, and then a second. She said the tea was slush, and as sweet as syrup, and called for more, and hot water.

As a maternal figure, she is an abject failure. Emma’s disregard for her children is revealed in a number of instances. She neglects her baby girl’s cries for water, demanding instead, that the child be removed from her presence. Emma also objects not only to Nils’ purchase of a doll, but also to his presentation of it to the baby. Moreover, her sickly eldest son is burdened with a load of duties well beyond his capacity, as a consequence of her
irresponsible behaviour. The connotation is that this woman suffers alienation from her husband and family because she cannot tolerate the conditions of her existence. For Emma, a bush hut is “no place for a woman”. The more stable Mary Wilson voices her own moment of doubt “I can’t stand this life here; it will kill me!” But the more unstable, neurotic Emma, unwilling or unable to cope with the harshness of bush life, responds with a broken cry of despair at the recognition of her situation:

...your poor wife slaving her fingernails off for you in this wretched hole, and not a decent rag to her back. Me, your clever wife that ought to be –”42

The unfinished anguished cry, suggests the agony of frustration that Emma has undergone. Her desire to lead a very different life, to fulfil her ambition to become a poet, is symbolised by the title of the poem “Misunderstood” left open on the kitchen table for her husband to see on his return. Even though Nils displays anger at Emma’s behaviour, it is a quiet, restrained anger demonstrated by the crushing of the cup between his palms, suggesting frustration at his inability to solve, her problems. The assumption is that Emma is rebelling against a husband whose intellectual prowess is beneath her own. Like many predecessors in earlier stories who are described as “too good” for their husbands, the situation exacerbates the estrangement and alienation between husband and wife. Although her irresponsible behaviour can be criticised, the inner state of Emma’s mind cannot be determined. For very different reasons Mrs. Spicer was defeated by her existence in the bush, and, in Emma’s case, her defeat manifests itself in anti-social behaviour hostility and rejection, towards her husband and family.

The portrayal of Emma is an acknowledgement on the part of Lawson that, like the freedom loving bushmen, a woman’s spirit may also be trammelled by the restrictions of the domestic sphere. For a woman of Emma’s
declared intelligence and cultural aspirations, the outcome is a withdrawal from the alienating situation. Wives may be "devils", but in many instances there are extenuating circumstances. This moment of enlightenment for Lawson was to be short-lived. Xavier Pons, in his discussion about Lawson's women, argues that in 1901, in "The Story of 'Gentleman-Once'", Lawson was sufficiently lucid to be able to sympathise with a woman who married a drunkard and present an honest account of her problems.43 This fairness or commonsense deserted him after 1903 when Bertha left him. The years of conspicuous decline, personal and artistic, had begun.

"The Story of 'Gentleman-Once'" illuminates Lawson's perception of man's vacillations of spirit and attitude towards women. In order to demonstrate the vagaries of men, he deliberately presents characters with differing points of view. The story brings together already well established characters such as Joe Wilson, his mate Jack Barnes, the philosophising Jack Mitchell, and Peter McLaughlin, Bush missionary. At the same time, the themes and preoccupations of earlier stories are reiterated. Through the contradictions in the ensuing conversations of the bushmen, Lawson's own confusions and frustrations concerning women emerge. Constantly frustrated by the imponderability of the "sex problem", Mitchell argues that women are a burden and have been "fated to drag a man down ever since Adam's time".44 Consequently, men have blamed women for their own problems ever since. Jack Barnes, agreeing with Mitchell, believes that listening to a wife's advice is a mistake. To do so will surely drive a man to the devil and only incur her contempt in the end. In a moment of anger, Joe Wilson accuses Mary of continually "dragging him back" just when he is getting his "head above water",45 while Joe Baker, in an earlier story, dies cursing his wife and family for "dragging him down to hell".46 Reflecting Lawson's views, the inference is
that for these men, and many others like them, the responsibility of marriage is a burden of such magnitude that it inevitably destroys them.

But Peter McLaughlin presents a very different point of view in his parable told to Jack Barnes, in an attempt to reform him from his addiction to alcohol. The wife of the drunkard ‘Gentleman-Once’, described as “pretty, intelligent and impulsive,” is the stereotypical devoted and loving wife. She nurses him through bouts of anger, irrationality and melancholy – the side-effects of alcoholism – even suffering the anguish of rejection, for ‘Gentleman-Once’ is, at first, scornful of his wife of a few month’s whom he believes is beneath him in intellect and education. Moreover, he considers that they are incompatible for “she couldn't possibly understand him”.

The ground covered in this passage is familiar territory, reinforcing the comments expressed by Mitchell in “The Sex Problem Again”, reflecting the alien worlds which men and women inhabit, thereby inhibiting communication. McLaughlin points out the pain and suffering that men inadvertently cause:

Besides, having found that they couldn’t have a thought in common he ceased to bother to talk to her. There are many men who don’t bother talking to their wives, they don’t think their wives feel it – because the wives cease to complain after a while, they grow tired of trying to make the man realise how they suffer. (My emphasis.)

Like all Lawson's noblest women, ‘Gentleman-Once's' unnamed wife suffers in silence but endures, imbued with an unflagging spirit born of loyalty and devotion. Lawson takes some care to establish that the responsibility in this marriage, from which she does not flinch, lies squarely on the shoulders of the young wife. Her strength and courage continually sustains her husband in his fight to recover from alcoholism. McLaughlin acknowledges the stress that a wife endures for the love of her husband:
I think it’s a cruel thing that a carelessly selfish young man cannot realise how a sensitive young wife suffers for months after he has reformed. How she hopes and fears, how she dreads the moment he has to leave her, and frets every hour he is away from home – and suffers mental agony when he is late. How the horror of the wretched old past time grows upon her until she dares not think of it.50

Lawson’s awareness and understanding of the emotional problems sustained by women in their struggle to maintain loving marital relationships as revealed through McLaughlin, was to be short lived. After the collapse of his marriage in 1903, the hatred engendered by Bertha’s actions was directed, henceforth, towards all women.

Consequently, Lawson’s representation of wives alters from the loving, faithful, loyal women – his idealised image of wives as “angels” – into the “she devils” of the dark side of his imagination. For instance, if a marriage fails, as does the marriage of Billy and Lizzie in “Triangles of Life” (1904-5), the responsibility inevitably lies with the wife, whereas the husband is declared blameless. Lawson illustrates the depth of his personal animosity by intruding into the narrative condemning women for their insincerity, lack of consideration and treachery:

What fools men are!... The soul-sickening suspicion and fright of the good, kind, generous, or “soft” husband, that his wife wants to get rid of him – the wife who had an eye to that contingency from the first, and had started wanting to get rid of him early. The blindness, the pitiful, unmanly pleading of the husband whose wife is not, and never was, fit to blacken his boots, who never had a sincerely kind thought and considerate moment for him. (My emphasis.)51

Such authorial intrusions undermine the artistic merit of his work by distracting the reader’s attention from the story. They are characteristic of his later stories and symptomatic of his personal and artistic decline. Lawson’s personal grievances towards women permeate the narrative, periodically erupting in
this way. In “Triangles of Life” he wrote vindictively about the vicious “tongue-
wagging” crones in the English village who destroy relationships with their harmful gossip, as well as the unscrupulous Lizzie who uses men for her own selfish purposes, which includes marriage. In contrast to the idealised image of wife and mother as the embodiment of purity, morality and chastity, Lizzie is depicted as a very different kind of person. The transformation from “angel” to “devil” is complete. She has led a seamy life, bearing a child and indulging in various liaisons in London before marrying Billy.

The third part of this lengthy story explores the failure of the relationship between Billy and Lizzie, always tenuous from Lizzie’s perspective, whose shallowness and insincerity is blatant. The marriage is fraught with misunderstandings and failures in communication (a constantly recurring theme), but, more importantly, it is pointed out that it is Lizzie’s deception, her treachery, which causes the final destruction of their marriage and misery for Billy, which is summed up in this impassioned outburst:

The sickening suspicion...that his wife doesn’t love him any longer, the wife who never loved him at all, that she doesn’t want him, she who never did, and only married him on impulse, or for vanity or caprice; or to be her own mistress in a home of her own...52

Deceit and treachery are the dominant characteristics of Baby, the wife of Joe Large, in “Their Mate’s Honour”. Her character illuminates the extent of Lawson’s obsessive hatred of wives whom he continued to portray with unqualified hostility during his life. As this story will be examined more fully in a later chapter, attention will be drawn only to those points which are relevant to the present argument.

Baby is the most flagrant and brazen of all Lawson’s “she devils”. Not only does she commit adultery with her husband’s friends but she also
conducts a private brothel in his absence, where even the dark-skinned Afghans are welcome. Out of the torment of his mind, Lawson has fashioned a “she devil” who plumbs the very depths of depravity, as judged by Victorian standards. The animosity engendered towards her by the local townspeople is articulated by Jack Moonlight who equates her behaviour with the evil of the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden:

   But is she a woman, though? I've seen plenty of 'em. 'Snake-inside-a-woman', I call 'em — and the little doll-faced ones are the worst.53

Diminutive and child-like though she may be, ironically, she has been invested with the very worst characteristics of Lawson’s feckless bushmen. As Baker deceives and betrays his loyal wife, so Baby deceives and betrays her decent, hard-working husband. Baker’s behaviour can be blamed on alcoholism, but, for Baby, there are no mitigating circumstances. Lawson conveniently finds reasons why his male protagonists behave in such a despicable fashion. But for a wife such as Baby, whose behaviour is expected to be exemplary, no explanation is acceptable. Any deviation from the norm is intolerable. Men forgive men for an indiscretion in the name of “mateship” and cover up for their name’s sake. For a woman no such consideration is even imagined. For Lawson’s women are clearly defined, virgin or whore, angel or devil; there is no middle ground. Her actions are motivated by avarice, selfishness, corruption and contempt for her husband. These qualities recur in the depiction of wives in later stories. Mrs. Johnson in “The Reformation of Johnson” and Dotty’s wife are further manifestations of his entrenched hatred of spouses.

Moreover, Lawson’s animosity towards separated and divorced women is manifested in Jack Moonlight’s vindictive denunciation of Baby’s sister:
Once again, the author's obsessions are exposed in the aggressive outbursts of his male protagonists, Jack Moonlight and Jack Mitchell, both of whom reveal that they have suffered the same fate as Joe Large, Baby's husband. This melodramatic over-statement detracts from the artistic merit of the work. Mitchell's impassioned outcry at Baby's behaviour is but a thinly veiled utterance of Lawson's own personal grievances. He attacks women for the power they wield over men because of Victorian social conventions, inhibiting public criticism of women. Furthermore, he denounces them for destroying men's lives and their reputations:

...you mustn't say anything about a woman. She can spoil a man's chances, and ruin his work, and drag him down, if he's a great man, and his country with him, and cripple him like that for generations; and send his name and reputation down black as pitch for his children's children to shudder at—...you can't say a word against the woman...you must believe all her lies, or you're no man.55

The shadow of Bertha lies darkly across this passage. The wife of Johnson in "The Reformation of Johnson", written in 1919 but not published until after Lawson's death in 1922, continues the bitter portrayal of wives, affirming that the wound inflicted by Bertha developed into a festering sore. Shaped with vindictiveness and malice, Mrs. Johnson is depicted as "a woman without a soul".

Discussing the artistic merit of the "Elder Man's Lane" stories, Brian Matthews considers that "for all the obvious pressures exerted by alcoholism and his personal crosses, Lawson's work in his last years has all the marks of a writer of talent caught in or beyond a crisis which he does not fully understand and from which he seeks to extricate himself by using what
techniques of reconstruction and regeneration his limitations allow".56 In both "The Triangles of Life" and "Elder Man's Lane" he discerns the beginnings and partial faltering development of an implied new style. This is manifested by the strong presence of the narrator himself and "the human frailty of his often uncontrolled diversions".57 Told as slabs of narrative to a passive listener with Lawson himself ever-present, relaying rather than dramatically recreating situations and characters, he looks back on his own life. Through the persona of Lawrence he recounts the miseries endured in the past, projecting them upon Johnson.

From the outset, Mrs. Johnston's character is maligned by her husband who accuses her of disloyalty, selfishness, dishonesty and prejudice. She is also blamed for causing violent arguments over financial matters and for incessant nagging. From his point of view, she has "no soul":

He saw his poor little wife, whom he married in haste, on account of a tale of ill-treatment at home, was narrow-minded and selfish; that she had a permanent tale of ill-treatment for anybody she happened to be talking to, and against everyone else, her husband especially; that she was, in short, a vindictive, picturesque, and circumstantial liar. She had no soul. (My emphasis.)58

This bitter, recriminating prose with its misogynistic sentiments, reveals the writing of a defeated man, one who blames women for his own shortcomings. For Mrs. Johnson, it transpires, is terrorised by her alcoholic husband, abused, brutalised and even subjected to life destroying threats. To escape from her intolerable situation she is forced to report her husband to the police. Johnson's vindictive outcry is incited by what he considers his wife's "soulless" action of publicly disgracing him. But the ordeal of the abused wife, the terror she must have suffered, is not a consideration. The situation of Mrs. Johnson is marginalised. Controlled by the narrator, the dominant male
silences the female voice. She is unable to defend herself against his accusations.

By comparison with the wife of 'Gentleman-Once' – Lawson's ideal image of woman, loyal, devoted and long-suffering – Mrs. Johnson has been stripped of all ideal qualities as Lawson constructs the image of a wife who is "a body without a soul"; disloyal, unloving, unforgiving, the complete antithesis of the "angel". She is the "devil" incarnate. Moreover, by implication, such women as Mrs. Johnson are far worse than prostitutes, the "Bad Women" who inhabit the "Underworld", with whom Lawson compares the women of the everyday world. As discussed in the chapter on "Fallen Women", Lawson's empathy with the inhabitants of the "Underworld", the home of the derelicts of society, is stated explicitly. He writes with sympathy and admiration of these women, for their loyalty, devotion to their fellow-sufferers and, in particular, for their compassion to their menfolk, regardless of their "brute" natures. The suggestion is that these women who are despised by society, are the more humane because of their own sufferings and humiliations. In this instance, the "sisters" of the "Underworld", the "devil's" by society's moral standards, constitute the "angels" who help Johnson when his wife ostensibly fails him.

But Mrs. Johnson does not fail her husband. Her behaviour is that of any normal woman coping with an intolerable situation. Like her predecessor Emma, who breaks away from the traditional submissive female role, she refuses to subjugate herself to her husband's brutality. Rather than remain a victim of male injustice and degradation, she disregards society's conventions by resisting his domination. From Johnson's point of view, she betrays him by not remaining silent in her suffering. Therein lies the enigma of Lawson's life. His expectations of women were always so much greater than reality allowed. Lawson's attitude can be summed up in the words of Mitchell, cogitating about the problems of marriage:
...Seems to me that a good many men want to make angels of their wives without first taking the trouble of making saints of themselves.\textsuperscript{59}

Whether "angel" or "devil", those wives who do survive the hazards of childbirth, the hardships of their lonely isolated lives and the disillusionment of their marriages, inevitably suffer a further transition to that of "haggard women".
NOTES

CHAPTER 3


2 Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction* IX.


6 Colin Roderick, ed. *Autobiographical and Other Writings* 277.


16 Marilyn Lake, *Historical Studies* 122.


18 Marilyn Lake, *Historical Studies* 125.


29 John Barnes, Henry Lawson’s Short Stories, 31.


38 Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: Commentaries on His Prose Writings* 308.


43 Xavier Pons, *Out of Eden* 121.


56 Brian Matthews, *The Receding Wave* 128.

57 Brian Matthews, *The Receding Wave* 140.

CHAPTER 4

LAWSON'S "HAGGARD WOMEN"

And let this thing be remembered when I've answered to the roll,
That I pitied haggard women – wrote for them with all my soul.
Henry Lawson, "The Last Review".
In Lawson's view of the world, the women who survive the transition from “little girls” to “faithful wives”, in maturity, suffer the most difficult transition of all, to that of “haggard women”. The best known of his female characters, they are so called because physically, these ageing mother figures are gaunt and withered, spare and asexual. The harshness of their existence, the deprivations, the oppression, the loneliness and isolation, has denuded them of their femininity, reducing them to a sexless, androgynous state. The drover’s wife is “gaunt [and] sun-browned”¹ and wears her husband’s trousers to fight a fire. Mrs. Spicer wears “an old coat of her husband’s”. She, also, is “gaunt and flat-chested...her face...‘burnt to a brick’...”² Drawn from close observation of the women he knew, Lawson described his typical bushwoman, in the Bulletin, in the following way:

The long, strong masculine hands – the hands of the Australian Bushwoman and mother, ...the hands that fought drought, fire, fever, rain, hail, flood, sand-storm, cyclone, “trouble”, pain and death. The hands that covered a worn and lined brick-burnt face of despair... Most of those hands were folded over withered breasts years ago, and are as fleshless as the breasts now.³

But it is not the bush alone that causes these ravages, for Mrs. Aspinall who lives in Jones’s Alley in the city slums, is also “a haggard woman”. In Lawson’s eyes, the city can be just as remorseless as the bush. He regards them as “good” women, therefore as “angels”, because they are endowed with the moral attributes of courage, endurance and, more importantly, devotion to their families. It is paradoxical that the genuine respect and sympathy that Lawson felt for his “haggard women” should be expressed in a poem of such banality as “The Last Review” (1904):

And I see my Haggard Women plainly as they were in life, ’Tis the form of Mrs. Spicer and her friend, the Drover’s wife, Sitting hand in hand “Past Carin”, not a sigh and not a moan, Staring steadily before her and the tears just trickle down.
It was no Place for a Woman where the women worked like men –
From the Bush and Jones’s Alley come their haunting forms again.
And, let this thing be remembered when I’ve answered to the roll,
That I pitied haggard women – wrote for them with all my soul.

(41-48)4

The women that will be discussed in this chapter, the drover’s wife, Mrs.
Spicer, Mrs. Weatherly, Maggie Head and Mrs. Aspinall, are essentially
maternal figures. It is this image, largely ignored by the critics, that is the focus
of the chapter. The maternal aspects of their characterisation which emerge
with such clarity, sit incongruously with Lawson’s reputation as a writer about
men and, in particular, about the creed of mateship. As Judith Wright states:

The mateship ingredient in Australian tradition was
always and necessarily one-sided; it left out of account
the whole relationship with woman.5

What does become evident on a close analysis of Lawson’s stories,
supporting Judith Wright’s contention, is that “mateship” was (and to a large
degree still is) an exclusively male domain. However, Lawson does not leave
out the relationship of man with woman. On the contrary, it is the basis of more
of his stories than is commonly acknowledged. Women become wives and
mothers, but never “mates”. Moreover, not only are they excluded from
“mateship”, but they suffer as a consequence.

Lawson’s “haggard women” are the victims of “mateship”, for, in each of
the stories examined: “The Drover’s Wife”, ”Water Them Geraniums”, ”The
Little World Left Behind”, ”Babies in the Bush”, and ”Jones’s Alley”, the plight of
the lonely, isolated wife whose husband is absent, wilfully, more often than
not, is the prevailing theme. Emphasising the harsh masculine aspects of the
Australian bushwoman’s life, Louisa Lawson wrote with bitterness in the
Englishwoman’s Review about her “colonial sisters”: 
for it is of their grim, lonely, patient lives I know, their honest, hard-worked, silent almost masculine lives... She works harder than a man. You may see her with her sons putting up a fence, or with the shearsers, whistling and working as well as any. She has a fine hard patient character.6

To his credit, determined to create fiction that gave an accurate and faithful representation of the Australian environment and character, Lawson’s “haggard women” are part of his achievement. He creates a distinctively Australian bushwoman. In the process, he moves away from the idealised Victorian heroines of his virginal “little girls”, characterised by their diminutive stature, lustrous hair and complexions of lilies and roses, to the gaunt, sun-browned, spare, asexual figures that are representative of his “haggard women”.

It is my intention to show how and why this image changes from the mythic idealisation of the bushwoman in "The Drover's Wife", to the much more perceptive treatment of Mrs. Spicer in "'Water Them Geraniums'", a personality in the process of disintegration. She is the embodiment of all the physical and psychological suffering that Lawson’s “haggard women” endure. Furthermore, it is necessary to point out that Lawson does not portray the bush as the fearful, hostile, antagonistic place it was for the women who lived in it. Nor does he fully comprehend the responses of his bushwomen to their encounters in and with the bush, predicated as they are upon other factors: fear of rape, of brutalisation, even murder. It is left to writers like Barbara Baynton to provide what Anne Summers refers to as “a savage corrective to the romantic myths of bush life”.7 Baynton is particularly concerned with the vulnerability of woman in a harsh bush environment, man’s brutality to woman, the ugliness of social life in the bush and the unremitting loneliness. In her stories she depicts the hardships, miseries and even murderous attacks experienced by bushwomen from rapacious swagmen, lecherous employers
and unsympathetic husbands. Louisa Lawson adds credence to this argument. She writes of the bushwoman's husband:

In those remote and isolated spots, man is king and force is ruler. There is no law, no public opinion to interfere. The wife is at the man's mercy. She must bear what ills he chooses to put upon her, and her helplessness in his hands only seems to educe the beast in him. There is a vast deal of the vilest treatment.8

In the context of this "brutalising environment" Lawson's treatment of the drover's wife is a romantic idealisation. He describes her self-sacrificing lonely life and her admirable stoicism against mainly physical hardships. While the reader is made aware of the stresses and fears she constantly endures and the abrasive effect on her character and personality, the actual processes by which she seeks to adjust mentally and emotionally to her situation, remain obscure. Brian Matthews contends that Lawson was able to explore such depths to a limited extent only, because his craft had not yet developed sufficiently. It is in the treatment of Mrs. Spicer that Lawson moves far beyond describing a woman and her thoughts, to a prose which embodies her confusions far more intimately. Furthermore, Matthews argues that Lawson's treatment of women lacks sexual intensity. The drover's wife "remains a shadowy figure", even though "the revealed pattern of her life endows her, if not with a personal individuality", for she remains nameless throughout the tale, "at least with a profound humanity".9

In contrast to the shadowy image of the protagonist, her role is clearly defined. Stereotypically, Lawson positions her firmly in the Domestic sphere as the keeper of the hearth and home. The image of the primitive house set in the wilderness which opens the story, establishes immediately that the bushwoman's place is in the home, even in its most primitive form, 19 miles from the nearest civilisation:
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, verandah included... The drover, an ex-squatter, is away with sheep...10

Her domesticity is established, and also, that she is isolated and alone. Admittedly, her duties extend beyond the confines of the house when necessity dictates. There are bushfires to contend with, floods to be fought and snakes to kill. But the central image conveyed, is one of a wife, and more importantly, of a mother, dedicated to her family. This is exemplified by the protagonist’s vigil after the invasion of the bush hut by the snake.

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...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.11

As a squatter, her husband had brought her to this isolated selection when they were first married. Ruined by the drought, he has been forced to return to droving. She has been left alone frequently, isolated from civilisation: “She once lived like this for eighteen months.”12 Denied an identity by Lawson who refers to her impersonally as “the bushwoman” and “the wife”, she has no recourse but to battle on desperately in an attempt “to inject meaning into [her] life, to reconnect [herself] with remembered values, rituals and structures.”13

Conscious of a woman’s need for, and attachment to the rituals of civilised life, the drover’s wife is portrayed clinging to the conventional routine of the Sunday promenade, and, in her attention to her children, her maternal qualities are underlined:
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 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.¹⁴

Her lonely walk along the bush track serves to demonstrate the strength of her attachment to the remembered rituals of her past life. That she is portrayed as performing this ritual, a ritual associated with the companionship and social intercourse of urban life, in the desolate environment of the bush, heighten the awareness of her isolation and remoteness from civilisation. Her gesture, at once pathetic and gallant, suggests sympathy for her plight but there is an unconscious irony in the implication that this lonely ritual is considered, by the narrator, to be one of her “few pleasures”. The barrenness of such a “pleasure” is intensified by the omniscient narrator’s comment that the “monotony” and “the maddening sameness” of that bush-track would drive a man away as far as he could flee. As the historian Michael Cannon says, bushwomen placed an enormous burden upon themselves by trying to maintain the elements of civilised living in a hostile environment. But, no matter what hardships they faced, the women unhesitatingly described the worst problem as that of isolation, solitude and loneliness.¹⁵

Lawson, whose vision encloses and shapes the whole narrative, portrays the drover’s wife as seemingly “contented with her lot”. As a “girl-wife”, she suffered from the solitude of the bush, but now, she has become inured to the oppression of loneliness, yet the habitual isolation has dulled her senses:

She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something to eat, and tidies up the children.¹⁶
Her behaviour towards her husband, lacking as it does, any display of marital affection, reflects the manner in which any woman would welcome a visitor by preparing good food and presenting brushed and scrubbed children to them. This is the essential tragedy of the drover's wife: because of their long separations her husband has become a stranger to her. "Once she lived like this [alone] for eighteen months..." and, of late, she has become anxious for she has not had a letter from him for six months. In reality she lives alone with only reminiscences to remind her of her husband. His nebulous existence is underlined when she is forced to "invent" him on occasions, but even then it is for the most practical of reasons:

She generally tells the suspicious-looking stranger that her husband and two sons are at work below the dam, or over at the yard...17

Lawson depicts her as feeling no resentment towards her absent husband: "No use fretting", even though she is aware that "he may forget sometimes that he is married."18 The inference is that she has already reached a state "past carin'," a dulling of the senses, prefiguring the more serious "dislocation" of Mrs. Spicer in "Water Them Geraniums".

With a naivety of comprehension, Lawson insists that the drover's wife finds all the "excitement" and "recreation" she needs in the Young Ladies' Journal and "Heaven help her! takes a pleasure in the fashion-plates." The image portrayed is at once ironic and pathetic. Ironic, because of her situation where, clothed in her very best, she will wear only an old and worn dress, and pathetic, because the reading of the journal now constitutes the very pinnacle of her pleasures. As Anne Summers comments, women such as the drover's wife were "culturally impotent",19 tied to activities within and around the home. What is not explicit is that her expectations as a squatter's wife have
never been realised: "As a girl she built the usual castles in the air, but all her
girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead".20

When she was first married, the kind of life she experienced was better
than the average. Their prosperity was evident, for when they did have
money, he took her to stay in the best hotels in the city and even bought her a
buggy. But, since the ruin of the drought and his forced return to droving, she
has been subjected to a traumatic change to her way of life – from
companionship to solitude, from plenty to poverty. Who could not help but
resent the loss of the riches of their past life and, above all, the loss of the
shared companionship of marriage?

So, she loves her children, and yet the narrator tells us "she seems harsh
to them". (My emphasis.) Her surroundings are not favourable to the
development of the 'womanly' or sentimental side of her nature". The question
that springs to mind is what weight of unacknowledged bitterness lies behind
that stoic mask? What causes her to be harsh towards her children? On the
one hand, it can be argued that Lawson describes the drover's wife in terms
that more appropriately, reflect his own mother's attitude towards her children.
Lawson, as narrator, recalls his own past. But the harshness ascribed to the
drover's wife contradicts the evidence of her behaviour towards her children
throughout the story. The quality and strength of her affection, displayed to her
son after the night of terror, is measurable "when she hugs him to her worn-out
breast and kisses him."21 Another and stronger argument stems from the
same premise. If the drover's wife's behaviour is harsh at times, then, the
connotation is that the absence of her husband lies at the heart of the matter.
A natural release for hidden frustrations and pent-up emotions would reveal
itself as a harshness towards her children, as was Lawson's own experience.
In spite of a reluctance on Lawson's part to assign any guilt to the absent drover, there are elements in the tale itself which suggest an ambivalence in this regard. One of these is the outburst of the woman's son at the end of the story. The snake is dead, the woman weeps, the boy is awake:

Presently he looks up at her, sees the tears in her eyes, and, throwing his arms around her neck, exclaims: 'Mother, I won't never go drovin': blast me if I do!' (My emphasis.)

With the simplicity of a child's view, he condemns the absent drover out of the emotional weight of the fear and horror he has experienced. It is the boy who has lived through that night of the snake and the many other dangers his mother has endured alone, who realises the full weight of her suffering. He understands. For this reason he declares, in an outburst of emotion, that he will never leave her alone, as his father has done. This experience also draws on Lawson's own childhood and the effect on his mother of his father's long absences. Louisa, however, was not the kind of woman to hide her own distress. She was profoundly unhappy much of the time, emotionally exhausted by her situation. She vented her frustrations on her children, railing at them incessantly, an occurrence which affected the young Lawson in particular, who never overcame the bitter unhappiness of his boyhood.

In the depiction of Mrs. Spicer, the most detailed of all Lawson's studies of "haggard women", he moves away from the idealisation of the traditional bushwoman to a characterisation which acknowledges her physical and psychological suffering and its effects on the personality. Lawson's ability to embody the "labyrinths of alienation and endless physical stress" into the personality of Mrs. Spicer, is a measure of his development as a writer. As Brian Matthews says, Mrs. Spicer is, "the drover's wife 'writ large'." The germ
of the ideas implied but not developed in "The Drover's Wife" – the effects of physical hardships, and the more destructive effects on the personality, of isolation, loneliness and alienation – is fully realised in the depiction of Mrs. Spicer in "Water Them Geraniums", a woman in the process of disintegration:

I suppose the reason why she hadn't gone mad through hardship and loneliness was that she hadn't either the brains or the memory to go farther than she could see through the trunks of the 'apple-trees'.

Lawson's stories are scattered with bushmen, "nutters" like 'Rats' in the sketch of that title, who are on the edge of insanity through a loneliness exacerbated by the ravages of a hostile environment, but it is in "Past Carin'" that Lawson depicts a Bushwoman, overwhelmed by adversity, who takes to madness as men take to drink, and finally to death, as an escape from an intolerable situation. Her capitulation, in complete contradiction of the "heroic stoicism" generally accorded pioneering women of the outback, is an acknowledgement by Lawson that women do suffer and endure, but can be and are defeated and destroyed by other factors: in Mrs. Spicer's case, by the anguish of motherhood. For Mrs. Spicer is the bush mother "writ large" – an "angel" of suffering.

Against the competence of the drover's wife, whose qualities of courage and steadfastness are intended to evoke admiration and compassion, Mrs. Spicer, who deals with many similar situations, is, for all her undeniable courage and tenacity, often pathetic and pitiable. The cumulative effects of hardships and dangers, of loneliness and failure in personal communications, have brought her to this state of dissociation from life. She is flawed and often a little confused:

Oh! I don't know what I'm talkin' about! You mustn't take any notice of me, Mrs. Wilson – I don't often go on like
this. I do believe I'm gittin' a bit ratty at times. It must be the heat and the dulness (sic.).

Depicted with stark realism, this characterisation has the particularity of detail that we associate with Barbara Baynton, but lightened by the characteristic Lawsonian humour: "They had a sense of the ridiculous, most of those poor sun-dried Bushwomen. I fancy that that helped save them from madness." The description of Mrs. Spicer is harrowing and indicative of the cumulative effects of years of hardships in a brutalising environment:

...She was gaunt and flat-chested, and her face was "burnt to a brick"...she had brown eyes, nearly red, and a little wild-looking at times, and a sharp face - ground sharp by hardship - the cheeks drawn in.

Mrs. Spicer's fate is the fate of the poverty-stricken bushwoman, virtually left to battle on her own to support her family, without hope of any improvement in her lot. Like her predecessor, Mrs. Spicer is a victim of circumstances over which she has no control. In accordance with Victorian ideology, as a wife and mother she is economically dependent upon her husband. She has no power of self-determination. Brought to this "wretched, poverty-stricken selection" by her husband, the circumstances of her life, the accumulated weight of physical hardships, the mental stress suffered in isolation, the constant confinements, the lack of companionship and alienation from her husband, have reduced her in middle age to a state 'past carin': "I seem to have got past carin' for anythink now. I felt it a little when Tommy went away - the first time I felt anythink for years. But I'm over that now."

Essentially, Mrs. Spicer is a maternal figure whose concerns are her children and her home. The disgrace surrounding her son Billy's theft of a horse finally undermines all that is left of her pride: pride that lies down in the end and turns its face to the wall and dies. It is this maternal aspect of Mrs. Spicer that has been overlooked. Brian Matthews' critical study of Mrs. Spicer
in *The Receding Wave*, fine as it is, is an exploration of her as an alienated personality, one who "has lost sight of the purpose [of life] and is animated only through habit."29 Alienated from her innermost self, her dissociation is revealed, at times, by the despair in her voice:

...[it] sounded...like a voice coming out of a phonograph – and not like a voice coming out of her. But sometimes when she got outside her everyday life on this selection she spoke in a sort of lost groping-in-the-dark kind of voice.30

Undeniably, she has gone beyond the stages of physical separation and alienation from her husband, though once they were painful enough:

I remember when we lived on the Cudgegong River...the first time Spicer had to go away from home I nearly fretted my eyes out... He's been away drovin' in Queensland as long as eighteen months at a time since then... But...I don't mind – I somehow seem to have got past carin'.31

But Mrs. Spicer is not 'past carin' about her children. They give purpose to her life. It is the strength of her maternal spirit that keeps her doggedly alive in the face of overwhelming odds yet, ironically, it is anguish stemming from this same maternal spirit that finally destroys her. The self-sacrifice that Mrs. Spicer displays towards her family, her subordination to their needs and interests, a typical view of Victorian motherhood is, paradoxically, oppressive to her own personal well-being and damaging to her psychic health.

The subjection of self for the welfare of others, deemed to be all that a woman required from life, in Mrs. Spicer's case, to her children, is a significant factor in Mrs. Spicer's alienation. As each of her children reaches maturity they are forced to leave the "poverty-stricken selection", to seek work elsewhere. Wounded by the separation and loss, the fragile fabric of her psyche is damaged. Questioned about her son Jack, and his whereabouts,
Mrs. Spicer's responses and actions are an explicit manifestation of her condition:

Oh, he's somewheres up country", she'd say in the "groping" voice, or "He's drovin' in Queenslan' or "Shearin' on the Darlin' the last time I heerd from him. We ain't had a line from him since – le's see – since Chris'mas 'fore last.32

And she'd turn her haggard eyes in a helpless, hopeless sort of way towards the west – towards “up-country”, and “outback”, for Mrs. Spicer's hidden plight is one of oppression in motherhood. Joe Wilson comments laconically about her confinements and countless children:

I never got a chance to count them, for they were nearly all small, and shy as picaninnies and used to run and hide when anybody came. They were mostly nearly as black as picaninnies too. She must have averaged a baby a year for years – and God only knows how she got over her confinements!33

But there is an absence in the text, concerning the full weight of the burden that Mrs. Spicer has borne. There is a lack of understanding of the terrors of childbirth in areas remote from expert assistance. The risks of childbirth, always serious in those medically innocent days, were multiplied by the large numbers of children wives were expected to produce to provide free labour for the selections. In the event of complications, there was little hope for mother or child. In many cases, as Michael Cannon states: “the process was regarded as a routine similar to the annual lambing of the ewes."34 It appears that Spicer belongs to this category of husband. Described as "gloomy and unsociable" and "seldom at home", Spicer's rare visits can be judged to have been more unwelcome than his absences once were, considering Mrs. Spicer's yearly impregnation. The amount of sheer physical labour these
"haggard women" had to get through each day was enormous, as evidenced by Mrs. Spicer's tasks:

...In smothering hot mornings in December...at work in the cow-yard, "bailing up" and leg-roping cows, milking, or hauling at a rope round the neck of a half-grown calf that was too strong for her...or humping great buckets of sour milk to the pigs or the "poddies" in the pen...Climbing she-oaks...and lopping off boughs to feed starving cattle.35

The fact that they were continually pregnant or nursing new babies in filthy conditions, reinforces the image that emerges of life as one of endless toil and servitude. The very survival of their children, through illness and periods of near starvation, when "the family was forced to live mostly on bread and...", must be seen as an intolerable burden, an undermining factor in Mrs. Spicer's disintegration.

But, with the pride that is born out of hardship and poverty, Mrs. Spicer, "who had been fairly well brought up", clinging to the just-remembered past, instils into her children the qualities that she still values. The first glimpse of her son Tommy, the boy on horseback carrying a gift of fresh meat to the Wilsons, demonstrates some of the values that Mrs. Spicer, against formidable odds, has succeeded in implanting in her children:

"We ain't that sorter people, missus," he said. "We don't sell meat to new people that come to settle here."

Elsewhere, when Mary Wilson asks Annie, the eldest girl at home and her "ragged mite" of a brother, if they are hungry:

"Mother told Annie not to say we was hungry if yer asked; but if yer give us anythink to eat, we was to take it an' say thank yer, Mrs. Wilson."36
The child's response is moving considering the obvious want in which the Spicer's themselves live. The description of their selection emphasises the image of grinding poverty and squalor that is part of their way of life:

...a big bark humpy on a patchy clearing...and the dusty ground round the house was almost entirely covered with cattle-dung... The hut was nearly as bare inside as it was out – just a frame of "round-timber" (sapling poles) covered with bark.37

With its handful of cows and miserably few sheep, it is representative of the very poorest class of selection that Lawson encountered. Cannon refers to the sketch of the selector's living conditions given by Lawson in "'Water Them Geraniums'" as "strictly factual": rough slab furniture rooted in the muddy floor, tins spread about to catch leaks from the roof, beds made from poles and flour bags, a ragged patchwork quilt spread over the beds, and kerosene tins used as saucepans. On a rough mantelpiece rested a few pathetic ornaments from an almost-forgotten earlier life. In accordance with Mrs. Spicer's maternal qualities, her treasured ornaments are "two mugs, cracked and without handles, one with 'For a Good Boy' and the other with 'For a Good Girl' on it".38 In the midst of this squalid environment, Mrs. Spicer struggles to surmount the adverse conditions for the sake of her children, to educate them, "to bring 'em all up decent."

The title of the story, "'Water Them Geraniums'" is, in one sense, symbolic of Mrs. Spicer, because geraniums, as Joe Wilson says, "were the only flowers [he] saw grow in the drought out there."39 Geraniums seem to have a quality of endurance largely because they do survive in adverse conditions and flower in spite of everything. If the idea of the gaunt and haggard Mrs. Spicer "flowering", seems a trifle ludicrous, it is the qualities of humanity and generosity that she exhibits in the midst of such abject poverty that represent that "flowering"! qualities that are apparent when Mrs. Spicer cares for Mary
Wilson when she is recovering from childbirth. Her willingness to “roll up her sleeves, and set to work to ‘tidy up’”, while wasting no time discussing her own troubles, establishes a woman of estimable character. In another sense, the geraniums are symbolic of Mrs. Spicer’s attachment to the conventions of civilised life. Lawson’s reverence for bushmothers, his “haggard women”, for whom he wrote with all his soul, is discernible in this compassionate portrayal of Mrs. Spicer battling to maintain appearances. Her actions, however well-intended, are nevertheless, pitiable. Lawson’s recognition of the burden that bushwomen placed upon themselves for their children’s sake is emphasised in this authorial comment:

And I think the saddest and the most pathetic sight on the face of God’s earth is the children of very poor people made to appear well: the broken worn-out boots polished or greased, the blackened (inked) pieces of string for laces; the clean patched pinafores over the wretched threadbare frocks. Behind the little row of children hand-in-hand – and no matter where they are – I always see the worn face of the mother. (My emphasis.)

One never loses sight of the fact that Lawson borrows freely from his known and autobiographically recorded past. There are frequent such borrowings in "'Water Them Geraniums'" which can be checked readily, in his Fragment of Autobiography, for instance, the Spencers, Lawson’s boyhood neighbours, are recollected. Lawson also writes at length about his schooldays and the importance his mother attached to her children’s education. Mrs. Spicer’s “great trouble” that she could not get regular schooling for her children, has obvious parallels with Louisa’s attitude. Lawson’s knowledge of this concern for her children’s education is manifested in Mrs. Spicer’s problem. With typical persistence she “learns ‘em at home as much as [she] can” regardless of the limitations of her own education and her exhaustion after a day’s toil. Nevertheless, Mrs. Spicer’s spiritual disintegration is irrevocable. The continual effort of maintaining appearances for her children and her own pride,
inevitably takes its physical, mental and spiritual toll. As Matthews comments: "the circumstances are of the same order as the drover's wife's conquest of the snake: there will be many more trials, many more heart aches". But she has reached the end of her endurance. In a moment of anguish, an ailing Mrs. Spicer betrays to Mary the depths of her despair and frustration over the conditions of her existence: "I wish you wouldn't come down any more till I'm on my feet, Mrs. Wilson... the place is such a muck and it hurts me." 

Life remains hard, cruel, potentially tragic in that she understands her situation with a terrible clarity. With the disclosure that Billy has been taken by mounted troopers for the theft of a horse, her suffering becomes intolerable. Stunned at first into a state of dissociation, of frozen immobility, Mrs. Spicer yields to her anguish in Mary's arms:

...it was awful! She didn't cry like a woman. I heard a man at Haviland cry at his brother's funeral, and it was just like that!

Maternal pride, all that is left to her, is destroyed. Life is too painful. Blame and humiliation for the boy's misdemeanour is ascribed to a bewildered Mrs. Spicer who agonises:

I tried to bring 'em all up decent, but I s'pose it was my fault, somehow. It's the disgrace that's killin' me – I can't bear it!

It is significant that Lawson imposes on her the full responsibility for Billy's waywardness. For, in the absence of Spicer, she has been forced to accept the burden of being both mother and father to their children.

Lawson's portrayal is in keeping with the Victorian ideology of wife and mother as moral guide of the family. Traditionally, responsibility for child rearing is placed firmly on the mother, who is seen as the "custodian of the
moral conscience”. Any transgression is a reflection on her rectitude. The implications are manifold. Billy’s crime not only discredits Mrs. Spicer, but it also sullies the reputations of the remaining children. This is a crucial factor in Mrs. Spicer’s final disintegration. From her point of view she has failed in motherhood, her central role and function in life – the ultimate disgrace – and fears her children will suffer: “If it only could have been kep’ quiet – for the sake of the other children; they are all I think of now”.46 As it is in "The Drover’s Wife", Lawson does not assign any guilt to the absent father. Yet, there is the evidence of Spicer’s own encounter with the troopers concerning “a cask of beef and a hide with the brand cut out”. But there is no suggestion that his example may have been detrimental to Billy’s behaviour. Instead, Lawson condemns Mrs. Spicer for “everlastingly nagging at the children”, ingenuously reflecting that this habit is more damaging than “the drinking habit in a father”. In his own life, it is acknowledged that Lawson found his mother’s nagging intolerable, but not so the absences of his father. From his perspective, the female actions are more destructive than the male. It is also understood that Lawson eschewed any hint of blame for his own actions in his marriage relationship with Bertha (although this was to change after his divorce), underlining his selfish adherence to the conventional moral codes of behaviour.

Like Lawson, Spicer remains blameless, absent, yet blameless. “He exists only as a gloomy, moody, bitter shadow of what he apparently once was”.47 For Mrs. Spicer, he is virtually non-existent. She neither thinks nor speaks of him. There is no one and nothing, to alleviate her suffering. Humiliation and guilt over her failure as a mother, obsess her: “...she would talk of nothing but her last trouble, till her visits were painful to look forward to.”48 Self-recrimination destroys her will to live until she is released from her psychological torment by death.
Two stories composed in 1900 and published in *Joe Wilson and His Mates* (London, 1901) along with "'Water Them Geraniums'", present differing versions of his "haggard women". In the sketch of life in a bushtown "The Little World Left Behind", Lawson finds that life there is still "drearily, hopelessly, depressingly unchanged". He voices a fierce resentment against the constricting world of his boyhood and youth, for it is a satirical portrait of the Mudgee district. Yet, in the middle of a vitriolic attack against the parochial journalism of the small isolated country town, he pauses to pay tribute to "the old local body", Mrs. Witherly, a daughter of English aristocrats, who still drives a dray into town twice a week with her "bit av produce". Masculine, gaunt, sun-burned, withered but unbroken in spirit, she is the embodiment of the traditional idealised bushwoman. The epitome of Lawson's "haggard women", in this instance, she is based on an actual person:

Her shrivelled face was the colour of leather, and crossed and recrossed with lines till there wasn't room for any more. But her eyes were bright yet, and twinkled with humour at times.49

In contrast to Mrs. Spicer, the venerable Mrs. Witherly survives the rigours of bush-life. Although it is only a slight sketch, Lawson evokes an image of a noble character who does not yield to despair despite the wretchedness with which she is surrounded:

She had been in the Bush for fifty years and had fought fires, droughts, hunger and thirst, floods, cattle and crop diseases, and all the things God curses Australian settlers with.50

One suspects that Lawson endows her with almost superhuman qualities as a tribute to her English ancestors who had now become his reading public. But the more sanguine mood of this portrait is attributed to the fact that Mrs.
Witherly is part of a community. She is not isolated. Her life is one of reasonable prosperity, as indicated by the ownership of the dray, not the desperate, spiritually nullifying existence of Mrs. Spicer. She is able to cope with the adversity that destroys Mrs. Spicer – the disgrace of her sons – through her own inner fortitude:

She had reared something under fifteen children, her own and others; and there was scarcely one of them that had not given her trouble. Her sons had brought disgrace on her old head over and over again, but she held up that same old head through it all, and looked her narrow, ignorant world in the face – and "lived it down".51

A significant recurrent theme emerging from these stories involving women and their relationships with men, covertly in "The Drover's Wife" and "Past Carin'", and overtly in "The Little World Left Behind" is the unworthiness of men in comparison with their womenfolk. This theme is dealt with at some length by Brian Matthews in his article, "Eve Exonerated: Henry Lawson's Unfinished Love Stories", in which he argues that "men and women stand little chance of successful, sustained loving communion because Lawson seems unable to free himself from the conviction that such involvement represents, for the woman, a descent, an entry into a kind of world which can only undermine and possibly destroy her".52 This theme was to enter increasingly into his fiction in the form of male characters who "damn the world", turn to drink, deceive, disappoint or irremediably wound their loyal women exemplified by Walter Head in "The Babies in the Bush". The idea of the unworthiness of man as husband and father, implied in the earlier stories, is also made explicit in "The Little World Left Behind":

She [Mrs. Witherly] had had two husbands, and it could be said of neither that he had ever done an honest day's work, or any good for himself or anyone else.53
On the other hand, Lawson’s admiration for his “haggard women” is reaffirmed. The connotation is that they are and remain “angels”.

A “haggard woman” of a very different kind emerges in “The Babies in the Bush”. Maggie Head is a bush-mother stricken with madness. Her hair has turned prematurely grey. Her children were lost in the bush, while her husband was absent from home:

I had an impression as of a little old woman – one of those fresh-faced, well-preserved, little old ladies – who dressed young, wore false teeth, and aped the giddy girl. But this was because of Mrs. Head’s impulsive welcome of me, and her grey hair. The hair was not so grey as I thought at first, seeing it with the lamplight behind it: it was like dull-brown hair lightly dusted with flour.

Although not “haggard” in the physical sense of the word, Mrs. Head is included in this group of women because she is “haggard” in a psychological sense, suffering as a victim of the bush. Lawson’s depiction of her as a distraught, hysterical mother driven by mental stress to insanity is far more disturbing than the complex disintegration of Mrs. Spicer’s personality, for the reader is confronted with the symptoms of insanity: hysteria, hallucination, delusions, suicidal tendencies, and, in this case, arrested development.

Mrs. Head bustled round like a girl of twenty instead of a woman of thirty seven... She had the figure and movements of a girl, and the impulsiveness and expression too – a womanly girl, but sometimes I fancied there was something very childish about her face and talk.

Gradually, it is revealed that she is living in the past. Images of her children as they were when lost are fixed and ever present in her mind:

The little ones toddled off hand in hand, with their other hands holding fast their straw hats ‘In case a bad wind blewed’, as little Maggie said. I saw them stoop under
the first fence and that was the last that anyone saw of them.56

After the loss of her children, Mrs. Head had been “raving mad” for some months. Unable to face life without the support of her delusions, she has retreated into a childlike world peopled with bush-fairies:

You know we lost our children out on the station. The fairies took them... You surely know about the Bush Fairies, Mr. Ellis,...the Bush Fairies that look after the little ones that are lost in the Bush, and take them away from the Bush if they are not found? ...most Bushmen have that I've spoken too.57

This story is based on an actual event and draws on the characters and experiences of persons known to Lawson, not excluding his wife. As Roderick comments, “Lawson did not embark on a deeper exploration of mental derangement until after he had reached London and Bertha's mind had become unhinged.”58 Out of this incident and out of his personal acquaintance with Walter Head, Lawson constructed this story, but only after Bertha's breakdown: with that background it becomes allegorical.

Maggie's description of the hostile “Voices” she hears during her hallucinations which urge her to self-destruction, reveals the inherent tragedy of her affliction.

The Voices did come back while you were away. Oh, how I longed for you to come back! They haven't come since you've been home, Walter. You must stay with me a while now. Those awful Voices kept calling me, and telling me lies about the children, Walter! They told me to kill myself; they told me it was all my own fault – that I killed the children. They said I was a drag on you, and they'd laugh – Ha! ha! ha! – like that. They'd say, 'Come on Maggie; come on Maggie.' They told me to come to the river, Walter.59
While finding the revelation of Maggie’s insanity “genuinely chilling”, Matthews refers to the “Voices” as “a cliché”. However, medical evidence substantiates that delusions and hallucinations are common features of mental disorders such as schizophrenia and, of course, Bertha was suffering from similar symptoms which Lawson observed. Matthews also suggests that “the accusatory inflexion of some of her questions seems to shift the blame insensibly, so that part of her plight may well result from fleeting intuitions of Walter’s guilt”. It is this statement which calls for discussion. Clearly, Walter Head is guilty because of his absence at the time the children were lost. Throughout Maggie’s account of the tragedy, her frequent allusions to Walter’s absence during the search, subtly implicate him.

It wasn’t your fault Walter, but if you had been at home do you think the fairies would have taken the children?

Elsewhere,

You were away, Walter, when it happened... And we couldn’t find you, Walter. You see...Walter – Mr. Head – was away in Sydney on business, and we couldn’t find his address.

The full implication of Walter’s absence, his deception, which Maggie senses but cannot allow herself to believe, is not revealed until the end of the story when Walter discloses that he had been away for over a fortnight on a drinking spree. The Lawson landscape is littered with such characters as Bogg of Geebung, The Oracle, the Hero of Redclay, the Peter M’Laughlans, his ‘haggard men’, who are burdened with guilt always in connection with a woman. But Walter’s guilt is more agonising than any other of Lawson’s characters. The grotesque outcome of his absence coupled with the shame of his deception, increases the intensity of his silent suffering. This is indicated in his rare disclosure to his mate, Ellis: “I could have found those children, Jack...I
knew those scrubs better than any man in the country". Lawson's depiction of Walter as a lonely, haunted man unable to unburden his guilt to his distracted wife, suggests that Lawson's own guilt concerning his absences and deceptions as a cause in Bertha's deterioration, was beginning to manifest itself in the stories.

Whereas bushwomen are oppressed by their husbands' absences, Mrs. Aspinall of "Jones's Alley", lives in constant fear of the "resurrection" of her second husband, who is "supposedly" dead. A "haggard woman" of the city slums, she would gladly purchase his absence at any price, if she had been able. She is oppressed by his infrequent appearances, for he claimed his "'conzugal rights' as well as his board, lodging, washing and beer". Forced to remarry for the sake of her children, this feckless man has oppressed her, leaving her almost destitute to fend alone for her family. "'This grinding poverty! I'll never have anything else but worry and trouble and misery so long as I live". Three of the four stories comprising the Jones's Alley sequence, "Arvie Aspinall's Alarm Clock", "A Visit of Condolence", and "Jones's Alley" were composed and published in 1892. The sequence owes its background to Lawson's sojourn in the city from 1883 to 1887, while living with his mother and working as an apprentice painter in a factory. The dark poverty of the environment he encountered during this time is reflected in these stories. The mother image, dominant in "The Drover's Wife" and "'Water Them Geraniums'" first appears in the "Jones's Alley" trilogy. Lawson's emphasis on maternal figures further supports Xavier Pons' argument that Lawson's mother was "undoubtedly" the most important influence in his life.

Foreshadowing Mrs. Spicer, Mrs. Aspinall's life is one of endless drudgery and toil, a desperate single-handed struggle to provide for her children. Other than the modicum of pleasure she is able to extract from being known as a "respectable woman", as distinct from her infamous neighbours,
her children are all that she has left to care about. Like Mrs. Spicer, she endures with “the spirit of a bullock” but “her whole nature was soured”. As Dorothy Jones remarks in a paper about the fiction of Olga Masters, “readers are impelled to recognise the harsh restraints which poverty and limited opportunity impose on the human spirit”. Not knowing where the next meal is coming from can be bitterly corrosive in its effects on family affections. In Mrs. Aspinall’s case, driven almost to desperation trying to feed and clothe her family and pay the rent on a totally inadequate income, ironically, she nags persistently at her children, the very reason for her being.

The first of the Mrs. Aspinall stories, "Arvie Aspinall’s Alarm Clock", concerns itself almost exclusively with the death of Arvie, who, as a consequence of overwork and fatigue, becomes a victim of the Grinder Bros’ factory. Mrs. Aspinall reviews memories of past trials and difficulties, while watching over Arvie sleeping, as the drover’s wife watched over her children in her different situation. She lies awake thinking of her troubles: her dead husband, her two wayward eldest sons who have deserted her, her five helpless younger children forced to grow up in the unsavoury atmosphere of brothels and her harsh existence scrubbing floors in the early hours of the morning.

The story sets out to tell of the circumstances, causes and actual occurrence of Arvie’s death but, instead, the image of the mother emerges as an embodiment of maternal love and devotion. Portraying concern for her sickly child, Mrs. Aspinall tends to Arvie’s every need: “Can’t you get to sleep, Arvie?”... “Is your throat sore? Can I get anything for you?” To enable him to sleep for a longer time, she gently alters the alarm clock – putting it forward by two hours – to no avail, for Arvie never wakes again to the sound of the alarm. Clearly, Lawson in this early story was using his own experience as a
point of reference for his fiction. In his poem “The Last Review” (1904), he specifically says:

Narrow bed-room in the City in the hard days that are dead –
An alarm clock on the table, and a pale boy on the bed:
Arvie Aspinall’s Alarm Clock with its harsh and startling call
Never more shall break his slumbers – Lwas Arvie Aspinall.

Lawson’s reverence for maternal figures, already well established in this argument, is reinforced by an authorial comment, inserted into the story before the advent of the clock:

[Arvie] volunteered no explanation as to how he expected mother to know the time, but, perhaps, like many other mites of his kind, he had unbounded faith in the infinitude of a mother’s wisdom.

In the second story of the trilogy, “A Visit of Condolence”, as Mrs. Aspinall and Arvie’s friend Bill converse only a few hours after the death of Arvie, the context of their lives is revealed. We learn how Arvie was driven to the grave by circumstances at Grinder Bros. unbeknown to Mrs. Aspinall, of the Aspinall’s migration from the bush five years before, and of their many misfortunes. In “Jones’s Alley”, which is set a few years later, Mrs. Aspinall is in similar, if not worse straits than before. “Times were hard with Mrs. Aspinall”. The emphasis again, is on a recapitulation of what has happened in the past. There is a happy ending of a limited, inconclusive kind, in that Bill and his “push” help Mrs. Aspinall to move out of the neighbourhood. For Mrs. Aspinall is a victim of the corrupt society of the city which Lawson passionately attacked in his prose, poetry and articles. He saw the city environment as inhumane, slowly strangling its victims rendered powerless by their poverty, and incapable of improving their situation. This is Mrs. Aspinall’s predicament. Unable to prevent eviction and the loss of her furniture, especially her ironing
board which is essential for her livelihood, she is driven to escape before the law arrives.

The extent of Mrs. Aspinall’s victimisation is realised when she is forced to appear in Court, because she was unable to pay the bills the landlord has directed to her, for repairs to his property. Lawson makes a point of telling the reader that women, “especially widows with large families” were at a much greater risk of exploitation by their landlords than anyone else. They are forced to pay excessive rents to provide a roof over their children’s heads even though “they couldn’t afford it without being half-starved”. The intensity of his conviction is apparent in his article “The City and the Bush” written for the Worker in 1894:

What of the poor city women – widows and the wives of loafing or drunken husbands – who have to keep their children and pay the rent on ten shillings or fifteen shillings per week? What of the women who have twelve or thirteen hours a day for from 2s.6d. to 5 shillings per day – and do a man’s work at that?69

Utterly demoralised by an unsympathetic reception in the unfamiliar surroundings of the Court, Mrs. Aspinall’s humiliation, heightened by her isolation, is overwhelming. She wanted someone to relieve her bursting heart to; she couldn’t wait to get home.70

Harry Heseltine draws attention to Lawson’s tentative experiments concerning “death-in-life”; that is, the hope of release through a symbolic dying and renewal into a new identity.71 This idea Lawson came to weave about the theme of spiritual nullity in story after story. Heseltine contends that “Jones’s Alley” was part of this early experimentation. Consider that Mrs. Aspinall lived in dread of her husband’s “daily resurrection” and that her rescue from imminent eviction with the help of Bill’s “push” and their rickety cart, takes on the appearance of a funeral procession:
When the funeral reached the street, the lonely "trap" was, somehow, two blocks away in the opposite direction moving very slow, and very upright, and very straight, like an automaton.72

The connotation is that Mrs. Aspinall may find release from the state of "death-in-life" she has been experiencing. The faint hope that a new life may result after a spiritual release from the present life is, however, always disappointed. It is evident that there can be "no resurrection" for Mrs. Aspinall. Her life will never change. She will continue to be oppressed by poverty, by the bondage of her family, and, because of her vulnerability as a woman and as a deserted wife. She will continue to be victimised by a corrupt urban society and sexually exploited by her feckless husband.

I have argued that in the stories examined, the absence of the husband is a significant contributing factor to the suffering of each of the "haggard women". The nameless drover's wife endures life in isolation, Mrs. Spicer suffers psychological disintegration, Mrs. Witherly simply endures, while Walter Head's absence is instrumental in the destruction of his wife's sanity. Mrs. Aspinall suffers in her own unique way. All these women are "angels" because of their moral attributes of courage, endurance, and, above all, maternal devotion. Lawson's reverence for their long-suffering is expressed in his poem "Past Carin'" (1899):

Through Death and Trouble, turn about,  
Through hopeless desolation,  
Through flood and fever, fire and drought,  
And slavery and starvation;  
Through childbirth, sickness, hurt, and blight,  
And nervousness an' scarin',  
Through bein' left alone at night,  
I've got to be past carin',...(13-20)73
NOTES

CHAPTER 4


3 Colin Roderick, ed. *Henry Lawson* 327.


13 Brian Matthews, "Australian Colonial Women and Their Autobiographies", Unpublished paper. (Published in Kunapipi, 1986.)


19 Anne Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police 97.


23  Brian Matthews, The Receding Wave 27.
26  Henry Lawson, "'Water Them Geraniums'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 579.
29  Brian Matthews, The Receding Wave 22.
30  Henry Lawson, "'Water Them Geraniums'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 578.
33  Henry Lawson, "'Water Them Geraniums'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 578.


49 Henry Lawson, "'The Little World Left Behind'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 373.

50 Henry Lawson, "'The Little World Left Behind'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 373.

51 Henry Lawson, "'The Little World Left Behind'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 373.

52 Brian Matthews, "'Eve Exonerated: Henry Lawson's Unfinished Love Stories'", Who Is She?, ed. Shirley Walker 52

53 Henry Lawson, "'The Little World Left Behind'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 373.

54 Henry Lawson, "'The Babies in the Bush'", Prose Writings, ed. Colin Roderick 403.


58 Colin Roderick ed., *Henry Lawson: Commentaries on his Prose Writings* 211.


60 Brian Matthews, *The Receding Wave* 77.


64 Henry Lawson, "Jones's Alley", *Prose Writings*, ed. Colin Roderick 38.


72 Henry Lawson, "Jones's Alley", *Prose Writings*, ed. Colin Roderick 42.

CHAPTER 5

LAWSON’S “FALLEN WOMEN”

O the heart of one great poet called to Heaven in a line –
Crying, ‘Mary, pity women!’ You have whiter souls than mine.
And if in the grand hereafter there is one shall wear a crown –
For the hell that men made for her – ‘tis the woman of the town.

Henry Lawson, "The Women of the Town".
In the stories already examined, Lawson presents either sexually innocent young heroines or morally “good” women who are, for the most part, depicted as asexual. However, there are also representations in his work of sexually experienced women who will be referred to in this chapter as “fallen women”. Whenever women give in to their own sexual impulse or, as Lawson thought more likely, are victimised and tarnished by the male, they become by Victorian standards, “fallen women”. The term “fallen woman” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “one who has surrendered her chastity”. The use of the word “fallen” in the moral sense of one who has lost purity or innocence, was the accepted connotation in Victorian times.

From a twentieth-century perspective, there is a difference and a distinction between a prostitute and a girl who has made one mistake. A certain section of Victorian society did not allow for such a distinction. Male middle-class respectability admitted the existence of only two kinds of women, the virtuous and the fallen. The forces, social, economic or psychological, which shaped the fate of “the fallen” were not always recognised. Many “fallen women” were single, unprotected young girls whose very innocence allowed them to be seduced easily. Nevertheless, all women from the young and innocent young girl to the professional prostitute were known collectively as “fallen women”. This is the connotation adhered to in this chapter.

Victorian beliefs and assumptions about sexuality were exceptionally oppressive. Until the seventeenth-century, the Pauline conception of the tempting and sinful woman was more or less universal, but with the emergence of the middle-class and the rise of protestantism in nineteenth-century England, this belief was transformed. A new model of woman evolved within the framework of the family where chastity, humility and transcendence were established as the contemporary ideal. The mutation of the Eve myth
into the Mary myth, of temptress into redeemer, implied a fundamental process of desexualisation of woman, who was gradually deprived of her carnal attributes.³

Popular mythology demonstrated that women were asexual. This point of view was vigorously supported by the majority of men who wished to indulge, or already indulged in extra-marital relationships. The contemporary moralist, W.R. Greg, went so far as to state that: "In men...the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent."⁴ Lord William Acton, an expert on prostitution, presents the reader with an intriguing portrait of female sexuality. Unable to reconcile woman's natural purity with ungoverned lust, he believed them to be incapable of any sexual impulses: "Love of home, children and domestic duties, are the only passion they feel."⁵ Moreover, Lord Acton considered prostitutes and courtesans to be different, both physiologically and psychologically from ordinary women in their need for sexual excitement, perceiving them to be unbalanced and nymphomaniac.

For the most part, because of their indoctrination, women actually believed themselves to be without sexuality or desire and morally superior to men because of it.⁶ The supposed absence of desire attributed to the majority of women led to the infamous double standards of sexual morality which punished women with ostracism if they breached the social taboos, but which blandly ignored male offences. Mistresses and prostitutes were an accepted part of a young man's life before marriage, and, more often than not, this pattern of behaviour continued after marriage.⁷

In Australia by the end of the nineteenth-century, middle class family life was very similar to the English models. Sexuality with its ideals of premarital chastity, marital fidelity, female passivity and "chivalrous" male behaviour, as
well as the double standards of morality for the sexes, was entirely typical. As Ruth Teale elucidates, from the 1850’s onwards, women adapted to one or other of the two polarised standards imposed upon them by the male majority. Either they were idealised above male scrutiny, or they became prostitutes, “the pest and gangrene of the colonial society”. George Watt refers to this phenomenon as the mythical “two women” dichotomy, the acceptance of which continued into the twentieth-century. It is around this “madonna/whore” dichotomy with its twin images of woman on the one hand the sexual property of men and, on the other, the chaste mothers of their children, that Lawson’s writing revolves: a reflection of the conventional social attitudes towards women. He finds difficulty, as did many other Victorian writers, in finding any middle ground between the virtuous and “the fallen”.

Most male writers of Victorian fiction portrayed women as their readers expected them to behave, even though the authors may have harboured private and contradictory opinions. Charles Dickens, despite his sympathy for and untiring efforts to assist prostitutes in his private life, did not alter his treatment of them in his novels, with the exception of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. His reading public would not have relished frankness. Similarly, although keenly concerned with moral problems, Thackeray did not have the courage to avoid the stigma of hypocrisy but deferred to public opinion.

Since female chastity was regarded not just as a virtue but as virtue itself, it followed that the loss of it, whether voluntary or not, was the worst disaster that could befall a woman. The phrase “worse than death” was used in all seriousness, and no degree of repentance or suffering could restore the “fallen woman” in her own eyes or in those of society. Margaret Dalziel remarks that “few authors failed to hunt down the ‘fallen woman’ with remorseless tenacity.” The conventional stereotype is of a wretched figure
obscured by darkness and gloom moving about stealthily at night, an outcast in her own land, forced to survive in whatever way she can, usually as a prostitute. Both Mercy Merrick in *The New Magdalen* and Nancy in *Oliver Twist* become prostitutes, for some time at least, while Hardy's Tess is compelled to become a kept mistress. Few women lost their chastity and survived untainted. Atonement for a lapse of virtue was usually achieved by the victim's madness, or death from either a broken heart, brain fever, consumption or from destitution, if not suicide.

In Australia the novels of Mrs. Woods were equally as popular as those of Dickens. Not wishing to offend the genteel sensibilities of her plentiful middle-class readers, her writing emphasised the conventional depiction of "fallen women". In fact, so influential were her novels in shaping the public's attitudes as well as catering for them that George Watt claims "novelists like Mrs. Wood could well be more entitled to the nomination as the 'moral' voice of the middle classes."¹⁴ Like Mrs. Woods, Lawson's writing generally reflects the standard social attitudes towards "fallen women".

Ruth Wilson in "The Hero of Redclay" is the familiar fallen innocent who must atone for her one lapse of virtue by death. Believing she has been compromised when her lover, Jack Drew, is caught leaving her room, she falls immediately into a swoon and ultimately dies from brain fever. Likewise, The Oracle must agonisingly tear himself away from his beloved "little girl" to marry a barmaid reputedly bearing his child, because she will be victimised by the more "moral" members of the town. Barmaids, for the most part, are portrayed conventionally as coarse and brassy, but the Oracle's barmaid is lifted out of the conventional category by the gift of a beautiful voice. Her singing, seemingly, is part of her attraction which lures the Oracle to a "death-in-life" analogous to the Sirens of mythology whose seductive singing lured sailors to their death on rocky shores.¹⁵
In this chapter, the majority of stories deal with “fallen women” as prostitutes. It is in their treatment that Lawson displays the extent of his sympathy for them, with the exclusion of Baby in “Their Mate’s Honour” who fits into a category of her own. It also becomes apparent that early in his career, characters like Lily in "His Adopted Daughter" are depicted in a stereotypical manner, conflicting with the opinions that he gave voice to in his poems of social protest. The assumption is, that like his contemporaries, Dickens, Collins, Thackeray and Mrs. Woods, he wrote to please his public. It was not until his reputation as a writer was firmly established that he found the confidence to voice his private opinions more publicly and adopt an independent stance.

In contradiction to the commonly held belief that “fallen women” had only themselves to blame, Lawson acknowledged the responsibility of men in their fall. In his fictional world Lawson implies that even the most degraded of women have been corrupted originally, by men. The Giraffe’s comment about the prostitutes in Bourke is typical:

I s’pose they’re bad, but I don’t suppose they’re worse than men has made them.\textsuperscript{16}

Xavier Pons comments that Lawson’s attitude towards prostitutes was sympathetic because he believed they did not choose a life of sensuality which society regarded as the unforgivable sin. It is vice, oppression and poverty that forces them to sell their own flesh for survival. Therefore they are far less guilty than the adulterous woman who has no excuse save her wantonness and cupidity.\textsuperscript{17}

Lawson’s attitude towards “fallen women” fluctuated throughout his life. In the innocence of his youth, the prostitute’s plight filled him with compassion.
Although embittered personally by the hardships of bush life, Lawson was shocked by the abject poverty, squalor and misery that he encountered in the city. Keith Dunstan reports that prostitution was common in the colonies because opportunities for women were so limited. "If a girl could not be kept at home, she usually went into domestic service... If she lost her job – The streets? The pay was better."\textsuperscript{18}

Ruth Teale documents the situation concerning prostitution which was rife in the colony in the 1880's:

In Sydney the red light district for the expensive class of prostitute, was along King Street between George and Castlereagh. A more rugged type of establishment existed in Lower George Street and the Rocks area, among the Chinese fan-tan schools and opium dens and in the cafés and ‘coffee houses' of the city and suburbs.\textsuperscript{19}

Lawson, who was living with his mother in Phillip Street at the very heart of this notorious area, witnessed the degradation experienced by the prostitutes. Beverley Kingston recounts that many of them were very young girls, destitute or abandoned, who were forced to support themselves in the only way they could.\textsuperscript{20} Lawson's social conscience was stirred and encouraged by the circle of political reformists with whom Louisa had become involved. Their unifying passion, the eradication of social evils, was an inspiration for the young, impressionable Lawson.\textsuperscript{21} Following the literary example of Thomas Hood and Edgar Allan Poe, he began composing poetry of social protest. The wretchedness of the prostitute's life moved him to write of their misery in the poem, "The Watch on the Kerb" (1888):

\begin{verbatim}
Night-lights are fading,  
Girl of the street,  
Go to your calling  
If you would eat.  
Lamplight and starlight
\end{verbatim}
And moonlight superb,  
Bright hope is a farlight,  
So watch on the kerb.

Comes a man: call him –  
Gone! he is vexed;  
Curses befall him,  
Wait for the next!

Fair world and bright world,  
Life still is sweet –  
Girl of the night-world,  
Watch on the street.

Dreary the watch is:  
Moon sinks from sight,  
Gas only blotches  
Darkness with light;  
Never, O never  
Let courage go down;  
Keep from the river,  
O Girl of the Town! (1-25)22

If the tone of the poem is sentimental, the emotion behind it is sincere, for it stems from the same impetus which spurred him to write his first sequence of stories dealing with the socially oppressed, "The Jones's Alley" stories, a year or so later. Without doubt, his attention was directed towards the circumstances concerning prostitutes by his mother Louisa who was deeply involved in feminist causes, and who published the first women's magazine in Australia, the Dawn (1888). Although there was friction between them in later years, Louisa wielded considerable influence at this time over her son who was sympathetic towards her mission.23

A.A. Phillips answers the question as to whether Lawson wrote with sincerity about the "street girls" or was sentimentalising a fairly conventional figure. Lawson was a man of sentiment, by which is meant that he responded emotionally to his subject, but not at the expense of truth, which saves him from sentimentality. Always he felt deeply for the "darkness of the human condition".24 That is why the subjects he chose to write about were the rejects from an unjust society: victims of the slums, the lonely bushman, the selector
struggling against the hostility of nature, their haggard wives facing a slow spiritual destruction through hardship and loneliness, and the street women.

Observation of these "fallen" women aroused his sympathy, but when he encountered the same women more closely, his attitude in his fiction was to change, at least temporarily, to one of censure. This attitudinal change is reflected in his depiction of the two barmaids, Alice in "Thin Lips and False Teeth", and 'the Madeline' girl in "The Story of the Oracle".

"Thin Lips and False Teeth", composed and published in the *Worker* in 1894, was written as a sequel to "An Unfinished Love Story". It does not seem to have been popular with his publishers however, for it was left out of several published collections, most probably for prudish reasons, and only received publication in a limited edition of 50 copies of *Over the Sliprails* in 1900. It is certainly a story unlike any other that Lawson had previously written and therefore, suggests experimentation. It is unlikely that Lawson was unaware of the current literary trends prevailing overseas in the nineties, for, as G.A. Wilkes points out in a discussion concerning the development of an Australian cultural identity:

...the intellectual modes of Australia were substantially the intellectual modes of the C19th in Britain and America, disseminated through the Mechanics' Institutes, local editions of overseas authors and journals like "The Worker", "Cornhill", "Blackwood's", and "Macmillan's Magazine".

It is in these journals that the short story as a new literary mode made its appearance. Patricia Stubbs establishes that during the 'eighties and 'nineties the short story became popular with writers in England. A new narrative form, more subtle and flexible was necessary to cope adequately with the new themes that literature was turning to. The short story met this demand. It was the ideal medium for the depiction of clashes between the old
and the new sexual moralities taking for its domain themes of “seductions, prostitution, animal magnetism” and the like.27

With its themes of seduction and prostitution, “Thin Lips and False Teeth” appears to have been directly influenced by the new trend. The story displays a side to Lawson’s character usually kept discreetly hidden. For the most part, the lack of sexuality in his writing, led critics to form the opinion that he was shy and prudish where sex was concerned. For his friends, however, Lawson wrote bawdy verses about the sexes and delighted in reciting them publicly.28 Furthermore, it must not be overlooked that he published poems with sexual overtones such as “The Beauty and the Dude” in the Boomerang in 1891. The double entendre is unmistakable:

A fresh sweet-scented beauty
Came tripping down the street;
She was as fair a vision
As you might chance to meet.
A masher raised his cady
(I don’t want to be rude)
He raised it to the lady –
That fresh sweet-scented dude.

They met and talked and simpered
And giggled in the street,
They were as bright a vision
As you might wish to meet.
I don’t know what they’re good for,
But don’t want to be rude
To the fair sweet-scented beauty
Or the well-upholstered dude. (1-16)29

Lawson did discover, on his trek to Hungerford in 1892, that the Australian bushman was prudish about sex. As Manning Clark states:

The Madonna was often the true image of a woman, the pure, undefiled one, who must not be degraded, or coarsened by the vile things men did to other sorts of women.30
Without doubt Lawson noted this aspect of the bushmen's character. That is why his bush stories are, for the most part, devoid of any explicit details about sex. But "Thin Lips and False Teeth" is set in the city, the place of vice and corruption. Lawson displays no prudishness in describing explicitly, a sordid sensual scene involving the barmaid and the male protagonist, after a night of debauchery in a "private" bar.

The term "private" bar, innocuous as it may seem at first reading, has intriguing connotations when further explored. The first line of the story states:

Brook was lying down on a lounge in the 'private' parlour of a private bar.\(^{31}\)

Note that Lawson has used inverted commas highlighting the word "private", signalling to the reader that it has a special meaning. Ruth Teale, writing about prostitution in the 1880's describes the "private" bars in Sydney as reported in the *Daily Telegraph*:

You go up a flight of stairs, perhaps, and come to a dingy, badly-furnished room, with a bar running along one side, having something in the shape of a man behind it. The sofas are like those in seedy second-class lodging houses, with broken springs and faded coverings...[next door] is an hotel and supper rooms of a lively, if not a particularly nice description...I find myself speedily in the fast life of Sydney. Women throng the narrow passage...they crowd the bar, and they invade the parlours. There is no attempt at disguise about their calling... Every man who enters the hotel...is pounced upon and touted for...\(^{32}\)

The "private" bar was simply a low class of drinking den used for purposes of prostitution. That Lawson was a frequenter of such establishments is well documented by both Roderick and Manning Clark.\(^{33}\) During the period in which he wrote the stories referred to, Lawson led a penurious and dissolute existence in doss-houses and cheap bars. He was drinking heavily, and, in
the company of his friend John Le Gay Brereton, "enjoyed Bohemian adventures cheerfully and irresponsibly". This leaves little to the imagination. Together they wandered into "the queer corners and neglected backwaters" of Sydney where Lawson pointed out spots associated in his mind with scenes from Dickens.34

Returning to the discussion of "Thin Lips and False Teeth", Lawson describes the interior of the private parlour through the eyes of the heavily intoxicated Brook, evoking an impression of licentiousness and debauchery:

...a table with a red cover, gaslights flaring overhead, cards scattered on the table, one or two overturned glasses, a man lifting a fat, painted barmaid down from some elevated position, another girl sitting on a man's knee...35

The depiction of the barmaid is a conventional stereotype; her demeanour is vulgar and bold, her figure is gross, while her face is brazenly painted. The very boldness of the subject, it seems, is reflected in the technique employed by the author. For in his writing, Lawson breaks new ground by describing in naturalistic mode, two sensual scenes between Brook and Alice the barmaid:

He felt the weight of her bust on his chest and shoulder, and thin lips and false teeth pressed hard on his mouth; and he understood her to say something about keeping awake and 'when the missus goes to bed'.36

And later:

The fat barmaid, in her dressing-gown, was leaning over him, with her arm under his head. An atmosphere of gin, and bloated sensual flesh – false teeth and thin lips!37

The madonna/whore dichotomy is manifested by ambivalence in the treatment of different kinds of women. Lawson suffers no inhibitions when
dealing with “fallen women”. He does not cloak them in ill-fitting garments as he does his “little girls” or his “haggard women”, in order to cover their sexual features. On the contrary, he describes the heavy bust of the barmaid, and the “bloated sensual flesh”, the aftermath of a night of sexual excess, with consummate ease. The suggestion is that sex is a sordid affair.

After his night of dissipation, Brook experiences feelings of revulsion towards the barmaid. He wishes to repulse her after “another of her kisses” but finds that his courage has waned with the return of sobriety. Lawson knew from personal experience, that it was not uncommon to suffer from remorse and guilt after this kind of wanton behaviour. In Brook’s revulsion towards the barmaid, Lawson encodes a masculine response to the situation. Brook has been a willing, if inebriated, participant in the evening’s activities, yet, in retrospect he is filled with contrition. The self-reproach that Brook experiences is transferred to the woman involved, in an attempt to absolve himself from his guilt.

A parallel may be drawn with the behaviour of Leo Tolstoy. Ruth Benson, writing about images of women in Tolstoy’s works states that Tolstoy was “body-haunted, obsessed equally by sexual desire and the guilt of sexual satisfaction”. He could never overcome his sensuality.

The humiliation over his vulnerability was reflected in his feelings about women. Since, according to him, they both provoked and were the object of sexual activity, women became the scapegoats for the self-reproach, the guilt, the self-hatred that inevitably followed Tolstoy’s sexual indulgence.38

Although this is a magnification of the situation regarding Lawson’s depiction of Brook, nevertheless the information is pertinent to the argument. Time and time again, women become the scapegoats for male guilt. In this instance, Brook is portrayed as feeling “mean”, resulting from the discomfort of
his remorse. His reaction is to assuage these pangs by returning to the country and the "little girl" he had trifled with and left behind, two years ago. She offers innocence and purity in contrast to the wantonness and promiscuity of the barmaids which now disgust Brook.

In a moment of self-revelation, through the medium of an internal monologue with "Reason", Brook's motives for escaping from his present environment are explored. "Reason" acknowledges that life with a simple, childish girl would drive him to distraction, to drink and finally to other women. The inference is that sexual experiences with "fallen" women and all that that implies, precludes a happy liaison for a man with the pure and innocent "little" girls that Lawson idealised. The ideas expressed in the internal monologue concerning relationships between men and women constitute a recurrent theme in Lawson's work, underlining the important role it played in his life. "Reason" says: "Such a marriage is the most wretched mistake a man can make". Brook's hurried return to the private bar in the city, having learned that the "little girl" is married, is a confirmation of this argument. His rapid departure, devoid of any backward glance, coupled with his aggressive drinking at every opportunity, is a reaffirmation of his previous way of life, which includes consorting with the barmaids.

Before discussing the barmaid in "The Story of the Oracle", which is set in the bush, it seems more appropriate to deal with another city story first. "His Adopted Daughter" is not one of Lawson's best stories. It is flawed by a melodramatic plot and the use of stock phrases borrowed directly from the music-hall. While Roderick comments that "it is a piece with his early rejection of romanticism", Matthews' contention that there is a romantic melodramatic streak in Lawson's work, is more cogent in this context. The fact that the main protagonist is a prostitute, albeit that she masquerades as a "little girl" at the beginning of the story, suggests that Lawson was still experimenting with more
modern themes. Although Angus and Robertson purchased the copyright of this story in 1899, like "Thin Lips and False Teeth", it was not included in any of the early Lawson Collections. Its only appearance in 1895 in The Worker, emphasises their more adventurous editorial policy concerning social comment, remembering too, that the Worker was, of course, a socialist paper.

In "His Adopted Daughter", Lily is depicted, ostensibly, as one of Lawson's "little girls". She has all the characteristics which exemplify his idealised image of young womanhood, his "angels". She is diminutive, demure, and as sweet and apparently pure as her name implies:

She was slight and girlish in figure, had a creamy complexion, a sweet, sorrowful mouth, big pathetic blue eyes and fair hair.41

Her demeanour throughout the story, until the revelation that she is a prostitute, supports the image of Victorian innocence and purity. The characterisation of Lily is a reflection of the stereotype of the "Innocent" prevalent in Victorian novels, usually described in this way:

Innocent, unformed and naive, often self-effacing and unsure, the Ingenue is at the mercy of the adults – especially the men – who enter her life. In her innocence she has implicit trust in man, who is as likely to lead her into a ruinous affair as to offer her marriage, the only socially acceptable goal.42

Lily fits neatly into this stereotype. The narrator, relating the story in the first person, recalls how he saves her from attempted suicide. She is a "fallen woman", the innocent victim of a villain who entices her away from her country home and then abandons her, penniless and alone, in "the cruel, heartless city."
Throughout the story, Lawson emphasises Lily’s child-like qualities. She is referred to frequently as “the poor child” and further, she is told “to be a good girl”. Her position of subjugation is clearly defined. Totally dependent on her rescuer, she is submissive and “full of trusting gratitude” for the man who is depicted as “her saviour”. When offered money by him to buy trifles, her embarrassment is so acute that she falls into a faint:

She made no motion to take the money, but stood before me with heaving breast and downcast eyes, and seemed struggling to speak. Then, she suddenly sank to her knees, seized my hands, kissed them passionately, and started to pour out all her gratitude for me, and finally she fainted.43

From his masculine perspective, the narrator considers his own action in saving the girl “from the shame that she as yet knew nothing of”, as noble. His reasons for behaving in this way are twofold. On the one hand it is clear that he is attracted to the girl, for he stresses that she was “sweetly pretty” and her dress and appearance were “superior”. These qualities appeal to him while on the other hand it pleases his ego to perform this “noble” deed, to save at least one woman from shame, in order to atone for the others whom he might have led astray in the past. This attitude is patronising and belittling to women. No consideration is given to the consequences for other “fallen women”. Have they been forced to suicide to escape the condemnation of an unjust society?

Behaving with the utmost propriety, Lily’s “saviour” arranges board and lodging for her with a respectable widow. His generosity extends to the hiring of a music tutor for her. Further, he insists that his relationship with her is that of an uncle or a father. In order not to compromise her in any way, he visits her infrequently. Lawson carefully builds up the image of the man as a kind-hearted, generous, even noble human being. He has been “a wicked fellow” along with other “scamps” of his own age, leading a reckless life, but now he
has reached a stage where he is romantically inclined. In an internal monologue, he day-dreams that Lily cannot fail to fall in love with him: "How could she do otherwise?" She would pine, grow thin and pale with hidden love for him. But with a nobility that transcends all wrong-doing, he would offer her marriage: He would "make such a sacrifice for her sake". The protagonist's egotism is boundless.

Underlining Lawson's ambivalent attitudes towards women in general, in this story men are shown to be victims of unscrupulous women. No matter how noble and benevolent a man may be, designing women like Lily deceive them with their feigned innocence and purity. As the narrator says: "Men are such fools". The narrator goes further in his condemnation of women, blaming this incident for ruining his life: "She changed and embittered my whole nature". Disillusioned that the one thing he believed to be "good and pure" in this world is tarnished, his attitude towards all women alters from respect to contempt. Moreover, he blames this one incident for the lost opportunity to become a man of honour. The situation is ironical. The Giraffe's remark about prostitutes referred to previously is particularly apt:

I s'pose they're bad; but I don't s'pose they're worse than men has made them.

What needs to be considered is what misfortune has forced Lily to take to the streets? What has made her behave so deceitfully? Has she been a victim of seduction, for the narrative informs us that she is a "superior" person judging from her dress and appearance. The implication is that Lily, (as the Giraffe says) is no worse than contact with man has made her. The double standards of Victorian morality lie at the heart of the problem. According to Basch, women of the lower orders were always considered "fair game" for gentlemen of rank and money. In any circumstance, however, if a woman was
seduced, she was punished as the guilty party. The seducer was treated with impunity, and, as Lawson would have it, looked upon simply as "a young scamp". Society would continue to receive him, without condemnation. On the other hand, society's judgment turned the victim, the woman, into an outcast, forcing her onto the streets for survival.

The "Story of the Oracle" has similarities to "His Adopted Daughter". The barmaid, like Lily, is portrayed as "a cold-blooded, designing" woman who deceives the male protagonist, in this instance, Tom Marshall (the Oracle). Both men are presented as characters who behave with nobility towards women, in contrast to the deceitful behaviour of their women. In the case of the Oracle, his life is ruined as a result of the deception. Furthermore, the theme in "His Adopted Daughter" that contact with "fallen women" changes a man's opinion to one of contempt, recurs in the introduction to "The Story of the Oracle". "Sympathy Joe", discussing with Mitchell the opinions that young "men-o'-the-world" hold about women, comments:

They understand women, and have a contempt for 'em; and chaps that don't talk as they talk, or do as they do, or see as they see, are either soft or ratty.

The assumption is that the "contempt" these men have for women, stems from unpleasant encounters presumably with prostitutes, as the mention of "trips to Sydney" would indicate. The Oracle, unlike his contemporaries, is depicted as a naive, unworldly young man who "didn't understand women...and therefore he hadn't any contempt for 'em". Sympathy Joe's following remark is contradictory: "Perhaps he understood, and understands them better than any of us, without knowing it." Lawson's own confusions and inability to comprehend women are embodied in these paradoxical statements.
As "The Story of the Oracle" unfolds through the narrator "Sympathy Joe", the reader learns that Tom Marshall has a brief affair with a barmaid described as "a fine lump of a blonde", whom he meets on the goldfields. He travels on to the Gippsland district where, for the first time in his life, he experiences profound love for "a girl as God made her", one of Lawson's pure and innocent "angels". On the point of planning marriage, Tom receives a letter from the barmaid naming him as the father of the child she is bearing. She entreats him to marry her for the child's sake, claiming that she is all but destitute. Together, Tom and his "little girl" agree that he must "do the right thing" and marry the barmaid.

Lawson's treatment of the "fallen woman" is, at first, both sympathetic and compassionate. As omniscient narrator, he discloses, through the comments of "Sympathy Joe", his attitudes towards those whom he refers to as "unfortunate girls" and his opinions concerning society's harsh treatment of them. He condemns the attitudes of a society which condones the inhumane treatment of "the fallen" by their more moral sisters:

...there is no mercy, at least as far as women are concerned, for the poor foolish girl, who has to sneak out the back way and round by back streets and lanes after dark, with a cloak on to hide her figure.51

Furthermore, Lawson's censure of moral women is severe. He criticises them as gossiping "hags" who vilify the "fallen", treating them as more shameful than criminals:

There is sympathy, a pipe and tobacco, a cheering word, and maybe a whisky now and then, for a criminal on his journey.52
These attitudes reflect the severe moral code that prevailed at the time the stories were written. But Lawson, who has been criticised for his prudishness, reveals a more libertarian attitude. His opinion is that of the moralists and writers Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, Ryan, Mayhew and Greg who contend that fallen women were “more sinned against than sinning”.\(^{53}\) Lawson argues through “Sympathy Joe” that:

...as most men would deceive women if they could, when one man gets caught, he's got no call to squeal about it; he's bound because of the sins of men in general against women, to make the best of it. What is one man's wrong counted against the wrongs of hundreds of unfortunate girls? (My emphasis.)\(^ {54}\)

The connotation is that Lawson, like the moralist W.R. Greg, believed in the expansiveness of a woman’s “fond” heart. Therein lies “a strange and sublime unselfishness, which men too commonly discovered only to profit by”.\(^ {55}\) Lawson acknowledges that men do take advantage of this quality in women. As the Oracle (who seems to understand women very well indeed) says, men have been the cause of the fall of “hundreds of unfortunate girls”. Women have always been harassed by men for sexual relations and, often enough, have been deceived with promises of love and marriage. So, when the Oracle discovers in due course, that he has been deceived – he is not the father of the child – he remains with the barmaid, accepting his fate philosophically. Unlike the protagonist in "His Adopted Daughter", the Oracle does not denounce all women as contemptible as a result of his deception. As “Sympathy Joe” comments: "...perhaps she convinced him that he was the cause of her first fall".\(^ {56}\) Instead, the Oracle remains with his wife and the child, intending to take them away as soon as he has saved sufficient money. The implication is that he is contented with the marriage.
However, the Oracle is deceived a second time when Redmond, the child's real father, returns to the town. This time, Mrs. Marshall's deceit is of a higher order; she becomes embroiled in an adulterous relationship with her former lover. The attitudes encoded in the story change from one of sympathy for her "fallen" state as a single woman, to one of condemnation for her infidelity in marriage. This reaction supports the traditional viewpoint held by society that the adultery of a wife is an unforgivable sin, punishable by social ostracism. The wife and mother, in the late nineteenth-century, was idealised as "the angel on the hearth". Victorian ideology viewed such women "as custodians of the moral conscience, the repository of all virtue". To breach the sexual taboos was unpardonable. The supposition is that Lawson clung to the traditional values in the depiction of wives and mothers and so the barmaid, given the opportunity to redeem herself, is expected to fulfil her maternal role with all its ramifications.

The implications of the union between the barmaid and the Oracle are clear. Any attempt to elevate an "impure" woman, already tarnished by contact with men, to the "pure", idealised and revered status of wife and mother is doomed to fail. As the Oracle discovers eventually, such women will revert to their original state of sin. As Margaret Dalziel states, from the Victorian point of view, no degree of repentance or suffering could restore the "fallen woman" to a state of purity. This incident emphasises the entrenched dichotomy between the madonna and the whore. Lawson reinforces the point of view presented in "His Adopted Daughter" that contact with immoral woman causes men to view them with contempt. In the case of the Oracle, his contempt is unexpressed but is implicit in his actions; he fights Redmond to avenge the adultery, then leaves the barmaid for good.
Apart from Ruth Wilson in "The Hero of Redclay" who has been dealt with at length in an earlier chapter (Lawson's "Little Girls"), and a brief episode in "Send Round the Hat", Lawson's interest in "fallen women" waned until the latter years of his life. This was due, largely, to his absorption in the writing of The Joe Wilson series, acclaimed as the pinnacle of his career, whose main theme focuses on the relationships between men and women in marriage.

The episode in "Send Round the Hat" revolves around a small troupe of prostitutes who have been plying their trade in a cottage on the outskirts of Bourke. After a disturbance, they are evicted from their premises, fined by the police and forced to leave the town. Finding they have insufficient money to pay their return fares to Sydney, the Giraffe, who is legendary for collecting money through the vehicle of his hat for anyone in need, "sends round his hat" for the prostitutes. The omniscient author reinforces his attitude of sympathy and compassion for these "fallen women". At the level of narration this is accomplished by comments, judiciously placed in the description of the women:

The woman was good-looking; she had a hard face, but it might have been made hard. (My emphasis.)

Elsewhere, he comments:

The third girl seemed half defiant, half-inclined to cry. (My emphasis.)

Furthermore, there is the Giraffe's much quoted comment:

I don't know anything about them women. I s'pose they're bad, but I don't suppose they're worse than men has made them. (My emphasis.)
The inference is that contact with men is the reason for the fall of these women to the level of prostitution. The comment that the face of the “madam” of the troupe, referred to as “the woman”, “might have been made hard”, suggests that the circumstances of her life have caused her to become hard. Moreover, two of the “girls” have children in Sydney. They are in a state of distress because they are forced to support their offspring.

As I have argued earlier, with the support of historical evidence, girls were forced onto the streets for a variety of reasons, not the least being the need to save themselves from starvation. It has also been argued that Lawson displays sympathy for women suffering hardships. He understood the reasons why women were forced into prostitution. It is evident however, that this compassion was conditional. It was maintained as long as the male was dominant over the female, as is the Giraffe in "Send Round the Hat". Once the balance of power is reversed, then Lawson’s compassion alters in "His Adopted Daughter" to animosity, and in "The Story of the Oracle" to implied contempt charged with hidden anguish.

Written several years later, "Their Mate’s Honour" (1908) repeats the prevailing theme of the stories already discussed: the deceitfulness of “fallen women” and the anguish that men suffer because of this deceit. It must be remembered that, in the context of his stories, Lawson’s barmaids are mostly prostitutes or, at the very least, promiscuous. Therefore, when Joe Large, the decent, hard-working shearer is beguiled into marrying "Baby the Barmaid", the trouble that ensues is not unexpected. The immorality of Joe’s wife, Baby, reinforces Lawson’s condemnatory attitude towards the barmaid/prostitute, first established in "Thin Lips and False Teeth", and further emphasised in "The Story of the Oracle". This attitude is exacerbated when "Baby", in her role as wife, is caught not only committing adultery with Joe Large’s friends, but also conducting a private brothel with the help of her sister. When it is
disclosed that Baby's clients include the dark-skinned Afghan camel drivers, then the wrath of Joe's mates is irreconcilable. The issue becomes not simply Joe's honour, but the honour of the country. She will be forced to leave the town immediately.

The inference implicit in "The Story of the Oracle" that women, already "fallen", cannot bridge the chasm between impurity and purity is made explicit in "Their Mate's Honour". The impure cannot be elevated to the idealised, pure and revered position of "wife". (The Victorian reader would never accept this.) Such is the case of "Baby". Undoubtedly she is the most brazen and flagrant of all Lawson's "fallen women". Her deceit is intensified because of her child-like appearance. The fact that she is diminutive, "doll-faced" and chatters in an engaging childish fashion, deludes Joe Large into believing that she is as innocent as she appears. The implication is that this is womanly deceit at its worst. If a woman looks like an angel, then the male expectation is that she will also behave like one.

The animosity engendered towards the adulterous wife is articulated by Jack Moonlight in his comment about Baby:

But is she a woman though? I've seen plenty of 'em. 'Snake-inside-a-woman', I call 'em – and the little doll-faced ones are the worst.\textsuperscript{62}

That such women were regarded as selfish and treacherous, ever ready to take advantage of a husband's goodness, is expressed by Jack Moonlight in a further hostile comment about Baby:

He took her out of the pub and married her, and took her to Sydney, and let her have her fling. And brought her back and gave her the prettiest little cottage in Bourke to live in, with nothing to do but put on tea-gowns and flirt... And Joe goes out and swelters in the sheds, and sends
her advance cheques, with his sweat to bind the dust on 'em...63

Moreover, Lawson’s attitudes towards separated and divorced women is manifested in Jack Moonlight’s vitriolic attack on Baby’s sister, “ex-chorus-girl, ex-third-rate actress, and ex-first-class barmaid”:

I tell you [she]...has got ‘Separated Woman’, and ‘Divorced-me-Husbin’ written in every line of her face and crook of her little finger.64

Jack Mitchell emphasises the aggression that Baby’s behaviour has aroused. He displays animosity, vindictiveness and anger towards women in general; his anger is directed at the power that women wield over men as a consequence of the Victorian social convention which inhibited public criticism of women:

You mustn’t say anything about a woman. She can spoil a man’s chances, and ruin his work, and drag him down, if he’s a great man, and his country with him, and cripple him like that for generations... But...You can’t say a word against the woman...you must believe all her lies, or you’re no man. (My emphasis.)65

This impassioned attack embodies the author’s own obsessions, for it goes beyond the parameters of the narrative and becomes personalised. The author, losing sight of reason, imposes his preoccupations about women onto his male protagonists. The revelation that Jack Moonlight and Jack Mitchell have both suffered the same fate as Joe Large, overstates the point. This melodramatic overstatement detracts from the artistic merit of the work. It must be remembered that after Lawson’s wife separated from him in 1903, his writings about women became expressions of hatred. His self-esteem was shattered, arousing in him a bitter antagonism towards Bertha which spilled over to all women, for a time. His most venomous attack against them appeared in “The She Devil” (1904) in which he publicly denounced women
who left their husbands or divorced them wrongfully accusing them of charging their husbands with adultery or brutality. Lawson’s hostility for the impure, adulterous Baby is encapsulated in the description of her as a “man-ruining she-devil”.

The deceitfulness and corruption of wives in contrast to the benevolence and generosity of husbands is emphasised early in the narrative. As Joe’s mates, in the true spirit of mateship, discuss the best way to help him, Jack Moonlight recounts a similar incident which occurred some years ago in Sydney. While Tom, the husband, is away working in the country, his wife and several other wives as well, betray their husbands. When their adultery is discovered, it is stressed that the men’s lives are destroyed. Either they “drink themselves to death” or, in Tom’s case, take their own lives. From the masculine point of view, women, this story insists, are untrustworthy and destructive. Ironically, Lawson seems to be suggesting (if unconsciously), that the male ego cannot cope with betrayal.

Jack Mitchell, who reappears in this story as Joe Large’s mate, reinforces this argument when he reveals that he has also suffered a similar fate:

The funniest part of it all is that none of them know that I’ve been through the same hell – Jack Mitchell! Ah, well!66

Moreover, Moonlight’s recollection as he waits to fight for Joe’s honour, reaffirms the dominant theme, emphasised to the point of obsession, of the deceitfulness of wives:

Moonlight was seeing a face, and a bit of sky and sea and cliff in a piece of broken looking-glass. The face of a mate who was looking down now, perhaps from amongst the thousands and thousands of wronged husbands. (My emphasis.)67
Lawson imposes his personal preoccupation with "wronged husbands" upon his male characters. In so doing, he overlooks that the few male characters who are married in his stories, are usually absent from home for long periods of time and do not appear to repress their sexual urges. Bob Baker ("Telling Mrs. Baker"), is representative of Lawson's wandering bushmen who lead dissolute lives, unknown to their wives. After his death from the effects of alcohol, his mates protect Mrs. Baker from the knowledge of his promiscuity with barmaids and the wives of other men by removing letters and photographs from his belongings.

The promiscuity of the bushmen, The Oracle, Bob Baker and others, is not an argument to exonerate Baby from her flagrant behaviour, but the point that must be emphasised is that Baby, as the Giraffe says, is "no worse than men has made her". Lawson places the full weight of the blame on women with little regard for the vice of men as a contributing factor. If it had not been for the lustfulness of the men of the town, and, more importantly, their disregard for the sanctity of marriage, Baby could not have fallen so low.

Lawson's ambivalent attitude towards different kinds of women is emphasised by the ending of the story. The anodyne to Joe's grief is the "little freckle-faced girl...the girl he should have married", who comforts him after his ordeal. The contrived appearance of the "little girl" as a solace for Joe, exposes the incipient flaw in Lawson's work – the romantic streak which Brian Matthews argues weakened his writing, particularly in these later stories. The point that does emerge is that, despite the treachery of impure women like Baby, Lawson reaffirms a belief in the goodness and salvation of pure women. As Mitchell says, reiterating the madonna/whore dichotomy in Lawson's work:

One woman gives her life to mend
The heart another woman's broken—
In the last stories to be examined, "The Rising of the Court", "The Reformation of Johnson" and "The Lily of St. Leonards", the sympathy and compassion towards "fallen women" which inspired the poem "Watch on the Kerb" is displayed in all fullness. Lawson's empathy with the "pitiful sinners" and disreputable "ladies" of Red Rock Lane Society is explicit in the treatment of them in "The Rising of the Court". He writes with adulation of their courage, of their tenacity and of their devotion to their fellow sufferers. Drawing on Dickens for his inspiration, he regards them with such esteem that he invests them with the heroic qualities of those who lead revolutions against social injustices and exploitation:

It was such women as Mrs. Johnson and One-Eyed Kate and their sisters who lead Paris to Versailles, and a King and a Queen died for it. It is such women as Mrs. Johnson and One-Eyed Kate and their sisters who will lead a greater Paris to a greater Versailles some day and many "Trust" kings and queens, and their princes and princesses shall die for it.71

The degree of glorification of "down-and-outs" of all kinds, the prostitutes, the drunks and the derelicts might be considered melodramatic if it were not for the acknowledged sincerity of the author. Brian Matthews draws attention to Lawson's "perverse glorification of 'down-and-outs'" found in "The Lost Souls Hotel" which he believed developed into an intellectual habit in his later writing, in particular the Elder Man's Lane stories.72 It takes little imagination to determine that Lawson's heightened awareness of the plight of the "down-and-outs" stems from his personal tragedy of becoming a fellow traveller. As Roderick points out, Lawson spent much of his life between 1904 and 1914 in the company of the "flotsam and jetsam of humanity" both in and out of gaol.73 His contact with these "lost souls" inevitably gave him an insight into their characters and behaviour, inspiring him to write about them with admiration. Matthews argues that Lawson chose to glorify the "down-and-outs" in his
declining years, openly advancing the state as a virtue. But, as A.A. Phillips comments, one must never lose sight of the fact that Lawson was a man of sentiment, a convinced believer in "the value of the tendernesses", in his fiction. 74 This is apparent in "The Rising of the Court" where, even in the midst of the sordidness depicted, there is yet, a belief in the humanity of mankind.

A lively, moving sketch, "The Rising of the Court" depicts with humour and compassion, the pitiful circumstances of the disreputable ladies of the notorious Red Rock Lane, in the form of Mrs. Johnson and her "sisters". The courtroom scene which begins the sketch, draws attention to the follies, vices and shortcomings of the lawyers, solicitors, magistrates and reporters who frequent the courts. Factual reporting only slightly fictionalised, it is a remarkably successful technique for arousing contempt and derision for the law and sympathy for the sinners:

...the little witness box to one side, where so many honest poor people are bullied, insulted and laughed at by third-rate blackguardly little "lawyers"...

From the point of view of women, the most important aspect of "The Rising of the Court" is that they become the major focus of the author's attention. Lawson did write later, with affection and humour about similar disreputable male characters in the Elder Man's Lane series. But it is the street "ladies" by whom he was so deeply impressed in the preceding years, who become the object of his commendation.

A significant reason for Lawson's adulation of Mrs. Johnson and her "sisters" arises from the revelation that there was a "sisterhood", a mateship, among them. The women of the underworld of the city, the under-privileged, the unemployed, the poverty-stricken, the "drunk and disorderlies", are united
in adversity as Lawson's bushmen are united in a different kind of adversity, by mateship. Recounted in a documentary narrative style, the author comments:

It is very hard to touch the heart of a woman who is down, though they are intensely sympathetic amongst themselves.76

The conviction that mateship existed among the women of the 'Underworld' is reinforced in the later story "The Reformation of Johnson". Moreover, Lawson's deeply entrenched belief in the ennobling qualities of the "down-and-outs" which became an obsession, is enhanced. By a comparison with women of the everyday world, ironically referred to as the "upper or superficial" world, the women of the "Underworld", the author claims, are loyal to each other. With a hesitant pen, Lawson also claims that they are loyal and devoted to their menfolk:

There are sisters down in the Underworld, too. They are not like their sisters of the upper or superficial world who lie incessantly about each other and each other's people in a superficial way, and whose lives, minds, amusements, and ambitions even, are just as superficial. They are mostly true to each other, and to their - their males, this Sisterhood: they are ready to make any sacrifice for a brute, hate an injustice to another fiercely, and are intensely sympathetic. (My emphasis.)77

Mrs. Johnson, the centre of the sisterhood in "The Rising of the Court" is described as being "a lady once". She has fallen to the depths of degradation because of her addiction to alcohol. In her sober moments she displays respectability and intelligence, speaks with refinement and, having a private source of income, supports her less fortunate "sisters", the prostitutes and derelicts of Red Rock Lane. She is accepted, grudgingly, because of her unstinting generosity, maintaining a "fierce, practical kindness to her unfortunate or poverty-stricken sisters".
The ironic Lawsonian sense of humour evident throughout this sketch by the use of an apt word or phrase, is exemplified in the passage referring to Mrs. Johnson. The irony is situational; “forgiven” is the operative word. Mrs. Johnson is “forgiven” for her unseemly behaviour when she is drunk, by her much less seemly but unfortunate “sisters”, because of her generosity. The point that is stressed is that Mrs. Johnson is not a “bad woman”. According to the author, a “bad woman” is defined as "a prostitute or a brothel-keeper". It is important to note this distinction because Mrs. Johnson, as her name denotes, is a married woman. Married women who have “fallen” are usually the target for the author’s contempt. But Mrs. Johnson is exonerated from “badness” because her fall has been caused by alcohol, a situation the author knows only too well from personal experience.

Mrs. Johnson’s fellow prisoners in the courtroom with the colourful names of One-Eyed Kate, Cock-Eyed Sal (clearly denoting their profession), are also exonerated from “badness”. The exoneration of the prostitutes underlines the ambiguity of Lawson’s attitudes towards women in differing circumstances. Having stated that Mrs. Johnson is not a bad woman, being neither a prostitute nor a brothel keeper, her “sisters” who are prostitutes and, therefore should be considered “bad”, are freed from any stigma. They are forgiven because they belong to the oppressed in society, the victims of social injustice. In this conviction Lawson never wavered.

The introduction into the sketch of the forlorn young girl, in gaol “for ‘inciting to resist’”, who sings “Jesus of Nazareth” with such sweetness and poignancy, has been criticised as over sentimentality. But, as Cecil Mann says, for Lawson “she is his glimpse of beauty, even in this place”. The unseen young girl, singing so plaintively in the darkness of the night, “is at once his concept of grace and beauty in common humanity, the worth in its
individual frailty..." In the midst of sordidness and misery she stands as a symbol of hope.

Depicted as slight, once pretty, fair-haired and blue-eyed, she has all the attributes characteristic of Lawson's "little girls", his image of innocence and purity. She emerges as a latter-day version of this stereotype. Although tarnished by her contact with man, she represents the idealised image of woman which Lawson eternally sought for, the embodiment of goodness, purity and innocence which reality constantly denied him. Her portrayal is at once a reconciliation of the dichotomy between the ideal and the real, the madonna and the whore, the "angel" and the "devil", which prevails in the earlier stories. It is a recognition of, a coming to terms with, the fact that even the angelic, the pure and the innocent are flesh and blood, part of the "real and unideal" world. She is, at one and the same time, the madonna and the whore, a refutation of Victorian ideology and a resolution of his earlier conflict. In another sense, the pathetic waif is transfigured, in an imaginary world, into an ethereal being whose compassion transcends common humanity. Momentarily she is exalted, as the two loves of his life, Nettie and Hannah, were exalted in Lawson's imagination, after their deaths.

I have argued that Lawson's attitude towards "fallen women" fluctuated throughout his life and that the changes in his portrayals can be traced to the changing circumstances of his life. "The Lily of St. Leonards" (1912) demonstrates this point. Lily in this story is a remarkably different depiction from the protagonist bearing the same name in "His Adopted Daughter", written 17 years earlier. This Lily conforms to the stereotype of the "she devil", the kind of woman that Susan Gorsky refers to as "the Schemer, descendant of Milton's Eve, ...the conniving woman of all times", the masculine response to which is one of contempt. The "fallen women" of the latter period of the
author's life are drawn more closely from real life and are therefore more individualised. Lily of St. Leonards, is a case in point.

The Lawson of 1912 bore the scars of a broken marriage, the pain of which drove him to entrenched alcoholism and a life of degradation among society's derelicts. The further his personality disintegrated, the greater his empathy for fellow sufferers. Not surprisingly, he was particularly tolerant of those afflicted with his own disease of alcoholism. This tolerance is reflected in his sympathetic treatment of Mrs. Johnson in "The Rising of the Court". The concluding comments of this story substantiate this point of view: "I have seen women in the horrors — that ought to be enough". There is also the implication that women alcoholics evoked a profound sense of pity in him. As we know, Lawson encountered many "lost souls" both in the city and the bush who, like himself, resorted to alcohol as an anodyne for their sufferings. But the experience of seeing women in a similar state of degradation was obviously a shocking revelation. "The Lily of St. Leonards" underlines this point of view with its portrayal of a young woman who has fallen to the depths of degradation because of alcoholism.

The story, direct reportage by the author, revolves around Lawson's nostalgic reminiscences of Lily whom he encounters on a ferry while in the company of another alcoholic, Benno. As it eventuates, she belongs to his happier bohemian days. Described in detail both in character and appearance, Lily's depiction is individualised to the extent that the reader is informed that she is "half-Jewish and Jewish by name". The acknowledgement that she was intelligent as well as beautiful, "a rare combination in anyman's experience" emphasises the entrenched masculine opinion of the intellectual inferiority of women. It also suggests that Lily was considered in a very different light from other women, because of her occupation and her libertarian attitudes towards men.
An artist's model, she was well-known and a favourite in all the artists' studios. That she was greeted “uproariously” at artists' suppers and applauded for her “wit, humour, philosophy and laughter” infers that Lily was anything other than chaste. According to Marilyn Lake, the Bohemians of the Bulletin in the late 1890's regarded their sexual attitudes as libertarian “courting ballet dancers, artist's models and prostitutes". To use Archibald's phrase, in sexual relations the Bohemians preferred “a plentiful sowing of wild oats”, regardless of their married state. This assertion is supported by the disclosures of the gaiety and revelry of the Dawn and Dusk Club.

Lawson emphasises the special 'virtues' of Lily by revealing that the occasions he most enjoyed were evenings or picnics spent in the company of Lily and a few “chosen spirits” who could not be described as “respectable”. To the Bohemians of the Bulletin, it seems, Lily was all that a man could desire, given their creed of “wine, women and song”. This attitude is strengthened by an authorial comment inserted after Benno's startled response to the idea of even contemplating marriage when his “ole moll" had proven perfectly satisfactory for his needs: (I thought of old Bohemian days and didn't blame Benno.) In Lawson country, the fate of those who choose “the primrose path of dalliance" it appears, is not a happy one. For Lily, recognised as the girl who once rejoiced in the bringing of life and laughter into the hearts of others, is now as worn and frayed as the old cloak clinging to her still-girlish figure. Benno enlightens the reader that she has served time in gaol for being "drunk and disorderly" and suggests she behaves furtively because she is ashamed of being recognised. The tone of the story is compassionate. Benno's final comment sums up the emotions engendered towards Lily who is mocked by larrikins when she is drunk: "Gorblime, I think its a bleedin' shame". The prognosis is that Lily's life will end tragically.
NOTES

CHAPTER 5


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CONCLUSION
Written from a feminist perspective, this study focuses on the female characters in Lawson's short stories, spanning the period from 1888 to 1921. The investigation disclosed that women feature in substantially more of his stories either centrally or peripherally, than had hitherto been acknowledged. They remained the hidden figures in Lawson's literary landscape. Further investigation established that his women could be categorised into discrete groups under the headings which title the chapters: "Little Girls", "Faithful Wives", "Haggard Women" and "Fallen Women". Within these groups, his women are represented as either "angels" or "devils", the stereotypical images of women in post Victorian fiction. Although this is fundamentally the case, the hidden truth embedded in the narrative, reveals that his women can be, at one and the same time, both "angels' and "devils". The reasons underlying this divided image of woman as angel/devil, forms the substance of the thesis.

Chapter One defines and describes Lawson's ambivalent attitudes towards women and examines the reasons for this ambivalence. Secondly, his personal life, in particular his relationship with his mother, Louisa Lawson, and his marriage to Bertha Bredt, as explanatory background and spiritual stage-setting for his fiction, is discussed and analysed. Thirdly, arguments relevant to this study, drawn from Xavier Pons' insightful appraisal of Lawson's personality, in particular, the parent-child relationship and the ways in which this influenced his writing, are assessed.

The relationship between Lawson and his wife Bertha and the profoundly disturbing consequences for him, of the collapse of their marriage, is examined in some depth. This event led to a radical change of attitude towards women, and their representations in his writing. Furthermore, his relationships with other women, specifically, Hannah Thornburn and Mrs. Byers, and their influence on his writing is analysed. Finally, the
overwhelming conviction of Lawson's lifelong obsession with women, whether they are "angels" or "devils", is disclosed.

The following chapter, Lawson's "Little Girls", determines that his representations of young unmarried women are the traditional idealised stereotypes, the "angels" of Victorian fiction. Transposed into an Australian bush setting, the paradox of the behaviour of the "little girls" and their bush image is discussed. This discussion demonstrates that his bush sweethearts are pure, innocent, virginal creatures, whose love affairs are devoid of any sexual manifestation. Constancy is their most admirable quality, for they are depicted as awaiting the return of the bushmen they love, with unflattering devotion. Inevitably, they pay dearly for their constancy, for rarely do their love affairs end happily. For the most part, there is suffering for the "little girls", whose brief moments of joy in courting turn into long months of lonely waiting. Inevitably they die of grief, of brain-fever, or carry a broken heart for the rest of their days, the typical outcomes developed in the literature of the late nineteenth century.

The chapter discusses the marginalisation of these "little girls" traditionally trapped within the boundaries of home or slipp rails, whose subservience and subjugation is emphasised by their enforced silences. Attention is focused on the wandering nature of Lawson's bushmen, whose love of freedom and mobility transcends their mortal loves. Also explored, are the reasons behind the bushman's attitudes towards women, his idealisation of them, and the conviction of his own unworthiness of this ideal, demonstrating Lawson's constant dilemma with the representation of women.

Entitled Faithful Wives, this chapter begins with a discussion of the role of wives and gender relationships in Australia at the end of the nineteenth century. The theories which influenced the cult of freedom and mobility for
married, as well as single men, and the origins of these theories in the Bush Mythology are examined. More importantly, the domestic consequences for wives and families of their itinerant lifestyle, which forms the theme of many of Lawson's stories, are addressed. The fluctuating pattern in Lawson's attitudes towards marriage and the reasons behind a significant change in his representations of wives is explored. Furthermore, the influence of the changing circumstances of his life on these representations, forming the angel/devil dichotomy in his work, is investigated.

**Lawson's "Haggard Women"**, develops the arguments formulated in the previous chapter regarding the maternal role of women in nineteenth century Australia. The discussion is broadened to include the effects of isolation, alienation and physical hardships, on the disintegration of their personalities. This study has sought to seek out "the lack in the work", to say what is "unspoken" about women's responses to their circumstances. Attention is drawn to the contradiction in Lawson's representations of these women, posited in the traditional setting of the home, yet performing rigorous masculine tasks. The chapter demonstrates the gradual merging of traditional ideology and reality, culminating in the creation of a distinctively Australian woman: gaunt, sun-browned, asexual figures that are representative of his "haggard women". They are categorised as "angels" for these ageing mother figures are "good" women, endowed with the moral attributes of courage, endurance and, above all else, devotion to their families. These aspects are discussed.

**Lawson's "Fallen Women"**, addresses a group of women, rarely, if ever, discussed by critics in the past. This chapter is illuminating for it discloses aspects of Lawson's character which the "Cultural Mythology" about him would prefer to conceal. His lifelong predilection for prostitutes is exposed. The chapter begins with a discussion of moral attitudes towards prostitution in
late nineteenth century Australia and the reasons which forced women to earn the title of "fallen women". For the most part, Lawson's representations display the sympathy he felt for "the fallen", acknowledging the responsibility of men in their "fall". The chapter demonstrates that after the collapse of his marriage, his attachment to "fallen women" became even more firmly entrenched. The influence of this attachment on their representations in his stories, is discussed. The conclusions drawn from an analysis of these stories establishes that "fallen women", paradoxically, were seen by Lawson to be "angels"

In conclusion, if any one story encapsulates the angel/devil dichotomy, it is "Telling Mrs. Baker". For, at one and the same time, Mrs. Baker is an essential source of strength and stability for her husband, and yet, an unwitting source of "domestic" oppression, from which all Lawson's men seek to escape.
WORKS CONSULTED


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