

Pavao Parunov

prof. Slavica Troškot

British Studies: Postcolonial Context

English Department

University of Zadar

January 6 2012

The Drover's Wife

seminar paper

1. Introduction

The Drover's Wife is a short story written by Henry Lawson, published in 1892 in *The Bulletin* – an Australian weekly magazine with a great influence on culture in politics until World War I. Lawson is considered one of the best-known writers in the colonial period but he is also often placed among the greatest Australian writers.

Lawson's short story was written during the colonial period but its central theme of a lone woman on the farm seems to be of no importance to the postcolonial studies. But once the story is subjected to the postcolonial reading and interpretation one will find covert elements in the underlying structure that give an insight to the perspective of the settlers and their attitude towards the natives – the Aborigines. This is the main focus of the seminar which will attempt to reveal possible unwitting elements of the story and interpret it in terms of postcolonial theory.

2. Previous Works and Postcolonial Reading

Previous studies on *The Drover's Wife* had a focus on various aspects: the theme of a woman in 19th century rural Australia and the conditions farmers' and rural wives were meeting while taking care of a household were presented by Katrina Alford (1986) while literary

analysis mostly elaborated Lawson's skills of storytelling of a difficult human situation. All these works omitted the context of colonialism.

Such an almost-structural analysis of this story would take a central theme of a lone woman versus dangerous nature as the dominant one. Analysis stops at this rather nodding point – the historical or social context was not completely taken into account because colonialism and its possible manifestation in the underlying structure were obviously omitted. Finding and interpreting the basic structure does not seem to be sufficient in the process of understanding broader meaning of *The Drover's Wife* regardless of the postcolonial theory.

Bill Ashcroft elaborated the term of postcolonial reading as a form of deconstructive reading that draws attention to the effects of colonisation process by reading or rereading anthropological accounts, historical records, scientific and literary writings. The form can be applied to the works of colonizers and those that were colonized. The purpose is to find and elaborate elements which demonstrate the ideology of colonialists and the relationship between the colonialists and the colonized.

3. The Elements of the White Culture in the Story

A central figure of the story is the woman with her children lives in a two-roomed house built of timber. She and her husband are both Australian – a part of settlers invasion and cultures that had started almost a century before. Her house is the world that she needs to preserve and defend. All around the house is the bush – a vast area of danger and the bushmen with their lives. Lawson's story telling created an apocalyptic atmosphere where the drover's wife and her children are found in the middle of dangerous threats. If she leaves the house area she is immediately exposing herself. Bushmen are the other world. Their lives are strange and unknown and their appearance around the house is absolutely unwanted unless needed in terms of the help or the physical work. On Sundays, the woman takes a walk in the bush but the walk is far from casual one. She gets dressed, tidies the children and goes for a walk by pushing a perambulator¹ as if she was walking the block in the city. Although she hardly meets anyone, this might be her form of statement – dressed and cleaned as she should be on Sunday, she takes her children and enjoys a walk on the last day of the week, a day when both working and rich people of the western cultures take time for themselves, the families and the

¹ A type of a baby-transport

city presentation. In her free time, she finds excitement in reading *Young Ladies' Journal* thinking about a frivolous matter such as fashion.

4. The Relationship Between the Wife and the *Blackmen*

One of the critical questions that is raised in studying colonial and post-colonial literature is the relationship between the settlers and the natives. In this case of literature written during the colonial period in Australia it is the question of the relationship between the indigenous populations in settled areas and the invading settlers (Ashcroft, 2008). Indigenous people are those born in a place or a particular region; the term „aboriginal“ was coined in 1667 in order to describe the indigenous people encountered by European explorers, adventurers or seamen. Although the term was used to describe indigenous inhabitants of settler colonies it is now usually used as shortened term for *Australian Aborigine*.

Aborigines, or the blackmen as presented in the story, are appearing in the story on several occasions. The wife and children have a story which they laughed over many times. Because of the fire she was fighting in the bush her face was black, and once she reached to take up the baby it screamed and *struggled convulsively* thinking it was a blackman. Alligator, the dog, also took a defensive position. Their reaction to a supposed blackman entering the area of the house may serve as a valid indicator that shows a position of the blackmen in their world: they are unwanted, dangerous and the cause of fear.

Living with children without the help from her husband created many challenges for the wife. She has to fight all kinds of dangers and threats in order to provide for her family. Lawson built up her character of a fearless woman who is eager to do anything – she seems to be a hero of the story. Still, she is occasionally scared to death by a *bushman in the horrors*² or a *swagman*³ looking for a place to stay when evening approaches. She tells them that her husband and two sons are working below the dam to get rid of them.

² A bushman in delirium tremens ; alcohol poisoning

³ A temporary worker who travels by foot from farm to farm carrying the swag - bedroll

5. The Aborigines Viewed by the Settlers

When the European settlers began invading Australian continent in 18th century the Aborigines were the sole occupants. The adjustment between the whites and the Aborigines wasn't peaceful and was often marked in blood. Settlers had a distinctive perspective of the natives. They found them miserable, nasty and they were appalled by their physical appearance. In order to start them on the path of civilisation the whites gave them work to do and paid them in alcohol and tobacco. Obviously, their presence in the lives of whites was wanted only when it was of use. This point of view was well maintained throughout the following century and its manifestation can be found in *The Drover's Wife*. On one occasion the wife ordered from a *blackfellow* to bring her some wood and went in search for a missing cow. When she came back she found a pretty large heap of wood and rewarded him by an extra fig of tobacco. Contrary to the white view of the 18th and 19th century Aborigines, they had an organised social structure – they shared norms and rules (Dousset, 2002). Their life interaction usually derived from kinship and they weren't simply scattered in wandering groups as proposed by many white settlers. Having a developed social life and culture but also a care for families and acquaintances from the groups, the Aborigines were willing to help the whites when they were in trouble. The wife was in painful labour with her second child with no one around in the bush when Black Mary, *the whitest gin⁴ in the land*, appeared on the door and helped her to have a child. The wife found it to be an act of God himself.

6. The Black Snake

The plot of the story revolves around the snake entering the house walls and floors through the cracks in the wood. Symbolically, the snake might refer to the colonial situation - allegory is often used in “reading” the texts of colonialism (Ashcroft, 2008) as it may reveal the point of view of the colonialists. Therefore, the snake in the story carries the role of an intruder which represents danger for the family. The wife is determined to not only protect the children but to dislodge the snake as soon as possible. The house is almost a sacred place to the wife. That very house is a place of her living and existing, a place where she and her children are building their lives. Other lives that differ from what they know and are used to

⁴ Aborigine

are unacceptable and unwelcomed. They are disturbing their existence, whether it's a blackman or a black snake. At first, she places a bowl of milk in front of the wood crack in order to allure the snake. Her act is a typical *white thinking* and the proof of the settlers' imperialistic ethnocentrism. Not only she is offering a somewhat of a materialistic good to the snake in trade for her leaving the house so she could get rid of it but she is also giving her what she thinks the snake would like and need – a bowl of milk. While it is in fact a possibility that milk would allure the snake, it is also just as possible that the snake was looking for a place to stay for a while, just as those nasty swagmen she has to deal with.

Once the snake matter is resolved, mother and her children watch the snake burning having their peace recovered.

7. Conclusion

In 1788 when the first European settlers started invading Australia the path of pain, destruction and alienation began for the Aborigines. Their land which they found sacred and spiritual was put in the white possession, they were tortured and degraded and put to hard labour. Although they had an organised society consisted of rules and terms and their own culture, the settlers found them uncivilised and almost non-human. Lawson wrote *The Drover's Wife* in a tradition of a populist nationalist mode of writing which served to claim *Australian* tradition. One of those traditions was the life in the bush. Since his story is not only about the bush but about an Australian woman with children fighting all the difficulties including the Aborigines, it is quite understandable why Lawson and the story are keep a special place in the Australian literary tradition. The Aborigines were of no importance such tradition since their very existence is simply an intrusion in it. Still, this short story served its purpose of an evidence of colonial period. In only few pages of the plot, Lawson unintentionally left the proof of the colonialist ideology and Euro-centric perspective of the Aborigines.

Works Cited

Alford, Katrina. *The drover's wife and her friends: Women in rural society and primary production in Australia, 1850-1900*. Australian National University, 1986.

Ashcroft, Bill. Griffiths, Gareth. Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge, 2002.

Ashcroft, Bill. Tiffin, Helena. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge, 2008.

Dousset, Laurent. *Introduction to Australian Indigenous Social Organisation: transforming concepts*. University of Western Australia, 2002. <<http://www.ausanthrop.net/research/kinship/kinship2.php>> WEB. 3 1 2012.