

WHILE THE BILLY BOILS

CLOSE READING: 'THE DROVER'S WIFE'

Context

Before students read, teachers can establish some of the context:

- What does a drover do? Why is this job no longer needed in our society?
- Why would it be difficult to be married to a drover?
- What role did the snake play in the story of Adam and Eve? What are the assumptions that we make about snakes? When you finish reading, think about how a Biblical understanding of the snake can be applied to the story.

The opening

Students can consider the opening of 'The Drover's Wife':

Bush all around – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek.

Note how Lawson creates an atmosphere by mentioning what the setting does NOT contain. The absences and silences in the bush are emphasised by his negative tone. The personification of the trees emphasises the wearying, monotonous nature of life in this environment.

- Which words are repeated? Link the repeated words with arrows to trace the development of the idea through the passage. Note how each repetition has different information, amplifying the effect. How does the additional information change the object being discussed?
- What is the effect of the negatives?
- List all the adjectives and consider how each adjective changes its reference. For example, is the use of 'native' just about the type of tree?
- How has Lawson managed to communicate a sense of isolation through this description?
- What is missing from the setting? Why does Lawson mention these absences?

Writing

Transform this negative passage into a positive one and share it with a friend. Your friend has to imagine the scene and draw a sketch of it. Pin the passage and the sketch onto a chart.

Visible thinking elements

Before they start to answer the questions below, students could be asked to analyse the types of questions using the [three level reading guide](#) categories: are they literal, interpretive or applied? Some questions may respond to a couple of parts. By doing this, the General Capability of Creative and Critical Thinking is contextualised, and the thinking is also made visible.

Students should also consider which element of prose fiction study is being addressed by each question: setting, character, form, structure, language, themes or context? This question creates awareness of different approaches to literature so that students can become independent learners, knowing what aspects of literature they need to search for.

- Describe the 'two-roomed house'. What atmosphere does Lawson create in his description of the physical setting?
- How are the children described? What does this tell you about their lives?
- What can you tell about the wife's relationship with the children from their dialogue?
- Is the situation with the snake especially upsetting because the protagonist is a woman? Would the story have a different mood if the drover himself was confronted by a snake?
- How does Lawson use the weather and other elements of nature to create a specific mood?
- When the wind 'threatens to blow out her candle', what do you think Lawson is trying to tell us about the perilous world outside? What does the wind represent, and what does the candle represent?
- Take careful note of the flashbacks in the story. What do we find out about the wife's life, and how does the use of flashbacks help us to understand her predicament?
- What is poignant in the image of the wife reading the *Young Ladies' Journal*? Why does Lawson say 'heaven help her!'?
- What do we find out about the drover? How is he presented as being a 'good husband' despite their difficult living situation?
- What are the similarities between the wife and Alligator's personalities? How have they developed as a reaction to living in harsh conditions in the bush?
- How does Lawson describe the death of the wife's child? What is the effect of the lack of emotive language? Do the facts speak for themselves, or would you have felt a greater sense of empathy if Lawson had used more dramatic and descriptive language?
- What did the wife use her husband's trousers to do, and how does this remind the reader of her vulnerability and aloneness?
- What makes the wife cry? What does this tell us about her feelings for her husband?
- What is a 'sundowner' and why would he be regarded with suspicion by the wife?
- What is different about Sundays? What is Lawson telling us about the wife's life and her wishes through her behaviour on Sundays?
- What is the effect of Lawson's description of the 'stunted trees'?
- Consider this statement: 'Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the "womanly" or sentimental side of nature.' What is Lawson saying about the bush lifestyle and its effect on the wife? Discuss the evidence he presents to support this statement in the story. How has the protagonist been affected as a mother, wife and homemaker by the challenges she faces?

- What happens with the ‘blackfellow’ in the story? Why is it sad that he ‘was the last of his tribe and a King’?
- What does the last line of dialogue in the story tell you about the child? Do you think he will live up to his promise? Why or why not?
- Lawson’s depiction of the bush has been described as ‘apocalyptic’. What does this word mean, and do you think it is a fair description?

Characterisation

Lawson often effectively conveys a sense of vulnerability:

She is hurt now, and tears spring to her eyes as she sits down again by the table. She takes up a handkerchief to wipe the tears away, but pokes her eyes with her bare fingers instead. The handkerchief is full of holes, and she finds that she has put her thumb through one, and her forefinger through another. This makes her laugh, to the surprise of the dog. She has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous; and some time or other she will amuse bushmen with the story.

Lawson rarely examines specific objects in detail. It is notable that he describes the handkerchief.

- The focus in this passage is the verbs. List the verbs and explain how the wife’s feelings are developed through the verbs.
- What does the passage tell us about her living conditions?
- What do you think the handkerchief represents?
- What can we tell about the wife’s personality based on her attitude to the handkerchief?
- How do we know that Lawson admires the wife?
- Why does the wife find her situation ‘ridiculous’, and how would her sense of humour be helpful in her current situation?
- Describe her relationship with the dog and the men.

Writing

Imagine she is telling her story to the men. Write and then act out the stories to each other.

Rich assessment task

Go to the **Significance** section of this unit for a **Rich Assessment Task** based on the impact of ‘The Drover’s Wife’ on other writers.

Summing up

Why do you think a story that presents such a dismal view of the landscape has become so famous? What does this story tell us about Australian life in the late 19th century? Write about what you have learned from reading ‘The Drover’s Wife’.