All That Strife Over a Wife: a comparative perspective of the
Australian Drover stories

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*The Drover’s Wife*: painting on oil by Russel Drysdale.

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**Abstract**

The Australian matrix of the arts has seen a lot done about the ‘drover’ culture that reflects, to a large extent, the bushman culture. The Bushman life has a lot to say about the history traversed by the collective people of Australia. This paper zeroes in on a number of works of the same title—‘The Drover’s Wife’—in a bid to define how various aspect of Australian bushman life is explored from a plurisignificant perspective there. *The Drover’s Wife* by Henry Lawson, *The Drover’s Wife* by Frank Moorhouse, *The Drover’s Wife* by Murray Bail and a painting of the same title (*The Drover’s Wife*) by Russel Drysdale are the works that are shortlisted to come under the literary scanner in this dissertation.

**Article**

In 1945, Russel Drysdale churned out oil on a 51.3cm x 61.3cm canvas, featuring a rather disproportionately large woman in a shapeless sort of dress and a hat, with a bag in her left hand and a pair of down-to-earth, no-nonsense shoes on her feet. Far away, or so it seems, judging by the diminutive size—can be seen a horse-drawn carriage with an undistinguishable figure seeming to feed a hunched up horse. The woman in the forefront has a placid but rather lost and remote gaze on her rather glumly pensive face …
modern painting it is with Rembrandtesque use of a chiaroscuro of light and shade. But that doesn’t make my point at all.

Russell Drysdale was brushing out this oil on canvas in 1945, exactly when after the Great Depression around 1932, and the soaring bout unemployment, Australia was inching towards the big Boom around World War II with those millions of immigrants just waiting round the corner. In fact, most of Drysdale’s ‘figurative expressionist’ paintings, panning chiefly on the Australian barren landscapes with one or two gaunt figures in tow, rather whacked rudely into the nascent Arcadian complacency of a Eurocentric perspective, shaking it up into confusion.

This particular painting of Drysdale’s harks back to the Jindiworobak Movement of the late 1930’s and 40’s, when the craze that ‘poets in Australia should portray Australian nature and people as they are in Australia, and not with the ‘European gaze’ as L. F. Giblin termed it, was hot in vogue. The same ‘Sense of Place’ as the Jindies would put it, was evident in most of the Drysdale paintings—to say nothing of the overtly Australian Drover’s Wife. The painting plainly speaks aloud of the fallow earth, the backbreaking hardship of earning and the helpless resignation of the Australian women in the face of the same. The painting expressionistically attempts to highlight the difficulties of living among the the Australian Aborigines in stark contrast to the Arcadian romanticism in some of the Eurocentric poetic visions of the A.D. Hope brood.

But then, I’m not at all planning an erudite autopsy of the visual art out here. The only reason I have for mentioning Drysdale’s painting is that this painting was just a cusp in the considerably long chain of works done, singularly enough, under the same title, thereby necessitating an introduction to facilitate further understanding of the other works which incidentally are in various modes of fiction.

One step farther back in the chronological continuity, the year of 1892 had already seen Henry Lawson, one of Australia’s first rankers among short story writers, penning a short story of the same name, The Drover’s Wife
The drover or squatter has taken his sheep to town and has been gone for quite some time. Months have elapsed—his care-worn ‘gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman’ wife back home looks after the household all by herself—alone with only the big tough dog Alligator for company. The ‘bush’ is her enemy as is the snake that slithers out of the wilderness to threaten the safety of her threshold. She stays up all night lying in wait for the snake to slip out of its hideout and then smashes it in, batters it until its back is broken in several places and its head crushed before tossing the mangled creature into the fire to end its very existence.

Henry Lawson was only writing a realistic story with the bush and the snake symbolizing the immense hardship in everyday existence of the aborigine Bushmen. Lawson, an avid member of the ‘Bulletin School’ of the 1980’s, emphasizes, through vivid vraisemblance, the existential issues of survivalism that was the necessary baggage of the Australian bushman’s identity.

Lawson’s story was well illustrated and drawn upon by the Drysdale picture—zeroing in on the same ontological aspects of Aborigine existence.

Yet more was to unfold in the life of the much-discussed ‘Drover’s Wife’.

After Lawson’s Drover’s Wife in 1892, and Drysdale’s painting of the same name in 1945, Murray Bail came up with yet another story with the same title in 1975 in Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories. Yet, Bail was to set the Lawsonian trend on its head with his pseudo-parodic half jocular rendition of the storyline. Bail, peering at this story from a very postmodern angle, creates a psycho-familial framework from which the story takes off on quite a different trajectory.

Lawson attempted a very realistic treatment of life in the unforgiving, inexorable bush, thereby focussing on what they believed to be the real Australian aborigine identity, making a point about who they are, by zeroing in on what they do and how they live.

Murray Bail, however, subverts and overturns this serio-realistic point of view of marvelling at the weather beaten hardihood of aborigine existence by his own rendition of the story. Set in telescopic narration, the story has a narrator who imagines the woman
in the painting to be his wife—the wife who had turned an unfaithful back on him (or so he says) thirty years ago. In contrast with the Lawsonian pensiveness, Bail’s narrator at first mulls over the past in order to forward a prelude of sorts to the Russel Drysdale picture of the drover’s wife, done in sardonic reflection before assuming a tongue-in-cheek imagination of her probable future story further on in the storyline as a postword to the same. Bail’s narrator completely smatters the rather archetypal portrait of the Lawsonian drover’s wife as a toiling, rugged, weather-beaten family-centric human being to a flirty, flighty and feisty woman who couldn’t care less for her so-called family and husband the moment she sniffed out better prospects with a drover. Hence, the drover tending the horse in the distance in the Drysdale picture. The narrator, a dentist, puts it all down to his wife’s—Hazel’s—‘silly streak’. By way of explanation he takes a sarcastic trip down memory lane and snickers at how she, elated at the first snow over Mount Barkar, had gone down on her knees in the snow ‘squawking like a schoolgirl’ or the instances when she would go around in her slip with a naïve yet devil-may-care air about her or how she irritated him one day when she killed the black snake that was under the beach shack they had taken and how she had shoved it in the incinerator unlike what a prim, proper and appropriately scared female would have done. Bail keeps painting his ‘dentist’ as he sits reminiscing and sniggering over the triflings of life that could exhilarate his wife, in shades that remind one of the horrific contempt with which Robert Browning’s Duke of Ferrara analyses how silly little things of life used to please his deceased duchess beyond words in the ever-haunting poem *My Last Duchess*. Though it sounds like a psyche gone awry, it is not the psychoanalytical critique that Bail aims at. He carefully manipulates the reader’s comprehension of what is real and what is fictional figment—thereby creating a metafictional framework of reference to probe the equation between fact and fiction, truth and myth. Bail meticulously churned out a parodic reconstruction—and therefore a reconsideration of Lawson’s story with its evocation of the bush life with its hostility, isolation and nothingness. Bail thus negates the ‘bush myth’—so celebrated by the likes of Lawson and others of the Bulletin school and also
the Jindiworobak campaigners, thus forcing a reinterpretation and revaluation of their obsession with the stereotypical intellectualization of a national Australian ‘identity’ in the academic as well as sociopolitical sphere. Bail, with his postmodern narratological skills, and Mark Twain-like use of satire, laced with irony, gives a solid tweak to the complacency of a nationalist preoccupation with an Australian literary tradition as an isolated country proud of its bush culture and heritage of endurance, and advocates a fresh exploration of the same from a Eurocentric perspective.

Bail, through this parodic replication of Lawson’s *Drover’s Wife*, creates a metafictional framework, pursuing the vogue brought into rage by the likes of John Barth, Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut, William H. Grass et al and the creators of the French ‘nouveau roman’.

Around a decade later, in 1985, came yet another ‘*Drover’s Wife*’—this time by Frank Moorhouse—continuing the metafictional streak that Murray Bail had begun.

Patricia Waugh, in her landmark of a book, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self Conscious Fiction*, belts out a number of traits to qualify a given text as a metafiction. According to Waugh, a metafiction most of the time subverts the cut-and-dried linear role of the omniscient narrator. She also opined that a metafiction is often a parody of a specific work or fictional mode. A metafiction, continues Waugh, often attempts to create ‘alternative linguistic structures or to imply old forms by encouraging the reader to draw on his own knowledge of traditional literary conventions’ (42). A metafiction sometimes presents a narrator intentionally exposing himself as the creator of the story being read. It often harbours a plot within a plot.

Keeping Waugh’s analysis in mind as a template, one would say that Bail, in his version of The *Drover’s Wife*, created a metafictional fabrication as he did away with omniscient narration to settle for the relatively modernistic ex cathedra storytelling. Bail, thus, also parodied the earlier pro-Jindy rendition of the story and hence the portrait, too.

Frank Moorhouse took Bail’s effort a step farther with his quite off-beat and rather malicious account of the *Drover’s Wife*. Moorhouse does not talk much himself
and ushers in a double-narrator framework—thereby generating the metafictional ‘plot-within-plot’ concept. Moorhouse’s Drover’s Wife moves aside a bit in the fictional or metafictional space to make room for a mild deluge of hedonism, sexuality and fantasy erotica for a little while. If Bail’s sardonism cuts, then Moorhouse’s insidiousness rubs salt into it. Bail played around with the concept of reality and fiction to put into reverse gear, the Australian fad with nationalism. Moorhouse goes a step farther and proposes that what he calls the ‘High Art’ of the Bulletineers like Lawson or Drysdale was only the ploy to confess some reasons of national shame.

Moorhouse carries on in the vicarious persona of a certain Italian Franco Casamaggiore and launches into a tirade about the proposition that the ‘drover’s wife’ did not connote a human being at all. Behind the façade of a tale of wifely hardship in the absence of a drover, the author—‘guilty’ of knowing the truth about his country’s reality, was trying to own up to a disgraceful skeleton in the cupboard of his much celebrated Australian identity. Moorhouse—or rather Casamaggiore, argues that the concept of a wife was more or less extinct with the Australian drovers as they seldom got to stay at home. Rather the constant company they got was that of the sheep they drove and thus, out of ‘emotional and physical drives’, there evolved a closeness between the similar-fated drover men, which, according to Moorhouse, was the real but under-the-cover meaning of the Australian nationalistic concept of ‘mateship’. More than that, Moorhouse also hints at a sexual closeness between the drovers and their sheep too—something he calls ‘interspecies reciprocity’ in his tongue-in-cheek sardonism. Hence, he argues that Lawson, or Drysdale or even Murray Bail, for that matter, were party to this national ‘secret’ and thus, the oh-so-celebrated ‘drover’s wife’ actually euphemistically stood for the sheep which was psycho-sexually closer to the drovers than anything else—underlining more than ever their bovine uncouthness: ‘So, in all the works of High Art under discussion, we have the women clearly substituting (for reasons of propriety) for sheep, but coded in such a way as to lead us, through the term ‘drover’s wife’ back into the folk culture and its joke’ (51).
To round off, one can very well say that all these aspects of the rather cult-figure of the drover’s wife signifies a polyphony of signifiers that speak quite some bit about Australian bush-life.
Bibliography