Elective 2 – Distinctively visual

This elective focuses on *what, how* and *why* meaning is shaped and conveyed by distinctively visual language use. Varied textual forms are explored in order to highlight how visual appeal and impact can be created within varied texts. Focus must remain on the specific language techniques that convey ideas and perceptions in ways that audiences can envisage or perceive. Visual imagery appeals on a sensory, intellectual and emotive level and can therefore be powerfully evocative and personal. Human experiences, relationships and the world can be communicated in distinctively visual ways which Karen Midalia argues 'are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality' because 'they represent for us, not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it.'

Students should take note of distinguishing features of language use that signify the composer's deliberate use of the distinctively visual to shape meaning. This requires far more than merely identifying generalised themes or details about setting or characterisation within a text. The elective focus requires students to closely evaluate what is either literally or metaphorically being communicated in a way that prompts responders to 'see' or visualise what is being described. To articulate this knowledge and understanding of how the distinctively visual is being used requires focus on the explicit language triggers or prompts that have been used. Depending on textual medium, these can include imagery, symbolism, repetition, irony, tone or atmosphere.

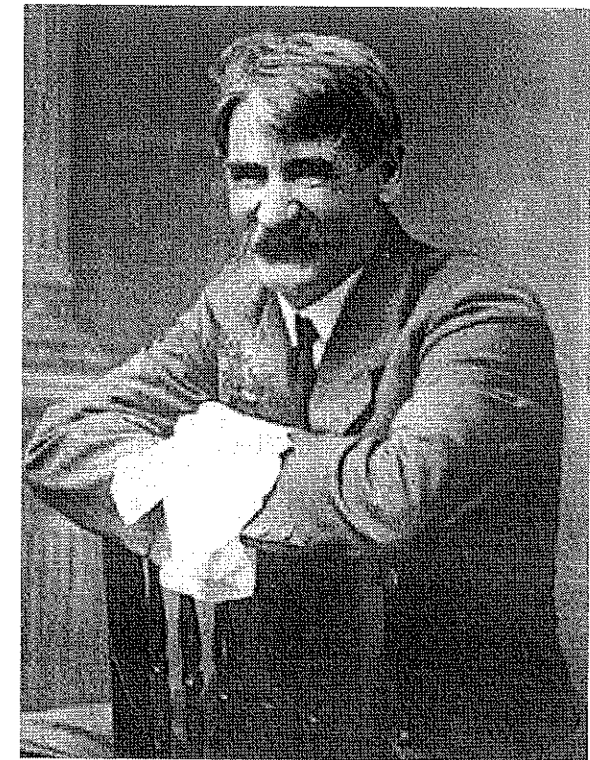
Texts that make effective use of distinctively visual language are those that Umberto Eco argues are 'characterised by using the language of the image as a stimulus for critical reflection and personal interpretation.' Composers use language for an explicit purpose, making use of visual inference or suggestion to add greater resonance to a text than just using simplistic or blunt description. Another advantage is that readers can be encouraged to 'see' characters, situations and experiences in certain ways but by stimulating an audience's imagination, they are not fettered or limited to seeing what is described in only one way. Robert Doisneau has pointed out, 'Nowadays people's visual imagination is so much more sophisticated, so much more developed, particularly in young people, that now you can make an image which just slightly suggests something, they can make of it what they will.'

This makes it easier for students to articulate their response to varied texts via a personal voice that is original and detailed rather than clichéd and generalised. In essence, students need to evaluate how responders are visually manipulated by image or imagery and other distinctively visual methodology. At times, responders may be prompted to reflect or challenged to question their thinking and attitudes. Perhaps the most articulate appraisal of the power of the distinctively visual to communicate ideas and perceptions is the following comment made by Sir Herbert Read in a 1945 interview when he was asked to highlight the power of visual language qualities within effective writing:

'If you asked me to give you the most distinctive quality of good writing, I would give it to you in this one word: 'Visual'. Reduce the art of writing to its fundamentals, and you come to this single aim: To convey images by means of words; to make the mind see.'

Henry Lawson (1867-1922)

Literary Context



Biographers often highlight Henry Lawson's humble and impoverished origins. His brother described him as being 'morose, somewhat irritable' and his solitary and introspective personality was undoubtedly influenced by personal experiences. Despite being nearly deaf by the time he was nine years of age and having only four years of elementary schooling, he became a popular *Bulletin* contributor and achieved literary success with publications of his poetry and short stories.

He wrote of working hard in his youth, recalling the 'terrible dreariness and weariness and loneliness of it all' and his city experiences including getting caught up with the radical political agitation of 1890's Sydney. He was frustrated and disillusioned by working in the city and wrote about the suffering experienced by social outcasts and the 'down and out'. The strong sense of authenticity in his work is supported by comments he made at various times to his publisher George Robertson. In one correspondence he explained, 'Most of my hard-up experiences are in my published books, disguised but not exaggerated.'

This testimonial aspect of his writing is borne out by another revelatory comment, 'My life is written between the lines in every book of mine that you have published'. He wrote about what he saw and experienced first-hand, giving a testimonial quality to his poems and short stories. It must be acknowledged however, that the quality of his work declined in the last twenty years of his life, which coincided with the severe bouts of depression and alcoholism that he experienced. During this period of failing health, he spent time in jail and mental asylum and became reliant on the generosity of others. When he died, aged only fifty five, the man described in 1918 by David McKee as being 'the first articulate voice of the real Australian' was given a huge state funeral.

Unique Narrative Style

Unlike his contemporary Banjo Patterson, Lawson did not idealise the outback or deliberately valorise the people that inhabited it. He depicted the rugged existence on the stations and the isolated settlements but left it to his reader to perceive the stoicism and toughness that was required to survive in such harsh environments. Different representations of this are found in each of the prescribed stories which are drawn from his earlier publications. They reflect different narrative forms and styles but in every story there is evidence of Lawson's skill for crystal sharp visual observation. This distinctively visual focus on his subject matter is reinforced by his renowned use of explicit diction, vernacular expression and dark humour. His trademark use of language was able to conjure up images of people, place and situations in ways that earned him public acclaim for being what A. G. Stephens described in 1895, 'the voice of the bush'.

He often focused on human idiosyncrasies and foibles, creating evocative sketches of personality, attitudes and values that revealed not only the failings of human nature but also the tenacity and fortitude required to survive daily hardship. The characters found within the prescribed stories have no time for self-pity or self-indulgence. Based on the very people he met in his own travels, they are easy to imagine, to picture in the mind's eye for as Lawson himself explained, 'I sought out my characters and studied them; I wrote of nothing that I had not myself seen or experienced. I wrote and re-wrote painfully, and believed that every line was true and for the right'. His fascination with everyday life and human experience was vividly incorporated into his narrative style. It enabled him to transport his readers to a largely unfamiliar world and shape their interpretation and recognition of the resourcefulness and resilience of those who inhabited it.

His prose style was marked by a relaxed and dead-pan, colloquial approach and yet it also insightfully foregrounds key markers of personality or attitude within his characters. His idiomatic phraseology was also often peppered by dry laconic humour and sardonic wit. Explicitly blunt, his use of diction is nonetheless highly evocative and inferential. Visual accuracy pinpoints essential features and so communicates vivid impressions of place, situation and characters that prompt reader curiosity and interest. Recurring themes of isolation, stoicism and larrikinism are evident in the characters and situations explored within the four prescribed stories in ways that make them epitomise the times and context. He portrays people via their flaws, virtues and individual idiosyncrasies. Though these may be only fleeting references that are suggested or inferred rather than overtly stated, readers are prompted to connect with them and more importantly picture themselves within their situations. Most are depicted as honest and hard-working individuals, but they are offset by the wags, rogues and misfits who are also represented.

In his stories, he does not sentimentalise or idealise the bush or patronise those who struggle to deal with its hardships. While he has often been described as focusing on bush types, examination of the prescribed stories shows the author's ability to individualise them inferentially by references to their attitudes and values. This builds empathetic identification and can be predicated by Lawson's use of reflective pause with comments like 'Ah...well' to show introspection. There are no extraneous details, Lawson examining his subject matter, using present tense and a third person, omniscient narrator perspective. Empathy with his characters however is still compellingly developed because he visually places his readers in the scene, showing rather than telling them details that flesh out their understanding and perceptions. His ingenious use of language appealed to the senses to delineate atmospheric context and characterisation. Oral storytelling techniques and the conventions of the 'sketch' are evident in the best of his short stories which were written between 1892 and 1920.

Manning Clark declared he was 'One of the great story tellers of mankind'; such accolades giving tribute to Lawson's exceptional skill with timing, anecdotal flashback and ironic understatement or restrained emphasis. He knew bush people first-hand and experienced the hardships he depicted but his focus remained fixed on their humanity. His distinctively visual use of language and quirky type of humour often prompts a reader's smile or moment of empathetic connection with the people being portrayed. Vance palmer in 'National Portraits' described Lawson's style as being able to capture an 'unmistakable movement of life.' What really testifies to the lasting textual integrity of Lawson's prose however is that it continues to resonate with contemporary readers despite the fact that the late 19th century world it depicts has long since disappeared.

The Drover's Wife (1892)

Narrative Focus and Style

A sketch is a narrative form that makes use of a tightly structured depiction of a single key incident. Structural focus must be maintained without any extraneous plotting or wasted words. Language use must be explicit because as Lawson himself argued, a sketch needs the writing to be 'good in every line'. Lawson delineates his situational context and narrative landscape by his masterful use of brevity and visual imagery. From the opening paragraph, bluntly negative terms force readers to scan the blighted vista of 'stunted, rotten native apple-trees'. The unappealing visual monotony is emphasised by stressing what is lacking; 'no horizon', 'no ranges in the distance' and 'no undergrowth'. This distinctively visual approach physically places the reader into the setting by shaping their perceptions with each reference to its features.

A depressing impression of isolation is conveyed for here there is nothing other than 'bush with no horizon' to meet the eye. The unequivocal tone that delineates this harsh and barren landscape directs us to note the 'near waterless creek' and an 'everlasting, maddening sameness'. Negative connotations are layered by simple but effective repetitions of 'no' or 'none' and the word choice which controls our controls our emotional response. Our gaze is controlled by the omniscient narrator who not only tells us what to see but strongly suggests how we perceive that here there is 'nothing to relieve the eye' apart from a crudely constructed 'two roomed' shack made out of slabs of 'stringybark' and 'round timber'. In this forbidding and hostile environment, this is the only sign of human habitation. Against all expectations, Lawson reveals that this grim place is home to a 'gaunt, sun-browned bush woman' and her four 'ragged, dried-up looking children'.

One of the author's distinguishing features is non romanticist or sentimentalist style. Curiosity is triggered by first painting such a confronting physical backdrop and then placing a mother and her children into its midst. She becomes the focus of interest, information revealed incrementally via anecdotal flashbacks. This simultaneously builds tension and connection with a woman who has somehow developed the inner resilience required to accept existence in a place 'which makes a man long to break away'. The author's evocation of place allows us to comprehend its harsh, uncompromising loneliness as well as the woman who somehow seems 'contented with her lot' and would now 'feel strange away from it'. Having set the scene, cameo insights are given to develop her character by showing her coping methods. We envisage the weekly Sunday walks along the bush track, with all the children cleanly dressed. By such strategies, she artificially gives shape and purpose to time in an effort to break up the grinding sameness of their existence.

In the following paragraphs, details are given about her experiences as well as the attitudes and values she has developed over time. The revelation of character challenges many past and present gender stereotypes, for she exhibits a level of physical and psychological stamina that is more often equated with men than women. The bush is the antithesis of the town but despite the different lifestyles, Lawson's powers of observation allowed him to reveal 'deep insights into and strong empathy with the people he wrote about.' This 'bard of the bush' used language as a tool for crystal clear delineation of people, place and experience, giving in this story in particular, an historical snapshot of a pioneering way of life that was already disappearing during the author's lifetime. Russel Ward in 'The Australian Legend' praised Lawson's 'natural powers of observation, his deep insights into and strong empathy for 'the people he wrote about' such as the drover's wife, the eccentric bush-undertaker, gold miners and bush liars and larrikins on a trip to Bourke.

Protagonist

The resourcefulness of this soul custodian of children, home and selection while her husband is away is vividly and credibly personalised. She is quickly established as a decisive woman by the action verbs 'dashes' and 'snatches' which describe her response to the snake sighting. The kitchen is 'larger than the house itself' with a dirt floor, and 'a large, roughly-made table in the centre'. By visualising the bushwoman's surroundings, the reader can better connect with her frame of mind. Pathetic fallacy and personification is used to ramp up the tense atmosphere as a 'thunderstorm comes on, and the wind, rushing through the cracks in the slab wall, threatens to blow out her candle'. She protects the fragile flame of the candle, like her children, against the harshness of her environment. Everything is reliant on her and this burden of responsibility is stressed by juxtaposing examples of strength and courage with times when she has felt lonely, frightened and defeated. Such moments of vulnerability humanise her and bolster our admiration for her stoicism.

She remains unnamed and is mostly referred to as 'she' and yet this anonymity bestows individual and representational status with access still given to her thoughts and feelings. Intimacy arises from reference to the pleasure, 'excitement and recreation' she gains by reading the 'young Ladies' Journal'. Readers can connect because just as she voyeuristically enjoys looking into a world she is not part of, Lawson offers glimpses into her uniquely different world. The exclamation that 'Heaven help her!' she even takes pleasure in the fashion plates' is highly effective because it is almost as if we are made a silent companion in the room. Awaiting the snake's emergence, readers share a momentary lull in tension that reaffirms her strength of character. Time and experience has made the girl-bride who had once 'hated' the loneliness become self-reliant. She is a product of her environment where her 'surroundings' have not proved favourable to the development of the 'womanly' side of nature'.

Lawson's use of explicit diction and anecdotal flashbacks, demand the reader's recognition of the physical and emotional resilience of this 'determined-looking woman'. We are able to imagine how she deals with typical outback threats including fire and flood as well as pleuro-pneumonia and a mad bullock that besieges the house. These and other problems like 'crows and eagles that have designs on her chickens' make up the pattern of her life and help define her character. Lawson uses third-person narrative voice and adopts the role of omniscient observer. His predominantly non-judgemental and objective tone predominates, is occasionally interrupted by an authorial comment such as 'She's not a coward' that expresses his personal attitudes. It is inferred that her life was once easier but that tough times on the land have forced her husband to go droving.

Gaining access to her thoughts, understated impressions of her husband represent him as being a 'careless, but a good enough husband' who 'may forget sometimes that he is married'. The switch to present tense gives immediacy to the woman's vigil as well as metaphorically placing the reader in the room, virtually keeping watch alongside her. At times, the narrative pace almost becomes languid in some sections except for the anxious actions that mark the beginning and end. This hiatus serves to strengthen the empathetic connection with the drover's wife that has been developing from the opening lines. Periodically, Lawson skilfully provides markers of time, reminding reminds us by phrases such as 'near midnight' and 'it must be near one or two o'clock' which break up her night watch and trigger moments of reflection and introspection when she 'lays down her work and watches, and listens, and thinks'. Solitude becomes the catalyst for contemplation.

Her marriage has been marked by hardship and misfortune but it is inferred that both husband and wife will cope. While she must miss her husband, there is the practical admission that 'they are used to being apart, or at least she is'. It is as if she has become inured to the loneliness and even the monotony, acknowledging that 'she would feel strange away from it.' The dangers of isolation however are skilfully embedded;

dispassionate language communicating how, 'One of her children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child.' Her ride is easy to imagine and we can similarly empathise when she fails, despite her best efforts to save the dam. Recognition of the years of labour that have been swept away takes its toll, The significance of what has been lost the result of years of labour swept away is made clear, 'her heart was nearly broken', sensitivity used to describe how 'she cried then' and later 'wept' in such moments of suffering. As her vigil goes on, such flashbacks show how her character has been moulded by what has happened to her.

She falters in moments of failure or deception such as she felt when she finds the hollow woodheap, 'she is hurt now, and tears spring to her eyes' but she has the ability to rally. The risk of isolation is highlighted by the time when alone during childbirth, she feels literally and metaphorically 'very weak' and 'full of despair'. Helpless and desperate, 'she prayed to God to send her assistance'; the tension sarcastically lightened because 'God sent Black Mary-the 'whitest' gin in all the land'. We are authoritatively told that 'she is not a coward, but recent events have shaken her nerves' and that 'there are things that a bushwoman cannot do'. Compression of detail verifies the need for pragmatism for it is 'No use fretting' for the oft repeated 'bush' is no place for moping or 'girlish hopes and aspirations'. Loneliness has been a recurring motif but she has become, 'used to being left alone. She once lived like this for eighteen months'. Visual cues have been used to convey such experience from opening reference to it being 'nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation' to the 'sickly daylight' that brings the story to its close.

Pivotal Incident

The story's key event begins with the sighting of the snake. Living so far from help, this dictates the mother's need for taking immediate action before anyone is 'bit'. Tension is alleviated with humour by reference to the dog's nose being skinned by Tommy's club. The dog however 'takes small notice of this and proceeds to undermine the building' before being finally restrained. Like most snake dogs, it is inevitable that one day he will be fatally bitten and they will lose him. Her abrupt instructions to her children are necessarily stern and authoritative. Visual imagery strengthens perceptions of real threat. The snake is described in sinister terms as being 'a black brute'. Evil connotations arise from the specific reference to its glistening 'pair of small bead-like eyes'. The danger is poses must be eradicated and so allied in purpose; the woman and her ugly but loyal companion keep vigil.

Alligator is visually described as a 'big, black, yellow-eyed dog-o-all-breeds' that they cannot afford to lose. He is clearly 'not a very beautiful dog' but his fierce protective streak is far more important than his unattractive appearance. Lawson also stresses his surly and aggressive personality by mentioning his lack of friendliness to anyone but his immediate family. During the husband's absence, their dog has become an integral part of the family unit. The ugliness and aggressive streak are necessary but so is his strong protective streak. We learn that this veteran of many battles has warned off sundowners and 'gallows-faced swagman' and in typically dry and laconic humour, 'being old and slightly deaf' has occasionally bitten the wrong person. He is a canine friend and guard for as Lawson unconditionally conveys, 'he is afraid of nothing on the face of the earth or under it' and that he will 'tackle a bullock as readily as he will tackle a flea'.

Tension mounts inexorably as they wait but eventually, after hours have ticked by and shadows have at first deepened and then begun to fade, the snake appears. The attention of woman, dog and reader become hypnotically fixated. The moment seems frozen in time and yet enlivened with expectation. Lawson's storytelling skills ensure that readers can picture the scene when the combined forces of mother, dog and son attack the reptile. The final paragraph is longer and written in third person narrative voice as waiting is broken by a dramatic explosion of action as the dog 'shakes the snake as though he felt

the original curse common with mankind'. Perceptions of evil threat are heightened by this Biblical allusion. The quickening pace and onomatopoeic 'thud, thud' of Tommy's club also help convey the urgent flurry of activity. As a result, 'Alligator's nose is skinned again', which represents a cyclical link, back to the snake's first appearance. When finally dead, its mangled remains are aptly thrown into the fire, a veiled allusion to the vanquishing of evil.

Victory however brings only an exhausted sense of relief and unity rather than any celebration. Danger has been faced and this time, been successfully dealt with. The narrative coda or tail comes as she 'lays her hand on the dog's head, and all the fierce, angry light dies out of his yellow eyes'. This act of homage to his courage in turn reinforces her resilience. Personification reinforces the pivotal role played by the dog alongside his mistress and her son, in overthrowing a common enemy. In an unusually demonstrative act of affection and unity 'she hugs' her son 'to her worn-out breast and kisses him'. The term 'worn-out' poignantly signals the emotional and physical cost of this latest battle in an arduous existence.

Distinctively Visual Use of Language

Lawson's inherent skill to depict what he saw and experienced with reference to bush men and women is evident in 'The Drover's Wife' which although one of his earliest stories, is considered by many literary critics to his masterpiece. His economic use of language and short paragraphs, at times only one or two sentences long helps maintain pace and create a clipped tone. We are told that although she 'loves her children' her life is such that she 'has no time to show it'. Visual signifiers such as the description of her children as being 'dried-up' and 'ragged' help delineate characters and their situation. With their father away, they respect 'Mother' who must be strict to ensure obedience and this is conveyed via the author's incisive eye for detail and visual focus.

Breaking up narrative passages by anecdotal flashbacks, sensory imagery and dialogue draws the reader into the harsh world of the drover's wife. With the appearance of the snake, Tom manfully tells his mother, 'Stand back! I'll have the beggar!' His colourful use of language reflects the chaos of the moment and the boy's personality, 'I'd like to screw their blanky necks'. It is easy for readers to picture the 'sharp-faced urchin of eleven' and hear the sternness of the mother's demand, 'Come here at once when I tell you, you little wretch!' Such brief exchanges are highly suggestive of the relationship between mother and her offspring who, while their father is away, must be treated firmly in order to keep them safe. And yet signs of their loving relationship is conveyed in subtle ways such as her frustrated but amused response to the boy's query about whether they will ever 'etricate' the kangaroos. 'Lord! How am I to know, child?'

The present is clearly coloured by what has happened in the past to bring the family to this point in time. Tenses alternate between past and present, adding emphasis to the present crisis and building awareness of her past experiences and how they have shaped her personality. What follows becomes a reflective appraisal of outback life. Clichés such as 'the usual castles in the air' or 'arrived in the nick of time' add to the general colloquial and an almost conversational tone. It is as if we are being directly addressed by the narrator, and given access to a world that is utterly unfamiliar to the one we know. Immediacy arises from mentioned details about how the baby 'howled lustily" or the dog 'charged furiously' or the 'drenching downpour' that broke the dam. A strong sense of the situational context underpins the story, peppered by phrases such as the 'rain has cleared off'.

Repetition is frequently used for emphasis as seen in the negative overtones of 'no' followed by 'nothing' in the opening lines to the quirky fact that 'she has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous. Compound words are used to give greater visual clarity to the author's depiction of place, people and experience; 'roughly-made', 'girl-wife', 'bush-track', and 'worn-out'. Sparing use of figurative techniques increases their visual impact like the woman's smile being likened to 'polished silver'. Simile stresses Alligator's speedy reaction to the threat for we are prompted to picture this 'big, heavy dog' being able to respond to threat 'as quick as a terrier'. Satiric humour often combines with a skilful use of adjectives, imagery and juxtaposition to give greater clarity to situations. During the bush fire threat, the woman metaphorically dons the manly role by putting 'on an old pair of her husband's trousers' and fighting the flames until 'great drops of sooty perspiration stood out on her forehead and ran down her blackened arms.'

What is seen however is not always reliable for appearances can be deceptive. This is shown when the wife's baby screams loudly thinking he is being handled by a 'black man' rather than his mother. Similarly, the 'big, heavy dog' can respond to threat 'as quick as a terrier'. His aggressiveness scared off the 'villainous-looking sundowner' who tried to intimidate his mistress but his being a fighter is offset of his love for his family and inferential details show moments of gentleness. Dogs feature often in Lawson's stories for they were an essential part of outback life, helping protect and work stock and as companions to people isolated for long periods of time. We are told that Alligator is 'not a very beautiful dog to look at' and that past encounters are revealed when 'the light shows numerous old wounds where the hair will not grow'. From the opening paragraphs, we can picture how he shows the 'wildest interest in the proceedings, breaks his chain and rushes after that snake.' Equally clear are the visual details that show his patient stake out awaiting his prey alongside his mistress, 'his eyes turned towards the partition.'

As the atmosphere closes in and deepens however, we become more responsive to the woman's shifting emotions, Lawson's distinctively visual use of language making us privy to her unspoken thoughts and feelings. Emotive adverbs and adjectives reinforce the use of visual and sensory imagery but stylistically, Lawson's language use usually remains utilitarian. Tension rises and then arcs dramatically with camera like focus as he 'springs, and his jaws come together with a snap. He misses this time, for his nose is large, and the snake's body close down in the angle formed by the slabs and the floor. He snaps again as the tail comes around, and tugs it out eighteen inches'. Such explicit visual representation is coupled with the onomatopoeic repetition of 'Thud, thud...thud, thud' to make the reader an eye-witness to the scene. Unity of time, place and action has enabled Lawson to provide a vivid snapshot of bush existence.

It is the author's sharp eye for details that enable his readers to become eye witnesses to events and develop strong connections to the tough woman whose works hard and does what is necessary to protect her family. Death is an ever present danger and while the snake's presence is the lynchpin of the story, the real focus lies with the experiences like flood, fire and drought that she has faced. These are bush realities and so while this day's danger has been successfully dealt with, the visually personified phrase 'sickly daylight breaks' serves as a grim reminder that other dangers will inevitably follow. Tommy's reaction and insightful recognition of why his mother is weeping is voiced in his declaration that he 'won't ever go droven'; blast me if I do.'

The Drover's Wife

Personal Response

What is being said?

1. What core conceptual ideas about the outback experience and environment are communicated by Lawson's hallmark narrative style?
2. What is achieved by focusing on a female rather than male protagonist?
3. What features and qualities of the Drovers Wife are conveyed in distinctively visual ways?
4. Why does Lawson give so much attention to developing reader impressions about Alligator? What narrative role does the dog play in developing reader empathy with his mistress?
5. This is considered by many critics to be Lawson's narrative masterpiece. To what extent is such praise supported by your response to the story and its distinctive use of visual language.

How is it being said?

1. How does Henry Lawson represent the environment in this story and for what purpose?
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of Lawson's use of flashback as well as direct and authorial comment.
3. What narrative functions are achieved by the use of several flashbacks within the story? What use of language makes them evocative and able to prompt the reader to identify with this woman?
4. Discuss the narrative structure and language techniques used to make the experiences of this anonymous woman, representative of the lives and hardships of such bush women.
5. The lengthy vigil is followed by an explosion of pace and tension. How does the ending bring resolution to core themes developed throughout the story?
6. Minimalist but highly distinctive language use has enabled readers to vividly visualise time, place and situation. Evaluate with close textual reference, whether the visual representation Lawson offers of the bush and those who inhabit it, is realistic or romanticised.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:While_the_Billy_Boils,_1913_-_The_Drover's_Wife.png

'The Bush Undertaker'

Narrative Focus and Style

The rugged harshness of the Australian bush is once again Lawson's setting, depicted as desolate, oppressive and unforgiving. There is mention of the lack of water; 'the bank of a barren creek' in 'The Bush Undertaker' echoing 'the narrow almost waterless creek' in the opening of 'The Drover's Wife'. Whereas that terrain is flat with nothing 'to relieve the eye', the shepherd's locality has 'sheep-yards' and 'a low line of bare brown ridges'. As representative bush types, both the drover's wife and the shepherd live in a roughly built 'slab-and-bark hut'. He is forced to shield his eyes from the crushing heat of the outback, described as 'the dazzling glow of that broiling Christmas Day'. The specificity of time and season make it easier for readers to picture not only his environment but how he spends the day. Physical and social Isolation are evident in all of the prescribed stories as well as a feature of the narrative style that earned Lawson's reputation as being an accomplished writer.

Madness is a predominant 'reading' of the story, some citing it as the cause of the old man's strange behaviour. The mind-numbing loneliness of outback existence has certainly contributed to the eccentricity of Lawson's 'hatter', the term no doubt based in turn on the 'mad hatter' from Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland'. We are given little contextual or background information about him apart from his previous acquaintanceship with Brummy and the fact that he is an old shepherd with only his 'four-legged mate' by the name of Five-bob for company. He is differentiated from other Lawson characters by the way he talks aloud in a running monologue. This coping mechanism for social isolation is credible because unlike the characters in the other prescribed stories; he has no family, mates or fellow passengers to interact with apart from his canine friend and assistant.

Other interpretations of the story focus on the sketch's representation of darker, contemporaneous colonial settler-native relationships. Some contemporary critics have described Lawson as being racist or at best ambivalent attitudes towards Aborigines, citing his digging up grave bones with the intention of using them for material gain. While this would not be tolerated now, it was legal and common practice at the time the story was written. On one level therefore, it can be considered as one of the ways in which struggling bush men could get a living from the land. Historian Tom Griffiths argues, 'the collector's interest in [indigenous] culture was as a dead culture, a relic, ornamental culture, a culture that could be picked up, displayed like a trophy, worn or discarded like a coat'. Lawson's story incorporates the fact that Aboriginal artefacts and bones were sold to such collectors; the old man's bag of bones reflecting the era's racist attitudes and values and how Aborigines were stripped of their lands, artefacts and even their buried remains.

The symbolic interplay of white and black helps shape perceptions of the old man's strange behaviour. Particular focus plays on the black man's bones that have been dug up and bundled into a sack, the corpse blackened by the sun and decomposition found under the tree and the ugly black goanna who doggedly tracks its stolen meal back to the shepherd's hut. Significantly, the bones of the 'old black-fellow' are white and there is 'nothing in the blackened features' of old Brummy until closer inspection, 'to tell aught of name or race, but the dress proclaimed the remains to be those of a European.' G. Blainey challenges the charge of racism in his text called 'Henry Lawson'; 'Of course he had his prejudices, and they were widely shared by his readers. He was capable of offering over simple stereotypes about races and nations'. His colour imagery however can also be read as offering the idea that regardless of colour and ethnicity, death comes to us all.

Characterisation

Positive and negative character traits are shown in Lawson's characters but in the main, as seen in 'The Bush Undertaker', most are depicted as being stoic, unsentimental and resilient individuals. Their outlook and behaviour has been shaped by personal experience on the land and the hardships and loneliness of bush life. Their endurance and strength of character is often conveyed with the sort of wry irony and irreverence that underscores 'The Bush Undertaker'. At the time of writing, some critics of the day criticised Lawson's use of colloquial language as lacking sophistication. One of his aims was to authentically convey the spoken language that was used by bush folk. G. Blainey confirms that it was a fundamental aspect of Lawson's narrative style and that the author 'dreaded the idea of verbally showing off'. The diction, nuance and rhythms of the old 'hatter's uneducated language, is brilliantly mimicked in a lifelike manner that helps develop his character and situation. It also helps place the reader in the scene, watching and listening to events as they unfold which also adds immediacy.

While the old shepherd remains nameless apart from the moniker 'hatter', the dog is named as is Alligator and Tommy in the other stories. The confident command given to Five Bob to 'Fetch 'em back' with reference to a few straggling sheep, creates the strong impression of the companionable working partnership between shepherd and sheepdog. By yarding the stock early, both get the 'arternoon' to themselves. His plans are conveyed via the constant monologue. At times it is almost soliloquy like as he expresses personal thoughts rather than instructing his canine friend to go out and 'keep yer eye on the sheep till I calls yer'. A really close connection with the protagonist is formed by the way he constantly talks to himself, 'We'll yard 'em early... We'll get dinner'. The reader virtually becomes a surrogate human companion. The bond between man and dog is humorously established by subtle visual cues like Five Bob seeming 'intelligible' and able to understand 'as though he understood English'. Mealtime is a shared affair and another sign of their close bond for his dog shows 'the liveliest interest and appreciation'.

Even on Christmas Day however, there is no signs of festivity and despite the heat, the old man strangely decides to spend his stolen free afternoon to 'root up that old blackfellow' from his bush grave. This turns out to be 'some three miles' away and so is no silly whim that is decided on the moment but something worth doing despite the reader never really been told what his ulterior motive is other than curiosity. Once their meal is over, he sets off with Five Bob and, after digging for 'about half an hour' he hits payable dirt.' This mining term seems to indicate that he may have been a gold miner in the past. He speculates about whether the bones 'had belonged to black or white, male or female' but reaching no 'satisfactory conclusion', dusts 'them with care', puts them in a bag and heads off home. Sighting a goanna distracts him and leads to the body of what turns out to be his old friend 'Brummy'. The 'nick-name' means something counterfeit or worthless and seems quite appropriate when we learn of the dead man's drunken lifestyle.

His first thoughts once he recognises the identity of the corpse is of the waste and missed opportunity, 'Yer cud earn more'n any man in the colony, but yer'd lush it all away. I allers sed as how it 'ud end, an' now yer kin see fur y'self.' Such musing and memories of former times fleshes out his character just as the same method achieves in 'The Drover's Wife'. The old shepherd had warned Brummy about the dangers of drink and this has autobiographical overtones of Lawson's personal struggle with alcoholism throughout his adult life. He also ponders the coincidence of finding his old friend so close to home, thinking he may have even been trying to make it back to someone who had helped him in the past. Relationships might be difficult to forge in such isolated environments, but they remain important which explains why this lonely old man would want to bestow as best he can, 'a good comfortable buryin' and some level of dignity to a man who had led such an inebriated and undignified life.

Distinctively Visual Use of Language

Economic use of language and detail is sufficient for readers to picture, from the opening paragraph, the actions of man and dog as well as the physical setting. An important linking motif throughout the story is mortality which is developed in distinctively visual ways to keep it at the forefront of the reader's mind. It is symbolically significant that Aboriginal grave bones have been dug up by a white predator as a saleable collector's curiosity. The old man seems pleased when he comes across another body when he sees a 'great greasy black goanna' run off from something under a tree, 'Me luck's in for the day and no mistake!' Both bodies seem to have value but what is significant is the way Lawson has juxtaposed the different ways in which both have been desecrated. The reptile, made more repulsive by the alliterative terms used to describe its appearance, becomes an important motif, reappearing so often that the old man later thinks he has seen a whole 'flock of black goahanners'.

Lawson does not shrink away from describing the repugnant details of his friend's corpse have been fed on by the goanna and his reactions are easy to imagine, 'He stepped back involuntarily, but, recovering himself, leant on his stick and took in all the ghastly details.' Lawson conveys the paradoxical blend of fascination and repugnance that is associated but also ironically combines it with wry humour by the old man's excitement when he finds a near full corked bottle of rum. The old man obviously loves his grog but he has kept it under control whereas his friend, despite his wasted talents and opportunities, had let his drinking destroy him literally and metaphorically. The shepherd's level of destitution is suggested by the way the old shepherd has to think seriously about having to tear off strips from his shirt for the makeshift coffin, 'sandwiching the defunct between the two pieces'.

Detailed description is given to show exactly how he uses his 'saddle-strap' belt and resourcefully buckles it at one end and have to improvise how to use his shirt to tie it up at the other end. His resourcefulness allows him to lug Brummy's corpse back to his hut. Lacking the money even to buy a new shirt, finding a nearly full bottle of rum is a real bonus, 'me luck's in, this Christmas, an' no mistake! This echoes his previous exclamation of good fortune and serves as another subtle reminder how difficult his life is. Sensory detail is also used to describe the body, prompting the reader's reactions to mirror those of the old man who is driven by a bizarre but credible mix of curiosity and repugnance. We become fellow eye-witnesses as he looks at and pokes and prods the body, giving details about how 'the flesh sounded like leather' and 'the shrivelled eyes seemed to peer up at him from under the blackened wrists.' The corpses 'eyes' crop up again later in the story as he comes face to face with them back at the hut.

Once he discovers that it is actually the mummified corpse of his old friend 'Brummy', the old shepherd is faced with a real moral quandary. He has to determine what he should and can do, about giving some dignity to his dead friend, especially as a proper funeral is not possible without a local vicar or church. Nor can he leave the body because it will be open again to predators like the goanna. His running monologue gives access to his train of thought, 'I expect I'll have t' fix yer up for the last time an' make yer decent, for 'twont do t' leave yer a-lyin' out here like a dead sheep.' He concludes in a prophesising manner, 'I spect it was the rum as preserved yer. It was the dath of yer when yer was alive, an' now yer dead, it preserves yer like-like a mummy.' Gallows humour is a hallmark feature of Lawson's prose but he uses it here to communicate a central truth about outback life, 'Nothing much mattered in the bush' except the ever-present reality of death.

After appraising how the corpse has been ravaged by the elements and preyed on by the black goanna the old man, in a 'softer tone than usual' tells his dead friend 'ye ain't as bad as yer might be, considerin' as it must be three good months sincer yer slipped yer wind.' Other information about bush existence includes references to the 'bits of bark' that he

finds that had been 'left by a party of strippers who had been getting bark there for the stations.' Bark built houses and outbuildings were the staple of the bush where lack of funds and isolation meant that early pioneers had to be resourceful and use materials that were to hand. Such visual and tactile references help contextualise the physical context for the reader. Other details bring the trip home to life, 'Yer don't smell none too sweet, Brummy. It must 'a' been jist about the middle of shearin' when yer pegged out. I wonder who got yer last cheque.' His musing now clarifies that Brummy had been a shearer but it also shows the pragmatism of bush survival in that perhaps the old man can claim Brummy's last cheque.

The grinding monotony of life in the bush has also clearly been turned upside down by the day's events for he admits with black humour, 'I anin't a-spendin sech a dull Christmas after all'. He is startled again by the black goanna and rests the corpse on the ground, has another drink from the bottle and try and sort his ungainly load by popping the packed 'bag of bones on his shoulder under the body' but has to stop soon after because 'The thunderin' jumpt-up bones is all skew-whift' and he has to rearrange them. Such attention to the old man's colloquial language fleshes out reader's impressions of him while humorously offsetting the central focus on death. Diction also echoes phrases from other Lawson stories for whereas in 'A Dry Season' the narrator does not like the snaky look of camels, the old shepherd in this story shows his dislike of goannas, describing his latest sighting 'gliding off sideways, with its long snaky neck turned towards him.' This makes city readers who have probably never seen a goanna, get some sense of their reptilian ugliness. It could also be argued, that it metaphorically links to the inferred evil of the snake in 'The Drover's Wife' but where Alligator is more than willing to attack the snake, Five Bob 'slunk off with his tail down'.

Once reached, the corpse is dumped up 'against the wall, wrong end up' while he tries to 'collect his muddled thoughts'. What Lawson offers next is a brilliant example of visual slapstick, for the propped up bark enclosed body immediately falls down and strikes him a 'violent blow on the shoulder' with the dead man's 'blucher boots'. The 'shock sobered him' making him jump and hitch up his pants that now lack a belt, but recovering his senses and propping it up again but not noticing the 'shorter sheet of bark'. He tells the corpse that 'Yer can't expect me to take yer into the hut' making the reader realise it is due to the stench. Embedded sibilance gives pace and visually horrific impact as when the body is righted, the old man is brought literally face to face with the corpse and shocked into silence by the 'awful scrutiny that gleamed on him from those empty sockets'. This is visual storytelling at its best, each part played out before the reader's eyes and yet with an undertone of how incredibly lonely the old man's existence is.

Lawson's use of spoken language by having this old man speak aloud to either himself or to a dog and a copse, challenges the normal narrative expectations of how dialogue cans be used. What it does achieve however is a vivid depiction of the crushing isolation of living, largely alone in the outback. It is even suggested that Brummy had been heading back to meet his old friend at the bitter end. This need for human companionship becomes one of the many things that is often sacrificed by these lonesome inhabitants of the bush. While some critics have argued that the lack of company has driven the old man mad, surely Lawson is throwing greater focus on how difficult is the struggle against this loss of companionable humanity that is taken for granted in other, less physically alienating circumstances. It is the landscape and outback environment that is being emphasised rather than the madness that could credibly arise from it.

The old shepherd's running conversation with Brummy's corpse almost makes it a living presence in the old man's hut. He not only directly addresses it but even warns it to stop playing 'pranktical jokes' on him or scaring him or else 'by the 'oly frost I'll kick yer to jim-rags, so I will'. This bizarre ongoing one-sided conversation with the dead really draws the

reader in while simultaneously conveying the old man's increasingly frazzled 'bushman's instinct'. Lawson visually maps out his actions when he is wakened later that evening, telling us how he lights a 'slush-lamp' before disturbed by 'a peculiar rustling sound overhead'. Despite using minimalist detail, the tension is brilliantly ramped up, 'Five Bob whimpered and the old shepherd, thought used to the weird and dismal, as one living alone in the bush must necessarily be, felt the icy breath of fear at his heart.' A few hours later, just before the ominous midnight hour and rising moon, he is again roused by 'the same mysterious sound overhead' but again finds nothing when he goes to investigate. Deciding it is best to stay up and keep watch, he is able to shoot the black object on the 'ridge-pole' and discovers the 'great black goanna in violent convulsions on the ground.' His response to finding that the noisy 'black object' that he shoots connects important elements within the story, incensed that the ' thunderin' jumpt-up thing has been a-havin' o' me,' he exclaimed. 'The same cuss-o-God wretch has a-follered me 'ome, an' has been a-havin' its Christmas dinner off of Brummy, an a-hauntin' o' me into the bargain, the jumpt-up tinker!' All this is visually communicated so that the reader literally plays in out in their mind's eye.

Having killed the goanna, the old shepherd now has to deal with what to do with Brummy's body. The physical isolation of the outback is stressed directly by Lawson, 'there was no one by whom he could send a message to the station' and 'dared not leave the sheep and go himself' and so decides he must bury his friend's body himself 'the next afternoon' by bringing the sheep home early again and digging the appropriate sized hole. He voices the reality that no 'pianer-fingered parsons' would be troubled to travel into 'this God-forgotten place' for a service, it is up to him to do it himself. Rather than mock this old man, the reader is encouraged to praise his loyalty to a dead friend, for he not only will he do it all with his 'own hands' but is determined, as best he can, to 'do jestice to it, and see that Brummy has a good comfortable buryin' – and more's unpossible'. This is the sort of bush reality that Lawson's prose communicates to readers. There is only so much that bush men and women can do and that is something they have to live with.

Reminiscent of the narrative device Lawson uses in 'The Drover's Wife', the old man experiences 'a flood of memories' saying after a time, 'It's all over now; nothin' matters now-nothin' didn't ever matter'. As he shovels dirt into the grave, occasionally resting as he goes, he remembers Brummy's foolish attitudes that things'ud be all right termorrer'. The reality is clear, 'termorrer's come, Brummy –come fur you-it ain't come fur me yet, but –it's a-comin.' With that summation of the basic reality of all life, he finishes filling the 'grave to the brim' before preparing to deliver the only funeral service that could be offered, uttering, 'Once or twice... I am the rassaraction' and then with a solemnity that disturbs his dog continues, 'Hashes ter hashes, dus ter dus, Brummy'. Thereafter he rests and passes his 'hand wearily over his forehead-but only as one who was tired and felt the heat before returning to his hut. The final line is pitch perfect, but unlike the dawn used to end 'The Drover's Wife', in this tale, Lawson uses the sun setting 'on the grand Australian bush'-the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and of much that is different from things in other lands.'

Personal Response

The Bush Undertaker

What is being said?

1. Lawson's stories are renowned for their ability to give readers visual vignettes of ordinary people enduring harsh conditions in the bush in the late 1800's. What snapshot details are given about the old shepherd and how do they shape our impressions of him as an individual and his isolated lifestyle?
2. The old man's canine companion is important to him in many ways. There are also echoes of the miner's dog that is central to events in 'The Loaded Dog'. Evaluate how Lawson from the opening words, develops our impression of Five Bob as being a very important part of the old man's life.
3. What suggests that the old shepherd may be mentally unstable? Consider if this is really the main idea that the author is trying to convey, using textual reference to support your argument.
4. Lawson has been described as laughing at human failings and inconsistencies. What evidence is found for this in the story and how are readers prompted to think for themselves about the issues raised?
5. What evidence is there to support the negative idea that the bush is the 'tutor of eccentric minds' and 'the home of the weird'.
6. This sketch is longer and more bizarre in many ways than others that Lawson wrote including 'In a Dry Season'. What is being emphasised by what Lawson conveys about how this old man spends the hot afternoons of Christmas Day and Boxing Day?

How is it being said?

1. Much of the story is recounted through the 'hatter's monologues which are rich in vernacular and idiomatic expression. How does these shape perceptions of the story's protagonist?
2. How does Lawson's 'camera-eye' narrative approach help the reader envisage what happens?
3. What ideas are suggested by the old man's efforts to give Brummy a funeral with some dignity and solemnity?
4. How does Lawson convey a real sense of spontaneity in the old man's reactions and feelings while avoiding sentimentality?
5. Evaluate with close textual reference how this story demonstrates the author's
mastery of timing and restrained emphasis.
6. What gives conceptual impact to the coda ending?

'The Loaded Dog'

Narrative Focus and Style

This is one of Lawson's most popular, bush-yarn stories, about a group of quirky Bushmen and their four-legged mate Tommy in a potentially dangerous situation. Many close calls are described but the sense of danger is minimised by the laconic observer's use of black humour. A few staged twists add urgency such as Dave diving on the dog, grabbing the cartridge and throwing it but not far enough for it not to be retrieved by Tommy who continues his chase. At another point, Jim first takes refuge up a sapling but when it gives way under his weight, he hits the ground running. More comic relief is used when the dog suddenly switches his attentions from Jim to Dave who heads for the bar. Such rapid shifts and the possibility of catastrophe, account for the story being described as a 'grim rural comedy'. This light-hearted look at bush life on the goldfields also sardonically reinforces the slim chances of striking it rich. The supposedly rich reef might be 'ten feet or hundreds beneath the surface' but 'in which direction.' This is the tenuous nature of their existence, the lure of riches matched by arduous labour and unlikely rewards.

The real story begins with an extended description of the fishing plan devised by the hopeful goldminers and the absurdly large dynamite cartridge they intend to use for that purpose. Detailed reference to the how it is made allows the reader to note its gradual transformation into something that 'was rigid and solid ... a formidable bomb'. Its very size and explosive potential foreshadows the disastrous but also comical events that follow and display the typical outback appreciation for the ridiculous. Their lack of foresight in considering possible consequences of constructing such an explosive device also highlights the cavalier attitude and improvising tendencies of this particular group of Aussie gold diggers. Panic sets in when the fuse is accidentally lit by their lovable 'dorg', 'Dave glanced over his shoulder to see how the chops were doing-and bolted.' When the galloping owners are pursued by their retriever pup, the improvised fishing tool quickly becomes a deadly weapon.

In a few frantic minutes of activity the reader is carried along with the sprinting figures. The tension mounts and becomes electrified but still buoyant by humorous understatements offsetting any sense of real danger. Thinking this is a great lark, Tommy 'bounded first after one and then after another, for, being a young dog, he tried to make friends with everybody'. This canine four-legged rogue becomes the star of the tale, his enjoyment juxtaposed with the fear of those he pursues. Changed circumstances are stressed by the narrator's warning tone, 'Run!!! Look behind you, you fool!' The three exclamations add further stress while the narrative pace is skilfully manipulated to build and then maintain the tension throughout. The tension is also masterfully controlled by Lawson's focus on the subsequent effects rather than the explosion itself. Lawson's typical laconic humour and colloquial phraseology create an ironic 'big-bang' finish as Tommy ends up being saved by the very dog that is despised by all.

When the vicious dog 'bares his teeth', the loveable pup drops the cartridge just before the penultimate ear-shattering explosion. The death of the 'vicious and nasty' yellow dog is implied rather than stated via black humour, 'It was very good blasting powder ... and the cartridge had been excellently well made.' This heightens the ironic justice of his demise and the aftermath is described with effective use of visual and aural imagery with bolting horses, yelping dogs and laughing Bushmen. The event earns the men an unenviable reputation, highlighted by the final lines. 'For years afterwards, lanky, easy-going Bushmen ... would cry, in a lazy drawl and with just a hint of the nasal twang: 'El-lo, Da-a-ve! How's the fishin getting on, Da-a-ve?'

Characterisation

The main characters are three friends who are working a gold claim, apparently without much success. Life and fortune is tenuous at best on the gold fields, the work is hard and the chances of striking it lucky very slim. Lawson simultaneously individualises and represents the men as types by sketching rather than detailing the main differences and similarities between them. References are made throughout the story to mateship and these men have forged a bond that helps them to cope with the harsh conditions. Their quirky sense of humour is focused on rather than their courage but their easy going companionship still shows how Bushmen cope with adversity. Most attention is given to Dave Regan, an imaginative man with elaborate schemes. Andy Page is equally handy and inventive and he was the one who 'usually put Dave's theories into practice if they were practicable, or bore the blame for the failure and the chaffing of his mates if they weren't'. Andy was also a practical jack-of-all-trades individual, 'as handy as the average sailor with needles, twine, canvas and rope'. Given the chore of finding something to eat, Andy sets about making a cartridge to catch fish. Jim Bentley is the least adventurous of the group but also the most cynical and judgmental, a man who 'wasn't interested in their 'damned silliness'.

Dogs feature in many of Lawson's tales and in 'The Loaded Dog'; he includes a motley caste of canines. The men's 'dorg' is loved 'for his good-heartedness and his foolishness' and having such a pet would help offset the hardships of the goldfields. He is described as taking 'life, the world, his two-legged mates, and his own instinct as a huge joke' and he becomes a central presence in the story. Lawson's minimalist but explicitly visual use of language helps convey his 'red, idiotic slobbering grin' and the general foolishness of this 'four-footed mate'. Personification and alliteration stress his silly mischievousness which seems a suitable match for larrikinism exhibited by his four owners. The frenzied situation that follows, is foreshadowed by the dog's habit, in keeping with his breed, of 'retrieving anything' including a dead cat that he had 'so kindly returned to the inside flap of their tent'. While the funny side of things predominates, the pup assumes a more sinister role at times but in the end, 'Tommy, the great, idiotic mongrel retriever, came slobbering round Dave and lashing his legs with his tail, and trotted home after him, smiling his broadest, longest, and reddest smile of amiability, and apparently satisfied for one afternoon with the fun he'd had.'

Conversely, other mongrels are depicted in more derogatory terms as 'spidery, thievish, cold-blooded' and 'yapping, yelping small fry. The imagery allows us to 'see' and 'hear' them and note a particularly 'vicious yellow mongrel' who is described as a 'skulking ... sneaking, fighting, thieving canine, whom neighbours had tried for years to shoot or poison'. Contrasting adjectives are used to strengthen reader perceptions, 'big', 'black' and 'young' with 'vicious, thieving canine'. Lawson also uses dashes to separate his listing of specific features of the pack of hounds: spidery, mongrel sheep-and cattle-dogs. Such sparse but well-chosen diction, ably communicates all we need to know about this villainous canine that comes to such an inglorious end, looking 'as if he had been kicked into a fire by a horse'. Lawson's hilarious combination of detailed description, realistic dialogue and fast-paced action allows readers to visualise what happens. By running as a pack, the men's danger is greatly increased and it takes some time before they realise that their chances of survival are improved if they head off in separate directions. We can imagine ourselves in the position of Jim, the hapless victim who stares up into Tommy's face while the pup, 'grinned sardonically down on him, over the edge'. A fleeting sense of danger is created before the pace quickens and Lawson's use of understatement and explicit diction makes the finale graphically destructive and visually hilarious.

Distinctively Visual use of Language

Lawson writes from the perspective of a mocking but detailed observer, giving the funny tale of a dynamite loaded dog a physically parched landscape, 'the creek was low, just a chain of muddy water holes'. A sense of the pervasive heat and humidity is conveyed via sibilance, 'sickly smothering atmosphere of the summer sunrise' and readers can easily envisage the 'weather-board and corrugated-iron kitchen and wash-house on piles in the backyard'. Such descriptions create a tangible backdrop to the ludicrous events arising from the idea that 'dynamite fishing' would be a good way of getting a meal. A lot of detail is given to how the cartridge is 'bound', 'pasted' and 'sewed' as well as how it was absurdly oversized 'about three times the size of those they used in the rock'. Hyperbolic exaggeration helps turn a fishing story into something that becomes riotously funny.

Idiomatic and colloquial language such as 'Dave nutted it out' and 'no muckin around' help differentiate the men and helps make it easier to imagine the slapstick situation that results. Snatches of vernacular dialogue and idiomatic expressions help clarify events, such as the useless cry to Tommy, 'Don't foller us!' Direct speech also provides moments of comic relief, 'your dorg's run orf inter the scrub' and 'I was goin' ter croak'. Euphemisms prompt the reader to fill in the missing colourful language when Tommy is described as a 'blanky retriever' and the publican calls Dave a 'crimson fool' for the careless way he has endangered everyone's lives. This is a technique found in 'The Drover's Wife' and the other stories and encourages readers to be more active in their response. Lawson's hallmark use of explicit diction effectively conveys information such as the pain of Dave's toothache having a 'burred edge' as well as frequent use of figurative language techniques make the story a comic masterpiece.

Other narrative techniques include switching between longer descriptive paragraphs and shorter ones that are shorter and more focused such as 'Dave got an idea' in order to maintain the comedic pace. This is also helped by Lawson's use of punctuation dashes and exclamation to ramp up the action '-Run, Andy! Run!' The use of visual verbs to describe how the cartridge are accompanied by others like 'jolt', 'dodged', darted and 'snatched' that gives readers a sense of the men's panic. The manic pace is also shown via alliteration as the 'dog dodged', and the men desperately 'snatched up sticks and stones' to try and chase him away. Abrupt statements also provide visual humour, 'Andy's legs started with a jolt; his legs started before his brain did' and dramatic irony as 'Dave looked over his shoulder and bolted-Jim looked behind Dave and bolted-Andy stood still'. Added visual detail is supplied by similes describing them 'jumpin' round like a flea in a fit' or Jim going up 'the sapling like a native bear. They are also used to give audio cues that ramp up the atmosphere by describing how the burning 'fuse sounded as though it as going a mile a minute.' Onomatopoeic descriptions, sibilance and sensory imagery maintain the frenzied pace and make the scene farcical as 'they followed each other...the live fuse swishing in all directions and hissing and spluttering and stinking.'

Instead of the expected climax, Lawson uses understatement and ellipsis: 'He (the yellow dog) sniffed at the cartridge twice, and was just taking a third cautious sniff when – 'it was a very good blasting powder'. The bush bar with 'several casual Bushmen on the verandah' is thrown into chaos when it is rocked by the explosion, 'some shut themselves in the stable' or ended up 'crouched, doubled up, against the wall, or rolled gently on the dust, trying to laugh without shrieking' after it is all over. Women became hysterical and livestock were traumatised while Lawson gives an ironic vignette of the publican telling his wife 'to hold up for my sake, Mary, or I'll lam the life out of ye'. Folkloric exaggeration has Bushmen saying 'the kitchen jumped off its piles and back on again' while the visual coda shows the retriever's having enjoyed his adventures while his human mates are doomed to a life ridicule by their mates.

The Loaded Dog

What is being said?

1. What humorous aspects of narrative style and structure differentiate this story from the others?
2. What impressions are given about the mining camp environment and the bond between the miners and their 'dorg'?
3. In what ways is the larrikinism often exhibited by Lawson's human characters, mirrored by Tommy's roguish behaviour?
4. What narrative advantage is gained by personifying the ungainly pup in detail?
5. What creates the expectation that everything will end well despite the suspense that is created during the chase?

How is it being said?

1. How has Lawson drawn on various types of humour to manipulate and mood?
2. Evaluate how the author achieves the hilarious combination of detailed description, realistic dialogue and fast-paced action that has made the story so popular.
3. Use detailed textual reference to demonstrate how the author has used distinctively visual language to skilfully build the tension and sense of mounting panic.
4. How does the use of direct speech, especially near the end of the story, enhance the sketch's bush mine context?
5. Evaluate what narrative benefits are gained by atypically not using a short coda finale but instead giving a vivid description of the aftermath of the cartridge's 'big bang' rather than having the reader imagine it for themselves.

'In a Dry Season' (1896)

Narrative Focus and Style

This is written as a short but detailed sketch which uses an anomalous narrative approach whereby Lawson assumes the personal of an experienced traveller although the story is based on Lawson's outback train trip to Bourke that had been organised and paid for in 1892 by the 'Bulletin'. A travelogue style is used, the narrator doubling as a tourist guide, subjectively outlining the bleak, unforgiving and uninviting landscape that can be seen from the train. The blunt authorial description of what can be seen by the naked eye remains unadorned or romanticised in any way. It is a blighted landscape, stressed ironically by the assertion that, 'the least horrible spot in the bush, in a dry season' was wherever clearing attempts had been made and a 'green crop is trying to grow'. The word 'trying' stressing the harshness of an environment where despite the best efforts, only a marginal existence could be sustained. Lawson uses this undeniable truth to mock any government 'talk of settling people on the land!' The overall appraisal of the hinterland of New South Wales by the time the train reaches Bourke is that it is unappealing and best avoided, especially in the dry season.

The narrator's authoritative tone is asserted from the opening word 'Draw' and the visual imagery of the opening sentence. It mimics a painter sketching sufficient details to create a visual snapshot of a physically unchanging landscape marked by 'a wire fence and a few ragged gums'. Uniformity is only occasionally broken up by 'some scattered sheep', the inhospitable sparseness and infertility becoming representational of the countryside, west of the Great Dividing Range, for it is much the same 'all along the New South Wales western line from Bathurst on.' A conversational tone is created by the way the guide directly addresses the reader. Negative connotations, evoked by Lawson's narrative style make readers feel like silent, accompanying passengers, informed first hand by eye-witness details about what the outback is really like. Imaginative engagement is prompted by Lawson's visual focus on the people and places observed *en route,* including the inhabitants living in the small towns that line the tracks.

Speaking on behalf of his fellow travellers, 'we' is used to describe a shared experience about the people who board the train as well as those inhabiting the small towns that line the tracks. On this trip, there is little to differentiate the landscape with town after town made up of the same combination of public house, general store and schoolhouse. It is suggested that we will likely notice 'a couple of patient, ungroomed hacks [who] are probably standing outside the pub, while their masters are inside having a drink—several drinks.' Lawson's minimalist narrative style stresses that everything seems to 'exist only in the shadow of the pub' suggesting the importance of alcohol as a coping mechanism against the never-ending assault of the elements.

The author's personal experience authenticates the dismissive view he offers of the Macquarie River. Unambiguously negative terms are used to describe the river in the dry season as being no more than just a 'narrow muddy gutter'. Both the physical environment and the people who inhabit it are rugged and hardened by the elements. Recurring heat-baked images shape the reader's outlook, stressed by understatement, 'Somebody told me that the country was very dry on the other side of the Nevertire.' The unsolicited advice of a 'know it all', 'Yer wanter go out back, young man, if yer wanter see the country' is similarly ridiculed by the sarcastic retort, 'I don't wanter; I've been there.' There can be no climactic ending to such a monotonous journey and is signaled only by a passenger noting 'Here's Bourke.'

Distinctively Visual Language

There is a strong feeling of anonymity about the countryside and the characters in this sketch, one serving to reinforce perceptions of the other. Except for a figure throwing out wash-up water from a 'box-bark humpy with a clay chimney', there are only male characters depicted. This absence of any softening female presence further reinforces the harshness of the environment. Literal rather than figurative language builds up a composite picture of landscape and people in this running, chronological commentary about what can be seen from the train. Readers of the time would have been familiar with debates between Paterson and Lawson in The Bulletin', and the distinctively different perceptions of the bush and its inhabitants. Readers are prompted to become fellow travellers by the way Lawson lets them 'see' the passing landscape and other train travellers.

This eye-witness experience is combined with darkly satiric techniques like sarcasm, irony and paradox. Interest is similarly maintained by narrative devices such as authorial comment, idiomatic dialogue, juxtaposition and euphemism 'through to the bitter end'. What they see *en route* reinforces the physical and cultural divide between city and bush that Lawson stresses in his work. It also destroys or seriously challenges any romantic or adventurous expectations that in contrast, are often alluded to in Patterson's verse. The Images of place and characters that Lawson depicts are representative rather than markedly individualised. The males are differentiated largely by their clothing, hat style, 'flat-brimmed hats, with wire trims' or whether they are clean-shaven or bearded. As the train moves out, reference is made to the crepe bands around the hats, which were worn to mark a death in the family at some 'remote date'. This visual detail becomes jarring and picaresque however when Lawson adds, 'This outward show of bereavement usually has a jolly red face beneath it.' Sardonic emphasis about the harshness of life out west is also added by his derisive observation, 'Death is about the only cheerful thing in the bush.'

The 'slop-sac' apparel worn by bush shearers, black trackers and snake-chasing sundowners becomes more 'old-fashioned' the further away from civilisation they travel. What is worn by Bushmen is markedly different to the 'square-cuts and stand-up collar's worn by city dwellers. Clothing becomes a visual marker of bush types such as the sundowner. The narrator thinks this man 'was mad' because his behaviour suggested he was 'about to attack the train'. He wears decrepit clothing and carries a billy, swag and stick but interestingly, it is later confirmed that he was not mad but was in fact trying to kill a snake. Other representative characters include the fettler and the unemployed rouseabout as well as the 'bush liar' who is dressed 'like a bush larrikin'. His is described as a pompous and annoying braggart, full of his own self-importance who is only forced to shut up when 'a quiet-looking bushman in a corner of the carriage grew restless, and presently he opened his mouth and took the liar down in about three minutes.'

Labourers like the shearers dress 'like the unemployed' suggesting rough and battered clothing that has seen better days. Appearances don't count for much in the bush but Lawson uses his descriptions of clothing worn by outback types of people who can seen from the train, to paint a visual gallery for readers. Other things that can be seen from the train also are functional and practical rather than beautiful to the eye or designed for comfort. The physical landscape and ambiance is visually brought to life by Lawson's colourfully colloquial language use, 'he was a bit of a scrapper' or 'dressed in all his glory'. This makes us imagine being on-board the train, listening to the conversation of fellow travellers. The relentless heat of the environment is brought vividly to mind as we picture "an animated mummy of a swagman" dried by the seasons.

Other techniques such as unusual juxtaposition make the scene distinctly visual. The animal imagery is also effectively used in reference to his believing there is, "something snaky about camels. They remind me of turtles and goannas". This comparison is similarly jarring to the reader, forcing them to picture the similarities. Subjective rather than objective, Lawson's running commentary of his trip into Australia's hinterland, paints a monotonous picture of a bleak, unforgiving and uninviting landscape. This is peppered by typical 'railway' towns that hug the tracks. There is a focus on the buildings that punctuate the sameness of the bush landscape. These like the characters that litter the prose of Lawson are marked by bland and often decrepit uniformity on this journey. The utilitarian function of such trackside towns is shown by the recurring use of the name 'railway' appearing on pubs and other businesses along the route. Lawson depicts in one Railway Hotel, 'a sundowner sitting listlessly on a bench on the verandah...reading the Bulletin'. There is also mention of those who worked on maintaining the rail links between city and outback with the narrator suggesting that prospective travellers could 'make a watercolour-sketch of a fettler's tent on the line... with three fettler's standing round filling their pipes.'

Another harsh reality of outback life is the problem of rural unemployment. Lawson embeds a sarcastic barb against the Government Labour Bureau policy, of sending unwitting unemployed labourers 'eighty or a hundred miles away' to work on remote stations. The narrator can only offer a prayer for those who have been sent to Bourke, 'God Forgive the social system.' He is also scathing about the pitiful level of rural development. "Native industry was represented at one place along the line by three tiles, a chimney-pot, and a length of piping on a slab". Visual details convey how makeshift and improvised buildings and constructions are the norm, 'unpainted and leaning in one of the eight possible directions.' Everything seems neglected, 'unpainted' or 'empty', townships lining the railway tracks visually marked by poverty with 'half-obliterated signs' and shuttered windows. There are few indications of possible development or prosperity; shearers seeming to have some level of independence but those who are unemployed doomed to destitution. Stoic bushman struggle to exist in the brutal and merciless environment so vividly depicted in the seemingly endless train journey, until with level of relief, someone observes, 'Here's Bourke'.

Plate Photograph of Bourke Railway Station 1900

In a Dry Season

Personal Response

What is being said?

1. What language features characterise this subjective travelogue sketch?
2. What makes Lawson's use of an artist motif so effective in conveying visual details of what can be seen from the train and prompting the reader to visualise them?
3. What visual details give a negative impression of the landscape and the townships dotted alongside the tracks?

How is it being said?

1. What is the impact of Lawson's adoption of a sarcastic conversational tone rather than his more typical narrative style in depicting the people both on the train and those that can be seen by the passengers?
2. How does Lawson's use of imagery convey a particularly harsh perception of central west NSW and stress the negative environmental impact it has on personal experience?
3. How does the lack of any alleviating positive features shape a prevailingly negative and realistic perception of this outback environment?

Comparative Evaluation

1. Discuss the differing methods and techniques uses in TWO of the prescribed stories that realistically and visually evoke both the people and the setting of outback Australia?
2. Evaluate how Lawson's use of the distinctively visual in TWO of the prescribed stories helps communicate human experiences that remain relevant despite the passage of time since they were written?
3. How has Lawson used distinctively visual elements to shape reader impressions and perceptions of individuals and how they interact with their environment?
4. Three of the four prescribed stories have animals that are given human characteristics. How does the use of anthropomorphic elements and human traits elevate the importance of these canines within each story?
5. Despite each story having unique subject matter, evaluate how when taken as a whole, the four stories give readers access to a world that has been depicted in distinctively visual ways by someone who knew it intimately.
6. As Vance Palmer stated, 'We can be sure that Lawson invented little. His stories have that queer unmistakable movement of life', the characters and situations he presents are filtered through his own subjective experience and based on 'people he had known.' Discuss with detailed reference to TWO of the four stories, how valid this interpretation is compared to your own.

The Shoe-Horn Sonata

John Misto

In dramatic tribute to the memory of female internees in Japanese POW camps during W.W.II., Misto's script compellingly transports audiences back in time to wartime Singapore. Factual information about the Japanese invasion is fused with an innovative multi-media use of light, music and visual images. The playwright's extensive research and interviews with survivors, ensures the historical veracity for what he explicitly or inferentially conveys on stage. Misto has argued that he didn't 'have the power to build a memorial so I wrote a play instead' that explored 'the stories we don't tell about war. The people who usually bear the brunt of war are the civilians, and the people who are non-combatants, who find themselves caught up in war.' The prevailing social climate, attitudes and atmosphere of the era are evoked in ways that allow audiences to perceive and share eye-witness experiences. Misto has also described that his play is about two middle-aged women who 're-visit their pasts and reconnect', vividly recalling British unpreparedness for the real Japanese threat and conveying how their subsequent imprisonment triggered an unlikely but staunch friendship. The years fall away as memories are recalled and truth, kept hidden for fifty years, is publicly declared. The vividly visual way in which their physical, psychological and emotional scars are communicated, enables audiences to connect with their past on both an individual and representational level and most importantly, be moved by it.

Dramatic Staging and Structure

'The Shoehorn Sonata' has two main characters, a Two Act structure as well as two main time frames and settings. The opening act which is set in the present is the longer, taking up nearly two thirds of the play. The past however, is frequently referred to as part of the interview process for a documentary on female prisoners of war. As well as becoming the surrogate interview audience, Misto gives us access to private conversations, away from prying cameras and microphones that take place within their motel rooms. Structural cohesion is achieved by this juxtaposition of public and private voices and emotions. Revelatory disclosures also provide the necessary historical and contextual insight that audiences require to better understand the play's subject matter. This also helps bring the period to life for audiences who might lack even a general knowledge about the Singapore Invasion and the impact this had on the war. As witnesses to this event, Sheila and Bridie can literally place the audience at the scene and give some sense of events as they unfolded.

Early in the opening scene, Bridie sarcastically stresses the mistaken belief held by an arrogant British command, that Singapore was militarily impregnable. Recollection of one officer's comment, also captures the prevailing racial prejudices of the British High Command at that time and place, 'they have slanty eyes, if they can't see properly, how can they shoot?' Factual information combines with archival images to show the chaos that followed the Japanese bombing of Singapore, giving the audience a sense of how events played out at the time from an eye-witness perspective. This layered performance within a performance framework, dramatically foregrounds Sheila and Bridie as individuals as well as representatives of what Misto calls the 'victims of history's worst-and least known massacre'.

The TV Studio location is defined by chairs on a slightly raised centre stage platform. An 'On-air' sign indicates when filming and recording is taking place, but only the interviewer's voice is head. Their shared motel room is also a utilitarian space typified by a few basic props including a bar fridge, two single beds, window, chest of drawers and small bedside table. Use of a minimalist, two setting stage, forces the audience to remain focused on