

Distinctly visual essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Distinctively visual texts are texts that allow the audience to create an image within their mind, using an array of language and visual techniques. Henry Lawson, an Australian bushman and author of the late nineteenth century, demonstrates the experiences of bush life through his numerous short stories. Other texts however, like a photograph or a painting, create an image or a scene in the viewers' mind to demonstrate particular experiences expressed within the text. Frederick McCubbin, also from the late nineteenth century, displays life in outback Australia through his paintings.

Mostly, those who lived in remote areas of outback Australia in the late nineteenth century experienced hardships as a part of their daily life.

Lawson's story *The Drover's Wife* illustrates the rough life of women in the bush and the hardships these women face. The woman of the story, placed as the protagonist, is left unnamed. This depersonalisation indicates that Lawson is stereotyping all women who live in the bush. The story describes the woman as highly independent, as she lives the majority of her life without her husband or other adult company for lengths at a time, only her children for company. She is used to being left alone. She once lived like this for eighteen months. As a girl she built all the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead. " Lawson emphasised the woman's hardship through the contrast between her old life in the city, and life in the outback. The opening paragraphs of *The Drover's Wife* illustrate the harshness of the environment in which the woman lives, before venturing into the bulk of the story.

The direct description of the house in such a matter-of-fact tone and the detailed imagery of the flora, like the " stunted, rotten native apple trees,"

introduces the element of hardship early in the piece, impressing on the reader the notion that bush life was a struggle. The hardship of life in the outback is expressed throughout the short story *In a Dry Season*, also by Henry Lawson. *In a Dry Season* paints the picture of the outback, from the perspective of a passenger on a passing train. Lawson uses the motif of an artist to describe what the passenger was seeing on his journey. By way of variety, the artist might make a water-coloured sketch of a fettler's tent on the line. " Lawson builds the image with descriptive language all throughout the piece, and the artist motif allows Lawson to describe the scene in visual terms. *In a Dry Season* has a generally harsh tone, only broken by the element of black humor and paradox. " Death is about the only cheerful thing in the bush. " By this statement, Lawson attempts to soften the harshness of this life. The element of black humor allows the reader to understand the seriousness and the bleakness of the bush.

Similarly, the painting titled *Down on His Luck* by Frederick McCubbin captures the element of hardship in the bush, differentiating from Lawson's stories in that McCubbin presents this experience through the use of visual techniques rather than language. The painting depicts a man alone in the bush, sitting beside a fire and his swag, looking down towards the ground. The man's down-cast face suggests discontentment and disappointment, and furthermore, hardship. His clothes are worn and discoloured; this emphasises the hardships and struggles of this man's life.

The earthy colours of his clothes also represent a connection with the land – but the lack of vivid greens in the drab trees and plants indicates that although the flora is alive, nothing is thriving but instead struggling to grow.

This signifies the man's misfortunes in his work, which involves the land. Lawson's *The Drover's Wife* is characterised as a bleak picture and this is directly stated in "there is nothing to see and not a soul to meet." The bush wife's experiences reflect the unpleasantness of isolation and living remotely.

This is enforced by the stressing of dangers posed on lone woman by strange men, through the image of "gallows-faced men." the isolated lifestyle of the bush is further demonstrated through descriptive language – "Bush is all around – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance." The repetition of "bush" and "no" fortifies the image of abundance of bush land, and a lack of everything else. The imagery "horizon," "flat" and "distance" reveal the land as having no change; adding a feel of monotony to the scene.

Correspondingly, the experience of isolation is illustrated in Lawson's *In a Dry Season* metaphorically. "You could go to the brink of eternity as far as Australia is concerned and yet meet an animated mummy of a swagman who will talk about going 'out back.'" Lawson's use of the metaphor of the edge of eternity for the affect of appearing far away, together with the metaphor of a mummy which is often symbolic of distance, epitomizes his isolated these towns are. Throughout many of his stories, Lawson's characters speak in colloquial language to stress their Australian connection and lifestyle.

The informal dialect implies the general level of education these people have acquired, and their restricted vocabulary advocates their isolation from educational resources. "Yer wanter go out back young man, if yer wanter

see the country. " The reference to the " out back" combined with the informal language accentuates the expression of isolation in the out back. Another allusion to isolation in In a Dry Season is that of monotony; Lawson refers to the " New South Wales Western line" as consisting of bush all the way along.

This suggests an unbrokenness and puts forward the absence of civilisation. Furthermore, McCubbin's painting Down on His Luck conveys the experience of isolation also. The inclusion of the rolled up swag indicates that the man in the picture does not have a township of which he can settle, but instead travels alone through the bush in search of work. The artwork lacks any sort of civilisation or cultivated land, but consists of just plain bush. This, along with the deliberate act of only placing one person in the images, instills the aspect of isolation in the out back.

Additionally, the swagman has been placed in the middle ground of the painting - a small shrub in the foreground, bush land in the background. This places the viewer on the outside; this emphasises the fact that he is alone, further impressing the idea of isolation. Australian bush is known to be one of the most dry places in the world, aside from deserts. Lawson incorporated the drought experience into his work of In a Dry Season using a multitude of different techniques. " Somebody told me that the country was very dry on the other side of the Nevertire.

It is. " In this quote, he points out that someone else said the out back was dry, inland away from the coast. The short, definitive sentence structure of " it is" is a confirmation of that. Lawson also includes a personal statement

regarding drought – “ I’d rather settle on the water; at least, until some gigantic system of irrigation is perfected in the West. ” The capitalisation of “ West” encompasses all of the out back and acts with regard to the out back existing as a specific place, creating a stereotype.

Towards the end of the story, Lawson makes reference to camels. “ At 5. 30 we saw a line of camels moving out across the sunset. ” This accentuates the drought theme as camels are animals that reside in drought-ridden places as they require minimal amounts of water to survive. Additionally, McCubbin has employed the experience of drought into Down on His Luck. The subdued tones and brown colourings of the trees and grass, and the absence of deep greens, denotes the lack of water and henceforth an inability of plants to flourish.

The element of hardship within the piece and the inclination that the man depends on the land for prosperity further impresses the drought situation. Lawson also demonstrates the theme of drought throughout The Drover’s Wife with the use of imagery and contrast between flashbacks. “ Nothing to relieve the eye save he darker green sheoaks which are slightly above the narrow, almost waterless creek. ” The detailed description of the creek and the monotonous scenery impress upon the reader the absence of hydration in the environment.

The woman, at one point in the story, has a flashback to a previous period of drought in which a bushfire threatened her family. “ The rain made the grass grow, and this reminds her of how she fought a bushfire once while her husband was away. The grass was long and very dry, and threatened to burn

her out. " The alliteration of the " g" in " grass grow" emphasises the grass actually increasing in size. This drought motif is contrasted by another flashback - " She thinks of his she fought a flood during her husband's absence. The contrast breaks the drought motif and adds variety to the story. Texts such as short stories and images display aspects of certain experiences, using an array of both language and visual techniques, to form an image in the viewer's mind of the situation portrayed in the text; such as how the works of Lawson and McCubbin explore the experiences of life in the bush in the late nineteenth century. Texts of this nature are considered to be distinctly visual, as they allow readers and viewers to understand the text on a visual level.