The tramp by barbara baynton

Profession, Writer

The Australian author Barbara Baynton had her first short story published under the title “ The Tramp” in 1896 in the Christmas edition of the Bulletin. Founded in Sydney in 1880, the Bulletin was instrumental in developing the idea of Australian nationalism. It was originally a popular commercial weekly rather than a literary magazine but in the 1890s, with the literary critic A. G. Stephens as its editor, it was to become “ something like a national literary club for a new generation of writers” (Carter 263).

Stephens published work by many young Australian writers, including the short story writer Henry Lawson and the poet “ Banjo” Paterson and in 1901 he celebrated Miles Franklin’s My BrilliantCareeras the first Australian novel. 2 ... Stephens deemed her “ too outspoken for an Australian audience” (Schaffer 154). She was unable to find a publisher in Sydney willing to print her stories as a collection and it was not until 1902 that six of her stories were published in London by Duckworth’s Greenback Library under the title Bush Studies. It was, on the whole, reviewed favorably.

She subsequently published a novel, Human Toll, in 1907 and an expanded collection of stories in 1917. Yet, although individual stories were regularly included in anthologies of Australian literature, by the time of her death in 1929 she was better known as an antique collector and her collected stories were not reprinted until 1980. 3 Until the advent of feminist criticism in the 1980s, Baynton remained a largely forgotten figure, dismissed as a typical female writer who did not know how to control her emotions and who was unable to put her “ natural talent” to good use.

As late as 1983 Lucy Frost could talk of “ her unusually low level of critical awareness” (65) and claim that she “ relies ... on instinct ... In order to write

well she needs to write honestly out of intuitive understanding. ... As art it makes forfailure” . For a long time reading the implicit in Baynton’s stories consisted in identifying the autobiographical elements and attempting to piece together her true life. She notoriously claimed, even to her own children, to be the daughter not of an Irish carpenter but of a Bengal Lancer and in later life tried to conceal he hardship of herchildhoodand early married life. The stories were read as “ true” accounts of what it was like for a poor woman to live in the bush at the end of the nineteenth century. This paper argues that far from being a natural writer whose “ talent does not extend tosymbolism” , Baynton is a sophisticated writer who uses obliqueness simply because this was the only form of criticism open to a woman writer in Australia at this time. The apparent inability of readers to engage with the implicit in her stories stems from an unwillingness to accept her vision of life in the bush. In order to understand Baynton's technique and why earlier readers consistently failed to interpret it correctly, it is important to replace her stories in the context of the literary world in which she was working for, as Brown and Yule state, when it comes to reading the implicit: “ Discourse is interpreted in the light of past experience of similar discourse by analogy with previous similar texts”. In 1901, the year of federation and the height of Australian nationalistic fervor, A. G. Stephens wrote: What country can offer to writers better material than Australia? We are not yet snug in cities and hamlets, molded by routine, regimented to a pattern. Every man who roams the Australian wilderness is a potential knight of Romance; every man who grapples with the Australian desert for a livelihood might sing a Homeric chant of history, or listen, baffled and beaten, to an Aeschylean

dirge of defeat. The marvels of the adventurous are our daily common-places.

The drama of the conflict between Man and Destiny is played here in a scenic setting whose novelty is full of vital suggestion for the literary artist. Women are conspicuously absent in this description of Australian life as they are in the work of Henry Lawson whose stories have come to be seen as the ‘ perfect’ example of nationalistic writing. In the titles of his stories women, if they exist at all, are seen as appendages of men: “ The Drover’s Wife,” “ The Selector’s Daughter. They are defined at best by their physical characteristics: “ That Pretty Girl in the Army,” but more often than not are specifically excluded: “ No Place for a Woman” or reduced to silence: “ She Wouldn’t Speak. ” In the texts themselves the narrators are either anonymous or male and male mate-ship is valued above marriage. In Lawson's most well-known stories the bush is a destructive force against which man must wage a constant battle. The landscape, perhaps predictably, is depicted in feminine terms either as a cruel mother who threatens to destroy her son or as a dangerous virgin who leads man into deadly temptation.

Men survive by rallying together and are always ready to help a “ mate” in distress. Women are left at home and are shown to be contented with their role as homemaker: “ All days are much the same to her … But this bush-woman is used to the loneliness of it … She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children” (Lawson 6). Baynton's stories challenge this vision of life in the bush in a number of ways: the

majority of her protagonists are female; the real danger comes not from the bush but from the men who inhabit it. From the very beginning, Baynton’s stories were subject to a form of malecensorshipsince Stephens heavily edited them in an attempt to render the implicit conventional and thereby make the stories conform to his vision of Australian life. Few manuscripts have survived but the changes made to two stories have been well documented. In1984Elizabeth Webby published an article comparing the published version of “ Squeaker’s Mate” with a typescript/manuscript held in the Mitchell Library.

She noted that in the published version the structure has been tightened and some ambiguity removed by replacing many of the pronouns by nouns. More importantly, the ending has been changed and, since endings play such a crucial role in the understanding of a short story, this has important repercussions on the whole text: The new, more conventionally moralistic ending demanded a more actively brutal Squeaker and a more passive, suffering Mary. So traditional male/female characteristics were superimposed on Baynton’s original characters, characters designed to question such sexual stereotypes.

As well, the main emphasis was shifted from its ostensible object Squeaker’s mate, to her attacker and defender; instead of a study of a reversal of sex, we have a tale of true or false mateship. Despite these changes the text's conformity to the traditional Australian story of mate-ship which the Bulletin readers had come to expect remains superficial. The title itself is an ironic parody of Lawson's story titles. The woman is defined by her relationship to the man but the roles are reversed. The man has become the effeminate “

Squeaker," the woman the masculine " mate. As in Lawson's stories the male character's words are reported in passages of direct speech and the reader has access to his thoughts while the woman's words are reported only indirectly: "... waiting for her to be up and about again. That would be soon, she told her complaining mate". However, and this is an important difference with Lawson's stories, in Baynton's work the text deliberately draws attention to what is not said. For example when Squeaker leaves her withoutfoodand drink for two days: " Of them [the sheep] and the dog only she spoke when he returned" , or again: " No word of complaint passed her lips" .

By the end of the story the woman has stopped speaking altogether and the reader is deliberately denied all access to her thoughts and feelings: " What the sick woman thought was not definite for she kept silent always" . The main character is thus marginalised both in the title and in the story itself. The story is constructed around her absence and it is precisely what is not said which draws attention to the hardships of the woman's life. 8 A similar technique is used in " Billy Skywonkie. The protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the story, is not even mentioned until the fourth paragraph where she is described as " the listening woman passenger" (46). She is thus from the start designated as external to the action. Although there is a lot of dialogue in direct speech in the story, the protagonist's own words are always reported indirectly. The reader is never allowed direct access to her thoughts but must infer what is going on in her mind from expressions like " in nervous fear" or " with the fascination of horror".

Despite the awfulness of the male characters, the decentering of the protagonist makes it possible for readers unwilling to accept Baynton's views

on life in the bush to accept the explicitly stated opinions of the male characters and to dismiss the woman as an unwelcome outsider. 9 The most significant changes to the original stories, and those about which Baynton apparently felt most strongly since she removed them from the text of Bush Studies, concern the story now known as " The Chosen Vessel. " This story, as many critics have remarked, is a version of " The Drover's Wife" in which the " gallows-faced swagman" (Lawson 6) does not leave.

Lawson's text states repeatedly that the wife is " used to" the loneliness of her life, suggesting even that it is easier for her than for him: " They are used to being apart, or at least she is" . Baynton's character, on the other hand, dislikes being alone and the story shows the extreme vulnerability of women, not at the hands of Nature, but at the hands of men. 10 Baynton originally submitted the story under the title " When the Curlew Cried" but Stephens changed this to " The Tramp. " Once again his editorial changes deflect the reader's attention away from the female character.

By implicitly making the man rather than the woman the central figure, the rape and murder are reduced to one ' episode' in the tramp's life. Kay Schaffer underlines that this attempt to remove the woman from the story is also to be found in the work of the critic A. A. Phillips. For many years he was the only person to have written on Baynton and his article contains the preposterous sentence that her major theme is " the image of a lonely bush hut besieged by a terrifying figure who is also a terrified figure".

As Schaffer rightly points out, it is difficult to understand how any reader can possibly consider that the man who is contemplating rape and murder is a " terrified figure. " As was then the convention, both the rape and murder are

implicit: She knew that he was offering terms if she ceased to struggle and cry for help, though louder and louder did she cry for it, but it was only when the man's hand gripped her throat that the cry of " Murder" came from her lips. And when she ceased, the startled curlews took up the awful sound, and flew wailing " Murder! Murder! over the horseman's head . Stephen's deliberate suppression of two passages, however, means the reader can infer a very different meaning to events than that intended by Baynton. The Bulletin version omits the scene in which Peter Henessey explains how he mistakenly thought the figure of the woman shouting for help was a vision of the Virgin Mary. The only possible reading in this version is that the horseman was riding too fast and simply did not hear her calls: " She called to him in Christ's Name, in her babe's name … But the distance grew greater and greater between them" .

Baynton's original version leads to a very different interpretation: ' Mary! Mother of Christ! ' He repeated the invocation half unconsciously, when suddenly to him, out of the stillness, came Christ's Name – called loudly in despairing accents … Gliding across a ghostly patch of pipe-clay, he saw a white-robed figure with a babe clasped to her bosom. … The moonlight on the gleaming clay was a ' heavenly light' to him, and he knew the white figure not for flesh and blood, but for the Virgin and Child of his mother's prayers.

Then, good Catholic that once more he was, he put spurs to his horse's sides and galloped madly away . By clarifying what is going on in the horseman's mind, Baynton is implying that patriarchal society as a whole is guilty. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that the woman does not exist as a

person in her own right in the eyes of any of the male characters. Her husband denies her sexual identity: “ Needn’t flatter yerself ... nobody ‘ ud want ter run away with yew”; the swagman sees her as a sexual object, Peter Henessey as a religious one.

Taken individually there is nothing original in these visions of woman but their accumulation is surprising and ought to lead the reader to consider what place is left for a woman as a person. Stephen's second omission is a paragraph near the beginning of the story where the reader is told: “ She was not afraid of horsemen, but swagmen” . This sentence is perhaps one of the best examples of the way the implicit works in Baynton's stories. The presupposition, at the time widely accepted, is that horsemen and swagmen are different.

Explicitly asserting the contrary would have been immediately challenged and Baynton never takes this risk. Only with the story's denouement does the reader become aware that the presupposition is false, that both horsemen and swagmen are to be feared. The other technique frequently used by Baynton is that of metaphor and metonymy. According to Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni: “ le trope n'est qu'un cas particulier du fonctionnement de l'implicite. ... Tout trope est une deviance et se caracterise par un mecanisme de substitution – mais substitution de quoi a quoi, et deviance de quoi par rapport a quoi” .

Readers of Bush Studies have all too often identified only the substitution, not the deviance. In her detailed analysis of “ The Chosen Vessel” Kay Schaffer examines the significance of the last paragraph of the story in which the swagman tries to wash the sheep’s blood from his dog’s mouth and

throat. She is particularly interested in the last sentence “ But the dog also was guilty”. Most readers have seen this as a simple, almost superfluous statement, whose only aim is to underline the parallel between man and dog: the man killed a woman, the dog a sheep.

Schaffer on the other hand sees here a reference to the first paragraph: “ but the woman’s husband was angry and called her – the noun was cur” (Baynton 81). She analyses the metonymic association of woman and dog and argues that the woman’s dog-likeloyaltyto a husband who abuses her is open to criticism since as ahuman beingshe is capable of making decisions for herself. According to Schaffer's reading: “ Her massive acceptance of the situation makes her an accomplice in her fate”.

Most readers do identify the woman’s metaphoric association with the cow as a symbol of the maternal instinct but Schaffer again goes one step further and argues that since the woman is afraid of the cow she is consequently afraid of the maternal in herself but in participating, albeit reluctantly, in control of the cow, her husband’s property, she also participates in maintaining patriarchal society and therefore: “ Although never made explicit in the text, by metonymic links and metaphoric referents, the woman paradoxically is what she fears.

She embodies ‘ the maternal’ in the symbolic order. She belongs to the same economy which brings about her murder” . The baby is rescued by a boundary rider, but this does not mean that motherhood emerges as a positive force in the story. Baynton’s title “ The Chosen Vessel” implies that the abstract concept of the maternal can exist only at the cost of the woman by denying the mother the right to exist as a person: The Virgin Mary exists

only to provide God with his Son, a wife is there to ensure the transmission of power and property from father to son.

At the end of Baynton’s story even this reverenced position is denied women: “ Once more the face of the Madonna and Child looked down on [Peter] … ‘ My Lord and my God! ’ was the exaltation ‘ And hast Thou chosen me? ’ Ultimately Schaffer argues: If one reads through the contradictions, woman is not guilty at all – she is wholly absent. She takes no part in the actions of the story except to represent male desire as either Virgin or whore … She has been named, captured, controlled, appropriated, violated, raped and murdered, and then reverenced through the signifying practices of the text.

And these contradictory practices through which the 'woman' is dispersed in the text are possible by her very absence from the symbolic order except by reference to her phallic repossession by Man. In a similar way Baynton's use of sheep as a metonym for women and passive suffering is often remarked upon but is seen as little more than a cliche.

This view is justified by referring to “ Squeaker’s Mate” where the woman is powerless to stop Squeaker selling her sheep, many of which she considers as pets, to the butcher and to “ Billy Skywonkie” which ends with an apparently stereotypical image prefiguring the “ meaningless sacrifice” (Krimmer and Lawson xxii) of the woman in “ The Chosen Vessel”: “ She noticed that the sheep lay passive, with its head back till its neck curved in a bow, and that the glitter of the knife was reflected in its eye” (Baynton 60).

Hergenhan does go slightly further by arguing that this is also an example of Baynton's denial of the redemptive power of the sacrificial animal but when the collection as a whole is considered, and the different references are read in parallel, the metonym turns out to be far more ambiguous. In " Scrammy ' And" the knife is clearly not a dangerous instrument: " The only weapon that the old fellow had was the useless butcher's knife" (41, my italics). Even more significantly in this story the reflection of the moonlight in the sheep's eyes is sufficient to temporarily discourage

Scrammy: " The way those thousand eyes reflected the rising moon was disconcerting. The whole of the night seemed pregnant with eyes" . Far from being " innocent" creatures the sheep are associated with convicts: " The moonlight's undulating white scales across their shorn backs brought out the fresh tar brand 8, setting him thinking of the links of that convict gang chain long ago" . Nor are sheep seen to be entirely passive: " She was wiser now, though sheep are slow to learn" . In thisrespectthe symbolism of the ewe and the poddy lamb is particularly interesting.

The old man claims that this is the third lamb that he has had to poddy. He accuses the ewe of not being " nat'ral" , and having a " blarsted imperdence" . The narrator, on the other hand, describes her as " the unashamed silent mother" . What is being challenged is not her motherhood but her apparent lack of maternal instinct. Once the shepherd is dead, the ewe is capable of teaching her lamb to drink suggesting that it is in fact the man who prevents the maternal from developing. This would seem to be confirmed by the repeated remark that men insist on cows and calves being penned separately.

Thus apparently hackneyed images are in fact used in a deviant way so as to undermine traditional bush values. In much the same way, Baynton's cliches also deviate from expected usage. For example in " Scrammy 'And" the old shepherd sums up his view of women as: " They can't never do anythin' right, an' orlways, continerally they gets a man inter trouble . " By inverting the roles of men and women in the expression " getting into trouble" the text suggests that values in the Bush are radically different to elsewhere. Something which is confirmed in " Billy Skywonkie" where the narrator reflects: " She felt she had lost her mental balance.

Little matters became distorted and the greater shrivelled" . Similarly the apparently stereotypical descriptions of the landscape in fact undermine the Bulletin vision of Australia. In " Billy Skywonkie" the countryside is described as " barren shelterless plains" . Were the description to stop here it could be interpreted as a typical male image of the land as dangerous female but the text continues; the land is barren because of " the tireless greedy sun". In the traditional dichotomy man/woman; active/passive the sun is always masculine and like the sun the men in Bush Studies are shown to be greedy.

Although never explicitly stated, this seems to suggest that it is not the land itself which is hostile but the activities of men which make it so. Schaffer sees a confirmation of this in the fact that it is the Konk's nose which for the protagonist " blotted the landscape and dwarfed all perspective" (Baynton 50). In Baynton's work women are associated with the land because both are victims of men. The least understood story in the collection is undoubtedly " Bush Church": Krimmer and Lawson talk of its " grim meaninglessness" (xxii) and Phillips complains that it is " almost without plot" .

It is perhaps not surprising that this story should be the most complex in its use of language. Of all the stories in the collection “ Bush Church” is the one which contains the most direct speech, written in an unfamiliar colloquial Australian English. These passages deliberately flout what Grice describes as the maxims of relevance and manner – they seem neither to advance the plot nor to add to the reader's understanding of the characters. Most readers are thrown by this failure to respect conversational maxims and the co-operative principal. Consequently they pay insufficient attention to individual sentences.

Moreover, the sentences are structured in such a way as to make it difficult for the reader to question their ‘ truth’ or even to locate their subversive nature. As Jean Jacques Weber points out, the natural tendency is to challenge what the sentence asserts rather than what it presupposes . This is clearly illustrated by the opening sentence: “ The hospitality of the bush never extends to the loan of a good horse to an inexperienced rider”. Readers may object that they know of occasions when a good horse was loaned to an inexperienced rider but few realise that the assertion in fact negates the presupposition.

Baynton is not talking here about the loan of a horse but is challenging one of the fundamental myths of life in the bush – that there is such a thing as bush hospitality. Once again a comparison with Lawson is illuminating. Lawson's anonymous narrator says of the Drover's wife: “ She seems contented with her lot”. In “ Bush Church” this becomes: “ But for all this Liz thought she was fairly happy” . Although semantically their meaning is similar, pragmatically they could not be more different.

It is not the anonymous narrator but Liz who is uncertain of her feelings and feels it necessary to qualify “ happy” by “ fairly. ” More importantly the presupposition, “ but for all this,” deliberately leaves unsaid the extremepovertyand the beatings to which Liz is subject. Susan Sheridan, talking of Baynton’s novel Human Toll, says: “ the assumption that it is autobiographical deflects attention from the novel’s textuality as if the assertion that it was all ‘ true’ and that writing was a necessary catharsis could account for its strangely wrought prose and obscure dynamics of desire”.

The same is true of her short stories. By persisting in reading her as a “ realist” writer many readers fail to notice her sophisticated use of language. Perhaps because none of the stories has a narrator to guide the reader in their interpretation or because the reader has little or no direct access to the protagonist’s thoughts, or because of the flouting of conversational maxims and the co-operative principal, sentences are taken at face value and all too often little attempt is made to decode the irony or to question what on the surface appears to be statements of fact.

Hergenhan queries the success of a strategy of such extreme obliqueness: “ It is difficult to understand why Baynton did not make it clearer as the ellipsis is carried so far that the clues have eluded most readers”), but it should be remembered that, given the circumstances in which she was trying to publish, direct criticism was never an option for Baynton. What is essential in decoding Baynton’s work is to accept that it is not about women but about the absence of women who are shown to be victims both of men in the bush and of language.