Writers of international standing will have an indigenous audience as well as a world-wide one, and as such will be popular not only because of delineation of character, plot-construction etc., but also because they happen to be typically 'Indian', 'Candian', 'Australian' and so on. Familiar themes seen from an unfamiliar point of view, whether due to settings or characters who are different from our own attract the reader. As Sir James Plimsoll says: "A reason for reading a good Australian novel, and a reason why it is good, is that it is Australian... just as an essential element in an Indian work being good is that it is Indian, though it might be written in English and dealing with universal values and forces."¹

How then does a work of fiction typify itself as belonging to a particular country or age? Through characters, the way they face or do not face (depending on how you look at it) a situation, which in turn shows their philosophy of life, the way they interact with their fellow creatures, their joys and sorrows, their surroundings and environment, all help us to know a particular country. It is almost a cliche that many things can be brought out by imaginative writing that

cannot be so well brought out through analytical works of history or sociology. And in imaginative writing, the best way perhaps to understand a different culture is through its humour.

II

Humour grows out of the socio-psychological context of the human mind. If you can grasp the locus of a joke of that culture, then you can understand its humour and thereby its culture. It is like saying that if you find yourself solving a tricky crossword puzzle in a particular language, then you have mastered that language.

Any member of modern writers reflect in their works, their surroundings, and are products of the environments they envisage for us. But for every thousand clever writers who consciously and acutely analyse the spirit of their generations, there may be only one who reflects deeply on life and focuses on it; there are a thousand clever dramatists, but only one Shakespeare.

Humorists are rare in literature because humour depends on catching not only the language but also the intonation, and gesture of the 'man on the street' and transform him into a
character. Both Lawson and Narayan have this kind of creativity: an eye for the unusual detail and personal idiosyncracy.

Thus the robust humour of Punjabi and Hindi sayings and proverbs, and North Indian idioms in Mulk Raj Anand, or the South Indian religious economic and social activities in Narayan contribute to presenting a typical Indian society. Which should be reason enough for reading them in addition to the other merits they also have. Similarly an understanding of the outback provided by the perennially poor but eternally optimistic 'father' stories of Steele Rudd or the zest for life shown by most of the characters of Lawson provide a deeper understanding of the Australian psyche.

Edward Garnett has this to say of Lawson: "His tales are not merely foreground. His pictures of life convey to us a great sense of the background of a whole people's life; their struggles and cares, their humour and outlook... he is a writer who does not stand aloof and patronize the bulk of the people who labour with their hands."²

The central force of humour comes through because of the contrast, and often incongruity, between the ideal and the actual. The contrast is brought out more effectively if there is a yardstick of an abstract statement which would make it more clear; a reference, subsonically as it were, to human values. It is aptly said:

"The highest comedy gains its power from the sense of tragic possibility, and the profoundest tragedy presents a full if fleeting vision, through the temporary disorder, of an ordered universe to which Comedy is witness. Without a sense of the tragic, Comedy loses heart; it becomes brittle, it has animation but no life. Without a recognition of the truths of Comedy, Tragedy becomes bleak and intolerable." ³

The quality of humour is not always 'pure' in the accepted sense i.e. there are always degrees of humour which overlap to produce a total impression. Thus genuine humour, though universal, does have different shades and is therefore relative to the society and age where it originates, like a flower whose fragrance perfumes the air around while it itself is rooted to one spot.

Humour is an essential ingredient in the stories of both Narayan and Lawson. They are both unquestionably masters, utilizing irony, exaggeration, satire and comedy with utmost zeal and skills their stories too, clearly indicate that they are true representatives of their cultures.

Henry Lawson's stories deal with men of little account in the world, but who have faced drink and droughts, Fate and Nature, unfortunate loves and unforeseeable circumstances. His pen-photographs are imprinted in the readers' minds: the bush larrikin in 'The Wreck', the shearer, the swagman and the shanty-keeper in 'The Exception', the cook in 'Macquarie's Mate', the bush drunk who quotes Homer in 'The Cove', the 'ratty' imbecile in 'Rats' - in short, both bush-workers and bush ne'er-do-wells, honest men and rogues.

Narayan's short stories too (termed 'his other work' by William Walsh) is representative of the life, customs, habits, expectations etc. of India, induced by tone and colour, perspective and imagination. The blind beggar making a slave of his dog, the student who commits suicide after his examination results, the ambitious parents of a would-be child-star, the corrupt rice-merchant, the pickpocket, the night-watchman: all are seen in their unique backgrounds.
Life in the Australian bush is no rosy picture, nor does Lawson attempt to paint it so. The woman of the bush (as in 'The Drover's Wife') faces a hard life of toil and sweat, slaving in the lone homestead, delivering her children all alone, bringing them up, and fighting snakes and tramps and other enemies that appear in the course of her life. His male characters, too, frequently narrate past exploits of gold-diggings, or attempt to clear the land of roots and stumps in order to grow crops, and the bushmen are not averse to "hump their blueys" and walk towards the sunset.

Yet here, Lawson has the ability to probe beneath the surface of the rough human nature, rendered so by the vagaries of Nature, and depict such immortal characters as the 'Giraffe', who is generous even to enemies:

"It's that there sick jackaroo that was pickin'-up at Big, Billabong," said the Giraffe. "They're sendin' him away to the hospital in Sydney in the speeshul train. They're jus' goin' to take him up in the waggonette to the railway station, an' I thought I might as well go round with the hat an' get him a few bob. He's got a missus and kids in Sydney."  

('Send Round the Hat')

A few other examples:

"Once, when Mary asked Annie, the eldest girl at home, if they were hungry, she denied it. ... A ragged mite ... explained things.

'Mother told Annie not to say we was hungry if you asked, but if yer give us anythink to eat, we was to take it an' say thenk yer, Mrs Wilson.' 5

(Water Them Geraniums')

Ow when Joe has a fight with a Sydney jackaroo, and Mary is afraid that the jackeroo may murder Joe later. The poor girl sits on guard all night:

"A girl screamed out ... she kept saying 'I thought you were ... I thought ...' An old, single-barrel muzzle-loader shotgun was lying at her feet." 6

(Joe Wilson's Courtship')

The manifold details in Narayan's short stories too, depict life, religion and economics:

"A great flame of camphor was waved in front of the image, and bronze bells rang. A silence fell upon the crowd. Every eye was fixed upon the image. In the flame of the

circling camphor Nataraja's eyes lit up."7

('Such Perfection')

"Sometimes ten rupees a day, five, two or nothing. I have eight children, my wife, and two sisters and a niece depending on me, and all of them have to be fed, clothed, sent to schools and provided with books and medicines..."8

A glance at the scope of their work would reveal that geographically, their range is limited. Lawson's range is comparatively wider: as Lawson had spent his early life among the unemployed or among manual labourers in city and country - or town and bush, to use Australian terms - his setting is usually proletarian. He can move from the Australian outback to draw pictures of city life, of New Zealand or shipboard experiences, but his natural milieu is the Australian bush, and the characters who inhabit it - wandering, hand-working, independent, outspoken - Australian to the core.

Narayan concretises his own experience over the years into a large pavement picture of Malgudi, "and if of Malgudi, then of India itself."9 - the evening crowd near Lawley's statue, children playing with hoops and balls, schoolboy disappointment and a student's suicide, Monday morning blues,

or blind beggar, or a wayside astrologer. The geographical features of the colourful world of Malgudi is familiar to all readers: the Sarayu river on one side and the Memphi Hills with its dak bungalow on the other, the railway station, the noisy market, Albert Mission School, Nallappa's Grove ... Malgudi is truly a microcosm of tradition Indian society, geographically limited but with universal themes.

IV

Both Lawson and Narayan had been journalists for a time, and their journalistic experiences naturally influenced their work. Keen observation and the capacity for ferreting out a fact were the genesis for their stories: experience transmitted.

'Producing' fiction to adhere to a strict schedule (not always written in inspiration) makes the work of both these writers suffer from that characteristic bane of such writing - inequality. The quantity and speed of writing demanded by such periodical production inevitably affects consistent quality. Readership response, too, played an important part, and such readership is not always discerning: the public tends to identify comedy with burlesque and tragedy with a lump in the throat. Any writer whose living depended on writing for them would be affected by them, even
if he did not wish to be so affected. Indeed, the Bulletin was seen as "a sort of literary sausage machine. The raw materials of the most diversified genius go into it, and they come out all alike at the other end."10

Both Lawson and Narayan have been hopelessly underestimated by early critics. Critics have either adopted a patronising tone towards what they took to be inspired naivete or found fault with their presentation. Some critics pronounced judgement on the work as a whole, without sifting through the stories written under pressure and against time, and those written with thought and leisure.

Lawson and Narayan both need a strong hint from Reality in order to write; they cannot write pure fantasy; and both can pinpoint the actual experience that was the source for a particular story. Yet, while Narayan is like a railway station, placidly rooted, with an observant eye on such passengers as may alight, Lawson is a rushing train that gathers sights and scenes in different places. Says Narayan:

"I get all influence from life, from the surroundings, a little bus-stop or a street shop."11

A little bit of family history comes out in one of

10. 'Touchstone' pen-name for Boote, Henry E., 'Lawson's Latest', Worker, Brisbane, 9th May, 1896.
Lawson's poems, which accounts for his multiplicity of experiences and his aversion to a settled life:

"A roving, roaming life is mine,
Ever by field and flood
For not far back in my father's line
Was a dash of Gypsy blood."^{12}

Both these authors honed their writing abilities through continuing to write in what was apparently the most casual and 'newspapery' and artless art, and developed a type of fiction which hovers between a straight short story and a sketch of scenes and incidents, using various kinds of humour to the greatest advantage in scrolling the human document.

Both have a distinct style: one can say 'This is Lawson' or 'This is Narayan' even before one reads the name at the simplicity marks a complexity that can encompass delicate sympathy, laughable follies and dry irony.

Lawson's 'The Union Buries its Dead' which uses the particular episode of the death and funeral of a young stranger as a structural device to focus on the callousness and

^{12} Quoted in the article 'Henry Lawson' (Anon) \textit{W.A.Teacher's Journal, Sydney.} 11th Nov.1922.
indifference that society has for an individual, has for its counterpart an incisive irony in R.K. Narayan's 'Iswaran'.

The workers attend the funeral of a stranger who dies suddenly in their town, not because they are struck with the frightful reality of Death, but because the stranger was a Roman Catholic and a member of the General Labourers' Union.

"... and unionism is stronger than creed. Drink, however, is stronger than unionism."\textsuperscript{13}

('The Union Buries its Dead')

Thus the workers get drink in the true tradition of a 'wake' and more than half of them are unable to follow the hearse. The few who do, strangers to each other, talk about the accident and lie about the narrow escapes they themselves have had. In other words, they are more concerned with themselves, each trying to 'yarn' projecting himself as a hero.

Narayan's 'Iswaran' is artistically more satisfying. Iswaran, who faces his college examinations and subsequent failure every year with bravado, smarting constantly under jibes from friends and family, suddenly becomes a 'hero' in his own eyes when he discovers that this time he has passed in the second class. The irony is that he is so thrilled with

\textsuperscript{13} Lawsoon, 'The Union Buries its Dead', \textit{The Bush Undertaker} and other stories, p.25.
his achievement that he pretends he is a king on a horse, and
gallops straight into the river Sarayu; leaving behind a chit
written before he had seen his results:

'My dear father: By the time you see this letter I
shall be at the bottom of the Sarayu. I don't want to live
Don't worry about me. You have other sons who are not such
dunces as I am . . ."... 14

('Iswaran')

These two writers share a tone - light, free, fluent,
conversational and more importantly, it is a tone that comes
naturally.

'The Loaded Dog' by Lawson, for example, finds a
parallel in Narayan's 'Attila' for similarity in tone and
a flexibility of style that modifies itself ever so slightly
as a speaker and the situation changes:

"Run, Andy! Run!" they shouted back at him. "Run!!!
Look behind you, you fool!" Andy turned slowly and looked,
and there close behind him, was the retriever with the cartridge
in his mouth -wedged into his silliest and broadest grin. And
that wasn't all. The dog had come round the fire to Andy, and
the loose end of the fuse had trailed and wagged over the

Stories, p. 91.
burning sticks into the blaze; Andy had slit and nicked the firing end of the fuse well, and now it was hissing and spitting properly."\(^{15}\)

(\textit{'The Loaded Dog'}

In 'Attilla', Narayan shows himself as a master of the ludicrous. Named after Attila the Hun, the dog in fact seems imposing but treats the whole world with overwhelming friendliness:

'He stood twenty inches tall, had on large frame and a forbidding appearance on the whole - but that was all... [\(A\)] person had only to stop and smile, and Attila would melt'.\(^{16}\)

Ironically, it is this very friendliness that makes him stick to the burglar who is consequently caught! Attila is praised to the skies, but "It was as well that Attila had no powers of speech. Otherwise he would have burst into a lamentation that would have shattered the pedestal under his feet."\(^{17}\)

VI

Both writers are drawn largely into their own work as narrators; their stories are usually told as if by one of the

\(^{15}\) Lawson, Henry., 'The Loaded Dog', \textit{The Bush Undertaker and Other Stories}, p.179.


\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.180.
members of a group when the events described occurred. The Talkative Man series is seen in the Indian context of the Bodhisattva tales\(^\text{18}\) where the tales vary according to the births of the soul who later becomes the Buddha. The Talkative Man, can also be seen as the 'bahurupiya' of modern India, playing different roles in society. The character Mitchell, always with his dog beside him, is the narrator in many of Lawson's stories. Indeed, the narrator reminiscing about the diversity of his experiences is the archetype of gossip in fiction: the gossip among neighbours or close companions over a cup of tea, or the detached, pipe-in-mouth yarn of the Australian bushman resting near a campfire and watching the billy boil.

Balancing on a tightrope of sentiment, using humour as a balancing rod, is the difficult artistic feat attempted by these writers. In writing about poverty, isolation and bleakness, it would have been very easy to sink into sick sentimentality or misplaced melodrama, but these writers are successful in rendering sentiment and avoiding sentimentality.

Consider, for example, the poverty of Muni in 'A Horse and Two Goats':

"His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment for the day ... She was old,

---

but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive."\textsuperscript{19}

This poverty is downplayed by the two parallel levels of incomprehension:

"He indicated two mounds with his hands. The stranger was completely mystified by the gesture. For the first time he said, 'I really wonder what you are saying because your answer is crucial. We have to come to the point when we should be ready to talk business.'

'When the tenth avatar comes, do you know where you and I will be?' asked the old man.\textsuperscript{20}

The initial misunderstanding snowballs, into a point of no return.

In Lawson's story 'Telling Mrs Baker' the parallel is maintained between the truth that we, the readers, know, and the lies spun out by the two characters Jack and Andy. These two drovers who had seen their boss die of the D.T.S., lie doggedly to Mrs. Baker to save her feelings as well as to protect the name of a dead mate. The irony is maintained throughout, as, after each lie, they stare for relief at the

\textsuperscript{19} R.K.Narayan., 'A Horse and Two Goats', A Horse and Two Goats, p.2.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p.6.
picture on the wall depicting the meeting of Wellington and Blucher on the field of Waterloo.

Lawson uses a three-tier structure: the truth, the drovers' telling lies which lead us away from the sentimentality of 'mateship', and the ending, a masterpiece of irony, leading us away from the sentimentality of 'chivalry' when the narrator, Andy's mate, justifies the deception, in ten short words: 'I don't think it did either of us any harm.'

Narayan's 'Dasi the Bridgegroom' narrates the story of a half-mad simpleton. Some mischief-mongers tell him that the new lady tenant is his wife, and, believing them, Dasi tries to meet her and consequently is thrown into the mental hospital. Yet, his belief unshaken, he earns parole on good behaviour and waits on the road to catch a glimpse of his 'wife'. Where, one may ask, is the 'humour' in this story? Again, in one of Lawson's stories 'No Place for a Woman', the author narrates how, when a bushwoman has labour pains, her husband rides hard for ten miles to get a doctor, and not finding him, rides a further ten miles for his in-laws, but returns to find both mother and child dead for want of help. He goes 'ratty' and continually imagines that his wife is alive and well and working in the house.

These stories show the writers' deep understanding of

loneliness and alienation. Humour arises out of incongruity between two parallels, and here irony is maintained through the constant shifting between reality and the madman's world, where objects, people and background are seen in a strange new light. The madman's confusion and utter bewilderment is scarcely 'comic', but the stories gain an ironic dimension through symbolism and pathos as we recognise in the bewilderment our own fear - in a world of shifting values, what really is 'real'? 

One remembers Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'Gimpel the Fool', where Gimpel's gullibility is the butt of everyone's jokes, and whose wife betrays him; yet Gimpel is unshaken in his faith in God. Gimpel is 'foolish', but he is 'happy' in his belief; the others are 'realistic' - but whether they are any better off is the question. Gimpel is a 'schlemiel' - a recurring type of character in Jewish Humour - which means a person whose luck is very bad, but who merits our sympathy sometimes. When the hopes of the wise seem foolish, then the faith of the foolish is a kind of redemption.

VII

One of the outstanding merits of Lawson lies in his familiarising Australian English to the literate world. The 'new' words in Australian English were actually words taken into
the language from the speech of aborigines either as they were or in a popularly altered form; occasionally, new words were coined.

For example, the word 'bush' has a well-defined significance: it means a small shrub and can be extended to mean thicket, scrub or a patch of uncultivated land covered with shrubs and small trees. In Australia however the term designates the whole hinterland, "all that part of temperate Australia which borders the constal strip to the east and south; including the gum trees with blue leaves, the Blue Mountains, the seemingly endless forests, the jungles of Queens land, the terrifying deserts named Never-Never land... and finally the West Australian hills with their gold mines."\(^{22}\) All this packed in one word!

This is how Lawson describes it: "Bush all round - bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted rotten, apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye..."\(^{23}\)

Narayan, too, holds that since India has fostered the English language for over a century, Indians are entitled to bring it in line with our own habits of thought and idiom.


English must "come to the dusty street, market place and under the banyan tree." His stories are liberally sprinkled with "kumkum", "khaddar", and "Coffee-tumblers" without however, any loss of directness and unambiguity in expression.

"If someone should ask, "How should an opposition function?" the best answer would be, "In the manner of a traditional mother-in-law who watches the performance of household work by a daughter-in-law and follows her about with her comments."  

The life depicted in the bush stories is rough and coarse, and one would expect the language too to be so. Yet Lawson uses conventional literary euphemisms for 'bad' words: he talks of 'stoussing' a man, substitutes 'crimson' for 'bloody' and for exclamations, we have 'I'm sure!' 'By Ghost!' and 'My Colonial!' which strike a discordant note.

Similarly does Narayan avoid four letter-words as far as possible.

"'What do you say, you vile humbug?'

'Shut up! Rajan Iyer cried,

'You shut up'.

---


I will thrash you with my slippers,' said Rajam Iyer.
'I will pulp you down with an old rotten sandal,' came the reply.
'I will kick you,' said Rajam Iyer.²⁶

The language of both writers is Pickwickian, not surprising if we consider that their common literary ancestor has been Charles Dickens. But the characters themselves are not Pickwickian in the sense that they are not personages who revel in a glorious innocence of the ways of the world. They are Pickwickian in a literary sense - the term 'humbug' for example is a strong insult in Dicken's work, because it escapes from conventional meaning, there is the implication of insult without the connotation.

VIII

A charge levelled against Narayan - and it may be said of Lawson too - is that he is not a 'serious' writer. The common complaint after reading Lawson and Narayan is that they have no psychological angle, no sense of rebellion, no significant confrontation etc. In short, we search in vain for heights of elation and depths of depression.

²⁶. R.K. Narayan, 'Fellow Feeling'.
Religion dominates the Indian ethos, yet it does not permeate Narayan's work, as say for example Graham Greene's. The freedom movement barely finds mention except perhaps when he has a dig at the 'fashion' of demonstrating patriotism; he seems to shut himself against certain disturbing yet very real elements in life. Certainly there is plenty of description about rituals in 'Such Perfection' and much discussion/influence of stars in 'Seventh House', but it seems without grip. Narayan seems to "lack comprehensive vision, a right perspective or a philosophy of life embracing the whole universe."  

While R.K.Narayan may not wear his religious heart on his sleeve, we do find in him deep and profound Indian truths: in 'Such Perfection' we find the humbling thought of man's puny nature compared to the Cosmic One; 'Seventh House' ends with the protagonist's acceptance of his fate or Karma; and 'Under the Banyan Tree' is a study of the Indian doctrine of renunciation.

Passionate love, with all its psychological complications, is played down by Narayan as well as by Lawson. Whatever class of people they write about, they present no primitivism, no debauchery, no ups and downs of passion. 'Love' is regarded by them as the calm, discreet preamble to marriage, nothing more or less. They are democratic writers for they write of

all kinds of people, but they remain faithful to the moral conventions of the middle class, again a result of the influence of Dickens, Scott and Lamb.

If, after reading Narayan, readers complain that he lacks a certain something, Lawson's work has suffered because of pre-judgement: people try to see the man in the author. Lawson was intimately involved with the Labour Movement, yet his work is not politically biased; his early childhood memories were that of a strong resentment against maternal domination, yet his women characters are not 'stereotypes', his extreme poverty continued till the end of his life, yet he is no self-pitying masochist; he took to drink so that he could lose himself in a halo of deceptive good fellowship, but he must not be classified merely as an apostle of mateship. Lawson, indeed, "looks on the play of life with friendly pity and friendly humour together, neither from the dress circle nor from the gods, but from the point of view of a member of the company of players, who is found of almost all of them and will be on the stage with them again in a minute or two."28

IX

Narayan and Lawson belong to that rare breed of writers who can be termed 'unclassifiable'. Their work is distilled from humour and sympathy together. Lawson's humour is truly

Australian, and is difficult to define: it is a little cynical, a little 'heartless' and given to practical joking, a little understatement along with a little exaggeration, with ample use of Coleridge's theory of the suspension of disbelief. But as Lawson himself has said, "There seems a quiet sort of sadness always running through outback humour." Narayan's is a sort of dry and quiet humour, easy going, with a tang of irony that invites the smile more than the laugh.

Both writers skim over the surface of humanity - it is human sensitivity, idiosyncracies and foibles that they write about - with brilliant realistic expression and an uncanny eye for detail. They have both established themselves as students of the human mind. In *Swami and Friends*, Narayan writes on the friendship between two boys:

"The bond between them was laughter." This holds equally good for Lawson and Narayan too.