

The Sitting Bee - Short Story Reviews

The Union Buries Its Dead by Henry Lawson

In *The Union Buries Its Dead* by Henry Lawson we have the theme of respect, change, responsibility, connection and identity. Taken from his *While the Billy Boils* collection the story is narrated in the first person by an unnamed narrator and from the beginning of the story the reader realises that Lawson may be exploring the theme of respect. The narrator and the other union men attend Jim's funeral based solely on the fact that Jim was a member of the Union. This may be significant as it suggests the impact that the Union may have had on life at the time the story was written. Men would attend other men's funerals even if they did not know the deceased out of respect to another union member. Though it is noticeable that throughout the story that most of the men who wanted to attend Jim's funeral abandoned the idea after they began drinking. This too could be important as it suggests that some men were not as conscientious or as respectful of others and once they began drinking their priorities changed. In many ways the funeral is an excuse for men to take a day of work and drink regardless of the fact the deceased like them might have been a union man.

The narrator's role in the story is also significant as he acts as the eyes and ears for the reader and as readers we get an insight into how fickle others might be. Particularly the men who chose to drink all day instead of attending the funeral. The narrator on the other hand feels as though he has a responsibility to Jim and as such does not miss the funeral. It is also interesting that the narrator's friend feels as though should he and the narrator have had a longer conversation with Jim. Jim may not have died. Which leaves the reader feeling as though the narrator's friend might be feeling guilty. Though he would have no real reason to feel guilty. Neither he nor the narrator are responsible for how long they might have engaged in conversation with Jim. The narrator's friend's remark that the river was deep enough to drown Jim might also be important. As Lawson could be using the harmless remark to act as foreshadowing to what happened Jim later on in the story. It is also interesting that the bars and pubs close for a brief moment when the hearse passes by as a mark of respect to Jim. Though the moment is only fleeting it does suggest a connection between the deceased and those who are still alive.

There is also a sense that the union connection to Jim is not the only reason as to why the narrator attended his funeral. There may be a stronger connection. One that both men shared due to the conditions of their work life. Both men work in the 'bush' where things would be hard so it is easy for the narrator to identify with Jim's life. At least that is the way it seems till it becomes clear that Jim is not really Jim and the man that has been buried remains unknown or at least forgotten by all (except by the narrator). It is possible that Jim chose to change his name and became a drover because of difficulties he may have incurred in the city. He may have needed to change his way of life and find a place in whereby he could be anonymous. As many drovers at the time choose to be. Everybody in life has baggage that they do not want to carry and by becoming a drover Jim was affording himself the opportunity to start his life afresh.

Which is somewhat ironic as Jim has never had the chance to live. He died a young man before he could really venture out in life and only had people at his funeral out of respect to his union membership. In reality nobody really knew Jim or cares to know Jim. Which may be the point that Lawson is attempting to make. He may be suggesting that the life of a drover or a swagman is a lonely life with few friendships. The funeral party are not friends of Jim's. They are only in attendance under a sense of obligation and even then most of those who were supposed to go to the funeral decided to get drunk instead. Only fifteen people attended the funeral of a man who was largely unknown and who will remain unknown. As mentioned friendships in the bush may have been rare with people living double lives or escaping from their past. Jim is no different to other drovers. He wanted a peaceful life after what may have been a period of chaos and the only place to find peace was to leave the city behind and become a drover.

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