

The Quest For Love and Identity in Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*

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ABSTRACT: Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874) has been described as 'the best novel produced in nineteenth-century Australia.'¹ Such a claim is reasonable because, at the time, Australian literature was but a fledgling and emerging phenomenon. However, the assertion could, arguably, be also extended to include twenty and twenty-first century Australian literature, since the novel's efficacy has not been diluted by time.

Some Classic Evaluations of the Work

According to Brian Elliot, the extent of Clarke's achievement could be gauged according to the quality and prestige of its many publications and reprints. As he wrote:

For the Term of His Natural Life (the longer title is used in modern editions) is available in the World's Classic Series, and in other issues, it even reached the Penguin editions, abridged and under the title *Man In Chains*.²

Michael Wilding's book on Marcus Clarke then continued with Elliot's line of reasoning by arguing that the novel's greatness can be measured according to the range of its world-wide publications and translations:

Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* (later titled *For the Term of His Natural Life*) is the most famous of all nineteenth century Australian novels. Its fame is international: it has appeared in English and American as well as Australian editions and has been translated into German (twice) Dutch, Swedish and Russian. And its fame has survived through a century to assure it the classic status that numerous publishers' series have awarded it.³

¹ Laurie Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction* (St Lucia Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993), p. 47. I would like to thank Dr David Andrew Roberts for making me aware of Hergenhan's book here cited, as well as Clarke's novel *For the Term of His Natural Life*.

² Brian Elliot, *Marcus Clarke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), Preface, p. xi.

³ Michael Wilding, *Marcus Clarke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 3.

A more recent critical study on the life and writings of Marcus Clarke also recognises the significance of the novel, except that, this time, the praise is perhaps more generous in that Hergenhan, Wilding and Ken Stewart all assert that it is equal to ‘any great work of fiction’,⁴ and, therefore, comparable with the Clarke’s own literary heroes, namely Balzac, Thackeray and Dickens.

Folklore and Narrative

Storytelling is integral to folklore’s power to connect individuals with communities.⁵ Collective memories are created in and through the telling of stories. Folklore is developed through the creation of narratives, knowledges, and experiences that draw together communities and cultures.⁶ Imaginative, emotive, and psychologically intense stories not only give individuals and their communities powerful experiences—they awaken desires and sensations that seek to reach beyond the limits of their sites of narration and of their printed contexts. The future, or the very desire for a future, is, therefore, built into the affective power of storytelling, awakening what could be thought as the thrill of immortality.

For the Term of His Natural Life is exemplary of folklore’s power to inspire thought, ignite emotion, and create memory. It has motivated literary and history scholars to examine its historical relevance, accuracy, cultural import, and aesthetic appeal; and further, it has contributed to the popular genre and to the community of biography writing, where Clarke’s personal life is scrutinized in order to further explore both his character and the character of his book.

The Novel’s Controversy and Complexity

Clarke’s style of narration is both effective and affective, in that it psychologically installs the reader within the terrors, torments, and injustices of a time that was once a source of great national shame and cultural embarrassment. Of course, recognition of our convict past has

⁴ Cyril Hopkins’ *Marcus Clarke*, ed. by Laurie Hergenhan, Ken Stewart and Michael Wilding (North Melbourne, Vic: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), p. 177.

⁵ There are countless books and journal articles that explore folklore’s connection with storytelling. Among them there may be cited Richard Bauman’s *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual Studies in Oral Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Simon J. Bonner’s, *Creativity and Tradition in Folklore: New Directions* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1992).

⁶ Australian Aborigines have managed to preserve—in diluted form—thanks to the efforts of colonizers to eradicate their race, for any group but fragments of their history and culture through performing rituals and songs, and also through the reification of their memories and stories as with cave and dot paintings.

taken some time to develop, and it is still questionable if the Tasmanians have ever really forgiven Clarke for providing such a brutal depiction of Port Arthur and of its surrounding environs.⁷ In light of this, it is again folklore in the sense that it has helped spawn a lucrative tourist industry that feeds off and on the stories of the tortured and the dead. *For the Term of His Natural Life* is not just a book; it has reached beyond itself in contributing to communities, careers, commercial industries, and individual experiences that have far exceeded the parameters of its printed text.

But to complicate matters, Clarke's novel is not just one text; it is two, since its original tragic ending was changed to appeal to a United States readership. Furthermore, it can be referred to in two different ways, *For the Term of His Natural Life* and *His Natural Life*, the latter being its original serial installment title.⁸ For many critics, including Wilding and Hergenhan, the title *His Natural Life* embraces more of the spirit of Clarke's desire to dramatise the complex alchemy of human character.⁹ Complexity, difference and multiplicity, therefore, all dwell within and through the very inception and development of Clarke's achievement.

By taking liberties with the discipline of history, the novel explores the psychological dimension of human suffering. The novel's truth, paradoxically, lies in its fiction. By making visible the invisible history of human mind-states, Clarke provides a powerful indictment of a system of deportation and incarceration that was a product of, and a response to, the industrialization and over-population of Britain's cities and prisons. As Wilding argues: 'It is Clarke's insight into the psychological structure of the convict system that makes *His Natural Life* a great novel.'¹⁰

The enduring greatness of *His Natural Life* is bound up with its power to elicit strong emotion. Clarke not only allows language to peer into the depths and abysses of what can and cannot be thought and felt, but he does this through directing the point of view through the mind-states of characters—in particular, of one Rufus Dawes. Wilding asserts that through directing the perspective through Dawes, Australia's convict 'years are given shape' and 'aesthetic meaning.'¹¹

⁷ At the historic site of Port Arthur there is a large placard erected in a central tourist location that provides information on Clarke's book, and its 1927 cinematic adaptation, as well as including newspaper reports of its nineteenth century reception. What was made clear from the newspaper reports was that Tasmanians were not happy about the depiction of Port Arthur and of their island in general.

⁸ In 1870 Clarke was editor of the *Australian Journal* where *His Natural Life* appeared in serial form.

⁹ In recognition of this allegoric and imaginative dimension to Clarke's novel, this essay will henceforth refer to the novel as *His Natural Life*.

¹⁰ *Marcus Clarke*, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The efficacy of Clarke's novel is achieved by telescoping the point of view through the thoughts and feelings of its likeable hero. We are introduced to both the novel and to Dawes through the revelation of a family secret, where we learn that he is not the biological son of Sir Richard Devine, but the bastard son of a Lord Bellasis who once visited the Devine household 'during the first' year of their marriage.¹² Once this scandal is revealed, Clarke's hero is cast out of the family home, to then be unfortunate enough to stumble upon a dead body, that, coincidentally, is that of his biological father. He is then unlucky enough to be the only person seen at the crime. In the eyes of the law he is a thief and a murderer.

Through the drama of the novel's and hero's introductions, we are persuaded to sympathise with Dawes. Furthermore, his decision to change his name from Richard Devine to Rufus Dawes, in order to protect the reputation of his mother, is seen as an act of self-sacrifice deepening the reader's sympathy. Dawes's surrender is exceptional, because what it means is that he gives up his power as a member of an elite class in its ability to avoid harsh punishment. As an orphan nobody, he cannot but be imprisoned.

Deep yearnings and primeval feelings awaken and dwell within Dawes once he is damned to a life of bondage on the other side of the world. Through his protagonist, Clarke questions the morality of a society that could exile, imprison, and make slaves out of thousands of people. Wilding acknowledges that Clarke was concerned with exploring the very 'human bases of society—psychology, motivation, action: the foundations of a consciousness.'¹³ As Dawes exclaims in utter exasperation to his foil in Maurice Frere:

'Wretch! If I am a wretch, who made me one? If I hate you and myself and the world, who made me hate it? I was born free—as free as you are. Why should I be sent to herd with the beasts, and condemned to this slavery, worse that death? Tell me that, Maurice Frere—tell me that!' (p. 153.)

Dawes's challenge to his tormenter in Frere brings to the fore the agony of identity when it is imprisoned and manipulated through the perceptions of villainous others and unjust institutions. Through the wicked Frere, Clarke indicts a convict system that not only denied people

¹² The front cover scene from the edition—Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life: Complete and Unabridged* (South Yarra, Victoria: Lloyd O'Neill Publishing Pty Ltd, 1983) p.26—features a scene from the Australian television series where the blurb, 'As Seen on TV', reinforces its audio-visual translation. All further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

¹³ *Marcus Clarke*, p. 12.

freedom, but also dignity. In light of this, what the excerpt also expresses is a general outrage felt for all convicts who were deemed unworthy of being human.

By characterising an exceptionally altruistic hero in Dawes, Clarke suggests that anyone, even the extremely heroic, can be transformed into an angry and violent wretch, if he or she were subjected to relentless tortures and abuses. As such, Clarke seriously questions the morality and civility of a system of deportation and imprisonment that seemed to neither support nor rehabilitate, but rather erode strength and goodness. Through Dawes's harsh convict experiences, we witness a process of spiritual and physical decline where his once generous nature is transformed into one of bitterness and anguish.

Both the quest and the crucial question of identity lie at the heart of Clarke's novel.

Identity in Disguise and Identity as Disguise

Interestingly, the theme of identity is explored through the trope of disguise. Disguise operates as a key narrative device through which situations develop and characters are formed. Disguise and name changes fill the pages of Clarke's novel in enabling plotlines to develop, and situations to arise. Certainly the narrative function and trope of disguise has been used many times over. For example, Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* uses disguise as a means in which to trick lovers and beloveds into revealing their true desires and motives.¹⁴ However, disguise in *His Natural Life* is not used as a means in which to enrapture or discover one's true love; rather it is used as a means in which to either protect or exploit.

Clarke dramatises the exploitative nature of disguise through the character of John Rex. In fact, Rex is described as a near physical twin of Dawes, which enables a counterplot to develop where their lives are intertwined and opposed. They look similar because unbeknownst to each, they are the bastard sons of a clearly very promiscuous Lord Bellasis. Once the convict Rex learns of Dawes's family secret, and miraculously escapes from imprisonment, he then manages to get back to England and assumes the identity of Mrs Devine's long thought of dead son. Rex's disguise, however, is not life-lasting since he not only wearies of the charade, and is threatened by a surprise visit of a spurned lover,

¹⁴ In *Great Expectations*, Dickens also uses the device of disguise in a slightly different way by suspending the name, and, therefore, the identity, of Pip's secret benefactor. Interestingly, the benefactor comes to be known as the convict—by the name of Abel Magwitch—whom Pip helped as a child. Despite Pip's help, Magwitch is caught and shipped to New South Wales. The Australian convict connection between Dickens, Clarke, and the theme of disguise deserves more attention than this essay can treat here.

but he is eventually re-captured and deported back to Australia. This counterplot, although an obvious contrivance, sharpens the sting of Dawes's suffering for, as he rots away in Port Arthur, Rex is shown to be enjoying all of the delights of a prodigal son.

This second level of narrative also hints at the arbitrary nature of human existence where the good are not necessarily rewarded and happy and the bad are not necessarily punished and unhappy. The original novel's ending further reinforces the grim reality of this truth, when it refuses to give its hero any lasting kind of comfort for his exceptional suffering and sacrifice. In this way, Clarke could be described as a social realist in his embrace of the arbitrary and melancholy weight to human suffering and existence.

Disguise in *His Natural Life*, therefore, cannot disguise the truth of life's injustice. It is also used as a means in which to reveal the very shallow and fragile veneer of our civility and civilization.

Epic Tragedy and Grand Passion

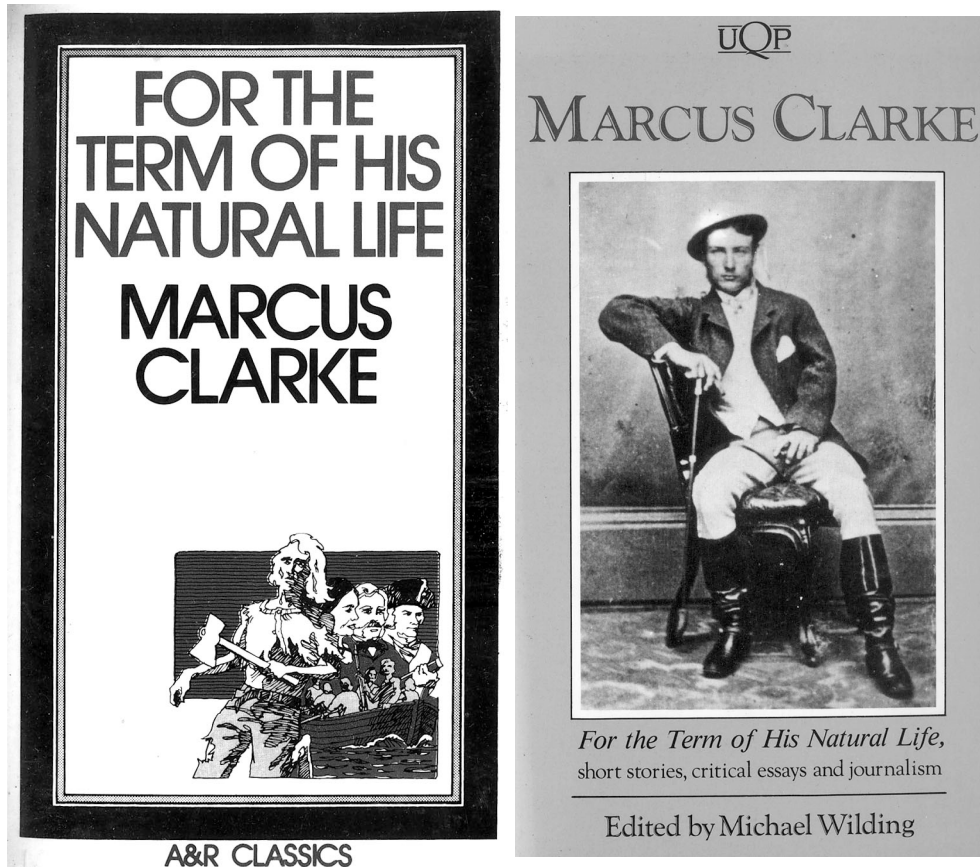
For the Term of His Natural Life is very much a tragedy. It could even be described as epic in its tragedy since it is all about a fall that cannot be controlled or rescinded. The aristocratic hero in Devine/Dawes not only falls from the great heights of money and class, but also for being known for his inner integrity. As the ephemeral words written in the sand by an adoring child in Sylvia Vickers reveal the truth of his smothered virtue:

'Good Mr. Dawes!

'Good Mr. Dawes!

This is the work of Good Mr. Dawes!' (p.173)

Words of affirmation written in the sand give Dawes some kind of hope after already enduring six long years of harsh convict punishment. But again, as in the beginning of the novel, the event of the writing in the sand is not exempt from difficulty because what Sylvia's recognition brings to the fore is another terrible decision. Much like the first disastrous decision he made to protect his mother by changing his name, Dawes is again internally conflicted when he is faced with the decision of either saving himself or the life of his beloved. For it is at this point in the narrative that Dawes is again installed within a situation not of his own making where the forces of chance come together in marooning him on an island where the villainous Frere and romantic heroine Sylvia are also stranded. He is subjected to a painful choice of either saving or abandoning his beloved girl, because through his own will, skill, and daring, he manages to build a raft. The raft or 'coracle' provides him with the means and desire for escape.



Covers of two editions of For the Term of His Natural Life—left, Angus and Robertson (1975) and University of Queensland Press (1976).

Both the coracle and Sylvia therefore present Dawes with a dilemma in which he struggles to address. For it is on this island, with a waiting coracle, that he has the opportunity to fully embrace his liberty. The struggle of this decision is also a struggle for identity because what Dawes wants to be so badly is the 'Good Mr. Dawes!' written in the sand by a girl-child who grows up into becoming his one great romantic passion.

It is passion, the passion to be good, and the passion to love and be loved, that drives Dawes to choose once again the welfare of another over his very self. But again such altruism is not rewarded because the girl-child is so traumatized by the exposure of floating for a lengthy time on a raft at sea that she suffers from illness and amnesia. The trauma of her suspended rescue is entwined within the grief of seeing her mother

die, of herself being ill, and of being constantly subjected to Frere's nasty lies. Sylvia therefore blocks out all memory of the experience.

Thus in saving a beloved once more, Dawes makes himself again vulnerable to an unjust legal system, to the pain of not being acknowledged, and to the suffering of a life-long term of loneliness and bondage.

The Genius is in the Novel's Difference

Through Dawes, Clarke not only dramatises the intensities and limits of human suffering—he makes them palpable. And he does this by transporting his reader into mind-states and psychological spheres where emotions dwell and struggle, even as they fight for survival and peace. Brian Elliot connects Dawes's extreme suffering with that of the tragic hero in *King Lear*. He has argued that through Dawes, Clarke exploits 'popular legend of concentrated individual suffering', in which he and Lear experience the agonies of 'helplessness and frustration' that lead to the crushing of their spirits.¹⁵

However, unlike the king in *Lear*, the prince in *Hamlet*, or the warrior-hero in *Othello*, Dawes's has no claim to subjectivity, let alone to the supreme subjectivities of kings, princes and famous warriors. He is denied subjectivity because he is a convict. Dawes calls himself a wretch because he is treated as one. He also has no grounding connection to any kind of identity in the form of a proper name, because he is neither Richard Devine nor Rufus Dawes but the bastard son of a dead man. He is therefore without foundation. Furthermore, his downfall is not the result of some internal flaw, fatal or otherwise, because he does not have the required vanity or egoism to seek revenge or exact personal justice. Instead, Dawes's tragedy is the result of unlucky circumstance. His painful fall is bound up with the erosion of identity, and with the degradation of feeling inhuman.

But perhaps the alchemiac nature of Clarke's sensibility in his choice of name in that of Richard Devine could lead us to an invisible sound identity concealed within the very word Devine, as that could acoustically be confused or twinned with the Divine.

Alchemy, Acoustics, Divinity and Duality

Reversals of fortune and misfortune that develop in and around the character Dawes demonstrate his narrative centrality, one in which plots, counter-plots and psychological pathways are opened and created. In this way, Clarke uses the idea of alchemy to creatively dramatise a mixture of

¹⁵ B. Elliot, *Marcus Clarke*, p. 146.

elements that enable relationships and plotlines to unravel, entangle and disentangle. The series of relationships between Dawes and Rex, Dawes and Frere,¹⁶ Good Mr. Dawes and Sylvia, Dawes and Devine all involve the character and name 'Dawes'. Both reconcilable and irreconcilable oppositions, resemblances, and unknown family bloodlines orbit and oscillate around Dawes. Further, the phonetic dimension of this name can again be drawn upon in understanding how Dawes operates as a kind of 'doors' through which plotlines, relationships and psychological mind-states are opened and explored.

The narrative design of Clarke's novel provides many kinds of dialectical struggles through which characters undertake epic psychological journeys as well as grand physical passages from England to Australia and back again. Yet Clarke's many different kinds of narrative and character alchemies presents us with a series of elements that do not equal, or add up to the sum of their parts because each component, thought of as a character or a plotline, has its own internal and, therefore, separate coherence.

One could, therefore, argue that at the heart of identity is a duality and a difference that is not reconcilable with its double or other. This is certainly the case for Dawes who does not know that he has a cousin in Frere and a half-brother in Rex. It is also the same for Frere and Rex who are equally unaware of their familial proximity to Dawes. Perhaps for Clarke, identity is about the alchemiac nature of relationships, all unaware of their inner connections, and—in so being—remain externally apart.

But, once again, there is perhaps an invisible acoustic identity in the names Dawes and Devine, one which could open up another line of thought into a sound-sphere where Dawes/Doors have the capacity to lead us into a Devine/Divine realm of the imagination and creation. Or perhaps there is already a divinity installed within the very idea and name of Dawes since he is, after all, the means through which new doorways are opened-up into the outwardly invisible sphere of mind-states.

The notion of invisible sound actualities/ divinities concealed within the names Dawes and Devine do not unfortunately allow him to harness any power for himself. And this is because he is selfless, a convict, and is used as a vehicle in which Clarke resists complying with the convention of narrative neatness; a technique often associated with the novels of Jane Austen. Perhaps Clarke's resistance to the imposing of an overarching form of symmetry is too unreal, and moreover, too synthetic

¹⁶ Unbeknownst to Dawes and Frere, they are cousins in the sense that Frere is the cousin of Richard Devine. Interestingly, too, the French word *frère* means brother, which is ironic since he is a brother to no-one.

a structure for such a historically inspired and morally serious book. In this way, the truth of life's injustice and incompleteness is again acknowledged by the novel's original ending that refuses to give to its hero Dawes, its heroine Sylvia, and its reader any lasting sense of comfort and fulfillment.

A Stormy Conclusion

By the novel's final chapter—aptly titled—'The Cyclone', Clarke loosens ever so slightly his grip upon Dawes's relentless suffering when, in a moment of brief affirmation, just before he and Sylvia drown, she remembers him once more for the man that he is—'Good Mr. Dawes!' (p. 439).

The extremely poignant question of identity that threads throughout *His Natural Life* is bound up with the very basic, yet necessary need to love and to be loved in return. The idea of folklore is entwined within this question of love, since it is, after all, about the love of storytelling. Such love can be so strong that it has the ability to bring individuals and communities together in their passionate embrace of emotions and memories that are integral to love's very possibility.

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