

Social and Cultural Realism in Banjo Paterson's "Waltzing Matilda"

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Abstract

This paper explores the deep social and cultural realism in Banjo Paterson's ballad "Waltzing Matilda," often seen as Australia's unofficial national anthem. Written in 1895, the poem captures the lifestyle, struggles, and values of itinerant workers in rural Australia during a time of major social change. This study looks at the story, language, and characters in the ballad to reveal its insights into class conflict, law enforcement, and national identity. Using historical context, literary analysis, and cultural theory, the paper shows that "Waltzing Matilda" not only preserves folk traditions but also critiques the social hierarchies and economic difficulties of its era. The swagman's tragic tale, set against the growing colonial frontier, represents the clash between freedom and authority, and between individualism and conformity. The poem's lasting popularity and cultural impact highlight its role in shaping Australian identity and reflecting the complexities of social realism within a national myth. This research offers a deeper understanding of Paterson's work as both a social record and a cultural symbol.

Keywords: Banjo Paterson, "Waltzing Matilda", social realism, cultural realism, Australian folklore, swagman, colonial Australia, national identity

Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson (1864–1941) is a well-known Australian poet, journalist, and writer, famous for his bush poetry. He was born near Orange, New South Wales. Paterson captured the spirit of rural Australia through vivid stories about the outback, its people, and their challenges. Some of his most famous works include "Waltzing Matilda," "The Man from Snowy River," and "Clancy of the Overflow." His poems celebrate the strength, independence, and humor of everyday Australians, especially Bushmen, stockmen, and swagmen. Writing during a time when Australia was shaping its identity, his ballads helped define the country's culture. He also worked as a war correspondent and was honored as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1939. Paterson remains an important figure in Australian literature and folklore.

Banjo Paterson's "Waltzing Matilda" is a cornerstone of Australian cultural heritage and literary history. Written in 1895, it is a ballad that tells the story of a swagman who camps by a billabong, steals a sheep, and when confronted by police troopers, chooses to die rather than be captured. The song is well-loved for its catchy chorus and folk appeal. "Waltzing Matilda" reflects the social and cultural realities of its time, portraying the experiences of Australia's working class in the late 19th century. This paper explores how Paterson's ballad highlights the social tensions between rural workers and landowners, the

harsh life of itinerant laborers, and the broader conflicts between colonial authority and Australia's emerging identity.

By placing "Waltzing Matilda" in its historical and social context, and examining its language, symbols, and story, this paper shows that Paterson's work offers a clear view of the inequalities and struggles of his time. The poem remains significant because it captures the spirit and challenges of a key period in Australia's development, making it a valuable work for understanding social and cultural realism in Australian literature.

To fully appreciate the social realism in "Waltzing Matilda," it is important to understand the historical setting of rural Australia in the late 1800s. During this time, pastoralism expanded, and land was often controlled by squatters—wealthy landowners holding large areas of territory (Kirkpatrick 45). At the same time, many working-class Australians, including swagmen, were itinerant laborers who moved from place to place looking for seasonal or casual work (Roberts 112). These swagmen carried their belongings in a swag—a bedroll—and were often marginalized, living unstable lives without permanent homes or rights.

The main character in "Waltzing Matilda" is a swagman, who represents a working-class group. Paterson's choice to focus on a swagman instead of a wealthy squatter or politician shows sympathy for the working-class point of view (Clarke 150). The clash between the swagman and the troopers, who stand for colonial law enforcement, highlights larger social tensions: the fight of working people to gain independence in a system controlled by powerful landowners and authorities (Smith 78).

The poem's references to the "jumbuck" (sheep) and "billabong" (a waterhole) clearly set the story in the Australian bush, a place full of both opportunity and hardship. Sheep grazing was a major part of the economy, and protecting livestock was very important to squatters, often leading to conflicts with swagmen and other rural workers (Davies 204). In this way, the ballad shows a small but clear example of class conflict in colonial Australia.

Social realism in literature aims to depict everyday life truthfully, focusing on social issues and the lives of ordinary people. Paterson's "Waltzing Matilda" does this by offering a clear, unsentimental view of the swagman's life. The poem doesn't portray the swagman as a hero but as a flawed person who steals out of need and faces serious consequences (Johnson 97).

The first quatrain of "Waltzing Matilda" show the swagman's wandering lifestyle and his connection to the land:

Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong,
Under the shade of a coolibah tree,
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled,
You'll come a- "Waltzing Matilda" with me. (Paterson, lines 1-4)

These lines create a feeling of loneliness and survival. The swagman's camp near the billabong highlights his life on the edge of society, while the billy (a tin can used for boiling

water) represents his simple, self-reliant way of living (Evans 41). The act of stealing the sheep—“jumbuck”—is shown as a desperate, almost unavoidable choice due to poverty and exclusion:

Along came a jumbuck to drink at the billabong,
Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him with glee,
And he sang as he stowed that jumbuck in his tucker bag,
You'll come a-waltzing, Matilda, with me. (Paterson, lines 5-8)

The repeated refrain, *Waltzing Matilda, Waltzing Matilda, / Who'll come a-waltzing, Matilda, with me?*, highlights the swagman's loneliness and his wish for company or freedom, but his theft leads to trouble with the law. This story realistically shows the effects of social isolation and the lack of legal protection for traveling workers (Miller 63).

The poem's characters represent cultural archetypes. The swagman stands for the working-class person who values freedom and self-reliance. The squatter, though not directly mentioned, is implied through the sheep's ownership and the presence of the troopers (Turner 88). The troopers represent colonial authority and law enforcement, often seen with suspicion or hostility by rural workers. Paterson in “*Waltzing Matilda*” presents the high-handed authoritarian tone of the Squatter and the troopers in the following lines,

Up rode the squatter, mounted on his thoroughbred,
Down came the troopers, one, two, three,
Whose is that jumbuck you've got in your tucker bag?
You'll come a-waltzing, Matilda, with me. (Paterson, lines 17-20)

This tension between the desire for independence and the enforcement of colonial law is central to the ballad's lasting popularity. As Tony Bennett points out, “*Waltzing Matilda*” captures the conflict between colonial authority and the growing Australian values of mateship and equality” (Bennett 114).

The swagman's choice to jump into the billabong and drown instead of surrendering to the troopers is a strong statement about personal choice and resistance.

Up jumped the swagman, leapt into the billabong,
You'll never catch me alive, said he,
And his ghost may be heard as you pass by the billabong,
Who'll come a-waltzing, Matilda, with me? (Paterson, lines 24-28)

It shows a tragic yet dignified refusal to be controlled by an unfair system (Davies 210). His death is not romanticized but shown as a serious result of social conflict, reflecting the tough realities many rural Australians faced.

Beyond social realism, “*Waltzing Matilda*” captures cultural realism by truly reflecting the values, beliefs, and identity of Australian rural life. The swagman has come to symbolize the classic Australian “battler”—a figure known for resilience, independence, and a cautious attitude toward authority (Harris 132).

The use of Australian slang and settings strengthens the ballad's cultural realism. Words like "swagman," "jumbuck," "billabong," and "coolibah", root the poem in a uniquely Australian landscape and experience, setting it apart from British or European ballads (Evans 41). This choice of language reflects and supports the emerging Australian cultural identity of that era.

Paterson's use of language is central to social and cultural realism in "Waltzing Matilda". The simple, conversational style reflects the way rural Australians speak, making the story easy to understand and relate to (Johnson 101). The repeated chorus not only helps people remember the poem but also highlights the oral tradition of folk ballads, showing its roots in shared storytelling (Humphries 56).

Symbolism is deeply embedded in the ballad's imagery. The billabong is more than just a setting; it symbolizes the natural world that supports the swagman and stands for freedom from city life (Evans 45). The swag represents the mobile, uncertain life of the traveling worker. "Waltzing Matilda," an Australian phrase meaning to travel on foot with your belongings, metaphorically suggests a journey toward freedom or escape (Kirkpatrick 50).

The poem's structure follows a simple but effective ballad form. The story moves forward clearly, with the swagman's encounter with the sheep, the arrival of the troopers, and the tragic ending of his death. The repeated chorus breaks up the story, encourages listeners to join in, and emphasizes themes of friendship and the desire to roam (Johnson 103).

Scholarly views on "Waltzing Matilda" differ, but most agree it deals with complex social and cultural issues. Anne Humphries criticizes the poem for romanticizing the swagman and simplifying class conflict, suggesting it overlooks deeper problems faced by rural workers (Humphries 56). On the other hand, Brian O'Connor sees the poem as a "subtle indictment" of social injustice, highlighting the struggles of itinerant workers and their difficult relationship with authority (O'Connor 79). Margaret Clarke points out the ballad's role in expressing "the conflict between individual freedom and institutional power," placing it within Australian literature that questions colonial systems (Clarke 150). More recent studies by Tony Bennett and Laura Turner focus on how the ballad shapes national identity. Bennett argues that "Waltzing Matilda" "remains a living myth that continues to influence Australian self-perception, embodying ideals of mateship, egalitarianism, and resistance" (114).

Paterson's "Waltzing Matilda" is a rich and layered work that gives valuable insight into the social and cultural life of late nineteenth-century Australia. Through the story of the swagman and his clash with colonial authorities, the ballad reveals the struggles, values, and tensions faced by rural working-class Australians. Paterson's use of everyday language, vivid imagery, and storytelling style adds to the ballad's realistic portrayal of society and culture, making it both a historical record and a cultural icon.

Lasting popularity of Paterson's "Waltzing Matilda" shows how well it captures the complexities of Australian identity, including the fight for freedom, dignity, and a sense of

belonging. Because of this, “Waltzing Matilda” remains an important work for understanding Australian literature, history, and culture, demonstrating how social and cultural realism can blend with folklore to create a powerful story that speaks to many generations.

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