

Magical realism and Australian-ness in Lisa Jacobson's "The Master Builder's Wife"

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Magical realism and Australian-ness in Lisa Jacobson's "The Master Builder's
Wife"

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Introduction

This paper will analyse how Lisa Jacobson's short story "The Master Builder's Wife" pertains to magical realism and how the author uses narrative elements to construct an imaginative retelling of Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife," one of the staples of Australian literature and sources of national identity. The paper will also address the representation of the narrator, the wife from the title, in relation to the issue of stereotypical gender roles still to a certain degree present in Australian literature. The first part of the paper will differentiate magical realism from pure fantastic proposed by Tzvetan Todorov by applying Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's theory in *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*. Although Sharon Sieber argues that "magical realism is a branch of the fantastic" (177) and asserts that it is "[w]idely recognized as a genre of the fantastic that combines dream, magic and prosaic reality" (169), this paper will show that it is a separate narrative mode, giving examples from the short story. This paper will not try to explain or define all different ways fantasy, Fantasy, fantastic literature and the fantastic are entangled in contemporary literary criticism, as narrative modes or as literary genres. Having in mind that the short story has elements of the fantastic, science fiction and magical realism, which is not surprising since "there is a closeness between magical realism, the fantastic, allegory and science fiction" (Bowers 28), this paper argues that magical realist aspects are prevalent over science fiction and fantastic elements. The paper will give and explain a definition of magical realism as defined by Chanady and examine how Lisa Jacobson's story conforms thereto. In addition to Chanady's concepts, it will focus on magical realist characteristics proposed by Wendy B. Faris in the article "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" and further developed in her book *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*.

The second part will show how the author uses magical realism to "rewrite" one of the most important Australian national stories, comparing some elements from the original story, Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife," and several retellings to elements in Jacobson's text. The paper will show that the short story contributes to the on-going conversation about the representation of women in Australian literature with the help of Kay Schaffer's book *Women and the Bush. Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* and Sue Kossew's *Writing Woman, Writing Place. Contemporary Australian and South African fiction*.

Characteristics of magical realism

The difference between magical realism and the fantastic might be more easily detected by the contemporary reader than theoretically explained by literary critics. Part of the problem lies in the confusion regarding literary terms used by critics. Both magical realism and the fantastic have been identified as literary genres (magical realism by Sharon Sieber and the fantastic by Tzvetan Todorov), but most of the critics cited in this paper classify magical realism as a narrative mode (Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, Maggie Ann Bowers, Stephen Slemon, Christopher Warnes, Wend B. Faris), and the same is true for the fantastic (Chanady, Slemon, Rosemary Jackson). Using “modal approach to establish a reading code that guides our [the readers’] reaction to a literary text” (Chanady 2) is particularly useful when analysing magical realism. Perceiving it as a mode directs the reader’s “response to – and expectations of – that work,” and allows the reader to associate it with “other works from [his/her] total experience of fiction that function in a similar way” (Wicks 241). As it will be shown, the implied reader’s reaction to the text is one of the basic elements that differentiate magical realism from the fantastic, so previous reading experiences, and the text’s connection to a certain narrative mode, can impact how the work is received and understood.

To disentangle magical realism from the fantastic, one must start by defining the latter. Todorov explains that a literary work falls under the category of the fantastic when in a realist text, based on logical rules of “our world,” there happens a supernatural event. The implied reader then must decide whether the event actually happened in the world of the text, and that means that it functions according to rules different from our world, or whether it could be explained as illusion or misunderstanding, according to laws of our world (25). This hesitation between the two choices is the most important condition of the pure fantastic. The character(s) may share this hesitation with the reader and the reader has to reject any symbolic reading of the text (Todorov 31-32).

This definition is the basis for Chanady’s theory which analyses three characteristics of the fantastic and magical realism and their differences. The first and “the most important condition for the existence of both the fantastic and magical realism” is “the presence in the text of the natural and the supernatural” (Chanady 32), two conflicting views of reality. The natural is equivalent to what a reader from Western

cultures would consider rational or realistic, in other words, anything that could happen in “the real world,” outside of the text. The supernatural is the opposite – events or elements the West regards as impossible or “contrary to our conventional view of reality” (Chanady 18). This is the “magic” in magical realism, which according to Bowers “refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science” (19). Lisa Jacobson’s story is full of both aspects. To give a short summary, the story is about a couple who buy a dilapidated house and move in. They begin renovating and expanding it. Soon the narrator realizes the house is changing on its own and she can no longer find her way around it. One day she discovers a room filled with goldfish and starts to slowly undo parts of the house. Returning to Chanady’s elements, the simplest example of the natural, or the realistic, is the beginning of the story where the narrator and her husband buy a house at an auction and move in. There are many more instances of their daily life, such as her making breakfast, or her husband doing renovations on the house. Likewise, supernatural elements are also abundant in the story. The narrator describes how they “polished the windows until they disappeared into the clarity of their own surfaces” (22). Even though this remark may be understood as a metaphor, it can be interpreted literally since soon after the house begins transforming itself, which would be impossible in the empirical world.

While both the natural and the supernatural exist in Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, he clearly establishes the natural as the predominant code. This is not true of magical realism where there are present “two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an ‘enlightened’ and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality” (Chanady 21-22). This means that in magical realist texts both codes are part of the reality. The two perspectives are consistent and logical in the world of the text. Whereas in the fantastic the realist code is prevailing, “the characteristic maneuver of magic realist fiction is that its two separate narrative modes never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy” (Slemon 410). Neither perspective is superior to the other – they are merged seamlessly to construct the world of the text. Using the same examples from Jacobson’s story, the “ordinary” life of the narrator and her husband is blended with the house changing its shape, size and layout, as well as other magical happenings. Although a literary work may have some magical realist elements, Bowers asserts that “unless the

magical aspects are accepted as part of everyday reality throughout the text, the text cannot be called magical realist” (25) – the magic in the text must be persistent.

The relationship of the two perspectives leads to Chanady’s second concept used in distinguishing magical realism and the fantastic. She employs the term antinomy or “the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text” (12), which can be resolved or unresolved. As demonstrated, the fantastic depicts a realistic world disrupted by something which cannot be explained logically. In that mode “the supernatural is seen as problematical because it cannot be integrated within the implicit ideological code conveyed by the text” (Chanady 8). The supernatural cannot be accounted for within the rules of the realist code, which causes the reader’s hesitation between accepting and explaining the supernatural. Since the “antinomy between the natural and the supernatural in the fantastic produces a reaction of uneasiness in the implied reader,” this conflict is unresolved (Chanady 123). The irrational event is a threat to the balance of the empirical world in the literary work, which causes a feeling of distress.

The situation is completely different in magical realist texts. Chanady claims that “[w]hereas the simultaneous presence of the natural and the supernatural in the fantastic creates a [sic] ambiguous and disturbing fictitious world, it is the essential characteristic of a harmonious and coherent world in magical realism” (101). Both codes have to be present, but they create a different dynamic. The supernatural does not disturb the order of the literary world because it is not introduced as contradictory or illogical in that world, but as a part of “the daily events of ordinary life” (Chanady 101). There is no hesitation – the implied reader accepts the supernatural as logical in that world. Unlike the fantastic, in magical realism the antinomy is resolved, which is the second characteristic of this narrative mode. (Chanady 25-26) It is clear that according to this criterion, “The Master Builder’s Wife” falls under magical realism. Although Jacobson’s narrator is autodiegetic (and not heterodiegetic as analysed by Chanady), the text does not give any suggestions that she is mentally unstable. She may be considered reliable, which will be explored later. There is no uneasiness in the story – the narrator presents both natural and supernatural happenings as equal, as normal parts of her daily life. She is not unsettled when her house starts changing:

Room after room appears – sometimes, it seems, overnight — and often one will take the place of another. I have no idea any more where this house begins or ends. What was once the laundry is now the lounge and what was once a

bedroom is now a bathroom. I have counted at least twenty-seven separate bathrooms, with their gold and silver, crystal and mahogany taps. (25)

The narrator describes what is happening with the house, but not in a way that is disturbing her, and without it seeming unusual or strange in any way – she even counts bathrooms, in a matter-of-fact manner.

The concept of resolved/unresolved antinomy is closely connected to the third element of Chanady's theory – authorial reticence, which signifies “absence of obvious judgments about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed by characters in the text” (30). This means that the characters (as well as the narrator and/or the implied author) in a magical realist work never comment on the supernatural events as if they were illogical or unnatural. This is the crucial concept that separates the two analysed modes because

[i]n contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader. [...] The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist. Since the supernatural is not perceived as unacceptable because it is antinomious, the characters and reader do not try to find a natural explanation, as is frequently the case with the fantastic. (Chanady 24)

Whereas in the fantastic the supernatural appears strange and unsettling, because it is in conflict with the realist code of the text, in magical realism it is shown as normal and unsurprising. The characters are never bewildered by supernatural events. They do not express their opinions on the possibility of such events happening, and because of that the reader does not try to find logical evidence or justification for it. The wife from the story is not startled when new rooms appear overnight, or when they change places. She simply relates that the “house is no longer what it seems. For a start, it's so much larger than it was. And the back garden, [...] well, now it's so much smaller” (24-25). She does not try to find reasons and answers to why or how this is happening.

In the two modes, authorial reticence is used in different ways to achieve different goals. The fantastic is founded on the reader's hesitation, so there “authorial reticence serves to maintain the ambiguity” of irrational elements, and therefore “prevents the reader from resolving the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural” (Chanady 122). The narrator describes the supernatural in a way that purposely maintains hesitation and obstructs its resolution. The contradiction is developed “not only by the structure and style of the narrative, but by the direct

reference to it by the narrator” (Chanady 95). As already discussed, the fantastic is set in a realist frame and narrated in a realist style, but what especially highlights the antinomy is the narrator’s focus and comments on it. At the same time, the actual supernatural phenomenon or event is described vaguely and without detail in order to preserve the reader’s hesitation (Chanady 132).

In contrast, magical realist narrator does not draw the reader’s attention to the impossibility of the supernatural but describes it in the same manner as the natural. In this way, s/he “present[s] a world view that is radically different from ours as equally valid” (Chanady 30) and gives the reader a new perspective. In magical realism, the narrator does not give any explanations of extraordinary happenings nor doubts the supernatural event happened, which “naturalizes the supernatural to a point where we hardly see it as such” (Chanady 151). This naturalization is also achieved by placing “the two antinomious codes on the same level of reality merely by describing them in the same way, as if there were no difference in their perception of them” (Chanady 104). The natural and the supernatural are reported in the same detailed manner as a part of the reality of the text. Jacobson’s story starts off very realistically by the narrator and her husband buying the house and moving in: “When the auctioneer’s silver hammer finally fell and the place was ours, he [the husband] took out his grandfather’s pen and signed his name across the creamy sheaf of paper that was the contract” (21). The house seems ordinary enough with interesting but feasible details. However, when the house starts growing, the same detailed approach is used to describe strange, puzzling and even impossible events. The wife is describing all the ways in which the house is changing on its own, depicting details such as the fact that all bathrooms have “gold and silver, crystal and mahogany taps” (25). Throughout the story there are smooth transitions between the natural and supernatural (such as the mentioned one) so that sometimes it is not clear which is which. In some instances, logically impossible events are described, as in the mentioned example, while sometimes the supernatural could be seen as possible and at the same time strange and mysterious, but highly unlikely: “The external walls had been slapped so often with quick coats of paint that even the most recent layer of ivory was already peeling back to reveal earlier colours — apricot, strawberry, aqua, violet” (21). The image of a house showing so many layers and earlier paints is certainly not impossible but it does present an unusual sight. All of this shows that in magical realism there is no clear divide between the two concepts, neither in what is rationally

possible, nor in the way the natural and supernatural are described, and authorial reticence is of great importance to keep this separation from emerging.

Closely connected to the notion of authorial reticence is the narrator. It is crucial that throughout the text the narrator presents “a consistent point of view so that the reader can accept the incredible” (Chanady 48). If the narrator changes perspectives or multiple narrators experience the supernatural differently, it calls the reader’s attention to the strangeness of the event or phenomenon, which nullifies the effect of authorial reticence. What is especially important is that, as opposed to the fantastic, in magical realism “the narrator provides no information that would suggest an alternative reaction to the supernatural” (Chanady 151). The text should not provide any clues to a different interpretation of the magical events, or a possibility that it did not actually happen. Additionally, the narrator can also be “a focalizer with a specific identity. If he [or she] is the primary narrator his account is not perceived as unreliable, because it represents the only point of view” (Chanady 103). This is the type of the narrator the reader encounters in “The Master Builder’s Wife.” The autodiegetic narrator is the focalizer through whose eyes all events are described. The reader is not given any other perspective by other narrators or outside observers, so her point of view should not be challenged, especially as she is not constructed as mad or mentally unstable, as mentioned earlier. Chanady affirms that “[i]t is irrelevant to debate whether the characters actually have supernatural experiences, [...] or whether the story is merely an unmediated account of their fantasies and hallucinations” (104) because there are no indications in the text which hint to a different point of view. According to all indicated concepts and elements, Jacobson’s story fits perfectly into the code of magical realism, and not into Todorov’s pure fantastic. In his categorization, the short story (as well as majority of magical realist texts in general) would be part of the neighbouring “genre” of marvellous where “supernatural elements provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or in the implicit reader” (54); which has already been discussed as a crucial element of magical realism.

As mentioned in the beginning, there are also science fiction elements in the text. However, these are very few and far between and connected to only two topics, payment and working hours, and they can mostly be seen as the known aspects of a Western-culture reader’s real world, only curiously phrased, or just a bit exaggerated. The first science fictional trope has to do with money or currency. The narrator remarks that her

husband is “paid plastic money” for his work and that “[h]e could have been paid in gold and silver coins, or even a paper bill [...] had he been so inclined” (23). This by itself sounds like using credit cards instead of bank notes, which are common enough in the Western culture. Nonetheless, the narrator also mentions that “[t]he value of such artefacts has soared now that plastic is the common currency” (23). Although used less and less, paper bills could still not be called artefacts, so this phrasing hints to something that could happen in the future, giving the short story some kind of the future timeframe, albeit tentatively. The other science fictional trope in the story concerns the number of working hours in a week. There are two instances where this is referenced – first the wife describes “the seventy-hour week” when her husband did not have much spare time and later she says that “the new government introduced the fifteen-hour week and the country was at leisure” (23). Unfortunately, some Western working people are familiar with putting in long hours, but even so, seventy hours for all types of work are an exaggeration. By contrast, fifteen-hour work week is unheard of in Western culture for full-time jobs. Without focusing on customary working hours for any job or culture, the fact that the government decides on specific working hours for everyone and that the difference is so drastic between the two examples makes the reader think of a different governmental structure than the familiar ones. However, there is no explanation for any of these aspects and the story has “a realistic setting that is recognizable in relation to [a] past or present reality,” both of which are distinguishing factors between science fiction and magical realism according to Bowers (28). Also, the cited examples are the only ones that appear in the text and for that reason the story could not be considered as science fiction.

After discussing what the story is not, it is time to focus on the mode to which the story does belong, namely magical realism. To give a simpler and more contemporary definition of that narrative mode, Warnes states that

[a] basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalizes the supernatural that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of rigorous equivalence – neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality. (“Naturalizing” 2)

As it has previously been explained, in magical realism the supernatural is normalised and assimilated into the text in a way that it appears on the same level as the natural. Neither of the two codes is dominant or more important than the other. The existence of

the two codes is discussed as an essential feature which is mentioned in many critics' definition of the mode (Bowers, Chanady, Slemon among others). Wendy B. Faris identifies five primary characteristics of magical realism, as well as many more secondary ones. Since some of the secondary elements are less relevant for this short story, and Faris suggests not all of them are crucial to distinguish magical realism ("Scheherazade's" 175), they will not be mentioned in this paper.

The first characteristic Faris enumerates is an already established feature, the presence of the supernatural or in her words the fact that "[t]he text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" ("Scheherazade's" 167). It is convenient to use the word magic instead of the supernatural since it is one half of the oxymoron of magical realism. The second factor has also already been scrutinized and it is that "descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world" ("Scheherazade's" 169). Although this element roughly encompasses what Chanady calls the natural, at least in concept, Faris specifies the way in which it is present in the text, explicitly, through precise depiction of details. She adds that "[r]ealistic descriptions create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in, often by extensive use of detail" (*Ordinary* 14). Nevertheless, Faris does not limit this element only to realistic phenomena and events but expands it to include the magic. This attention to detail in magical realism is also what "distinguish[es] it from much fantasy and allegory" (Faris, "Scheherazade's" 169), two categories which also contain magical elements. As opposed to fairy tales (for example), "[n]ot only is the story set in a normal, contemporary world, but it also contains many realistic descriptions of man and society" (Chanady 46). The following scene from "The Master Builder's Wife" shows both detailed descriptions and a familiar part of the contemporary world – a common sight when moving houses:

One hundred and twenty-two cardboard boxes lined the hallway, and I had labelled each one so that the material contents of our lives together were as neatly organized as possible into such categories and sub-categories as 'silverware', 'woollen socks', and 'Christmas decorations'. (22)

The exact number of boxes with specific labels creates a scene which is both effortlessly imaginable to the reader and at the same time very recognizable. And, to go back to the multi-layered colourful house walls, and mahogany taps in bathrooms, this attention to detail is not limited to realistic events, which makes magical events easy to envision and

in this way brings them closer or naturalizes them without explaining (Warnes, *Magical* 153).

Faris's third concept opens a discussion because it is contrary to Chanady's theory. On the one hand, Faris maintains that the "third quality of magical realism is that before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts" (*Ordinary* 17). To put it even more simply, prior to accepting magic as a part of the world of the text, the reader questions whether supernatural events really happened and tries to find reasonable explanations for them, such as dreams, hallucinations or miracles. She adds that in many examples the hesitation lasts very briefly because of the narrator's absolute acceptance of supernatural elements and the transparency of magic (*Ordinary* 19-20). According to Faris, because of this state of indecision, magical realism forms part of Todorov's fantastic ("Scheherazade's" 171). On the other hand, as already indicated, Chanady believes that the fantastic and magical realism are separate entities and that the reader's hesitation is one of the crucial distinguishing factors between the two, seeing that the fantastic is based on the reader's indecision and in magical realism s/he accepts the supernatural without reluctance. To add to this discussion and being aware of Chanady's theory, Faris argues that

[a]lthough many magical realist narrators accept the disjunction between realism and magic, thereby tempting their readers to do likewise, many others do not and thus promote hesitation. Another reason this distinction, while generally valid, seems not entirely unproblematic is that even when the text does not entice us to hesitate, we readers' investment in the codes of realism is still so strong, and if they are present in the text we are reading, even the narrator's acceptance of antinomy does not overcome our hesitation completely; thus the hesitation tends often to remain rather than being totally resolved. (*Ordinary* 20)

Therefore, while some narrators may recognize the supernatural as being on the same level of reality as the natural, some may not and in this way the antinomy stays unresolved – the indecision is still there. Furthermore, even when the text does not encourage doubts and the supernatural is naturalized in the text, the reader is accustomed to the code of realism to such an extent that the hesitation persists in the reader's mind.

While completely understanding Faris's point of view, seeing that some texts belonging to magical realism may promote ambiguity and some Western readers truly cannot liberate themselves from their immersion in literary realism, a few opposing

arguments could be made in favour of Chanady's theory. As for the first part of Faris's argument, "the idea prevalent in magical realist criticism [is] that the narrator and reader accept the existence of the magical elements in the text" (Bowers 24). This means that if the narrator does not fully recognize the supernatural as a part of his/her world, which in turn arouses scepticism in the reader, the text may not be received as magical realist. This element is included in what has become a staple of magical realism – a descriptive narration of both realistic and magical elements in a setting similar to the empirical world, *of which magic is an inherent part*, never attributed to dreams, hallucinations or drugs (Bowers 29, emphasis mine). With regards to the second part of the claim, there is no way to prove whether the reader is left with unresolved hesitation, no matter if s/he is from Western cultures or not. The reader's reception of the work depends heavily on his/her cultural background, expectations, reading experience, and previous encounters with a narrative mode or genre; and this is especially true for magical realism because of its departure from literary realism. While some readers who have never read a magical realist work may feel unsettling doubts, others may accept the narrator's story the moment they start reading the text because they expect to find magic there. This is why the concept of the reader's hesitation is a very precarious element to list as a primary characteristic of magical realism, as Chanady and Faris warn, having in mind Todorov's approach.

Bowers avoids this debate completely, by not mentioning the reader's feelings and instead acknowledging that magical realism "relies upon the full acceptance of the veracity of the fiction during the reading experience, no matter how different this perspective may be to the reader's non-reading opinions and judgements" (3-4). Irrespective of what the reader's actual reaction to the text is, magical realism depends on the implied reader's suspension of disbelief. For this reason it is important to focus on elements present in the text which can be analysed, that is to say, whether the work of fiction gives any occasion for the reader to experience doubts. To go back to the debate, if there are no clues in the narrative to provoke the reader's mistrust in the narrator, and "the narrator [...] presents the story without any comment about its lack of veracity, the reader is not justified in reacting to the narrated events with scepticism" (Chanady 154-155). If there is no indication in the text that supernatural events may be understood differently or explained rationally, the implied reader should accept them at face value.

To connect this discussion to Jacobson's story, it could be argued that since the narrator is autodiegetic, she is not objective, which then brings into question the authenticity of her story. However, she weaves so many details into her account thereby establishing her reliability and earning the reader's trust. Additionally, there is a rather short but significant exchange between the narrator and her husband which gives the impression that the husband sees things differently. When her husband suggests that she should polish the silver, the narrator answers that she cannot find either the silver or the dining room in which it is stored. The following ensues: "What do you mean?" says he. 'It's down the hall where it's always been, first on the right.' But there is no left and right in this house any longer, as I have told you" (26). To be fair, the reader does not get enough information to establish whether the husband does not perceive anything magical happening, or whether he no longer grasps any changes, natural or supernatural. The narrator discourages the reader from trusting her husband's perspective saying that "[i]t is impossible to get any sense out of him" (26) and describing all things he did not notice, which, as it will be later argued, also constructs the husband as the voice of patriarchy, i.e., as a man unaware of domestic chores which "lie" in the "female" domain. Since the wife builds up her dependability through detailed descriptions, while the husband's perspective is insufficiently present, but also discredited by her, the reader has no choice but to trust her. The reader receives no hints that the narrator may be mentally unstable or descending into madness, which would make her narrative unreliable. Furthermore, the text does not display any other hints for the reader to challenge the veracity of magical elements.

To continue Faris's characterization of magical realism, the next feature is that "we experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds" (*Ordinary* 21). In a general sense this would signify incorporation of the magical into the real, the supernatural into the natural (Faris, *Ordinary* 21). Faris expands her theory to include blending of any two different worlds, such as material and spiritual or traditional and modern, and even blurring the distinction between fact and fiction (*Ordinary* 21-23). Be that as it may, this seems as an unnecessary reiteration of different aspects of the first two characteristics. As a result, Warnes maintains that of all principal features proposed by Faris, "only the first two are crucial" (*Magical* 5).

Faris's fifth and last primary characteristic of magical realist texts is that they "question received ideas about time, space, and identity" ("Scheherazade's" 173). In

these texts time, space and identity do not work in the same manner as in the alleged empirical worlds embedded in literary realism and in this way they challenge the reader's knowledge and perception. To start with space in Jacobson's work, since it is the easiest to pinpoint, the house is an obvious example. It grows, multiplies its rooms and changes directions: "North, south, east and west mean nothing in this house any more. Last night, while I lay down to sleep on the floor in a room painted all over with cornflowers, the sun set behind my head; today, it has risen in exactly the same spot" (27). At the same time, the garden, which once "stretched on for miles" (22), becomes smaller and smaller until the narrator acknowledges that there is very little garden left, "scarcely a patch six feet by five" (30). Time does not have such a prominent role as space, but the narrator does mention that she "can no longer be precise about the names of days, the numbers of hours" (27). Furthermore, she also reveals that "so precious had the price of a minute become that it assumed the status of an hour, or even a day" (23). This example shows that time is treated differently in this world, where its status can be changed depending on how much time a person has. This treatment of time is also an illustration of "magic realization of metaphor" (Bowers 51) or metaphor made real. The passage of time could be felt only from the narrator's point of view because of her "confinement", but having in mind the mode of the story, the extension and abbreviation of time could be literal. The same could be said about the space – it could be regarded as subjective because of the master builder's wife situation, where she cannot find her way around the house – or the female sphere – but the house's expansion could also be literal. In regard to identity, it is closely tied to the notions discussed in the second part of this paper, and relies on the original story by Lawson, so it will be examined later. For now, it is important to say that neither the narrator's nor her husband's identity is established in the story. All of this works to dispute the reader's established notions and to change his/her perception of them, at least while being immersed into the world of the text.

Some secondary aspects of magical realism are useful for its analysis, despite not being distinguishing or present in all magical realist works, and many of them serve to place it within postmodernism (Faris, "Scheherazade's" 175). One of those features is presence of "metafictional dimensions" in the text, frequently through uncovering the process of its creation or self-conscious observations (Faris, "Scheherazade's" 175). "The Master Builder's Wife" displays its metafictionality in a subtle way, through its connections to "The Drover's Wife," which will be addressed in the next section. Another

very common element in magical realism is “verbal magic — a closing of the gap between words and the world,” (Faris, “Scheherazade’s” 176) or rather, when “the metaphorical is imagined to be literal” (Faris, *Ordinary* 110). Especially prominent “verbal magic” in Jakobson’s story is the recurrent use of what would seem an exaggeration, which is then “made real” by detailed descriptions. Just after moving in, the narrator describes the miserable state that the bathroom was in, saying that “[w]e were dirtier after we had used it than before” and adding that “[t]he first time I tried to take a bath there came out of the tap a stream of mud and leaves and tiny, unnameable insects” (22). What would seem an exaggerated statement, that they were filthier after bathing, is proven legitimate after describing all the mud, leaves and insects coming out of the tap.

Probably the most interesting secondary concept Faris mentions is that “[r]epetition as a narrative principle, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, creates a magic of shifting references” (“Scheherazade’s” 177). Very frequently in magical realist works, there is a mirroring of history, reiteration of stories and reflections of characters, often connected to reflective surfaces. “The Master Builder’s Wife,” being a rewrite, contains all mentioned elements, but even more interesting is a variant of this principle – “the occurrence of reversals of various kinds” or “plot-mirroring” (Faris, “Scheherazade’s” 178). While this is found in different types of texts, in magical realism it presents a recurring element which foregrounds its “revisionist agenda” (Faris, “Scheherazade’s” 178). This means that plot-mirroring in magical realism calls attention to its intention to change attitudes and points of view, as well as give alternative stories to widely accepted histories and narratives – this aspect will be examined later in the context of Lawson’s story. In Jakobson’s story, the mirroring starts to happen when the narrator finds a room where all the walls and furniture are brimming with goldfish. She looks closely at the fish, of which some are missing fins and scales, and begins to observe “the unravelling of things” (28). She then orchestrates a plan: “little by little, I shall take away from this house the most minute amount — say, a single floor tile, a ceramic doorknob, a strip of paint from a bedroom wall — until there is nothing left at all” (28). She will upend all that her husband has constructed, piece by piece, until the house is completely undone. As mentioned, this reversal highlights the intention to deliver an alternative point of view, to combat the established male perspective. Additionally, it is important to note that the

narrator gets the inspiration to disassemble the house when she is met with reflective surfaces such as glass and clear water in the goldfish room, which also coincides with Faris's theory.

As argued earlier, all major magical realist aspects can be found in "The Master Builder's Wife." The challenge to the established stories posed in this last magical realist element leads to a discussion on how and why magical realism is used in the context of a retelling of a well-known Australian short story, and how it is different from previous rewrites.

Magical realism and Australian-ness

One aspect of magical realism that has not been considered yet is its connection to postcolonialism. Historically, magical realism has first emerged in "postcolonial countries that are battling against the influence of their previous colonial rulers, and consider themselves to be at the margins of imperial power" (Bowers 31). As it has been mentioned before, the rules of logic in magical realist worlds are different from that of the empirical Western world, presented through literary realism. In the beginning, that was because postcolonial authors "started constructing alternative worlds by relying on non-Western cultural codes" (Polak 76), such as indigenous beliefs of native people, with different perspectives towards what is logical and real. In this way, magical realism subverts "universalist cultural claims" (Polak 76), that is, all the truths that the West established as worldwide but are actually culturally determined, and combats accepted histories and narratives, generally identified as true.

Even now, most of magical realist text can be characterized as postcolonial, since they are "set in a postcolonial context and written from a postcolonial perspective that challenges the assumptions of an authoritative colonialist attitude" (Bowers 90). Of course, much of English language magical realism comes from former British colonies, which are associated by their resistance to British colonialism (Bowers 46). However, even though Australia is an important former British colony, magical realism has not been fully adopted there and "remains in the margins" (Polak 4). That is not to say that Australian writers rely solely on realistic mode of writing, being that SF and fantasy are widely accepted and produced (Polak 7). With all of this in mind, it is unusual that Jacobson chose magical realism as a preferred mode for her story.

To try to give an explanation for this fact, it is important to move on from the topic of magical realism and focus more on Australian writing, especially female authors, gender stereotypes and related themes. In *Writing Woman, Writing Place* Sue Kossew argues that “[o]ne of the striking aspects of contemporary Australian women’s writing is its ongoing preoccupation with contesting stereotypical gender roles that gathered momentum in the 1890s” when a national character was established as men living in the outback, free and devoted to male comradery or mates (24). As their opposites, women were associated with urban experiences and domestic life and were ill-suited to the life in the bush. When they did have a presence in the outback, they were confined to the role of “drover’s wives” which “profoundly alienated women from discourses of nation” because of their confinement to the private sphere (Kossew 24). All of this would mean that many Australian female writers are still concerned with disputing ideas formed more than a hundred years ago and that they are still trying to assert their place in Australian national history.

The role women writers are trying to refute is directly taken from “The Drover’s Wife” by Henry Lawson, one of the most important figures of Australian national literature (Schaffer, *Women* 34). Lawson’s text is a realist short story describing a day in the life of a woman, a drover’s wife, living in the outback with her children and a dog and taking care of everything while her husband is away droving sheep. A snake enters her house and she sits awake through the night to kill it, remembering, through the perspective of the heterodiegetic narrator, her harsh life in the bush and all the misfortunes that happened to her. In the end, she kills the snake with the help of the dog and throws it into the fire. In the story, the drover’s wife is strong and resilient, able to live in severe conditions, but also taking care of her children, resigned to her circumstances and not complaining. The importance of this text for the construction of Australian national narrative is such that since it was written in 1892, there have been numerous retellings and rewritings, both by male and female authors, one of which is also Jacobson’s short story. Due to the abundance and variety, these adaptations display a timeline of “ongoing dialogues about Australian national identity, gender relations, and particular literary genres” (Sayer 193), depending on the author or the year of publication. Furthermore, according to Kossew, through “ongoing responses to the stereotype, successive generations of Australian women writers have articulated changing attitudes to the issues embedded in the politics of this representation” (25). As

conventions for women shifted, the retellings of the story also changed to shed light on new problems women face and give room to a wider group of women to be included into the national narrative.

One of the first stories that challenged Lawson's representation of women in the outback is "Squeaker's Mate" by Barbara Baynton. In this text, the woman has completely taken over the male role – she cuts down trees, brings the water from the creek, rounds up cattle and is even dressed "as a man" in trousers and a shirt – but in the end she is left disabled in an accident. This story is not technically a retelling of "The Drover's Wife" but it is interesting as a completely different portrayal of women in the bush. Murray Bail's "The Drover's Wife" is told by a dentist, who is supposedly the drover's wife first husband. He tells the story of how his wife left him to live with the drover. Frank Moorehouse's "The Drover's Wife" is written as a pseudoscientific article by an Italian student analysing Lawson's story and its retellings in which he concludes that the drover's wife is actually a sheep. Barbara Jeffris's "The Drover's Wife" is written from the point of view of the drover's wife who tells her story and explains the facts that other revisions got wrong. Anne Gambling's "The Drover's De Facto" tells the story of a postgraduate student who is charmed by a drover and goes to live with him. He hits her because he thinks she is cheating on him, and she leaves him after months of having been unhappy. Damien Broderick's "The Drover's Wife's Dog" is written from the perspective of the dog. Finally, Mandy Sayer's "The Drover's Wife" is written from the perspective of the wife, exposing the lies told about her by her husband, the dentist, and others. She did not leave him; to the contrary, he left her because he could not deal with her sensual personality.

Since a great number of rewrites of "The Drover's Wife" has already been explored by Kay Schaffer in "Henry Lawson, The Drover's Wife and the Critics," this analysis will mostly focus on Jacobson's story, on what it reveals and its comparison to the original text by Lawson. As Schaffer explains in her article, by examining the drover's wife as a changing female role and an embodiment of Australian tradition and by scrutinizing all the different narratives the drover's wife appears in, one can see changes in critical attitudes towards women's position in Australian culture ("Henry Lawson" 201). To offer another point of view, women writers have especially tried to rewrite her story and concentrate on her voice, as with other neglected women in history (Kosew

2). Because even though she is the principal character in Lawson's text, her voice is not heard, she is not an agent in her own story.

The most obvious element that shows this is the fact that the drover's wife "has no name except that which her husband has given her" (Schaffer, *Women* 164). She is referred to as "the drover's wife" and as nothing else, her name is not mentioned. This ties into the reality that "[w]hen women inhabit the bush in the histories and fictional accounts, it is seldom in their own right. They appear as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers in relationships to men. That is, they are (always) already spoken for" (Schaffer, *Women* 62-63). Both in nonfictional and fictional narratives, women in the outback have always been connected to men if they even make an appearance; they are never there in their own right. This same principle can be seen in Lisa Jacobson's short story. The titular character is only given the name of "the master builder's wife;" she does not have any other denomination unconnected to her husband. This is one of the few elements in "The Master Builder's Wife" that reference Lawson's story directly, and one which Jacobson preserves in her adaptation.

One noticeable difference in Jacobson's text is that her story is not narrated by the heterodiegetic narrator which greatly impacts the reader's reaction to the character. While the heterodiegetic narrator in Lawson's story gives the impression of being objective, all the elements prioritize the male perspective (such as the idealization of the character and an obvious demonstration of female inferiority). "The Master Builder's Wife" is narrated by the autodiegetic narrator, from the point of view of the wife herself. In this way, Jacobson gives a voice to the wife, as opposed to the silent woman from Lawson's text, whose opinions and thoughts have been excluded, even though she is the protagonist of the story. Female authors, as well as different minority groups, often use "first-person narration and the confessional mode [...] through which [they] voice their otherness" (Schaffer, *Women* 74). The goal of Jacobson's short story is to give an alternative version to the narrative, to present the female point of view and to oppose the male perspective of Lawson's text.

"The Drover's Wife" created an important Australian national female figure, but Jacobson challenges it in her text and she does so using magical realist mode, among other methods. Magical realism often discusses the questions of representation and history and "may also seek to change it, by addressing historical issues critically and thereby attempting to heal historical wounds" (Faris, *Ordinary* 138). Giving a new take

on Lawson's text, the story opposes the established history and attempts to modify it by filling in the gaps. The key element in both the original story and Jacobson's retelling is the setting – the house. In Lawson's story the house is placed in the outback, in the middle of nowhere, while Jacobson gives it a contemporary twist and puts her house in the suburbia. In both texts, the whole plot happens in the house or is directly connected to the house. There is also a parallel that is drawn between the house and literary portrayal of women. Jacobson's story (as well as other female retellings of Lawson's story) is trying to undo the "damage" the male perspective of the drover's wife made to the representation of women in Australian literature and their cultural image in society in general, in the same way the master builder's wife is trying to disassemble the residence, or we could metaphorically say the drover's house, her husband has constructed. The house, which has been expanded by her husband, has taken on a life of its own, just as the depiction of women which was mainly in men's hands, spread and can no longer be consciously managed. As the wife takes the house apart piece by piece after the house has grown so large that it has swallowed the woman's universe, so do women's accounts and perspectives try to deconstruct the image of what an Australian woman should be. Jacobson's text signals that it is hard, on-going work which may leave scars and chipped fingernails, but it can be done with persistence and patience. The story takes on the task of uncovering the other point of view, that of the wife, challenging both a well-known narrative of the bush and a national stereotype of women who lived there.

When analysing the protagonists of the two texts, there are both similarities and differences between the two women. Physically, the drover's wife is described as a "gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman" (Lawson 47) which reveals a woman used to hard work and being outside. She is seen as looking exhausted and suffering. Strictly physically, the drover's wife is not given any masculine features, although that changes when discussing her role in the family. As for the master builder's wife, the reader is informed about only one physical attribute of hers and that is her "broad, square hands" (Jacobson 28), in line with the ruggedness of life in the bush. In Western cultures, broad and square are adjectives usually related to descriptions of masculinity, as opposed to slender and long which would be "more suited" to feminine figures. When specifically discussing Australian cultural images, a "masculine-looking woman is represented as outside her proper feminine place" (Elder 68), which applies to women in the outback.

This would signify that the master builder's wife's hands mark her as more masculine than what is traditionally considered to be a proper Australian woman. In addition, near the end of the story, there are more descriptions of her looks. The wife notices her own unkempt appearance: her dry skin and a "loose thread in my shirt, which I have not changed for months now" (Jacobson 28). Her outward appearance gets even worse when she starts undoing her husband's work on the house. Her hands are full of cuts and scars with chipped and dirty fingernails and there is plaster in her hair (29-30). Therefore, physical work has taken a toll on both women and they look bedraggled because of it. This is again in contrast to the alleged valued feminine image in Australia, which is that women should put some effort in their appearance and look agreeable (Elder 68-69).

Personality-wise, the drover's wife is a "tough but vulnerable woman" (Kossew 5), to some extent capable of taking care of her family, but not without help. She is worried about her husband and "loves her children, but has no time to show it" (Lawson 51). She does not question her marriage or her happiness, because it is presupposed that she could not have any complaints, or even if she did, she could not possibly change anything. And as much as the harsh circumstances do not allow her to cultivate her feminine side, she still enjoys fashion plates. This division of her traits does seem problematic – she "maintains the distinctive marks of femininity, occupying both (privileged) masculine and (inferior) feminine positions within the culture's gender order" (Schaffer, *Women* 137). On the one hand, she is at the same time masculine enough to survive in the severe environment of the bush, but not enough to do it all by herself and take over the role of her husband completely. On the other hand, she has the most important cultural feminine role, that of being a mother and raising children (Elder 82). She does not have time to show them care and affection, but she does have time to engage in as frivolous a pursuit as fashion. Once she had "girlish hopes and aspirations" (Lawson 49), but now she is resigned to her role. All these aspects of her personality make her strong enough to fill in for her husband, but she still stays just a silly, vulnerable woman. Kay Schaffer refers to it as "the dream of the perfect mother, powerful yet capable of being subdued and mastered without a struggle" (*Women* 169). Although she does not represent a "perfect" image of femininity, because she cannot be in these rough living conditions, she preserves all the essential female "attributes (being emotional, looking feminine, acting as if motivated by maternal instinct) [...] within a

masculine economy” (Schaffer, *Women* 14). She is presented as sufficiently female to serve the established male hierarchy.

Jacobson describes a character that is different in some aspects and similar in others. The master builder’s wife does not enumerate her own qualities, but there are glimpses of her personality. As opposed to Lawson’s drover’s wife, she is not represented as having expected qualities of traditional womanhood. She has the audacity to express her dissatisfaction and desire to leave and in the end offers resistance to her restrictive situation. She uses the symbol of traditional marriage to start dismantling the house: “To begin with, I took the diamond ring from my hand and made an almost imperceptible crack in the glass wall of the goldfish room” (29). She will not be put in a cage, or an aquarium. Also, unlike the drover’s wife, she is “more at ease with leisure” than her husband (Jacobson 24) and her hands are not used to hard work. However, she is diligent, precise, persistent and patient. She cooks meals every day and helps her husband in cleaning and renovating the house. She may seem very similar in character to the drover’s wife, but there is a crucial difference – she is not a mother. She refers to this in only two instances – the first time being when describing their improved cottage: “the home of a young couple with no children. We have no children, but that is beside the point” (Jacobson 24). Once again, the master builder’s wife does not fit into the cultural mould for Australian women, because being a mother is one of its necessary requirements (Elder 68). In this way, Jacobson offers a critique of the traditional Australian womanhood, as do Baynton’s Squeaker’s mate, who is punished for being barren by being crippled, and as Gambling’s protagonist who leaves the drover, whom she did not marry nor had children with him.

Childless women are viewed as deviant and flawed in the eyes of society, they are “the other of the other, doubly lacking first as a woman (not man) and then as a non-mother (not fully woman)” (Gandolfo 113-114). The reason for their childlessness is also important: if it is unintentional, these women are sympathized with, if it is deliberate, they are considered selfish and have to justify and explain themselves (Gandolfo 112). If they do not have children voluntarily, their choice is also seen as “anti-Australian” (Elder 84). To get back to the story, the master builder’s wife does not give any explanations for her childlessness and, consequently, the reader does not know whether she does not want children or she cannot have them. However, there is defensiveness in her clarification, as if she is used to justifying her choice: “[w]e have no

children, but that is beside the point” (Jacobson 24). Rewriting a character which has four children and is “both mother to the nation and to her own family” (Kosew 5) as childless and therefore “anti-Australian,” Jacobson dismantles one of the pillars Lawson’s drover’s wife is standing on, chipping away at this Australian literary stereotype and national figure.

The second situation where the couple’s childlessness is mentioned is even more interesting. It occurs when the wife realizes that the house has started expanding and she is describing new rooms that have appeared: “There is an entire wing of nurseries although, as I have already said, we have no children. And in these rooms everything — the doorways, the built-in wardrobes, the height of the lavatory seats — is scaled down to the size of a child” (Jacobson 25). To examine this example more thoroughly, it is necessary to go back to the magic in the story. In magical realism, according to Faris, “[m]agical images or events, glowing alluringly from within the realistic matrix, often highlight central issues in a text” (*Ordinary* 9). That is to say, the supernatural elements draw special attention to the problems that the text explores. In “The Master Builder’s Wife” the only element that is obviously magical is the house itself. It is a direct connection to Lawson’s text, where the home encompasses the wife’s territory. As in Lawson’s story, the house represents the female domain – the private sphere. The fact that the couple’s residence produced a whole wing of nurseries even though there are no children in the family points to an issue that is exposed here, and that is pressure to procreate and expand the family. The wife, as a young childless woman, is expected and “pressured” by the house – and by the society – to become a mother. For that reason, the magic of the house supplied a plethora of rooms which the wife deemed unnecessary and maybe even unwanted. The traditional domains have been preserved, the man has built the house and it is now the woman’s duty to fill it with children. The issue stays the same no matter if the house is small and shabby as in “The Drover’s Wife” or suburban and expanding as in “The Master Builder’s Wife.”

Another problem that the magic of the house brings to light, especially in connection to the character of the wife, is the inability to leave. In the original “The Drover’s Wife”, the protagonist “seems contented with her lot” (Lawson 51), so she supposedly does not feel a desire to leave, or rather she does not express it in the story. In many rewritings of the text the woman leaves the man, be that the drover or somebody else. For example, in Murray Bail’s and Barbara Jefferis’s stories, the wife

leaves her husband, a dentist, for the drover. In Anne Gambling's text, the woman leaves the drover to write her thesis. However, in Jacobson's text the magic of the house physically stops the wife from leaving the residence, even though she expresses a wish to flee: "What if I were to try to leave here? I have often considered it. But the last time I unbolted a window the air rushed through in a [sic] such a vertiginous wave that I felt as if I were drowning" (26). She cannot even open the windows because of the stream of air that enters and she feels as if she is suffocating. She dreams of escaping completely with the help of a big bird – "I am outside the house. I am actually outside! There is no fear, no dizziness" (27). Thus, unlike some other drovers' wives, she has no choice but to stay because the house does not allow her to leave – she is literally trapped inside. In terms of cultural stereotypes, Elder asserts that "[g]ender is deployed in national stories as a means of ordering the lives of men and women in terms of a public/private dichotomy" (73), which suggests that women belong to the home and men to the public spaces. Jacobson has taken this notion to the extreme, having the wife be closed indoors at all times, without even visiting the garden. In addition to that, as opposed to Lawson's protagonist, she is not satisfied with her situation, but she feels fear and anxiety if she tries to leave. Still, while Lawson's protagonist's "passive acceptance of the situation makes her an accomplice in her fate" (Schaffer, *Women* 165), Jacobson's narrator is not passive. In the end, she takes action – she may not be able to abandon the house but she can dismantle it from within.

An essential fact is that she does not take any construction tools to do it; she does it with her own hands or with objects that have been used for female tasks for centuries – needles and kitchen utensils: "I pierced the plastic couch in the goldfish room with the point of a safety-pin [...] I have also wrenched out all the nails I can find from the floorboards with a fork from the kitchen cupboard. Later, when I am rested, I shall rip away some of the skirting boards" (29). The fact that the wife takes down the house with her own hands is a reference to Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" which also gives the title to Jacobson's short story (in combination with Lawson's "The Drover's Wife"). In this way, Jacobson acknowledges that, as a childless woman "who stand[s] outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women" (Lorde 112), her protagonist would never manage to disassemble the house and completely free herself using her husband's tools. Her husband's tools would "never enable [her] to bring about genuine change," only temporary

achievements (Lorde 112). Instead, the wife does it with her own hands and her own “tools” in the hope that she will be able to save herself from the constraints of her husband’s house and the society’s expectations.

As it has been shown, magical realism is used in this story on a conceptual level, accordant with many elements of the mode, but also on a notional level, emphasizing some of the issues of the representation of women in Australian society and literature. To end this thesis, it is imperative to scrutinize how the use of magical realist mode separates Jacobson’s story from other popular rewritings of “The Drover’s Wife.” First and foremost, there is a fundamental divergence between male and female takes on Henry Lawson’s text. On one hand, male authors converted the character of the drover’s wife into “something of a national joke” (Schaffer, “Henry Lawson” 205). While these authors can be commended for constructing “imaginative innovations on a formal level, the representation of women (and the landscape with which they are associated) remains ambivalent, even slightly hostile” (Sayer 198). Murray Bail creates a silly, mannish woman, Frank Moorhouse deduces that the drover’s wife is actually a sheep and Damien Broderick focuses on the point of view of the drover’s wife’s dog. There is no question that these renderings are inventive and comical, but Sayer argues that “there are some aspects of their stories that mirror Australian traditions of misogyny” (198). These humorous tales are male-oriented and are told at the expense of women.

On the other hand, women writers have taken a completely different approach to the story – their texts “tend to focus on issues of the silencing of the woman character by the male authorial voice and inequalities of power implied by the discourses of nation and gender” (Kossev 35). Therefore, they have assumed the task of giving a voice to the drover’s wife who has been muted by Lawson, whose literary influence was paramount for creating the so-called early Australian literary tradition, and of exposing the imbalance of positions of men and women in national stories. However, while this is an important and necessary effort in many established male-oriented narratives, in the case of “The Drover’s Wife” it also produced an unfortunate side effect. As Kossev explains,

[a] notable feature of women’s rewritings of the story is their emphasis on its textualisation of disempowerment and their alertness to its gaps and omissions, while, paradoxically, their own stories often reinforce the power of the myth itself and the roles it prescribes for men and women within the nation by reiterating its basic premises. (34)

In other words, many female authors' retellings focus on filling in the blanks of male stories and expressing the wife's point of view, but in doing so they also consolidate a national stereotype of bush women – and, to a certain extent, of Australian women in general. They maintain the inequality of power because female authors “recycle and incorporate aspects of the drover's wife character from previous male-authored versions” (Kossew 35). Female stories allude to and expand male texts, disputing their versions of the story, justifying the actions of the drover's wife and giving explanations, and with that, they end up recreating rather than defying that portrayal (Schaffer “Henry Lawson” 207). The example of this is Barbara Jefferis's text where the wife gives her account of the events, preserving many elements of the original text and further developing narratives by male authors. She criticizes male authors for showing just one side of the story and for not giving her a name or getting it wrong, but does not provide a name herself (Kossew 35-36). Schaffer concludes that by writing in realist mode and by merely swapping point of view, “the story naturalises rather than problematizes the myth as construction” but does not dismantle the stereotypical representation itself (“Henry Lawson” 207).

Jacobson's short story avoids this trap by recycling fewer elements from “The Drover's Wife” than other mentioned female retellings. And while she does swap points of view, giving the account from a woman's perspective, she is not as explicit about it as Jefferis's narrator. The point is that the concepts that are preserved clearly tie it to Lawson's story. Jacobson uses the nameless protagonist and, more importantly, the house, as an opening for discussion and criticism of patriarchy. The house may be placed in the suburbs instead of the outback, a more contemporary environment for national narratives, but the issues are unchanged. No matter the size of the house, the surroundings or the occupation of the husband, the woman faces the same difficulties. The most obvious distinction of Jacobson's text from the mentioned female retellings is the mode used. As it has been explained, one of Schaffer's criticisms is that many female revisions of “The Drover's Wife” are written in realist mode, which does not help in deconstructing the male-oriented myth of the drover's wife. Retelling a very Australian story through magical realism may seem counterintuitive, having in mind the relative unpopularity of the mode in Australia. However, this mode also ties the short story to “a Great Australian Novel” (Dixon 258), Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, which also deals with Australian themes through magical realism, making it “seem fashionable and even

international" (Dixon 256). In both texts, the use of magical realism is peculiar precisely because it has never taken root in Australia.

Another reason magical realism is appropriate for this story is that it is a mode that commonly represents "the marginal perspectives of people lacking political power" (Bowers 31), including women, minorities and native people. Likewise, Jacobson's text questions a fixed national stereotype which is in close association with the suggestion that "magical realist texts frequently assume antibureaucratic positions, using their magic against the established social order" (Faris 139). Last but not least, magical realism possesses "a female spirit" due to its themes and elements of spirituality, embodiment and polyvocality, no matter whether the author is male or female (Faris 170). All of these elements, along with others discussed throughout this thesis, are the reason why magical realism perfectly suits this story and makes it different from other revisions of "The Drover's Wife." It uses a mode with "a female spirit" to dismantle a popular narrative only implicitly referencing the retellings that came before it and in this way constructs a new, different version of one of the most important Australian national narratives.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper argues that "The Master Builder's Wife" manages to set itself apart from other retellings of Lawson's text by using magical realist mode. As it has been demonstrated, Jacobson's short story fits perfectly into Chanady's three notions that separate magical realism and the fantastic: it has both natural and supernatural elements, the antinomy in the text is resolved and the authorial reticence helps the reader accept the supernatural without hesitation. Also, it features all five of Faris's primary characteristics of the mode and many of the secondary ones. All of these notions and elements are adopted in interesting ways to comment on an influential Australian female figure – the drover's wife. Jacobson preserves some of her personality traits, such as being diligent, hardworking and persistent, but changes others. Neither character fits completely into the mould of a "proper Australian woman," but the master builder's wife is missing the drover's wife's redeemable quality – being a mother. As in many magical realist works, the supernatural is used in Jacobson's story to point to essential issues of the text; in this case, the magic of the house exposes two big problems for women – being childless and having a desire to leave. Compared to other female rewrites of

Lawson's story, "The Master Builder's Wife" strength comes from the facts that it does not recreate and strengthen the myth of the drover's wife by using realist mode while challenging Lawson's story. The biggest advantage of Jacobson's version of the story is the use of magical realism, a female-centred mode, frequently used by people lacking political power, to retell a defining Australian realist story.

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Abstract:

Henry Lawson's short story "The Drover's Wife" has generated many retellings and reimaginings due to its importance as one of the staples of Australian national literature and sources of Australian identity. This paper analyses one of the more recent reinscriptions, Lisa Jacobson's "The Master Builder's Wife," focusing on magical realist mode and examining gender roles and national stereotypes addressed in the story. The paper uses Chanady's theory on the differences between magical realism and Todorov's pure fantastic, giving examples of how the story conforms to magical realist mode as opposed to the fantastic. Acknowledging the difficulty of pinpointing uniform characteristics of this mode in literary theory, this paper enumerates and explains many different magical realist elements and their relevance for Jacobson's story, with focus on Chanady's and Faris's theory of the mode. Having in mind that this mode is not very popular in Australia, the second part of the paper compares the short story to Lawson's original, as well as other prominent retellings, showing how Jacobson uses magical realism to reimagine the story and the protagonist. Many magical realist elements are adopted in the story to highlight central issues of the text. The short story comments on the drover's wife, an influential national female figure, and through her, the representation of Australian women in the bush and in national literature. The paper compares Jacobson's and Lawson's protagonists and examines whether they conform to the image of a "proper" Australian woman. In addition to the character of the drover's wife, the paper puts emphasis on the setting and how it affects Jacobson's protagonist. Special attention is dedicated to female retellings and the way in which Jacobson's story differs from them in some aspects. This paper argues that magical realism sets the short story apart from other famous reinscriptions and allows it to avoid re-establishing a stereotypical representation of women.

Key words: magical realism, Australian literature, drover's wife, Lisa Jacobson, female representation