

Chapter Three

THE SHORT STORIES

Astley states:

The writer of short fiction must necessarily have a different approach to his work from that of the writer of novels. The short story, in its perfect form, is a much more difficult medium to handle.¹

That she handles the short story form with *élan* becomes clear with her two collections, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* and *It's Raining in Mango*.

In *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* the disintegration of society's moral values are reflected in the behaviour of her hippy characters. These drop-outs delude themselves that they are practising an 'alternative life-style', even though they eagerly accept the benefits of the society they pretend to despise. They display none of the sense of purpose which Astley suggests is necessary for self-integration, while Moth's abandonment of her child typifies their irresponsibility. Keith Levenson, the narrator, contributes to his unintegrated state by neither accepting himself nor interacting with other people except in a superficial manner. Clarice's aversion to the Aboriginal, Willy, and Leo's sexist war with Sadie are examples of the divisiveness generated by social structures which are not spiritually directed. The conduct of the clergymen, Rassini and Morrow, and their rivalry reflect the uncharitable, insular attitudes encountered within institutionalized religion.

Some of the hippies from *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* reappear as peripheral characters in *It's Raining in Mango*. This work suggests

1. See 'Questionnaire to Authors' in *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, October, 1981.

that integration in the form of close family bonds and involvement with the environment is a powerful force for good in the development of the human spirit. Astley sets private history against a vast public background of early North Queensland settlement, goldrushes, the Great Depression, two World Wars, the Vietnam combat, the counter culture of the 1960s and the tough, survivalist 1980s. The stories accentuate the repetitive nature of human behaviour. The kindness of the Laffey family to the Aboriginal Mumlbers throws into relief the recurrent savagery directed by white people against the Aborigines. The unhappy story of Will stresses the perils of self-containment, while the energetic, yet gentle characters demonstrate the advantages bestowed by the development of the unified consciousness.

HUNTING THE WILD PINEAPPLE

'Where's the sense of history, romance even?' (p. 15) comments the narrator as he muses admiringly on a vision of Captain Cook bouncing, Odysseus-like, along the Queensland coast in his undersized *Endeavour*. Astley's first and devastatingly funny collection of short stories, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*,² is refreshing indeed as she proposes that a measure of adventurous style and imagination must surely revitalize a debilitated society. She entwines images of Tennyson's *The Lotos Eaters* with these complex tales which salute the romance of the Quest. Her questers are the hippies and various other oddities who come to the North Queensland rainforest region in order to 'find themselves'. Astley points out that the object of their quest, peace of mind, is to be found within the self and not in any one fixed place.

Her rainforest microcosm is both threatening and enchanting, and so too are Astley's stories.³ By exposing the betrayals and rejections among the characters, she drives home the way in which human cruelty persists. Again the author challenges the established order which, she suggests, contributes so much toward this cruelty. In this work the *élitist* group consists of racist politicians, town councillors, landowners and clergy. Astley stresses the arrogance and absence of charity in the members of the group by opposing them to the humility and compassion of Willy Fourcorners, the tolerance of Fixer and the patience and devotion of Bo's mother and the senior Rassini.

The hippies denounce the established society and choose to live outside the conventional structures. Yet theirs is not a genuine

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2. T. Astley, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, Melbourne, 1979. All page numbers will be incorporated in the text.
 3. These stories with their undertone of psychological brutality evoke Gwen Kelly's short stories in the collection *The Happy People and Others*, Armidale, 1988. Brian Matthews suggests that they have echoes of Barbara Baynton's stories in his 'Thea Astley: "Before Feminism ... After Feminism"', in *Romantics and Mavericks: The Australian Short Story*, Townsville, 1987.

challenge because they depend on government support:

... every dole day you'll see them heading back to the scrub with their government-sponsored goodie boxes jam-packed with the products of a society they reject. (p. 18)

Sadie's challenge to Leo's authority fails because her flesh dominates her spirit. It is Fabio who, in pointing out the absurdities within religious institutions, offers the strongest challenge to the ruling powers. That his challenge to authoritarianism fails is obvious in Canon Morrow's subsequent cruelty to his wife.

The absence of any satisfactory relationship between males and females in the stories underscores the absence of any effectual integrated consciousness in the characters. Fixer and Willy exercise their assertive and caring qualities but are routed by the rigid prejudices of Lilian and Clarice. Sensitive Keith with his appreciation of spontaneity is potentially 'androgynous', but he lacks self-integration. All the facets of his personality lie dormant as, uncommitted to anybody, enclosed in his own private world, he chooses to observe life rather than to become involved in it.

The stories are set in the 1970's amid the languid heat and extravagant scents and colours of mythical towns in coastal North Queensland. Contrasting the rainforest's fecundity with the sterile minds of most of the characters, the tales mesh physical and psychic landscapes and examine the ripenings and witherings of nature and of relationships among the inhabitants and the invaders from the south who come seeking Eden. Astley displays her social conservatism as now she replaces her compassionate attitude toward adolescents with amiable scorn.⁴

The narrator's reflections frame the sequence of eight interconnected stories. This rises from a quiet beginning, 'North: Some Compass Readings: Eden', to the disturbing, climactic 'Ladies Need Only Apply', and then sinks to the ironically wistful 'A Man Who Is Tired of Swiper's Creek Is Tired of Life'.⁵ The open ending

4. See L. Clancy, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

5. See S. Hall, 'Landscape With People', in *24 Hours*, January, 1980, p. 65.

emphasizes Astley's conviction that actuality is fluid, and not a rigid construction: 'Living is serial, an unending accretion of alternatives'. (p. 175)

As the narrator, Keith Levenson is an ironic choice. Now, after twenty years, the youth who had craved discipline in *The Slow Natives* recounts the outcome of those permissive years. In order to illustrate her questioning of society's inherited certainties, the author sets up a series of contradictions which question the narrator's reliability. Thus, as he continually insists on his associativeness and interest in people, it becomes apparent that he remains in his 'bubble of recluse snugness' (p. 104) and that he is only marginally involved with them. This detachment is stressed by the discovery that, despite his appearance in all but one of the stories, he is clearly distanced from their action. Also, his credibility deteriorates with his attempts to vindicate it: 'I always seem to be explaining how I got where'. (p. 63) It crumbles even more when in 'Ladies Need Only Apply' he enters the consciousness of Sadie Klein, although there is no evidence that he has even met her. However, Astley is not merely using Levenson as a literary device, a narrator whose eroded plausibility is just a reflection of the eroded plausibility of the ruling clique. It becomes clear that Levenson is a character whose own story is integrated into the book's structure.

In the first story, 'North: Some Compass Readings: Eden', which introduces all the main characters by name and locates this particular lotus-land in North Queensland, the one-legged Levenson, now in his late thirties, introduces himself as an all-round failure and spent force. Without purpose, he eventually drifts from Brisbane into the northern tomorrow-land and becomes the proprietor of a motel.

Levenson imagines himself a romantic, insisting 'It's not the dreaming that matters ... It's the reality that rubs', (p. 3) yet, paradoxically, he has neither enough imagination to take risks, nor practicality to become a successful businessman. Captivated by the hippy girl Moth he admits:

... I might have followed her, but the bad dream of grocery bills and rates and power and the hideousness of my failed business-man persona were all intolerant. (p. 11)

Instead he assumes the role of recorder of human rivalries. However, behind the mask of the *blasé* observer who cynically accepts his bogus leg as a means of shocking people, he cowers in his private enclosure, shocked by his mutilation and conscious of being outside the fold.

He learns from the experiences which he records and in the final story he is able to confront his self-delusion, to admit to his need for real integration with others. He acknowledges his urge to become a fully functioning human being instead of a mere historian:

I - want - to tune - IN'. (p. 174) He listens to Doc. Tripp's diagnosis of his disquiet:

'It's not rejection ache you've got.
It's acceptance. The bloody ache to
accept yourself'. (p. 175)

Leverson's ruminations are intermittently interwoven with tales of the nonchalant hippy 'family' which has penetrated the rainforest near his motel at Mango. He is ambivalent toward the scruffy hippies, few of whom achieve any individuality in the stories. Like their Tennysonian counterparts they, too, have 'had enough of action and of motion', (p. 21) and here where, as in the land of *The Lotos-Eaters*, it seems to be always afternoon, they wander unmotivated from shack to unfinished shack,

... one joint to the next ...
while the weeds lashed up and
over and no one turned a sod. (p. 21)

Leverson deplores, yet grudgingly admires, their insouciance. Hedonistic and self-confident, they delude themselves with the romantic idea of 'finding themselves' in the magic forest where, paradoxically, they blur their already fading identities with nicknames.

Here we meet Lilian, who is afraid to risk herself. When the family conducts a raffle in order to reward the helpful, sixty-seven-year-old Fixer, a truly stylish local eccentric who is both rational and intuitive, they offer a girl as the prize. This is Lilian, twenty, fat and lonely. Having failed in an attempt to end her unhappiness in suicide, she has turned revivalist and hopes to

achieve her quest for inner peace by 'finding Jesus'. However, at Fixer's shack she feels a fluid sense of communication with him which dissolves the enclosure of her loneliness. In five days the aged man and the young woman develop a loving bond which the blissful Fixer wants to make permanent. She, however, influenced by conventions which divide the youthful from the aged, is afraid to risk entering a potentially happy union because of the incongruity of their ages, and abandons him.

Lilian's insecurity is a quality foreign to the clerical characters in the next story. 'The Curate Breaker' is a splendidly crafted, taut and polished tale, its wry wit to be savoured as lingeringly as the Cointreau which the *bon vivant* Catholic priest, Father F. X. Rassini, enjoys so much. He and the Anglican Canon Morrow, two Pharisaic men of God who adopt the form but not the spirit of Christianity, are shown to be as privately monstrous as they are publicly pious. Rassini projects style without substance, so that Levenson, watching him

... praying his way carefully and
beautifully through Mass [is]
reminded flippantly of midday matinee! (p. 33)

Conditioned by hierarchical seminaries, Rassini is able to reduce the curates to 'limp sweaters' (p. 38) who do the real spiritual work of the parish while he concentrates on the material.

This dogmatic member of the *élitist* group has a strong belief

... in the superiority of the clergy,
the philosophic inferiority of all
laymen, and the non-existence of women
except in some cloudily defined area
known as auxiliary where he believed
them to be tea-makers for God. (p. 38)

When he is inconvenienced by a walk-out of that exploited minority group, his domestic staff, he combines a lukewarm concern for his old, widowed father with the lure of acquiring an unpaid servant, and bullies him out of his home and into the presbytery. There Rassini exploits the fanatically respectful old man. The priest is constantly irritated by his father's shortcomings which interfere with his own physical comfort and he reacts destructively, humiliating the old man and frightening him with bad-tempered confrontations.

The quest for souls permits no fellowship between the two priestly competitors who have, Morrow insists, different Gods. He is

... a fierce anti-papist who was
as filled with splenetic loathing
for what he called the 'incense
pack' as the other was with the
total indifference of infallibility. (p. 41)

In the rectory this authoritarian figure demands the terrified worship of his childless wife while he crushes her identity,

... hardly seeing her, certainly never
listening to her, and only occasionally
touching her. (p. 41)

Astley's conviction that associativeness and integration with other selves is necessary for human well-being is not his. Despising 'anything as passionate as friendship', (p. 41) he is enclosed in his own ascetic world. Unlike Rassini who has occasionally experienced the poetical implications of

... an inner spot of calm that
he felt expand through the
trembling itches of his blood ... (p. 50)

Morrow is free from such disturbances:

... only once or twice in his boyhood years ...
had he ever imagined departures of the
spirit. (p. 49)

Both clergymen, however, are unaware of the disintegrating influence of institutionalized religion, and it is the diabolically mischievous schoolboy, Fabio Galipo, who delights in reminding them. These are men of certainties and Fabio challenges them. He questions the Church's interpretation of the Bible, paying particular attention to the Judaic laws concerning women:

'Sir,' Galipo announced ... 'I have
tried to persuade my father to apply
Judaic strictures to mother.'

The Canon felt a choking sensation.

'You what?'

'My father says it is domestically
impossible unless we build on.'

The class roared. (p. 49)

However, it is Fabio's mischievousness which creates the crisis needed to jolt Rassini out of his self-delusion and into a realization of his own lack of charity. When he visits Morrow in order to wrestle for the boy's soul their conference is interrupted timidly by Mrs Morrow. Her husband cruelly destroys her dignity by demanding a kneeling apology for the intrusion. Rassini flees in horror. Comforting himself with his sense of being a reasonable man, on arriving home he is confronted with his own like victim, his father sitting 'hunched a little, frail, grey ... shelling the peas'. (p. 59)

That the closest bonds are capable of generating cruelty is confirmed by the title story⁶ which suggests that real values must not be allowed to deteriorate in the quest for novelty and diversion. Levenson muses on the absence of integration in so many relationships. With none of the communication between selves which Astley advocates, they become mere

... temporary interpretations ...
of what appears to be a strange new
language which, despite the sameness
of the semantic signals, is strange
and new because the signals are given
by a stranger. (p. 64)

Conforming to the trend, Levenson attaches himself to one of his guests, the American, Crystal Bellamy. He takes her to a pineapple show farm where the owner, Pasmore, merely plays the role of farmer, having divided himself from the natural world with technology:

'It's all mechanised now. Turn a
knob and off race the nutrients.
Saves a hell of a lot of trouble
and the casuals do all the rough
stuff ... And I don't have to
pause between drinks'. (p. 63)

Nothing seems real here. Pasmore is 'just sufficiently not quite like a well-known actor to appear not valid'. (p. 68) His sarcastic deferrals to his disillusioned, alcoholic wife expose their alienation

6. Astley says, 'The book had its impetus - and its title - from an experience I had ... One night after dinner at a place near Rockhampton our host simply said "OK, let's go and hunt the wild pineapple." For those who don't know, the wild pineapple is a symbol, I suppose, for Queensland. 'Wild' in the sense of *sauvage*, untamed'. See Kinross-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

in a marriage which is as cold as their absurd piles of frozen food, and as unstable as their barn-like home.

In this boring life in which he has lost touch with fundamental values, hunting the misshapen wild pineapple has become for Pasmore more than a clowning performance for guests. For him it is a quest for distraction, and he sees himself as an adventurer stalking the bizarre in a world where the fantastic is more desirable than the real. In the role of 'raree-show-proprietor', (p. 74) he takes his guests to see his casual employees, the fat little Greek, Georgy, and the handsome Scot, Tom. These two men have a stable homosexual relationship which is as solid as their bright cottage and as warm as Georgy's hot coffee. Their partnership suggests a continuity which is as harmonious as their commitment to the soil and to their planting and replanting.

With paternalistic presumption their intrusive employer exhibits them as objects, a '*spécialité de la muh-haison*', (p. 73) promising,

'They will even, if asked nicely,
make us coffee. And, if asked
really nicely, make music'. (p. 72)

Tom, the stylish musician, reacts like a professional and sardonically performs on cue with comic songs, while Pasmore, made destructive by his own inner discord, uses Crystal's admiration as a spiteful ploy to divide the two:

She's fusing. Relating ...
giving him the Martini eye in
a singles bar. (p. 74)

Jealous Georgy diverts her attention to himself. Deluded by a money-grabbing art school into believing that he has painting talent he shows her his few pathetic drawings and the correspondence lessons which he has kept for two years. Pasmore maliciously leads Georgy into the finale of the performance, forcing him to admit that he has never begun the course. Secure in an illusion of his own creativity which is as supportive as Pasmore's illusion is decadent, the naïve Georgy remains unaware that he is the butt of Pasmore's cruelty. His caring, perceptive mate, however, looks at their mocking employer with hatred.

Spurious romanticism is equally destructive in Clarice Geary's life. She is 'A Northern Belle' of Queensland, where the divisive traditions of class consciousness and racism are as rigid as any in the American south. Levenson maintains that we

... ripen and wither and repeat
ourselves in stories. Which are
relived by others ... (p. 3)

This story of privileged Clarice affirms his theory as Astley expertly divides the reader's sympathy between Clarice, victim of the conditioning of her powerful parents, and the Aborigine, Willy, victim of her prejudice.

Clarice has none of the helpless femininity of her stereotyped American counterpart. Her forceful qualities dominate her consciousness. She is strong-minded, ferociously sporty, astute in business and used to command. Her materialist mother

... was determined Clarice would
marry well, but no one was ever
quite well enough ... (p. 81)

and, worried that her daughter's purity is threatened by ineligible suitors, she warns her of her own experience with 'a sexually maddened blackfellow'. (p. 81) Not given to romance, Clarice has a rational conception of the sexual act, and her reaction literally stuns Mrs Geary:

'But I don't understand ... Were
you carnally known?'

Her mother fainted. (p. 81)

Nevertheless the girl accepts her mother's edict to keep men at a distance, to repress her sexuality. She accepts, also, the nuns' advice that she must repress her assertive qualities and cultivate the 'feminine drives' (p. 82) which will fit her for her inferior role in society. Influenced by the tragic wartime love-story of Mother Sulpice, she decides that her renunciation of sex will be just as romantic. Distorting her true nature in imitation of the ethereal nun she represses her boisterousness and assumes 'a *quattrocento* ... mystique' (p. 86) which, as she grows older, men find intriguing. The narrator says, '... it was for her, perhaps for the wrong reasons, transfiguration'. (p. 84) That this femininity is not integrated into her consciousness is indicated by her lack of sensitivity:

The troubles of others found
in her a grotesque response
of incomprehension. (p. 85)

Clarice becomes engaged to Roy, an American serviceman, and prepares to relive the nun's tragedy. However, her practical *fiancé* not only does not die in battle, but, having received none of Clarice's sexual favours, disengages himself from her and marries a more accommodating nurse.

Her quest for the perfect man continues but as she meets more and more men she finds, as her mother did, that they always fail to please. Eventually, after the death of her parents, she channels her energy into gardening and all her affection onto the dog, Bixer, a perfect male substitute:

She only had to reach down to pat Roy,
a colonel, a traveller, or
even Dick Shepworth, and they
would respond with a wag of the tail. (p. 87)

Reality asserts itself when arthritis reveals her self-sufficiency as self-delusion, her single state as less than blessed. Desperate for assistance, she bullies the Aborigine, Willy Fourcorners, into working for her, and finds herself communicating with him, appreciating him as another human being.

Ironically, in a reversal of circumstances, the privileged woman for whom no man was worthy enough becomes dependent on the old black man. She professes disbelief in 'a Christian blackskin' (p. 89) but gentle Willy is a true Christian. Despite his own commitments he does her heavy work, he nurses the dying Bixer and he displays the only real tenderness which she has encountered. Clarice, however, is her mother's daughter and Willy is a black male:

She looked up at him, messy with grief,
and Willy put his old arm round her
shoulders and gave her a consoling pat.
'There,' he said. 'Don't you mind none.'
He'd never seen a face distort so.
She began to scream and scream. (p. 94)

Unlike Clarice, Brian Hackendorf of 'Petals from Blown Roses ...' is a natural romantic whose poetical tendencies are neglected as he deludes himself that his talents lie in moneymaking. Only the fantastic nature of his business schemes and his bizarre suicide attempts reveal his inventive imagination.

At the Hackendorf's home Levenson and Mrs Waterman meet at a poolside party. Her husband is a cryptic crossword composer and Astley uses him to illustrate the way in which life's poetry can be converted into prose as he reduces the fascinations of the visual world to a collection of signifiers:

It was impossible for him to glimpse
some autumnal grove of tamarisks
without his mentally tabulating
'a grateful expression mother hazards
among shrubs'. Or ... he would
classify unicorns as 'varsity
problems referable to chiropodists
and other fantastic creatures'. (p. 99)

Mrs Waterman's distaste for such intellectualization means that she is unsympathetic when the practical Bosie Hackendorf complains of the social disadvantages caused by the uncouth diction of Brian - she calls him 'Brain'. When, therefore, Mrs Waterman accepts his invitation to 'Get y'gear off!' (p. 102) she is not at all offended by his unrefined compliment to her mature style:

It's your cool! Your bloody cool!
... In fact ... you're the only one
here with any tits at all.' (p. 103)

As the drinks flow there comes a revelation as Brian, for all his careless diction, discloses his appreciation of things poetic. The saxophone melody soars from the tape deck and he expresses his delight in the musician with a phrase from *The Lotos-Eaters*: 'That Johnny Hodges sure is petals from blown roses on the grass'. (p. 104) Then Bosie asks him to sing. Levenson is stunned as it becomes obvious that, in his quest for money, Brian has wasted his greatest asset, a superb singing voice:

His voice is so rich, so naturally beautiful.
... Here it is - the one thing he can do
and never talks about. He just doesn't
know. (p. 110)

The astonished Mrs Waterman, like the lotus-eaters, is under a spell. Levenson sees her 'kneeling ... in the simple act of devotion'. (p. 110) It is not Brian however, but the poetry of life that she is worshipping.

Astley explores a less poetic subjection in the next story, 'Ladies Need Only Apply'. Sadie Klein⁷ is still a sexual adventurer in search of a man. From Astley's fiction emerges the hope that suffering will be reduced when human beings develop a consciousness which exercises gentle as well as aggressive qualities. This story indicates that she is pessimistic about the possibility of this happening. Here a confrontation between the sexes ends with the female reduced to submission by a male who is determined to control her.

Fifty-seven-year-old Leo Stringer, who fancies himself as a 'macrobiotic musician', (p. 115) lives in the rainforest near Reeftown where he grows the fruit and vegetables necessary for his lifestyle. He advertises in the local newspaper for an assistant and the comic ambiguity of his statement, 'Genuine ladies need only apply', (p. 115) attracts school teacher Sadie's attention. Now forty-two and on long-service leave, she rationalizes her application for the position as something of a giggle, accepts Leo's invitation to inspect his place and somewhat uneasily decides to stay a while.

The self-absorbed Leo, for all his transcendental jargon, is merely a conventional nature boy and a second-rate musician. Despite occasional flashes of warmth he displays all the inflexibility and dogmatic arrogance of the society which he claims to loathe, and he makes plain to Sadie his scornful recognition of her man-chasing ambitions. In the outdoors she blossoms and he decides that he is in a position to control her. For her part, Sadie stays because she dreads a return to teaching and because he is pertinent to her quest,

... a present chunk of male whose
remoter coastline she found herself
wanting to chart. (p. 127)

7. Sadie appears in an earlier short story, 'The Scenery Never Changes', in *Coast to Coast*, 1961-62, pp. 201-05.

Leo begins a campaign to arouse her lust, flaunting himself naked under the shower and teasing her with his attentions to his young pupil, Flute. There is no rapport between them, but Sadie, like the pawpaws, is ripe for picking and ready to abandon emotional satisfaction for physical reasons. Nevertheless, she has pride enough to fight off his first advance when he hurts her vanity. But Leo expects genuine ladies to conform to the submissive role which social conventions demand. When she refuses to be humbled he punishes her with his indifference and so forces her into a torment of craving and detestation.

Sadie's pride, however, has been undermined by loneliness and now it begins to crumble as she makes diffident bids for his approval. By now Leo's conceit demands her complete humiliation, and the savage storms of the Wet aid him as they conspire to isolate her in her hut. Astley pushes her theme of female subjection to its grotesque limits as Sadie fights her way across the flooded creek and crawls like an animal to Leo's hut stripped of all but her sexual identity:

... and not until she felt the frightful quality of him did she look up, forcing herself into the one word, 'Please?' ... as he looked down at her on all fours, naked, glistening silver with lust and rain.

'That's better,' he said. 'That's more like it. Come on in.' (p. 144)

Subjection such as Sadie's would shock the self-interested hippy dwellers at Mango, those careless questers after personal freedom. 'Write Me, Son, Write Me' examines further their ambivalent attitude toward authority as they reject society's rules and yet accept government benefits. Family bonding and loyalties have disintegrated and these young people, like Tennyson's lotus-eaters, yearn to cut their ties with home and to form ephemeral and irresponsible relationships of their own. The title echoes the plea of a caring mother to her wandering son, Bo, who with his hippy companions dodges work, collects the dole and cheerfully justifies his economic philosophy:

'No sweat. Look at it this way:
We're eating, aren't we? ...
As long as we purchase we're keeping
the economy fluid. Someone pays ...' (p. 151)

Bo is loosely associated with Moth and her tiny son, Wait-a-while. Moth has dismissed her caring parents' conservative and constricting ambitions for her:

She wanted success without effort
(which the education system would
have provided for her had she stayed
with it), scruffy boys with bulging
jeans, the pillion seats of motor-
bikes, and pot. (p. 147)

She has a more relaxed attitude toward her son. Unfussed about diet she feeds him almost solely on bananas and subscribes to the group's liberated educational policy:

'We won't be sending him to school ...
We're not going to give him the hang-ups
we had, man.' (p. 149)

When their aversion to toil eventually results in an embarrassing withdrawal of the dole and community fellowship becomes strained, Moth remembers her parents. Their offer of a business course in lieu of cash appals her and she runs away with a passing musician. Self-gratification comes before responsibility in lotus-land and she 'forgot to take Wait-a-while, who failed to miss her', (p. 154) while Bo's initial pining wanes.

He is a gentle lad and in between pill parties he takes care of Wait-a-while with a casual tenderness. At last he sends his own parents a terse appeal for fifty dollars. Christmas approaches and he remembers home festivities with nostalgia. Eventually his mother's answer arrives, filled with guilty excuses for the delay caused by an accident in the family. She sends him news of his brothers, humble pleas for his return, 'unquenchable devotion' (p. 153) and a large cheque. Bo is ecstatic. Now there is an ironic reversal as Astley subverts reader sympathy for Bo, when all his sentiment evaporates and practicality prevails:

... he ripped open the envelope and
opened up the letter. There it was.
The cheque ... Carelessly he
crumpled the letter into a ball, shot
it light-heartedly across the footpath
into the gaping trash bin ...

'Geez, man!' he cried ... And his eyes filled with tears. 'They've written!' (p. 158)

Beneath these droll tales there is always a groundnote of poignancy like the hippy's flute melody, 'an endless question ... so repetitive', (p. 30) an awareness of ripening and withering. Levenson echoes the absence of spirituality and the feeling of futility in modern society when he admits:

... I'm sickened with the pointlessness of our passion for growing, begetting, dying - and not a thing to show for it. (p. 165)

This last story, 'A Man Who Is Tired of Swiper's Creek Is Tired of Life', is about the facing of human transience and the development of that spirituality which inspires acceptance of mortality. As Doc. Tripp tells him:

'The problem for most people is they see themselves as total animal - all excitability and want. They forget the other half, the half that accepts its biological mortality. Spirit. Soul, if you like.' (p. 174)

Now, searching for some feeling of fulfilment, Levenson accepts the invitation of his acquaintance, Mac, to drift north to his shack at Swiper's Creek. Musing, he regrets the reduction of the poetic nature of Queensland by the inroads of prosaic materialists. Swiper's Creek is a ghost town, with

... no trace of the trepang fishers, the cedar cutters, the miners, the thousands of yellow men or scraps of half-starved curfewed blacks, the publicans, card-sharpers, pick-pockets, prostitutes, the milky newchums. (p. 165)

Yet gradually he becomes aware of the story repeating itself. Here again are the adventurers, the Minneapolis couple, the gosseller from Perth, the old man from the Hebrides, the retired Sydney chicken farmer, all on their own quests, all searching for tropical nirvanas.

But in this lotus-land the lotus rots, and the stench of decaying yellow mangoes underscores human transience. Time is running out for

these withering questers. Astley suggests that the object of every quest is the inner peace which accompanies self-integration and that this is achieved not in any one place but in 'the Swiper's Creeks of the mind'. (p. 162)

Leverson's conviction that what he has seen here cuts 'too close to the bone' (p. 170) is confirmed when, on his way home to Mango he meets the old lady whose family has discarded her. He, too, is an outcast from life. It is time to relinquish the role of outsider and to become fully involved in life, to accept himself, not only his maimed body but the 'soul part'. (p. 175) Doc. Tripp's conviction that the desire to be remembered as an enclosed individual is 'a tawdy thing' (p. 175) reminds him that as one who ripens and withers he is integrated into the continuity of the life cycle and plays his part in charting the future. Yet again Astley stresses the mysterious, uncertain nature of existence: as Tripp tempts him with another chance to escape himself in a slow drifting to remote horizons Leverson comments,

As the afternoon sun gutters,
I promise I'll join him.
But will I? (p. 175)

These selected vignettes give little indication of Astley's wicked touch, nor of the sheer fun of the stories. There are uproarious scenes such as the pompous sermons of Morrow fraught with hilarious, unconscious ironies and indecently interrupted by flatulent schoolboys. Here is Rassini fearing the loss of Fabio's soul:

'To whom, Father?' the junior curate
asked respectfully. 'Not that fast
piece of the Corkerys?' (p.51)

The author sees the younger generation as being more rational than romantic. When Moth's mother tells her that love hurts she replies, 'Not if you do it right'. (p. 147)

At times the comedy sharpens into satire whose tone is more resigned than bitter. Leverson marvels at social reversals which see the surge of suburban-ites to inner-city terraces and to mean, rural blocks:

It's the middle-class struggling
back toward the slums and serfdoms
out of which they struggled over
the last two hundred years. (p. 19)

Absurdities flourish here. One tax-avoiding tourist believes that the authorities are hounding him by artificially inducing heart attacks, and Levenson insists the 'bomb squads can spend up to an hour defusing a case of mangoes'. (p. 161)

Astley is absolutely in command in this work in which her usual staccato prose gives way to rhythmically-constructed sentences whose form has at times a visual impact. For instance, in this sentence a dying fall dramatically accompanies the lowering head:

The class bowed its head on its
laughter and Galipo, glancing once
more with terrible and artless
appeal at the blind-eyed Canon,
lowered his head also. (p. 49)

Here a succession of controlled phrases demonstrates to a nicety Rassinini's hierarchical authority:

He would explain this delicately
to the curates, sipping his Cointreau,
wielding the pause, flick flick flick,
with such conviction the vintners knew
exactly where they stood in relation
to the grapes. (p. 42)

Astley uses both nature and landscape as a dramatic aid to action and characterization. The rain, chattering on the roof, intruding 'like a gauche conversationalist' (p. 54) foresees Mrs Morrow's unfortunate interruption. Leo's garden is as arrogant as he: 'everywhere flowers and leaves exploded with tropic swagger'. (p. 122)

The author ridicules the fashionable banalities of language. Levenson's bus companion is insistent:

I want a meaningful relationship,
she said. I mean I want to relate,
she said. How do I get to express
my total self? she asked. (p. 64)

The hippies inject an off-beat vitality:

They groove and they say 'don't
heavy-scene me, man' and they
despise bread. Not give us this
daily variety. (p. 18)

The cultural allusions are appropriate to such an acclamation of the imagination as this work. Here are remembered earlier heroes of the quest, Odysseus and his mariners, the acquisitive Jason and the venturesome James Cook. Here, too, Levenson enjoys Mac's scornful gesture toward Plato's poet-less visionary world, and he applauds the shack-dweller's irreverence when he finds

... the page he's ripped from Plato's
Republic and tacked to the canvas
 wall of his dunny'. (p. 167)

In *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* the author's focus on the 'Me Generation' of the 1970's as part of the social background highlights the continuing relevance of her preoccupations. Morrow's humiliation of his wife, the malice with which Pasmore ridicules Georgy and Clarice's rejection of Willy are all examples of recurring human cruelty.

Permeated with the theme of human transience, each story examines an aspect of the divisiveness caused by hierarchical power structures. The division between the generations and society's disintegrating moral values are reflected in disintegrating family bonds as Moth and Bo regard their parents as mere providers, and as the family in the south abandons the old mother to a strange nursing home in the far north.

The schism between white and black peoples is shockingly obvious in Clarice's treatment of Willy, while Leo's determination to control and subjugate Sadie amply illustrates the position of women in society. The animosity between Rassini and Morrow represents the divisiveness within Christianity. Their arrogant behaviour reflects the lack of charity within institutionalized religion, as well as the evils inherent in hierarchical organizations.

Keith demonstrates the debilitating effects of an absence of self-acceptance and self-integration, although at last he comes to realize that to achieve them he must become fully involved with life and integrated with other selves.

Although Astley bestows on Fixer and Willy the integrated consciousness which she suggests will change the human way of thinking and evaluating, she further illustrates her idea here by acclaiming the qualities of spontaneity and imagination, the creative power of which becomes the poetry of existence. She suggests also that the integration of poetry with the prose of living will result in an enriched existence.

In her next collection of short stories she demonstrates, through the Laffey family, the way in which each individual may apply practical charity and fraternalism in the hope of achieving a more compassionate world.

IT'S RAINING IN MANGO

Astley has developed brilliantly her talent for invoking laughter by exposing the friction between the tragic and comic aspects of life and she exploits this in her second collection of short stories, *It's Raining in Mango*¹, a work which is at once poignant, savagely satirical and very funny. In shocking scenes of physical and psychic violence she reworks her theme of human cruelty, particularly in the form of racism, and again she looks at the cyclical nature of life and the recurrent patterns of good and evil. Here, too, for the first time Astley introduces strong, resourceful women who refuse to accept the role of passive victim, and who, in the absence of supportive men, are able to fulfil their aspirations adequately.

She pursues her protest at the lack of spiritual direction in human affairs, and at the attitudes of the established powers which create divisiveness. The white settlers' murder of the Aborigines, the bloody riots and lynchings at the gold diggings, Billy Mumbler's humiliation by the publican, the savage beating of the Aborigines by Block's gang and the hippies' treatment of Will are all examples of that human cruelty with which she is so preoccupied. The divisiveness generated by centralized power structures is obvious in these stories where we see whites divided from blacks, fighting among the Chinese tongs, coolies killed by Aborigines and whites, Christian sects alienated from one another and men parading their superiority over women.

Representing the *élite* here are the colony's founding fathers, the powerful, materialistic figures who, either through position or money, control public policies. These are the politicians, policemen, newspaper owners, graziers and professional men and Astley undermines their authority by disclosing their lack of moral values. Over the years there is seen to be an imbalance of justice as the government condones the dispossession and murder of the Aborigines, rewards Gallipoli veterans with unproductive farm blocks, misleads the public during World War Two with evasions and lies and jails those who publicly protest against the aggression in Vietnam. The stories

1. T. Astley, *It's Raining in Mango*, Ringwood 1987. All page numbers will be incorporated in the text.

suggest, also, that in this society some drug users and dealers are under the protection of police and government because they operate on a large scale. Newspaper owners are shown romanticizing colonization and suppressing the truth about white atrocities, while station owners are accused by the Aborigine, Billy, of cheating him of his earnings.

Against the callousness of the *élitist* group Astley opposes the spiritual kindness of some of her characters. Jessica Olive cares for Bidgi and rears Nadine's illegitimate child; George and Mag protect Nelly and her baby; Clytie, Harry and the children, Connie and Will, give to the swagman succour as practical as that which Connie later bestows on the drowning man. As Billy leaves gaol for the journey home the humane policeman hands him two dollars, the hippies give him a ride and later Will defends both Billy and his father during the fight at the hotel.

The *status quo*, however, does not go unchallenged. Cornelius denounces the *mores* of the diggings, the hypocrisy of greedy, racist Christians and the newspaper owners who misrepresent the situation. Jessica challenges the right of the diggers to shoot the blacks, and the attitude of the institutionalized Catholic church toward women. Mag and Nelly defy the bullying policemen and Clytie snaps her fingers at social niceties and the edicts of the health authorities. Similarly Will challenges his school's policies and Connie questions the rulings of the head nun. Billy makes his protest to the publican and to Block. The hippies force Mango's policeman to the scene of the hotel *debacle* and Reeve joins the public protest against the Vietnam war and against the desecration of the rainforest.

For the most part the challenges fail. Cornelius loses his job, Nelly hopelessly says of the policemen, 'Come nex time', (p. 89) Connie is left 'shrunked and humiliated' (p. 110) and the truck driver tells Billy, 'You won't win, mate'. (p. 194) It seems, however, that Astley has confidence in the efficacy of such challenges because Clytie succeeds in having published the list of Harry's lovers and in burying him on the farm. Reeve finds the tree in which he tied himself in protest still standing: 'They'd spared it. He can't help grinning. Spared it'. (p. 240)

In this work the increase in the number of characters who possess the desirable transformed consciousness is also an indication of hopefulness: Jessica, Mag, George, Clytie, Will, Connie and Reever all exercise both their forceful and their gentle qualities. However, in such a society very few achieve self-integration. Jessica and Clytie are deprived of physical fulfilment by their defaulting husbands and denied the right of re-marriage: as Father Madigan says, '... divorce ... is out of the question'. (p. 75) Will represses the physical facet of his personality, his sexuality, because homosexuality is socially unacceptable. As well, he detaches himself from other people. Connie's emotional dimension is stunted because of the repressive controls imposed by her educators. Although it seems likely that in their happy life together Mag and George attain a sense of harmony, it is only Reever who displays all the evidence of self-integration.

Connie Laffey, 'looking for a reason', (p. 13) attempting to trace the lines that lead to her, uses memory to resurrect her forebears, to bring into focus their strengths and weaknesses. Comparing their experiences across time and space she hopes to perceive a pattern which will aid her in her search for meaning. This pattern, by revealing the past's relevance to the present and its power to shape the future, will, she hopes, sustain her consciousness of worth and purpose.

The title posits the elements as another powerful shaping force in human affairs as Astley's characters are shown to be at the mercy of atmospheric uncertainties and excesses. Buckle says 'I've never known people get so involved with weather', (p. 218) and in North Queensland these people are assaulted by the ferocious heat, while the tensions of the 'build-up' are offered as 'an explanation for all transgression'. (p. 218) Even the release of the 'Wet' is marred by its treachery:

Two days after Christmas a cyclone ...
tore roofs off like wrapping paper ... (p. 199)

The sub-title, 'Pictures From the Family Album', reminds us that art helps to reconstruct the past. Photographs evoke other lives, other worlds, and by selecting and retaining detailed moments provide, if not the whole story, at least pieces of it, and so impose a pattern of continuity.

The epigraph is an Aboriginal song:

Come with me to the point and we'll
look at the country,
We'll look across at the rocks,
Look, rain is coming!
It falls on my sweetheart.

Its felicitous overtones evoke an idyll soon to be disrupted by white invaders.

Just as it challenges rigid social attitudes, the text also evades conventional literary procedure. Following the epigraph the four generations of Laffey's are listed with brief, intriguing accounts of their fates, alongside a less detailed list of the Aboriginal Mumbler family. Next, a prologue introduces the sixty-three-year-old Connie as she anxiously watches Reeve, her middle-aged son. He, as one of a conservationist group, has lashed himself high in a tree in order to protest against authorities who, repeating the pioneers' land-raping policy, are bull-doing a road through the rainforest. When Connie goes to reason with Reeve she falls and is taken back to her home nearby. There, as she rests, she 'goes back to the start of things'. (p. 15)

In the succeeding fourteen inter-related stories Astley uses a sardonic third-person narrator, but she subverts the concept of a controlling narrative voice and an individual consciousness by interweaving various voices and entering the consciousness of several characters. This device also sets up a process of interaction between reader and characters.

The stories are set in the period between 1861 and the late 1980's, but again the author overturns the concept of control by fracturing chronology with abrupt dislocations of place and time. At the same time, and paradoxically, the structure becomes an example of that integration which Astley maintains is necessary for human well-being, as space and time, past and present, generations of black and white lives are interwoven, with the characters continually re-appearing throughout.

Order is further disrupted as each life story is fragmented: all the Laffey's fates are registered in the catalogue, but it is only over the whole work that their stories unfold. For example, the deaths of Will, his father and grandmother are dramatized in the penultimate tale, while Connie's history is not divulged until the final story. The text contains gaps and is resonant with uncertainties and hints of the mysterious nature of existence. Expectations are subverted and the known integrated with the unknown as Cornelius and Nadine disappear. What did Cornelius do in those forty-six years? Did Nadine drown? The closure of the work, as Reeve walks north to his sources, rejects the notion of rigid completion in favour of the acceptance of life, like story-telling, as a fluid process.

The backgrounds are varied. Cornelius and Jessica battle dust and clawing heat on the North Queensland gold diggings, Connie experiences wartime Brisbane thronged with American troops and Will samples the culture of present-day Sydney. It is, however, in the North Queensland region which Astley has peopled with oddities and mythical towns that the Laffey's eventually settle. Here among the pungent scents of the rainforest canopy they build their homes, their gardens ablaze with scarlet poincianas, yellow crotons and purple swags of bouganvillea. The tropical atmosphere is palpable as the author evokes the almost unbearable anticipation of the build-up which climaxes when clouds 'black-bellied and with lightning in their guts' (p. 160) burst into the Wet.

As the intricately interwoven threads of individual lives which compose the pattern of the Laffey and Mumbler families are teased out, cycles of repetition and ironic parallels and contrasts emerge. 'How to Get Sacked' introduces the young journalist, Cornelius Laffey, a handsome Celtic dreamer from Canada, pictured in the album as 'muttonchopped splendid'. (p. 20) He lands at the settlement later

named Bowen² with a vision of establishing a colourful frontier journal. In the rigorous reality of pioneering this fails to evolve, and when he produces a broadsheet which is sympathetic to the dispossessed Aborigines the settlers' enraged reaction prompts his departure for Sydney.

Here he charms Jessica into marriage, and after the birth of two children, Cornelius drags his reluctant family back to North Queensland. Again working as a journalist he swaggers about the shanties, gathering stories as he drinks with the tarts and the exotic flotsam of the diggings. Showing little of that responsibility which Astley cites as a necessary element of the fully-functioning human being, he leaves Jessica, stifling in a primitive shack, to cope with the family obligations which he avoids. She becomes cynically disillusioned and resigned to an ambivalent 'union of hostility and love'. (p. 35)

On a trip to the Palmer goldfields with his young son, George, Cornelius comes upon a pile of rotting Aboriginal corpses. Horrified, he writes an article condemning the greed-ridden diggers and challenging the authorities who condone such slaughter. As he foresees, it costs him his job. Shortly afterwards he abandons his family and no more is heard of him until forty-six years later when Jessica sees a photograph of him with a group of bohemians in a Sydney newspaper. He dies, we are told, soon after this unmasking. 'Was he really a man of the people or simply a good-time Charlie?' (p. 29) asks George, and certainly he is an ambiguous character, both captivating and reprehensible. He is a romantic, yet he also has a compulsion to expose the callous underside of romanticized colonization, while his sensitive social conscience is balanced by his heartless irresponsibility concerning his family.

2. These stories have much of the flavour of Louis Becke's North Queensland fiction, peopled as it is with Chinese gold diggers and snobbish, materialistic settlers in the coastal towns. See his novella, 'Chinkie's Flat' in *Chinkie's Flat and Other Stories*, London, George Bell, 1904, and his novel, *Tom Gerrard*, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1904. In his *Bush and Town or Twelve Months in Northern Queensland* (unpublished novel, c. 1865) R.T. Wood satirizes the snobbery of the moneyed class in 'Lowerton', which is probably Bowen. I am indebted for this information concerning Becke and Wood to the article by Cheryl Frost, 'Humour and Satire in Early North Queensland Writing' in *LINQ*, X, 1981, No. 1, pp. 35-54.

Jessica, seen in the album both as bride and young mother, shares the stage with her bachelor son George in 'Singles'. The years between have been spent grieving for Cornelius and her lost daughter, Nadine, rearing George as well as Nadine's child, Harry, and acquiring an hotel, the Port of Call. This tale follows events there and her retirement to the home of Harry and Clytie, his wife. That this intelligent woman is guided by her spiritual dimension is apparent in her wide-ranging concern for others, whether she is defending Bidgi from racist barbs or contesting women's rights with Father Madigan. However, she considers that her repressive education has warped her personality, that

'... the simple dogmas the poor unfortunate sisters drummed into me at the behest of a male hierarchy, have been my undoing as a human.' (p. 75)

Her unintegrated personality does not become destructive, however, as, paradoxically, the spleen she feels toward Cornelius turns into a sustaining force.

Her daughter, Nadine, 'a ringleted puss' (p. 22) in the album, is both deserted like Jessica and a deserter like Cornelius. In 'Across the Wide Missouri' the flirtatious fourteen-year-old willingly succumbs to an adventurer who leaves her pregnant. 'Nadine had been ready for sex but not motherhood (p. 53) and, bored by the baby, she runs away to a brothel in Reeftown. Faintly remorseful about her son, she thinks of returning home but can face neither society's condemnation nor Jessica's forgiveness. Her problem is solved when cyclonic rains³ dislodge the strongly-built brothel and carry it, whores and all, into the bay⁴.

When, in 'How to Get Sacked', her brother George stumbles on the putrid Aboriginal bodies he is stunned to see a hand sticking out of a crevice, a 'pleading decayed hand whose fingers formed a white bone

3. Here, literally, is the 'wind at the door' which rages throughout Astley's fiction, the hurricane to which Brian Matthews refers in 'Life in the Eye of the Hurricane', *op. cit.*, p. 148.

4. The stressing of the house's sturdiness as it lifts 'like a boat' (p. 64) tempts the hope that Nadine, merely sketched into this story, will survive this absurd adversity and reappear in a future Astley volume.

barrier'. (p. 30) Jessica's rage when she realizes that the child has seen the corpses, provokes a spectacular quarrel with Cornelius. George, awakened, paints himself with stoveblack and confronts his parents with hands outstretched, mutely conveying his revelation that black and white skins are two aspects of a common humanity.

Cornelius maintains that good fellowship is the first principle of being human (p. 46) and now George's understanding develops further in 'Getting to Know Them' as he and the Aboriginal boy Bidiggi learn to communicate with each other. We find George at twenty-three lovable but stolid, as unlike his father as Nadine is unlike her mother. Sailor-suited in the album, in 'Singles' his one trace of adventurousness is quashed when he is shipwrecked, and he settles on land near Mango. 'Heart is Where the Home Is' sees him at fifty farming diligently and married to the delightful Mag. In 'Old Man in a Dry Spell' we learn that George drops dead while fencing and that Mag dies in an influenza epidemic.

Little of George's dependability is discernable in Harry, who, like his mother Nadine, is at fourteen an accomplished flirt:

He had his mother's dark good looks
and a double serving of rover from
both Cornelius and the wandering adventurer
who'd sired him. (p. 68)

'Singles' tells of his marriage to Clytie and purchase of a canefarm at Swiper's Creek, where, in 'Right Off the Map', subdued by the Depression, he and Clytie are shown practising the charity and goodfellowship which Astley implies must replace human greed and cruelty. This story reveals the humiliations of those other dispossessed, the wandering unemployed. It highlights the plight of the swagman, Will, who, rewarded by the ruling powers for his service at Gallipoli with an arid farm block, is forced to leave his family and look for work. Hunted from town to town because of the 'susso law' (p. 94) imposed by the authorities and brutally implemented by the police, he is bitter about the privileges of the *élitist* group:

'It's all right if you squat on
a bit of land big enough. They
respect you then. All we had in
Reeftown was tent space ... and
they begrudged us that.' (p. 97)

After two years he despairingly decides on a suicidal last walk.

Harry warns him,

'There's nothing out there. Not
for the next hundred miles.'

'That'll do me,' the man said. (p. 98)

Although the Laffey's survive the Depression, 'The Kiss, The Fade-out, The Credits' announces the end of Harry and Clytie's love story. Conditioned by the rigid conventions of the established powers Harry 'felt his masculinity assaulted' (p. 117) by his childlessness and his rejection by the army. This exacerbates the promiscuity inherited from Nadine, and the hilarious but shockingly public disclosure of one of his seductions ensures his sexual estrangement from Clytie. However, they remain together in an ambivalent love-hate relationship, united by their love for Connie and Will whom they rear after George's death. Later Harry resumes his philandering. In Reeftown he dallies too long with his current mistress, a dalliance made uproarious by the presence of an observer:

... twenty yards away and above them
Arch Malloy, linesman ... perched on
his power-pole and moaned with frustration. (p. 120)

When he misses his ferry Harry admits to self-delusion: 'It was never worth it'. (p. 121) The insight comes too late. Clytie looks at the withering flowers he brings her and tells him as she pitches them out, 'They're too far gone'. (p. 126)

Harry is seventy-one in 'Committing Sideways',⁵ and with this tale Astley challenges the complacent certainties of the controlling powers with a fine example of uncertainty as Harry dies in ambiguous and blackly comic circumstances. As Maxie Tripp performs an appendectomy Harry awakens from a too-meagre dose of anaesthetic and Clytie claims that either Maxie killed him 'or Harry flung himself on the scalpel'. (p. 129) The farce continues as the outrageous Clytie defies conventional niceties and the health authorities by listing his past mistresses as mourners in the death notice and burying him 'in a kind of emperor-sized garbage bag down by the second paddock' (p. 130)

5. Astley says, 'Sideways is a slang term for suicide up here' [North Queensland]. See Ellison, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

Astley challenges the rigid authoritarianism of hierarchical power structures in 'Getting There'. At the convent Connie's spontaneity is endangered by her teachers as they insist on physical and emotional control:

Passion, resentment, the beginnings
of diffident cries of protest, even
overt anger, would meet a contemptuous
'Control yourself.' (p. 107)

Saturdays mean freedom from this enclosure as she is overwhelmed with sensual delight in the fluidity of existence, in worldly colours and smells. During her visits to the library she becomes aware of a man of middle years who is aware, too, of her, although they neither speak nor smile. The adolescent girl is in the process of 'getting there', of achieving self-knowledge, and this male awakens ambivalent feelings in her, an 'agreeable sensation of delight and terror'. (p. 106)

The consciousness of her body which he stimulates conflicts with the strictures of the nuns, who insist on the division of flesh and spirit. Such medieval asceticism inspires in the practical Connie guilt and resentment, and a case of chilblains precipitates her rebellion. Caught bandaging her fingers and accused of self-indulgence she challenges the inquisitorial attitude of the head nun, reminding her that Christ healed the sick. Connie decides that rather than adhere to such destructive spiritism she will celebrate her body. Recalling the man at the library she makes up her mind to smile at him. Again an absence of information stresses the mysterious nature of existence. The narrator alludes tantalizingly to the consequences of Connie's decision in 'Back to the Source', when, meeting an American serviceman

... she was reminded ... of another man
she had once met in a library in Reeftown
and the grotesque maturity of her first
insistent kissing ... (p. 235)

Now eighteen and at University in Brisbane, Connie continues to live with zest:

She tore Bach partitas apart, scribbled
dazzling last-minute essays, hiked with
her friends into the mountains ... (p. 234)

However, ahead of her time like Cornelius, she searches for something more, and thinking sex may be the answer she allows herself to be courted by an American who deflowers her. When, with frightening candour, she expresses her disappointment in sexual intercourse, he accuses her of frigidity. Connie is outraged and challenges his assumption of superiority. 'Me? she cried. ... It's you. You're only interested in your own orgasm. Not mine'. (p. 237) The shocked serviceman drives out of her life.

Abandoning University Connie returns to North Queensland and channels her talents into a nursing career in which she finds both purpose and satisfaction. Within three weeks she marries a marine who days later flies to the war zone, leaving her pregnant. She never sees him again. Eerily echoing the photographic reappearance of Cornelius, a television camera reveals her husband's body in a bloodied sea as, forty years later, she views a documentary of the Iwo Jima landing.

'Build-up' finds the aging Connie sharing an affectionate camaraderie with her adult son, Reeve. He, fascinated by an alleged miracle worker, Chant, and, like Cornelius, spurred to investigate further, invites the evangelist and his group to his beach shack. Connie goes too. Later in the first pelting moments of the Wet Bo finds the barely-alive body of a youth washed up on the beach. Chant calls for prayers, for a miracle. Connie, however, applies prolonged resuscitation in the firm belief that spirituality must not be divorced from practicality. As the youth revives and Chant demands thanksgivings for a miracle Reeve is incensed. He tells Chant:

'Prayer isn't simply words. Con's been praying nonstop for exactly forty-eight minutes ... That's what I call prayer.' (p. 165)

The ironic coda reflects the nihilism of the age:

'Thanks for nothing,' the man was gasping,
... 'For nothing.' (p. 165)

Connie is an intriguing character, with a responsible attitude toward her family, an exuberant involvement with life and so adept at communicating with others that strangers confide in her. As Astley's fiction advocates, she develops her talents and has a sense of purpose, and her tolerance and compassion indicate that her personality is directed by her spiritual dimension. She is

intelligent, with a healthy sexuality, but fails to attain self-integration because, conditioned by her educators to repress her emotions, she is emotionally warped. There is no mention of love in her brief marriage, and of her shadowy relationship with Malloy she tells Will, 'There's no passion in it'. (p. 144) At Harry's death she feels no real grief, and not even Reevever 'could make demands beyond a certain point'. (p. 131)

Connie's exuberance, however, is lacking in her younger brother, Will. In 'The Kiss, The Fade-out, The Credits' Will challenges the school authorities by disobeying their rules. He runs away because he refuses to play football after another boy deliberately breaks his fingers, a brutality treated lightly by the sports-obsessed teachers. Here, forceful qualities are cultivated at the expense of the gentler and, always an outsider, Will is now branded a coward and his violin-playing 'rather effeminate'. (p. 122) However, as Harry suspects, the boy's protest has a more significant aspect. His snapped fingers have revived in nightmarish detail George's story of the massacre, and he is protesting also at that other greater, condoned brutality, at

... the hands beseeching sky, the sprawl
of colonially administered death by the side
of a bush track. (p. 124)

'Committing Sideways' finds the adult Will in Brisbane where he meets the polished Cassidy, another loner, who makes sexual advances to him. Although Will has had a brief homosexual affair⁶ while in the army, he rejects Cassidy, at the same time feeling shocked at his own physical excitement. When he returns to the north he discusses his sexuality with Connie as they walk on the beach. They swim together and afterwards he clings to her 'closer and closer until the warmth of her body absorbed his'. (p. 143) Facing their incest with incredible practicality Will leaves to settle on George's farm.

'Grass' takes up his story thirty years later at a point where arthritis is making the mowing of his sprawling lawns a burden. He is obsessed with the latent power of fecundity, a quality absent from his

6. Although Astley takes no stance regarding Will's homosexuality it is interesting to note that her conservatism seems to have relaxed. Her compassionate attitude toward him contrasts with the contempt with which she treats Varga in *The Slow Natives*.

life, until he feels that he is drowning in grass. Reeve suggests that his uncle lease a campsite to a hippy family in exchange for their labour, and Will, although used to privacy, agrees. The hippies settle in. However, their initial assiduity slackens, and when Will goes to remonstrate with them they introduce their naïve host to their favourite 'grass', marijuana, reducing him to an amiable torpor in which he finds himself roaring with laughter and sensuously wallowing in the unmowed grass. It is as if with the family's arrival he is to be initiated into the joys of fecundity:

He was bathing in grass ... and savouring
the unkemptness. Not drowning, but
swimming! (p. 185)

In the poignant 'Old Man in a Dry Month', Will, now in his sixties, muses on his two years' involvement with the hippies upon whose company he has come to depend. The group now includes Buckle and Waitawhile, the baby in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* who is now, predictably, a 'monstrous, head-shaven, pot-smoking eleven-year-old'. (p. 212) 'I think I'm one of nature's grand neuters. I need no one', (p. 144) Will has told Connie, but now he becomes infatuated with Buckle, and Buckle knows it. Lured by the handsome youth Will becomes a hanger-on at their parties, heaping the family with gifts aimed specifically at Buckle.

When they begin to steal from him, Will feels betrayed, accusing, 'You bludge on society and now you're breaking all the rules and bludging on me'. (p. 220) Nettled, the girl Flute lashes him with evidence of Buckle's mocking indifference to him, and Will retreats, crushed, as they drive off to a rainforest protest. However, made mindless by infatuation, he follows, his pride lacerated like the savaged jungle. His servile and very public apologies are ignored, and in a starkly tense scene he receives a final mortification with Buckle's vicious repudiation, 'You hear me, old man? ... *Piss off!*'. (p. 225)

Ominous echoes of Harry's end sound as Will feels that the 'termination of things has the angularity of a knife onto which he is

plunging'. (p. 212) When his need for Buckle forces him to confront his loneliness, Connie warns him, 'You've left your run too late'. (p. 225) For sixty years Will has exercised 'a preference for privacy over people'. (p. 172) Astley stresses the need for the integration of the self with other selves, emphasizing the invigorating effects of communication. His detachment has deprived him of that vitality which, drawn from fellowship, nourishes the psyche. His ambiguous sexuality repressed, 'broken in a spiritual two', (p. 240) Will's distorted personality becomes self-destructive, and he shoots himself.

Connie and her son grieve for him. 'Build-up' fills in details of Reeve's adulthood and we find that he has acquired a science degree and a government post. However, the idealistic young man at thirty-one drops out of conventional society in protest at a government he labels evil, when he is unfairly arrested during an anti-war protest. Back in North Queensland he continues to delight in life and its mysteries:

There had been magic enough in the
extraordinariness of the world. Of
the people he encountered ... (p. 152)

Reeve is self-integrated. He develops his intellect and exercises his physical and emotional facets:

There'd been sex. Once there'd
been love. Time for each separately
and together. (p. 153)

He interacts with others:

For friends Reeve mowed, slashed,
built rock walls ... He knew every
hippy bum between Swiper's and the
Roads. (p. 175)

'I've found myself', (p. 175) he tells Connie, as he develops his horticultural talents with purpose, creating gardens with flair. His compassion and kindness are evidence that his personality is spiritually directed. However, in 'Source Material', disturbed by another wave of invaders, the materialistic developers of tourism, he decides to walk north to Charco in a search for origins and a reconciliation with the past.

Astley reworks her ambivalent attitude toward drop-outs through Reeve and Will. Reeve resents any criticism of his hippy friends, seeing in it a criticism of his own life-style. However, although he has casual habits he is no parasite, whereas many of the hippies expect rewards without striving. Will wonders, 'How much ... did this generation want for virtually nothing?' (p. 177) Again, he is amazed that, unlike Reeve, so many young people are uninterested in their origins. Will deplores the division they make between past and present as they ingenuously regard the past as a mere progression to the questionably ideal present. As Bo insists, 'It doesn't impinge'. (p. 169) Will does, however, find Bo's disinterest in money refreshing and he contrasts it with the greed of earlier drop-outs:

Were the madmen of 1873 so different
in the bum-rush hysteria with which
they abandoned homes, families, jobs,
and headed into the country behind
the Palmer? (p. 170)

However, he decides later that if white settlers preyed on the land of the tribal Aborigines, now, in another ironic reversal, the settlers are preyed upon by a different kind of tribal society. Will tells the family, 'You contribute nothing.. You simply take'. (p. 220)

Nevertheless their company invigorates even as it disturbs, so that when they leave it seems 'as if the humanity had gone from his garden'. (p. 221) Astley allows the reader to make no rigid judgements, showing that although their treatment of Will is callously irresponsible, they display a responsible concern as they challenge the policeman's behaviour and try to get justice for the battered Mumbler at the hotel.

The tragedy of Aborigine massacres and the divisiveness of racism in a hierarchical society assume more subjectivity in those stories told through the consciousness of the Mumbler. 'Getting to Know Them' is an indictment of white ferocity. Here is made plain the shocking difference of the intruders, the gabble of their language, their strange sticks which shout. Bidiggi, the twelve-year-old survivor of a massacre, lurks on Charco's fringes, and through his somewhat idealistically presented association with George, there begins the long association of the Laffey and Mumbler families.

The adult Bidiggi, known as Bidgi Mumbler, reappears in 'Singles' when George takes him home to Jessica. She employs him as a handyman, and later he works on George's farm. The kidnapping of Aboriginal children by the established white powers is the subject of 'Heart is Where the Home Is'. Nelly, Bidgi's daughter-in-law, refusing to conform to their rules flees with the baby Charley to the Laffey farm where George hides him, and Mag, his spirited wife, challenges the authority of the belligerent policemen. When the Laffeys offer Nelly permanent security with them she declines, preferring to live under threat with her own people.

Nelly's husband complains, 'Take everythin. Land. Kids. Don't give nothin, only take', (p. 84) and two generations on, the centralized powers are determined to take more, adding technology to their weapons of persecution. A computer tracks down Billy Mumbler and he is imprisoned for tax evasion. 'You come soon, you homes hear, its rainin in Mango', (p. 191) writes his mother and the title story follows Billy as, helped on his way by that rarity in Astley's fiction, a compassionate policeman, he begins the walk home. 'You won't win, mate', (p. 194) the truck driver warns when he argues with the swindling publican and Billy tramps through the rain remembering other humiliations, 'the heights of failure he'd clambered over and over again'. (p. 194) When finally he reaches home he finds the only warmth he is likely to know,

... feeling the arms hugging
and the hands touching, smelling
his wife's hot familiar smell. (p. 196)

Later Will joins Billy and his father Charley for a Christmas drink in Mango, and Astley mocks the myths of mateship and the drinkers' false fellowship in

... a cheer-spot where people met and thought
they loved people. (p. 201)

When Billy falls foul of the vindictive ocker, Block, the results are calamitous. Conditioned by the established powers to settle disagreements by force, Block organizes a pack of louts who set upon the Mumlbers and Will. In the carnage which follows, heads are kicked and faces mashed. During brawls on the diggings Cornelius remarks on

the absence of police, and now Mango's authority figure is remarkably absent until shamed into attendance by the hippies. Surveying the shambles he arrests Billy. 'It was in order to blame a blackskin. The easy way out'. (p. 204) In a no-win situation the Aborigine takes evasive action, so that when Reeve, in 'Source Material', thinks of inviting him to go north with him, Malloy tells him to forget the idea of Billy as a 'Jacky-Jacky':

'He's into Stevie Wonder plaits and sharp cool-dude clothes these days since his dad copped it. Maybe he thinks it's protective colouring.' (p. 239)

These stories insist on the repetitive nature of human cruelty and the divisiveness generated by a centralized power structure. The narrator's cynical reference to the American Civil War is followed by evidence that Australia's own civil war is underway in 1861 'as officious colonisers showed the indigenous people what's what'. (p. 19) The child George asks, 'Are blacks worth less?' and Cornelius replies, 'We are trained to believe so'. (p. 30) The intruders show no compassion. They ignore the Aborigines' prior rights of possession, confiscate their hunting grounds and devalue their humanity, with a self-righteous government decreeing that for every white man killed, twenty blacks are to be shot. Cornelius points ironically to the subversion of moral values:

'Only a few decades ago, poaching in Britain meant transportation or even hanging. Here, poaching is approved by the government, and murdering the owners of the local "grouse", blinked at.' (p. 32)

Astley parallels the disintegration of society's spiritual principles with debilitation of the Aborigines, deprived as they are of spirituality and of their own culture by white settlement. In the next generation a wave of inhumane paternalism overwhelms them when the authorities divide children from parents in an attempt to impose an alien culture upon them. In the 1980's Billy Mumbler considers his position: 'Like animals ... the lot of us, jus livin like animals', (p. 195) and when Block and his gang confront him he 'felt his slaughtered forebears shiver through his bones'. (p. 201)

Cornelius recognizes the dangers of a powerful *élite*. When his article is suppressed he rages:

'We mightn't get justice under the bloody system and it certainly ... isn't democratic. But at least we could talk about it. Now we can't even do that.' (p. 34)

The centralist powers prevail. In the 1980's Connie denounces 'a dictatorship that poses as a democracy'. (p. 154) Harry is frank about the position of minority groups in the hierarchical order:

I'm part of the established Australian social structure ... and I can't help it. mate/horse/dog/missus/wog/poof/boong that's the pecking order. (p. 115)

Jessica's challenge to Father Madigan concerns the sexist attitudes and the rigid dogmatism of the institutionalized church:

'Tell me, Father, how is it that a sex which commits most of the crimes of this world also happens to be the arbiter on morals?' (p. 75)

She claims further that obedience to church rules on birth control overtaxes women physically and mentally, and she criticizes the clergy's Thomist attitude toward women.

The practice of charity which Astley believes is a vital factor in the promotion of world harmony seems to be missing from organized religion. The prostitute Sylvia condemns her father, a so-called 'man of God ... sanctimonious on Sunday and a swine every other day'. (p. 57). Cornelius believes that

... Christian goodwill shrivels when confronted by a skin that is any shade but white. (p. 32)

Theologians are divided among themselves. Of a clergyman's fatuous comment the narrator remarks: 'He was low-Church Anglican and the answer was only what might have been expected', (p. 190) and the intolerant Father Rassini damns Chant because he lacks the pope's blessing. 'The world is its own miracle', (pp. 147-48) Chant intones, and Astley agrees, proposing that actuality is a mysterious, fluid process, not, as the ruling powers would have it, a rigid composition

which can be reduced to classification. Connie and Reever question Rassini's dogmatism. Perhaps Chant's is a sincere search for elusive truth and God, and how is the mystery of Sister Seawater's healed hand to be explained?

Throughout her work Astley's characters have questioned religious institutions and here a credo emerges. Jessica criticizes a hierarchical system where clergymen serve the institution rather than God, and where genuine spirituality is eroded by hubristic tendencies which divide the clergy from 'the little people'. (p. 75) Father Madigan is too conscious of his privileged position, while Clytie says of Father Rassini, 'He'd patronise God'. (p. 210) Chant, too, beguiles people into thanking him, not God, for the alleged miracles.

'True charity in the churches' (p. 154) is the miracle Connie hopes to see. She feels, also, that the idea of prayer as a personal line to God has overtones of enclosure in that it breeds spiritual selfishness, an absorption in the idea of individual salvation. She considers that prayer must have a communal quality which also demands practical charity, and her efforts to revive the unconscious youth bear out this belief. Astley's characters do not all believe that God is dead. Jessica tells the priest that she saves her respect for God, not him, Reever thanks God when the young man rallies, and Will, if somewhat turgidly, expresses his faith in a God at once personal and universal:

Dear little planet ... you affirm my
belief in a God who can retain within
his mind's kindly eye the personal
history of every human, animal, plant,
the ultimate proof of an all-seeing
God. If machines made by man can cope
... then how much easier for Him. (p. 229)

In *It's Raining in Mango* Astley writes with verve and confidence and the tortured style of much of her work gives way to lively, lucid prose, laced with wit and irony. She makes her points with decisive, short sentences which here, in describing the actions of the power group, emphasize its rigid attitudes:

The editor of the *Charco Herald* rejected
Cornelius's article.
Then he sacked him.
The *Queenslander* rejected it as well.
So did the southern papers. (p. 33)

She is comfortable with contemporary idiom and conveys it brilliantly, the dialogue is tough and unsentimental and she deftly captures the clipped English of the Mumlbers. Sometimes images are confusing. Here the children inspect the swagman:

His eyes had lost their muddy look,
although they were still prowling
feverishly the perimeter of moonscapes. (p. 97)

The allusions to Ovid, Austen, Blake and Byron add texture to the work's emphasis on the significance of the past and of continuity, reminding us of a shared literary heritage. Music plays its customarily significant part in her work as Will tries to communicate with Buckle through Bach and Delius, and she uses mouth organ and guitar to peel back time with nostalgic protest melodies from the 1960's.

Language, the author maintains, may be used as a constructive or a destructive power. She shows George and Bidiggi struggling to communicate, while for Jessica as hotel proprietor it constitutes an armour:

Manless, she found that *grande dame*
vowels and aloof turns of phrase
were her best protection. (p. 69)

On the other hand the *elitist* newspaper owners use language to misrepresent the attitude of the white settlers toward the Aborigines. Cornelius promises:

'I'll open the eyes of everyone
down south to all the horrors of
the promised land. I'll give them
"unbiased," "unemotional,"
"nonprovocative".' (p. 29)

Again, it becomes a devastating weapon as Buckle administers to Will 'a flaying from a mere four words'. (p. 223) Conversely, Reeve finds the absence of words a force in itself:

He has come to believe in silence
and the authority of stillness,
its power to move. (p. 238)

By presenting events through the consciousness of several characters, the author allows the reader to draw closer to them, thus generating a warmth which many of her previous characterizations lack. These are not merely receiving consciousnesses but people who grow in the course of the stories. The reader becomes involved with them and their fates invite concern.

Astley illustrates her theory that the achievement of a more harmonious society depends on human beings exercising both their forceful and caring qualities through the characters who possess the unified consciousness. Jessica uses her business ability to support the remnants of her family and to enter the social order on her own terms. She asserts herself forcefully to challenge the diggers' right to fire on the Aborigines and to oppose Father Madigan's patronizing attitudes. However, she is also a homemaker and nurturer who is determined to preserve the continuity of the family.

Like Jessica, the audacious Mag refuses to accept a submissive role, being

... a woman who never knew her
place, always airing an idea
of some sort. (p. 86)

Yet like George, she is gentle and compassionate as she protects Nelly and her child. George is a strong, vigorous man who combines 'a tough centre' (p. 228) with creativity and a closeness to nature, while even as a child he displays an associative sense of identification with the Aborigines.

Clytie demonstrates her gentle, nurturing characteristics in her rearing of Connie and Will. Even so, Reeve remembers the time when the publican ignored her plea to tone down the noise of the band and the seventy-year-old Clytie compelled silence by pulling out the power lines.

Connie, as well as being a caring mother, a teacher and a nurse, is forceful enough to demand her sexual rights, outwit the patronizing Rassini and evict the hippies from Will's place. Will has practical, assertive qualities. He is adept at farm labour, courageous in war and in his defence of the Mumlbers. He does, however, resist the suppression of his gentle characteristics, his love of music and painting. He rejects violence as a means of solving problems, and is able to admit his wartime fears and weep for his experiences.

His nephew, Reeve, is a rational man with a bent for science. Yet he also displays an affinity with nature in his gardening, he is caring and thoughtful with Will, and his associative nature is obvious in the generous sharing of his talents with his friends. Not surprisingly, those who do not conform to this aggressive society's established roles incite suspicion. So it is that Reeve overhears someone say of him, 'He's a nut and his mother's a nut and so's her bloody brother'. (p. 233)

Thus again in this work Astley studies the ways in which centralized power structures promote that divisiveness which causes so much human cruelty. Through the Mumlbers she condemns racism, while the strong voice of Jessica criticizes in hierarchical educational and religious institutions, and in society generally, a lack of charity and spiritual direction as well as the sexism which strait-jackets women's lives. Here the absence of love is shown to be another aspect of division in the estrangement of Jessica and Cornelius, Nadine and the bushman, Clytie and Harry, Connie and her husband. With the hippy family and Will, Astley demonstrates the barriers erected between young and old, and with Will's sterile life she stresses the ruinous results of fellowship denied.

While the characters who possess the transformed consciousness provide the ultimate image of the integration she advocates, in this work Astley uses the web of family as a symbol to reinforce her opinion. Connie is convinced that 'only the family ... has cohesion, provides a core'. (p. 15) Further images of the interweaving of lives and associations insist on interdependence as a necessary ingredient for human well-being. Connie reflects,

So closely meshed, all of us, the
nature of our closeness bound up
with this place. With family. (p. 16)

Bidiggi savours 'the smell of family' (p. 39) and Nelly refuses to leave the 'old men old women uncles aunts cousins brothers sisters' (p. 90) of her tribe, while the integration of the white Laffey's and the black Mumbler's is evoked in a dramatic image when, after the barbarous *melee* at the hotel their 'blood mingled and ran into the mud'. (p. 203)

In her quest for meaning Connie fails, and 'even at the end of things, she is still looking for a reason'. (p. 240) Astley's concept of actuality as a fluid process not subject to rigid definition postulates that, in the face of the fundamental mystery of existence human beings must accept uncertainty, aspire to self-integration and interact in compassionate fellowship with others. In searching for and interpreting origins as the explanation of our own lives, it seems that we must devise our own meanings.

As well as reworking her major themes in the short stories, Astley deals with other aspects of her vision. The stories in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* affirm the sustaining power of the imagination, while Keith's experiences at Swiper's Creek lead him to an awareness of human transience and illustrate Astley's notion that time does not pass, that it is an element through which we move. The unfulfilled hordes who invade the rainforest support her proposal that peace of mind must be achieved within the integrated self, and is not dependent on any one place.

However, the human need for a harmonious integration with a home place is borne out by the sense of identification with the environment which many of the characters feel in *It's Raining in Mango*. In this work, also, she refutes the idea that the past is irrelevant, as she integrates past, present and future in her appreciation of life's cyclical nature.

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, a study of Astley's fiction reveals the integrity and homogeneity of her vision as each work promotes a greater understanding of the others and imparts a sense of continuity. The author is aware of the battle being fought between the forces of good and evil beneath the commonplace surface of Australian society, and she uses her skills as a writer to express this. With her intense feeling for the suffering of the ordinary people who make up the major part of society her work aims to stimulate in the individual the spiritual dimension which is too often unacknowledged. She takes an unflinching look at a disquieting world and uses wit and satire to demonstrate her awareness of the relationship between tragedy and comedy.

During the course of my discussion Astley's major themes have been clarified. She is preoccupied with the prevalence of cruelty and the lack of charity in a society which is in a state of moral disintegration. She suggests that hierarchical power structures which, her work infers, are male-dominated, are responsible for the social divisions which contribute to that cruelty. She proposes integration as an alternative to divisiveness.

From Elsie Ford's abandonment of Harry in *Girl With a Monkey* to the Aboriginal massacres of *It's Raining in Mango* Astley is consistently concerned with the human capacity for violence and cruelty. Examples taken from throughout her work clearly show the scope of disintegration, from organized religion to the family, to small town society in Australia. In *Girl With a Monkey*, for instance, Astley illustrates what she sees as the failure of institutionalized religion as a force for good in a scene where, during an outdoor service, a breakdown of the electricity supply plunges the crucifix into darkness. The erosion of family bonds is obvious in the absence of parental authority in *The Slow Natives* and in the alienation of the hippies from their families in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*. The debilitation of the Aboriginal culture and the instability of characters like Colley, Gabby and Moon in *An Item From the Late News* combine with the decrepitude of towns like Allbut to further emphasize this social disintegration.

In every work Astley's characters challenge the power structures which are controlled by privileged groups and which cannot accommodate the outsider or the individual who is in any way different. Moller's diagram of Gungee's order of social importance and Harry Laffey's list of the pecking order demonstrate this social stratification. Astley stresses the aggressive nature of the ruling clique through authoritarian figures like the Buckmasters and Cropper and indicates its inflexible attitudes through her presentation of dogmatic characters like Dorahy and Connolly. Determined to disclose the paradoxes within these controlling structures she uses irony to reveal hidden evils. Thus in *A Descant for Gossips* the members of the establishment who slander Moller and Helen are shown to be adulterers themselves. The town powers at The Taws flout the law, the policeman, Cropper, murders Wafer, and in *It's Raining in Mango* the government is seen to condone the massacre of the Aborigines.

Astley uses wit and satire to define this society and to suggest reform. As we have seen, the concept of integration as an alternative to divisiveness is fully realized in her work. All of her fiction illustrates her idea of the 'androgynous' consciousness which permits the individual to develop the whole scope of human possibilities by integrating and exercising those forceful and gentle qualities which are traditionally regarded as 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits. In the early novels the possessors of this transformed consciousness are Harry, Moller, Mrs Timbrell-West and Sister Beatrice. Vesper, Sadie, Bathgate, Dorahy, Lunt, Wafer, Doss and Emmie demonstrate the theory in the mature novels, and Fixer, Willy, Jessica, Mag, George, Clytie, Will and Reeve do so in the short story collections.

From this group - the possessors of an integrated consciousness - come the characters who assert themselves to challenge the entrenched powers. They try to interact with, instead of being overwhelmed by, the institutions which attempt to control the individual. The characters who fail, such as Vinny, Wafer and Will, are those who remain enclosed within their individuality; an enclosure which Astley compares with the enclosure of the centralist social system.

Those with the unified consciousness display, also, the spiritual kindness which expresses itself in compassion and a sense of responsibility toward others. Thus the forgiving Harry buys Elsie a farewell gift, Moller befriends Vinny and Sister Beatrice acts compassionately and responsibly when Sister Matthew rebels. Bathgate nurses his sick wife and Sadie cares for the neglected child, Holberg. Wafer protects Emmie, and Doss is a thoughtful benefactor to both of them. Willy helps Clarice and, with the exception of Nadine, the Laffeyes are seen constantly caring for people, both black and white.

As I have shown, Astley's work suggests that, on an individual level, each human being must achieve self-integration as well as integration with the community. This involves the development of the capacity for self-knowledge without which we become self-deluded. Self-deluded characters abound. Elsie, Wafer, Keith and Will delude themselves that peace of mind lies in self-containment. The Gungee scandalmongers, George Brewster, Monsignor Connolly and Dorahy are convinced of their own righteousness, and the hippies deceive themselves with the belief that they will automatically find fulfilment in the rainforest. Astley suggests, also, that the unintegrated individual will become a destructive force and this idea is supported by the events instigated by those characters who fail to achieve self-integration. Elsie betrays Harry, Vinny kills herself, George Brewster gives pain to many, and Bernard fails his son. Holberg punishes his servitors, Buckmaster incites a massacre and Dorahy's behaviour causes Lunt's death. *The Unbalanced Moon*, Cropper and Gabby destroy Wafer. He, in his determination to remain complete within himself, becomes self-destructive as his detachment infuriates Cropper to the point of murder. Will, too fond of his privacy, shoots himself.

During the course of my discussion I have shown that Astley associates with hierarchical power structures a concept of existence which can be explained and controlled, and that against such inflexibility she opposes fluid integration and the notion that existence is a mysterious, indefinable process. Incorporated into this idea of indefinability are the minor themes. These are the problems of perception and the inaccessability of the inner self to others which she explores in *The Acolyte* through Holberg's dark world, and in the conflicting accounts of the massacre in *A Kindness Cup*.

Linked also to the idea of the mysterious, indefinable process of existence is the nourishing power of the imagination which we find in Emmie and in the stories which celebrate the poetry of life in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, as well as the consideration of human transience and the concept of time as the element through which we move which are shared by Wafer and Keith Levenson.

The author implements the notion by keeping the reader wondering and by preventing the formation of rigid judgements. Thus Elsie's ambiguous relationship with her family is not clarified, Alice's past remains a mystery, and Sister Matthew's fate is unresolved. Characters like Emmie and Cornelius disappear without explanation. Questions remain unanswered. Are Holberg's demands a natural result of his blindness? Who acts more wisely about the town-fathers' crimes in *A Kindness Cup*, Lunt or Dorahy? Mysterious chance is shown to play its part in the lives of Astley's characters as Helen's early departure contributes to Vinny's decision to suicide and Wafer's chance finding of the stone precipitates his murder.

It is remarkable that Thea Astley, who has produced a prestigious body of work over a writing career of thirty years, and won many awards, has never attained the stature she deserves within Australia's literary culture. Brian Matthews argues that during the ten years in which she published her first five novels, women writers were a solitary breed in Australia, particularly those whose interest was not realism. During the 1970's her work attracted more attention, not only because of its excellence, but because the women's movement generated a more congenial atmosphere for women writers. Yet in the 1980's in the great wave of women's writing, even though she is an esteemed figure, she still stands apart.¹

1. See Matthews, 'Romantic and Mavericks', *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

Astley identifies with the outsider:

'I think being born a female before the war made one an outsider right from the start ... one is made very conscious of the fact that there are terrible restrictions and sanctions, that females can't break through.'²

When she began to write she decided that her only chance of being read was to focus on male characters or write from the male point of view. Uncomfortable as she felt in this position, when in *An Item From the Late News* she chose to use a female voice, she felt the effects of having been 'spiritually neutered by society':³

'Although I had my own ideas, when I tried to write as a woman speaking, I suddenly realised I didn't remember how I thought when I was fourteen, eighteen, twenty-five, because we were not supposed to think. I used to read books by feminist writers and I was filled with envy, and admiration for the way in which they made women's problems and the woman's voice seem not only intelligent and interesting, but totally credible ... And I thought, I can't do this.'⁴

In most of Astley's work the women display no inner assurance, being ineffectual, shallow, malicious and submissive to men.⁵ It is not until *It's Raining in Mango* that her female characters show themselves capable of competently managing their lives.

Up to the present few scholarly articles have been published regarding Astley's work, and her fiction is too often disparagingly reviewed.⁶ Although her prose has become more concise in the later works, it is the elaborate style which seems to come most naturally to her which draws most of the adverse criticism.

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2. See D. Headon, 'Interview with Australian Novelist, Thea Astley', in *Northern Perspective*, 7/1, June, 1984, pp. 19-20.
 3. Ellison, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
 4. *ibid.*, p. 57.
 5. Matthews, 'Romantics and Mavericks', *op. cit.*, p. 18.
 6. *ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

Rosemary Wighton says of *The Well Dressed Explorer*:

'... what makes the book quite impossible is the style; it is empty, mannered and pretentious.'⁷

Helen Garner, reviewing *An Item From the Late News*, says it is

'... heavy-handed, layered-on, inorganic, self-conscious, hectic and distracting.'⁸

On the other hand, Marion Halligan says of the same novel,

'Astley writes a curious, idiosyncratic prose ... with an urgency of rhythm that leads one to persevere and be very glad of it.'⁹

Robert Ross claims that her prose is 'shaped by the metaphysical ideas it signifies':

'... from her first novel ... to her most recent work ... she has carved out a prose exquisitely shaped in its malformation, well-formed in its twisted configurations, altogether lucid in its impenetrable design.'¹⁰

Nancy Keesing comments wisely:

'If, in full career, and with a gap of four years after her fifth book, Thea Astley persists with a style which many critics, and I among them, have found sometimes unnecessarily difficult and mannered, then the style becomes a matter for acceptance and discussion - not for reproach.'¹¹

At times the critics have charged Astley's work with cruelty because of the astringent nature of her writing. She counters:

'But very often I'm genuinely filled with sympathy for the things I'm knocking ...'¹²

She adds:

'Perhaps it is because I am a woman - and no reviewer, especially

7. R. Wighton, Review, *Australian Book Review*, February, 1963, p. 71.
8. H. Garner, 'In the tradition of Wake in Fright', *The National Times*, October 17-23, 1982, p. 22.
9. M. Halligan, Review, *Canberra Times*, March 24, 1984, p. 23.
10. R. L. Ross, 'The Shape of Language in Thea Astley's Work', *World Literature Written in English*, XXVIII, No. 2, 1988, p. 260.
11. N. Keesing, 'On the altar of genius', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 16, 1972, p. 21.
12. Ellison, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

a male one, can believe for one split infinitive of a second that irony or a sense of comedy or the grotesque in a woman is activated by anything but the nutrients derived from "backyard malice". Assuming these particular qualities - sense of irony, the eye for the comic or the grotesque - are an indication of intelligence and believing *a priori* that no woman is intelligent, critics assign the evidence of humour, irony or comedy to darker forces at work; the Salem judgement comes into play, and the lady writer is for burning.¹³

Astley's career is far from over, yet even now the intensity of her vision, her wit and cutting social criticism ensure for her a niche among Australia's most eminent writers. Clever rather than profound, she is limited in some areas. Her characterization has not the imaginative acuity necessary to establish the interior lives which make characters come alive. It is not until *It's Raining in Mango* that she is able to create characters who inspire the reader's affection and involvement. This defect contributes to a cold tone in her work which is in ironic contrast to her sensuous language and flamboyant settings. Again, even with her immense technical skill in the use of words, at times her mannerisms grate, she becomes overly poetic and her striving for effect is evident. At times her choice of butts for her satire is too predictable, and the satire itself tends to be unrestrained, thus prompting the critics' accusations of cruelty.

These limitations, however, do not detract from her achievements. With a poet's interest in words she makes us conscious of the significant part language plays in life. She demonstrates the way in which it can be used as an instrument of division or of integration between peoples, and shows that it links us to time and to the things of the world. She creates her own Yoknapatawpha in North Queensland. She conveys the atmosphere of an age through her intelligent observation of contemporary experience. With her sophisticated and satiric perception of social and political issues and their effect on

13. Thea Astley, 'Writing in North Queensland', *op. cit.*, p. 4.

ordinary lives, she illustrates the way in which these issues influence a writer's imagination. By challenging the established powers she fulfils that function of the artist in society which is to supply a salutary element of rebellion. As she searches for Christian ideals¹⁴ in a world which is disillusioned with organized religion she provides the reader with an opportunity for greater self-knowledge and self-development. Most significantly, in presenting her vision of an integrated world as opposed to a divisive one, she offers hope of social regeneration, imparts fresh perceptions of the human condition, and makes us aware of our common humanity.

14. Astley says, 'I'm *not* dismissing the Christian ideals - but longing for them ...'. See R.L. Ross, 'The Shape of Language in Thea Astley's Work', *op. cit.*, p. 263.

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