
UNIT 3 BARBARA BAYNTON : *THE CHOSEN VESSEL*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 *The Chosen Vessel* – Text
- 3.3 Overall Structure Of *The Chosen Vessel*
- 3.4 Interpretations
 - 3.4.1 A Feminist Reading of *The Chosen Vessel*
 - 3.4.2 Reflections on the *Bush* in *The Chosen Vessel*
 - 3.4.3 Motherhood and Baynton
- 3.5 Barbara Baynton's Ideological Position: Contextualising *The Chosen Vessel*
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to look at one of the first and finest writers of the Australian *Bush*, Barbara Baynton. I do not wish to go into the fascinating details of Baynton's own life but I will mention those episodes that seem to find an echo in her short stories. I will also critically examine her story, *The Chosen Vessel* as an indictment of the hardships of *Bush* life and as a paradigmatic statement of the dichotomous relationship between the sexes.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Baynton wrote most of her short stories in the 1890s and her writings show an aching sense of discordance and disjuncture between the characters that people her stories and their habitat. Baynton's own life, specially her date of birth and her parentage is shrouded in mystery. The details supplied by her have been subsequently proved wrong (Her birth date given by her as 4th June 1862 was later shown to have actually been 4th June 1857). Baynton married thrice in her life and adopted the surname of her second husband, Dr Thomas Baynton, whom she married in 1890. It was during the period of this marriage that she wrote most of her short stories. Her first story was published in the Christmas edition of the *Bulletin* in 1896. After initial title changes (*The Tramp, What the Curlews Cried*) it was decided that the story be called *The Chosen Vessel*. Her early short stories were included under the collective title of *Bush Studies*. Some of her best stories of the 1902 edition published by Duckworth And Company, London, were *Squeaker's Mate*, *Scrammy* and, *Billy Skywonkie*, *Bush Church* and *The Chosen Vessel*. Her novel *Human Toll* was published in 1907 and *Cobbers* in 1917. Barbara Baynton died in Melbourne on 28th May 1929.

Most of her work shows an overriding concern about people in the *Bush*, their alienation from it and the shockingly harsh effects of the cruel landscape upon the people inhabiting it. Here she is almost at par with her contemporary, Henry Lawson, in depicting the evil, brutal nature of the *Bush*. She does not celebrate it as a singularly 'Australian' entity as most other writers did. The ideas of the Australian nation and a virile masculinity connected with the *Bush* are subverted very skilfully by Baynton's stories.

3.2 THE CHOSEN VESSEL - TEXT

She laid the stick and her baby on the grass while she untied the rope that tethered the calf. The length of the rope separated them. The cow was near the calf, and both were lying down. Feed along the creek was plentiful, and every day she found a fresh place to tether it, since tether it she must, for if she did not, it would stray with the cow out on the plain. She had plenty of time to go after it, but then there was her baby; and if the cow turned on her out on the plain, and she with her baby, – she had been a town girl and was afraid of the cow, but she did not want the cow to know it. She used to run at first when it bellowed its protest against the penning up of its calf. This satisfied the cow, also the calf, but the woman's husband was angry, and called her – the noun was cur. It was he who forced her to run and meet the advancing cow, brandishing a stick, and uttering threatening words till the enemy turned and ran "That's the way!" the man said, laughing at her white face. In many things he was worse than the cow and she wondered if the same rule would apply to the man, but she was not one to provoke skirmishes even with the cow.

It was early for the calf to go to "bed" – nearly an hour earlier than usual; but she had felt so restless all day. Partly because it was Monday, and the end of the week that would bring her and the baby the companionship of his father, was so far off. He was a shrearer, and had gone of his shed before daylight that morning. Fifteen miles as the crow flies separated them.

There was a track in front of the house, for it had once been a wine shanty, and a few travellers passed along at intervals. She was not afraid of horsemen; but swagmen, going to or worse coming from, the dismal, drunken little township, a day's journey beyond, terrified her. One had called at the house to-day, and asked for tucker.

That was why she had penned up the calf so early. She feared more from the look of his eyes, and the gleam of his teeth, as he watched her newly awakened baby beat its impatient fists upon her covered breasts, than from the knife that was sheathed in the belt at his waist.

She had given him bread and meat. Her husband she told him was sick. She always said that when she was alone and a swagman came; and she had gone in from the kitchen to the bedroom, and asked questions and replied to them in the best man's voice she could assume. Then he had asked to go into the kitchen to boil his billy, but instead she gave him tea, and he drank it on the wood heap. He had walked round and round the house, and there were cracks in some places, and after the last time he had asked for tobacco. She had none to give him, and he had grinned, because there was a broken clay pipe near the wood heap where he stood, and if there were a man inside, there ought to have been tobacco. Then he asked for money, but women in the bush never have money.

At last he had gone, and she, watching through the cracks, saw him when about a quarter of a mile away, turn and look back at the house. He had stood so for some moments with a pretence of fixing his swag, and then, apparently satisfied, moved to the left towards the creek. The creek made a bow round the house, and when he came to the bend she lost sight of him. Hours after, watching intently for signs of smoke, she saw the man's dog chasing some sheep that had gone to the creek for water, and saw it slink back suddenly, as if it had been called by some one.

More than once she thought of taking her baby and going to her husband. But in the past, when she had dared to speak of the dangers to which her loneliness exposed her,

he had taunted and sneered at her. "Needn't falter yourself," he had told her, "nobody 'ud want her run away with yew."

Long before nightfall she placed food on the kitchen table, and beside it laid the big brooch that had been her mother's. It was the only thing of value that she had. And she left the kitchen door wide open.

The doors inside she securely fastened. Beside the bolt in the back one she drove in the steel and scissors; against it she piled the table and the stools. Underneath the lock of the front door she forced the handle of the spade, and the blade between the cracks in the flooring boards. Then the prop-stick, cut into lengths, held the top, as the spade held the middle. The windows were little more than portholes; she had nothing to fear through them.

She ate a few mouthfuls of food and drank a cup of milk. But she lighted no fire, and when night came, no candle, but crept with her baby to bed.

What woke her? The wonder was that she had slept – she had not meant to. But she was young, very young. Perhaps the shrinking of the galvanized roof – hardly though, since that was so usual. Yet something had set her heart beating wildly; but she lay quite still, only she put her arm over her baby. Then she had both round it, and she prayed, "Little baby, little baby, don't wake!"

The moon's rays shone on the front of the house, and she saw one of the open cracks, quite close to where she lay, darken with a shadow. Then a protesting growl reached her; and she could fancy she heard the man turn hastily. She plainly heard the thud of something striking the dog's ribs, and the long flying strides of the animal as it howled and ran. Still watching, she saw the shadow darken every crack along the wall. She knew by the sounds that the man was trying every standpoint that might help him to see in; but how much he saw she could not tell. She thought of many things she might do to deceive him into the idea that she was not alone. But the sound of her voice would wake baby, and she dreaded that as though it were the only danger that threatened her. So she prayed, "Little baby, don't wake, don't cry!"

Stealthily the man crept about. She knew he had his boots off, because of the vibration that his feet caused as he walked along the verandah to gauge the width of the little window in her room, and the resistance of the front door.

Then he went to the other end, and the uncertainty of what he was doing became unendurable. She had felt safer, far safer, while he was close, and she could watch and listen. She felt she must watch, but the great fear of wakening her baby again assailed her. She suddenly recalled that one of the slabs on that side of her house had shrunk in length as well as in width, and had once fallen out. It was held in position only by a wedge of wood underneath. What if he should discover that? The uncertainty increased her terror. She prayed as she gently raised herself with her little one in her arms, held tightly to her breast.

She thought of the knife, and shielded its body with her hands and arms. Even the little feet she covered with its white gown, and the baby never murmured – it liked to be held so. Noiselessly she crossed to the other side, and stood where she could see and hear, but not be seen. He was trying every slab, and was very near to that with the wedge under it. Then she saw him find it; and heard the sound of the knife as bit by bit he began to cut away the wooden support.

She waited motionless, with her baby pressed tightly to her, though she knew that in another few minutes this man with the cruel eyes, lascivious mouth, and gleaming knife, would enter. One side of the slab tilted; he had only to cut away the remaining little end, when the slab, unless he held it, would fall outside.

She heard his jerked breathing as it kept time with the cuts of the knife, and the brush of his clothes as he rubbed the wall in his movements, for she was so still and quite, that she did not even tremble. She knew when he ceased, and wondered why, being so well concealed; for he could not see her, and would not fear if he did, yet she heard him move cautiously away. Perhaps he expected the slab to fall – his motive puzzled her, and she moved even closer, and bent her body the better to listen. Ah! What sound was that? "Listen! Listen!" she bade her heart – her heart that had kept so still, but now bounded with tumultuous throbs that dulled her ears. Nearer and nearer came the sounds, till the welcome thud of a horse's hoof rang out clearly.

"O God! O God! O God!" she panted, for they were very close before she could make sure. She rushed to the door, and with her baby in her arms tore frantically at its bolts and bars.

Out she darted at last, and running madly along, saw the horseman beyond her in the distance. She called to him in Christ's Name, in her babe's name, still flying like the wind with the speed that deadly peril gives. But the distance grew greater and greater between them, and when she reached the creek her prayers turned to wild shrieks, for there crouched the man she feared, with outstretched arms that caught her as she fell. She knew he was offering terms if she ceased to struggle and cry for help, though louder and louder did she cry for it, but it was only when the man's hand gripped her throat, that the cry of "Murder" came from her lips. And when she ceased, the startled curlews took up the awful sound, and flew wailing "Murder! Murder!" over the horseman's head.

"By God!" said the boundary rider, "it's been a dingo right enough! Eight killed up here, and there's more down in the creek – a ewe and a lamb, I'll bet; and the lamb's alive!" He shut out the sky with his hand, and watched the crows that were circling round and round, nearing the earth one moment, and the next shooting skywards. By that he knew the lamb must be alive; even a dingo will spare a lamb sometimes.

Yes, the lamb was alive, and after the manner of lambs of its kind did not know its mother when the light came. It had sucked the still warm breasts, and laid its little head on her bosom, and slept till the morn. Then, when it looked at the swollen disfigured face, it wept and would have crept away, but for the hand that still clutched its little gown. Sleep was nodding its golden head and swaying its small body, and the crows were close, so close, to the mother's wide-open eyes, when the boundary rider galloped down.

"Jesus Christ!" he said, covering his eyes. He told afterwards how the little child held out its arms to him, and how he was forced to cut its gown that the dead hand held.

It was election time, and as usual the priest had selected a candidate. His choice was so obviously in the interests of the squatter, that Peter Hennessey's reason, for once in his life, had over-ridden superstition, and he had dared promise his vote to another. Yet he was uneasy, and every time he woke in the night (and it was often), he heard the murmur of his mother's voice. It came through the partition, he knew she was praying in her bed; but when the sounds came under the door, she was on her knees before the little Altar in the corner that enshrined the statue of the Blessed Virgin and Child.

"Mary, Mother of Christ! Save my son! Save him!" prayed she in the dairy as she strained and set the evening's milking. "Sweet Mary! For the love of Christ, save him!" The grief in her old face made the morning meal so bitter, that to avoid her he came late to his dinner. It made him so cowardly, that he could not say good-bye to her, and when night fell on the eve of the election day, he rode off secretly.

He had thirty miles to ride to the township to record his vote. He cantered briskly along the great stretch of plain that had nothing but stunted cotton bush to play shadow to the full moon, which glorified a sky of earliest spring. The bruised incense of the flowering clover rose up to him, and the glory of the night appealed vaguely to his imagination, but he was preoccupied with his present act of revolt.

Vividly he saw his mother's agony when she would find him gone. Even at that moment, he felt sure, she was praying.

"Mary! Mother of Christ!" He repeated the invocation, half unconsciously, when suddenly to him, out of the stillness, came Christ's Name – called loudly in despairing accents.

"For Christ's sake! Christ's sake! Christ's sake!" called the voice. Good Catholic that he had been, he crossed himself before he dared to look back. Gliding across a ghostly patch of pipe-clay, he saw a white-robed figure with a babe clasped to her bosom.

All the superstitious awe of his race and religion swayed his brain. The moonlight on the gleaming clay was a "heavenly light" to him, and he knew the white figure not for flesh and blood, but for the Virgin and Child of his mother's prayers. Then, good Catholic that once more he was, he put spurs to his horse's sides and galloped madly away.

His mother's prayers were answered, for Hennessey was the first to record his vote – for the priest's candidate. Then he sought the priest at home, but found that he was out rallying the voters. Still, under the influence of his blessed vision, Hennessey would not go near the public-houses, but wandered about the outskirts of the town for hours, keeping apart from the towns-people, and fasting as penance. He was subdued and mildly ecstatic, feeling as a repentant chastened child, who awaits only the kiss of peace.

And at last, as he stood in the graveyard crossing himself with reverent awe, he heard in the gathering twilight the roar of many voices crying the name of the visitor at the election. It was well with the priest.

Again Hennessey sought him. He was at home, the housekeeper said, and led him into the dimly lighted study. His seat was immediately opposite a large picture, and as the housekeeper turned up the lamp, once more the face of the Madonna and Child looked down on him, but this time silently, peacefully. The half-parted lips of the Virgin were smiling with compassionate tenderness; her eyes seemed to beam with the forgiveness of an earthly mother for her erring but beloved child.

He fell on his knees in adoration. Transfixed, the wondering priest stood, for mingled with the adoration, "My Lord and my God!" was the exaltation, "And hast Thou chosen me?"

"What is it, Peter?" said the priest.

"Father," he answered reverently; and with loosened tongue he poured forth the story of his vision.

"Great God!" shouted the priest, "and you did not stop to save her! Do you not know? Have you not heard?"

Many miles further down the creek a man kept throwing an old cap into a water-hole. The dog would bring it out and lay it on the opposite side to where the man stood, but would not allow the man to catch him, though it was only to wash the blood of the sheep from his mouth and throat, for the sight of blood made the man tremble. But the dog also was guilty.

3.3 OVERALL STRUCTURE OF *THE CHOSEN VESSEL*

The story of *The Chosen Vessel* is superficially, simple enough. It tells of a woman, alone in her *Bush* home with her baby. A visit by a *swagman* during the day unsettles her and she is afraid that he may return. When he does, she is terror-stricken. Just at the moment when he is about to enter her house with his "cruel eyes, lascivious mouth and gleaming knife", she hears horse hooves. She runs to the man on the horse for help but, Peter Hennessey, the rider, with his own particular problems, thinks that she is an apparition and rides away. The next day her corpse is found by a boundary rider, still holding on to her baby.

A summary of this sort cannot bring out the powerful undercurrents of the intense little story. What marks it as a gem in its genre is the telling itself. The story is repeatedly told in the past. There is a fascinating backward-forward movement of the tenses. We meet the unnamed woman in the evening when she is penning up her calf for the night. The first visit of the *swagman* in the morning is told in the past tense. Again, the identity of the horse - man to whom she runs for help, is not explained till later. Peter Hennessey gives his own account of a woman in white with a baby clasped to her bosom, running towards him. The actual rape and murder takes place in a black out of language. This telling of the story in flashbacks gives it an edge of suspense without lessening its dramatic immediacy.

The story itself can be divided into five unequal configurations. The first, when the woman goes about her work, thinking about the morning's encounter with the *swagman*. The second, when the *swagman* comes back at night, the woman's subsequent fear ending with her flight, rape and murder. The short third part is about how her body is discovered by a boundary rider. The fourth part is the succinct account of Peter Hennessey's life and politics culminating in his ecstatic vision of what he thought was the *Madonna* and *her child*, ending with his knowledge of her real identity. The miniscule fifth forms the conclusion of the story and tells about the murderer. It is an intriguing and haunting end because Baynton talks about how "the sight of blood made the man tremble". The story ends on a note of brittle equipoise.

3.4 INTERPRETATIONS

3.4.1 A Feminist Reading of *The Chosen Vessel*

The most noteworthy feature of *The Chosen Vessel* is the depiction of the time-honoured division of woman as an object of sexual desire and as a mother/goddess. However, the way Baynton does it is replete with hidden ironies and nuances. The anonymous young wife and mother, alone with the male baby are defenseless and vulnerable. Her urban/town background is mentioned in passing which makes her even more alienated from

the *Bush*. Her loneliness is overwhelming and her defenses fragile. She has to resort to such flimsy pretences as impersonating a male voice to make the *swagman* think that there is a man in her house. She leaves food and her mother's brooch to bribe any intruder. She does not have any money to give the *swagman* showing how women in the bush were economically dependent on their husbands. Her husband himself never takes her fears of being left behind alone seriously. He taunts her by saying that, "nobody'd want ter run away with yew." Of course, he is proved wrong.

The story takes up the bisection of woman as object of lust and woman as nurturer at the very beginning. The first sentence that the woman thinks about the morning visit of the *swagman* goes like this

"She feared more from the look of eyes, and the gleam of his teeth, as he watched her newly awakened baby beat its impatient fists upon her covered breasts, than from the knife that was sheathed in the belt at his waist."

The same breasts that nurture the baby also awaken the glint of lust in the

swagman's eyes. This motif is carried on throughout the story with several ironic undertones. The apparently harmonious relationship between mother and child, cow and calf, ewe and lamb, is invalidated by the agony of Peter Hennessey's mother praying for the salvation of her son's soul. The effect of the story is intensified by Hennessey's grotesque mistake of confusing a victim of rape with the virgin mother.

The story is also enlivened by several indirect barbs against the Church. The priest with political interests, "rallying the voters", the repetition of the words "good Catholic" for Hennessey when he rides away from the woman, entirely undermining the meaning of the words; show Baynton's concern about the meaninglessness of institutionalised religion.

3.4.2 Reflections on the *Bush* in *The Chosen Vessel*

The *Bush* had earlier been glorified by most male writers as the embodiment or as an identifying marker of the Australian nation and as a space within which male camaraderie, strength and machismo flourished. Baynton totally changes this bias. Peter Hennessey may have the time to notice the rugged beauty of the *Bush*

"He cantered briskly along the great stretch of plain that had nothing but stunted cotton bush to play shadow to the full moon, which glorified a sky of earliest spring. The bruised incense of the flowering clover rose up to him, and the glory of the night appealed vaguely to his imagination."

For the woman, however, the *Bush* is an "enemy", just as the cow is an enemy, to be met head on with a stick. In fact, the gender divisions of the story are quite stereotypical. The men are all out in the open, traversing vast spaces. The husband, a shearer, had gone away to his shed, leaving his wife to look after the homestead and the baby. The priest is politically active, an important and busy man involved with his community. The *swagman* is almost a vagabond with his dog and his knife. And Hennessey rides to town to cast his vote. It is 1896 and there is, of course, no question of his mother going out to vote. She too is left behind to pray for her son's soul. The two women can be seen as appendages to the men; they do not really exist in their own right. The woman in the *Bush* does not even have the right to fear for her own safety, and as the story tells us, her self-esteem was frequently sullied by her husband's jibes and insults.

3.4.3 Motherhood and Baynton

Baynton has usually been seen by various critics as a writer who valorised the maternal instinct. In the collected works of Barbara Baynton, entitled by her name, the editors, Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson write about this facet in their introduction to the text.

“In contrast to the pervading vision of moral chaos and cruelty Baynton’s images of motherhood emerge as a hope for humanity ... Amongst all the destructive, environmental forces ... motherhood is the one creative element.”

This can be seen in the relationship between the murdered mother and the child. She does not let go of her child even after death. But the correlation is not without its own tensions as can be seen in the flawed bond between Hennessey and his mother. The bitterness and guilt in the relationship is almost galling for Hennessey and leads to not one, but two episodes of disorientation and confusion. The first is the obvious one when he thinks that the woman about to be raped and killed is a supernatural vision of the Virgin and her child. The second is when he actually sees a picture of the Madonna and Child in the Priest’s house. The religious halo of the picture is eroded until he sees an ordinary woman with “half-parted lips” and eyes “beam(ing) with the forgiveness of an earthly mother for her erring but beloved child.” The passion of her motherhood brings her down to ordinariness. And it is Hennessey’s own blemished understanding of motherhood that makes her so ultimately proving her to be as counterfeit as his ‘vision’ of the night before.

3.5 BARBARA BAYNTON’S IDEOLOGICAL POSITION: CONTEXTUALISING *THE CHOSEN VESSEL*

In order to understand *The Chosen Vessel* we have to place it within the context of Baynton’s entire oeuvre, see it as being framed by her own social/ideological concerns. To look at *The Chosen Vessel* as an isolated text is a risk that we cannot take because it would give us a false understanding of Baynton as a writer. I will try to connect *The Chosen Vessel* with her most overriding concerns that abound in all her writings. Namely her insistence on sexual difference between men and women and the special status accorded to pregnancy, childbirth and the maternal instinct in women. In fact the first point of sexual difference incorporates the second too to a certain extent because according to Baynton the maternal in women is what leads them to be superior to men; peace loving, caring, cultured as opposed to the crudeness, bestiality and the callousness of the men who are closely connected to the same adjectival qualities of the Bush. A false reading of Baynton’s ideological stance as a writer is what I wish to avoid and the isolated reading of *The Chosen Vessel* would lead us to exactly that: an incomplete comprehension of the tensions and contradictions in Baynton’s writings. It is very easy to label Baynton as a feminist writer based on analysis of *The Chosen Vessel* but my contention is that her insistence on sexual difference based on the biological superiority of women leads her to a trap of her own making.

Firstly, I wish to clarify what exactly I mean by sexual difference. I use the term in the way the “the gynocritics” (a word coined by Elaine Showalter) of feminism use it — as an *écriture féminine*, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text. Hélène Cixous, one of the leading advocates of *écriture féminine* has said that there have been very few writers who have inscribed their femininity into their writing. However as Elaine Showalter puts it:

“The concept of *écriture féminine* provides a way of talking about womens’ writing which reasserts the value of the feminine and identifies the theoretical

project of feminist criticism as the analysis of difference", (Elaine Showalter, *Writing and Sexual Difference*, p. 16, 1982).

Barbara Baynton

If we follow this line of argument we can go further and say with Adrienne Rich that –

"female biology ... has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource rather than a destiny", (Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, p. 35, 1979).

I wish to first see Barbara Baynton as a writer who consciously and deliberately inscribed her feminine, biological self into her writings. Her repeated metaphors of pregnancy and motherhood is her way of citing the difference between men and women. In *A Dreamer* she talks about a young pregnant woman who is travelling home to see her mother. It is full of references to the special bond between mother and child. As the unnamed woman walks she listens to the birds.

"From the branch of a tree overhead she heard a watchful mother-bird's warning call, and the twitter of the disturbed nestlings. The tender care of this bird-mother awoke memories of her childhood. What mattered the lonely darkness when it led to mother?"

And later the authorial voice says "She quickened her pace, but did not run, motherhood is instinct in woman."

I have already talked at length about the intense maternal instinct of the woman in *The Chosen Vessel*. Baynton, in fact, wrote about the death of her son with Dr Thomas Baynton in her poem *Goodbye Australia!* and *Baby* both written in 1899 and the former published in the *Bulletin*. I will quote *Goodbye Australia!* in full

Good-bye to it all!
God still holds the land, haply;
Still holds me - its toy.

First, our one child died;
And the heart-broken mother
The summer sun slew,

Last flood drowned the stock;
The fires took home, fencing ...
Her garden is gone.

So, I will leave it.
The blue waters roll the ship
In the dull, sad bay

Forget you, loved hearts!...
This dead wattle holds your dear
Memory ever.

Good-bye to the grave
On the hill; for the far isles
Are calling. Good-bye!

This poem, entitled *Good-bye, Australia!* is a lament, not only for the dead son but also for the dead, cruel land which has forgotten how to nurture. The summer sun, the floods and the fires all compound the death of the son and increase the agony several times. Nature itself seems to be ruthless and uncaring and she has to move to greener climes. In another poem, *To My Country*, she apostrophises Australia as a mother who breeds slaves. The concluding lines are :

“O, nurse of serfdom, how shalt thou be shriven
Of threadbare knees and dust-enshrouded brow,
Mother of slaves who dare not speak their thoughts.”

The idea of the maternal is carried on to the idea of the nation; but here the mother is to be pitied for breeding such sad progeny, “a painful tale of desperate men.” Baynton’s notions about sexual difference seem very subtly to talk about Australia, and more specifically, the Bush as male, dead and non-nurturing. As the University of Queensland Press introduction to her collected works puts it succinctly.

“In most of the stories woman is shown as maternal, loving and peaceful while man is portrayed as brutally sexual. Man’s natural home is the cruel landscape while woman is instinctively associated with civilization and the town.”

Baynton’s complex identification with writing about the maternal is not without its own set of problems specially when she connects all that is anti-woman with the Australian Bush. When she does this, she in fact plays into the hands of patriarchal ideology. In a way it can be seen as an agreement with “the structure of patriarchy that have divided labour into mens’ production and womens’ reproduction ... (and) the familiar dualism of mind and body, a key component of Western patriarchal ideology. Creation is the act of the mind that brings something new into existence. Procreation is the act of the body that reproduces the species.”(Susan Stanford Friedman, *Speaking of Gender*, p. 75, 1989).

In *The Chosen Vessel* we can see the crosscurrents of all these ideas: The public sphere of men, the private sphere of women; the physicality of the women (the breasts of the nursing mother which arouses the glint of lust in the *swagman*’s eyes, even the physical ordinariness of the *Virgin Mary* as seen by Peter Hennessey) and the valorisation of the bond between mother and child. The patriarchal order had always wished to relegate women to the processes of her body. As Nietzsche says, “Everything concerning woman is a puzzle, and everything concerning woman has one solution: it is named pregnancy,” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), quoted by Susan Stanford Friedman, p. 78). Susan Stanford Friedman says that such ideas project “the concept of woman as a being without thought, without speech, in the creation of culture. Before the discovery of the ovum, woman’s womb was represented as the mere material vessel into which man dropped his divine seed. But even after womens’ active role in conception became understood, cultural representations of woman based on the mind-body split continued to separate the creation of man’s mind from the procreation of woman’s body,” (ibid, p. 78) According to patriarchal definition, de Beauvoir writes, woman “has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with the glands,” (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949) ibid, p. 78).

Baynton’s characters do the same. They think with their glands except may be in the one powerful exception, *Squeaker’s Mate*. The same themes recur in her novel *Human Toll*. The heroine Ursula Ewart is given Baynton’s mother’s maiden name and also the name of one of her grandchildren. Ursula wishes to write but she feels that she has to first move away from the Bush in order to be able to express herself creatively. Ursula is

herself an orphaned child who is taken care of by a reformed convict called Boshy. Her only friend is Andrew and she grows to love him but later, a girl called Mina tricks him into marrying her and also has a child by him. Mina however ill-treats the baby and attempts to kill it. Ursula runs away with the child into the *Bush* but gets lost and the baby also dies. Ursula cannot forget the child as it was when alive and loves it all the more now that it is dead. Ironically, it had been Ursula's possessive love for the baby that had made Mina want to kill her own child.

The strange twists of fate that occur because of Ursula's fevered love for the little child seem almost to happen in the realm of madness. The rescue of the child and the flight into the *Bush* is also a flight into hysteria and delirium. When alone, tired and thirsty with the stiffening child, she cannot even make herself steal one egg from an emu's nest. She imagines that "the robbed bird was standing disconsolately over ... its nest" and she restores the egg. The meaning of her life is bound to Andrew's baby and its death makes her lose her hold on reality until Andrew and an Aborigine save her. Interestingly the drama of her hysteria, in a stream-of-consciousness mode, happens in the space of the *Bush* where "nature was frankly brutal". Baynton's carries the idea of maternity further by delineating it as an instinct that may transcend even natural laws. The maternal instinct may rise as in Ursula's case "like the spring sap in a young tree" even for a child that is not her own.

But motherhood in Baynton is not without its own problematics. In *A Dreamer* the promise of reunion with the mother is brought to nought. I have already mentioned the guilt and tension in the relationship between Peter Hennessey and his mother.

In her most anthologised story, *Squeaker's Mate* we meet a woman who is entirely different. Her strength is destroyed after an accident and the rest of the story happens with her lying alone in a room while Squeaker brings home another mate who is pregnant. Her former "man's strength" had alienated her from other womenfolk because she had "no leisure for yarning" and her barrenness makes her all the more alien. She is the only woman with a name in Baynton's collection of short stories and ironically, her name is *Mary*, the symbol of pure motherhood.

Various questions remain unanswered. Is the woman so strong, silent, and indeed, almost traditionally masculine because she is not like other women ("her uncompromising independence", her barrenness; her physical strength)? The questions become more plentiful when we see that the manuscript of the story tells the birth of the new mate's child and the death of the woman in hospital. What would this new birth have meant? Of course, the published version ends with the old mate still in power with a broken back, an unfeeling brute of a husband and childless. Is she so strange and superior because of the very fact of her childlessness? Interestingly, her husband repeatedly compares her to a snake that has now to crawl on her belly in order to live. (He found the "Go and bite yourself like a snake", would instantly silence her). The same epithet is used for Mina, Andrew's wife who tries to kill her own child. As The UQP introduction says, "Mina is continually described in terms of a serpent, her "venomous eyes" blaze with "green malignity"; she hisses, is "snake-head"; and her hands are "scaly!" She is therefore the "symbolic embodiment" of "evil". So is the *Squeaker's Mate* evil because she cannot bear a child and behave like a woman? Is her broken back a punishment for having tried to transgress gender roles?

Baynton herself had very fixed ideas about women's traditional roles. She valorised the space of the home and household duties for women. In an article entitled "Indignity of Domestic Service" she gives reasons why domestic servants are no longer happy with their work and prefer to go and work in factories. She writes that now they no longer have to be servile and self-effacing in front of the mistress of the house.

"No hated caps, or other "I serve" - insignia, and above all, that paramount privilege, men as masters."

"I may sound disloyal to my sex, yet, it is a common truth; show me a woman in power, and I will show you a despot. Indeed, in my anti-suffrage canvass in London, my surest and most successful weapon for anti-votes was to just ask shopgirls. "Would you rather have a woman over you than a man?" Towards the end she states - "The domestic life is in the - to women - political wilderness just the one oasis which they understand... It is selfish thoughtlessness that has made girls leave this most womanly pursuit for the demoralizing factory life, with its pernicious, far-reaching after-effects."

Baynton goes back to the traditional roles allowed to women by a patriarchal society. Her anti-suffragism and the glorifying of "domestic life" as a "womanly pursuit" can only mean that her accordance of special status to the maternal is not an inscription of the feminine body in the masculine world of literature, but rather a kind of "regressive biologism" (a term used by Susan Stanford Friedman for Anais Nin). It is not a feminist interruption in male literary discourse, as the "gynocritics" would wish it, but a regression into the same old dichotomy of the male mind and the female flesh. Seen in this light, we can say that Baynton is in concordance with the kind of "patriarchal thought that has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications." She too "thinks with her glands" and makes her characters do the same. For her feminine difference and maternity are not radical departures but sentimentalized depictions within the traditional patriarchal framework.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

Baynton's *The Chosen Vessel* is a terse, yet exquisitely forceful story about the ruptured interpretations of 'woman', she is a victim of lust as well as of worship. The Biblical allusion of the title makes the story that bit more ironic and expands its field of reference. What has woman been chosen for after all? Hennessey asks a similar question towards the end of the story, "And hast thou chosen me?" But his hope too turns out to be chimaera. We also see that the *Bush* has been depicted as malevolent, malignant and vicious.

In the last section I have tried to place Baynton's story within her entire oeuvre from the point of view of sexual difference and the inscription of the maternal into her texts. But I was led to conclude that Baynton's claim for the superiority of the reproductive female body is ultimately regressive and falls within the traditional patriarchal division of male production and female reproduction.

3.7 QUESTIONS

- (1) Can you read Barbara Baynton's story, *The Chosen Vessel* as an indictment of *Bush* life?
- (2) Explain the dichotomy of whore/goddess (mother) with reference to *The Chosen Vessel*.
- (3) Write a note on how the short story has been structured. Does it have a 'twist' in the end?
- (4) Make a note of the stereotypical gender differences that have been depicted through the characters in the story.
- (5) What is *écriture féminine*? Do you think Barbara Baynton's valorisation of the maternal is a feminist interruption in male-centred literary discourse?

3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

- (1) Sally Krimmer & Alan Lawson (eds.) : Barbara Baynton : Bush Studios, other stories, Human Toll, Verse, Essay and Letters (Univ. of Queensland Press : 1980).
- (2) Laurie Hergenhan's: "Shafts into Our Fundamental Animalism": Barbara Baynton's Use of Maturalism in **Bush Studies**. (Australian Literary Studies, Vol.17, no:3, May 1996).
- (3) Jack Lindsay's "Barbara Baynton: A Master of Naturalism." from **Decay and Renewal** (published by Wild & Woolley, Sydney, 1976). and
- (4) A.A. Phillips', "Barbara Baynton and the Dissidence of the Nineties" from **The Australian Tradition** (Angus & Robertson Sydney, 1966)