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Representations of Class, Social Realism and Region in "Eleven Months in Bunbury" by James Ricks

Joshua J. K. Ledger

Edith Cowan University

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REPRESENTATIONS OF CLASS, SOCIAL REALISM AND REGION IN ELEVEN MONTHS IN BUNBURY
BY JAMES RICKS

J.J.K.Ledger
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B.A. (English) Hons
REPRESENTATIONS OF CLASS, SOCIAL REALISM AND REGION

IN

ELEVEN MONTHS IN BUNBURY

BY JAMES RICKS

By

Joshua J. K. Ledger

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to explore representations of class, social realism and region in *Eleven months in Bunbury* by James Ricks. This novel stands outside dominant literary theory in its representations of class, realism and regionalism. It also presents opportunities to consider ideology and class through the eyes of a working class person, in the language of the class that it depicts. Thus it speaks to a class which rarely has its point of view and lives represented in conventional literature. It is therefore a useful literary and social document.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Date: 12 December 2000
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INTRODUCTION

Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion to one's own. (Terry Eagleton. *Literary theory: an introduction*).

My interest in the novel *Eleven months in Bunbury* began when I introduced it to a creative writing class at the Bunbury Regional Prison. Several young men were 'totally wrapt' in the book. Their skills as literary critics were, while not developed, reasonably astute. They saw its apparent weaknesses, such as failure to develop character, for example, as strengths. "You don't need that bullshit. You know what they're like by how they talk". "This book says exactly how I think about things – it's like I wrote it!". They understood the language from the inside and thrilled at its immediacy and authenticity and its gutsy, rebellious tone. One young man (aged twenty four) admitted that it was only the third book he had read since he left school and it ..."made me cry". It was the first text that spoke directly to these men, brought their imaginations to life and inspired them to write, "because I didn't know you could write books like that". The connection to place for some from the Bunbury region further strengthened the book's appeal and meaning to them. It made the ordinary, extraordinary. *Eleven months in Bunbury* spoke to, and of, the lives of these under-privileged men.

My other motivation for studying this particular book arises from a general observation of the historical narrowness of the recommended academic texts. As Eagleton states:

That there *is* an academic institution which powerfully determines what readings are generally permissible is certainly true; and the 'literary institution' includes publishers, literary editors and reviewers as well as academia (1989, p. 89). [italics included]
I suggest that *Eleven months in Bunbury* affirms that literature is a 'changing object' (Ibid) and that there are no 'determinates' in literature. Linguistic and historical conventions make all meanings arbitrary, both constraining and freeing. As Reid notes in *Fiction and the great depression*:...'indeed it may happen that through its very imperfections the most interesting properties of a work are revealed' (1979, p. x). Once *Eleven months in Bunbury*’s literary shortcomings are no longer the sole focus of its legitimacy, the novel provides a worthy opportunity to examine issues of class and social realism in a specific regional setting. Additionally, its marginalisation outside the literary canon makes its ideological content and position a valuable social document and literary text. Apparently unconcerned with literary conventions it is consequently unconstrained by them.

In Chapter One a discussion of *Eleven months in Bunbury* as a document of class explores the relationship between literature and ideology. Reference is made to Jameson's concept of all ideologies as 'strategies of containment' which allow societies to suppress the underlying contradictions of history (Selden, 1993, p. 97). Balibar and Macherey’s theory on ‘the way that literature functions in the reproduction of ideology’ within Althusser's ideological state apparatus’ of the education system is applied to the text. Finally, Eagleton's application of these frameworks to the relation between the literary text and the social world form the basis of ideological considerations in this paper (Rice and Waugh 1997, pp. 51-52).

Chapter Two examines the novel within the framework of social realism identified by Kaplan, Brook, Lye, Reid and Belsey. According to Kaplan and Thomas, realism as a political and cultural practice has been eclipsed by the success of romanticism and consumerist culture. This foregrounds my discussion of *Eleven months in Bunbury* as realist literature marginalised because of its confronting style and
content. Their thesis that the ‘renaissance’ of realism and its growing appeal lies in its ready engagement with societies in flux and in its challenging of the status quo, is, I suggest, relevant to Ricks’ novel. Lye and Belsey provide excellent critical tools for examining realism and how it functions in literature and in society. I use Belsey’s discussion of classic realism and romantic literature to critically compare these genres with social realism and Ricks’ novel. Reid’s useful overview and comparative discussion of realism in Australia presents an opening to explore his and Kaplan’s theories of the role of the realist writer.

In Chapter Three a brief discussion of regionalism uses the theories of Bennett, Reid and Jolley to explore interactions between people and place both physically and psychologically. I examine Eleven months in Bunbury as an urban novel that eschews the myth that insists that Australian literature is obsessed with the country to the exclusion of the city.

My approach to Ricks’ novel is informed by Northrop Frye’s astute observation that; ‘It is much easier to see what literature is trying to do when we are studying a literature that has not quite done it.’(cited in Reid, 1979, p. x). The gatekeepers of the canon have marginalised considerable worthwhile literature because the literature not only hasn’t done it, but also because it has not done it in an acceptable manner. Here, this thesis’ central concern is not with evaluative criticism of Eleven months in Bunbury, but rather a reading of it in the context of an historical understanding of literature and its milieu.
CHAPTER ONE

CLASS

No matter what people believe, class structure as an economic arrangement influences their life chances according to their position in it. (Gerth and Mills, *Character and social structure*)

Giddens refers to class as...‘socioeconomic differences between groups of individuals which create differences in their material prosperity and power’ (1995, p. 580). Elsewhere, Curran and Burrow state...‘It is difficult to generalise about a class that may be ‘united’ by employment status, but which contains a diversity of class situations’ (cited in Edgell, 1993, p. 65). In *Eleven months in Bunbury*, these perspectives on class are strongly signified through the conflicting ideologies of the two main protagonists, Nelson and Jim. Nelson is portrayed as an authentic, working class Aussie bloke. Jim’s middle class sensibilities distinguish him from Nelson and his workmates at the mill via expressions of his ideological sophistication and enlightened opinions about issues of race, gender and power relations. Nevertheless, regardless of his rancorous attitude, and denigration of the workers' shabby, mindless working lives, he is, by his physical presence at the mill, and his status as a wage earner, one of them. Here the book accurately identifies the ideological determinants involved while unavoidably engaging its characters as victims/subjects of them. Class functions as a social structure which both coerces and constrains people. That Jim's psychological life is a product of his social existence which is, in turn, spinning upon the axis of his economic entrapment, illustrates the text's integration of social and economic determinism and its effects on the lives of the characters.

Those who hold economic hegemony are able to shape the ideology of those who do not. This includes the thinking as well as...‘the production and distribution of
the ideas of their age' (Marx, cited in Crotty 1998, p. 121). The legitimacy of the position of the dominant class is upheld by the perception of those who live under it that this (ideology) seems to be a normal and unavoidable way of surviving and dealing with the world. Thus power is maintained by the ruling class through both the hegemony of dominant economic ideas and the ideological dominants in the literature of the society. Althusser calls the relations of production of a class society,...‘the mechanisms of those relations of exploitation’ (1971, p. 8). The corollary, that the function of the ruling class is to mask these mechanisms of class exploitation, is managed through the ideological manipulation of literature and the 'immutable laws of textual production' (Eagleton, 1998, p. 70), which are always subject to modes of ideological insertion.

In Eleven months in Bunbury, Jim's workmates perceive him as thinking that he's above them (Ricks, p. 28). While struggling with the sheer boredom of robotic toil, Jim's immediate struggle is to come to terms with the disintegration of his family and the psychological impact of this on himself. The workplace becomes a focus and contribution to his crushing depression. Its disturbed characters and monotonous labour amplify the distress and alienation that Jim is experiencing. After two years of work on the green chain, he has suffered all the travails and impacts of alienation. As an assembly line worker, Jim has no sense of fulfilment or pride in the task he is performing and the product he is creating. In the following extract he grasps the real cause of his and his mate Turvey's rage that is the essence of the concept of alienation of the workers from the product of their labour. (Ritzer, 1998, pp. 57-78). Jim exclaims:

...it's the place. The whole concept of the place. Timecards. Clocking on. Clocking off. Sirens. Conveyor belts. Pulling logs. Pulling logs. We're all expected to get up every day and do something that's completely dehumanising'...He looked around him and everything was grey and metal and black. He pushed himself forward and left his soul behind him (Ricks, p. 56).
These manifestations of the alienation of people by their social and work conditions, are, according to Marxist theory, results of a crisis of identity ... 'fashioned mainly and often violently around the excesses of marketing and consumption and the natural social relations of post-industrial society' (McLaren, 1995, p. 2). The timber belongs to the company and Jim has no connection to or ownership of what he is creating. He is similarly disconnected from his fellow workers by the work technology which separates out their tasks into isolated meaningless repetitions. He is an acerbic Schadenfreude (Ricks, pp. 30-31). His acute sense of others' vulnerabilities further estranges Jim and singles him out as another alienated worker. Indeed, insult and 'put down' epitomise the conversations of the workers. Physical difference invites ridicule. Turvey's lips are compared to a pin up girl's labia (Ricks, p. 33). Chalky is lucky his long, hairy legs don't break in half and stab him in the stomach (Ricks, p. 30). The grinding drudgery of the work place and its demeaning social conventions confound any opportunities for the workers and Jim to actually recognise or realise their real human potential. They are deeply alienated from each other and from themselves by mindless repetitive work, the essential requirement of capitalism in its need to optimise production for profit creation.

In an interview with Anderson, Ricks ... 'does admit that the introspective character Jim, who has a particularly hard time understanding himself, was closely aligned with himself (South West Times 15/04/97). This autobiographical aspect of his writing situates James Ricks as Jim's alter ego. Just as Jim sits judgementally on the sidelines, so too does Ricks the writer. The symptoms of alienation and introspection underpin the role of Jim and of the writer. Significant to a Marxist reading, Ricks' novel is not concerned with a conscious or active engagement in the struggles of the working class. This would actively 'involve' the writer as creator of a class document, a role out of character with Jim's and Ricks' make-up and attitude, in so far as the text is

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nominally devoid of any political or overt ideological content. Pertinent to this dynamic is the function of the text in its relation to history. Because the text is actually concerned with ideological formations, its depiction of 'concrete situations' via its inherent fictiveness (its lack of a real direct referent), distances it from history. Similarly, Jim and his alter ego, the author, are not telling the 'real' story via the narrative, but via the ideological formations buried within the text. 'The pseudo-real of the literary text is the product of the ideologically saturated demands of its modes of representation' (Eagleton, 1998, pp. 73-78). Alienated by his personal angst and dysfunctional social background, Jim is detached, a watcher whose observations are all the more relevant because they personify the distant, alienated role of the disempowered character/narrator. His fury, while born of personal misery, is enunciated in a mode of 'subjective urgency' (Elliot in Kaplan & Sprinker, p. 237). He is the 'recruited subject of the state' (Althusser, cited in Rice and Waugh, 1996, p. 60) who sits impotently on the sidelines, brutalised by the 'nightmare of history' and able only to rage or indulge in cynicism. Ricks is similarly stranded by the dynamic of literature as ideology within culture and society. His novel may well be 'nothing but ideology', just a manifestation of 'false consciousness' or, in its challenging of dominant ideologies, an attempt to expose hidden ideologies and thereby provide insights into social realities (Eagleton, 1989, pp. 16-19 [italics included]. In so far as the text depicts the relationships between the modes of production and the working class subjects of Eleven months in Bunbury, it is, like them, subject to the inextricable relationship between text and ideology.

Jim's workplace is populated by a polarised community of competitive and largely alienated individuals. Work is where you survive and get your pay. Significantly, the masculinity exhibited in this workplace is
An amplified and exaggerated masculinity [which] has become the boastful centrepiece of a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated (Gilroy, 1993, p. 85. Cited in Crang, p. 173).

Gilroy's quote supports Marx's statement about 'an accumulation of misery, corresponding with accumulation of capital' (1889. Capital). Later, in response to the notion that Nostradamus' prediction of the end of the world is imminent, Brett, the mill boss, volunteers that he would

...“do all the things you wouldn't normally be allowed to do”...“Things like killin' someone.”.... Brett continued, “And then I'd rape a sheila. I'd fuck her up the arse”. Brett smiled, turned and went back to his seat in the mill workers room. “Shit,” gasped Johnny, “I could imagine Brett doin' somethin' like that”. “If the world was gunna end”, said Jim, “I'd shoot myself. I'd fuck fate up the arse”(Ricks, pp. 57-58).

Regardless of the hypothetical scenario, extreme misogyny, fantasies of rape, murder and suicide symbolise disturbed human behaviour by men estranged from themselves and the community of their fellow human beings. The indifference with which they utter and share their imaginings implicates and insinuates a social framework already deeply embedded with fundamentally disturbed and fragmented individuals. This is the behaviour of emasculated men who only realise their identities through the principle of their own subjection to the power structures which dominate their lives as victims of class (Butler, 1997, p. 85). The society that has produced these human responses and which exists in constant expectation and fear of them, has, partly through cultures of demeaning labour, interposed mechanisms between workers and nature and between workers and their own physical being.

Such work, Marcuse argues, by its routine and mechanical nature, tends to the almost total exclusion of libidinal relations from this important sphere of life. Alienation, the negation of the pleasure-principle, in favour of a non-libidinal reality principle means in effect that the body is de-sexualized for its working period (Meakin, 1976, p. 154).
Female sexuality is brutalised and demeaned in the working place by the ideology of cultural sadism (Barry in Bell and Klein, 1996, p. 449). Its natural expression is replaced by a narrow sexuality that characterises society; the plethora of pornography at Alpine (Ricks, p. 30) and in society at large (sexuality at its narrowest, most genital) could be seen as a result of the alienation of work (Meakin, 1976, p. 154). 'Sexual objectification is a core dimension of the oppression of women....particularly [through] pornography' (Barry in Bell and Klein, p. 449). The class and sex based exploitation of women can be seen to operate widely through the economic marginalisation of women and the fact that pornography is a growth market. This public 'deconstruction' of female sexuality through pornography also reflects and implicates the ongoing deconstruction of men's bodies (and sexuality) through such events as the violent amputation of limbs in the mill as a daily risk (Ricks, p. 78-82, 157, 128). Men's bodies are here the sites of class power struggles. Capital needs labour and the risks involved are eclipsed by economic imperatives; physical and mental crippling (castration) are products of Marx' 'accumulation of capital and misery' as the corollary of workplace alienation and exploitation (see quote above). Thus one male response to dehumanising work and societal repression is exposed in the sexual objectification of women, including voyeurism and blatantly sexist conversation, which is safely and unquestioningly indulged in the male bastions of the capitalist workplace (Ricks, 14,15,30,32,33,39,127,128).

Jim, as an 'intellectual', finds himself working and suffering alongside the foci of his scorn and ultimate hope, the rock bottom working class yobos at the sawmill. Their distrust and disdain for him is not just a response to his caustic, anti-social disposition and attitudes. It is founded in a reflexive and historical experience of deception (Althusser, 1993, p. 25) which the working class retains for intellectualism and
intellectuals. In *Power without glory*, Frank Hardy's realist classic Australian text about the rise of a working class man to the ruling class, Hardy quotes Charles Kingsley: 'A working man who deserts his own class, tries to rise above it, enters into a lie' (p. 27).

Kingsley's words orientate and source cross-class attitudes to intellectualism and social mobility. Here, upward social mobility is defined as 'desertion' and deliberate falsity, while Edgell in his work *Class* defines downward mobility as 'class deterioration' (1993, p. 83). Through the texts, the divergent ideologies presented by both the working class and intellectuals, rather than elucidating the issues, just present attitudes symptomatic of and reinforcing their class positions. These incumbent ideologies can produce behaviour deeply embedded in powerful class conflicts that are normally hidden behind social facades.

The intense alienation experienced by the mill workers explodes in an episode of violent and abusive behaviour after the annual Alpine booze up. Paid off and 'liberated' by the company's free beer (Ricks, pp. 140-146), Nelson and his mates rampage through another hotel. The conceptual anonymity of 'the other' (Bhabha cited in McLaren, 1995, p. 89) as a focus for class and social resentment finds convenient and violent expression when the mill workers go 'shit stirrin'.

There they were: reeling up and down the bar. Giving shit. Drinking beer. Spitting on the floor. Their work clothes stood out. The pine sap made their skin shine. They hadn't felt this crazy since the salmon trip (Ricks, p. 147).

Allied by their appearance, alcoholic courage and 'sociopathic' hatred of these other people, the mill workers portray themselves as a separate class and exploit their own feelings of inferiority in order to harvest revenge. The students who are drinking in the bar are 'poofers'. The young women are sexually molested and abused. The bouncer is savagely beaten.
They were ugly then. Their faces were dark and furious. Sinews knotted. Movement demented. Hell-bent on violence (Ricks, p. 148).

In this class battle of 'us against them' the working class exact revenge against the ruling class, the natural enemy of the workers. Aroused by the beer that the bosses have provided, the workers turn on their symbolic masters (educated class, property owners and their thugs) and temporarily destroy law and order. Through 'revolutionary' collective action, the mill workers actually break out of the repression of their own ideologies 'strategies of containment' (Jameson cited in Selden, 1993, p. 97), which normally safely bind them to inaction and class disempowerment. Nelson actually threatens to kill anyone who tells the police, who are regraded as the agents of the ruling class and the traditional enemy of the workers. This theme of aggravated lawlessness (see Ricks, pp. 57-58 above) underpins a class attitude based in alienation and historical antagonism with the law. As Ned Kelly wrote in 1879:

...Victorian Police who some calls honest gentlemen but I would like to know what business an honest man would have in the Police as it is an old saying it takes a rogue to catch a rogue and a man that knows nothing about roguery would never enter the force... (sic) (cited in Turner, 1968, p. 73).

In this extract, as in Ricks' novel, the inner literary form is tied closely to the concrete issues at stake. The struggle between class and authority, the questioning of signifiers, and the oppositional judgement of the ideological dominants are stated in the language of the class. There are no pretensions about the form of the text. All is expressed through the content in a direct language which evokes the spoken word and presence of the class protagonists. As a document of class, Ricks' novel speaks of the uncertainties of the times. The continuum of predictable, stable, orderly class systems is constantly subverted and questioned by the ragged lives and behaviour of the workers. Despite the fact that he has had four jobs in eighteen months, Nelson quits work over a petty
disagreement (Ricks, pp. 4-5). Poverty, endemic violence, drunkenness, public brawling, shattered families, drug abuse, racism, alienation, workplace bullying and vendettas, prison, alcoholism, co-dependency, domestic violence, pornography, child abuse, rape, sexual abuse, incest, murder, ageism, masochism, sadism, workplace accidents and suicide characterise the lives of these people in a society which is ostensibly Christian and egalitarian. Ricks 'uses' and exposes these false ideologies extensively. In presenting these social realities, the text confronts the dominant ideologies of the state and its literary hegemony. Through its text and contextual positioning Eleven months in Bunbury deconstructs ideologies and (contemporaneously) decentres the relations between the capitalist mode of production and the realities of life for the mass of people living as its subjects (Eagleton, 1998, p. 98). At this level the text interposes itself between reality 'the nightmare of history' and the dominant ideology of the state which exists via the production of ideology in the 'literary' texts.

According to Gardner, over time, Marx's prediction of the political radicalisation of workers as a result of their degradation by work has not, despite or perhaps because of unionisation, improved the conditions and pay of the South West mill worker (personal conversation: George Gardner. 30/10/2000) i The history of exploitation, that has typified the working lives of mill workers and the industry they work in, maintains in the conditions at the Alpine mill where inadequate recreational and working conditions are a 'given'. Working while exposed to freezing rain, wind and blazing sun (Ricks, p.116), inadequate mess resources together with low pay ii reflect the conditions of exploitation. Trapped by their ignorance of organisation and radicalisation, the mill workers confound their potential to improve their lot.

Ricks’ description of the relations of production in the mill are reflected in the lyrics of a song about contemporary work conditions in South West timber mills by
local songwriter, luthier and musician Scott Wise (see Appendix A). Written in 1990, *The Boys in the Yard* is pertinent to the lives of Ricks’ characters. The following extracts portray mill work conditions and deal with the origins of the problems with particular emphasis on alienation. According to Gardner *et al*, historically, disempowered unions have plagued the lot of the South Western Australian mill worker. Regional union divisions, Northern and South West, have served to duplicate bureaucracies resulting in diminished effectiveness and wasted precious resources. Historically, the impact of early regional economic underdevelopment and the scarcity of secondary or alternative industries together with cultures of rural poverty have minimised the mill workers' chances to bargain effectively in the work place (personal conversation, George Gardner, 30/10/2000).

*On a pay that's the worst in the land  
And yer welfare seems nobodies' cause.*

These lines are accurate. The mill worker has traditionally been the lowest of the lower waged manufacturing workers in Australia. The history of the industries' physical isolation, workers with poor or little education, conservatism, internal skill based competition and industry exploitation have combined to undermine these workers over a long period of time.

*Because you're in competition with the rest of the crew  
And the whole night shift is competing with you,  
And if ya can't talk to them  
Who the hell's gunna listen to you?*

Green chain workers are looked down upon by the other mill workers. The culture of competition and antagonism between workers in different sections of the mill provocatively illustrates the causes of work alienation.
And if the boys in the yard
working so damn hard can't get on
with the boys in the mill,

Terkel describes productivity in the Fordist assembly line system as pitiless (Ritzer, 1998, p. 58). Danger, overwork and loss of breaks are unavoidable features of automated production. Labour is manipulated from within the workplace by fear of retrenchment and the insecurity of short contracts (a day, a week at a time) (personal conversation, Tony Lovett, 8/11/200). These aspects of alienation erode the workers' rights and human dignity when ...'all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers;...' (Marx, (1889) Capital)

Well ya better start to wonder how it got this way
After so many years on such miserable pay.

Chronic alienation hinders the collective ability to question and change conditions. Without a culture of collective bargaining and with a history of division and low status founded in the public perception of their lowly work, the workers' will to social mobility is weak.

Wise concludes his song by noting the effectiveness of alienation as a divisive and deflective political instrument in the mill with the lines

'Cause if you're at each others' throats
they know you won't be after theirs'.

Ritzer proposes that peer competition and the hostility it generates into alienation is a contrived system of disenfranchising workers. The lyric exposes the power-relations in the mill and the manipulation of the workers by both the bosses and the workers. Because of the constraints of ideology the workers cannot perceive alternatives to their
traditional roles; the capitalist workplace depends upon this continuing view of history and the structures and strictures which it generates (Eagleton, 1989, p. 214-215).

...'outright competition to extract maximum productivity...[insures]... considerable hostility is generated among the workers towards their peers. This is useful to the capitalists because it tends to deflect hostility that otherwise would be aimed at them. The isolation and the interpersonal hostility tend to make workers in capitalism alienated from fellow workers' (Ritzer, 1998, p. 58).

The social motivation to retain employment is further explored by Ricks in his depiction of, firstly, characters in conflict, and secondly, the financial pressures that materialism inflicts upon workers.

The unquestioned social desirability of ownership of things finds a simple quotidian in Johnny’s comment about his fellow employee Chalky, who owns a $12,000 Hilux. He comments to Nelson that “He’ll be workin here a long time to pay that bastard off” (Ricks, p. 27). Gramsci (1971) suggests that, the prevailing ideology which stresses the virtue of private property and all that it signifies...‘creates an acceptance of the whole capitalist social order among all classes’ (Edgell, p. 61). Thus Chalky’s work commitment and social enslavement to ownership go hand in hand and insinuate that he no longer has choices about his engagement with both. Later in the novel, after a disagreement with Turvey, he is dragged off a fight by his workmates with the warning, ‘“Wait Chalky.....Is it worth losing your job over? Think of that Hilux. Twelve grand. That’s a lot of money Keith” ’ (Ricks, p.55). Here, Ricks has deftly described the complex entanglement of ideologies and imperatives to which the worker is subjected. The fear of unemployment and debt, the knowledge that unskilled labour brings low wages in a lean economy, coupled with his aspirations to own the Hilux, conspire to dissuade Chalky from exacting revenge on the overbearing Turvey.

Any myth of working class solidarity at Alpine is exploded when an ‘ethnic’, Lac, arrives on the work scene. Immediately the brunt of Nelson’s cutting wit -""Is that,
Lac as in lackey band?" (Ricks, p.36 ), Lac experiences extreme racism in the workplace community. He has no one 'to stick with' and resorts to eating his meals outside with Anthony who is an outcast because he is stupid, or in Nelson's words... 'Fuckin' useless, dumb cunt...' (Ricks, pp.86-87). As Tsiolkas writes in *Loaded*:

There is another urban myth. It is about solidarity. The myth goes something like this; we may be poor, may be treated like scum, but we stick together, we are a community. The arrival of the ethnics put paid to that myth in Australia. In the working-class suburbs.....where communal solidarity is meant to flourish, the skip sticks with the skip, the wog with the wog, the gook with the gook, and the abo with the abo.

(Cited by Syson in *The Point of Change*, p. 165).

On the other hand, the overt, active racism in the smoko room at the arrival of the Vietnamese man unifies the workers.

"A fuckin' gook", hissed Johnny. "Wonder which poor bugger missed out on a job 'cause of that fuckin' yellow bastard"...... He looked down the chain at Chalky who was pulling at the corners of his eyes. Nelson and Johnny and all the workers began openly to laugh. They felt a common bond in their hatred of the nip (Ricks, p. 35).

Racism as an everyday aspect of the workplace is an erosion of the human rights of the individual workers. The ideological springboard and motivation for racism may be simple to identify. Indeed, ideologies of racism are so well accepted at the mill that they have become effectively naturalised. Jim's friendliness and defence of Lac (Ricks, p. 35-37) is aggressively attacked by his work mates because it flies in the face of their social and ideological frameworks. Epistemologically, these responses (to difference) are made, in part, as a privileging of whiteness and racial differenciation. As Huggins states:

White norms and values are enshrined in our institutions and white knowledge and ways of valuing are taught and recorded in our schools. We are all products of history and, as a consequence, occupy particular positions of privilege or disadvantage (1998, pp. 1-2)
Significantly, in a society in which economic decline and immigration are often causally related by sections of the indigenous working class, racism is not a set of mistaken perceptions. It arises because of the concrete problems of different classes and groups in the society. Racism represents the attempt ideologically to construct those conditions, contradictions and problems in such a way that they can be dealt with and deflected at the same moment (Hall cited in Miles, 1989, p. 279).

These working class responses to racism exacerbate the divisive dynamics of the work place and its impact on the workers. With only their labour to sell, lower paid workers are prey to the insecurities of the boom/bust cycles of the capitalist economic system. The racism is a reaction of working class communities to protect jobs from the competition of outsiders. As a solution for endemic racism, 'glossy' multiculturalism, often economically and politically driven, neglects the cause of the problem it is seeking to fix. This can be seen in pluralist societies' tendency, while ignoring the workings of power and privilege, to impose concepts of seamless, uninterrupted social accord upon already profoundly conflicted cultures (McLaren, 1995, p. 127). The difficulties of articulating and affirming cultural difference in societies labouring under hegemonic myths of 'national unity' aggravates these problems. According to Ebert, terms of derogatory racial signification (naming) are required by the socio-economic hegemony so that the unequal distribution of privilege and power can be maintained. The economic and political relations involved are based in material processes dependent upon distinctions among groups (McLaren, 1995, p. 129).

Thus class as a relational function is dynamic on the work place lives of the young men in the novel. This impacts notably in their alienation from each other, their work, the products of their labour and inhibits them from realising their own human potentials. Jim has aspirations to be a writer (Ricks, p. 41, 59). While this is only alluded to briefly in the text, it is a significant comment about him as a working class...
man who is, through his daily labour, alienated from fulfilling his real potential as a human being. This situation is a source of further conflict in Jim's life. He must deal with the contradiction that while he has shelter and food to eat, the conditions of his life within the capitalist system preclude him from doing what he finds most fulfilling as a creative being, which is writing. In so far as

... we are highly successful in bringing about the immediate results of our conscious intentions, we still too often fail to anticipate and forestall the undesired remoter consequences of these results (Marx, cited in Ritzer, p. 65).

Jim comprehends writing as a means of escape from his trapped class situation and the life which it entails.

If he could get his writing up to scratch he could say he had two things he was good at. Writing and driving a car. They could serve the same purpose. They could take him somewhere (Ricks, p. 59).

The writer may perceive himself as more than just human capital, but also as a creative and unique individual. But because of the conflictual nature of class structures, writing as a means to upward class mobility also invokes Marx' edict that... 'The more a ruling class is able to assimilate the foremost minds of a ruled class, the more stable and dangerous becomes its rule' (cited in Edgell, p. 81). Edgell also notes Sorokin's observation that class is 'fluid, changeable, and unstable, at least in part' (p. 86). Thus, Jim's proposed and postponed forays into the world of published literature evoke Jameson's view of the condition of art as just another product of late capitalism and the commodification of everything (cited in Selden, pp.185-186). Importantly too, the Marxist view of art as part of the 'superstructure' of society, whereby the rule of one class over another...' is seen by most members of the society as 'natural', or not seen at all' (Eagleton, 1992 p. 5), illustrates the immutable existence of the book as a commodity, a product of the market place (Eagleton, 1989. pp. 57-59). Further, pertinent to Jim's situation is Marx’s comment that the writer...'is a worker not in so far
as he produces ideas, but in so far as he enriches the publisher, in so far as he is working for a wage' (cited in Eagleton, p. 60). Ironically, but not surprisingly, Eleven months in Bunbury is now out of print. It clearly does not meet the profit making expectations of its publishing house.

As the real antihero in the novel, Nelson Clements presents a difficulty to literature. To even the most cynical reader, his death is a tragedy. It reads like a preordained death sentence from his own family, his presumed executioners. But as a working class man, he simply doesn’t fit the traditional role of a tragic character. However as a battler and authentic bloke, Nelson encompasses human characteristics readily embraced by the wider society. Ricks’ choice of first name for Nelson Clements, and his decision not to abbreviate or nick name him, and its presumed historical association to Lord Horatio Nelson reflects notions of (class) heroism. A sickly child from an impoverished background, Lord Nelson possessed an indomitable spirit which was demonstrated through many vicissitudes. Nelson Clements displays real guts when being beaten by a bouncer and in his wiry resilience to his brutalised family life. (Ricks, p. 6-8, 84). Lord Nelson was hounded by family and society because of his public affair with Lady Hamilton, as was Nelson Clements for his relationship with Verlene. Lord Nelson returned to active duty long after retirement and died a horrific death from a head wound in battle (Hill, 1997). Nelson Clements insists on attending the family Christmas gathering, knowing full well the dangers and humiliations which await him there. He is killed by a blow to the head with a beer bottle. Comparisons, while problematic, present opportunities to review the realities of class existence and the historical, social and economic forces at work across time. In identifying a working class person with the name of a historical hero, Ricks raises questions about the use of naming (signifying) and the associations attached to it. The
linking of the signifier (Lord Nelson) with the signified (Nelson Clements), attaches an entirely different and (positive) meaning to these separate entities (signifieds). The role of history (as ideology) shifts meaning through parallelism between two classes (of difference) (Saussure, cited in Rice and Waugh, 1996, p. 114-15). The uses of history are here questioned and exposed by the text through its collapsing of ideological concepts. In his own reality, Nelson Clements faces enormous challenges. Violence and death are sub-narratives of war (Lord Nelson's profession) and of *Eleven months in Bunbury*. Killing off Nelson, the average working class bloke, at the hands of his own family, may insinuate the death of his class in its refusal to acknowledge its shackling to the ideological treadmill of capitalism (Kaplan, 1988 p. 34). The historical insignificance of his life and death reinforces the power of ideology and literature to make or break heroes according to their social and class status. As Nelson's world explodes from white into black (Ricks, p.166), the dark economic forces that ruled his short life are evoked as being irrationally damning of the life of the society which it dominates and specifically of the class in which he struggled (Eagleton 1989), p. 7-8).
i George Samuel Gardner, OAM, Secretary of the Sleeper Cutters Union of Western Australia in 1936 and was then a member of the Communist Party of Australia. A transcript of Mr Gardner's oral history interview is held at The Environmental Awareness in Australia Oral History Project at the National Library of Australia. Mr Gregg Borschmann was the interviewer. 10-13 September, 1994. The transcript is only accessible with the written permission of the interviewee.

ii The current minimum award wage for an unskilled mill worker is $400.40 per week. Source: Tony Lovett, 8/11/2000. The Living Wage in 1997 was $359.40

iii In 1990 Scott and Louisa Wise researched, wrote and recorded a musical cassette tape called *Timber Town* as part of the Timberworkers Music Project which was funded by the West Australian Dept for the Arts and the Australia Council with generous assistance from the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Timberworkers Union of the South West Division. The lyrics to *The Boys in the Yard* were kindly made available by Scott Wise.


CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL REALISM

'I couldn't say (this) in public...but you can take it from me - the Australian worker is a brute and nothing else.
(Henry Lawson, cited in Johnstone 1962, p. 136)

Social realism has many aspects. Theories of 'reality' and literary realism occupy a central and polemical position in an extensive philosophical and literary discourse. Because reality is an inclusive term referring to feelings, perceptions, objects, phenomena and to states of being and kinds of knowing, its use may be more restrictive than instructive. This shortcoming focuses on the idea that any representation is a selection and hence inclusive and exclusive. It must also be acknowledged that realism is a construct that does not unproblematically 'represent reality' (Hamon cited in Lye. 1997, p. 2) and which is, through intertextuality and cultural codification, inevitably ideological.

The social origins of realism imbue it with critical aspects of its form and development. Realism has grown partly out of the need to correct distorted historical representations of class. This has been motivated by the need to create awareness and change, and to counter the ideological strategy (hegemonic) of imposing hierarchies through representation. The emergence of classes in urban industrial society produced the raw material for the realist novel (Kaplan, 1988, p. 38). Realism’s concern is to represent …‘life as we live it – sequential, contextualised, rooted in the concrete’ and in the everyday language of the class it depicts. These aspects bring the reader close to the materiality of existence, minimally distorted by ideology. Further, in its dedication to portraying the everyday, ‘realism forms and enforces a world without a genuine spiritual dimension’. Indeed, because of its focus on the physical, it leaves no room for the ‘spiritual in man’ (Lye. 1997, p. 3). Over and above all defining characteristics, and
In keeping with the tone and seemingly unresolved ending of *Eleven months in Bunbury*, realism remains 'a multifaceted and unfinished debate' (Kaplan, 1988, p. 15). These findings are appropriate to this reading of *Eleven months in Bunbury*.

In *Eleven months in Bunbury*, the main aspects of realism with which this paper deals are presentations of text that represent life and the social world, and that evoke characters who 'feel' like real people who might actually exist in situations that might well happen (Abrams, 1985, p. 174). Through simple directness, Ricks' novel evokes real lives in a recognisable place. Critical to its meaning as a realistic work is its lack of artifice and exaggeration and its unselfconscious expression of a language entirely appropriate to, and representative of, the characters and the class it portrays. Occasions as ordinary as masturbation and extraordinary as violent limb amputation are reported in the same matter-of-fact and unspecific way. This stylistic mode parallels and informs the novel's realism through its depiction of life as arbitrary and chaotic, and the novel's disinterest in any 'rigid ideological bias' (Reid, p. xi). Similarly unhampered by any overt politicisation of the text, with its incumbent discourses, the novel can present certain and real insights into the human situation of some working class people. ‘Realism [defines itself] by privileging content over form and accessibility to readers’ (Valentine, 1999, p. 40). Ricks has not set out to write a novel about class struggle, nor has he created a work of mindless escapism. Free of sociological commentary or of valorising the class which it depicts, *Eleven months in Bunbury* avoids class sympathies. In this style, it prescribes its engagement with social realism.

A defining aspect of Ricks' novel is its treatment of class and work. *Eleven months in Bunbury* portrays these aspects of life starkly. There is an uncompromising straightforwardness to the writing. For example, Nelson's job description resembles a quasi-social document and precedes a perfunctory *character profile* of his fellow
workers at the mill (Ricks, pp. 25-29). Here, and elsewhere in the novel, there are elements of the antinovel in the breach of traditional literary norms and reliance upon objectivity to create effect. Each character is introduced in a reportorial style redolent of topic headings rather than short chapters. This style of writing eschews a conventional introduction and narrative development of character. Its bluntness reflects the fragmented, alienated sense of identity of the narrator and his subjects. People are reduced to ten line descriptions. Opinions are formed promptly and without consultation. Unconcerned with aesthetics or a realism locked into explicating ideological principles, this way of expressing language is an ethical issue and in Wilding's interpretation: 'It represents a shorthand term for telling the truth in writing...' (1999, p. 43.). Involved in this practice is a 'laying bare' of the writer's technique which resonates with, but does not imitate, a Brechtian mode of realism. There is no attempt at concealment nor of a presentation of the literature as 'a seamless unity of discourse'... (Selden, 1993, p. 33). Ricks' realist, blunt and 'unliterary' style identifies his work too, as popular fiction and 'the number one public enemy of literature' (Gelder, July, 2000. p. 34). Here, Gelder refers to an acrimonious debate regarding the admission of popular fiction into the 'hallowed domain' of Australian literature. This results in students getting 'an absolutely artificial, reified and narrow view of the prose fiction produced in their country'....(Ibid, pp. 35-36). Serle, paraphrasing Judith Wright, states that:

The writer makes a contribution to understanding our existence - both as human beings and on the meaning of life in Australia, here, now - which has little to do with literary quality. One has only to mention Power without Glory or The One Day of the Year to make the point (Serle, 1973, p. 144).

By stripping back language and subject to their nonliterary form, particularly in depictions of class and work, the real misery is exposed and the social realism presented
translates as political criticism. As Kaplan states, within realist literature: 'Stylistic inconsistencies and problematic endings ....[are].... narrative articulations of ideological problems' (1988, p. 5). This linguistic discourse embeds the text with a realism strongly engaged with issues of textual ideology so that a parallel engagement of content and form is developed. Social realism's historical connections with the documentation of proletarian life, and the ruling class resistance to this implicit 'revolutionary' threat, explicate ideological conflicts based in the inextricable link between language and ideology, with weighty social implications.

Balibar and Macherey identify the 'specific linguistic practices' (cited in Rice and Waugh, 1997, p. 61) which are passed on through the general schooling system and which reproduce the dominant bourgeois ideology. Primary school reading books such as Gagg's *Going to school* (1959) establish elementary notions of behaviour, gender, role playing and law and order along with grammatical and linguistic conventions. This in turn determines, and is determined by, a common language which literature then assists to maintain. As such, the school functions as an ideological State apparatus, (Althusser, 1971 p. 137) which recruits ideological subjects and which ensures their interpellation, subjection and ability, in most cases, 'to work by themselves'. The national language is bound to the political form of 'bourgeois ideology' (Balibar and Macherey, 1997, p. 62). Social realism's engagement with social issues becomes integral to the review of history. By using the language in other ways and through its subject engagement with social issues, social realism 'ideologically' challenges literary and hegemonic conventions. Ricks also stands outside 'literary' convention and constructs a materialist dialectic out of the language. While Jim, for example, exhibits superior language skills and uses them mercilessly to denigrate his work mates, the text itself is unconcerned with correct spelling, grammar, syntax [excluding unintended
typos] or observing 'common decency'; verbal obscenity is standard linguistic currency. The overwhelming impression is of crude, unpretentious language as Ricks faithfully records the dialect of the workplace. The limitations and economies of this language ably illustrate its appropriateness to how its users think and behave. Its depictions of a subset of the working class’s ideas about sex, gender, power, fighting, family, mateship, alcohol, race, death, and work, comprehensively disengage the novel from society at large by falling outside social and literary codes of correct or accepted subject or form. This is an anomalous theme, given that the working class is the largest class; but in doing so, it clearly illustrates the ideological dominance of literature in society.

The ideological content of Eleven months in Bunbury's language, while based in authentic speech, presents both limitations and opportunities for 'telling the truth'. Because the text can never manage a straight mirroring of reality, it necessarily produces a reality-effect and a fiction-effect. ‘So the literary discourse itself institutes and projects the presence of the 'real' in the manner of an hallucination’ (Balibar and Macherey, Ibid p. 65.) [italics included]. Here, the realist novel, in struggling with the implicitly fictive characteristic of the written word, emulates the struggle of the working class to rise above the overbearing control (meaning) of political culture which is couched in literary dominance. This is the ideological domination-effect which stimulates the variety of discourses (aesthetic, religious, political, moral)....‘ which always reproduce..... the same ideology (with its contradictions’) (Ibid. p. 67). Evident here is a mirroring of the great class struggle in which the lower classes...'struggle ...to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression' (Eagleton, 1976, p. vii). It is the 'class' of thinking that sustains the elitism of the written word and attitudes to it. Literature and language are perceived as the domain of the upper classes. The
hegemony has thus excluded working class literature as legitimate text, commentary and input into the social and ideological power bases within the society.

A distinct effect of literary dominance by one group or class is that the existence of a healthy debate is marginalised. Novels, along with other art forms which are concerned with the anger and despair and the meaninglessness of contemporary life, become victims of the bourgeois reluctance to engage with the hard issues. Sidelined by the hierarchical institutionalism of canonical forms, the dismissal of realist literature simultaneously disenfranchises new literature and social patterns, particularly new and changing ones, with which realism normally engages (Gelder, 2000, p. 37).

In its engagement with the ordinariness of life, Rick's novel reifies the commonplace, but not as a literary celebration of working class life. With graphic directness the significant struggles which shape the destinies of the characters are related as the vicissitudes of daily life. The writer avoids any attempt to typify 'life'. Through the characters of Jim and Nelson, a discourse is established which, as well as providing conflict for the narrative, registers cultural as well as social pressures. The life choices for its characters are constantly compromised by the social realities of class entrapment. The haunting family backgrounds which Jim and Nelson inherit, rather than uniting them as similarly wounded men, divides them within their lives and relationship. Similarly, the workplace (and the social scene) presents constant social conflict, humiliation, boredom and angst. This is a landscape of young suicidal men who are struggling from adolescence into adulthood in a society which has lost touch with the qualities of compassion, generosity and reciprocity. The foreboding tone of the narrative, its preoccupation with disillusionment and the one dimensionality of late twentieth century working life, frees it from the more disingenuous aspects of romanticism and the strictures of literary aesthetics. This flatness of tone and reluctance
to look below the surface equate with the novel's fundamental social focus on unimaginative, bored lives. This is the realm of social realism. It also assigns realism to an anomalous area of fiction because, as Wilding intimates, it is not what people really want to read. Oppositionally, literature which is...'designed to appeal to and lure and seduce the public'...(1999, p. 43), is quite distinct from realism. Ricks' intention to convey a sense of the trouble and danger which dominate the personal histories of the main protagonists Jim and Nelson, and which form the... 'view of profound social disturbances that inform realistic narratives'...(Kaplan, 1988, p. 28), prevails forcefully in *Eleven months in Bunbury*. It should be noted, too, that while realism poses challenges to these inequities, it may be complicit in them.

Produced within the ideological hegemony of capitalism, realism may be said to aid and abet in the production of disciplined, middle-class subjects. Realism's concern with relating the very 'guts' of human life may be seen as a representation of the surveillance of the individual and Foucault's...'fascination with discourse as a modern technology of control' (Thomas, 1997, p. 14). That is, the more expository and closer to 'truth' that the realist novelist achieves, the more accessible the work becomes as an instrument of the capitalist state. In relating explicitly 'what people do', the realist novel's disclosure of social conditions presents a *camera lucida* for potential use and interpretation by the state. The demystification of Jim's and Nelson's private and public lives strives to leave nothing to the imagination and becomes a 'realist policing of the real' (ibid, p. 14). Additionally, in its offering of a minimum of positive human values, the book further maintains the status quo. One of the novel's fundamental appeals is its ability to engage the reader with one of the most common activities of modern life – 'just looking'. Kaplan similarly interprets this function of realism as related to the culture of surveillance in which the realist participates in the panoptic forces which both
control and produce the real world; by seeing it without being seen in return (1988, p. 7). This historic review of society and the role of the realist writer within it, accurately sites the novel as another product of consumerism, arising from within the society, but, most importantly, as a critic of it.

Jim's angst and Nelson's hazardous existence embody the flawed and fragmented society in which they live. Ricks emphasises the difficulty these men have in trying to gain a hold of their lives and make sense of the dysfunctional families they have inherited. Here, realism breaks with traditional notions of the novel as 'just entertainment', in its determination to understand and explain society. It recognises the 'common difficulty [of] discovering a vantage point from which a coherent vision may be made' (Regan, 1998, p. 3). These are lives that are constantly battered by their personal histories and their protagonists' inability to stand back and see their dilemmas. Ricks pursues the realist agenda by portraying flawed characters; people do not suddenly appear in smart cars, neat happy homes and secure jobs. Their social milieu in all its limiting misery is allowed to speak forcefully through a positive linguistic and visual landscape. The shabbiness of contemporary working class suburban life becomes a depiction of harsh social facts. The novel begins:

Morning. Nelson stood at the window of his crappy fibro house... (Ricks, p. 3). He stood over the small dirty basin in his small dirty bathroom and looked into the small dirty mirror (Ricks, p. 8). He lived in the heart of Carey Park, a suburb of Abos, (sic) dole bludgers and single mothers. A panorama of crappy fibro houses owned by the government (Ricks, pp. 11-12).

Using repetition, minimal description and carefully chosen images, Ricks throws the reader into the realm of the socially deprived; this realism is all the more effective because people and their material existence become political statements about given social determinants. Interiors of houses are stripped down to barest fundamentals; the
characters who inhabit them are similarly in relief – just the bare bones; their bodies, their blunt language and common humour. These characters have been bitten off by life and their emptiness eloquently reflects the pain of their shallow lived lives and their unconsciousness. The unstated fact of these suburbs (and their occupants) being unassimilable with others, transmits the spectre of class as the dominant reality and mode of relation in the sub narrative of the novel. These are unmistakable ‘lines’ drawn within the text which denote and make visible specific knowledges, such as where is ‘respectable’, and where in the city is in social ‘decay’ (Kaplan, 1988, p. 48). Geographies of place converge with geographies of culture; here, also, social ideology and economic dimensions interface.

Through the realist novel, the nuts and bolts of how lives are lived are rationally assembled and faithfully displayed. These too, are, perhaps, images of mental confinement as well as physical entrapment, that are a vital connection of the Australian historical imagination with its convict past (Reid, 1979, p. 126). Indeed, while Nelson had once ‘escaped’ to Onslow (Ricks, pp. 50-51), the ritualistic monotony and familiarity of the small city suburbs provides him with a security commensurate with the misery of internment. As much as he despises the place, the fact that ‘Bunbury would never change’ (Ricks p. 12) provides him with a home territory and connections that he can rely upon. ‘He drove past Hands Oval, homeground of his beloved footy club, the South Bunbury Tigers’ (Ricks, p. 12) which, together with the pubs and his mates like Trevor, the Tiger’s ruckman, are an integral part of Nelson’s identity and his entrapment. Nelson’s true Nemesis and deepest fear is his family. The traditional Christmas reunion with its climactic ‘brawl’ in which Nelson gets his inevitable ‘thrashin’ (Ricks, pp. 51-52), draws him inexorably back through remorseless patterns
of family abuse and finally to his death (Ricks, pp. 165-166). These factors and events insinuate meanings and outcomes in which:

A kind of realism emerges which undermines romantic assumptions, literary conventions and even political ideals, demanding instead our assent to the proposition that people and events remain quite individual, quite unpredictable (Johnstone, 1962, p. 145).

This quote is taken from Wallace-Crabbe's reading of Joseph Furphy's *Such is life*. This remarkable book, with its author's *alter ego* character of Tom Collins, breaks through contemporary conventional literature to establish a ...'complex articulation of the novel' (Hope cited in Johnstone, 1962, p. 139). In its then radical departure from contemporary narrative and romantic notions of the novel, the book is variously described as 'flawed and almost unreadable', through to 'a work of genius'. Nevertheless, through ruthless irony and an acute observation of the 'patterns and operations of life itself' (Johnstone, 1962, p. 147), *Such is life* describes levels of realism and meaning which articulate the chaos and unpredictability of human existence. By providing an account of Nelson's history and life in a style untrammelled by any emotional or moralistic baggage, Ricks, too, allows his character to meet his appointment with fate. As a realist tragic hero, Nelson innocently fulfils the role of family scapegoat. Regardless of behavioural theories, such as his borderline personality disorder, the fatal end which Nelson meets transcends any attempts ...'to account for the complex tragi-comedy which is life' (Ibid, p. 142). This realism is not attuned to an existential rendering of the text; rather, it is based in the apparent illogicality of life, of how 'things just happen'. The haphazardness of events, like the narrative, fit together in the way that life is revealed to us. The novel, then, ...'resembles [the] precarious unity we impose in our own experience' (Ibid, p. 143). These realist episodes in *Eleven months in Bunbury* propel the novel, not through artifice or clever narrative
construction, but by exploring and transparently recording the complexity of temperament and motive of characters within their social class and in relation to their own past. Ricks’ two main protagonists experience epiphanies which are significant moments of realism and reversal of narrative expectation.

Jim is a brooding and disturbed young man. His past and his present have conflated into a nightmare from which he seems to be unable to extricate himself. Desperate episodes of drunkenness (Ricks, pp. 101-104) and social paranoia (Ricks, pp. 72-78) with pessimism and isolation suggest suicidal tendencies. While Nelson, a rambunctious man of action, with a lover and a job and a dream of escape, is depicted as a person discovering a future appropriate to his expectations. Jim expounds his mental state:

‘People often find the truth depressing Nelson. ’ He was on his hands and knees in his own vomit, ‘Especially our kind of truth. Our kind of truth is the most depressing of all.’ (Ricks, pp. 144-145).

Nelson expounds his:

‘Truth,’ hollered Nelson. ‘Your idea of truth’s all fucked up. I’ll tell ya about my truth mate. It’s summer, I got money in the bank, I got an unreal woman and I’m, standin’ here drinkin’ free piss’ (Ricks, p. 145).

At this point of the narrative, the personal ideologies of the protagonists are collapsed into confrontational cliches. There is no grasping for universal truths or metaphors, just factual content, readily recognisable and intelligible. Their individual conditions and attitudes would indicate that Nelson is dealing with life more capably than Jim. Jim’s catharsis and Nelson’s ‘Waterloo’ have maximum effect in the narrative with minimal authorial artifice. The eventual demise of Nelson and the survival of Jim reflect the hazardous and unpredictable nature of real life. Realism documents the materiality of existence which is ‘real life’. As well as its reaction against romantic notions of justice,
love and happy endings, realist narrative is unconcerned with resolving dilemmas but, rather, concerned with exposing the chaotic and confusing battles of life. In contradistinction to social realism, classic realism’s ‘enigma followed by disclosure’ (Belsey, 1980, p. 112) presents cosy structural forms with ‘absurdly simple’ explanations that are plausible but not real. *Eleven months in Bunbury’s* ending is a resolution of sorts, but not a closure; life goes on through the articulation of conventional and familiar concepts including the paradoxical opening / closure of death.

When realists write about writers, they explore the social construction of their own roles and their implication in constructing the reality their novels represent (Kaplan, 1988, p. 14). As Jim’s *alter ego* (*South West Times, 15/4/97*), Ricks ‘lives’ through the novel. The seemingly incidental statements about writing and Jim’s frustration and ambitions around it, present a self-reflexivity based in realism (Ricks, pp. 41, 59, 61-62). These incidents are loaded with Jim’s emotional self and his passionate involvement in what he writes and how he and his father (the society) perceive the work. The writer and his work are here charged with a palpable realism; the realism of personal creation and the individual’s deep connection to it. However, once expressed, the narrative immediately moves on, unhampered by the intellectual concerns of the *convoluted novel*, but nevertheless, strongly informed by these events. Ricks candidly records the problems of the unpublished writer; the crippling self-criticism and the idealised belief in writing as a means to escape poverty and his class origins. These incidents represent the writer engaged with the novel as both its creator and its subject, and, as commentator on the social function of the novel, particularly its reception by the mass audience. The strategic role of the realist writer in this process is notable in that the author simultaneously uses the text to define its place in the real world as well as the author’s. Also, by addressing self-reflexive (subjective) and
impersonal (objective) aspects within and about the novel, Ricks comments directly upon the issues of self exposure and the betrayal of intimacy.

The ‘little city’ of Bunbury and its small community insists that these two notions are not insignificant. Just as the novel presents physical icons unique to Bunbury, the realist tradition of drawing characters from real life informs the novel. In a local newspaper interview, ‘Ricks is quick to point out that the characters are not based on anyone he knows, but more a conglomerate of many’ (South West Times, 15/4/97). Ricks concurs then, with Frank Hardy’s instructions on how to write character:

The creation of the type is the basis of character building for the socialist realist writer. Take quotes from several grocers to create one, for example, taking well into account the behaviour of the small shopkeeper (cited in Valentine, 1999, p. 42)

Local anecdote suggests that several characters are readily linked to well known local identities which indicates that the work is based in the familiar and everyday. In the novel, Jim’s agony over exposing his work (himself) exemplifies Balzac’s striking definition of realism that: ‘It will not be the fault of the author if things speak for themselves and speak loudly’ (cited in Beasley, 1979, p. 185). The coarse vitality of his writing here depicts Jim demeaning himself while confronting the truth of his situation.

He looked down at what he’d written the night before. He didn’t get through the first paragraph. He laughed disgustedly and tore out five pages of writing. Fuckin’ bullshit. Things were getting worse (Ricks, p. 41).

Here, the writer becomes public property, totally exposed in the process of self expression and self disgust; an honourable self-crucifixion which then legitimises the writer’s character assassination of anyone else. This explains Jim’s innate animosity and admiration for Nelson who possesses a strength that eventually symbolically defeats, and frees Jim (Ricks, p. 145). Realism’s use of self-reflexivity focuses on
observed reality; in this scenario, since there is nowhere to run, why bother? Jim’s
thruth, unlike Nelson’s, will not, in the end, brook self delusion. Presentations of reality
such as these both elevate and ground the author’s role. There is no conflict between
the fantastic or the factual which might distract the reader or the author from personal
and class based struggles; similarly, there is no allusion to the spiritual aspects of human
existence.

In this ‘absence’ of the spiritual from the text, Ricks integrity as a realist author
is evident. The characters in Eleven months in Bunbury are largely caught up in place
and time. Their daily struggles to survive and their commitment to immediate escape
from work, mainly preoccupies their minds. For example, the atrocious accidents at the
mill are exploited as opportunities to get off work (Ricks, pp. 78-82, 128). Indulgence
in sympathy for, or serious consideration of, the implications for the crippled workers’
lives, is busily despatched. This behaviour involves a conscious public denial of human
feelings and sentiment. Jim’s attempts to register the tragedy of these events is
disparaged and ridiculed (Ricks, pp. 79-80). Ironically, this behaviour insists on a
deliberate act of unconsciousness, a denial that anything ‘real’ has actually happened.
Ricks textually solidifies these incidents by using simple language and by noticeably
minimising the use of metaphor throughout the text. These devices aid in shutting down
the imaginative life of the characters, and in literally grinding down their lives with the
monotony of their ‘horizontal existence’. The forced absence of any imaginative
engagement with things beyond that horizon, or pertaining to other worldliness, rigidly
locates the novel and its characters in a spiritual desert. This reinforces the
‘transparency’ of the language in its conscientious representation of the ordinary. ‘Like
so many others, works of realism do participate in a process of demystification’
(Thomas, 1997, p. 12). As the spiritual aspect of human existence ...‘may be a
mystification' (Lye, 1997, p. 3), the lack in the novel of all things spiritual, while exposing inherent limitations in realism writing, is consistent and appropriate to its form. In its depiction of the ‘unreal’ world of mass materialism and wide scale social disaffection, realism accentuates the spiritual poverty of the masses by non-essentialising it. The invisibility of spiritual life is made real by its absence from the text. This comprehensive exclusion of hidden forces and meanings in the human psyche reiterates realism’s reaction to romantic conventions and notions of the novel in which such representations are commonplace. In its process of ‘truth to life’ (Belsey, 1980, p.35) realist text does not install itself between fact and illusion by presentation of a simulated reality. In its depiction of lives which are apparently spiritually barren, and in which there is no awareness of other kinds of knowing, Eleven months in Bunbury centres upon contextualising the individual’s fate in their temporal social environment.

The reference to the eleven month duration of the novel in its title is a simple statement/understatement of an incomplete cycle that intimates a life cut short. Integrated into the mood and intensity of Eleven months in Bunbury is the flexibility of form and style of the short story, or shortened novel. Cowan claims that: ‘...the short story snatches at the fragmentary nature of today’s experience, the pointlessness and frustration and bitterness’…(cited in Bennett, 1985, p. 31). Ricks’ short journey into the lives of the young Bunbury men captures the haste and impatience of youth and the brittleness of their grasp of life. He achieves this through an economical and focused realist style which imitates a feisty society and its attendant hazards
CHAPTER THREE

REGION

Where is here?
(Northrop Frye. *The stubborn structure*).

This chapter will consider ways in which the literary imagination has been shaped by the land and urban environment. It will explore ‘the city, to show what it is, what values it lives by, and what effects it has upon the individual’s character and destiny’ (Gelfant cited in Reid. 1979, p. 29). It explores the relationship between people and place and how each interacts with the other, both mentally and physically (Bennett, 1985, p. 16). Within this context, it takes on board Western Australian author Elizabeth Jolley’s assertion that all writing is regional (Jolley, 1989, p. 82), a premise that includes all places including the regions of cities and their symbiotic suburbs.

While essentially an urban novel, *Eleven months in Bunbury* is not restricted to either the bush or the city. It successfully negotiates, and is informed by, both regions. In doing so, it reflects peoples’ behaviour and relationship to region in real life. In this mode it also exposes myths about Australian fiction and life. One myth, somewhat dated now, insists that ‘Australian fiction practically ignores....on the whole....the cities and concentrates on the country’ (Hope cited in Reid, 1979, p. 28). In *Fiction and the great depression*, Reid argues convincingly that this myth is and was erroneous through a thorough survey and interpretation of Australian literature written between 1930 and 1950. He goes on to say that the growth of urban literature resulted as;

> the Australian writer began to feel the attraction of familiar, distinctive features in his [sic] urban environment, and to recognise the worth of delineating these for their own sake (Reid, Ibid, p. 34).
As the centres of a highly urbanised nation since the beginning of the last century, Australian cities have focused the underlying social pattern of economic growth based on urban industry and commerce. The Australian urban novel has grown out of this concentration of wealth and population in the cities, as the literary imagination attuned to...‘the city making men its image, conditioning their characters as well as their daily lives’(Eldershaw cited in Reid, Ibid, p. 32). Bennett further questions this myth by indicating one of the formative origins of it in the powerfully evocative realist writing of Henry Lawson whose contribution placed Bourke and the bush as ‘absolute’ icons in the psyche of the nation. The following quotation presents a fascinating scenario and implications.

Yet, as Brian Matthews and others have convincingly shown, Lawson’s distinctive Australian bush received its specific impetus and inspiration from his 1892 visit to Bourke, ‘the metropolis of the Great Scrubs, on the banks of the Darling River’, with which Lawson was ‘agreeably disappointed’. The power of Lawson’s images of the Bush, magnified by the receptivity of city readers to them, appears to have created an archetypal Australia which was largely rooted in the Bourke experience. The local had been made national; and for some, universal (1991, p.17).

The dominance of the bush myth had far reaching effects particularly as it attracted historians and academics away from urban and suburban histories and literature (Bennett, 1985, p. 6). This distortion of focus and the reluctance of criticism to acknowledge the existence and importance of an urban literature, contributed in turn to the ‘Sydney or the bush’ myth. This myth would insist that we live either in Sydney or the bush. However, as Bennett states:

Those ofus who live neither in Sydney nor the bush know that this is a distortion of the real physical differences between places in Australia and imposes a false uniformity upon an actually quite various and imaginatively diverse nation (Ibid, p. 6).
Antagonistic but not contrary to this argument are the experiences of a growing number of Australians who are equally familiar with both the bush and the city. The ubiquitous four-wheel drive vehicle and jet travel have flattened the mental barriers and landscape of a once impenetrable interior and vast unapproachable coastline. The diversity that Bennett alludes to has been altered yet again, not by bulldozers, but by accessibility. It is here that Ricks’ novel crosses over the thresholds of regional diversity by transporting the urban mind into the wilderness and back home again with minimal apparent mental awareness. This is in contrast to how Tim Winton’s characters perceive the boundaries of city and bush, land and sea, as metaphor and backdrop for their conflicts (Rossiter, 1993, p. 16) Ricks’ bush bashin’ boys are simply mesmerised by the journey.

Blokes love a good four-wheel drive trek. It has a different feel to a road trip. Keith, Johnny and Nelson were silent as they wound their way through the rugged coastal scrub. The four-wheel drive trek is steeped in solemnity. It is a battle. Car against track. The boys sat back, spectators, hypnotised by the lurching movement of the Cruiser (Ricks, p. 92).

For these suburbanites, the real journey is in the vehicle. There is no suggestion that their psychological landscapes are altered by the experience of the last remaining wilderness in their ‘backyard’. The shift from city to bush is a purely physical relocation. The imagined divide between these utterly diverse environments has become blurred and meaningless. For these men, the constraints of the local do not create the tension which the idea of freedom imposes. Trapped by the boredom of suburbia and the limitations of their daily lives, there are no far horizons or ‘the freedom of spaces uncluttered’ (Bennett, 1985, p. 24). What is crucial here is Ricks’ persistence with the horizontality of his characters’ urban minds. Without the eyes to ‘see’ these men are trapped wherever they go. Their alienated existence allows no
glimmers of wonder or perception of nature. The drinking and fishing alone have meaning for them. Nelson’s salmon is an ‘opponent’ which, once landed is beaten to death.

But Nelson didn’t notice the colours or the beauty. He just knew he’d caught a salmon and he was glad. Now it was time to kill it (Ricks, p. 108).

"I haven’t had so much fun in ages!” (Ricks, p. 109).

Ricks’ mill workers are not discovering themselves through the land. (Bennett, 1985, p. 37). Nelson’s engagement with the place is distant, expedient and detached. The damming reality of urban alienation travels intact to the wild places; the bush and beach become oppressive and bloodied locations or simply mindless escapes.

In the 1934 novel Upsurge, Harcourt sets his characters and story in the city of Perth during the hard years of the Depression. Peter Groom is a social dilettante who has fallen on hard times. A bitter view of the city is conveyed through the eyes of a loser.

...brick and stone and concrete cliffs...Groom reflected that every building in that huddled mass meant money. He saw the city suddenly from a new point of view; in terms of money. Millions and millions of pounds sterling were frozen in the huddled mass of the city and every penny of it belonged to somebody else. (Harcourt, 1934, p. 249).

While Ricks’ characters may instrumentalise the bush, they share Harcourt’s view of the cityscape. One who previously strode mindlessly through this scene without a care, is now oppressed by these symbols of capital. The place and the character have undergone change. The city is not a friend of the poor and the disillusioned.

And there, in the heart of Bunbury, looking absurd amongst the laundromats and Chinese restaurants stood the Bunbury Tower, symbolising this fledgling city’s struggle to rise above small-town mediocrity...Nelson had always hated the look of it. Like a giant blue-and-white
milk carton... A city filled with people who almost made it to the Olympics, who almost made it to the AFL. A city filled with successful small businessmen who are arseholes, and sit on the Bunbury Council... A little city (Ricks, p. 12).

As he cruises down to his pub to meet Verlene for the first time and to have his balls kicked by Dion, Nelson, still wearing a shiner from his last brawl, observes the city he despises. Both Groom and Nelson are oppressed by images of urban materialism and wealth. Despite their opposite social backgrounds, they are both alienated by their experiences of the urban values of pretentiousness and, for them, unobtainable wealth. These interactions between characters and their 'palpably distinct' (Reid, 1979, p. 30) urban environment are driven by notions of the city as a place of suffering, ... 'a tragic disappointment, a species of hell' (Oates cited in Bennett, 1985, p. 55). Cities embody notions of the impersonal, of being inimical to human needs and feelings (Reid, 1979, p. 33). Ricks' trapped characters thrive on the negativity of the urban world.

Distinctions between regional and urban literature have proliferated despite and because of the myth of city and bush. In the past, local literature was either ignored or belittled and traditional academic criticism lacked interest in the 'local scene'. However the recognition of 'sense of place' as a central aspect of human identity and behaviour, involves regional literature in a critical function of language and literature. As Eudora Welty wrote;

The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of 'What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?' – that is the heart's field (cited in Bennett, 1991, p. 15).

Ricks' novel focuses on the lives of people who are locked into a psychological region that is a direct reflection of the urban spaces they inhabit and their perception of them. Cursory descriptions of run down lower class suburbs immediately evoke the essential
tone of the book (Ricks, pp. 3, 8, 10). Place becomes a mental landscape in which
caracters live out their destructive lives. The city and suburbs of Bunbury are
described with a jaundiced eye. Entrapment, work boredom, histories of domestic and
small town violence further place the characters wholly into their physical and
psychological settings. This sense of place is informed by the novel's literary style of
sparse, limited description and focus on the materiality of life. This obsessive concern
with material conditions points to a crucial factor in the novel's depiction of place.

The landscape of the city enters into the psyche of the people living there and
becomes part of their response to the landscape of place (Davidson, 1978, pp. 77-78).
The writer's response to place is, in part, what he evokes as peculiar or distinctive
about it and its way of life (Ibid, p. 78). Ricks' novel is loaded with both natural and
manufactured icons which not only locate it geographically, but which indicate the
primal familiarity of Bunbury to him. What further distinguishes his book as a regional
work is its tone of grievance and dissatisfaction, not just with life, but with 'the place'
(Ricks, pp.12,61-63,102-105,142-145). This attitudinal response is tied to a specific
place. It moves beyond the general misery of the small town blues. Having recognised
the place and his particular response to it, Ricks develops his narrative with a
confidence based in knowing where he is and what will happen there. This 'aggressive
use of landscape' (Jolley, 1978, p. 74) not only demands that we look at place, but at
what is going on there. The dark, violent mood of the novel grows out of this
distinctive and palpable relationship to location and these associated feelings. The
interaction between characters and place is thus framed by a dominant temper; misery
and alienation. For example, the overbearing atmosphere at the mill is alienation which
dominates the talk, and relationships of the workers (Ricks, pp.30-33,53-58). The men
are alienated by their work from each other in an alienating landscape.
Syson notes the general absence of literature dealing with work and class in Australia today. The years after world war two and up to 1970 were the golden age of working class writing. Out of this period grew Realist Writer (now overland) and the Australasian Book Society (1998, p. 161). While other areas of literary production have diversified and grown, realist urban novels like Loaded, by Tsiolkas (1995), which deals with the alienated life of a gay, working class immigrant, are less prolific. The workers’ relationship to work and the workplace are regarded as aspects of a bland homogeneity; the boredom of working class suburbs and their lifestyle. In Ricks’ work we see not only a particular sense of place but also the effect of this on the writer’s creative process (Watzke, 1992, p. 21). In exploring work as a region, Ricks draws the reader into a response to an environment that is generally overlooked. As Jolley states:

Landscape is not just trees and paddocks and hills, it’s crowded streets, it is the varying smells of different kinds of poverty, it is the well being of affluence and the security of smug suburban hedges or, to be more up to date, expensive brick walls, it is the excitement of people (1978, p.73).

Ricks’ achievement is to have taken the ordinary and made it interesting and formative within his work. Nicko, Brett and the other ‘big bastards’ at Alpine personify the place. They make it live. Situating the novel in the urban/suburban setting of regional Bunbury insists that the reader goes there imaginatively. ‘Consciously and unconsciously the writer seeks his own identification and uses his setting as background’ (Ibid, p. 73) We are made to look not just at the characters, but into the landscapes they occupy. The entire absence of beauty, of the ‘luminous spirit of place’ (Hewitt) which often identifies West Australian writing, provokes engagement and insists on a refocusing.
Intentionally or not, Ricks has engaged with two Goliaths of literature; regional snobbery and ideological exclusion. Further, he has engaged with urban and suburban environments readily categorised as anonymous and ‘ oppressively homogeneous’ (Ward, 1978, p. 71). The built environment often lacks differentiation and structural identity, and is perceived as metropolitan, mediocre and parochial. The strength and value of this parochial thinking is used to advantage by Ricks in Eleven months in Bunbury. The clear observations and descriptions of location transmit a distinctive character of place. There is an unselfconscious presentation of the little city. Its shabby and pretentious aspects are noted with equal detachment. This is not what the travel writer sees, and naturally this is not the side of Bunbury that its establishment wanted to acknowledge (Lawson, 1997, p. 33). In addition to the vicissitudes of the local cringe and distrustful parochialism, the regional novel is more easily marginalised because of its ‘distance’ from the urban centres, whose writers are perceived as dominant in the literary landscape. Controversial, pungent writing like Ricks’ confronts taste and ideological barriers. Its strong regional setting and designation as popular literature immediately removes it from any sphere of serious criticism and study. The limited approach endemic to this elitism insures the discouragement and exclusion of numerous other literary cultures and genres, of which Rick’s novel is one.
CONCLUSION

As literature that 'presents the relationships that link social divisions arising from the systems of production' (Reid 1979, p. xiii), *Eleven months in Bunbury* fulfils the role of a document of class. It affirms the theory that literature is determined by historical, social and economic forces through its depiction of Jim's and Nelson's lives and, in particular, their working lives. Further, the representations of class, social realism and region in *Eleven months in Bunbury* indicate the privileging of some literary texts over others. As Eagleton suggests, the literary evaluation of the text by the institutions powerfully shapes its economic and ideological importance and future (Eagleton, 1989, p. 89)

*Eleven months in Bunbury* was introduced into the Edith Cowan University Bunbury campus Regional Writing unit reading list in 1996. In addition to its local perspective its inclusion raised the issues of what constitutes literature and its value to the community. Early reviews of *Eleven months in Bunbury* varied from glowing to non-committal and scathing. In *The Western Review* David Harris, gave the novel a strong recommendation for its realism and honesty, praising Ricks as a writer with immense potential. Local *South Western Times* reviewer Margaret Anderson presented a polite, uncommitted review, no doubt conscious of the book's local profile and controversial content. Airlie Lawson of *Australian Book Review* savaged the novel and headed her review 'Rustic Grunge', noting that its only positive was that the inner city monopoly on grunge had been broken. The value of these reviews is that they represent a valid reflection of responses to the novel. The novel is now out of print and unavailable. Its inclusion on reading lists at both the Bunbury Regional Prison and Edith Cowan University is threatened. Its marginalisation is
perhaps complete, but, because of its local popularity, a proposal to the publishers to print a second run is under consideration.

This reading of the novel has shown the 'value' of a work of literature that stands outside the narrower strictures of the literary canon. Its textual engagement with class, ideology and realism indicate that *Eleven months in Bunbury* can inform us of different ways of seeing and making social and literary valuations. This is crucial to shifting perceptions of 'literature' and, in particular, the role of literary criticism in the wider society. 'Non-literary' texts which challenge the canon present new opportunities to broaden the agenda of criticism and to change the topic of the debate while reviewing the relevance and function of the institutions in the society.

Part of *Eleven months in Bunbury*'s appeal and controversy as a regional text is its interpellation of Bunbury. Regardless of its literary quality or perceived proximity to 'truth' the novel sinks home in the local mind. As such, *Eleven months in Bunbury* presents a window into local life and, by doing so, affirms the ...‘real strength and uniqueness of regional writing [which] is its focused, precise insights into particular places and the environments, people and communities that exist there.’ (Bennett, 1991, p. 15) The future of regional writing, publication and criticism depends upon nurturing local literature regardless of its style, content or agenda. The local newspaper and the local novel essentially reflect the identity of place. This thesis suggests that surveying and appraising what is here is essential to this pursuit.
REFERENCES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


THE BOYS IN THE YARD
SCOTT WISE

For how long has he been there in that job
The job of a sawmill hand?
All day long pushing logs through the saw
Workin' hard with his eyes feet and hands.
Twenty years you've been there in the yard
Making bundles of wood from the saw,
On a pay that's the worst in the land
And yer welfare seems nobodies' cause

Because you're in competition with the rest of the crew
And the whole night shift is competing with you,
And if ya can't talk to them
Who the hell's gunna listen to you?

'Cause if the shift doin' nights all stressed so tight
won't even give you the time of day,
And if the boys in the yard
working so damn hard can't get on
with the boys in the mill,
Well ya better start to wonder how it got this way
After so many years on such miserable pay.

And your boss, he's a man you can trust
But you must understand he'll only pay what he must.
So you see, its really all up to you,
Why don't you talk to your mates
Show what a union can do.

And if the shift doin' nights are all too damn tired
To even give you the time of day,
And if the boys in the yard working so damn hard,
can't get on with the boys in the mill.
Well ya never gunna have a single cent you deserve,
'Cause you're never gunna get the pay you deserve,
'Cause if you're at each others' throats
they know you won't be after theirs'.