HENRY LAWSON remains unquestionably our greatest short story writer. Indeed he is one of our greatest prose writers, a man whose achievement stands there in the Prose Works, square and solid and unmistakable. At the same time, we cannot pretend not to notice his limitations, which are considerable: to put it simply, Lawson worked within a very limited range in terms of form, of emotional variety, of the kinds of experience he could grasp and set down clearly. Within these narrow bounds his remarkable art came to fruition and, in time, fell away.

A cluster of themes run together through Lawson's stories. These are extremely persistent and they have obvious origins in his private life, wherein the pain of family tensions can only have been reinforced by the affliction of early deafness. Again and again we are brought up against loneliness, failure, the false haven of alcoholism and a compulsive insistence upon the gossamer precariousness of human happiness. Far from being able to participate imaginatively in the optimism of his age, Lawson portrayed life as a vale of tears, or if not of tears at least of patient stoicism and bitter humour. His characters have very little satisfying contact with one another: there is the hard-won mateship of the bush tracks, certainly, but this does not seem so much a lasting thing as a kind of tolerant alliance against the forces of the world.

Lawson's materials are so heavily charged with emotion that he slides all too frequently into the troughs of self-pity: stories like “His Father's Mate”, “Black Joe”, and “Two Boys at Grinder Brothers” show how easily a tender heart could succumb to the blandishments of tear-jerking. But in his best work he faces up to the harshness of his world, faces up to his emotions—pity, fear, despair, loneliness, self-indulgence—and portrays them with great accuracy and conciseness. The crisp clarity of the prose exemplifies his control: his achievement in creating a “style” is at the same time an achievement in gaining self-knowledge.

Although they transparently draw on the experience of a sensitive adolescent, Lawson's finest stories are a rigorously adult achievement. Among these mature and deeply moving works I would class “The Drover's Wife”, “The Union Buries Its Dead” and “Going Blind”. Along with, yet unmistakably above, these stand the four linked stories which comprise the Joe Wilson sequence: four stories which were, significantly, among the last effective stories he produced, since the quality of his writing from 1901 onward fell away rapidly. Joe Wilson was written when the collapse of Lawson's life was directly confronting him; it is a triumph snatched out of the teeth of despair.

The four interlocked stories of Joe Wilson are the nearest Lawson ever came to transcending the bounds of his unassertive short story form and writing something in which he could look at human relations more substantially, more expansively. The sequence is, in miniature (or in the form of a skeleton), his “big novel”. His attempts to weave the four pieces of narrative into a larger pattern for which he presumably did not have the stamina, reveal themselves in very interesting ways.

“Joe Wilson's Courtship” begins the sequence. Here is the first stage of Lawson's portrait of Joe, the debilitatingly sensitive protagonist of the stories: a young man who plainly has much in common with the author himself. But there are two Joes. Joe Wilson is both narrator and main actor in the sequence, the story beginning with the older Joe looking back on the young man that once he was:
There are many times in this world when a healthy boy is happy. When he is put into knickerbockers, for instance, and “comes a man to-day”, as my little Jim used to say. When they're cooking something at home that he likes. When the “sandy blight” or measles breaks out amongst the children…

I wasn't a healthy-minded, average boy; I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake, and grew up to be a bushman, and didn't know what was the matter with me—or the world—but that's got nothing to do with it.

There are times when a man is happy. When he finds out that the girl loves him. When he's just married. When he's a lawful father for the first time, and everything's going on all right: some men make fools of themselves then—I know I did. I'm happy to-night because I'm out of debt and can see clear ahead, and because I haven't been easy for a long time. (p. 323)

This opening is strikingly casual, yarn-like; the older Joe is a garrulous, relaxed figure, inclined to wax philosophical but perhaps a little world-weary. His tone suggests the considerable distance in time between the present and the occurrences he is recalling—and, as we see soon enough, an equally large gap between the man he was and the man he is now.

Such a leisurely beginning is unusual for Lawson (A. A. Phillips has noted his tendency to plunge into the heart of things from the very first sentence) but it is by no means as aimless as it may look at first glance. The flashes to and fro in time—back to schooldays and forward again to the years of all too worldly wisdom—begin to indicate the wider perspectives of Joe Wilson. This apparently casual chatter is loaded with implications for events ahead: I need only single out Joe's insistence that he wasn't “a healthy-minded, average boy”, and the familiarity with debts and depression in his present life. On top of this, a distinctly ominous tone is struck by the piece of advice which follows in the next paragraph: “Make the most of your courting days, you young chaps, and keep them clean, for they're about the only days when there's a chance of poetry and beauty coming into this life.”

This first story follows a simple enough series of events, tracing the courtship through a number of scenes and situations, which delineate Joe's relationship with his workmate Jack Barnes, his growing awareness of the girl who is nicknamed “'Possum”, his bungling, his shyness, his need to be jockeyed along by Jack. All this is achieved concisely, perceptively, humorously. Of particular interest is the sketch of Jack and Joe early on:

Jack was sentimental too, but in a different way. I was sentimental about other people—more fool I!—whereas Jack was sentimental about himself. Before he was married, and when he was recovering from a spree, he'd write rhymes about “Only a boy, drunk by the roadside”, and that sort of thing; and he'd call 'em poetry, and talk about signing them and sending them to the Town and Country Journal. But he generally tore them up when he got better. The bush is breeding a race of poets, and I don't know what the country will come to in the end. (p. 324)

There is a strong element of Lawson in both these characters. Both, for instance, have a dangerous weakness for alcohol; both are sensitive and sentimental, though Jack has plainly toughened up a good deal more than Joe has. Interestingly enough, it is Jack who gets cast in the role of would-be poet, which gives the narrator the opportunity for a mildly cynical wisecrack. But Jack is also the more practical of the two. He is obliged to keep planning the courtship for his nervous workmate: in fact he has to keep bullying Joe into making a move of some kind.

A lot of the material which has gone into this story is demonstrably autobiographical. In Bertha Lawson's reticent little book, My Henry Lawson, we find an account of relations between Henry and his wife that has affinities with the Joe Wilson stories. For example, Bertha came from Gippsland, as Mary probably does, and had a more genteel upbringing than her husband-to-be. More significant is the resemblance between the introverted, isolated Joe, with his extraordinary difficulties of communication, and Lawson's own destructively manic-depressive temperament; prolonged failures of communication are a prominent feature of both marriages.
However, the full impact of these tensions is not felt until later in the sequence. At this stage Joe's awkwardness is wholly engaging and gently entertaining, as in the humorous passage where the clothesline breaks and he bumbles along to assist Mary. Joe's courtship goes ahead in an easy-paced, unemphatic unfolding of narrative, with a minimum of interpolation from the backward-looking narrator. The highlight of the action is Joe's fight with Romany, a silly, unheroic affair; Romany, an ugly customer on the surface, is an unhappy outcast, disliked by his fellow workers. This misfit is the man whom shy, sensitive Joe has to knock about:

*I felt the reaction pretty bad. I didn't feel proud of the affair at all. I thought it was a low brutal business all round. (p. 339)*

Romany's downfall leads obliquely to Joe's triumph, which is ironic since Joe's rival for Mary is somebody quite different, a confident jackeroo. Long afterwards, in “A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek”, it is partly his catching another glimpse of Romany that spurs Joe on to buying the double buggy and nursing his marriage out of one of its black periods. On such slender threads of narrative are the four stories strung together.

After an absent-minded proposal, the first story ends on the note of old Black's reminiscence when Joe goes to ask for Mary's hand. This is not only a nicely turned conclusion; it also parallels another kind of nostalgic reminiscence: that of the older Joe at the very beginning. And we realize that not much has been made of the presence of the narrator. That ominously resigned note has not been fully justified as yet: the hints of “Joe Wilson's Courtship” look forward to, and open out into, events to come.

“Brighten's Sister-in-Law” passes over Joe's marriage, over the birth of a son, over a period when the Wilsons have been living in the scruffy town of Gulgong, such past events being sketched in by means of apparently random memories and flashbacks. We have come to a time when Joe decides to take up a small selection and the story turns on a terrible fit that seizes his delicate son, Jim, on the track to Lahey's Creek. The whole tone of this second story is darker. The voice of the narrator has lost some of its easy-going quality and his emphasis falls more obviously on loneliness, separation, fear. We can see why young men were advised to “make the most of their courting days”: the world of maturity is so harsh and uncompromising that all one can do is to grasp at early, transient pleasures. For a sense is growing in the narrative of disasters constantly looming up in life. Young Jim's fits, Joe's recollections of helpless drinking sprees, the glimpses of marital conflict, all these become part of the natural pattern of existence.

One thing that emerges is the way Joe's isolation is growing worse. Here, surely, we have the fullest picture Lawson was ever to paint of his own increasing loss of contact, loss of confidence. Here we have the self-questioning of the deaf, unhappy writer, his life already disintegrating, his talent soon to do the same, gathering up fragments to shore against his ruins. At this late point in his career, in the figure of Joe Wilson—Joe the narrator and Joe the actor together—Lawson was able to create a piece of self-analysis more ambitious than anything else in his writing.

Even young Jim notices his father's progressive alienation and in sidelong glances from the narrative we are shown relations with Mary beginning to deteriorate. A passage early in the story reveals how things are going:

*This sort of talk from Mary always bored me and made me impatient with her, because I knew it all too well. I never worried for myself—only for Mary and the children. And often, as the days went by, I said to myself, “I'll take more notice of Jim and give Mary more of my time, just as soon as I can see things clear ahead a bit.” And the hard days went on, and the weeks, and the months, and the years—Ah, well!*

*Mary used to say, when things would get worse, “Why don't you talk to me, Joe? Why don't you tell me your thoughts, instead of shutting yourself up in yourself and brooding—eating your heart out? It's hard for me: I get to think you're tired of me, and selfish. I might be cross and speak sharp to you when you are in trouble. How am I to know, if you don't tell me?”*

*But I didn't think she'd understand. (p. 349)*
This, I believe, is what the whole sequence is about. There are four distinct stories about widely different incidents, ranging from the gentle, charming comedy of the courtship to the grim emptiness of worn-out Mrs Spicer's death at the end of “‘Water Them Geraniums’ “, but the common factor to them all is Joe: Joe as narrator trying to pull the threads of his past life into some shape, Joe as awkward young pioneer trying to build his life, Joe as uncommunicative husband, Joe as sensitive, introverted man, constantly hurt by what he sees and feels around him.

The figure of Brighten's sister-in-law plays a key role in the story that bears her name. She is the kind of failure that Joe seems fated to become. Her strength and her weakness run close together. Her insight, her humane imagination, the loving care which she bestows on Jim in nursing him out of his fit: these are aspects of the idealism which has, it appears, driven her out of the busy world and banished her to a wretched wayside shanty. Her background is vague, the story being that “she'd been a hospital matron in the city … and there were yarns about her. Some said she got the sack for exposing the doctors—or carrying on with them—I didn't remember which.” But, given the insight with which this woman comprehends the tensions existing between Joe and Mary, we are left in no doubt that her failure is inextricably connected with her warm humanity.

Two women in these stories throw light back onto Joe's situation. These are Brighten's sister-in-law and poor old Mrs Spicer. Both women are failures or near-failures who keep on struggling against the slings and arrows of an intolerable universe; both have affinities with similar courageous women elsewhere in Lawson's fiction, with the Drover's Wife, for example. Perhaps they represent something of the battling feminism of Lawson's mother?

For Joe Wilson these two women are, first of all, images of what could happen to Mary. The sight of a battered bushwoman fills young Joe with fears for his young wife, at present so fresh and confident; throughout the third part of the sequence the Spicers' selection lies alongside the Wilsons' newly taken up land like a horrible cautionary tale.

Then again, both women are embodiments for young Joe of the threat of personal defeat that haunts him in a world of perpetual insecurity. His own potential alcoholism could all too easily drag him down, just as that unnamed indiscretion drove a woman from a Sydney hospital to a shanty on a disused bush road. And, as I have suggested, the proximity of Spicer's selection shadows forth the way in which vicissitudes of wind and weather could reduce him to a scratching poverty. Furthermore, in old Joe, the narrator, we hear the voice of a world-weariness which isin some ways comparable with the weariness of the two women; his spirit of garrulous futility, his memories of ways that were once open to him and now are closed for ever, the oblique, self-reproachful indications of his later life, all these things reinforce the note of weather-beaten acceptance, which is the most that Lawson's older characters have managed to wring out of life.

Thirdly, both Brighten's sister-in-law and Mrs Spicer are more perceptive than young Joe; both are capable of seeing into his marriage. The ex-matron, after the crisis with young Jim's fit has passed, has a long talk with Mary, who is then, Joe notices, “extra gentle for the next few days”. And even dotty old Mrs Spicer, having observed Mary's attempts at civilizing the primitive shack in hard, lonely country manages to blurt out: “What-did-you-bring-her-here-for?” In other words, their apparently disconnected stories keep bearing back on the central preoccupations of Joe Wilson—a man's fragile personality and his attempts to sustain human communication, to prevent himself from becoming completely alienated from family and society.

“A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek” is, like the first story, a straightforward account of relations between Joe and Mary, and it recounts the coming of a period of material success. The conclusion might suggest an optimistic ending to the sequence, until we look back and recall how much of the narrative has depicted obstinacy, argument, conflict, until we recall the intermittent world-weariness of the narrator and weigh the final impact of such an aside as this:

*What women some men are! But the time came, and not many years after, when I stood by the bed where Mary lay, white and still; and, amongst other things, I kept saying, “I'll give in, Mary—I'll give in,” and then I'd laugh. They thought I was raving mad, and took me from the room. But that time was to come.* (pp. 363-4)
In short, we are given no encouragement to see the glow of domestic peace which concludes “A Double Buggy” as anything but a transient condition. We come away from *Joe Wilson* still affected by the feeling that drought and illness, loneliness and disagreement provide the norm in Lawson's vision of life.

All this is frail and modest enough, it must be admitted; the limitations of Lawson's talent are seen in his reliance on brief hints and flashbacks instead of the full dramatic presentation that a full-scale novel could provide. But it is impossible not to admire his concentration on what he knows and what he has felt. *Joe Wilson* is a clean, economical work, its human insights relentlessly frank. It stands high among the achievements of Australian fiction. Perhaps even its tentative, skeletal structure emerges in the long run as a paradoxical virtue, serving to reinforce the quality of painful and reticent plainness which characterizes the whole sequence.


4. (Sydney, 1943).