



THE COMPLETE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE

by C.J. DENNIS

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Teacher's Notes prepared by Kevin Densley

The Author and His Place in Australian Literature

C. J. Dennis was born in Auburn, South Australia, in 1876 and died in Melbourne, Victoria, in 1938. For much of his life, he worked in journalism. He remains one of Australia's most famous, popular and best-loved writers. His works include: *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, *The Moods of Ginger Mick*, *Doreen*, *The Glugs of Gosh*, *Digger Smith* and *Rose of Spadgers*.

Dennis is part of a notable tradition of Australian comic writing, going back to Henry Lawson and on through the 20th Century to include writers such as Lennie Lower and, in the present, authors including Clive James and Barry Humphries.

The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke – Outline and Structure

The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke is the story, told entirely in rhymed verse, of Bill, the “sentimental bloke”. Bill is the narrator of the work, which begins with him revealing a yearning to leave his rough, larrikin past behind and find his “ideel bit o’skirt” – that is, his perfect woman. This occurs in the first chapter, “A Spring Song”.

Thirteen other chapters follow, in which Bill tells of his initial meeting with Doreen - certainly, his “ideel bit o’skirt”- and the ups and downs of their relationship, through to a conclusion where he and Doreen are happily married with a baby son. All the typical stages of such a relationship are dealt with.

Bill's story is worth describing in detail. In “The Intro” (Chapter II.) he falls for Doreen and eventually, after being rebuffed by her, manages to successfully ask her out. Chapters III-V “The Stoush o’Day”, “Doreen” and “The Play” respectively, detail

the early development of Bill and Doreen's romance. "The Stror 'at Coot" (Chapter VI) depicts a temporary split in the relationship on account of Bill's jealousy at the attention Doreen receives from a rival suitor. In "The Siren" (Chapter VII), Bill and Doreen make up. Her singing, in particular, inspired him to do so: "She sang a song; an' orl at once I seen / The kind o' crool an' 'eartless broot I been."

By Chapter VIII, "Mar", Bill and Doreen's relationship has become "serious" and he meets his girlfriend's mother for the first time. "Pilot Cove" (Chapter IX) shows Bill and Doreen with a parson, receiving their pre-marriage talk. The actual marriage takes place in "Hitched" (Chapter X), with Bill's best friend, Ginger Mick, as Best Man.

In "Beef Tea" (Chapter XI), Bill describes an early, temporary falling out in the marriage, while "Uncle Jim" (Chapter XII), "The Kid" (Chapter XIII) and "The Mooch O'Life" (Chapter XIV) all tell, in various ways, of his happiness in the married state, including the birth of a son in "The Kid".

Main Characters

Bill

Though Bill is shown, at the outset, as a larrikin type, his desire to leave that life behind for something better is already strong. Fundamentally, he is a good-hearted, sentimental individual with an idealistic streak. This becomes more apparent as his relationship with Doreen progresses. In appearance, Bill is more ugly than handsome. Though there is no precise indication of his age at any point, he could reasonably be placed somewhere in his twenties. By the end of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, Bill is as settled and content as anyone could possibly hope to be: "Sittin' at ev'nin' in this sunset-land / Wiv 'Er in all the World to 'old me 'and, / A son to bear me name when I am gone. ... / Livin' an' lovin - so life mooches on."

Doreen

Doreen is quiet and feminine. She is, it can be assumed, roughly the same age as Bill. Interestingly, in "The Siren", she is shown – through Bill's eyes – as a captivating singer. Initially, she has been reduced - due to her father's untimely death - to working in a pickle factory to help support herself and her mother. In this instance, as in many others in the story, her loyalty and resourcefulness are apparent. Indeed, Doreen's mother says of her: "Doreen's been *sich* a help; she 'as indeed."

Doreen's Mother

Doreen's mother plays a minor role in *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, as do all the other characters, apart from Bill and Doreen. In appearance, she is a large, not particularly attractive woman, prone to bursts of weeping in times of both unhappiness and great joy – a good example in the latter respect occurs at Bill and Doreen's wedding.

The Parson

The Parson (or “Pilot Cove”, in Bill’s slang) is the person who gives Bill and Doreen their pre-wedding “chat”. He also performs the marriage ceremony. He is an elderly, gentle, well-meaning man, to whom Bill takes a liking.

Ginger Mick

Ginger Mick is Bill’s best mate. Although he does not figure prominently in the story – apart from a small but significant appearance as Best Man at Bill and Doreen’s wedding – there is enough detail given to see him as a loyal, rough and ready but engaging young man, fond of a drink, a bet or a “stoush”.

The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke - Themes

The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke possesses a number of major themes. These include:

- a man from the wrong side of the tracks can reform himself and make good with the love of a good woman
- people in general, given a chance, will turn out good rather than bad
- friendship and loyalty are all-important
- opposites can attract
- hard work brings its rewards
- ups and downs are part of life in general and of marriage in particular

All of these themes, as well as others you may think of, are worthy of detailed discussion.

Language

The particular kind of language employed by Dennis in *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* is a central aspect of the work. Basically, Dennis uses a larrikin street language, involving rhyming slang and many words particular to the larrikin set. An extensive glossary of words and expressions used in *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* is included at the end of the book. The glossary is a very valuable aid, particularly for readers new to Dennis.

The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke - Discussion Questions

1. Is Henry Lawson’s preface to *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* of any significant use in terms of introducing the work to a reader?
2. Discuss Lawson’s contention that “Doreen stands for all good women.”
3. Is Bill’s sentimentalism so excessive that it is implausible?

4. How idealized is the relationship between Bill and Doreen?
5. Do you feel Bill's language accurately represents the particular way larrikin types spoke in Dennis' day? Or is the language of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* more the invention of Dennis himself? (This question may require some research.)
6. Do you find *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* funny? Why?
7. To what extent are the main characters stereotypes rather than credible individual beings? Does this issue matter in a comic work such as Dennis'?
8. What qualities have made *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* a classic of Australian writing?
9. What is the literary merit of this work? Is it good literature, or simply an example of clever, popular comic writing? Is such a distinction appropriate here?
10. Has *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* dated at all? Or is it still as "fresh" now as in the time in which it was written?
11. Is the language in Dennis' work still accessible enough for the present-day reader to enjoy?
12. Did reading *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* make you wish to read other works by C. J. Dennis? Why?