



THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY LEE BURTON



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OVERVIEW >

This study guide discusses how secondary and tertiary teachers of English, Film Studies and Media Studies can use the restored version of *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford, 1919) and the resources in the accompanying DVD produced by the National Film and Sound Archive.

A comedy, a romance, a ripping good yarn – that’s *The Sentimental Bloke*, one of Australia’s iconic early silent films. *The Sentimental Bloke* broke all box-office records in Australia and New Zealand when it was released in 1919, with people queuing along city blocks to see it. However, it did not succeed in the United States, where test audiences failed to understand the Australian street vernacular of the time. The National Film and Sound Archive recently produced *Raymond Longford’s The Sentimental Bloke: The Restored Version*, and made a DVD that includes the restored film and other reference materials.

The film is based on Australian C.J. Dennis’ 1915 book *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*. The book was the first of Dennis’ ‘verse novels’ and introduced Bill (the Sentimental Bloke), his wife, Doreen, and his friend Ginger Mick. Wildly popular, the book sold more than 60,000 copies in the eighteen months following its publication in 1915. Dennis appears to have produced approximately 4000 pieces of prose and poetry during his long career as a writer.

The film has a classic narrative structure, with strong and engaging characters, wit and charm. This is particularly evident in the intertitles, which use Dennis’ colourful verse. *The Sentimental Bloke* raises important questions about gender, class, language and our national identity. Most importantly, it marries humour and a love story, and is warmly told with a great deal of empathy for its characters and their tribulations and triumphs.



Students may find Dennis’ verse difficult to decode in the intertitles, but reading sections from *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* should help them to enjoy the language. (The book is readily available to order online and in bookstores.)

Some words that were in common usage amongst the working class in 1919 are now unacceptable, such as ‘nigger’ and ‘tart’, but they provide an excellent starting point for a discussion on how societal values change and language evolves over time.

The NFSA’s DVD also provides us with other resources to explore history and the history of Australian film. It is important to remember that Australia has a proud film heritage. About 250 silent feature films were made in Australia between 1906 and 1930. Less than fifty have survived in whole or

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in part, and today Australians treasure them as part of our cultural heritage.

The Sentimental Bloke was rediscovered in the 1950s and a new print screened at the Sydney Film Festival in 1955. Since then, the original negative sent to the US has been discovered and found to be of a better quality than any of the Australian copies. The new version premiered at the 2004 Sydney Film Festival and screened at the 2005 London Film Festival.

early years of Australian cinema, before she died at 35 from tuberculosis. *The Sentimental Bloke* is recognised as their masterpiece.

Andrew Pike writes:

It is one of the mere five surviving films that were made by them, key figures from the first few decades of Australian cinema. As such, it is a window into the extraordinary quality of their work – their bold innovations in storytelling technique, as well as the sensitive humanity of their stories.²

The Sentimental Bloke was filmed mainly in the Sydney suburb of Woolloomooloo. Dennis' story was set in Melbourne, but Longford moved the location to inner-city Sydney, an environment he knew well, having been raised in Darlinghurst. The film's honest depiction of slum neighbourhoods and their poverty and energy reflected a world that audiences of the time would have recognised and in many instances would have related to.

Unlike the vast majority of silent films of that era, particularly those coming out of the US, Longford directed his actors to be natural and to use facial expressions and gestures that mirrored real-life behaviour. This is one of the features of the film that makes it timeless in its appeal and that students will appreciate. The actors prepared for their roles by immersing themselves in working-class culture and speaking slang all day.

Another appealing aspect of the film is the ordinariness of the actors' appearance. For example, lead actor Arthur Tauchert looks more like a 'bloke' than a movie star. Tauchert was a vaudeville performer and former labourer, and embodied the type of simple Aussie working-class man he also

**RAYMOND LONGFORD'S
THE SENTIMENTAL
BLOKE: THE RESTORED
VERSION** (National Film
and Sound Archive DVD)

DVD Special Features

Musical accompaniment composed by Jen Anderson, long-term member of folk-rock group Weddings Parties Anything, and performed by Jen Anderson and the Larrikins

Interview with Jen Anderson about writing and performing the musical accompaniment for the film

Curatorial commentary about the making of the film and its historical social background

Image gallery

Interview with Raymond Longford, the director

MAKING THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE

Reviews of the original screening of *The Sentimental Bloke* are very interesting to read as examples of the critical approaches of the time, and also help students gain a sense of the social and cultural milieu. For example, read this review excerpt from *The Argus* of 4 December 1918:

Beginning with the 'Bloke's' experience of trouble arising from drink and association with 'the push' (Larrikin mob), the picture shows his decision to reform and to do honest work ... The photography is good and judgement has been exercised in selecting the backgrounds, chiefly the neighbourhood of Sydney.¹

Actor Lottie Lyell, partner of the film's director, Raymond Longford, collaborated in the production of *The Sentimental Bloke*. She co-wrote the screenplay and played the heroine Doreen. Lyell also selected the intertitles and assisted with locations, editing and art direction. Pioneer filmmakers Longford and Lyell had a very creative partnership, making about twenty-five films together in the



The film, like the verse novel, tells the love story of Bill, a larrikin, and 'his girl', Doreen. Although both are working class – Bill is a street hawker and Doreen sticks the labels on the jars in a pickle factory – she is more genteel than Bill and he has to woo her before she agrees to go out with him.

However, before Bill meets and falls in love with Doreen we are shown his life as a knockabout larrikin – drinking with his mates, playing two-up and engaging in rough street fights.

In the beginning of the film Bill describes his life-style: 'I spens me leisure re Gettin' on the Schick' (drinking and gambling). He is a relaxed, genial character who is easily led astray by his mate Ginger Mick (Gilbert Emery), and when they go to an

played on screen. Similarly, Lottie Lyell had none of the glamour associated with American silent-movie stars such as Theda Bara or Greta Garbo, although she had a girl-next-door appeal similar to that of Mary Pickford ('America's sweetheart') or Lillian Gish.

THE BLOKE'S STORY

'As documentary film maker and anthropologist David MacDougall once said, "At the heart of most great fiction films is a great documentary."³ Andrew Pike describes the story of *The Sentimental Bloke* as observational documentary.

*The story unfolds with minimal intervention by the author: it is driven by every day, 'ordinary' occurrences and melodramatic narrative devices are barely discernable. There are no murders, mysteries, tragedies or sudden acts of God, no crimes other than illegal gambling, and no villains.*⁴

Much of the simplicity and charm of the story resides with the Bloke himself. Henry Lawson wrote in the foreword to Dennis' book:

*The Sentimental Bloke ... is more perfect than any alleged 'larrikin' or Bottle-O character I have ever attempted to sketch, not even excepting my own beloved Benno. Take the first poem for instance, where the Sentimental Bloke gets the hump. How many men, in how many different parts of the world—and of how many different languages—have had the same feeling—the longing for something better—to be something better?*⁵

That statement alone says much about the book's popularity, in that it appeals to the egalitarian Australian sensibility and illustrates the idea of the 'fair go'.



ACTIVITIES

- Discuss how costume is used in film and television today to signify particular contemporary character types.
- How are stereotypes established in films and television programs?
- In what ways are stereotypes different to fully rounded dramatic characters?
- Are any of the characters in *The Sentimental Bloke* stereotypes?

illicit two-up school after several hours of drinking, Bill hits an all-time low. The police raid the game, chasing the players all over the neighbourhood. Mick hides in a horse feed barrel, but Bill is arrested after a 'stoush' with a policeman. This early scene is pure knockabout comedy, where Ginger Mick's clothing – high-waisted pants and fancy scarf –



identify him to audiences of that time as a member of a gang of ruffians, just as a shaven head, a hoodie and low-slung loose pants and sneakers signify today's cinema ruffian. Bill is arrested at a two-up game for biffing the policeman. After a six-month stint in jail, he decides to change his ways and finds a steady job hawking at the market.

*I tells meself someday I'll take a pull An look around for some good stiddy job.
An cut the push for good an all; I'm full of that crook mob!*

This is the defining moment for Bill. However, he also longs for love and he finds it at Steeny Isaac's stall in the form of the lovely Doreen, his 'ideal tart', who is looking at trinkets.

Bill arranges an introduction, takes Doreen on a ferry ride and they enjoy drinks on the beach, where the couple have their first kiss. He also tells her about his spell in jail and she accepts that he has had a rough life. In the thrall of love, Bill becomes romantic and lyrical.

It was a Bonzer Night

*The wet sands glistened and the gleamin' moon
Shone yeller on the sea, all streakin' down.
A band was playin' some soft, dreamy toon;
'Oldin' in me own
'Er little 'and.
O strike it was divine
The way she raised 'er shinin' eyes to mine.*

The beauty of C.J. Dennis' verse is enhanced all the way through by lyrical passages such as this, by the excellent photography and through close-ups of Bill, which are moving but never too emotional.

Perhaps one of the best-loved sequences in the film revolves around a night at the theatre where Bill and Doreen see *Romeo and Juliet*, which in some ways parallels their own love story. Doreen is emotional about the romance of the play, but Bill becomes very involved in the action scenes.



*Nex' minnit there's a reel ole ding-dong go —
'Arf round or so.
Mick Curio, 'e gets it in the neck,
'Ar rats!' 'e sez, an' passes in 'is check.*

*Quite natchril, Romeo gits wet as 'ell.
'It's me or you!' 'e 'owls, an' wiv a yell,
Plunks Tyball through the gizzard wiv 'is sword,
'Ow I ongcored!
'Put in the boot!' I sez. 'Put in the boot!'
'Ush!' sez Doreen . . . 'Shame!' sez some silly coot.*

In order to retain dramatic tension, the love story has to have an upset. This occurs when a rival, the Stror 'at Coot, appears. A jealous Bill ends up trying to start a fight with him, and Doreen and he have an argument and break up. Not long afterwards, Ginger Mick invites Bill to a party; Doreen is there and she sings a sad song that moves Bill to tears. They get back together and marry soon afterwards.



Bill slips back into his old ways only once, when he is tempted by Ginger Mick and stays out all night drinking and gambling. But Doreen forgives him, cementing their relationship. Uncle Jim, a 'hayseed' from the country, arrives to stay with the happy couple and invites Doreen and Bill to leave their home in Sydney and live on his farm, as he can no longer run it.

The Bloke has made the journey from larrikin to farmer, and the arrival of a son completes the narrative.

EXPLORING MASCULINITY IN THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE

Dennis had great interest in what it meant to be a man in Australian culture, and this was a question that occupied him throughout his life. The book

and the film of *The Sentimental Bloke* were both created in a post-First World War context, when masculinity was an important concern for Australian culture. Philip Butters points out that Longford spent considerable time hunting for an appropriate 'Bloke', one able to convey the correct balance between blokedom and sentimentality. Butters quotes Stephen Garton, who has written that for the men coming home from the war 'return seemed to represent a direct conflict between their "male-ness", newly strengthened at the front, and its opposite – a stifling feminised world'⁶

The affirmation of the Australian man as both a bloke and a person able to love and improve himself is much better represented in the film than in the original poem. As Butters writes:

*The film draws attention to the moral and economic depths to which [Bill] has sunk, and his inappropriateness as a breadwinner, so that it can chart his gradual rise. Where the poem ignores his form of employment until he explains to Doreen's mother that he has a job as a storeman in a printer's joint, early on in the film he gets a job hawking, and later graduates to the printery.*⁷

The narrative of the film of *The Sentimental Bloke* shows a balance has been achieved between the two: Bill moves from blokedom into true adulthood. His manhood is finally equated with being a responsible husband and a loving father, and he is content in both roles.

For Bill, coming to terms with the world of women involves meeting 'Ma' (Doreen's mother) at her home where, surrounded by knick-knacks and served Sunday tea, Bill feels distinctly out of place but is determined to make a good impression: 'I study books wiv yearnin' to improve. To 'eave meself out uv me lowly groove.' He is dressed in newly purchased clothes: 'Me patent leathers nearly brought the tears ... Me stand-up collar sorin' orf me ears.'

Bill is initiated into the cosy domesticity of Doreen's world, which by the end of the film he has embraced.

THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE – FILM CONVENTIONS AND CODES

In comparison to his peers, by 1919 Raymond Longford was in command of a full range of techniques that had not long been invented. The film is shot mainly in long takes and wide shots as was common in other early films, influenced as they were by the visual language of the theatre. However, Longford also knew how to use close-ups to great advantage and how to compose them using appropriate camera angles, not just to reveal emotions but to add comedy to a scene or enhance action.

He also used coloured filters to aid the expression of emotion, and this restored version is faithful to the original in that respect. Longford also skilfully applies other conventions just beginning to be used in film. These include irised close-ups (putting a dark circle around the happy couple in the wedding scene by closing down the iris of the camera, in the tradition of a photographic portrait), and reverse shots during the chase scenes after the two-up game.

The DVD extras includes a short interview with Raymond Longford, recorded not long before he died in 1959, aged 80.

The music track was composed and arranged by Australian composer/performer Jen Anderson, long-time member of folk-rock group *Weddings Parties Anything*, and was performed by Jen Anderson and the Larrikins. The music is true to the style that was popular at the time, and it was important to Anderson to use the authentic instruments of the film's production era, which included piano, guitar, mandolin, violin and tin whistle. Also on the DVD is a detailed interview with Anderson, where she discusses how she chose the music and the songs included on the soundtrack.



Endnotes

- ¹ Anthony Buckley, Dominic Case, Ray Edmondson & Andrew Pike, *Raymond Longford's The Sentimental Bloke: The Restored Version*, National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra, 2009, p.165.
- ² *ibid.*, p.37.
- ³ *ibid.*, p.47.
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ C.J. Dennis, *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, Kessinger Publishing, Montana, 2004, p.6.
- ⁶ Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.22, quoted in Philip Butterss, 'A "Careful Little Housewife": C.J. Dennis and Masculinity in *The Sentimental Blokes*', *Screening The Past*, no. 16, 2004:
<http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr_16/pbfr16.html>
- ⁷ Butterss, *ibid.*



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