

# *CREATIVE RESPONSE TO THEA ASTLEY'S*

## *HUNTING THE WILD PINEAPPLE*

**See *Literature for Senior Students*, Chapter 7, Creative responses to texts, p. 194**

This article contains a creative response to Thea Astley's collection of linked short stories, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (Penguin, 1981). The response is a short story that could be added to the collection. Following the story is a reflective commentary identifying the features of the original text (especially its use of recurring characters) and elements of Astley's style that the writer has sought to emulate.

See Chapter 7 of *Literature for Senior Students* (Insight, 2006) for more information on writing creative responses to texts, as well as examples of responses to Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and Peter Carey's short stories.

### ***Acknowledgment***

Insight Publications thanks Deb Watson for permission to publish her story and reflective commentary.

## The response: a short story to be added to the collection

### FRÀ PANDOLF, MULES AND OTHER HUMDRUMMERY

I jerked my nose out of my third or fifth whisky and blinked furiously, futilely struggling to make three Mr Watermans into two. "I shay, there's too mush money goin' where's no need. Why, they'sh on'y given pi 56,763 digits! It's terror to capacity; awful! (now, was that another cryptic mental tabulation, or perhaps one too many stingers?) 3 point 1,4,1,4, ..." It looked like being a long night at the Mango Pub, with sprinklings of over-ripe Queenslanders arranged haphazardly in the beer-garden and tap-room, a bar full of depressed natives with a few out-of-towners and the odd hippie spattered around. The mosquito-drone of Mr Waterman's voice was like one of those Bingo announcers - tonight's numbers are, folks - and the satisfying thuck of a dart striking home came less and less frequently as players succumbed to the perils of free-flowing liquor.

Mrs Waterman's eyes had taken on the glazed aspect of terracotta pottery. She was, regrettably, fully clothed. Somewhere behind her, enunciating ever-so-carefully her carefully-formulated opinion of these "tiresome drunks," the unmistakable vowels and equally unmistakable profile of Bosie Hackendorf - also decently attired ... fortunately - perched on a bar-stool like a scraggle-feathered Kakapo-hen defending her mound of earth. There was no trace of the unconscious musician in Brain, sprawled *soûl comme un cochon* over the table between them, snoring like a hippie in a cannabis patch. But if Mr Waterman's recitation was a mosquito, Mrs Hackendorf rated at *least* a march-fly:

"Brain! Oh, Brain, *do* get up! You're making such a *dreadful* scene!" My eye-brow struggled heavenwards. Brain's head lifted momentarily, then flopped, fish-like, to resume its place on the table.

The door banged open and we turned our heads, slowly, slowly, like a herd of dazed sheep, and the two bedraggled figures who entered were a less than eloquent reminder that it was raining outside the safe haven of the pub. It was one of those tropical downpours, as I recall, that just seem to go on for days and days, turning the pineapple-plantations into a porridge of soil and greenery and water-logged fruit. The pleasantly discordant harmonies of argument - which, from the sound of I've-already-said-this-a-thousand-times-but-I'll-say-it-again, had been going on for a while - preceded the afore-mentioned couple:

"... booked us in -" a woman's voice.

"How was *I* to know the Motel would be closed? At this hour!?" her husband's half-hearted attempt at a shout carried inside.

"Yes, well if you'd only *listen*," she sighed theatrically.

Some deeply elusive mystery in the bottom of my glass became utterly absorbing.

It was difficult to tell whether Mrs Keiner dripped more from the rain or the weight of *faux* pearls at wrists, ears and throat. They had, apparently, drifted North on one of those 'second honeymoon' rackets, searching for that elusive spark that ignited, flared and was misplaced sometime after youth had, in its annoying little way, passed them by. Or maybe they were looking for pineapples? Anyway, they'd intended to bypass Mango altogether, but the no-expense-spared Mercedes-Benz hire car they procured somewhere outside Brisbane sputtered and died on a minor road halfway between Mango and Nowhere. The map they found in the glove box seemed to have missed all the by-roads, and they took three wrong-turnings before finally ending up here. In the pub. Where the town - including its three-limbed motelier - comes together for its customary dose of communal numbness.

Mr and Mrs Keiner strode to the nearest tables, demanding - in the nicest possible way - to know where they were going to stay, but whether out of kindness to me or plain Northern perversity, the occupants feigned ignorance. In the end it was Bosie Hackendorf, smelling money, who welcomed the newcomers, leaving her insensible husband snoring at their table.

"Thank goodness that *dreadful* man has finally stopped," she said, by way of a conversation-starter, pointing a little unsteadily at Mr Waterman, who was now slumped over the bar, having stalled at decimal place number 37. "All those numbers, like, like ..." The simile eluded her.

Mrs Keiner smiled politely, taking a seat midway along the bar. Mr Keiner, sensing opportunity, beamed at her:

"Yes, yes, yes. It all reminds me of that gallery opening we attended last March," he said, extravagantly waving a hand that seemed to be searching for a Cuban cigar. "You remember, don't you dear? When Mrs Anspruch got a little tipsy and splattered *Chateau Dilettante* all over that new Pollock, you remember the one? Actually improved it, someone said, don't you remember?" he guffawed.

"Are you a painter, then?" Bosie inquired. "I knew a man who painted portraits, once, such an *interesting* man." Her unintentional parody of Iris was perfect.

"Oh, my goodness me, no!" Mrs Keiner replied, laughing. "Oh no no. My husband is an art *dealer*. He makes his living out of other people's talent," she confided. I wonder, that smirk couldn't have been a touch nasty, could it?"

Since emerging green from a well-financed Sydney art school, Mr Keiner quickly learned that there was less work and considerably more money in art dealership than in its actual production. He was quite successful and his lack of artistic refinement proved only a minor handicap; he was always attracted by the Pro Harts and Ken Dones rather than a potential Whiteley or Gleeson, a talent which quickly established him as a champion of the art 'enthusiast,' and one of which he was immensely proud. The real connoisseurs took their millions elsewhere. In his early years, Mr Keiner also learned the most important word in the English language: 'Investment' and, equipped with this knowledge, managed to scrape together enough cash to sufficiently impress the future Mrs Keiner.

"Oh a *dealer*?" Bosie breathed. "Well, how fascinating. How absolutely fascinating. And where did you say you were from?"

"We didn't," Mrs Keiner said, unkindly. She knew Bosie was being observed and appraised like any *objet d'art* found in any of the great (and, certainly, the lesser) galleries. "But we are from the South, up here on *holiday*." A significant look at her husband.

Mr Waterman suddenly took up where he left off - "5, 8, 2, 0, shhhev ..." and trailed off again into an alcohol-induced stupor.

"You must tell me all about it," Bosie insisted, poised to catch the social-confetti he was surely about to scatter.

Mr Keiner was never one to be unduly modest about his high-flying career.

Mrs Keiner glanced in my direction. "My, my, what a character!" I could almost hear her thinking. She must have noticed the leg. Funny how a phoney limb can contain so much personality; you'd think *it* was doing the talking the way people stare-without-staring sometimes. Perhaps that's what persuaded her to stay, or maybe it was the walk back through the steaming mist that shrouded hibiscus and pink bougainvillea in ethereal loveliness. At any rate, they checked in at the motel,

"At least for a few days."

Once they had the car back, the Keiners discussed the possibilities of sight-seeing. If you head east from here, there's a windy road that meanders around, through and over a good deal of dreary cultivated land. Then out of nowhere it tops a little rise, and spread out before you is this completely isolated patch of rainforest

that's grown up around a tiny thread of a creek, a veritable oasis of kite-palms and white bat plants, with bright yellow, orange and purple orchids peeping out of deep pockets of shadow. The chorus just at dusk as the rosellas and kingfishers turn in for the night far surpasses anything a mere human ensemble could produce - but the Keiners never asked. Bosie had suggested the *objet juste* might be found in the little craft shop down the main street - although on her tongue the borrowed phrase sounded more like some bizarre brand of pineapple juice - and Mrs Keiner was inclined to agree. However, Mr Keiner, in search of artistic plunder, yearned to search further afield, and so the next night, the three of us seemed inexorably drawn once again to the pub, like unwary insects to a Venus fly-trap.

Bo was there, with a few of the family, drinking and smoking something that was clearly inducing vacant-eyed inertia. There were more stranger-faces, I noted, in my customary sweep of the tap-room, more lively conversation crackling around the room. The darts were flying like a flock of frenzied flamingos, but whether they were hitting the target or not was another matter.

Mr and Mrs Keiner sat at the bar together. Draining his second Scotch, Mr Keiner swivelled his used-car salesman smile onto a man seated a little further down the bar and started making inquiries about exhibitions and galleries and resident artists.

"Artists? Well, let's see now ... there's Georgy Whatsit out yonder," the stranger replied, sniggering.

Mr Keiner had another Scotch. Mrs Keiner wearily suggested it was time for them to go, but her husband was inclined to keep his nose in the trough a little longer.

"The trouble with women's they're always out to ruin ever'one's fun." He stared around the bar, eyes unfocused, stoically downing another stinger. "Now, paintings're a much better inves'ment. These women, they dep, depr, de - lose value, an' y'can't even sell 'em! Hey! Anyone want t'buy my wife? I'm open to an offer for this gem o'creation." Spasmodic laughter and merrily drunken banter from the dart players,

"How much, mate?"

"She in good nick?"

Mrs Keiner had heard this before. Very slowly, very deliberately, slightly unsteadily, she removed the ring with its ostrich-egg jewel from her ring-finger and placed it in her handbag. Mr Keiner took no notice. Then, even more unsteadily she tottered over to the corner and held her hand out imperiously to a long-haired young man draped with enough beads and charms to be officially classified as a

Christmas tree. Bo gaped at her. A bitter smile of triumph played about her slightly smudged red lips as she made for the door, propelling a slightly stoned, somewhat bemused hippie before her, but she lost her balance and stumbled to her knees, arms flailing like a fly caught in a slick of honey. She wobbled to her feet again, gazed purposefully at Bo and placed a hand on his arm. "Sold," she announced quietly.

## Reflective commentary

This story would come after 'Ladies Need Only Apply' in the anthology, so that Bosie and Brain Hackendorf and Mr and Mrs Waterman would have already been introduced in 'Petals from Blown Roses', and the two stories concerning these characters would be separated. The title comes from Robert Browning's famous poem 'My Last Duchess', connecting Mr and Mrs Keiner in this story to the Duke and Duchess in the poem. The names of the central characters, Mr and Mrs Keiner, come from the German word for 'nothing', implying, as Levenson frequently does, that their individuality is less important than the set of people they represent: middle-aged, middle-class married couples. Levenson/Astley also uses foreign words and phrases within the text, like those in this story: *soûl comme un cochon*, a French phrase literally translated as 'drunk like a pig'; *faux* (false) pearls; the *objet juste* and *objet d'art* (art object). I tried to pick up on the central theme in the anthology, that of searching for something either unattainable or not worth aiming for: in this story, the Keiners are hunting for their lost passion, a search which proves futile.

Levenson's voice is very ironic and fond of exposing other characters' weaknesses, so I used him as the narrator to expose the Keiners' baseless pretensions. Through Levenson, Mr Keiner's mediocrity as an art expert is revealed, as well as the lack of taste of the art-buying middle classes - the enthusiasts - which could cause him to be successful in spite of this mediocrity. Mrs Keiner is like Mrs Waterman in that she is trapped in marriage to a man who has no time for her; unlike Mrs Waterman, she has pretensions of sophistication but lacks the natural class of Mrs Waterman.

Levenson also reveals some more of his own extreme self-consciousness in immediately concluding that Mrs Keiner noticed his leg (or lack thereof). He mocks himself as a means of self-defence, trying to justify his own sense of failure, implying that people only find him interesting because of his missing leg. Bosie reveals her lack of intelligence through her choice of language: the repetition of 'dreadful'; borrowing the phrase *objet juste* from Mrs Waterman; and her inability to come up with a simile for Mr Waterman's droning.

The principal ideas this story aims to explore are the pretensions of the middle classes (which Astley also explores); the marginalisation of women, particularly those like Mrs Waterman and Mrs Keiner, as revealed in 'Petals from Blown Roses' and 'Ladies Need Only Apply'; and Astley's dislike of 'developers' and foreigners, especially southerners. Middle-class pretension is shown through the Keiners' attempts to appear classy and sophisticated, and oppression of women is highlighted by Mr Keiner's treatment of his wife - sleeping around and treating all women as objects. Mr Keiner is one of Astley's developers, more interested in making a profit than in the natural beauty of the landscape as Levenson/Astley sees it; Levenson is critical of and exasperated with those who

are too wrapped up in themselves to appreciate it. By implication, southerners - like the Keiners - are predisposed to have little connection to the landscape.

Links to other stories in the anthology, as Astley includes throughout, show each is not isolated; they are all part of the one story, and this feature is continued in 'Frà Pandolf, Mules and Other Humdrummery'. Examples include Leverson's comment about Bosie parodying Iris, the reference to Georgy and Mr Waterman's cryptic crossword clue ('terror to capacity; awful', meaning 'dreadful').

I employed intertextuality, as Astley does, alluding not only to Browning but also to Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* through Mr Keiner's 'auctioning' of his wife. I linked the characters to the landscape - like Hardy - implying that, although no money changes hands, Mr Keiner has sold out on his wife. The slowness of the darts in the opening scene corresponds to the sluggishness of the bar's patrons, and later their speed indicates increased animation; the Keiners being lost in the storm, and emerging out of it in the middle of their argument, reflects their confusion and lack of real direction.



## Assessor comments

- The student has established a highly convincing relationship between the text and the response.
- The creation of character – the pretentious Keiners, and their encounter with the equally pretentious Bosie Hackendorf – shows a comprehensive understanding of Astley’s techniques of characterisation.
- Similarly, the isolated setting and the tropical downpour show the student’s awareness of Astley’s condemnation of ‘Southern’ drop-outs, adventurers and failures – and the vengeance wreaked by the forces of nature on these pretentious or self-deluding interlopers.
- Tone is particularly well handled, with the cynical and self-deprecating narrative voice of Leverson adding wry humour to the response: this is highly characteristic of Astley’s style.
- Other elements of style – literary allusions, references to grammatical features and incorporation of foreign words and phrases – are also used to good effect, enhancing the sophisticated humour of the piece.
- In general, the response shows the student has performed a very close and perceptive reading of the text.
- The addition to the text is seamless: the story is appropriately inserted at a point where existing characters have been introduced.
- The response illuminates the original text, further developing Astley’s condemnation of cultural pretensions (through the characters of Georgy, Iris and Bosie).
- An awareness of narrative structure is demonstrated through passing references to Georgy, Iris and Bo; these subtly reinforce connections between apparently disconnected stories, as in the original text.
- The student’s allusion to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is very effective in darkening the mood. Astley also uses this technique in several of her stories (‘A Northern Belle’, ‘The Curate Breaker’ and ‘Ladies Need Only Apply’)

to suggest something tragic in the lives of women, which is intensified through their exposure to the uncompromising tropical landscape.

- The reflective commentary shows a detailed insight into the process of producing a creative response. The student clearly identifies and skilfully reproduces pertinent aspects of character, and carefully explains how elements of style, narrative structure, setting and tone are used to illuminate the original text.
- This is a thorough and perceptive analysis of the features of the original text. The creative response and reflective commentary would score in the A+ range (90–100%).