Transition and change

“*It is a play about growing up and growing old and failing to grow up*”

*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* depicts a group of people in a period of immense transition. It is the seventeenth summer that three of them have spent together, and from the outset things are different. Nancy has been replaced in the group by Pearl, who casts a questioning and often critical eye over their arrangement. However, the changes prove to be deeper and more significant than this, as each of the characters comes to realize over the course of the play.

**How is this represented in the play?**
- Males go from big, strong and masculine men to weak and vulnerable figures. For example, Roo’s admission to walking out of the group not because of health problems, but because of realising that he isn’t good enough.
- Barney admitting that he isn’t a ladies man, and also having to get used to not having Nancy around, and having to adjust to having Pearl in the house.
- Bubba starts off as a quiet girl, just watching the older people, but by the end of it her attitude changes as she expresses her own feelings more freely.

**How does this link to the idea of distinctive voice?**
- Throughout the play the distinctive voices of the characters show transition and change. “They remind me of, she says, two eagles flying down out of the sun and coming south every year for the mating season.” This offends Olive because Pearl doesn’t take it seriously.

**How does this theme contribute to the conflict in the play?**
- Roo lied about hurting his back and he had no money and had to work throughout the layoff season, and this was a major cause of conflict in the relationships.
- Nancy went off and got married, leaving Olive to find a replacement in Pearl.

**How do each of the characters respond to, or fight against this theme?**
- Transition and change are key themes in *Summer of The Seventeenth Doll*. Roo starts a transition from cane-cutting to painting. When he speaks to Dowd, Dowd points out that, “Y’look like you been paintin’ the town.” This makes Roo feel defensive as he knows he can’t handle the physical work at the same rate as the younger character.
Generational conflict in the 1950s

The Doll depicts three generations, and the interactions and points of conflict between these generations.

Emma represents the older generation in the play, but her status is far from straightforward. At times she offers advice to the central characters, and she provides a wisdom and perspective that comes from her age. But frequently she is instead the butt of jokes, and she often lacks the authority that she might be expected to have over Olive and her friends. While she owns the house in which the action of the play takes place, it is Olive who runs the house.

Significant too, is the conflict between Olive, Pearl, Barney and Roo, and the younger generation, represented by Bubba and Dowd, but also indirectly by the absent Vera, Pearl’s daughter. The Doll deals with the transfer of power to this younger generation. At the end of the play, Dowd is set to become the head ganger, taking over Roo’s role, while Bubba steps into Olive and Nancy’s shoes, going off to meet Dowd but insisting that this time it will be different.

How is this represented in the play?
- There is a clear contrast between Emma and the younger generation. This is most evident before and during the New Years Eve party in Act II. Barney and Roo are fighting and Emma simply says, “Quiet … leave him alone … cut it out.” Following this, the room is silent, hence enforcing her authority. During the party Emma gets mad when things don’t go right “… muckin about and you don’t care if you get it right or not.” This quote shows her aging need for things to stay as they were. The Doll addresses generational conflict, easily seen between Emma and the other characters.

How does this link to the idea of distinctive voice?
- The older they are, the less power they have over the younger characters. For example: Olive, Pearl, Barney and Roo often don’t listen to Emma and what she has to say.
- In the 1950s the men were expected to go out and work while the women were expected to stay home and undertake household jobs. However, in the play Olive and Pearl go out and work and the men stay home and do nothing during the layoff season.
- Emma: “Better take your coat with you, Olly. It looks like rain.” Olive: “Weather like this? You’re mad!” Emma: “Alright then, don’t be told.” This dialogue supports the idea of the younger generation not listening and not caring what the older generation has to say.

How does this theme contribute to the conflict in the play?
- Conflict in the play occurs due to the characters being in different generational and maturity stages. They treat Katherine as a child by calling her Bubba instead of her real name, making her seem inferior.

How do each of the characters respond to, or fight against this theme?
- Roo doesn’t want to let go of what he had, in terms of work and strength.
- Everyone still looks up to Emma as the matriarch of the house.
- Near the end of the play, Emma is not really respected by Olive, although when Olive collapses at the end, she is supported by her mother just as though she is a child.
City and country in the 1950s

One of the many changes evident in Australia during the 1950s was the continuing shift from rural to urban industry, with urbanization ever increasing. “What does the „average Australian” look like?...

In that sense, Barney and Roo are representative of an older, more traditional image of Australia, one that was rapidly diminishing.

How is this represented in the play?
- The use of slang throughout the play.
- Occupations of the main characters are defined by city and country lifestyles.
- The characters are very representational of bush and city Australians of the 1950s.

How does this link to the idea of distinctive voice?
- Roo and Barney are typical Australian men. They work on the land and have strong bonds based on mateship and masculine personalities. They split their time between the ego-free city and the country in an untraditional way as they are not married or providing for a family. “Coupla sugarcane cutters from the tropics, not two professors from the university,” is how they are described in the play. This quote shows not only a contrast between the changing city and country occupations, but also conveys a typical Australian voice. Roo and Barney are portrayed quite similarly, however towards the end of the play Barney is seen as more authoritative, “Roo, C’mon boy.” Is used to reduce Roo to less than a man, thus corrupting his manly persona that portrays his unique voice.

How does this theme contribute to the conflict in the play?
- Their traditional life is going to be changed quite rapidly because Roo is going to work to get the money he didn’t earn harvesting sugar cane.
- Throughout the play, there are several different conflicts between several different characters. These conflicts reveal the slowly diminishing masculinity of the males and the gradual empowering of the females in the play. For example the fight between Barney and Roo, and Roo admitting that he walked out on his group not because of health problems, but because he isn’t good enough. This represents the loss of masculinity.

How do each of the characters respond to, or fight against this theme?
- During the 1950s men and women were quite stereotypical. The characters in the play fight against stereotypes, and refuse to fall into normal life expectations. They want things to stay the same, due to the fact that Roo and Barney don’t want to be seen as weak, and Olive doesn’t want to be subjected to a simple life of marriage as a housewife.
Ideals, Dreams and Reality

All of the characters in the play have dreams that they hang on to as they believe these dreams to be the ideal life. When reality creeps in, they struggle with adjusting to their new realities. The way the characters respond to these changes is an important comment on the context of Australia in the 1950s.

How is this represented in the play?
- The characters in the play show this theme by clinging on to the past and not being ready to adjust to change and the idea of settling down, “I want to marry you, Ol.” This presents change which shocks and upsets Olive as she wants everything to stay the same, “You can’t get out of it like that – I won’t let you.”

How does this link to the idea of distinctive voice?
- Olive wants everything to stay the same and when things change she doesn’t cope at all. This shows that she still sees herself in a childish way as she has only ever lived with her mum. “You think I’ll let it all end up in marriage – every day – a paint factory – you think I’ll marry you?
- Bubba wants Olive and Roo’s life for herself, even though it fell apart, “I’ll have what you had – the real part of it – but I’ll have it differently. Some way I can have it safe and know that it’s going to last.”

How does this theme contribute to the conflict in the play?
- Roo and Barney have pre-existing ideals about living life working on the land as cane cutters. This becomes compromised when Roo ‘injures’ himself and walks out on the job. The audience later discovers that this is a lie, and that Roo just couldn’t keep up with the physical demands of the job. “No strain or nothin’, and did a better job than me because he’s a better man than I am.” Shows his idea that his inability to perform is excruciating. This quote closes the fight between Roo and Barney. This is one of the most notable conflicts in the play as Barney and Roo have such a deep mateship.

How do each of the characters respond to, or fight against this theme?
- Olive was arguing with Roo because he wanted to go off and do a painting job to earn money for them, but she sees it as breaking of tradition.
- During the fight between Roo and Barney, the 17th doll is broken and this represents the breaking of their 17 year tradition.
- Near the end of the play, Emma breaks the ideals of the characters when she turns to Roo and tells him to “clear out and never come back. The lay offs in this house are finished – for all of you.” This shows Emma fighting against the ideals within the play as she orders the breaking of traditions.