

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

IDEALS, DREAMS VERSUS REALITY IN THE PLAY
"SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEENTH DOLL" BY RAY LAWLER: AN ANALYSIS

A.R. JYOTHI PRIYA

Research Scholar, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad



A.R. JYOTHI PRIYA

ABSTRACT

The play, "*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*" by Ray Lawler is set in Australia and talks about times in the 1950s. In the play, one sees that, Lawler gives audiences rich insights into the societal structure, code of conduct etc typical of Australian life set in that period of time. The play talks about a group of ordinary people who are struggling to stay young as do not acknowledge the reality that they are aging. In their desperate bid to escape the inevitability of the consequences of change, the characters inflict hurt upon themselves and one another evoking pity and compassion in the audiences. Through the characters Lawler explores issues about Australian masculinity, mateship and the so called social "norms". Lawler sends a message to his audiences through his play about the social problems people faced in their day to day lives and how he sees that there is a need for change. He challenges readers to examine and question the ideals, values and attitudes, which form their own "world" by exposing the limitations of lives based on the pursuit of unrealistic aspirations. This paper discusses the theme of 'ideals, dreams versus reality', which shows how each character in the play cherishes a dream and respects an ideal, while in reality, it turns out to be something different and portrays how these expectations are up to the mark or lay shattered at the end.

Keywords: Australia, masculinity, mateship, norms, Ideals, Dreams, Reality, Ray Lawler

©KY PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

While reading the play, one can perceive that the play is relatively simple in structure but complex in plot. The four main characters in the play are Roo, Barney, Olive and Pearl. Roo and Barney live with two bar maids, Olive and Nancy. The play is set in the seventeenth year of this arrangement. Nancy has married and been replaced by the sceptical Pearl. Olive fights against the change, desperate to maintain her ideal of 'the layoff'.

In the play one sees that each character has a dream. Roo's dream is the dream of being at the top of everything that requires physical strength and hard work. He likes and takes pride in being looked

up to for what he is capable of. Yet, in the play, he is afraid of getting old as that would mean he would have to compromise his job and also his personal relationship with Olive would be disturbed. Therefore, in this process, he loses confidence in his own abilities and in himself. Next, the character Olive also has her own ideals and dreams. She is the dreamiest character of the lot. Olive's dream is of the lay-off season and all its meaning –That is, it is a time for her where she can be loved by all around and have fun with people she loves, but without the inconvenience of conventional marriage (although it is in many ways a permanent attachment) or worries of having to support a family – That is, it is purely for

the enjoyment of all is what Olive hopes for. Yet, like Roo she too has a different angle. She realizes that Roo is not the 'Aussie hero' that she thought him to be, the reality being he is getting old and losing his strength to become a lowly worker in a paint factory as well as personally wanting to betray her lay-off ideals by settling down to marry her. Here, the readers see that a lot of emphasis is placed on superficial things such as age, beauty, youth etc rather than concentrating on the larger issues of their lives. On the other hand, for the character Barney it is his idolizing of Roo at the top of everything. He believes in mateship, but both Roo and Barney break this code according to their convenience. When Barney realizes the reality, it is a great shock to him, although he does try to prove his realisations wrong by getting 'back on the top' with Dowd and the boys. Pearl, a character in the play, who is an outsider is a dreamer too although she is very realistic in her approach to life and knows what she wants in life. She wants to be seen as being respectable (remember her 'good black' dress), or perhaps to find someone to marry and settle down with. She realises fairly early that she will not find this in Barney, but at the end she leaves the house with some regret. She is more realistic in her approach than the other characters.

EXPECTATIONS VERSUS REALITY:

In the play, Olive is a dreamer and has a firm ideal and idea about the lay-off and how it should proceed. It is a ritual that is followed every year. Through her the readers come to know about the men characters better. The statement, "*...the regulars'd stand aside to let 'em through, just as if they wasa coupla kings.*" helps us to see into Olive's perception of the lay-off and how it has affected her. She trusts the men and puts them on a pedestal in her mind. On the other hand, Roo and Barney are not the gentlemen that Olive believes in. They come with their own issues and problems both in relation to each other and with Olive. The men characters too face problems when it comes to being loyal as their male pride prevents them from having a smooth relationship. Also, the seventeenth doll in the play comes to represent the happiness or destruction of dreams and expectations in the play as the characters come to reality.

In the play, the readers begin to see the futility of Olive's dreams when she so protectively talks about the dolls. This gives a picture that perhaps she is insecure in her mind. The dolls represent not only her dream but are a reminder throughout the working season that there is someone who loves her. She holds a childish sense of an ideal world where she expects all others to understand how she feels and wants them to feel the same way as she does. She realizes that Roo has a side to him that he is caring and considerate and that she can depend on him which becomes a symbol of her self-delusion as the doll is presented to her. On the other hand, Roo is indifferent towards the sentiment for the dolls which can be seen as a typical male reaction to sentimentality or as the prelude to disappointment for Olive, as she realizes he doesn't share the same dream as she does.

REALIZATION OF TRUTH:

Every story has its destiny and so does it apply to every character's life in the play. The characters come to realize the truth about themselves later in the second act of the play. This leads to a great purgation of emotions and lots of self reflection. One sees, for example, how each individual feels about his own dreams. Roo realizes that his romantic dream of being a cane cutter is far away from the reality as he is only a holiday laborer something that he doesn't enjoy being. He refuses to go grape picking with Barney when he insists. However, Roo is also caring and concerned towards Olive for her situation and tries to make the best out of what he could do. On the other hand, Olive lives in her own dream world. She loses the spirit of her enchanting dream of what she thought could be a wonderful season. The fact that she bursts into tears at the end of Scene One is a reflection that she has realised that her dream life is really only an illusion and she cannot cope with this very well as we later see her in the end. Barney and Roo's relationship is also affected due to the break of unwritten code of mateship which they strongly believe and abide by. Barney's focus is entirely selfish and he doesn't care what really happens to the other characters. Therefore, the lay presents a gloomy picture of the characters' relationships. Pearl is also seen to be very selfish in that she doesn't want to understand

what this season meant to all the characters. In other words, she is indifferent and insensitive about what the others need and how important it is for them. However, the good thing is that she doesn't actually cause Olive's dream to be shattered. It is how the characters react to the realism that causes the scene to break down. She has brought to their attention that the whole layoff was just an illusion that the other characters had built up for themselves.

Thus, right from the beginning, the reader sees that all the characters have been holding on to their various illusions until it breaks down. The most symbolic element of the play is the broken vase which represents the broken structure of the characters' illusions while presenting the reality. Also, we see that each character is influenced by the others with the opinions or the prejudices they have or hold with or against each other. For instance, Emma says that Olive is a fool for believing so deeply in her dream and for letting it affect her so much. Bubba Ryan, another character also is a dreamer and is convinced the dream will work for her and Dowd. Roo tries to explain his reality to Olive who refuses to accept it. While he attempts to persuade Olive about the reality of the situation and what future he plans for them, Olive refuses to accept him. She doesn't compromise at all even slightly. She chooses not to live with him and to remember the dream as it was. We can see as she leaves that she is the most tragic of all the characters as she is broken in spirit by something that meant so much to her; more to her than to any other character. This assertion is supported when audiences learn Olive held the seventeenth doll "almost as if it were a baby". This is evident when Emma comments to Roo, *"middle of the night Olive sat here on the floor, hugging this and howling. A grown-up woman, howling over a silly kewpie doll. That's Olive for yer."* Barney and Roo also try to settle matters but it becomes something that they cannot fix and it would forever remain disturbed. The deliberate breaking of the seventeenth doll symbolises the final shattering of the dream for everyone involved.

Hence in the play, Pearl and Olive are contrasted with the different values and ideals each of them represent by which Lawler sends a message

to the audiences to interpret and learn from them. On the whole, Olive's character is labeled unconventional in society and doesn't usually fit into society's expectation of her. She is a matured woman and knows who she is, what she is supposed to do and likes to follow her duty as a mother to look after her child and this, she tries to explain it to Olive who is quite in contrast with her. Pearl is a character much more realistic in her approach in life recognizing the need for change and because of this the readers who may see Pearl as somewhat of an "indomitable moralist" still acknowledge the value there is in accepting the realities of life and taking responsibility. Contrastingly, Olive's character is very much unlike Pearl and that she has unrealistic expectations from Roo in her personal relationship with him. Instead of analyzing whether what she expects can be truly given to her, she indulges in her own dreams of what could be. She fails to exchange her immaturity for responsibility and even Roo recognizes telling her thus: *"know, a man's a fool to treat you as a woman. You're nothin but a little girl about twelve years old"*. It is not surprising when Olive tries to blame the failure of the lay off on Pearl who says: *"You're blaming me, aren't you? Because I was here instead of Nancy."* Here, it is quite evident what a difficult situation is that of Olive's who fails to understand her own self.

Though the ideals that Olive's character holds are not particularly realistic, yet at the same time her ideals represent the same silly hopes, dreams and aspiration people participate at times in life. Therefore, the readers feel pity for her desire to build an ideal "world". At the same time the readers recognize and appreciate strong characters like Olive who choose alternative lifestyles and do not conform to the gender roles accepted by society. Lawler uses the character of Olive to confront viewers with the consequences of basing one's life around idealistic dreams and disregarding values that society expects although he does not condemn non-conformity. Lawler proposes a balanced approach that is so much essential for life and happiness. Contrastingly, Lawler uses Pearl as a representation of the respectable voice in society. He proposes audiences to stick to reality while also not being selfish. The characters in the play and the

values they hold and represent form the core of the play. Thus the ideas in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* are conveyed through the forms and conventions commonly used in realism. Lawler brings about the theme of change to the Australian stage and he uses realism to express key themes and ideas. Lawler wanted to create the illusion of real people dealing with real problems. He wanted a naturalistic depiction of Australian characters and their environment.

CONCLUSION

The "*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*" is much more than just a play. It is not just a representation of how Lawler perceived the Australian lifestyle but it challenges concepts such as the battle between dreams and reality, childishness and maturity, male and female differences. Lawler's portrayal illustrates how ordinary people hurt themselves and one another because of Man's reluctance for change in general. Through the play audiences are challenged to question and evaluate unrealistic ideals, values and beliefs in life that could affect one's happiness for lifetime.

REFERENCES

Lawler, R., *Summer of the seventeenth doll*.
Strawberry Hills, N.S.W., Australia:
Currency Press.

All quotations are taken from this text.