Summer of the Seventeenth Doll won first prize in the Australian Playwrights' Advisory Board competition for 1955. This brought it to the attention of the newly formed Elizabethan Theatre Trust, who mounted a professional production which, after a successful Australian tour, went on to attract audiences and win prizes in Britain. British approval being confidently interpreted as proof of Australian cultural maturity, this in turn cemented the play's unique place in Australian theatre history as a milestone and a coming-of-age and other strangely conflicting metaphors of monument and transformation. And there is general agreement among literary critics and historians that the Playwrights' Advisory Board prize is where it all began.

What most people don't know is that Summer of the Seventeenth Doll was not the only winner of that 1955 first prize. It was a joint winner with a play by Oriel Gray called The Torrents, which the Playwrights' Advisory Board obviously thought was at least as good a play as the Doll, and which is largely to do with social and economic justice for women; perhaps predictably, it sank without trace. Until it appeared in Dale Spender's Penguin Anthology of Australian Women's Writing in 1988, The Torrents had never been published or, as far as I can ascertain, performed.

While I was trying to think of a way to tell this story, to talk about what its significance might be, a novel I happened to be reading supplied me serendipitously with the following paragraph:

The news they imparted was good, wholly positive, in fact: the lump removed from my mother's side this morning was not, as they feared, the pulpy sponge of cancer but a compacted little bundle of bone and hair, which, they told me, was a fossilized fetus, my mother's twin sibling who somehow, in the months before her own birth, became absorbed into her body. . .She's carried her lump all these years, unknowing, a brother or sister, shrunk down to walnut size and keeping itself quiet.
Was the fossilisation of *The Torrents* some kind of in utero accident, or was there some less biological and more sinister form of gender specificity at work? Of course it is a good thing that *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* was given its chance, but would it not have been an even better thing if both of the twins had survived? In the literary climate of the 1950s, girl babies were at best disconcerting and at worst left out on the hillside, and all in the name, then as now, of literary excellence—which, now as then, is simply another name for the tastes and values of the dominant culture:

A feminist approach... means taking nothing for granted because the things we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture and that is not the point of view of women.  

Very few commentaries on the *Doll* have even mentioned the possibility of a feminist reading. There were a couple of paragraphs by Anne Summers in 1975; there was an informed glance by Imre Salusinszky in 1990, in the context of an argument about the city/bush dichotomy and its ideological uses and implications for both writers and critics. John McCallum’s enlightened critique of “masculinity” as a major aspect of the “bush legend”—while admittedly androcentric, if not phallocentric, by definition—in his 1985 article on the *Doll* is probably the most detailed discussion of the play’s gender agenda that we have.

And that is all we have. For over thirty-five years of critical analysis and commentary enshrining the values of the dominant culture, certain things about this play have been taken for granted—in particular, the notion that Olive’s childlessness invalidates her status both as a woman and as an adult, that it is an outward and visible sign of her having “failed to grow up”, and that the seventeen dolls unproblematically “are” the “children that Olive never had”. These notions are again reinforced in the two later “prequels” *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times*. This essay, however, concerns only the text of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*; it does not assume some extra-textual reality, in which facts about the characters and their history are provided by *Kid Stakes* and *Other Times*, in a way that could limit interpretation of and speculation about the original. I would
argue, in fact, that the two anterior plays are effectually part of
the body of critical response to the first.

In this essay, then, I want to look from some of the points of
view that feminist theory provides at this play and at the history
of its reception. "Taking nothing for granted", as Austin puts it,
about the meanings of the play, I write in the spirit defined by
Catherine Belsey in the opening paragraphs of her essay on
gender identity in Shakespeare:

The problem with the meanings that we learn—and learn to
produce—is that they seem to define and delimit what is
thinkable, imaginable, possible. To fix meaning, to arrest its
process and deny its plurality, is in effect to confine what is
possible to what is. Conversely, to disrupt this fixity is to
glimpse alternative possibilities. A conservative criticism
reads in quest of familiar, obvious, common-sense meanings,
and thus reaffirms what we already know. A radical criti­
cism, however, is concerned to produce readings which
challenge that knowledge by revealing alternative meanings,
disrupting the system of differences which legitimates the
perpetuation of things as they are. The project of such a
criticism is not to replace one authoritative interpretation of
a text with another, but to suggest a plurality of ways in
which texts might be read in the interests of extending the
reach of what is thinkable, imaginable or possible.6

While I wouldn’t go so far as to call this essay “radical criticism”,
I have certainly written it with Catherine Belsey-like aims in
view; I don’t have any one particular line to take, case to argue,
barrow to push or target to destroy—unless you count “the
perpetuation of things as they are” in Australian schoolrooms
where this play is still taught in traditional ways and its gender
messages unwittingly reinforced, which has gone on long enough.

But in order to bounce and skid across a number of points
that feminist theory in its various modes has made it possible to
argue, I do want to offer some arguments that are quite
deliberately both perverse and partial, in both senses of the
word. I will propose a number of fairly wild notions in order to
make the point that such things are, Belsey puts it, “thinkable,
imaginable and possible”: they include the identification of
Barney as an unwitting radical feminist; the suggestion that the
kewpie dolls are not entirely girls; the reading of the stage set as a metaphor for a passive and penetrable female interior; and the suggestion that Olive refuses to marry Roo at the end of the play because she regards husbands as emasculated creatures by definition, and since her own characteristic is sexual desire, marriage to Roo would amount to a form of suicide.

The title *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is habitually shortened to “the Doll”. The abbreviation creates a shift in emphasis, a shift from the name of the season to the name of the object, which shows just where people’s attention has always been focused. The summer is neither here nor there, but the seventeen dolls are universally read as the central symbol of the play, and are almost universally identified as “the children Olive never had”—a notion which sounds like an arcane problem in philosophy but which is naturalised by the unspoken assumption that having children is what women are for. Nobody has mentioned “the children Roo never had”, and nobody has questioned the idea that the seventeen dolls are “meant”—presumably by both Ray Lawler and Roo—to be substitute children. This is not surprising, since Lawler pushes the point several times in the stage directions: once early in the play where the initial description of Olive refers to her very suggestively as “curiously unfinished”, and later when she is specifically described as holding the seventeenth doll “almost as if it were a baby”.

So the really very cruel idea of the kewpie dolls as mock-children is firmly inscribed in the play as well as entrenched in its critical commentary, and while I find it personally disturbing I do not want to argue that this isn’t what the dolls “mean”, not least because such an authoritative and negative assertion would run counter to my aims in trying to open up new ways of reading the play. I want to do two other things: to offer some alternative, or perhaps additional, readings of that central symbol; and, maybe more importantly, to worry for a little while about the unquestioning critical acceptance, over nearly forty years, of the two unspoken assumptions on which this simple reading of the symbol rests. The first of these is the idea that a woman without children is not a complete woman, whatever that may mean. The second is that children are something that a
man gives to a woman, something over which he has both the power of gift and the choice to withhold. Olive says to Roo in Act I:

You know why I like the dolls more than anything else you’ve brought down? . . . the birds and coral and—and butterflies and stuff—all that you got ’coz I wanted to know what it was like up there. But the dolls—they’re something you thought of by yourself. So they’re special! (p.29)

Roo, it seems, has conceived these children all by himself; like the goddess Athena, they have sprung fully armed, or in this case fully dressed, from the head of their father.

Both Lawler in his writing of the play and most critics in their reading of it have been so curiously insistent on the correlation between dolls and babies that I would like to unpack this idea in a general way before moving on to the more specific questions of what sex a kewpie doll is and why. What I would like to suggest is that the whole idea of dolls as substitute children is a male misreading of female culture. It’s a misreading which comes partly out of the masculinist notion that women are relative creatures whose function in society is to provide men with sex, offspring and childcare in that order (little girls, therefore, should own dolls to practise on), and partly out of association between the idea of dolls and the idea of children. The meaning of dolls as such is not that they are substitutes for children; in a way, in fact, they are the opposite. A doll is a thing a child plays with, an object to the child subject, an Other to the child self. And a doll is by no means necessarily a baby Other; look at the Barbie doll, which is a representation of a sexually mature human female and is therefore “older”, as it were, that its owner. And anyone who has ever known a Barbie doll at first or second hand will be aware that they have nothing to do with motherhood and everything to do with the social semiotic significance of clothes—with the relationship, that is, between clothes, identity, and the performance of roles and activities and tasks in the world as a fully functioning, autonomous, grown-up human being.

Elizabeth Jolley’s 1992 essay “Only Connect!” suggests another use that little girls might have for dolls.
Nymphomaniacs and murderers, perplexed housewives, greedy spoiled children, unfaithful husbands and angry maiden aunts inhabited our dolls' houses. Apart from the endless story from one day to the next, endless dialogues, situations and incidents, there was the cleaning. Joan, a cleaning lady with loose pink legs, too large to fit in any bed, sat on a wooden chair all night and later rattled about her dust pan and brush from one room to the next. She began and ended each day with the most vital gossip. She is the forerunner of my character, Weekly, in the novel *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* though I did not realise this until after I had written the novel.8

The young Elizabeth was learning from her dolls, not how to be a mother, but how to be an artist.

The kewpie doll as we know it, neither shop-window mannequin nor loose-legged cleaning lady, features simulated makeup and bouffant skirts. The makeup is usually mostly rouge, a cosmetic whose purpose is to mimic the appearance not only of one's lost youth but also of the improved blood circulation which is one of the signs of sexual arousal (another of these signs is dilated pupils, also a common kewpie doll feature). The skirt is usually pink, glittery, ballerina-like and hoiked up at the back in a manner which exposes the androgynous and pre-pubescent little plastic behind. The kewpie doll, in short, is a rather sinister combination of child, adult, sex toy and female impersonator.

The late Barbara Hanrahan's memorably suggestive description of a sixteen-year-old-couple on their first date at the Royal Adelaide Show, also during the fifties, hints richly at what the meaning of a kewpie doll might be for women, and adds a whole new dimension to the way the doll symbol could function in a reading of Lawler's play:

There were kewpie dolls on sticks. Pink celluloid perfect ladies. Chubby pink faces—dimpled, dented; golden crimped heads, wide eyes with a peek-a-boo stare, dainty rosebud mouth, tinsel glitter. Tinsel dots on the kewpie dolls, zigzag fan of skirt, cocked up crinoline of net and they dangle, hooked to a stick. He bought me a kewpie doll, I must carry the mocking doll lady about and there are
saveloys, hot dogs; sausage swells out from soft white bread—scarlet, orange, gobble me up. Fairy floss melting away to nothing, just a cloying sugar taste on the tongue. ⁹

Here, to be given a kewpie doll by a man is at once to seduce and be seduced in a half-grotesque and half-understood conflation of rituals and metaphors of fertility, hunger, emptiness and lust; it is also, simultaneously, to be presented with an image and pattern of what a woman is supposed to be like. And once a man has given you a kewpie doll, you have to carry it around with you: you are stuck with the heavy burden of desire which is both your own and someone else’s, and stuck also with the even heavier burden of expectations which are exclusively someone else’s. And if that’s what it means to be given a kewpie doll, what does it mean to be given seventeen?

Kewpie dolls, moreover, were originally invented in 1909 by an American woman called Rose O’Neill who designed them to represent little cupids (alternative spelling: “cupie”), and hence, of course, their name: Cupid, whose other name is Eros; Eros, the personification of desire, gendered male. The personification of desire is a little boy; a kewpie doll is a little boy in drag. As a model of a human creature, the kewpie doll covers all four basic permutations of representations, it is both male and female, both adult and child, and it suggests a plurality of sexual meanings and possibilities most of which are right outside the rules that Australia in the 1950s was living by.

So while a patriarchal world view might identify the dolls in the play as symbols of unborn children, and a certain kind of feminist counter-reading might argue that the dolls in their mute and glittering immobility represent a grotesque idea of femininity, there’s a third reading that acknowledges the complexity of the dolls’ sexual suggestiveness. As Imre Salusinszky has spelled out, “One of the reasons for the success of the lay-off ritual, and Olive’s abiding attachment to it, is: good sex” (p.173). The dolls can be read as symbols of renewed mutual desire, of sexuality unconstrained by habit, unsanctioned by marriage, and unconfirmed by the presence of offspring: desire carrying those suggestions of the illicit, the anarchic and the magical which are associated with carnival in both the Bakhtinian and the Luna Park senses of the word. And the breakage and removal of the dolls marks the end, the death, of desire.
This reading has a number of implications, in fact, for the play's one scene of overt physical violence. Much has been made of this climactic point at the end of Act 2, ever since Wal Cherry in his 1956 *Meanjin* review referred to "the fight in the parlour, the vicious smashing of the dolls".\textsuperscript{10} Cherry was reviewing the performance, not the script, and no doubt this felt to the audience like a moment of extreme violence. But according to the text, the fisticuffs take place on the verandah, and such vicious smashing as occurs is mostly directed at Barney; the "fight in the parlour" is a brief recurrent outbreak, and the smashing of the dolls is accidental. The stage directions are as follows:

\[\text{[Barney] seizes the object nearest to his hand. It is the vase containing, among others, the seventeenth doll. This he swings at ROO's head, but the big man rips it from his hands and throws it away into the centre of the room, smashing vase and scattering dolls.}\]

After this only Olive and Bubba move or utter: "The others are unmoving." The only mention of smashed dolls is made by Olive the following morning, explaining to Roo why she's tidied up: "some of the dolls were broken". But for any or all of the three readings of the doll symbol that I've outlined above, this moment of destruction is profoundly significant. The reason that Barney takes a swing at Roo with the vase is that Roo has been taunting him about his sexual failures. And the notion of "sexual failures" itself, of course, objectifies women as a test to be passed or failed—the word "women", in its turn, here a masculinist metonym for (hetero)sexual activity. The doll with all of its symbolic freight (children? femininity? desire?) becomes first a weapon and then a casualty in a macho stoush about virility.

Closely related to this business about dolls and children is another major aspect of the play which has likewise become gospel, both as inscribed in the playtext and as endlessly repeated in production and in the criticism, and that is the issue of Olive's alleged failure to grow up—what Salusinszky calls "a hitherto unknown psychiatric condition" (p.172). Lawler repeatedly suggests, in the stage directions and in the dialogue, that Olive has never really made it past adolescence; and many critics have attacked her for her failure to grow up almost as
savagely as if she were a real person. The main reason for this seems to be the fact that she doesn’t want to have to face the collapse of an arrangement that has been making her very happy for quite a long time.

And that is a profoundly peculiar criterion for immaturity. As far as childishness is concerned there is no word or deed of Olive’s in the play that even comes close to Barney’s big-noting and grandstanding, much less to any of the several tantrums thrown by Roo. And the circumstances of Olive’s life as they are indicated by the play point to an extraordinarily responsible and stable character; her life situation is one that requires of her several versions of maturity that very few wives and mothers of her generation would ever have needed to manifest. For one thing, she has apparently remained faithful to Roo for seventeen years under very difficult circumstances and without the social, financial and emotional security of marriage. For another, she is and has always been financially independent and takes responsibility for her own survival to the last, as we are reminded by John McCallum: “[The] final emotional twist [is] to give the last exit to Roo and Barney (Olive has herself staggered out earlier, apparently, in spite of everything, to go to work).”

Perhaps Olive’s most convincing piece of responsible grown-up behaviour, though it is part of a total silence about sexuality—a silence at the heart of the play—can be revealed by contrasting her with Barney’s various old lovers, who seem to have been popping babies out like peas all across the country for the last twenty years. But unless she is infertile (and if we read the play this way then a radically different interpretation becomes a necessity), Olive, for a working-class Australian girl in the middle decades of this century, appears to have been quite extraordinarily and consistently knowledgeable and responsible about contraception for almost as long as Barney has been fathering children.

The awful irony of this is that it is precisely Olive’s lack of children which is the real reason why both Lawler and his audiences think of her as immature. The creation of the character of Olive is firmly grounded in patriarchal ideology, which in turn is the source of the unspoken assumption that the only real criterion for female adulthood is motherhood. Olive has no children, therefore she cannot yet be grown up: Q.E.D.

While Olive’s non-existent children have been exhaustively
carried on about, Barney’s all-too-real children have been practically ignored. But Barney’s reproductive habits are very interesting for a feminist reading. As with Lady Macbeth, we never find out exactly how many children Barney has; but it’s possible to deduce from various bits of dialogue that there are at least four, all with different mothers. And what this constitutes in effect, if certainly not intentionally on Barney’s part, is a quite active defiance of the patriarchal social structure in which sexuality is regulated and contained inside the social unit of the nuclear family.

Even better, Barney’s two oldest boys are exactly the same age, a fact which disrupts the notion of primogeniture that is one of the cornerstones of patriarchy. And his rejection of the traditional family structure is apparent in his membership of no less than three counter-families: the cane-cutting gang, the lay-off ritual foursome, and his own mob of differently mothered children. “I haven’t got a family,” he remarks at one point, “what I got is kids” (p.45). Barney is a wild card in the patriarchal pack, a sexual anarchist and subversive of whom, unlikely as it seems, a radical feminist could wholly approve.

Barney is also the antithesis of what Pearl calls respectable, which brings me to the question of sexuality and class. Critical commentary on the character of Pearl has tended to concentrate mostly on what I’d call her historical instability; John Sumner’s essay on the staging of the trilogy in 1977 puts it like this:

...we were not prepared for the reception this character received in the theatre of the 70s. This possibly showed, more than anything, how our own society had changed in these twenty-two years.

In the first productions of The Doll, the character of Pearl—the observer—had been received most enthusiastically. She had so often spoken for the audience of the day, especially in her criticism of the lay-offs and of the “indecent” way in which the characters lived. [But by] 1977 Pearl was looked upon by part of her audience as a wowser.11

And by 1985, a normally fairly temperate and detached critic like
John McCallum, not given as a rule to abusing characters in plays, was writing things like “Pearl [is] a carping hypocrite”.

What Pearl is is a triumph of dramatic construction, the embodiment of mediation. Pearl lives on the border, or rather on a number of borders: between working class and middle class; between respectability and licentiousness; between the play’s audience and the rest of the characters. A widowed barmaid with an innocent eighteen-year-old daughter, a good black dress, and no enduring objections to falling into bed with Barney, she is a character whose sexual status, like her social status, is constructed as an unstable proposition with a deceptive surface. She so obviously has a structural function in the plot and on the stage that her one moment as a real character in her own right has gone almost ignored.

Yet for a feminist reading it’s one of the most interesting moments in the play. It reveals in Pearl a bottomless depth of self-loathing and self-mistrust about her own sexual behaviour and her own competence as a mother, and it also reveals how closely the issue of class identification is linked with sexual freedom. Near the end of Act II Barney tries to persuade Pearl to bring her daughter Vera to the races, as a date for Johnnie Dowd:

PEARL: [alarmed] Vera? To the races? . . . Oh, I couldn’t, she’s only eighteen.
BARNEY: Didn’t you ever go to the races when you were eighteen?
PEARL: That’s different. I didn’t have a chance from the beginning. I’m looking after Vera—she’s not being brought up the way I was. . . I won’t have her goin’ any place she’s likely to get into bad company.
BARNEY: [to DOWD, marvelling] Will yer listen to that? Bad company! [To PEARL] I’m askin’ her to go out with you—her own mother! You’ll be there all the time. What’s the matter, don’t yer trust yourself to look after her? (p.64)

Pearl is reduced to tears by this conversation and retreats upstairs; we don’t see her till next morning, when she talks briefly about it to Barney, who is still exasperated. “She was asked to the races,” he says. “One afternoon.”
“Yeah,” says Pearl, “and I know what sort of runnin’ goes on! I got caught up with it myself round her age, and I’ve ended up here with you. Well, it’s not going to happen to my daughter. She’s going to have the kind of respectability that doesn’t need a black dress to show it” (p.79).

The unspoken assumptions lurking in this conversation surface again a little further on in the play, in the scene where Roo fails to talk Bubba out of going looking for Johnnie Dowd. So he advises her to lie to him on the phone, although of course he doesn’t put it like that: “Don’t make yourself cheap,” he instructs her. “Tell him you’re ringing because you can’t get any sense out of Barney” (p.87). In the case of both Pearl and Bubba—the two women of different generations who share the opening scene of the play, in which what they are doing is waiting for the arrival of men—in both these cases the message is clear: for women, the expression of sexual desire and the exercise of sexual freedom will not be worth the price that, sooner or later, will have to be paid. Conversely, Pearl at least appears to believe that sexual ignorance is something a woman can trade in for a measure of upward mobility. The message that both Roo and Pearl—and, it seems, Lawler—are conveying to Bubba and beyond her the world at large is “Keep your mouth shut and your legs crossed, and hold out for marriage; otherwise you’ll end up like Olive.”

Elizabeth Webby makes stagecraft the focus of her 1990 essay on the play. “One of the constraints of theatrical naturalism,” she says,

is that plays working within the conventions of this genre have to be set inside. . . one can create an illusion of real life relatively easily with interior sets, but it is virtually impossible to make exterior sets look ‘real’.¹²

This necessary focus on interiors, almost always domestic, has very interesting implications for the three-way relationship between gender, genre and space. Beatriz Colomina, an assistant professor of architecture at Princeton, makes the bold claim that “the politics of space are always sexual”; I would add that the
poetics of space are always gendered, and want to consider Lawler's very detailed and oddly beautiful description of what the stage should look like with these ideas in mind.13 “The setting,” he instructs at the beginning,

is a composite study of a ground-floor front room, with adjacent hallway, staircase, and a passage leading to the kitchen, held between a front and a back verandah. . .the front verandah, with a section of overgrown, palmy garden before it, should be visible. . .both verandahs are profusely decorated with green shrubbery and ferns. (p.4)

He goes on to describe the detail of the front room, with its tropical birds and butterflies on the mantelpiece and its sixteen kewpie dolls deployed around the walls, and concludes with the instruction that “the entire effect should be a glowing interior luminosity protected from the drabness outside by a light-filtered, shifting curtain of greenery”.

Lawler has gone to a great deal of trouble here to establish the importance not only of the inside/outside dichotomy but also of the delicate, porous, penetrable barrier of leaves and light that separates the one from the other. On a metaphorical level this set is a feminine space, enclosed, immobile, the domestic interior, the private sphere. And on a literal level it is a house in which women are waiting for men to arrive with their suitcases from somewhere else, to move across the liminal and magical green space of the verandah from the outside to the inside, and come to rest in the pink interior.

Cut to feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, musing on the characteristics of Hollywood melodrama:

The melodrama takes place in the literal and psychological space of home and family, turning the narrative space inward, lifting the roof off the. . .home. . .opening its domestic space into a complex terrain of social and sexual significance, the opposition, for instance, between upstairs/private and downstairs/public space, the connotations of stairs, bedroom, kitchen. And this “interior” also contains within it “interiority”, the psychic spaces of desire and anxiety, and the private scenarios of feelings, a female sphere of emotion within the female sphere of domesticity.
. . . the characters' difficulty in articulating or externalising their emotions overflows into the expressive nature of the mise-en-scene. Thus in the melodrama, the home is the container of narrative events. . . But its emotional reverberations and its gender specificity are derived from and defined in opposition to a concept of masculine space: an outside, the sphere of adventure, movement, and cathartic action in opposition to emotion, immobility, enclosed space, and confinement.14

Item for item and idea for idea, this fits what is happening in the Doll. The narrative events of the play are for the most part interior and emotional ones. The set is, visibly, a repository of either desire or anxiety or more usually both, in every scene of the play. The boys do indeed arrive from outer, or masculine, space, where they have spent the winter cutting sweet things down to size, and where adventure and movement and cathartic action, as opposed to stillness and enclosure, are what actually defines their masculinity, at least according to Olive: "These are men, not the sort we see go rolling home to their wives every night, but men" (p. 14)—a man, that is, is a thing without a home or a wife.

Even the implied sexual analogy holds: the seventeenth annual harvest ritual, like all the others, is a movement from outside to inside, from freedom to confinement, from action to feeling. For seventeen years Roo and Barney have been moving very regularly and rhythmically in and out of an enclosed female space, and the seventeenth summer brings to its climax the most long-drawn-out bonk in the history of Australian writing.

But in the context of such a reading, one which identifies the set with the female body, Roo and Barney's outbreak of violence and Olive's sad mopping-up operations after it must be read as very grim indeed.15 This alternative reading also lends a certain slightly shocking resonance to Wal Cherry's observation that the dialogue accompanying the doll-breaking scene "lacks the. . . deep penetration which marks a great play" (p. 84); I quote this remark not just in order to make a cheap joke but also to demonstrate the insistence with which the rhetoric of male sexuality is traditionally invoked in literary criticism as a mode of approval.16

I want to finish by taking this correlation between domestic
space and the female body one stage further while I look at one last critical orthodoxy about the play. Most of the critical commentaries use either the word “dream” or the word “illusion” to refer to Olive’s attitude; more often than not, these words are pejoratively and retroactively applied to the whole seventeen-year history the characters call “the lay-off”. The illusion argument is also articulated by Pearl after the room has been stripped of its decorations, and its implication is twofold: firstly, that the original foursome were never really happy at all, they only thought they were; and secondly that, because the ritual hasn’t lasted forever—just a mere seventeen years—then by definition it must have really been a mistake and a failure right from the beginning. For Olive, to marry Roo would be to concede that “the lay-off”, with its sexual happiness and freedom, was an illusion—marriage being implicitly, by contrast, the real thing.

Olive’s own bodily presence on the stage is directly identified with the stage set right at the beginning. The room in which all the play’s action takes place is decorated with the dolls, gifts and souvenirs which chart her emotional and sexual history. The luminous curtain of greenery on the verandah, which Lawler describes in such detail, is echoed and focused by her clothes. At her first entrance she is described as wearing “a crisp green and white summer frock”, and her first line concerns some green earrings; she is clothed in the same way as the set itself, and her obvious state of sexual anticipation makes it clear that the dress, like the foliage on the verandah, is going to be fairly easy to get past. By the beginning of Act 3, the morning after Olive has cleared away the dolls and souvenirs, the stage directions describe the room as having “an oddly deserted look” and Olive, again identified closely with it, as “masking an immense inner dreariness” (p.76).

So what are the implications of this identification of the stage set with Olive’s body for what happens at the end of the play? On her way out on the morning after Roo and Barney’s fight, Pearl says to Olive:

Take a look at this place now that you’ve pulled down the decorations. What’s so wonderful about it? Nothing! It’s just an ordinary little room that’s a hell of a lot the worse for wear. And if you’d only come out of your day-dream long
enough to take a grown-up look at the lay-off, that's what you'd find with the rest of it. (p.77)

Johnnie Dowd says something very similar, even before the room is stripped, when he's talking to Bubba: "All the fun they're supposed to have here" he says, looking "disparagingly" round the room. "I just can't see it." Bubba replies, "You don't know... All that's happened in a house makes a feeling— you can't tell anyone that. It's between people" (p.67).

In his Introduction to The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard discusses what he calls "eulogised space"; "images of felicitous space...[which] seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love...It has been lived in...with all the partiality of the imagination." And how, he goes on to ask, "can rooms that have disappeared become abodes for an unforgettable past?...How is it that, at times, a provisional refuge or an occasional shelter is endowed in our intimate daydreaming with virtues that have no objective foundation?"

The ground-floor front room, while still decorated with the evidence, embodies the characters' whole seventeen-year history. Elizabeth Webby makes a suggestive point about the dolls and butterflies: "a matter to consider if producing The Doll would be the extent to which the room should have the air of a museum" (p.16). The function of a museum is to embody collective memory, and that is what it does for Olive, Roo and Barney. Stripped, the room is no longer remembering for them; that is a function that Olive must now take over, if the past is to remain unforgettable.

Until the end of Act II, the set of the play functions as an "image of felicitous space"; but in Act III, the morning after the fight, it has become "a room that has disappeared", with Olive in the middle of its now meaningless space and described as crouching doubled up on the floor, "as if cradling an awful inner pain" (p.93); no wonder, considering what she has been obliged to internalise. Olive has lost everything she values, but without being allowed to forget it: she herself has replaced the eulogised space as the embodiment of memory, and there's a very real sense in which her body remembers what is now finished. The room is bare, the ritual objects are smashed, the good sex is finished forever, and Olive's own lonely and helplessly desiring

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female body has become the sole repository of the entire seventeen-year history, "the abode for an unforgettable past."

1. I am indebted to Susan K. Martin for this information.
5. See Summers, p.44; Salusinszky, p.173; also Joy Hooton "Lawler's Demythologising of The Doll: Kid Stakes and Other Times*, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, ed. Peter Holloway (Sydney, 1987), pp.252-3.
15. It is, if anything, worse in the traditional "dolls = babies" reading of the play, which, taken to its logical conclusion, casts Roo as a child-murderer—a fact which, to my knowledge, only Elizabeth Webby has so far faced: see Webby, p.19.