Inheritance
by Hannie Rayson

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Page numbers in these notes refer to Rayson, Hannie. Inheritance, Currency Press, Sydney, 2003

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Section 1.
A Perspective on Inheritance

In *Inheritance*, Hanie Rayson has created a view of the world that stretches beyond the narrow bounds of its Mallee setting and into the murky depths of the Australian psyche. As sisters Dibs Hamilton and Girlie Delaney prepare for their eightieth birthday celebrations, we are shown a world that is far from idyllic. There are the obvious strains and stresses of living in rural Australia at the beginning of a new millennium with the legacy of depression, drought and the associated drift from country to city. Add to this the difficulties few families are immune from: sibling rivalry, jealousy, greed, unforgiven grievances from years past and the general tensions that arise from a group of disparate people thrown into close proximity with one another. But this is not exclusively a ‘domestic’ drama. Rayson sees herself as a ‘political’ writer, and at least a portion of this play attempts to explore what it is that might account for the rise of an ultra-conservative political party in a so-called enlightened era. Linking all these concerns is the notion of ‘inheritance’: not just ‘who gets the farm’ but ‘who gets the nation’.

One of the difficulties of using a factual setting and period for a piece of writing, particularly if this is within the lived memory of the audience, is that there is a tendency to want everything about the piece to be factually accurate. And whilst there is a general air of accuracy about the events in the play, we must never forget that we are watching a work of fiction. Interestingly, one aspect of the play’s structure that both supports this and works against it is the way in which characters speak directly to the audience. Felix introduces Julia and tells us that she regularly ‘takes on this passive-aggressive tone when [she] wants [him] to come up to Allandale with her’ (p.4). Girlie does the same soon after when she comments on Dibs’ gardening strategies that ignore Girlie’s advice. ‘Doesn’t take a jot of notice’ she complains to the audience (p.5). Whilst these comments might reflect something true about the character referred to, they are equally revealing about the speaker and the relationship between the two.

This style, too, has a notable effect on the audience. Far from fitting into the model embraced by Bertolt Brecht, leading to the so-called ‘alienation theory’, Rayson’s technique is to draw the audience in, making us co-conspirators in the drama. Perhaps this increases our understanding, but it leads too, to a rather disturbing ‘cosiness’ so that in the end, there is an alienation of sorts. This play was commissioned by the Melbourne Theatre Company and the audience will be, by and large, a city one made up of the ‘gullible lefties’ and ‘bleeding hearts’ to whom William refers. There is, therefore, an air of ‘preaching to the converted’ – an easy way to get unquestioning acceptance of the views being promulgated.

The central motif of the play is ‘inheritance’ and in its complexity it touches on a great deal more than how to satisfy fairly the claims of the next generation when it comes to dividing the property on the death of the parents. It is true that it is this concern that was the driving force of the play from its inception, but notions of inheritance stretch far beyond the family ownership of broadacre properties. We see the line of ownership of Allandale, the family farm, carried from Dibs’ and Girlie’s grandmother, Jessie Allan, down through Norm Myrtle and Farley Hamilton (when he married Dibs). The unspoken expectation is that the farm will be inherited by another of that family. But

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the family has been blighted by the wider inheritance conferred by life in the Mallee: poor seasons represented by the mouse plague, lack of sustainability of the sheep industry, the cost of scratching a living and the need to look for work outside farming to make ends meet. So the legacy has been corrupted by another legacy, and that is one of helplessness, despair, debt and depression leading in two cases to self-destruction.

Dibs foreshadows this in likening Lyle to Norm, but Rayson goes further when she has Nugget first inherit and then lose the farm when Dibs rips up Farley’s revised will. The tragedy here is that Nugget, as representative of his race, has already been disinherited. The irony is that both he and his parents have realised that for farmers to survive in the modern world, they need to do things differently – in a way that might be represented in the diploma from Longerenong. Yet even that is not enough to protect him when the ‘race card’ is played.

So who ‘wins’ in all of this? The terrible truth is that it is probably Maureen Delaney; yet she is the most unsatisfying of all of the characters. She simply occupies a ‘position’, her mouth filled with clichés that get the cheapest of all reactions from the audience. She has a role to play in that it is through her that Rayson’s concerns about the inheritance of the farm in these days of family break-up and divorce settlements are taken to the fullness of awful conclusion. The farm might be facing changes, but to be removed entirely from the family by a ‘cause’ that was to prove so fleeting, in itself compounds the horror.

It is possible, of course, that one family could encompass so many socially challenging lifestyles: a farmer who hovers on the brink of dementia; a gay son; a daughter who has divorced her gay husband and is now pregnant to one of her Indian lovers; the educated Aboriginal son of a white farmer from a liaison with an Aboriginal worker at his sister-in-law’s hotel; a politician of Hansonesque proportions; an alcoholic optimist and a ‘very Christian woman’. Families are complex combinations of complex people. Nevertheless, one cannot completely escape the disturbing suspicion that the play is being used, at times, as a vehicle to carry a hotch-potch of undeveloped ideas on a range of marginalised groups. Despite such reservations, Rayson does explore some character traits in reasonable depth.

For instance, she manages to demonstrate with conviction that self-interest drives all of the characters in their quest for recognition in the estate, although some of the motivations appear more acceptable than others. For Lyle and his family, bankruptcy is a real and looming threat. Lyle’s mother, Girlie, argues that she has as much right to the land as Dibs and more than Farley. In comparison with this, Julia’s and William’s claims seem negligible and greedy. Nugget appears to have the best claim on every level, but one thing Rayson does particularly well is to allow us to see the intricacy of Dibs’ claim that he is ‘not family’. In the end, Nugget’s inheritance is to carry the ‘sin of his father’ and of all other men like his father who betrayed their marriage vows with Aboriginal women.

Ultimately, although we feel for Nugget’s predicament, there is a sense that he is well equipped to cope with adversity. William and Julia would, no doubt, feel justifiably enraged and hurt by their mother’s rejection of their claims in favour of Lyle, but we are told that Julia is ‘adaptable’ and William also has managed well without the farm up to now. But what about Girlie and Dibs? Girlie seems to have an incorrigible belief in the possibility of luck even if she has little evidence of its likelihood. Dibs, on the other hand, has lived a life of duty.
She never wanted the farm in the first place; she has lived all her married life with a man inextricably damaged by war; she has adopted Nugget, the evidence of his, and by extension her, ‘shame’. In conversation with Girlie, she has admitted to not particularly liking William, and we see in her conversations with Julia that she does not have a great deal of faith in her daughter. When Girlie offers her a luxury holiday, she is at her lowest ebb and it is tempting to see her as susceptible to the flattery of ‘[Lyle] loves his Aunty Dibs. Always has’. For one brief moment of elation she feels she has done the one thing that will save the farm, but as the sisters return to Allandale, the wheel has turned full circle and two other 'little girls in blue' are finding their father hanging in the barn. Rayson seems to be suggesting that like the toss of the coin that started the sisters on their respective paths, it is all about chance, luck and fate and there is nothing anyone can do to control what we will all eventually inherit.
# Section 2. Questions to Consider

## Setting

1. To what extent do the events in the play rely on its being set in a rural area. Could it have been re-set in the city with similar results?

2. Although the majority of the play takes place either at Allandale or at the Delaneys’ home on the outskirts of Rushton, other settings are used. What/where are these locations and what significance do they have to the gradual unfolding of the drama?

3. Hannie Rayson seems to want to link political position with geographical locale. How do the concerns of the country lead to the political attitudes that arise in the play? Does she make the similar assumptions about the city?

4. For Girlie, the city is a place to avoid, but for the younger generation it is somewhere to aspire to. What do the city and country mean for each of the characters in the play?

5. In many ways, the setting and the themes and issues of the play are indivisible from one another. What does Rayson hope to achieve by setting much of the drama in the kitchens of the two families? Is this a successful way of conveying her concerns?

## Structure

1. In what ways are Young Dibs and Young Girlie Myrtle similar to Brianna and Ashleigh Delaney? What about Lyle and Norm?

2. Hannie Rayson uses flashbacks to show the cyclical and repetitive nature of life. Is there anything in these that suggests that the events at the end of the play should have been predicted?

3. The large number of short scenes allows each person a space in which to voice his or her own position on the various issues explored. Does this make it easier for us to adopt an individual position free from the prejudices of the writer herself?

4. *Inheritance* is divided into two acts, the first preceded by a Prologue and the second succeeded by an Epilogue. What role does each of these divisions play in the unfolding and resolving of the drama?

5. There are occasions when one or other of the characters addresses the audience directly. What effect does this have on the way we see the play, the characters and the issues they confront?
Character

1. Who do you believe is the main character – the ‘star’ if you like – in the play? What makes this character more significant than the others?

2. We are told that Farley is a ‘tyrant’. To what extent is he responsible for the way things turn out in the play?

3. As characters, are Maureen Delaney and Nugget Hamilton simply two-dimensional representatives of particular positions or do they serve a more complex purpose?

4. With the toss of a coin, Girlie gains ‘freedom’. How have her circumstances changed by the end of the play? Is she still ‘free’ in the way she was when the coin was tossed?

5. Girlie tells Dibs that the difference ‘between being a good farmer and a bad one [is] three weeks. All in the timing’. Is it timing that leads to Lyle Delaney’s downfall?

Themes

1. Is Maureen right when she says that the land belongs to those who work it?

2. In the end, nobody inherits anything. Do you agree?

3. We think of prejudice most often in association with race and colour. However, Inheritance sees prejudice lurking in many other areas of our lives. What prejudices are explored and what effect do these have on the way the people in the play behave?

4. ‘Doing one’s duty’ is often seen as a positive way to live one’s life. Does this play endorse such a view?

5. ‘All the characters in Inheritance believe that being members of the family will protect their interests. In fact, it is ‘family’ that destroys them’. To what extent do you agree?
Section 3. Two Guided Essay Responses

A. ‘In her attempt to improve Lyle’s ‘luck’, it is Dibs who destroys everything’. Discuss.

Unpacking the topic

Key terms: ‘her attempt’ – (associated words: try, decision, desire, determination, desperate attempt, endeavour) what does Dibs try to do? does she succeed? If not, why not?
‘luck’ – (associated words: fortune, fate, fortuitousness, chance, destiny) is lack of luck the reason such desperate measures must be taken? if luck is not the cause what other alternatives are there?
‘it is Dibs’ – (closely linked to the next key term) is it her fault? is she the only one who contributes to the problem?
‘destroys everything’ – (associated words: harms, damages irreparably, breaks, smashes, disbands, disinherits, dispossesses, devastates, wrecks) what is ‘everything’? what form does destruction take?
‘Discuss’ – there need not be one hard and fast position. This word allows us to encompass a number of ideas and to look at the relative merits of a number of possibilities. It opens the topic up and calls for a wide use of evidence. This word encourages us to look for a range of options and allows – in fact, insists – that we should at least consider some points of disagreement with the given proposition.

Brainstorming

Questions to ask:
- What ‘destruction’ is referred to?
- Does this only mean the sale of the farm or could there be more than one component to the destruction? Is the destruction absolute or is recovery possible?
- Should it have been foreseen?
- Is it Dibs’ action in transferring the deeds of the farm to Lyle that causes the problem?
- Does she do this to give Lyle ‘help from Lady Luck’ or is there some other motive?
- Can Dibs be blamed for her actions whatever her motives?
- Is Dibs a) entirely responsible, b) partially responsible or c) not at all responsible for any disasters that occur in the play?
- If a) how can others be exonerated?
- If b) who else plays a part?
- If c) why can she be completely cleared given her actions? Is there any other person who is completely to blame? What would make her actions understandable/acceptable?
- Dibs and Girlie, Maureen and Lyle seem to be the main ‘players’ in this discussion. Are there others who should be included? Will there be something important that will be omitted if they are not included?
**Structuring Ideas**

As we have read, watched and studied the play, we have probably formulated some firm views and opinions about the characters and the issues and themes it explores. These might inform the sorts of questions we have asked in relation to this particular topic. However, if this has not been the case, by the time we have unpacked the terms of the topic and explored some of the interesting ideas they suggest, we should be starting to get a very clear picture of what we think about the play and the characters in relation to the topic. We might decide to try couch our ideas in the form of a ‘contention’ that we will try to argue. There is a danger in this in that it is possible that if we don’t quite capture the meaning of the topic, we could be lured into writing on something other than the question that has been asked. Instead, we could try writing a series of answers to the questions we have asked ourselves or writing a sentence or two that reflects what we think about the topic. So we might end up with something like:

‘Dibs does try to manipulate and control the future in favour of keeping the farm ‘in the family’. In doing this she does some quite unconscionable things. We can excuse her attempt to improve the fortunes for Lyle and the rest of the family as it is misguided but not malicious. The same cannot be said for her disinheriting Nugget. Ultimately, however, her actions are prompted by a desire for the wider good. Others in the play cannot escape their share in the blame for the ultimate downfall of the farm and the family.’

By sorting our ideas out in this way, we have almost written a mini-plan that will not need a great deal more to turn it into quite a useful introduction or conclusion.

Now we need to consider how best to ‘sell’ our message to the reader and/or the marker of the essay. What order should the material take and what evidence should we use to support our thesis?

**You might end up with an outline like this:**
1. Dibs’ action in settling the farm on Lyle opens the way for the eventual sale of the farm by Maureen.
2. Dibs’ destruction of the revised will – this is worse than her later action.
3. Maureen’s desire to further her political career by selling the farm – totally selfish as she is not thinking about the farm and the family.
4. Lyle’s death – Maureen would not have gained access to the farm without this.

**Evidence**
The evidence you select should be a combination of examples that are paraphrased and short quotations.
For this essay topic, you would be looking for evidence to support:
- why Dibs might decide to hand over the farm to Lyle. You would want to find information that helps you substantiate the motives for her actions
- whether her actions were foolish. Should she have been able to predict Lyle’s self-destruction? Even if he had not hanged himself, would the farm have been in good hands?
- what motivates her destruction of the revised will and how much this might have contributed to the demise of the farm even if Maureen had not inherited the land
- whether this action is worse than her previous one
- why Maureen sells the farm and what she says about it
- Lyle’s responsibility in the loss of the farm.
- the similarity between Lyle and Norm and how much his misery is inherited
Write the essay

Topic: ‘In her attempt to improve Lyle’s ‘luck’, it is Dibs who destroys everything’. Discuss.

When Dibs Hamilton decides to give ‘luck’ some assistance by signing over the deeds of the farm to her nephew Lyle Delaney, she has no idea what kind of disaster she will facilitate. Although it is this action that finally allows for the disinheritance of almost the entire family, it is not the only action, nor is she the only agent, to create havoc in the lives of the Mallee families portrayed in Hannie Rayson’s play, *Inheritance*.

Although Dibs and Girlie are twins, there is no doubt in our minds that Dibs is senior in influence. Partly this is conveyed by position within the community; the owner of property and therefore wealth, commanding more influence than Girlie, the owner of a pub with a share farmer for a son. Even having a daughter-in-law who is about to go into politics is no real advantage for Girlie, particularly as, like so many in depressed farming communities, she has to hold down a second job to make ends meet. But Dibs’ superiority comes from another source and that is the manner in which the farm has passed to her. It is true that chance – inheritance through the ‘toss of a coin’ – has played a part but Dibs did not see it as particularly ‘lucky’ at the time. Her father, Norm, has told both his daughters that ‘the hardest lesson in life [is] accepting how the coin falls and making the best of it’.

This is exactly what Dibs did all those years before. She accepted ‘duty’, gave up her budding nursing career and all the joy she was experiencing in her life in Melbourne and returned to Allandale to look after her mother and the farm. She also convinced her mother to provide adequate compensation to her sister, Girlie. Not only does she have social and financial authority, she also has moral dominance that is recognised in the way that others defer to her. Through the sacrifice of her own interests she has saved the farm for the family and played a large part in its current success.

Dibs’ decision towards the end of the play to hand the farm to Lyle is consistent with her sense of duty and with her love of the land and the family connection to it. Although this leaves the way clear for Maureen to inherit the land when Lyle dies, it is not a consideration that ever enters Dibs’ and Girlie’s minds. We see that Girlie has good reason for wanting Dibs to look favourably on her son and his wife and children. They have nothing once the bank has reclaimed Lyle’s unfortunate purchases of farm equipment. She may well be right when she suggests that if no-one in the Hamilton family want the farm as it stands then Dibs should ‘give it to someone who does’. It is one of the many complications that Rayson creates in this play. On the one hand, there is the land with all its heritage and sentimental connections. On the other, there are the individual members of the family with their own needs and agendas.

In Girlie’s family, the two come together and one has to ask whether her offering to share a holiday with Dibs who is at her lowest emotional ebb after the death of Farley and the various upheavals in the two households, is an entirely altruistic move. When she tells Dibs that Lyle ‘loves his Auntie Dibs’, she offers Dibs the alternative she has been looking for to break the nexus that she herself has created when she destroyed the revised will. Perhaps Dibs should have foreseen the disaster that this turns out to be. She has mentioned the similarity she has recognised between her father, Norm, who committed suicide when the girls were young, and Lyle Delaney. She and Girlie have both puzzled over the reasons behind their father’s death and despite their inability to define it specifically, they have both recognised the sadness that goes with ‘trying to scratch a living’ from the unforgiving Mallee and supplement the income from
the farm by working in a butcher's shop during the day. Added to this are Lyle's inadequacies as a farmer. We are told that he has overstocked the land. We see his regular attempts to involve Nugget in risky purchases of machinery, telling him he should 'take a risk for once in [his] life', and we are also aware that his drinking and his temper are out of control. It is possible that owning Allandale might be 'the making of him' as Girlie claims when Dibs returns triumphantly from seeing the solicitor in Mildura. But there is more evidence to suggest that this is a disastrous choice made with the best intentions even before Maureen sells the farm to finance her political career.

We might forgive Dibs' gift of the farm to Lyle Delaney as a noble but ill-advised action. Such forgiveness, however, cannot be extended to her earlier disinheriting of her adopted son. Any 'Christianity' Dibs exhibits elsewhere in the play disappears completely when she is faced with her late husband's revised will in which the farm is left to Nugget, his son from a liaison with an Aboriginal woman. Although Dibs has not been particularly supportive of William, the son she doesn't 'like all that much', she takes his side when confronted by her husband’s secretiveness in writing a new will without telling her. Her action in tearing up this new document is not only illegal, it is morally reprehensible and inexcusable. It is made worse by her telling Nugget that he is 'not family'.

The destruction of the will is, in many ways, a greater catalyst for the devastation of the farm and family than Dibs’ noble if misguided attempt to improve Lyle's fortunes. Dibs is well aware of Nugget's superior farming abilities and knows that the farm would be safe in his hands if he were to take it over. She has taken his side against Lyle Delaney in the argument over the purchase of new equipment. Her destruction of the will is an act of the purest spite, as perhaps was Farley's in writing it, and has little to do with the problem of the land and its continuing viability, and everything to do with revenge against her philandering husband whom she punishes posthumously through his son. In doing so, she performs a deed that will ultimately allow for the ruin of everything she holds dear.

Whilst Dibs must be held responsible to a significant degree for the mess that eventually occurs, the decisions she makes are not always based on self-interest. Maureen Delaney cannot be regarded as kindly. There is no doubt that her life is a hard one and her anger is evident when she confronts Lyle over his desire to spend more money when there is not even enough to pay the gas bill or let the girls go to the pictures. But her view of the world is one that is bitter and intolerant. She doesn’t have the softer side that we see in Lyle when he flies his pigeons. Instead, she is greedy and envious, quick to see partiality and discrimination from the city against those she regards as 'real Australians', that is not 'every Asian, Moslem and Hottentot' and, of course, Aborigine. She turns her rural preferences onto a political path that feeds her desire for fame and self-aggrandisement. She expresses her decision in the most magnanimous terms: 'Who wouldn't sell their farm to save their country?', but we reject her behaviour and her justification for it as Rayson has built a damning picture of a woman who is nasty and bigoted.

Throughout the play we, too, have developed a connection with Allandale and an understanding of its meaning and value to the identity of the family and the country as a whole. When we hear what Maureen has done, our reaction is one of shock and incredulity. Dibs' actions have allowed this to happen but it is unlikely that she could have predicted such an outcome. Maureen, on the other hand, has taken deliberate steps to dispossess every member of the family, and once the farm is sold and the proceeds channelled into her political activities, there is no going back and nothing left
Dibs’ mistakes cannot even begin to compete with such hard-nosed opportunism as her sister’s daughter-in-law displays.

It is clear that Maureen is an evil woman who must take a large share in the blame for the disasters of this unfortunate family. However, if Lyle had not died, she would not have had the opportunity to put her schemes into place. It is easy to condemn Lyle for the decisions he chooses to make, but Rayson paints a partially sympathetic picture of a man caught up in the painful grip of inherited misery. Not only is he heir to the personality and psychological despair of his grandfather, but he is also the recipient of the legacy of all that has happened in rural Victoria, and specifically, the Mallee, since the 1940s.

The depression from which he suffers is mirrored in the mouse plagues, the drought and financial depression that has left little towns like Rushton without a bank or a doctor. Even had he lived long enough to hear of the windfall orchestrated by his mother and aunt, it might simply have delayed the inevitable. Despite his depressive nature, he is an optimist: ‘You can’t wait for things to come to you, you know. You’ve got to make things happen’, he soliloquises. Had he waited for things to come – not tried to pre-empt ‘the timing’ and taking the risks he does – he might have prevented the final disastrous event.

Ultimately, the catastrophe at the end of the play results from a combination of events that began several generations before. It is rooted in the nature of farming in the Mallee and the fraught question of who will inherit the farm. Lyle’s death and its proximity to Dibs’ decision to hand over the farm to him are tragic in consequences and open the way for the disposal of the farm away from the family. It is Nugget’s disinheritance through the agency of Dibs, and Maureen’s selfish sale of the farm that complete the destruction we witness at the end of the play.

Essay Topic
B. ‘Inheritance shows that everyone suffers from prejudice when personal interests are challenged.
Discuss.

Unpacking the topic
Key terms:

‘everyone’ -- a word that could open up the discussion. ‘Everyone’ might suffer from prejudice but do they all suffer from the same sort of prejudice and to the same degree?

‘prejudice’ -- (intolerance, racism, hypocrisy, bigotry, unfairness).
What kinds of prejudice does the play explore?

‘personal interests’ -- (greed, self-interest, selfishness, egotism)

‘challenged’ -- (confronted, questioned, opposed, threatened) Does prejudice require challenge for it to surface?
Brainstorming

Questions to ask:

- What causes prejudice in the general sense in our society and how is it manifest?
- What kinds of prejudice are explored in the play?
- Is everyone in the play prejudiced in some way?
- Does this only appear when personal interests are threatened?
- Do some people appear less prejudiced than others or are there other reasons for their intolerance to surface such as ‘political correctness’?
- Might what appears to be bigotry to one person seem perfectly acceptable to someone else? Why might this difference exist?
- Is Rayson’s view of the world just as narrow and one-sided as that of those whom she appears to condemn? What position is she asking us to take?

Structure
1. General discussion of prejudice and a specific focus on racism as this is the most obvious demonstration of intolerance in the play.

2. Most of those who live in the rural areas are depicted as being racist and homophobic. The most obvious examples of this are Maureen, Girlie and Lyle. Their personal interests are dominated by their depressed existence and their fear of lifestyles they do not understand and by which they feel threatened.

3. But Dibs stands out as being different at first in that she has adopted an Aboriginal boy and appears to see his merits and love him as a son. When the revised will is discovered her interest in the farm and the hurt she feels changes her point of view. She is an excellent example of how personal concerns can affect once-held beliefs. Even so, her reaction might be more complex than pure racism.

4. Whilst we are positioned to resist the bigoted attitudes of the rural parts of the families, we can see that the representatives from the city also operate from a basis of self-interest. Compare William’s attitude to Nugget with Julia’s. Part of the disparagement we feel towards the country cousins is based on a superiority conferred by education. But Rayson challenges this idea by creating some undesirable ways of thinking apparent in those from the city. Examples?

5. Perhaps Nugget is the only one who resists the tendency to intolerance embraced by almost everyone else. There are occasions when he claims a special position for himself in Farley’s affections setting himself at odds with Lyle and William. On the whole, however, even when his interests are threatened he does not attack the person who is trying to undermine him, preferring to challenge ways of thinking instead.