Extinction

1. Introduction: A brief snapshot

At the heart of innovative technology and products lies exceptional human creativity. Our brains are practically wired to create and innovate newness. Naturally, the influx of products entering the market, create a consumer frenzy. Suddenly, everything is commodified entities with a dollar-sign attached to them. Their inherent value lies in how much consumers covet the item.

Let’s take the iPhone for example! An idea of a communication device both sleek in its functionality and aesthetic is mass produced, consumed by millions and the cycle perpetuates itself. It is an item so coveted and desired, a 17-year-old boy from China sold a kidney to buy the iPad and iPhone. This phenomenon of consumerism is symptomatic of a contemporary world’s obsession with vanity and aesthetic. Our fixation on the surface-level and glossy facades is similarly echoed by Extinction’s main protagonist, Professor Heather Dixon-Brown who criticises the ‘charismatic fauna push’ where we are ‘making celebrities out of pandas and polar bears’. While those campaigns are successful in raising better awareness and positivity in the realm of conservation, they do not change the ways in which we live and consume.

How we live today is inflicting a deep ecological impact on planet earth. Furthermore, as urban landscapes inevitably expand, we continue to encroach on the territory of the natural world.

These are the kind of thoughts that popped into my mind after reading Extinction.
Hannie Rayson’s provocative play delves deep into the central question of what does it mean to uphold a personal conviction in the face of self-interest and necessity. Casual flings, extinguishing of life and the friction between ‘ideological purity’ and functionality threatens to unhinge even seemingly robust characters such as Heather Dixon-Brown, an ecologist who preaches that she ‘uses her head, not her heart’. Rayson’s literary work endeavours to capture how the human character is in fact, multidimensional and never static! As the passionate environmentalists and pragmatic ecologists are entangled in ethical quandaries, the playwright also illustrates how divorcing your mindset from emotion is a universal struggle. Furthermore, she explores how moral conviction is consistently at odds with the demands of the personal, work and professional domains we inhabit.

Throughout the drama encapsulating mining magnates, environmentalists and ecologists, Rayson combines their fictional voices to echo a cautionary tale on how self-interest and misconception about ‘The Other’ may distort rationality. When the CEO of Powerhouse mining, Harry Jewell bursts into a Wildlife Rescue Centre in Cape Otway, holding a critically injured and endangered Tiger Quoll, he inadvertently catalyzes a conflict that will draw out the prejudices withheld by the trio of environmentalists.

_I encourage you to think about the lessons embedded in the play. What is the take-home messages YOU have discovered?_

Guiding questions:

1. _What is the message playwright attempting to deliver to her audiences?_
2. _When you finished the play, what feelings were you left with?_
3. Which characters did you find likeable? Who aggravated you the most? And most importantly, evidence why you feel that way! Is it because of their problematic ways of dealing with an ideological crisis? Or their fierce passion towards upholding moral conviction.
**Character Analysis:** Let’s take a look at these deeply flawed human beings.

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<th>Characters</th>
<th>Brief Outlook</th>
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<th>Explanation</th>
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| **Professor Heather Dixon-Brown** | Director of the CAPE institute  
• Interested in only saving species that are ‘statistically savable’  
• Bureaucrat with the realism to match. | “I am an ecologist, not an environmentalist. I use my head, not my heart.”  
Species are like commodities… I just don’t approve of this ‘charismatic fauna’ push-making celebrities out of pandas and polar bears.”  
(PP. 99)  
“You want me to close the CAPE. Is that what you want? Then we can bask in ideological purity…” – pp 120 | The never-ending struggle between heart and mind is central thematic theme in the play. |
| **Harry Jewell** | An idealist with the knack for alluring women to fall for him.  
Mr Evil, Big Coal (PP.120) | “You don’t serve your cause by being indifferent to the interest of working people.”  
“I know his type: the kind of greenie who’s always saying no. No dams. No |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Piper Ross</th>
<th>Zoologist from San Diego Zoo (temporarily transferred)</th>
<th>&quot;They are all ‘worth saving’.“ (pp. 83)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Andy Dixon’s girlfriend</td>
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<td>• Get entangled in a romp with Harry Jewell aka Mr. Evil</td>
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<td>Andy Dixon</td>
<td>A vet who is extremely pragmatic in his mindset towards his work and personal life.</td>
<td>… the great advocate for our native flora and fauna…“ (pp. 118)</td>
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<td>&quot;You should see this dairy farm. It’s all computerized. They’ve got one bloke managing a thousand cows. No human supervision of the milking. No-one to check the udders. I’m just there.</td>
<td>• Slight aversion towards technology • The inevitability of technology supplanting certain occupations • Technological evolution? (Is it the kind of evolution we want?)</td>
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THEME LIST

Logic versus emotion (Pragmatism vs. Ideological purity)

To divorce your emotions from affecting your decision-making capacity is a universal struggle aptly captured by Rayson’s depiction of Dixon-Brown’s gradual inclination towards the Tiger Quoll project funded by a coal company. In this case, we can argue that her objectivity and ‘her head’ is seemingly beguiled by the charms of Harry Jewell.

Early in the play, Professor Dixon-Brown is anchored to her desk, filing applications and paperwork instead of ‘getting back to her own research’. This prospect changes when Harry-big coal- offers “two million dollars on the table” to fund the tiger quoll campaign. Nonetheless, we see the two unexpected collaborators setting a dangerous precedent where one can simply equate a species’ livelihood to ‘commodities’ and ‘a good return’ of profit.

What is compelling about Harry’s character is that he combines both pragmatism and ideological purity. Firstly, Harry has the means and business acuity to manoeuvre a board of directors bent on exploring coal ‘right on the edge of the national park’. However, ‘Mr Evil’ is also inspired by nostalgia and sentimentality over a childhood memory where a tiger quoll steals his drumstick.

Conversely, Andy Dixon-Brown’s stance against the mining industry and automated dairy farms is admirable considering how technology has become a central cornerstone of modern-day life. His partner, Piper Ross, a zoologist echoes similar
distaste for mining companies however, her passion for ‘saving’ all animals eclipses her own presumptions towards ‘Mr Evil’. She is eventually persuaded to head the Tiger Quoll project.

Where Ares, Professor Dixon-Brown enjoys the uncomplicatedness of numbers and statistics. However, her carefully crafted algorithm fails to differentiate between the diversity of animals within the ecosphere. Instead it filters out populations of 5000 and above to collate only the ‘statistically saveable’.

In this respect, Harry’s actions showcase how a striking a balance between pragmatism and emotion is important.

**Unity in a socially divisive world**

In this play, the ‘us vs them’ mentality pervades the minds of the protagonists. Through the heated dialogue between environmentalists, ecologists and mining moguls, Hannie Rayson delivers the messages that as a society we should not be so reliant on simplifying individuals based on age-old presumptions and surface-level characteristics. Harry Jewell echoes a similar sentiment as he discusses his company’s plans to Piper: “Who’s this ‘we’? You don’t serve your cause by being indifferent to the interests of the working people.” (pp.92)

**Zooming in: Andy & Harry**

Let’s explore the volatile dynamic between the two males.

Andy’s indignant stance against collaborating with the mining industry showcases his resilience in sticking to his moral code. One can argue that his immediate demonization of Harry Jewell, as evidenced by the nickname ‘Mr. Evil’, is a symptom of Andy’s
oversimplified thinking. It is through Andy’s inflammatory and infantile language towards the Mining CEO, Rayson articulates how the politics of conservation is in shades of grey. Conversely, Harry’s admission that he knew Andy was ‘the type of greenie who’s always saying no [from the moment he came through that door]’. In highlighting the binary oppositions of the two men working in different fields, the play acknowledges how prejudice inhibits potential collaborations.

It basically showcases how our own misconceptions about ‘the other’ detracts from our own moral causes- Such as in this case, saving the forest. Both men are committed to the same cause, however Andy’s antagonistic approach towards Harry undercuts his own integrity. As he willingly allows prejudice to cloud his thinking. Simply, because it is the more convenient thing to do. As opposed to collaborating and accommodating to each other’s interests.

Categorizing strangers into convenient stereotypes is pure laziness.

- Andy: “Hope he didn’t damage that cruise missile he’s got out there?” (pp.73)
- Harry: “I know the type- knew him the moment he came through that door. He’s the kind of greenie who’s always saying no. No dams. No mines. No roads.” (pp. 114)

**Romanticism vs reality**

Against the backdrop of familial arguments and budding romances, Extinction’s Professor Dixon-Brown’s blunt dialogue about conservation reveals its politicized nature. Her heated dialogue with Piper echoes her frustration at ‘writing [Stuart Decker’s] applications so he can get ‘a sun tan’ conducting research on The Great Barrier Reef and win accolades for it. Furthermore, she satirically exclaims that ‘[the institute] needs to defend its territory’. Her mocking of the vice-chancellor who acted like they were in a ‘White House Situation Room’ implicitly demonstrates her growing disdain towards the tenuous politics of her workplace. Essentially,
Heather’s realist approach exposes what lies beneath the glossy exterior of conservation efforts.

I’ve seen quite a few videos of baby pandas circulating on my Facebook feed, most of them are part of a conservation effort or campaign. The comment section of these videos is like a medley of heart-eyes, exclamations of ‘How cute!!’ This relatively harmless sentiment is dismissed by Professor Dixon-Brown when she states that she is completely disengaged with ‘charismatic fauna’ (pp.99) push-making celebrities out of pandas and polar bears’. Our overwhelmingly positive reactions towards such campaigns is based on a societal gravitation towards the aesthetically pleasing. Which bleeds into the next thematic idea revolving around our fixation on appearance (surface-level).

Essentially, in the context of this play, the preferential treatment of endangered animals reflects our own biased thinking.

**Vanity and our obsession with appearance**

The idea of vanity also pervades the sub-consciousness of both male and female protagonists.

Against the backdrop of environmental conservation dilemmas, Hannie Rayson manages to entwine a secondary story strand which captures the insecurities peppering the Female experience in this contemporary age. The audience learns that Heather Dixon-Brown spends $267 on hair removal every five weeks. Interestingly, her brother- ‘a screaming heterosexual’ (pp. 95)- likens the hair removal process to ‘getting a tree lopped’. The destructive and almost violent imagery of chopping down a tree echoes the crippling pressure for Heather to ‘sculpt’ herself into a particular ideal of femininity.
It is in this way, Rayson articulates a broader thematic idea that womanhood is still being defined in terms of attractiveness and perseveration of youth. Heather’s internalized insecurities resurfaces in her heated confrontation with Harry. She accuses him of ‘prefer[ing] a younger woman’ and ‘never been with a woman with pubic hair’. Both of which Harry indignantly refutes. Through this heated dialogue, audiences gain an insight into Heather’s vulnerability as a divorcee-to-be and interestingly, we are exposed to her assertiveness as she questions ‘can’t [you] stomach a woman who stands up to you?’

Her conflicting ideologies on womanhood is best exemplified through Harry almost admonishes her for embodying ‘some nineteen-fifties idea of relationships’ where ‘sex with someone’ does not necessarily entail ‘a lifelong commitment’. Which is also the central conflict faced by all the characters who engage in seemingly non-committal relationships and false expectation. It is through these failed trysts that Rayson disapproves of uninhibited sexual impulses and by extension, criticizing the increasing promiscuity in contemporary times. Essentially, Rayson’s fixation on causal sexual relationships mirrors her own opinion that there has been a paradigm shift in how we govern our sexuality and bodies since the 1950s.

Conservation in a world of destruction

You can define conservation in terms of ‘preservation of ….’, ‘sustaining…..’. In the personal domain, Piper maintains that she and Harry ‘slept in separate tents’ to her boss, Professor Dixon-Brown who also doubles as her potential sister-in-law. Conversely, Professor Dixon-Brown is forced to make an ethical compromise
to prevent a career besmirching orchestrated by a mass-email insinuating a sordid romance between her and her newest collaborator, Harry Jewell. Her reputation as CAPE’s director is nearly tarnished by the vengeful force of a fling’s ex-wife.

*Do I preserve my moral compass or my professional reputation?*

Other thematic ideas that relate to this umbrella phrase includes: **misuse of authority and ethics of the digital world.**

Deleting emails is tantamount to rewording/rewriting history. Professor Dixon-Brown’s attempt at salvaging/restoring her pristine moral code of ‘using her head, not her heart’ is encapsulated in her desperate dash to the IT servers at 1am in the morning to delete the incriminating email detailing her illicit relationship with Harry Jewell. Which undoubtedly, compromises both of their careers as professionals. Furthermore, their intimate fling casts Dixon-brown as a seducer/a woman who is easily compromised. Which is untrue. However, it’s the facades that count in the play.

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<td><strong>Euthanizing the female tiger quoll</strong></td>
<td>In this case, by virtue of being female, we can assume the tiger quoll ‘with a crushed spine’ has reproductive capabilities. The injured tiger quoll was a life-giving entity. Technically, if she recovered fully, the tiger quoll could be the solution to its endangered status.</td>
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Andy’s swift decision to euthanize the animal in great pain could be in reference to his own desire to ‘make [his life] over’. He has inadvertently projected his own fears and anxieties over his GSS diagnosis onto the critically injured creature. Essentially, in the moment of mutual pain, Andy could resonate with the tiger quoll.

Real-life Amanda -> Tutor comment translation:

As I was reading the text, a recurring question kept nagging at me:

“Why are there intimate scenes sandwiched between the layers of ideological conflict and tension?”

Tutor -> real-life Amanda translation:

Oh my goodness, are these characters THAT sexually frustrated? Someone’s heart is going to get broken and then we will have to analyse that in our essays. Ughhhhh.
One-night stands/casual sex/ non-committed relationships

My theory is that the images of casual sex serves as an ironic layer to a play titled Extinction. Both Piper and Heather unwittingly develop sexual relations with Jewell on a casual basis which symbolizes how intercourse is no longer purely valued as a means for continuing the species. These ‘efforts’ for reproduction is fruitless.

1. Shows how mankind is centered on pleasure and instant gratification. Prioritizing the self above all matters.
2. Demonstrates how modern living expectations, consumerism and the perpetuation of gluttony have led to a plateau in human evolution.

Stage directions

Weather transitions

1. The opening scene showcases how vets and environmentalists alike are surprised with the first sighting of a tiger quoll in a decade. Their surprise at this unprecedented occurrence is reinforced by the ‘wet and windy’ conditions. Typically, stormy weather is symbolic of chaos and unpredictability.
2. During a particularly heated exchange between Andy and Piper, the interjection of ‘thunder’ intensifies rising temperament in both characters. (pp. 73)
3. When Andy discovers who ‘Harry bloody Jewell’ is, his growing disbelief and rising temperament is complemented by the off-stage sound of ‘the roar of the motorbike’. The audiological stage cue characterizes Jewell as an unwanted presence of chaos and noise. As the motorbike’s roar is a sound incongruent with the natural environment encapsulating Harry.

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<th>The meaning of fire</th>
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<td>In Act Two: Scene One, the secretiveness of Harry and Piper’s tryst is underlined by the ‘vast blackness’ and their figures ‘in silhouette’. Furthermore, its fragile and tenuous connection is symbolically related to how both counterparts repeatedly ‘pokes the fire’ to ensure its longevity through the night. Perhaps, this imagery is referring to how all temptation and sexual energy needs to be moderated. Which complements Piper’s reluctance to continue their budding relationship.</td>
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<td>PROMPTS</td>
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<td><strong>Theme-based</strong></td>
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| How-based | How does Hannie Rayson explore the idea of emotion in the play, Extinction? | 1. Emotion as a distractor. Hence, Heather’s ban on ‘cruising bars’. Beneath her paradoxical coolness in the face of ‘white house-style workplace situations, she harbors some crippling insecurities.  
2. Emotion as the perfect vent/catalyst to greater outcomes. Piper & Harry’s relationship (fire symbolism) = tiger quoll project.  
3. The way in which we handle emotion reveals our true moral fiber. Deletion of emails – what does that entail in this modern-day society that orients around |