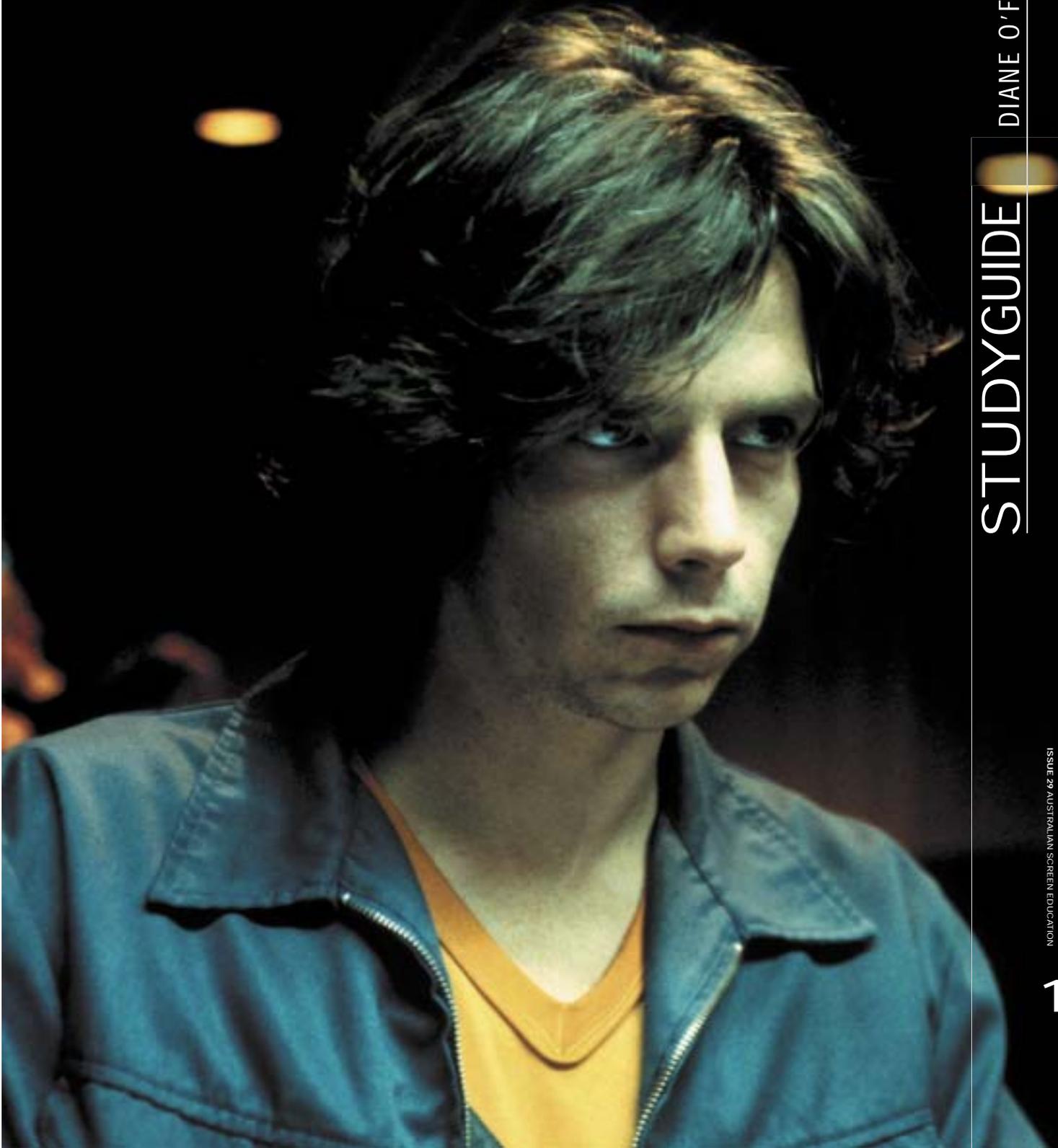


# MULLET

JUST A BLOKE.



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STUDYGUIDE



THIS STUDY GUIDE ANALYSES THE AUSTRALIAN FEATURE FILM *MULLET* (DAVID CEASAR, 2001). THE GUIDE LOOKS AT HOW THE SCRIPT AND THE DIRECTION IS ABLE TO TELL THE STORY VERY HONESTLY. THERE IS NO PRIVILEGING OF INFORMATION; NO TRICKS USED. WE UNDERSTAND THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHARACTER CHOICES AT THE EXACT MOMENT AS THE CHARACTERS THEMSELVES. IN FACT, WE OFTEN KNOW MUCH MORE THAN THE CHARACTERS UNDERSTAND ABOUT THEMSELVES. THUS WE SEE THE CENTRAL PROTAGONIST ON A JOURNEY WITH ALL THE IMMEDIACY AND FRESHNESS WHICH THE LACK OF FORMULAIC ANSWERS LENDS A STORY. THE PROTAGONIST'S DISCOVERIES OR BLINDNESS (AND THOSE OF THE CHARACTERS WHOM HE CONTACTS) BECOME VERY OBVIOUS TO US.

PLOT

Because *Mullet* is a character driven film, it's important to look at the plot. Characterisation rests on relationships within the film, the way characters hold themselves in relation to each other and to the spaces around them. Plot allows us to see the nature and pull of those relationships. The local barmaid, Kay (Belinda McClory) tells the story. Her voice-over narration in the second scene prepares us for what we are about to see. 'Country town stories ...are about getting married and having kids or they're about petty scandals and people leaving...This one's about someone coming back.' That someone is Eddie Maloney (Ben Mendelson) who returns to Coollawarra, NSW, after three unspectacular years in Sydney. He hitches a



ride into his hometown in the back of the ute of a pig shooter. The lyrics he sings tell us what's on his mind: 'I'm sifting though/ all these memories of you/ all these versions of you'.

The script's strength is in portraying

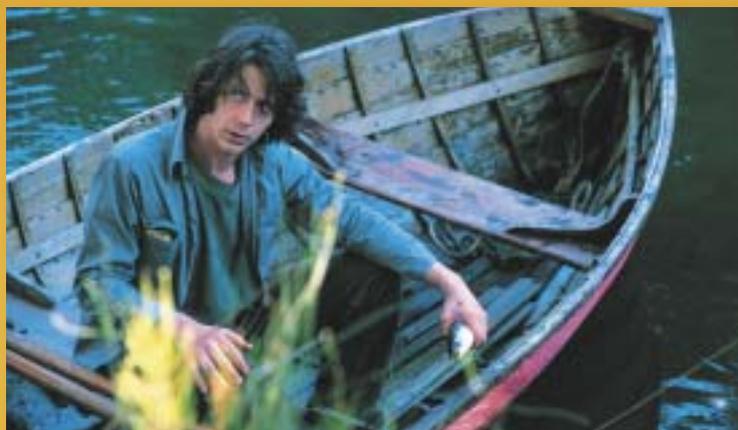
the effects Eddie's presence has on everyone else in the small country town. The story centres round the town's hostile reaction to Eddie's return and the consequences of his endeavors to renew his relationship with ex-girlfriend Tully (Susie Porter) who is now married to Eddie's brother Pete (Andrew S Gilbert). She must choose between the two men.

COUNTRY TOWNS

A huge dimension of characterisation and character interaction takes place in the film's setting of Coollawarra, a typical NSW country town. Looking at the film's depiction of this way of living allows us to understand Eddie's behavior and decisions. Again, Kay sets us off. 'People think that country towns are full of rednecks and gossip...home spun wisdom and preserved fruit...' We encounter each of these elements, which give some sort of balance to the overall picture. But perhaps the most important factor in constructing the town is its singular and rigid vision of what should be done, how it should be done and when it is appropriate to do it.

Look at the following scenes and discuss what is revealed about the speaker and the town by the tone of the quotation given. Find visual clues to support your understandings.

First page: Eddie 'Mullet' Maloney (Ben Mendelsohn). This page clockwise top left: The Maloney family L-R Col (Tony Barry) Robbie (Peta Brady), James (Wayne Blair) and Eddie (Ben Mendelsohn); Eddie; Peter (Andrew S. Gilbert); Tully (Susie Porter)



- Eddie is visiting his folks, Col (Tony Barry) and Gwen (Kris McQuade). Look at the interior of the house. What does it tell you about them? Look at the rituals of the scene. What do they tell you about Col and Gwen's relationship?
- Later in the scene, Eddie's father walks him to the car, saying 'Come to the footy'. 'I don't want to come to the footy.' Eddie replies. 'I don't care. Come anyway,' his father says.
- The scene is in the local pub. The guys from the footy club are getting boisterous. In a voice-over, we hear the publican (Bryan Brown) yell, 'Tell 'em to behave or they're out the bloody door.'
- Eddie walks into the local fish shop to sell his parcel. Robbie (Peta Brady) rejects the fish. Eddie says, 'Small town, eh? Everyone works together to get rid of something they don't like.' In contrast with the demands of the town for conformity are the two types of people within it. We meet the majority who makes it their business to live there with some complaint and ostensible contentment, and those who seemingly would like to get out. We do not know or hear of anyone who goes away and stays away. Or do we?
- At various times throughout

- the film, we hear what the town thought Eddie was doing while away-a Hollywood producer, working on some big paper in London, playing first for a Rugby League team in Sydney. What do all these expectations have in common and why do they increase your knowledge of an aspect of life in Coollawarra?
- Eddie asks Kay, 'Thought you were gonna get out of here as soon as you could', and she replies, 'Someone's got to run the pub now that Mum's ...ran off with a poker machine repairman.' What does this tell you about Kay's view of herself?
- After the netball game, Tully tells Robbie, 'All I want to do is just go...away'. What does this indicate about Tully's current state of mind? Find visual clues to support your views. Is it a sustained state of mind?
- Col seems to love his life. What roles in the town give him this satisfaction?
- Gwen is not speaking to Col yet again, but seems content to weather the storm. Provide evidence in favour of and against the notion that she enjoys her life.
- Robbie seems to accept her life, although she asks Tully 'Wouldn't it be good to have a dick-just for a day?' She says she is 'so itchy (she) could scratch me insides

- out...Had thrush for 3 days.' When her brother is sickened by the image, she taunts, 'Don't chicks in Sydney get thrush?' What do you make of her approach to her life in Coollawarra?
- James (Wayne Blair) is very content with life but Eddie tells him 'You could've played for St George (a top Sydney team), but no. You'd rather just stay in this shithole the rest of your life and do stuff all.' To which James replies 'This is my home, mate. I live here.' What do you learn about each man from this conversation? What does it say about attitudes to race/aboriginal people in the town?
- The film ends with Eddie dropping Kay back at the pub. She invites him in but he says, 'No. I was just gonna keep on driving since it seems that everyone in town wants me to leave.' Her reply is short: 'Not everyone'. She goes inside. He lingers, but doesn't drive off. Kay's voice-over has just brought the story to an end: 'Even when you think its finishing, something else is starting up, but I suppose that's the point'. Yet Eddie has always been adamant that he's 'not back, just visitin'.' Using visual and verbal clues, discuss whether he stays or goes.

Clockwise top left: Robbie (Peta Brady); Mullet and Robbie in the fish shop; Kay (Belinda McClory) and Eddie; Tully and Peter



## CHARACTERISATION

The MEN portray and convey various aspects of MASCULINITY defined by their ages and circumstances. Each one bases their authority from being part of the patriarchy (especially in a country town). Build a portrait of all characters using the suggested scenes. Look at the visuals, as well as the language and its tone.

### COL

- When Eddie visits, Col ignores his wife's requests to go inside. He wants to show him the flushing toilet. Although Eddie will take his word that it flushes, Col insists on demonstrating. Eddie's seen it all before, but he affirms his father's pride, saying 'beautiful'. Contrast this scene with the one after training where Col tells Eddie that footy 'is about heart, getting knocked down, getting back up. It's about not givin' up.' Then Eddie offers Col a gift. 'What am I s'posed to do with mullet? Ah, give us it...feed it to the chooks.' Is it lack of heart when Col rejects Eddie's gift of fish?
- In the next scene, Col maintains 'microwave gives you cancer' as

well as later admonishing Eddie, asking, 'who said you could stay (in the van)! Then later, he, sashays round the room, singing 'One day you're gonna go missin' /missin' all the love we used to share /...sorry for the love you let slide through your hands'. Notice how the visual at the end of the song makes a cosy 'family portrait' of them.

- Before the barbie, Col remarks to Gwen, 'Good fella, James, pity he's a black fella'. What does this add to your knowledge and perception of Col? Why would Col have this attitude to James and do Col's words reflect what he really thinks of James? What is being said about Col's generation?
- In the 'Chopping Wood' scene, Col says about Gwen, 'Some mornings I wake up beside her and think 'Who the bloody hell are you?' Other mornings I thank Christ (she's) here cause at least I know where I am.' So what are Col's views about love? To what extent do his experiences form these views? What is he trying to say to his son?

### PETER MALONEY

- We learn a lot about Pete the moment we meet him in the first

scene of the film. Even though we don't know who anyone is, retrospectively, this scene helps us understand the film's themes. Look at the details-man and woman prawning and sharing a moment of hilarity, their indulgence of an older woman on shore who tends a campfire and encourages their efforts, and Hawaiian guitar music in the background. What is being built up here? When Pete says, 'another 15 minutes just to keep her happy', we learn the main ingredient of his character. It's not until later that we make sense of his wish to keep the mullet in the bucket rather than throw it back to the river. Look at how the visuals convey his excitement when he catches the mullet.

- In the scene where he insists on paying for the leatherjacket fish he's getting for his wife, Tully, look at the establishing shot and listen to his language. What do these extremes tell you about him? Make similar observations of the scene where he goes to see Eddie in his caravan. Perhaps you can draw even deeper knowledge about Pete from this scene because it is further into the story. 'I didn't come out here to start a blue...If you're going to be around, we're having a



barbie...Saturday. Be good if you could come.'

- Gather evidence on Pete as a husband. Compare the scene where he's ironing his own shirt at home with his explosive behavior at the barbie.
- In the scene where Tully is searching for her keys, look at what's NOT BEING SAID. Observe the looks between the Tully and Pete, their own expressions and body language, the silences and the interaction achieved by the director's use of space within the setting. Look at where Caesar has placed the people, and the camera. These visual aspects should tell you as much about the story as the words tell you. Find other scenes where your understanding is deepened by character reaction or silence.
- Look at the scene where Pete drives into the forest and sits singing, 'When you look at me, I feel that I'm no good/...All I want to do is hang my head and cry'. Has Tully given him any evidence she wants to leave her marriage? What makes him so upset?

#### JAMES

- 'You reckon people in this town

have forgotten you're an abo, do you? They just forget that when you win the footy for them.' What does this scene tell you about Eddie? And look at James's reaction. What do you learn about him?

- How does James deal with Col's attitude toward him? Does this relationship add to our knowledge of James?
- Look at James's three main scenes-the incident in the pub where Eddie does not want the beer his mate bought for him ('Doesn't matter, I'll drink it'), his reaction to Eddie reminding him of his colour, and his dialogue when he and Robbie arrive for the barbie ('You don't let the dumb black fella carry the grog'). What can you deduce about his masculinity? What do you understand James has been through growing up in a country town? When James tells Eddie, 'I'm black mate, I've been told', what do we learn about James?

If the men are representatives of the faces of

masculinity, the WOMEN cover numerous aspects of FEMININITY. For instance, compare the netball match to the footy match. Women are the peacekeepers-they all take this role at some stage of the film. They all control their men, and although they grumble, they finally seem content. But ultimately, what else is available to them?

#### G W E N

- Hers is the 'homespun wisdom' Kay talks about, although it is disguised with clichés and



On location in Kiama, L-R front row: Allan 'Robbo' Robinson, Director David Caesar, Back row: First Assistant Director John Titiley, Producer Vincent Sheehan



a layer of toughness. Look at Gwen's sparse words in the prawning scene. She reminisces about how it was, saying 'People are greedy now'. She understands what makes things in the town work or fail.

- Look at Gwen's relationship with her son. She is overjoyed to see him but understates it: '...you got a bloody kiss for me or what', hiding her emotions by telling him Zip (the dog) missed him. Later, in the barbie scene, she tells him he'd be smart to leave town, again concealing her emotions, even as her words break her heart. Why does she say, 'Go and give your old man a hand before he has a heart attack'?
- Find a couple of cliches and look at the real reason she uses them.
- Study Gwen's attitude to Col's views about James and say what we learn about her through these views?

#### TULLY

Her relationships tell us a lot about her changing character.

- Look at the normal functioning household. He wants a baby but she wants a puppy. He goes to rugby league practice and she goes to netball. They play cards with Robbie and James. It's a quiet life. Look closely at the moment when Pete tells her, 'I heard Eddie's in town'. She is at

the oven cooking. Look at her body language, the type of shot, her tone and her actions. Is the new subject matter to which she shifts the conversation significant (especially in the light of Pete's later offer to Eddie after he's been suspended for a high tackle: 'You can take my place')?

- Only after Eddie arrives, Tully notices how dull Pete is. If only he'd 'do something, lose it just for once, anything that'll show me his heart's still beating'. Find other examples of his passivity (or his being 'nice').
- Look at the scene at netball where Robbie objects to being called Tully's '...sister-in-law...he's back a couple of days and everything's different'. Tully doesn't see it - 'Got nothin' to do with him'. Look also at the use of space within this scene (and others at the netball court). In particular, find examples involving framing and camera placement. Is the wire fence significant?
- Look at the scene where Tully is sitting on the steps outside her house and Mullet comes by. Look at how the relationship between the two is set up by framing and settings (brick wall, bars of steps). She is "in the cage"; he is against the wall. Why do these devices affect the way the scene works? What other scenes in the film involve aspects of setting to convey the message?
- When Eddie comes by the kin-

dergarten, she takes it all in her stride. She punches him on the chin, hurting her hand, and then apologises. There's an interesting contrast here. Look at her with the kids, then as she jumps the fence, landing the punch that really hurt. How does this scene foreshadow the rest of the movie?

- When Pete asks Tully what it was like seeing Eddie, Tully replies 'He gave me the shits, being smart-arsed.' Is she through with Eddie? Why is Eddie a smart-arse?
- Why does Tully eat the sugar?
- Tully feels like an object, '...just the thing you're fighting over'. She sits in the toilet, telling the successive knockers to 'piss off'. After she comes into the yard with the pistol and 'settles down', she tells Pete they're going to have a baby. Pete cuddles her and looks with victory at Eddie. Why does this recall the opening prawning scene? Why does it resolve the contest between the two men? Was there ever a contest or was it only in Pete's mind?
- Find evidence to support what you consider to be Tully's definition of love. Then contrast that to Eddie's definition of love. Do these definitions reflect the individual characters' experiences of how the world is for them?

#### ROBBIE

- We first meet Robbie when she grabs her brother from behind, and flattens him to the ground. His only response is, 'Stupid cow, Robbie, could've spilt m' beer'. He later greets her in the fish shop as 'big spunk', and we get the idea (why?) that she pays Eddie more for the fish than they're worth. What do these incidents tell you about her?
- She has an easy attitude to life - her thrush worries her, and although her questioning of Tully reveals genuine concern for her brother's marriage, she finds the answer to the dilemma by saying, 'Come down the pub. Have a game of pool'.

- At the barbie, she turns on Eddie, 'You hate me and James because we're happy. You don't know how to be happy and you're jealous'. Is she right?

#### KAY

- 'When you work in a pub, people tell you things', Kay tells us in voice-over narration at the beginning of the movie. When she follows Eddie into the urinal at the pub, we see her sexual interest in him. Does it also foreshadow romantic interest? 'You gonna flush that? I'm the stupid bitch who's got to clean that out in the morning'. She calls back as an afterthought (the camera stays on Eddie), 'And wash ya hands, ya grub!' What does Kay think about herself and what roles can you discern she believes are hers?
- Eddie has told Kay he's back in town 'to see how many people (he) can give the shits to'. Kay tells him, 'You can put me down as the first'. What do you make of this reply in light of Eddie's remark to her at the bar: 'O.K. I'll go for the (beer) and let you surprise me on what else I get'?
- Eddie gets drunk. Kay skulls gin to 'catch up' with him. They go to bed together. And nothing happens. What do you make of Kay's outburst the morning after: 'You should've rooted me...it wouldn't've just been a root...that all, a root...? Compare this scene with the one where Kay tells him she's 'rooted half the blokes in town'. Discuss the similarities in this scene to the one where Eddie confides in her about his past. What difference do you see in Kay's view of sex from Eddie's view of sex? Could the reason for this difference be also found in their individual life experiences?
- When Pete buys the alcohol for the barbie, he says '...we're a well-behaved lot'. Her response is, 'Maybe that's the problem.' Did this advice influence Pete's later behavior? Is Kay part of the town's wisdom?
- At the barbie, Kay comes up the



- drive to join the party. When Tully falls into Pete's arms, the family goes to "leave them alone" in their moment of happiness. That would leave Eddie "without company". How does the director get Eddie and Kay together for the end of the movie?
- Why does this barbie scene help elucidate the town's understanding of relationships/love/sex.

#### E D D I E

In most of the examples examined, we've learned a lot about Eddie's character. But he also reveals himself by what HE says and does. The most important part of Eddie's character is apparent from recurring concepts in the film

#### THEMES, METAPHORES AND IMAGES.

Discuss how the filmmakers continued the themes and metaphors of the film in the Poster - the 'Face off' between Mullet the character and Mullet the fish?

- Did this image give you a way into the film?
- What was your reaction to it?
- How did the log line - 'Family, Can't Live With Them, Can't throw them Back' - tie into the visual and cultural themes of the film?

#### MULLET

Mullet is a fish caught in the area. It is also Eddie's nickname. What do you make of the following references?

- Col says, 'Mullet? ...Tastes like

shit'.

- Pete buys leatherjacket. He knows Tully's dislike for the mud-fish.
- Gaza says, 'Very sweet fish. Soft textured flesh', but he's being ironic.
- Gwen says, 'Bugger, it's a bloody mullet'
- Tully says, 'Mullet. They're no good for anything'
- Robbie accepts them at first but finally says, 'Can't get rid of 'em' and throws them in the garbage.
- Kay says, 'Nobody wants 'em. ...Nobody wants your fish.'
- James's mother makes them taste good when she cooks them.
- Eddie says in his monologue, 'Poor little buggers. They're swimming along, enjoying a bit of mud. Next thing they know, they've got a net up their gills and they're stuffed'. Then we see HIM trapping them, sticking the knife into them, pulling out their guts and throwing it away. Is this a metaphor of self-mutilation?
- Linking shots of mullet are superimposed over the highway and we often see close-ups of them caught in the net.
- Look at the Australian saying 'A Fish out of Water' as a central metaphor of the film. How has the director explored and used this theme either through images of sound?

#### LIGHT.

Discuss the implications and compare

- the expansive lighted window of Tully and Pete's home.
- the small lighted window of Ed-

die's van.

- the solitary light on Eddie's boat as he fishes for mullet.
- the lights in the pub.
- the cosy light in Col and Gwen's home.
- the headlights of Tully's car which flood Eddie's van as she drives up.
- the line of lights outlining the bay in the town.

**DIRECTION**

Using the following scenes discuss how the director's choice of framing and camera moves as well as the relationships of the characters to their environment and each other (especially to Eddie) help underpin the drama of the scene and the themes and metaphores of Eddie's story.

- First Scene - Peter catches Mullet and puts it in bucket.
- Outside Tully's House - 'Doesn't Pete let you smoke in the house?'
- Col and Mullet chop wood.
- Fish shop - Mullet tell Robbie about the best bits in life.
- At the Caravan - Peter comes to tell mullet about the Wedding.
- Netball - Tully tells Robbie she wish Pete would do something.
- Tully's Kitch - Tully comes home very late, Pete leaves with out saying a word.
- Col and Gwen's house - I'm not talking to him.
- List other scene that you like and look for similar themes of devices that may be working with in the scene.

**IDEA OF WANTING, GIVING AND GETTING**

- Col says, '(Love's) about taking the good with the bad', and later, in reply to Eddie's annoyance over not being asked to Tully's wedding, Col says, 'Nobody wanted the shit that goes with having you there'.
- Pete says. 'Its not about what you get, it's about what you give...' Compare this to the scene where Tully asks, 'What do you want Eddie?' and Eddie replies 'it doesn't matter what I want. It only matters

what I can get.'

- Perhaps the saddest line in the whole movie is at the end of the barbie. Eddie says 'Look. I don't know how to get what I...' Look at the context, his tone of voice, his expression, and the camera work. Has he discovered a way of growing?

**COMING BACK TO YOUR ROOTS**

The town wants to know why Eddie returned.

- Collect quotes from Gaza, Robbie, Tully, and Col that ask him about it directly. Look at their body language in these scenes. Find other parts of the film where people assume he's a drifter. What is the effect of Coollawarra's attitude?
- Do you think Eddie hoped to rekindle his relationship with Tully? Does his motivation for coming back change during the film? Supply evidence for your reading.
- What do you make of the scene where Eddie tells Robbie 'Fish have bad memories'? How does this metaphor fit in with his philosophy about 'the best bit' of life. How does it fit in with her philosophy of life about 'more effort'? Why is the tracking close-up shot of the dead fish on ice so effective here? This is a very important scene in revealing Eddie's dilemmas. Make sure you understand both Eddie's views of the world/life and Robbie's views of the world/life as shown so well in this scene. What does Robbie reveal of her opinions about her brother? What devices (other than the tracking close-up) has the director used to make this scene so powerful and effective? Look and listen.

**BEING NICE, KIND, LOYAL.**

The town values the qualities of niceness, kindness, and loyalty: 'It's mostly about people trying to get on with each other' (Kay).

- Why does Ceasar include the

incident where Eddie rejects the beer his mate bought for him?

Look at the scene where Tully explains why she married. She says, 'Pete didn't want anything. He was just being nice. After awhile, I got used to him being there.'

- Remembering that this is what she settled on for the rest of her life, discuss the importance of 'being nice' in a small town. Take into account Tully's words to Eddie: 'You don't deserve me being nice to you', and later when she smashes the glass, 'I didn't do it because I was being kind. That's love, you bloody idiot'.
- In your discussion, remember that at the barbie Pete screams at the assembled gathering 'Where has it got (me) being nice?' and after mimicking his brother, Eddie tells him 'You've got everything you want, you've got everything I want'
- Find an incident where Eddie is careless of someone else's feelings. Look at the function of the scene.

Ceasar has shown us what happens when Eddie tries to go back to his past without any thought of what had happened to him and the others in the intervening time. We see the town reject him, assuming he doesn't want to belong to the community. And as Kay says, 'The hard thing about writing stories about people you know, is finding the end'.

For further information please visit [www.mullet.net.au](http://www.mullet.net.au)

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