Alan Ayckbourn’s
Absurd Person Singular
and Woman in Mind:
A Study Guide

for the Pardoe Theatre Production of Absurd Person Singular
July 22 through August 7, 1993
&
for the Margetts Theatre Production of Woman in Mind
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Excerpts from a longer work
by Tim Slover

Edited by Bob Nelson,
Nola Smith, and Kim Abunuwara

Theatre and Film Department
Brigham Young University

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Sixth in a series: study guides were also prepared for BYU productions of
Hedda Gabler, Mother Hicks, Waiting for Godot, Julius Caesar, and The Importance of Being Earnest

These study guides are for teachers, students, and others who attend our productions.
We hope they enhance enjoyment and lead to deeper appreciation of the plays.

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Alan Ayckbourn: A Chronology of His Career

1939 –Born April 12 to Horace, first violinist for London Symphony Orchestra, and Irene, who writes for women’s magazines. Ayckbourn: “I watched her write them, because she used to thump them out in the kitchen. And it sounds a corny anecdote, but she really did—I suppose if Mummy had been washing up all day, I’d probably have become a very good washer-up–she gave me a little typewriter and I started to thunder out my own awful tales. I wrote stories and I wanted to be a journalist.”

1947 –Irene, divorced, marries bank manager, Cecil Pye. Ayckbourn: “I was surrounded by relationships that weren’t altogether stable, the air was often blue, and things were sometimes flying across the kitchen.”

1952 –At public school, Haileybury, on Barclay’s Bank scholarship, A. studies journalism.

1954 –Leaves Haileybury, having passed A-levels, works with actor-manager Donald Wolfit.

1954-57 –Works as stage manager and actor for various provincial companies, discovers his talent for technical theatre, especially sound and lighting.

1957 –Joins Stephen Joseph’s experimental Studio Theatre Company, which emphasizes theatre-in-the-round in Scarborough. He acts and stage manages. Ayckbourn on Joseph: “He believed that all of us shouldn’t be purely concerned with our own little role in the theatre, that theatre people should be total theatre people.”

1958 –Writes first play, under pseudonym “Roland Allen,” The Square Cat, at Joseph’s request. Ayckbourn: “He [Joseph] said to me, ‘If you want a better part [Ayckbourn was playing Nicky in Bell, Book, and Candle], you’d better write one for yourself. Write a play, I’ll do it. If it’s any good.’ And I said, ‘Fine.’”

1959 –Marries Christine Roland, writes Love After All. The Square Cat and Love After All (“Roland Allen” plays) performed in Scarborough by Studio Theatre Company.

1960 –National Service at RAF Cardington, Bedfordshire (two days).
–First child born.
–Dad’s Tale (“Roland Allen” play) performed in Scarborough.

–Standing Room Only (“Roland Allen” play) in Scarborough. Although West End producer Peter Bridge likes the script and attempts production throughout the next two years, the play is never produced on a London stage.

1962 –Becomes founding member and Associate Director of the theatre company at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent.
–Children’s play, Xmas v. Mastermind, in Stoke: “most disastrous play I’ve ever done.”
–Standing Room Only in Stoke.

1963 –Mr. Whatnot performed at Stoke.

1964 –Leaves the Stoke company. Last appearance as an actor.
–Mr. Whatnot becomes first A. play to be produced in London, to disastrous reviews.
–Joins the BBC in Leeds as radio drama producer, vowing never to write again.

1965 –Meet My Father performs in Scarborough.

1967 –The Sparrow performs at Scarborough.
–Under new title of Relatively Speaking, Meet My Father performs in London, to favorable reviews. It becomes A.’s first published play and first major “hit.”

1969 –How the Other Half Loves performed in Scarborough. “Much of the farcical comedy of this
plot is in its stagescape, a living/dining room which manages simultaneously to be that of the Phillipses and the Fosters, with the two menages co-existing in the same stage space even when the times do not coincide: thus dinner at the Fosters on Thursday is played simultaneously with dinner at the Phillipses on Friday, with constant dovetailing and crosscutting” (Ian Watson, Conversations with Ayckbourn). Revision for Broadway is only Ayckbourn play until Callisto Five set outside of England (in NYC), not terribly successful in New York.
–Relatively Speaking produced for television by BBC.
–Countdown in Scarborough.

1970
–Leaves BBC; Director of Productions at Library Theatre in the Round, Scarborough.
–Family Circles in Scarborough.

1971
–Time and Time Again in Scarborough.

1972
–Absurd Person Singular in Scarborough.
–Time and Time Again in London.

1973
–The Norman Conquests in Scarborough: consists of three plays, each taking place simultaneously in different rooms of a country house: Table Manners in the dining room; Living Together in the living room; and Round and Round the Garden in the conservatory. A., having experimented extensively with stage space, now begins his study of stage time.
–Absurd Person Singular in London.
–Evening Standard Best Comedy Award for APS.

1974
–Absent Friends in Scarborough: first A.’s “serious” comedies; recently had US premier, NY.
–Confusions, five interlinked one-act plays, at Scarborough.
–Service Not Included, A.’s only screenplay written initially for television, on BBC 2.
–Norman Conquests in London.
–Evening Standard Best Play Award and Plays and Players Best Play Award for Norman Conquests. Variety Club of Great Britain Playwright of the Year for Absurd Person Singular and Norman Conquests.

1975
–Jeeves, musical based on P. G. Wodehouse characters, score by Andrew Lloyd Webber, Lon.
–Bedroom Farce, three beds onstage representing three bedrooms and the couples who inhabit them, in Scarborough.
–Absent Friends in London.

1976
–Scarborough company moves from seasonal arrangement in the Library to its own year-round permanent theatre in a converted school—subsequently named the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round.
–Just Between Ourselves in Scarborough: attracted critics to A.’s writing on oppression of women in marriage. “As we meet the characters on three separate birthdays during the course of a year, Pam becomes increasingly sour in her relationship with Neil, who leans on Dennis for support and is given ill-informed and disastrous investment advice as a result. Vera is finally driven into catatonia, but even this fails to shake Dennis into the vaguest awareness of the responsibility he has for her condition” (Watson).
–Confusions in London.
–Time and Time Again produced on television by ATV.

1977
–Ten Times Table.
–Bedroom Farce and Just Between Ourselves in London.
–Norman Conquests produced for television by Thames TV.
–Evening Standard Best Play Award for Just Between Ourselves.

1978
–Joking Apart in Scarborough.
–Men on Women on Men in Scarborough: one of a series of unpublished late-night and lunch time revues with scores by Paul Todd.
–Ten Times Table in London.
–Just Between Ourselves produced for television by Yorkshire TV.

1979
–Sisterly Feelings in Scarborough: the first of Ayckbourn’s “multiple outcome” plays; either
one or the other sister has an affair with a handsome sportsman, depending on the toss of a coin. First and last scenes are the same in either case.

-Taking Steps in Scarborough: a farce relying on A.’s innovative staging: three stories of a country house, connected by spiral staircases, are all played on a flat surface.

-Joking Apart in London.

-Joking Apart shares Plays and Players Award for Best Comedy of 1979.

1980

-Suburban Strains in Scarborough: full-length musical, score by Paul Todd.
-First Course in Scarborough: review, score by Paul Todd.
-Second Course in Scarborough: review, score by Paul Todd.
-Season’s Greetings in Scarborough.
-Sisterly Feelings, Taking Steps in London.
-Bedroom Farce produced for television by Granada TV.

1981

-Me, Myself, and I in Scarborough: three reviews, score by Paul Todd.
-Way Upstream in Scarborough. A.’s most darkly symbolic play, and most ambitious in terms of staging: action takes place aboard a boat (England’s ship of state) sailing up a river; actual boat and water are called for. Play also tours to Houston, Texas.
-Making Tracks in Scarborough: a musical, score by Paul Todd.
-Suburban Strains in London.

1982

-Intimate Exchanges in Scarborough: by far the most ambitious of A.’s “multiple outcome” plays; two characters wade through a virtual television series of possible plots, ending in sixteen possible conclusions.
-A Trip to Scarborough in Scarborough: combines Sheridan plot with two of A.’s own.
-Making Tracks revived in Scarborough.
-Season’s Greetings and Way Upstream in London.

1983

-Backnumbers in Scarborough: a revue, score by Paul Todd.
-Incidental Music in Scarborough: a revue, score by Paul Todd.
-It Could Be Any One of Us in Scarborough: spoof of Agatha Christie mysteries.
-Making Tracks at Greenwich Theatre.

1984

-The Seven Deadly Virtues in Scarborough: musical musings on both “natural” and “supernatural” virtues, score by Paul Todd.
-A Chorus of Disapproval in Scarborough: a play set in the mythical town of East Pendon, about a modern MacHeath’s amours during rehearsals of The Beggar’s Opera.
-The Westwoods in Scarborough: two brief musical revues, score by Paul Todd.
-Intimate Exchanges at Greenwich Theatre and then London at Ambassador’s Theatre.

1985

-Woman in Mind in Scarborough.
-Boy Meets Girl/Girl Meets Boy in Scarborough: musical revue, score by Paul Todd.
-A Chorus of Disapproval in London.
-Absurd Person Singular, Absent Friends produced for television by BBC.

1986

-Starts two-year leave-of-absence at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough to act as a Company Director at the National Theatre, London.
-Granted the Freedom of the Borough of Scarborough.
-Mere Soup Songs in Scarborough: musical revue, score by Paul Todd.
-Mere Soup Songs in London.
-Woman in Mind in London.
-Me, Myself, and I at NT, London, as late-night entertainment.
-Evening Standard Best Comedy Award, Olivier Best Comedy Award, Drama Best Comedy Award for A Chorus of Disapproval.

1987

-Henceforward… in Scarborough: could be termed A.’s science fiction debut, but is really about a husband who chooses profession (art) over love and family.
-A Small Family Business at National Theatre, London: tackles morality of the business world as family resorts to fraud, extortion, and murder to keep furniture business afloat.
-Mere Soup Songs at National Theatre, London, as late-night entertainment.
Season’s Greetings and Way Upstream produced for television by BBC.
– Receives CBE in New Year Honours List.

1988
– Returns to Artistic Directorship of the Stephen Joseph Theatre.
– Man of the Moment in Scarborough: a meditation on fame and morality.
– Mr. A’s Amazing Maze Plays in Scarborough.
– A Small Family Business tours UK and overseas; opens in London’s West End.
– A Chorus of Disapproval produced as feature film by Michael Winner.
– Evening Standard Best Play Award for A Small Family Business.
– Plays and Players Best Director Award for Arthur Miller’s A View from the Bridge.

1989
– The Revengers’ Comedies in Scarborough.
– The Inside Outside Slide Show.

1990

1991
– The Revengers’ Comedies in London.
– Absent Friends, Taking Steps premieres in New York.

Alan Ayckbourn: An Introduction to the Man and his Work

English playwright Alan Ayckbourn is popular and prolific, having written and produced some fifty plays in Scarborough and London. At the time of this writing, The Revengers’ Comedies and Invisible Friends, which premiered in Scarborough in 1989 and London in 1991, are his latest plays to be published, but he has written and produced six plays since and is scheduled to put his newest play, as yet unwritten and untitled, into rehearsal on February 5, 1994. In addition to his own productions, Ayckbourn’s plays continue to be seen in productions throughout the English-speaking world, and translations of his plays appear regularly in Europe. Because he is both popular and prolific, he has, until lately, been ignored by most theatre critics and scholars. Although his plays have received major West End productions almost from the beginning of his writing career, and hence have been reviewed in British newspapers, Ayckbourn’s work was for years routinely dismissed as being too slight for serious study. Notable exceptions to this dismissal have been, among a few others, Benedict Nightingale, Sidney Howard White, and Michael Billington, who have championed and commented usefully on his work for many years. Recently, however, other scholars have begun to view Ayckbourn as an important commentator on the lifestyles of the British suburban middle-class and as a stylistic innovator, experimenting with theatrical styles within the boundaries set by popular tastes.

Of the critics who have commented on his work from the late 1960s to the present, the overwhelming majority see in his work a formal progression (this word best describing their value judgment) from light boulevard comedy to darker, more serious plays. Sidney Howard White’s comment may be considered typical, commending Ayckbourn for his progress from a “nimble worker of farces to a Chekhovian writer of comedy.” This view of Ayckbourn’s work suggests an evolution in style and theme that is stately and ordered, rather like the early views of human evolution: from less good, to better, to best. However, I propose a different, hopefully more accurate view of Ayckbourn’s
artistic evolution, one closer to the contemporary view of natural evolution: as a bush with many side branches and doublings back rather than a ladder with rungs neatly marked with improvements. Far from leaving farce behind in the 1970s, for example, Ayckbourn continues to employ its elements in plays as recent as *Man of the Moment* and *Revelers’ Comedies*, and he considers farce among the most sophisticated and difficult of theatrical styles in which to succeed. And serious, darker themes reach back into Ayckbourn’s career as least as far as 1972’s *Time and Time Again*, in which the seeds of his theatrical commentary on domestic oppression are planted. Ayckbourn himself describes his work in terms of stylistic and thematic “phases,” which have alternated over the years of his career, and which may be interrupted by new ideas. In addition to farces, “black farces” (Ayckbourn’s term), comedies of wit and manners, and serious plays in comic form, he has also written musicals, revues, and children’s plays, and has done so over the course of his career. In the best of his plays, “the idea and the technique come together,” so that form and content complement each other with a precision and effectiveness which elevates them into the realm of the finest of English-speaking comedy.

Alan Ayckbourn’s is a life wholly given over to the theatre from his days at Haileybury Public School onwards. Unlike other British playwrights of his generation, whose early work grew out of a literary or experimental background, Ayckbourn’s early plays were a direct response to the need to fill a small theatre in a seaside resort town, a sizable percentage of whose clients were holiday-makers. Since he has remained artistically connected with Scarborough throughout his career, this need has, more than any other single force, shaped his growth as a popular dramatist. Over the course of his career, Ayckbourn has learned to craft his plays such that even his most dour social observations are presented within a theatrical framework which remains accessible to a general theatre-going public.

By choice, Ayckbourn writes plays which are structurally familiar to a mainstream theatre clientele: comedies of manner, farces, children’s plays, and musicals. The anomalous *Way Upstream* represents a fascinating mixture of comedy of manners and allegory. Over the years, Ayckbourn has come to believe that in presenting his themes in these traditional forms, “I do really treat theatre as pure art,” as he said in an interview with Ian Watson. “That’s why I don’t like heavy political themes. Of course one can write a play about women’s liberation—it’s a very important topic—but I don’t think it’s very satisfying when they stand on a chair and tell the men in the audience that they’re pigs. And that’s where I differ from agitprop theatre, in that I hate being told things.” Although Ayckbourn admires playwrights of non-linear drama, such as Harold Pinter, and claims to have been influenced by them in developing his voice, that influence seems largely to have manifested itself in thematic rather than stylistic terms in his plays.

But if Ayckbourn’s style is traditional, that is, realistic and linear, his dazzling and endlessly inventive variations within it display an impressive array of comic forms and theatrical diversity: sets which interpenetrate each other to suggest the tangled lives of two couples; interlocking comedies which suggest offstage characters and action as vivid as the onstage action an audience can see; multiple plot outcomes which, taken together, illustrate the consequences of seemingly trivial decisions; and always the accretion of farcical elements hurtling characters toward often disastrous ends which seem both
predestined and natural. Not only is Ayckbourn England’s most prolific playwright; he is, within traditional boundaries, also its most formally and technically innovative. Drama critic Michael Billington said of him, “He is fascinated by what theatre can do. He is even more fascinated by showing that there is virtually nothing that it cannot do.”

Some critics have found in Ayckbourn’s characters fully fleshed, three-dimensional characters, while others see them as emblems of middle-class types. Certainly some of Ayckbourn’s characters are fully rounded: his comedies portray a rich tableau of domestic relationships, and it does not overstate the case to assert that his abilities are Chekhovian in portraying complex characterizations and exploring the interpenetration of laughter and tears, the comic and the tragic. Like Chekhov’s indolent and immobilized aristocrats, many of Ayckbourn’s characters are trapped by social constraints which they seem incapable of challenging. As they prosecute their endless round of meals, family occasions, parties, business deals, and adulteries, their behaviors illuminate the expressed and suppressed desires of Britain’s middle class. Bernard Levin wrote in 1977 that it was with the play *Just Between Ourselves* that Ayckbourn crossed the threshold from two-dimensional to three-dimensional characterization when he presented a “bitter depiction of real people in real pain.” However, two years later, Robert Cushman wrote that Ayckbourn’s characters were more type than individual. In a 1979 review of *Sisterly Feelings*, he stated that “Mr. Ayckbourn sees his people less in terms of character than in terms of domestic circumstance,” and about some of Ayckbourn’s characters this seems entirely accurate. In some plays he does indeed sacrifice three-dimensional characterization for flatter characters which illuminate middle class types. In his most memorable characterizations, however, he manages to combine a rich three-dimensionality and particularity with an emblematic quality which allows the characters to represent a social context or interpersonal issue. Hence, Susan in *Woman in Mind* is both an individual character and emblematic of the oppressed housewife; Marjorie in *Just Between Ourselves* is both a memorably horrific mother and mother-in-law and the emblem of the usurping relative; Karen in *The Revengers’ Comedies* haunts the memory both as a woman suffering a particular and dangerous psychosis and as emblematic of an important Ayckbourn character type: the agent of destruction. Interestingly, these repeated characterizations often become crucial determinants of the formal shape an Ayckbourn play may take.

Over the course of an ongoing career, Ayckbourn has developed sophisticated and unique insights into such subjects as marriage; family life; innocent and volitional destructiveness; the success ethic; male oppression of women, particularly in the marriage relationship; the penchant for women, particularly wives, to be complicit in their own oppression, and so on.

Although critical discourse on Ayckbourn is growing, much about the playwright is still in the form of interviews with him and newspaper and periodical articles discussing individual plays at the time of their first production. The most extensive of the interviews with Ayckbourn is the book-length *Conversations with Ayckbourn* by Ian Watson (London: Faber and Faber, 1988). This book covers some aspects of Ayckbourn’s life and career until 1981 and then does a quick update covering the years 1981 to 1987. Other interviews include Paul Allen’s “Interview with Alan Ayckbourn,” published in 1983 in
Marxism Today and Mark Lawson’s interview published in The Times, 27 June 1987. Ayckbourn is quotable, and much of his commentary appears in newspaper and journal articles about his work. Of the many theatre critics who have reviewed and continue to review Ayckbourn’s plays when they premiere or are revived, the most important are Benedict Nightingale, Irving Wardle, Michael Billington, Sheridan Morley, Mel Gussow, and Robert Cushman.

At present two books, both entitled Alan Ayckbourn, have been published about Ayckbourn’s life. One was written by Sidney Howard White (1984), and the other by Michael Billington (1990). Both survey his career briefly, giving some attention to most of his plays. Both books provide valuable biographical details, particularly about Ayckbourn’s early life, although the playwright’s extensive interview with Watson is actually more revealing of character, opinions, and methodology than either of these books. Both books give brief accounts and analysis of many of Ayckbourn’s plays. Billington attempts to group the plays thematically, and since his thesis is that Ayckbourn’s work has “progressed” chronologically, he sometimes forces a play of one decade to fit into a particular category with other plays of the same era. White’s 1984 book was the first large treatment of Ayckbourn’s plays and, of course, does not deal with any plays of the last nine years.

A recent book edited by Bernard Dukore, Alan Ayckbourn, A Casebook, combines the scholarship of himself and others in a series of essays dealing with Ayckbourn topics. These essays tend to grapple with issues which range across the breadth of Ayckbourn’s output. An essay by Felicia Hardison Londré, for example, traces the development of Ayckbourn’s female characters, while an essay by Richard Hornby does the same with his male characters. Three of the essays deal in some detail with a single play or trilogy: two focus on the directing of A Chorus of Disapproval and Taking Steps, and one examines The Norman Conquests thematically and stylistically. The book also provides an excellent interview with Ayckbourn by Dukore, the most recent taking of the playwright’s artistic pulse. Another recently published book, Laughter in the Dark by Albert E. Kalson, examines the Ayckbourn canon from the intriguing if sometimes forced perspective that, from The Square Cat to The Revengers’ Comedies, a continuing character in all the plays is Ayckbourn himself, split into many sometimes opposing personas. Journal articles and chapters about Ayckbourn in books include John Russell Taylor’s chapter, “Art and Commerce,” in Contemporary English Drama, edited by C. W. E. Bigsby (1981), and his article “Only When They Laugh?” in Plays and Players (1982).

Because his output is so voluminous, the few books about Ayckbourn, trying to be comprehensive in approach, are able to analyze in only the briefest terms any one play. The following two papers give a fuller historical treatment of the selected plays, and provide more detailed analysis, particularly about the subjects outlined above. Theatre reviews of Ayckbourn’s work tend to focus on individual plays rather than discuss the evolution of style and thematic treatment in any detail; interviews with the playwright are illuminating and useful but tend to be anecdotal and uncritical; and journal articles, to date, have discussed subjects other than those I will analyze. I must stress that all have been useful in my research, and I have acknowledged them either in substance or direct quote where illuminating; all have provided valuable pieces to the puzzle of the evolution of Ayckbourn’s
style and thematic concerns. However, I found the puzzle to be still partially incomplete, despite these pieces, with significant gaps remaining to be filled through close reading of scripts and observation of texts (that is, scripts in production). I hope that my work fills in some of those gaps.

Absurd Person Singular:
Offstage Action, Characters, and Locations, and the “Fraught” Marriage and Business Relationships

I. Formal Elements: Offstage Action, Characters, and Locations

Ayckbourn recalls that it was during the writing of his hugely successful Absurd Person Singular that he “was becoming increasingly fascinated by the dramatic possibilities of offstage action,” not as a theatrically realized metaphor or any such abstraction, but simply as a device “with plenty of comic potential still waiting to be tapped.” This comedy was to be his “first offstage action play,” the first staged expression of his dicta that “an audience’s imagination can do far better work than any number of playwright’s words,” and that “the offstage character hinted at but never seen can be dramatically as significant and telling as his onstage counterparts.” For the first time, in this play he locates action and characters in imaginary space which is completely beyond the visual range of the audience and not linked to actual settings in any way.

Ayckbourn acknowledged that using offstage action presents special challenges to the playwright. For it to be effective, he noted, the dramatist must “show his action” rather than “describe” it; if he does not, “the audience can rapidly come to the conclusion that they’re sitting in the wrong auditorium”—that is, that the dramatic incidents being presented to their view are less relevant to the unfolding of plot, characterization, and theme than those described onstage as taking place out of their view, offstage. Fortunately, Ayckbourn is generally successful at confining his significant action onstage, employing a number of strategies to bring to life characters never seen by the audience and to “show action” which occurs offstage.

Ayckbourn’s strategies to “show action” occurring offstage emphatically do not include characters’ onstage recitation of past events, such as the autobiographical speeches of Sam Shepard’s characters or the messengers’ speeches of classical or Shakespearean tragedies. Nor do they include tantalizing descriptions of unseen characters who, eventually appear onstage. For Ayckbourn, an offstage character must remain offstage for the entire play, his presence registered entirely by other than visual stage elements.

One strategy which Ayckbourn sometimes employs is concurrent offstage and onstage action in which onstage incidents are augmented by offstage action occurring at the same time, with onstage characters simultaneously participating in both. As in the earlier Time and Time Again, in Absurd Person Singular Ayckbourn uses a second perhaps less imaginative strategy. Here, offstage incidents
occur concurrently with those onstage, but onstage characters participate in them not at all or only briefly as they enter and exit.

*Absurd Person Singular* employs five different offstage areas for concurrent action over the course of the three acts (each act consists of one scene) and three offstage characters who are heard but never seen. The play dramatizes three successive Christmas Eve parties (taking place “*last Christmas, this Christmas, and next Christmas*”), held in the houses of three couples: Sidney and Jane Hopcroft, Geoffrey and Eva Jackson, and Ronald and Marion Brewster-Wright. As originally conceived by the playwright, the parties were to occur in the sitting rooms of the three couples, but Ayckbourn notes that he soon “realized that I was viewing the evening from totally the wrong perspective.” The formal sitting rooms lent themselves to formal conversations and polite activities. But Ayckbourn was interested in the portrayal of more intimate events in which characters could more quickly reveal the true natures of their personalities and relationships. He solved his problem by setting his plays in the more informal kitchens, thus also sparing himself the tedious business of writing the introductions and small talk. An upstairs bedroom and gardens just outside the kitchen doors are also employed by the playwright for incidental offstage action. Two sitting rooms, then, those of the Hopcrofts and the Jacksons, constitute the two major areas in the play where offstage action occurs. There the rituals of polite discourse are played out; meanwhile, onstage, in the kitchens, where much more of domestic life is actually lived, the social barriers tumble.

A couple named Dick and Lottie Potter and a large dog named George are heard but never seen onstage. Ayckbourn introduces the Potters early in Act One. While we see Jane Hopcroft preparing herself for company in the command center of her kitchen, we hear the Potters arrive at the Christmas party which is to take place in the offstage sitting room. The theatrical device which Ayckbourn introduces will serve throughout the remainder of the play: when the kitchen door is open, we can hear the voices in the sitting room. Jane peeks through the door to see them; immediately we hear “[a jolly hearty male voice and…a jolly hearty female voice. They are Dick and Lottie Potter, whom we have the good fortune never to meet in person, but quite frequently hear whenever the door to the kitchen is open].” Since Ayckbourn can only establish these characters aurally he is careful to note that “[both have loud, braying, distinctive laughs],” so that, when we hear them again, we will quickly recognize them. Then, completing his stage convention, he indicates that Jane “[closes the door, cutting off the voices].”

Gradually, as the scene progresses, a fuller picture of the Potters and their relationship to other characters is built up from bits and pieces of conversation and laughter heard through the kitchen door. Ayckbourn weaves the lives and personalities of characters we never see with those onstage, using offstage characters to reveal important personality traits of his onstage characters. For example, the Potters serve as a foil to the snobbery of the Brewster-Wrights. Lottie Potter becomes the vehicle by which he introduces Geoffrey’s major personality traits of lechery, infidelity, and insensitivity to his wife. Geoffrey’s frank sexual predation—he appraises Lottie’s physical attributes with the practiced eye
of a livestock judge—becomes the central issue of the second act, and his eventual emasculation at Eva’s hands an important aspect of the third.

We next encounter the Potters in act two, at the house of Geoffrey and Eva, a year later. The Jacksons’ relationship has now reached the stage of separation; indeed, just before the arrival of the guests, the drunken and drugged Eva, who never utters a word during the entire scene, scrawls the first of her suicide notes. Dick Potter, we learn from Jane, is playing in the sitting room with the third of Ayckbourn’s offstage characters in *Absurd Person Singular*, the enormous dog George (“Huge, isn’t he?” Jane observes to Eva, “Like a donkey—huge”). The onstage action once again takes place in the kitchen; the offstage incidents occur in a sitting room, and a door between the two acts as a sound barrier. Hence, when Jane Hopcroft enters Eva’s kitchen, we hear George barking until the door closes. Jane informs Eva that the hearty Dick has bought George a rubber ring for Christmas and that the two of them are, at that moment, “running up and down your hallway out there—Dick throwing it, him trying to catch it.” The information adds to our store of knowledge about Dick, giving us a clearer image of him, and at the same time it creates the impression of frantic offstage action, a complement to the increasingly farcical events onstage as Eva methodically rings all the changes on possible ways to kill herself while the other characters unwittingly prevent her.

Ayckbourn keeps audience attention focused on onstage kitchen activities, but, making sure offstage incidents are not forgotten, he sends in both verbal and aural reports about Dick, Lottie, and George. “[Sidney opens the door and goes out. We hear Lottie’s laughter and the dog barking distantly for a moment before the door closes.]” However, a few minutes later, all is not well between dog and man offstage, as Marion reports when she enters the kitchen. Again, as the door opens we hear the Potters and George for a moment, but this time, “[the dog barks and raised voices are heard].” This is the aural signal that something is amiss, and we soon learn what that is from Marion, who has come into the kitchen to get help: “I say—something rather ghastly’s happened…. That dog…he’s just bitten that Potter man in the leg…. Terribly nasty.” The Potters, we learn, have now left to seek medical attention for Dick’s wound, leaving George alone in the sitting room. When Marion opens the door, we hear “[a low growl]” from offstage, and she describes what she sees: “It’s sort of crouching in the doorway chewing a shoe and looking terribly threatening…. I don’t think it’s going to let us through, you know.” Marion’s disbelieving husband, and later Sidney, both confirm this fact by attempting unsuccessfully to get past the dog: George now imprisons them all in the kitchen for the remainder of the scene.

Ayckbourn uses several theatrical devices, including the dog, to justify his characters’ remaining onstage throughout the farcical events which follow, and to heighten the humor of those events. His craftsmanship is revealed not so much in employing this device as in his careful preparation, making the device seem credible, even inevitable. Both Acts One and Two of *Absurd Person Singular* begin just minutes before the guests arrive for their Christmas parties, and it seems therefore natural for hosts to be in the kitchens as they prepare for their guests. Ayckbourn keeps the action centered in the kitchen after their arrival in Act One largely through aspects of characterization: Jane, uncomfortable with company she does not know, continually retreats into her inner sanctum; then Sidney and the others gradually drift
into the kitchen in response to her isolationist behavior. In the second act, Eva’s attempted suicide and the efforts of other characters to help her out of what they wrongly perceive to be domestic difficulties again centers the action in the kitchen; later, George, stirred to madness by Dick Potter’s well-meant torments, keeps the characters pinioned in the room. The playwright employs all of these strategies in order to make it plausible that, despite the fact that a social gathering is supposed to be taking place in the offstage sitting rooms of the two houses, the characters really spend much of their time in the onstage kitchens. In Act Three, which takes place one year later in the kitchen of the Brewster-Wrights, Ayckbourn alters his strategy. In contrast to the first two acts, no Christmas party has been planned, and roughly half of the third act is taken up with activities which occur before the arrival of the unexpected guests, the Hopcrofts. Eva Jackson, and later her husband, share the first half of the scene with Ronald Brewster-Wright, but it is to help him take care of the convalescent dipsomaniac, Marion. When the Hopcrofts do arrive, Marion is by now up and in the kitchen and she as well as all the others are kept there by the fact that, apart from Marion’s bedroom, only the kitchen sustains a temperature above freezing, the heat being off in all the other rooms of the house—a theatrical correlative of the frosty state of marital relations in the Brewster-Wright household.

Like the now banished George, Dick and Lottie are not physically in attendance this third year—because at last Ayckbourn would have no plausible reason to keep them out of sight in another room of the frigid house. But the others inform us subtly that their lives have become so intertwined with the offstage characters that they are not forgotten. The Potters, though unseen, still hover over the action.

Intrinsic to the success of Ayckbourn’s use of offstage characters and spaces is the very fact that they are never seen, their physical attributes left to the audience’s imaginations. Ayckbourn accrues two specific and unique benefits from requiring his audience to participate in this interpretive free-play: first, a remarkable stage economy, vital to the success of popular social comedy; second, by offering his audience characters and locations never seen, he encourages the audience to act as imaginative collaborators in bringing his theatrical text to fruition. This combination of audience-conceived and playwright-conceived characters is a crucial element of this play’s popular and critical success. A play is bound to seem more memorable and representative of social verities if some of its characters and settings are imaginative recreations drawn from individual audience members’ own social realities. In addition, his creation of offstage sitting rooms facilitated Ayckbourn’s effective drawing of the contrast between the formal and informal modes of social interaction: the unseen sitting rooms are just as much foils for the onstage kitchens as are Dick and Lottie Potter for the onstage characters.

II. Themes: The “Fraught” Marriage and Business Relationships

Ayckbourn presents three marriages in Absurd Person Singular, all, in different ways, dramatic embodiments of the playwright’s profound pessimism about the marriage relationship and illustrative of his belief that “in general, I don’t think people were meant to live with each other for too long.” The relationship between Marion and Ronald Brewster-Wright is familiar as another version of the “dull”
marriage explored in *Woman in Mind*. However there is more of wistfulness and bafflement in Ronald’s feelings for his wife than those of Gerald for Susan. Ronald is a figure who seems to have had tender feelings for Marion, as indeed for his first wife, but through lack of imagination and sensitivity has lost their respect and affection; and having lost those, he has now given up caring much about her.

In a long, rambling, and telling admission in the third act, Ronald expresses his bafflement and failure to Geoffrey, telling the story of his first wife’s desertion: “Seemed pretty happy on the whole. Then one day, she suddenly ups and offs and goes. Quite amazing. I mean, I had literally no idea she was going to.” He never saw her again and later “took up tennis to forget her and married Marion.” Now their subsequent marriage is also emotionally dead, the two living estranged lives in their large house and rarely even meeting, but Ronald harbors no particular resentment and feels no distress. Throughout the play Ronald is a confused and enervated figure, rarely able to muster more emotion than vague geniality or mild irritation. Women, he confesses, are a “completely closed book” to him, and his wives’ sudden rages have always baffled him: “Both my wives, God bless them, they’ve given me a great deal of pleasure over the years but, by God, they’ve cost me a fortune in fixtures and fittings.” This is not far from the language of a man who has purchased complicated equipment and somehow misplaced the owner’s manual to explain its use.

That the Brewster-Wrights will never regain any mutual affection they may have one time enjoyed seems a certainty. Ayckbourn includes clues to this throughout the play, the most telling of which occur in the second and third acts. For instance, as Ronald is in the process of being nearly electrocuted, clutching the live wires of a light socket, vibrating and unable to speak, Marion shows not the least concern, or even more than mild interest. Marion too has become enervated and world-weary as a result of her emotionally atrophied relationship with Ronald, and she too recalls her past life with regret and her present situation as irretrievably hopeless. The marriage of the Brewster-Wrights, with the exception of some increasingly rare sparks of irritation, is an extinguished fire, another dramatic example of Ayckbourn’s “dull” marriages in which both partners “really can’t be bothered” even quarreling anymore because of their mutual indifference.

The other two marriages in the play, however, fall into Ayckbourn’s other category, the “fraught” marriage. Those in this category have usually been married for a shorter time than those in dull marriages. The relationship is still “full of passion” and hence of conflict, even physical conflict. Participants in the fraught marriage still “care about each other; it’s just that they handle each other in boxing gloves half the time, and not with kid gloves.” However, lying dormant in this tempestuous relationship are the seeds of its probable destruction, a tendency for the passion to yield eventually to either separation or the indifference of the dull marriage. This happens, according to Ayckbourn, because of a loss of individuality, even of identity, which marriage’s compromises tend to bring about:

I think a big piece of us dies in a marriage…. One personality, being stronger, will eclipse the other. Sometimes that happens by slow erosion—in the woman’s case it’s usually a long-term marathon. She’ll just whittle away…. And that’s a case of one personality having gently established a superiority.
The marriage of Sidney and Jane Hopcroft is an example of a relationship in which there is still mutual affection, but in which one partner, Sidney, is well on his way to eclipsing the personality of the other. A major theme of *Absurd Person Singular* is the rise of Sidney Hopcroft.

Throughout the play, all of Sidney’s actions, including the social schooling of his wife, are motivated by his intense ambition to succeed as a land developer. Indeed, his only reason for hosting a Christmas party in Act One is to impress and cultivate the influential Ronald Brewster-Wright (investment banker) and Geoffrey Jackson (successful architect). Because of his unprepossessing appearance and manner and his distinctly petty bourgeois background, both Ronald and Geoffrey underestimate Sidney’s personality and resolve to succeed (actually an almost rabid will to power), and both Marion and Geoffrey pour scorn on Jane and him. But by Act Three, Sidney’s successes, coupled with Geoffrey’s failure, give both him and Ronald reason to respect, even to fear Hopcroft. When Sidney and Jane come uninvited to the front door of the Brewster-Wrights, Geoffrey asks Ronald why he doesn’t “just go in the hall and shout ‘Go away’ through the letter box?” Ronald replies, “Because he happens to have a very large deposit account with my bank.” Ayckbourn’s point, developed through the events of the play involving Sidney’s financial rise, is that business success confers social acceptance and power. It is that power which allows Sidney to visit upon the heads of those who formerly scorned him his odious party game of forfeits at the end of the play, in which they literally dance attendance upon him.

This success in business is not achieved, however, without ruinous cost to the relationship of Sidney and Jane, for as Sidney rises in his business accomplishments and contacts, his personality becomes more forceful and domineering towards all around him, including Jane; Jane, meanwhile, while acting more aggressively towards others as a result of her husband’s successes, also becomes more dominated by him.

The welter of rituals and territoriality which has developed in the Hopcroft marriage over the subject of cleaning is a good indicator of the evolving state of their relationship. Jane, obsessively tidy, has established her kitchen as her domain; here, at least, she is in control, and Sidney acknowledges this in Act One with good humor and even affection and admiration. For her part, Jane considers her house cleaning a support, almost an homage, to her husband’s ambitions: “I don’t want you to be let down. Not by me,” she tells Sidney. “I want it to look good for you…. It’s special tonight, isn’t it? I mean, with Mr. and Mrs. Brewster-Wright and Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. It’s important.” And Sidney acknowledges her eagerness to do her part to further their upward mobility by reassuring her that she has never failed him in the past.

In Act One, although Sidney views his wife’s cleaning habits as slightly amusing, he nonetheless acknowledges them to be helpful, her contribution to furthering their social–and, therefore, business–lives. By Act Two, after Sidney has had some measure of success in accomplishing his development schemes, he is less sanguine about Jane’s cleaning obsession. He comes into the Jacksons’ kitchen and discovers that his wife has decided to clean Eva’s oven, and exclaims “I just can’t believe my eyes. You can’t be at it again…. Mr. and Mrs. Brewster-Wright have arrived, you know. Ron and
Marion. I hope they don’t chance to see you down there.” Many things have changed socially for Sidney since Act One. He is now on a first-name basis with the Brewster-Wrights; he has both the financial means and the fashion awareness to care about his and Jane’s clothes. Jane has not kept pace with these changes, and he is irritated by this. Later in the scene, when Jane proposes to sweep the Jacksons’ floor so that it will look more presentable when Eva’s physician arrives, Sidney is more direct with her than he would have been in Act One; by the third act, Sidney’s stronger personality has won out over Jane’s desires, and, although he has not yet been wholly successful in her social retraining, he has broken her of the habit of public cleaning. In a hurried moment of private conversation outside the Brewster-Wrights’ back door, Sidney scolds Jane for her behavior at a party which they have just left given by an important developer: “I haven’t yet forgiven you for that business at the party. How did you manage to drop a whole plate of trifle?” Anxiously, Jane replies, “I didn’t clean it up, Sidney, I didn’t clean it up.” If Jane’s propensity to clean were an activity she pursued only in a mistaken belief that it was beneficial to her husband’s upward mobility, it would be of less moment that he has bullied her out of the habit. But cleaning is, in fact, an integral component of Jane’s personality, from which she derives her deepest gratification and pleasure, a fact Ayckbourn takes care to dramatize at the very end of Act One, depicting Jane calming herself after the stress of the party by happily launching into “[a full-scale cleaning operation].” Over the course of three Christmases Sidney has gone a distance toward robbing his wife of this substantial happiness, demanding its sacrifice on the altar of his ambition.

Ayckbourn demonstrates the eclipsing of Jane’s personality by the stronger personality of Sidney in other ways, as well. She has always admired her husband: “You want to know anything, you ask Sidney,” she tells Eva in Act Two; she even finds his small witticisms genuinely funny in the first two acts. But by the third act, this admiration has taken a pathetic turn. In her desire to avoid social blunders and thus anger Sidney, Jane has taken to playing it safe conversationally by often simply repeating, parrot-like, whatever her husband says. Jane’s personality has become obscured in her husband’s dark penumbra; she has moved entirely into his orbit and, by the end of the play, willingly, even gleefully, accedes to his every wish. At the nightmarish conclusion, when Sidney is barking commands at the Jacksons and Brewster-Wrights, who are reluctantly playing the rather cruel party game of forfeits, “Jane, the acolyte, darts in and out of the dancers with a dedicated frenzy.” She, just as the others, literally dances attendance on Sidney, who is revealed at last as the ravenously power-hungry martinet he has trained to become.

To use Ayckbourn’s phrase, the “big piece” of Jane which has “die[d] in…marriage” is emotional and intellectual independence. She has become an appendage to her husband’s stronger personality. As yet, this marriage qualifies as fraught, in the Ayckbourn sense of the word, because the spark of mutual affection is still present. But the prognosis for this marriage of un-equals seems bleak.

In the couple of Geoffrey and Eva Jackson Ayckbourn dramatizes a shift of power in a fraught marriage relationship, away from the husband and toward the wife. Through the first two acts of the play, Geoffrey is the more dominant of the two, basking in his financial and aesthetic successes as an architect and openly prosecuting marital infidelities while Eva, loathing herself and resenting Geoffrey,
slips ever further into drugs and, eventually, suicide attempts. In the third act, the situation is reversed: Eva has become the more confident and dominant of the two, the result of crushing business failures which have financially and emotionally decimated Geoffrey.

That Eva and Geoffrey are experiencing serious marital difficulties is made abundantly clear from the moment they are introduced in Act One. In fact, Eva’s frankness about it so shocks slight acquaintance Sidney that it renders him speechless. She miserably confesses to him that, in her husband’s opinion, “…my existence ended the day he married me. I’m just an embarrassing smudge on a marriage license.” Meanwhile, Geoffrey openly boasts his domination over his wife. When Ronald expresses surprise that Eva allows Geoffrey his infidelities, Geoffrey replies, “Nonsense. She chooses to live with me, she lives by my rules. I mean we’ve always made that perfectly clear.” Geoffrey has, in fact, elevated his thoughts on adultery to the status of advice-column philosophy, claiming “there’s just too much good stuff wandering around simply crying out for it…. ” Eva sums up the current status of her relationship with Geoffrey at the end of the scene when she reminds him that is time to leave: “Your house, your dog, your car, your wife—we all belong to you, darling—we all expect to be provided for. Now are you coming, please?” She appears to accept her submissive role in the marriage and to attempt to exploit it, at least, for security.

The second act, however, reveals the truer nature of the Jacksons’ relationship. This act opens with Eva, attired in a dressing gown, alone in her kitchen growing progressively more drunk on scotch while writing a succession of what are apparently unsatisfactory suicide notes. She will continue both of these activities throughout the act, interspersing them with suicide attempts; she will not utter a word until the end of the act when she begins to sing “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” In a few moments Geoffrey enters, gives Eva a quick kiss, talks briefly about his business problems, and pours himself a drink. In the course of his subsequent long monologue, directed mostly to Eva but occasionally to George, Geoffrey reveals the passion and violence under the surface of his relationship with Eva, explaining that while he is “very patient” he will soon lose his temper and “take a swing” at her. Eva will retaliate by “systematically” trashing their flat. This is their standard routine. Geoffrey is not as smoothly in control of his marriage as he led Ronald and Sidney to believe in Act One; nor is Eva as submissive as she appeared to be. While wife-beating is deplorable, in the Ayckbourn universe it is a signal that there is actually some caring left in the relationship. It is noteworthy that Ayckbourn regards violence and other open displays of hostility as symptomatic of an early stage of marriage, a stage in which sexual attraction and mutual affection remain at least partially intact. The Jacksons have been married only five years. In this stage of the relationship, established power roles have not yet been fully established, and the marital combatants are jockeying for positions of dominance. In some relationships, one partner’s overwhelming personality may greatly shorten or nullify the struggle; one feels this was probably the case in the Hopcroft marriage. But in the Jackson marriage, Eva, though generally dominated, has occasionally struggled against her assigned role of submission. Act Two reveals to us the nadir of Eva’s struggle. She has apparently given up and, instead of destroying more furniture, she has decided to destroy herself. All the suicide notes she scribbles in the scene are variations on the
theme of her being “a burden to everyone.” Eva’s continued attempts at self-destruction, caused by Geoffrey’s constant blows to her self esteem and by his infidelities and threat of abandonment, bear mute witness to her attachment to her husband.

For a few moments after his entrance, Geoffrey does not discern that there is anything more than ordinarily wrong with his wife. When he eventually notices Eva’s state, he is quick to discern the cause: she is still distressed about their late-night-into-the-morning conversation in which he revealed the seriousness of his relationship with one Sally and in which she told him to vacate the premises for his girlfriend’s. But Geoffrey is mystified (or, at least, feigns mystification) as to why Eva should still be upset: “I mean, it was your idea.” Certainly it is the “best thing” for Geoffrey, the self-confessed “sexual Flying Dutchman.” He shares with many of the males in the Ayckbourn canon a sensitivity deficit which makes it difficult for him to empathize with Eva’s predicament. After brief, unsuccessful attempts to rally her spirits (he does not yet realize that she is contemplating suicide), he implores her to resume observing the forms of polite society—at first because it is Christmas Eve and then because he suddenly remembers that guests are due to arrive immediately for a seasonal party. But Eva, never even at the best of times adept at donning the social mask, silently rejects the idea. Her desperation has freed her from any vestige of social restraint: she will remain in nightdress, attempting suicide in various ways throughout the act. It is, in fact, Eva’s refusal to participate in normal social patterns that provides much of the incongruity and humor in the scene.

In order for the Jacksons’ marriage to qualify as “fraught” under Ayckbourn’s rules, it would need still to be animated by mutual affection despite its many problems. And Geoffrey does demonstrate his attachment. For example, Geoffrey has never conceived his new liaison with Sally to preclude a continued relationship with Eva, whom even now he cannot entirely abandon. Of course, this is extremely selfish and self-regarding, but it demonstrates Geoffrey’s continued attachment. More telling is the moment in which Geoffrey finally discerns that Eva is suicidal. He enters the kitchen to discover her out on the window ledge, steeling herself for a fatal leap. Geoffrey “[gently]” brings her down from the ledge, showing genuine concern for her: “Darling, darling, what were you trying to do?” From this moment of realization, Geoffrey pursues behavior which displays his affection for Eva, abandoning the social role he had urged on her a few moments before by leaving their party guests to fend for themselves while he while he fetches a doctor. Indifference is a hallmark of the dull marriage in Ayckbourn’s plays; passionate over-reaction the behavioral indicator of the fraught marriage. At the end of the act the relationship between Eva and Geoffrey is ambiguous. What effect will the attempted suicides have on Geoffrey’s decision to leave his wife? Are they Eva’s last desperate act before she surrenders her will to that of her husband, or are they her trump card in establishing lasting dominance in the relationship?

The answer to these questions is one of the most fascinating thematic features of Act Three. In complete contrast to her precarious emotional state in Act Two, Eva at the beginning of the third act is poised, confident, and now in a position to help Ronald cope with his dipsomaniac wife. This extreme contrast, occurring immediately after the curtain has gone down on her breakdown (though one year
later in the play’s time), raises dramatic questions. What has happened over the course of one year which has so drastically changed Eva’s emotional state? What is now the state of the fraught Jackson marriage?

It may be that Eva’s suicide attempts have so deeply chastened Geoffrey that he has abandoned all thoughts of leaving her; if so, there is not a hint of this explanation in the play. What seems chiefly to have brought the two of them back together is a colossal architectural failure on Geoffrey’s part, which humbles Geoffrey and forces him to rely on Eva’s surprising business expertise. Geoffrey gets his comeuppance as Eva becomes the dominant partner. Tellingly, Eva forces Geoffrey to play Sidney’s dreadful party game at the end of the play. When Geoffrey tries to make their excuses before the game begins, telling Sidney that they must leave, Eva quickly interrupts, “No, we don’t. We’ll play.” Geoffrey mildly remonstrates, “What do you mean, we’ll–”; but his wife interrupts, “If he wants to play, we’ll play, darling.” Geoffrey never speaks again.

In *Absurd Person Singular* Ayckbourn dramatizes three marriages, each different from the other two. It is the interactions of the three couples which gives this play its fascination: the steady rise of the Hopcrofts, the emotional upheavals of the Jacksons, and the continued bafflement and misery of the Brewster-Wrights, all interwoven to create a rich tapestry of the human condition. It is a testimony to Ayckbourn’s extreme skillfulness in presenting his pessimistic outlook on marriage in a popular comic style that *Absurd Person Singular* remains his single most performed play.

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### Woman in Mind:
**Destructive Family Relationships, the Usurping Relative, and the Subjective Viewpoint**

Ayckbourn’s *Woman in Mind* (1985) focuses relentlessly on the issue of a woman entrapped in relationships which progressively overwhelm and destroy her. One of the bleakest plays yet written by Ayckbourn, it chronicles the mental disintegration of its female protagonist into madness, as a result of disastrous and futile family relationships from which she cannot extricate herself. *Woman in Mind* is, even for Ayckbourn, formally experimental. Stylistically, if not thematically, feminist, the play features a female protagonist who not only propels the dramatic narrative, but also provides the exclusive viewpoint from which the audience experiences all the play’s incidents.

**I. Theme: Destructive Family Relationships and the Usurping Relative**

In Alan Ayckbourn’s plays, the home environments and family relationships within it are more likely to destroy than to nurture the psyche, especially the female psyche, and the home of Susan in *Woman in Mind* is among the most psychologically destructive environments he has yet devised. Within this environment an insensitive husband, interfering relatives, lack of communication among family
members, and cessation of sexual relations all contribute to the mental destruction of the principle female character.

Susan is a woman at least resigned to being eclipsed by the stronger personality of her husband. The author describes her as “[an unassuming woman in her forties, used to and happy to play second fiddle to more determinedly motivated personalities than her own].” But during the play she becomes aware of her own growing discontent and begins to feel keenly the failure of her relationships. Susan tells her husband, Gerald, of her new restlessness: “I don’t any longer know what I’m supposed to be doing. I used to be a wife. I used to be a mother. And I loved it….But now…the thrill has gone.” Her youth and her only child both now departed, Susan has only recently begun to face the reality of a dull and loveless marriage. Her inability to revitalize or abandon this marriage will lead to her mental collapse and loss of identity.

Unlike Susan, the men in this play suffer from what Bill Hornby has variously called “lack of imagination” and “lack of recognition,” qualities which he correctly attributes to many of the male characters in the Ayckbourn canon. Susan’s husband and son, Gerald and Rick, are unaware of, or unbelieving in Susan’s crisis. Gerald, for example, claims not even to have noticed the transition from caring to indifference which has taken place in his marriage. When Susan asserts in Act One of Woman in Mind that she and Gerald are no longer in love, he protests: “I do [love you]. At least, I’m not aware that my feelings towards you have altered that much.” Susan then enumerates the many ways in which their relationship has deteriorated, concluding the observation that “It’s nobody's fault. It just happened, over the years”; but Gerald will have none of it. When his interfering sister Muriel enters, interrupting the marital conversation, Gerald, happy for the intrusion, whispers to her, “She’s in a little tiny bit of a mood, Muriel. Don’t worry.” In Gerald’s view, Susan has inaccurately analyzed their relationship; she has merely been experiencing typically female dyspepsia. It is his response whenever she brings up unpleasant subjects, particularly ones in which he may come in for criticism.

Cold, distant Gerald woefully lacks understanding of his wife’s needs, and tends to retreat from the company of his wife into his stultifyingly dull book on the six-hundred-year history of his parish rather than try to improve relations with her. He does not consciously attempt to harm his wife: Gerald just never recognizes the deterioration of his marriage and marriage partner as his spouse does, and this is the essential difference between Gerald and Susan in the play.

Susan, on the other hand, has made a significant emotional investment in her marriage and family. She reminds Gerald, “I run this house. I do all the cooking, the bulk of the washing up, all the laundry…I cope with the sheer boring slog of tidying up after both of you, day after day…. ” Sacrificing for her family has not resulted in happiness; but because she devoted so much of her time and energy to these relationships, when they deteriorate, she has no reserves of happiness independent of them on which to draw. For Susan, the collapse of family relationships is a prelude to mental collapse: she retreats increasingly into a fantasy world which eventually swallows up her sanity and what remains of her identity.
The lack of sexual relations also contributes to the unhappiness in Susan’s marriage. She and Gerald now sleep in separate beds, the physical side of their marriage apparently over. Gerald does not seem to miss their physical intimacy and is surprised that his wife does. But to Susan sex is an integral component, without which the marriage does not function. When the “sexual side” is lost, no other side can remain intact, and the joy and purpose of marriage is gone. Sex is, in fact, a specialized form of marital communication to Susan, and she prizes it primarily for that aspect. Its loss is the prelude to losing all other manners of sharing. In Gerald’s compartmentalized conception, by contrast, sex is a part of marriage no longer essential to the kind of relationship he now desires. He does not prize sex as an opportunity for sharing or communicating because these are no longer activities in which he wishes to engage with Susan—nor possibly with anyone else. He is more than content to have left behind all intimacy, physical as well as emotional.

Ayckbourn considers the denial of sexuality within the marriage relationship to be unnatural. He suggests that meaningful sexual contact is an essential component of any marriage in which the partners hope to maintain esteem and affection, and effectively dramatizes the dismal sterility that results from sexual dysfunction and deprivation: in Woman in Mind, Gerald’s frigidity drives Susan into the arms of an imaginary lover—that is to say, into delusional auto-eroticism.

While Gerald ignores the gradual withering of his marriage, Muriel, Gerald’s interloping sister, actively works to kill it. Muriel is a widow who has come to live with the married couple—“forever,” Susan laments, and Gerald acknowledges this to be true: “Yes, probably forever. Still, what are we to do? She’s no huge problem.” Muriel interferes incompetently with the management of the house, chiefly as a reproach for Susan’s alleged lack of interest. She manages to find ways to shift the blame. For example, she sighs “I thought I’d make some coffee. Since nobody else was….I hope it’s all right. Susan generally manages to find something wrong with my coffee. I’d have thought she’d have made some herself by now, rather than leaving it to me.” The reason for her reproach, the subtext of Muriel’s barbed comments toward Susan and her insisting on providing everyone with a continual round of meals, always virtually lethal, is always that Susan is not treating Gerald as she should. The implication here, of course, is that Muriel has learned the technique.

Muriel clearly wishes to usurp Susan’s place—to replace Gerald’s wife with herself, drawing him away from the marital bond by offering supposed superior domestic blandishments and by constantly criticizing Susan in a way that makes Gerald an unwitting participant to her scheme. Ayckbourn underscores the calculation of his usurping relatives by structuring the action so that they make their unflattering comparisons only when the husbands are within earshot; and they almost always make their appeal directly to him, referring to the wife in the third person even when she is present. It is the insensitivity of the husbands towards their wives which seems to disallow them from taking a stand against these malicious activities. Indeed, Gerald shows more indulgence toward the usurper, in terms of allowing her to continue in her calculations, than toward his wife when she makes attempts to prevent them. Gerald is far more solicitous of Muriel and her deranged attempts to contact her deceased husband than he is of Susan’s attempts simply to make some sort of contact with him. The cumulative
effect of this unwitting complicity between interfering relative and insensitive marriage partner is to isolate and embitter the usurped partner. Marriage being a difficult enough proposition in the Ayckbourn canon, the activities of the usurping relative only hasten its destruction. Susan is partly able to retain her mental resilience in the face of Muriel’s barrage of insinuations because she no longer has any affection or respect for her husband.

In *Woman in Mind*, the family forces which batter Susan bring about her mental deterioration in an indirect manner which, Ayckbourn seems to say, makes her somewhat complicitous in her own demise. Susan’s unhappiness about her relationships with her inattentive husband and son have led her into daydreaming about a happier, more expansive life in which she lives in luxury, surrounded by an adoring family which cherishes and admires her. So thoroughly and intensely has she imagined the details of these characters and her fantasy life with them that, Faustus-like, she is able to conjure them to appear at her behest in order to counteract the disappointments of her actual family relations. Susan, then, has consciously constructed this wish-fulfillment fantasy as a means of emotional escape from her forlorn reality, and, to this extent, Ayckbourn makes her culpable for what follows.

During the first of the play’s two acts, Susan is able to summon or banish her fantasy family at will. Ayckbourn’s theatrical signal that Susan is feeling unhappy and isolated is the appearance of her imagined family; family members’ interactions with her play out the particular nature of her latest disappointment. And when some incident from reality reinforces her and makes her feel loved, as Rick’s exchange at the end of Act One does, the imaginary family members either disappear or stop in their tracks.

However, in Act Two, as the intensity of Susan’s disillusionment and disappointments mount and she increasingly resorts to her fantasy life, she becomes less and less able to control the characters she has created, and her fantasy and reality become mixed, and Susan gradually loses her grip on reality itself. The most severe blow to Susan’s happiness occurs when she learns that Rick has always considered her an unfit mother. Here she reaches her emotional nadir. Hence, when Lucy appears immediately after this exchange, proclaiming, “Even if they don’t appreciate you, we love you, Mother,” so miserable is Susan now that, as Andy says, she no longer “really means it” when she dismisses her fantasy family.

From this point onwards in the play, Susan’s fantasy family begins to interfere with her ability to cope with the exigencies of her real life and relationships. They progressively usurp not her own position in her family, as Muriel has attempted to do, but the places of her husband and son, and eventually all of her reality as she consents to imaginary lovemaking with Andy while her body in actuality burns Gerald’s manuscript. Susan briefly returns to reality after this episode, but finding events overwhelmingly miserable there, returns to her fantasy life at Tony’s invitation. This time, however, she discovers that she has entered a maelstrom of madness from which she can never return. Her fantasy family, joined by versions of Gerald, Rick, Muriel and others, altered by her insanity, engulf her, cutting her off from the real world. At the end of the play, her consciousness shattered, she cries out
incoherently, in the words we and Susan heard Bill use in trying to revive her, “December bee? [Remember me?]”

II. A Formal Element: Subjective Viewpoint

*Woman in Mind* provides an excellent example of how Ayckbourn experiments widely with form while remaining within the flexible, but not infinitely flexible, boundaries of popular theatre. For this play contains within the realistic framework which characterizes popular theatre some of the non-naturalistic formal elements which have come to be associated with less easily accessible theatrical genres: seemingly unmotivated character actions, dialogue which relies on rhythms rather than intellectually perceived sense to carry its meaning, disorientation of space and time. However, *Woman in Mind* manages to remain firmly within theatrical realism by means of a device simple for Ayckbourn to state in stage directions but difficult to sustain through two hours of stage time: “[subjective viewpoint].” Most plays unfold according to an objective viewpoint which is the theatrical equivalent of zero omniscience in the novel: the actions and words of all characters are revealed before an audience, but the audience has no direct access to the characters’ thoughts. In *Woman in Mind*, however, Ayckbourn presents his action following the theatrical equivalent of limited omniscience in the novel: the audience experiences all events in the play from the perspective of one character, Susan. “[Throughout the play, we will hear what she hears; see what she sees. A subjective viewpoint therefore and one that may at times be somewhat less than accurate].” But Ayckbourn’s subjective viewpoint is carried beyond presenting to the audience the sensory world as Susan experiences it; through the lives of the characters who are figments of Susan’s imagination, the audience also experiences her inner world of thoughts, desires, and emotions. Strange things might be happening on stage, the play tells us, but that is only because you are looking at the world through the eyes of a woman who is going insane. Once the audience has solved this problem of viewpoint, they are prepared for every puzzling event of the play.

Ayckbourn dramatizes the subjective viewpoint in the play masterfully, rising to heights of control new even for him. The general pattern he establishes is to present a seemingly non-naturalistic element first, in order to generate dramatic interest by momentarily disorienting the audience, and then to fit it neatly into the realistic framework of the play, demonstrating that it was, after all, perfectly logical. He follows this pattern in both small and large scale. So, for example, the play begins with a woman lying on the grass while a man kneels over her speaking gibberish. Immediately the audience is confronted with a seemingly non-naturalistic element, speech which has the rhythms but not the sense of English, or any other language. Within a few moments, however, the woman revives, and the man’s language gradually metamorphoses into English. We soon learn that he is a physician, Doctor Bill Windsor, and that the woman, Susan, has just “apparently caught a bit of a knock on the head.” What appeared to be a strange new language is really simply English as briefly misunderstood by a woman who is recovering from a concussion, a seemingly non-naturalistic element brought comfortably into the framework of realism.
An example of the larger scale of the pattern occurs in the introduction of Susan’s families. Ayckbourn introduces her imaginary family to the audience first, accompanying Andy’s entrance with the rather tricky stage direction, “[…The garden grows imperceptibly bigger and lighter].” This effect is to occur every time Susan’s imaginary family takes the stage, but, as this is the first time it occurs and the audience has not yet met Gerald or Muriel, the obvious assumption is that Andy, and Tony and Lucy who quickly follow, are, in fact, Susan’s real family, although Bill tries to convince Susan otherwise. This manipulation is conscious on Ayckbourn’s part, and the effect it creates is important in building up the play’s subjective viewpoint. Only after a protracted discussion between Bill Windsor and Susan, in which he questions at some length the plausibility of Susan’s explanations about Andy and the others, does the audience come to suspect that Windsor is right and Susan is wrong. When Gerald and Muriel suddenly appear to confirm what Bill has been trying to make Susan understand, the audience is jolted into comprehending, at precisely the same moment that Susan does, that these, as Bill has said, are her real family and that those we took for her family are imaginary. Our understanding grows only as quickly as Susan’s does. The jolt sends Susan into a faint and the audience into a blackout, the theatrical correlative of her unconsciousness, and the subjective viewpoint is upheld.

Susan seems to regain consciousness only a moment later and immediately is in her right mind and is talking to Gerald normally, as though she had not claimed to Bill a moment ago not to have the slightest idea who Gerald was and as though she had never been convinced that her real family consisted of Andy, Tony, and Lucy. Another disorienting moment of seeming non-naturalism looms for the audience: is Ayckbourn experimenting with the selective amnesia of a Sam Shepard-like character who mentally blocks unpleasant experiences in the time-stream? Are his characters stepping outside of realism to muse in Pinteresque fashion on the unreliability of memory and the human predilection to recreate the past in the present? Why is Susan acting so strangely? Ayckbourn completes this larger loop of his basic stylistic pattern by re-grounding his audience firmly in realism. Susan, as she reminds Gerald, “only came out of hospital this morning,” indicating that she has spent one or more days there despite the fact that only a moment of stage time has elapsed. The logical explanation of Susan’s seemingly sudden non-naturalistic shift in mental perspective is that it was not sudden at all, and hence not non-naturalistic. Hours or days of hospital care have intervened.

Ayckbourn is extremely skillful in manipulating unrealistic elements to reinforce Susan’s ongoing failing mental health. For example, he carefully establishes the ground rules of when her fantasy family may appear and who is able to perceive them. When Susan is at her most unhappy, which occurs when her real family most disappoints her, the presence of the imaginary family is most strongly felt. At first, they remain discreetly offstage when Gerald or Muriel are with Susan, waiting to monopolize her mind only when these two have gone. But the addition of Rick adds a new dimension to the arrangement. By causing real and imaginary family members to intermix more and more freely during the second act, Ayckbourn signals his audience that Susan’s mental state is becoming increasingly precarious.
He carefully demarcates the moment in which Susan is unable to distinguish fantasy from reality by suddenly breaking the rule that no one from the real world can hear or see her imaginary family. Previously Susan had expressed her wish to Bill Windsor that he would be able to see them, explaining, “Then I’d know I was sane.” But when, in fact, this occurs, and Susan suddenly discovers that Bill can hear and speak to Andy, things go horribly awry. Bill starts talking nonsensically and pulls a macramé dress from his briefcase. To her horror, Susan discovers that she is no longer able to sort out real people from figments of her imagination. Ayckbourn’s effective stroke here is in expressing this not through dialogue or description but through eminently theatrical incident.

The final and most devastating effect of the subjective viewpoint is felt at the end of the play when Susan finally succumbs completely to madness. Having rejected Gerald’s offer to come inside with him out of the rain, Susan yells at his retreating back, “I’m free of you all now, you see,” and gives herself over entirely and willingly to her fantasy world, despite the warnings she has received that she is no longer able to control it. Lucy’s wedding, long daydreamed about as an antidote to her son’s secretive elopement, is the subject to which she now turns her fevered imagination. At first she is able to control and enjoy all of its delightful details, but soon those details turn into a nightmarish conglomeration of “[images remembered by her of films she has seen, books she has read, TV she has watched],” all suggestive of “[Susan’s own extreme mental state].” Control has permanently fled. The wedding turns into a bizarre bridal race, and caricatured versions of both real and imaginary people in Susan’s life reflect twisted snippets of her own thoughts back to her. Eventually she is left alone, spouting gibberish which even she cannot understand.

Because Ayckbourn chose to be uncompromising in presenting the play from Susan’s viewpoint, he must end it in this madness. The play can never explain what “happens” to Susan because she is now incapable of knowing what is happening to herself. Nor can the effects of Susan’s madness on her husband and son be recorded, since Susan’s mental state precludes her from this knowledge. This makes the ending of Woman in Mind peculiarly poignant: Ayckbourn has carefully constructed a viewpoint which allows the audience to develop an unusually close identification with the play’s protagonist. By never relinquishing this viewpoint, even at the gates of madness, he allows the audience to feel with great force the disillusionment with family life which motivates Susan’s daydreaming, the seductiveness of her imaginary world, and, finally, the horror of madness which comes from her succumbing to it. Woman in Mind leaves its audience confronting the condition Susan suffers: a shattered mental state.

Because of the seriousness of its subject matter, Woman in Mind almost parts company with popular British comedies, including Ayckbourn’s own. With its subjective view, dwelling as it does on themes of isolation, failed marriage, inability to communicate, and mental deterioration, the play does not really fit the category. The character of the interfering relative, a staple of popular comedy if presented as a caricature, is dramatized in the play with too much clarity and dimension to be truly humorous. This play is among the darker expressions about human relationships which Ayckbourn has yet written. Displaying only occasional flashes of bitter humor through its deep pessimism, it is a
penetrating dramatization of the brutalities of British middle-class family life, of the heartlessness and indifference which lies beneath empty endearments, and of the hatred hidden in consanguinity.

Some Concluding Thoughts on the Works of Alan Ayckbourn

In the end it is counter-productive and misrepresents Ayckbourn’s work to attempt to define a linear progression in his plays, either stylistically or thematically. He is as likely to write a farce now as he was in 1979, as likely to turn to the darker subjects of his “winter plays” now as when they were penned. However, examining his artistic life and closely reading selected plays—the methodology which has informed my extended study of his work—has yielded some interesting conclusions.

In 1993 Alan Ayckbourn accepted an invitation to spend a semester at Oxford University as a visiting professor, lecturing in dramatic literature and theatre. This perhaps is as good a milepost as any to measure the recently acquired acceptance of the playwright’s work in academic circles; in theatrical circles the success of his plays at the box office and among theatregoers has been taken for granted for far longer, at least since the early 1970s when *Absurd Person Singular* and *The Norman Conquests* made him for several months the toast of both the West End and Broadway. No evidence, either from the plays themselves or from the life, indicates that Ayckbourn has particularly sought this academic recognition. His artistic biography from earliest to latest theatrical endeavor indicates that he is an artist entirely absorbed in the process of writing and producing plays for a theatrical milieu, usually a milieu of his own creation either at his own theatre in Scarborough or in productions he directs in London or elsewhere. Much more than other writers of his generation, Ayckbourn has shaped his own artistic influences by controlling the elements of the artistic environment in which his work has developed: he writes primarily for his own theatre and has done so since becoming its artistic director in 1970. Hence, he has measured his success as a playwright almost exclusively in purely theatrical terms, by how well his plays succeed commercially with an audience—first at the Stephen Joseph Theatre and second in other venues—and almost not at all by how they are received by a critical or scholarly community.

This somewhat insular environment has had a mostly salutary effect on Ayckbourn’s artistic development, but not entirely. He tends to write plays quickly and to a deadline, often finishing a final draft days or even hours before it is to go into rehearsal. Since he directs the premieres of his own plays, not a great deal of re-writing occurs during the rehearsal period. The script “very rarely changes, I must say,” he commented to Watson. “At one stage, when I was very new, the actors wanted to change everything. They all wanted to put their three ha’p’orth in. Now they learn my spelling mistakes!” Once the script is completed, Ayckbourn’s self-imposed pressure-cooker writing schedule is followed by intensive weeks of rehearsal to ready the new script for performance in a pre-arranged season schedule which puts the new play before an audience as quickly as possible. According to Ayckbourn, this situation ideally suits his creative temperament; indeed, he sees speed as a critical element in his
creative process. To Watson’s query about whether he might wish to spend longer writing his plays, slowing the process from first draft to staged production, he replied, “No. If I get time for rethinking—I’m a really ferocious critic of my own work, I really am—I would destroy it. There’s no way it would survive if it didn’t have to survive just in order for there to be something there.” This method of writing and producing, coupled with the fact of his artistic control of the theatre in which his plays appear, has tended to insulate Ayckbourn from significant outside analysis and criticism of his new work; there is simply neither time nor mechanism for it. The playwright has relied, as he indicates, on his own critical faculties almost exclusively to shape his plays, and Ayckbourn’s critical faculties are more sensitively attuned to his own creative instincts and interests and to the expectations of his (usually) Scarborough audience than to critical trends in a larger theatre world.

One result of this situation is that his own past artistic output is sometimes the richest source material for current work, a fact which explains why in recent years he has returned to earlier plays to re-examine them in later, altered versions: *Invisible Friends* is a child-drama version of *Woman in Mind; Callisto Five* is *Henceforward…* redux. This sort of insularity in another playwright could be disastrous, but Ayckbourn’s work indicates that he is incurably curious and inventive formally and that his keen observations of middle-class English life continue to inform his plays. It is accurate to assess the relative artistic freedom and security which his position as writer-in-residence and artistic director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre has afforded him as being fruitful to his explorations of style and content as well as being an effective stimulus to his burgeoning output. On occasion, however, his position has led him to write plays which have no real life outside of his own theatre, such as the rather in-joke play, *A Trip to Scarborough*, the appeal of which Ayckbourn knew would probably be strictly local.

Ayckbourn believed that the voluminous *Intimate Exchanges* would have a wider appeal—a miscalculation based perhaps on his insularity—and its production history serves as an interesting example of both the limiting factor and the positive effect of Ayckbourn’s position at the Stephen Joseph Theatre. Its success in Scarborough was a result of a combination of local factors, only one of which was the fine, if freakish, script; the other two factors were two superb and committed actors in Ayckbourn’s company, and an audience loyal to and sophisticated about Ayckbourn’s writing which was willing to sit night after night watching all the permutations of the play. Although the play moved on to London with its original cast, it was not particularly successful critically or commercially at either the Greenwich or Ambassador’s Theatres and has never been revived. Nevertheless, the freedom to explore dramatic forms, conferred by his position at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, allowed Ayckbourn to write a play such as *Intimate Exchanges*, and a case can be made that the vast, alternative-ending piece was both an outgrowth of his earlier alternative-scene play, *Sisterly Feelings*, and an antecedent to the more manageable alternative-scene children’s play, *Mr. A’s Amazing Maze Plays*, and the double-ended *Man of the Moment*. The freedom to write and produce *Intimate Exchanges* allowed Ayckbourn to set the parameters of this distinctive theatrical form, which yielded more successful and satisfying plays later. That freedom has continued to be important to his development as a writer.
There is no indication that Ayckbourn intends to desert the basic tenets of his craft, at least in the near future: his playwriting remains linear and realistic. What continues to characterize his formal explorations is the writing of plays which fully exploit the elements exclusive to theatrical art. Almost from the beginning of his career as a playwright, Ayckbourn has written plays which can only be fully realized in theatrical performance. His plays are not, for example, polemics which could as effectively be essays; nor are they narratives which could as effectively be translated into film as into theatre pieces: their domain is exclusively the stage, and they exploit what the stage can offer an audience in live performance. One method of exploiting theatrical elements has been his effective use of stage space. The interpenetrating living rooms of *How the Other Half Loves*, the compression of three stories of a house into one in *Taking Steps*, and lining up three beds (supposed to be in three separate houses) in parallel formation in *Bedroom Farce* (recently produced locally by Actors’ Repertory Theatre Ensemble) are all examples of Ayckbourn’s manipulation of stage space in such a way as to relate his narratives not only effectively but in such a way that one can only imagine them related theatrically. Other methods the playwright has employed to fully exploit the theatrical medium include the alternative-scene and alternative-ending techniques mentioned above, the effective use of offstage space and characters, and the adaptation for the stage of cinematic techniques such as cross-cutting (*The Revengers’ Comedies*), selective focus (*Man of the Moment*), and onstage use of video equipment (*Callisto Five*).

This, finally, is the most distinctive feature of Ayckbourn’s work: the full exploitation of stage as stage, and the sense that his plays can only be fully realized as texts when they are performed live in theatres. With the exception of *Way Upstream*, Ayckbourn’s plays do not achieve this quality by demanding expensive and difficult technology or technical effects in the manner of, for example, Tom Stoppard’s plays. While many of Stoppard’s plays seem better suited for cinematic rather than theatrical treatment and hence demand extensive technical support to make them successful on stage, Ayckbourn’s plays work in the opposite way: they exploit the elements inherent in the theatrical medium, often inherent exclusively in the medium, to succeed as pure theatre pieces. His abiding interest in theatrical communication sets him apart from other playwrights of his generation who, increasingly drawn to film projects and the writing of screenplays, have not meditated as long or as deeply on the subject as has Ayckbourn. The result is that Ayckbourn, once viewed by critics as a boulevardier and stylistically regressive when compared to the vanguard of Britain’s writers for the theatre, is now justly regarded as among its foremost stylistic innovators. He is certainly the most sensitively attuned to the unique properties of theatrical art.

It has been suggested by some scholars that Ayckbourn’s later plays indicate a greater interest than heretofore in larger social problems and national issues. Susan Rusinko points to *A Chorus of Disapproval*, *A Small Family Business*, *Henceforward…*, *The Revengers’ Comedies*, and *Man of the Moment* as being Ayckbourn’s statements on, respectively, corruption in the real estate business, the sinister nexus between legitimate business and the drug trade, urban gang violence, the indifference to humanity of multinational corporations, and the poor quality of television. While it is true that a
discussion of these issues is present in these plays, it should be noted that the examination of larger social concerns is not a recent phenomenon of Ayckbourn’s later plays but has been a part of the fabric of his work throughout his career. *Way Upstream*, for example, a play earlier than those mentioned by Rusinko, is Ayckbourn’s most celebrated state-of-the-nation play, but even earlier plays include critiques of social problems which beset especially the middle class: *Ten Times Tables* speaks to the issue of civic chauvinism and provincial prejudice; *Gosforth’s Fête* to the indifference of conservative government to national concerns; *The Norman Conquests* and *Time and Time Again* to the warehousing of brilliant if eccentric minds in meaningless employment.

But the more important point to be made is that, while the entire canon of Ayckbourn’s plays bristles with social issues, only very rarely do they achieve thematic primacy. He is neither an agitprop nor a thesis writer. In the overwhelming majority of his plays, larger social concerns emerge only as they relate to the domestic problems and interpersonal issues of his characters, subjects of far greater interest to the playwright. For example, the corporate machinations of Lembridge Tennit in *The Revengers’ Comedies* serve as backdrop to the major issue of the play, an exploration of the motivations and effects of revenge in the live of Henry Bell, Karen Knightly, and Imogen Staxton-Billing. *Henceforward...* is certainly much less about urban gangs than about the manner in which artistic endeavors can compromise interpersonal family relationships. To suggest the reverse would be only slightly less absurd than to contend that *Absent Friends* is a play primarily about the importance of water safety because a death by drowning sets the plot in motion, or that the major theme of *Absurd Person Singular* is home repair. It is domestic issues which dominate the world of Ayckbourn’s drama: insensitivity in marriage, neediness in relationships, coping with failure and envy, escaping from destructive relationships, the problems of living within an extended family; all other “larger” issues are tangential to these. It would overstate the case, however, to say that Ayckbourn is uninterested in social problems; it is more accurate to conclude that he chooses to illuminate them indirectly through dramatic presentations of interpersonal issues.

Finally, one is struck by the durability of the plays of Alan Ayckbourn. The best of even his early plays retain their freshness and broad appeal both on the page and in the theatre. In production they need not be approached as period pieces (as, for example, early Neil Simon now often is) because they transcend period. This durability is the result of the stylistic inventiveness of the plays and of the fact that they concern themselves primarily with interpersonal rather than topical issues. Perhaps most significantly, they endure because they are eminently, and exclusively, theatrical. Now in his thirty-fourth year as a continuously writing and producing playwright, Alan Ayckbourn has refined his popular style into trenchant observation of the human condition.