Absurd Person Singular

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SIR ALAN AYCKBOURN

Ayckbourn was born in London, and his parents divorced when he was still a child. He left school at the age of 17, as was common for working-class English teenagers in the 1950s. He got married at the age of 18, and took a job at the Scarborough Library Theater, which helped encourage him to write and produce plays. He succeeded in getting several plays produced in the West End in the early 1960s, including *Mr. Whatnot*. However, this play was a flop. Ayckbourn's first major success was *Relatively Speaking*, which made him a rich man. In the 1970s, Ayckbourn was at the height of his powers, with three back-to-back hit plays, all of which dealt with the plight of the British middle class. Ayckbourn was knighted in 1997, and to this day he enjoys a stellar reputation in the British theater world, though he's relatively unknown outside of his own country.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ayckbourn's play, a study of recognizably middle-class characters, is often discussed in terms of the economic changes affecting the U.K. in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the quarter-century following the end of World War Two, the British middle class expanded. However, many pointed out that the middle class's lack of a common culture and ideology had left its members alienated and consumed with self-loathing—an insight that lies at the core of Ayckbourn's play. The play also briefly mentions apartheid, the system of racial segregation used in South Africa until the early 1990s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ayckbourn's play incorporates many different and almost contradictory theater styles. For example, many elements of the play, such as its middle-class setting and grim depiction of social aspiration, fit in with the social realist tradition of the "Angry Young Men" of the postwar period, particularly John Osborne, whose play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is often considered the definitive exploration of these themes. At other points, Ayckbourn's tone is closer to that of another great postwar British playwright, Harold Pinter, whose work is often associated with the Theater of the Absurd, the style that emphasizes illogical actions and speeches over coherent plot and characterization. Particularly in the second and third acts, as the characters become more despondent, the play becomes absurdist at times (the title is a dead giveaway), with Sidney, Jane, and Robert turning a blind eye to Eva's suicide attempts. Also, the bizarre, mirthless game that Sidney organizes in Act Three evokes the famous game of "blind man's bluff" at the end of Pinter's *Birthday Party* (1957). Another term that's often applied to Pinter's *oeuvre*, "Comedy of Menace," seems like an apt description for *Absurd Person Singular*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Absurd Person Singular
- **When Written:** 1971
- **Where Written:** London and Scarborough, England
- **Literary Period:** Postwar British Theater
- **Genre:** Social realism (though there are arguably some elements of Theater of the Absurd, especially in the second act)
- **Setting:** An unnamed English city, over the course of three successive Christmas Eve parties
- **Climax:** The arrival of Sidney and Jane Hopcroft in Act Three

EXTRA CREDIT

Pop-pop-popular. It's been suggested that Ayckbourn is the most performed living English-language playwright, and the second most performed in history (after William Shakespeare, of course). To be fair, there are several other playwrights to whom the latter honor is often attributed, including Ibsen, Pinter, and Noel Coward.

Keep on keepin' on. Though Ayckbourn is an elderly man, he continues to write and produce successful plays. His early 2000s play *Private Fears in Public Places* was a hit, and in 2006 it was made into a well-received film by the great French New Wave director Alain Resnais.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play consists of three acts, taking place over three successive **Christmas** Eve parties. The first act, and party, takes place in the suburban home of Sidney Hopcroft and his wife, Jane Hopcroft. Sidney and Jane are frantically trying to prepare the house for the night's festivities. Sidney is particularly keen on impressing the successful banker Ronald Brewster-Wright and his wife, Marion Brewster-Wright. Jane, on the other hand, seems to take pleasure in the simple act of cleaning the kitchen.

The Brewster-Wrights arrive, and almost right away Jane accidentally spills something on Ronald's trousers. In private, the Brewster-Wrights express their desire to leave quickly, while another couple, Dick Potter and Lottie Potter arrive and laugh loudly (over the course of the play they're heard but

never seen). The next guests to arrive are Eva Jackson and her husband, Geoffrey Jackson. Eva complains that she needs to take her pills or else become a "raving lunatic." Geoffrey, on the other hand, is a charismatic and handsome man. Alone with Ronald and Sidney, he alludes to his sexual affairs with other women and claims that Eva has to "play by his rules."

Disaster strikes when the guests run out of tonic water. Desperate to please everyone, Jane puts on her husband's raincoat and goes out into the rain to buy more. Finding herself locked out, she's forced to ring the bell and enter through the front door of the house. However, Ronald doesn't recognize her, and Sidney later lies by telling Ronald that the person who entered through the front was a deliveryman bringing tonic water. Sidney also begs Ronald for a loan that will enable him to expand his growing chain of grocery stores. Shortly afterwards, Geoffrey asks Ronald to recommend him as an architect for the community's forthcoming **shopping complex**.

The guests depart shortly after one another, leaving Sidney and Jane alone once again. Sidney justifies his choice to lie to Ronald about Jane by saying that these guests can be "very useful to us." He goes to watch television, and Jane returns to scrubbing the kitchen.

Act Two, which takes place exactly one year later at the apartment of Geoffrey and Eva Jackson, begins with Geoffrey berating his sad, suicidal wife. He suggests that he's going to move out until Eva recovers, and alludes to having hit Eva recently. He also complains that his work on the shopping complex is slow and frustrating.

Sidney and Jane Hopcroft arrive, and in private Geoffrey bitterly notes that Sidney has been doing very well lately. Suddenly, Eva tries to commit suicide by stabbing herself with a knife. Geoffrey stops her and then goes out to find a doctor, leaving Eva alone. One by one, Jane, Sidney, and Ronald enter the room. Although Eva says nothing, and proceeds to write a suicide note and then attempt to kill herself, the characters seem not to notice. Instead, they notice various aspects of the kitchen, and volunteer to repair them: Sidney fixes the sink pipes, Jane scrubs the oven (just after Eva has tried to asphyxiate herself in it), and Ronald tries to change the light bulb in the ceiling (even while Eva tries to hang and them electrocute herself). Marion enters the room and mentions that the Jacksons' dog, **George**, has bitten Dick Potter. At the end of the act, Eva begins to sing "The Twelve Days of Christmas," very softly. One by one, the guests join in. Geoffrey returns, accompanied by the doctor, to find his guests and wife sitting in the kitchen, singing a carol.

The third and final act begins exactly one year later. This time, the setting is Ronald and Marion's Victorian home. Marion has become an alcoholic, and spends most of her time in bed. Eva stops by to visit with Ronald, and together they discuss their failing fortunes. Ronald's bank isn't doing particularly well, and Geoffrey hasn't found any work in a while, since the shopping complex he designed collapsed.

Marion comes downstairs and begs Ronald to have a **drink**, saying, "It's Christmas." Geoffrey arrives as well, and Eva encourages him to ask Ronald to return the money he lent Ronald in the past. Then, the doorbell rings—it's Sidney and Jane Hopcroft. Ronald admits that he'd like to tell them both to go away, but can't, since Sidney has a sizeable deposit at his bank. He turns off all the lights in the apartment and hopes that the Hopcrofts will go away. Instead, the Hopcrofts enter through the back door and find Ronald, Eva, Geoffrey, and Marion trying to hide from them. Seemingly oblivious to their "friends'" attitude, Jane and Sidney announce that they've brought gifts for Ronald and Marion. They give Ronald a set of screwdrivers and Marion a bottle of gin.

Sidney announces that he's brought a game for everyone to enjoy. The game, **Musical Dancing**, involves everyone dancing and stopping at the exact instant that the music stops. Anyone who continues dancing must take a forfeit—i.e., carry some object that makes dancing more difficult. Neither Sidney nor Jane plays the game. Humiliated, the other characters dance, too financially dependent on Sidney to ignore him.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sidney Hopcroft – Sidney Hopcroft is a thirty-something, middle-class businessman who appears to own a chain of stores, and later a number of apartment buildings. However, the precise nature of his business is never fully explained. Initially portrayed as a mediocre, talentless man, Sidney's fortunes grow between each act of the play. In the first act, his fortunes are insecure, and he is eager to impress his wealthier, more successful friends. But by the third act, it is Sidney who seems wealthy and self-satisfied, while his friends are eager to flatter him. In some ways, Sidney is presented as a pathetic character—in particular, his infatuation with games seems childish. In other ways, Sidney could be interpreted as an aggressive, even abusive character: he seems to take his wife, Jane Hopcroft, for granted, and to think of her as a tool to help him impress his friends and make more money. But ultimately, Sidney is neither hero nor villain. Like every other character in the play, he's adrift in the world—even though he's doing well in Act Three, it's not hard to imagine an Act Four in which he's poor again.

Jane Hopcroft – Jane Hopcroft is Sidney Hopcroft's long-suffering wife. Obsessed with cleaning her house (and, at times, cleaning other people's houses), she lacks much of a sense of empathy or understanding for other people's thoughts and feelings. She is, in some ways, the most sympathetic character in the play, since she's never shown to do anything to hurt another character, and seems not to be greedy or interested in

"getting ahead." At the same time—and this probably isn't a coincidence—Jane is probably the least fully developed character in the play: compared with the five other cast members, she has the smallest number of lines.

Ronald Brewster-Wright – Ronald Brewster-Wright is a local banker who, as the play begins, is seen by his friends and peers as an impressive, successful man whose favor is always worth currying. Over the course of the play, however, Ronald's fortunes decline, just as Sidney Hopcroft's fortunes improve: by Act Three, it is Ronald who's desperate to impress Sidney, not the other way around. Like the two other male characters in the play, Ronald is often shockingly indifferent or oblivious to other people's feelings, especially those of women. He appears to envy Geoffrey Jackson for getting away with cheating on his wife, Eva Jackson, and seems highly unsatisfied with his marriage to Marion Brewster-Wright, an alcoholic.

Marion Brewster-Wright – Marion Brewster-Wright is, along with Jane Hopcroft, the character with the fewest number of lines in the play. However, it's clear from the beginning that she's an uncomfortable, frequently insecure woman. As the wife of a successful banker, Marion looks down on many of her husband's friends—indeed, she can't even remember Sidney Hopcroft's name until the second act. By the end of the play, Marion has become a full-fledged alcoholic, suggesting that she's unhappy in her marriage to Ronald Brewster-Wright (who never seems to show her much affection, or even take much interest in her).

Geoffrey Jackson – At the beginning of the play, Geoffrey Jackson is a confident, attractive, highly charismatic man in his thirties. But by the end of the play, he's lost his charisma and his optimism. An architect by trade, Geoffrey seems to think highly of himself, and has affairs with other women, often bragging about it in innuendo-filled conversations with Ronald Brewster-Wright and Sidney Hopcroft. As time goes on, however, Sidney's fortunes decline: his wife, Eva Jackson, becomes suicidal, and he loses his credibility as an architect after a **shopping center** he designs collapses. In some ways, Geoffrey's "character arc" is the most tragic: the young, ambitious man rapidly becomes disillusioned and tired of life.

Eva Jackson – Eva Jackson is the volatile wife of Geoffrey Jackson. She's shown to be mentally unstable in some never-explained way, and in Act One she claims that she has to take pills every few hours in order to stabilize her moods. In Act Two, for reasons never explained, she becomes actively suicidal, and tries to kill herself in various grotesque ways while the other characters ignore or misinterpret her actions. In Act Three, Eva seems relatively content and self-controlled, especially compared to the other characters, many of whom are deeply disillusioned with life. But, as with all the other characters in the play, it's easy to imagine a fourth act in which Eva's fortunes change once again: such is life for the 1970s British middle class, at least as Ayckbourn sees it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dick Potter – A local friend of the other characters, known for being funny, sometimes in an obnoxious way, and for being a schoolteacher. Dick Potter never appears onstage.

Lottie Potter – Dick Potter's wife, a teacher, like her husband. She also never appears onstage.

Sally – A woman with whom Geoffrey Jackson is considering running away in Act Two. Like the Potters, she is only mentioned by name and doesn't appear onstage.

Walter Harrison – Owner of a local **shopping center**.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE MIDDLE CLASS

In *Absurd Person Singular* and his other plays from the 1970s, Sir Alan Ayckbourn offered a scathing critique of the British middle class. For most of the early 20th century, the British class system was mostly split between the working class (families whose incomes came mostly from manufacturing-based jobs) and the upper class (families whose incomes came mostly from financial and managerial jobs, or who lived off of an inheritance). That changed following the end of World War Two: Great Britain (rather like the United States) became a country with a large and influential middle class.

All six of the characters in *Absurd Person Singular* are recognizably middle-class. To begin with, the men's professions aren't immediately tied to manufacturing or some other kind of physical labor (which would probably make them working-class), but nor are the men financially secure to the point where they don't have to worry about money. One is an architect, one runs a small bank (we know it's small because he suggests that a single customer's deposit could make or break his business), and one is in some kind of real estate-related field (he's described as having many tenants and having put up many buildings). They all have to go to work, but what, exactly, they *do* in the course of a day is never made clear. Furthermore, the three women don't appear to work for a living, but have enough disposable income to buy non-essential items like washing machines. Financially speaking, all six characters are doing well, but not to the point where they can afford to do nothing. And this can be downright nerve-wracking: the characters are obsessed with making money and entering the ranks of the upper class, but they're also terrified by the possibility of failing

and falling back in with the working class. This, in a nutshell, was the dilemma of the British middle class of the 1970s.

Ayckbourn explores this dilemma throughout his play, but especially through the characters of Sidney Hopcroft and Ronald Brewster-Wright. Over the course of the play, Sidney gets richer and Ronald gets poorer. However, it's never clear why; the characters' jobs are vaguely defined, and as the play goes on they become vaguer, not clearer. In the first act, Sidney Hopcroft appears to own a few general stores, but by Act Two, it's unclear how he's earning his money: he just says he's had some "lucky hunches" (you wonder if even Sidney himself completely understands the source of his own success). Because we don't understand how the characters make their money, we can't fully understand why their economic status keeps rising or falling. Ronald Brewster-Wright's status appears to be going down, while Sidney's appears to be going up, but it could just as easily be the other way around. Such is the inherent instability of middle class life, Ayckbourn suggests.

Ayckbourn matches his characters' economic instability with cultural instability. The six characters have no real heritage or traditions to fall back on (which is especially striking, considering that the play takes place during the **Christmas** season, when many families celebrate their traditions). The characters never even discuss their own backstories, or refer to any event that takes place long before the beginning of the play. Their conversations are nauseatingly present-tense, revolving around crass products and incomprehensible business deals. This could then be interpreted as Ayckbourn's commentary on middle-class values. Bereft of a real heritage (unlike the upper class or the working class), the new middle class of the 1970s strives to *make* its own values and traditions and legacy, but without much immediate success. Indeed, one of Ayckbourn's most important insights is that the defining feature of the middle class is precisely its lack of a stable identity and set of beliefs: everything is in flux.

In the absence of a strong culture or sense of identity, the middle-class characters of *Absurd Person Singular* are often alienated from one another—sometimes comically, sometimes tragically. Such is the case throughout the play, but never more so than at the end of Act Two, during which four of the characters make idle chitchat and tinker around in someone else's kitchen while Eva Jackson, supposedly their friend, tries to commit suicide in various ways. The six characters in the play are supposed to be a community, looking out for each other. Instead, they seem oblivious to each other: no values or beliefs, aside from a shallow materialism, bind them together. The flaws of the middle class are at the core of *Absurd Person Singular*, and in a way all the other important themes of the play emanate from this one, underlying theme.

MATERIALISM

All six of the characters in *Absurd Person Singular* believe in the same twisted "religion"—materialism. Fanatically, they seek to accumulate physical possessions: washing machines, toys, bottles, spoons. It can be overwhelming just to think about all the useless *stuff* that the characters buy over the course of the play. Ayckbourn was writing his play at a time when the middle class was booming, and when the sale of nonessential products and appliances was through the roof. In many ways, *Absurd Person Singular* is his satire of the vulgar materialism of the era.

Why, exactly, are the characters in the play so obsessed with material possessions? One might think that these objects are important simply because they give the characters pleasure. For example, one of the first appliances the characters discuss is the washing machine in Sidney and Jane Hopcroft's suburban home. While nonessential, this machine would seem to be useful because it gives its owners more leisure time. But Ayckbourn undercuts this assumption almost immediately by showing that its owner, Jane Hopcroft, actually *enjoys* doing physical labor. If given the choice of how to spend her free time, she'd scrub the kitchen, wash her laundry by hand, etc. Throughout the rest of the play, the characters exchange and discuss other appliances that, while potentially useful, don't seem to give their owners any discernible pleasure—for example, in Act Three, Sidney and Jane give Ronald Brewster-Wright a set of screwdrivers for **Christmas**, a gift that seems to bewilder Ronald. One would think that material goods would bring their owners some kind of intrinsic pleasure, especially considering how much time the characters spend discussing them. But Ayckbourn goes out of his way to show that this simply isn't the case.

So why, then, are material things so important to the characters in *Absurd Person Singular*? Ayckbourn suggests a second, subtler reason: material goods are status symbols, a way of showing off or currying favor with one's peers. The characters use material goods for this purpose throughout the play. Even before any of the characters has spoken, for instance, we see Jane and Sidney Hopcroft preparing their home for a Christmas party. The purpose of their action is unmistakable: they want to impress their wealthy, successful guests, Ronald and Marion Brewster-Wright. They want to use material things—a clean, shiny kitchen, a brand new washing machine—to communicate that they're successful, independent people, and therefore worthy of the Brewster-Wrights' respect (and, in Sidney's case, worthy of a loan from Ronald's bank). Sidney also gives other characters gifts in order to signify his material wealth. At the end of the play, when he gives Ronald the set of screwdrivers, the message is clear, both to the characters and to the audience: Sidney's fortunes have improved, to the point where he can flaunt his wealth by giving extravagant (albeit very weird) gifts to other people. So material things aren't important

to the characters because they're intrinsically interesting or even intrinsically useful. Rather, material things are part of a language of status and power, in which all six of the characters are fluent.

Ultimately, this is the poignant side of *Absurd Person Singular*: the characters can only understand the world, and each other, in material terms. They have no sense of each other's thoughts or feelings, and because they've been so brainwashed by the doctrine of materialism, they lack the capacity to learn. Consider the moment in Act One when the characters talk about the Hopcrofts' washing machine. Nobody seems particularly keen on carrying on the conversation—but nobody has anything better to discuss, either. Even after Eva Jackson confesses that she's suffering from depression (or another, similar psychological problem), the others prattle on about material things. Their materialism becomes even more disturbing in Act Two, when they busy themselves fixing Eva's sink, light bulbs, and oven, so obsessed with appliances that they don't recognize that Eva is actively trying to commit suicide. The characters' obsession with material goods also explains why their gifts are often wildly inappropriate—for example, in Act Three, the Hopcrofts give Marion Brewster-Wright, an alcoholic, a bottle of **gin** for Christmas. Instead of empathizing with her condition, or trying to do something to improve it, they enable it. In all, materialism blinds the characters to anything that can't be measured in strictly material terms—such as loneliness, depression, alcoholism, and insecurity. As a result, the characters live out miserable little lives, buying things they don't want with money they don't have to impress people they don't like.

FORTUNE

One of the most puzzling things about *Absurd Person Singular* is the way that the characters' fortunes—both their economic status and their overall luck in life—keep going up and down for no discernible reason. In only two years, Ronald Brewster-Wright—who was introduced as a successful, impressive middle-aged banker—falls on hard times, to the point where he's relieved simply because his bank isn't "in the red." Another character, Eva Jackson, goes from being socially functional to being actively suicidal to being, for all intents and purposes, the most confident, secure character in the play. To name one more example, Sidney Hopcroft goes from being a pathetic, financially insecure businessman to being, it would seem, one of the most successful people in his community—and yet it's never clear what he does or why he's been successful. The characters' happiness, confidence, and economic status are constantly rising or falling, but Ayckbourn gives little to no indication of why. Their fortunes would seem to be beyond their own control.

One reason the characters' shifting fortunes can be puzzling is that the most significant events in their lives happen offstage in between each of the three acts. Each of the three Christmas parties depicted in the play shows the *results* of the major events of the previous year. For example, in Act Three we learn that Sidney has become a powerful businessman of some kind, and that Geoffrey Jackson has lost his credibility as an architect after one of his buildings collapsed earlier in the year. By depicting only three brief scenes from his characters' lives, Ayckbourn emphasizes the unpredictability of fortune, and makes the shifts in the characters' lives seem especially abrupt and shocking. In just a few minutes of play-time, Geoffrey Jackson goes from a confident, ambitious architect to a disillusioned, prematurely weary has-been. As with so much of *Absurd Person Singular*, this structural feature of the play can be interpreted as Ayckbourn's commentary not only on the unpredictability of life in general, but also on the instability of the mid-seventies English economy. Ayckbourn wrote his play at a time when millions of English citizens were uncertain of their job security and financial stability. The economy of 1970s England was unpredictable and ambiguous: one month things seemed rosy, and the next month it seemed that the postwar boom was finally coming to an end. By obscuring the source of the characters' fortunes, Ayckbourn captures this sense of unpredictability.

Moving away from economics, *Absurd Person Singular*'s portrayal of fortune makes the play's tone difficult to interpret, since it's difficult to decide how much to sympathize with the characters. In many ways, the play is tragic: the characters suffer from depression, alcoholism, and runaway ambition, all familiar tragic themes. And yet, in the typical tragedy, the characters' own qualities bring about their success and then their downfall—King Oedipus' thirst for knowledge *causes* his suffering. Not so in *Absurd Person Singular*: Geoffrey Jackson is arrogant and charismatic, but these qualities seem to have nothing to do with his failed career. He doesn't bring about his failure—instead, failure just "happens" to him. The same could be said for any of the other characters in the play: Ayckbourn depicts them as puppets, passive victims of fortune. Sometimes they're sympathetic, sometimes merely pathetic. By depicting fortune in this unconventional way, Ayckbourn could be said to create a hybrid genre, somewhere between the gritty realism of John Osborne and the menacing absurdism of Harold Pinter (both major English playwrights of the generation preceding Ayckbourn's). Ayckbourn, like Osborne, is clearly attuned to the economic and political realities of his time, and he depicts the lives of ordinary, suffering English people. And yet, rather like Pinter, Ayckbourn doesn't lose sight of the fact that these ordinary people are sometimes, in spite of their suffering, laugh-out-loud funny.

GENDER ROLES

Absurd Person Singular comments on what modern English society expects men and women to do, as the play's middle-class characters obey strong yet unwritten rules about their gender roles. The three male characters work, while their wives do not, and tend to be more overtly associated with the domestic sphere. And yet, as a result of the structure of middle-class life, these kinds of gender roles keep getting mixed up. Men behave in stereotypically effeminate ways, and women embrace stereotypically masculine behaviors. (Ayckbourn finds an apt symbol for these scrambled gender roles when the characters cover Ronald Brewster-Wright, who's just been electrocuted, with a variety of male and female articles of clothing.)

Although the characters only ever speak about gender rules indirectly, it's clear that they all have strong ideas about how they're supposed to behave. The men act as "breadwinners" for their families, and seem to believe that this permits them to be unfaithful and inattentive to their wives. This is clearest toward the end of the first act, when Geoffrey Jackson, Ronald, and Sidney Hopcroft discuss Geoffrey's affairs with other women. In an innuendo-heavy monologue, Geoffrey brags about how he's cheated on his wife, Eva Jackson, many times, and adds that Eva has no choice but to accept his "rules" of marriage, a sentiment that Ronald and Sidney approve of, or believe they're supposed to show their approval of in a party setting. Throughout the play, furthermore, the male characters treat their wives indifferently, and instead focus their energy on vaguely defined, nonsensical business pursuits. There's even a suggestion that Geoffrey has hit his wife, reinforcing the fact that he, like other men, dominates his wife and forces her to play by his rules. At the end of Act One, Sidney is so pleased at having persuaded Ronald to give him a loan that he ignores his anxious, weary wife, Jane, even though she's been humiliated at her own party. The act ends with the poignant, Sisyphean image of Jane alone in her kitchen, cleaning the same objects she was cleaning earlier, while Sidney watches television. The shallowness and materialism of the British middle class, Ayckbourn implies, has in some ways exaggerated old, offensive stereotypes about male and female behavior. Men, because of their labor, enjoy some small measure of freedom, while women are confined to the kitchen.

But although there's a strong sexist undercurrent throughout *Absurd Person Singular*, gender roles repeatedly break down as the play goes on. At many points, it is the female characters, not their partners, who do the hard physical labor, while the men remain idle. During her **Christmas** party, Jane Hopcroft, not her husband, goes out into the rainy night to buy more bottles of tonic water—an act that Ayckbourn symbolically genders as male by having Jane don a man's raincoat before leaving the house. Throughout Act One, Sidney often seems emasculated and too timid to assert himself at his own party. When Geoffrey brags about his sexual conquests, for example, Sidney laughs along with everybody else, but Ayckbourn notes that he's way "out of his depth." In Act Three, furthermore, the female characters are often more business-minded than their husbands: for instance, Eva Jackson has to pressure her husband to ask Sidney Hopcroft for job opportunities, and in the end she just asks on his behalf. In the strange new world of the middle class, masculine and feminine gender roles seem to be moving closer and closer together.

One could argue that Ayckbourn is having his cake and eating it, too: criticizing traditional gender roles and also criticizing the modified, middle-class roles that succeed them. On one hand, he pokes fun at Sidney and the other male characters for their timid, emasculated behavior and finds humor in Jane's donning a man's raincoat. On the other hand, he seems to suggest that traditional, rigidly defined gender roles are just as bad, or worse. But perhaps these two concepts—rigidly-defined gender roles and reversed or blurred gender roles—are more closely connected than they appear: put another way, the characters assert traditional gender roles *because* they see these gender roles collapsing. At times, the emasculated male characters become so frustrated that they lash out at their wives, ordering them around (as Sidney does in Act One), hitting them (as Geoffrey claims to have done in Act Two), or calling them ugly (as Ronald does in Act Three). In each act of *Absurd Person Singular*, one could even argue, gender roles become complicated in some significant way, only to be clumsily reestablished by the characters. Gender roles, like everything else in this play, are in a constant state of flux, and any order the characters try to impose is short-lived.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GEORGE THE DOG

George the dog is mentioned in all three acts of the play, though it never appears onstage. At various points, the characters describe George as a good, obedient, lovable dog—however, in Act Two, George bites a party guest, Dick Potter, even though Dick is supposedly good with dogs. As a family pet, George is supposed to bring its owners happiness—but instead, it ends up hurting other people. In this way, George might be interpreted as a symbol of domestic bliss gone sour: the characters try to find happiness in their homes and their partners, yet these are the very things that cause them the greatest amount of pain.

ALCOHOL

Throughout the play, the characters drink alcohol and offer it to others. Alcohol is another example of something that's supposed to bring its consumers happiness, but which often ends up making them sadder and lonelier. In this way, alcohol is an apt symbol for the tawdry, superficial pleasures the characters pursue, and the alienation they often feel as a result.

MUSICAL DANCING

The play concludes with a bizarre game, organized by Jane Hopcroft and Sidney Hopcroft. In this game, the characters must dance and then stop at the same time as the music. Players who continue dancing earn a forfeit—an object they must hold or wear, which makes further dancing harder. The Musical Dancing game is humiliating for its players, and yet they all participate, because they want to impress Sidney Hopcroft—the man who, in Act Three, seems to be making more money than anyone else. In all, the game symbolizes the sycophancy and "sucking up" in which all the characters engage at different times, in the hopes that they'll be rewarded with some material gain.

THE SHOPPING COMPLEX

Geoffrey Jackson is chosen to design a new shopping complex; however, he's humiliated when the complex collapses, nearly killing its manager. The building symbolizes the instability of Geoffrey and the other characters' lives: one day, their fortunes are going up, up, up, and the next they're nothing but a pile of rubble.

CHRISTMAS

All three acts of the play are set during Christmas parties. Christmas is often considered a holiday that celebrates kindness, generosity, and family. However, Christmas is *also* a holiday that epitomizes greed and conspicuous consumption. It's a time when wealthy families who practice the holiday lavish money on gifts for themselves and show off by buying overpriced presents for other people. In all, Christmas perfectly symbolizes the contradictions of the middle class: like most of the characters in the play, it's defined by selfishness and selflessness, childishness and maturity, community and crass materialism.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Absurd Person Singular* published in 1994.

Act One Quotes

SIDNEY: [chuckling knowingly] I don't imagine the wife of a banker will particularly choose to spend her evening in our kitchen. Smart as it is.

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft (speaker), Jane Hopcroft

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

As the play begins, Sidney and Jane Hopcroft are preparing for a Christmas party. Jane is concerned with cleaning every room of the house, including the kitchen—even though Sidney, her husband, insists that none of the guests will want to go in there. As it turns out, Sidney is wrong: the guests *do* go in the kitchen, and in fact, the entire play is set in three different kitchens, across three different years. So the line is an ironic joke that sets the tone for the rest of the play. Contrary to what Sidney condescendingly claims, the guests *will* look at the kitchen, and Ayckbourn's play is a look "behind the scenes" at the banality of English middle-class life, for which there's probably no better symbol than a kitchen.

JANE: No, but it's special tonight, isn't it? I mean, with Mr. and Mrs. Brewster-Wright and Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. It's important.
SIDNEY: Don't forget Dick and Lottie Potter. They're coming, too.
JANE: Oh, well, I don't count Dick and Lottie. They're friends.

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft, Jane Hopcroft (speaker), Ronald Brewster-Wright, Marion Brewster-Wright, Lottie Potter, Dick Potter, Eva Jackson, Geoffrey Jackson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Jane and Sidney are nervous about hosting their Christmas party, as many hosts would be. They want to make good impressions on their guests, and make it clear that they have a lovely, respectable suburban home. But as this passage makes clear, not all the guests are equal in the

Hopcrofts' eyes. Some are more important and respectable than others. The Brewster-Wrights, in particular, are people who Jane and Sidney see as very important.

The passage establishes one of the key themes of the play: there's an intricate social hierarchy, and every one of the Hopcrofts' friends belongs in a different place in this hierarchy. However, different people, including the Hopcrofts themselves, are always rising and falling—such is the nature of English middle-class life in the 1970s.

MARION: Just look at these working surfaces and you must have a gorgeous view from that window, I imagine.
SIDNEY: Well…
MARION: It must be stunning. You must look right over the fields at the back.
SIDNEY: No—no.
JANE: No, we just look into next door's fence.
MARION: Well, which way are the fields?
JANE: I've no idea.
MARION: How extraordinary. I must be thinking of somewhere else.

Related Characters: Jane Hopcroft, Sidney Hopcroft, Marion Brewster-Wright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, there's a subtle contest between the host and their guests. Marion Brewster-Wright and her husband, Robert, are clearly wealthier and more socially distinguished than the Hopcrofts. As Marion examines the Hopcrofts' home, she makes various comments suggesting that it's not a very nice place to live: it doesn't have a good view, for example (a house with a nice view being one of the quintessential signs of social status, all the more so because having a nice view is "useless"). Marion's tone seems dismissive and even derisive, and the Hopcrofts seem embarrassed and intimidated by their wealthier party guests. The message is clear: the Brewster-Wrights "outrank" the Hopcrofts in the hierarchy of the middle class.

MARION: [bending to read the dial] What's this? Whites-coloureds—my God, it's apartheid.
JANE: Beg pardon?

Related Characters: Jane Hopcroft, Marion Brewster-Wright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief scene, the Hopcrofts give Marion a tour of their house and point out their washing machine. Marion notices that the machine has a colored / white setting, and makes a feeble joke about apartheid. (The idea being that apartheid, the South African system of racial segregation, involved separating human beings into white and black, or "colored," groups. It's really not a funny joke.)

It's notable that this is one of the only times in the play when the characters discuss politics, culture, or "the world at large." And it's no coincidence that Jane doesn't get the joke, either. The characters are so obsessed with their own feeble little lives that they have little to no awareness of what people in other parts of the world are going through—yet another sign of the characters' callousness and indifference to suffering.

SIDNEY: What?
EVA: Did I put that glass in there?
SIDNEY: Er—yes.
EVA: My God, I knew it, I'm going mad. I am finally going mad.

Related Characters: Eva Jackson, Sidney Hopcroft (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Eva Jackson, the wife of Geoffrey Jackson, suffers from some kind of mental illness, and has to take pills every three hours in order to stabilize her mood. As a result of her condition, she can be somewhat volatile, and in this scene, she casually throws a glass into a trash can without realizing—only to catch herself a moment later. The strange thing about Eva is that, while she's ostensibly the only character with a defined mental "problem," she's also the only character who seems aware of her own problems, and shows some willingness to get better. By contrast, the other

characters in the play seem so hopeless lost in their delusions—greed, superficiality, jealousy, etc.—that they don't even realize that they have a problem.

MARION: Oh, that's lovely. Just that teeny bit stronger. You know what I mean. Not too much tonic . . .
SIDNEY: No, well . . .
MARION: Perfect.
SIDNEY: Actually, that's neat gin, that is.

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft, Marion Brewster-Wright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Marion complains that her gin and tonic doesn't have enough tonic (in fact, it doesn't have any). Then, Sidney goes to find some tonic water to add to her beverage. A moment later, he returns to Marion, without having done anything to the drink. Marion sips the drink and claims that it now has the perfect amount of tonic water in it.

The exchange isn't just a perfect example of the "placebo effect." It's also a sign that the characters are out of touch with reality. The mere power of suggestion—the fact that Marion thinks Sidney has added tonic to her gin—is enough to delude Marion into believing that she's tasting something different than she actually is. The scene also foreshadows Marion's alcoholism later in the play.

RONALD: Ah. Well, as long as you know about him. Might have been after your silver. I mean, you never know. Not these days.
SIDNEY : No, indeed. No, he—he was from the off-licence.

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft, Ronald Brewster-Wright (speaker), Jane Hopcroft

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Jane goes out to buy tonic waters and, through a series of farcical mishaps, winds up having to trudge through the front door in a soaking wet raincoat, leading Ronald to believe that a strange little man has intruded on the Hopcrofts' party. When he points this out to Sidney, Sidney improvises and claims that the "man" was really a deliveryman from the shop around the corner, a lie that Ronald finds perfectly plausible.

First, note that Ronald obviously doesn't know either of his hosts too well, or he would've recognized Jane when she was wearing her husband's raincoat. Second, Sidney is so desperate to impress Ronald (and then ask him for a bank loan) that he tells a silly lie about Jane. Telling the truth wouldn't be all that embarrassing—but Sidney has been so set on talking to Ronald, and is so hell-bent on keeping up appearances, that he chooses to lie.

GEOFFREY: Oh now, come off it. Nonsense. She chooses to live with me, she lives by my rules. I mean we've always made that perfectly clear. She lives her life to a certain extent; I live mine, do what I like within reason. It's the only way to do it...
SIDNEY: Good gracious.
RONALD: I wish you'd have a chat with Marion. Convince her.

Related Characters: Ronald Brewster-Wright, Sidney Hopcroft, Geoffrey Jackson (speaker), Eva Jackson, Marion Brewster-Wright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Geoffrey Jackson, another one of the guests at the Hopcrofts' party, is a charismatic, handsome man who likes to brag to his male friends about his sexual conquests. In oblique terms, Geoffrey suggests that he cheats on his wife all the time, but adds that she's learned to "play by his rules." In other words, Geoffrey uses adultery to assert his authority over Eva: he's the "king of the castle," and Eva has to support him in whatever he does.

The passage is a grating, satirical example of "guy talk." The three male characters crack little jokes about adultery, at least partly to fit in with the group. Sidney in particular seems uneasy having such a discussion, but he thinks that he has a social obligation to join in.

MARION: This really is a simply loathsome little house. I mean how can people live in them. I mean, Geoff, you're an architect, you must be able to tell me. How do people come to design these sort of monstrosities in the first place, let alone persuade people to live in them?
GEOFFREY: Well...
MARION: Oh, God. Now he's going to tell me he designed it.
GEOFFREY: No. I didn't do it. They're designed like this mainly because of cost and people who are desperate for somewhere to live aren't particularly choosey.

Related Characters: Marion Brewster-Wright, Geoffrey Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Just as the Hopcrofts predicted, the Christmas party is in reality a subtle game of one-upmanship, in which the different couples quietly judge one another for social status. Marion, the wife of the successful banker Ronald Brewster-Wright, doesn't seem to think much of Sidney and Jane, and in this passage Marion makes it clear why. She thinks they're beneath her in the economic hierarchy: their house is cheap and ugly-looking, so they can't be very wealthy at all.

As Ayckbourn makes clearer and clearer as the play goes on, however, Marion and Geoffrey's obsession with ranking other peoples' social status is a sign of their insecurity regarding their own social status. In the middle class, families are always rising and falling, and over the course of the play Geoffrey and Marion will do both.

SIDNEY: These people just weren't anybody. They are people in the future who can be very, very useful to us...

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft (speaker), Jane Hopcroft

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

After the guests have left, Sidney and Jane discuss their party. Sidney makes it clear how he feels about things: he thinks the party was a great success because he was able to convince Ronald to give him a bank loan. Sidney doesn't really think of his party guests as intrinsically valuable human beings; instead, he sees them as "useful," because of what they can do for him. Therefore, a guest like Ronald is someone who he respects and admires, whereas a guest like Dick Potter is someone he doesn't care about impressing. Sidney doesn't even seem to care about his own wife's feelings: although she's been humiliated that evening, having to trudge in through the front door in a wet raincoat, Sidney doesn't even ask her how she's feeling. His ambition and greed for material wealth has blinded him to everything else.

Act Two Quotes

GEOFFREY: Yes, I know. You're very anxious, aren't you, that I should go and work for the up and coming Mr. Hopcroft? So is up and coming Mr. Hopcroft.

Related Characters: Geoffrey Jackson (speaker), Sidney Hopcroft, Eva Jackson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

As Act Two begins, one year has gone by since the last Christmas party, and things have changed. Sidney, first encountered as a pathetic, struggling businessman (in some vaguely defined field), is now a successful businessman (his jobs has something to do with real estate, but Ayckbourn says almost nothing more about it). Geoffrey Jackson, who in Act One comes across as a cocky, ambitious young architect, is now a cynical, prematurely jaded fellow, who clearly envies Sidney for his sudden success.

In the turbulent world of the 1970s middle class, Ayckbourn suggests throughout the play, fortunes are always rising and falling. Furthermore, fortune seems to have nothing to do with one's talent or drive. Ayckbourn never explains *why*, exactly, Sidney has been doing well and Geoffrey hasn't—their economic success would appear to have little to do with their innate qualities.

GEOFFREY: Eva—I'm being very patient. Very patient indeed. But in a minute I really do believe I'm going to lose my temper. And we know what happens then, don't we? I will take a swing at you and then you will feel hard done by, and by way of reprisal, will systematically go round and smash everything in the flat. And come tomorrow breakfast time, there will be the familiar sight of the three of us, you, me and George, trying to eat our meals off our one surviving plate.

Related Characters: Geoffrey Jackson (speaker), Eva Jackson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

A year after the Christmas party in Act One, Geoffrey and Eva's marriage has disintegrated. Geoffrey is contemplating leaving Eva, perhaps forever, and claims that he's been seeing another woman. Eva, chatty and energetic in Act One, has become quiet and apparently suicidal. Furthermore, Geoffrey alludes to having hit his wife in the past—perhaps on many occasions.

Beneath the idle, banal façade of the characters' lives, there's a lot of violence in this play. Geoffrey and Eva seem like a typical thirty-something couple, but in fact Geoffrey is an abusive husband who often takes out his anger on his wife, and Eva responds by breaking their possessions or attempting to hurt herself. Part of Ayckbourn's goal in writing *Absurd Person Singular* is to expose the cruelty and brutality of "ordinary" middle-class family life.

GEOFFREY: Now, I'm going to phone the doctor. I'll just be two minutes, all right? Now, you sit there. Don't move, just sit there like a good girl.

Related Characters: Geoffrey Jackson (speaker), Eva Jackson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Geoffrey Jackson realizes that Eva Jackson, his wife, has tried to kill herself. Appallingly, he decides to leave her alone while he phones the doctor. This seems like a foolish thing to do, since—just moments ago—she tried to jump out of a window. One would think that Geoffrey should stay with his wife.

The passage is a good example of how the actors and director of a theatrical production—not just the playwright—get a hand in interpreting it. On paper, it's unclear if Geoffrey is just clueless, and doesn't know any better than to abandon his wife, or if he has a sinister motive for exiting the room (in light of their earlier conversation, it's plausible that, on some level, he's hoping that she'll "finish the job" and leave him to run off with Sally, presumably his mistress.)

JANE: I must clean that oven if it kills me.

Related Characters: Jane Hopcroft (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

As Act Two goes along, its tone becomes more and more farcical. Here, Jane walks into the room and—seeing Eva stick her head in an oven—assumes that Eva is trying to clean her oven. Jane has become so blinded by her obsession with cleaning things that she assumes everyone else is just like her. The idea that Eva is sticking her head in an oven to commit suicide (which, of course, she's doing) doesn't even occur to her.

The passage is also a good example of dramatic irony, since Jane uses the phrase "if it kills me" idiomatically and not seriously, whereas Eva has just made a serious attempt on her own life. There are lots of other similar instances of dramatic irony in the rest of Act Two.

JANE: Shall I tell you something—Sidney would get so angry if he heard me saying this—but I'd far sooner be down here on the floor, on my knees in the oven—than out there, talking. Isn't that terrible. But I'm never at ease, really, at parties. I don't enjoy drinking, you see.

Related Characters: Jane Hopcroft (speaker), Sidney Hopcroft, Eva Jackson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this rare moment of candor from Jane Hopcroft, she admits that she doesn't enjoy drinking or going to parties. This is interesting, since we first met Jane when she was about to host a Christmas party. In many ways, Jane is the most sympathetic character in the play. She doesn't really buy in to the culture of drinking and shallow conversation that Ayckbourn satirized in Act One (and continues to satirize now). And her desire to find happiness in the act of cleaning, while somewhat pathetic, is also rather poignant. However, whatever sincerity and openness one finds in Jane's speech gets undercut by the fact that Jane remains oblivious to the fact that Eva is trying to commit suicide. Jane can be honest about herself, but she's still blind to the suffering of other people—and in this sense, Jane is no different from the other characters.

SIDNEY: Now. I'll give you a little tip, if you like. You'll never get a sink unblocked that way.

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft (speaker), Eva Jackson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After Jane begins scrubbing Eva's oven, her husband Sidney walks into the room. Noticing that Eva is bending over the sink (she's dropped the sleeping pills on which she is trying to overdose), Sidney wrongly assumes that Eva is trying to repair her sink. Just like his wife, Sidney is so used to thinking about household appliances (mostly as status symbols) that he can't see the blatant truth; Eva is trying to end her life.

When Sidney begins repairing Eva's sink, the play becomes more savagely funny and satirical. Act One of the play, while hyperbolic in some ways, was for the most part believable as a portrait of middle-class life. In Act Two, however, the characters behave in increasingly oblivious and grotesque ways, and their acts become more symbolic of Ayckbourns' satire of middle-class values, rather than expressions of how middle-class people would literally behave.

RONALD: Had a good year. Must be pretty pleased.
SIDNEY: Oh, yes. Had a few lucky hunches. Seemed to pay off.

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft, Ronald Brewster-Wright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Sidney and Ronald talk about Sidney's recent successes as a businessman. However, because Sidney's exact profession is almost unknown to the audience, their conversation is confusing. Sidney doesn't even talk about what business deals, in particular, have left him so much better off than he was a year ago. Instead, he just says that he's had some lucky hunches. The word "lucky" is important, since Sidney's good fortune as a businessman seems unrelated to his talent or ambition. Sidney hasn't earned success for himself—just as he suggests here, he's just been lucky. Success "happened" to him; he didn't earn it for himself. The same could be said for any of the other characters in the play. Their fate is out of their hands: instead, they're the passive victims of vast, incomprehensible forces.

SIDNEY: Don't do that! Don't do that! It's too late for that. Look at this shirt. This is a new shirt.

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Sidney has been busily repairing Eva's pipes (even though she hasn't asked him to do anything of the kind, and in fact hasn't spoken at all). Then Jane accidentally runs the faucets, spilling dirty water all over Sidney's new shirt. Sidney becomes surprisingly angry when this happens—he yells that his shirt has been permanently ruined (although one would think that he could just throw it in his washing machine). But the fact that Sidney would become so angry about a shirt suggests that, in the year between Act One and Act Two, he's become even more selfishly materialistic, and even more oblivious to the needs of other people. Indeed, while Sidney complains about his shirt being ruined, Eva is still trying to kill herself.

Act Three Quotes

RONALD: Drink? No, I don't honestly think so. She's always liked a—I mean, the doctor did say she should lay off. But that was only because it was acting as a stimulant—She hasn't touched it lately.

Related Characters: Ronald Brewster-Wright (speaker), Marion Brewster-Wright

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

As Act Three begins, another year has gone by. Ronald's wife Marion has become bedridden for vaguely-defined reasons. Eva suggests that Marion is an alcoholic, while Ronald refuses to believe this. However, as the act goes on, it becomes clear that Eva is exactly right. Ronald's refusal to believe the obvious truth about Marion is a form of denial: he can't accept the painful truth that his wife is addicted to alcohol (even though he begins to admit that she is, and then cuts himself off). The passage is a telling example of the way Ronald—and all the other characters—hide their problems from view rather than discussing them candidly. Because their social milieu places so much stock in appearances, the characters repress their serious problems.

EVA: Darling, I hate to remind you but ever since the ceiling of the Harrison building caved in and nearly killed the Manager, Sidney Hopcroft is about your only hope of surviving as an architect in this city.

Related Characters: Eva Jackson (speaker), Walter Harrison, Geoffrey Jackson, Sidney Hopcroft

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In this expository line of dialogue, it's revealed that Geoffrey Jackson's career is in crisis. He designed and built a shopping complex, but the building collapsed, nearly killing a few people. Now, nobody in town will hire Geoffrey, with the possible exception of Sidney Hopcroft, a man who, as we've seen already, Geoffrey despises.

As was the case in Act Two, it's unclear why Geoffrey's fortunes have plummeted. We're given so little information about the collapse of the shopping complex that it's impossible to tell if the collapse was a product of Geoffrey's carelessness, or just an unrelated mistake. More broadly, the passage suggests that Geoffrey's fate—and the fates of the other characters—is out of his own hands.

RONALD: 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. All the same. Couldn't do without them, could we?

Related Characters: Ronald Brewster-Wright (speaker), Marion Brewster-Wright

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Ronald delivers a long monologue about his marriages, and about his relationships with women in general. He mentions having been married once before marrying Marion, his current wife. However, his way of discussing his two wives is surprisingly clinical and bloodless. He shows no real affection for either woman; instead, he speaks about women as if they're investments, measuring the risks against the rewards and coming to the bland conclusion that he can't do without them.

Ronald, no less than the other characters in the play, is a vulgar materialist, somebody who measures everything in life—even other people—based on how useful they might be for him.

RONALD: Nobody wants your damn picture, now shut up.

Related Characters: Ronald Brewster-Wright (speaker), Marion Brewster-Wright

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marion Brewster-Wright has come down from her room and proceeds to deliver a long monologue about how she was once a beautiful woman. She's clearly upset at having lost her looks (in part because she's drank so much in the last couple years). But instead of offering his wife sympathy, comfort, or even constructive advice, Ronald just tells her to shut up. His reaction, while cold and unfeeling, is typical of the way the male characters in the play treat their partners: they make no effort to provide sympathy or compassion. The failure of communication between husbands and wives is one of the fundamental flaws of middle-class life, as Ayckbourn depicts it.

MARION: Why don't you just go in the hall and shout "Go away" through the letter-box?
RONALD: Because he happens to have a very large deposit account with my bank.

Related Characters: Ronald Brewster-Wright, Marion Brewster-Wright (speaker), Jane Hopcroft, Sidney Hopcroft

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

The Hopcrofts have arrived at the Brewster-Wrights' house, and now they're trying to get in. Nobody inside wants to see the Hopcrofts; they seem to find them annoying. Furthermore, neither Geoffrey nor Ronald wants to talk to Sidney Hopcroft, who's become increasingly successful over the last two years. Their envy for Sidney's financial success is palpable. But at the same time, Sidney's financial success is the only reason that Ronald doesn't tell Sidney to go away; he needs Sidney's business at his bank, which, we've already heard, is on the verge of going under. So because Ronald is so financially insecure and so desperate for better social status, he decides not to tell Sidney to leave.

SIDNEY: Yes. Up at Walter's place. Walter Harrison.
RONALD: Oh—old Harrison's.
SIDNEY: Oh of course, you'll know him, won't you.
RONALD: Oh, yes.
GEOFFREY: Yes.
SIDNEY: Oh, yes, of course. Asking you if you know old Harrison. I should think you do know old Harrison. He certainly remembers you. In fact he was saying this evening...

Related Characters: Geoffrey Jackson, Ronald Brewster-Wright (speaker), Walter Harrison

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85-86

Explanation and Analysis

At Ronald's party, Sidney is his usual obnoxious self. He brags about having gone to another party before Ronald's, hosted by Walter Harrison—seemingly a powerful, wealthy member of the community (and therefore a symbol of Sidney's newfound social status). Furthermore, Sidney brings up the fact that Geoffrey knows Walter, since it was Geoffrey who designed the ill-fated shopping complex Walter owned.

The passage is another good example of why it's up to the actors to interpret a playwright's work. On paper, it's unclear if Sidney is trying to mock Geoffrey for his failings and brag about his own success, or if Sidney is genuinely clueless. A good performer playing Sidney has to make these kinds of choices, and in doing so provides his own interpretation of Ayckbourn's text.

SIDNEY: That's it. Dance. Come on. Dance. Dance. Come on. Dance. Dance. Dance. Keep dancing. Dance . . .

Related Characters: Sidney Hopcroft (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

The play ends with a funny yet disturbing image of the characters playing a humiliating game. According to the rules of the game, the characters must dance, and then stop at the same time that the music stops. The last person to be caught dancing must accept a "forfeit," i..e., must carry an

object that makes it harder for them to continue dancing. None of the characters wants to play this game. But because Sidney (who's tried and failed to introduce party games in each of the last two acts) is now such a powerful businessman, the characters feel that they must play along in the hopes of staying in his good graces.

In all, the dance is a fitting way to bring the play to an end.

Ayckbourn has been ruthless in exposing the various ways that middle-class people sacrifice their humanity in order to gain material wealth and social status. And the dance-game is the ultimate symbol of this idea. The characters sacrifice their own dignity just so that they can impress Sidney, a man whose name they could barely remember two years ago.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT ONE

The play begins "last **Christmas**" in the kitchen of the suburban home of Sidney Hopcroft and Jane Hopcroft, both in their thirties. Their home is modest, but it has modern appliances, such as a fridge and a washing machine. Jane busily scrubs the floor with a cloth, singing as she works. Sidney walks cheerily into the room, wearing fancy, somewhat old-fashioned clothes.

Take careful note of the setting, not just the characters. First, it's suburban. This was a time when the British middle class was expanding and moving out of cities and into suburbia. Note, also, the modern appliances—familiar signifiers of a bourgeois, middle-class, materialistic environment. Meanwhile, Jane and Sidney both seem blandly happy in their respective gender roles. Altogether, it seems like the kind of scene you'd find in an ad.

As Jane scrubs, Sidney notes that he has "a few games lined up .... just in case." He also points out that Jane doesn't really need to scrub the kitchen, since their guests that night won't be standing there. Jane points out that some of the women might want to look at the kitchen, but Sidney argues that bankers' wives won't care about someone else's kitchen. He mentions that he spilled something on a sideboard, and Jane, agitated, immediately goes to clean the spillage, complaining that now the house will smell of polish.

We get a lot of information here. Jane and Sidney are planning a party, and Jane sees to be more invested in keeping up appearances than Sidney—in fact, she seems to be interested in cleaning, just for the sake of cleaning. Also notice that Sidney seems highly attuned to his guests' social status: his goal this evening, it can be assumed, isn't just to have fun; it's to do some networking.

Sidney asks Jane for a "**Christmas** kiss," but Jane instead says that Sidney's tie smells like fly spray. Then Sidney notes that it's 8:28, meaning that the party officially starts in two minutes. Suddenly, the bell rings. Frantically, Jane says that she hasn't sprayed the kitchen yet, and pulls out a spray canister. Sidney goes to let the first two guests, the Potters, into the house. These guests, Dick and Lottie Potter, are never seen, but their loud, braying laughs now fill the house.

Sidney and Jane are neurotically, but also comically, interested in the tiny details of their party, right down to the number of minutes until it starts. Also, Ayckbourn lets readers know upfront that the Potters will never be seen. This is interesting because it might suggest that the entire act will be set in the kitchen, away from the guests and "behind the scenes" of this ordinary, banal Christmas. And in a way, that's exactly what the play is: a behind-the-scenes look at what it means to live an ordinary middle-class life.

Sidney ducks back into the kitchen, where Jane is still spraying. Jane remembers that she's been wearing slippers—she's left her dress shoes by the fireplace, and begs Sidney to go get them at once. Sidney retreats back into the room with the Potters, and there is a sudden bellow of laughter. Then, Sidney returns to the kitchen, carrying Jane's shoes. He notes that it's lucky "it's only Dick and Lottie" in the other room, rather than the Brewster-Wrights.

Sidney ranks his guests into a very clear hierarchy. Dick and Lottie are just bodies in the room—he doesn't particularly care about impressing them (which may be why he rudely left them alone). The Brewster-Wrights (even their last name sounds pompous and fancy), however, are people whose favor Sidney is trying to win.

Jane and Sidney leave the kitchen, and the sound of laughter and conversation from offstage fills the kitchen. Sidney returns to look for a bottle opener, and suddenly the doorbell rings. Sidney goes to open the door; a moment later he comes back into the kitchen and hisses, "It's them." Jane knows that Sidney means Ronald Brewster-Wright and his wife, Marion Brewster-Wright.

The fact that Sidney and Jane both know who "they" are would suggest that they both regard the Brewster-Wrights as important people (though what makes them so important is anybody's guess).

A moment later, Jane, Sidney, and Ronald Brewster-Wright—a man in his mid-forties who is "impressive without being distinguished"—burst into the kitchen. Ronald's trousers are wet, and Jane is apologizing profusely for spilling on him. She offers him a tea towel, which he uses to dry his trousers.

Ayckbourn's description of Ronald is worth keeping in mind. Nothing in this play, when it comes down to it, is particularly distinguished: the characters and setting and dialogue are all mostly tawdry and banal. By spilling a drink of Ronald's trousers, Jane sets a more plainly comic, slapstick-y tone.

Marion Brewster-Wright, Ronald's wife, enters the kitchen. She praises the kitchen, especially the shiny "working surfaces" and the cupboard drawers, which can be filled with "all sorts of things" and then shut and forgotten about. Marion also notices the washing machine, which was Sidney's **Christmas** present to Jane. She notices the dial that reads, "Whites-coloreds" and jokes, "it's apartheid," a comment that Jane doesn't understand.

Jane was right after all—bankers' wives would want to see the kitchen (and Ronald is, in fact, a banker, though we don't know this yet). So far, there hasn't been any really substantive conversation: the guests are just making chit-chat about appliances and other material things. Even when Marion tries to allude to politics and current events, however loosely, Jane has no idea what she's talking about. (The apartheid system of racial segregation was still in effect in South Africa when this play was released.)


The doorbell rings, and Jane leaves the room to greet the guests. Marion asks Sidney, who she calls "Mr. Hopcraft," how he managed to "squeeze" the washing machine into the kitchen. Sidney explains that he's built all the shelves in the kitchen and measured the washing machine to fit underneath the shelves. Jane pokes her head into the kitchen and announces that the Jacksons, Eva and Geoffrey, have arrived. Jane and Sidney walk out of the kitchen.

The characters keep harping on about the washing machine, almost as if they're incapable of talking about anything else. By this point, audiences are starting to get a sense for the "rhythm" of the play—every few minutes, somebody walks in or out of the kitchen, and sometimes, there's nobody in the kitchen at all.

Marion and Ronald stay in the kitchen, studying the washing machine. Marion tells her husband to "make our excuses quite shortly," since she wants to get home to her children, finds Dick Potter's jokes horrible, and doesn't like the **drinks**. Ronald complains that Jane spilled soda on his trousers while pouring him a drink.

Marion and Ronald don't want to be at this party: they don't seem to take Sidney and Jane seriously, and dislike the other guests. It's clear that they consider themselves to be superior to the others.

Sidney returns to the kitchen to summon the Brewster-Wrights into the drawing room. Marion tells him, "we can't tear ourselves away from your divine kitchen," but she and Ronald follow Sidney out. A moment later, Jane returns with an empty bowl, which she fills with chips. Sidney follows her, explaining that they're out of tonic water. Jane asks him to tell Lottie to stop eating so many chips.

Just a second after bad-mouthing the hosts, Marion flatters them for having a nice kitchen. So far, it's worth noting, a decent chunk of the conversation has been about the kitchen, suggesting that Jane was right after all (and also that these guests aren't very imaginative in their conversation).


Jane and Sidney continue looking for the tonic water, and Sidney complains that she's "let us down" by forgetting where the tonic is—or, worse, forgetting to buy extra tonic. Sidney leaves the kitchen, and Jane stands alone, on the verge of tears. Suddenly she opens a drawer and begins counting out coins. She puts on her husband's raincoat and then goes out into the rain, leaving the back door ajar.

Sidney's tone is bullying and callous: he seems not to notice that he's hurting his wife's feelings, perhaps because he's so fixated on impressing his (supposedly important) guests, the Brewster-Wrights. It's interesting that Jane takes on the more active, physical role, running out to get more tonic. Also notice that she wears a man's coat, symbolizing that she's performing a more traditionally masculine role.

Sidney returns to the kitchen, carrying Marion's glass, which needs tonic water. Then, Eva walks in. She's in her thirties and "makes no concessions in either manner or appearance." Eva explains that she needs some water so that she can take her pills and avoid "turning into a raving lunatic." She's been taking pills since the age of eight, she claims, and finds it disturbing that her existence is "geared round swallowing tablets every three hours," including in the middle of the night. She accepts a glass of water, drinks from it, and then throws it in the garbage can.

In contrast to the other guests, Eva is comically frank in her conversation—instead of making idle chitchat about washing machines, she "goes for it" and talks about her depression (or other, unnamed mental illness). In a way, all the characters structure their existences around material things, on which they're completely dependent—Eva with her pills, Jane with her appliances, etc. Yet Eva is the only character who seems not to like this state of affairs.

Eva, speaking half to herself, goes on to explain that she and her husband, Geoffrey, have left their dog, **George**, in the car so that it won't get too restless. However, the dog has a habit of sounding the car horn with its nose. As she speaks, Sidney retrieves the glass from the trash. Eva, noticing him, says, "My God was that me?" and says, "I am finally going mad." She leaves the kitchen.

Even though Eva in some ways seems more mentally unstable than the other characters, she is also more self-aware. At least she's not obsessed with cleaning, like Jane, or currying favor, like Sidney.

Marion enters the kitchen, asking about her glass. She sips from it and claims that it's much better now that it has a little tonic water—however, Sidney points out that it's pure **gin**. Marion teases Sidney, "what are you trying to do to me?" Sidney points out that the mistletoe is in another room, and Marion says, "Lead on," though she can't remember Sidney's name. Sidney absent-mindedly closes the back door.

Marion is so out of touch with her senses, and reality, that she doesn't even realize what she's drinking (and this also foreshadows her later alcoholism). There's also some awkward flirting between Marion and Sidney, even though Marion clearly isn't interested in the conversation (she can't even remember Sidney's name) and is just going through the motions.

A moment later, Jane arrives at the back door, soaking wet, with a carton of tonic waters. She finds that the door is locked. She knocks gently, then louder, but nobody hears. She decides to try the front door. Sidney comes back into the kitchen, carrying an empty chip-bowl. He sees the back door, realizes his mistake, and runs out into the rain. A moment later, he rushes back inside, and Jane comes in through the front door, her boots squelching on the floor.

Even though viewers can't see the living-room of the Hopcrofts' apartment, they can hear the squelching of the boots, symbolically undermining all the time that Jane presumably spent cleaning the floors. Jane is doubly humiliated, first because she has to walk around in a man's raincoat at her own party and second because she hates dirtiness.

Back in the kitchen, Sidney asks Jane what happened, and Jane explains that she went out for tonic water—Ronald Brewster-Wright let her in again. She notes, "I don't think he recognized me" and admits that she doesn't think she can face her guests now. Sidney says she should apologize to the guests.

Jane is so self-conscious that she doesn't want to continue on as a hostess. The fact that Ronald doesn't recognize her in a raincoat reinforces the fact that he's quite indifferent to his two hosts, and doesn't know them well.

Just then, Ronald enters the kitchen, and Jane rushes out the back door rather than face her guest. Ronald explains that he just let in a "little short chap." Sidney hesitates, then says, "He was from the off-license" and brought some tonic water. Ronald and Sidney discuss Sidney's general store business, and Sidney brings up a "chat" the two of them had the other day. Ronald hesitates and then says, "I think the bank could probably see their way to helping you out."

Sidney keeps up the charade and tells a bizarre lie about having an "off-license" deliveryman, so that he can ask Ronald for a loan. Readers don't really know what Sidney does for a living (something with general stores, but that's it). This, it's suggested, is the conversation Sidney has been waiting all night to have: he's desperate for that loan.

Geoffrey Jackson, a handsome, confident man in his mid-thirties, enters and asks, "Is there a chance of sanctuary here?" He complains that Dick Potter is telling the women annoying jokes. Sidney claims that Dick is a "fascinating character," a teacher who works with young people most of the time. Geoffrey notes that Dick's wife Lottie has sexy legs, especially for a woman of her age. Sidney agrees, but then says he hasn't really seen Lottie's legs.

Geoffrey is more comfortable talking about sex than the other characters in the play, and here he introduces some "guy talk." Sidney joins in, sensing that that's what he's supposed to do, but he also gives the sense of being out of his element.

Suddenly, Jane appears outside the back door. Sidney waves her away, without his guests seeing him. Meanwhile, Ronald asks Geoffrey about a party the two of them went to, during which Geoffrey flirted with a blonde. Geoffrey brags, "You have no idea," and Sidney tries to laugh along and give "noises of sexual approval." Geoffrey complains that he wishes he could "bury" his wife sometimes. Ronald points out that Geoffrey is lucky to have Eva, since she probably has a "jolly good idea" by now, but still lives with Geoffrey. Geoffrey says that Eva has learned to live by his rules. He adds that there's too much "good stuff wandering around."

In this farcical section, Sidney manages to stop his guests from seeing Jane—it would seem that Ronald and Geoffrey are too busy talking about women to notice the actual woman standing by the back door. Notice that Geoffrey never explicitly talks about sex or adultery, but gives the impression of having cheated on his wife. He also boasts that he's in charge in his household: his wife Eva has to accept his infidelities. It's unclear if Geoffrey really is the playboy he claims to be, or if he's only bragging. The mention of "burying" Eva is also a dark joke foreshadowing her later attempts at suicide.

Eva strolls into the kitchen and claims that the men have "abandoned" the ladies at the party. Sidney leaves the kitchen. Eva tells Geoffrey that they should get going, since their **dog** needs to go home and eat its dinner. She also tells Ronald, "Your wife is looking slightly less than pleased."

The "guy talk" comes to an abrupt end when Eva walks into the room. Ronald, who'd seemed to admire Geoffrey for cheating on his wife, is now reminded of his own spouse.

As Eva leaves, Geoffrey brings up a business deal with Ronald—he wants to know if Walter Harrison's new **shopping complex** in the area has an architect yet. When Ronald says no, Geoffrey asks Ronald to put in a word with the owner of the complex, and Ronald promises he will.

Geoffrey, it turns out, is just as eager as Sidney to get in Ronald's good graces: he needs Ronald to recommend him as an architect. Ronald clearly has a lot of influence in his community, but it's never fully explained why, beyond the fact that he's a banker.

Marion enters the kitchen, just as Ronald is leaving. She tells Geoffrey that the house is horribly ugly, and Geoffrey agrees—he explains that houses like this are designed to be cheap, because people in the neighborhood usually aren't choosey. She tells Geoffrey that he must come visit her and Ronald.

Geoffrey and Marion enjoy a rare moment of camaraderie (which, interestingly, contrasts with the "guy talk" of a few minutes ago), making fun of the Hopcrofts for their tiny, ugly house. The Hopcrofts have spent a lot of time making their home look nice, but their guests dismiss it right away. Marion's invitation to Geoffrey could be interpreted as flirtatious, or it could just mean that Marion isn't keen on spending any more time with Eva Jackson.

Sidney and Ronald, now wearing his overcoat, come back into the kitchen. Marion thanks Sidney and tells him that he and Jane should visit them sometime—assuming he can ever find Jane. Alone in the kitchen, Sidney smiles and rubs his hands together.

Notice that Marion invites Sidney and *Jane to visit (whereas she extended this invitation to Geoffrey but not Eva). Sidney is clearly overjoyed to have extracted a promise of money from the powerful, well-connected Ronald.*

Jane knocks on the back door and Sidney lets her in. Jane is a "sodden mess"—she explains that she stayed outside until all the guests had left. Sidney claims that there was nothing he could have said to the guests that would've explained Jane's bizarre behavior. The guests, he adds, are people "who can be very, very useful to us."

Sidney is so pleased with his agreement with Ronald that he's oblivious to Jane's sadness and humiliation. He sees his guests as means to an end—financial success—rather than as interesting human beings.

Sidney tells Jane that he'll watch some television now—since it's **Christmas** Eve, there should be something good on. Sidney walks out, leaving Jane along in the kitchen. She stares at the dirty things scattered around the room. She picks up a damp cloth and begins to clean the room, singing happily to herself.

Sidney's obliviousness and lack of feeling for his wife suggests that he's single-mindedly focused on becoming rich. The act ends with the poignant image of Jane cleaning the same room she'd been cleaning earlier in the day. This could be interpreted as a symbol for the Sisyphean repetitiveness of Jane's life. But at the same time, Jane seems more content than the other characters in the play: she's the only one of them who seems to take genuine pleasure in something, however superficial it might seem (whereas the other characters seem more restless and uneasy).

ACT TWO

Act Two takes place "This **Christmas**" in the kitchen of Geoffrey and Eva's fourth-floor flat (apartment). The kitchen seems untidy—the appliances "have seen better days" and the furniture is plain. Eva sits at the kitchen table, writing something in a notepad. After a few moments of frustration, she tears up the page and starts again.

Act Two takes place in a very different kind of middle-class home, that of Geoffrey and Eva. Unlike Sidney and Jane, this couple doesn't seem to place too much stock in appearances. Notice that the act opens with another image of repetition, echoing the end of the previous act.

From offstage, Geoffrey plays with his dog, **George**. He walks into the kitchen and kisses Eva. Eva barely notices—she's too busy writing. Geoffrey pours himself a drink and complains that Walter Harrison's **shopping complex**, which he's been designing, is proceeding slowly, and it's going to cost twice as much as he'd thought.

Geoffrey and Eva show no fondness for each other: Eva doesn't even kiss her husband, and Geoffrey seems much more concerned with his architectural project (the shopping complex mentioned in the previous act) than in his wife's well-being.

Geoffrey notices that Eva seems distracted. He points out that she's still in her dressing gown. Then, he mentions the conversation they had last night. As they'd discussed, Geoffrey will go and live with Sally. He hopes that Eva isn't bitter about what's happened, and promises that eventually he'll want to see Eva again. Finally, he claims that he'll be moved out by Boxing Day.

Though never mentioned again, Geoffrey seems to be contemplating running away with a woman named Sally, with whom, it's implied, he's been having an affair. However, Geoffrey discusses the matter obliquely, so it's unclear exactly what has happened.

Geoffrey recalls that some friends will be coming by soon and realizes that there's only a little bit of liquor in the flat. As he rummages through the drawers looking for **alcohol**, he reminds Eva that the people coming to the flat that night are really Eva's friends, not his. One of these is "the up and coming Mr. Hopcroft," and Geoffrey has no intention of being polite to him, even though Mr. Hopcroft wants Geoffrey to come work for him. Eva says nothing.

Bizarrely, Geoffrey and Eva are having a Christmas party, even though Geoffrey is apparently on the verge of leaving his wife altogether. Sidney Hopcroft, a pathetic, struggling businessman in the previous act, is rapidly becoming a successful, respected figure, though why this has happened is never explained.

Geoffrey picks up a dishcloth and carries it around with him. He turns to Eva and claims, "I'm being very patient," and then says that he might lose his temper, in which case he'll probably hit Eva and she'll "smash everything in the flat." Just then, the bell rings. Geoffrey goes to answer the door and tells Eva to go to bed, so that things will be easier. Alone in the kitchen, Eva finishes writing her note. She pins it to the table with a kitchen knife.

Geoffrey alludes to having hit Eva in the past. He's a contemptible character: someone who seemingly takes out his frustration with his job and his marriage by bullying his wife in various ways. Notice that Eva, in contrast to her persona in the previous act, has yet to speak. However, the ominous way she attaches her note to the table alerts the audience that something isn't right.

Eva immediately turns to the window. She opens it and stands on the ledge. Geoffrey comes back into the kitchen, explaining that the "bloody Hopcrofts" have arrived. He cleans some glasses and complains that Jane Hopcroft is too fussy about cleanliness. Just then, he notices that Eva is standing by the window. He pulls her back inside, and she begins to moan and wail.

Eva is trying to commit suicide: she's alluded to her problems with mental illness in Act One, and now her pills seem unable to improve her mood. The passage sets up a contrast between the pettiness of Geoffrey's concerns about the party and the deep seriousness of Eva's suicide attempt—Ayckbourn will riff on this contrast for the rest of the act.

Geoffrey notices Eva's note on the table and reads it. He asks Eva, "what do you mean, a burden to everyone?" Suddenly, Eva stands up and tries to cut herself with a bread knife. Geoffrey stops her and says he needs to call a doctor, who'll probably be able to "calm you down a bit." He tells Eva to wait in the kitchen while he makes the call.

Geoffrey recognizes that Eva has left a suicide note on the kitchen table. But despite this—whether because of his obliviousness, the absurdity of the play's world, or, more darkly, because he wants her to kill herself—he leaves her alone.

Alone, Eva writes another note. Then, she turns to the oven and sticks her head inside. Jane walks into the room, carrying some glasses. Eva tries to sit up, and bonks her head on the inside of the oven. Jane tells her, "You shouldn't be on the cold floor in your condition, you know." Jane notices that the oven is dirty and says, "I must clean that oven if it kills me." She looks around the kitchen for oven cleaner.

Gradually, the tone of the act becomes more and more farcical. Jane doesn't even realize that Eva is trying to kill herself: Jane is so obsessed with cleaning things that she assumes Eva is just cleaning her oven. The passage has a few choice examples of dramatic irony: Jane casually uses the idiomatic phrase "if it kills me," even though Eva is literally trying to kill herself.

Geoffrey walks back into the room, and Jane asks him if she could borrow an apron. Geoffrey nods and explains that he's called a doctor, who's out on another call. He decides to go out and find the doctor, which he claims should take no more than ten minutes. Jane promises to keep an eye on Eva while Geoffrey is gone. Geoffrey removes the knives from the room, and then walks out. He claims that he's taking the knives downstairs to the group of Muslims having a big party. As Geoffrey walks out, the bell rings.

Geoffrey's time estimate seems pretty low (and, as it turns out, he's gone for much longer than ten minutes). Also, his allusion to the Muslim party downstairs is interesting, because in the 1970s immigrants from Muslim countries began to come to the U.K. in greater numbers than ever before. Jane, oblivious as ever, doesn't question Geoffrey's bizarre explanation for removing the knives from the room.

Alone with Eva, Jane tells her that **George** is getting big. She adds that Dick Potter is very good with dogs. She also tells Eva that she usually prefers cleaning to socializing at parties—she's never enjoyed drinking and chatting. As Jane talks, Eva finds a small pillbox and swallows a pill, then another. Then she spills the pills, and they disappear down the drain.

Jane makes idle chitchat, of the kind she and her husband made in the previous chapter. Viewers can deduce that Eva is trying to kill herself by overdosing on pills (since, if she were merely taking her prescription, as she alluded to in Act One, she'd only take one pill).

Sidney enters the room and sees Eva and Jane. He explains that the Brewster-Wrights have arrived. Seeing that Eva is trying to fish something out of the sink, she tells her, "You'll never get a sink unblocked that way." He looks under the cupboard and promises to fix the sink with a wrench. To explain things to Eva, he picks up Eva's suicide note, glances at it, and then turns it over and draws a diagram of the sink and pipe. Jane smiles and tells Eva, "It's at times like this you're glad of your friends, aren't you?"

Sidney, no less than his wife, is unable to recognize that Eva is suicidal. He's so obsessed with material things, especially bourgeois household appliances, that he has no understanding of people's feelings. The passage becomes even more darkly comic when Sidney ignores Eva's suicide note and writes on the back. Eva's "friends," contrary to what Jane suggests, pay almost no attention to her.

Sidney steps out of the room, and Eva finds a piece of rope, climbs up on a chair, and begins to tie the rope around a ceiling light. She tears out the bulb and the fitting, and begins to yawn as a result of taking two sleeping pills. Suddenly, Ronald enters the kitchen, and behind him Lottie Potter's laughter can be heard. He notices Eva standing on the table, and Jane tells him, "Bulb's gone." Ronald offers to fix the bulb for Eva. Meanwhile, Sidney has retrieved a heavy bag of tools, including a wrench, from his car, and begins fixing the pipes.

The farce expands as Eva tries other ways of killing herself, and is foiled again and again. Notice, also, that the characters believe they're giving Eva valuable help by repairing her kitchen, to the point where they feel they have the right to repair her appliances in the middle of a Christmas party. Appliances, it sometimes seems, are the only things they understand.

Ronald gets up to change the bulb and notices that the fitting has been removed, leaving bare wires. Sidney offers to fix the light, and again writes on the back of Eva's suicide note to explain what he's doing. As he writes, Eva "scrawls another suicide note." Then, she stands on the table again and reaches her hands out to the bare wires on the ceiling. Sidney and Ronald stop her, warning, "They might have been live."

Ronald doesn't realize that Eva wants *the ceiling wires to be live: he still assumes that she's just trying to repair her light bulb, despite all evidence to the contrary.*

Sidney checks to make sure the light is turned off, and tells Ronald that it's safe to touch the wires. While Ronald and Sidney perform their respective jobs, Sidney asks what Marion is up to, and Ronald explains that she's probably in the living-room, talking to the Potters, adding that Marion's been "on her pins" lately. Ronald praises Sidney for having had a good year, and Sidney admits he's had some "lucky hunches."

In this passage, we get a very small amount of information about how the different characters view one another. Sidney, no longer a struggling, pathetic businessman, has had a good year—but readers still don't fully understand why, or even what Sidney's job consists of. There's an interesting contrast between the concrete, literal nature of the characters' "work" in this scene, and the ambiguity surrounding what the characters "do for work."

While Jane, Sidney, and Ronald work, Eva writes yet another suicide note, and then finds a tin of paint stripper. She tries to pry open the tin, but can't. Just then, Marion enters the room and says that something "ghastly" has happened—**George** has bitten Dick Potter's leg. Meanwhile, Eva rummages through the bag and finds a screwdriver. Marion asks, "How's the invalid?" and Ronald replies, "Very groggy." Marion shrugs and offers everyone a **drink**. She gives a drink to Eva, just as she's used the screwdriver to open the tin.

Marion's exclamation is another good example of dramatic irony: audiences recognize that the real "ghastly" event, Eva's attempted suicide, is taking place right in the kitchen. Also, notice that George has bitten Dick, even though Dick is supposed to be good with animals. This could symbolize the heightening menace and internal strife of the British middle-class household. Finally, notice that Marion carelessly gives Eva a drink, even though Eva has already overdosed on sleeping pills.

Sidney suggests that the guests play a party game. Just then, Ronald drops a small "thing" that's a part of the ceiling lights. Sidney crawls around on his hands and knees, trying to find the "thing." Ronald decides he doesn't need the "thing"—a nut—after all—he wants a screw instead. Marion puts the light on so make easier to see; just then Ronald, who's touching the wires in the ceiling, begins to "vibrate" and moan. Marion turns off the light, and Sidney and Jane carry Ronald down. The guests cover Ronald, who seems cold and weak, in "an assortment of laundry, both male and female."

In each of the three acts, Sidney suggests that the guests play a game (but they only play in Act Three). Ronald's electrocution is sickening but also darkly hilarious—almost like a gag in an old Charlie Chaplin or Jerry Lewis movie. The pile of male and female clothes has been interpreted as a symbol of the scrambled gender roles of the English middle class, and the emasculation of the middle-class man.

Marion offers Ronald a **drink**, and Ronald replies, in a strained voice, "I feel very peculiar." Jane goes to wash her hands in the sink, and when she turns on the sink, water drips down the pipe and onto Sidney, who's still underneath the sink. Sidney, irritated, tells Marion that she's ruined a new shirt, and that he's going to get his overcoat before he freezes. He angrily tells Eva, "That dog of yours is a liability," and adds, "This is the last time I accept hospitality in this household."

Notice that Marion's solution to every problem is to offer someone a drink—this'll become important, and rather tragic, in Act Three. The slapstick-y tone of the scene builds when Sidney gets doused with a sink-full of dirty water. Again, the characters all complain about comically trivial matters, even as their "friend" Eva contemplates ending her life.

Faintly, Eva begins to sing, "The Twelve Days of **Christmas**." After each verse, a guest joins in—first Marion, then Jane, then Ronald, then Sidney. In the distance **George** barks. Suddenly, Geoffrey walks in. He's astounded by the sound of his guests and his wife singing.

Surprisingly, Eva stops trying to kill herself and takes refuge in a Christmas carol—as do the other characters. And this, curiously enough, is one of the only times in the play when the characters come together to celebrate a Christmas tradition. Perhaps Ayckbourn's point is that Eva, like the other women in the play, has the ability to escape her sadness and take comfort in little things like music (much as Jane takes comfort in cleaning). Finally, the materialistic aspect of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" makes it the perfect song choice for these crass, materialistic guests.

ACT THREE

Act Three takes place "next **Christmas**" in the kitchen of the Brewster-Wrights' old Victorian house. The kitchen has many modern appliances, but also the "flavor" of the original Victorian design. Ronald sits in an armchair, wearing a scarf and listening to the radio. He reads a book, and laughs out loud every couple seconds.

Ayckbourn first introduced the Brewster-Wrights as an impressive couple with a lot of social status, and their house would seem to support such an interpretation. Victorian architecture still signifies wealth and prestige. However, the chilliness of the house (signaled by Ronald's scarf) might also symbolize the couple's cold, emotionless life together.

Eva walks into the rom, wearing a winter coat. She complains that the house is very cold, and Ronald asks her if "her room's all right." Eva tells Ronald that "she" would like a sandwich, and adds that "she" is doing much better. Ronald thanks Eva for dropping by, and assures her that Marion appreciates it, too. Marion, he explains, has been living "on her nerves" lately, since she's very insecure. Eva suggests that this may be because she drinks too much, but Ronald denies this, claiming that she hasn't been drinking at all, lately.

Eva has come by to take care of Ronald's wife, Marion. Eva—quite reasonably, given her earlier behavior—suggests that Marion is an alcoholic, something which Ronald (who appears to be in denial about his wife) won't acknowledge.

Ronald offers Eva a **drink**, and she accepts after turning it down the first time. Just then, the bell rings, and Eva says that it's probably Geoffrey. Ronald walks off to answer the door. A moment later, Geoffrey walks into the kitchen and asks Eva, "How is *she*?" Eva replies, "drunk." Eva asks Geoffrey if he asked Ronald for money, and Geoffrey says he hasn't. Eva points out that Ronald owes Geoffrey the money, and claims that she'll bring it up with Ronald after **Christmas**.

Even after they discuss alcoholism, the characters continue to drink, suggesting that they're all highly dependent on alcohol (if not actually alcoholics). Eva, not Geoffrey, takes an active role in her family's finances, while her husband (charismatic and active in the previous acts) is now more passive and laconic. No explanation is offered for why Eva, suicidal in the previous section, seems so much calmer here. The implication is that Eva's stability and mental health is outside her own control.

Ronald enters the room, noting that there seems to be little **alcohol** left in the house, even though he bought some recently. He guesses that his maid has been sneaking drinks. Ronald goes off to look in other parts of the house. Alone, Eva tells Geoffrey that she hates working for him—he leaves in the middle of the day, leaving Eva to do all his typing. Eva also suggests that Geoffrey reach out to Sidney Hopcroft, but Geoffrey refuses to get involved in his "seedy little schemes." Eva replies that ever since the roof of Walter Harrison's **shopping complex** caved in and nearly killed the Manager, "Sidney Hopcroft is about your only hope of surviving as an architect in this city."

Ronald refuses to accept that his wife is an alcoholic and, in all probability, is the one who's been sneaking drinks. This is also one of the only times in the play when it's suggested that a woman has a job outside the house. This could be interpreted to signal that the Jacksons' finances are plummeting since the shopping complex Geoffrey designed collapsed (since he has hired his wife to save money). Finally, notice that Sidney's fortunes have continued to rise while Geoffrey's have gone down—but again, Ayckbourn offers no explanation for why this should be so. The result is that Sidney's good fortune feels as accidental and beyond his own control as does Geoffrey's bad fortune.

Ronald returns with the **drinks**, and the three of them toast and drink. Geoffrey notes, "Bit quieter than last **Christmas**, eh?" He notices the book Ronald was reading—a "saucy" thing, Ronald explains, which he found under "one of the boys' mattresses." He tells Geoffrey that he was sorry to hear about the collapsed **shopping complex**. Geoffrey asks Ronald how his bank is doing, and Ronald explains, "We're not in the red, yet."

Ronald is reading a child's book, suggesting his infantilism (much like in the previous act). Ronald's fortunes, just like Geoffrey's, are plummeting: that's why he's pleased simply because he's not losing money.

The bell rings, and Ronald explains that it's Marion upstairs. Eva goes to attend to Marion. With Geoffrey, Ronald reminisces about his first wife, a woman who left him abruptly and wrote him a letter saying, "she'd had enough." Ronald next married Marion, but he still thinks about his first wife sometimes. He adds that he still has no idea "what most women think about anything."

This is one of the few times in the play when a male character explicitly voices his feelings about women. Ronald sees his relationships with women as being unpredictable and beyond his own control. He's alienated from everything and everyone, even his own wife (who, one would think, he'd understand pretty well).

Eva enters the room again. Ronald asks her how their **dog** is doing, and Eva tells him, "We had to … give him away." Ronald remembers that Dick Potter had to have three stitches because of his dog bite. Dick Potter is mountain-climbing in Switzerland this **Christmas**, meaning "We'll have to do without old Dick to jolly us up this year."

The characters often describe Dick as an annoying, bothersome character, but they also seem lonely without Dick in the picture. Also, Eva's comments could be interpreted to mean that she and Geoffrey had to have George put down because he bit somebody, or that they had to give the dog away because they could no longer afford to take care of him.

Suddenly, Marion walks into the room. She greets the guests and thanks them for coming. Ronald warns her that she needs to put on warmer clothing. After Marion asks him for a **drink**, Ronald starts to say, "The doctor said very plainly …" Marion cuts him off, saying, "For the love of God, Ronnie, it's **Christmas**." Then, she begins to weep. She tells the guests that she used to be a very beautiful woman. Ronald cries, "Nobody wants your damn picture, now shut up."

To Marion, Christmas is an excuse to get drunk (as it is for plenty of people). And yet she's drinking not for its own sake, but because she's miserable. She's dissatisfied with the direction her life has gone. Obsessed with appearances, she hates herself for having lost her looks as she's grown older. Ronald, as unfeeling as ever, offer Marion no sympathy and simply silences her.

The doorbell rings, and Eva goes to see who it is. She comes back to the kitchen and tells Ronald that it's the Hopcrofts. Ronald says "Oh, good grief," and Geoffrey adds, "Heaven forbid." Marion asks Ronald why he doesn't yell for them to go away, and Ronald replies, "Because he happens to have a very large deposit account with my bank." Eva suggests that they just sit silently and wait for the Hopcrofts to go away. Ronald turns off the lights in the kitchen. They can hear the Hopcrofts walking around to the back door. The Hopcrofts are dressed in party hats and they're clearly a little drunk. Suddenly, Ronald says, "I've got a nasty feeling I didn't lock the back door."

This scene is equal parts slapstick, horror, and social realism. We see how far Ronald has fallen—to the point where just one deposit could make or break his bank. At the beginning of the play, Sidney and Jane had to grovel and flatter in the hopes of getting Ronald's attention. But now the shoe's on the other foot: it is Ronald who has to stay in Sidney's good graces.

Sidney opens the back door, even though Jane tells him not to. He shoots back, "I haven't yet forgiven you for that business at the party. How did you manage to drop a whole plate of trifle?" Sidney and Jane walk into the kitchen and turn on the light, to find Ronald, Marion, Geoffrey, and Eva trying to hide in various spaces. There's a pause, and then Marion says, "Boo."

This is another good example of the play's tragicomic tone. It's hilarious, and almost like something out of a sitcom, that the guests are caught in the act of trying to hide from Sidney and Jane. Yet it's also horribly sad: whatever community these six "friends" once had has been torn apart as their fortunes have veered in wildly different directions.

Ronald offers Sidney and Jane **drinks**, and Sidney mentions that he's just come from Walter Harrison's party. He turns to Geoffrey and says, "You'll know him, won't you?" He mentions that he and Jane went to the party partly for pleasure, but adds, "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."

Sidney has evidently become a powerful member of the community (signaled by the fact that he knows Harrison, the owner of the shopping complex). While it's difficult to know how to interpret Sidney's character (and this is largely up to the actors and directors, not just Ayckbourn), Ayckbourn suggests that Sidney, for all his new wealth, is still a rather petty, pathetic character. He thinks in empty clichés, and doesn't seem to understand the source of his own fortune.

Jane offers Ronald and Marion their presents, which they open, confused. Jane and Sidney explain that the presents are a set of electrical screwdrivers for Ronald and a bottle of **gin** for Marion. Jane also gives Ronald two "rather ghastly woolly toys" for Ronald and Marion's children. Finally, Jane produces a tiny bell, which she gives to Geoffrey, saying that he can put it on **George**'s collar. She apologizes for not bringing any presents for Geoffrey and Eva—she didn't know they'd be there.

Sidney's present for Ronald is pricey, a signifier of his new social status. But it's also impersonal—nothing in the play so far suggests that Ronald would particularly enjoy receiving screwdrivers for Christmas. Even more impersonal is Marion's bottle of gin: apparently, the Hopcrofts don't realize Marion is an alcoholic (or don't care, or are even trying to mock her for her addiction). The Hopcrofts are so obsessed with material things that they lack any sense of empathy or compassion for others.

Ronald tells Sidney and Jane, "You'll have to excuse us if we're not our usual cheery selves." However, Marion says, "I'm perfectly cheery." Eva mentions that Geoffrey is "dying" to do jobs for Sidney, and Sidney replies, "I'll certainly keep him in mind. Really rather depends."

This is a good example of a place where the actors and director can choose how to interpret Ayckbourn's dialogue. Marion could be speaking sarcastically, or not. And depending on how Sidney delivers his line, he could be dangling his new wealth in front of Geoffrey, or he could be genuinely clueless.

Sidney and Jane tell the others, "We're going to get you all jumping about." Sidney proceeds to tell Jane about his idea for a game, but because the radio is playing too loudly, it's impossible to hear what he's saying. Jane and Sidney proceed to remove all the chairs in the kitchen, and then roll up the carpet.

For the third time in the play, Sidney tries to get everyone to play a game. And this time, due to his new status, he succeeds: the guests have no desire to play, but they're too desperate to say no.

Sidney explains that they'll be playing a game called **Musical Dancing**. The point of the game is to stop dancing at the exact moment when the music stops. The person who's caught dancing after the music stops will get a forfeit (an item they must carry), and at the end of the game, the person with the least forfeits gets a chocolate Father **Christmas** (i.e., Santa Claus).

The game is a sly parody of the different characters' struggles for material success. In a way, they've been "dancing" for prizes all along: Geoffrey tries to charm Ronald into giving him an architectural contract, for example. Thus, the game is a microcosm for the middle-class world the characters inhabit.

The game begins, and everyone but Jane and Sidney begins dancing. Marion dances in a shaky "classical ballet style," while the others dance "sheepishly and reluctantly." Ronald gets the first forfeit, an apple under the chin, followed by Eva, who gets an orange between the knees. The rest of the game proceeds more quickly, with the characters all getting forfeits. Marion's forfeit is to drink a shot of **gin**, which Ronald tries to protect—but when he does so, he drops his own forfeit, a spoon in the mouth. Thus, Jane gives him another forfeit, a pear on the spoon in his mouth.

It's perfectly obvious that none of the characters (except perhaps Marion) want to play the game, but they play along anyway in an effort to stay in Sidney's good graces. The game, much like the Hopcrofts' gifts, is absurd and impersonal: again, Marion is made to drink. Finally, notice that neither of the Hopcrofts is playing the game: as the organizers (and, as we've seen, the people with the most social clout), they have the privilege of watching everyone else humiliating themselves for the sake of potential money or status.

The game proceeds, with the characters "accumulating bizarre appendages." Eventually, Sidney no longer stops the music at all: he just yells out, "**Dance**. Dance. Dance. Keep dancing. Dance ..." And the curtain falls.

The play ends with a tragicomic image of the characters dancing. The sight is funny, but also disturbing, since it suggests that the characters are so desperate to succeed that they're willing to throw away all dignity. For now, Sidney and Jane seem to be on top, but there's no guarantee that they'll stay there. In the unstable middle-class world in which this play takes place, everything is in a state of flux.

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