Sources of Humor in Alan Ayckbourn's *Absent Friends*

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Abstract:

The paper studies the British playwright Alan Ayckbourn's Absent Friends as an example of modern comedy. It highlights its thematic and technical features, and determines the sources of humor which the playwright uses, employing words, characters and situations. The research reveals that his style of farce embodies humor, exaggeration, comic and tragic scenes, unexpected reactions, monologues and psychological depth. It also shows how the play Absent Friends criticizes the British people who are indulged in their egos and turn self-centered. In short, the play laments the loss of true friendship in modern England. The protagonists Paul, Diana, John , Evelyn and Marge prove that they do not really care about their friend Colin who has lost his fiancée in an accident. Diana arranges a party to console Colin, but the get-together shows that each one focuses on oneself.

Keywords:

Modernism- Humor- Farce- Egoism- Materialism- Alienation

الملخص

تتناول الدراسة مسرحية الكاتب البريطاني ألن ايكبورن "الأصدقاء الغائبون" نموذجاً للكوميديا الهزلية الحديثة. ويبرز البحث مصادر الفكاهة والمرح بالمسرحية وهي: الكلمات والشخصيات والمواقف. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، يكشف البحث عن

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meaning in Alan Ayckbourn (b.1939)'s play Absent Friends (1974). Salvatore Attardo points out, "It is widely recognized that humor research is an interdisciplinary field ….including (but not limited to) psychology, anthropology,sociology, literature, medicine, philosophy, philology, mathematics, education, semiotics, and linguistics" (15). Hence, investigating humor in Ayckbourn's drama involves various studies in different fields.

In contemporary literature, three theories of humor are most common: first, the Relief Theory which exhibits an outlet of nervous charge; second, the Superiority Theory which makes one feels superior on laughing at others; third, the Incongruity Theory that highlights disharmony. Attardo notes,

خصائص الهزل في المسرح الحديث، فيتطرق إلى الفكاهة، والمبالغة، والمشاهد المضحكة والمحزنة، ورد الفعل غير المتوقع، والمونولوجات، والعمق النفسي. وأخيراً، تقدم مسرحية "الأصدقاء الغائبون" نقداً للشعب البريطاني الذي طغت عليه المادية بسبب النظام الرأسمالي، فبدت تصرفاته قاسية وأنانية، وأصبحت الصداقة بمعناها الحقيقي مفقودة وغائبة عن المجتمع. تثبت الشخصيات بول ، وديانا، وجون ، وايفيلين، ومارج في المسرحية أنهم لا يكترثون بصديقهم كولن كما يجب. لقد فقد كولن خطيبته كارول في حادث، ورتبت ديانا حفلاً لمواساته، لكن اللقاء يكشف عن انشغال كل فرد بنفسه، وسيطرة الذات على النفس.

الكلمات الدالة:

الحداثة- الفكاهة- الهزل- الأنانية- المادية- الإغتراب

Humorous interpretation of a text involves a pragmatic approach. The research shows how implicature, deixis and presupposition contribute to

"[Henry-Louis] Bergson's theory is an incongruity-based theory (it has its prime example in the contrast between the natural and the mechanical), but this premise is exploited for a sociologically-oriented analysis (humor as a social corrective)" (58).

This paper studies Alan Ayckbourn's Absent Friends as an example of modern comedy. It highlights its thematic and technical features, and determines the sources of humor which the playwright uses, employing words, characters and situations. The research reveals that his style of farce embodies humor, exaggeration, comic and tragic scenes, unexpected reactions, monologues and psychological depth. It also shows how the play Absent Friends criticizes the British people who are indulged in their egos and turn self-centered. In short, the play laments the loss of true friendship in modern England.

The contemporary British farceur and director Alan Ayckbourn has written more than 79 plays. Ayckbourn is, not only a British playwright, but also a stage director of productions. Moreover, he has his theatre company and is involved in the theatre craft. If William Shakespeare is famous for his Globe Theatre, Alan Ayckbourn is well-known for his Scarborough counterpart.

Ayckbourn won several awards like Laurence Olivier (2009) and Tony (2010). Besides, Ian Watson determines, "He [Ayckbourn] …has been awarded 1

three honorary doctorates by British universities" (x). Paul Allen remarks, "J. W. Lambert in

the Sunday Times calls Ayckbourn 'the most remarkable British dramatist to have emerged since Harold Pinter'" (142). Moreover, Albert Kalson believes, "Ayckbourn is Britain's most prolific, most successful dramatist since George Bernard Shaw (9)….[H]is works have been translated into thirty languages and produced throughout the globe (11)." John Russell Brown notes, "[I]n his [Ayckbourn's] hands the 'old-fashioned' well-made play still lives and allows him to examine whatever it causes our irremovable and often ridiculous unrest" (37).

Bernard Dukore mentions that critics ignored Ayckbourn's drama for several years because they underestimated dramatists who deal with farce. They started to consider Ayckbourn as a distinguished playwright only in 1974 when his play Norman Conquest (1973) achieved success on stage (x). In fact, Ayckbourn wrote several serious farces like Absurd Person Singular (1972), Absent Friends (1974), Joking Apart (1978), Man of the Moment (1988), Communicating Doors (1994) and Things We Do For Love (1997).

Mohammad Enani defines a traditional farce as a comedy which focuses on the characters' outside actions, funny movements and illogical behavior, believing that a modern farce makes the characters' movements reflect their inside psychological state" (304-305). In that sense, Absent Friends, the focus of research, is a modern farce. Ayckbourn has never written traditional farces in the 'laughter for laughter's sake'

tradition. His drama is obviously functional. In an interview, he tells John DiGaetani that he means to entertain audiences and make them ponder deeply over life to finally accept it(23). Besides, Ayckbourn informs Christopher Bigsby that he intends to make the audience laugh at and sympathize with the characters at the same time (156). The characters in Absent Friends are round, not flat. They bear psychological depth, and the audiences laugh when they are funny and cry when they suffer.

Thomas Postlewait notes that there is a problem of placing Ayckbourn's drama in a certain category. Some critics think of his plays as comedy of menace, specifically the later ones. Other critics believe they are social plays which reflect

> the English capitalist society.

Others mention Ayckbourn as a great farceur (60). Postlewait concludes that Ayckbourn's early plays are farces, not social drama, and "his later darker plays depend upon farcical techniques in plot development and character interaction" (60).

Lee Kornblum suggests that "Absent Friends contrasts the comic relationships of three married couples with the tragic situation of their friend, whose fiancée has just drowned" (971). Henry Raynor argues, "Absent Friends [is]… the most openly unhappy but not the least hilarious of his [Ayckbourn's] plays" (54). Ayckbourn himself tells Ian Watson, "I said to it, 'I'm an Absent Friends man now, a much more serious dramatist.' I always liked Absent Friends, but that's just blatant prejudice for a play that's had fewer productions than

any other" (89).

Albert Kalson contends, "Absent Friends…[is] a play that evokes laughter despite its bleak tone. ….Absent Friends is a comedy of pain and loss probing material relationships as well as friendship" (49). Absent Friends shows that although people think they are friends, time may prove that they are really not. Friendship embodies intimacy, care, faithfulness and closeness which Colin's friends lack in the play. The play exhibits a situation that proclaims the death of friendship. Paul, Diana, John, Evelyn and Marge are not true friends to Colin. Paul Allen observes, "It [Absent Friends] was, after all, a play about death…. His [Colin's] good nature relentlessly exposes the death of their [Colin and his friends'] relationship" (143). Robin Thornber believes that "Ayckbourn's humor comes through his characters and situations rather than words alone" (83). Mohammad Enani confirms that the sources of laughter in Ayckbourn's comedy are: words, characters and situation (306).

The paper studies these three sources of humor in Ayckbourn's Absent Friends. Richard Hornby asserts that "Ayckbourn uses few verbal jokes in the plays themselves" (104). Still, the title, and central metaphor of the drama, is a play on words. The word play in the title Absent Friends itself implies that although Paul, Diana, John, Evelyn and Marge are Colin's friends, they are

unhelpful, uncaring and selfish. They prove to be fake and untrue in the play. The punning title of the play reflects the

playwright's delight in playing games with language. The friends are morally, not physically, absent. They are not supportive friends. They gather to console Colin, but in reality they focus on their own personal pains. They cannot help one another.

The play depends on dialogue more than action to show that British people are fond of talking about themselves. Ayckbourn criticizes them for not having enough time to care about others. Like William Shakespeare, the playwright highlights the theme of 'appearance versus reality' to uncover the nature of people.

Act I opens with Diana showing care about Evelyn's baby in the pram:

> Diana: (Anxiously) Should he be covered up as much as that, dear?
>
> Evelyn: Yes.
>
> …….
>
> Diana: Oh. I was just worried he wasn't getting enough air.
>
> Evelyn: He's all right. He doesn't need much air (1).

Evelyn's unexpected reply denotes that she is a careless mother; however, her attitude evokes a smile.

Moreover, Marge mistakes Little baby Wayne for "Walter." Diana laughs and says, "Marge, honestly. You can't have a baby called Walter" (3). Another example of verbal humor is Diana's confession's to Marge that she does not trust Evelyn. She calls Evelyn "Miss Chatterbox" at her absence (5).

In another context, Marge happily shows Diana the shoes she has bought. The dramatist describes them as "a pair of very unsuitable shoes," and Diana

compliments Marge calling it "lovely" (5). Marge talks about her shoes while Diana discusses her doubts that Paul has had an affair with Evelyn. Misunderstanding between both ladies draws laughter:

> Marge: (Parading in her shoes) Look, you see—these tights aren't right with them but…..
>
> Diana: I mean, why should he suddenly not want them [Evelyn and her husband John] round? …..
>
> Marge: Odd. There was another sort, you know, across here (5).

Diana indeed offloads her problem on to Marge; the latter ignores her plight. She does not really care about Diana. While Marge is talking to her husband on the phone, Diana fights with Paul. Marge is upset because her husband Gordon has spilled his cough mixture on the bed (19). Diana's serious fight is contrasted with Marge's trivial speech with her baby-like husband.

Diana implicitly accuses Paul, "If anyone has dragged Evelyn into this, it's you" (18). Then, she calls Evelyn "bitch" (19). The audiences read between the lines. They understand that Diana believes that Paul has seduced Evelyn and that they are having an affair. Evelyn is embarrassed and tries to leave, but John stops her because Colin is about to arrive. At the same time, Marge asks Gordon on the phone to move to the dry side of the bed until she returns to clean the mess (19).

Sidney White proposes that " Their [Diana, Paul and Evelyn's] heated argument neatly overlaps Marge's telephone conversation with Gordon, who has just spilled

his cough mixture" (69). White continues, "the device is a standard one in farce—the bumbling misunderstanding" (48). In this case, the farcical device is used to show that each character is involved in his/her own world and does not communicate properly with the other. Patrice Pavis believes that such dialogue gives drama a mathematical feature. The characters' dramatic speeches are calculated in quantity, not quality (204).

These are two examples of 'failure in communication.' Marge and Diana are both self-centered. Neither of them gives time to her supposed 'friend.' According to Pavis, these are two false dialogues. Apparently, the characters exchange speech, while they are not communicating in reality. They talk at cross purposes (98). It seems that two separate monologues are interwoven in one false dialogue.

Marge talks about her own problem. She is childless, and her husband Gordon refuses to adopt a baby. His justification sounds humorous: Marge narrates, "He's frightened of it, I think. He keeps saying to me, It's not like a dog, Marge. We can't get rid of it if we don't like it. ……..what happens if we adopt one and then it grows up to be a murderer" (6)?

Moreover, Dian's early talk about Paul's favorite sport will later ring a bell for the audience:

> Diana: I think he [Paul]'s playing his squash again.
>
> Evelyn: Oh.
>
> Diana: Him and his squash. It used to be tennis—now he's squash mad. …All afternoon hitting a ball against a wall. It's so noisy. Bang, bang, bang.

…Does John play squash?

Evelyn: No (2).

Evelyn later confesses to Marge that she has had an affair with Paul, but she has not enjoyed the experience. She says, "I'm not likely to do it again. He'd just been playing squash, he was horrible" (12).

Marge frequently rings Gordon up. She pampers him as if he is a baby. She calls him "Jumjums". He bangs his leg and needs Marge to rub it for him. Marge says to Diana and Evelyn: "Honestly, I don't know what I want children for, living with Gordon" (7). Marge justifies his dependence on her, noting, "He's so big. …He bangs his head on buses. He can't sit down in the cinema and he has trouble getting into his trousers. …Somebody the other day said he looked like a polythene bag full of water (She laughs)" (7). Paul makes fun of Gordon's laziness. Paul tells Marge "He's always ill. ..Hasn't been to work for two years, has he" (10)? Colin also tells Marge, "He [Gordon] wasn't feeling too good when I left [years ago], was he? That's right. He was sick at the farewell party" (21).

Diana mentions that Carol, Colin's fiancée, has drowned two months before. Marge's comment is funny: "I'd hate to drown. (Pause) I don't mind anything else. Poison, hanging, shooting—that's never worried me but I'd hate to drown. You look so awful afterwards" (9).

Colin asks John's pardon for forgetting his wife's name. John replies, "That's okay. I forget it myself sometimes" (22). Colin has a sense of humor. He reminds

John when they used to give Marge a name. Colin says, "It was a beetle or a spider or something" (23). Colin is embarrassed when she hears him saying "The stick insect" (24). John and Paul laugh, but Marge does not realize they are talking about her (24)!

Paul jokes about his business with John. He tells Colin, "He [John]'s still the worst bloody salesman in the country. I'm the only one who'll buy his rotten stuff. I've got about five hundred tins of his rubbish. I can't give it away"(23).

When Colin mentions the fact that his late fiancée Carol drowned, his friends try to console him. Their attitude is funny, and their speech sounds ridiculous. They search for consoling words:

Diana: [Y]our grief is our grief. After all, in this world, we are all to some extent—we're all—what's the word….?

Paul: Joined.

Diana: No.

John: Related.

Marge: Combined.

Diana: No. Dependent.

Paul: That's what I said (26).

They all start and finish with the same meaning. They circulate with various words to reach the starting point. Ayckbourn uses the circular technique to stress one idea. The characters want to say that true friends are supportive. They like to share happiness and grief with one another.

Verbal humor is clear in Colin's comments on his assumed friends. Colin analyses Gordon's character, and describes him as "shy". He notes "Big men are like that. They're always shy. …Gordon was famous for his

appetite"(36). Marge replies, "He still is. I like a man with an appetite" (36).

Then, Colin mentions to the company that Paul was "shy" and "sweating" in his first visit to Diana's family house (37). Colin says that Paul cracked one of the China ducks on the wall, so he hid it in his pockets to glue the ornament at home. Colin also informs Diana that Paul took her table napkin and kept it at his pocket, then he took it home to remind him of her. Paul is embarrassed. In order to cover his embarrassment, Paul remarks that he indeed keeps Diana's napkin "to clean the car with" (38). Diana grows mad, and pours the cream jug all over Paul's head (38). Colin comments, "Paul is really a very romantic man. He's soft. ….he's ashamed of his own nature. …Somewhere he's got this idea that, if he shows any sort of gentleness to people, they'll think he's soft" (40).

John bursts out that Evelyn has "no sense of humor" and "she's permanently unhappy." He tells Paul and Colin, "Misery is her natural state. We are also fortunate in being blessed with a very miserable baby. In fact, apart from me, we are the most miserable family you are ever likely to meet" (45). John's ironical speech here brings laughter as well as tears. Such examples of verbal irony are part and parcel of verbal humor, which is found in Absent Friends.

As a matter of fact, Ayckbourn's characterization is indeed another source of humor and laughter. Ayckbourn admits, "All my characters have flaws and

are pock-marked, and I don't do a cosmetic job on them" (91). Therefore, the audiences see them unreal and do not identify with them. Consequently, they judge the characters objectively and point out their mistakes. Richard Hornby determines

that it is ironical that the audiences know the characters' mistakes, while the characters themselves do not know, and refuse to admit that they are mistaken (103). Enani points out that humor in Ayckbourn's drama also emits from the characters' funny movements or defective personality. Each character exaggerates one bad quality like foolishness, coldness, arrogance, etc. (306).

For instance, Diana is nervous. The playwright introduces her in the stage direction as follows: " She always gives the impression of being slightly strained. She smiles occasionally, but it is painful" (1). Diana talks in dramatic monologues. Her long speeches reflect her psychological stress. She uses witty language with Evelyn. She suspects but cannot confront her. In a monologue, Diana tells Evelyn, "I won't blame him. Not altogether. If he did. With someone else. You know another woman. I wouldn't blame him. Not as long as I was told. ….But I will not stand deception. I'm simply asking that I be told. Either by him or, if not, by her (2). He's not very clever and he's a very bad liar like most men" (3).

Diana tries to control her anger after pouring the cream over Paul. Her farcical action, according to Thomas Postlewait, is part of the funny puppet-like

slapstick tradition which evokes laughter (64). She bursts into another monologue. She notes that her sister Barbara was jealous of her because her mother bought her a red coat for her birthday. Then she looked terrible when she put it on. The coat was not like those of the Canadian Royal Mounted Police Officers' ones. The law prevented her from such a job because she was a woman, so she got married to Paul and had babies to please society. She constantly rages against wasting her life and losing her dream (41).

Diana breaks down in front of her guests. She can no longer contain herself. Her moving monologues are the highpoint of the entire play. There is neither climax of events or denouement in that play. Alan Ayckbourn does not offer a resolution to Diana's problem at the end. Enani remarks that monologues come out as moments of emotional explosion, where a character goes out of his/her social role to express inner conflict (382). Alan Ayckbourn says, "I have great sympathy for people like Diana in Absent Friends, desperately trying to make a marriage work" (35). Michael Billington determines, "The wretched Diana is driven to nervous breakdown and blush-making, rambling confessions about a teenage urge to join the Royal Canadian Mounted Police" (87-88).

Albert Kalson infers, "A wife's discontent becomes something ever more serious for Diana, on the verge of a breakdown in Absent Friends" (38). Sidney White thinks, " Ayckbourn is also at his best in

portraying women. ….Diana, for example, has a breathtaking scene toward the end of the play where all her anguish comes to a head and recites a terrifying monologue of her youth and how all she really wanted was to join the Canadian Royal Mounted Police" (iii).

A case can be made for Chekhovian influences. Stuart Baker says that according to Anton Chekhov, a farce must have long speeches, so "the most tongue-tied of them [characters in a farce] all suddenly ….become eloquent" (36). Alan Ayckbourn asserts that "Chekhov and Ibsen …. Were huge influences" on him (Bernard Dukore 10). Like Chekhov, Robert Corrigan says, Ayckbourn creates "a situation instead of a plot (80). Corrigan adds, "Chekhov's plays talk and plan a great deal, but they do nothing" (80).

On a point suggestively relevant, Ayckbourn states, "I'd like to finish up writing tremendously human comedies, Chekhovian comedy in a modern way" (Simon Trussler 88). Like Chekhov's human comedy, Ayckbourn's Absent Friends mingles tragedy with comedy. The play is not a well-made play. Sidney White notes, "Ayckbourn's bittersweet comedies …[have] a sharper edge, and [illustrate] his own definition of comedy—tragedy that has been interrupted" (iii). Stuart Baker agrees with White concluding, that "the more horrible and the more painful the reality, the better the farce"(27). Henry Raynor argues, "the essential vision it [an Alan Ayckbourn play] offers is not purely farcical; the machinery serves a more complex and essentially sadder view of life" (54).

Diana's husband Paul reflects another kind of extremity. His insensitivity and selfishness are provoking to others. He is uninterested in attending the tea party. Before Colin arrives, he tells John, Evelyn, Marge and Diana, "I didn't like him [Colin]" (17). Stuart Baker suggests, "He [Paul] is a gruff, noisy bully; she [Diana] is tense and lost, despairing of a life thrown away on a man she detests, yet trying to salvage the marriage that is her only justification for living" (38).

Michael Billington believes that Ayckbourn does not sympathize with Paul who is portrayed as "a gold-plated monster" (84). "[T]here is the piggish coarseness of Paul who not only knows that his love for Diana has gone sour but feels obliged to advertise the fact to everyone in the room" (87).

Besides, Paul tries to convince Colin that his love for Carol is not true. He argues with Colin, ignoring his feelings:

> Paul: How long had you known Carol, Colin?
>
> Colin: Just over a year. Fourteen months, twenty-three days.
>
> …….
>
> Paul: I mean, to be fair you hadn't time really to get to know her. Not really (33).

Ayckbourn believes that marriage is a traditional system that kills love. He tells Ian Watson in an interview, "I'm less interested in marriages than I am in just man-woman relationships. …..In general, I don't think people were meant to live with each other for too long—although, having said that, there are millions of

exceptions. As soon as people feel that they are married, there's a sense of entrapment" (94).

It can be said then that Ayckbourn shows the Colin-Carol love relationship to be successful because it is not confined within marriage. Harold Hobson thinks that Absent Friends highlights an example of true love through Colin and Carol (47). John DiGaetani asks Ayckbourn if he believes "we're living in a 'post-marriage age' (22). Ayckbourn replies, "That's certainly occurring here in the U.K. as well [as in the U.S.A.]. Not being married can keep people together longer than if they were actually married. A couple can be happier together knowing they are

both free to leave at any time, that they are not legally locked together and trapped" (22). The play has an open ending. All the married couples are left in emotional torment and perplexity.

Paul, selfish as he is, frees himself from the marriage bond by betraying Diana with Evelyn. He rebels against restriction and boredom. Paul is also reluctant to see his friend Colin. He tells Diana, "Colin who" ? (10) He denies that Diana has informed him about the consolation party she is holding for Colin. Paul pretends to be busy with work and goes upstairs (11).

The second couple, Evelyn and John, is repulsive. Evelyn is too cold and rude to be admired by any other character in the play. Sidney White points out, "Evelyn is a masterwork of comic invention—'a heavily made-up, reasonably trendily dressed expressionless girl' who evidently

sees life on a cold, usually hostile footing. She chews gum constantly" (67).

Michael Billington believes that "Evelyn, a morose gum-chewer who works as a cashier at the Rollarena, is constantly immersed in women's magazines as if they were a pulp drug and makes little attempt to communicate with her husband, John, her baby or anyone else" (82). Stuart Baker assumes, "Evelyn …occupies herself reading trashy magazines despite her contempt for them. Uncontaminated by any trace of humor, imagination, or guile, she thus seems hard and heartless" (38). Evelyn's rudeness is shown when she tells Marge to the face that her new shoes are ugly and "a lousy buy"(13). John calls his wife a "trouble maker"(15). She fights with him for getting cheap stuff at home. She tells him, "Nothing you ever get for us is quite right. I've got a vacuum cleaner with elastic bands holding on the attachments because you got them cheap off another model" (14). She continues, "I've got an electric mixer. I can't use because it flings the food half-way up the bloody wall" (15).

Consequently, John hates his wife Evelyn. Bernard Dukore argues, "In Absent Friends, John masks his hostility toward his wife by treating it as play: as if in jest, though really in earnest, he shadowboxes near her face"(73). Stuart Baker observes, "John is restless and fidgety, constantly moving about. Virtually impotent, of his wife Evelyn, of Paul, and probably anyone else who might take the trouble to intimidate

him"(38).

Paul asks John if he has told Diana about his affair with his wife Evelyn. John coldly replies, "Why should I? I mean, as we said, it was just one those things, wasn't it? ….Wouldn't happen again (20). ….It was a bit of a shock when she [Evelyn] told me. But I'm not bitter" (21). Ayckbourn tells Ian Watson that John acts like a cuckold "because he needs a contract. John's very much a parasite on the back of Paul" (92). Ayckbourn adds that he means to tackle the boss-employee relationship, showing John accepting that his boss Paul sleeps with his wife (92).

Bernard Dukore compares John to a dog noting, "In Absent Friends, Paul throws a cigar to John as an afterthought; he catches it as a dog catches a bone—a demonstration of their business relationship" (72). Moreover, John proves to be an insensitive friend to Colin. Before Colin arrives, John tells Paul, Diana and Marge, "Colin? I didn't mind him. ……As long as he doesn't start talking about death, I don't mind. If he starts on about death or dying, I'm off" (17).

Marge is the third unhappy wife in the play. Michael Billington points out, "Marge, the third of this doomed trinity, has the relentless busyness of the childless married woman for whom the husband becomes a substitute kid; in her ceaseless telephone calls to the bedridden Gordon (whom she addresses as Jumjums) you feel she has positively mothered him into illness" (82).

The audiences laugh at

Marge's treatment of Gordon as if he is a baby. She is upset to know how he spills medicine on the bed, and has his hot-water bottle burst because he is left on his own in his illness. Stuart Baker remarks, "Despite his [Gordon's] physical absence, his presence is felt through constant telephone calls about his catastrophic attempts to tend to himself. Marge seems to have found something of a vocation in nursing him" (38).

Marge insists upon knowing from Evelyn if she has had an affair with Paul, Diana's husband. Evelyn says that it was brief and awful, and both Paul and herself disliked it. Moreover, she has discovered that Paul is worse than John in bed (12).

Colin is the only happy character in the play. He looks strong since he reconciles with his tragedy. He talks about his deceased fiancée without agony. He bravely faces death, and searches for pleasure in memories. Carol's photos are source of happiness, not pain to him. He proves realistic and pragmatic. He tries to help his friends to be happy like him, but unintentionally he creates much tension for them. Daniel Marowski et al. propose, "[H]is [Colin's] astonishing openness and the happiness of his memories force the couples to contemplate the lesser happiness of their own marriages" (39).

In Act II, Colin says he has a transcendental power. He knows things by intuition. He tells his friends, "I've always had this knack—gift if you like, I suppose you could call it—for being able to sum people up pretty quickly.

Sometimes I've just got to meet them, exchange a few words with them and on occasions, not always but on occasions, I know more about that particular person than they know about themselves" (33-34).

To prove his words, Colin starts detecting his friends' worries. He tells Evelyn, "one of your worries is John" (34). Colin begins to praise John as "clever—wonderful with his hands" (34). Then, he mentions John's defect saying, "God help the woman he marries. Because every day of their lives together, she is going to have to get used to the fact that John is going to be the driver while she is going to have to spend most of her life in the back seat" (34).

Diana is surprised to find Colin "perfectly recovered" and "cheerful" while she expects to find him suffering (27). John agrees with her (28). Colin fetches a photo album, and shows Carol's pictures to all. All the friends like the photos, then Colin bursts into a monologue. He expresses his sadness for losing Carol and his pride to have such "real friends" around him (29). Colin then says that he is "very happy" (30). If John, Paul and Diana had been true friends as Colin thinks, they would have never envied him for being happy. Paul is enraged when Diana acts hysterically and cries; so he tells Colin, "Do me a favor. Just shut up for one minute about Carol, would you?" (43-44).

Colin seems insensitive to keep talking about himself and Carol while Diana is breaking down. Stuart Baker confirms that Colin "is the stereotype of the tragic clown" in Absent Friends (38).

Baker adds that a clown in a farce is not an ordinary character placed in an extraordinary situation. He is characterized by "indifference to pain, ….the immunity to the destructive force of the world that we instinctively attribute to the natural fool" (37). "Having achieved a strange transcendence through a personal tragedy, he has become immune to pain and disaster, although he both reveals it and causes it in others" (38).

It is undoubtedly true that situations are humorous in Ayckbourn's Absent Friends. Ayckbourn puts his characters in extraordinary situations, and they act illogically. Their unexpected reaction makes the audiences laugh. Richard Hornby points out that "Ayckbourn…. writes true situation comedies, unlike American television sitcoms, where comical situations are rarely exploited and everything is subordinated to the verbal gags" (104).

John DiGaetani calls Ayckbourn "the master of comedy of situation" (17). The whole play Absent Friends is indeed a situation irony. Sidney White notes, "Since friends gather to offer condolences to one of theirs who will need none (67). The unmournful mourner. From the moment they greet him at the door, everyone is shocked to find Colin is not the broken and distressed man they expected; insisted he is a glowing joyous glad-hander" (70).

J. W. Lambert reveals that, "In the event he [Colin] turns out to be in a state of irrepressible euphoria, armed with happy memories, a photograph album….., he no less

cheerfully sets about telling them what's wrong with their lives" (34).

Michael Billington states that Colin strengthens his friends' weaknesses (89), "myopically unaware of the havoc he is creating" (87). He adds, "Colin …

….fails to see the hornet's nest he is stirring up" (86). Malcolm Page believes, "the contented Colin lacks the tact and sensitivity to understand his impact" (48). In fact, Colin gives hints that Evelyn is an agent of destruction, Gordon is a dependent husband, and the childless Marge has transferred her maternal feelings on to him. Paul hates the sight of John after sleeping with his wife Evelyn, and John wants to attend the party to avoid meeting Paul. Diana hates Evelyn also for sleeping with her husband. Therefore, all friends are distressed except Colin, who feels secure and happy in his memories.

Diana suffers from alienation within her own family. Once she confesses to Marge, "Paul? We haven't talked for years. …Now he's had his own way and sent the children off to school. …I don't know why he wanted them at boarding school. They're neither of them happy" (6). All members of Diana's family are sad and unsatisfied. Paul has cut the ties that connect them.

Colin's friends now know they are more enemies than friends. They all suffer as victimized human beings, and are not ready to help one another. When they reach out to Colin, they find out that Colin needs no consolation from them. Their personal conflicts are contrasted

with Colin's happiness. Such situations evoke both laughter and empathy. Richard Hornby notes, "In his [Ayckbourn's] plays, he takes farce even closer to the edge of tragedy" (109).

All in all, the main theme of Absent Friends is the death of true marital love and friendship. Paul Allen illustrates, "Perhaps the most illuminating [points in] … Absent Friends [is]….the death of love, and the taboo of death" (144-145). All the married people in the play suffer from unhappiness, while the unmarried Colin is happily and spiritually connected with his late fiancée Carol. Ayckbourn tells DiGaetani, "Sexual dissatisfaction and frustration seem to me to be recurrent themes in my plays, but these themes are generally treated farcically" (24). Absent Friends reflects British society. Ayckbourn wants to say that capitalism has usurped warmness from the British people's lives. People are too busy earning their living. They have no time to be honest with one another. They have lost true friendship and love. Their selfishness and carelessness kill such values and deprive

them of a happy life. Albert Kalson asserts, "Ayckbourn attempts to reach and to entertain a popular British audience that has remained loyal to him, that understands his plays as comments on their own lives" (45).

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