

AYCKBOURN'S STAGE REACTION TO FAMILIES BURIED IN TECHNOLOGY

KAĞAN KAYA

Cumhuriyet University, Sivas

Abstract: *The paper analyses the premature warnings of British playwright, Alan Ayckbourn, who foresees that the modern family has been under the onslaught of technology. His dystopia, Henceforward... (1987), set in the flat of the high-tech addict protagonist, Jerome, tells one of the traditional family stories of the playwright. However, the paper focuses on Ayckbourn's neglected dramatic mission - that of securing the British family.*

Keywords: *Alan Ayckbourn, British drama, dystopia, family, technology*

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”
(Tolstoy (2001), 1875-1877:1)

1. Introduction

British playwright, Sir Alan Ayckbourn, is often referred to as a famous farceur. However, he is not pleased with this label, because with a “tireless dedication to the idea of theatre and... fierce moral concern with the state of the nation,” (Billington 1989), he has a distinctive multi-dimensional understanding of drama. In fact, he expresses sociologically harsh criticism of British middle-class man through his black comedy, in the light of his vision of drama.

Henceforward..., which is the thirty-fourth play of the playwright, is a very noteworthy fraction of Ayckbourn's tenet, for several reasons. It received the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy in 1989. It was the second quickest transfer of all Alan Ayckbourn plays to the US, Houston's Alley Theatre. Even the title of the play suggests a kind of manifesto of the playwright which declares that he is resolute in the changes of his drama. There is a profound “shift in tone and genre in Ayckbourn's work” (Hudson 2006: 186) after *Henceforward...* It propounds that Ayckbourn must not be called only a traditional farceur. In his

introduction to his *Collected Plays One*, Ayckbourn himself states, of the comic tone of the play, that

Henceforward... is on the surface a comedy but it does present a gloomy prediction of a possible future world where society, maybe as a direct result of the behaviour portrayed in *A Small Family Business*, has all but collapsed. And I suppose any play in which the hero allows his wife and daughter to die whilst he finishes writing his latest composition can't be considered funny. (I wonder where I got this reputation for being a comic dramatist.) (Ayckbourn 1995: ix-x)

Henceforward..., which is one of the serious state-of-the-nation comedies of the playwright, specifically demonstrates the potential risks that the average family including British middle-class would face in the technology-oriented world. Although it is easy to claim today that British family is in danger due to the negative effects of new science and technology, it must have been hard to voice such futuristic and serious criticism in 1987, when he wrote *Henceforward...*. In an interview, Ayckbourn criticises the contemporary family, saying that “we get more and more computer-literate, more and more little boys sit down in front of computer screens and find them much more satisfying than playing outside with their mates” (Watson 1988: 147).

As opposed to many studies and reviews of the play, this paper does not pay attention to the other conflicts present in the play, but concentrates mainly on familial problems. Although *Henceforward...* “stands a significant and particularly rich Ayckbourn creation that has much to say about the nature of art, love and human relationships” (Murgatroyd 2016), my paper puts familial conflicts at the heart of the research, and aims to analyse Ayckbourn's premature sociological warnings for British society.

Henceforward... tells audiences a well-known, serious and gloomy story of past, present and future. The play is about the modern man who has no time for his family. It covers a short and recent span of time, from June to October. The un-Ayckbourn but funny plot centres on a composer, “a man about forty”, (Ayckbourn 1998:1), Jerome Watkins who tries to get his child back after his wife, Corinna, a defenceless forty-year-old bank manager left him four years ago. At that time, their daughter, Geain was nine. The basic reason for their separation was that Jerome behaved as if he were programmed by high-technology, as most people today seem to be. He now wishes to convince the social service official, Marilyn that it would be good for his daughter to stay with him for long periods of time; in this way he would just take his revenge on his ex-wife, and more importantly he would be able to compose new musical pieces. Jerome is a wizard on the Synclavier, a word processor for sounds, which synthesises music by sampling natural sounds. He also creates an android, Nan 300 F out of a robot that he bought for his household management. He, then, pretends to have a home in which his daughter would be happy, with the help of this robot. Therefore, he pretends that Nan is his so-called

fiancée. Meanwhile, Corinna tries to return home and reunite the family. However, Jerome seems to be a man stuck in the web of art and technology. He does not care about his ex-wife and his daughter. He leaves his own family members, who become the victims of a feminist-terrorist sect called Daughters of Darkness. This certainly causes a tragedy.

The present article contributes to the literature on Ayckbourn in three ways. Firstly, as previous studies have mostly neglected Ayckbourn's ideas and warnings focused on British middle-class family, this paper makes the family the main concern of the research. It reveals that Ayckbourn foresees the danger for the family, which was much nearer than one expected when he wrote *Henceforward...*, as the playwright always seems to have some words to say to protect the British family. Secondly, based on the existing literature, it focuses on new ideas about the children-parents relationships reflected in the play. And thirdly, it analyzes the difficulties of being a child in a single-parent family, the negative effects of technology use on a child, in the light of Ayckbourn's drama – based on his sociological sensitivity and prescriptive intelligence.

2. Technology and the relationship of the couple

Ayckbourn organizes his plays mostly around the British middle-class married couples, as his frequent theme is marriage. He reveals the unlucky marriage stories of these couples. They deal mainly with the lack of communication, parenthood responsibilities, and affection, as in the case of Teresa and Bob of *How the Other Half Loves*. Some of the couples are unfaithful spouses, like Bob of *How the Other Half Loves* and Paul of *Absent Friends*, or they are generally insensitive to, or thoughtless and negligent of the needs of their partners, like Dennis of *Just Between*, or Gerald of *Woman in Mind*.

Henceforward... has only an on-stage divorced couple, Jerome and Corinna. They fail to share their emotions and thoughts properly before and after their divorce. There is a lack of communication between them even when they are a family. Above all, Jerome has never talked to Corinna and Geain since they left home. Corinna has not allowed him get into connect with them, she has not let him have any photos of Geain who is now thirteen. Jerome luckily has one of the video recordings of his daughter which was taken when the family was together.

However, the most devastating family problem is Jerome's indifference and his technology addiction. Ayckbourn admits that Jerome is "the closest I get... He's very selfish... Jerome is after different things... This man is after creative fulfilment" (Dukore 1991: 14). He is the key figure who is enslaved in his technologically-equipped house. Besides, he programmes Nan 300 F as a new childminder that he has brought home. Nan is also programmed to do the cleaning and the cooking. This suggests that Jerome prefers a machine to his wife at home. He even hires an actress, Zoe, to record her voice in order to adapt it for his robot.

In fact, Jerome is in pursuit of the best pronunciation of the word: ‘love’, which he wants to sell to an advertisement company, and more importantly, which he wants to use in order to make Corinna feel inadequate and envious. While waiting for Corinna, Geain, and Mervyn, Jerome’s intentions seem quite clear: “I want to present them with a relationship that’s so perfect that not only can she not find fault with it, but doubles her up with jealousy. It leaves her eating her heart out with envy and frustration” (31); that is why he not only tries to change Nan technologically, but also to change it physically, and make it look like a real woman.

As a result, Zoe describes both Jerome and Corinna as “vindictive” (31), which disturbs Jerome much. He reacts to her revealing that he is hostile to all women in the society, exclaiming: “God, you bloody women. You don’t half stick together, don’t you?” (31). Jerome also reveals to the actress Corinna’s vicious attitude:

She’s not the one who’s been forbidden to see her own daughter. Denied all those precious moments watching her child grow up. She’s not the one who’s been left to live in an empty flat. Unable to work –unable to write a single note of music for four years. Four years! (31)

Jerome, like Dennis of *Just Between Ourselves*, or Gerald of *Woman in Mind*, is a man who is not aware of his responsibilities as a husband. While he requires a robot-like or puppet-like woman to do housework and obeys his own rules and life style at home, he is not even able to mend the door of his house. It is ironic that he creates a new robot to do housework, but he is not able to mend a door. “Ayckbourn’s men are frequently embarrassed or defeated by toys and inanimate objects” (Holt 1999: 25), especially by electronic ones. They are real “bunglers” (Hornby 1991: 108). According to the playwright, Jerome

to a large degree is a child... He behaves badly and when his mother scolds him he sulks. But he longs for forgiveness. Because he desperately needs Corinna’s approval... Everything he does in the play – well, nearly – is related to his feelings for Corinna. To hurt her, to make her love him – to make her react. (Ayckbourn 2016)

Jerome is also a stereotype husband who demonstrates how a man can manipulate a woman. Ayckbourn’s men generally do not *accept their wives* for what *they are* and Jerome is one of those men. He is the representative of “the national masculine siege mentality” (Rabey 2003: 97) of the eighties. In fact, accepting people does not itself mean agreeing with his wife, approving of his wife, waiving his own rights, or downplaying his wife’s impact upon him. Jerome can still take appropriate actions to protect or support him, or he can simply let people be. Either way, he must accept his wife for who she is. He may not like it,

he may not prefer it, he may feel sad or angry about it, but at a deeper level, he is at peace with it. However, he prefers a robot instead of her.

On the other hand, the playwright describes Corinna as a woman who, “like anyone who lives with anyone for any length of time, knows Jerome’s weakest point. She knows how to punish him.” Ayckbourn (2016), indicating that every woman is a Corinna. A woman may think that divorcing is the best way to punish a man and win the sex war, but this is not so. Corinna does not realise that “it means punishing herself” (Ayckbourn 2016). After leaving Jerome, Corinna also feels really alone, with a daughter that she cannot control. She becomes aware that marriage is not a game played between a man and a woman, as she becomes aware that she has lost her house, her own castle, to a robot. Londre (1996: 71) says that “Nan is a metaphor for the changing roles of women” in the eighties.

The playwright makes use of technology as a subject matter, referring to both tragic and comic aspects of marriage. The play points out that the modern man really prefers rational machines to irrational human beings. On the one hand, Nan’s transformation into a domestic woman figure is a criticism of Corinna as a wife. The ideal feminine robot, Nan, registers everybody around as a child, trying to wash their faces, telling them tales before going to bed. All this and her appearance with Corinna on the same stage simply gets everybody to smile, and at the same time causes Corinna to be envious of Jerome, as he planned her to feel. As a result, Corinna confesses that: “[...] I am simply amazed. I didn’t think anyone could do it, Zoe. Make a civilized animal out of this man.” (63) Her tragic and ironic remark shows that Nan has already filled her place as a wife. Jerome, on the other hand, turns into a man with the soul of a robot at the end of the play. He prefers staying at home to going out with his family. His emotionally becoming a machine is really disturbing. ‘Love’ becomes an artificial word stuck in the meaningless sentences of this couple. Jerome prefers the recorded artificial form of this word to Corinna’s. While Jerome makes Nan ready to show her affection and gets the word, ‘love’ repeated all the time during the interview with Mervyn, he does not want to be with Corinna anymore. Jerome prefers a simulacrum of Corinna rather than her real existence. “Jerome is looking for love, and it’s right under his nose” (Ayckbourn 2016), even if Jerome confesses that the robot was there just to impress his ex-wife. Corinna’s last effort to win back her own home is in vain. Jerome has already turned into a mechanic husband. He chooses to lose his whole family, while trying to find the meaning of love among his technological equipments, in spite of the fact that he hears Corinna trying to save their marriage while she is explaining to Geain why she must not stay with the robot:

In the past, your father and I, we have – we have both been selfish, we have been thoughtless and stupid and – human. But we have also been, in our time, warm and spontaneous and amusing and joyful and loving. Which is something we can also be, because we are human. But which that machine can never be. You see? (GEAIN *seems to be still waiting to be convinced.*)

What we are going to do now, the three of us – you, me and Jerome – we are going down to that car and we are driving home together. And we're all going to start again. All of us. As of now. Isn't that right, Jerome? Jerome? (94)

Ayckbourn's other plays, e.g. *Standing Room Only*, *Communicating Doors*, *Comic Potential* and *Surprises*, also present technology as a source of conflict. However, *Henceforward...* is his fully sci-fi play. The playwright asserts that "Henceforward... [...] provided me with the opportunity to indulge my love of robots. In particular the British (sorry-about-that-mate-we're-still-waiting-for-the-part) sort of robot: totally eccentric, idiosyncratic, unserviceable and unreliable" (Ayckbourn 2016), a robot that breaks down the relationships among the family members.

3. Technology and the destruction of the concept of home

The eighties was a period of light and shadow. The overall image of the age tends to be positive with the development of the middle class and the emergence of the underclass, just like in the Victorian time. This was largely due to the new monetarism and commercialism, when money was the supreme ruler of the world, to the detriment of the human. During the Thatcherite era, dependency culture was replaced with enterprise culture, whereas the academic world was faced with cuts – often painful and undeserved. In the case of many intellectuals, the result was indifference, fatalism and isolation. Isenberg (1991) points out that the playwright constructs the background of his play through the Thatcherite dystopia, which is what the New Industrialism had turned Britain into:

The playwright was at a party a while back when a woman acquaintance started talking about her boyfriend, an art historian. The historian lived in such a desolate, run down part of England, Ayckbourn recalls, that everyone else on the block had moved out. Describing the neighbourhood, the girlfriend said she was afraid to visit anymore.

This background paves the way for the playwright's constructing his own space with "no windows, or, at least, what there were are curtained off and no light comes through the heavy steel shutters outside." (1) His scene belongs to his composer protagonist, not to a historian who might live in such a place. Jerome's society "is on the edge of breakdown: a Dystopian vision of hell in which outer London suburbs like Edgware are policed by mobs of vigilante feminists (the Daughters of Darkness) [...] Ayckbourn is projecting into the future fear many people have today of walking the streets" (Hudson 2006: 195). That is why it is probable that Jerome walls himself off - because of Pinteresque safety reasons.

Ayckbourn creates a loveless atmosphere for Jerome's house. He makes his audience realize that the setting is a musical lab. Ayckbourn is not unfamiliar with such a place, as the play reflects some of his own home atmosphere: it is known

that his father, Horace Ayckbourn, was once a lead violinist with the London Symphony Orchestra. At the same time the setting is like Ayckbourn's own working area, where he writes his plays. Ayckbourn describes this place so vividly, as if he had lived in:

It's a curious room [...] There is a sofa, two swivel chairs and a low coffee-type table – all modern. That's really extent of the recognizable furniture. The remainder of the room is filled with some very sophisticated electronic equipment. Not an amateur electronic rat's nest of wire and cable but custom-built units containing computers, tape and disc recorders – racks of amplifiers filters, reverb units and gismos of all descriptions. At one end, several keyboards... The room, in fact, betrays the contradictions in his own character. For while the immaculate technical equipment is kept lovingly protected from the slightest speck of dust, the rest of the room – the living area – is in fair chaos. Remnants of instant meals, old tea and coffee cups, the odd item of clothing... And, strangely, the overall impression given off, despite all the modern paraphernalia, is of something faintly Gothic [...] (1)

In this chaotic atmosphere, Jerome has two purposes. First, he wishes to take his daughter Geain back. Second, he wants to create his new music to live on. Although he builds his own isolated atmosphere for himself, he cannot manage to be creative after he is left by himself. An artist cannot survive without his skills and art, and he needs his loved ones around to create something valuable. The play dramatically announces that an artist becomes unsuccessful and even useless, when his main source of life and inspiration - his family or his loved ones - are lost. The key factor, then, for an artist to create any form of art is the love in his heart. Without emotional relief, an artist becomes an ordinary man. Jerome points out his waning ability to create in the absence of love, in a conversation with Zoe, whom he hired to do some recording:

Zoe: I'd love to hear some of your music. Could I, possibly?

Jerome: Yes. Perhaps. Sometime. As I say, I haven't written anything for – ages.

Zoe: Since they left?

Jerome: Nearly.

Zoe: Four years. Heavens. You really did need them, then, in some ways? Well, your muse did.

Jerome: Geain. I needed Geain. I need her back more than anything in the world.

(*ZOE, for the first time, notices the signs of his inner stress.*) (38)

In order to compose a precious and unique work of art, an artist also needs a peaceful atmosphere. Jerome is not an amateur, but he lost his ability to create art when he lost his family. His house may be full of technological equipments meant to help him to compose musical lyrics, but it cannot be called a real home and a work place anymore.

Jerome loses his family and his warm work atmosphere. He is not aware that in order to do his job, he needs Corinna. He behaves as if he did not need her. He has been metamorphosed into a different person, contrary to the claim that he is “a misanthrope, a hermit by nature” (Rawson 2000). In this monetary and “depersonalised” (Gussow 1988) world, Jerome unavoidably “loses his own humanity; he begins to seem robotic” (Gussow 1988) in the artificial atmosphere that he himself creates.

Jerome’s artificial home is best observed when Corinna comes back home with Geain and Mervyn. In Ayckbourn’s plays “the family home is the crucible in which the concept of the family can be tested [...] The problem is that the getting together of a family group often accentuates all the stresses in the family life” (Holt 1999: 23). However, there is no such atmosphere in *Henceforward...*, as the family is not together anymore. Jerome’s house has become just a place where one can hear only the sounds of robots or technological equipments, such as the beeps of his answering machine, or the artificial sounds of the word, ‘darling’:

Jerome: (*Calling*) Darling!
 Zoe’s Voice: (*From the kitchen*) Hallo, darling?
 Jerome: Darling, what are you doing?
 Zoe’s Voice: (*Off*) I’m just finishing off in here, darling.
 Jerome: Darling, come on in, they’ve arrived.
 Zoe’s Voice: (*Off*) Right you are, darling. Just a tick. (55)

While Jerome recreates his robot, he either forgets one significant problem or he never thinks of it. He partly manages to transform his home, with the help of an android, creating an approval atmosphere, while the outdoor atmosphere is totally unsuitable for a child. He forgets about the vandalism, annihilation, destruction existing outside. Gangsters are everywhere. Jerome, himself, cannot go out of his home without a sword. “The microcosm of Jerome’s inability or unwillingness to accommodate the feelings of others is reflected in the macrocosm of the violent world outside his flat” (Hudson 2006: 188). Through this kind of atmosphere, Ayckbourn reflects the economic progress of Thatcher’s England, and at the same time, the soullessness it brings about. Rich (1989) thinks that “Ayckbourn reveals an immensely disturbing vision of contemporary middle-class England poisoned by the rise of economic ruthlessness and the collapse of ethics” in those Thatcher years. In such an atmosphere, it is already impossible to create something new. Instead, one loses what one possesses; Jerome loses his real life with his wife and daughter.

4. A victimized child

Geain experiences the most psychologically devastating effects of the technology-based house. Geain was apart from her father simply because of his life

style in his own technology-oriented world. In this isolated world, she becomes the victim of her father who is really selfish. When she is a little girl, there is not even a tiny clue that might show that Jerome cares about her. Corinna is also guilty because, through her divorce, she causes Geain an emotional trauma. Corinna behaves towards her daughter as if she were a doll, and does not have a satisfactory relationship with her, using her a kind of revenge material against Jerome.

However, Geain differs from other children characters in Ayckbourn's plays. She does not try to look for her father among the clouds, like Suzy of *Mr. A's Amazing Maze Plays*, or create a whole imaginary family, like Lucy of *Invisible Friends*, to overcome her loneliness. She manifests her reaction to her family through her aggression and boy-like behaviour style.

Geain is a teenager and she displays some weaknesses. Her aggression against her mother may partly be caused by her being at the puberty age. Yet, it is mostly caused by her growing up without a father. "Having been deprived of contact with her father for the last four years – she has opted to dress like boy and join the male Dominance Movement" (Londré 1991: 93), to punish him. At the same time, in his stage directions, Ayckbourn's costume design reveals that this is a kind of reflection of Geain's hermaphrodite rejection of her mother's thoughts and acts:

She wears a not unfamiliar parody of male work clothes circa 1955. But hers are carried to some extreme. Heavy boots, cord trousers with a wide leather belt, padded rather incongruously at the crotch, old, faded shirt open at the neck to reveal the currently fashionable 'hairy vest' i.e. an undershirt knotted with a mass of supposed chest hair. The back of her jacket is studded with words: SONS OF BITCHES. Her hair is short, brushed straight back and oiled; her only make-up the blue chinned, unshaven look. (75)

Corinna is alone and silent about what Geain wears or how she acts and behaves. She cannot cope with her daughter's problems alone anymore, although she is a successful working mother - a bank manager. Corinna "loses her ability to function as a mother" (Londré 1991: 91), has no ability to discipline her own daughter. She cannot be a woman that Thatcher would prefer to see at that time. Campbell (2007: 102) indicates that "[Thatcher] had become a role model for career women the world over, but also wished to be seen as the guardian and champion of family values." While Corinna is one of the successful Thatcherite period career women, she cannot manage to be both father and mother for Geain. She just tries to escape from her problems and return to Jerome.

Ayckbourn creates a dystopic atmosphere: one day androids would take over motherhood roles in society. This reveals that Ayckbourn not only questions the identity of women, but also their motherhood roles. That is why there is no skilful mother on the stage. Even Zoe Mill, the actress hired for her voice by Jerome, is a single woman who has no child-rearing abilities. Zoe "lists among her credits

Hedda Gabler, Queen Margaret, Madame Arkadina, and the mad Mrs. Rochester - all of them women who have either lost their children, ignore them, or detest the thought of bearing them” (Karlson 1993: 69). Nan, the originally childminder robot, on the other hand, has many more maternal qualities than both Corinna and Zoe. She clearly reveals her maternal skills through her actions, when she comes across Geain for the first time:

(Promptly) I'd love to have children of my own. Wouldn't it be lovely to hear them rushing about the flat, laughing and yelling? With the right man – someone who'd share them – they'd be everything I ever wanted. I suppose you're either maternal or you aren't. I know which I am. (*A Silence*, 71)

Ayckbourn seriously criticizes all mothers. He implies that most women have no capacity to bring up their own children. Therefore, he chooses a robot as the best woman-childminder. It is really a rare thing to come across a “fully-equipped” mother in his plays, except for Nan of *Henceforward...* and Lucy of *Mother Figure*. It is Mervyn who points out that Nan also has a kind of motherhood ability intrinsically, while talking to Jerome: “Jerome: Well, it's - it's just part of her - basic - original - I mean it was there already in her, you see... / Mervyn: As it is within all women, Mr. Watkins. All women...” (81).

Henceforward... partially contains some details of Ayckbourn's childhood, too. Ayckbourn grew up in a single-parent family before her mother's second marriage. He describes his childhood “as lonely but not particularly miserable” (Allen 2001: 22), but he sometimes mentions harsh brawls between his mother and his stepfather.

Similarly, Jerome is not a man who is ready to be a father. He is a domestically unsuccessful man. He does not think about his daughter's need for real mother and father affection and for the warmth of a family. He never tries to reconcile with his ex-wife for the sake of his daughter. He even tries to change his daughter. Ayckbourn indicates that “we all try to alter each other subtly, and this man has the chance to change the people around him completely. When Jerome has seen Geain after eight years' time, he immediately distances from her because of her appearance. He even does not want to accept that she is his own daughter, as she seems a “travestite truck-driver” (79). It is really absurd that Jerome expects warm acts from his daughter, while he does not provide any for her. Above all, he thinks that Geain is a “treasure” (77), as she is merely important for his inspiration and his career:

Jerome: Geain. I need Geain. I need her back more than anything in the world...

I recorded her over several days...

Zoe : You mean it was actually her? Actually Geain you used?

Jerome: Yes. That was the first occasion I started using purely natural sounds – sampling and treating them. It took months. (38)

Ayckbourn morally criticizes both parents and ridicules them on the stage. Jerome develops his ability to use all technological equipments and builds a new robot, but loses his ability as a father. Although it would be easy to become a good husband and father for his family, he chooses to stay at home with an android. Jerome is not aware of the chaos he causes, because, while he tries to take revenge on his wife, he causes his daughter's psychological and emotional collapse. Therefore the playwright's stage critically lacks a skilful parent, with the exception of the feminine robot, Nan.

5. Conclusion

In *Henceforward...* Ayckbourn has much to say about the nature of art and love, the relationship between science and man, and about human relationships in general. However, this paper concentrates first of all on the relationship between technology and man and on human relationships. Secondly, it concentrates on the bad influence of technology on the unity of family and on a victimized child.

Ayckbourn suggests in his play that "Computers are, on the one hand, quite reassuringly constant, but dangerous because you don't in the end, get anything back from them. No conflict and no criticism" (Watson, 1988: 147). My paper clearly reveals Ayckbourn's direct criticism of the parents, Jerome and Corinna, in terms of their own relationships and family roles, and it reflects Ayckbourn's own thoughts about the British family; for the first time, it also pays attention to the only child character in the play.

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