Inadmissible Evidence Study Guide

Inadmissible Evidence by John Osborne

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Introduction

The first performance of *Inadmissible Evidence* at the Royal Court Theatre in London on September 9, 1964, by the English Stage Company, was a resounding critical and popular success. It also reinforced John Osborne's status as England's most important post-World War II dramatist. The play chronicles the mental disintegration of middle-aged, London solicitor Bill Maitland over the course of two days as he experiences the breakdown of his professional and personal life. Osborne combines elements of realism and theater of the absurd as he illustrates Bill's nightmarish world that ironically Bill has constructed himself. It results from his inability to face up to his own failures as well as to the pain he has caused those who have tried to save him. In this poignant study of one man's struggle to avoid harsh truths about himself and his relationships with those closest to him, Osborne presents a compelling portrait of the devastating causes for spiritual and emotional bankruptcy.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: English

Birthdate: 1929

Deathdate: 1994

John James Osborne was born December 12, 1929, in London, England, to Thomas Godfrey Osborne, a commercial artist and copywriter, and Nellie Grove Osborne, a barmaid. Much of his childhood was spent in ill health and in poverty, especially after his father died of tuberculosis in 1941. Osborne earned a General School Certificate from St. Michael's, a boarding school in Devon, but never went further with his education, which made him feel like an outsider among the intellectual group of playwrights with whom he was grouped in the 1950s.

After graduating, he wrote for trade journals for a few years but left to take a position as a tutor for child actors in a touring company. He worked his way up in the troupe to assistant stage manager, and in 1948, he began acting in their productions. Osborne toured the country with the troupe for the next seven years, during which time he began writing plays, including *The Devil Inside Him*, with Stella Linden, first performed in 1950, and *Personal Enemy*, with Anthony Creighton, produced in 1955. Osborne, however, could get neither play published and ran into trouble with the Lord Chamberlain's Office concerning the latter play, which deals with homosexuality, forcing Osborne to delete key scenes.

While his *Look Back in Anger*, which premiered on May 8, 1956, earned mixed reviews, the impact the play had on the theater became legendary due to its biting commentary on postwar England and the status of the British working class, as well as to its influence on an entire generation of playwrights. Osborne, who like *Anger*'s Jimmy Porter came to be known as an angry young man, gained a reputation as a result of this and other plays, as well as in the press, as a controversial figure who spoke his mind about political and social issues of the age, including the Lord Chamberlain's Office's censorship power over the theater. His personal life became as tumultuous as that of his characters: he married five times and was estranged from his daughter for a long time.

Osborne enjoyed a long, successful career in the theater, penning over twenty plays, as well as several television dramas and screenplays, including one for the celebrated film *Tom Jones*. He received several awards during his career, including the Evening Standard Drama Award for the most promising playwright of the year for *A Patriot for Me* in 1965 and for *The Hotel in Amsterdam* in 1968; the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *Look Back in Anger*, and for *Luther* (1961); a Tony Award in 1964 for *Luther*; an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay in 1963 for *Tom Jones*; the Plays and Players Best New Play Award in 1964 for *Inadmissible Evidence*, and in 1968 for *The Hotel in Amsterdam*; and the Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Writers' Guild of

Great Britain, 1992, the same year his final play, *Dèjávu*, was staged. *Inadmissible Evidence* was published by Faber and Faber in 1965.

Osborne wrote two autobiographies, *A Better Class of Person* (1981) and *Almost a Gentleman* (1991). Osborne, a diabetic, died of heart failure on December 24, 1994.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Inadmissible Evidence opens with a dream sequence in a solicitor's office, involving the main character, Bill Maitland, and his trial for □having unlawfully and wickedly published . . . a wicked, bawdy and scandalous object. . . . Intending to vitiate and corrupt the morals of the liege subjects of our Lady the Queen.□ The object is Bill Maitland himself. Bill pleads not guilty and insists that since he is a lawyer, he will defend himself. He tries to begin his defense, but random thoughts keep breaking in, and he ultimately admits, □I'm incapable of making decisions.□ The session is interrupted by Bill searching for his tranquilizers, noting that he has a headache brought on by too much drinking the night before.

Bill then begins a brief summary of his personal history, ending with his admission that he is □irredeemably mediocre.□ After losing his train of thought, he thinks he sees his ex-wife, his father, and daughter, all there in the room. He then offers a character analysis of himself, ending with his assertion that he has never wanted anything more than good friendship and the love of women but has failed at both. The light then fades, and the judge becomes Hudson, Bill's managing clerk, and the court clerk becomes Jones, Bill's clerk as Bill emerges from the dream into reality.

In the next scene in Bill's law office, Hudson and Jones chat about the latter's upcoming marriage as Bill arrives. Bill criticizes Shirley, his secretary, for not wearing any makeup and makes lewd comments to her about her fiancé, which she throws right back at him. Jones announces that Shirley is going to quit her job because □she's fed up with the place□ and especially with Bill, who insists, □I haven't touched that girl for months.□

Bill then begins another series of lewd comments directed toward Jones, concerning his fiancée and Shirley, which embarrasses the clerk. Later, he criticizes Shirley's fiancé and Jones, insisting that they are too cautious and boring. Another secretary, Joy, brings Bill a glass of water after Shirley ignores his request, and he flirts with her as Hudson tries to focus Bill's attention on a client's divorce case. Bill admits that something seems a bit odd this morning: he was not able to get a taxi and now he cannot concentrate on his cases.

Bill complains of his headache, brought on by too much drinking the previous night, and searches for his pills. He tells Hudson that he needs to get out of a weekend planned by his wife, Anna, to celebrate their daughter's birthday so that he can spend the time instead with Liz, his current mistress. Bill believes that Anna planned the weekend because she discovered his arrangement with Liz.

As he discusses with Hudson the juggling he must accomplish with his wife and mistress, he wonders whether his sexual escapades are worth the trouble and admits that he has never found anything that gives him a sense of meaning. Hudson tells him

that the key is to not expect too much out of life. The two talk about Mrs. Garnsey's divorce case, Bill's recent inability to remember anything, and his marital situation until they are interrupted by a phone call from Anna. Bill tries to get out of the weekend, but the situation is left unresolved.

Later, Shirley tells Bill that she is leaving because she is pregnant and is getting married soon. When Bill tries to show concern for her situation, assuming that the baby is his, and asks her to stay, noting their past relationship, Shirley gets angry and declares that she is leaving immediately. Bill, visibly shaken, asks Joy to ask Mrs. Garnsey, who has just arrived, to wait. He then calls in Hudson and asks him to become a partner in the firm. Hudson does not give him an answer, admitting that he has received several other offers, but he agrees to think about it. Bill phones Liz about Anna's plans for the weekend and complains about his lack of connection with his family. He ends the call by exacting a promise from her that she will see him that evening.

As Bill interviews Mrs. Garnsey about her husband's infidelities, she begins to feel sorry for her husband who has been rejected by her and their children. When Bill tries to comfort her, he cannot move and so calls Joy to bring her a drink. After Mrs. Garnsey leaves, Joy tells Bill that he does not look well. Bill asks her to stay late that evening and to call Liz and tell her □to expect [him] when she sees [him].□

Act 2

The next morning, as Bill is lying on the sofa in his office having slept there through the night, Liz calls, angry about his not coming over. After excusing himself to throw up, he returns to the phone and tells her that he loves her and that yesterday was a bad day for him. He begins to ramble, which he does during every conversation that he has during the day, to the point that the audience does not know whether he is really speaking to someone or is only dreaming.

Bill continues his ramblings about his wife and her boring friends and about his daughter, Jane, whom he criticizes as well. He pauses periodically to ask if Liz is still there. At the end of the conversation, he gets her to promise that she will wait at home for his call. He then speaks with Anna on the phone, telling her that he will be spending the weekend with Liz and that Jane would not care whether he attended her birthday. When Jane gets on the phone, he asks her to come see him that afternoon so he can explain about the weekend. After speaking briefly again with Anna, he tells her that he loves her and ends the conversation.

Hudson arrives and tells Bill that he still has not made up his mind about the partnership offer. Joy calls Mrs. Garnsey to set up another appointment and learns that Mrs. Garnsey has decided to call off the divorce. Joy and Bill discuss the previous evening, which apparently included sexual activity between the two in the office. He gets her to promise that she will not leave as Shirley has done.

Bill asks Jones whether he would take Hudson's place as managing clerk if Hudson leaves, but Jones will not commit. Bill accuses Jones of thinking that Bill will soon have to defend himself against charges of unprofessional conduct brought on by the Law Society. He then admits that he lost Mrs. Garnsey as a client and that he is “the wrong man for these things.” Bill reads the divorce papers for Maureen Sheila Tonks, whom he claims he used to date.

Mrs. Tonks, who is played by the same actress as Mrs. Garnsey, arrives and begins to discuss her petition against her husband, who, she insists, made inordinate sexual demands upon her. As she presents the details of her case, Bill counters with her husband's written claims, but eventually, he begins responding to her charges with accounts of his own marital behavior. He has trouble defending that behavior and often admits to his shortcomings. When Joy interrupts, announcing the arrival of Mrs. Anderson, Bill passes Mrs. Tonks off to Jones.

As he waits for Mrs. Anderson, Bill remembers having an affair with her as well, and when she enters, the audience sees that she is played by the same actress as Mrs. Tonks and Mrs. Garnsey. As Mrs. Anderson begins to describe the details of her divorce case, Bill struggles to keep focused but again adopts the role of the client's husband, providing details of his own personal life. Since Mrs. Anderson does not directly respond to Bill's comments, he may be voicing them only in his head, or Mrs. Anderson could be a part of a dream. Bill rambles about the details of his funeral and speculates about what it would be like if Anna died. Mrs. Anderson ends her statement with painful account of her husband's lack of feeling for her, but Bill shows no compassion, not having paid any attention to what she has said.

When Bill sends Mrs. Anderson out, Joy tells him that Mr. Hudson has left. He tries to get his colleagues on the phone, but they refuse to talk to him. He then phones Liz and admits that no one will speak to him and that he fears that they are all laughing at him. He pleads with her not to go out so he can call her later and insists that they will spend the weekend together.

The next client, Mr. Maples, who is played by the same actor as Jones, arrives to give his statement to Bill concerning his arrest for indecency but also includes personal information about his homosexuality and the effect that had on his marriage. Bill actually appears to be listening to this client as he asks Maple questions about his relationships with his wife and his lovers, but he does not take any notes. When Maple realizes this, he leaves.

When his daughter comes into his office, Bill begins a long rambling monologue outlining all of his troubles: “there isn't any place for me . . . in the law, in the country, or indeed, in any place in this city.” He grows increasingly agitated until he demands, “Do you want to get rid of me? . . . Because I want to get rid of you.” Bill tells Jane that he feels only “distaste” for her as he does for all of her generation whom he considers unfeeling and apathetic. During the monologue, Jane does not respond but gets increasingly distressed. Finally, Bill tells her to leave, and she does without a word.

Joy tells Bill that the Law Society is investigating him and admits that she does not like him either. After Bill insists that he is "packed with spite and twitching with revenge" and that he would like "to see people die for their errors," Liz arrives, and Joy leaves. Angry that Bill never came to see her, Liz tells him that he is "a dishonest little creep" but that she still loves him. Liz shows real concern for Bill's deteriorating condition, but he refuses to allow her to comfort him and so she leaves him. At the end of the play, Bill calls Anna, noting that his vision is fading and telling her that he has decided to stay in his office. Bill hangs up and waits for something that is not identified.

Characters

Liz Eaves

Liz Eaves is having an affair with Bill Maitland. She appears at the end of the play, worried about Bill's mental state but willing to confront him about his repeated broken promises to her. Although she tries to get him to face up to his bad behavior, she shows patience and concern, repeatedly telling him that she loves him. When she cannot get Bill to commit to their relationship, she decides to leave him.

Wally Hudson

Wally Hudson, Bill's patient office manager, tries to offer sound advice to Bill but it is ignored. His sense of responsibility and loyalty emerges as he continually takes cases that Bill cannot handle. His loyalty, however, has its limits. Realizing that Bill is being investigated for misconduct and that he is losing his grip on reality, Hudson decides to think of his own future and accepts another position.

Joy

Joy, a young, attractive office worker, appears rather shallow when she is flattered by Bill's attention that has shifted from Shirley to her. She initially plays along with his flirtatious games and has sex with him, but she soon grows tired of his self-involvement and determines that she will quit as well.

Bill Maitland

Bill Maitland is an egotistical, self-centered lawyer who eventually alienates all those close to him. He tries to manipulate others into feeling sorry for him by providing them with a long list of perceived injustices that he has endured as well as his mental and physical ailments, which makes him appear pathetic. In an effort to retain his wife's and mistress's loyalty, he insists that he loves them, but his lack of consideration for them proves that he is incapable of that emotion. Unable to face his shortcomings, he blames others for his failures in order to deflect attention from them.

As Bill refuses to recognize the needs of others, he withdraws further into his world until he becomes unable to separate illusion from reality. The only perspective he acknowledges is his own, but his judgment becomes clouded by self-centeredness and by his alcohol and drug consumption. His inability to form satisfying relationships with others results in his complete isolation and mental breakdown.

Shirley

Shirley, Bill's young, attractive secretary, is pregnant with his child. Her coldness toward Bill is a result of her anger with him for not taking responsibility for her pregnancy. She tries to deflect his attacks by ignoring him or by firing back with flip responses, but she cannot endure his ill treatment of her, and she quits by the end of the day.

Themes

Objectification as a Defense Mechanism

The play explores how objectification, which occurs when someone is regarded as a type or object rather than a distinct person, can be used as a defense mechanism. Bill objectifies his secretary and daughter in order to dismiss them as individuals so he will not need to feel any responsibility toward them. He places Shirley initially in the category of "sexy" and then when she does not speak to him, he lumps her together with all modern "girls" who no longer wear makeup. When he orders her to put on some lipstick, he is trying to push her back into the "sexy" category, a type that he knows how to deal with. He keeps her in this category by making lewd comments about her having sex with her boyfriend so that he will not have to see her as a woman who is pregnant with his child.

Bill regards his daughter only as a part of a generation that he feels has dismissed him. Since he insists that he knows what her responses will be, he never allows her to voice her own opinions. He claims that she is not upset but merely bored by his relationship with his mistress as "any of those who are more and more like you" feel about any personal attachments. He groups her with all of those he sees "in the streets," inflicting "wounds," without shame and "unimpressed, contemptuous of ambition but good and pushy all the same." Since women are only types, not flesh and blood humans who can be damaged by his actions, Bill absolves himself from any sense of blame in an effort to protect his fragile psyche. Ironically his objectification of others pushes them further away, which eventually leads to his mental collapse.

Search for Meaning

Another factor that leads to Bill's mental collapse is his inability to find meaning in his life. Bill no longer has any respect for the law that he feels has exploited him, and he has in essence abandoned his family because he feels useless to them. He claims that he tries to "take an interest in all kinds of things," but "the circle just seems to get smaller." Left in the circle at this point are his affairs with other women, but he recognizes that his attractiveness is waning along with his interest in them. In his self-absorbed universe, Bill ascribes meaning only to experiences that buoy his ego. When others refuse to excuse his selfishness, he turns on them and searches elsewhere for a sense of contentment. By the end of the play there is no where else for him to look. Osborne here suggests that the absence of a clear sense of meaning can cause spiritual and psychological bankruptcy.

Style

Theater of the absurd is drama that communicates a sense of the fundamental meaninglessness of the human condition by employing surreal or unrealistic techniques. Playwrights in this genre abandon the clear sequential scenes that are logically connected for disjointed and illogical scenes and moments. Osborne uses elements of the absurd throughout the play to suggest Bill's disconnection from his world and his growing confusion about his relation to it. This focus emerges in the opening dream sequence when Bill struggles to defend himself and his actions in front of an imaginary court. Osborne combines realism with absurdism in the rest of the play as he depicts Bill's interactions with his family, his mistress, and his colleagues. Some scenes, especially the early ones, contain actual dialogue between two people, as the conversations between Bill and Hudson and Bill and his secretaries. But at other points, it becomes unclear whether Bill is talking to an actual person or addressing a figment of his imagination, as when he speaks on the phone to his wife and mistress and continually asks whether anyone is there. Reality is further confused when one actor takes on different roles as in the case with the woman who plays all of Bill's female clients. Osborne's use of absurdist elements reflects Bill's unhealthy mental state as the lawyer descends deeper into a world of his own making.

Historical Context

In the early 1950s, British audiences watched imported American musicals; sentimental plots involving the middle class and their traditional, moral standards of behavior; and drawing-room comedies. The British theater offered nothing, in short, that was connected to the social and political realities of the age. Then on May 8, 1956, John Osborne brought new life to the London stage with his play *Look Back in Anger*, a work that focuses on the British working class and its sense of being betrayed by political and social institutions. This new type of realism urged a generation of British playwrights such as Arnold Wesker (*Chicken Soup with Barley*, 1958, and *The Kitchen*, 1959) and Edward Bond (*Saved*, 1965)) to recreate on stage cottages in dirty industrial towns in the north of England as well as rented one-room flats in London. In these plays that came to be known as kitchen sink dramas, angry young men like Osborne's Jimmy Porter offered caustic attacks on society as they struggled to survive economically as well as emotionally in a world that offered them no real purpose.

In the late 1950s, Harold Pinter, in plays such as *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*, both produced in 1957, combined the realism of the kitchen sink dramas with the absurdism of Samuel Becket, creating often claustrophobic works that focus on the difficulties of communication in an incomprehensible world. In 1964, Osborne experimented with structural and stylistic combinations in *Inadmissible Evidence*, retaining the same gritty realism of *Look Back in Anger* but adding absurdist elements, such as the play's opening dream sequence, which externalizes his conscience. His angry, middle-aged hero, while firmly in the middle class, struggles, like Jimmy and the other heroes of this generation of playwrights, to find meaning in his life.

Critical Overview

Inadmissible Evidence was a commercial and critical success in London, especially with Nicol Williamson in the lead, but it did not fair as well with U.S. audiences. Many critics conclude that the play is appreciated more by British audiences because of its essentially British character. Harold Clurman, in his review of the play, explains: □The English see in Maitland a 'hero' of their day, the present archetype of the educated middle-class Britisher,□ who has withdrawn from the world due to a sense of personal despair. He notes that several English critics found the play to be more □profound□ than Osborne's famous *Look Back in Anger* because it is □the more universal play□a modern tragedy.□ Clurman finds that British audiences see themselves in Maitland, and in this, along with the author's □extraordinary faculty for derision in passages of coruscating rhetoric, lies the strength of Osborne's play.□ Clurman determines that American audiences want a sense of hope in the theater and so tend not to identify with Maitland as readily as those in England.

Many critics praised the structure and themes of the play, including Simon Trussler, in his article on British neo-naturalism, who writes that □Osborne has found his happiest medium so far in the solipsistic□ play, and Benedict Nightingale, who declares it is □maybe his finest play.□

Others, however, have found fault with its structure and bleakness. Robert Brustein, in his article on the English stage, determines that if Osborne does not □put his wonderful eloquence at the service of consistently worked-out themes, he will remain a playwright of the second rank.□ Brustein concludes that □after a brilliant first act, [the play] collapses completely into structural chaos as the author introduces rhetorical essays on subjects only remotely related to his theme.□ In his review of the play, John Gassner wonders □whether, so to speak, Osborne's ingenious game is worth the candle,□ as he criticizes the play's □essential lack of conflict.□ While he praises the characterization of Mr. Maple, Gassner insists □that it gives us not much else,□ which becomes □the mark of its intrinsic failure.□ Clurman notes that □it crackles with sharp phrases which startle us to a guffaw□ but criticizes its negativity and lack of compassion.

Frank Rich, in his review for the *New York Times*, finds its themes compelling, however, concluding that if the play presents □an evening of almost pure pain, it is honest pain, truthful pain.□ While he finds the play □by no means flawless□ with its □overlong Act II,□ Rich argues that □one cannot take away the tough-mindedness that Mr. Osborne has brought to the creation of Bill Maitland□ and for finding □a common ground where the audience and his hero can meet.□ Rich insists that □it is Mr. Osborne's achievement that *Inadmissible Evidence* takes us right up to the edge of that darkest of voids . . . the sweaty fear that we may, in the end, be completely alone in the world.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of twentieth-century American and British literature and film. In the following essay, she traces the causes and consequences of the main character's mental breakdown.

John Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence* opens with a dream or rather a nightmare in which Bill Maitland struggles to defend himself in court against charges that he has □unlawfully and wickedly published . . . a wicked, bawdy and scandalous object□: himself. When Bill claims in this opening scene that he is innocent of these charges, the audience assumes that during the rest of the play, he will try to defend that innocence. Yet after Bill emerges from his dream, he spends the next two days proving the opposite as he alienates his family, colleagues, clients, office workers, and mistress. The growing sense of his inability to establish strong connections with anyone and thus to find some kind of moral stability throws him into a state of confusion and despair that ultimately leads to a complete mental breakdown.

In his defense during the dream sequence, Bill insists upon □the ever increasing need . . . for, the stable ties of modern family life,□ and his desire to face □up realistically [to] the issues that are important.□ Yet in the next two days, he severs those ties as he alienates his wife and daughter by ignoring, betraying, exploiting, and belittling them as he does others. Bill has created a solipsistic world, aided and enhanced by tranquilizers and alcohol, in which all his failures are perceived by him to result from others letting him down. Since he is the center of that world, he is unable to respond to the needs of others, lashing out instead at them for their □errors□ against him, which ultimately compound his isolation.

Bill admits truths in his dream that he refuses to recognize in his conscious state. He realizes that he is □*only* tolerably bright . . . and irredeemably mediocre.□ He declares, □I have never made a decision which I didn't either regret, or suspect was just plain commonplace or shifty or scamped and indulgent or mildly stupid or undistinguished.□ Only in the dream does he acknowledge that in his relationships with women, he □succeeded in inflicting . . . more pain than pleasure.□ He insists that he cannot escape the truth of his actions. Ironically, in this dream state, he is more aware of the reality of his relationships with others and the damaging effects he has had on them. When he emerges from his dream, this evidence becomes □inadmissible□ because of his inability to face it, and so he begins to create his own world, one he refuses to allow others to penetrate.

Bill's solipsism is illustrated by his repeated insistence that he cannot see or hear clearly. This becomes evident when he is unwilling to recognize his abhorrent behavior toward his wife, Anna, and the effect that it has on her. Bill does not try to hide the fact that he has a mistress or that he will not be attending his daughter's birthday weekend so that he can spend the time with his lover. Although he calls Anna □darling□ and often professes his love for her, his conversations with her center exclusively on his own difficulties, and when Anna brings up the birthday weekend, he refuses to acknowledge

the pain he is causing her except for muttering a quick and feeble “sorry,” before he hangs up. Later he tries to blame his wife for his predicament when he tells his mistress that Anna cooked up the weekend just to thwart their plans.

Bill employs similar tactics with his daughter, Jane, in an effort to justify his bad behavior toward her. In explaining why he will not be attending her birthday celebration, he attempts to gain Jane's sympathy by insisting that his colleagues and family are ignoring him and that there no longer is a place for him in the world. When that comment does not elicit a sympathetic response from her, he switches to an attack on her character in an effort to justify and deflect attention from his actions. Bill suggests that she is not worthy of his love and support, and he objectifies her as part of a generation of “unfeeling things” who regard their elders with “distaste.” Then he abruptly tells her to leave without having listened to her concerns or asked her to respond to any of his charges.

Bill also treats the women in the office as sexual objects that are there solely for his pleasure. For example, when Shirley, his secretary, snubs him, he retaliates, criticizing her for not wearing makeup and insisting that she must not be getting enough sex. After Jones tells him that she is quitting because of him, he declares, “*I've* done no harm to her. If she's unhappy it's not my fault,” refusing to recognize that she is angry because he is the father of her unborn child and has taken no responsibility for it.

Ironically, Bill's effort to construct a protective world in which he does not have to face reality inevitably compounds his isolation and threatens his sanity. The subconscious recognition in his dream of his responsibility for alienating his family causes him to take more pills and drink more alcohol to the point that he becomes incapable of making decisions and of remembering important details about his work. This pattern in turn negatively affects his relationship with his colleagues as he insists that they handle his workload and as he loses clients because of his inability to focus on their cases. His inability, along with that of the audience, to determine whether he is speaking to real people on the other end of the phone or real clients in his office or just to himself as his state of confusion and resulting agitation increases signals his impending breakdown.

By the end of the play, after his office manager and secretary have quit their jobs and his last client has been lost, Bill's only connection to reality and possible salvation is his mistress, Liz, who appears at his office, trying to find out why he has been avoiding her. She offers him a last chance to forge a connection with another human being and so save himself from moral and psychic collapse. When she begs Bill to trust her, he insists, “it isn't easy to trust someone you're busily betraying.” This moment of clarity is short lived, however, as he begins to attack her for scrutinizing and assessing him.

Liz tries to compel him to face reality when she declares: “You pretend to be ill and ignorant just so you can escape reproach. You beggar and belittle yourself just to get out of the game.” Ironically, though, at this point, Bill is not pretending. After Liz gives up trying to force him to establish a real connection with her and leaves, Bill's vision fades as he suffers a complete breakdown, determining that he will stay in the office until something happens, although he has no idea what that might be.

Bill's inability to find meaning and significance in relationships with others causes him to repeatedly betray people until he is left morally and psychologically bankrupt. Osborne offers no hope for Bill, which has prompted some critics to determine that the play is too bleak. When Osborne refuses to rescue Bill from the solipsistic world of his own creation, he forces his audience to acknowledge through his poignant and harrowing portrait of this man that the recognition of complete and utter isolation is too much for the human mind and heart to bear.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *Inadmissible Evidence*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on literature, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In the following essay, he discusses Osborne's use of the metaphor of marriage to represent the breakdown of civility and reason in the world of the play.

The opening stage directions to John Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence* establish this play as *A site of helplessness, of oppression and polemic*. It is a site that Osborne mines with virtuosity, as he had in the groundbreaking, autobiographical *Look Back in Anger* (1956), a play that explores the emotions of the prototypical angry young man. In both plays, angry men are forced to confront the failings of their marriages and their respective will to live a life guided by intellect and honesty, what Bill Maitland calls an ethic of frankness. Over his career, Osborne repeatedly focused on these themes, on the unforgiving retrospection that focuses on the disintegration of marriages and decay of family and other personal relationships.

Whereas Osborne's earlier plays feel at times almost claustrophobic in their compressions of language and emotions, in *Inadmissible Evidence* the metaphors of decay expand ruthlessly to map Bill Maitland's spiral away from civility into a chaotic nightmare world of vicious mutterings. At once a tragic figure in a world that increasingly presses its citizens to adapt to different conditions . . . and . . . rapid change, Maitland barely contains his anger. On trial in the courtroom of his own mind, Maitland is forced to acknowledge his own metaphoric divorce from the world in which he lives. He is, as he admits, a man more packed with spite and twitching with revenge than anyone he knows.

Despite the thick veneer of misanthropy, Maitland is forced to confront the irredeemable mediocrity of his life and his pathological inability to change the trajectory of his decline. As he admits in his opening statement, Maitland is naturally indecisive, has never made a move in his life that he did not regret, and has lived in fear of being found out and exposed.

Indeed, Maitland's day on stage is a monotonous litany of divorce cases, musings on the monotony of his own extramarital affairs, and misogynistic ranting about sex and women. When the telephonist Joy enters his office, for instance, Maitland comments casually about opportunities for group sex. Full of such comments and more tellingly with discussions of couples in various stages of dissolution, the play emphasizes marriage as a metaphor, as a figurative strategy for making meanings or, alternatively, for creating a framework of connotations through which new connections between ideas might be explored. In this sense, Osborne's marriage metaphor *creates* for the audience an uncomfortable sense of familiarity with Maitland's world.

If members of the audience do not know this world personally, they have seen it before in the plays of Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Tennessee Williams. But in this play, Osborne's marriage breakdown radiates outwards, extending beyond the intimacy of

coupled lives into a cloud of ambiguities and multiple meanings that accumulate during the play. Marriage as a kind of sustained balancing act, a negotiation of mutual respect and compassion, becomes reconfigured through the language of this play into an illogical game in which no one wins and the measure of success ultimately seems to be based on a prowess for inflicting pain both verbally and physically. The metaphoric implications of marriage, then, becomes martial rather than marital, grounded more in the language of divisiveness (separation) and battle than in the vocabulary of honeymoons and happy endings.

The broader problem is that over time, even the most powerful of cultural metaphors become stagnant, less meaningful, even unsupported assumptions. In the world of *Inadmissible Evidence*, the metaphor of marriage has lost its value, in the same way that guilt has been reduced to "a real peasant's pleasure. . . . For people without a sliver of self-knowledge or courage." As Maitland argues frequently in addressing his clients, one way or another misfortune looms over marital relationships, which inevitably end badly or approach the impasse of reticence and resentment. Maitland's business day is telling in its routine: the termination of union is negotiated, divorce papers are signed, and new hopes are born. But as the stagnation of the office and the world weariness of his colleagues attest, failure of even this burgeoning hopefulness is soon to follow, and the routine will go on.

Yet, as Maitland illustrates, marriage is a metaphor that the audience cannot escape, either as a social contract into which he and his clients seem destined to enter or as a set of memories (the failed, the failing) that inevitably crash into the present tense of the play. As Maitland observes during his conversation with his client Audrey Jane Anderson: "Our marriage. What a phrase." It is a phrase and an idea that cannot be avoided when discussing Osborne's play or when considering Maitland's defense of his own life, in which repeated failed unions are inevitably unmasked.

Glimpses into his past show Maitland to be a character drawn more in the tradition of Albee's venomous husband George (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, 1962) than of Eliot's tragically passive Prufrock ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 1915). Maitland has "succeeded," as he admits, in "quite certainly inflicting, more pain than pleasure" in those marriages, both literal and metaphoric, that have come to define his life. At the point in this internalized trial that frames the play, he lives on pills and alcohol, totally dependent on what Tennessee Williams would call the kindness of strangers, or as Maitland knows it, on "the goodwill of others." But in Maitland's world kindness and goodwill are anathema, and the middle-aged solicitor is forced to watch as his much-abused ex-wife Sheila and daughter Jane desert him, setting a path that will be followed by law associates, mistresses, and a variety of other women.

His daughter's ghostly figure, hovering in memory and at the edge of the stage, reminds Maitland poignantly of his failed marriages. "But, and this is the but," he admits to her, "I still don't think what you're doing will ever, even, even, even, approach the fibbing, mumping, pinched little worm of energy eating away in this me, of mine, I mean." Fumbling for the language that will bring his thought to expression, Maitland steps into the fullest light of his own drama, acknowledging that he has sunk "slowly into an

unremarkable, gummy little hole□ of a world, □outside the care or consciousness of anyone.□

The play illuminates the vitriol and wastefulness of a life lived in anger. Relationships dissolve and language unravels, neither able to provide the meaning to which Maitland might cling in one final desperate attempt to make sense of his world. He is forced to admit that when □you feel you are gradually being deserted, and isolated, it becomes elusive, more than ever, one can grasp so little, trust nothing.□ Trapped in self-pity and divorced from any reassuring sense of who he is and what he believes in, he declares late in the play: □[I]t's inhuman to be expected to be capable of giving a decent account of oneself.□ It is inhuman, Maitland concludes, to be able to articulate clearly the depth and breadth of one's own humanity. As the stage lights fade and Maitland dissolves into shadows, he struggles towards the final separation, divorcing himself from his own life, stepping aside to view himself as a man guilty of a life energized only with a □spluttering and spilling and hardening□ spirit.

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on *Inadmissible Evidence*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

A film version of *Inadmissible Evidence* was produced by Woodfall Films (United Kingdom) in 1968. The screenplay was written by Osborne and starred Nicol Williamson, who had played Bill to rave reviews on the British and U.S. stage. As of 2006, this film was not available.

Topics for Further Study

Read Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and compare its □angry young man□ to that of *Inadmissible Evidence*. Determine what has caused each man to be angry and compare how each vents that anger and the consequences of that venting. Prepare a PowerPoint presentation comparing and contrasting the two men and be prepared to discuss what point you think Osborne makes about the nature and/or the consequences of anger in these two plays.

If you can get a copy of the film version of the play, be prepared to lead a discussion on how the filmmaker depicts Bill's mental collapse. If you cannot get a copy of the film, write a section of a screenplay that reflects the audience's inability to determine whether Bill is speaking to real people. How would you cast doubts in a film version on the reality of certain characters?

Research the tensions that were emerging in the 1960s between British parents and teenagers and prepare to lead a discussion on whether these tensions were similar to the ones that arose in the United States during this period.

Write a poem or short story that traces someone's descent into madness.

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Compare and Contrast

Mid 1960s: *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), by Betty Friedan, chronicles the growing sense of dissatisfaction women feel about the unequal treatment they are receiving in the home, the workplace, and in other institutions.

Today: Women have made major gains in their fight for equality. Discrimination against women is against the law in England and in the United States. Yet while women hold prominent positions in Parliament (20 percent) and in Congress (15 percent), as a population, they are underrepresented as is the case with corporate CEOs in both countries.

Mid 1960s: A group of playwrights come into prominence as creators of a new school of drama, the theater of the absurd, which has a great impact on theatrical conventions. These playwrights adapt existentialist theories from philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, creating individual views on the essential meaninglessness of life and the absurdity of the human condition. Playwrights included in this group are Edward Albee and Arthur Kopit (American), Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett (French), and Harold Pinter (British).

Today: Musicals, such as *The Producers* and *Phantom of the Opera*, and reality-based plays, such as *Proof*, dominate Broadway and the London stage.

Mid 1960s: Fed up with social mores and government policies that reinforce the status quo, the youth in Britain and the United States hold protest rallies for civil rights, especially for minorities, and against the Vietnam War.

Today: Young people are often accused of being politically and socially apathetic as their main pursuits become materialistic.

What Do I Read Next?

Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1957) chronicles the downfall of music hall performer Archie Rice in a period when that venue had become practically obsolete. Osborne parallels Rice's decline with that of Britain in a scathing attack on what he considered to be his country's moral bankruptcy.

Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is often said to have inspired a revolution in the theater due to its reaction against the sentimental, middle-class plays of the previous decade. The play focuses on Jimmy Porter, an "angry young man" who has turned his back on his middle-class roots and on the society that he feels has failed him.

Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen," one of the collected stories in her *A Man and Two Women* (1963), centers on a middle-aged English woman who embarks on a journey of self-discovery that ultimately becomes a descent into madness. The story is set against the backdrop of early 1960s London, when women were caught in the social conservatism of the past and unable to see the promise of a future that would encourage choice, fulfillment, and personal freedom.

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) is set on a bare stage that represents a partially underground room where Hamm the master, Clov his servant, and Hamm's parents, who live in trash cans, alternatively try to humiliate each other as they wait for something to occur.

Further Study

Denison, Patricia D., ed., *John Osborne: A Casebook*, Garland, 1997.

Denison has collected a wide range of useful articles on Osborne, such as analyses of individual plays, including *Inadmissible Evidence*; an examination of the plays' reflection of their historical moments; a commentary by Osborne's contemporary in British theater, Arnold Wesker; and a comprehensive bibliography.

Gilleman, Luc, *John Osborne: Vituperative Artist*, Routledge, 2002.

Gilleman focuses on the themes of power and sexual politics in Osborne's plays, analyzing their destructive effects on his characters.

Heilpern, John, *John Osborne: The Many Lives of the Angry Young Man*, Knopf, 2007.

Heilpern provides a fascinating account of Osborne's life and uncovers the autobiographical elements in his plays, especially those that deal with the psychology of his characters.

Shellard, Dominic, *British Theater since the War*, Yale University Press, 2000.

Shellard presents a comprehensive view of trends in British theater in the latter half of the twentieth century, examining political and social influences and successful exports, as well as the development of the National Theatre.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's“For Students” Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on “classic” novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of “classic” novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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