



John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Kitchen

Sink Drama

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ABSTRACT

A profound social and economic change occurs in England after the World War II (1939-45) due to the great loss in death toll and the collapse of economy that leave their imprints on the English social life especially on the poor people who suffer the harshness of their living conditions, and prompt at the same time educated people such as playwrights and writers to literary revolt against the current severe situations after war, constituting the movement of the Kitchen Sink Drama so that they can express their thoughts and ideas through their writings. Thus, the research paper deals with the playwright John Osborne's portrayal in his masterpiece *Look Back in Anger* (1956) of the harsh life of the English people especially the young men and their indignation at their society which does not provide them with their rights in achieving a good life.

Key Words and Phrases: World War II, Severe situations, Kitchen Sink Drama,

جون اوزبورن النظر الى الماضي بغضب ودراما قذارة المطبخ

المستخلص

لقد حدث تغيير اجتماعي واقتصادي كبير في انكلترا بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية (1939-1945) بسبب الاعداد الهائلة للقتلى وكذلك بسبب انهيار الاقتصاد البريطاني الذي ترك بصماته على كل الحياة الاجتماعية الانكليزية خصوصا على الناس الفقراء الذين يعانون من شظف العيش وكذلك حفز في نفس الوقت الناس المثقفين مثل الكتاب بشكل عام وخصوصا الكتاب المسرحيين ليثوروا بطريقة ادبية ضد الازواضع المزرية انذاك بعد الحرب وليؤسسوا حركة درامية سميت دراما قذارة المطبخ لكي يستطيعوا من خلال كتاباتهم ان يعبروا عن افكارهم ورائهم. لهذا، جاءت فكرة البحث ليختص بتصوير الكاتب المسرحي



جون اوزبورن في رائعته النظر الى الماضي بغضب (1956) للحياة القاسية للشعب الانكليزي خصوصا الشباب وسخطهم على مجتمعهم الذي لم يعطهم حقهم في تحقيق حياة كريمة.

عبارات استدلالية : الحرب العالمية الثانية, اوضاع مزرية, دراما قذارة المطبخ

Introduction

Kitchen sink drama is a literary movement that appears as a result of the cruel life of the English people in the fifties of the last century after the World War the Second WWII (1939-1945) that culminates in social diseases such as poverty, starvation, ignorance, prostitution and the like. Therefore, the movement came as a reflection of the painful experiences and sufferings of people, in accordance to the spiritual, economic and social significant changes, to revive the English theater through presenting a new notion of social revolutionary plays, including *Look Back in Anger* that shows the real life of that historical epoch after WWII:

The old conception of theatre as a cultural decoration was dead; so, too, was the conception of theatre as the entertainment of an exclusive leisured class. The end of the war was the beginning of a social revolution that has not yet ended. This revolution has deep spiritual as well as economic and social significance; it demands from the theatre a corresponding revolution in its outlook.

(Hunt, Hugh, 1962: p. 150)

Kitchen Sink drama which is so a British significant realistic movement that it transformed the suffering and torture of English people, young men in particular, into the English stage and Mass media can be precisely defined as a:

term which became popular in Great Britain in the middle and late 1950s. Often used derogatorily, it applied to plays which, in a realistic fashion, showed aspects of working-class life at the time. The implication was that the play centered, metaphorically (or psychologically) and in some cases literally, on the kitchen sink. The works of John Osborne, Arnold Wesker and Alun Owen (among others) were all so described.

(Cuddon, 1979: pp. 351-352)

As long as drama is concerned, the English aforementioned movement along with the plays that related to it shows the disappointment and discontent of the educated generation of the fifties in England on the stage whose characters typically described as the "Angry Young Men" which:



became a catch-phrase in Britain in the middle and late 1950s, and by 1960 at the latest was a much-used cliché. A part from the journalists, the writer mainly but indirectly responsible for its popularity was John Osborne whose play *Look Back in Anger* (1957) spoke for a generation of disillusioned and discontented young men who were strongly opposed to the establishment; to its social and political attitudes and mores, and indeed to the whole 'bourgeois ethic'.... Osborne's excellent play survives; the cliché is now hardly ever used.

(Ibid, p. 43)

Unfortunately, the WWII and its horrific consequences does not only plague England and all European nations but also the American continent where its poets established similarly, just like in England, a group in the fifties of the last century and named it "Beat Poets" whose work became particularly popular in the late 1950s. The best known of these writers are Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. They are especially associated with San Francisco, U.S.A. Their 'father figures' were Kenneth Rexroth, Henry Miller and William Burroughs. The best writers (and many of the 'beat generation') developed their own slang and a highly idiosyncratic style. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) represents as well as anything the disillusionment of the beat movement with modern society, its materialism and its militarism. ... But all these writers were a considerable fertilising influence.

(Ibid, p. 43)

Although the well-known and best American plays such as *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) which is written by Tennessee Williams and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) proved success on the American stages, some critics believe "their work was expressing a social and cultural reality too far removed from the English condition to serve as an effective model." (Griffiths, 1981: p.11)

As long as English drama is concerned, one of the well-known plays that relates to the Kitchen Sink Drama is *Look Back in Anger* which is written by the English playwright John Osborne (1929-1994) approves success as it revives the English stage after the latter becomes stagnant due to WWII. The American psychiatric professor John Robert Taylor remarks that: "Although the verse dramas of Christopher Fry and T.S. Eliot achieved a certain level of success in the thirties and forties, they could not revive and revitalise the stagnant British



drama. In other words, their plays did not prove popular enough and did not seem to be what British theatre was waiting for to be saved from its stalemate." (Taylor, 1969: p. 20) Although the change in the style of the post-war plays which is caused by the dramatist John Osborne when he presented his masterpiece *Look Back in Anger* on the English stage, Some critics attribute the aforementioned play success to the "stagnant and unexciting nature of the English theatre in the post-war period. There had been very little fundamental change in the style of plays which the public had been offered since the 1930s." (Griffiths, 1981: p.11)

Discussion and analysis

Look Back in Anger is a revolutionary and realistic play written by the British playwright John Osborne (1929-1994) who was one of the prominent members of the Angry Young Men. The play was written in the middle of the twentieth century exactly in 1956 which was "the year of Suez and Hungary, protest was in the air, and the mood of the country, especially that of young England, veered sharply from the preciousity and dilettantism which had been in vogue at the universities and elsewhere for the last few years to one of grim political consciousness." (Taylor, 1969: p. 35) Moreover, the beginning of the 1950s was wrapped by the atmosphere of despair and frustration due to "the decline in Britain's position in the world, its economic depression, and its loss of an imperial presence overseas." (Griffiths, 1981: p. 9) Therefore, English people in general in the fifties and even in the sixties of the last century were desperate to improve their miserable situation, thus, England witnessed a period of opposition and protest against the government which faced a new wave of disagreement and disapproval that was carried out by the Angry Young Men movement whose members were from the working class who felt frustrated and disappointed in their society which was considered by them hypocrite since it did not provide them with opportunities of having jobs and because those angry young men believed that their society at that time was supporting the rich against the poor. Hence, Osborne is a realistic playwright as he writes in his masterpiece *Look Back in Anger* about the current social dilemmas of the English society after the WWII and what really is going on at that time in a simple style but with obscene language because it relates to violence or sex which is spoken by the protagonist Jimmy Porter. The foul or obscene language is unpleasant and sometimes shocking, offending not only those people who surround him like Alison, Cliff, and Helena but also the English institutions. In his *Notes* (1981), the English professor Gareth



Griffiths explains succinctly the title of the play and the crucial point about the character of Jimmy as well as his part in it in addition to:

his relationship with the past. The title, *Look Back in Anger*, contains the essential contradiction which the character of Jimmy explores. He is angry when he looks back at a past in which he longs to be contained, but which he cannot ever accept. This is not because he has a better ideal or dream to offer, but because he cannot accept the dreams of the past except by a process of sentimentalizing them. At the heart of the character seems to be an anger at being cast-off and excluded.

(Griffiths, 1981: p. 40)

Jimmy Porter, the protagonist in *Look Back in Anger* who is a "tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a very worn tweed jacket and flannels," (Osborne, 1957: p. 9) lives along with his wife and their friend Cliff in an old one-room attic flat has launched powerful attacks against the social, political and religious institutions as he is the tongue of the playwright himself whose life has been "examined with great interest by critics because of the feeling that his plays, notably *Look Back in Anger*, have a strongly autobiographical flavor." (Griffiths, 1981: p. 5) Jimmy's verbal attacks starts in the early beginning of the play when he seems irritated while reading the Sunday's newspapers, pouring his anger at Cliff and Alison as saying: "Well, you are ignorant. You're just a peasant. (*To Alison.*) What about you? You're not a peasant are you?" (Osborne, 1957: p. 11) Cliff, the same age of Jimmy, is the foil for the latter as he is "easy and relaxed, almost to lethargy, with the rather sad, natural intelligence of the self-taught. ... He is a soothing, natural counterpoint to Jimmy." (Ibid, p. 10) The play begins on Sunday and it is noteworthy that most of its events occur on the days of Sunday which is a hateful day for Jimmy because it is a holiday and for him it is a matter of routine, asking "Why do I do this every Sunday? Even the book reviews seem to be the same as last week's. Different books – same reviews." (Ibid, p. 10) Jimmy and Cliff who are from the working class as they run a sweat stall do not go for work since it is a holiday and they are thus sitting, reading, and scanning newspapers, various books, and magazines while Alison who is considered from middle class as her father who is currently retired was a high-ranking officer, serving his country in India when it was a British colony is busy in ironing a pile of Jimmy's clothes. Moreover, Jimmy criticizes the English religious men represented by the Bishop of



Bromley who is regarded by Jimmy as a hypocrite who "makes a very moving appeal to all Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb." (Ibid, p. 13) Besides, Jimmy becomes so disgusting when reading in the Sunday newspaper that the Bishop is "upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says he denies the difference of class distinctions." (Ibid, p. 13)

Jimmy who has a revolutionary spirit, desiring eagerly that English people have to revolute so that they can change the miserable conditions of their country after the WWII and criticizing at the same time the government of England for failing to come up with any self-reliance to establish institutions of industry, agriculture and the like to achieve the country's self-sufficient without depending on foreign countries to satisfy country's needs. Therefore, Jimmy who is a university graduate young man is so indignant that he launches into a tirade against English people and their government as saying: "Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening." (Ibid, p. 17) Then Jimmy criticizes those government figures without naming them who claim patriotism of not establishing foundations, factories and the like to develop their country and to employ its people in the fields of industry, agriculture, and any other jobs to achieve self-sufficiency of goods and equipment instead of importing them from other countries and to eliminate at the same time unemployment. Therefore, Jimmy accuses them of their ignorance in politics because "Somebody said – what was it – we get our cooking from Paris (that's a laugh), our politics from Moscow, and our morals from Port Said." (Ibid, p. 17) It is noteworthy to mention that Jimmy confesses reluctantly a feeling of sorrow about Alison's father, the colonel Redfern, who served his country in India, when the latter was a British colony and he who enjoyed the happiness of the past when England was called Great Britain: "I hate to admit it, but I think I can understand how her Daddy must have felt when he came back from India, after all those years away. The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquer, bright ideas, bright uniforms." (Ibid, p. 17)

Many critics have considered Jimmy as just "a spokesman for his generation." (Griffiths, 1981: p. 53) It is a matter of fact that there is a powerful link between the individual at any society and the psychological dilemmas he or she face, and the difficulties of an entire



generation of people in 1950s. Jimmy is thus a good example of "those people who, born into the working class, were educated out of it, but were unable to find an acceptable role in the complexities of the English class system." (Ibid, p. 53) Although Jimmy is a university graduate, he does not find a public job after a year of his graduation; therefore he is desperate and malicious, intending to harm and scorn people especially his wife (Alison) because she is from the middle-class people whom Jimmy believes that they have never suffered during their life. Thus, he wishes that Alison "could have a child, and it would die. ... Please – if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognizable human being yourself. But I doubt it." (Osborne, 1957: p. 37) Apparently, Jimmy suffers from desperation when he feels that he is in a bad condition as he is unable to relate his feelings to what is occurring around him especially Alison who is his wife and her child whom Jimmy wishes it to die is his child too. The professor psychiatric Bessel Van Der Kolk remarks: "When people are desperate, they will do just about anything to feel calmer and more in control." (Kolk, 2014: p. 226) The aforementioned attack of Jimmy against Alison who expects to be a mother as she is currently pregnant frustrates her too much and this is the fundamental reason that stands behind bringing a grief and despair to her because "mothers became increasingly frustrated, defeated, and helpless in their interactions." (Ibid, p. 122)

It seems that the subject matter of that play aims at criticizing the English society and its institutions so that it can raise the spirit of English people to improve the hard circumstances of their country as a whole and to restore the glories of the past. Jimmy who represents all the English educated young men who are plagued by the horrific consequences of WWII does not only insult Alison to satisfy his monotony and frustration but he also abuses her along with the rest of her family members except her father who lived the years of power and happiness of the past when England was at the top of its greatness as it was called Great Britain, "it is not surprising therefore that he should have a kind of grudging respect for Alison's father, Colonel Redfern. Like Redfern, Jimmy survives by idealizing the past, and by creating defensive pockets of memory to which he can retire when the emptiness of his present and the desolation of his future become too much to bear." (Griffiths, 1981: p. 40) In his continuous verbal attacks against those who surround him, Jimmy describes her along with her brother Nigel by describing them as: "They're what they sound like: sycophantic, phlegmatic and



pusillanimous." (Osborne, 1957: p. 21) in fact he launches a tirade against Nigel who represents politics as he is a member in the parliament, so that he may instigate people indirectly against the political figures whom he considers them self-centered ones as they appear only at the beginning of elections and when they are elected by people they disappear in order not to aid poor people who are in a desperate need for help, starting his tirade against Nigel, expecting: He'll end up in the cabinet one day, make no mistake. But somewhere at the back of that mind is the vague knowledge that he and his pals have been plundering and fooling everybody for generations. ... Now Nigel is just about as vague as you can get without being actually invisible. And invisible politicians aren't much use to anyone – not even to his supporters! And nothing is more vague about Nigel than his knowledge.

(Osborne, 1957: p. 20)

The English professor Katherine J. Worth of drama (1922-2015) likens Jimmy's tirades against the people of his society to the famous playwrights George Bernard Shaw and August Strindberg when she pinpoints that "Jimmy Porter's long speeches are at the same time violent and controlled, sardonically humorous and in deadly earnest, evoking occasional echoes of both Shaw and Strindberg." (Worth, 1968: p. 37)

By writing the play, Osborne can be considered a social reformer just like Shaw, the father of drama of ideas, who believes that theatre is the perfect medium of reform: "The Theater is both school and church" (Shaw, 1973: p. 7) By relying on Worth's above-mentioned point of view over the "Porter's long speeches" which are regarded by her as almost similar to Strindberg and Shaw tirades especially the latter who launches tirades against the traditional views of people's beliefs for example in his masterpiece *Arms and the Man* (1894) this way: As an Irish I could pretend to patriotism neither for the country I had abandoned nor the country that had ruined it. As a humane person I detested violence and slaughter, whether in war, sport or the butcher's yard. I was a Socialist detesting our anarchical scramble for money, and believing in equality as the only possible permanent basis of social organization, discipline, subordination, good manners, and selection of fit persons for high functions.

(Clark, 1971: p. 66)



Similarly, Strindberg launches a tirade for example in his masterpiece *A Dream Play* (1901) against the female members of his family, expressing his deep agony towards his sister, daughter, wife and even his mother whom she was considered his foe as:

She robbed my embryo of nourishment, so I was born incomplete. My sister was my enemy when she made me knuckle under to her. The first woman I took in my arms was my enemy. She gave me ten years of sickness in return for the love I gave her. When my daughter had to choose between you and me, she became my enemy. And you, you, my wife, have been my mortal enemy, for you have not let go until there is no life left in me.

(Bogard, Oliver, 1965: p. 332)

Although Jimmy's anger and criticism is continuous against almost everything, Alison who seems impassive and in an active situation in the play still loves him, pretending to listen to him in order to make him think that she cares about him: "I pretended not to be listening – because I knew that would hurt him, I suppose." (Osborne, 1957: p. 28) In fact Alison is in a critical position as she is stuck between her family and her aggressive husband, and this is probably the reason that stands behind her timidity as she keeps herself calm about any bad behaviour or action carried out by Jimmy due to his suffering from the hard circumstances he lives and she is thus having the ability to control her feelings but she has not the ability to "try and take his suffering away from him – he'd be lost without it," (Ibid, p. 54) especially she is from the middle-class people whom Jimmy detests. Once, Jimmy insults her when he talks in the presence of Cliff about lovemaking "Oh, it's not that she hasn't her own kind of passion. She has the passion of a python. She just devours me whole every time, as if I were some over-large rabbit." (Ibid, p. 37) At the end of the play she becomes so exasperated for the first time in the play when she returns home tired, frustrated, and helpless after spending several months in her parents' house and aborting her child that she decides "not to be neutral." (Ibid, p. 95)

Conclusion

It is a matter of fact that chaos, disorder, and confusion occur after any war and therefore authors and writers unconsciously take the task of educating people through their writings since pen is mightier than the sword to be aware of the risks that surround them. As long as England is concerned, the movement Kitchen Sink Drama and the term Angry Young Men seem to be very obviously a reflection of those writers' experiences keenness as educated people who



aspire to enhance the harsh situations and achieve justice and equality in their society immediately after WWII. As a playwright whose responsibility for making a change to the better, Osborne writes his a groundbreaking play to provide people with new and positive ideas so that people can make a change concerning to take steps towards accomplishing progress and prosperity.

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