

The Influence of Kitchen Sink Drama In John Osborne’s “ Look Back In Anger”

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Date of Submission: 16-09-2018

Date of acceptance: 01-10-2018

John Osborne was born in London, England in 1929 to Thomas Osborne, an advertisement writer, and Nellie Beatrice, a working class barmaid. His father died in 1941. Osborne used the proceeds from a life insurance settlement to send himself to Belmont College, a private boarding school. Osborne was expelled after only a few years for attacking the headmaster. He received a certificate of completion for his upper school work, but never attended a college or university.

After returning home, Osborne worked several odd jobs before he found a niche in the theater. He began working with Anthony Creighton's provincial touring company where he was a stage hand, actor, and writer. Osborne co-wrote two plays -- *The Devil Inside Him* and *Personal Enemy* -- before writing and submitting *Look Back in Anger* for production.

The play, written in a short period of only a few weeks, was summarily rejected by the agents and production companies to whom Osborne first submitted the play. It was eventually picked up by George Devine for production with his failing Royal Court Theater. Both Osborne and the Royal Court Theater were struggling to survive financially and both saw the production of *Look Back in Anger* as a risk. After opening night, the play received mixed reviews. It did receive a handful of glowing reviews from several influential theater critics, however, and Osborne was soon pronounced to be one of the most promising young playwrights in British theater. He brought a new trend in play writing which is popularly known as “kitchen sink drama” which brought a new face to the modern era of writing.

Kitchen Sink drama is a term used to denote plays that rely on realism to explore domestic social relations. Realism, in British theater, was first experimented with in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by such playwrights as George Bernard Shaw. This genre attempted to capture the lives of the British upper class in a way that realistically reflected the ordinary drama of ruling class British society.

According to many critics, by the mid-twentieth century the genre of realism had become tired and unimaginative. Osborne's play returned imagination to the Realist genre by capturing the anger and immediacy of post-war youth culture and the alienation that resulted in the British working classes. *Look Back in Anger* was able to comment on a range of domestic social dilemmas in this time period. Most importantly, it was able to capture, through the character of Jimmy Porter, the anger of this generation that festered just below the surface of elite British culture.

The 1950's through the 1970's saw the rise of one of the most important movements in modern British theater: the Kitchen Sink drama. These types of plays had several characteristics that distinguished them as a break from the forms of theater before them. They can be compared against theatrical movements such as avantgarde theater, or the theater of the absurd, characterized by the plays of authors such as Samuel Beckett.

Perhaps the first, and most notable, characteristic of these Kitchen Sink dramas was the way in which they advanced a particular social message or ideology. This ideology was most often leftist. The settings were almost always working class. The previous trend in Victorian theater had been to depict the lives of the wealthy members of the ruling classes. These classes of people were often conservative in their politics and their ideologies. This was not the case for Kitchen Sink theater. The Kitchen Sink drama sought, instead, to bring the real lives and social inequality of ordinary working class people to the stage. The lives of these people were caught between struggles of power, industry, politics, and social homogenization. Another chief characteristic of the Kitchen Sink drama was the way in which its characters expressed their unvarnished emotion and dissatisfaction with the ruling class status quo. This can be seen clearly in the play considered to be the standard bearer of this Kitchen Sink genre: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. In Osborne's play, Jimmy Porter plays the role of the Angry Young Man. He is angry and dissatisfied at a world that offers him no social opportunities and a dearth of emotion. He longs to live a “real life.” He feels, however, that the trappings of working class

domesticity keep him from reaching this better existence. His anger and rage are thus channeled towards those around him. Osborne's play is a study in how this pent up frustration and social anger can wreak havoc on the ordinary lives of the British people.

Some critics have noted the irony in the term "Kitchen Sink drama." The domestic world during this time was believed to be the domain of the feminine. Almost all of the major Kitchen Sink works which take place in the mid-twentieth century, however, are centered around a masculine point of view. These plays rarely centered around the emotions and tribulations of its women characters. The power dynamic between male and female often assumed to be masculine and is an unexamined critical component in many of these plays. Women are often assumed to serve the men of their household and, when conflicts do arise, it is often the man who is portrayed as the suffering protagonist. Women's suffering is always a result of the suffering of the male.

Though Kitchen Sink dramas gained notoriety in twentieth century British culture for their unflinching anger and criticism directed towards the social, political, and economic establishment, the plays were also significant for the way they depicted the most intimate aspects of domestic life. This was in stark contrast to popular classical or Victorian dramas and comedies which largely centered around the public lives of socially established characters. Before the Kitchen Sink dramas, commentators have noted that in the mid-twentieth century, British theater still produced plays as if it were the nineteenth century. The Kitchen Sink drama, in contrast, moved the action and emotion of the theater from depictions of the public space of people's lives into the most intimate of settings. The kitchen was considered to be the realm of the domestic, of females and servants, and Victorian drama often excluded any mention of it. Kitchen Sink dramas, however, turned this notion around and made the kitchen the center of familial and social life. In the case of the Porter's attic apartment, the kitchen and living spaces were all one room on the stage. The boundaries of intimate domestic life and public life were blurred and created a realism not seen before in British theater.

Whether social or domestic, the Kitchen Sink drama changed the trajectory of British theater. Though many of the authors considered to have written in this genre such as Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden never claimed the title of Kitchen Sink dramatist, these author's plays contained themes of common life that deeply resonated with British culture of the period. These types of plays signaled a resolute shift of British theater into the 20th century

Kitchen sink realism (or kitchen sink drama) is a term coined to describe a British cultural movement that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s in theatre, art, novels, film and television plays, whose protagonists usually could be described as "angry young men" who were disillusioned with modern society. It used a style of social realism, which depicted the domestic situations of working class Britons, living in cramped rented accommodation and spending their off-hours drinking in grimy pubs, to explore controversial social and political issues ranging from abortion to homelessness. The harsh, realistic style contrasted sharply with the escapism of the previous generation's so-called "well-made plays".

The films, plays and novels employing this style are set frequently in poorer industrial areas in the North of England, and use the accents and slang heard in those regions. The film *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) is a precursor of the genre, and the John Osborne play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is thought of as the first of the genre. The gritty love-triangle of *Look Back in Anger*, for example, takes place in a cramped, one-room flat in the English. Shelagh Delaney's 1958 play *A Taste of Honey* (which was made into a film of the same name in 1961), is about a teenage schoolgirl who has an affair with a black sailor, gets pregnant, and then moves in with a gay male acquaintance; it raises issues such as class, race, gender and sexual orientation. The conventions of the genre have continued into the 2000s, finding expression in such television shows as *Coronation Street* and *East Enders*.^[1]

List of films:

- ❖ *Look Back in Anger* (1959)
- ❖ *Room at the Top* (1959)
- ❖ *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960)
- ❖ *The Entertainer* (1960)
- ❖ *A Taste of Honey* (1961)
- ❖ *A Kind of Loving* (1962)
- ❖ *The L-Shaped Room* (1962)
- ❖ *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962)
- ❖ *A Place to Go* (1963)
- ❖ *This Sporting Life* (1963)
- ❖ *Billy Liar* (1963)
- ❖ *The Leather Boys* (1964)
- ❖ *This is My Street* (1964)
- ❖ *Alfie* (1966)

- ❖ The Whisperers (1967)
- ❖ Poor Cow (1967)
- ❖ Up the Junction (1968)
- ❖ Kes (1969)
- ❖ Spring and Port Wine (1970)

In John Osborne's 'Look Back In Anger', is a suitable title for the play. It has two parts: "look back" and "in anger". certainly there is enough of anger in the play. *Look Back in Anger* follows a young husband and wife, Alison and Jimmy Porter, as they attempt to navigate class conflict and deal with a deteriorating marriage in 1950s England. Alison comes from a traditional upper class background. Jimmy comes from a working class background, though he is highly educated. The couple lives with Cliff Lewis, an affable working class man and Jimmy's longtime friend. The scene opens on a Sunday morning in the apartment. Alison irons clothes while Cliff and Jimmy read the newspaper.

The play's first act largely consists of Jimmy's angry tirades against upper class complacency and his wife's lack of "enthusiasm." Jimmy thinks that suffering is the only way to experience true human emotion, and that Alison and other upper class people are therefore less "alive" than he is. He also seems to have some nostalgia for a past age in Britain when the country had more power. Jimmy's attempts to shock his wife into some display of emotion escalate as the act progresses—he insults her family and complains that all women are out to destroy men. Cliff, attempting to cheer Jimmy up, begins to banter and roughhouse with his friend. The two fall against Alison's ironing board, and she burns her arm. Jimmy apologizes, but she yells at him to leave, and he exits.

Cliff helps Alison treat the burn, and she reveals to him that she is pregnant with Jimmy's child. She hasn't told Jimmy yet, because she is afraid that he'll feel trapped and angry. Cliff comforts Alison, and tells her that Jimmy loves her. He kisses her. Jimmy enters while they are kissing, but doesn't acknowledge or object (the three live in a non-traditional set-up that would have been shocking to audiences at the time). Soon after, Cliff leaves to get some cigarettes, and Alison and Jimmy share a tender moment. They play their "bear and squirrel" game, which allows them to escape into affection while pretending to be animals. Then Cliff returns and says that Helena Charles, one of Alison's upper class friends, is on the phone. Jimmy's mood immediately darkens. When Alison says that Helena wants to stay with them, Jimmy explodes. He says he wishes that Alison would have a baby that would die so that she could experience true suffering.

The second act begins with Helena and Alison sharing the womanly duties of the home while Jimmy plays his trumpet off stage. Alison tells Helena about her first months with Jimmy. They lived with his working class friend Hugh Tanner, and spent time going on "raids" to parties of Alison's upper class friends. She says that she felt like "a hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on." Helena asks why they got married, and Alison says that it seemed to be largely because Alison's mother and her father Colonel Redfern disapproved. That made Jimmy want to marry her no matter what.

Jimmy and Cliff come in to eat. When he hears that Helena and Alison are going to church together later that day, Jimmy also becomes convinced that Helena is out to take Alison away from him. He lets fly a series of outrageous insults against Alison's mother. Helena tries, and fails, to reason with him, and Jimmy asks whether she has ever watched someone die. He tells the story of watching his father die from wounds received fighting in the Spanish Civil war when he was ten years old, and claims that this taught him more about life than Helena and Alison know even now. Near the end of the scene, Jimmy leaves to go get the telephone. While he's gone, Helena tells Alison that she has sent a message to Colonel Redfern asking him to come pick Alison up. Alison doesn't protest. When Jimmy returns, he says that Hugh's mum, the working class woman who set him up in his candy stall and for whom he harbors deep affection, is dying of a stroke. He asks Alison to come to the hospital with him. Instead, she goes to church. Jimmy is left alone on stage.

In the next scene, Colonel Redfern helps Alison pack to leave. He reveals that he thinks he and Alison's mother reacted too strongly to her marriage with Jimmy, and that Jimmy might have been right to be angry with them. He says he thinks that Jimmy could be right that he, Redfern, is a relic of an old version of England that has ceased to exist. He also says that he and Alison have a tendency to stay neutral and not take a strong stand on things. She is surprised to hear this from him, and as she finishes packing she briefly reconsiders her move. Then Helena enters, and Alison decides to go. She says goodbye to Cliff. Helena stays behind because she has a work meeting the following day. Alison and Colonel Redfern exit, and Cliff, angry that Helena has disrupted their life, leaves before Jimmy comes back. Jimmy returns a few moments later, furious, having seen Alison leaving with her father on his way home. Helena gives him a letter that Alison wrote explaining her decision. Jimmy is angry at her polite, restrained language. Helena tells him that Alison is going to have a baby. He says that he is not overcome with emotion at this news, and insults Helena, who slaps him. This causes Jimmy to collapse in despair. Then Helena "kisses him passionately," and the act ends.

The scene opens several months later, looking very similar to the beginning of Act 1, except that it is now Helena who is ironing. Jimmy and Cliff joke and discuss newspaper articles. They roughhouse, and Cliff dirties his shirt. Helena leaves to clean it, and while she is off stage, Cliff tells Jimmy that he is moving out. Jimmy wonders why he always chooses women over male friendship, even though he values Cliff's company more highly than he values Helena's. Helena comes back with the shirt, and Cliff leaves to dry it in his room. Helena tells Jimmy that she loves him, and he asks her desperately to never leave him. Then Alison appears at the door, looking sick and disheveled.

The next scene opens a few minutes later, with Jimmy playing his trumpet off stage. Alison tells Helena that she is not angry with her, and is not trying to break up the new couple. Helena, however, says that Alison's presence has reminded her that what she is doing is wrong. Alison has also had a miscarriage, and Helena considers this a "judgment" on her relationship. She calls Jimmy back, and tells him that she is leaving. Jimmy says that he always knew Helena wasn't strong enough for true love, which requires "muscle and guts." Helena leaves.

Alison apologizes, and Jimmy says that she should have sent flowers to Hugh's mum, and remembers his first meeting with her, when he thought that she had a "wonderful relaxation of spirit." This turned out to be just complacency, he says. Alison lets out a cry, and tells him that the loss of their child has made her understand the depth of emotion that he wanted her to have all this time. She tells him that she wants to be "corrupt and futile," and collapses at his feet. Jimmy can't bear to see her this way, and kneels to help her. Then, "with a kind of mocking, tender irony," he launches into their bear and squirrel imaginary game. "Poor squirrels," he says to Alison, and she responds, "poor, poor, bears" ,this brings the couple together again. The writer does not tell , but I hope that the couple would have passed their life in peace ever after.

I would like to conclude by saying that all the characters in this play seems to be living next door and facing the struggle of their life like us. John Osborne has helped in increasing our understanding of human nature and of a particular human situation. It offers permanent moral insight.

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Sadaf Zaman" The Influence of Kitchen Sink Drama In John Osborne's " Look Back In Anger". IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 23 no. 09, 2018, pp. 77-80.