
UNIT 5 *ANGER AND AFTER : THE PLAY'S* SUBSEQUENT IMPORTANCE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Osborne's Place in 20th Century British Drama
 - 5.1.1 His Other Plays
 - 5.1.2 The Impact of *Look Back in Anger*
- 5.2 Common Themes in the Plays
- 5.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.4 Glossary
- 5.5 Questions
- 5.6 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to see *Look Back in Anger* in relation to Osborne's other plays and to trace its impact on contemporary and subsequent British drama.

5.1 OSBORNE'S PLACE IN 20TH CENTURY BRITISH DRAMA

5.1.1 His Other Plays

In the first unit I listed Osborne's plays (except *Epitaph For George Dillon* all were subsequent to *LBA*) in the order of their performance. The more important among them will here be discussed briefly so that it becomes possible for us to draw any comparisons and/or contrasts that might be useful in our study of *Look Back in Anger*. These discussions will not necessarily include descriptions of plot and character in the plays since their aim is rather to locate certain common themes and concerns which are common to Osborne's work, and to trace the progression of his drama.

The play that followed *Look Back in Anger* was *The Entertainer* and here Osborne makes the music-hall, which had provided comic interludes in the previous play (see 3.3.3) the basis for the play's entire structure. He retains the conventional, three-act structure, but divides each act into short scenes which are numbered like acts on a music-hall bill. The action takes place on two main settings – the sea-side boarding house where the Rice family live and a 'comedy spot' where Archie Rice (the protagonist) performs solo scenes at a microphone.

The main difference between the monologues in this play and those in *Look Back in Anger* is that they lack the same vehemence and level of invective, and consequently had less immediate impact when the play first appeared. *The Entertainer* has two distinct kinds of monologue, the monologues in the solo scenes and those in the family scenes. Notice that Osborne here finds a way to introduce soliloquy (which is absent from the earlier play) through these solo scenes. Political and social comments remain part of the monologues, except that since they are now in the form of music-hall songs and solos, they coexist with stories and wisecracks of a kind more light-hearted and less abusive than Jimmy's are.

Osborne had by now self-admittedly begun to be influenced by Brecht's Epic Theatre (see 1.3.3) which meant that he concentrated more on bringing out the theatricality of the play and on discarding dramatic illusion. Though a realistic structure is retained, the vaudeville sequences work against it. The play also makes much more direct references to contemporary events (like Suez and the Trafalgar Square rallies)

and persons, than are found in Jimmy's rather vague allusions. This serves to make the language of *The Entertainer* less opaque, at least on the surface, than that of its predecessor. Even when Archie does launch into a long speech like the one from which the following extract is taken, it is qualified by the audience's knowledge that he has been drinking :

" But if ever I saw any hope or strength in the human race, it was in the face of that old fat negress getting up to sing about Jesus or something like that. She was poor and lonely and oppressed like nobody you've ever known. Or me, for that matter. I never even liked that kind of music, but to see that old black whore singing her heart out to the whole world, you knew somehow in your heart that it didn't matter how much you kick people, the real people, how much you despise them, if they can stand up and make a pure, just natural noise like that, there's nothing wrong with them, only with everybody else."

When I say that the language is less opaque, I mean that while undoubtedly rhetorical and self-dramatizing, it shows up these words clearly for what they are – drunken and sentimental. For this reason, this speech is in much less danger of being identified as the voice of the playwright, than Jimmy's speeches are. The gap between the protagonist and the minor characters is lessened here since they are given more interest and impact than are Alison, Cliff, Helena and Colonel Redfern — everyone besides Jimmy is a 'minor' character in the earlier play.

After a musical (*The World of Paul Slickey*) and a television play (*A Subject of Scandal and Concern*), neither of which was a particular success, Osborne wrote the only one of his plays to have a historical subject, *Luther*. Like *Look Back in Anger*, it is almost entirely centred around the personality of one man, but the man in this case doesn't emerge as clearly, partly because of the constraints of creating a character the audience would already know something about and yet keeping him from becoming predictable. It is of course simplistic to see Osborne's *Luther* as a direct transcription of the figure from history, particularly since the play's emphasis is on the psychological, and Luther's opposition of the Church is explained in terms of an identity crisis, among other private conflicts. This is a useful point of contrast to the play we are studying, which, though open to a reading that stresses the psychological, offers no such overt explanations.

The language of *Luther* has been criticized for lacking a speech pattern that emerges naturally from the characterization, another problem arising from the attempt at reconciling language that sounds appropriate to the setting with the 'modern' patterns of speech and the colloquial language Osborne is accustomed to writing in. The language therefore varies between passages of quotation, which are recognisable as such, and what one critic calls " passages of Osborne". How well the two fit together is extremely debatable, as you can see from this example :

" ...Oh, thou my God, my God, help me against the reason and wisdom of the world... For myself, I've no business to be dealing with the great lords of this world... my God, do you hear me ? Are you dead ? No, you can't die, you can only hide yourself, can't you ? ... in the name of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, who shall be my protector and defender, yes, my mighty fortress, breathe into me. Give me life, oh Lord. Give me life."

The passage begins and ends in language appropriate to the period, with quotes from the real Luther, but in between becomes that of a disturbed, 'modern' voice. On the other hand, *Luther* is not actually concerned with history or with the religious aspect of the subject it deals with, and in that sense is not a historical play at all. It concentrates on the individual rebelling against all other human authority, and in this case, one of the conditions of such a rebel is his isolation. An obvious parallel with Jimmy comes to mind here-but there are important differences. Luther has a cause

that he believes in and he also has religious faith, however tormented, both of which are unavailable to the modern world of Jimmy Porter.

Osborne experimented further with different styles in two short plays, *The Blood of the Bambergs* and *Under Plain Cover* which were produced together at the Royal Court under the title *Plays for England*. The first contains the different styles of vaudeville, satire, parody and farce, but since it also has only two acts, the effort to make all these styles effective doesn't really succeed. The second is a one-act play, with similar experiments in style as well as the theme of incest which though a far from unprecedented one, was fairly uncommon on the stage at the time.

The next Osborne play, *A Patriot for Me* is, again, conventional in form and has a sequence of short scenes to show the hero Redl, in varying circumstances. The departure from the earlier plays comes in the depiction of the central character who is this time seen more through other people's eyes than his own. The play's main theme is homosexuality, and though Redl is presented as someone who is a member of not one but two minorities, since he is not only homosexual but also Jewish, the fact of his Jewishness is largely ignored. The social and professional pressures he faces because of his sexual identity eventually lead to his death. For once Osborne concerns himself with dramatic and suspenseful external action along with the inner tensions he habitually explores, and does manage to a large extent to successfully bring together the private and the public in a way that I think *Look Back in Anger* tries, but fails, to do. Neither does Redl conform to any stereotypes of the homosexual as someone to whom society's values are unimportant, and though he chooses in the end to betray his country rather than his real self, this only makes him, for Osborne, a true patriot. The chief concern is, once again, with the man who is placed outside society (and is the target of its prejudices), someone alone and aware of his isolation.

Of the remaining plays, *Inadmissible Evidence*, *A Bond Honoured*, *Time Present* and *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, only the first mentioned requires to be looked at in any detail, though *Time Present* is significant in being the alone among Osborne's plays to have a woman in the central role – the heroine, Pamela, who is an actress out of work at the moment, is strong and highly articulate and holds forth in speeches as full of invective as Jimmy's on various subjects (such as hippies and drug-taking) which in themselves demonstrate the shift from the 1950s to the 1960s.

To return to *Inadmissible Evidence*, the by now familiar pattern of contrasting styles is repeated, this time on the level of form rather than that of language. Naturalistic scenes of office routine alternate with stylized ones showing nightmare sequences, and at moments, the action is viewed through the distorting gaze of one of the characters, called Bill, who is gradually losing the ability to focus on external reality. This loss is depicted by a movement into his mind, through the device of having three different women (all divorce clients whom Bill interviews) played by the same actress. The dialogue in the three interviews becomes progressively more unrealistic and stylized to show the increasing disintegration of Bill's subjective vision. The dialogue thus takes over much of the task usually reserved for the monologues – to reveal the consciousness of the characters – and loses in the process some of its own traditional function of effecting communication. The play has been criticized for trying, like *Look Back in Anger*, to fulfil two contradictory aims at the same time: Bill sees other people as withdrawing from him, he is himself meant to be seen as losing perspective, and the play looks as if it is attempting not just to give voice to both points of view, but to be written equally from both.

5.1.2 The impact of *Look Back in Anger*

Some of the more enthusiastic reviews of the play have already been quoted earlier (see 2.3) so you ought to have a fair idea of the way in which it was greeted as a revolutionary and innovative development in British theatre. These claims, however,

special significance. The reconciliation with Will happens near a light from a window and the last book of *Middlemarch* has the title, "Sunset and Sunrise." Dorothea has another "prison" too, her special kind of blindness which leads to errors of judgement. Because imprisonment and blindness both have to do with the lack of light, the "metaphor of vision" (J. Hillis Miller) in the novel denotes enlightenment and also the crumbling of prison walls. One of Ladislav's functions in the novel is to replace with light the darkness which Dorothea experienced with Casaubon.

The use of scientific vocabulary and imagery applies also to the changing relationship between Lydgate and Rosamond as their incompatibility and disagreements make them like creatures from different species. Rosamond's predatory power, her eventual survival as the 'fitter' of the two, is described in a novel by way of images from biology and zoology. Thus Lydgate's circumstances at a late stage in the novel are said to be as noxious as an inlet of mud to a creature used to breathing and surviving in the clearest of waters. At another place we are told that Lydgate lay blind and unconcerned as a "jelly-fish which gets melted without knowing it." (271). By contrast, Rosamond is seen as a "torpedo" whose numbing contact paralyses Lydgate.

We should also note the use of water imagery, often given as a stream flowing haltingly, or alternatively, as a swift current. Water gives a suggestion of connectedness similar to a web but it is an element traditionally associated with the "flow" of human destiny. In his essay "Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy" Mark Schorer finds in *Middlemarch* many metaphors of unification, representing yearnings, and quite a few metaphors of anti-thesis, representing a recognition of fact. Schorer's view is that everyone and everything in the novel is in a state of flux, moving along a "way".

Let us look at a prominent example of metaphor in Chapter 36:

Young love-making—that gossamer web! Even the points it clings to—the things whence its subtle interlacings are swung—are scarcely perceptible; momentary touches of fingertips, meetings of rays from blue and dark orbs, unfinished phrases, lightest changes of cheek and lip, faintest tremors. The web itself is made of spontaneous beliefs....

In the above passage, the web, the woven cloth, the light, become linked analogies. The sense of bonding has the illusion of permanence. The author's imagery calls up a host of cultural and literary associations by which the reader understands the nature of the illusion even if the characters within the book do not.

J. Hillis Miller makes another vital point about the imagery which, he says, helps George Eliot to create a totalising image of society: "The special mode of totalisation in *Middlemarch* is this combination of specificity, on the one hand, and on the other hand, generalising interpretation on the basis of specificity."

5.3 MINOR CHARACTERS

The generalising can be seen in the quick pen portraits of the minor characters. Mrs. Cadwallader, Mr. Brooke, Sir James Chettam, Celia Brooke, Caleb Garth and Mrs. Bulstrode can be taken as representing character traits that constitute the diverse forces in a society. They do not unfold an inner life in a complex and sustained way but are given dramatic moments that capture an essence of thought or feeling. We shall take a quick look at some of their distinctive qualities.

Mrs. Cadwallader is shrewd and talkative and is full of 'worldly' wisdom. Her pitiless remarks spare only a few. She is appropriately introduced through her dialogue with

Mrs. Fitchett, the lodge-keeper at Tipton. Mr. Brocke is well-meaning in a sweeping sort of way but mostly ineffective. His is a "too rambling habit of mind." A man of acquiescent temper and miscellaneous opinions, the local political issues rendered though his interpretation are happily caught in a profusion of ideas. Celia Brooke is a conventional young woman seeking the time-honoured comforts of a husband and the domestic hearth. She finds the right match in the traditionally minded Sir James Chettam whose "amiable vanity" make him "a blooming Englishman of the red-whiskered type." Caleb Garth, whose simplicity and goodness offers a foil to a number of others, remains emblematic of the positive value of work. Mrs. Bulstrode receives little attention until very late in the novel but in Chapter 74, she suddenly comes to be the centre of attention. In her husband's disgrace she is shown as behaving bravely and admirably and this gives her story threads of associative connection with the suffering of other women as wives controlled by the decisions of their men.

The minor characters help to reinforce the organicist dimension of the novel. As Sally Shuttleworth says in an essay "*Middlemarch* : An Experiment in Time", George Eliot was influenced not only by Darwin but also, more immediately, by Lewes's studies on the subject. "The purpose behind her labour also corresponds to that of scientific practice for the aim of science, Lewes suggests is to link together, through imaginative construction, the fragments of the phenomenal world so as to reveal an underlying order".

The same principle of organic interdependence applies to physiological life language, social relations, and historical developments. The structure of *Middlemarch* reflects this principle.

5.4 THE FINALE

The ending of *Middlemarch* takes the story into projections of the future. Dorothea is "absorbed into the life of another." The author rhetorically asks what else was it in her power to do.

The Finale is complementary to the Prelude about St. Theresa, the "foundress of nothing." After reading *Middlemarch* with care, would you subscribe to this view?

One should be aware by now of the dynamic quality of George Eliot's writing. Critics of the older viewpoint have mentioned her universalising tendencies, her transcendence of history, her humanism and moral priorities. Recent critics have preferred to see energetic conflict of ideas, contrapuntal forces, divergences, tensions and subversions in the text.

However one factor remains indisputable, that Eliot was a self-conscious artist carefully crafting her text and that she wished to engage active participation from her readers in the full understanding of her story set in the Reform era in England. Though readers today are removed from her in time and history, and social forces have other directions, the reader is still intrigued by the openness that *Middlemarch* has as it invites mediation. As David Lodge says, "*Middlemarch* has achieved a unique status as both paradigm and paragon in discussion of the novel as a literary form."

5.5 LET US SUM UP

The historical timeframe of the novel determines several aspects of the story. You may wish to recapitulate the particulars relating to the passage of the first Reform Bill which changed the voting patterns and power structures in England. The echoes of altered political system were felt in other arenas of community existence. *Middlemarch* is created with fine attention to the details of interconnected structures

of politics, family, domesticity, community, business enterprise, scientific innovations. By a brilliant use of metaphor of the web, George Eliot is able to suggest that civic society is based on organic, yet tenuous and shifting principles. J. Hillis Miller not only reiterates the traditional praise granted to Eliot for the super structuring of this novel, but also builds a further argument for metaphors of light that counterbalance the "web".

Consequently, though there is a "finale" to Dorothea's story in her marriage to Will Ladislaw, an intricate link is established with Lydgate's research on "primitive tissue" and Bulstrode's inability to escape the past.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Consider how the subject of "reform" is related to various segments of society in *Middlemarch*.
2. How do conflicting attitudes to money determine the relationship of Lydgate and Rosamund?
3. Discuss the metaphor of the web in the context of events and people relating to Bulstrode.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*", published in John Peck, ed., *Middlemarch* (New Casebooks, 1992).

George R. Creeger, *George Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall, 1970.

Gordon S. Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

What follows is a "Selected Bibliography". These books are very useful and you may like to refer to them. They are not compulsory but reading some of them will help you to understand *Middlemarch* and George Eliot better.

Hardy, Barbara, ed. "*Middlemarch*": *Critical Approaches to the Novel*. London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1967.

Haight, Gordon S., ed. *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965.

Beaty, Jerome. "*Middlemarch*" from *Notebook to Novel*. Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1960.

Bennett, Joan. *George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art*. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1948.

Haight, Gordon S. *George Eliot: A Biography*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968.

Hardy, Barbara. *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form*. London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1959.

Harvey, W. J. *The Art of George Eliot*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1961.

Knoepfsmacher, U. C. *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

Leavis, F. R. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. New York University Press, 1948.

Wiley, Basil. *Nineteenth Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1949.