
UNIT 1 APPROACHING THE NOVEL

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to a) major critical approaches to *Middlemarch* and b) give you an insight into the link between George Eliot's life and some important issues in the novel. At first sight, the voluminous text of *Middlemarch* can be a little intimidating. Yet, read with systematic attention, the book gives pleasure and also instruction. The first Unit will help you develop familiarity with the methods adopted by Eliot throughout the book.

1.1 INTRODUCTION: HOW TO APPROACH *MIDDLEMARCH*

"And what are you reading, Miss—?"

"Oh! it is only a novel!"

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Ch.5.

Jane Austen's ironic dismissal of "only a novel" should alert us to the serious intention behind the statement. Speaking for a generation of readers, Austen, with wry humour, exaggerated the expectations that a novel was required to fulfil as "some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (*Northanger Abbey*, Ch.5). Whether a novel measures up to such demanding criteria or not is often a matter of individual response and ideological subject positions. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* from the time it was published in 1871 has attracted strong and controversial opinions from leading critics of English literature.

At the very outset, George Eliot's contemporary Henry James, a prolific writer and an astute theoretician of the novel, published a review grounded on measured statements:

"*Middlemarch* is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels.... We can well remember how keenly we wondered, while its earlier chapters unfolded themselves, what turn in the way of form the story may take—that of an organised, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction, or a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan. We expected the actual result, but for the sake of English imaginative

literature ... we hoped for the other.... But that pleasure has still to hover between prospect and retrospect....*Middlemarch* is a treasure house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole".

However, while moving his focus from form to content, James was enchanted with the social realism, of "people, solid and vivid in their varying degrees ...a deeply human little world." He was equally impressed by George Eliot's "broad reach of vision," the "brain, in a word, behind her observation." But in analysing the totality of the novel, Henry James, like many others after him, could not reconcile the diversities contained in the plenitude of *Middlemarch*. He concluded his review with a perplexed query, "If we write novels so, how shall we write History?" (Henry James, *Galaxy*, March 1873)

A similar "doubleness" has marked the opinions of other famous critics, and you may have to decide upon your own preferences as you discover the ways in which the novel can be addressed by various methodological tools of analysis. There is no "right" or "wrong" assessment of a book such as *Middlemarch* but it must be based on informed and thoughtful understanding. Virginia Woolf, for instance, claimed for *Middlemarch* the status of "the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 Nov. 1919) but left it to others to work out the implications of her claim. We notice, however, that the emphasis on form and content has shifted to the subject of ethics in adult relationships.

Later critics tended to see form, content, ethics and morality as inextricably linked in George Eliot's art. Consequently, competing views about the novel debated how the "moral pattern" is to be worked out in a novel where the author keeps firm control not only indirectly as an omniscient narrator but directly through interventions addressing the readers. You will find Eliot telling the reader how to interpret a character, how to link an individual story to a "universal" design, in fact, she offers reasons for apportioning praise and blame. Several readers resent such controlling authority while others are quite comfortable with accepting George Eliot's professed views. Of the books which favour the "classic-realism" of the novel are W.J. Harvey's *The Art of George Eliot* (1961) and Barbara Hardy's *The Novels of George Eliot* (1959). Both speak of the exquisite interrelatedness of characters and episodes, which creates a level of verisimilitude and grants access to the fictional time of the novel. In Barbara Hardy's words, "In *Middlemarch*... we feel the pressure of an enormous number of human beings, similar and dissimilar, modifying the doctrines of the novelist as well as contributing to them." (p.143)

While a majority of the critics in the 1950's and 60's condoned the traditions of a third person narrative wherein the many didactic, speculative and summarizing passages found appropriate place, new critical theory of the last two decades has tended to dismantle the authorial "authority" of George Eliot and other nineteenth century novelists. Influential essays by Terry Eagleton and J. Hillis Miller have argued that *Middlemarch* is fraught with discontinuities and disjunctions which George Eliot is strenuously forcing into an artificial balance. Some of these tensions can be attributed to Eliot's problematic relation with the Church and the consequent debates in her mind about secular values versus religious values and the conflict of social obligation with individual fulfillment. Furthermore arose the question of "humanism" deriving from the intellectual influence of Feuerbach and other "positivist" thinkers who gave enormous significance to the play of destiny and scientific rationalism. More details about these philosophical movements will come to you later in the lessons. Meanwhile it is important to note that new interpretations of *Middlemarch* deconstruct the text by challenging its obvious surface meanings by keeping in view that the author too is constructed by a series of personal and intellectual experiences.

to merge the two ends, so far as they can be merged. But it seems to me that this very important condition of the Welfare State's success is difficult of fulfilment in contemporary England. This difficulty is not due to an absence of men with a will to do something. The real trouble is that there is very little to do and it is very difficult to arrive at a clear perception of what to do. On this point, ever since the end of the war I have had a feeling that the English people are in the closing stages of one cycle of their existence and have not as yet entered on another.

(*A Passage to England*, pp. 214-5)

Despite the rather vague generalization of its opening statement, I think the passage helps to provide a sense of the ambivalence that came to prevail in British social and political life in the first decade after the country's victory in the Second World War. This victory was followed by the coming to power in 1945 of a Labour government under Clement Attlee and the establishment of the Welfare State which aimed to provide to its citizens social security and benefits such as health care, housing and old age pensions. The idealism attendant on this socialist, utopian vision also resulted, in some quarters at least, from the perception of Britain as beginning to leave behind her imperialist past (starting with the independence of India in 1947) though this was hardly as yet seen as an ongoing process. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953 served as the occasion for a national celebration, particularly since the country saw itself as leaving behind the recent past of war, conflict, depression and poverty. This optimism is evident in the phrase 'the new Elizabethan age', widely used at the time.

J.B Priestley in 1934 described what he saw as the co-existence of three Englands, "Old England, the country of the cathedrals and ministers and manor houses and inns, of Parson and Squire ... Nineteenth-Century England, the industrial England of coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool, railways ... and New England", the last of these influenced by American consumerism and egalitarianism and based on mass-production and urbanization. The first two Englands, familiar to us from the novels of George Eliot and Dickens, were probably anachronisms by the 1950s, though remembered and mourned by people like Colonel Redfern whom Jimmy compares to Priestley and who admits to being 'an old plant left over from the Edwardian wilderness' (*LBA*, II,ii). But there remained some uncertainty about where 'New England' was going.

1.2.1 The Economy

The late 1940s had been a period of slow economic recovery for Britain, further hampered by the fact that she was still using large sums of money to retain her military and political power in many parts of the world and spending beyond her means on defence. The United States, on the other hand, had recently benefitted economically since the war had actually helped to pull the economy out of depression. Britain had been during the latter part of the war, and still was, heavily dependant on American financial aid and only managed to pay off her debts to the United States by giving up all her assets in that country. Under these circumstances, the arts and the theatre could not of course be among the country's most important priorities, and they suffered from a lack of funds and of support from the state.

The 1950s saw the eventual recovery of the British economy, with an end to rationing and a general improvement in living standards. At the time, most people began to see the period as one of prosperity and in 1955 the *Daily Express* described this sense -- '... higher pay packets, lower taxes, full shops and nice new homes' while in 1958, Macmillan was elected as Prime Minister on the strength of his slogan, "You never had it so good!"

Along with Britain's improved economic condition came state support for the arts, since greater attention could now be given to them and to leisure industries. One important development was the National Theatre Act of 1949, which provided for a

new theatre to be financed and built by the Labour government. In practise, however, the implementation of such proposals took quite a long time.

State intervention in the economy through planning or control -- such as bringing the trade unions directly into the government -- saw to it that greater equality, both of income and of opportunities for employment, became the most desired goal and was in fact attained to an extent unprecedented in England. Behind this change was the experience of the war years, not only those of the recently ended war but also the earlier one -- the First World War, which had, in England at least, effectively done away with the old nineteenth century concept of a *laissez-faire* economy.

The acknowledged need for a new system went along with the determination to avoid the mistakes of contemporary Communist and Fascist (ie. the extreme Left and the extreme Right) experiments in planning, and led to the adoption of ideas put forward by liberals in the inter-war years (contained in the Liberal Party's manifesto of 1928, *Britain's Industrial Future*) which stressed state control with a commitment to social justice through welfare. Interestingly, these changes were seen as desirable by all the political parties and if there was any opposition, it came from some among those -- the upper and middle classes -- who stood to lose by them. Even here, resistance was tempered by the realization (though it may seem patronizing) that some return was due to the working classes for the way in which they had fought the war on behalf of a system that had been distinctly unkind to them.

Social conflicts however, remained and were heightened by these economic developments, partly because many were understandably sceptical of the egalitarianism professed by people who were themselves privileged. It is to this that Jimmy Porter sarcastically refers in saying "I ought to send the Bishop a subscription ... He's upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says he denies the difference of class distinctions." (*Look Back in Anger*, 1)

1.2.2 The Welfare State and Social Change

The policies of the Welfare State, when put into practice, resulted in a distinct change in the social structure of Britain. Greater economic equality, brought about partly through discriminatory taxation, led to a further levelling of the classes, a process that had begun during the war. With the increasing prosperity and stability (in material terms) of the working classes, the old 'condition of England' question resurfaced. The 'question' now was not, as earlier, one of the middle classes bringing 'culture' to the masses, but of the idea that class differences must go in order for culture, in its new and extended sense as involving the whole population, to exist. Jimmy Porter is not to be brought to the 'redbrick' university (as Leonard Bast in *Howards End* is 'brought' to Beethoven) rather the importance attached to the redbrick university is to be undercut, and indeed, Jimmy does so effectively. The term 'working class' itself became an increasingly nebulous category since more and better paid jobs had resulted in increasing social mobility. Common styles of living with similar housing, food and clothing, as well as the common forms of entertainment provided by the mass media, especially television, replaced the former clear distinctions between the classes -- a system where it had been possible for an observer to place people socially simply by a glance at their dress. A further blurring of society's old classifications came about with the beginning of the immigration into Britain of many Asians and West Indians, which carried on until the 1970s.

One major change that affected all levels of society in both private and public spheres came about as a result of many women choosing to retain the jobs they had had to take up during the war, and an increasing number choosing to work in areas other than the traditional ones of teaching and nursing, though housework did still remain the woman's charge—notice that in *Look Back in Anger*, Alison is shown as constantly busy either ironing or making tea and is grateful for help in the kitchen when Helena arrives.

The arts now became, more than ever before, one of the concerns of the state, a concern embodied in what had become an English national institution during the war, though I do not suppose it is still thought of as such by most people who watch or listen to it today -- the BBC. State funding saw to it that a number of municipal theatres were built as part of the reconstruction of city centres damaged during the war. 1956, the year in which *Look Back in Anger* appeared, also saw the arrival of rock 'n roll music in Britain through the film *Rock Around the Clock* which actually caused riots in some cinemas. 'Culture' clearly had begun to mean more than the fine arts or 'good' literature, though there were those, like T.S.Eliot, who felt that such democratisation threatened culture which they saw as the creation of an elite group. The state provided, and made compulsory, free secondary education for everyone up to the age of fifteen with the result that people from any social background could now go to university. In practise, of course, not everyone who managed to go to Oxford or Cambridge found life easy there—one novel written around this time that deals with the issue is Philip Larkin's *Jill*.

These new realities and ideas resulted in a certain amount of class tension. Most ordinary people were now better off than ever before, but at the expense of a minority who saw them as a threat, in terms such as, Osborne says, "the monster on the street corner." Osborne goes on to state that his own sympathies are firmly with the 'monster', though he is clearly less concerned with social reform than with the idea of a cause and the character of the rebel. He is also sceptical about the success of the Welfare State as an enterprise, describing it as "everyone moping about, having to bear the burden of everyone else." (Diary entry from 1955)

The other contemporary problem that Osborne deals with at some length is the question of what place the traditional values of patriotism, loyalty to family, and chivalry to women had in the new social order. There were always those, like Jimmy Porter, who felt that these ideals, though highly prized, were at best essentially irrelevant to the lives of most people and at worst an imposition on the rest of the country by the upper classes, almost a conspiracy to keep things going the way they wanted. What, for instance, could 'public service' mean to someone without a job and no hope of getting one, except a polite abstraction? And yet, as Jimmy senses, it was these same loyalties -- to country, family, 'truth' and 'morality' -- that provided the causes people need:

There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. (LBA, III i)

1.2.3 Political Changes

The confusions between a stated social agenda, the failure to know where and how it was to be effectively put into practice, and the resentment it aroused in some quarters, led to a gradual disillusionment with the compromises of the Labour government and to the Conservative return to power under Churchill in 1951.

Another reason for the Labour defeat was the increasing identification, in the eyes of most people, of the party with those sections of the working classes who were poor and labouring. This worked to their disadvantage because larger numbers of people were moving out of this category and because such class-based politics were now beginning to be considered obsolete. Labour was even accused of trying to keep class tensions alive so as to preserve its own votes. But public unhappiness with politicians continued since the Conservative government's decision to retain the Welfare State programme was unexpectedly seen as showing up the lack of a consistent policy of its own. This apparent moving together of the two major political parties seemed to negate the integrity and political convictions of both,

though the Conservative victory was repeated in 1955 and again in 1959. The description of Alison's brother Nigel, though probably meant to be seen as motivated by personal dislike on Jimmy's part, does put across something of this suspicion of politicians:

"He'll end up in the Cabinet one day, make no mistake. But somewhere at the back of his mind is the vague knowledge that he and his pals have been plundering and fooling everybody for generations." (*LBA*, I)

The general mood in Britain was therefore one of disillusionment with the entire political process, along with a divided response to the fact of social change. The dissatisfaction remained however largely aimless and undefined, taking no form of direct political protest, and this inaction was in itself further cause for discontent.

1.2.4 The International Scene

Plenty of events took place on this front that were conducive to public cynicism. This supposed 'time of peace' saw the development of the hydrogen bomb and the beginning of a race for arms that eventually grew into the Cold War. Soviet Russia proved, by militarily crushing a revolution against the Russian-imposed government in Hungary that a Communist state could act in an imperialist manner. At the same time, Britain found herself, together with France, holding onto her imperialist interests by trying to prevent the Egyptian government from taking over the Suez Canal. The United Nations eventually returned the Canal Zone to Egypt and the failure of the attempt only deepened the sense of humiliation in England. This humiliation existed on two levels—practical, since such politically aggressive gestures were clearly no longer possible, and moral, since the failure to refrain from making them was a reflection on the country. The play (*LBA*) also refers to the Spanish Civil War (of the 1930s), which had been seen as a great cause by the previous generation, and in which Jimmy Porter's father received the wounds that killed him.

1.2.5 Reactions in Literature and Drama

What then were the ways in which this general feeling of resentment expressed itself? John Russell Taylor suggests that the expression in literature (and later, in life) took two forms—cynicism and rededication. The first is the position of many characters in the novels of Evelyn Waugh or of a character like Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, who is irreverent and defiant but without any serious aims or a dedication to any cause. Amis describes Dixon in *Lucky Jim* as often giving in to social pressures and realities: "But economic necessity and the call of pity were a strong combination; topped up by fear, as both were, they were invincible.

The same concerns could be seen as present in Amis' poem *Against Romanticism*, a kind of manifesto where a particular view—secular and rational—of the world is advocated for the age, through a rejection of the Romantic stress on passion and rebellion:

Over all, a grand meaning fills the scene,
And sets the brain raging with prophecy,
Raging to discard real time and place,
Raging to build a better time and place...

By showing up the Romantic zeal for reform as both irrational and impractical, the poem could be read as putting forward a certain kind of cynicism, or more correctly a scepticism, about what is to be gained from radical thought or action.

'Rededication', on the other hand, involves active and effective (usually political) protest. Such clearcut distinctions are not quite sufficient to describe a character like

Jimmy Porter. While expressing a cynical attitude, he reveals an anguish that is more than cynical and yet does not lead him to action. I am also not sure how far Taylor's idea can be applied to the domestic, familial level on which Osborne's play takes place, an area that had itself rapidly changed in the post war years, largely due to the change in women's lives when they began to work. I shall return to this issue of the relations and changing equations between the sexes, in greater detail in the next unit (see 2.4) but meanwhile should like to stress that in Osborne's work at least, it seems to function more as a space for the treatment of character and less as a comment on the contemporary state of things. The issue of class might seem to be a relatively more explicit concern, but is also subservient to Osborne's stated aim—to give 'lessons in feeling'. In both cases it becomes important, I think, to see the plays of the 1950s as not simply provoked by prevalent conditions, social or political, but also as informed by them and thus as both reacting to, and reflecting, contemporary 'reality'.

1.3 BRITISH DRAMA FROM 1890 TO 1956

1.3.1 Two Lines of Development

It is not possible to see a single chronological line of development in early twentieth century British drama, but I use the year 1890 as a convenient starting point, following Christopher Innes, who traces the beginning of modern drama in England to the date of Shaw's lecture on 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism'. When the changes in British drama are seen in stylistic and thematic (rather than chronological) terms, we can identify the different genres of Realism, Comedy and Poetic drama. Another, and for our purpose, perhaps more useful method would be to trace two simultaneous progressions in British drama – the Realist / Naturalist and the Expressionist, and then to look at the areas where they overlap.

1.3.2 Realism/Naturalism on the Stage

To begin with a working definition of these terms, **Realism** here means the reproduction or representation of ordinary or 'real' life on the stage. The term is often used interchangeably with **Naturalism**, a slightly inaccurate usage since **Naturalism** means the use of realist methods to convey a certain philosophical belief (that everything is a part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes) often doing this through the use of symbols. **Naturalism** does seek a realistic representation of life on the stage, but at the same time rejects the idea that art should try to show the most beautiful and inspiring aspects of life. **Realism** as a category is better used to define the focus, usually social, of certain plays rather than their form.

Shaw's ideas about theatre and its social role remained very influential even after his death in 1950, and some of Osborne's concerns can be traced to him. Shaw had advocated a direct social function for theatre, in saying that it ought to try and alter public views and conduct -

Can you believe that the people whose conceptions of society and conduct, whose power of attention and scope of interest, are measured by the British theatre as it is today, can either handle this colossal task themselves, or understand and support the sort of mind and character that is (at least comparatively) capable of handling it? For remember: what our voters are in the pit and gallery they are also in the polling booth.

(From the Epistle dedicatory to *Man and Superman*)

Shaw was also influenced by Ibsen's rejection of the earlier prevalent concept of the 'well-made play' and of melodrama with its exaggerated theatricality. His ideal was a 'rational' drama that dealt with, and perhaps offered solutions to, social issues such as those of poverty and the relation of economics to religion, which are his chief

concerns in *Major Barbara*. Abstract ideas such as those of heroism in *Arms and the Man* are also dealt with only in a specific social context.

Dramatists like Oscar Wilde and later, Galsworthy and Granville-Barker, shared this emphasis on the social, often using comedy and working through distortion to make their points. Wilde's *Lady Bracknell* (in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) to whom Jimmy compares Helena, is almost a caricature of a certain social type, one example of such distortion.

Naturalism on the stage was certainly helped along by the many technical innovations of the time, the most important among which were realistic costumes, and the sound effects and variable lighting that became possible with the use of electricity. When it is seen against the background I have described earlier, which included war, the gradual loss of empire, urbanization and the rise of socialism, it is not surprising that naturalism also brought nationalist concerns back to the British stage (from which they had been largely absent since Elizabethan times) and theatre began to be used for propaganda. The function of plays during each war became to provide entertainment that was both escapist and patriotic. New playwrights who dealt with these developments satirically, emerged after both World Wars – Noel Coward in the 1920s and Christopher Fry in the 1950s. An indication of the importance these nationalist concerns assumed for drama in wartime, is the fact that Shaw, who took an iconoclastic attitude to the war of 1914-18 was temporarily banished from the stage despite his status as a famous and popular playwright.

1.3.3 Expressionistic Drama

Expressionism, the other area mentioned above, began in early twentieth century Germany and was much more a European than a British movement. It substituted, or sought to substitute, the personal vision of the world for the representation of external reality. When applied to the theatre it meant a reaction against realism, with a stress on inner psychological states. Naturalism relied on the cumulative effect of external detail reproduced as closely as possible – this was discarded by Expressionism, which instead sought maximum expressiveness. I use the term loosely to cover a whole set of developments (known as *avant-garde*) in European drama. These were movements such as the Theatre of the Absurd, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Brecht's Epic Theatre. Except for the last of these (Brecht) the influence of these developments on British drama was both narrow and short lived. Epic Theatre which exposes theatricality and rejects stage illusion (the illusion that what happens on stage is real and actual) became relevant to British drama mainly because of the social and political perspectives it retained, which other *avant-garde* movements did not.

1.3.4 Effects on Style and Characterization

What were the effects on style of British drama's remaining largely Naturalistic rather than Expressionistic? For one, it meant the rejection of the abstract in presentation and of mythical, allegorical or even historical characters. These survived only in the area of poetic drama which used verse and usually had religious themes – T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* is one example. Image and metaphor, on which most absurdist drama relied, also took a back seat.

Northrop Frye has identified four levels of discourse which apply to drama as well as to the novel: the realm of myth, where the audience looks at the characters as much above them, as gods; the realm of the heroic, where the audience looks up to the characters as heroic; when the audience sees the characters as being on the same level as themselves, this is the realistic style; and if the audience looks down on the characters as contemptible or beneath them, the mode is ironic. Myths and heroic plays will obviously require more poetic, stylised or elevated language than the other categories. Realistic drama, on the other hand, demands everyday prose, which thus became the most common style or form of expression of drama in Britain at this time.

Multidimensional and complex character, realistic situations and conversation, and the relation of the individual to the group, all of which are present in Osborne's work, remained the desired focus of post-war drama in England.

1.3.5 Changing Subject Matter

One development which can be seen as relevant to the entire period we are looking at, and to all forms of drama, was the eventual success in the 1960s of campaigns begun at the turn of the century for the abolition of censorship and the founding of a national theatre. This meant the extension of subject matter in drama to areas that were earlier not considered proper for the stage, among them the details of domestic life. Plays that concerned themselves with such details were called 'kitchen sink drama' by some critics who saw such matters as trivial, drab and too far removed from the glamour that they were used to associating with the stage. Osborne's early plays, as well as those of Arnold Wesker, were included by many in this category, since both depicted domestic tasks being carried out on stage – Alison's ironing in *Look Back in Anger* and the washing-up that is carried on for most of Wesker's play *Roots*, are two often-cited examples.

Another feature of postwar British drama was the effort to make itself once again accessible and interesting to working class audiences, an effort that was required in order to change the general perception of the theatre as the preserve of an educated, cultured elite, as well as to ensure the survival of plays as a form of entertainment in the face of increasing competition from the cinema. Part of this effort was the rediscovery by dramatists of popular culture, particularly of the use of music (in the forms of both song and dance) as an almost necessary part of drama, a common enough device in Elizabethan times as well as in the nineteenth century, but one that had become rare in the recent past. Surprisingly enough, these attempts at 'popularizing' drama coexisted with the writing and production of plays (for example, those of Samuel Beckett) which do not seem to concern themselves with popular taste or with public demand, though of course these are both very generalized categories. But even these 'difficult' plays were largely free of the older ideas that certain types of drama are inherently superior to others—for example, tragedy as being 'better' than comedy—and of the notion that all forms of entertainment are not suitable for every social class.

1.3.6 Irish and Scottish Drama

Though both Shaw and Wilde were Irish, they belonged to the English tradition of modern, realist, prose drama. It was in Ireland, especially in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, that the beginnings of modern poetic drama lay, with the verse dramas of Yeats and Lady Gregory. Synge (who wrote in prose) and O'Casey were two other influential Irish playwrights, and Samuel Beckett became the first Irish dramatist of international importance (though he was actually part of the anti-realist European dramatic tradition.) J.M. Barrie, a Scottish playwright was extremely popular on the London stage, despite—or perhaps as a result of—his moving away from realist conventions by the use of fantasy, something evident from *Peter Pan*, a non-dramatic work which is also his best remembered.

I mention these dramatists in order to qualify the idea of 'British' drama as a unified whole, unaffected by regional differences. In addition, if what we are looking at is a number of patterns and movements with varied influences, rather than a line of progress, we also need to take into account the American drama of the period

1.3.7 American Drama and its Use of Tragedy

American drama concerned itself with one important area that British theatre neglected at this time – that of tragedy. Though a vexed term with a complex history of theory and practise, tragedy can be rather broadly defined as an interrogation of

human nature, of its relation to the universe, and how these are affected by and give rise to disaster, as well as being a protest against the inexplicable nature and injustice of suffering. It has been argued that the modern world (and by extension, the modern stage) can provide a space that is only potentially tragic and falls short of actual tragedy as present in classical and Elizabethan models. For example, does Arthur Miller's play *The Death of a Salesman* contain tragedy or merely pathos? I do not think there is a clear answer, but the question could be considered in terms of the new dimension provided by modern psychology, which was not present to classical tragedy. This involves a rethinking of the term itself, or at least a broadening of its critical usage. Raymond Williams argues in *Modern Tragedy* that while tragedy and bourgeois society might appear to be mutually exclusive, to say that tragic concerns like those described above have disappeared from the modern stage would be to ignore, in favour of an abstract theory, a large body of evidence to the contrary. American drama at this time did seem to focus less on society and more on the individual, than did the work of British playwrights like Osborne, Terence Rattigan and Joe Orton. American dramatists like Miller, O'Neill and Tennessee Williams did not see tragedy as incompatible with realism, or for that matter with modernism, as most British drama appeared to. It is interesting to consider the implications of this for Osborne. Could Jimmy Porter be seen as a potentially tragic hero who remains unrealized due to constraints of time and place, of (as he says himself) the lack of causes? Another British dramatist to think of in this connection is Harold Pinter who does seem to use tragedy in a new way – through silence resulting from the breakdown of speech, as happens in *The Caretaker*.

1.4 OSBORNE

1.4.1 Biography

John Osborne was born on 12 December 1929 into a working class family of pub keepers. This was his mother's family; his father Thomas Osborne, who was a commercial artist, died of tuberculosis while Osborne was still a child. Osborne, though very attached to his father, did not spare in his plays the 'genteel' middle-class to which his father's family belonged. Yet he also mentions happy days spent in his childhood with his paternal grandparents. He describes his mother's family thus:

My mother's parents were publicans ... and whenever they got together for some celebration, there would be plenty to drink, however hard things were: that is something middle-class people find difficult to understand or forgive ... There would be battling shrieks of laughter, yelling, ignoring, bawling, everyone trying to get his piece in ... They talked about their troubles in a way that would embarrass any middle-class observer. I've no doubt that they were often boring, but life still had meaning for them. Even if they did get drunk and fight, they were responding; they were not defeated.

(*Declaration*, ed. T. Maschler, p.80)

This passage makes evident at least two points which are relevant to the play we are studying. Osborne clearly uses the 'middle-class' as a negative standard against which to describe the family he grew up in, thus implicitly allying himself with the 'working class' to which such a family belongs. Jimmy Porter's hatred of the middle-classes – not in either case a particularly clearly defined category – is very similar. Also, a statement like 'they were responding; they were not defeated', serves to romanticize the working class family, however true it may have been of the particular individuals described in the passage.

After attending state schools and later a minor public school (from where he was expelled for retaliating in kind when the headmaster slapped him) Osborne worked at various jobs, writing copy for trade journals and tutoring children in English and

Arithmetic. He then became assistant stage manager to a repertory company and himself began to act in 1948. As to the inevitable question of how his writing might have been influenced by his stage career, Osborne admitted,

Well, I always enjoy acting and if I were offered a really good part, I'd be tempted. But I've never taken myself seriously as an actor, and neither has anyone else. It would be indulgent to do it any more! Of course when I'm writing I see all the parts being played beautifully by me, to perfection! ("That Awful Museum", interview with John Findlater. *Twentieth Century*, February 1961)

In 1951, Osborne married the actress Pamela Lane and though they divorced in 1957, it was while he was living with her that he wrote *Look Back in Anger*. The dramatic situation, especially the portrayal of the married couple was, he himself admitted – saying that the marriage ceremony in the play was “a fairly accurate description of our wedding.”—more than slightly influenced by the experience of his own marriage. Like Alison, Osborne's wife left him while she was pregnant, only unlike Alison, she did not return. Her parents' disapproval of Osborne was so strong that they actually had him followed by a detective during the couple's engagement, so Jimmy's accusing Alison's parents of similar tactics is not as far-fetched as it might sound. Pamela, when shown the manuscript of *Look Back in Anger* remarked that it was “dull and boring”, but when Osborne took it to the Royal Court Theatre, the response was enthusiastic enough for him to note in his diary –

There was no question in my mind on that muggy August day that within less than a year – and on my father's birthday [8 May]-- *Look Back in Anger* would have opened, in what still seems like an inordinately long, sharp, glittering summer.

1.4.2 The Plays

I will here only list Osborne's plays (subsequent to *LBA* in 1956) in order of performance. A more detailed analysis of Osborne's place in British drama will be found in Unit 5.

The Entertainer

Epitaph for George Dillon (this actually predates *LBA*)

The World of Paul Slickey

A Subject of Scandal and Concern

Luther

Plays for England

A Patriot for Me

Inadmissible Evidence

A Bond Honoured

Time Present and The Hotel in Amsterdam

1.5 LET US SUM UP

The distinction between 'theatre' and 'drama' needs to be kept in mind in order to avoid confusion in our use of the terms. This distinction is also necessary for the placing of a play in its social context, since it highlights the public aspect of the theatre, as against the dramatic text which can lend itself to private reading.

A study of *Look back in Anger* demands a consideration of the social, economic, political and cultural changes that Britain underwent in the period immediately following the Second World War. These changes include the establishment of the Welfare State, its functioning under successive Labour and Conservative

governments, an economic crisis followed by relative stabilization, a weakening of the rigid hierarchies of class, and the beginnings of the disintegration of Empire.

Developments in drama at the time saw a predominance of realist plays on the British stage. The play under consideration here remains true to this category in its form and structure, and many of the changes mentioned above resurface in its treatment of nationality, class and gender.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Ambivalence	Uncertainty, simultaneous but opposing responses to something.
Anachronism	Something that is out of date, more appropriate to an earlier period.
'Condition of England'	A phrase first used by Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century, expressing concern over the poverty and misery caused by the Industrial Revolution. A body of fiction with such social concerns appeared at the time.
Contemporary	Of the same time or period
Laissez-faire	Literally, leave free to do as thought best. Principle of non-interference by government in trade and industry.
Theological	Pertaining to religious doctrine or dogma or to the study of the precepts and beliefs of a religious system. The term is here used with reference to Christianity.
The 'well-made play'	Term applied to a neatly constructed play with all the conventional requirements of plot and structure. Such plays were especially common in Britain in the 1930s.

1.7 QUESTIONS

- Q1. Differentiate between the terms 'theatre' and 'drama'. What are the implications of this difference for the study of a play?
- Q2. Do the social and economic realities of Britain in the 1950s find expression, direct or indirect, in *Look Back in Anger*? If so, how?
- Q3. Indicate the ways in which Osborne tries to provide 'lessons in feeling' in the play. Do you think the attempt is successful?

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Primary material

Osborne, John *A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography 1929-1956*,
London: Faber & Faber, 1981

Secondary material

Bergonzi, Bernard *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its background*
1939 - 60, Oxford: University Press, 1993.

Chambers, Colin *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar*
and Mike Priors *British Drama*, Oxford: Amberlane Press, 1987.