



Kitchen Sink Drama and Naturalism: Trends of Post-War English Theatre

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Abstract

The present paper studies Kitchen Sink Drama and Naturalism to investigate how a cultural movement through which artists like Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, and Shelagh Delaney express their disillusionment during the post-war period representing the reality of their lives via theatre. The period of 1956–1965 can be considered as a period of time identifying post-war British theatre which is related to post-war cultural, social, and political developments. In this period, playwrights take a social stance which reflects daily experiences of working class undergoing social and political changes in that time. Following the destructive consequences of the First and Second World Wars social, religious, and political alterations resulted in unemployment, insecurity, and frustration in society, especially among young educated people who returned from the war. The Kitchen Sink Drama is a peculiar type of drama for plays written within the mode of the new wave of British Realism in which plays are staged in domestic settings with a Naturalistic representation of ordinary life.

Keywords: Kitchen Sink Drama, Naturalism, Angry Young Men

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Introduction

The term “Kitchen Sink Drama” was applied in the late 1950s and early 1960s to the works of playwrights such as Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, Shelagh Delaney whose protagonists can be regarded as a figure of the Angry Young Man; playwrights aim to portray living surroundings, language, issues, way of thinking of working class and lower-middle class by means of domestic Realism (Drabble, 2000). In the twentieth century, the impacts of both World Wars were evidently seen in social, political, and religious realms. Following the destructive consequences of the wars, social, religious, and political alterations resulted in unemployment, insecurity, and frustration in society, especially among young educated people who returned from the World Wars. Right after World War II, British society underwent economic, social, and political reconstructions. Taking an active role in these reconstructions, the playwrights followed unconventional practices, as David Ian Rabey (2003) states:

Whilst *Look Back* is anti-consensual, and remains challenging to English theatrical convention, its success constituted a necessary mutual vindication for the Royal Court and the Arts Council. In a period of steady decline of British power British artistic achievement has played an important part in keeping the country’s prestige high. And in this area, British playwrights have been of paramount importance. In the development of these playwrights, the Royal Court played a decisive role. (p. 30)

Elected in 1945, the Labour Party promised to provide economic development through nationalization of banks, industries, and railroads. The Labour government came up with the provisions of the Welfare State, providing housing, education and employment opportunities, free universal medical care, sickness, and employment benefits. However, the government failed to provide prosperity, shattering people’s hopes and expectations. Under these circumstances, there appeared dissatisfaction as well as a sense of severe anger of disillusionment among the youth in British society. The chaotic atmosphere of the post-war British society brought about the emergence of several movements such as The Theatre of the Absurd, Angry Young Men, and Kitchen Sink Drama. The movement known as the “Angry Young Men” began in England in order to show the anger and frustration of the youth in British society. *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne in 1956 can be considered one of the most prominent plays of the times. In his play, Osborne presents the character of Jimmy Porter who represents the anger of the working class in a Naturalistic way. Following the movement of Angry Young Men in which the playwrights tend to present a Realistic portrayal of working class people and their lives, a new movement called Kitchen Sink Drama emerged in the 1950s and was staged by a group of young playwrights. The social and political factors set the ground for the new ways of expressing disillusionment of these young artists. Dan Rebellato (1999)

indicates the awakening of this new generation in his book entitled *1956 And All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*. "A new wave of dramatists sprang up in Osborne's wake; planting their colors on British stages, speaking for a generation who had for so long been silent, they forged a living, adult, vital theatre" (p. 2). He analyses the rise of a new generation of dramatists who were going to represent unvoiced and unrepresented problems of disillusioned working class Britons which were in sharp contrast with their predecessors' theatre of escapism, the well-made play.

Review of Literature:

Naturalistic Depiction of Working Class via Kitchen Sink Drama

In the post-World War II era, Realism arose and became the dominant form of the time in substitution for Victorian, Romantic drama. Before the post-war period, the playwrights of the British theatre such as Thomas William Robertson and Terrence Rattigan inclined to reflect the lives of the middle class in their plays. The new wave dramatists bring the social injustice in British society and life conditions of the proletariat into the stage. There is a distinction between Realism and Naturalism as John Smart (2002) suggests, "realism is different from naturalism in that it focuses less on the trappings of daily life, and more on the issues and conflicts which underlie it" (p. 70). In this aspect, Naturalism appears as a tendency to reflect the domestic interior of the working class people. Hence, the distinctive feature of Kitchen Sink Drama can be considered as the Naturalistic depictions of working class rented houses which were poorly equipped. Roger Cornish and **Violet Ketels (1985) summarize the penchant of the young playwrights for these depictions as follows:**

A generation of playwrights was emboldened by Osborne's success to write about life in the rented bed-sitters of London and the workers' cottages of grimy industrial towns across England. Gas stoves, sinks, creaking wooden chairs, and bare kitchen tables replaced the earlier fashionable decors with their overstuffed comforts, velvet draperies, and stylish paintings. (p. vii)

The playwrights reshaped the setting of their plays in order to present the Naturalistic representations of the living spaces that most of the population dwelt in Great Britain. This change on stage experienced by the audience, on the one hand, can be viewed as one of the vital leaps in the history of British Drama. On the other hand, the young playwrights also went through a change in their lives, which enabled them to convey their own experiences to the stage in their Realistic plays. Taking the working class background of Kitchen Sink dramatists such as Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, and Shelagh Delaney into our account, we can say that most of them left their education incomplete and started working in different jobs and

writing their plays. On this account, these playwrights aimed to draw a portrait of the working class life. Their Realistic stance in their plays is exemplified by Stephen Lacey (1995) in his *British Realist Theatre*:

New wave drama at the moment of its first appearance, and the desire to extend the range of British social experience—particularly class experience—represented in the drama is one of the central projects of several key writers and directors. It can be seen as an element in *Look Back in Anger*, and the terms in which the play was signified as being different from what had preceded it lay at least partly in its non-bourgeois, provincial setting. All the plays of Arnold Wesker in the period were concerned with the situation of the working-class, as were those of Bernard Kops (*The Hamlet of Stepney Green* (1958), for example). Shelagh Delaney's plays—*A Taste of Honey* (1958) and *The Lion in Love* (1960)—were also discussed in terms of their representation of working-class experience, with the added inflection that they were set in the North, a factor in the critical reception of Alun Owen's *Progress to the Park* (1961) and Keith Waterhouse's *Celebration* (1961) as well. John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* (1958) was seen as a semi-documentary account of the effect of a group of gypsies on a northern housing estate (although Arden himself was unhappy with this interpretation). Most of the output of Theatre Workshop in the period was concerned with a variety of working-class situations. (p. 70)

Lacey's remark reveals the focal point of The New Wave playwrights on the working class conditions. Their prime focus was on working class condition eventuated in forming features of Kitchen Sink Drama. Kitchen Sink dramatists utilized a working class setting with working class characters representing ordinary people who had been ignored for a long period of time in British theatre. It can be stated that these playwrights presented these working class characters to mirror the struggles of ordinary people against the established socio-political system which served the higher class. It is important to notice that the working class conditions and issues handled by The New Wave playwrights had not been dealt with before 1956. Their Realistic approach brings about the emergence of new themes and new modes of writing. The values of the British traditional society were questioned in The New Wave plays in which the playwrights accentuated some social problems such as social inequality, the institution of marriage, homosexuality, racial issues, corrupted ideals and norms, etc. Apart from class issues and the representation of the social structure, the new English drama dealt with the unspoken reality and concerns of British society. Stephan Lacey (1995) illustrates the striking content of these plays in the following lines:

The politics of Working Class Realism also embraced more than just class, of course. Part of the 'shock' of the New Wave lay in a general willingness

to confront experiences and issues that could not be located in purely class terms, yet still lay beyond the boundaries of fifties culture. That this might be important to the way that the 'contemporary' in contemporary Britain was perceived was sometimes recognized by reviewers. T. C. Worsley, for example, described *A Taste of Honey* as a play 'about' a tart, a black boy giving a white girl a baby, a queer. The whole contemporary lot, in short.' (p. 74)

As Lacey further mentions, the major plays of the period promoted the reformist presentation of the 'other' by shattering the conventional British values. In *A Taste of Honey* (1958), Shelagh Delaney concentrates on social injustice, homosexuality, and racial issues. Delaney breaks through hegemonic established ideologies such as white supremacy, motherhood, compulsory, and heterosexuality by presenting a homosexual character and a pregnant woman without being married. Shelagh Delaney can be considered as one of the significant New Wave playwrights challenging conventions of the middle class drama in her *A Taste of Honey*.

Method

The present paper has adopted Kitchen Sink dramatists' method that employed a domestic setting with the working class characters and focused on the new themes related to social realities and domestic issues. The use of daily language is another important feature of Kitchen Sink Drama. The dialogues among the characters of these plays are presented in a Naturalistic language. Using Realistic settings, costumes, colloquial language and Realistic dialogue, the playwrights of Kitchen Sink Drama aimed to portray living conditions of working class people and their struggles against social and political problems. Lacey (1995) emphasises "The New Wave playwrights' penchant for reliance on colloquial speech, and on dramatic language which approximates the everyday conversation of its audience" (p. 64). Through the characters' speech and the dialogues between the characters, the playwrights conveyed their radical ideas. For this reason, the audiences of Kitchen Sink Dramas could identify themselves with the characters and their lives reflected on the stage. One of the most prominent aspects of Kitchen Sink Drama can be described as an inclination to approach leftist ideology. The playwrights provide an insight into working class resentment and frustration for poverty, social inequality, and corrupted values of the privileged classes. As one of the post-war English playwrights who belong to the Angry Young Men movement, Bernard Kops (1961) summarizes their core aim in his essay, "The Young Writer and the Theatre":

We write about the problems of the world today because we live in the world of today. We write about the young because we are young. We write about Council flats and the H-bomb and racial discrimination because these things concern us and concern the young people of our country, so that if

and when they come to the theatre, they will see that it is not divorced from reality, that it is for them and they will feel at home. (p. 1)

As Kops states in his essay, in the new style of theatre, Kitchen Sink Drama, young playwrights began to write Naturalistic plays reflecting the conditions they lived with. These plays were generally concerned with social and political issues that working class people struggled against. Dealing with the issues such as racial discrimination, homophobia, the established values, and conventions of the higher classes, the playwrights of Kitchen Sink Drama confronted the audience with the grim reality of their daily struggles in theatre.

Discussion

It can be stated that in post-war era two main movements were followed by Kitchen Sink playwrights as the dominant modes of drama in that period, Realism and Naturalism. John Smart (2002) indicates, "Kitchen sink drama is a specific kind of naturalism that focuses on the domestic issues of working-class life" (p. 70). Arnold Wesker as a Kitchen Sink dramatist presents a Naturalistic portrait of the working class life in *The Roots Trilogy: Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958); *Roots* (1959); *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960) and *Chips with Everything* (1962). Stephan Lacey (1995) provides a clear understanding of the distinction between Realism and Naturalism in his book:

There was a strong sense amongst the protagonists of the New Wave that naturalism and realism were distinct, representing two impulses, if not two formal projects. The bases for the distinctions were not always clear or consistent, but within them, realism became identified with the new, contemporary, socially extended drama and theatre that we have been examining—or rather, it described the 'content' of that theatre, and the critical attitude towards contemporary **society that informed it.** [...] Naturalism has become, in much critical debate, a shorthand for a 'photographic' approach to theatre, one which attempts to construct a plausible illusion of social reality in all its outward forms, and does so across the entire means of theatrical communication (light, sound, mise-en-scène, acting). (p. 99)

Basically, Naturalism aims to reflect the role of environment in determining the character's life. There is a close linkage between Realism and Naturalism in both philosophical and theatrical presentation. Realism focuses on the depiction of subject matter and content reflecting the everyday lives of ordinary people. Naturalism, however, concerns with the more Realistic physical descriptions of the natural world by presenting a natural setting, natural daily language, and Realistic characters. At the same time, Naturalism as a movement is based on Darwin's

theory of evolution and natural selection which refers to the adaptation of a being to its environment. In a theatrical term, Naturalism focuses on the lives of people determined by their environment and the effects of the developments in society on its people. In this sense, Kitchen Sink Drama is seen as a Naturalist drama which reflects life Realistically. The name of this type of drama is derived from the Naturalistic setting of the theatre. Unlike nineteenth century theatres, Kitchen Sink plays were set in working class houses and rented flats with poor equipment. The playwrights of this type of drama attempted to present the representation of the interior life of ordinary people in Great Britain in order to create an intimate connection between the stage and the audience. Stuart Hall (1970) summarized certain aspects of the Naturalist traditions in terms of social and political contents by associating theatrical Naturalism with the words: “the desire to recreate working-class life, the preoccupation with humanist values and an interest in the attack upon the Establishment values through social criticism” (p. 213).

Contrary to popular belief, many playwrights such as Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden never entitled themselves as Kitchen Sink dramatists. However, all of them provided common aspects of this new drama style. Kimball King (2007) clarifies this argument in his *Western Drama Through the Ages* as follows:

Few people outside the press used this term, however. Playwrights such as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden, who were supposedly part of this movement, never referred to themselves as ‘Kitchen Sink Dramatists.’ Arnold Wesker, whose trilogy was closely associated with the term, said, ‘Kitchen Sink Drama is a lazy description of a group that didn’t exist. I certainly was not a conscious party to a countermovement to the drawing-room theatre. We were all so diverse’ (e-mail message to author, March 2005). The widely varied list of authors and works, many of them not even playwrights that are supposedly part of this movement, are John Braine (*Room at the Top*), Shelagh Delaney (*Taste of Honey*), Alan Sillitoe (*Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*), and Keith Waterhouse (*Billy Liar*). (p. 452)

It can be evidently indicated that the pioneer of ‘Angry Young Man’ movement John Osborne (1956) provided main characteristics of Kitchen Sink Drama in his *Look Back in Anger* by presenting domestic setting and conditions of a working class family. During the post-war period, Kitchen Sink Drama became an outstanding type of drama with Realistic and Naturalistic aspects which distinguished Kitchen Sink plays from the modes of Epic theatre and the Absurdist theatre of Samuel Beckett. Kitchen Sink Dramas became prominent with their depictions of detailed domestic life of common people, and their critical approach toward social, political, and economic structure of society. It can be noted that

British theatre ignored working class people and their living conditions, but focused on the privileged classes and their everyday life before new wave plays and especially Kitchen Sink Dramas which created an interior door opened to the lives of the majority of British people. Kitchen is generally considered as a domestic space of female in the dominant ideology. However, Kitchen Sink Drama presented the kitchen as the domestic life of working class people. Through this radical shift between representations, the playwrights of Kitchen Sink Drama broke down the barriers of natural life of common people.

Considering the plays of Arnold Wesker, the main characteristics of Kitchen Sink Drama can be demonstrated as illustration of the living condition of working class people with Naturalistic depictions and presentation of the tension between the middle class and the working class. Stephan Lacey (1995) expresses Wesker's Realistic description of daily life of the working class in the following lines:

The events of *The Kitchen* are contained within a single day, and are shaped by the cyclical routine of the preparation for the meal and the recovery from it; the stage directions inform us that one of the first tasks to be performed in the morning is the lighting of the ovens, which creates a noise that 'grows from a small to a loud ferocious roar' that will 'stay with us to the end' (Wesker 1960a:19), acting as a constant reminder of, and metaphoric substitute for, alienated labour. (p. 106)

As one of the trilogy plays written by Arnold Wesker in 1958, *Roots* can be shown as an adaptation of Naturalistic Kitchen Sink Drama which means a Naturalistic representation of daily lives of working class people. The play is centred on the living surroundings, language, and problems of the proletariat. In the play, the focus is on the reflection of daily life of working class people which is considered as one of the main characteristics of Kitchen Sink Drama. The intimate domestic details show the Naturalistic portrayal in the play. In Act I, there appear household items such as washings, basins, a tin washtub with shirts and underwear to be cleaned and washing hangs on a line in the room. The everyday clothing and kitchenware naturally reflect the domestic part of life. To illustrate apparent domestic portrayal in which interior door is opened with a Naturalistic setting, Wesker (1961) gives the first description of the setting of *Roots* as follows:

A rather ramshackle house in Norfolk where there is no water laid on, nor electricity, nor gas. Everything rambles and the furniture is cheap and old. If it is untidy it is because there is a child in the house and there are few amenities, so that the mother is too over-worked to take much care. An assortment of clobber lies around: papers and washing, coats and basins, a tin wash-tub with shirts and underwear to be cleaned, tilly lamps and primus stoves. Washing hangs on a line in the room. It is September. (p. 83)

In Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, 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 channelled towards those around him. Osborne's play is a study in how frustration and social anger can wreak havoc on the ordinary lives of the British people.

Kitchen Sink Realism foreshadowed revolution of intelligent young middle class kids railing against the bourgeoisie culture of their parents and a political regime they saw disenfranchising the white poor via writers like Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* and John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*, who stood inside white privilege, churning the bellies of their audiences with a nasty bout of observational truth. *A Taste of Honey* becomes more than a joyful narrative about the working class when we observe all social taboos are manifest, from homosexuality and mixed-race relations, through to emotionally abusive mothers and abortion. What the white middle class may perceive as distasteful is part of the vibrancy of the lives of the working class.

Conclusion

The Kitchen Sink Drama moved the action and emotion of the theatre from depictions of the public space of people's lives into the most intimate of settings. The kitchen was 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 theatre.

These types of plays generated an interest to develop a cultural movement in which artists and people could express their disillusionment through their action in theatre, films, and books during the post-war period. Consequently, the movement of Kitchen Sink Realism affected Western culture and literature. In *The Enchanted Years of the Stage*, Felicia Hardison Londré (2007) lays emphasis on Kitchen Sink Realism by stating that, "as an original contribution to American theatre and drama studies, *Kitchen Sink Realism* is outstanding" (p. 103). As an illustration, both *Death of a Salesman* by American playwright Arthur Miller and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams show central features of Kitchen Sink Realism. Both plays depict the lives of working class people who live in a poor inner-city environment and deal with economic struggles.

As a conclusion, Kitchen Sink Drama tends to reflect the living conditions and social inequality of working class people on the stage. The class tension and power struggle based on industrial, political, and social consequences of post-war era are represented in the plays which are classified Kitchen Sink Drama. Furthermore, the Realistic mode of Kitchen Sink Drama initiated the Naturalist and Realist tradition in films, plays and novels in the Western world which depicted the domestic, social, and political issues of working class.

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