

Contemporary Drama and the British Class System: A Critical Examination of *Look Back in Anger* and *Posh*.

Contemporary British drama frequently focuses on wide-spread social issues relevant at the time of performance, often maintaining an established social relevance over time as well. *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne and *Posh* by Laura Wade are two such plays. Both performed for the first time at the Royal Court Theatre, a theatre synonymous with thought-provoking new plays, these two plays offer a critical look at the British class system from within. *Look Back in Anger*, first performed in 1956, presents a snapshot of the domestic life of Jimmy Porter, an educated man from working-class beginnings – a relatively new perspective that helped usher in a new era of theatre. *Posh*, on the other hand, depicts a gathering of upper-class young men from the University of Oxford; first performed in 2010, it can be seen as a response to the political climate at the time under a Labour leadership. *Posh* was later revised in 2012 before its West End debut to reflect issues arising from the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, suggesting a keen interest in accurate representation of the political landscape on the part of Wade. As such, the revised 2012 edition will be discussed here. Whilst both plays offer opposite perspectives of the British class system, they arguably tackle the same issues showing a dissatisfaction common across all classes.

Regardless of class or creed, British culture is often defined by its general unhappiness with the state of affairs. Contrasting *Look Back in Anger* with *Posh* serves to highlight this universal British experience effectively. Set over fifty years apart, with protagonists from widely differing social groupings, the anger both groups show towards the social climate is almost identical. Despite both being conceived under Conservative rule, the Riot Club's anger is just as palpable as Jimmy Porter's – suggesting the working and upper classes are two sides of the same coin. Both playwrights make effective use of language to show this discontent in a very similar manner. Jimmy rails against the Bishop of Bromley saying "He says he denies

the difference of class distinction. ‘This idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by – the working classes!’ Well!’ (p. 6), whereas Alistair speaks against the landlord when he argues “Does it feel like we’re in power? Or does it feel like that fucking landlord, like people like him still get to shit wherever they want and we’re just trailing round with a poop scoop?” (pp. 104-5). Both rally against a single, stereotypical opponent who symbolically embodies the whole of the opposing class. It can be argued that “by stereotyping the “Other”, the construction of a society seems homogenous – a structure into which the “Other” does not fit” (Sharifi, p. 325) which further emphasises the class divisions the two plays are attempting to examine by creating two very distinct sects. Yet both authors subvert this idea of stereotyping and homogeneity by having their characters use the language most associated with the class they are supposedly against. Jimmy uses the dignified “Well!” to express his dislike for the Bishop’s statements whereas Alistair uses “the abrupt, sometimes crude speech thought characteristic of working-class existence” (Hefner, p. 112) in his assessment of the lower classes. This use of language prompts the audience to reconsider any stereotypical views or prejudices they may have regarding members of certain classes by showing that these stereotypes may not always be accurate. Furthermore, the idea of presenting a homogenous society on stage that looks one way but speaks another – the coarse, well-spoken Jimmy vs. the coarse-spoken Riot Club in tails – could serve to highlight to the audience that class divides are not as rigid as they may be perceived to be.

This idea of class divides as redundant is further stressed by the assimilation of the working and upper classes into each other. The settings of the two plays are used to great effect to show this assimilation of classes. Despite their ranking in society, the Riot Club boys are held, at the discretion of the landlord, at the “*Bull’s Head Inn*” (p. 21). This highlights the reliance of the upper classes on the lower classes, particularly shown by the use of a common working-class pub name to emphasise this difference in status. The Bull’s Head Inn symbolises

a rural, working-class area as the upper classes tend to prefer Gentleman's Clubs as suggested in the prologue rather than traditional inns or taverns. Its name also suggests it is a working-class pub as pubs that cater to the upper classes tend to focus on royalty or patriotism, often including the words 'Lion', 'Queen' or 'Earl' in their names. Bull has further connotations of anger and violence which fits with the theme of the play. The Riot Club are dependent on working-class people for all aspects of their evening and this is evidenced through the deference James shows to Rachel when he complains about the ten-bird roast. Not only is he reluctant to make the complaint, he stammers out "OK, yeah. Sorry about this, know this isn't your fault, but we'd like to complain about the fact of the um, the ten-bird roast, because it only had nine birds in it, actually. By our reckoning." (p. 77). The numerous caesuras and embolalia throughout the stilted speech, symbolically made by the president, suggests an unwillingness to verbalise the issue. This reluctance is made further apparent when James states "It's just when we arrange something, we kind of expect to get it, you know?" (p. 78). James is attempting to balance their entitlement with their reliance on the hosts and is struggling to verbalise this conflict effectively. The balance of power and reliance may suggest to the audience the necessity of all classes to a functioning class system and show the careful balancing of the different classes together. The other patrons of the pub also offer an insight into the fickleness of class as George mentions "one of them used to work for my father,... then he got his own farm, free-range piggies, did terribly well till the economy went, well, tits. Bloody nice chap, too. Shame." (p. 50) Here George uses language consistent with his class yet offers a perspective on the working-class and their upward mobility that would not be thought typical. This line is particularly effective due to the interruption after the preface of "one of them used to work for my father" which would usually be considered a derisive comment. By interrupting George here, it prompts the audience to make an assumption as to what the rest of his thought will be which is then undercut when he continues. Setting the play in a private

room in a public space allows Wade to explore the boys' interactions with those of a different class whilst still allowing them the isolation to espouse their unfiltered views – offering the audience a chance to witness and compare the two.

On the other hand, *Look Back in Anger* is set in the domestic space of the Porter's apartment. It can be argued that "the domestic became a physical and affective space in which forms of class difference were paradoxically most stable" (Hefner, p. 116). This is evidenced within *Look Back in Anger* as the apartment can be seen to represent not only Jimmy's class but also his eagerness to escape the class he was born into. The Porter's live in a "one-room flat" (p. 1) where the furniture is "simple, and rather old" (p. 1), showing their lack of disposable income as well as allowing the audience an unencumbered view of the Porter's entire domestic life. The lack of walls or partitions suggests an openness to the scene and gives unprecedented access to the internal life of a working-class family that the largely middle-class audience may never have experienced before. Theatre was, and to some extent still is, a past-time of the wealthier members in society as "theatre-going... depends on income as well as education" (Bourdieu, p. 116) and as such they would have been unused to what Osborne was attempting with his play. By immersing the audience so completely into the domestic space forces them to experience the play alongside the characters rather than as external witnesses. The apartment is also described as a "fairly large attic room, at the top of a large Victorian house" (p. 1). This symbolic elevation serves to represent the inability for Jimmy to progress any further than he has already; he has reached the highest position that his class allows. Jimmy comes to represent "men like him, educated beyond their working-class origins yet fiercely conscious of class allegiance" (Weiss, p. 285) and the setting of the play attests to this. Further to this, the scattering of books and newspapers around the flat show a drive to better himself but the furnishings and Jimmy's actions, such as smoking a pipe and starting a fight, within the

apartment suggest a class consciousness he can not rid himself of. This idea is later explored with Jimmy's interactions with Cliff. While reading the newspapers, they have this exchange:

Jimmy Why do you bother? You can't understand a word of it.

Cliff Uh huh.

Jimmy You're too ignorant.

Cliff Yes, and uneducated. Now shut up, will you?" (p. 3)

Jimmy seems to express frustration with Cliff ("Common as dirt, that's me" (p. 27)) for his ignorance surrounding the "posh paper" (p. 5) yet is seen to be less invested in actually reading the paper than Cliff, instead consistently attempting to get a reaction from Cliff regarding what he has read. Jimmy here seems to embody the disdain of the upper classes towards those lower than themselves and as such can be viewed as a somewhat ineffectual 'hero' as "although dissatisfied, he does not attempt to change the society in which he finds himself and suggests no alternative to his sense of frustration and anger" (Zarhy-Levo, p. 40). However, by doing this, Osborne creates a discourse that allows the audience to critically examine the world in which Jimmy disapproves without prescribing them with any form of outcome or solution. Removing the didacticism common with previous eras of drama prompts the audience to consider, with more scope, the issues raised on their own accord. Having Jimmy's anger at the forefront and the wider politics in the background "insists that the audience must feel and react first; thinking and abstract contemplation could come later" (Hefner, p. 116), which is a similar phenomenon within *Posh*.

Contemporary drama prompts the audience to consider the issues of the British class system by presenting them with "a sense of acutely conflicted, highly ambivalent class consciousness" (Hefner, p. 113) from multiple angles and experiences. Arguably, *Look Back in Anger* and *Posh* present the class system as an arbitrary but necessary construct by highlighting the similarities between classes and the reliance they have on each other, rather than promoting them as stereotypical opponents. This is best summed up when Alison argues

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“Oh, don’t try and take his suffering away from him – he’d be lost without it” (p. 54), which could be applied to either of the two plays. The suggestion is that class identity requires an adversary, regardless of the direction that anger is aimed in.

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