



## Neo-Naturalistic Drama: a Study of British Drama After 1950

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper is an endeavour to show the development of Neo-naturalism as a distinctive dramatic mode of social representation. Neo-naturalism is unanimously seen as a unique appearance of theatricality in the 1950s. In order to understand this Neo-naturalistic drama and its unparalleled contribution, it is worthwhile to see how it emanated at a crucial historical juncture. It was a point in time when drama had lost its direction and purpose. Neo-naturalism appeared as a major dramatic model to reverse the inaction and decadence during the second half of the twentieth century. This paper also highlights the role played by John Osborne in being an initiator of this theatricality and taking this Neo-naturalism to a zenith. This Neo-naturalism achieved what was beyond the expectations of the dramatic critics during 1950s. Neo-naturalism can be seen as a force of social transformation and a committed defence against all evils of the society

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## INTRODUCTION

Neo-naturalism is an important dramatic means used by the dramatists of the 1950s to highlight the social and political issues deeply affecting the society. This Neo-naturalism is usually referred as a 'New Wave' on the grounds that it swept off the decadence and inertia in drama in the 1950s. This 'New Wave' is characterised by the use of Neo-naturalism, a dramatic means of theatrical representations to comprehend the social realities accurately. After World War II, the British stage was refreshed primarily by a 'New Wave' of Neo-naturalism. This rebirth of naturalism into Neo-naturalism is the result of the inadequacy of the already existing dramatic models. Historically, naturalism is a movement that began in France in the 19th century and spread to other European countries. As a pure movement it did not last long but certain of its ideas have shown up frequently in later dramas. However, it is worthwhile to see that Neo-naturalism was highly agreeable and fascinating for the dramatists in the second decade of the 20th century. Neo-naturalism is radically drawn towards one of the elements of naturalism: their neat and bit by bit representation and examination of outside social conditions and realities.

Neo-naturalism as a contribution to naturalism intends to eliminate the potentially symbolic dimension of realism in the interests of scientific accuracy. It also rejects the use of symbols due to their tendency to create vague and ambiguous expressions. Neo-naturalistic drama is different from realism for its different demands on the actor with characterisation, the designers with sets, properties and costumes and the subject, which must resemble everyday life. Simon Trussler used the label "Neo-naturalist" to capture one of the most striking differences between the post-war plays written and staged in the early 1950s and the ones written by the new generation of authors. Neo-naturalism, according to Trussler is unique for using prose than verse, sets designed to evoke realistic intentions and theatre as a vehicle of expression for the working classes. These two features can easily be assimilated into the group of contemporary writers evolving on the stage after 1950s.

### **Emergence of Neo-Naturalism on the British Stage**

There were obvious reasons for the development of Neo-naturalism in the 1950s. Firstly, Neo-naturalism emerged out of the discontent with the existing modes of writing. Indeed neither the commercially successful popular works of Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan nor the verse plays of T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry spoke of contemporary reality to an adequate extent. Neo-naturalistic drama was a revolt against the poetic drama of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry as it had failed to communicate the underlying reality. They failed to capture the new mood created by World War II. The verse drama started as a reaction to the harsh and reiterative prose utterance of the realistic drama and offered musical dramatic speech. But in spite of T S Eliot's and Christopher Fry's best efforts, it ended in mannered dialogues and failed to touch the inner and normally inarticulate experience of the audience. As long as religious and historical themes were concerned, it could appeal to the audience's taste with its poetic eloquence. But when confronted with the modern themes especially after the Second World War, it fell short of synthesizing dialogue and action with its

poetry. As Simon Trussler says, "Eliot's high Toryism was as much out-of-tune politically with the new dramatists as his sugar-coated cadences were stylistically ill-adapted to their themes" (1968: 133). Pointing out the rigidity of poetic drama J. R Taylor says that, "It was difficult for a character to order a servant to bring a pack of cigarette and attend the telephone call simultaneously in poetry" (1962: 27). In the old mode, T. S. Eliot and others continued to write verse-drama, but their religious or mythological themes, when put into modern settings, proved hard for actors to perform convincingly and audiences did not like these plays much, so verse drama died out. This paved the way for Neo-naturalistic drama. As Trussler points out:

New drama wasn't a label any of the early new-wave (Neo-naturalistic) British dramatists would have chosen deliberately, but a shape for which they reached instinctively: it happened to meet many of the demands which they were beginning to make on the English theatre. It served as a convenient vehicle for direct social comment, as opposed-very much opposed-to that poeticism in symbolic drawing-rooms which delighted the cultural establishment, and which was being vaunted abroad by the British Council as a renaissance of verse drama (1968: 130).

More than this the theatricality of poetic drama was lost. New drama rejected it and strode upon new themes of common life experience.

The death of Shaw created a vacuum in the English theatre which no playwright then practically appeared qualified and skilled enough to fill up until the arrival of new dramatists. Shortly after the World War II, nothing suggested that a revolutionary tendency in playwriting might appear on the British theatrical scene. For the simple reason that many of 'the existing theatre buildings had been heavily damaged' during the conflict as a result the British theatre was not showing any signs of progress. Dan Rabellato in his book 1956 *And All That*, summarizes the bareness and ineptness of the post-war period. He laments and hopelessly notes that "by 1956, British theatre was in a terrible state" (1999, 1). In a similar vein English drama critic Kenneth Tynan, writing in the *London Observer* said, "The bare fact is, that apart from revivals and imports, there is nothing in the London theatre that one dares to discuss with an intelligent man for more than five minutes" (1954). The situation of the post-war theatre was highly disheartening because it was entirely cut off from the contemporary reality. It was clearly weakened and apparently at its end. This state of the English stage before the decade of 1950s is appropriately evaluated by Richard Findlator, when he grieves over the state of affairs of the theatre. He recounts that the theatre "takes its sociology from Punch, its politics from British Movie tone, its religion from memory" (qtd in Tynan: 111). This awareness of decline was not visible in England only but also clearly expressed in America. Arthur Miller an American playwright, before a Royal Court audience in November 1956 comments on British theatre, "I sense that the British theatre is hermetically sealed against the way the society moves" (qtd in J. R Brown: 1982: 147). This situation was beyond control and seemed to produce lasting effects. Dramatic critics like Tynan expressed the idea in memorable words: "How is it that

political plays are not being turned out in England at the present time? How is it that in fact we have no tradition of political theatre?" (109-110).

### **John Osborne Contribution to Neo-Naturalism**

Explain your methodologies in this chapter. You should explain your research in this context, when drama was clearly showing signs of decadence, the role of the English Stage Company was of crucial importance in developing the theatre. It was set up by George Devine, a director, Lord Harewood, a patron of the arts, and Neville Bond, a businessman. They took control over the Royal Court theatre with the urgency to restructure it. They intended to make it a writer's theatre which had an artistic aims. Due to nothingness and lack of originality in the British theatre, George Devine approached established novelists like Graham Greene and Angus Wilson to persuade them to write for the theatre. Devine offered a chance of a lifetime to these new writers by advertising and instituted a system of Sunday night 'try-outs'. He offered a way to the educated working class playwrights to give vent to their disillusionment and anger they had been harbouring for a long time against establishment. John Osborne replied to the advertisement and submitted *Look Back in Anger* (1956) which provided a step forward by initiating this neo-naturalistic drama. For theatre the seeds of change had been placed with Osborne's play. This was an unforgettable moment in history of British theatre, regarding which Tynan writes: "we begin in the dust-bowl of Shaftesbury Avenue, a wasteland owing its aridity to improvident speculators. Famine seems imminent, when suddenly, to everyone's amazement, life blossoms in the virgin lands of Sloane Square and the East End" (16).

With Osborne's success several writers arrived at the London stage by means of the Sunday night try-outs, notably Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delany, Edward Bond and John Arden. Among them John Osborne first projected contemporary life through the neo-naturalistic mode thus bringing the out-of-date realistic drama to a new and innovative direction. By doing this, Osborne pulled off an exceptional merit at a crucial point in the history of British drama. He achieved what Ibsen and Shaw had attained in the 19th and early 20th century European and British drama. As Tynan says:

The moment of this play was undoubtedly a momentous one in the history. I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6, 733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of twenty and thirty ... I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade (130-131).

*Look Back in Anger* is thus a dividing line that separates the post-war British theatre into two periods - pre and post 1956. Osborne's hero Jimmy Porter articulated the expectations and apprehensions of post-war generation which forced English people, especially young men and women, to come together in clusters to the Royal Court. The anger of Osborne challenged the propriety of moral and spiritual viability of the British Welfare State. His criticism was directed towards a society which in the name of economic improvement had enlarged moral callousness. Jimmy Porter, the central character is a working class young man who feels deprived because of his class and is disillusioned on seeing

the “welfare state”, an “utopian dream” (Innes, 1992: 98), envisioned by the Labour Party, getting thwarted. This disillusion like the rest of the generation is promoted by the waning glory of England as an imperialistic power with its loss of colonies and made humbler and insignificant in the international political scenario, with the ‘Suez crisis’ and ‘Hungarian suppression’. Jimmy has a severe resentment towards the establishment, the snobbery of the middle class, the corrupt church and the unconcerned society as a whole. These were all major characteristics of the post-war Neo-naturalistic drama.

There were other plays produced at about the same time other than by Royal Court Theatre, which showed a greater spirit of innovation, for instance, Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage* (1958) produced by Joan Littlewood in the Theatre Workshop. They were produced in Neo-naturalistic form and challenged contemporary assumptions about race, class and gender in a more adventurous way than Osborne’s play had. Osborne’s particular contribution has been to bring to the British theatre-goers in mid-fifties, a mood of newness and an attitude of defiance against the establishment. The situation in Britain was one of disenchantment with politics at home, frustration with politics abroad, confusion about the economy and disorientation about the direction of society. Historically the time was ripe for the new drama to arrive. The situation was suitable not only for the emergence of Osborne but of a whole wave of playwright.

### **Neo-Naturalism and Thematic Preoccupations**

This neo-naturalistic approach is used by the contemporary writers of depicting the everyday lives of ordinary people. These people struggle against the degradation of powerlessness, the loss of community or the deadening influence of the suburbia. Its aim was to provide a vivid picture of lower class in its most often unpleasant reality. Tom Costello, a well-renowned dramatic critic discusses this Neo-naturalism as having the ‘focus in the text on working-class culture’ and characters are presented as determined by environment and habit. According to him, the sense of these plays come across as having been written to ‘expose accurately and minutely’ the particular socio-political time. Neo-naturalism gives more accurate description of life than realism. Raymond Williams writes about this passion for giving accurate picture and truth which he sees as the driving force behind this Neo-naturalistic drama. He notes that seeing the man-made environment in its detail will help us see the truth about people. Williams also points to the metaphysical function of the setting of room as a trap where the human consequences of the decisions made elsewhere are lived out: “The rooms are not there to define the people, but to define what they seem to be, what they cannot accept they are... there are forces inside these people in these rooms which cannot be realized in any available life” (1981: 8).

Many of the Neo-naturalists, as it is true in case of Wesker, Arden and Osborne believed that the most appropriate subject matter for the drama was the lower class. Simon Trussler commenting on this neo-naturalistic drama of 1950s says:

Their subject matter has now become almost as conventionalized as that of the tennis-racket and- tea-party syndrome, but at the time they shook the

“realistic” theatre out of the hangover of the thirties and into the fifties arousing, however incidentally, a lot of ordinary human enthusiasm on the way (Trussler, 1968:132).

Neo-naturalists frequently focussed on the sordid and seamy aspect of society in his works. The genre used ordinary everyday language in an attempt to provide the audience with an accurate picture of society. They do so in order to call the attention of audience to social problems and to instigate reform. By depicting their life on the stage, they wanted to gain the attention of the audience and to awaken them to the reality of their problems. It was usually set in a bed-sit or flat and dealt with domestic issues. Conflicts took place between people who were poor and lived in cramped conditions. As Trussler says, “And they did indeed put kitchen-sinks on the stage not to mention ironing boards, and tin baths in front of the fire... debates about school-fees which continued to soothe elderly middle-class sensibilities...” (1968: 132). In an essay “Hyperrealism in Contemporary Drama: Retrogressive or Avant-garde?”, Carol Gelderman while referring to Neo-naturalism says that playwrights were creating a new type of realism, which he labels as ‘hyperrealism’. This hyperrealism with its “theatricalization of everyday life . . . [is] the only truly new aesthetic since the Theatre of the Absurd” (1983: 366).

The most striking feature of this Neo-naturalistic drama was the novelty of its content. Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* achieved a breakthrough not in terms of form but in terms of content. Raymond Williams, referring to this fact, observes: “When this revolt at last broke through, it was very like the many that had preceded it. Its great virtue was new content, which came through with an evident excitement and vitality. Conspicuously it was the life and style of a new generation as in Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*” (1968: 31-32). In a similar vein, Shelagh Delaney opened her revolt against the middle class drama in her *A Taste of Honey* (1958). Plight of youth and poverty, restlessness and frustration of the disorganized class were the main commitments of most of the playwrights who succeeded her. They surprised and shocked the audience, which attracted Lord Chamberlain’s rage for the liberal presentation of homosexuality, prostitution, violence and death. They often chose popular and vulgar subjects, like slum clearance in Arden’s *Live like Pigs* (1961), a collection of fashion clothes and of antiques in Pinter’s *Collection* (1961), a new housing project in Wesker’s *Their Very Own* and *Golden City* (1966) and others.

More than this, they raised questions but withheld solutions. They knew the age lacked an established religious, social or ethical doctrine and so a neat and general answer to any problem was impossible. These Socialist writers were against the establishment, militarism and imperialism. For them content and passion mattered more than strict adherence to the rules of the theatre. They brought a spirit of freedom and vitality into the drama. They overthrew all preceding conventions and invented new ones of their own. Socialist playwrights craved love, friendship and humanity which they thought could dispel the despair and frustration the age suffered from. They were Leftist in tone, and committed to human situation.

Neo-naturalistic drama assumed a confrontational attitude towards the older generation. These dramatists deliberated that Britain was not rebuilding as pledged and there was a state of inactivity in every field. There was still a middle class Britain debating free-thinking values and philosophical concepts or concerned about traditional family and domestic values. John Russell Brown remarks that these new dramatists:

Write for the theatre because this is the art form which allows them to show the complexity of those worlds: the permanent and frightening forces that lie behind each explosive crisis and each boring, dehumanizing routine, the limitations, dangers and experiments of personal, subjective view: the impossibility of judging any except in relation to other, the strength of truth and permanence of idealism. They write youthful plays, logical, sensational, theatrical, exploratory, complicated and hence, responsible medium (1963: 14). Their new freedom enabled them to embark upon the subjects which really concerned them, and which have increasingly concerned the British people as a whole. Christopher Innes writes, "the landmark in contemporary drama have been more like landmines, shattering conventional expectations, a whole new configuration of subjects and themes emerging on the stage each time after the dust of public outrage settled" (1994: 126).

This first break with traditional drama began with the writers taking middle class as subject of a drama. Later, another striking development led to the emergence of authentic 'working-class fiction'. This was possible by the assuming of stage by writers coming from the industrial northern part of England. Of several powerful writers, Osborne, Bond, Wesker, and Alan Sillitoe are good examples. They produced vigorous fiction about the lives of workers as seen from a working class point of view. This upsurge expressed the discontent and frustration of the newly educated lower class which felt that it was still denied the opportunities and privileges accorded to the educated upper class. These new plays had a working-class hero who rebels against the social privilege of the middle and upper classes. Neo-naturalistic drama came with their low-life, with new themes involving the ordinary man's ordinary experience which were thought the themes unfit for the theatre before. They rejected the style and subjects of the educated upper-middle class in London and the universities, and wrote about common people in the provinces who had quite a different point of view. It was a rejection of versions of theatre reality made habitual by the middle class drama. The orthodox middle class drama, observes Raymond Williams in his book *From Ibsen to Brecht*:

Starts and ends in appearances. It is concerned on the stage with a real looking room, a real looking people, making real sounding conversations. This is all right as far as it goes, but invariably it is not far. The whole world of inner and normally inarticulate experience, the whole world of social process, which makes history yet is never clearly presented on the surface, are alike exclude. The more real all it looks, the less real it may actually be (1981: 28).

'New Wave Dramatists' broke away from these conventions and appearances and used new kinds of dramatic effect for communicating a different underlying reality.

Post-war dramatists experimented radically and extended the possibilities of what drama was able to represent. In contrast to the dominant theatre which had preceded it, Neo-naturalistic drama did indeed introduce new and often shocking subject matter and replaced the earlier rational explorations of ethical, moral and spiritual concerns with often emotionally charged studies of various aspects of sexuality, violence and alienation.

The exploration of new themes also initiated the change of the language used by the characters depicted in the plays. The way the characters spoke matched up with the radical ideas expressed by the authors. A frequent usage of strong language became common. Brown observes that: "Before that time, the actual language spoken by people in real life, especially by people without middle class inhibitions, could not be spoken on the stage. Everyday 'four-letter' swear words were banned" (1973: 13). The change of language used by the characters in these plays is also noticeable "New characters and fresh themes called for fresh idioms, new patterns of stage dialogue, and new theatrical forms" (1973:13). The authors of the New Drama describe working-class life as realistically as possible. Their plays can be therefore considered naturalistic. Simon Trussler in his article "British Neo -Naturalism" suggests that "The new wave dramatists instinctively chose naturalism mainly because it served their purposes, and allowed them to make social comments, unlike the previously frequently used poeticism" (1968: 33).

When contrasted with the state of the British theatre before the year 1956, the above mentioned features of Neo- naturalism demonstrate the fact that the appearance of this genre caused a dramatic change in the British theatre. It forced critics as well as the audiences to acknowledge the theatrical pieces written by young working class playwrights. These authors were considered revolutionary mainly because they decided to challenge the long established and conventionally forbidden. They used new forms of expressing their opinions and paid attention to the unseen working classes.

Most of the 'New Wave Dramatists' liked to be sensational, to surprise and shock, choosing themes like homosexuality, prostitution and abortion, nymphomania, disfigurement and callow humour. In Edward Bond's play *Saved* (1962), a baby is stoned to death in its perambulator on the open stage to show the dehumanizing effects of society, in John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, (1959) Musgrave prepares for the killing of twenty five persons, Jimmy Porter, in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is highly vociferous against almost all aspects of the establishment, and in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, (1957) Stanley is bashed and brain washed and made completely dazed. In the plays of Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delany and John Maritime such sensationalism is not found. Wesker draws materials for his plays from experienced reality of his life and is almost autobiographical in his plays. His trilogy *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959) and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960) is a recreation of his family life and his experience that is rendered dramatically.

## CONCLUSIONS

Neo-naturalism at first had the appearance of breakthrough but a careful recognition of it makes it an already known style. From a contemporary standpoint, the theatre of Neo-naturalism might appear to be an old-fashioned leftover of the 19th century, an exhausted, antiquated aesthetic form bearing little relevance to present-day culture and politics. It is easy to forget, especially for those not especially interested in the heritage of the performing arts, that naturalism was a revolutionary movement that exposed bourgeois hypocrisy, rallied against injustice and inspired its detractors to rebel in the streets. Neo-naturalistic theatre was therefore a significant aesthetic and political force in the second decade of the 20th century. Neo-naturalism therefore, is one of the important dramatic means which aimed to convey the social reality deftly, carefully and accurately. By doing this it exposed the irrational values of the society to the extent that the audiences were motivated to think deeply of social reforms.

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