



## Angry Young Playwrights With Respect of Three Representatives

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### Abstract

Angry Young Men led a movement on the post-war English drama stage in 1956, expressed a mood of restlessness, disorganization and frustration that was not limited to the working class but was shared by young people throughout English society. This essay briefly introduces the Angry Young Men from three representatives: John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, and Alan Sillitoe, who brought an important fresh element into the literature by their subject matter and attitudes.

**Key words:** Angry young men; John Osborne; Arnold Wesker; Alan Sillitoe

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### INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War, English drama developed in two new directions: Theatre of the Absurd and working class or 'kitchen sink' drama. 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 very much so verse drama died out. In its place came Theatre of the Absurd which borrowed European ideas, notably Existentialism. These plays experimented radically and extended the possibilities of what drama was able to represent.

Taking a different direction, there also appeared a new type of drama that was not at all interested in experimentation. The realistic depictions of lower class life led it sometimes to be described as "kitchen sink" drama, in contrast to "drawing room" comedies that had been popular on the English stage for nearly a century. What was wrong with English drama, argued the new playwrights, was that the speech and action of most plays did not represent contemporary English life. The plays being produced in London still showed the manners and habits of the middle class as it was before the war.

In fiction, a group of rebellious writers appeared in 1950's known as the "Angry Young Men" Led by Kinsley Amis, they deliberately revolted against the sort of artistic innovations in literature. The Angry Young Men were hostile to anything "highbrow", which they labeled as "phoney". They rejected the style and subjects of the educated upper-middle class centered in London and the universities, and wrote about common people in the provinces who had quite a different point of view..

This first break with tradition was followed a few years later by another striking development, the emergence of authentic working-class fiction, coming from the industrial northern part of England. Of several powerful writers, John Osborne, Arnold 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. They made no experiments in technique, following the example of the Angry Young Men, but they brought an important fresh element into the literature by their subject matter and attitudes. This was made possible by the increased opportunities after the war for workers' children to receive the best education and enter universities where they could get training in literature.

English drama, meanwhile, underwent a revival that coincided with the revolt of the Angry Young Men, John Osborne began the upsurge with an angry play that 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 old educated upper class. Arnold Wesker contributed plays that showed the struggles of working-class families to put their socialist ideals into practice, thus helping to raise the social consciousness of the British people. The post-war drama depicting the everyday life of common people brought to an end the long dramatic tradition of social comedy and manners. Drama has remained the most vigorous branch of English literature up to the present time. English plays are frequently presented in America and translated for presentation in other countries.

This new movement began in 1956 with *Look Back in Anger*, a play by John Osborne. The title gave the Angry Young Men their nickname, whether they were writing plays or novels. The play has a working-class hero who rebels against the social privilege of the middle and upper classes. This privileged section of society had been the accepted subject of plays until that time, including social commentaries, comedies of manners, and also T.S. Eliot's later poetry-dramas. All of them dealt with the upper classes, intellectuals or the wealthy. English people of the lower classes were rarely interesting to playwrights, and they usually appeared in plays only as servants. John Osborne opened up a new, contemporary subject which other playwrights soon followed when they saw the enthusiasm of both critics and audiences.

From the often-used term "working-class drama" is not quite accurate, according to some literary critics. The plays written by the Angry Young Men express a mood of restlessness, disorganization and frustration that was not limited to the working class but was shared by young people throughout English society and by Asian and African minorities working in the middle class.

A more precise political picture appears in the plays of Arnold Wesker, who writes specifically about Jewish workers in London's poor East End. The Jewish minority, being often more intellectual than others in the lower class, are more inclined to study Marxism and seek for political solutions. Yet in Wesker's plays, even the young Jewish people display the same uneasiness and lack of organization, so their political aspirations do not give rise to any well directed movement. Both Osborne's and Wesker's plays have a sharp edge of bitterness and rage at the general mood of England. They do not describe actual conditions in the society so much as its state of mind. The frustrated despair that emerges is not much different from the mood captured by Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, but here it is presented in a context of realism and fact. Neither Osborne nor Wesker offers a clear solution to the problem, but they make a strong, emotional protest that can easily be shared by the audience.

After 1956, English drama became revitalized. Many new playwrights presented plays, some tending towards the absurd, some angry, some cruel, and many that mix elements from them all. The Angry Young Men only

existed as a definable movement in the 1950's, but they have continued to write on various subjects. English plays have remained the most interesting, energetic and popular of any in the Western culture up until the present day.

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## 1. REPRESENTATIVES

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### 1.1 John Osborne (1929-1994)

Through his first play *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne presented audience a play that described the generation of young English people of the lower class who were aged under thirty. They had been children during the Second World War and now they found England to be shabby, dull disappointing place where the future did not look bright for them. In this play, the hero is a worker's son who has got a good education through the new post-war school system, and as a young man he has the capability to do work that would raise him into the middle class. But he can see that the old privileged class will not permit him to climb very far. He marries a middle-class wife, whom he treats very badly as a way of showing his frustration. In this play, Osborne restores a dramatic device that was neglected for a long time: the tirade, by an angry character in the story. He makes the audience share his anger and understand his point of view.

In another play, *the Entertainer* (1957), Osborne demonstrated England's decline by contrasting two generations of lower-class comedians. In this play he uses the music halls, the traditional entertainment of the lower class, to show the sad changes that have taken place in the taste and vitality of the people and their attitude toward their own nation.

The great hit, *Luther* (1961), in both England and America told the life of the German monk who led the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and Osborne succeeded in making his historical figure seem thoroughly believable as a real man. This was because, having been an actor himself, Osborne is able to write roles which an actor can perform realistically.

### 1.2 Arnold Wesker (1932- )

The plays of Arnold Wesker focused on the conflict between individuals and the pressures of society, often choosing as his subject Jewish families in the East End of London. Three years younger than John Osborne, Wesker's first play, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, was first performed in London in 1958. The title is the name of a favorite nourishing dish of the Jews, which in this case referred to the way in which friends help and care for one another in times of need, to make a strong, good society. The play, which had firm political overtones, was an angry protest against England's disintegrating society, seen from a Jewish viewpoint. The three acts traced the downfall of the ideals in a changing world, parallel to the disintegration of the family. Wesker delicately explored

how they struggle to maintain their convictions in the face of World War II, Stalinism, or the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. With the inference of the disintegration its Jewish East End community Wesker intended to warn of the Communist Party in Great Britain after World War II and of the loss of commitment to socialist ideals in the face of crass materialism; and politically, explored what true socialism really is. In 1961, *The kitchen* was finished describing a kitchen of a big restaurant serves as a model for the whole society. Most of woks of Wesker dealt with the bigger question of the submission of individuals to the demands of society, and their struggles to live outside its rules.

### 1.3 Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010)

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, D. H. Lawrence was the only major English author who was born into the working class and was able to write about the life of workers from personal knowledge. Otherwise workers generally appeared in literature as clowns to supply comedy, or as stereotyped figures for propaganda purposes, or as criminal types who sought to do harm to the middle class. One of the most significant developments in English literature after the Second World War was the emergence of true proletarian fiction. Several talented writers from the working class showed themselves to be the successors of D.H. Lawrence by giving humane, understanding treatment in their novels to people who were never normally spoken about as fully developed human being. Alan Sillitoe was the most outstanding of this group.

The Angry Young Men, led by Kingsley Amis and John Osborne, protested against the middle class which would not allow them to rise in its ranks, against intellectuals, and against the weakening of England in the modern world. They began the lower-class literary movement against established privilege.

The proletarian writers who followed them were more savage and anarchistic, without patriotism or ideals. Similar to the characters depicted by the Angry Young Men, the heroes of the workers' novels were also highly individualistic and selfish, eager to get advantages for themselves but unwilling to help others to cooperate in any mass movements. They opposed the English government's new social system that had raised their standard of living because it also put restrictions on them through taxes and various labor controls. They had no desire to serve their country because they looked on national institutions, such as the army, the police and the government, as their enemies. They had no confidence in politicians or political parties unions. They would gladly have destroyed the whole of English society but had no thought of what should replace it

This lack of vision is a serious fault in the writers who tried to describe England realistically after the Second World War. They have stated the problems and exposed the

shortcomings of the society but have not looked for serious answers. "The re-affirmation in new and original terms of existing values, or, where old traditions have decayed, a passionate search for new ones, is surely one of the major tasks of the artist," writes Gilbert Phelps (1975). The English writers of the contemporary period seem to have given up this search and surrendered to defeat or despair.

Alan Sillitoe burst upon the literary scene with his first novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958). Unlike Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* which had been compared to the witty social satires of the 1920's when it appeared two years earlier, Sillitoe's novel had no such polish. Its style is one of habitual violence and its point of view is that of an angry, self-educated, cheated factory worker who sees no pleasure in life except getting drunk, pursuing women, fighting and occasionally fishing. Sillitoe's novel brought new vigor and honesty to English writing and gave the reading public its first unadorned glimpse of lower class life in a northern industrial city as seen from the inside.

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959) are full of energy and anger. The lively dialogues reproduce working-class speech, with the flat accent and dialect words spelled just as they should be pronounced. He shows the background of industrial workers and records the thoughts and motives of people who feel no obligation or responsibility towards the society as a whole. He neither condemns nor praises them, but the reader feels some compassion for their condition and some understanding of their negative, angry state of mind. Sillitoe tells his stories honestly from first-hand experience, setting down realistically what he has observed. But he does not examine the reasons for the anti-social attitudes of his characters, nor does he offer any solution, or vision of a better future.

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## CONCLUSION

The Angry Young Men and the proletarian writers made a great contribution to English literature in the 1950's, but during the ensuing years their anger has cooled off and they become bitter or simply bad-tempered, but their early works continue to be widely read and studied.

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