

Evolution Of Angry Young Man In English Theatre

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Abstract.

This research paper discusses the evolution of the concept “Angry Young Man” in the British theatre from its origins to development till eventual transformation. The term was first used by Rebecca West in 1941 later becomes popular in 1950s by the British Playwrights like John Osborne , John Wain and Kingsley Amis. These writers appropriately encapsulated the frustration of their generation and the disillusionment of the youth in postwar Britain. These writers belonged to the working class or lower middle class and so their works are critiques of class system, social inequality and highlights the hypocrisy of the upper and middle classes. In their plays there is a quintessential protagonist who is rebellious sometimes without any clear understanding of the cause, goes through an existential angst and is very critical outlook towards the societal norms. The movement “Kitchen Sink Drama” brought the authentic working- class voices and their issues to the popular stage while challenging the elitist traditions of English theatre. As there was certain improvement in the social conditions of working class in the 1960’s the archetype of Angry Young Man gradually faded which gave way to new dramatic forms and concern, but its impact on the English theatre and modern British Literature remains significant as it democratised both the form and content of the written word.

The term was first used by Rebecca West in ‘Black lamb and Grey Falcon’ a journey through Yugoslavia in 1941. She used it in the sense of a young man who is angry on the circumstances he is caught in.

Soon after that the young playwrights of the 1950’s Britain like John Osborne, John Wain and Kingsley Amis in their ‘Hurry on Down’ and ‘Lucky Jim’ expressed their disaffection with the socio-political order of their country. Their resentment was partly against the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes. Although their political orientation was generally left of centre and certainly opposed to the status quo, they adhered to no specific doctrine or ideology.

The playwrights were the redbrick university graduates who could (they were educated, aided by the state - post second world war) see through the English societies, their hollow causes which had led Britain in its downfall.

The Angry Young Man is the protagonist of the plays written by these playwrights who frequently expresses raw anger and frustration as the post war reforms failed to meet the exalted aspirations for a genuine change. To understand the rise of their figure one has to understand the background of that time's Britain. After the War as Roland Quinault puts it "The country's physical fabric was not in a good position." Most grandfathers had served in the first world war most fathers in the second world war and most young men were currently called up for two years of National Service.

In 1950's Britain spent 6.6% of its GDP on defence. More than any major country except Soviet Union. In the mid 1950's The Labour Party had left Britain with a plethora of state regulation and high taxation. The standard rate of income-tax was nine shillings in a pound. (20 shillings made one pound) To improve state finances basic commodities like butter, meat, tea and coal were rationed. The combination of war damages and the scarcity of manpower and materials created a serious urban housing problem. Nearly half of the population lived in privately rented accommodations-often in dingy rooms with little privacy, comfort and warmth. It was this situation under which the male protagonist is developed. The character shows signs of depression, anxiety, rebellion and critical attitude towards post-war British society.

Significance

The foremost achievement of the "Angry Young Men" is the uncondescending incorporation of authentic working-class voices, characters, and issues into the English literary tradition, from which they had been conspicuously absent. These writers' virile, defiant, iconoclastic protagonists (often described as muscular or physically big) stand in marked contrast to long-familiar caricatures of the working class in English literature—the clownish artisans in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-1596), the drunken porter in *Macbeth* (1606), the genially shiftless Alfred Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), the ever-indolent comic-strip character Andy Capp, and countless one-dimensional, more or less competent servants who, if they perform their jobs well, go virtually unnoticed by or subordinate themselves to their social "betters" (even when such betters are as fatuous as Bertie Wooster and his friends in P.G. Woodhouse's numerous stories of the perfect butler, Jeeves).

The few major protagonists in pre-1950 fiction who are of working-class origins—Pip in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) and Paul Morel in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), for example—typically, if wrongly, regard their class background as something to be escaped and perceive themselves as both apart from and better than "common" people. The post-1950 writers are more divided on such issues; Sillitoe's characters express no desire whatsoever to leave the working class, while Braine's Joe Lampton is successful in marrying his way out of it but ultimately becomes disillusioned. Many of Storey's characters rise into the professional classes through education but find themselves in a social limbo, at home neither in their new class nor in their old one.

Major Characteristics.

- Revolt against social inequality
- Hate for the socio-political system which favored middle and upper classes.
- Critical about the elitist Modern Mannerism :- The men who were aboard in the colonies serving the Empire, the so-called Civil Services were highly criticized by these playwrights.

The most important point was the Portrayal of the social status of the youth/young. Depiction of the abject position of youth who are deprived of their normal rights. Somehow the system made sure that they are driven to the belief in the conservative or traditional system of thoughts.

- Rebel against Conventionality.

They mostly rebelled against all accepted norms and ideals. Like the existentialist novels of Kafka and Camus there is symbolic meaning to register in their plays.

The characters from these plays and novels often feel alienated (some of them suffer through the Peter Pan syndrome), their refusal to grow up and deal with the adult world which according to them is filled with moral corruption. They were dissatisfied with their job and felt that they were deprived of their rights- a condition that mirrored with many youth people in the postwar Britain. They expressed their anger through the cynical mocking humour which was like a coping mechanism for them. According to them the society seemed like a dead entity very static, unresponsive and indifferent to the needs and desires of the younger generation.

In the plays particularly Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* the settling of the play breaks away from the genteel and traditional representations of British Life. Instead it depicts through the protagonist the raw emotion and his existential despair which highlights the emotional and cultural stagnation experienced by the youth of that age/era.

For example:- In 'The Kitchen' play there is destruction of certain household property but no killing. Peter's violence unlike Jimmy's is inflicted on himself when he wounds his own arm. In 'Look back in anger' the symbolic killing (death of the child) serves as a setback to the audience where Osbourne tries to say that there is no hope of starting afresh over these situations. According to him there is no hope for the future generations. The only way out if not a solution is 'Escape'. The world is too unstable to live a stable life.

We should also note that the 'Angry Young man' as a protagonist is not used by the writer for propogandist purpose. His attitude towards life ,his approach and his treatment to the problems of modern social life are highlighted.

He is generally concerned with the social pressures that the individual has to face in the modern life. The play restudies in the potential for a change and failure in achieving it. The conflict resolves themselves into

the clashes between man, his role in his life, society which results into dehumanising that part of the society which they want to offend.

The wave starts coming towards the end when half a decade passes and the situations gets better. Housing is improved, employment betters and the roles of individuals in the family gets redefined. (Here the role of royal family Of Britain plays a major part by highlighting the importance of family and family values.)

Now the working mothers a typical British working class mother is busy outside the house. The son of the family now sits in front of the television set and watches 'Rock and Roll' and the hydrogen bomb at the same time. The younger generation shifts their scope from anti-bourgeois to anti-parental. In the film 'Smoking in the Boy's Room' the male protagonist is not much concerned about he not understanding his principal of the school or visa-versa, but in the evening gets together with his friends at his house and play rock and roll music till it deafens his mother.

Theatre in mid 1960's distinction between experimental and established theatre became blurred. Now the young generation could relate to Robert Bolt's, 'Man of all seasons'. The so-called Kitchen Sink Drama in the daily life of the lower middle class and the working class had somehow lost momentum.

Despite their efforts as Mr. Groth puts up" it is difficult to say to what extent they succeeded in creating a genuine working class theatre in Great Britain.

Several new trends thus emerged in mid 1960's. Rise of 2nd wave of dramatics- Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* (1965) with minimal, rich and luxuriant use of dialogue.

Then the theatre of cruelty and absurdist drama took roots. This was anti-middle class drama for the middle classes and the limits of upward social and economic mobility seemed to be the centre of interest for the new playwrights unlike the Angry young men who were preoccupied with the idea that upward social and economic mobility is impossible to achieve and even if it is achieved one cannot escape the social problems of the world they their facing.

The Labour Party was successful in getting employment to large majority of the people in Britain and as the outer rural area starting coming inside the main city London, the trade, construction sector bloomed and money making opportunities flowed in the working, lower middle class.

Now they had a self-earned house and Sundays were spent in the newly greened parks. This is how the journey of the term and figure of 'Angry young men' started and then ended. The anger was reduced and took other creative forms like rock bands and in sports.

Conclusion

A critical period of British cultural history is reflected through the evolution of the Angry Young Man in English Theatre, where for the first time postwar disillusionment and social upheaval found powerful expression on stage. As the Angry Young Man emerged from the climate of economic hardship, class resentment and the longing for genuine change, it became a symbol for youth rebellion and social critique. Through plays like *Look Back in Anger* and others these dramatists gave voice to the earlier silenced echoes of the frustration of the marginalized generation. They also redefined the language, themes, culture and audiences of English theatre. The movement itself was short-lived and the writers often resisted being grouped together yet their collective influence when viewed in hind sight was profound. It paved a way for greater realism, inclusivity and social awareness in British Drama. It also made a way for cultural studies in Britain. As new artistic trends emerged the Angry Young Man archetype receded but its legacy still continues with the exploration of class, identity and resistance within English theatre.

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