



SPECIFIC FEATURES OF KITCHEN SINK DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the hierarchal evolution of British drama and centers on particular peculiarities of kitchen sink drama. Furthermore, it focuses on comparison of realism vs. social realism, character changes throughout the types of drama genres and the importance of irony in kitchen sink dramas. Main representatives and their best plays are partly analyzed throughout the article.

KEY WORD: *Avant Garde theater, Victorian theater, characters, Kitchen Sink genre, social anger, irony, domestic life, realism, social realism, 'anti-heroes', protagonists.*

INTRODUCTION

The 1950's through the 1970's saw the rise of one of the most important movements in modern British theater: the Kitchen Sink drama. These types of plays had several characteristics that distinguished them as a break from the forms of theater before them. They can be compared against theatrical movements such as avant garde theater, or the theater of the absurd, characterized by the plays of authors such as Samuel Beckett.

Perhaps the first, and most notable, characteristic of these Kitchen Sink dramas was the way in which they advanced a particular social message or ideology. This ideology was most often leftist. The settings were almost always working class. The previous trend in Victorian theater had been to depict the lives of the wealthy members of the ruling classes. These classes of people were often conservative in their politics and their ideologies. This was not the case for Kitchen Sink theater. The Kitchen Sink drama sought, instead, to bring the real lives and social inequality of ordinary working-class people to the stage. The lives of these people were caught between struggles of power, industry, politics, and social homogenization.

Another chief characteristic of the Kitchen Sink drama was the way in which its characters expressed their unvarnished emotion and dissatisfaction with the ruling class status quo. This can be seen clearly in the play considered to be the standard bearer of this Kitchen Sink genre: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. In Osborne's play, 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 channeled towards those around him. Osborne's play is a study in how this pent-up frustration and social anger can wreak havoc on the ordinary lives of the British people.

Some critics have noted the irony in the term "Kitchen Sink drama." The domestic world during this time was believed to be the domain of the feminine. Almost all of the major Kitchen Sink works which take place in the mid-twentieth century, however, are centered around a masculine point of view. These plays rarely centered around the emotions and tribulations of its women characters. The power dynamic between male and female often assumed to be masculine and is an unexamined critical component in many of these plays. Women are often assumed to serve the men of their household and, when conflicts do arise, it is often the man who is portrayed as the suffering protagonist. Women's suffering is always a result of the suffering of the male.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Though Kitchen Sink dramas gained notoriety in twentieth century British culture for their unflinching anger and criticism directed towards the social, political, and economic establishment, the plays were also significant for the way they depicted the most intimate aspects of domestic life. This was in stark contrast to popular classical or Victorian dramas and comedies which largely centered around the public lives of socially established characters. Before the Kitchen Sink dramas, commentators have noted that in the mid-twentieth century, British theater still



produced plays as if it were the nineteenth century. The Kitchen Sink drama, in contrast, moved the action and emotion of the theater from depictions of the public space of people's lives into the most intimate of settings. The kitchen was considered to be 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 theater.

Whether social or domestic, the Kitchen Sink drama changed the trajectory of British theater. Though many of the authors considered to have written in this genre such as Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden never claimed the title of Kitchen Sink dramatist, these author's plays contained themes of common life that deeply resonated with British culture of the period. These types of plays signaled a resolute shift of British theater into the 20th century.

The cultural movement was rooted in the ideals of social realism, an artistic movement, expressed in the visual and other realist arts, which depicts working class activities. Many artists who subscribed to social realism were painters with socialist political views. While the movement has some commonalities with Socialist Realism, another style of realism which was the "official art" advocated by the governments of the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries, the two had several differences. While social realism is a broader type of art that realistically depicts subjects of social concern,¹ Socialist realism is characterized by the glorified depiction of socialist values, such as the emancipation of the proletariat, in a realistic manner.

Unlike Socialist realism, social realism is not an official art produced by, or under the supervision of the government. The leading characters are often 'anti-heroes' rather than part of a class to be admired, as in Socialist realism.

Typically, protagonists in social realism are dissatisfied with their working-class lives and the world, rather than being idealised workers who are part of a Socialist utopia in the process of creation. As such, social realism allows more space for the subjectivity of the author to be displayed. Partly, social realism developed as a reaction against Romanticism, which promoted lofty concepts such as the "ineffable" beauty and truth of art and music, and even turned them into spiritual ideals. As such, social realism focused on the "ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathized with working class people, particularly the poor." (The quotation is from George Shi, of the University of Fine Arts, Valencia).

In the United Kingdom, the term "kitchen sink" derived from an expressionist painting by John Bratby, which contained an image of a kitchen sink. Bratby did various kitchen and bathroom-themed paintings, including three paintings of toilets. Bratby's paintings of people often depicted the faces of his subjects as desperate and unsightly.

Kitchen sink realism artists painted everyday objects, such as trash cans and beer bottles. The critic David Sylvester wrote an article in 1954 about trends in recent English art, calling his article "The Kitchen Sink" in reference to Bratby's picture. Sylvester argued that there was a new interest among young painters in domestic scenes, with stress on the banality of life.² Other artists associated with the kitchen sink style include Derrick Greaves, Edward Middleditch and Jack Smith.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The artistic vitality of the new wave came from an upsurge of attitudes, diction, and characters formerly unknown to the British stage; but it seems that the release of energy among the supposedly inhibited English could only take place in the absence of genteel restraint. At all events most of the new writers had an education well short of university standards. The result is a freshness of imaginative response side by side with conceptual poverty, as if they were artistically mature and intellectually virgin.³

The term applied to the plays of writers such as Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney was 'Kitchen Sink Drama.' These playwrights portray working class or middle-class life with an emphasis on domestic realism. These plays

¹ Walker, John. (1992) "Kitchen Sink School" (<http://www.artdesigncafe.com/kitchen-sink-school-1992>). *Glossary of Art, Architecture & Design since 1945*, 3rd. ed. Retrieved 20 January 2012.

² Todd, James G. "Social Realism". *Art Terms*. Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

³ Kitchen, Laurence. "Drama with a Message: Arnold Wesker." Ed. J.R. Brown, 71.



were written in part as a reaction against the drawing room comedies and middle-class dramas of Coward and Rattigan. Tynan primarily championed this new group of writers.

The 'Kitchen Sink Drama' depicts the real and often sordid quality of family life. The plays are socially and politically motivated, seeking to focus attention on the destruction of moral values caused by consumerism and the breakdown of community. The Kitchen Sink Drama is related to the kitchen-sink movement in art, a loose-knit group of British painters, active in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Wesker's play *Chicken Soup with Barley* is a typical example of kitchen sink drama. The backdrop for the action of the play is the stirring Spanish Civil War waged by Gen. Franco for overthrowing the domestic representative set up in Spain which polarized the forces of fascist counter revolution against domestic rule.

Franco's attempt was likely to lead to a leftist regime. As an immediate representation of fascist upheaval in England to the Black Shirts under Oswald

Mosley mushroomed as a fascist show up which was strongly registered by the Unionist Working Class of East London. In this play the Kahn family of Jewish stock is seen involved in an anti-fascist demonstration in Cable Street.

The play represents more than an escape or retreat to statuesque from the ideological illusion. It depicts graphically how the members shed their views and their visions. They are either frustrated, disillusioned, incapacitated or turn retrograde. They did not end with a big bang but with a low whimper. Sarah, the brave old lady, denounces everyone. Others lapse into the parochial old world of selfish revenge with their initial vision sadly ebbing away. The play reveals the initial error carrying into a major human tragedy which Sarah suffers and bears with rare courage and dignity. The central motif of the plays is stated by Ada. "What audacity tells you, you can harbor a billion people in a theory? What great, big stupendous egotistical audacity, tell me."⁴

Sarah is a perennial source of inspiration not only for Harry Kahn, her husband, Ada and Ronnie, their children but also for the left minded unionist worker Cissie, Ada's husband Dave Simmonds and the family friends Montig Blatt and his Bessie. Charmed by the ideology of socialism they come together for a common cause to fight for a better deal for the exploited working class. The massive and noise demonstration, the vocal and violent protest against the reason stall all the fascist wave with a band playing the revolutionary song and the slogan 'Madrid today come London tomorrow' keep the backdrop ever reverberating.

In Act II, as the Kahns have now moved to a better flock of flats in Hackney, they have been able to make both ends meet. All but Sarah feels the sense of bitterness and fury of the young post war generation. This process of inevitable disillusionment and disintegration continues even in Act III, ultimately leaving Sarah alone fast to her socialist vision.

Before the 1950s, the United Kingdom's working class was often depicted stereotypically in Noël Coward's drawing room comedies and British films. Kitchen sink realism was also seen as being in opposition to the "well-made play", the kind which theatre critic Kenneth Tynan once denounced as being set in "Loamshire", of dramatists like Terence Rattigan. "Well-made plays" were a dramatic genre from nineteenth-century theatre which found its early 20th century codification in Britain in the form of William Archer's *Play-Making: A Manual of Craftmanship* (1912), and in the United States with George Pierce Baker's *Dramatic Technique* (1919). Kitchen sink works were created with the intention of changing all that. Their political views were initially labeled as radical, sometimes even anarchic.⁵

John Osborne's play *Look Back In Anger* (1956) depicted young men in a way that is similar to the then-contemporary "Angry Young Men" movement of film and theatre directors. The "angry young men" were a group of mostly working- and middle-class British playwrights and novelists who became prominent in the 1950s. Following the success of the Osborne play, the label "angry young men" was later applied by British media to describe young writers who were characterized by a disillusionment with traditional British society. The hero of *Look Back In Anger* is a graduate, but he is working in a manual occupation. It dealt with social alienation, the claustrophobia and frustrations of a provincial life on low incomes.

⁴ Wesker, Arnold. *Chicken Soup with Barley. The Wesker Trilogy*, London: Cape, 1960. 43.

⁵ "Social Realism" (http://instruct.westvalley.edu/grisham/1b_social.html). Retrieved 2008-05-04.



The impact of this work inspired Arnold Wesker and Shelagh Delaney, among numerous others, to write plays of their own. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, headed by George Devine and Theatre Workshop organised by Joan Littlewood were particularly prominent in bringing these plays to public attention. Critic John Heilpern wrote that *Look Back in Anger* expressed such "immensity of feeling and class hatred" that it altered the course of English theatre. The term "Angry theatre" was coined by critic John Russell Taylor⁶.

CONCLUSIONS

This was all part of the British New Wave—a transposition of the concurrent *nouvelle vague* film movement in France, some of whose works, such as *The 400 Blows* of 1959, also emphasised the lives of the urban proletariat. British filmmakers such as Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson (see also Free Cinema) channeled their vitriolic anger into film making. Confrontational films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961) were noteworthy movies in the genre. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is about a young machinist who spends his wages at weekends on drinking and having a good time, until his affair with a married woman leads to her getting pregnant and him being beaten by her husband to the point of hospitalization. *A Taste of Honey* is about a 17-year-old schoolgirl with an abusive, alcoholic mother. The schoolgirl starts a relationship with a black sailor and gets pregnant. After the sailor leaves on his ship, Jo moves in with a homosexual acquaintance, Geoffrey, who assumes the role of surrogate father. *A Taste of Honey* raises the issues of class, race, gender and sexual orientation. Later, as many of these writers and directors diversified, kitchen sink realism was taken up by television directors who produced television plays.

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⁶ John Russell Taylor. *Anger and After*, 1962, London: Methuen.