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9.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you are going to

- Know the biographical details of the prominent dramatist of mid-20th century: John Osborne and his works
- Understand how Osborne’s personal life affected his writing.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

John Osborne, the Oscar-winning screenwriter, has been regarded as one of the most noteworthy dramatists of the 1950s. He along with a group of the playwrights transformed the English-speaking theatre. His life and career had many ups and downs.

9.2 OSBORNE’S LIFE

John Osborne was born on the 12th December, 1929 in a suburb of London. He came of a poor middle class family. His father, Thomas Godfrey Osborne, was a professional artist and a copywriter and his mother, Nellie Beatrice, was a bar-maid. He adored his father and hated his mother. In 1941, his father died. Osborne used the earnings from a life insurance settlement to send himself to Belmont College, a private boarding school. Osborne was thrown out after only a few years for attacking the headmaster. He received a certificate of completion for his upper school work, but never attended a college or university. There, he was unhappy for most of the time. Then, Osborne returned home to his

mother in London and for a short period of time, tried trade journalism. He also worked several odd jobs before he found a niche in the theatre.

In 1948 Osborne worked as tutor to new actors in a touring drama company. He himself acted for the first time at the Empire Theatre, Sheffield. Soon he became an actor-manager and thus managed the staging of plays. The play, *The Devil Inside Him*, written in collaboration with Stella Linden was staged in 1950. He married an actress, Pamela Elizabeth Lane in June 1951. Later, he collaborated with Anthony Creighton and wrote two plays *Personal Enemy* and *Epitaph for George Dillon*. The play, *Look Back in Anger*, written in a short period of only a few weeks, was summarily rejected by the agents and production companies to whom Osborne first submitted the play. Finally, it was picked up by George Devine for production with his failing Royal Court Theatre. Both Osborne and the Royal Court Theatre were struggling to survive financially and both saw the production of *Look Back in Anger* as a risk. After opening night, the play received mixed responses. It received a handful of glowing reviews from some influential theatre critics. And Osborne soon made his noticeable presence in the list of the most promising young playwrights in British theatre.

His play, *The Entertainer* was first performed in 1957 and in July the same year *Look Back in Anger* was staged at the World Youth Festival in Moscow. In New York it won the Drama Critics Award for the Best play of 1957. In August 1957 he ended his marriage to Pamela and married Mary Ure, an actress. With Tony Richardson, he founded Woodfall Films Society and produced a film of *Look Back in Anger*, followed by *The Entertainer*. In 1963 his marriage to Mary Ure ended and he married the critic and journalist, Penelope Gilliatt. In 1964 'Inadmissible Evidence' was staged in London. He received the Film Academy's Oscar Award for his screen play of *Tom Jones* in the same year. He directed a few plays performed at Royal Court Theatre. In 1967 his marriage to Penelope Gilliatt was dissolved and in 1968 he married the actress, Jill Bennett.

Later, Osborne looked seriously interested in films. The film versions of some of his plays including that of *Look Back in Anger* have been quite successful and satisfactory. More and more of his plays are now being televised and appreciated greatly. Osborne continued to work in the artistic and entertainment worlds through the 1970's and 80's. He wrote plays, but also ventured into writing screenplays, television adaptations, and autobiography. Osborne made several appearances as an actor during this period. He starred in several popular Hollywood films including *Get Carter* and *Flash Gordon*. Later in life, he received numerous awards for his work including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writer's Guild in Britain.

Osborne remained angry until the end of his life. Many women seem to have found his anger attractive; he had more than his fair share of lovers in addition to wives, and he was not kind to them. He was married five times; the first four ended in divorce, the last in his death:

- 1) Pamela Lane (1951-1957; inspired Alison Porter from *Look Back in Anger*)
- 2) Mary Ure (1957-1963)
- 3) Penelope Gilliatt (1963-1968)
- 4) Jill Bennett (1968-1977)
- 5) Helen Dawson (former arts journalist and critic for *The Observer*, 1978-1994)

The annoyance with women continued even with his daughter as he used to behave cruelly with his daughter, Nolan, born from his marriage with Penelope Gilliatt. He spitefully abused his young daughter and finally drove her out of his house when she was aged seventeen. Then they never met or talked to each other again.

After a serious liver crisis in 1987, Osborne became a diabetic, injecting twice a day. He died from complications from his diabetes at the age of 65 at his home in Clunton, near Craven Arms, Shropshire. He was buried in St George's churchyard, Clun, Shropshire alongside his last wife, the critic Helen Dawson, who died in 2004.

9.3 LITERARY CONTRIBUTION OF OSBORNE

In 1949 Osborne co-wrote his first play, *The Devil Inside Him*, with his married lover Stella Linden. He described it as a 'melodrama about a poetic Welsh loon' who murders a girl when he realises that she is trying to frame him for sexual assault. *Devil* was briefly performed in Huddersfield in 1950 but was largely forgotten about during Osborne's lifetime, as were six other early plays. Osborne, in writing, especially focused on what he knew —the plight of being young, educated, and filled with contempt for the disappointing results of welfare reform, unfair class structure, and living in the harsh aftermath of World War II while being too young to have participated in it. In his writing one may clearly observe his anguish towards his mother, his wives and his children too. Almost all his plays have created controversy. The government censored many of his shows by forcing scenes to be eliminated and shutting some productions down entirely. Finally, with *A Patriot for Me*, a play based on a true scandal involving a British spy, Osborne helped to end censorship that had been imposed by Lord Chamberlain. Osborne truly changed the theatrical landscape and is one of the most important British playwrights of the 20th century.

It was *Look Back in Anger*, Osborne's eighth play (often mistakenly referred to as his first), which brought his work to public attention in 1956. The breakdown of his marriage to actor Pamela Lane was the reason for writing the play *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Having completed the script in the spring of 1955 Osborne submitted it to the newly-formed English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square, London. George Devine, the Theatre's artistic director, was impressed by the play's unusual outspokenness and decided not only to produce it but

also to help Osborne financially by taking him on as an actor and script reader. *Look Back in Anger* gave the strongest boost to the concept of the 'Angry Young Man'; the tragi-comic depiction of failure, the liar, and the irresponsible showed him strengthened up with optimism and nostalgia for a past that always seemed better than the present. Written in seventeen days, *Look Back in Anger* was largely autobiographical, based on his time living and arguing with Pamela Lane in cramped accommodation in Derby while she cheated on him with a local dentist. It was submitted to agents all over London and returned swiftly with a response of rejection. In his autobiography, Osborne writes:

"The speed with which it had been returned was not surprising, but its aggressive dispatch did give me a kind of relief. It was like being grasped at the upper arm by a testy policeman and told to move on."

Finally, it was sent to the newly-formed English Stage Company at London's Royal Court Theatre. Formed by actor-manager and artistic director George Devine, the company's first three productions had been flops and it urgently needed a success just to survive. Devine was prepared to gamble on this play because he saw in it a fierce and scowling articulation of a new post-war spirit. Osborne was living poorly on a leaky houseboat on the River Thames at the time. Devine was so keen to contact Osborne that he rowed out to the boat to tell him he would like to make the play the fourth production. The play was directed by Tony Richardson and starred Kenneth Haigh, Mary Ure and Alan Bates. *Look Back in Anger* opened in May 1956 and after a slow start became a huge hit. Its electrifying rhetoric and emotional intensity have long been credited with reviving British theatre. Most of the critics opine that *Look Back in Anger*, like his other few plays are an insightful commentary on England's social and political situation during the 1950s. However, later critics consider *Look Back in Anger* to be a conventional and disappointing play, more a cultural achievement than a literary one.

Osborne's second play for the Royal Court was *The Entertainer* (1957) firmly established Osborne's importance in postwar British drama. The play starred Laurence Olivier as faded music hall star Archie Rice. This play, Essentially a deep evaluation of three generations of the Rice family, *The Entertainer* exhibits one more time Osborne's gift for counterblast and his deep compassion for failures. In addition to being a portrait of three generations of an English middle-class theatrical family, *The Entertainer* can also be seen as a depiction of the past, present, and future of contemporary England. Principally, however, this play is Osborne's requiem for the dying music hall and the vital part of English life that it represents. *The Entertainer* has been regarded as Osborne's canon of being his first play commissioned by an actor: Laurence Olivier. Olivier eventually played the part of Archie Rice, a seedy, fifth-rate music-hall comedian. Olivier immediately showed his interest for performing the character after reading a portion of the script. Approximately, after ten years, in an interview with Kenneth Tynan, Olivier described the role of Archie Rice as "the most wonderful part that

I've ever played" in a modern play. Like *Look Back in Anger*, it mourns the passing of English traditions and the British Empire. Most critics praised the development of an exciting writing talent.

Osborne's third play to be produced by the Court, *Epitaph for George Dillon* (1958), was written prior to *Look Back in Anger*. These three successful Royal Court productions were followed by a spectacular flop: a West End musical called *The World of Paul Slickey* (1959) which satirised the tabloid press and upper-class society. It is a bitter musical satire of the London press and an attack on individuals who allow themselves to be influenced and manipulated by the mass media.

Osborne's reputation was restored with *Luther* in 1961, a play about the 16th-century German Protestant reformer Martin Luther which chronicles his struggle with faith. Critics and audiences were impressed with this play. And Osborne won Tony award on Broadway. *Luther* was followed by *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964), regarded by some as Osborne's best play. Many critics consider this play as a result of the themes developed in his earlier plays and his finest dramatic achievement. The play focusses on Bill Maitland, a dishonest London lawyer who is haunted by feelings of guilt and self-doubt that eventually lead to his separation from society and his nervous breakdown. Solicitor Bill Maitland is a typical Osborne anti-hero: a paranoid, self-hating man going through a mid-life crisis. The drama takes place in a courtroom dreamscape where Maitland presents evidence of his failings and disappointments. The style of the play is innovative, using intercut monologues to signal the dissociative, abstract quality of the piece. Three years on, when Osborne was struggling with his own nervous breakdown, he looked back on the play as 'an act of self-prophecy'. Then, *A Patriot For Me*, was premiered in 1965. The play is based on the true story of the gay Austro-Hungarian spy Alfred Redl, who was blackmailed by Russia for hiding his sexuality.

John Osborne's plays in the 1970s included *A Sense of Detachment* and *Watch It Come Down*. Osborne turned in his most famous acting appearance for next few years. He wrote a diary for *The Spectator*. In the last decade of his life, he published two volumes of autobiography, *A Better Class of Person* (1981) and *Almost a Gentleman* (1991). He also collected various newspaper and magazine writings together, in 1994, under the title, *Damn You, England*.

His last play was *Déjà Vu* (1991), a sequel to *Look Back in Anger* was first performed at the Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead, in May 1992, and subsequently at the Comedy Theatre, London. The play revisits Jimmy Porter after the interval of 35 years.

9.4 LET US SUM UP

Critics have observed disparity in his works, but have declared Osborne's standard as impressive, rich, and vital. Thus John Osborne's legacy was the transformation in the British theatre. Osborne and a group of playwrights whom he influenced made language important. They also

introduced emotional intensity into the theatre. For them, the theatre was a medium to attack the class distinctions. Though Osborne fell out of theatrical fashion, the best of his work will survive. He once depicted his plays as “lessons in feeling”. And his unique gift was to create violently communicative theatrical heroes who represented his own wounded and damaged spirit. He was, to the very last, a man with a talent for conflict.

9.5 KEY WORDS

Royal Court Theatre A non-commercial West End Theatre in London, England.

Angry Young Man Angry Young Man was a term used for a group of mid twentieth century British writers who presented the anger and frustration with Modern British culture.

9.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 Answer the following questions in detail.

1. Evaluate John Osborne as a playwright with special reference to *Look Back in Anger*.

2. Assess the development of John Osborne as dramatist who transformed the British theatre.

3. Give a brief note on the plays written by Osborne.

Q.1 Choose the Correct option from the given options.

i. John Osborne hated his _____

a. father

b. mother

c. brother

ii. The play, *Look Back in Anger*, finally was picked up by _____ for production after early rejection.

a. George Devine

b. George Eliot

c. George Nashe

- iii. The play, followed by *Look Back in Anger* was _____.
- a. Inadmissible Evidence b. *A Sense of Detachment*
 c. *The Entertainer*
- iv. John Osborne was married _____ times.
- a. two b. four
 c. five
- v. _____ gave strongest boost to the concept of Angry Young Man.
- a. *Look Back in Anger* b. *The Entertainer* c. *Watch It Come Down*
- vi. Osborne won Tony award on Broadway for his play _____
- a. *Look Back in Anger* b. *Luther*
 c. *A Patriot for Me*

9.7 SUGGESTED READING

- Choudhuri, A. D. *Contemporary British Drama: An Outsider's View*. New Delhi: Arnold –Heineman, 1976. Print.
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 - Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.
 - Burgess, Anthony. *English Literature: A Survey for Students*. London: Longman, 1974. Print.
 - Dubey, Arjun. *The Plays of John Osborne*. New Delhi: Alfa Publication, 2010. Print.
 - Gilleman, Luc *John Osborne: Vituperative Artist*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
 - Radcliffe, J B (John B). *Ashgill: Or, the Life and Times of John Osborne*. London: Sands and Company, 2008. Print.
- ❖ Answers:

Q.1 Choose the Correct option from the given options.

- i. - b ii. - a iii. - c iv. - c v. - a vi. - b