



## John Osborne The Man Behind The Artist

Mr. Sunil N. Wathore

Asst. Prof. & Head Dept. of English Arts & Science College, Pulgaon, Tah.Deoli, Dist. Wardha (M.S.)  
Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University, Nagpur.

**ABSTRACT:** John James Osborne, an English playwright, ex-journalist, screenwriter and actor, known for his excoriating prose and intense critical stance towards established social and political norms was born on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1929 in Fulham, London. His father, Thomas Godfrey Osborne, was born in Newport, Monmouthshire, an artist by profession. Apart from his background, there was a strong impulse to imitate the Edwardian grandeur that Osborne felt in his Grandma Grove and Grandpa. These early observations must have influenced Osborne to a later deep-seated idealism, a dream of what the world could be. Moreover, even though his roots are firmly stretched into this lower class of soil, he never wished to mix with his relations nor did he ever identify himself in his childhood with this background. He always maintained some distance and developed a strong 'ego' as if he did not belong to this 'class'. The protagonists of Osborne's plays too, who are the chief representatives of the age, are picked up from the common masses. They are chosen by the playwright from different sections of society to present the overall situation of post-war England and thus, behind all them there is an artist like John Osborne. Osborne's artistic vision seems to have been conditioned and shaped by two important forces - those are heredity and environment on one side and his own personal experiences on the other. While trying to trace the origin of the tragic impulses in Osborne, a researcher has to study these two inevitably.

**KEYWORDS:** John Osborne's Artistic Vision, Man behind the Artist, A strong Impulse, Deep-seated Idealism, Sense of Isolation, Tragic Vision.

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

John James Osborne, an English playwright, ex-journalist, screenwriter and actor, known for his excoriating prose and intense critical stance towards established social and political norms was born on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1929 in Fulham, London. His father, Thomas Godfrey Osborne, was born in Newport, Monmouthshire and an artist by profession. Referring to his relations, Osborne writes: 'There was a dark place in the filial landscape when figures would appear in a blazing memory of innuendo' <sup>(1)</sup>. This was in special reference to his father's family, the Osbornes, who are called by his mother 'moneyed people'. Coming to his mother's side Nellie Beatrice, her parents were publicans. They managed a succession of pubs in London and his mother herself worked behind the bar most of her life. It was typically the lower middle class life:

There would be battling shrieks of laughter, yelling, ignoring, bawling, and every one trying to get his pieces in. A big celebration would be the worst, like Christmas, when there was invariably a row. Sometimes there would be a really large gathering and we would all go over to Tottenham, which was the family headquarters. Setting out from London, it was an exciting journey one never knew what might happen. There would be two or three dozen of us somebody's brother would have a pint too many at the pub and perhaps his wife; carnation button holes would be crumpled; there would be tears and lots of noise... They 'talked about their troubles'. In a way that would embarrass any middle class observer. I have no doubt that they were often boring but life still has meaning for them. Even if they did get drunk and fight, they wereresponding; they were not defeated. <sup>(2)</sup>

Osborne's artistic vision seems to have been conditioned and shaped by two important forces - those are heredity and environment on one side and his own personal experiences on the other. While trying to trace the origin of the tragic impulses in Osborne, a researcher has to study these two inevitably.

Apart from this background, there was a strong impulse to imitate the Edwardian grandeur that Osborne felt in his Grandma Grove and Grandpa. Hence, Osborne has immortalized his Grandpa in "The Entertainer" by identifying him with Billy Rice:

Billy Rice is a spruce man in his seventies. He has great physical pride, the result of a life time of being admired as a 'fine figure of a man'. He is slim, upright, athletic. He glows with scrubbed well being. His hair is just gray, thick and silky from its vigorous daily brush. His clothes are probably twenty five years old including his pointed patent leather shoes but well pressed and smart. His watch chain gleams, his collar is fixed with a tie-pin beneath the tightly knotted black tie, his brown homburg is worn at a very slight angle. When he speaks it is with a dignified Edwardian diction - a kind of repudiation of both Oxford and Cockney that still rhymes 'cross' with 'force', and yet manages to avoid being exactly upper-class or effete. Indeed, it is not an accent of class but of period. One does not hear it often now.<sup>(3)</sup>

Osborne himself admits in his autobiography that this is a part portrait of his grandfather. "The Entertainer" is one play in which we get a full explanation of the phenomenon which also occurs in most Osborne plays - the sentimental longing for an order of things since passed. Billy Rice, a star of the 'good old days' epitomizes this concern for the past era:

Billy: We all had our own style, our own songs and we were all English. What's more, we spoke English. It was different. We all knew what the rules were, and even if we spent half our time making people laugh at times we have never seriously suggested that anyone would break them. A real pro is a real man, all he needs is an old back-cloth behind him and he can hold them on his own for half an hour.<sup>(4)</sup>

Osborne's Grandpa Grove certainly had his own style, but unlike Billy Rice he could not be regarded as having been a star, except in a very small way at the height of his career as a publican, when there were handsome cabs, cigars and his famous breakfast which was said to have consisted of half a bottle of 3-star brandy, a pound of porterhouse steak, oysters in season and a couple of chorus girls all year round.

Perhaps, these early observations must have influenced Osborne to a later deep-seated idealism, a dream of what the world could be. Moreover, even though his roots are firmly stretched into this lower class of soil, he never wished to mix with his relations nor did he ever identify himself in his childhood with this background. He always maintained some distance and developed a strong 'ego' as if he did not belong to this 'class'. And the frequent comments of his elders added to this attitude, who have a 'glancing fondness for him' and who would live to see the day when he would become the 'Prime Minister of England'. Osborne always longed for this Edwardian frame of standards and never tired to carry it even to the adult life. But could this ever be materialized when it is seen through the perspective of the harsh realities of his generation? Whether he had the talent and the potential to realize this ideal frame of standards was a different matter. But was it not going to be inevitably shattered into pieces? Well, if it is so, what are the forces that are to destroy this 'dream world'? Those could be the environment and the heredity themselves to which we made a reference in the beginning. Most of the heroes in Osborne's tragedies begin their tragic struggle to realize their ideals on the stage itself with vain results. Whether it is the energetic Jimmy in "Look Back in Anger", or the talented Dillon in "The Epitaph for George Dillon", or even Martin in "Luther", the root cause of all their tragic struggle shoots itself from their will to realize this consciously framed 'ideal world'.

According to modern authorities on the developmental psychology, a child's environment, above all his relationship with parents, starts shaping his outlook and personality. As Osborne could not enjoy his parent's love and affection as a child, he started developing a feeling of being 'neglected' and 'unwanted' by them. The constant tension and conflicts between his parents made his childhood life unstable and careless. This ultimately resulted in the sick 'alienation' which had become the major theme in his plays. Osborne writes in his autobiography that living the first years of his life in Fulham meant mostly living with his mother. 'My parents saw little of each other, what happened between them I had no way of knowing.'<sup>(5)</sup> His Father, when he was not in Brompton Hospital or in Colindale Sanatorium, seemed to stay in digs a long way from Osborne. He would come over to see his son when he was able and Osborne had a vague remembrance of his parents hitting each other also. But their acute poverty too seems to have killed all his enthusiasm and depressed him from the beginning, which exhausted everything from their life. It was possible that this exhaustion also might have made his mother Nellie Beatrice ruthless and unsympathetic towards her sensitive child. Osborne reveals it in his own words:

We went through miles of department, floor by floor, my mother unable to buy anything, saying little except to complain about her feet aching. Often I felt that my own legs were going to drop off, which meant ... looking up at a clouded, furious face. I remember the childbirth sequence in a film called "The Citadel"... the spectacle was too much for me. Blood seemed to drain out of me and in no time my head could be between my knees and I would be sipping water from a kindly usherette or, in the case of Cadby Hall waitress, who was certainly more sympathetic than my mother.<sup>(6)</sup>

Later on Osborne's admission into school had further increased his sense of isolation. Like hospitals, he knew that they were places where pain and humiliation were the rule. Every school and hospital he went to proved him right. The classrooms may have been purgatory but the playtimes were undoubtedly hell for him. The reason should be quite obvious. He could not bear the 'noise of the constant clash of the boots'. He was almost spinsterish in his distaste for noise and personal disorder although he was capable of initiating both. That was because of his mother's instructions not to disturb his father (almost bedridden throughout). He was always constrained to close doors with surgical accuracy so that the lock went into its place without making a sound or of taking his shoes off in the house and padding about in slippers or even stocking feet. Creaking stairs had to be negotiated like minefields. This should be the finest instance to show as to how one's private life (severely restricted) affects one's public life depriving him of all the enthusiasm that it offers. The consequent 'isolation' in his school days neither had given him any friends nor any enemies. His life at 'Ewell Boys' too was 'glum, anonymous and uneventful'. Scarcely anyone spoke to him directly, staff or boys. Only boredom and apathy prevailed during the working hours. He was also aware of the fact that achieving popularity was not a gift he possessed that he found in others. Consequently this sort of experience implanted a feeling of 'unbalancing' in him. Naturally when he turned to playwriting with his bitter experiences of an unhappy home and unresponsive parents, a life devoid of any affection or friendship who often shooed a cold shoulder, the seeds of tragedy were sown here itself as he began to view life as essentially tragic. His formative years have planted and fostered a deep sense of 'unbelonging' and 'bitterness' in his unconscious which ultimately became the source of his 'anxiety' or 'crisis' and the tragic vision of life.

In the mid-1930s his father's health had recovered enough for him to go back to his work as an advertising copy writer. Some kind of reconciliation might have been affected between his parents as they now set about living together under the same roof. They moved away from London, away from Fulham to Stoneleigh. But the movement was restless. His mother was insistent not to buy any permanent home because she did not want to be 'tied down'. The wretched experiences of the ceaseless movement and the life in such house (in which they rented) are well described in Osborne's autobiography:

Thirty or forty times during the first seventeen years of my life we wrapped up dozens of china dogs and pictures of hated ladies with straining borzois brought or won from fairgrounds like Dreamland in Moorgate to move into another house or new digs until her sterling, raw nailed boredom and dissatisfaction exploded again, driving her to make a dash for another lair- 'I am fed up with this dead and alive hole' <sup>(7)</sup>.

By 1940, the condition of Osborne's father had completely worsened. Now Osborne managed to keep away from school more than ever. Of course he was legitimately unwell for a while with a bad cough and often feverish which prompted his mother to tell the attendance officer convincingly that John was going to be just like his father. Before a few days of his death, his father suddenly had gone blind, but seemed to recover. But the condition soon deteriorated which has given a great relief to his mother who made no secret of her relief that it would all be over soon, when she could get out of the 'dead and alive hole' and go back to London. Yet the hour came when she was waiting excitedly for her husband's last moment and at once insisted John to go in to his father's bedroom to look at him into his coffin. The smell in the room was strong and strange and in his shroud, Osborne's father was unrecognizable. But what was most shocking to Osborne was his mother's reaction to his dead father. Osborne himself describes his experience:

As I looked down at him, she said, Of course, this room's got to be fumigated; you know that, don't you? Fumigated. Fumigated was how she pronounced it. With father's body lying in the bedroom across the landing, I had been obliged to share my briefing room with my mother, who spent hour upon hour reading last Sunday's news of the world, the bright light overhead, rustling the pages in my ear and sighing heavily. For the first time I felt the fatality of hatred. <sup>(8)</sup>

Perhaps this background may help us in understanding why Jimmy attacks Alison almost with animal anger who also places herself in a similar situation like that of his mother, when Alison in the play shows indifference to the death of a relative, Hugh's mother.

But his mother's judgment was right when she said that her son too was going to be just like his father. He was struck by rheumatic fever. Osborne too received a similar treatment. She told him that it was too much to look after him and rightly be in hospital. The idea appalled Osborne but he readily agreed. Because anything would be preferable for him to her presence. After a long time he recovered to some extent. Later on his visit to 'Gone with the Wind' at Rembrandt has a blood letting effect in its excitement, after being so long in confinement. Osborne longed to be in the world again, but longing had taken him to the forbidden world of drinking and whores. The pursuit of drink was more than sex. It would be proper to say that Osborne was forced into this life rather than saying that he drove himself straight into it. Deprived of parental love or any other attachment in his early life, he aspired a great deal from the opposite sex. As he himself admits, Joan was his first girl friend and was for some time his only friend during his school days (1939). But Osborne was also aware as he writes: 'I began to see that my longing for any scraps of affection, friendliness or even tolerance would come to nothing' <sup>(9)</sup>. But what was still more appalling to him was his mother's discouragement.

‘What do you want to go on moping about after Joan for? You just make yourself look silly. She’s only laughing at you the whole time. They all are. What do you think a girl like that could see in you? Even if she were the same age, she’s not ever going to be interested in someone like you. She will get fed up with you in five minutes. You will see. They are all the same. Time you learnt it now. Before you get really unhappy’<sup>(10)</sup>. These words barred Osborne from taking any initiative resulting in Joan’s departure without any intimation. In time he grew to convince himself that he could become ill with grief. Stricken with sickness unto death, he only waited for it to pass. It had to be endured along with the inheritance of a weak body, a blemished skin, ugly limbs, teeth and dandruff. The next girl to meet was Jenny at St. Michael’s. Osborne was certain that Jenny was sincerely concerned with the same kind of feeling as him. But soon she too betrayed him when for the first time existence itself seemed deliberately pumped out from his being. This intense passion of Osborne for love is expressed in his plays in many forms. In “Look Back in Anger” it is expressed in anger. Alan Carter recognizes it- ‘To be angry is to care, and Osborne’s anger is certainly one that stems from love’<sup>(11)</sup>. This is how his School life ends and the school certificate, a passport to nowhere as it turned out to be. However, prompted or not by his friends, it was decided that Journalism was his only hope. In January 1947, he was sent to work for ‘Benn Brother’ controlled by Mr. Granville and Mr. John who in turn directed him to Mr. Silcox, the Editor in chief of the ‘Gas World’. Mr. Silcox had a very high opinion of himself and immediately and eagerly gave him long lectures on the ethics and responsibilities of Journalism. Osborne was soon to become the ace reporter of the ‘Gas World’, following up a scoop which led to his almost immediate promotion. The winter of 1947 was an historically harsh one, ushering in the first post-war fuel crisis. And in February there were heavy floods in the Home Counties and he was tied to visit the hard hit region and report on the situation as it affected the gas industry. His successful attempt gave him great confidence to enter into the life again: ‘By this time I had so enjoyed my own undiscovered, untapped resourcefulness that the outcome was unimportant anyway’.<sup>(12)</sup>

If we juxtapose the ‘Ideal World’ that Osborne has been nourishing since his childhood, and the practical world in which he is trapped now, they stand in an absolute contradistinction, and as totally irreconcilable. Yet, he cannot escape from such life. He must live. Osborne’s vision of man is a creature kept in a perpetual state of striving by the power of ‘will to live’. Osborne’s vision is the Dionysian, which suggests struggle in place of resignation, an affirmation of life in place of denial. This is what Osborne has seen in life, experienced in life and dramatized in his plays. In his heroes we witness a savage will to power, a will to live life to its fullest with all its tragedy and sorrow.

The series of tragic heroes that follow in his plays are involved in a vicious web of circumstances and situation; a web that is not of their own weaving. Viewed from this situation the web seems like an octopus entangling everyone in its tentacles; with the protagonists relentlessly struggling not only to disentangle themselves from its clutches but also trying to destroy it. As these protagonists ‘will’ their own defeat in place of the meek submission to it, their losing battle, however, confers on them a tragic dignity.

Well, what is this web? And what are the forces that made it? Why did those men have to revolt against these forces? For understanding how and why the revolution came about, it becomes necessary to look at the political, sociological and economic conditions of the post-war England. For, we know Osborne has written his plays and presented their heroes out of intense personal experience and he is remarkable for carrying the mood of his time into his plays most successfully. The success of “Look Back in Anger” itself testifies to this fact.

The picture of the British variety of ‘the affluent society’ in the fifties and sixties was convincing enough to the natives of the islands as well as to any foreign visitor. But affluence had its areas of darkness. The nation spent millions of pounds on mass consumption of gadgets and entertainments, but it could not afford to build a single new hospital or prison during 1950-60. Accepting the standard of forty percent above National Assistance rates as minimum living level, Townsend estimated that fourteen percent of the total population of Great Britain was in poverty. Not only the neglected classes of old age pensioners and the sick were left behind in the race for affluence, there was not even a complete minimum wage policy.

And affluence, moreover, brought in disquieting social problems. One of the fruits of the welfare state was steep rise in crime, particularly among teen-agers. Criminologists indicated possible links between fast changing society of this kind and the alarming increase in juvenile offenders, illegitimacy, prostitution and drug taking. Traditional values were being discarded by the youth and an uneasy quest for new values strained the post-war community structure. A fairly sizable section of the population felt either completely left out or partially crippled by insurmountable difficulties. It was an image of a nation with a high proportion of young people struggling to adjust itself to an expanding economy and an outdated socio-moral convention. ‘Even those who enjoyed material prosperity, like Arthur Seaton in Alan Sillitoe’s “Saturday Night and Sunday Morning”, could not feel a sense of communal belongingness, and were aware of their loneliness in the mass society’<sup>(13)</sup>.

This paradoxical situation- affluence enjoyed by a section of the community and a large human area left uncared for- was bound to have its impact on the drama. The Welfare State raised high hopes, but most of its promises remained unfulfilled. It was a society deeply divided against itself.

And the worst phenomenon that added to the 'crisis' was the recurrence of wars. World War II reduced Britain from the position of a great imperial power to that of a second class power; its impact on British society was extensive and deep. Britain lost an empire and did not quite know its role in a fast changing world; Suez and Cyprus only underlined the diminishing importance of Britain in the community of nations. The Conservative Party gave way to the Labour Party in 1945 and this brought in fresh hopes, for a new brave Britain among the working classes, the middle classes and the youth. They demanded a new society, a society not dominated by class system and class culture, but a society fixing its priorities and values in tune with the spiritual and material needs of the entire population. The Welfare State concept with its ambitious programme of distribution of national wealth and welfare among the people was heralded as a real revolution.

The nationalization of industries, dismantling of colonial empire, opportunities of free education up to the highest levels, establishment of health services and social insurance were only one side of the picture. On the other side of the picture we see neglect of the old and the sick, insufficient assistance in the form of social insurance, young children in schools from higher studies and condemning them to a life of drudgery and mediocrity, political and residual wealth, top jobs still open to an exclusive class. The contradiction of a society professedly rejecting the values of an outdated social structure was reflected in the bitterness and frustration of the unprivileged youth. They discover that they had been cheated, given false hopes, and found themselves trapped in the iron frame of the industrial society with a distinct bias for class and hierarchy. This frustration, self-consuming in character, was all the more intolerable as there was no apparent way out of the impasse. Osborne's strength primarily rests on his power to give a convincing shape and release to the contemporary pent-up feelings of frustration of the non post-war generation. In Jimmy Porter's incoherent attack of the contemporary values the audience discovered their language of protest; in his blind anger and frenzy they explored the realities of their own circumstances. And so Kenneth Tynan's great outburst of enthusiasm in the 'Observer' which ended - 'I agree that' "Look Back in Anger" is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters however, is the size of the majority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, twenty and thirty ... I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see "Look Back in Anger"<sup>(14)</sup>.

Thus, there was a 'revolution' which acquired its identity in the history of British Theatre on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1956. Osborne achieved the initial breakthrough while Arden, Bolt, Delaney, Owen, Pinter, Wesker, and others were waiting to attitudes in common, although their work is very different. Essentially they were left wing, disillusioned and irreverent. As J.B. Priestly found the time, as people were 'in danger of turning into a faceless nation'<sup>(15)</sup>. Class remained an obstacle to opportunity and blocked initiation. The young looked around and saw very little which raised their hope or enthusiasm. They saw a world in which two 'blocks', the communist and the anticommunist, glared threateningly at each other, a world where religion had ceased to function as a positive force. In Britain they inherited society riddled from top to bottom with class barriers and petty snobberies. Little wonder then that the young were ready to welcome anybody who took up the fight to revise the principles by which they lived. They sought to change the key necessary to open doors, or better, to have no doors at all. The movement if it could be called anything as definite as that was in its essence an expression of disillusionment. Many people were fed up, bored, and had little opportunity for 'achievement'. They were searching for a world they could believe in, and even get angry at. All this was turned into the forms of stage by Osborne and his own generation possessed 'heat', a glowing emotional fire burned in it. Of course later on the flames have died to a cost flicker, but in 1956, in the circumstances of that period, they leapt high, as Jimmy wonderfully puts it:

Jimmy: ... I may write a book about us all. It's all here, written in flames a mile high. And it won't be recollected in tranquility either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth. It'll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood.<sup>(16)</sup>

## II. CONCLUSION:

It seemed that Osborne had ripped out an inner part of himself and tossed it, bleeding onto the stage. One could not help but feel the burning cry of the masses and the sense of frustration which emanated from the stage. In a word, Jimmy Porter personified Britain's condition. Darkness and disillusionment characterized that society wherein life itself has become 'sickness unto death'. Osborne's tragic vision bases itself on the helpless individual raging impotently against a cruel and inimical social set-up. The protagonist is born into that society from which he has no other option but to 'live'. What is left to his is only to live in such inescapable crisis, and the process of his life is only 'preparing to die'. This tragic situation is skillfully recaptured by the dramatist on the stage who himself was a man behind the artist.

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