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## “ THE INDOMITABLE CONSCIENCE OF BILLY RICE IN”THE ENTERTAINER. ”



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### ABSTRACT: -

**T**he art form "The Entertainer" is set in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis - a time of demonstration in Trafalgar Square, trouble in colonial Cyprus and the impending resignation of the Prime Minister. The year 1956 was riddled with political crises, and even though the Hungarian revolution was not mentioned in the play, it still contributed its undercurrents to the general background of the play.

This drama, apart from being a social caricature of Britain, presents people all at ease with themselves and their surrounding.

**KEYWORDS:** Indomitable Conscience , Billy Rice , political crises, The Entertainer.

### INTRODUCTION :

Still the generations in the family are held together not by family ties but by a common bond of predicament. The predicament that while what they have at present is not much good, it is probably a lot better than anything the future will bring. They are all frightened with a sense of utter insecurity and hopelessness that echo in their breathings.

The basis of the play itself is contained in a

speech made by Archie's son Frank which is an indictment of Archie, and a bitter social criticism. But at the same time, it is an expression of the wider theme of frustration with the increasing meaninglessness of life lived in middle class self-absorption. And what is important is, even though the speech has got wide ranging implication on the stage, it is directed against Archie who symbolically represents the sick culture. However, the character who is placed in absolute contradiction to Archie himself, in every respect, is Billy Rice, Archie's own father. Between these two characters the main confrontation is presented. Thus the play evolves a conflict between an 'Ideal' and 'decadent' society. The play delineates the fate of the characters who are miserably trapped in a self-deceptive society and their rebellion against such vulgarised one that is chiefly symbolized in Archie.

Here the audience is bound to find fault with society and not with the protagonist. Further, the interest is stimulated by the fact that the playwright has adopted some form of a Brechtian framework for the play. The intention is to bring a 'Therapeutic effect' upon the audience.

The real life story of Archie, Billy Rice and the family is portrayed in scenes enclosed by a framework of Archie's music-hall acts. In these acts, through Archie, Osborne passes some general comments on life and even on the primary action of the play. Archie himself becomes a symbolic expression of the decay of the world:

**Archie:** I'm dead behind these eyes. I'm dead, just like the whole inert, shoddy lot out there. It doesn't matter because

I don't feel a thing, and neither do they(1).

In "The Entertainer" Osborne applies his knife vivisectionally to the very virtue of his time and shows how many lies were concealed under the cover of contemporary morality and how much virtue has outlived. And this is what constitutes Archie Rice who is rightly characterized as "a shabby, shallow, song-and-dance man, a blasphemous, lecherous, self-centred heel". On the other hand, there is Billy Rice, quite opposed to him who exhibits a Promethean defiance without leaving any sign of submission. And between these two polarized characters, representing their own worlds, the conflict is generated in the action of the play. In "The Entertainer", along with the chief protagonist Billy Rice there are other characters like Jean and Frank who vehemently oppose Archie Rice and the self-deceptive dreamy world. That is why, we also sense in the play, the focus being laid more on Archie Rice.

Thus "The Entertainer" becomes a polarized axis between Billy and Archie, who are real embodiments of a dying way of life. At the very outset we listen to a bitter criticism of contemporary life. In the First Act we see Jean returning to the family after having broken about her brother's involvement in Suez and favours another brother Frank who opted to go to jail instead of joining National Service. While Jean's feelings about the futility of Mice's efforts for the country, and her cynicism go even beyond the comprehension of the characters present on the stage, the audience comes inevitably to share the frustrated feelings of the masses who seem to have resigned to the pathetic condition of life.

In his note to the text, Osborne says – "The music-hall is dying, and with it, a significant part of England has gone: something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art". Osborne is nostalgically reminiscing the Edwardian splendor, which he thinks actually existed for him, but he is also raising a burning cry against the antediluvian world whose faults have brought the present one into existence.

As it is already noted, the basis of the play itself is contained in a speech made by Frank:

**Frank:** Look around you, can you think of any  
Good reasons for staying in this cosy  
little corner of Europe? (2)

In fact, this is exactly how Archie has been reduced to nonentity. While this criticism has its own wider implications it is all the more directed against Archie who knows he is trapped in the web, chooses to ignore it and quietens Frank telling him that he will wake up the poles living below.

In the First Act itself the two conflicting forces are drawn together when Archie provokes Billy Rice, and then immediately tries to suppress his voice. At this, Billy bursts forth with a characteristically Osbornian caricature:

**Billy:** Don't talk to me about that bunch of  
greasy tomcats! One Britisher could  
always take on half a dozen of that  
kind. Or used to. Does not look like  
it not (3).

In this expression the dramatist typifies an era of significant achievement and appropriate values, especially in comparison with that of Archie's. Billy Rice is the immortalization of his grandfather in whom Osborne saw the Edwardian reflections; Billy Rice himself enjoyed the "Edwardian frame of Standards" in his good old days but now vehemently criticizes the present society which is lacking in values. His character-portrayal is quite appealing:

Billy Rice is a spruce man in his seventies. He was great physical pride, the result of a lifetime of being admired as a “fine figure of man”. He is slim, upright, athletic.(4)

Billy’s dissatisfaction can be realized fully when we juxtapose the soul-shattering experience of Phoebe with the ‘ideal world’ of Billy:

**Phoebe :** I don’t want to end up being laid out by some stranger in some rotten stinking little street in Gateshead, or West Hartlepool or another of those dead –or- alive holes!(5)

For, this is the fact, which we know, is almost certainly awaiting her, who, like the rest, is trapped in a world where there is no ray of hope. But for Archie Rice even though he is aware of the pathetic situation – when Osborne diagnoses the sick culture through him:

**Archie :** I’m dead behind these eyes. I am dead, just like the whole inert, shoddy lot out there. It does not matter because I don’t feel a thing, and neither do they (6).

Archie is not quite as “dead behind his eyes” as he has declared himself to be. That is why it is important to remember Osborne’s own warning against taking Archie at his word, that is, either in his declared incapacity for feeling, or in his advice to Jean to deaden her responses.

Archie, on the other hand, instead of preparing himself to join the struggle, to remove himself from the clutches of the circumstances, makes attempts to stage another show which would be financed by the parents of his latest girl friend. However, Billy interferes with all his manoeuvres and prevents him from marrying by informing the parents of the girl that Archie is already married. Billy expects his son not to compromise with a degraded life and demoralize his art. He laments about the people who submit themselves passively to the compelling needs of life, without making any retaliation. It seems to him as if people have forgotten the very meaning of the life:

**Billy :** I feel sorry for you people. You don’t know what it’s really like. You haven’t lived, most of you. You’ve never known what it was like, you’re all miserable really. You don’t know what life can be like (7).

Billy is presented throughout the play as a man worthy of respect who always sticks to his ‘ideals’ without exhibiting even the slightest sign for flexibility. He knows that in the process of time, society itself lost its centre, went out of time but he himself does not lose his ideals; culture itself becomes chaotic and valueless but he did not want to lose his dignity or his image as a ‘star’.

There is thus, a strong wish-fulfillment in Archie’s eventual attempt to stage a comeback for his father. In the family argument, this proposal generates and the reaction of Jean on behalf of Billy is remarkable:

**Jean :** He’s is the only one of us who has any dignity or respect for himself, he’s the only one of us who has anything at all, and you are going to murder him, you’re going to take him down to –(8)

The answers to these questions are not difficult to assume; along with Jean the audience too are bound to sense that Billy is too sensitive to be an accomplice in the destruction of his dignity and, in the event, of himself.

The prolonged conflict between Billy and society, that has been demanding his submission and decline through the same forces that have been working on Archie, comes to an end. But the struggle of Billy in the play is more suggestive rather than direct. He has been given a voice through Jean who also becomes a mouthpiece for what all the dramatist had to say from the vantage of his vision. Billy does not bow down to the pressures of society that successfully work through Archie but, instead, prepares himself to lose his life. He is prepared to commit suicide, as he does in the play, rather than reconcile himself with the circumstances. But his unwillingness to commit himself to anything more absorbing than utter resignation, becomes a condition necessary before a new identity, a new style of living can be discovered. In this regard he very much resembles Jimmy Porter who also goes along similar lines.

Billy, not only as a human being but also as an artist is better suited to the passing of an era. In fact, Billy himself asserts – “I keep telling him – it’s dead already”(9), the ‘business’ that Archie has been trying to perpetuate.

Both are pathetic comments on human life, and we get a final moving image of Archie, alone and defeated, walking slowly off stages. One of the chief merits of this play is that, Billy’s death becomes symbolically appropriate, because it marks the point at which Archie’s struggle, the struggle which could hold back the historical process is finally rendered futile. This is how “The Entertainer” remains as an exquisite creation for revealing the tragic vision of Osborne where the polarities cannot be reconciled. The only alternative seems to be uprooting the existing sick culture, to smash it into pieces, so that it can be reorganized later; it can be given a new shape and identity.

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