



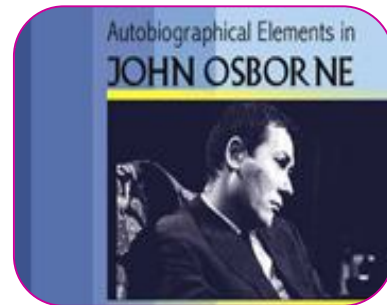
“THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN THE WORKS OF JOHN OSBORNE”

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ABSTRACT

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 : *heredity and environment , Autobiographical Element , blazing memory.*



INTRODUCTION

John James Osborne, ex-journalist, actor, playwright and ex-Director of Woodfall Films, was born on 12th December, 1929 in Fulham, London. His father, Thomas Godfray Osborne, was born in Newport, Monmouthshire, an artist by profession. Referring to his relations, Osborne writes: "There were dark places in the filial landscape when figures would appear in a blazing memory of innuendo'. 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, every one trying to get his pieces in. A big celebration would be the worst, like Christmas, when there was invariably a row. (*A Better Class of Person*,14)

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 lifetime 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. (*The Entertainer*, 13)

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' epitomises 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. (Ibid.86)

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". 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. (*A Better Class of Person*,36)

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".

The '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 'unbelonging' 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 shoed 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.

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. Frumigated 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. (Ibid.39)

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 *Look Back in Anger* shows indifference to the death of a relative, Hugh's mother. This is how all the plays of Osborne contain many incidents of his personal life whom we call as the autobiographical element.

WORKS CITED

1. John Osborne, *A Better Class of Person, An Autobiography* (London, 1960), p.14.
2. Quoted by Alan Carter, *John Osborne* (Edinburgh, 1973), p.9.
3. Osborne, *The Entertainer* (London, 1957), p.13.
4. *Look Back in Anger* (London, 1957), p.54.