

# Disillusionment and Despair: Study of John Osborne's Selected Plays

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the fundamental themes of despair and disillusionment present in selected plays of John Osborne, a key figure in the "Angry Young Man" movement in post-World War II Britain. The study aims to explore the disillusionment and despair in six plays, "Look Back in Anger," "The Entertainer," "The World of Paul Slickey," "Inadmissible Evidence," "A Patriot for Me," and "The Hotel in Amsterdam". Through a comprehensive literary analysis, this research elucidates how Osborne's characters embody the pervasive disillusionment of their era and examines the broader sociopolitical commentary embedded in his works. The results highlight the enduring relevance of Osborne's plays in both theatrical and sociocultural contexts, offering insightful perspectives on the human condition and the changing dynamics of post-war British society.

**Keywords:** John Osborne, literary analysis, disillusionment, despair, post-World War II Britain, Angry Young Man

## **1. Introduction**

Osborne began to gain recognition as a playwright in the late 1950s and early 1960s in post-World War II Britain. This era, often referred to as the "Angry Young Man" movement, was marked by a sense of unrest among intellectual and working-class youth. Britain has a disrupted economy and a society in transition as a result of World War II. The country experienced tremendous social and political transformations, notably the rise of the Welfare State and the dissolution of traditional class structures, as the British Empire was in decline (Garland). A new generation of painters, writers, and playwrights emerged during this time who attempted to express the frustrations and disillusionment of the time.

Born on 12 December 1929, John James Osborne was a British playwright, screenwriter, and actor who became a central figure in the "Angry Young Man" movement. He was born in London and held several occupations before becoming a playwright, including acting and journalism. With the 1956 performance of "Look Back in Anger," a play that reshaped the British theatrical establishment, he finally achieved success. He was also renowned for creating complicated, frequently anti-heroic characters that battled their feelings of disillusionment and despair. His other significant works, such as "The Entertainer" and "Inadmissible Evidence", both demonstrated his skill at portraying characters who are battling disillusionment and despair. John Osborne received various honours for his contributions to British theatre, including an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for his work on the film adaptation of "Tom Jones" (1963). On December 24, 1994, he passed away, leaving behind a legacy of thought-provoking plays.

Six John Osborne plays, “Look Back in Anger” (1956), “The Entertainer” (1957), “The World of Paul Slickey” (1959), “Inadmissible Evidence” (1964), “A Patriot for Me” (1965), “The Hotel in Amsterdam” (1968), have been analyzed in this study for their portrayal of disillusionment and despair. Therefore, this study aims to explore the disillusionment and despair in John Osborne's play.

## **2. Literary analysis of the selected plays that highlight disillusionment and despair**

### **Look Back in Anger**

John Osborne's seminal play “Look Back in Anger” is a profound story about post-war disillusionment and the breakdown of class hierarchies in Britain in the middle of the 20th century. Jimmy Porter, the main character, stands in stark contrast to the pervasive rage and discontent of the time. Osborne criticizes oppressive uniformity and emotional repression of upper-middle-class society through scathing monologues and turbulent relationships with Jimmy (Fisher). A cramped flat serves as a metaphor for the oppressive surroundings that feed the wrath of Jimmy. “Look Back in Anger” is a timeless piece of social and psychological reflection because of Osborne's inventive use of vernacular language and expressionistic techniques, which give the play a raw, genuine aspect.

### **The Entertainer**

“The Entertainer” is a fascinating exploration of the loss of the British Empire in the post-World War II era as well as a fading music hall artist named Archie Rice. Osborne expertly crafts dark comedy and biting dialogue against a backdrop of societal upheaval and political disenchantment to illustrate the collapse of traditional values and the hollowness of the theatre industry. Archie Rice, a representation of the entertainment industry's decline, represents the moral relativism of a changing country. The play is a stinging assessment of a country striving to identify its identity in a changing world, and Osborne's choice of a crumbling theatre as a symbol for Britain's waning splendour emphasizes this point (Billington).

### **The World of Paul Slickey**

“The World of Paul Slickey” (1959), a play by John Osborne, epitomizes disillusionment and despair within the realm of celebrity culture and journalism (Lee). Set against the backdrop of post-war London, Osborne delves into the moral bankruptcy and hollowness of a sensationalist press, as represented by the titular character, Paul Slickey. Slickey's relentless pursuit of scandalous stories and his unscrupulous manipulation of public figures underscores the corrosive effects of fame and media on individuals. Osborne masterfully exposes the vacuity of a society obsessed with superficiality, reflecting the disillusionment and despair inherent in a world where integrity and authenticity are sacrificed at the altar of sensationalism.

### **Inadmissible Evidence**

“Inadmissible Evidence” gives a harsh portrayal of human hopelessness and social alienation. Osborne shows the damaging impact of modernity on personal identity through the character of disillusioned lawyer Bill Maitland (Moazzam). The cynical and self-hatred-filled soliloquies of Maitland provide a glimpse into his failing mental state and are a symbol of a larger existential crisis. The nonlinear narrative style of the play emphasizes the fragmented nature of Maitland's psyche, paralleling the breakdown of post-World War II British society. Osborne's relentless examination of inner despair and

the inevitable effects of cultural conformity ultimately reveals a grim, expertly drawn portrait of the human condition.

### **A Patriot for me**

“A Patriot for Me” explores the complex interplay of identity, sexuality, and social standards in the strict boundaries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Kelly). Osborne examines the psychological conflict of a homosexual man in a hostile environment through the character of Colonel Redl, using his narrative to comment on the broader themes of conformity and treachery. Redl's double existence and final demise offer a moving assessment of the damaging impact of society's standards on personal integrity. Osborne's unwavering portrayal of these topics emphasizes the eternal relevance and enduring impact of the play in the canon of contemporary drama.

### **The Hotel in Amsterdam**

“The Hotel in Amsterdam” examines the fundamental themes of loneliness and existential sorrow against the backdrop of an erratic relationship. The play presents the lives of three actor couples who have fled for a luxurious weekend in Amsterdam to escape the tyrannical director, KL (Osborne). The people struggle with their inner demons in a desolate hotel room, illustrating the frailty of interpersonal relationships. Osborne embodies the absurdist theatrical tradition with his limited speech and harsh symbolism. The play explores the protagonists' emotional emptiness, which reflects the gloom of post-war Europe. Osborne challenges the audience to consider the isolation and disillusionment inherent in the human condition through an unsettling atmosphere and existential difficulties of characters, making the play a thought-provoking work of existential theatre.

### **3. Disillusionment and despair in the plays**

Osborne's plays are emblematic of his ability to capture the disillusionment and despair that pervaded British society during the post-war period, both in terms of character portrayal and thematic exploration.

#### **Characters**

In the play “Look Back in Anger,” Osborne portrays Jimmy Porter as a representation of disillusionment and despair. Jimmy, an intellectual but discontented working-class man, becomes a symbol of post-war frustration. His unending rants, which are frequently harsh and angry, reveal his sense of hopelessness against the world. He feels stuck in a socioeconomic group that provides him with little opportunity for advancement and even less fulfillment. His constant criticism of his wife Alison and her upper-middle-class family, whom he sees as an embodiment of the social limitations that bind him, reveals his profound disappointment. Alison is also enmeshed in a web of despair as she struggles with her love for Jimmy and her desire for a different life. She feels split between her husband and herself. The protagonist of “The Entertainer,” Archie Rice, represents disillusionment in the setting of the deteriorating British entertainment industry. Archie, a fading music hall performer, sees his career crumble, reflecting the decline of the once-glorious British Empire. His desperation and sense of hopelessness damage his attempts to save his profession and personal life. His daughter Jean Rice also depicts the generational disillusionment. She struggles with her ambitions and the harsh reality of her father's world, ultimately deciding to rebel and flee.

Osborne introduces Paul Slickey in “The World of Paul Slickey,” a character who is a representation of the disappointment that might result pursuit of fame and superficial success. As he navigates the world of celebrity journalism, gossip journalist Slickey exposes the hollowness and shallowness of the culture he covers. Despite his apparent success and status in society, Slickey struggles with the meaninglessness of his existence and the vacuity of the world he lives in, which gives rise to a profound sense of melancholy in his character. His disillusionment serves as a critique of the values of celebrity culture and the futility of pursuing popularity at the expense of real happiness.

“Inadmissible Evidence” introduces us to Bill Maitland, a middle-aged solicitor whose life is in chaos. He is Bill Maitland is a symbol of disillusionment, with his legal profession failing, his connections deteriorating, and his internal unrest intensifying. Other characters, like Shirley, his mistress, represent despair through her unfulfilled desires and internal conflict. Colleagues like Hudson and Jones reflect the pervasive disillusionment within the legal profession. Osborne uses these people to effectively show the despair and disillusionment that characterize the life of Maitland, providing a striking depiction of the human condition.

Colonel Redl, a character in “A Patriot for Me,” is also an ideal example of disillusionment. As a homosexual man living in the oppressive Austro-Hungarian Empire, his inner battle highlights the glaring discrepancy between his true nature and societal expectations. There is a pervasive sense of despair caused by the tension between one's internal individuality and social conformity. Redl's eventual downfall highlights the devastating effects of cultural conventions on one's integrity, leaving the audience with a terrible sense of disillusionment regarding the limitations of the world in which Redl lived.

The characters (three actor couples) in “The Hotel in Amsterdam,” discover themselves entangled in a labyrinth of loneliness and existential anguish while fleeing their oppressive director KL. A persistent sense of disillusionment gradually overtakes their original enthusiasm for a lavish weekend getaway. This disillusionment emerges as they confront the stark reality that their attempts to escape have merely transplanted their internal demons to the confines of the desolate hotel room.

## Themes

“Look Back in Anger” serves as a compelling exploration of alienation and disillusionment (Yaşar). The conflicted relationship between Jimmy Porter and his wife Alison is the central theme of the play. Jimmy, the archetypal “angry young man,” personifies disenchantment with society and the status quo. His rage is a reflection of his extreme estrangement from his surroundings (Tecimer). His disgust for middle-class comfort and his unhappiness with the socio-economic inequalities of his period serve as the pinnacle of this estrangement. Jimmy Porter represents the sense of hopelessness that comes from realizing that the assurances of post-war Britain have not come true for people like him.

In “The Entertainer,” Osborne emphasizes the disillusionment and despair that the music hall performer Archie Rice is experiencing. A microcosm of the larger societal disillusionment is the decline of the music hall as a form of entertainment. Archie Rice portrays the anguish of people struggling to hang onto a fading period. Osborne weaves themes of nostalgia and hopelessness throughout the play, as Archie's professional breakdown represents a greater disillusionment with a post-colonial Britain striving to find its place in the world (Gilliard). The fall of the music hall is a reflection of the waning splendour of the British Empire and the loss of identity of the nation in the international arena, leading to a profound sense of despair among its citizens.

“The World of Paul Slickey” explores tabloid journalism, celebrity culture, and the emptiness of contemporary life (Lee). Osborne investigates how sensationalism and manipulation of truth in the media lead to disillusionment. Paul Slickey, the play's central figure, is a celebrity gossip columnist who thrives on disclosing the private lives of celebrities. Osborne delivers a critical indictment of the contribution of the media to the spread of despair and disillusionment through the figure of Slickey. This theme extends to the broader social environment, as many people lead brief and meaningless lives due to their obsession with fame and money achievement.

The play “Inadmissible Evidence” examines the moral decline and disillusionment in the legal profession (Moazzam). Osborne uses Maitland's persona to illustrate the decay of moral principles and the hollowness of professional accomplishment. Maitland's encounters with clients and coworkers shed light on the moral compromises that lawyers make in the quest to achieve financial success. As lawyers like Maitland renounce their beliefs in favour of pragmatism and personal gain, the legal profession, once viewed as the foundation of justice and integrity, becomes a symbol of disillusionment. The play ultimately emphasizes the moral despair that can come from working in a field where justice is frequently compromised for the sake of professional progress.

“A Patriot for Me” takes on the theme of identity crisis and disillusionment within the context of espionage and sexual identity. Redl's struggle to balance his sexual orientation with his responsibilities as a military officer serves as a metaphor for the broader theme of societal disillusionment (Horzum). He lives in secrecy and lies because of the harsh societal rules and expectations of the time, leading to a profound sense of despair. The play underlines the tragic results of a society that promotes conformity at the expense of personal authenticity, leading to the disillusionment and moral decay of its citizens.

“The Hotel in Amsterdam” addresses the theme of isolation and despair in contemporary society. Characters in the play gather in a hotel room and engage in a series of conversations that show their deep-seated alienation and disillusionment (Osborne). The hotel room itself becomes a representation of the isolation that permeates contemporary life. The relationships between the characters are characterized by a sense of detachment and alienation, representing the emotional emptiness and loneliness that can be a part of contemporary life. The play provides an engaging depiction of the despair that can emerge from the breakdown of deep human connections and the alienating forces of modernity.

### **Comparison of the portrayal of disillusionment and despair in the plays**

Collectively, John Osborne's plays provide a rich examination of despair and disillusionment in post-World War II British society. Even though each play explores these themes in a different setting, they all have similarities that allow for meaningful comparisons. One similarity is the portrayal of people trapped in circumstances beyond their control, leading to a profound sense of disillusionment. Jimmy Porter in “Look Back in Anger,” Archie Rice in “The Entertainer,” and Paul Slickey in “The World of Paul Slickey,” these characters all struggle with the social, professional, or cultural restrictions placed on them by their respective environments. This shared struggle highlights the pervasiveness of disillusionment in a world that is rapidly changing.

Furthermore, Osborne's characters frequently engage in internal conflicts that reflect external societal conflicts. Alison in “Look Back in Anger” symbolizes the internal conflict experienced by characters who get stuck between loyalty and selfish aspirations. Colonel Redl in “A Patriot for Me” exemplifies the conflict between personal identity and social convention, which represents a larger sense of societal

disillusionment. Additionally, all of Osborne's plays examine the impact of external factors on the lives and decisions of individuals. The fall of the music hall in “The Entertainer” parallels the decline of the British Empire, illustrating the connection between individual and societal disillusionment. Likewise, in “The World of Paul Slickey,” the sensationalism and deception of the media also contribute to the protagonists' disillusionment, reflecting a larger social trend. However, the portrayal of despair and disillusionment in each play also offers distinctive nuance. “Inadmissible Evidence” primarily focuses on the legal industry, bringing light on the moral compromises lawyers make in their pursuit of success. “The Hotel in Amsterdam” points out the collapse of human relationships while providing a current perspective on isolation and despair in a society that is rapidly modernizing.

### **Socio-political commentary and influence on theatre**

John Osborne's plays became popular in the years following World War II as engaging venues for sociopolitical critique, having a substantial influence on British theatre. They reflected and shaped the socio-political commentary by capturing the disappointment and despair that characterized the time. Osborne's characters functioned as conduits for the anxiety of the time during the tremendous socioeconomic changes of the post-war era. These characters, most notably Jimmy Porter in “Look Back in Anger,” opposed tradition and gave rise to a new type of anti-hero that captured the anger of the working class (Zohra). Audiences looking for more genuine storylines reacted well to this break from conventional theatre. “Inadmissible Evidence” explored disillusionment within the legal profession, reflecting concerns about ethics and integrity in the post-war judicial system (Moazzam). Osborne's criticism reshaped established beliefs and encouraged discussions about improving the field. The decline of the music hall was portrayed in “The Entertainer” as a representation of the declining British Empire (Billington). This reflection on cultural identity and status sparked conversations about cultural preservation and renewal in modern times. “The World of Paul Slickey” analyzed sensationalist journalism and celebrity culture, contributing to debates about media ethics and responsible journalism (Lee). It highlighted the emptiness of modern life, which is fueled by popularity and superficial achievement. “A Patriot for Me” criticized societal norms and views against homosexuality, influencing commentary on LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/questioning and more) rights and the acceptance of many identities (Kelly). “The Hotel in Amsterdam” sparked debates on the dissolution of human connections and the alienating effects of modern living (Osborne). Hence, Osborne's plays dealt with sociopolitical concerns and revolutionized theatre, motivating a new generation of playwrights to use theatre to bring about social change, shaping British theatre.

### **4. Conclusion**

Osborne expertly captured the zeitgeist of his time with his engaging characters and thought-provoking ideas, providing a critical lens through which to study the socio-political scene. His characters, including Jimmy Porter and Paul Slickey, act as mediums for the general angst and dissatisfaction of a rapidly changing world. These plays changed the course of British theatre, ushering in a new period of realism and anti-heroism while simultaneously serving as a forum for socio-political commentary. Osborne's legacy lives on via his works as a monument to the ongoing value of art in illuminating the complexity of the human experience and the changing social fabric.

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