

Ghent University
Faculty of Arts and
Philosophy



COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHN OSBORNE'S *LOOK
BACK IN ANGER* AND MARK RAVENHILL'S *SHOPPING
AND FUCKING*

Supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Jozef De Vos

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1 INTRODUCTION

The theatre of the twentieth century experienced several ups and downs. Nevertheless, two innovative movements were able to give a new impulse to the theatre world: the Angry Young Men of the 1950s and the In-Yer-Face movement of the 1990s. John Osborne was a pioneer of the first movement, Mark Ravenhill an engineer of the latter.

In order to expose some similarities and differences between these two movements, I decided to focalize on John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing*. These masterpieces are both incredibly significant of the theatrical movements they belong to. Of course these works were written in a different generation and obviously they show several dissimilarities but I want to demonstrate that the following quote of John Heilpern¹ is slightly incorrect: "*Shopping and F***ing* has nothing in common with *Look Back*, except the Royal Court." (189)

In the second chapter, John Osborne, the characteristics of the Angry Young Men and the content of *Look Back in Anger* will be presented. Logically, the same structure applies for the third chapter in which Mark Ravenhill, In-Yer-Face theatre and the content of *Shopping and F***ing* will be depicted. In the fourth chapter, my survey on the affinities and the differences between the two plays will be elucidated. Because of the word limit, I had to focus my exploration on a few particular subjects. In the fifth and final chapter, the different subjects will converge and an answer will be formulated to the question whether Heilpern was right to claim that *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* have nothing in common (189).

¹ John Heilpern wrote *John Osborne: A Patriot for Us*, an authorized biography of Osborne. In this work, he makes a dodge to Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing*, in which he alleges that *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* are two totally different plays.

2 JOHN OSBORNE'S *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

The treatment of John Osborne's life and works will be rather extensive since Osborne employed a lot of autobiographical elements in the realization of *Look Back in Anger*. The autobiographical facts constitute a noteworthy role in the comparison between *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*. In Osborne's biography I will not discuss all the plays he has ever written but focus on the most significant ones.

2.1 *John Osborne*

John Osborne was born in Fulham, a suburb of London, on 12 December 1929.² His father Thomas Godfrey Osborne, a former advertising copywriter and commercial artist, was suffering from tuberculosis and his mother Nellie Beatrice was a barmaid. Osborne had much respect for his father who died when he was only ten years old. His sister Faith had already died of tuberculosis when he was two. Osborne would wail his father's death for the rest of his life. Though his father had a drinking problem, Osborne romanticized his paternal love.

Osborne did not have a steady, loving childhood. As a child, he was often sick. Moreover, he did not grow up in a warm home. He spent most of his time at the house of his childhood friend Mickey Wall. At school Osborne was frequently abased and bullied. In spite of this violent environment Osborne started writing poetry and short stories at school. His interest for theatre had already aroused earlier because both of his parents often took him to the theatre.

At the age of fourteen, Osborne attended school at Belmont College in Devon. Unfortunately he was expelled from school after hitting his headmaster Mr Heffer. Osborne

² This biographical introduction is chiefly based on John Heilpern's *John Osborne: A Patriot for Us*.

disliked the headmaster's upper-class accent and caught Heffer's disapproval when he fell in love with his niece Jenny. He was not merely a schoolboy rebel but an excellent student as well. He was self-educated and he adapted his cockney accent in school in order to belong to the solid middle class. He was intelligent enough to go to university but Mr Heffer tempered his ambitions. The headmaster suggested that a career in journalism would suit Osborne perfectly.

When he turned fifteen, Osborne became a journalist for a trade journal named *Gas World*. Heilpern points out that Osborne actually hated journalism: "he became that despised thing, the object of his own derisive furies, a journalist." (70) He strongly disliked his job and decided to flee from reality and his meddling mother. He joined the 'world of theatre' where he became an actor in 1948. He became the protégé of George Devine, the founding artistic director of the English Stage Company.

Osborne turned out to be a poor actor and only got minor roles. He wanted to change his course: he started his career as playwright. He wrote his plays in accordance with his own acting experiences:

Osborne's compensation for his failure as an actor was to write great whopping roles and imagine himself performing them brilliantly. It's why the leading parts in his best plays are all male, and why their monologues of blistering contempt and desperation revel in star actors. (Heilpern 93)

Osborne became friends with another actor: Anthony Creighton. Together they wrote *Personal Enemy* in 1954. The play was conceived as a huge failure. A few years later, they wrote a more successful play: *Epitaph for George Dillon* (1958).

The term ‘womanizer’ perfectly applied to John Osborne. He married five times. Surprisingly, he married three actresses (Pamela Lane, Mary Ure and Jill Bennett) and two literary critics (Penelope Gilliatt and Helen Dawson). That is quite astonishing because “he said of actresses that they made impossible mistresses and even worse wives” and “Osborne famously dismissed critics as treacherous parasites.” (Heilpern 4) His first four marriages turned out to be full-size calamities. Osborne once described his chaotic love life with this straightforward comparison: “I often confronted problems like an improvising chimpanzee faced with the dashboard of a jumbo jet” (qtd. in Heilpern 201). Only his fifth wife, Helen Dawson, was able to make him happy: “Until he met Helen Dawson, women defeated him. Women drove him mad” (Heilpern 334).

In 1951 Osborne acted together with Pamela Lane. He fell in love with her and they married that very same year. Her middle-class parents always withheld the marriage. They were even so suspicious of Osborne that they hired a private detective to trail his activities. After the detective had reported the closeness of Osborne with a homosexual actor, Mr and Mrs Lane tried to convince their daughter that Osborne was gay. In a letter to Creighton, Osborne angrily describes the accusations of Pamela’s mother:

The big gun she [Pamela’s mother] brings up against me is that I am QUEER. Yes!!
Or as she puts it: a NANCY BOY. She points to my long hair, the dying Keats face
and body, my complete oddity, my affectedness, effeminacy – even Vicky!! [his dog,
a dachshund]. (qtd. in Heilpern 119)

The resistance of Pamela’s parents drove them even more in each other’s arms. After they got married, Osborne and Lane did not have enough money to buy their own place. Creighton offered them to live with him in his flat. Osborne and Lane seized the opportunity with open

arms. A few years later Lane got a miscarriage. In 1954 they separated after Lane had admitted that she was having an extramarital affair.

In May 1955 Osborne started writing *Look Back in Anger*, a play based on his unsuccessful marriage to Pamela Lane. He finished his play within two intensive months. The anger of his hero Jimmy Porter is outrageous. Porter's monologues are full of (implicit) social criticism. The play is strongly autobiographical: for instance the character of Alison is based on Pamela Lane. In the summer of 1955 Osborne discovered an advertisement of the newly instituted English Stage Company in the newspaper. The Company was looking for new plays to be performed at the Royal Court Theatre. His submission of *Look Back in Anger* was accredited positively, hence the play had been accepted for production at the Royal Court Theatre. The play was directed by Tony Richardson who thought that “*Look Back in Anger* is the best play written since the War.” (Heilpern 153) The play turned out to be a huge commercial and financial success.

In 1957 Osborne married his second wife, actress Mary Ure. Ironically, he came to know her after she had played Alison (character inspired on his first wife) onstage. In the same year he also accomplished his second theatrical success with *The Entertainer*. The central theme of this play was similar to *Look Back in Anger*: social protest (Marowitz 175). The protagonist Archie Rice is represented as a social failure and resembles in this way the character of Jimmy Porter (Skovmand 96). Skovmand accounts that *The Entertainer* is even a better play than Osborne's most famous work *Look Back in Anger*: “although there is a central character he is not allowed to overshadow the others to the same degree as Jimmy did in *Look Back in Anger*.” (99)

During his career, Osborne's plays evolved thematically. In *Epitaph for George Dillon* (1958) and *The World of Paul Slickey* (1959) Osborne exhibited religious disturbance and he

even launched a combat against the failing church (Marowitz 175-176). In 1961 Osborne wrote *Luther*, a historical drama about Martin Luther, in which the rapturous rebel Luther instigated the Protestant Reformation.

Osborne often humiliated Mary Ure in public and subsequently she started an affair with Robert Shaw. The marriage of Osborne and Ure was officially over in 1963 when Osborne on his behalf started a relationship with his future third wife, critic Penelope Gilliatt. Osborne and Gilliatt married in 1963, shortly after his divorce to Ure was granted. The following year Gilliatt gave birth to Osborne's daughter Nolan. He never succeeded in building up a solid relationship with his daughter. In 1965 Osborne wrote *Inadmissible Evidence*, a play in which he expresses that solitariness is a curse. His isolated hero Maitland cannot find a place in contemporary society, just like Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*.

The death of George Devine in 1966 made a huge impact on Osborne: "the turning point of Osborne's adult life." (Heilpern 319) Osborne has always seen Devine as his surrogate father and moreover he was the first one who supported Osborne's plays. The loss of Devine's paternal protection made Osborne insecure and he got a depression. In 1966 Osborne wrote *A Patriot for Me*, a play based on a true story. This time his hero Alfred Redl is a homosexual officer who is in denial of his own sexuality and Jewishness. Nevertheless, the play does not revolve around homosexuality as such: "It's about sexual ambiguity and outer appearances, public morality and private lives. It's a celebration of the outlawed individual and it's an elegy for the persecuted." (Heilpern 307)

Osborne's marriage to Gilliatt was "the most creative period of his life in what appeared to be the perfect harmony of love in a golden bowl." (Heilpern 283) He became the leading playwright of England. The marriage seemed perfect but it only lasted for five years because Osborne was having an affair with his future fourth wife, actress Jill Bennett. Osborne and

Bennett married in 1968. They had an unhappy, cruel marriage in which they almost annihilated each other. In 1990, thirteen years after her divorce from Osborne, Bennett committed suicide. People whispered that she had never recovered from her broken marriage.

In 1978, Osborne married his fifth and last wife, critic Helen Dawson. She was the only wife who took his last name. She offered him the inner peace that he was longing for all the time.

Osborne wrote the first part of his autobiography, *A Better Class of Person*, in 1981. In this work he revealed his hatred against his mother: “At least a man who hates his mother has a standard of excellence in mind” (qtd. in Heilpern 21). Even after her death in 1983, Osborne did not change his opinion: “A year in which my mother died can’t be all bad” (qtd. in Heilpern 22). His aversion against his mother had many reasons: he paid all her bills from his first success until her death and she embarrassed him often in public with her little knowledge of theatre. Despite all the hatred, their relationship was twofold: he displayed some love by inviting her at theatre openings and parties at the beginning of his career. Heilpern found out that “the key to Osborne’s hatred of her [his mother] was provoked by the unending sense of devastation and loss caused by the death of his father.” (41) When she died, he had not seen his mother for over seven years.

From 1985 onwards Osborne was constantly ill. He was diagnosed as a diabetic and he had additional complications: his liver collapsed after years of heavy drinking and he lay in a coma for three days. In 1987 Osborne suffered from a life-threatening hernia. Osborne refused to tackle his illness, just like he denied to abut his debts. In order to dissolve his debt problem, Osborne even had to sell the original manuscript of *Look Back in Anger* to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, a literary archive at the University of Texas.

The second part of his autobiography, *Almost a Gentleman*, appeared in 1991. In this volume he depicted his former friend Creighton as “a cadging, homosexual drunk” (qtd. in Heilpern 149). In 1995, when Osborne had already died, Creighton avenged Osborne’s statement by declaring that he had a secret affair with Osborne. Later, in 2002, Creighton acknowledged on television that he had lied about the nature of their relationship.

In 1992 Osborne wrote *Déjàvu*, a sequel to *Look Back in Anger*. He wrote the play in order to transfer his weakening health to the background for a while and to gain some money to redeem his debts. He described Jimmy Porter’s life thirty years later: “a gray haired man of indeterminate age, casually and expensively dressed...” (qtd. in Heilpern 445). Jimmy Porter resembles more and more his creator John Osborne. Cliff and Alison were still living with Jimmy. Fortunately for Osborne, the sequel became a success. Unfortunately, it would have been the last play he had ever written. John Osborne died of a heart attack in 1994 on Christmas Eve.

2.2 Angry Young Men

In the 1950s a new literary movement emerged in Britain: the Angry Young Men. The great pioneer of this new kind of literature was John Osborne. His revolutionary play *Look Back in Anger* was the beginning of the era of the Angry Young Men. The Fifties became known as ‘The Angry Decade’ (Heilpern 164).

The first performance of *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 “marks the real break-through of “the new drama” into the British theatre” (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 98). The play was a real innovation because the anger of its protagonist Jimmy Porter symbolized the general condition of Britain’s lower middle class in

the 1950s: “What was new and struck the public nerve in *Look Back in Anger*, was the sense of naked honesty that came from the identification between author and protagonist, and the tone of self-lacerating (but generalized) anger” (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 103).

After the opening night of *Look Back in Anger*, the play gathered mixed reactions. George Fearon, a part-time press officer at the theatre, abhorred *Look Back in Anger*. He disliked all the anger in the play and called Osborne “an Angry Young Man” (Little, McLaughlin 25). Several critics picked up Fearon’s comment and the name of the new movement was born.

The English Stage Company played an important role in the propagation of the plays of the Angry Young Men. The Company launched the works of many new English dramatists - John Osborne, John Arden, Ann Jellicoe, N.F. Simpson, Arnold Wesker, Alun Owen – and became the ‘habitat’ of new drama in Britain (Russell, “Ten Years of the English Stage Company” 120).

The ‘new spirit’ of *Look Back in Anger* obviously had a major influence on the theatre of the 1950s. The leverage was not restricted to the theatre world. In the novels of Alan Sillitoe, John Wain, John Braine and Kingsley Amis a similar sound was audible (Skovmand 19-23). Critics defined all these writers as ‘Angry Young Men’ or ‘Angries’, but most of the authors did not want to be associated with the group. They tried to draw the attention to their individual voice. Although the works of all these writers yielded the same tone and rage, publisher Tom Maschler pointed out that the Angry Young Men did not belong to a *united* movement: “They [the Angry Young Men] attack one another directly or indirectly in these pages. Some were even reluctant to appear between the same covers with others whose views they violently oppose.” (8)

Although the movement displayed individual differences among its writers, the Angry Young Men did share common ground: they all lived in an age in which Britain was in decay. The end of the Second World War had meant two things: “rationing and poverty in economic terms, and as a result of this economic weakness, a greater degree of political dependence upon other countries, especially the U.S.” (Skovmand 7) In 1945 the Labour Party accomplished a landslide victory because they supported Keynes³ economic ideas of massive financial intervention (Skovmand 8). Between 1945 and 1951 Labour was trying to build up a welfare state:

The four pillars in the welfare state were to be: a new educational system, a national health organization, a social security system, and nationalization of the country’s key industries. Labour’s success or failure in carrying out these measures had a considerable influence on the whole mood of the fifties.(Skovmand 10)

Although Labour had achieved several successes, the inability to meet the nation’s housing problems and their troubles to face the payments deficit meant the inducement of Labour’s defeat in 1951 (Skovmand 13). The Conservative Party “reestablished itself, its complacency and callousness, its intensity and ignorance” (Weiss 285). The downfall of Labour had a tremendous impact on the conscience of its voters:

The defeat meant an end to the optimism that had carried Labour forward in the first difficult years after the war. It meant a setback to all those who had believed in the Labour Government as “their government”, and had regarded 1945 as a political watershed. The disappointment and disillusion that followed in the wake of this defeat

³ The British economist John Maynard Keynes wrote *How to Pay for the War* in 1940. In this book “he argued for a financial policy in which high government spending should run parallel with heavy taxation, consumer rationing and price controls. [...] Keynes’ economic ideas were important, then, not only because of their value in strictly economic terms, but because they made possible that “massive financial intervention”, which, because it was successful, helped pave the way for the Labour’s Party’ electoral success in 1945.” (Skovmand 8)

helped keep the Conservatives in power for the following 13 years, and had a crucial influence on the political mood of the decade. (Skovmand 15)

The disappointment and disillusion became even more substantial when the Labour Party split in a left and a right wing⁴ and the Suez crisis⁵ contributed to the loss of Britain's prestige (Skovmand 17-18).

The 1950s was the end of an era with social reforms and the beginning of a period with little state interference. The age of wealth, individual moneymaking and no public commitment nor enthusiasm for political or social reasons caused anxiety and disillusionment, especially among the working classes. The cynicism and resentment of the Angry Young Men is clear evidence of the despondency inflicted by the wretched state of Britain in the 1950s.

(Skovmand 18)

The Angry Young Men were commonly associated with left-wing aspirations. In their works they (implicitly) accused the former political and social situation of Britain, a state being ruled by the Conservative Party. Writers as Amis, Braine, Wain and Osborne were generally identified with Left and Center (Kroll 555). Their works were affluent bearers of social criticism. Their protest was headed against “the rigid pattern of class stratification”.

⁴ In 1957 “the Labour Party was split in a left wing, led by Bevan, and a right wing, led by Hugh Gaitskell, and this, of course, made things much easier for the Conservatives, who lost no opportunity to point to the lack of unity within the largest opposition party. Mainly the disagreement revolved around the question of the Labour Party’s future course – was the party to be a genuine socialist party (Bevan), or a working-class party comparable to the social-democratic parties in, e.g. Scandinavia? (Gaitskell) [...] Eventually a sort of compromise was reached, but the whole debate hurt party unity and served to underline the precarious balance within the party between the left wing, supported by most trade unions, and the others, centrists or right wingers.” (Skovmand 17)

⁵ The Suez crisis of 1956 was a war between Israel, France and Britain against Egypt. In 1956 “the Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal Company, after the U.S. and Britain had refused to join the World Bank in loan to Egypt. Britain and France, who owned a majority of the company’s stocks, and Israel who had been harassed by Egypt and suspected that several recent terrorist attacks originated there, then decided to take matters in their own hands.” (Skovmand 17) Britain and France entirely failed in their political and strategic objective of controlling the canal. “Thus, Britain, France and Israel were forced to stop the war before it had really begun.” (Skovmand 18)

Most of the heroes in these works were educated for roles which transcend their class identity: “they are displaced persons in English society, belonging to no one, yet wanting to have an acceptable identity compatible with their self-realization” (Kroll 556). Jimmy Porter is a plain example of this kind of hero. In their protest, the Angry Young Men dismissed formal institutional ties and relationships. The writers showed signs of the reasons for their anger: they depicted economic uncertainty, money problems and a strong dissatisfaction with the past (Kroll 556).

The works of the Angry Young Men had a rebellious character. Their heroes rejected anything that would hold back their growth as individuals: “they will not accept anything that dulls the intensity of feeling, the proclivity to act and react to their environment. They refuse to join a society that will deny them anything because it is ‘out of their class’” (Kroll 557). Some critics confused their longing for individual development with a total rejection of society. Actually, the heroes’ rebellion is rather quiet:

They do not reject all society; none of the heroes leaves England. They dissent; they run away from what they do not like. Detach, but don’t destroy. If necessary, escape from an impossible situation and find one’s own comfortable niche. (Kroll 557)

The escapism of the heroes is not even that surprising if you consider that “[in the 1950s] the lower classes no longer have a distinctive ideology in conflict with the ethos of society” (Young 123-124). The unity and coherence of working class identity had blurred on account of the improved working class living standards: there was more employment and wide-ranging welfare provision (Brooke 773). The divergence in the working classes made an actual collective battle against the official institutions barely impossible. Flee from reality probably would have seemed an easier way to revolt against society.

The political establishment in Britain felt uneasy with the rise of the Angry Young Men. A striking example is the critique that professor Frederick R. Karl expressed against the movement in his book *The English Contemporary Novel* (1962):

Their protest in the fifties is similar to the American gangster's revolt in the twenties, as the motion pictures have presented him: a man trapped by social forces which are themselves corrupt. In order to be "honest", he must deceive, lie, steal, even kill. He must work his way to margins and peripheries. Eventually, he must throw himself against the very structure which will eventually crush him. Nevertheless, in destroying himself, he achieves a certain kind of perverted purity. (222)

Karl's reproduction of the hero of the Angry Young Men does not make much sense. He talks about a 'gangster revolt' but in fact the heroes are not revolting, at least not explicitly (Skovmand 19). His inaccurate analysis may expose his, and maybe the general middle- and upper-class', fear of a mutiny out of the lower classes. Two other professors, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams confirmed the restlessness of the establishment. They considered the new authors as "an expression of that breaking down of class-barriers that had begun with the reforms of the Labour Government and was continued during the 50s due to general rise in the standard of living." (Skovmand 22)

2.3 Look Back in Anger

Look Back in Anger (1956) is still Osborne's most renowned play. He dedicated the play to his beloved father in remembrance of his early death. In order to grasp the essence of the play, I will tackle the following subjects: title, plot and characters, autobiographical realism, themes and in conclusion structure.

2.3.1 Title

The title of *Look Back in Anger* determines the underlying theme: the play is “motivated by outrage at the discovery that the idealized Britain, for which so many had sacrificed themselves during the war years, was inauthentic.” (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 102) Protagonist Jimmy Porter could no longer live within this kind of society and he got isolated and alienated.

Heilpern regarded the original handwritten manuscript of *Look Back in Anger* and concluded that Osborne had considered six other titles for the play: Farewell to Anger, Angry Man, Man in a Rage, Bargain from Strength, Close the Cage behind You and My Blood is a Mile High (163). Eventually Osborne chose the title *Look Back in Anger*, inspired by the Leslie Paul’s homonymous autobiography about “a disillusioned social philosopher [...] who lost faith in Soviet Russia during the 1930s.” (Heilpern 163-164) His choice made perfectly sense because disappointment in society is a major characteristic of both plays.

2.3.2 Plot and characters

The plot of *Look Back in Anger* was affected by *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), a play of the American playwright Tennessee Williams:

In both dramas, a refined upper-class woman was married into the lower class. Stanley Kowalski [the hero of *A Streetcar Named Desire*] / Jimmy Porter has blowtorched his way into “society”. Each wife is brutalized by a furious outsider who wants to bring her down to his animal level. And in each play, Another Woman intrudes in the role of the wife’s genteel sister/best friend whose façade of propriety is shattered when she’s raped/seduced by the hero. (Heilpern 116)

The upper-class woman in *Look Back in Anger* is Alison, the hero of the lower class Jimmy Porter. Jimmy wants to bring Alison to his animal level: she has to face the death of a loved one to become a ‘real human being’. After Jimmy and Alison had broken up, Alison’s best friend Helena started a relationship with Jimmy. At the end of the play Helena leaves because she is ashamed about having interrupted her best friend’s marriage. When Jimmy discovers that Alison’s attitude changed after she had a miscarriage, they reconcile.

Jimmy’s confidant Cliff is another important character. He shares a shabby flat with Jimmy and Alison and is “a personification of the working classes” (Skovmand 87). Alison’s father, Colonel Redfern, is the fifth character in the play. He fought on the foreign front in India. When he came back to Britain he felt like he did not conform to the changed society.

The play functions as a replica of England in which the poor state of the country is mirrored in the troubled relationships between the characters. Michael Billington, a journalist of *The Guardian*, expressed this idea excellently:

Its premiere [of *Look Back in Anger*] at the Royal Court in May 1956 not only put the English Stage Company on the map, but proved to a generation of contemporary writers that it was possible to put contemporary Britain on stage. (qtd. in Heilpern 186)

2.3.3 Autobiographical realism

Look Back in Anger demonstrates striking parallels with Osborne’s own life. Heilpern described the play as “his [Osborne’s] most autobiographical play” (123). The play was based on Osborne’s broken marriage to Pamela Lane. The character of Alison is a representation of his ex-wife, the voice of Osborne is audible in Jimmy Porter and Cliff’s character refers to his friend Anthony Creighton:

Author and protagonist are mirror-opposites. [...]. Like Alison she [Pamela] became pregnant, had an abortion and left him, while her parents disapproved so strongly of their engagement that they had Osborne followed by a detective. Even the presence of a third person in the Porter *ménage* is not simply a dramatic convenience, providing a counterweight to the over-articulate author-figure. It too has autobiographical justification, since Osborne and his wife lived with Anthony Creighton (who collaborated on Osborne's early plays) in his flat. (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 99)

The way in which Alison resembles his wife Pamela is very prominent. Pamela and Alison, two beautiful women, both eluded their husband (Heilpern 114). They both married impulsively despite the objections of their parents (115-116). The hiring of a private detective by Pamela's parents is plainly reflected in *Look Back in Anger*: "So she [Alison's mother] hires detectives to watch me, to see if she can't somehow get me into the *News of the World*" (Osborne, 52). Finally, Pamela and Alison both had a miscarriage.

Osborne gave Creighton the nickname 'mouse'. The nickname returns in *Look Back in Anger* when Jimmy and Alison are comparing him with the animal:

Jimmy (*pointing at Cliff*): He gets more like a little mouse every day, doesn't he? [...] He really does look like one. Look at those ears, and that face, and the little legs.

Alison (*looking through her bag*): That's because he *is* a mouse.

Cliff: Eek! Eek! I'm a mouse.

Jimmy: A randy little mouse.

(Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 28-29)

Jimmy Porter highlighted particular ideas of Osborne. After the Second World War there was a surprising post-war influx of French drama. French became very fashionable in Britain but Osborne distrusted the French influence (Heilpern 95). In his autobiography *Almost a Gentleman* (1991) Osborne looked back at this phenomenon:

For as long as I could remember the literary and academic classes seemed to have been tyrannized by the French. The ‘posh papers’ every Sunday blubbered with self-abasement in the face of the bombast of the French language and its absurd posture as the torch-bearer of Logic, which apparently was something to which no one in these islands had access. (11)

Jimmy Porter is also not fond of the French intrusion in the newspapers: “I’ve just read three whole columns on the English novel. Half of it’s in French. Do the Sunday papers make you feel ignorant?” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 2).

2.3.4 Themes

The major theme of *Look Back in Anger* is social protest. Osborne probed into personal relationships and bared their social determinants (Weiss 286). Actually, drama is an ideal genre to represent social and individual oppositions:

It can simply show what is going on in the society in turmoil at the same time that it allows more than one emotional response to these intellectually unprocessed human facts. It is by nature ironic. Drama is thus ideally the medium of social as opposed to individual negative capability, it can resist irritable reachings [sic.] after fact and theory; and thus carry forward the uneconomical dialogue of self-interpretation that is

the cultural role of art which is not merely *upholding* and *disciplining* received attitudes. (Kaufmann 95)

Heilpern indicated what made *Look Back in Anger* so thrillingly new in the 1950s: “It was the first British play that openly dramatized bruising emotion, and it was the first to give the alienated lower classes and youth of England a weapon.” (184) Osborne saw his play as a weapon with which ordinary people could break down the class barriers (Taylor, *Ten Years of the English Stage Company* 123). The social and individual issues were not Osborne’s only new theme: he gave a sweeping nature to the angry attacks of his protagonist and he also infringed a lot of social and sexual taboos.

2.3.5 Structure

In contrast with the thematic revolution, the structure of *Look Back in Anger* was certainly not new. Osborne referred to the play as “a formal, rather old-fashioned play” (Taylor, *Anger and After* 28). The play consists of three acts, five scenes and two intervals. This was the conventional form that he had known all along as an actor: the structure preferred by the old West End managements of the era (Heilpern 184). Perhaps Osborne did not search for a new structural form because he shared George Devine’s idea that the content is more important than the form:

I am very much more interested in content than in form. I do not think any play is really worth producing if it’s not a play of ideas. Literally, the play’s the thing. (qtd. in Osborne, *Almost a Gentleman* 15)

The circularity of the play resembles the structure of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1955) (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 102). The third act opens as a

deliberate replay of the first act, but this time not Alison but Helena is standing at the ironing-board wearing Jimmy's shirt. Again there are three people onstage: Cliff, Jimmy and his girlfriend (Alison in the first act, Helena in the third). In the first act Jimmy expresses his hope of Alison having a dead child: "If you could have a child, and it would die." (36) In the third act Alison reports the loss of her child: "I lost the child. It's a simple fact." (97)

3 MARK RAVENHILL'S *SHOPPING AND F***ING*

In my approach to outline the context of Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing* I will often refer to similarities and differences with John Osborne, the Angry Young Men and *Look Back in Anger*. I will use the same method as in 2.1. and only discuss Ravenhill's major plays.

3.1 *Mark Ravenhill*

Ravenhill was born in June 1966 in Haywards Heath, West Sussex.⁶ The backgrounds of Osborne and Ravenhill are reasonably different. In contrast to Osborne, Ravenhill grew up in a stable family with his parents Ted and Angela Ravenhill and his younger brother. Besides, Osborne had to give up his academic plans whereas Ravenhill managed to study Drama and English at Bristol University from 1984 until 1987 (Svich 81). Nevertheless, Osborne and Ravenhill had a couple of things in common. They both had an early interest in theatre. And just like Osborne, Ravenhill discovered that he was not a great actor: "I originally wanted to act, [...], but I quickly realized that other people were better than me." (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 122) Ravenhill had taken jobs as director, administrative assistant, drama teacher and freelance director before he decided to become a playwright.

In 1993 Ravenhill wrote his first play *Close to You*, a comedy about an 'outing' gay Member of Parliament. Ravenhill explained in *Theatre Forum* that two events had urged him to start writing: the death of his homosexual boyfriend and the James Bulger murder (Ravenhill, "A Tear in the Fabric" 88). Ravenhill's boyfriend died from AIDS in February 1993. In the mid-nineties Ravenhill would be diagnosed as HIV-patient (Ravenhill, "My Near

⁶ This biographical introduction is chiefly based on Aleks Sierz' *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (122-152).

Death Period" 23). The other event, the James Bulger murder in 1993, was also very tragic. James Bulger was only three years old when he was kidnapped from a shopping centre by two ten-year-olds: Jon Venables and Robert Thompson. The boys harassed him and kicked him to death, after they had left him near a railroad. Ravenhill recognized only several years later the influence that the murder had wielded on his writing career:

How could I have never spotted before that I was someone who had never written a play until the murder of James Bulger? And it was the Bulger murder that prompted me to write? I've been writing ever since the murder. ("A Tear in the Fabric" 87)

Ravenhill and Osborne were both clearly influenced by their living circumstances. Their anger towards the unfairness of society inspired them both to start writing. In 1995 Osborne wrote *Fist*, a play about two men who are talking about sex for ten minutes.

Ravenhill rendered his breakthrough with the controversial play *Shopping and F***ing*. Max Stafford-Clark, director of the Out of Joint Theatre Company, directed the play at the Royal Court Theatre in September 1996. The consternation about *Shopping and F***ing* after its premiere was comparable to the astonishment that came along with *Look Back in Anger*'s debut at the Royal Court forty years earlier. The cruel character, the chaos and the social criticism in the play were very shocking and confronting.

Aside from *Shopping and F***ing* Ravenhill wrote other shocking plays. His most controversial plays stem from the 1990s: *Faust is Dead*, *Sleeping Around*, *Handbag* and *Some Explicit Polaroids*. With *Faust is dead* (1997) Ravenhill found himself in a transitional stage of his writing. The setting had changed: "Unlike *Shopping and F***ing*'s quasi-epic Kafka-esque commentary on an immediate, specific London, *Faust (Faust is Dead)* presents California as a virtual Baudrillard-like world whose topography is flattened by transitory

experience" (Svich 85). The play carried two of Ravenhill's favorite themes: "anonymity and the randomness of identity in the contemporary world" (Svich 84). His next play *Sleeping Around* (1998) was the result of a joint collaboration with three other writers: Hilary Fannin, Stephen Greenhorn and Abi Morgan. The play revolved around emotional violence. The storyline of *Handbag* (1998) was derived from Oscar Wilde's Victorian classic *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895): "Ravenhill's play is both a prequel to Wilde's text and a contemporary story about unconventional parenting and its effects. The marriage of two *fin-de-siecles*, *Handbag* looks back and forward in time with equal moments of unease and dread" (Svich 85-86). The themes of *Shopping and F***ing* returned to some extent in Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999). It was a portrait of societal chaos, random violence and a desensitized London. In *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001) Ravenhill applied songs in a play, for the first time in his career.

During the first decade of the new millennium, Ravenhill experimented with form and abstract themes, which deviated to a great extent from his earlier work that portrayed contemporary British society. In *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001) Ravenhill worked with alternations of songs and dialogue. *Product* (2006) was a mixture of form experiment and new themes. The play "is both a satire on our post-9/11 attitudes to terrorism, and also a minutely observed reflection on the limits of language and form to capture contemporary reality" (De Buck 4). Ravenhill's provisionally last plays to be published were *Over There* and *The Experiment* in 2009 (Buse).

3.2 In-Yer-Face Theatre

At the beginning of the nineties British drama lacked quality and freshness. The rise of In-Yer-Face Theatre saved British theatre with a new aesthetic and new experiments (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* xii). Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing* inhaled the ideas of the new literary movement. He even became one of the trailblazers of In-Yer-Face Theatre. By the end of the millennium there was more new writing in British theatre than ever in its history (Sierz, "Beyond Timidity?" 56). In-Yer-Face Theatre even became the norm and dominant theatrical style of the decade (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 4).

Sarah Kane's shocking playwright *Blasted* (1995) caused a shock wave in Britain: "*Blasted* was both shockingly radical in form and deeply unsettling in content. It was attacked by critics with unprecedeted fury and the resulting uproar demonstrated that, far from being irrelevant, theatre could be highly provocative and controversial" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* xii). Kane's *Blasted* and Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing* were at the heart of the new British playwriting in the 1990s. Their pioneering role resembles the significance of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in the 1950s. Ravenhill became "part of a group of young writers out to reclaim their place on the British stage by drawing on the energy of the alternative music and theatre scenes" and was "regarded as both a 'poster boy' for fringe culture, as well as its most bracing satirist" (Svich 81). Boles described the new movement as "the second renaissance of contemporary English drama, which is always surprising, ever challenging and, on occasion, a tad messy. Gone from their comfortable (but by now timeworn) chairs of drama are John Osborne and his Angry Young Writer colleagues" (Boles 125). As a matter of fact, the Angry Young Men had carried out a lot of influence on the theatre of the following decades.

The in-*yer-face* writers shared the blunt critical attitude of the Angry Young Men concerning the poor state of Britain, but their means of presentation and motives for writing clearly differed (Boles 125-126). The new writers aimed at raising discussions amongst the audience about the moral problems they had presented in their plays:

In the old theatre, the actors offered the play as a salesman displays his product. [...] Thus the audience became customers, whose satisfaction was the necessary end of the performance. In the new theatre, the audience will offer itself to the actors. It will relinquish its status as customer and abandon its expectation of reward. When it ceases to see itself as customer, it will also cease to experience offence. (Barker 67)

Ravenhill pointed to this consumerist role of the audience in the first part of the title *Shopping and F***ing*.

The phrase ‘in-your-face’ is defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* as an informal adjective “used to describe an attitude, a performance, etc. that is aggressive in style and deliberately designed to make people react strongly for or against it”. The slang word ‘in-*yer-face*’ was officially chosen as reflection of the directness of the movement.

Critics suggested several other terms in order to give the new movement a name. Barker suggested “Theatre of Conscience and Criticism” as a reference to the major themes of the movement (Barker 96). Other employed denominations were “New Brutalism” (Boles 125), “Theatre of the Urban Ennui” (Benedict Nightingale, qtd. in Freeman 401) and “New Nihilism” (Wolf 44). Sierz pointed out why In-Yer-Face Theatre was the most suitable name:

Although drama has always represented human cruelty, never before had it seemed so common. For these reasons, the label ‘in-*yer-face*’ – often used in reviews – describes

nineties drama more accurately than other coinages, such as ‘new brutalists’ or theatre of urban ennui’, neither of which achieved much currency. (*In-Yer-Face Theatre* 30)

Nonetheless, the variety of names indicates the ambivalence of the plays:

All of them [the various labels] attempt to capture various aspects of the plays’ sense of loss and negativity, as well as their assault on the audience’s sensitiveness and limits. [...] What are they trying to do? Are they purely trying to shock us? Are they documentary plays? Are they satires, teeming with moral purpose and righteous anger? Are they numbed by the collapse of political and moral certainty? (Rebellato⁷, *Shopping and F***ing* xii)

The Royal Court Theatre played an important role in the spread of the in-*yer-face* plays. The Royal Court was lead by Stephen Daldry from 1993 until 1998. He launched the works of most in-*yer-face* writers. By casting these shocking plays, the Royal Court got a frolic reputation: “The play’s title [*Shopping and F***ing*] is also a good example of the Court’s tradition of mischief-making: neither Stephen Daldry nor Stafford-Clark is immune to the temptation of being a bit naughty” (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 126). Urban described Daldry’s straightforward philosophy concisely: “do lots of new work, do it for short runs so that houses are full every night, always invite important people, and if a play bombs, remember that it will close before the Court loses too much cash” (Urban 357). Consequently, the new plays became highly marketable. Daldry totally mastered ‘the art of transfer’: “moving shows from the Court to bigger houses, spurred on by the consumer demand created by the length of the initial runs” (Urban 357). Forty years earlier, the Royal Court had also played a tremendous role in the propagation of Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* and other plays

⁷ Dan Rebellato, playwright and lecturer in Theatre at the Royal Holloway University of London, wrote the introductory commentary and notes in my edition of *Shopping and F***ing*.

of the Angry Young Men. Svich regarded the manifestation of In-Yer-Face Theatre in the Royal Court as a continuation of the ideas of the Angry Young Men:

[...] the Royal Court Theatre began to place a great deal of its administrative designs on building and nurturing the careers and writings of playwrights under-25 years of age. This was done both in an effort to renew the theatre's commitment to its audience, and also as a way to ride the crest of burgeoning movement that would up-end the 'angry young man' school of writing for which the Court had earned its reputation so many years ago with John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. (Svich 81-82)

In accordance with the Angry Young Men, In-Yer-Face Theatre was certainly not an undoubtedly delineated movement, but rather "a theatrical sensibility" (Urban 354). The process of appropriating and enforcing the pre-existing phrase 'in-*yer-face*' to describe new theatrical works provides a critical means of categorizing. Consequently, many writers of the 1990s did not want to be associated with the movement. Ravenhill, for instance, did not feel part of a movement: "When I was writing *Shopping and F***ing*, I hadn't seen *Blasted*" (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 124). The same phenomenon was detectable in the attitudes of the new writers in the 1950s: they did not want to be labeled as an Angry Young Man.

Theatre can virtually always be interpreted as an observation on or an elaboration of reality (De Buck 2). In-Yer-Face Theatre is, similar to the movement of the Angry Young Men, fed by social criticism (Sierz, "Beyond Timidity?" 57). The writers of the movement definitely presented their view on the contemporary British society in their plays: "[...] theatre was counted among the glories of British culture in that brief but highly hyped moment of cultural confidence known as Cool Britannia" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* xii). The reign of 'Cool Britannia' was instigated by the revitalization of both British arts and British pop. The revival

of British culture signalled the return of “swinging London” (Urban 355). London virtually became the centre of the cultural renaissance.

The Labour Party tried to regain its popularity by emphasizing “a love of youth culture by joining the cosmopolitan ‘rebranding’ of Britain” (Urban 356): the party changed its name into ‘New Labour’. Branding was an ideal way to highlight the utilitarian bond between a consumer and a product: “[...] a brand forges a connection with consumers by representing ideals and values appealing to specific communities and, as a result, creates the idea of brand loyalty on the part of consumers” (Urban 356). Apparently, New Labour rated the commercial gain higher than the ideological one. The downfall of the party was accelerated by its split in rival factions and fragmentation into special interest groups (Rebellato xviii). Britain had unmistakably reached a period of political crisis.

The in-*yer*-face writers were inflicted by the conservative regime of Margaret Thatcher. They had consciously experienced her reign as prime minister of Britain from 1979 until 1990 (Rebellato xv). The important values of Thatcher’s political program, “virtues of competition, individual choice, entrepreneurialism and the making of money as a moral duty” (Rebellato xvi), were attacked in the works of the in-*your*-face writers.

Furthermore, the status of British economy was reflected in several in-*your*-face plays. By the nineties, the British economy had evolved from a manufacturing business towards a retail economy (Buse). In the new economy British workers no longer needed to produce products but simply had to sell them.

Most of the representatives of In-Yer-Face Theatre had a middle class background. Paradoxically “their visits to the lower depths [were] smacked of cultural tourism, making an art out of other’s people’s misery” (Sierz, “Beyond Timidity?” 57). Adversely, The Angry

Young Men were generally intellectuals with working class origins. Therefore, their attachment towards their heroes was much stronger.

In the 1990s, aggression, addiction, sex and the crisis of masculinity were openly shown onstage. The shock method, strengthened by the offensive themes and the direct, filthy language, is applied, “not only to provoke reaction, but also to reveal a deeper meaning to the audience” (De Buck 5). Despite the provocative character of the in-*yer-face* plays, the movement began to show signs of rapid aging: “For example, depictions of anal sex, which had once been a powerful stage image of the “crisis of masculinity”, soon became as mannered as cigarette-holders were fifty years ago” (Sierz, “Beyond Timidity?” 57).

The popularity of British theatre, caused by the rise of In-Yer-Face Theatre, resembled the status of the theatre of the 1950s: “Benedict Nightingale pointed out that *Look Back in Anger* had once ‘caused such stir that the theatre was clearly “the place to be at”’, and said that ‘there is a similar buzz in the air now’” (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 64).

3.3 *Shopping and F***ing*

*Shopping and F***ing* (1996) quickly launched Ravenhill’s writing career. In order to grasp the essence of the play, I will discuss the same subjects as in my analysis of *Look Back in Anger*: title, plot, autobiographical realism, themes and structure.

3.3.1 Title

The commotion caused by *Shopping and F***ing* mainly relied on its title. At first, its intended title was *F***ing Diana*, as a reference to the imagined sex scene of Mark and

Princess Diana in the play (Sierz 123). After a meeting with a colleague who told the story of shocking an old schoolfriend by telling her “Oh I’m writing a shopping and F***ing novel” (Sierz 123), Ravenhill changed the title to *Shopping and F***ing*.

Because of the Indecent Advertisement Act of 1889⁸, the title was transformed to *Shopping and F***ing* (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 125). Ironically, the censorship only made the play more eye-catching and successful. The prudish title constituted a strong antithesis with the violent scenes of the play. The word ‘F***ing’ was considered as the appalling word of the title but Peter Buse noticed the treacherous nature of the word ‘shopping’:

It is not for shock value alone that Ravenhill [...] places provocative words in his title. In fact, all his plays lead us towards the conclusion that the most shocking word and activity in the title of *Shopping and F***ing* is not the last one, but the one that goes uncensored, the seemingly banal, everyday one, ‘shopping’.

The first word motions the dark side of modern consumerist society in which everything, including human life, is for sale: “The world of Ravenhill’s plays is the underside of our modern culture of conspicuous consumption, where happiness awaits at the end of a commodity, where the logic of the marketplace is invincible.” (Buse)

3.3.2 Plot and characters

Similarly, as seen in the plot of *Look Back in Anger*, *Shopping and F***ing* revolves around five characters: Mark, Robbie, Lulu, Gary and Brian. The ‘ménage à trois’ of *Look*

⁸ “Under a Victorian law – the Indecent Advertisements Act 1889, amended by the Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981 – the word ‘fuck’ is banned from public display. Originally drafted to stamp out the explicit adverts that prostitutes once put in shop windows, a law designed to curb a real-life activity was used to ban adverts for a play that represented, among others, that activity.” (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 125)

Back in Anger (Jimmy, Cliff and Alison/Helena) returns in *Shopping and F***ing*. Mark, Robbie and Lulu are living together in a flat. The two outsiders, Gary and Brian, who threatened the bond of the three friends, leave at the end.

The protagonist of *Shopping and F***ing* is Mark (Svich 82). He is a drug addict and decides to go to a rehabilitation centre. He gets kicked out because he violated the rules of the centre. When he returns home, he renounces all emotional commitment. However, when Mark meets Gary, a fourteen-year-old prostitute, he falls in love with him. Buse claims that Mark is a typical Ravenhill character: “The vomiting character, also called Mark, is typical of Ravenhill’s characters – a drug addict, sexually ambiguous and promiscuous, a piece of human urban driftwood.”

In the play Lulu witnesses a robbery, but instead of helping the victims, she steals a chocolate bar out of the robbed shop. Lulu has got other problems: she has to sell three hundred ecstasy pills for her ‘boss’ Brian. Robbie, Lucy’s ex-boyfriend but also Mark’s former lover, wants to help Lucy but his pacifistic vision on life urges him to give all the pills away for free. Brian is furious with Lucy and Robbie and he demands his money. Consequently, Lulu and Mark decide to start a telephone sex line in order to accrue the lost three thousand to Brian.

Gary was abused by his stepfather in his youth. He is not able to return Mark’s love. He just wants paternal love. He proposes to give Mark, Robbie and Lucy money if they fulfill his dream: being penetrated with a knife. The three friends decide to accept his advance. In the last scene, Gary is no longer mentioned, which leaves the audience with the question whether or not Gary has died during the action. The most logical conclusion would be that he has actually died due to the violent sexual action.

At the end of the play, Brian acquires Robbie and Lucy's debts because they adopted his capitalist viewpoint that "Money is civilization" (Ravenhill, *Shoppping and F***ing* 87). Brian leaves and he disappears out of their lives. As a result, the triangular relationship between Mark, Lulu and Robbie is restored.

The play is deep-rooted in the British society of the nineties. Three male characters are named after members of pop group Take That, the most influential boy band of the 1990s: Mark Owen, Robbie Williams and Gary Barlow. Lulu is named after singer-songwriter Lulu Kennedy, who recorded a song with the boy band. (Urban 368) Ravenhill's striking choice of names is explained in *In-Yer-Face Theatre*:

'I never remember the names of characters, so I thought it's not worth spending time agonizing over them', he [Ravenhill] says. He took the names from a CD that was lying on his desk. The choice of names meant that young people not only 'fell about laughing' when they read the play, but also 'felt an ownership of it, felt it was written for them and was about them'. (Sierz 130-131)

The origin of Brian's name is less clear. Rebellato suggests that Brian might have been named after "the ugly leader of the rival gang, Brian Harvey from East 17" (xxxvi).

Critics often refer to the choice of names to prove Ravenhill's thinness of characterization: "Their names reinforce the sense that these are characters without fully-realized, naturalistic pasts. Further, it suggests a life entirely colonized by commercial culture" (Rebellato xxvi). Nevertheless Ravenhill tempered the criticism by praising the openness of his characters:

No, they're not the product of accumulated detail, but are quite pared down and spare; they're the sum of their actions. [...] this allows the actor to add to them and the

audience to project onto them. My characters are more open. The weakness is that people think I'm dismissive of human beings. (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 131)

As a matter of fact, the characters in *Look Back in Anger* are far more marked out. Their appearances and personalities are described in long stage directions.

3.3.3 Autobiographical realism

The autobiographical nature of *Shopping and F***ing* is limited. Unlike *Look Back in Anger* only vague references to Ravenhill's own life appear in the play. Ravenhill's homosexuality is recognizable in three male characters: Mark, Robbie and Gary. The cruel death of Jamie Bulger is possibly reflected in the hinted death of Gary, the child in the play.

Svich claims that Ravenhill's characters serve as authorial mouthpieces at various points of the play (82). A good example is a scene in which Robbie attacks consumerism: "And I think: Fuck money. Fuck selling. Fuck buying and let's be... beautiful. Beautiful. And happy. You see? You see?" (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 39). In *Look Back in Anger* only Jimmy Porter served as the bearer of Osborne's viewpoints.

3.3.4 Themes

The themes of *Shopping and F***ing* are reflected in each character. All characters are inflicted by consumerism and explicit sexuality, two characteristics of British society in the 1990s. On top of that, they all have to put up with many personal concerns. (De Buck 11) Ravenhill accentuated the straightforwardness of his play's theme: "These were extreme characters pushed to extreme situations. The market had filtered into every aspect of their

lives. Sex, which should have been private, had become a public transaction" (qtd. in Sierz 123). *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* are both charges against the society of their time.

Consumerism and sex are not only linked in the title of the play but also in the play itself. Sex has lost its connection to love and is depicted as being interrelated with consumerism: "Sex had become a negotiable transaction and shopping had acquired a tangible sexual excitement" (Billington 361). De Buck enumerated a few examples of the correlation between sex and consumerism:

Mark for example, prefers to pay for impersonal sex with Gary than to make love with Robbie. In the drug rehabilitation centre, he offers Wayne money because he wants to lick his arse. Later on in the play, the same thing happens again, but with Gary, a fourteen-year-old rent boy. (9)

Another good example is the fact that Robbie and Lulu started a telephone sex line to earn three thousand pounds.

The demonstrated physical and verbal violence in *Shopping and F***ing* is certainly as horrible, if not even worse, as in *Look Back in Anger*. Verbal violence is strong in both plays. Nevertheless, there is more physical and sexual violence (penetration with a knife) detectable in *Shopping and F***ing*. Urban argues that 'violent character' is rather an understatement to define in-yer-face plays and points at 'cruelty' as a more appropriate word: "Cruelty is part of consciousness itself, affecting both the receiver and the giver. [...]. Cruelty is the violent awakening of consciousness to the horrors of life that had previously remained unconscious, both unseen and unspoken" (Urban 362). After the violent/cruel scenes had caused many shocking reactions, Ravenhill asserted that the shock effects were unintended:

I've never had the desire to shock, [...]. It's a boring desire and I think you'd write really badly if you woke up in the morning and said, "Today I'm going to try to shock somebody." I have shocked myself a bit but I had to be true to what the characters demanded. (qtd. in Lawrence 14)

Ravenhill wondered why everybody was shocked by the violence. He considered the feelings of his isolated characters far more disturbing (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 133).

A remarkable difference between *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* is the absence of homosexual characters or references in the first play. In the 1950s, homosexuality was still considered as a deviant: it was illegal and considered 'unnatural' by some people (Kitsuse 7-8). Although Osborne broke several taboos, the 'immoral' status of homosexuals was not questioned, likely because homosexuality was not allowed onstage until 1958 (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 15). Even after the allowance of homosexuality in theatre, there was no big rush of gay plays. The theme of homosexuality went through a long history. The Gay Liberation Front of the 1960s tried to reclaim the stigmatized image of homosexuality (Rebellato xxxiii). The Campaign for Homosexual Equality in 1972 brought the debate even a step further. The campaigners demanded the same rights for lesbians and gay men as for straights (Rebellato xxxiii-xxxiv). In the 1980s and 1990s there was a shift of terminology from 'gay' to 'queer': "It [the word 'queer'] suggested an assertion of difference, not a desire to assimilate; it suggested a slanted viewpoint, a unique perspective that was outside the mainstream; it demonstrated the outsiderliness [sic.], and the refusal to integrate" (Rebellato xxxv). Ravenhill identified himself as a queer playwright: "Gay people have had enough positive images, [...]. What those nellies need is some negative images to shake them up. [...] I introduced gay shame into theatre!" (qtd. in Rebellato xxxvii). This sound is clearly audible in *Shopping and F***ing*. Homosexuality is not named, nor explained or treated as a

problem: “His play features no ‘coming-out’ speeches, it is entirely silent about AIDS [...], or any other of the major political campaigns” (Rebellato xxxvii).

3.3.5 Structure

*Shopping and F***ing* consists of fourteen scenes. The play does not have a classical structure, whereas the traditional three acts were still employed in *Look Back in Anger*. Ravenhill’s choice for an unfamiliar theatrical structure makes the cruelty in his play even more unbearable than the hostile atmosphere in *Look Back in Anger*:

The further a play departs from the conventions of naturalism, especially those of the well-made three-act drama, the more difficult it is for many audiences to accept. [...]. Naturalistic representations of disturbing subjects are usually much easier to handle than emotionally fraught situations that are presented in a [sic.] unfamiliar theatrical style. (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 6)

Conform *Look Back in Anger*, *Shopping and F***ing* displays repetition in structure. Svich noticed that the same climaxes return: most scenes end with a sexual image (83). The play comprises a set of distorted mirror images as well:

Mark’s initial telling of the shopping story – a fantasy in which he buys Lulu and Robbie from a ‘fat man’ in the supermarket – is reprised at the end when he retells a mutated version of it; Mark is throw [sic.] out of the clinic because he has ‘lick and go’ sex in a toilet, which is reflected in the gross toilet cubicle story about Diana and Fergie; Lulu’s problem with sharing individual ready meals is mirrored by Gary’s offer of pot noodles to Mark; Robbie gets sacked from his McJob after being attacked by a customer wielding a plastic fork, while Lulu witnesses an attack on a shop

assistant with a real knife; [...]; the Rule Number One of drug dealing ('He who sells shall not use') is mirrored by Brian's 'We need something [...] a set of rules'; Robbie's 'Fuck money' is challenged by Brian's 'Money is Civilization'. (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 129-130)

Even the beginning and the ending show striking parallels: "[...] for it returns back to where it started – as Mark, Robbie and Lulu eat from their TV trays in their spartan [sic.] flat" (Svich 83). This pattern resembles the restored triangular relationship between Jimmy, Cliff and Alison at the end of *Look Back in Anger*.

As stated in the introduction, Ravenhill was not very fond of Osborne's work. Despite some paralleling structural elements, the form of *Shopping and F***ing* was not as classical as the one of *Look Back in Anger*. Ravenhill ironically claimed that *Shopping and F***ing* was "quite an old-fashioned play" as an echo of Osborne's portrayal of *Look Back in Anger* as "a formal, rather old-fashioned play" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 125)

4 COMPARISON

4.1 *The history of provocative outrage*

The unleashed rage which is displayed in *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* was not entirely new. Osborne and Ravenhill both based their plays on aspects of other works and previous movements to complete their own ‘angry style’. In order to expose their reliance on other ‘angry’ sources, I will present the chronological history of provocative outrage in British theatre from the ancient Greek tragedies onwards to the In-Yer-Face movement.⁹

The history of provocative outrage is not a streamlined movement, “not a simple narrative of progress from repression to liberation. Instead, taboos are broken, reformed and are broken yet again” (Sierz 29). The thrill of horrendous images, the language of violence, the shock of prohibited aspirations and the fun of disobedience are also present in other literary genres.

Typical examples of such violent genres are gothic fantasy, melodrama and the horror story.

4.1.1 Ancient Greek tragedy

The ancient Greek tragedies approach extreme states of mind, like anger, “brutal deaths and terrible suicides, agonizing pain and dreadful suffering, human sacrifice and cannibalism, rape and incest, mutilations and humiliations” (Sierz 10). In the tragedies, the meeting between fate and human fears plays a prominent role. The heroes are driven to hopelessness when they need to take position against the unalterable and inexplicable. Famous Greek heroes are Oedipus, Medea, Phaedra and Agamemnon.

⁹ The theoretical background of the literary history of outrage is mainly based on Sierz’ *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (10-35). Quotes from this book and other sources are mentioned parenthetically.

The Greek tragedies aimed at cleansing the bad feelings of the audience. So, “Greek tragedy was probably not intended to attack but to heal the audience, to make it better able to face its time. This argues for a kind of utilitarian role for theatre, making it a form of shock therapy” (Sierz 10). Consequently, the audience needed to use its shocking experience in order to repel its own bad thoughts.

The content of *Look Back in Anger* reasonably differs from the classical tragedy. In *Look Back in Anger* the harsh experiences are “cut away at the root of the wonderful, of the overexcited demand, the “divine discontent” of the questing spirit” (Kaufmann 98). Jimmy is disillusioned by social injustice but he does not actually fight for his beliefs. In contrast to the classical hero, he is “a hyperactive egomaniac who will subvert an already chancy effort at human survival” (Kaufmann 98). The tone of the Greek tragedies is unsurprisingly tragic, whether the dominant tone of *Look Back in Anger* is a mixture of comical effects and systematic satire (Kaufmann 98).

Ravenhill’s early plays, like *Shopping and F***ing*, are fuelled by moral impulse, which reveals influences of a more classical tradition. He was clearly affected by “ancient Greek drama, the plays of Oscar Wilde and contemporary pop culture” (Svich 81). Nevertheless, *Shopping and F***ing* also lacks divine content, does not have a classical hero and has no tragic ending. Ravenhill even implicitly suggested in *Shopping and F***ing* that the Greek tragedy is not an available mode for the playwright of the late twentieth century (Kuti 460) (see 4.2.2).

Look Back in Anger and *Shopping and F***ing* did not aim at purging the minds of their audience. Osborne wanted to shake Britain awake by teaching his audience how to feel (see 4.1.6). Ravenhill on the other hand saw his audience as consumers (see 3.2).

4.1.2 Jacobean tragedy

The tragedies in the Jacobean age¹⁰ are even more horrifying, “delighted in horrible murder, painful torture, wanton acts of cruelty and vicious vengeance” (Sierz 11). This kind of tragedy is therefore called ‘the tragedy of blood’. Bloody details are depicted in several Shakespearean plays, for instance *Hamlet* (1602) and *King Lear* (1605).

The Jacobean audience was not shocked by the horrific images: it was thrilled by the depictions of evil. Nevertheless, there was moral objection:

What tended to disturb them [the audience] was the upsetting of the Christian moral universe that such acts implied. Only the expectation that morality would be finally restored gave them permission to guiltlessly enjoy such poetic inflammations of sensation, such orgies of feeling. (Sierz 11)

The heroes of *Hamlet* and *Look Back in Anger*, Hamlet and Jimmy Porter, show some striking parallels. This is not surprising because Heilpern discovered that Osborne always carried an acting edition of *Hamlet* like a talisman with him (171). Jimmy and Hamlet are both angry young man who could not cope with the society they were living in:

Both have been unfitted by a higher education from accepting their normal place in the world. They think too much and criticize freely. [...] Both heroes are naturally histrionic, and in both cases the estrangement, marked by histrionics, is close to insanity. Both have no fixed purpose beyond that of awakening the people around

¹⁰ The Jacobean age alludes to the period under the rule of King James I of England who was James VI of Scotland as well (1603-1625). The word ‘Jacobean’ is derived from the Hebrew name Jacob, which is the original form of the English name James. (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 11)

them from their trance of acceptance to the horror and baseness of the world.

(McCarthy, qtd. in Heilpern 171-172)

The American critic and novelist Mary McCarthy did not only see similarities between the heroes of the plays but also between the other characters:

She sees Cliff, the working-class Welshman, as Jimmy Porter's loyal Horatio; Alison is the brutalized Ophelia who's the innocent product of a corrupt Establishment; both Ophelia and Alison are victimized by a paranoid hero pre-empting betrayal; Alison's brother Nigel is her Laertes; and her plotting mum is the pompous ass Polonius lurking behind the scenes for any damning evidence *against*. (Heilpern 171)

The statement that the depictions of violence are more cruel in Jacobean tragedies than in Greek tragedies, resembles the distinction that Urban made between the ‘violence’ in *Look Back in Anger* and the ‘cruelty’ in *Shopping and F***ing* (see 3.3.4).

4.1.3 The march of censorship

The sprawl of uncontrolled emotions was often considered as threatening. Therefore shocking language and actions were banned from theatre by censorship: “Introduced in Britain in 1737, modified in 1843 and, from 1999, governed by parliamentary guidelines, strict rules controlled the nation’s stages” (Sierz 11).

Lord Chamberlain had made an extensive list of things which forbade indecent, blasphemous and offensive material on stage:

The list of things routinely banned included swearwords; nudity; risqué stage business; representations of God, the Royal family or anyone living; and homosexuality.

Profanity was forbidden and political radicalism discouraged. An actor and actress could not appear together in bed under the same sheet. (Sierz 11)

Censorship was considered “authoritarian, uncountable and undemocratic” (Sierz 12). The writers often challenged the censorship of particular words and scenes. Therefore, many compromises were made to temper the authorial frustrations.

Censorship had paradoxical effects: “on the one hand, it aimed to inhibit even suggestions of sex and violence; on the other, it drew attention to them, often publicizing a play more effectively than any advertizing” (Sierz 12). Taboo subjects became even more attractive to writers because they were illegal. In order to get provoking scenes on stage, they tried to give moral justifications for their plays.

The power of censorship was clearly present in Victorian¹¹ and Edwardian¹² theatre. Bernard Shaw’s realistic social plays were regularly censored. Kroll posited that *Look Back in Anger* displays “a Shavian intolerance toward immediate social shortcomings” (557). Even the word ‘pregnant’ was forbidden on stage:

As late as 1909, Edward Garnett couldn’t describe the condition of the heroine of his play, *The Breaking Point*, as ‘pregnant’ because it was considered vulgar and likely to inflame lascivious thoughts. He had to use the French ‘*enceinte*’. If you were classy enough to speak French, presumably you were immune to sudden lust. (Sierz 12)

This was an exceptional case because most of the time foreign influences were regarded with fear. I already mentioned that Osborne’s aversion of French was reflected in his character

¹¹ The Victorian age covers the era of Britain under Queen Victoria’s reign from 1837 until 1901. (Sierz 12)

¹² The Edwardian period succeeded the Victorian era. It was the age in which Edward VII reigned over Britain from 1901 until 1910. (Sierz 12)

Jimmy Porter (see 2.3.3). On the contrary, an expression of disgust towards foreign leverage cannot be detected in *Shopping and F***ing*.

4.1.4 Experimental theatre

The experimental continental plays of the 1920s and 1930s were often perceived as dangerous. Nevertheless, “if British theatre guarded itself against shock, it soon found experimental theatre creeping in, despite rigorous border controls” (Sierz 14). Gradually, the works of modernist experimental writers like Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, Brecht, Ionesco and Artaud reached the English stage.

Antonin Artaud had a major influence on the British audience. His radical ideas about a Theatre of Cruelty were derived from the Greeks and Jacobeans:

The theatre will never find itself again [...] except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior. [...] the theatre must pursue by all its means a reassertion not only of all the aspects of the objective and descriptive external world, but of the internal world, that is, of man considered metaphysically. (Artaud 92)

Artaud wanted to confront the audience with the true reflection of their inner conflicts and wishes, as pictured in dreams. He downgraded the importance of language and emphasized physical non-verbal communication. (Feazell 30-31) In *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* the philosophy of Artaud is only partly present. Artaud’s emphasis on physical non-verbal communication is reflected in the importance of violent acts in both plays. The plea of Artaud to downgrade language on the contrary is dismissed in both plays. Jimmy Porter uses

the strength of language to amplify his angry tirades. In *Shopping and F***ing* the characters use dirty words and invectives to expound their feelings.

Osborne developed a totally different style in *Look Back in Anger* “without resorting to any of the numerous experimental evasions with which the modern stage was attempted – from the late symbolism of Ibsen to the epic realism of Brecht – to cope with broad social and ethical concepts” (Weiss 288). Instead he chose the old jug of realism, filled with a strong heady brew, to make his social protest clear (Weiss 288). Innes contrasted the experimental movements with Osborne’s socially affected *Look Back in Anger*:

The symbolic existentialism of Beckett, and the French absurdism [sic.] of Ionesco, which both appeared on the London stage in 1955-56, opened up with new possibilities for English dramatists, which were directly opposed to the social confrontation initiated by Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* at the same time. (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 350)

Nevertheless, Osborne absorbed the estrangement of absurd theatre as a theme in *Look Back in Anger*: alienation from society.

Contrary to *Look Back in Anger*, existentialism had an influence on *Shopping and F***ing*. In the play, violent action is presented on the surface but more complex problems of human existence, like nihilism, are slightly recognizable on the background (Urban 367-369).

4.1.5 Naturalistic theatre

Although naturalistic theatre was considered preferable to absurd theatre in the 1930s and 1940s, even naturalism was often experienced as a violent movement “when it crossed those

imaginary boundaries between the ‘done thing’ and the unthinkable” (Sierz 14). The fate of the working classes is highlighted in the naturalistic plays. Middle-class audiences in particular were offended by representations of unrefined scenes. Williams’ play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1949) caused a lot of commotion among the audience because it depicted “domestic brawls, a rape scene” and “even the sound of a lavatory flushing offstage troubled the public” (Sierz 14).

The realism of the naturalistic movement is clearly visible in *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*. Nonetheless, *Look Back in Anger* is far more influenced by naturalistic theatre. Firstly, the plot of *Look Back in Anger* was based on the naturalistic play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (see 2.3.2). Secondly, the naturalistic attention for disadvantaged people is stronger in *Look Back in Anger*: the hopeless fate of the working class is one of the most important themes of the play.

4.1.6 Angry Young Men

At the end of the 1950s, a new sensibility conquered British theatre. The new movement was heralded by Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* in 1956: “[...] what offended the critics was not only the shabby setting (a Nottingham bedsit rather than a Home Counties living room) but also the hectoring tone of the play, and especially the language used by its antihero, Jimmy Porter” (Sierz 15). The miserable state of Britain was depicted in the play. Osborne “wanted to shake it [the audience] awake, to teach audiences to feel” (Sierz 16). Some critics were repulsed by Osborne’s shock tactics, others were pleasantly surprised with the new sensibility.

The social realism of Osborne encouraged other dramatists to explore society: “One of the ways in which sensibility became increasingly in-yer-face was when dramatists searched for new social landscapes” (Sierz 16). Joan Littlewood, for instance, explored the Irish society. Many dramatists, like John Arden, Arnold Wesker and Ann Jellicoe, started to build narratives around less fortunate people: working-class characters, poor and disadvantaged men. The audiences were sometimes more shocked by the centrality of the working classes than the suggestive depictions of violence. Nevertheless, “the early sixties saw the first steps in the emergence of a truly confrontational theatre in Britain” (Sierz 17). The provocative language atmosphere of the 1960s was even starting to influence language television: “On 13 November 1965, during a live BBC late-night discussion about showing sex onstage, Kenneth Tynan said ‘fuck’ for the first time on television” (Sierz 18).

The outrageous character of the Angry Young Men is of course strongly present in *Look Back in Anger*. The emotional chaos of the play is mainly caused by the shouting of its hero Jimmy. His angry outbursts are “a discontinuous series of accidental and incidental explosions aimed at arbitrary targets and scattering dirt on innocent and guilty alike” (Weiss 285).

Alison is getting desperate during Jimmy’s outrage: “God help me, if he doesn’t stop, I’ll go out of my mind in a minute” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 16). There are no serious motives for his excessive outbursts towards Alison mentioned in the play: “What crimes, real or imagined, has she committed during their years of marriage to warrant Jimmy’s cruel hostility and raw-nerved suspicion? Why, and how, has communication collapsed between them? We are perplexed” (Weiss 287-288). Actually, Alison does not really know why she married Jimmy but the anger of her family urged her to marry him:

Alison: [...] Well, the howl of outrage and astonishment went up from the family, and that did it. Whether or not he was in love with me, that did it. He made up his mind to marry me. They did just about everything they could think of to stop us.

(Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 44)

Ravenhill considered *Look Back in Anger* as “a good, but not extraordinary play, [...] if anyone tries to tell you that the play is the most significant play in modern British theatre, I suggest you pause politely and then continue talking about the weather” (qtd. in Heilpern 190). Although Ravenhill tries to dissociate himself from Osborne and *Look Back in Anger*, some parallels cannot be ignored. David Edgar, an English playwright stated that “without Osborne we certainly wouldn’t have had Ravenhill” (qtd. in Sierz *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 149-150). In order to prove his clause, he referred to “passages in the play [*Shopping and F***ing*] that hint at the anger that Ravenhill undoubtedly feels about the alienation of contemporary life” (Sierz *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 150). The verbal outbursts of Ravenhill’s characters are not as high-leveled as Jimmy’s tirades in *Look Back in Anger* because Ravenhill was “so concerned not to bore his audience that he cuts short political discussions” (Sierz *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 150).

4.1.7 The downfall of censorship

The negation of censorship was typical for the postwar time: “censorship was increasingly seen as a trivial nuisance and writers began to enjoy provoking the Lord Chamberlain” (Sierz 14). Osborne could not remember that many parts of *Look Back in Anger* were changed or deleted:

I have no record of the cuts imposed on *Look Back in Anger*. The Lord Chamberlain's Office must have misjudged certain elements as for years television critics and provincial newspapers were to complain about the earthy, degrading or even filthy language. The only deletion I can remember was 'as tough as a night in a Bombay brothel and as rough as a matelot's arse. 'Arm' was substituted for 'arse'. (Osborne, *Almost a Gentleman* 38)

Many theatres were transformed into private clubs for sake of avoiding the rules of censorship.

Some taboo subjects like homosexuality were always banned on stage. The fear of homosexuals was so high that even inhuman depictions were envisaged less dangerous: "When the Lord Chamberlain considered Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* in 1958, he was more worried about its references to homosexuality than about its account of cannibalism" (Sierz 15). Chamberlain softened the rules against homosexuality in December 1958. Hereafter, homosexuality was allowed on stage.

During the 1950s and especially the 1960s, more and more censorship rules were broken. The British era of censorship symbolically ended with the celebration of the American musical *Hair* (1968): "Provocative both in name (evoking hippie 'longhairs') and in its nudity (which argued that we are all one under the skin) the 'tribal rock musical' was a big commercial hit" (Sierz 21).

In the late 1960s provocative plays were liberated from the strict rules of censorship: nudity, simulated sex scenes and excessive assaults became very common in British theatre. By 1970, "audiences were rapidly acclimatizing to the new countercultural insights" (Sierz 23). Provocative themes like sadomasochism and pornography no longer caused scandal.

Although censorship was abolished since 1968, in 1996 the title of Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing* was transformed into *Shopping and F***ing*. The change in name relied on the Indecent Advertisement Act of 1889 (see 3.3.1).

4.1.8 Feminist theatre and gay militant theatre

Gender-related subjects were very popular in the 1970s and 1980s. A new radical sensibility emerged in the 1970s: feminism "which challenged not only the mainstream but alternative theatre as well" (Sierz 23). The 'fixed' roles of women in society were questioned. Discussions sprouted about which female images could or should be shown onstage. Feminist theatre wanted to shock the audience by showing injustice and argued "against the marginalization of the female" (Sierz 23).

The female writers broke taboos by speaking, perhaps for the first time, with a plain openness about sex. The feminist moment was successful and "continued to speak the unspoken" (Sierz 24). The Women's Theatre group *My Mother Says*, for instance, scrutinized underage sex and other taboos. In the 1980s several plays tackled the brutality of life for women under the regime of Margaret Thatcher. In *Shopping and F***ing* Ravenhill also reacted against Thatcherism: he implicitly criticized Thatcher's dictum that there was no such thing as society (see 4.3).

Feminist theatre drove some, especially male, critics to madness. They rejected the one-sided women's world that was shown onstage. Moreover the critics condemned the nudity of, in particular older, women's bodies as titillating.

Alongside feminist drama, militant gay theatre appeared on the British stage. Sierz stressed the confrontational character of this new kind of drama: "Militant gay theatre has often been

deliberately in-*yer*-face, with the intention of confronting audiences with their prejudices and rallying the gay community with assertions of pride in its identity” (25). Homosexual love and desire were described in detail. The directness and subject of the militant gay theatre are immediately retraceable in *Shopping and F***ing*. However, the liberating ideology of the militant gay theatre is crushed in *Shopping and F***ing*: in contrast with the heterosexual characters, the homosexuals are not able to deal with their problems (see 4.5).

4.1.9 In-Yer-Face Theatre

In Sierz’ description of the ‘nasty nineties’, he remarked that “never before had so many plays been so blatant, aggressive or emotionally dark. The decade witnessed more and more new writers [...] being drawn to the extremes of experience” (Sierz 30). In-Yer-Face drama reflected extreme ideas being pushed to the limit:

If drama dealt with masculinity, it showed rape; if it got to grips with sex, it showed fellatio or anal intercourse; when nudity was involved, so was humiliation; if violence was wanted, torture was staged; when drugs were the issue, addiction was shown.

While men behaved badly, so did women. And often the language was gross, the jokes sick, the images indelible. (Sierz 30)

One contemporary movement had a major influence on Ravenhill’s work: the ‘blank generation’ of North American novelists. In “A Tear in the Fabric”, Ravenhill expressed the underlying ideas of this movement: “These American writers didn’t write about the working class or the underclass, but about middle-class kids whose life had no meaning, with an overwhelming death wish” (Ravenhill, “A Tear in the Fabric” 90). The ‘dirty realism’ and the

harshness of the ‘blank generation’ writers inspired Ravenhill to scatter the hopeless moral nihilism of the world in his plays (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* xxi).

The history of provocative outrage demonstrates that drama has always represented human cruelty. Nevertheless, never before violence was considered so common.

4.2 Social criticism

Due to the major importance of social criticism in *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*, this chapter will be more elaborated than the previous and following ones. In both plays social criticism is mainly implicit. Nevertheless, there are some striking differences e.g. there is a discrepancy between the society of the 1950s and the one of the 1990s and the nature of the social problems differs as well. Moreover, the playwrights approach the societal problems in their own specific way.

4.2.1 Class struggle in *Look Back in Anger*

The central social theme in *Look Back in Anger* is class struggle. Although Jimmy Porter was born in a working-class family, *Look Back in Anger* cannot be labeled as a working-class play. Its protagonist Jimmy Porter no longer belongs to the working classes, because he is “first-generation, university-educated, emerging *middle-class*” (Heilpern 174). Jimmy dropped out of university since he no longer felt at ease with his emerging new social status. He did not want to lose his pure link with the working classes in which he was born but it was already too late. He has arrived in no-man’s land, stuck in-between “the working class, to

which he belongs emotionally, and the middle classes, to which he belongs by right of education" (Skovmand 86).

The opportunity for working-class children to attain academic studies was quite new. In 1945 the Education Act offered new opportunities to the working classes:

The Act ensured that education no longer remained a fortress of the privileged. It held out the promise of transforming the social landscape by creating opportunity for the excluded working class, while giving birth to a new meritocracy of talent and a newly educated audience for the theatre. Osborne's generation was its first outcome.

(Heilpern 175)

Look Back in Anger led the way in showing the audience the emergence of a new class: the educated working class. Jimmy Porter was hailed as the spokesman of the new younger generation (Taylor, "Ten Years of the English Stage Company" 123).

Jimmy Porter is the bearer of stereotyped class images. He describes his friend Cliff as an unwitting person because he belongs to the working class: "Well, you *are* ignorant. You're just a peasant" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 3). He continues his conversation by pointing to the supposed literacy of his upper-middle-class wife Alison: "(to Alison) What about you? You're not a peasant are you?" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 3). A few moments later, the battle of the classes returns:

Jimmy: Why do you bother? You can't understand a word of it.

Cliff: Uh huh.

Jimmy: You're too ignorant.

Cliff: Yes, and uneducated. Now shut up, will you?

Jimmy: Why don't you get my wife to explain it to you? She's educated. (*to her*)

That's right, isn't it?

(Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 3)

This scene is a good example of Jimmy's position (working-class but educated) in-between the uneducated working-class Cliff and educated upper-middle-class Alison. Osborne depicted Cliff as the essential counterbalance to Alison in order to present Jimmy's dilemma physically onstage: "his attraction towards Cliff as a romanticized image of the proletariat and his ambivalent relationship with Alison – on the one hand repulsion because of the values she represents and on the other sexual and emotional attraction" (Skovmand 87). The flat they are living in is represented as a replica of the outside world. Jimmy wages the struggle of the classes within his own four walls (Skovmand 88).

Jimmy is aware that he is a displaced person in a society in which "the wrong people [are] going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 101). His running of a sweet-stall could be an indicator of his denial to recognize his new place in society. Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, does not understand Jimmy's choice: "Sweet-stall. It does seem an extraordinary thing for an educated young man to be occupying himself with. Why should he want to do that, of all things" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 66). Skovmand distinguishes two possible reasons for Jimmy's adherence to a sweet-stall:

If this is meant as more than a purely private protest, it is futile; if on the other hand it is as means of keeping his wife in social and economic circumstances which are unusual and embarrassing for her, then Jimmy is definitely successful in his line of work: "The Lady Pusillanimous [Alison] has been promised a brighter easier world than old Sextus [Jimmy] can ever offer her." (87)

Hugh's mother had bought the sweet-stall for Jimmy. He has much respect for her because she belongs to the working class. Alison tries to explain the bond of Jimmy and Hugh's mother to her father:

Oh – how can you describe her [Hugh's mother]? Rather – ordinary. What Jimmy insists on calling working class. A Charwoman who married an actor, worked hard all her life, and spent most of it struggling to support her husband and her son. Jimmy and she are fond of each other. (Osborne, *Look back in Anger* 66)

Jimmy feels like society let him down. Marowitz describes Jimmy as a “fuming British malcontent” (175). His position in-between two classes is very frustrating:

And men like him, educated beyond their working-class origins yet fiercely conscious of class allegiance, articulate beyond stiff-upper-class reticence, and possessed of and by a “burning virility of mind and spirit”, find themselves at war in a world with no acceptable outlets for their energies, a world ostensibly without “good, brave causes” or occupations worth one’s efforts. (Weiss 285)

Jimmy is not the only character who is residing in no-man’s land. Cliff feels like he is trapped in-between Jimmy and Alison: “This [flat] has always been a battlefield, but I’m pretty certain that if I hadn’t been here, everything would have been over between these two long ago. I’ve been a – a no-man’s land between them” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 61). Cliff functions as a peacekeeper between Jimmy and Alison: “I’m wondering how much longer I can go on watching you two tearing the insides out of each other. It looks pretty ugly sometimes” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 24). Cliff pities Alison who is constantly being shouted at by Jimmy. However, he has much sympathy for Jimmy because they have a lot in common due to their working-class background:

Well, I suppose he and I think the same about a lot of things, because we're alike in some ways. We both come from working class people, if you like. Oh I know some of his mother's relatives are pretty posh, but he hates them as much as he hates yours [Alison's relatives]. Don't quite know why. Anyway, he gets on with me because I'm common. (*grins*) Common as dirt, that's me. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 27)

Jimmy's disappointment in society, in which the voice of Osborne is clearly audible, does not result in the launching of a revolution. Instead he runs away from society (Marowitz 176). He cannot identify with the class system because he has been robbed of a sense of identity. The idea of alienation is emphasized right from the beginning of the play (Skovmand 87). Osborne's disillusion reflects a sense of disappointment "that the traditional values are not true: a desire for lost certainties, which leads to the nostalgic portrayal of Edwardian figures like Alison's father" (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 102) (see 4.6). Osborne's characters in general are determined by an inability to act (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 98). They are constantly repeating the same actions: Jimmy is angry during the whole play, Cliff is always reading the newspapers and Alison and Helena keep ironing. Because of this inability to undertake action, Osborne's play cannot be seen as a social revolt.

Jimmy's frustration with society and with himself is taken out on all his personal relationships (Taylor, *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger: A Casebook* 84). One of the results is Jimmy's sadomasochistic relationship with Alison. Skovmand declares this outcome by pointing to an important aspect of bourgeois marriage: "that one's matrimonial partner functions as a scapegoat for one's failures outside the home" (87). In *Look Back in Anger* Jimmy furiously gives an image of the upper-class behavior he truly hates:

Did you read about the woman who went to the mass meeting of a certain American evangelist at Earls Court? She went forward, to declare herself for love or whatever it is, and in the rush of converts to get to the front, she broke four ribs and got kicked in the head. She was yelling her head off in agony, but with 50,000 people putting all they'd got into 'Onward Christian Soldiers', nobody even knew she was there. (7)

Jimmy attacks the careless attitude of the upper classes towards people in need. He pervades his anger into his own behavior against Alison and her family. Obviously, he cannot fight 50,000 people, and certainly not a whole society, but he can "pull out one of the guilty innocent and punch him on the nose and that is what Jimmy is using his marriage for" (Skovmand 88).

The passage above is not the only moment in which the upper classes are linked with religion. When Jimmy is shouting about the amount of money they have to pay to their landlord Miss Drury, he assumes she would be in church:

I don't give a damn about Miss Drury – that mild old gentlewoman doesn't fool me, even if she takes in you two. She's an old robber. She gets more than enough money out of us for this place every week. Anyway, she's probably in church, (*points to the window*) swinging on those bloody bells! (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 20)

When Alison is on the verge of leaving Jimmy, she wants to go to church with Helena. The sudden appearance of her religious beliefs symbolizes the return to her upper-class background:

Jimmy: [...] I didn't ask you what was the matter with you. I asked you where you were going.

Helena: (*steadily*) She's going to church.

[...]

Jimmy: You're doing what? *Silence*. Have you gone out of your mind or something?
 (to Helena) You're determined to win her, aren't you?

(Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 51)

Apart from religion, the newspapers in *Look Back in Anger* indicate class differences.

Jimmy makes a distinction between ordinary newspapers and “posh papers” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 5). He refers to an article about the Bishop of Bromley, published in a posh paper, not surprisingly if you take the religious content of the article in consideration. Jimmy is angry because the Bishop is spiriting the class distinctions away: “He [the Bishop]’s upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says he denies the difference of class distinction. ‘This idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by the working classes! Well!’” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 6). His friend Cliff, on the other hand, is reading the posh newspapers in order to climb the social ladder: “I’m trying to better myself” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 4).

Besides newspapers, music is an important cultural medium in the play. Jimmy’s frustrated view on society is strongly present in the scene in which he wants to hear some English music. He is surprised by his own wish because “people like me aren’t supposed to be very patriotic” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 11). Most of the time he is playing jazz on his trumpet, a nostalgic reminder of a music genre that became popular before wartime. Jimmy composes songs in which his own class struggle is recognizable. Some striking lyrics are “Just because she is better than you” and “Those forgotten middle-classes may have fallen on their noses” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 86). Jimmy himself is a member of the emerging ‘forgotten’ middle class.

Jimmy's disdain of the upper classes is mainly directed to Alison. Alison's Establishment background makes her a surrogate for the class system (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 98). Nevertheless, he does not indulge her relatives from his rage. He hates her brother and her mother 'Mummy', two pure products of the upper classes: "Have you ever seen her brother? Brother Nigel? The straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst? I only met him once myself. He asked me to step outside when I told his mother she was evil minded" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 14).

Jimmy's attitude towards Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, is rather ambiguous. In a conversation with her father, Alison clarifies Jimmy's somehow different opinions about Mummy and the Colonel:

Alison: Do you know what he said about Mummy? He said she was an overfed, overprivileged old bitch. 'A good blow-out for the worms' was his expression, I think.

Colonel: I see. And what does he say about me?

Alison: Oh, he doesn't seem to mind you so much. In fact, I think he rather likes you. He likes you because he can feel sorry for you. (*conscious that what she says is going to hurt him*) 'Poor old Daddy – just one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining any more.' (*rather lamely*) Something like that, anyway.

(Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 68-69)

On the one hand Jimmy feels sorry for the Colonel because he hardly recognized England after he had come back from India. Just like Jimmy, he suffers from a feeling of alienation from society. In this way he is "Jimmy's older *alter ego*" (Skovmand 89). On the other hand

the Colonel returned to England and to “his typical upper-class existence of affluence and influence”. In this way, the Colonel functions as a contrast to Jimmy.

Jimmy’s attitude towards Alison’s parents resembles Osborne’s attitude towards Pamela’s parents:

Lane’s parents were implacably opposed to the marriage. [...]. Yet Osborne didn’t regard her father bitterly, and the two of them even liked each other grudgingly across the great divide. Mr Lane, himself the son of a West Country master draper, had been a dashing flying officer and hero in the Great War. “Mummy” was the armour-plated war leader marshalling all forces in the bloody cause of stopping the marriage.

(Heilpern 116)

Alison and her family are not the only victims of Jimmy’s frustrations: the play is moving gradually to progressive isolation “with the protagonist driving each of his companions away” (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 98). At the beginning of their relationship, Jimmy idealized Alison but now he is incompetent of valuing her real qualities. His violent actions drive Alison back into the arms of her family. Jimmy’s new relationship with Helena, a surrogate from Alison’s cycle, drives his best friend out of the flat. Cliff became alienated by the lack of emotional honesty in the relationship of Jimmy and Helena (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 99). Helena also leaves after she has realized that she is an intruder in the marriage of her best friend Alison. In the end Alison returns but the question is whether this will bring more prosperity in the future (see 4.6).

Osborne represents the class struggle as a war between the lower and the upper classes (Weiss 285-286). When Alison is talking about the beginning of her marriage, when Jimmy and she were sharing a working-class apartment with Hugh, she describes this war:

Those next months at the flat in Poplar were a nightmare. I suppose I must be soft and squeamish, and snobbish, but I felt as though I'd been dropped in a jungle. I couldn't believe that two people, two educated people could be so savage, and so – so uncompromising. Mummy has always said that Jimmy is utterly ruthless, but she hasn't met Hugh. He takes the first prize for ruthlessness – from all comers. Together, they were frightening. They both came to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 42)

In Jimmy's war, the upper classes are regarded as enemies. Jimmy describes Helena as "one of my natural enemies" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 33-34). Alison also belongs to the very group of people Jimmy detests. In the spirit of the hostile terminology in the play, Weiss describes Jimmy's marriage "not as an alliance with the enemy, but as a marauding venture into his territory" (286). In order to secure a successful marriage, she has to break completely with her middle-class background. She has to adopt a completely different lifestyle and "endure uncomplainingly cramped living conditions" (Weiss 286). Since Jimmy is constantly insulting her family and friends, she cannot take "a neutral position between the combatants" (Weiss 286). She has to choose whether she is with or against him. Her decision to choose Jimmy's side forced her into difficult living conditions. The constantly returning ironing-board symbolizes Alison's protective shield against Jimmy's outbursts. When she is ironing, she can pretend that she has not heard what Jimmy was shouting about: "Alison's power and secret weapon is her self-protective shield of withdrawal" (Heilpern 123). Alison's alternating choice inevitably led towards social clashes and even a battle of the sexes (Weiss 286) (see also 4.5).

In order to overcome his displacement in society, Jimmy wants "to have an acceptable identity compatible with his self-realization" (Kroll 556). Jimmy's failure of belonging to a

specific class is also connected with his self-exploration. The social sciences have proved that the inner self cannot be classified into groups: “everything is classifiable except the residual, unexercised inner self” (Kaufmann 103). Consequently, Jimmy’s exploration of his inner self does not fit into social boundaries as well and Jimmy only gets more frustrated.

In 1957, one year after the first performance of *Look Back in Anger*, Arnold Wesker wrote *The Kitchen*. The play shows a lot of similarities with *Look Back in Anger*: criticism on society, a small setting, the presence of all layers of society and interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, *The Kitchen* was far more utopian than *Look Back in Anger*. (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990 : 1890-1990* 113-121)

4.2.2 The social appeal of *Shopping and F***ing*

*Shopping and F***ing* is socially more radical than *Look Back in Anger*. Ravenhill seems to be making “a plea for a world in which love can transcend the violence and hatred of a society that has been run into the ground by the consumerist values of a wayward class” (Svich 82). This plea gives the play the revolting character that *Look Back in Anger* is missing.

In the consumerist society everything is for sale. Brian is a loyal supporter of this kind of society: “for the right sum – life is easier, richer and more fulfilling” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 10). Even human life is for sale. At the beginning of the play, Mark is telling a story in which he fantasizes about buying Robbie and Lulu from a man in the supermarket: “Well, says fat guy, they’re both mine. I own them. I own them but I don’t want them [...]. Wanna buy them? [...] Yeah, yours for twenty” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 5). In the class society of *Look Back in Anger*, slight traces of consumerism are already detectable as

Jimmy is crying out “You want anything, you pay for it. Like I have to” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 48).

Look Back in Anger and *Shopping and F***ing* are both criticizing the Establishment of their time. In *Look Back in Anger* Jimmy’s outbursts are passively steered against the class system, mainly against the upper layers of it, whereas *Shopping and F***ing* questions the ethics of consumerist society. Robbie, for instance, is revolting against the power of consumerist society: “Fuck money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let’s be... beautiful. Beautiful. And happy” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 39). Rebellato recognizes the importance of Robbie’s speech: “On the one hand, we’re laughing at his chemically-induced reverie, the absurd naivety of his insight, but on the other, we recognize the resonance of his claim” (xxvii).

Ravenhill’s resistance to the consumer culture is not constantly present in the play. In several scenes, the characters consume recklessly and excessively (Buse). Nonetheless, the objections against consumerism always return. When Robbie has to sell five hundred ecstasy tablets, he consumes some of the pills himself. Although money and consumption are inextricably allied in consumerist society, he decides to give the rest of the pills away for free. Because of this action, Robbie transgresses the ‘golden rule’ of consumerist society: “when money is exchanged, an act becomes a ‘transaction’” (Urban 368). Lulu, for instance, is fond of eating. Since she has no permanent job, she often has to violate the golden rule by stealing food. When she witnesses a robbery at the Seven-Eleven, she does not help the victim behind the counter but steals a chocolate bar. Buse comments on Lulu’s prior concern: “What horrifies her most is not that she did nothing to help, but that she used the attack as an opportunity to steal [...] a chocolate bar. The most hideous offence is not the failure to help a fellow human being, but the transgression against the rules of consumption most of us

automatically obey". In this scene Ravenhill clearly ridicules the overwhelming influence of consumerism on contemporary life: obeying the rules of consumerism is more important than a human life.

The societal chaos is omnipresent in *Shopping and F***ing*. Ravenhill described how disoriented his characters feel in society by comparing his play to the science-fiction series *Dr Who*:

My characters in *Shopping and F***ing* make up an alternative family – just like *Dr Who*. Rather than being lost in time, they are lost in the city. And just like in *Dr Who*, there are monsters in the *Shopping and F***ing* world. When my characters leave the flat it is never very long before something awful happens. These troubled urbanities live in homes with microwaves but no kettle. (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 150).

One of the 'monsters' in society is the violence. The cruel appearances of violence are more emphasized in *Shopping and F***ing* than in *Look Back in Anger*. Violence is everywhere as a direct result of the greediness caused by consumerism. Accordingly, especially physical violence has a more savage character in this play. According to Wade, the violence onstage also "stems from the postmodern modalities of alienation" (114). In *Look Back in Anger*, the weaknesses of the reigning class system primarily inflict alienation. In some cases, like Jimmy Porter's, this isolation can lead to verbal and physical violence.

Ravenhill used the shock method, not only to provoke the audience, but also to expose the underlying meaning of the play. With the aid of the shock method, Ravenhill transgressed boundaries and defied moral values "it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 4). The shocking opening scene of *Shopping and F***ing* is deliberately offensive. In this scene Lulu

and Robbie are consuming takeaway food. Mark does not want to eat this kind of food and is vomiting. Buse indicates the symbolical meaning of Mark's action: "Vomiting is the antithesis of consumption, an absolute rejection of the imperative to consume". So Ravenhill's revolt against the modern culture of suspicious consumption, where happiness is waiting at the end of a commodity, is kicked off from the opening scene of the play onwards.

Individualism takes a more prominent place in *Shopping and F***ing*. Whereas the characters in *Look Back in Anger* mainly aim at finding an appropriate place in the rigid patterns of the class system, the characters of *Shopping and F***ing* have to deal with a lot of personal concerns: addiction, unemployment, sexual abuse (see 3.3.4). Nevertheless, their own problems are depending on or caused by consumerist society: the individuals are consumers and little more (Rebellato, *Shopping and F***ing* xix). The play displays "the atomized relationship between the individual and a bleak world (Wandor 237). In *Look Back in Anger* the self-realization of the characters does not fit into the class system. Furthermore, class values are considered more important than individual values. In *Shopping and F***ing*, there is more space for self-analysis. Mark, for instance, considers his dependency on others as one of his weaknesses:

I have this personality you see? Part of me gets addicted. I have a tendency to define myself purely in terms of my relationship to others. I have no definition of myself you see. So I attach myself to others as a means of avoidance, of avoiding knowing the self. Which is actually potentially very destructive. [...] I don't stop myself I repeat the patterns. Get attached to people to these emotions then I'm back to where I started.
 (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 32-33)

As a matter of fact, the pattern will be repeated when he falls in love with Gary. The consumerist society does not only offer more space for self-analysis, it is often providing products aimed at satisfying individual needs. A typical example are the individually packed ready meals. Lulu has problems with sharing these meals: “They’re really not made for sharing. It’s difficult” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 21).

In *Shopping and F***ing*, sex is no longer an act of love, but a commodity of consumerist society (see also 3.3.4). When Mark comes back from the rehabilitation centre, he explains why they kicked him out:

I just – you know – in the shower. Shower and I... Saw his bottom. Saw the hole, you know. And I felt like – I wanted to... lick it. [...]. We did a deal I paid him. We confined ourselves to the lavatory. It didn’t mean anything. (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 19)

This scene contains an implicit critique of Ravenhill on the importance of money in consumerist society. He deliberately uses “the fact that Mark pays to perform this act in order to evoke the mythical connection between money and shit, a connection that Sigmund Freud famously wrote about in his essay ‘Character and Anal Eroticism’ (1908)” (Rebellato, *Shopping and F***ing* 93). The connection is repeated later in the plays when Mark pays Gary to lick his arse.

In *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter implicitly connects religion with the upper classes. The beneficence of religion is questioned again in *Shopping and F***ing*. Apart from religion, Ravenhill criticizes other valid ideologies of contemporary society: for instance capitalism. The characters in *Shopping and F***ing* are having difficulties “to make sense of a world without religion or ideology” (Billington 360). In a world focused on money and

consuming, a world without any reliable ideology, the characters are feeling lost and confused. Robbie expresses the human need of “big stories”:

I think... I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them. (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 66)

Kuti notices that “Robbie’s list of ‘big stories’ covers the crucial stages in the development of western drama (and indeed civilization) – from Greek tragedy [Gods and Fate], to Enlightenment rationalism, to Brechtian socialism: none of them, Ravenhill implicitly suggests, available modes for the playwright of the late twentieth century” (460). Nonetheless, Robbie has found a way of coping with the loss of trustworthy ideologies: “so now we’re all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we’ve each got one” (Ravenhill *Shopping and F***ing* 66). The creation of small, personal stories offers the characters consolation characters in a world in which they all have to deal with loneliness and isolation.

In accordance with Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger*, Gary is very critical of religious beliefs. He calls religious people members of the “God Squad”¹³ (Ravenhill *Shopping and F***ing* 24). He mocks the hypocritical behavior of a Christian client: “We’re at it [i.e. the sexual act] and he kept going about the Lamb of Jesus. Hit me. I give as good as I took” (Ravenhill *Shopping and F***ing* 24). Gary thinks that nothing is really worth believing in. However he uses the ideologies of other people to his gain. He makes an appeal, for instance, “to Mark’s idea of

¹³ ‘God squad’ is a derogatory slang term for a religious zealot, usually Christian. (Rebellato, *Shopping and F***ing* 94)

transaction and to Lulu's belief in stories to convince them to go on with the consensual rape" (De Buck 17):

Listen, right. When someone's paying, someone wants something and they're paying, then you do it. Nothing right. Nothing wrong. It's a deal. So then you do it. I thought you were for real. Pretending, isn't it? Just a story. (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 85)

It becomes clear that the ideologies that Mark and Lulu are adhering, urged them to fulfill Gary's wish of penetrating him with a knife. Mark believes that his only chance to survive in this brutal society is avoiding commitment. He wants to unfasten the connection between love and sex. From now on, sex is a purely economic transaction to him: "More of a... transaction. I paid him. I gave him money. And when you're paying, you can't call that a personal relationship, can you?" (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 18). However, he fails in accomplishing his own ideology when he admits to Gary that he is in love with him:

There's a physical thing, yes. A sort of wanting which isn't love is it? No, that's well, desire. But then, yes, there's an attachment I suppose. There's also that. Which means I want to be with you. Now, here, when you're with me I feel like a person and if you're not with me I feel less like a person [...] Yes. I love you. (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 55-56)

Lulu also invents an own ideology. She believes in the power of fantasy stories in order to cope with the loneliness of society. Nevertheless, she soon discovers that real life is nothing like her created story world: "what kind of planet is this when you can't even buy a bar of chocolate?" (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 28).

The capitalist ideology is personified by Brian. His motto exhales the old values of capitalism: “Civilisation is money. Money is civilisation” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 87). Brian even says that the first words of the Bible are “get the money first” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 87). Ravenhill’s skepticism towards capitalism becomes clear when Brian stresses the violent character of the attempts to earn money and accomplish civilization:

And civilisation – how did we get there? By war, by struggle, kill or be killed. And money – it’s the same thing, you understand? The getting is cruel, is hard, but the having is civilisation. Then we are civilized. Say it. Say it with me. (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 87)

Nonetheless, Brian himself realizes that capitalism is not the ideal ideology but he fails in finding a better option: “It’s not perfect. I don’t deny it. We haven’t reached perfection. But it’s the closest we’ve come to meaning” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 87).

Ravenhill opposes Brian’s capitalist ideology to Robbie’s pacifist beliefs. When Robbie is at the night club to sell Lulu’s ecstasy pills, he takes some pills himself. He has a hallucination in which he reflects anarchical ideas:

I was looking down on this planet. Spaceman over this earth. And I see this kid in Rwanda, crying, but he doesn’t know why. And this granny in Kiev, selling everything she’s ever owned. And this president of Bogota or... South America, And I see the suffering. And the wars. And the grab, grab, grab.

And I think: Fuck money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let’s be... beautiful. Beautiful and happy.

(Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 39)

Consequently, Robbie starts giving the pills away for free. However, Robbie's pacifistic generosity gets him into trouble. Brian threatens to torture Lulu and Robbie if they do not collect the money as soon as possible. In order to pay off their debts, Robbie gives in to the money-culture: he has to change his motto "Fuck money" into Brian's "Money is civilisation", at least for a while. (De Buck 16-18)

Some of the characters switch positions or reverse their values during the play. De Buck remarks that *Shopping and F***ing* "functions as a process of revealing their true identity and overcoming former obsessions. [...] Lulu agrees to share her food and Mark abandons his theory of love as a transaction" (De Buck 60). Lulu's changed attitude is further discussed in 4.6.

Ravenhill criticizes the social services in *Shopping and F***ing*. He gives a critique on the resignation of social services in the subject matter of sexual abuse. Gary was sexually abused by his stepfather. When he went to the council to report this offence, the woman behind the counter simply asked "Does he use a condom?" (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 40). Subsequently, she ordered Gary to give his stepfather a leaflet. The incapability and reluctance of the council to take severe measures stirred up a rage in Gary:

Well, I don't know. Inject him with something, put him away, cut something off. Do something. And I'm – I've got this anger, right? This great big F***ing anger – her in front of my eyes. I mean, I F***ing hate her now, right? (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 41)

Furthermore, Ravenhill accuses the social services of undertaking insufficient precautions of social control. Mark's sexual relationship with Gary is a pederast offence, because Gary is only fourteen. Already at their first encounter, Gary's age does not seem to bother Mark:

Gary: How old did you think I was – on the lines?

Mark: I didn't think about it.

Gary: How old do you want me to be?

Mark: It doesn't matter.

Gary: Everybody's got an age they want you to be.

Mark: I'd like you to be yourself.

(Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 23)

Subsequently, Mark guesses that Gary is sixteen or seventeen. Although this would mean that Gary is still under age, he still wants to have sex with him. Gary reveals his real age later in the play when Mark wants Gary to give him a blowjob in a changing room:

Mark: Suck my cock now. Take you home later.

Gary: There's a security camera;

Mark: Doesn't matter.

Gary: All this for me? Fourteen. You got it wrong. I'm fourteen.

(Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 57)

Apparently, the presence of a security camera made Gary uncomfortable. Ravenhill's reference to security cameras clearly symbolizes his plea for more social control. (De Buck 14)

4.3. Political agenda?

The social content of *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and Fucking* is quite straightforward. In the depiction of their societies, references to political facts and ideas are visible. The question is to which extent the writers aimed at spreading a political message.

4.3.1 Political elements in *Look Back in Anger*

As I mentioned before, *Look Back in Anger* is full of social criticism but fetches no social revolt (see 4.2.1). According to Innes, Jimmy Porter is reduced to verbal outbursts because of denied political opportunities for changing the world around him (*Modern British Drama* 98). Supporters of the Labour Party reacted positively on the release of *Look Back in Anger*. They applauded the thoughts that Jimmy spreads in his numerous tirades. Michael Foot, the former leader of the Labour Party, explains the enthusiasm: “He came along and expressed all we thought more eloquently than we were doing” (qtd. in Heilpern 231). The conservative newspaper *The Star* described Porter as “a caricature of the sort of frustrated left-wing intellectual who, I thought, died out in the war” (Heilpern 169).

Since Jimmy Porter functions as an authorial mouthpiece, Jimmy’s tirades reflect some of Osborne’s political ideas, for instance his disillusioned patriotic feelings: “I suppose someone like me isn’t supposed to be very patriotic” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 11). However, the play cannot be categorized as a political play. Innes remarks that “the political metaphor breaks down [...] precisely because the play is not a monologue” (*Modern British Drama*, 100). Jimmy Porter is often regarded as ‘the spokesman for the young generation’ because of his negative vision on contemporary society (Innes, *Modern British Drama*, 100). This negativism is far more significant than any political insight.

An important figure in *Look Back in Anger* is Alison's father, Colonel Redfern. He is the symbol of the Edwardian era (1901-1910) in which British colonization flourished. Osborne's nostalgia for the comforting Edwardian era, personified in the Colonel, is often taken too literally. Heilpern posits that Osborne's reference to the Edwardian period had no political ground:

The sentimental Edwardian allure is a link to the imagined era of Osborne's father, born at the close of the century. The nostalgia isn't really about the style of the colonial past, but the saving grace of something within the washed-up past that's still of value. (234)

The Colonel is a symbol of an era and policy that Jimmy detests: imperialism (Skovmand 89). Attentive readers would notice that Jimmy is sometimes mocking the idealized image of the Edwardian twilight of Empire:

The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-make cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you've got no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 11)

The last sentence of this passage is probably not addressed to the lost world of the Colonel, but functions as a reminder of the lost world of Osborne's father.

Heilpern is convinced that Osborne had no political motives when he was writing *Look Back in Anger*. The negativism of Porter about contemporary society, in which the

Conservative Party was governing, does not mean that he automatically belongs to the Left: “My view is that Osborne was never committed to any political agenda in the first place – Left or Right. With *Look Back in Anger*, he was labeled a radical socialist and taken up by the Left” (Heilpern 230-231). Osborne himself had already denied any political purpose of *Look Back in Anger* in 1957: “I am not a politician [...]. I must make myself clear about this identity. I am a playwright, and the only valid statement I can ever make is in the theatre” (qtd. in Heilpern 231). Nevertheless, *Look Back in Anger* challenged the status quo of society and can therefore be seen as a political play to some extent (Heilpern 233). Jimmy is attacking this status quo in one of his outbursts about Alison’s brother Nigel, a politician of the Conservative Party:

But somewhere at the back of that mind is the vague knowledge that he and his pals have been plundering and fooling everybody for generations. [...] Now Nigel is just about as vague as you can get without being actually invisible. And invisible politicians aren’t much use to anyone – not even to *his* supporters! (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 15)

Jimmy is certainly concerned about the political situation of his time. Apparently, he is attacking the stagnating political situation every day, as becomes clear in Helena’s question: “Jimmy, can we have one day, just one day, without tumbling over religion or politics?” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 83).

Audiences are not tended to sympathize with the outbursts of Jimmy. Instead, upper-class characters like Alison and her father arouse more respect. Innes remarks that “the audience is clearly intended to empathize with her [Alison] as a suffering individual” (*Modern British Drama* 100). The Colonel earns respect by admitting that he might have overreacted when Alison wanted to marry someone of a lower class. Since Jimmy, bearer of Osborne’s

(political) ideas, is the less sympathetic character of the play, it is questionable if Osborne had a political agenda in mind when he was writing *Look Back in Anger*.

4.3.2. The political content of *Shopping and Fucking*

Shopping and Fucking is not only socially but also politically more radical than *Look Back in Anger*. The political program of the conservative regime of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s had a major influence on *Shopping and Fucking*. Ravenhill admitted that his play was an implicit critique on Thatcher's proclamation that there is no such thing as society: "if her vision was true, this is what you got, a 'cynical and hardened' attitude, angry that 'a sense of society has disappeared'" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 132).

Although the philosophy of Thatcherism urged Ravenhill to write *Shopping and Fucking*, according to some critics, this was not enough to consider *Shopping and Fucking* as a distinct political play. David Greig, a Scottish playwright, points out that "political plays [...] must contain a suggestion that change is possible" (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 240). Since the capitalistic view of Brian prevails in *Shopping and Fucking*, the play suggests little hope of change. In the last scene of the play, Brian is pleased with Robbie and Lulu because they adopted his philosophy of "money is civilization and civilization is money". The fact that Brian is returning the money that Robbie and Lulu owed him might seem positive, but he only gave the money back "because you [Robbie and Lulu] have learnt. The lesson has been learnt you see. You understand this (*Indicates the money*) and you are civilized" (Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* 88).

Though the hope of political change might seem small, the play has a revolting character because some of the characters are attacking the current political situation. Robbie, for

instance, complains about all the suffering and wars in the world. He indicates that change is necessary: “This system. Fuck the bitching world and let’s be... beautiful” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* 39). Although he aggresses the current political system, he is not able to present an appropriate solution. Sierz considers the characters’ lack of political goals as one of the provocative features of *Shopping and Fucking*: “that’s the provocation: they don’t call on the government to sort out their lives; they don’t say they should get more unemployment benefit; they don’t have a political vocabulary” (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 130). The political revolt is limited, because Ravenhill thought that the audience would feel bored if his characters were moaning about politics all the time:

The Royal Court plays of the Eighties were contributing to a debate, and everyone who saw them shared a political vocabulary. You can no longer assume that an audience will share that particular vocabulary – or *have* any political vocabulary for that matter. (qtd. in Smith 39)

Ravenhill’s aim was “to keep the audience on its toes by juggling with conflicting feelings of empathy and criticism” (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 130).

In contrast to Osborne, Ravenhill did not make a secret of his own political viewpoint. His sympathies lie with the leftist point of view (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 148). Despite his political preference for the Left, he tried to be fair to the opposition. He deliberately depicted Brian’s vision of capitalism as a seductive ideology (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 148). However, Brian functions as a threat to the ‘happy’ triangular relationship of Mark, Robbie and Lulu.

Shopping and Fucking might not offer solid solutions to better the political situation, nevertheless, the play has a political agenda “because it addresses and criticizes contemporary

social, political and moral problems (Reinelt 311). Ravenhill applies shock tactics in order to ask profound questions about social mores and moral norms (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 9). Ravenhill's implicit political skepticism towards the values of Thatcherism, for instance making money as a moral duty, is intended (Rebellato, *Shopping and Fucking* xvi).

In order to make a political statement, Ravenhill eloquently shows the different viewpoints of his characters:

We take in the whole play, understanding the place of all characters in a way that is unavailable to them. This is the source of the play's political sophistication: its compassionate irony, its structural beauty and the perspective it affords all combine to ask us to imagine a world without buying and selling. (Rebellato, *Shopping and Fucking* xxxix)

Rebellato's conclusion is simple: “[*Shopping and Fucking*] was a political play but in a new mode” (xx).

4.4. The importance of the father figure

In *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* the value of paternal love and support is emphasized. Although the images of fatherhood differ, the importance attached to the father figure is surprisingly similar. The depiction of mother figures is confined in both plays.

*4.4.1 The romanticized father figure in *Look Back in Anger**

Osborne dedicated *Look Back in Anger* to his father Thomas Godfrey. His father was born

on 8 May 1900 and Osborne intentionally chose 8 May 1956 as the opening night of *Look Back in Anger* (Heilpern 46). Many autobiographical elements with regard to Osborne's father are detectable in the play itself (see also 2.3.3). Osborne's bleak feelings about his father's death are transferred to Jimmy's character. The death of Jimmy's father seems to be an exact copy of the death of Osborne's father:

For twelve months, I watched my father dying – when I was ten years old. He'd come back from the war in Spain, you see. And certain God-fearing gentlemen there had made such a mess of him, he didn't have long left to live. Everyone knew it – even I knew it. [...] But, you see, I was the only one who cared. [...] We all of us waited for him to die. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 58)

Osborne lamented the loss of his father all his life. Hence, he has felt a sense of abandonment all along: "I was born with a sense of loss, a feeling of things withheld and banished" (qtd. in Heilpern 42). Shortly after his father's death, he felt for the first time 'the fatality of hatred' (Heilpern 62). Osborne's sense of isolation and titillated hatred are powerfully reflected in Jimmy's character.

Osborne searched for appropriate father figures all his life: "Osborne became a man in search for fathers, and the loss of his own led to protective surrogates who understood him and were steadfast in their affection" (Heilpern 69). George Devine, the artistic director of the Royal Court, was the most important father figure in Osborne's adulthood. Devine discovered Osborne and became his mentor. Heilpern states that "there was no doubt that he [Osborne] saw Devine as his substitute father. In *Look Back in Anger*, there are no signs that Jimmy is looking for a new father figure. He is rather concentrating on his mission to let Alison experience what kind of suffering he felt after his father's death.

In 4.1.2, I made a comparison between Shakespeare's hero Hamlet and Osborne's hero Jimmy. They were both estranged, displaced persons in society without a fixed purpose. Yet, Heilpern discovered another remarkable parallel: they are both "haunted by a father whose death must be avenged" (172). Jimmy is abreacting the anger he feels because of his father's death towards his flat mates and the world around him.

Jimmy's obsession with his father's death takes huge proportions. He thinks that only people who have experienced the death of a loved-one are real human beings: "Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 58). In his opinion, anger, death and helplessness are a prominent part of human life. He describes his father's death as an essential part in the struggle of life:

I had to fight back my tears. At the end of twelve months, I was a veteran. [...] You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry – angry and helpless. And I can never forget it. (*He sits.*) I knew more about – love... betrayal... and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 59)

Only after Alison has lost her – but also his! – child, Jimmy considers her human.

Although Jimmy is an unsympathetic character who is constantly raging against Alison and to a lesser extent against Cliff, in one particular passage he presents himself as a father figure for them: "What do you think you're going to do when I'm not around to look after you? Well, what are you going to do? Tell me?" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 9).

Another father figure in the play is Colonel Redfern. The upper-class parents of Alison are both frequently the subject of Jimmy's outbursts: "They [Alison's friends]'re either militant like her Mummy and Daddy. Militant, arrogant and full of malice. Or vague" (Osborne, *Look*

Back in Anger 14). Whereas he depicts Alison's mother as a truly evil woman, he has some respect for her father. He shares the Colonel's feelings of alienation in society (see also 4.2.1). Moreover, Osborne presents the Colonel as a sympathetic character who truly cares about the welfare of his daughter. He feels guilty about his interference in his daughter's marriage: "I didn't approve of Jimmy at all, and I don't suppose I ever should, but looking back on it, I think it would have been better, for all concerned, if we [i.e. Alison's parents] had never attempted to interfere" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 67-68). The Colonel is also a symbol of the time in which Osborne's/Jimmy's father grew up (see also 4.3.1). The Colonel has some respect for Jimmy too, because Jimmy has learnt his daughter a lot about the struggles of life: "Your husband has obviously taught you a great deal, whether you realize it or not" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 69).

The absence of reliable mother figures in *Look Back in Anger* is striking. The only mother in the play is Alison's mother and she is depicted as an evil creature: "That old bitch should be dead!" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 53). The ironing in the play suggests a motherly care of Alison and Helena for the household. Nevertheless, ironing seems to be the only thing they are doing all the time.

4.4.2 The ambiguity of the father figure in *Shopping and F***ing*

In *Shopping and F***ing* the father figure is more ambiguously approached: positive and negative connotations are linked to fatherhood. Furthermore, all characters are influenced by their images of fatherhood.

Mark functions as a father figure for Lulu and Robbie. They repeatedly ask him to tell the story in which Mark fantasizes that he bought Lulu and Robbie in a shopping center:

Lulu: Tell us the shopping story.

Robbie. Yeah, come on. You still remember the shopping story.

(Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 4)

The shopping story does not show a traditional father figure, but an ambiguity between paternal care (“And I’ve been keeping a room for you and I take you into this room. And there’s food. And it’s warm.”) and predation (“So, I do the deal. I hand it [i.e. the money] over. And I fetch you. I don’t have to say anything because you know. You’ve seen the transaction.”) (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 5).

Lulu often reminds Mark of his promise: “And you said: I love you both and I want to look after you for ever” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 4). However, when Mark goes to the rehabilitation centre, and later when he falls for Gary, Lulu and Robbie need to get by without him (Urban 368). They have difficulties with taking their lives into their own hands. They get in trouble due to the abortive drug sale. Apparently, they are lost without a father figure. Only when Mark returns, they are happy again (see 4.6).

Gary was abused by his stepfather and is now desperately looking for a caring and protecting father figure: “I want a dad. I want to be watched. All the time, someone watching me” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 33). Although he ran away from his stepfather and his home, his imagined ideal partner “seems to have the same sexualized mixture of protection and violence” (Rebellato, *Shopping and F***ing* xxx): “I’m not after love. I want to be owned. I want someone to look after me. And I want him to fuck me. Really fuck me. [...]. And yeah, it’ll hurt. But a good hurt” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 56). Gary never talks about his birth father. Just like Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger*, Gary desires his absent father (Urban 368). But rather than being loved, Gary’s fantasy is being sodomized with a knife by a

father figure. After Mark, Robbie and Lulu have agreed to fulfill Gary's wish, he expresses his ultimate desire of being fucked to death by his father.

Brian is the only real – or better: biological – father in the play. He is very proud of his son and becomes even emotional when he is showing Robbie and Lulu a video in which his son is playing cello: "His teacher says 'It's a gift from God.' Kid like that, nice kid – his father's son – but nothing special, picks up a bit of wood and string and – well – grown men cry" (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 47). With the utterance 'his father's son', he emphasizes the emotional bond between father and son. During the play, Brian is often retelling the story of the *Lion King*, a story that he learned from his father:

So now the father is dead. Murdered. It was the uncle. And the son has grown up. And you know – he looks like the dad. Just like him. And this sort of monkey thing comes to him. And this monkey says 'It's time to speak to your dead dad.' So he goes to the stream and he looks in and he sees [...] his own reflection. [...] But then... The water ripples, it hazes. Until he sees a ghost. A ghost or a memory looking up at him. [...] he sees... his... dad.

My little one. Gets to that bit and I look round and he's got these big tears in his eyes. He feels it like I do.

Because now the dad speaks. And he says: 'The time has come. It is time for you to take your place in the Cycle of Being (words to that effect). You are my son and the one true King.'

And he knows what it is he's got to do. He knows who it is he has to kill. And that's the moment. That's our favourite bit.

(Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 9)

The fact that Brian is frequently retelling the story “stresses the father-son bond of familial obligation, emotional attachment, and cyclical regeneration” (Boles 132), an idealized image of fatherhood. Brian adapted his father’s ideology of capitalism. At the end of the *Lion King*, the son succeeds his father as king. De Buck states that this scene “mirrors the passing on of capitalist ideology from his father to himself and perhaps to his son (19). Nevertheless, when Lulu asks Brian if he resembles his father in any way, Brian answers “No. Not really. Not much” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 9).

Next to Mark, Brian functions as a father figure for Robbie and Lulu as well. He teaches them the basic values and techniques to survive in contemporary society:

In conformity with the accepted pedagogical standards, he lets them experience the importance of money. When they understand Brian’s capitalist message, he generously returns the money to Robbie and Lulu, just like a parent rewards a child with a sweet or a small compliment. (De Buck 19)

In *Shopping and F***ing* the ambivalence of the father figure is created by a juxtaposition of the kind, loving father and the sexual father. Rebellato points out that the traditional social characteristics of the father, being protective and disciplinarian, have transformed into a deep political ambiguity:

In *Shopping and F***ing*, as in the novels, the father who is missing is the protective father, the father from the sixties, the paternalist, welfare father; the father who appears in these books is the disciplinarian, but now without the protective instinct. (*Shopping and F***ing* xxxi)

This new kind of father is correlated to money and clearly visible through Brian. Brian’s father told him that the first words of the bible were “Get. The Money. First” (Ravenhill,

*Shopping and F***ing* 87). Moreover, Brian explains to Robbie that money is even more important than the father: Behind everything “behind beauty, behind God, behind paradise” and even behind the father, is “money” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* xxxi). Robbie on the other hand says that a father is the essence of everything. Rebellato fears that this new type of father could be very destructive: “Perhaps this father that will kill us all is the unfettered force of capital, the unrestrained force of consumerism” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* xxxi).

Similar to *Look Back in Anger*, there is not much attention for the mother figure in *Shopping and F***ing*. There is no real mother in the play, but Lulu does possess some typical maternal characteristics (De Buck 21). First of all, she is the peacekeeper, like Cliff in *Look Back in Anger*, when Robbie and Mark are arguing: “Well, look at this mess. If you don’t watch yourself, you just revert, don’t you? To the playground or canteen and suddenly it’s all food fights and mess. So let’s be adults” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 63). Clearly, Lulu is looking after her boys. Secondly, her care for the household, for instance by providing food, partially fills the empty space of the absent father figure. Fourthly, Lulu acts like a mother when she speaks to Gary. She simplifies her language and explains difficult words: “You’re the protag – you are the central character of the film?” (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 67). Finally, Lulu is the least sexual character of the play. Children do not consider their parents as sexually active people, so this characteristic fits into her mother role (De Buck 22).

4.5 Gender-related interpretations

4.5.1. The clash of class and sexes in *Look Back in Anger*

During the 1950s, the rigid gender patterns of the past were breached: “femininity became less firmly tied to motherhood, while work gradually became accepted as a province of both men and women and masculinity was seen as reformed. This destabilized established understandings of working class masculinity and femininity” (Brooke 774). This change in roles was particularly influential in the working classes, in which the man was always considered as the breadwinner and the woman as the mother. Consequently, the changes disturbed the unity of the working classes. Brooke described two dominant modes in which the transformation in the working classes, provoked by new gender patterns, was expressed: nostalgia and the celebration of aggressive masculinity (775). The second mode is at work in *Look Back in Anger*: “the expression of an aggressive masculinity was a backlash against the present with all its uncertainties about both class and gender” (Brooke 775).

In *Look Back in Anger* the class struggle is transposed into the war of the sexes. The four main characters in the play are “clearly divided on class lines, in which sex equals status” (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990* 99). The male characters Jimmy and Cliff have a working-class background, whereas the female characters Alison and Helena belong to the upper classes. Consequently, the social conflict becomes a sexual conflict as well. (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990* 99)

Jimmy’s outbursts against Alison, her mother and Helena are not independent of his social conscience: “they represent predatory, selfish, ignorant, and insensitive society” (Weiss 287). Helena, for instance, is depicted as a strong middle-class woman: “Her sense of matriarchal authority makes most men who meet her anxious, not only to please but impress, as if she

were the gracious representative of visiting royalty" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 37). This is the type of woman Jimmy detests. He regards Alison with suspicion, because he has known suffering, loss and death, while he has not experienced those feelings yet. There is only one woman in the play who is not attacked by Jimmy: Hugh's mother. Unsurprisingly, it is also the only working-class woman in the play. However, she does not correspond to the traditional 'mother' of the working classes: she worked hard all her life. Moreover, Jimmy never calls her name. She is always described as the mother of Hugh, not accidentally a man. This is a clear example of Osborne's effort to profile the dominance of masculinity, as an attack to the changing role patterns.

Jimmy certainly does not think highly of women in general. Jimmy's image of women is originated in Osborne's experiences with women, namely the bad relationship with his mother and his divorce from Pamela Lane. Heilpern refers to Jimmy's utterance about women in general: "blood-sucking vampires" (41). Jimmy also considers women as noisy creatures:

Have you ever noticed how noisy women are? [...] The way they kick the floor about, simply walking over it? Or have you watched them sitting at their dressing tables, dropping their weapons and banging down their bits of boxes and brushes and lipsticks?
 (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 19)

Jimmy's complaint is rather ridiculous because he is shouting all the time in the play. His anger towards women is not limited to verbal assaults. He has no scruples of using physical violence against women: "I hope you won't make the mistake of thinking for one moment that I am a gentleman. [...] I've no public school scruples about hitting girls" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 57-58). Ironically enough, a few moments later, Jimmy says "I'm the type that detests physical violence" (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 58). Apparently, he makes an exception for women. Sierz explains why Jimmy, despite his angry feelings towards upper

classes and women, twice falls for an upper-class woman: Osborne “showed how class war can be fought through sexual conquest” (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 16). When both Alison and Helena have left Jimmy, he seems to confess that he has lost the battle of class and sexes: “Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death? [...] No, there’s nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the woman” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 89).

The confusion and anger in *Look Back in Anger* is not only caused by Jimmy’s loss of class identity but also because of the loss of traditional gender identities and especially the lost traditional femininities: “the misogyny of a Jimmy Porter exists in the no man’s land of class and gender identity in the fifties” (Brooke 788-789).

4.5.2 The clash of heterosexuals and homosexuals in *Shopping and F***ing*

As the title of *Shopping and F***ing* suggests, sex is a recurring motif in the play. Wandor notices that “the chief and most intense mode of interchange between the characters is sexual, and that mainly homosexual” (228). Gary and Mark are fucking several times and at the end Gary is also penetrated by Robbie. The only heterosexual intercourse in the play is the scene in which Lulu is giving Robbie a hand job, but Robbie loses his erection. In the past, Robbie and Lulu had an ordinary heterosexual relationship:

Robbie: Still love you.

Lulu: Haven’t said that for a long time. Wish we could go back to before. Just you and me.

(Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 31)

Nevertheless, Robbie seems to be more attracted to Mark now, because he is jealous when Mark declares his love to Gary.

Lulu is aggravated because Robbie lost his erection. At that moment she realized that Robbie will never completely give in to heterosexuality (De Buck 21). Lulu's frustration results in a critical outburst on homosexuality:

Boys grow up you know and stop playing with each other's willies. Men and women make the future. There are people out there who need me. Normal people who have kind tidy sex and when they want it. And boys? Boys just fuck each other. (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 39)

Paddy Chayefsky offers a possible clarification for Lulu's frustrations: "Each woman has a common belief that she alone can straighten out a homosexual" (qtd. in Loeffler 124).

In accordance with *Look Back in Anger* the crisis of masculinity is depicted in *Shopping and F***ing* (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 130). This crisis is visible in three of the four male characters: Mark, Robbie and Gary. Mark is depicted as an emotional man and a junkie. Robbie seems to be bisexual: he penetrates Gary, but also had a relationship with Lulu. Gary is very vulnerable because he was the victim of sexual abuse. Ravenhill states that "people picked up on the crisis of masculinity quite quickly" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 130). Brian, the only heterosexual male, is represented as a strong character. Lulu, the heterosexual female of the play, is the one who keeps the household together. Clearly, the heterosexuals seem to be more stable characters. In *Shopping and F***ing* the homosexuals are not able to deal with their problems, but the heterosexuals can.

4.6 A glimmer of hope?

4.6.1 The pessimistic character of *Look Back in Anger*

In *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy is constantly criticizing contemporary society (see 4.2.1). He is attacking the present situation of British society in his verbal outbursts, because it is “not in accordance with the ancient rules of chivalry” (Skovmand 90). Due to the rhetoric of war in the play, a class war, a marital war and a sex war are sprouted (Heilpern 116). According to Jimmy, contemporary life is a battlefield. Alison describes Jimmy’s reckless fighting spirit:

Jimmy went into battle with his axe swinging round his head – frail, and so full of fire.
I had never seen anything like it. The old story of the knight in shining armour –
except that his armour didn’t really shine very much. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*
44)

Jimmy is continuously revolting against contemporary life in his mind and his outbursts. Nevertheless he does not launch a revolt that reaches further than his personal environment. The class war and the sex war are clearly recognizable in Jimmy’s speech about Helena’s departure: “You made a good enemy, didn’t you? What they call a worthy opponent. But then, when people put down their weapons, it doesn’t mean they’ve necessarily stopped fighting” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 91). Apparently, Jimmy saw his relationship with Helena as a continuation of his symbolical battle against the upper classes.

The pessimistic tone of *Look Back in Anger* is sometimes broken by nostalgic reflections of the past. The Colonel glorifies the Edwardian era, and Jimmy is attached to this period because his father died in it (see 4.3.1). Nevertheless, their nostalgic reflections are an indication of the troubled state of contemporary society. Alison explains their disillusionment:

“[to her father] You’re hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 70). The Colonel feels isolated in contemporary society, because he hardly recognized England when he came back from India:

Oh I knew that things had changed, of course. [...] But it seemed very unreal to me out there. The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914, and I was happy to go on remembering it that way. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 70)

Jimmy also suffers from a severe cause of alienation. He decided to leave his class by taking an education under the pretence that society would change in the same way. However, the class system has not changed at all, which results in extreme disappointment on Jimmy’s behalf (Skovmand 89). All the persons that are valued positively by Jimmy, like his father and Hugh’s mom, belong to the past. Helena ascertains that “he [Jimmy] was born out of his time” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 96). Consequently, Helena does not predict a positive future for Jimmy: “He doesn’t know where he is, or where he’s going. He’ll never do anything, and he’ll never amount to anything” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 96).

In order to forget their problems, Jimmy and Alison are often fantasizing about bears and squirrels, because “It’s just all we seem to have left” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 46). They feel safe in their fantasy world of tenderness and love: “We’ll be together in our bear’s cave, and our squirrel’s drey, and we’ll live on honey, and nuts – lots of nuts. And we’ll sing about ourselves – about warm trees and snug caves, and lying in the sun” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 102-103). The bear-squirrel games are an autobiographical element of the play. Osborne gave Pamela the nickname ‘squirrel’ and she called him ‘bear’ (Heilpern 10). The only positive thing about the marriage of Jimmy and Alison is their escapism in this bear-squirrel fantasy world. As the play ends with a bear-squirrel scene, it might seem a happy

ending at first. Nevertheless, “when Jimmy’s and Alison’s marriage only functions on this level they are in danger of destroying not only their actual relationship but also their personal identities” (Skovmand 91).

The disillusionment about the future is powerfully present in *Look Back in Anger*. The hopelessness of Jimmy is clearly depicted in the following scene:

Oh, heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm – that’s all, I want to hear a warm thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I’m alive! I’ve an idea. Why don’t we have a little game? Let’s pretend that we’re human beings, and that we’re actually alive. Just for a while. What do you say? Let’s pretend we’re human. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 8-9)

When Helena leaves Jimmy, she claims that the class differences between them are too big: “he wants one world and I want another, and lying in that bed won’t ever change it” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 96). After this scene, Jimmy and Alison reconcile. However, Helena’s words are also applicable to the marriage of Jimmy and Alison. Consequently, a happy future seems very insecure. With regards to the future, Jimmy casts a curse on his and Alison’s baby: “If you could only have a child and it would die” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 36). On the one hand, he thinks that Alison might grow as a human being if she would be personally confronted with death. On the other hand, his prediction can be seen as a curse against the future itself (Skovmand 90). Therefore, the possibility of meaningful social change, a child of the future, has vanished (Innes, *Modern British Theatre: 1890-1990* 102). Nevertheless, at least some common understanding is achieved in the end: now they have both experienced the loss of a loved-one. A famous quote by Jimmy serves as an appropriate conclusion to indicate the hopeless situation of Jimmy and Alison: “there aren’t any good, brave causes left” (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 89).

4.6.2 A sparkle of hope in *Shopping and F***ing*

In *Shopping and F***ing* the triangular relationship between Mark, Gary and Lulu is threatened by the powers of consumerist society. Their attempts at self-improvement come under threat: Mark is thrown out of the drug clinic and Lulu needs to strip in order to get a job (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 126). Robbie's idealism leads him to giving away drugs for free. Consequently, together with Lulu he has to avoid Brian's torture by earning some money with a telephone sex line. In this way, they have to take over Brian's philosophy that 'money is civilization'.

In accordance with *Look Back in Anger*, fantasy is an important instrument of escapism in *Look Back in Anger*. The characters are clinging to small stories, since there are no reliable big stories anymore (see 4.2.2). Story-telling is an important means of creating an alternative world in which the characters can depict their own desires. Lulu is disappointed when she realizes that life is nothing like a story world. In this way, Ravenhill clarifies that even small stories can be very dangerous. The ultimate proof that clinging on to a fantasy world can be dangerous is Gary's death. Coles remarks that Ravenhill seems to condone the murder, because after Gary's death the peace in the play is restored to some extent (134).

As I mentioned in 4.2.2, *Shopping and F***ing* is a plea for a world in which love can transcend the violence and hatred of a society that has been run into the ground by the consumerist values of a wayward class. Although violence and capitalism are powerful sources during the whole play, love turns out to be the strongest force in the play. Despite all effort to keep distance and avoid commitment, Mark still falls in love. Love is depicted as a genuine power that overrides all human efforts (De Buck 12).

The ending of *Shopping and F***ing* is far more positive than the one of *Look Back in Anger*. Although Brian has passed his capitalist view onto Robbie and Lulu, he leaves in the end. It is not sure that Robbie and Lulu will always adopt his ideology in the future. When Brian is at the verge of leaving the flat, he recounts the happy ending of the *Lion King* in which the son has avenged his father's death and becomes king: "Father. Everything is alright, Father. I remembered. The Cycle of Being" (Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing* 89). This could be a reference to Brian's achievement of having passed his ideology, but it could also be a precursor of the somehow happy ending of the play.

Ironically, the death of Gary, has brought Mark, Robbie and Lulu back together. In *Look Back in Anger* the death of a child was also the reason why Jimmy and Alison regained each other. In contrast to *Look Back in Anger*, however, the future of Mark, Robbie and Lulu seems more hopeful. Lulu, for instance, has overcome her initial problem with sharing food. The fact that Mark, Robbie and Lulu are sharing a meal in the end is hopeful. They look like a closely knit intimate family and they are feeding each other. The ending suggests that "finally a time of companionship, nourishment and love has arrived" (Coles, 134). However, this is not an absolute certainty. But at least some glimmers of hope have finally arrived.

5 CONCLUSION

Look Back in Anger and *Shopping and Fucking* are two pioneering plays in the British drama of the twentieth century. Their authors, John Osborne and Mark Ravenhill, were both engineers of a group of new young writers, respectively the Angry Young Men and In-Yer-Face Theatre. *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and Fucking* are complaints about the contemporary society of their time. *Look Back in Anger* deals with the lacks of the class system in the 1950s, whereas *Shopping and Fucking* is questioning the values of the consumerist society in the 1990s.

The plays were both very innovative in their time. The overall tone in both plays is pessimistic. The anger that Osborne's hero Jimmy Porter spreads in *Look Back in Anger* was never seen before. A similar angry sound is detectable in *Shopping and Fucking* in which capitalism is depicted as a seductive but dangerous ideology.

The major themes of both plays are social alienation and violence. In *Look Back in Anger* the social determinants of personal relationships are fully explored. *Shopping and Fucking* is exploring the lack of reliable ideologies in a society in which money is the core element to success.

Look Back in Anger is strongly autobiographical. The play is a reflection of Osborne's unhappy marriage with Pamela Lane. Osborne's hero Jimmy Porter functions as an authorial mouthpiece whereas Alison represents Pamela. The death of Osborne's father is a running motif in the play. *Shopping and Fucking* on the other hand cannot be considered as an autobiographical play. Only vague references to Ravenhill's life, for instance his homosexual nature, are detectable.

In *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*, the main characters are engaged in a triangular relationship. The peace in this relationship is at stake in both plays. In *Look Back in Anger* the major focus lies on Jimmy Porter. Since he is a representative of Osborne's own ideas, Osborne wants Jimmy to be heard. Because of Jimmy's outrageous outbursts, it was even impossible to ignore Jimmy's anger. The protagonist of *Shopping and F***ing* is Mark, since he serves as a father figure for Robbie and Lulu.

In *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*, influences of other provocative movements are detectable. The character of Jimmy Porter has a lot in common with Shakespeare's Hamlet, a representative of the Jacobean theatre. Furthermore, Jimmy's sympathy for the working classes shows some naturalistic thematic influences. *Shopping and F***ing* on the other hand revalued the morality of the ancient Greek drama. Furthermore, the play carries the heated style of the Angry Young Men. Ravenhill acknowledges that he was also influenced by the blank generation of North American novelists of whom he adopted a nihilistic view on society.

Social criticism is abundantly present in *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*. In *Look Back in Anger* Jimmy does not find his place in the class system because the class system provides no space for educated working-class people. He directs his disillusionment in society towards the people in his near environment. *Shopping and F***ing* is socially a more radical play. The play has a revolting character because it makes a plea for a world in which love can transcend the violence and hatred of contemporary society. According to Ravenhill, the violent society is a direct cause of consumerism and capitalism.

The political content of *Look Back in Anger* is less significant than its social statement. Although Jimmy's outbursts are often directed to the politics of the Establishment, the play has no political agenda. Ravenhill took Thatcher's dictum that 'there is no such thing as

society' as the root of *Shopping and F***ing*. He aimed at showing what could happen if this statement would be actually true. The representation of chaotic world is a result of the lack of reliable ideologies. The leftist program of the play is straightforward and revolting.

The need for paternal love is a recurring motif in *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*. The absence of father figures in both plays makes the characters insecure. In *Look Back in Anger* the father figure is romanticized, whereas the father figure is more ambiguously approached in *Shopping and F***ing*. The characters in *Shopping and F***ing* are desperately longing for a substitute father. The protective father of *Look Back in Anger* is missing in *Shopping and F***ing*. Moreover, the disciplinarian father in *Shopping and F***ing* has adopted the capitalistic viewpoint. In both plays, a father figure is valued higher than a mother figure.

Gender-related issues are detectable in both plays. The crisis of masculinity is the only gender theme that appears in *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing*. However, the nature of the crisis differs. In *Look Back in Anger* masculinity is threatened by the arising power of femininity. The crisis of masculinity is part of a bigger problem: the class war is transformed into the war of sexes. The working-class male characters are opposed to the upper-class females in the play. In *Shopping and F***ing* the power of masculinity is intimidated by the emotionality of the homosexual characters. The play opposes the strength of the heterosexual characters against the emotionally dependent homosexuals.

Although the tone in both *Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* is pessimistic, the endings have a different outcome. The reconciliation of Jimmy and Alison in *Look Back in Anger* does not imply positive hopes for the future. In *Shopping and F***ing* a more positive image is represented. Although the characters are still dependent on consumerist

culture, change is noticeable. All the threatening characters – Brian and Gary – have disappeared and the bond between Mark, Lulu and Robbie seems closer than before.

In conclusion, I presume that I have proved that Heilpern's statement that '*Look Back in Anger* and *Shopping and F***ing* have nothing in common' is clearly exaggerated.

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