I Think my Mother Would Have put me off Women for Life'; John Osborne and the Construction of the Maternal Female in Four of his Plays: Look Back in Anger, The Entertainer, Time Present and The Hotel in Amsterdam

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Abstract

The following thesis aims to provide an insight into the life of British playwright, John Osborne and to examine his relationship with both his mother and other significant females present in his life. In addition, the following document aims to consider the subsequent effect Osborne’s relationships may have had upon both the construction and depiction of the maternal role in four of his plays: Look Back in Anger (1956), The Entertainer (1957), Time Present (1968) and The Hotel in Amsterdam (1968). Evidence to support the thesis was obtained from a wide variety of sources: autobiographies, biographies, plays, film, critical theory, reviews and journals. It is presented in a traditional and chronological format. The thesis examines Osborne’s relationship with some of the significant women in his life, in turn highlighting specific people and events that may have effected the production of specific characters and/or events in the nominated plays. It provides the reader with a greater insight to Osborne’s relationship with women and an in-depth assessment of the maternal roles in the nominated plays.
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John Osborne and Nellie Beatrice

The aim of my thesis is to examine the construction and portrayal of the maternal female in four of John Osborne’s plays produced during his association with the Royal Court Theatre Company; the nominated plays are: *Look Back in Anger* (1956), *The Entertainer* (1957), *Time Present* (1968) and *The Hotel in Amsterdam* (1968). In addition, I endeavour to highlight the possibility that some of Osborne’s maternal characters were based on or written for specific women present in Osborne’s life. Furthermore, I aim to research the presence of autobiographical elements of Osborne’s life in his plays, in turn examining how people and events helped to forge his perception of the maternal female and the construction of the maternal character in his plays.

Upon examining the construction of Osborne’s maternal characters, one is obliged to consider his relationship with his own mother, especially considering the fact that Osborne never attempted to hide his loathing, dislike and contempt for her. As he made clear in his autobiography, *John Osborne A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography 1929-1956*,

I am ashamed of her as part of myself that can’t be cast out, my own conflict, the disease which I suffer and have inherited, what I am and never could be whole. My disease, an invitation to my sick room. (1981, 271)

There can be no denying the effect that Osborne’s mother, Nellie Beatrice, had upon him both growing up and later in adult life, as noted by Benedict Nightingale, ‘Something of that “disease” is surely there in his quick contempt, his instinctive and sometimes barely rational distastes, and the mean-mindedness with which he is capable of expressing them’ (1982, 68). Osborne’s ‘quick contempt’ and ‘mean mindedness’ was to filter through his plays and characters, for example in *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, the play’s protagonist Laurie shows no remorse when talking about his dislike for his mother, nor the effect she had on him, ‘I think my mother would have put me off women for life’ (1968, 8).
Nevertheless, who was Osborne’s mother? The daughter of publicans, she was ‘happiest at the pub—mistress of her boozy, convivial kingdom, having a good laugh with the regulars and the GI’s on leave...’ (Heilpern, 2006, 27). Nellie Beatrice left school at the early age of twelve and her first job was scrubbing the floor in a dining hall. At sixteen she became a cashier at Lyons Teahouse, until finally she found her home as a barmaid. It was while she was working as a barmaid that she met Osborne’s father. Osborne was her second child; Faith, her first child and his only other sibling, died from tuberculosis shortly after he was born.

His much-admired father, Thomas Godfrey Osborne, suffered from tuberculosis while Osborne was growing up, subsequently dying when Osborne was a young boy and leaving him to undergo the burden of a life with his mother without any support. As noted by John Stokes, ‘In memory this sickly but apparently kindly figure became a hero who might, if he had lived, have given meaning to life. By contrast, the inadequacies of Osborne’s mother, Nellie Beatrice, were the source of lifelong grievance’ (2006, 3), John Heilpern states, ‘He idealized his dying father as his saviour-protector in battles with his mother’ (2006, 57). Moreover, it is highly possible that Osborne blamed his mother for his father’s sickness and ultimate death, as suggested by Fintan O’Toole, ‘It is clear that Osborne blamed his mother...for his father’s death, and this anger may be at the root of the rage against womankind that both fuels and disfigures his work’ (2007, 24). Nellie Beatrice never re-married after the death of her husband.

It has been said that Nellie Beatrice would prey on her son’s points of weakness and use them publicly to humiliate and vilify him, and over time such treatment gave birth to the anger that raged inside Osborne. As John Carey notes,

...the rage that drove him accumulated gradually during his childhood and adolescence, thanks to Nellie Beatrice’s devoted goading and belittlement. She ridiculed him for his acne, his bed-wetting, his puny physique, and any additional shortcomings that came to mind, and he quailed before her cockney-barmaid bluntness. (2006, 1)
Later in life, in return, Osborne would treat his mother in the same manner. For example, he would invite her to fashionable parties just to watch her flounder. As Ian Jack notes, ‘Osborne detested and ridiculed his long-surviving mother, a London barmaid who he would often bring along to smart parties for comic effect’ (2007, 2). In his second autobiography, *Almost a Gentleman An Autobiography Vol II: 1955-1966*, Osborne recalls the time he brought his mother to a party at the Oliviers’ and to his horror, he watched as she rubbed expensive Beluga caviar into the Oliviers’ new carpet,

I watch Nellie Beatrice as she takes a portion...Instead of refusing it politely, she executes a dextrous mime, watched by all...during which she slowly and slyly deposits a creamy black stream of finest Beluga on to the newly laid, purple-pristine carpet. (1991, 229)

However, as Michael Vesty notes,

Osborne was a man of extremes and contradictions...He blamed his mother, the indomitable Nellie Beatrice, a barmaid, for his father’s departure and later death from tuberculosis, and vilified her in print for the rest of his life. And yet he supported her financially, escorted her to the first nights of his plays and took her on family holidays... (2006, 1)

What exactly was it that Osborne despised so much about his mother? Was it her ability to put him down and publicly mock him, her lack of understanding and sympathy in regard to his father’s illness and death, her inability to offer support or, perhaps, her embarrassing nature? It is my belief that it was a combination of all this and more that we shall never know however I do believe, that, there can be no denying the link between the construction of maternal figures in Osborne’s plays and the relationship that existed between him and his mother. As Edward Short states,
Osborne claimed that he hated his mother because she was “the grabbing uncaring crone of my childhood,” berated him publicly when he was growing up, and showed no grief when his beloved father died. What most galled him was her refusal to show him the maternal love he craved. (2007, 1)
Look Back in Anger

For a post-war generation, John Osborne’s play, Look Back in Anger, helped to change the face of British theatre and provided a voice to those previously unheard. Osborne’s play brought to the surface the fears and anxieties of a deflated generation, who felt that there were ‘no good causes left dying for’ and were unsure of their position in the rapidly decaying British Empire. In 1956, when Look Back in Anger was first performed at the newly formed Royal Court Theatre, audiences were shocked and inspired by what they witnessed on stage. Osborne had successfully achieved in annihilating the old ways of the British theatre, with its focus on plays displaying the life and times the British upper classes. In its place, Osborne left Jimmy Porter, a brash and unforgiving voice for a new generation. For Jimmy, no one and nothing was sacred nor spared from the acidic wash of his tongue. Jimmy’s tirade included victims such as the upper classes, the Sunday papers, and the ‘dying Edwardian Brigade’. In particular, Jimmy enjoyed aiming his vicious tirades at females. Osborne’s construction of the various female characters in Look Back in Anger is limited to a small number of roles, the wife, the mistress and the mother. The focus of this chapter is to examine in detail the construction of the maternal role of the female in Look Back in Anger and to consider the influence of significant events and people in Osborne’s life on the production of text and construction of character.

The characters in Look Back in Anger that I will be examining are Alison’s mother, Jimmy’s mother, Mrs. Tanner and Alison. Of the four characters, Alison is the only one we actually see; the others are off-stage. I will begin with Alison’s mother. In the play, Jimmy saves some of his best insults, which fly from his mouth with machine-gun speed and a sniper’s accuracy, for ‘Mummy’: ‘Threatened with me, a young man without money, background or even looks, she’d bellow like a rhinoceros in labour—enough to make every male rhino for miles turn white and pledge himself to celibacy’ (52). Jimmy’s descriptions of Alison’s mother assist in constructing the maternal figure in a negative perspective as he delivers his one-sided version of events. Nevertheless, some may see her resistance to her daughter’s marriage as evidence of maternal love and a
mother’s intrinsic need to protect her children; Jimmy views this resistance as an attack on him and all that he represents; a working class, uncouth, stranded young man.

Jimmy also takes great pleasure in describing the lengths that Alison’s mother went to in order to stop him from taking her daughter away. Convinced that Jimmy’s decision to wear his hair long represented something other than freedom of choice and a tight wallet, ‘Mummy’ hired a private detective to follow Jimmy and unearth the truth behind his long locks, ‘But that obvious, innocent explanation didn’t appeal to Mummy at all. So she hires detectives to watch me, to see if she can’t somehow get me into the *News of the World*’ (52). The act of hiring a detective to follow her future son-in-law, allows her to be constructed as appearing to be mistrusting, deceitful and willing to pursue any means in order to protect her daughter.

The attack on Alison’s mother does not stop there. Jimmy has not finished until he has recounted the details of his and Alison’s doomed wedding day, relishing in the description of the ‘pole-axed rhino’, finally defeated on the day of her daughter’s wedding, ‘How I remember looking down at them, full of beer for breakfast, and feeling a bit buzzed. Mummy was slumped over her pew in a heap - the noble, female rhino, pole-axed at last!’ (55). Alison’s mother, for all her objections to the marriage and attempts to stop it is stripped of her fight for her daughter and is left with nothing, and Jimmy, buzzing from his breakfast beer victoriously takes his prize, Alison.

Interestingly, we also learn that to a certain degree Alison’s father, Colonel Redfern, agrees with Jimmy about the behaviour of ‘Mummy’, ‘I’m afraid I can’t help feeling that he must have had a certain amount of right on his side’ (67). The Colonel goes on to say,

It’s a little late to admit it, I know, but your mother and I weren’t entirely free from blame. I have never said anything – there was no point afterwards – but I have always believed that she went too far over Jimmy. (67)
It would appear as though Jimmy’s argument against ‘the overfed, overprivileged old bitch’ (68), may hold some merit in light of the Colonel’s thoughts on the whole affair, and in voicing his opposition to his wife’s behaviour, Colonel Redfern assists in constructing her as a dominating and over reactive character.

Jimmy’s own mother suffers the same fate that Alison’s mother suffers. As with Alison’s mother, we come to know her through the descriptions that Jimmy provides, which are limited at best. As Jimmy recounts the death of his father, he reveals this about his mother,

As for my mother, all she could think about was the fact that she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side of all things. My mother was all for being associated with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones. (58)

Jimmy’s description of his mother constructs her as lacking in emotion and missing the nurturing characteristics that are often associated with the maternal female. Instead he informs us that he was the only one who felt emotion and cared for his father, meanwhile his mother was incapable of love and could only pity the dying man, ‘My mother looked after him without complaining, and that was about all. Perhaps she pitied him. I suppose she was capable of that’ (59). In A Better Class of Person, Osborne recalls his mother’s unsympathetic response to her son’s questions, after yet another visit to the hospital with his father,

While the ambulance men carried him back upstairs, my mother said, ‘Well your father’s only got six weeks. Six weeks to live, do you understand?’ Would he be alive at Christmas? ‘I don’t know, do I? Don’t ask bloody silly questions.’ (1981, 99)

Osborne further outlines his mother’s impatient attitude towards his dying father, ‘...my mother, who was already making no secret of her relief that it would all be over soon, when she could get out of this dead-and-alive hole and back to London’ (1981, 101).
The third character who is significant to my topic is the mother of Jimmy’s childhood friend, Hugh Tanner. Mrs. Tanner becomes a surrogate mother for Jimmy; when he talks of her, he does not lambast her as he does when talking about his own or Alison’s mother. Instead, Jimmy describes her as being a ‘good friend’ to them both, even going as far as to help set him up with employment,

And there’s Hugh’s mum, of course. I’d almost forgotten her. She’s been a good friend to us, if you like. She’s even letting me buy the sweet-stall off her in my own time. She only bought it for us, anyway. (32)

To hear Jimmy referring to a maternal character in such a fond way is in stark contrast to the treatment that the other maternal characters have received. It appears as though Jimmy, unsatisfied with his own mother, has substituted her with Mrs. Tanner and developed a fondness for her and the maternal love she provides, which was otherwise lacking. As noted by Simon Trussler, ‘To redeem that maternal guilt, Jimmy sought a working class mother-substitute in Hugh’s mum, over whom he tear-jerks unashamedly’ (1969, 47-8).

On the other hand, Alison’s description of Jimmy and Mrs. Tanner’s relationship reveals another facet, ‘Jimmy seems to adore her principally because she has been poor all her life, and she’s frankly ignorant’ (45). Alison appears to suggest the reason that Jimmy is so fond of Mrs. Tanner is not to do with her motherly affection for him but more to do with her ignorance and lack of knowing anything different. Alison further supports this sentiment whilst discussing Jimmy and Mrs. Tanner with her father,

Oh--how can you describe her? 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 very fond of each other. (66)
Alison’s perspective on her husband’s relationship with Mrs. Tanner raises questions over the sincerity of Jimmy’s affection towards her. There is no denying that Mrs. Tanner receives better treatment than the other maternal characters in the play and in contrast, she appears to support the traditional conventions of a maternal character and display traditional characteristics.

It is after Mrs. Tanner’s death that Jimmy reveals the true emotion felt for her,

   For eleven hours, I have been watching someone I love very much going through the sordid process of dying. She was alone, and I was the only one with her. And when I have to walk behind that coffin on Thursday, I’ll be on my own again. (77)

If we compare the description that Jimmy provides of his father’s death, ‘He would talk to me for hours, pouring out all that was left of his life to one, lonely, bewildered little boy...’ (59), and his description of Mrs. Tanner’s death, it is possible to see that the two share similarities. However, it is only in the event of Mrs. Tanner’s death that we truly sense the impact of her loss on Jimmy, as once again he is alone to face the world, as noted by Trussler:

   Hugh’s mum lives (and, during the course of the action, dies) offstage, a proletarian substitute for the mother from whom Jimmy felt himself estranged. And it is in the genuineness of his response at her death that she comes to life at last, as more than a figment of working-class wish-fulfilment. (1969, 43)

Osborne never had a substitute mother figure; perhaps his strained and painful relationship with Nellie Beatrice was enough to suffice and to influence his perspective of the maternal female.

In contrast to the play, in the film production of Look Back in Anger (1959), directed by Tony Richardson, Mrs. Tanner’s character is present, played magnificently by Edith
Evans. Nigel Kneale, upon recommendation from Kenneth Tynan, had been hired to write the screenplay whilst Osborne wrote additional dialogue. As recalled by Osborne in *Almost a Gentleman*,

He and Tony decided to ‘open it up’. It seemed to me they were ripping out its obsessive, personal heart. I protested without much authority and Tony agreed to let me rewrite some of the dialogue scenes, particularly those of Ma Tanner, one of the many characters who were discussed but never appeared in the play. (1991, 108)

Osborne had the opportunity to bring Mrs. Tanner’s character to life, yet when faced with this prospect he realised that her character was easier to handle when not on the page, ‘Ma Tanner was a treacherously difficult role with almost no immunity against mawkishness, which was the reason I had banished her off-stage early on when writing the play’ (1991, 108). However, with input from Edith Evans, Osborne was able to construct Mrs. Tanner as a sentimental, nurturing and affectionate maternal character, without being overemotional or weepy. We are first introduced to her when she arrives unannounced at the markets, ‘Hey, hey there’s Ma Tanner!’ exclaims Jimmy, before rushing over, embracing her warmly and kissing her affectionately on the cheek. Later, we see Jimmy and Mrs. Tanner sitting in a pub having a drink together and we are able to decipher the closeness and affection between them as they converse comfortably, sharing their gratitude for one another,

JIMMY: ‘I owe you a lot, Ma.’

MRS. TANNER: ‘You don’t owe me nothing, son.’

We next see them together at her husband’s grave, as they both tidy up his headstone and plot and again we are able to perceive the affectionate relationship that Jimmy and Mrs. Tanner have as she kindly asks him in a motherly fashion, ‘What do you really want, Jimmy?’ As they are leaving, she and Jimmy share a joke and he then gently places his hand on her back for support, a tender gesture revealing his concern for her. Edith Evans’
interpretation supports a more traditional perception of a maternal character, yet still has enough energy to match Jimmy. As noted by William Whitebait, in a review of the film in the New Statesman,

> Then, hitherto, a mere cursory mention, Ma Tanner (Edith Evans, beautifully subdued) walks and talks, lays flowers on a husband’s grave, and is herself, finally, lowered in a coffin, so that she exists as something more than material for harangue. (cited in Page, 1988, 16)

It is interesting to note that Alison’s mother is also present in the film adaptation. We briefly see Mrs Redfern as she tends to the garden, whilst Alison and her father are having a conversation about Jimmy and the pending birth of their child. We sense Mrs. Redfern’s dominant nature as she scoffs at her husband’s suggestion that their elderly dog may be coming to the end of its life, ‘Nonsense, my dear. A fifteen year old dog doesn’t need putting down, just a good walk.’ Her physical presence in the film matches the image that Osborne constructed, ‘She’s as rough as a night in a Bombay brothel, and as tough as a matelot’s arm’ (52). As we see in the film, Mrs. Redfern is a broad woman, who confidently strides across the garden and easily bends over to tend to the garden beds; when Alison utters the words, ‘Will Mummy hate it?’, we can estimate how truly cold-hearted ‘Mummy’ may be, as her daughter fears that she will not love her grandchild.

When considering the construction of the maternal female in Look Back in Anger, it is vital to consider the character of Alison Porter. During the first act, Alison reveals that she is pregnant but Jimmy does not find out till the end of act two when she has left him and upon finding out, Jimmy’s reaction is not compassionate,

> Listen, if you’ll stop breathing your female wisdom all over me, I’ll tell you something: I don’t care. (beginning quietly) I don’t care if she’s going to have a baby. I don’t care if it has two heads! (76)
He neither shows nor offers support toward his pregnant wife; in fact, he displays the total opposite, declaring that he would not ‘care if it has two heads’. When he learns that Alison has lost the baby, he simply shrugs and reminds us that, ‘It was his child too, you know. But (he shrugs) it isn’t my first loss’ (98). Rather than supporting his wife, Jimmy brings our attention back to his situation and reminds us that he also lost the baby but he has lost people before, perhaps insinuating that he is accustomed to the feeling. It is possible to speculate that he blames Alison for the baby’s death and if this is so, then he blames Alison for another loss in his life, just as he blamed his mother for his father’s death and by doing so he is placing Alison in the same despised category as his mother.

Significant people and events of Osborne’s life, and Look Back in Anger, are certainly entwined. In 1951; whilst working together in a theatre production Osborne met and fell in love with Pamela Lane. They began a relationship, much to the disapproval of Pamela’s family, as Osborne recalls in A Better Class of Person, ‘I had expected no gestures and looked for no quarter. What did surprise me was the tide of dislike that I had been able to attract and sustain so soon’ (1981, 239). Like Alison’s parents, the Lanes tried desperately to stop their daughter’s relationship with Osborne, going to great lengths to prove that he was homosexual, ‘The Lanes hired a private detective to follow my movements after it had been reported that they had seen Bob fumbling with my knee under the table in a teashop’ (Osborne, 1981, 240). In a letter to Anthony Creighton, Osborne’s friend, confidante and suspected lover, he outlines how Pamela’s mother accused him of being homosexual,

When troubles come they come not in single spies, but in battalions-- the big gun she [Pamela’s mother] brings it up against me 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]. (Heilpern, 2006, 119)

Jimmy and Alison’s wedding is not only significant to the play and the construction of the characters but, in fact, its significance resonates with Osborne’s life; the battles
played out on stage, were happening in real life. The Lanes strongly disapproved of their daughter marrying Osborne and like Alison’s mother in the play, tried their best to stop the marriage from going ahead. As noted by John Heilpern, in his biography *John Osborne: The Many Lives of the Angry Young Man*,

Lane’s parents were implacably opposed to the marriage. “They’d never met anyone like him before,” she told me. “They’d never been *spoken* to like that before.” Yet Osborne didn’t regard the father bitterly, and the two of them even liked each other grudgingly across the great divide...“Mummy” was the amoured-plated war leader marshalling all forces in the bloody cause of stopping the marriage. (2006, 116)

Osborne and Pamela were to be married in secrecy but the vicar gave their secret away at the last moment and as it were, the Lanes were present to watch their daughter’s marriage to Osborne. Osborne later noted in *A Better Class of Person* the parallels between his own wedding and Jimmy and Alison’s, ‘Apart from the references to Daddy and the Indian Princes, it is a fairly accurate description of our wedding. The vicar lost his nerve at the last moment and rung the Lanes’ (1981, 243).

Once more, events in Osborne’s life share parallels with the play; in *A Better Class of Person*, Osborne reveals his disappointment at his wife’s indifferent attitude towards being pregnant,

In spite of the tram rattle from Camberwell to Richmond, Pamela soon declared herself pregnant. No, she didn’t declare it, she mentioned it like a passing comment. Mention seemed all we could offer each other. Anthony’s mother sent us a packet of something called Penny Royal pills, with instruction to take these together with gin and a hot bath. Country girl that she was, Pamela followed Mrs Creighton’s bucolic wisdom and was rewarded. If she was
relieved, she never expressed it, nor I my disappointment. (1981, 246-47)

As Osborne’s marriage to Pamela had all but ended, he began a relationship with Mary Ure, an actress who would play the role of Alison in both stage and film productions. In Almost a Gentleman, Osborne recalled meeting with Pamela after their relationship had ended,

She had heard that I was living with Mary and asked me if we intended to get married. I said, truthfully, that it was possible but definite. She said nothing to this but told me that she had not been well lately, having had an abortion at a too-late stage, which only she could have contemplated. She saw me on to the train and absent-mindedly kissed me goodbye. (1981, 25)

In the film adaptation, an extra scene was added in which Alison goes to the doctor and whilst there, refers to the possibility of an abortion,

ALISON: Doctor, is it late... I mean, to do anything?
DOCTOR: I'll pretend I didn't hear that question.
ALISON: I'm sorry.
DOCTOR: I hope you won't ask it again, of anyone or try anything foolish.

As the film adaptation and any additional dialogue were written after Osborne’s marriage with Pamela Lane had ended, it is conceivable that Pamela’s indifferent attitude towards having children is reflected in the construction of Alison. Alison’s request for an abortion adds another dimension to her character and makes us question her motives. Is it possible that she fears that Jimmy will not love the baby, or does she simply not wish to have his child? Possibly, on an even more callous note, does she aim to use the loss of his unborn child as ammunition in their war?
Overall, Osborne's construction of the maternal female in *Look Back in Anger*, with the exception of Mrs. Tanner, challenges the stereotypical image prevalent in society. Traditionally, the maternal character is constructed as nurturing, protective and devoted; Osborne challenges this by constructing the maternal characters of *Look Back in Anger* to appear as being self-motivated, detached and unloving. The result is the construction of maternal characters that challenge our perception and traditional understanding.
John Osborne’s next play, *The Entertainer*, is similar to *Look Back in Anger* as it highlights the apprehension and concern felt about the emerging face of contemporary England in the aftermath of World War II; the play’s main protagonist, Archie Rice, is struggling against a tide of transformation and change. *The Entertainer* differs from *Look Back in Anger* as it features an on-stage maternal character, Phoebe Rice. Ronald Hayman notes that ‘Phoebe Rice is the only mother of any importance in Osborne’s work...’ (1968, 30). With emphasis on the character of Phoebe Rice, the following chapter aims to examine the construction of maternal characters in *The Entertainer* and to consider the likelihood that events in Osborne’s life influenced their construction.

There is a legend behind *The Entertainer* that Osborne wrote the role specifically for Laurence Olivier, yet as Osborne notes in *Almost a Gentleman*, this is not the case, ‘Journalists insist I wrote the part of Archie Rice in *The Entertainer* for Laurence Olivier...These dumb speculations have a way of perpetuating themselves as fact’ (1991, 35).

Osborne reveals that it was Royal Court founder, George Devine, who persuaded Osborne to allow Olivier the opportunity to play the lead in his next play,

Sometime in early 1957, George telephoned me. He was meticulous about not hectoring writers and so I was surprised when he asked, ‘How’s the play going, dear boy?’ ‘All right.’ ‘How far have you got?’ This was most unlike him. He knew the powers of my evasion. ‘Oh, I’ve finished the second act. Almost.’ ‘I see. I hate to ask, but something’s just come up. I don’t suppose you can tell me if there’s a part in it for Laurence?’ ‘Laurence who?’ ‘Olivier.’ (1991, 36)

Another interesting fact about *The Entertainer* occurred when Tony Richardson and Osborne were invited to the Oliviers’ hotel room to discuss the play and casting of actors;
as they came to the casting for the character of Phoebe Rice, Olivier shocked them by suggesting his wife, Vivien Leigh, for the role, ‘Then came the question of Phoebe, Archie’s wife. Larry came up with a dull selection of H.M. Tennant and Elstree actresses. Suddenly, with dazzling Olivier craftiness, he said, ‘Well, now, what about Vivien?’ (Osborne, 1991, 37). Osborne could not imagine an actress of Vivien’s beauty playing the role of a downtrodden, middle-aged wife,

After a few minutes it was agreed, without any intervention as I remember from Vivien, that this was, after all, an impractical suggestion, that Vivien was of course far too beautiful and, most unfortunately, the British Public would never accept her as ageing, ugly and common. (Osborne, 1991, 37)

This provides an insight into the specific type of character and physical image that Osborne had in mind for the character of Phoebe.

Our first introduction to Phoebe occurs through the stage directions, which inform us she

is about sixty, with fair hair that was attractive once, and still has a great deal of care spent on it. Her face is made up, though not very skilfully... if she is obliged to sit and listen to anyone, she usually becomes abstracted and depressed, sitting on the edge of her chair, twisting her fingers round her hair. Just now, she is flushed, like a child, prepared to be excited. (25)

The image left is a mixed one, for at first we perceive that she is a mature woman, vainly trying to retain her looks but on the other hand, we get the impression that she is like a child, unable to stay still and contain her excitement. It is plausible that our view of Phoebe has been tainted by this small description as Osborne has singled out the traits of older women and children that are despised by many: desperate vanity and uncontrollable excitement.
The impact that Osborne’s relationship with his mother, Nellie Beatrice, had on the portrayal of Phoebe Rice is significant. Like Phoebe, Nellie also vainly tried to retain her looks much to the distaste of Osborne, as he describes her appearance in *A Better Class of Person*:

Her lips were a scarlet-black silver covered in some sticky slime named Tahiti or Tattoo, which she bought with all her other make-up from Woolworths...She had a cream base called Crème Simone, always covered up with a face powder called Tokalon, which she dabbed all over so it almost showered off in little avalanches... (1981, 35)

Like other Osborne characters, Phoebe is grappling with a changing England and needs the security of knowing what lies ahead. Archie’s daughter, Jean, comes to visit the family and tells them that she has broken off her engagement. When Phoebe tries informing Archie of this news, he appears to mock her by acting surprised; this appears to irritate Phoebe and ignites a trail of anxiety about where her own life is going to end up, ‘Oh, I wish I knew what’s going to happen’ (39), followed with, ‘Oh, Christ, I wish I knew what was going to happen to us!’ (39). Phoebe further outlines her fear and anxiety towards the unknown when she reveals her reservations at ending up dead in a ‘dead-or-alive’ place, with ‘down and out’ people,

PHOEBE: I don’t want to always have to work. I mean you want a bit of life before it’s all over. It takes the gilt off if you know you’ve got to go and on till they carry you out in a box. It’s all right for him, he’s all right. He’s still got his women. While it lasts anyway. But I don’t want to end up being laid out by some stranger in some rotten stinking little street in Gateshead, or West Hartlepool or another of those dead-or-alive holes! 
JEAN: Phoebe don’t upset yourself, please. Let’s enjoy ourselves-
PHOEBE: Enjoy myself! D’you think I don’t want to enjoy myself! I’m just sick of being with down and outs, I’m sick of it, and people like him. (40)
It is clear to us that Phoebe fears not knowing what her fate will be, and yet she recognises that the situation she is in has her trapped. As Alan Carter states, ‘Like her husband, she is trapped in a world without hope. Phoebe is sick and tired of her existence amongst a collection of “down and outs” as she calls them’ (1969, 67). Once again, Osborne used his own life to help form the foundation of Phoebe Rice, for in *A Better Class of Person*, he describes his mother’s fear at ending up trapped in her current situation, ‘her snarling, raw-nailed boredom and dissatisfaction exploded again, driving her to make a dash for another lair. ‘I’m fed up with this dead-and-alive hole’’ (1981, 39).

*The Entertainer* was adapted to film in 1960 and once again, Kneale and Osborne were responsible for the screenplay. In a similar fashion to *Look Back in Anger*, the play was ‘opened up’ on the screen, resulting in additional scenes and dialogue that were not present in the original. Osborne wanted Brenda de Banzie to play the part of Phoebe, as she had done in the stage production, as he recalls in *Almost a Gentleman*,

Tony and I had gone to Rottingdean to persuade Brenda de Banzie to repeat her stage performance. Her put-upon husband, employed as one of Binkie’s stage-managers, and her aspiring-pop-singer son listened obediently as minuscule drinks were poured and she made her demands. Her Gilda-like ‘suggestions’ were centred on the importance of ‘developing’ the part of Phoebe. We readily agreed. (1991, 146)

De Banzie’s interpretation of Phoebe is a marvellous portrayal of a suffering wife and mother, as she brings Phoebe’s hopes, fears and struggles to life. Her insistence on developing the part of Phoebe had not gone unnoticed by Osborne, who agreed with De Banzie and felt too much importance was placed on Olivier’s role, ‘The emphasis was too much on him and the other people in the cast, particularly Brenda de Banzie and George Relph, who were outstandingly good, were somewhat overlooked…’ (cited Page, 1988, 18). Presented as a well-kept, middle-aged woman, De Banzie evokes the fear that dwells inside Phoebe. For example, as she watches her husband and Jean chat happily,
she wrings her hands nervously whilst pressing herself up against a wall, before desperately asking those in front of her, "What's going to happen?" Phoebe's desperate and urgent need for an answer increases, as she sobs uncontrollably, only to be led off to bed like a child. De Banzie highlights Phoebe's need to be mothered herself, her need to be comforted and reassured that everything will be okay.

Another incident that provides us with an insight into the character of Phoebe Rice happens when she discovers that Billy Rice, her father-in-law, has already helped himself to the cake that she bought for Mick's return home, 'You've been at my cake. You've been at my cake, haven't you?' (56). Billy's actions send Phoebe over the edge as she releases her fury upon Billy calling him a 'bloody old greedy pig' and asking, 'Couldn't you leave it alone? It wasn't for you. What's the matter with you?' (57). Phoebe's outburst over the cake appears excessive but acceptable as we witness a mother's anxiety for her son's safe return from war. As Simon Trussler states,

Phoebe's sudden, last straw fury with Billy, when he anticipates the cutting of the cake intended to celebrate Mick's return, is a textbook example of conflict that is almost unmotivated, yet assured in its feeling for the raw edges of domesticity. (1971, 55)

The cake incident serves to show Phoebe's inability to control her anger. After Billy has exited from the stage, Phoebe looks for another victim and finds Archie, singling him out and asking, 'Archie, you haven't got anybody coming tonight, have you?' (57), when Archie replies that he does not and that she need not have attacked Billy as she did, Phoebe instantly apologises and asks for Archie's forgiveness.

In addition to her fears and anxieties, Phoebe's relationship with her husband Archie also contributes to the construction of her character. Stage directions given during the first act provide us with one of the first clear insights into their marriage; it informs us that Archie patronises his wife, encounters thoughts of leaving her and conducts affairs with other women, 'He patronizes his wife, Phoebe, whom he pities wholeheartedly. Is it this that has prevented him from leaving her twenty years ago?' (34)
Throughout the play, there are examples of Phoebe and Archie’s relationship that show its patronising nature and help to establish Phoebe as a suffering wife and mother. One example of this occurs when Archie interrupts Phoebe, who is in the middle of conversation with Jean,

PHOEBE: Archie, I’m talking to Jean.
ARCHIE: Yes, I thought that’s what you were doing. I sized up the situation in a flash.
PHOEBE: Oh its easy for people like you to make fun. I left school when I was twelve years old.
ARCHIE: Christ, if she tells me that once more I shall get up on the roof, drunk as I am, I shall get up on the roof and scream. I’ve never done that before. (53)

The scene continues with Phoebe trying to explain to Archie that he doesn’t understand her and what she is talking about but he quickly lets her know that he understands her clearly,

PHOEBE: You don’t understand-
ARCHIE: I know. Phoebe scrubbed a dining hall floor for five hundred kids when she was twelve years old, didn’t you?
PHOEBE: Oh-
ARCHIE: Didn’t you? Have you any idea, any of you, have you any idea how often she’s told me about those five hundred kids and that dining hall? (54)

However, Archie is not finished with Phoebe and continues to belittle and vilify her in front of her children, ‘Like that poor, pathetic old thing there. Look at her. What has she got to do with people like you? People of intellect and sophistication’ (54). At this point, I feel it is important to mention that Archie’s relationship with, and subsequent treatment, of Phoebe shares parallels with Osborne’s relationship with his mother. In both cases, the former vilifies and belittles the latter, and questions what they have to offer to people of
intellect and sophistication', as noted by Heilpern, 'Archie humiliates Phoebe without mercy (as Osborne punished his mother): ‘Look at her. What she got to do with people like you? People of intellect and sophistication’ (2006, 222).

In the film adaptation, Osborne added in an extra scene that highlights Archie’s extramarital affairs and reveals Phoebe’s reaction to the situation. Archie is the master of ceremonies at a bikini competition and it is here that he spots his next young lover, a pretty, aspiring actor named Tina. Phoebe, Billy and Jean watch the proceedings from their seats in the audience and as they do Phoebe smugly asks, “I wonder which one Archie’s picked for himself?” De Banzie makes it appear as if Phoebe is trying to act offhandish, as though she does not care. However, after the show is over, she goes to find Archie and catches him in the company of his soon-to-be new lover and her mother. Phoebe is unnerved by what she sees and as she approaches him, he brushes her off as though she were not even there. Her gaze follows them as they leave and we see her hurtful expression change, as she appears to clench her jaw and develop a look of deep frustration. This scene reveals the lack of respect that Archie has for his wife and highlights the struggle that Phoebe goes through whilst trying to maintain that she does not care about Archie’s affairs, when really she does.

Phoebe’s role as stepmother to Archie’s daughter, Jean, reveals another facet of her personality. In the beginning of the play, Jean unexpectedly arrives to stay for the weekend and Phoebe is delighted that she has come and in a typical motherly fashion, begins to question Jean about Graham, her fiancé,

PHOEBE: Graham’s all right, is he?
JEAN: Yes, he’s all right.
PHOEBE: There’s nothing wrong there, is there? (27)

When Billy tries to tell Phoebe that she is being too inquisitive and to mind her own ‘bloody business’, Phoebe informs him, ‘After all, she may not be my own, but I did help to bring her up a little, didn’t I? After all, she’s Archie’s daughter. Be a bit strange if I wasn’t interested whether she was happy or not’ (27). It appears as if Phoebe is placing a
disclaimer on her behaviour and establishing a difference between Jean and her own children. This in itself appears to be a rather cold-hearted thing to do and is akin to the behaviour of Nellie Beatrice. In *A Better Class of Person*, Osborne reveals how his mother would publicly mock him and used his weaknesses for points of attack, ‘Naturally, my mother was hot to this gaping weakness, and it stoked her ingenuity to theatrical excess. She would settle for nothing less than an auditorium for my arraignment’ (1981, 92). Whilst Phoebe is not attacking Jean or using her weakness as ammunition, she does highlight the difference between her own children and Jean, which in itself is an unnatural maternal instinct.

Another significant incident between Phoebe and Jean occurs during the second act, when after consuming a significant amount of alcohol, Jean tries to get Phoebe to eat something and Phoebe refuses. What takes place represents a role-reversal as we see Jean, in the role of the mother,

JEAN: I'll get something for you.

PHOEBE: No, I couldn’t. I couldn’t – hold it down.

JEAN: (moving). I’m not going to argue - (48)

Phoebe, irritated by Jean’s behaviour and attitude, turns nasty and once again, acknowledges the difference between Jean and her own children, ‘You’re a sweet girl, Jean, and I’m very fond of you. But you’re not even my own daughter. I wouldn’t take that from Mick or Frank, and they’re my own’ (48). This time we witness Phoebe use the difference between Jean and her own children as a point of weakness and ammunition to stop Jean and put her back in her place.

Phoebe also fulfils the role of mother to her two children with Archie, Frank and Mick. Frank has a minimal role in the play and at times appears to function and exist only as Archie’s sidekick, his contact and relationship with Phoebe is limited at best. Frank also operates as neutral territory between Archie and Phoebe, often coming to Phoebe’s defence and telling Archie, ‘Oh, shut up’ (54), when he is attacking his wife. Frank’s relationship with his mother bears little significance upon the play or construction of
Phoebe’s character, except to interrupt Phoebe and Archie’s arguments and ask Phoebe if she ‘Feels all right now?’ (58), and whether he should, ‘bring you up an aspirin?’ (78).

Phoebe’s relationship with her other son, Mick, also exists in the same minimal fashion; Mick exists only as an off-stage character and dies during the course of the play. Because of his death, we never know what type of relationship may have existed between Phoebe and Mick. Construction of Mick as an off stage character and his death could perhaps be suggestive of Osborne’s inability to deal with the maternal relationship and could be representative of his inability to construct a maternal figure in a positive perspective. Phoebe’s deficient relationship with her sons resonates with aspects of Osborne’s life as he failed to have a positive relationship with his mother and loathed having to spend time in her company.

In contrast, the film adaptation briefly includes the character of Mick, played by Albert Finney. We meet Mick as he is preparing to catch his train and go off to war, and then he is never seen again. Moreover, in another added scene, we see Phoebe at a bakery buying an elaborate cake for Mick’s return home, “I’d thought I’d buy this for Mick when he gets home. He’s got such a sweet tooth.” which assists in showing the motherly nature of Phoebe’s character and the tenderness she feels towards her son. The inclusion of Mick’s character in the film helps establish a rapport between mother and son, and reinforces the importance of his death on Phoebe.

Ronald Hayman notes that

Phoebe too has moments of being very moving and very real...Osborne succeeds in striking so many notes which ring absolutely true in her ginny, garrulous, inconsequential flow of talk, her rambling reminiscences of childhood, her drunken touchiness, her differentiation between Jean and her own children...her appreciation of Brother Bill...and her fear of never really having anything-- (1968, 29)
It is in the realness of Phoebe's character that we are able to see Osborne's genius for constructing plays and characters that make us feel for and think about the world and people around us. Overall, it is plausible to consider that the true-to-life character of Phoebe Rice not only has foundations in the life of Osborne but also in our own everyday lives.
Written in the same year, under the title *For the Meantime* (1968), Osborne’s, *Time Present* and *The Hotel in Amsterdam* reflect some aspects of his early work, with a focus on characters as they struggle to accept and adjust to the world around them. As noted by Alan Carter, ‘*Time Present* and *The Hotel in Amsterdam* are basically portraits of individuals struggling to stay afloat in an ever engulfing tide of meanness’ (1969, 45). In contrast to his early plays, *Time Present* features a female lead role and a predominately-female cast. The following chapter aims to examine and discuss Osborne’s construction of the maternal female in both *Time Present* and *The Hotel in Amsterdam*; in addition, this chapter seeks to highlight significant events in Osborne’s life that may parallel events in the plays.

*For the Meantime* represented Osborne’s return to the Royal Court after the failure of his next play *A Bond Honoured* at The National Theatre and the death of George Devine in 1966. Devine, one of the founders of the Royal Court, was a significant father figure in Osborne’s life and an ardent campaigner for his work, ‘His most important father figure in adulthood was George Devine, artistic director of the Royal Court, who discovered him and became his mentor’ (Heilpern, 2006, 70). For Osborne, the absence of Devine from the Court and his life affected him dramatically, ‘Something was most certainly over and irrecoverable...I already knew that there would be no place for me to start again. My Court days were over’ (Osborne, 1991, 268). In addition to the death of Devine and the failure of his play, Osborne also divorced his third wife, Penelope Gilliatt, and suffered a breakdown, which would require him to receive treatment in hospital. After his recovery, Osborne began a relationship with Jill Bennett and returned to the Court; successfully working with its new director Anthony Page. Ronald Bryden, in *The Observer*, noted the significance of the use of the title *For the Meantime* during this turbulent time in Osborne’s life, ‘The double meaning is now obvious. Not only are these interim works, deliberately smaller in scope...They are also plays for a time that is mean, and permits nothing large or generous’ (cited in Page, 1988, 52-53).
At the beginning of his tumultuous relationship and subsequent marriage to actress Jill Bennett, Osborne wrote two roles for her; Pamela in *Time Present* and Annie in *The Hotel in Amsterdam*. Due to scheduling conflicts, Bennett never played the role of Annie when the play opened at the Royal Court; she later reprised the role in a televised adaptation of the play. However, she did play the role of Pamela the night *Time Present* opened at the Royal Court, on May 23rd 1968; coincidently, she and Osborne got married that same day. The couple lived the glamorous life of the theatre world, drinking champagne all day, living lavishly, going to parties and premiers but it was not long before their marriage soured and their battles began. As noted by Heilpern,

If there had ever been happiness and ease in Osborne’s marriage to Bennett, it was gone within eighteen months. Their battles were unending as each fought for control and possession of the other in the pretence of living happily ever after. (349)

However, before their marriage soured Osborne wrote the role of Pamela as a gift for his new amour,

*Time Present* was Osborne’s present to Bennett. When he read it to her, she fell asleep two-thirds of the way through Act One... Criticized for writing lead roles only for men, he set out to write a leading role for a woman in *Time Present*. He confided to a friend, “It may not be Cleopatra, but it’s a start.” (Heilpern, 2006, 341).

Pamela is Osborne’s ‘start’ at a female lead role, an actress in her thirties, who spends her days drinking champagne and campaigning against all things vulgar in life, ‘I think a suntan is definitely vulgar’ (53). Her father, Gideon Orme, whom she greatly admires, is dying in hospital and she is struggling to cope with the imminent future. Throughout the course of the play, her father dies; she engages in an affair with her friend’s lover, falls pregnant and decides to have an abortion. Interestingly, apart from her decision to have
an abortion, all other significant events take place either off-stage or during the interval. As noted by John Bowen in the *London Magazine*,

She sustains the loss of a father (off stage), becomes pregnant (during the interval), and continues to talk and on and on, mostly about what she dislikes, and to drink champagne. One might say, ‘At last John Osborne has written a part for an actress’, as if he had never written Phoebe Rice. (cited in Page, 1988, 54)

Our first introduction to Pamela occurs after she has been to see her father and she arrives back at Constance’s’ flat, where she has been staying while getting over her previous relationship. When Pamela arrives, rather than accept the offer of some food, her response is, ‘No thanks. I’ll have a glass of champagne’ (9), and when she learns that her mother, who is also at the flat with her stepsister, has not had much rest, she tells her, and ‘You should take a pill. I do’ (10). From the outset, we see Pamela’s refusal to accept reality and what lies ahead through her use of alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism.

At this early stage, it is possible to recognise elements of the play that parallel reality. For example, Pamela shares with Osborne the same burden of watching their father die and as we learn it is with her father that Pamela has a stronger relationship, just as Osborne and his father had, ‘Pamela’s his daughter. He’s made that very clear. And besides it’s different with him and her’ (4). Interestingly, the relationship between Pamela and her father has considerable significance because it has been said that when Osborne wrote the role for Bennett, he modelled the character of Orme on Bennett’s first and true love, Sir Godfrey Tearle, ‘In the fiction within *Time Present*, Gideon Orme is Pamela’s worshipped father. In life – real life – he was Osborne’s tribute to Jill Bennett’s first love, a famous actor of the old school, Sir Godfrey Tearle’ (Heilpern, 2006, 342).

Pamela’s relationship with her mother, Edith, is significant as she often uses her as a device to measure her enigmatic and revered father against, and in a similar manner to the maternal relationships in previous Osborne plays, their relationship is somewhat strained. Orme is a relic from the past, a dying badge of honour from the theatre of bygone days,
and according to Pamela, her mother pales in comparison, ‘The old man had more in the way he held a tennis racket than every letter she ever wrote…’ (82). We witness Edith acknowledge this lack of relationship when chatting with Constance, ‘She needs friends. Without her father. Well she’ll find it harder still. (Pause.) We’re not friends. She and I, I mean’ (8).

When Edith and Pauline leave, Pamela reveals her delight at their going,

    Thank God! They’ve gone! We must be going. Why didn’t she go?
    Instead of drinking champagne and going on about it, being so busy looking tired and distressed. She’s Madam Distress Fund, my Mama. Calling her Mama is better than Edith. Edith almost makes her sound dignified. (16)

Edith and Pamela’s relationship does not conform to the conventional mother/daughter relationship often portrayed, especially during an emotional time like the death of a family member, when traditionally a person likes to have family around for support, not to ‘Thank God!’ when they leave. Pamela also makes it clear to her mother that she has managed to survive without a significant maternal relationship in her life and she will continue doing so without one,

    EDITH: I’m concerned about you, Pamela.
    PAMELA: Well, don’t be. We’ve managed quite well without each other for about twenty years.
    EDITH: It’s not been easy.
    PAMELA: I couldn’t have changed it.
    EDITH: What’s going to happen to you?
    PAMELA: I shall go on as I have done for twenty-nine years. (55-56)
In some respects, the lack of relationship and understanding between Pamela and Edith at the time of her father’s death could be reminiscent of Osborne’s lack of relationship with his own mother, especially after his father’s death,

She was waiting excitedly for me to return and at once insisted I go into my father’s bedroom and look at him in the coffin. The smell in the room was strong and strange and, in his shroud, he was unrecognizable...For the first time I felt the fatality of hatred.

(Osborne, 1981, 101)

It is interesting to examine the character of Edith in comparison to another of Osborne’s maternal characters, Phoebe Rice. Edith displays the characteristics of a strong-minded woman, with an ability to take control of a situation rather than being overwhelmed by it, unlike Phoebe who was painted as the suffering wife, unable to control or escape from the world around her. Our first introduction to Edith occurs when she and Pauline are waiting in the flat,

\textit{It is late at night and when the curtain rises Edith, Pamela’s mother, is sitting on one of the uncomfortable chairs with a cup of tea and reading Hansard. She is in her late fifties, and looks tired but alert. The doorbell rings. She goes to it and calls out firmly before opening.}

\textbf{EDITH: Who is it? (1)}

Unlike Phoebe Rice, who feared opening the front door in case there should be someone she does not wish to see nor deal with on the other side, Edith has no fear or apprehension. Whilst discussing her views on life and marriage with Pauline, Edith makes it clear that a woman should not have to conform to a life of being a wife and mother, ‘And the worst waste I can think of is training woman to the top of her potential and then just off-loading her into marriage when she’s probably at her most useful’ (4). In contrast to Osborne’s previous attempts at maternal characters Edith stands out, firstly for
displaying a strong disposition and an independent mind, and secondly for being granted a place on the stage.

As Pamela predicts, it is Edith the ‘Great, Sloppy-minded organiser’ (18), who organises the memorial service for Orme, highlighting her take-control and capable nature. We last see Edith after the service is over and she has gone back to the flat to see Pamela. Whilst there, she shows concern for her daughter’s well-being, ‘But what are you going to do...You don’t have any work, any aim, hardly any friends now...’ (53). Pamela fails to respond to her mother’s concern and the two depart under a cloud of tension. Simon Trussler notes that ‘Edith is not a garrulous gossip...she is an efficient divorcee, recognising her duty towards her ex-husband on his death bed’ (1969, 151).

Part way through the play we learn there is another maternal figure in it, Constance. She has a son but due to custodial arrangements with her ex-husband, she sees little of him,

PAMELA: ...Do you miss your child very much?
CONSTANCE: Yes.
PAMELA: How often do you see him?
CONSTANCE: About twice a week. (31)

We learn that he is about four years old and that they meet at the zoo but apart from that, Constance’s status as a mother carries little significance to her character or to the play. Once again, this raises the question, as to whether the maternal character and relationship was too much for Osborne to deal with when writing his plays and constructing his characters.

Pamela takes it upon herself to inform us that she ‘wouldn’t mind having a son. Except I possibly couldn’t look after it’ (31). This offers us some insight into her frame of mind regarding children and foreshadows her decision to abort her pregnancy later in the play. When Pamela hints at the future she would like to see for her son, should she ever have one, it suggests an irresponsible attitude towards children,
If I had a son, I wouldn’t have a clue what I’d want him to be. I don’t mean like an engine driver or something futile like an astronaut or star export manager. I mean would he prefer champagne or drugs. (32)

Osborne’s use of a female as the central character generated mixed reviews. While applauded by some, others felt that ‘The disadvantage that comes with having a woman as the central character, however, is that what passes for anger with Jimmy Porter looks awfully like bitchiness with Pamela. Even when it isn’t’ (Martin Banham, 1969, 82). It is significant to note that the male characters in the play are there only to function in accordance with Pamela’s character. As noted by Trussler,

*Time Present* is unusual not just among Osborne’s works but among most modern drama in being peopled entirely by women for almost half its length, and in therefore permitting its men to play purely functional parts—to be precise, of impregnating or helping to abort Pamela. (1969, 155)

As we learn during the second act, one of the ‘functional’ male characters, Constance’s lover Murray, gets Pamela pregnant and another ‘functional’ male, her agent Bernard, helps to organise her abortion. Pamela’s pregnancy and her decision to have an abortion reveal a selfish facet of her character and highlight her lack of maternal instincts. It is only when Pamela rings Bernard and asks for his help in organising her abortion that we even learn she is pregnant,

All right, listen, Bernie...you know that address book of yours. The one with the names of the gentlemen in it. Yes, Ladies Services. Can you give me a few numbers to ring and which names to mention when I ring? (58)

When Murray enters and overhears the conversation, Pamela is forced to reveal to him the truth,
MURRAY: What was that about the Ladies’ Services?

PAMELA: *(going to hatch and pouring champagne)* None of your business. Here have some of this.

MURRAY: It is.

PAMELA: It was a private telephone conversation.

MURRAY: I can’t pretend I didn’t hear it. Come on. What are the Ladies’ Services?

PAMELA: What do you suppose? *(59)*

Pamela fails to either listen or reason with Murray in regard to her decision and makes it clear that she will not change her mind. She carelessly and coldly informs him that having an abortion is, ‘like going to the crimpers. Only more expensive. I may have to borrow some money from you’ *(63)*; by doing so, Pamela demonstrates her self-centred nature, very different from the traditional selfless maternal figure. Moreover, when Pamela refers to her reproductive organs as ‘mysterious and capricious place’, that often ‘feels like a Bosch triptych’ *(63)*, she outlines further her lack of maternal instinct.

It is possible, whilst on the topic of Pamela’s decision to have an abortion, to speculate that once again, events in Osborne’s life have helped to shape events in the play. Osborne’s first wife, Pamela Lane, fell pregnant twice whilst they were married and on both occasions she decided to have an abortion, with little discussion or input from Osborne. Coincidentally, we see the same events unfold in *Time Present*.

It is ironic that Osborne concluded *Time Present* with the play’s protagonist leaving the stage with the intention to abort her unwanted pregnancy, since in his next play, *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, Osborne’s only maternal character present on-stage happens to be a pregnant woman. *The Hotel in Amsterdam* follows three couples as they escape to Amsterdam, for a covert weekend away from the clutches of their dominant boss, ‘K.L’.

As noted by Benedict Nightingale in *Plays and Players*,

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39
...the mood of a group of six friends abroad, all self-conscious and a bit jaded, film people unsuccessfully trying to forget the pressures from which they are escaping... (cited in Page, 1988, 57)

The ‘group’ consists of Laurie and Margaret, Gus and Annie, and Dan and Amy,

*They are all fairly attractively dressed and near or around forty but none middle-aged. In fact, they are pretty flash and vigorous looking. Perhaps Gus and Margaret less so than the others. This is partly because... she is visibly pregnant, though not unattractive.*

(1)

Whereas Osborne constructed Pamela as a flighty actress, unable to take responsibility for her own life let alone the life of a child, he constructed the character of Margaret as a solid and reliable mother figure, capable of taking on the duty of looking after herself, her husband and their children. As noted by Trussler, Margaret is, ‘tolerant of his [Laurie’s] fits of verbosity. But she is also more conventionally loyal, and she thus exerts a strong stabilising influence’ (1969, 178). We see a demonstration of her ‘stabilising influence’, an attribute often associated with mothers, when the group first arrives at the hotel, as she reassures her husband,

MARGARET: Don’t fret, darling. Your drink will be here soon.

LAURIE: God, I hate travelling.

MARGARET: Well, you have arrived. Relax. (6)

In an opposite fashion to *Time Present*, the female characters of *The Hotel in Amsterdam* appear as functional characters orbiting around the play’s protagonist, Laurie, ‘The women are less well-defined, less readily distinguished’ (Trussler, 1969, 170). For instance, Margaret’s function in the play is often confined to operating as a counterbalance to Laurie’s self-indulgent nature,

LAURIE: ...God, I’m getting fat.
MARGARET: You’ve always been fat.


MARGARET: You’re very attractive. Pleasing.

LAURIE: More pleasing than K.L.?

MARGARET: Yes. Don’t know about more attractive.

LAURIE: Hell! (17)

Whilst Margaret may entertain her husband’s outbursts and self-indulgent personality, their relationship appears to be lacking in affection and respect, as Laurie often fails to think of his wife and her condition. An example of this occurs when Laurie makes a point of ordering drinks but fails to check if his pregnant wife would like anything. Instead, it is left up to one of the other characters to do so,

GUS: (rising, taking Margaret’s coat and putting it on chair D.L.) Margaret?

MARGARET: No. I’m not.

GUS: Of course. Would you like something else? (4)

Moreover, Laurie refers to his mother’s own pregnancy whilst in front of Margaret without any apparent thought of offending her, ‘I mean just to think of swimming about inside that repulsive thing for nine months’ (8). Another insight into Margaret and Laurie’s relationship is revealed when Laurie is talking with Annie and she asks why Laurie and Margaret decided to have a child, he replies, ‘I thought we might get pleasure from it. She thought I would get pleasure’ (42), not the traditional reason or answer that one would expect from a parent awaiting the birth of their child. As noted by Alan Carter, ‘His wife Margaret is pregnant, but this brings little joy to either of them, and she is resigned to her life as it exists’ (1969, 106). It is possible to suggest that in a similar fashion to other maternal characters from his previous plays, Osborne has been unable to deal with the maternal figure; as a result, he has failed to develop fully the character of Margaret, and instead has bestowed upon her the duty of being a ‘functional’ character, orbiting around the central character, Laurie.
In addition to having a maternal character on stage, Osborne also uses the character of Laurie to help construct an image of the maternal female in *The Hotel in Amsterdam*. If we compare Laurie and Jimmy Porter, we can see similarities between the two characters and how they are used to construct an image of the maternal female. For instance, both Laurie and Jimmy are dominant characters, delivering spitfire monologues, condemning the world around them, and both characters have an aversion to their mothers and during the play refer to them, often for easy laughs. As Martin Banham notes,

Laurie is restless, lazy, and brilliant. The constant actor, the natural focus of attention. For Laurie, Osborne has written with considerable fire and humour...He is a fountain of absurd ideas, mostly carried off with dashing vulgarity. (1969, 84)

Throughout the play, Laurie reveals his views and attitudes towards various issues: the pill, homosexuality, his mother, his wife’s pregnancy, ‘With a great *panache* he begins to air his pet hates: air hostesses, the pill, effeminacy, marriage, boredom, and worst of all relatives...’ (Carter, 1969, 107). Laurie takes no prisoners when on the attack and we very quickly learn of the dislike he has for his mother, as he describes ‘her very mean little face’ (7) and paints her to be a ‘self-involved’ bully,

I suppose you think her face is pitted by the cares of working-class life and bringing up her sons on National Assistance. Well, it isn’t. She has that face there because behind there’s a mean, grudging, grasping nature behind it. (7)

Laurie follows up this summary of his mother’s appearance by telling us that his mother ‘would have put him off woman for life’ (8), he then pretends to be sick just thinking about her, ‘Excuse me – I think I’m going to -. It’s the idea of my mother’ (8). In a similar manner to Jimmy Porter, Laurie has few encouraging remarks to say about his mother, as a result, the image left constructs her to be somewhat of a monster, who would have, ‘snapped at you, and smirked at you meaninglessly or simply just ignored you’ (8).
It would appear that Laurie has little sympathy for his wife’s pregnant condition and often fails to consider her feelings. This is evident when Laurie makes cruel jokes in reference to pregnant airhostess while in front his wife, ‘Fancy a pregnant air hostess. Think how high and mighty she’d be. Putting her feet up and pecking at all the customer’s canapés’ (12). Laurie’s cold-hearted jokes and references to being pregnant contrast the stereotypical expectant husband that is often portrayed, one who is over-protective, sympathetic and mindful; whereas Laurie is constructed so he appears distant from his wife, often failing to offer her assistance and lacking in understanding.

Just as some would say that Jimmy Porter was an avatar for Osborne, the same could be said for Osborne’s construction of Laurie,

Spoilt rich Laurie is like a self portrait of Osborne at forty...He reviles critics... He lampoons his mother coarsely for easy laughs...He goes too far, obviously. He’s mean and witty and he pushes the edge...He enjoys showbiz camp, but needs and charms women-beautiful, strong, scary women. (Heilpern, 2006, 355)

As noted by Osborne in an interview with Kenneth Tynan in The Observer, ‘Hotel in Amsterdam is based on germs of things that happened, but also on things that never happened....’ (cited in Page, 1988, 56). Within The Hotel in Amsterdam, there are significant characters and events that share parallels with significant people and events in Osborne’s life. For example, one of Laurie’s victims is his relatives,

Retired, rotten, grafting publicans, shop assistants, ex-waitresses.
They live on and on. Having hernias and arthritic hips and strokes.
But they go on writing poisonous letters to one another. (49)

He then goes on to deliver monologue under the guise of a letter from Uncle Ted,

Dear Laurie, thank you for the cheque. It was most welcome...the doctor sends me to the hospital twice a week...How are you, old
son...Rose doesn't get any better, I'm afraid...Must close...excuse writing but my hand is still very bad. Ever. Your Uncle Ted. (50)

What is significant about Laurie reciting Uncle Ted's letter is that Uncle Ted's letter was based on letters that Osborne had received from his mother and other relatives, as noted by Heilpern, 'Osborne based them almost verbatim on letters from his own mother and various, affectionate, grasping uncles' (2006, 357). An example of Nellie's letters can be found in *A Better Class of Person*,

Dear John,

They say if one can live here one can live anywhere, as one might express it...I think a change from this place and Stoneleigh would be nice...What an unhappy woman she is...Always in my thoughts, Mother...p.s. Sorry ree the mistakes and writing—must get more glasses my sight is not too good. (1981, 89)

Interestingly, this was not the only letter or incident in the play that can be traced back to having its roots in reality; Osborne included another two significant letters. The first was a letter from Osborne to Tony Richardson, the second another letter from him to Jill Bennett. Osborne and Richardson formed the successful Woodfall film production company and produced many successful films while they were partners but the pair had a falling out during the making of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, which would end their friendship for a number of years. In the play, K.L. is Osborne's alias for Richardson and it has been reported that a scathing monologue Osborne gave Laurie, is in fact 'a polished version of his letter to Richardson that destroyed their friendship' (Heilpern, 2006, 356),

I simply hope tonight that you are alone – I know you won't be. But I hope, at least, you feel alone, alone as I feel it, as we all in our time feel it, without burdening friends. (39)
Before her death, Bennett had her secretary destroy all letters she had received from Osborne during their relationship. The secretary fulfilled her duty and yet one letter remains,

There remains a love letter from him to Bennett in a play. In The Hotel in Amsterdam—written in tandem with Time Present—there’s a declaration of love that at least suggest the finer, real thing about Osborne’s feelings for her...(Heilpern, 2006, 337)

Osborne’s letter to Bennett made it into the play under the disguise of a declaration of love between Laurie and Annie, the role written for Bennett,

...Because – to me – you have always been the most dashing – romantic – friendly – playful – loving – impetuous – larky – detached – constant – woman I have ever met – and I love you – I don’t know how else to say it – one shouldn’t – and I’ve always thought you felt – perhaps – the same about me. (66)

In Time Present and The Hotel in Amsterdam it is possible to see the link between Osborne’s life and his plays, and as with prior works such as, Look Back in Anger and The Entertainer, they reveal Osborne’s skill and ability at constructing characters that challenge our traditional perceptions of the world and those that inhabit it. Osborne’s later attempts at constructing maternal characters still reveal the difficulty he has with understanding and portraying the maternal character and relationship.
Conclusion

Alan Carter states,

To see drama in something is to perceive conflict, and the art of drama must take note of the mishaps and disasters of ordinary life for it is in them that conflict is revealed. Osborne’s drama is full of conflict, generated by the inflexibility of both society and his characters. He is fully aware of the umbilical connexion between art and life, and his theatrical expression is based deep in human nature. (1969, 164)

Osborne perceived conflict, his life consisted of conflicting events; a boy who idolised his father but who had him snatched away at an early age, a lad who craved maternal love and attention but received neither, a man who searched for love but found grievances. When Osborne burst onto the English theatre scene, his irrepressible fury and scorn at the world shocked audiences, and shook the foundations upon which the British theatre had been built. His plays inspired a generation and gave life back to the dying theatre, and he can be credited with paving a new path in the world of theatre, as well as introducing a new breed of characters.

Benedict Nightingale writes that

In so far as Osborne’s case, we may, I think, conclude that his family, and especially his mother, did much to define him both positively and negatively. His upbringing presumably helps explain his work’s insistence on the primacy of emotion, the idea that we must keep caring, keep responding, or die. He said once that his aim as a writer was to give “lessons in feeling”, meaning in love, friendship, outrage, hate and, perhaps despair… (1982, 66)
One enters dangerous territory when trying to establish a link between an artist’s life and his or her art but after in depth examination of Osborne’s life and four of his plays it is plausible to entertain such a notion. Osborne’s aim, as a playwright, is to give us lessons in feeling but one cannot give lessons in feeling if they have not felt themselves. In addition, as we have seen, perhaps this was Osborne’s problem, maybe he felt too much. He felt the death of and absence his father immensely, not only as a child but also all through his adult life and he suffered at the hands of his mother’s emotional brutality and lack of affection throughout his life until her death. Nellie’s lack of maternal relationship with her son would echo through the rest of Osborne’s life; as we see in his search for a wife who would give him the domestic bliss he craved and as we see with the construction of the maternal characters in his plays.

Within society, the pre-conceived notion of the maternal female has very specific constructions and conventions; for example, often they are seen as possessing nurturing, selfless, reliable and loving traits. Yet, if we consider the construction of the maternal figures in Osborne’s play’s we can see that he challenged this traditional perception when he constructed his various maternal figures. Was this purposeful, was Osborne’s aim to have us think about the role of the maternal female or was it purely through use of his own experiences as a guideline that Osborne constructed his maternal characters in such a way? It has been noted by Roanld Hayman that, ‘The mother relationship...is something that Osborne has yet to come to grips with in a play’ (1968, 30), and we see evidence of this in Osborne’s inability to fully develop the role of the maternal female in his plays, either betrothing to them undesirable qualities or banishing them off-stage or to functional character roles. To suggest that the mother relationship is something that Osborne is yet to deal with would suggest that experiences in life have effected the production of his plays and the construction of his characters. In addition, it is possible to see the connection between significant people and events in Osborne’s life and the production of his plays, in particular focusing on the construction of the maternal female. Some may deem Osborne’s portrayal of the maternal female as inaccurate, misogynist and biased, however, there is no denying the truth in the fact that at least Osborne did not deny nor try to hide his true feelings, instead he took a leap of faith and placed them on the page and stage for all to see and judge.
Bibliography


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