

## Paper 4, Module 32: Text

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## **Arnold Wesker's *Roots***

### Introduction

Sir Arnold Wesker is remembered in the broad vista of English literature mainly for his plays written in the 1950s and 1960s. Born in 1932, in London's East End to Jewish parents who were active communists, Wesker grew up in a typical working-class environment. He tried his hand at jobs as varied as that of a furniture maker's apprentice, farm labourer and a pastry cook. It was while working in a hotel in Norwich that he conceived the idea of his first play, *The Kitchen*. Disillusionment with socialist ideals is a major theme in his works. This theme runs through his much acclaimed Wesker Trilogy, in the intricate ways in which socialism is worked out in the spheres of interpersonal relationships within the family and the society.

### Important Works

#### Stage Plays

- *The Kitchen*(1959)
- Wesker Trilogy (1960) – *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, *I'm talking About Jerusalem*
- *Chips with Everything*(1962)
- *The Four Seasons*(1965)
- *Their Very Own and Golden City* (1966)
- *The Friends* (1970)
- *Shylock*(1980)

- *Caritas: A Play in Two Acts* (1981)
- *Wild Spring and Other Plays* (1994)

#### Television Plays

- *Menace* (1963)
- *Barabbas* – BBC Production

#### Lectures

- *Two Snarling Heads* (1961)
- *Tarnished Virtues and Confused Manners* (1966)
- *Theatre, Why?* (1967)
- *Fears of Fragmentation* (1968)

#### Short Stories

- *Six Sundays in January* (1969)
- *Love Letters on Blue Paper: Three Stories* (1974)
- *The King's Daughters* (1998)

#### Memoir

- *As Much as I Dare: An Autobiography* (1994)

#### Fiction

- *Honey* (2005) – a sequel to *Roots*

#### Poetry

- *All Things Tire of Themselves* (2008)

### English drama in the 1950s and 1960s

The Labour Government that came to power in U.K. soon after the Second World War, brought in the Welfare State. This gave many young people from the working class, access to quality education. These newly educated youngsters found themselves in an ambiguous region which was neither aristocracy nor their own stock. Their rage and frustration found expression in the plays of John Osborne, particularly *Look Back in Anger*. Playwrights like Osborne brought to the English stage, situations and characters from the congested industrial suburbs and the impoverished, rural agricultural scene. This offered a radically different perspective from the drawing-room comedies of Noel Coward and Terrence Rattigan. Such plays were fashionable in the post war decade as they offered an inaccurately romanticised picture of the realities of the ordinary folk who lived a hand to mouth existence, struggling with their class and cultural identities.

Wesker expressed the direct influence of Osborne's play in his interview to Simon Tussler in 1966, "When I saw it, I just recognized that things could be done in the theatre, and immediately went home and wrote *Chicken Soup*" (194). Shelagh Delaney, another writer who shared this feeling, wrote plays about working class or lower middle class life. The dramatic output of these new writers came to be nicknamed "Kitchen Sink Drama" mainly due to the height of social realism expressed in them. This is echoed in the words of Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*, "There aren't any good, brave causes left". The theme of self-discovery, especially in a social milieu where cultural identity is constantly under the scanner, forms another major theme in these plays.

- Click on link below and watch powerpoint on Kitchen Sink Drama

[ide.erciyes.edu.tr/eng/wp-content/.../02/KITCHEN-SINK-DRAMA.ppt](http://ide.erciyes.edu.tr/eng/wp-content/.../02/KITCHEN-SINK-DRAMA.ppt)

### Learning Outcome

- To gain a general awareness of English plays of 1950s and 1960s
- To appreciate the unconventional features of 'Kitchen Sink Drama'
- To identify various themes assimilated in these plays
- To evaluate language, form and content of the plays
- To analyse the universal relevance of the plays today

### ***Roots* by Arnold Wesker**

The Wesker Trilogy contains three plays, *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), and *I am Talking about Jerusalem* (1960). The complete trilogy, based on Wesker's working class Jewish background, was first performed in 1960 at the Royal Court Theatre, London. These plays trace the hopes, aspirations, disillusionment and edification of the Kahn family and those related to it. *Roots* stands out, as it is entirely centred on Beatie Bryant, although the Kahn household is represented indirectly through Beatie's constant references to Ronnie Kahn.

The second play of the Wesker Trilogy, *Roots*, was voted on to the National Theatre's list of the hundred most important 20th century English language plays. Glenda Leeming in her "Introduction" to *Roots* describes it as a seminal play in the British New Wave of realist socially aware drama of the 1950s and 1960s. Themes and settings of these plays- social division, youthful challenges to apathy, distinctive regional lifestyles and speech patterns, the foregrounding of ordinary routine- made a strong impact on audiences. *Roots* itself is a many-layered play, it moves away from the political idealists and activists of the other two plays in

the trilogy, *Chicken Soup with Barley* and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, to focus on the low-paid agricultural workers of Norfolk. It not only shows us the life problems and humour of struggling farm labourers, it also penetrates to the underlying social unfairness that paralyses them (Leeming 2013). From the first performance itself, *Roots* gained critical recognition, as in Bernard Levin's claim that 'I have now seen this great and shining play three times and it seems to have grown visibly in stature each time' (*Daily Express* 20 June 1959).

#### Dramatis Personae

Beatie Bryant, Jenny and Jimmy Beales, Mrs and Mr Bryant, Pearl and Frankie Bryant, Stan Mann, Mr Healey

#### Summary of the Plot

*Roots* is a genuine 'kitchen-sink' play depicting women characters in domestic scenes. The play is tightly structured in three Acts, with Act II consisting of two scenes. The action spans a few days in the life of the Bryant family. Although nine characters appear on stage, Beatie Bryant dominates the action throughout the play. The play poses a complex, but superficially simple problem through Beatie - 'how can the majority of the population enrich their restricted lives?'

#### **Act I**

The opening act is set in the Beales' family home, a ramshackle house with no electricity or any modern convenience. Jimmy and Jenny Beales lead a quiet, slow-moving, ordinary but discontented life in the country, sharing simple joys and woes. This monotonous setting is disturbed by the arrival of the lively protagonist, Beatie Bryant. She is making a rare visit home, but first she prefers to stay for a while with her married sister, Jenny. Ignoring her

sister's reserved welcome; Beatie creates a pleasant atmosphere with her boisterous and friendly nature. This often invites the sharp criticism of her brother-in-law Jimmy, as Beatie constantly refers to the different life she is accustomed to in London.

The real purpose of Beatie's visit is to prepare her family to meet her boyfriend, Ronnie Kahn. The Beales naturally show interest in Ronnie as it is assumed that he is soon to become their brother-in-law. Beatie has never brought Ronnie home before because she is embarrassed about her background. Ronnie believes that country people 'live in mystic communion with nature'. Beatie quotes Ronnie's ideas during her conversations with Jenny and Jimmy. Her strong criticism of people who read comics provokes Jimmy to remark sarcastically about town folk who read books, see paintings and listen to classical music. The audience will tend to sympathize more with Jimmy who sees people as having different interests. According to Beatie, Ronnie accepts all activities and hobbies as long as people have broad interests: 'there's something wrong with comics all the time'. Beatie standing on a chair to present her pompous views, adds a comic dimension to the opening act.

Beatie also gives a long speech about her unemployment benefit, again quoting Ronnie profusely. This provokes Jimmy's angry outburst as he doesn't understand what Beatie says, especially about language and 'words as bridges'. An embarrassed Jenny immediately diverts the conversation to food and local gossip. Wesker mentions that the silences in their conversations are as equally important as what is being said. A stage direction in Act I explains: "this is a silence that needs organising. Throughout the play there is no sign of intense living from any of the characters – Beatie's bursts are the exception...The silences are important-as important as the way they speak, if we are to know them". Soon after, tension arises when Beatie criticises the Territorial Army. This irritates Jimmy who accuses Beatie of "pushin' ideas across at us" and angrily exits the stage.

When Beatie is left alone with her sister, she reveals more intimate details of her romantic relationship with Ronnie. But she also confesses the difficulties she faces in the company of his friends. She seriously admits that it takes a lot of effort to cling on to her love. Soon her mood changes and she talks enthusiastically about baking pastries, an art that Ronnie had taught her. They also discuss babies, disclosing that Jenny's daughter is illegitimate. This explains Jenny's cynicism about love. Beatie pointing out the untidy condition of the home offers to clean up. Jenny is amused and comments, "You hit this place like a bloody whirlwind, you do". Their talk soon turns to family gossip. Jenny mentions the mean nature of their miserly father, their financial struggles and how their mother refuses to talk to her children.

Stan Mann's comic entrance with Jimmy, again changes the direction of the conversation. Mann was once a rich farmer, now a "paralytic drunk" having lost his "whole bleeding fortune". He wonders why Beatie hasn't married yet, before Jenny packs him off to bed. The act ends with everyone preparing to go to sleep. Beatie also reveals to Jenny that she has started painting abstract designs and patterns. It is evident that Beatie tries her best to show her sister and brother-in-law, how London life with Ronnie has drastically changed her as an individual. In the first act "Beatie makes it clear to Jenny and to the audience that Ronnie's lifestyle, as a political and social radical, deeply involved in cultural activities, is profoundly alien to the taciturn, slow-moving though affectionate existence of the Jenny's family" (Leeming 2013).

### **Act II - Scene I**

The first scene of the second act begins two days later in Beatie's parents' home, which is the setting for the rest of the play. This house is neat and electrified, but ordinary. Unlike Jenny



who is burdened with household chores, Mrs Bryant suffers from acute boredom with only her cat Cossie for company. This act begins with Daphne Bryant in her kitchen peeling potatoes when Stan Mann drops in on his way to the vicarage. They recollect the good old days which were livelier than the present. She expresses her concern at the old man's poor health. After he leaves, she plays some loud music on the radio when Beatie arrives and surprises her. They have a regular mother-daughter conversation, which reveals Beatie's distaste of the country life. Mrs Bryant continues to peel potatoes while listening to her daughter talk about her exciting life in London with Ronnie. Beatie remarks that they need to get the whole family together for Ronnie's visit. She is anxious that the family should not let her down and quotes many of Ronnie's principles and ideas to her mother. Mrs Bryant responds saying that Ronnie sounds like a preacher. Beatie again gets on a chair to impersonate Ronnie, but the more serious she tries to be, the more ridiculous she sounds. The wasp hunt that follows highlights Beatie's childish nature.

Mrs Bryant then fetches buckets of water for Beatie's bath while she unpacks her clothes. She moves in and out of the room during their conversation and Beatie criticises her mother's love for gossip. She doesn't appreciate Beatie's efforts at painting and shows no interest in her daughter's life in London. Beatie gifts her mother a pinafore and while preparing food she starts singing a lively folk song. The talk soon turns into a debate on pop music provoking Mrs Bryant to exclaim; "you do go up and down in your spirits" [115]. Beatie continues quoting Ronnie's ideas but her mother says she doesn't understand him at all. Later they happily sing a pop song together enthusiastically while making lunch. Daphne admits that she is grateful when Beatie comes home sometimes, because she brings a little life with her.

Their happy moments end when Mr Jack Bryant arrives home early with the "ole guts ache". His wife advises him to consult a doctor. He mentions that Stan Mann was seen lying on the road and taken to hospital. Beatie mentions she is baking a sponge cake when Mr Healey, her

father's boss drops in. His business voice reveals an apologetic threat as he asks about Jack's health. He also informs them the death of Stan Mann. They are deeply moved by the sad news. Soon Jack quarrels with Beatie and prevents her using up electricity in his home to bake a cake for Jenny. Beatie gets upset when her parents fight, but she stops arguing. Instead she holds back her tears, gives her father his present and gets ready to eat a pleasant lunch.

### **Act II- Scene II**

The second scene begins with a continuation of the quarrel from the previous scene. Daphne doesn't talk to Jack directly; instead she uses Beatie as mediator. Beatie tries to pacify them both, and has some fun with her father. He fetches the tin bath tub for Beatie. Daphne hangs some curtains in the kitchen, behind which the bath tub is placed. Jack leaves for work and Beatie enjoys preparing for her bath with childlike glee. The conversation continues while Beatie is in the bath. Daphne shares more local gossip and comments on buses passing by. After her bath, Beatie switches on the radio and listens to classical music. Daphne switches it off which starts off another bitter quarrel. Beatie accuses her mother of not allowing her to listen to good music or read good books during her childhood. According to her, Daphne lacks 'majesty' and spends her time among green fields and flowers. Her mother has a cluttered up mind with nothing and shuts out the world. She feels that is the reason for her ignorance. She blames her mother saying: "you didn't open one door for me", whereas Ronnie's mother cared more for her. Daphne remarks sarcastically that Ronnie must have a hard time trying to change Beatie. Beatie responds by quoting Ronnie:

"You can't change people, he say, you can only give them some love  
and            hope they'll take it." [128]

This short scene however ends on a note of harmony. Beatie successfully demonstrates to her mother, how to sit and listen and enjoy good music. She claps her hands and dances to a record, and finally her mother also smiles and claps her hands.

### Act III

Two weeks have passed and it is Saturday, the day of Ronnie's arrival. The table is set with plenty of food and eight chairs around it. It is raining heavily outside but Beatie is excited as other members of the Bryant family arrive. Frank and Pearl are the first to come, anxious to see "the article". Frank is glad to see his sister and appreciates her painting displayed on the wall. Beatie asks her sister-in-law about her quarrel with Daphne. The conversation drifts to another sister, Susan who is also not talking to their mother. Jimmy and Jenny Beales soon arrive, curious about the mysterious stranger whom Beatie wants to introduce. The talk is light-hearted and informal and to pass time Beatie suggests solving a moral problem. None of them can solve it and it gives Beatie another golden chance to quote Ronnie. She jumps on a chair and begins a hysteric outburst of his quotes. During her performance, they hear a knock on the door. But instead of Ronnie, Beatie receives his letter. The contents of the letter shock her and leaves her speechless. Mrs Bryant immediately takes the letter from her and reads loudly. She continues to read insensitively, although it is clearly a letter of rejection. Beatie interrupts her and snatches the letter shouting "No, he entcomin" [143].

The family though confused at this unexpected turn of events, remains silent. The younger generation is sympathetic but the parents seem indifferent. Beatie confesses sadly that it is her fault that Ronnie dumped her. She neither bothered to learn what Ronnie wanted to teach her nor tried to understand what he wanted. Mr Bryant mocks her and Mrs Bryant comments ironically, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree – that it don't" [144]. Beatie wearily requests her family to comfort her but her pleas fall on deaf ears. Mrs Bryant ignores her totally and suggests they finish off the food. This angers Beatie who screams that she hates her mother, provoking Mrs Bryant to slap her face. Everyone is shocked at this harsh treatment and Daphne gives a long speech revealing her frustrations. She cannot tolerate Beatie's accusations and tells her daughter to "do the talking" as she pretends to know

everything. Beatie answers in a defeated voice that she “got no roots” and is just a “mass o’ nothing”. She tries to explain the concept of roots and its importance as “things that make you proud of yourself”. She doesn’t refer to the family roots but about the growth of the whole world in general.

Beatie’s speech grows more enthusiastic when she realises that she has the ability to talk and voice her opinions. She hates the fact that people do not make any effort to change their lives in spite of education.

“We don’t fight for anything, we’re so mentally lazy we might as well be dead” [147]. She continues, quoting Ronnie that it serves them right as it is their “own bloody fault”. Her last speech at the end of the play is characterized by a mounting excitement. She doesn’t even mind when her family stops listening to her. She is delighted that she has started talking, without quoting Ronnie anymore. Beatie overcomes her distress and feels elated on discovering her new aural ability. She doesn’t mind the fact that her family will continue to live as before, whatever she will do. Beatie stands alone, articulate at last. Her final words reveal her confidence and her determination to move on in life:

“I’m beginning on my own two feet. I’m beginning...”

### Characterisation

- **Beatie Bryant:** A main reason for the play’s wide popularity is the protagonist, Beatie who dominates the whole plot. She returns to her family home in Norfolk with the intention of showing-off her new *avatar*, acquired from London life with her boyfriend Ronnie. A sprightly and spirited young woman, she is contrasted with her elder sister Jenny and her mother Daphne. The lives of the other women characters depict the life Beatie also might have led if she hadn’t left home. “Beatie is saved because she happens to have attracted a proselytising thinker into a love affair”

[Leeming and Trussler 58]. Her zeal and passionate temperament is imposed on her mother and sister. The second act exhibits Beatie's current amphibious circumstance, as she contemplates her present and past lives. She annoys everyone with her habit of quoting Ronnie's principles and ideals every now and then. Ronnie's letter of rejection in the final act is a traumatic experience which jolts her into reality. "The letter is the catalyst to Beatie's growth, the emotional trigger of an intellectual advance. . . Beatie is brought over the threshold of a distinct new area of articulacy. . . Suddenly things hang together; things connect; things have roots" [ibid. 63].

- **Jenny and Jimmy Beales:** Beatie's sister and brother-in-law lead a tough life in the country, as shown in the first act. Both are likeable, down to earth characters who illustrate how modernism can wreak havoc in society. Beatie seems to be unsympathetic to their problems and even criticises her sister for lack of household amenities and untidiness. Jimmy, a garage mechanic, bluntly voices his views in response to Beatie's snobbish remarks and Ronnie's quotes often leading to bitter arguments. But the sisters share some intimate moments and reveal sibling affection, in spite of their differences in opinion. In the end, this couple appear to be more sympathetic to Beatie, than any other character in the play.
- **Jack and Daphne Bryant:** Beatie's parents make an odd couple, but they lead a better and comfortable life than the Beales. A hard-working farmer, Jack Bryant is a control freak and mean towards his wife and children. It seems strange that Daphne Bryant doesn't talk to her other daughters Jenny and Susan, or take interest in their affairs. She seems content being bored, loves gossip. She silently endures Beatie's harsh criticism in Act II. Beatie and her mother do not seem to have anything in common. Every conversation Beatie has with her mother, even on a simple topic like pop music, invariably leads to an argument. It is evident that her parents do not

approve of Beatie's life in London with Ronnie. Her mother does not show any interest in Beatie's city life or her new found passions for painting and baking pastries. When Ronnie's letter arrives they are least bothered by the trauma Beatie undergoes, pretending it is just what they had anticipated. Instead of comforting her, they completely ignore her hysterical and emotional reactions. But it is Daphne's harsh reaction in the end that challenges Beatie to speak in her own voice, without quoting Ronnie.

- **Stan Mann:** The pitiful figure of the partially paralysed alcoholic, though brief stays in the minds of the audience. He recollects the past as a lovely period, he had been a rich man in his youth. Wesker portrays his individuality through his ruminative dialogues. He strongly criticises the new generation for the fast lives they lead. His tragic death moves Beatie who has fond childhood memories of him. "He is a genuine old-style country-man, product of some richer rural past, and driven to find a sort of solace in the present" [Leeming and Trussler 66].

### Themes

Critics believe that the major theme of the play, is the growth of Beatie Bryant as an individual. Beatie who was inarticulate, parroting Ronnie's ideas attains "true articulacy" comprehending "both speech and understanding" [Leeming and Trussler 64] at the end of the play. Failure of communication was a common theme in twentieth century plays. Beatie's attempts to communicate with her family are either met with hostility or with silences. Another theme, is the theme of conflict. According to Leeming and Trussler, the conflict in *Roots* is between a life-denying environment, in this case agricultural, and a stimulating one—that is, Beatie's London life with Ronnie [58].

## Conclusion

John Russell Taylor wrote in 1962 that “Wesker has acquired a greater reputation on the strength of a still relatively small body of work than any other dramatist of his generation. . . .” After the performance of the Wesker Trilogy plays at the Royal Court in 1960, critics hailed the work as “an unparalleled achievement.”! A. R. Jones praised in *Critical Quarterly*: “Wesker has rewritten the myth of our time and rewritten it from the point of view of those who suffered and, somehow, survived the crises and disillusionments of the last twenty-five years. It is ... a profoundly moving embodiment in imaginative terms of his generation's experience of the history of our time ... To say that he is promising would be insulting; the trilogy represents a real achievement.”

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