

A Mockery of Class-Conscious Britain: John Arden's *Live like Pigs*

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Abstract

John Arden's 1961 play *Live like Pigs* presents a mockery of the clash between British underclass, working class, and middle class. In its playful tone that is enhanced by the juxtaposition of the prosaic language with the poetic use of songs, the seventeen-scene play aims to make fun of class-conscious British society in a bitter way. With several characters representing the underclass way of life, such as Old Croaker, Blackmouth, and Daffodil, as well as the Sailor's household, the play touches upon several behavioral codes and living patterns in the multiple layers of the class-conscious society of Britain. Those codes and patterns vary from conforming or not conforming to the expectations of the government and society as a whole, economic dependence on welfare support, the use of the gardens as tools of establishing the norms of moral and aesthetic values, as well as expected gender roles. This article seeks to read Arden's play closely from a cultural studies perspective, which reveals the author's mockery of the clash between these three classes. Using the theories of hegemony and ideology as a springboard for discussion, it analyzes how these three classes are in a power struggle with one another.

Keywords: hegemony, ideology, power struggle, class-consciousness, class identity, John Arden, *Live like Pigs*

İNGİLİZ TOPLUMUNDA SINIF FARKINDALIĞININ HİCVİ: JOHN ARDEN'İN *LIVE LIKE PIGS* TİYATRO OYUNU

Öz

John Arden'in 1961 tarihli oyunu *Live like Pigs*, İngiliz alt sınıfı, işçi sınıfı ve orta sınıfı arasındaki çatışmanın bir hicvini sunmaktadır. Düz yazı diliyle şarkıların şiirsel kullanımının bir araya getirilmesi yoluyla oyunbaz bir tona sahip olan on yedi sahnelik bu tiyatro oyunu, Britanya toplumunun sınıflar arası fark konusundaki hassasiyetini ağızda acı bir tat bırakacak biçimde alaya almaktadır. Oyun, Old Croaker, Blackmouth ve Daffodil gibi karakterlerin yanı sıra, Sailor karakterinin tüm ailesi de dahil olmak üzere çeşitli karakterlerin temsil ettiği alt sınıf kavramı ile, Britanya'nın sınıf farkındalığı yüksek toplumunun sayısız katmanındaki çeşitli davranış kodlarına ve yaşam biçimlerine değinmektedir. Bu kodlar ve yaşam biçimleri, devlet ve bütün olarak toplumun beklentilerine uymak veya uymamak, refah desteğine duyulan ihtiyaç, ahlaki ve estetik değerlerin normlarını oluşturacak araçlar olarak bahçelerin kullanımı ve geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri gibi pek çok açıdan çeşitlilik göstermektedir. Bu makale, Arden'in oyununu, yazarın bu üç sınıf arasındaki çatışmayı hicvedişini gözler önüne seren kültürel çalışmalar perspektifinden yakın okuma tekniği ile incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Hegemonya ve ideoloji kuramlarını tartışmanın alt yapısı olarak kullanan makale, bu üç sınıfın birbiriyle nasıl iktidar mücadelesine girdiğini irdelemektedir.

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Anahtar sözcükler: hegemonya, ideoloji, iktidar mücadelesi, sınıfsal farkındalık, sınıf kimliği, John Arden, *Live like Pigs*

First presented on stage in 1958 and published in 1961, John Arden's seventeen-scene play *Live like Pigs* aims to make fun of class-conscious British society in a bitter way. The play, which was a turning point in Arden's career, leading him to leave behind "his job in an architect's office" and dedicating himself fully to "writing ever since" (Trussler, 1973, p. 5), did not come out as a stage success in terms of box office records although Arden was a playwright who received many awards throughout his career. The playwright's own words in explicating the reasons behind such failure are outlined in an interview, referring to the play's possible misinterpretation by the audience as a "social documentary" (as cited in Gaston and Arden, 1991, p. 153). Arden also noted in the introductory note to his play that he was more interested in creating a "poetic structure" rather than a "journalistic" one (1984, p. 101). Despite this explanation by the playwright, the play's closeness to the reality of the decade in which it was set makes it lenient to be evaluated as a "social document" (Hunt, 2014, p. 80), and Arden's words in "Who's for a Revolution?: Two Interviews with John Arden" (1966) further reveal that the play was indeed based on his observations of his neighbors in North Yorkshire, where he and his spouse, Margaretta D'Arcy, owned a cottage:

We [Arden and D'Arcy] discovered that our neighbors were all of the class of people I was writing about in *Live Like Pigs*. They were traveling gypsified tinkers who [...] are closely interconnected by marriage, forming a sort of clan structure. They have their own very strict codes. The ones I had written about in *Live Like Pigs* were rather wilder, but the same sort of casts. The life of these people is an extension of old nomadic habits. (Arden et al., 1966, p. 44)

The play thus centralizes the social and ethical conflicts between two families, namely, the Sawneys, a group of nomads who were forced to leave behind derelict tramcar to be resettled into a home on the council estate, and the Jacksons, who live in the adjoining semi-attached house. The Jacksons' seemingly proper social habits cause them to feel threatened by the existence of their new neighbors, the Sawneys. However, Arden does not simply juxtapose the two families to direct any criticism at only one; he rather remains objective in the presentation of the clash between the classes that these families come to represent. With this objectivity, the playwright intends to point out how corruption on both the individual and the societal levels leads to a collapse in the implementation of the welfare state policies in Britain. Indeed, while the play is often discussed as regards whether it should be read as a political critique of the welfare state system itself or as a remedial suggestion to uplift its faulty implementation, it is also a dramatic example of class-consciousness, as it presents a life-like representation of British underclass, working class, and middle class. For this reason, it is not only a political mirror held up by the playwright to the economic policies of the 1950s, but it also displays a critique of the so-called moral values of the time, often associated with how families seem to adjust themselves according to the expectations of the society in general. In a sense, the play can be read as Arden's signature criticism of the British way of keeping up appearances, as the author often dealt with post-war problems in Britain from a left-wing perspective, as many of his contemporaries, such as Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Osborne did.

Bearing in mind the leftist inclinations of the playwright, therefore, this article seeks to read the play closely from a cultural studies perspective, which reveals the author's mockery of the clash between the aforementioned three classes. It employs the term *underclass* to refer to the socially and economically marginalized groups of people, as represented by some of the characters in the play, such as Old Croaker, Blackmouth, and Daffodil, as well as the Sailor's household. Although the term is quite debated among conservatives and liberals alike, regarding whether it is offensive or not, as William Julius Wilson (2002) argues in his chapter titled "From *The Truly Disadvantaged*: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy," the lack of terminology to distinguish these representations from those of other social and economic classes leads one to use such a term. The term *lower class* and its dichotomous counterpart *upper class* are also used at times to denote the hierarchical line among classes rather than to indicate one particular group. In other words, in this article, the word *upper class* does not denote its original meaning.

The play involves prosaic dialogues as well as poetic songs with rhymes at the beginning of each scene, the purpose of which is to establish the atmosphere regarding the topic of the related scene. At the same time, the songs form the basis of an intended smooth transition between the scenes, as indicated by the introductory note at the very beginning of the script. This note, in fact, serves more than the function of an introduction, but it plays the role of a stage direction, suggesting that "the singing of the ballads should be in some way integrated into action or else cut out" (Arden, 1984, p. 102). With the help of this note, the playwright seems to show his desire to prevent the likelihood of an abrupt beginning for each scene.

There are fourteen major characters in the play; six male, seven female adults, and a female child, all of whom make up three different families, accompanied by a state official from the Local Housing Department, a police sergeant, and a doctor, all representing different segments of society. The play, through the use of various characters of diverse backgrounds, mocks the class-consciousness instilled in the multiple layers of British society. Arden, in this sense, successfully depicts how the idea of hegemony is expanded over a wide variety of parts in society. In other words, as Arden (1984) notes in his introduction, "[t]he Old Croaker-Blackmouth-Daffodil group have much the same effects upon Sailor's household as the Sawneys in general do upon the Jacksons" (p. 102). This argument requires a deepening of the term *hegemony* and how it is viewed by various established thinkers and scholars.

Originally theorized and developed by the Italian philosopher and politician Antonio Gramsci (1981-1937), hegemony broadly refers to a governing power for the ruling classes (Gramsci, 1990, p. 53). In the play, although the ruling classes are not dealt with, each social group is observed to have its own dynamic power relations with the preceding one in the hierarchy. In other words, each of those groups exerts hegemony over the one that precedes it, i.e., the one that is associated with, so to speak, a lower line in the *caste*. This resembles Gramsci's explanation about hegemony when he notes that it is an arena of power struggle between two opposing forces within the social and cultural sphere (1990, p. 53). Since there are more than two opposing forces in the play, it is possible to think of these forces as pairs or dichotomies, where there is an opposition between the powerful and the weak, or the socio-economically disadvantaged. In this kind of dynamics, as Mike Cormack (1992) states, hegemony is observed to take place in a class-conscious society, "in which one social group has dominance over another" (p. 15). Therefore, in *Live like Pigs*, it is the advantaged ones that exert dominance over the less privileged or underprivileged groups, as expected.

The play takes place in a council estate in an unnamed northern English industrial town, which exemplifies the underclass, working class, and middle class alike. The Sawney family, who previously lived in the slum area, is now forced to move to a local housing estate provided by the government so that the slum areas will undergo restoration. This is given as typical of an underclass experience as the second and the third stanzas of the song in Scene One suggest:

But if you want your freedom kept
 You need to fight and strive
 Or else they'll come and catch you, Jack,
 And bind you up alive.

So rob their houses, tumble their girls,
 Break their windows and all,
 And scrawl your dirty words across
 The whitewashed prison wall (1984, 1, p. 105)

These lines are of utmost importance in understanding the behavioral codes of the Sawney family throughout the play. They “rob houses,” “tumble girls,” “break windows,” and “scrawl dirty words” on public property (Arden, 1984, 1, p. 105). On the other hand, whether it is the Sawneys or it is the Old Croaker, Blackmouth, and Daffodil that are from underclass is open to debate. It is true that Sawneys cause trouble for the Jacksons and other *already established* families in the local housing area, but *the lowliest of all*, the trio cause further trouble for both the Sawneys and the rest in the neighborhood. All in all, from the Jacksons’ perspective, the Sawney household and their never-leaving guests boil down to the same definition, which Wilson (2002) describes as “a large population of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasted sharply with the behavior of the general population” (p. 261). This is where the audience observes the direct opposition between the Sawneys and the rest of the population in the neighborhood. The characters of Col, who seems to have a temporary job, and Blackmouth, who is unemployed, display signs of what Wilson calls “cycles of deprivation,” mentioning the rising “rates of inner-city joblessness” (2002, p. 261). The Sawneys are the living example of such cycles because they are totally dependent on a system that they abuse. Whether this dependency is forced or by choice could have been debated if they had not sung the song at the beginning of the scene. The family further exemplifies Wilson’s words explaining the commonality of “teenage pregnancies [and] out-of-wedlock births,” when the characters Rosie, a young woman of early twenties and her ten-year-old daughter, Sally are considered (2002, p. 261). Other themes and characters that illustrate Wilson’s observations are “female-headed families,” as seen in the case of Old Croaker and Daffodil, “welfare dependency,” which is obvious as the theme of the play in general, and “serious crime,” of which Blackmouth is found guilty at the end of the play (2002, p. 261).

Apart from the constant referencing made by the playwright to the social shortcomings of the period as seen to be created by the characters in the play, there are several aspects to be examined in terms of class analysis in accordance with cultural studies. The first one of the issues is class mobility. In *Live like Pigs*, Arden is suggestive of a possibility of class mobility through the Jacksons, as Mrs. Jackson confesses in Scene Two that they used to live “past the Town Hall, down by the Catholic Church” on “mucky streets” (2, p. 113). Having been “moved out” by the state, whose plan to build new Corporation Offices seems to aim at reorganizing the city into an orderly condition, Mrs. Jackson announces her happiness to have climbed the stairs in terms of class: “Isn’t it lovely here, though? Wide streets, bits of garden, and all” (Arden, 1984, 2, p. 113).

With her frequent mention of her husband, she puts an emphasis on family ties and signals that she is not from lower class anymore. Similarly, her neighborly attempts – which are encountered by unfriendly, even hostile manners of the Sawneys – are an indication of her conformist, rather than marginalized, attitude. In other words, Mrs. Jackson has become the wife of the Agent, which she sees as an important position, and hence, a means of boasting. On the other hand, the lack of ability to conform to the norms as indicated by the Sawneys causes them to end up where they have begun. Since the Sailor's household fail to look after their garden and home, they are moved out of their new accommodation supplied by the Housing Scheme. In this way, Arden implies that class mobility is only possible for those who are willing to accept the norms of society and for those who are able to live up to the standards that are expected from them.

As for the gardening issue, it is essential to underline that gardens stand for class in Britain. Hence, Mrs. Jackson brings up the garden topic repeatedly so as to tell the Sawneys to keep up appearances, and thus, she reminds her neighbors of their responsibilities, which they fall short of fulfilling. As a quickly adapted member of a working class family, Mrs. Jackson, in fact, symbolizes a strong link between gardening and class. This link is obvious in Joanna Bourke's *Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (1994), where the author draws attention to the correlation between gardening and class, noting that gardening is more than a leisure time activity, which shapes the understanding of class in Britain. Bourke (1994) notes that after the 1920s onwards, there was an increase in the number of allotments and gardens with regard to council estates, and she adds that these "were championed as a way of alleviating the worst effects of poverty" (p. 71). In this sense, gardens not only helped *keep up appearances* but also "did provide an important supplement to the household's diet" (Bourke, 1994, p. 71). It is also important to point out that malnutrition was a serious problem among the residents of the council estates, and without the food supplement from the gardens, this problem would yield irreversible effects. As a result of this, to improve self-sustenance among citizens, the local councils offered prizes for those whose front gardens looked attractive and the back productive; in fact, gardening held such a significant place in the council estates that it was put into school curriculum (Bourke, 1994, p. 72). It is for these reasons that the Sawneys' not looking after their garden causes tension because the garden holds an economic value aside from its aesthetic aspect. The Sawneys persistently continue their dependence on the government for nutrition as well as accommodation, which results in their losing all the support.

On the other hand, Mrs. Jackson plays it according to the rule and sides with her new class, so she keeps warning to make a complaint about the Sawneys because they pose a threat to her newly gained class identity. Mrs. Jackson clearly does not want to be associated with those *underclass* people, due not only to economic reasons and the social norms they threaten but also to the way they endanger her moral values. After Rachel's flirtatious fortune-telling session with Jackson in Scene Four, Mrs. Jackson states that she calls this kind of behavior a "disgrace," and says: "If it goes on I shall make a complaint. They've no right to send people like that to live here" (Arden, 1984, 4, p. 120).

She further argues that "anything might happen" to their daughter, Doreen (Arden, 1984, 4, p. 120), so her looking down upon the newcomers is obvious. As *an established member* of the new community, she quickly forgets where she has come from and associates herself with those who are one level upwards.

This clear distinction made by Mrs. Jackson also underlines what is significant in terms of an eye-pleasing sight, which goes hand in hand with class and class-consciousness. In other words, class, behavioral codes, social norms, moral values, and the aesthetic aspect of gardening are interrelated, which can be explained by Jon Cook's apt observation. Cook, in his chapter titled "Class, Taste and Space" in *Cultural Studies and the Working* (2000), emphasizes the link between law and pleasure as well as the right thing to do and the enjoyable thing to do (p. 99). Depending on one's class and class identity, the questions of *what is right* and *what is enjoyable* may have a variety of answers in their legal, ethical, and aesthetical aspects. This explicates why the issue of gardening matters in *Live like Pigs*: While the Sailor's household represent the underclass understanding of the issue, the Jacksons stand for the working class, one that aspires to become the new bourgeoisie if the conditions allow them to be. The struggles between the two imply a struggle between climbing the social ladder and taking down the ladder one stands on.

Such struggle reminds us of Terry Eagleton's views that clarify aesthetics as part of class identity. Eagleton (1990) believes that aesthetics is a form of power struggle, an outline of hegemony, which may require respect as a form of law or its representatives, but on the other hand, when the human condition is in question, this requirement may in fact capsize (pp. 42-43). In the play, it is obvious that the Sawneys are not happy where they are because they have familial problems. As part of the human condition, which can resonate with Maslow's pyramid, their needs differ from those of the other citizens in the neighborhood. Under the given circumstances and having satisfied their most basic needs, they cannot conform to the expectations due to emotional reasons, nor have they had the necessary access to the tools that would enable them to conform to such norms, like formal education and employment. It is, therefore, quite understandable that they share neither the aesthetic taste nor the economic supplementary methods of their neighbors. In the scene where the Official introduces the house to the Sawneys, for instance, Rosie's and Sally's reactions are also worth discussing in this sense. They sound both shocked by the mention of an internal bathroom in the council estate home, which indicates that they are not accustomed to having one, as they previously lived in their derelict tramcar in a slum area. In his introductory note to the play, Arden describes the intended outlook of the house: "Downstairs: Living-room; hall, with staircase, front door, and door into kitchen. Upstairs: Large bedroom; small bedroom; landing, with door into bathroom. The kitchen and bathroom are not seen on the stage" (1984, p. 102). Since it is clear from the scene that Rosie and Sally have never seen or used a bathroom located within the house, the bathroom scene can be identified as a sign of class identity. In fact, it pinpoints the clear-cut distinction between the expected standards and norms of social behavior, as further exemplified by the scene where Rosie's daughter Sally starts to play with the tap water and gets chased by the Official, who seeks to correct the Sawneys' behavioral codes according to the norms of the society. It is only expected, then, the Official receives resentment from the Sawneys, who, not being used to such expectations, constantly disrupt the so-called social norms.

Another point that needs attention in this respect is the relationship between language use and class. Not having had access to education or any form of cultural or intellectual training, the use of language differs in the Sailor's household from other characters. This echoes Basil Bernstein's argument that "[l]inguistic differences, other than dialect, occur in the normal social environment and status groups may be distinguished by their forms of speech" and that "this difference is most marked where the gap between socio-economic levels is very great" (1960, p.

271). When one take Bernstein's claim as a basis, it is clear that the use of language is a certain indicator as a class marker in British society and Arden's play exemplifies this well. For instance, the difference in the choice of words, pronunciation, sentence structure, and especially use of verbs shows great variety between the Official and the Sailor's Household. The same can be applied to the case of other characters, including the Jacksons, the Doctor and the underclass trio, namely, Blackmouth, Daffodil and the Old Croaker. From the very beginning of the play onwards, many instances could be provided to support this: Rosie speaks in a more colloquial tone, Rachel distorts grammar, while Mrs. Jackson tries to be as polite as possible, keeping her sentences within the normative line of language:

ROSIE [*wearily*]. Why don't you folks leave us alone? We didn't come here cos we wanted; but now we *are* here you ought to leave us be (emphasis in original). [*To the baby.*] It's time you had your dinner, Geordie. In we go, in we go, in we go to dinner.

RACHEL. I says go to hell. You're not wanted here. Keep to your own garden, you like it so much.

MRS. JACKSON [*stopped gasping in midstream*]. I beg your pardon! . . . (Arden, 1984, 2, p. 113)

The differences between the register, lexical preference, and syntactic correctness in the language use of these three female characters reveal their class identities. But the most important difference appears in the linguistic features of the Official's speech. As a white collar worker, the Official is also a symbol of the working class, and additionally, perhaps because he sympathizes with the Sawneys in the beginning, or because he also considers them as inferior, he uses an unexpectedly informal tone while speaking to the Sailor's household. One of the many examples of this is seen in Scene One, when the Official cannot hide his anger on hearing Rachel's complaint about being forced to live in the council estate: "But where did you get all this fat nonsense from, hey? "No choice," "put you to live here" – *who* put you to live here?" (Arden, 1984, 1, p. 106; emphasis in the original).

Rachel's reply to his remark is also significant in terms of both language and behavioral codes: "You put us. Coppers put us – all the lot of narks" (Arden, 1984, 1, p. 106). The word "copper" is significant because it stands in its place as a class marker, a lower-class way of saying 'police officer.' Secondly, "nark" is also significant as an urban colloquial term for a person who reports any kind of misbehavior or the action of reporting misbehavior. With regard to gender roles, Rachel's use of colloquial words is also essential in understanding the relationship between class and gender. This relationship is further marked by her smoking. In contrast to Mrs. Jackson, who is fond of acting *like a lady*, Rachel is harsh and vulgar in her relationships with the male characters. In this sense, Rachel's smoking versus Mrs. Jackson's not smoking can be, in a way, resembled to the characters in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* (1951), a significant British novel that deals with class and class identity. In this novel, for instance, Brenda smokes, but Doreen does not. Just like dress code and use of language, smoking and not smoking also function as behavioral codes that indicate one's class, which becomes a defining agent in shaping conventional gender roles. Arden's *Live like Pigs*, therefore, not only problematizes the issues of class and mocks class consciousness in British society, but it presents the seemingly intrinsic links between class and gender.

The ending of the play suggests the cruel nature of class-conscious British society. The persistence of inequalities within society are exemplified throughout the play, which indicate an overall inability in society to present an "ideological unity between the bottom and the top"

(Gramsci, 1990, p. 52). The non-conformist attitudes of the Sawneys and their long-term guests, as well as Blackmouth's being arrested for a crime which remains a mystery whether he committed or not, can be read as signs of disobedience by the upper classes, while they may seem perfectly normal for the lower-class cultures. This discrepancy between various societal layers leads to what Louis Althusser calls "interpellating individuals as subjects," which can be interpreted as the suppression exerted through the ideology of the ruling classes (1992, p. 55). In this sense, the class issue seems like a vicious circle, and although an erosion of boundaries between classes is frequently suggested by thinkers, Arden's play argues just the opposite. The system seems to have created a loophole, which compels the subjects of a dominant ideology to consider their given roles as natural. But in Arden's play, while the underclass characters seem to resist such ideology, the citizens representing higher steps in the social ladder seem to be conforming to it. Still, all the characters display behaviors that are *expected* of them, thus naturalizing their given roles. Hence, the play, through these seemingly disobedient characters as well as the conformist ones, presents a mockery and a criticism of the class system in Britain and ironically deals with a macrocosmic issue on a microcosmic level.

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