



A Class Act: Identity and the Problem of Form

Michael Waters

Case of Hugh Tanner v James Porter

Mr. Justice Waters (JD) oversees.

(Application no. 55120/00)

Hugh Tanner against James Porter, an action suing for damages in the wake of nefarious libel.

Excerpts from case transcript follow:

Prosecution (PR) examines Mr Porter (JP)

PR: Mr Porter, you have accused this man, Mr Tanner - a former friend of yours – of being, in your own words, a ‘class traitor.’ This has been deemed libellous and has had a potentially damaging effect on Mr. Tanner’s literary standing. I would ask you, first, to explain what you mean by the term ‘class.’

JP: I looked it up the other day. It’s one of those words I always thought I knew, but have never been quite sure of. [*At this point witness reads from the OED*]. Here - *Class*: A division or order of society according to status; a rank or grade of society... Now, they say here ‘status’. Well, what’s status when it’s at home? Just another word for ‘money’, another way of saving the blushes of the fat cats at their garden parties. And when it comes to money, you either have it, or you don’t. And I don’t. So what’s my status, then? Working bloody class is what.

PR: So class for you is simply a matter of finance?

JP: That, and it’s a question of allegiances, too. You can’t just say class doesn’t exist anymore – though your type like to think it – it’s always been there. The toffs against the ordinary people, the working class. That’s how it is. Always the same ritual... and we never seem to get any further, do we? We’ve got nothing to struggle for now, and no one’s got the guts to find anything new. Hugh couldn’t take that, that’s why he gave up.

PR: That’s as may be. But it’s interesting you’ve emphasised the financial aspect. Am I right in saying your wife is a woman of some wealth?

JP: Her parents are, I don’t know about her. She seems more of a parasite than anything else. But, I suppose all women are... they just take-

JD: Yes, well, if we could perhaps leave questions of *gender* aside, and return to the matter at hand. This is a question of *class*, Mr Porter. Let’s stay on topic, if you would.

PR: Indeed. Now, Mr Porter. Wealth in our society can be shown to be increasing at all levels; your own wife, as I’ve said, is wealthy. Bearing that in mind, do you really believe that your ideas of class are valid? Aren’t they a bit... behind the times, perhaps? For instance, the gap in education is closing – you yourself went to university, I believe – on a state grant, too.

JP: Ah, you’re one of those, are you? ‘The class system is a myth fostered by the working class’, and so on. A Bishop of Bromley type, all smiling insincerity and handshakes. Let me

tell you, education doesn't change a thing. You stand there and tell us you're doing us a favour, and then tell us what we should be doing, what we should be buying, who we are, how to think, what to listen to. Laughing every time we mispronounce a word. You're so phoney it makes me vomit. Why should I need a grant while chinless Nigel pays his way easily? I'd rather I could pay my way, but instead I'm nursed by the state and told to be thankful. You claim there's 'social change' but I don't see it – the newspapers, the media, they're all the same: the posh ones are more pompous than ever, and the dirty ones get more wet round the mouth.

PR: So the class system, for you, is set in stone? And anyone who refuses to wage war on the middle class is a traitor? Is solidarity a precondition of the working class?

JP: It should be. It was, maybe. But there's nothing left to rally around now, the old mob are back and no-one's got the stones to fight...

PR: So you admit that this 'class war,' if indeed such a thing exists, is futile?

JP: For now. But that's no reason to stop fighting it, it's all I'm good at.

PR: No further questions.

Witness called by the prosecution, Mr E P Thompson. Prosecution (PR) examines Mr Thompson.

PR: I put it to you, Mr. Thompson, that this man, who claims to be a member of the working classes-

T: *Class*, not classes.

PR: I beg your pardon?

T: I said working *class* – 'classes' is too evasive. It opens the door to simply isolating individuals, or small groups. Unless I am mistaken, we are talking about class, which is something altogether larger.

PR: How would you define the working class then, Mr Thompson, before we go any further? What is it that characterises them as a group? Financial grounds? Educational grounds? Or is it perhaps a question of heritage, or self-definition?

T: Well, I'd be careful about describing them as a 'group', first of all. The working class is not a defined, static, body – I can't point to anyone in this room and say *he* is working class. Rather, class is a historical process, it is something that *happens* rather than a category.

PR: So, my good friend Mr Tanner there, you wouldn't say he is working class? And neither is the defendant, Mr Porter? Even if they think they are?

T: Well ... they may still be a part of the class *process*, you see. But it is ongoing. So Mr Porter may very well *feel* himself to be a member of a class movement. There may be men who share experiences with him, who feel they have a common goal or a shared position in the relations of production – his old housemate Mr. Lewis, on page 27 of the record, claims they have just such an understanding – and together they may form in opposition to men of different interests (who we might term the middle class). Class consciousness develops out of just such a relationship, and it is realised in the way a group's cultural productions deal with their shared experience. So it is a cultural and an economic formation which takes place across a group, over a period of time. It is not, technically, that one man, at any time, is 'class-conscious'.

PR: So it is impossible for any one person to *be* working class, class is just something that happens to society?

T: Well, of course, class *arises* out of individuals, but it is something that happens over a sustained period... it can only be observed in the sense of social change, is what I mean. So isolating individuals themselves is pointless. Class is not a category that you can put someone into, as I believe I said right at the beginning. If anything, it is a verb, rather than a noun.

PR: No further questions.

-----*End of transcript*-----

Postscript. A self-critique.

I decided to use the form of a trial because a courtroom is necessarily a divisive space, and as such it brings the two perspectives on class into confrontation with each other. One of the significant issues with *Look Back In Anger*, I believe, is that it is too self-contained, and Porter's arguments are never sufficiently challenged. A play should be dialectical, confrontational – Brecht, for one, emphasised its potential to be a catalyst for argument, an arena in which social contradictions could be played out.¹ I would suggest that *LBIA*, considering its form, is peculiarly one-dimensional.

It's contemporary critics highlighted two things as negative in their rather brusque reviews. One is the setting. Trewin complains that:

“This violent little play, set in a one-room flat in a large Midland town, does not establish one's belief in Mr Osborne as a mouthpiece of the younger generation.”²

The setting is, interestingly, directly linked to Osborne's failure as a spokesperson. The operative words here are 'little' and 'one-room'. The space is cut-off from the social world of the outside, which is only occasionally referred to as the realm of pints and work. It is, indeed, a 'bear's cave' where Jimmy's views are very rarely challenged. There is very little sense of the characters engaging with society, and as such there is little evidence to back up Jimmy's ranting on abstract social issues.

The second problem is the time allotted to Jimmy – Trewin describes Jimmy's part as 'a bitter monologue,'³ and Monsey accuses Jimmy of being a 'pretentious bore,' criticising his 'horribly long, vicious, self-pitying speeches.'⁴ Even Tynan, in his famously enthusiastic review, highlights the 'weakness for soliloquy.'⁵ Although he doesn't mean it unfavourably, it is indeed a weakness. In a form that should present arguments and social tension, what we have is an enclosed environment controlled by a ranting egomaniac. Throughout, Osborne is guilty of what Williams would call 'a failure of consciousness'⁶: There is too much of the 'angry young man' as an individual, with society only intruding occasionally, and mostly for dramatic purposes.

My intention, then, was to introduce Jimmy into a dialogue with another view – the view espoused by Thompson in his brief description of class. Thompson's article has its own problems, which are thrown into relief when his ideas are presented alongside Jimmy's. Although he makes a reasonable argument for the nature of class as a socio-cultural force, Thompson seems unable to satisfactorily locate the individual in relation to this force. If class is born out of people, 'is defined by men as they live in their own history,'⁷ and it is not some disembodied and mindless phenomenon, then it seems only appropriate to pay lip service to the individual's engagement with it and understanding of it. My intention, then, was to use the form as a route into interrogating Thompson's perspective on the individual, which still seems to me to be unclear. His disregard for the personal, ultimately, is as damaging for his presentation of class as Osborne's obsession with the personal. Indeed, we might accuse

¹ Roswitha Mueller, 'Learning For a New Society: the Lehrstück', in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. by Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.85-6.

² Reviews of the first performance of John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*, Module Reader (Dossier One)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', in *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965[c1961]), p.309.

⁷ E. P. Thompson, 'Preface', from *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)

Thompson's preface of inheriting many of the same problems as the 'descriptive social novel'.⁸ This descriptive, socially-focused bias might seem natural enough in a historical account, but I would argue that the individual experience is essential to any real understanding of class landscapes, and it is dangerously neglected in Thompson's preface.

Of course, neither text is entirely without merit. Both authors, for instance, recognize the importance of class relationships, and both seem to endorse the dialectical materialist argument that progress is formed out of class opposition,⁹ although their reactions to it are different. Thompson traces the process of dialectical materialism, focusing on class oppositions and the historical changes they appear to produce, and uses this as the basis for his understanding of class. Contrastingly, Osborne approaches class with a predefined idea of it, and he sees that idea being lost as a result of a failure of consciousness, brought on by a decline in the intensity of class relations. The focused creative energy of class opposition, then, is replaced by a helpless anger which has no obvious outlet.¹⁰

As Williams points out in his discussion with Hoggart, consciousness can only really arise in opposition, in the feeling of an 'us' which becomes a thinking about 'us' versus 'them'.¹¹ Consciousness cannot develop in isolation, or in the individual – which is why Williams stresses repeatedly the necessity for a literature which is both social and personal: personal so that it becomes identifiable for the reader, social so that it can be placed in a wider context.¹² The railway acted as a catalyst in his own village, spurring the development of consciousness and the evolution of working class social and political bodies like the trade unions.¹³ The railway, of course, is symbolic of industrialisation, but also of connection – of a community. It is a connection that allows a shared understanding of class to blossom. The signalmen are united by a common purpose, a shared mode of work, and a shared social position, which they are able to place in the context of a wider class reality – hence the possibility of rousing a strike in support of other class bodies.

With the emergence of the university-educated 'white collar proletariat',¹⁴ however, this shared purpose, shared consciousness, has disappeared. It is the loss of consciousness that Williams laments when he says: "...there's no kind of automatic correspondence between being working-class, objectively, feeling working-class, and voting for a working-class party."¹⁵ It is this loss of consciousness, too, that affects Jimmy. He retains the old class values – his idea of 'allegiances' – but they seem rather rootless in the new social realm, and this generates his anger and helplessness. Class-consciousness has lost its 'logical' connections to experience,¹⁶ and left the new lower class 'unsure of its bearings',¹⁷ rendering it politically redundant. The linear connection of Williams' railway has given way to a myriad web of communication, and rather than a unified voice we have a million individuals crying out at once.

The search within working class literature is thus for a new, shared, cultural voice which can be used to renew the class struggle in earnest. Form is, of course, an important ideological indicator, and restricts the possible range of meanings within a text.¹⁸ The difficulty has been in finding a form that is communicative on both the social and personal

⁸ Williams 1965, p.306.

⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, preface by Stefan Kipfer, trans. by John Sturrock. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp.71-4.

¹⁰ Aleks Sierz, 'John Osborne and the Myth of Anger', *New Theatre Quarterly* 12.46 (May 1996), p.139.

¹¹ Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, 'Working Class Attitudes', *New left Review* 1(January 1960), 114-5.

¹² Williams 1965, p.314-5.

¹³ Hoggart and Williams, p.114.

¹⁴ Somerset Maugham, 'Review of Lucky Jim' *Sunday Times*, 25 Dec., 1955.

¹⁵ Hoggart and Williams, p.116.

¹⁶ Thompson

¹⁷ Sierz, p.143.

¹⁸ John Frow, *Genre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.101.

level, and, also, which is *accessible* but not dumbed-down, that is *not* the “contraceptive that an illiterate can take by the mouth.”¹⁹ A form which reduces people to ‘blocks’ has no feeling and no accessibility,²⁰ but a form that deals too much with the individual and which emphasises only one point of view leads to the kind of rampant individualist egotism that fuels capitalist society. Neither the historical survey nor the domestic drama, I would argue, based on the evidence above, has successfully mediated the correct balance between society and the individual. Williams and Hoggart - working, as they do, from their own experiences – also struggle to maintain the equilibrium between subjectivity and objectivity. What, then, is the appropriate form?

My own attempted solution was to bring these disparate forms into a relationship with each other. I chose a dialogue because the system of class is itself a dialogue (or a ‘tension’, as Williams describes it²¹). It is a dialogue between experience and consciousness, a dialogue between society and the individual, and a dialogue between culture, economics, and history. In the form I used, I presented the two voices and, hopefully, highlighted their contradictions, but ultimately without offering any potential resolution. Hence, I suppose, this ‘postscript’: an attempt to hedge my bets by putting forward the hypothesis that any such resolution is impossible. The class struggle is constant, and ever-changing, and most of all it is subjective. The notion of class itself is constantly being re-imagined and redefined, and ultimately the whole area of class and culture is as much a dialectical battlefield as the area of class relations. In a sense, then, the confused²² form, the subjective form, the unbalanced form, is the only form possible. It is such a form that Williams would regard as “a warning and a challenge”.²³ But I would argue that the only form which can reflect accurately the oppositional nature of class relationships, and the complex and subjective nature of class itself, is one which is itself unbalanced, confused, and ultimately subjective.

¹⁹ Hoggart and Williams, p.119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.120.

²¹ Williams 1965, p.315.

²² Raymond Williams, ‘Fiction and the Writing Public’, *Essays in Criticism* 7.4 (1957), p.426.

²³ Williams 1965, p.316.

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