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Arnold Wesker's Visionary Quest for Cultural Democratization

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Abstract

Arnold Wesker occupies a distinctive position in post-war British drama not only as a playwright of social commitment but also as a cultural thinker deeply invested in the democratization of knowledge and artistic experience. He champions a progressive vision where democratic governance, shared responsibility, mutual possession, self-management, economic fairness and cooperative socialism exist to serve the working class without sacrificing individual liberty. He advocates for a society where workers are empowered to make autonomous decisions, dismantle socio-economic barriers, and ensure equal access to education, and cultural and intellectual enrichment, fostering individual growth and collective progress. His work consistently championed the disempowered classes. He translated his humanist convictions into practical advocacy, creating platforms like Centre 42 to democratize the arts, ensure working-class access to culture, and foster an inclusive, egalitarian society. This paper examines Wesker's visionary quest for cultural democratization, tracing his sustained efforts to challenge the elitist structures that traditionally governed access to culture, literature, and education. Drawing upon his plays, essays, public speeches, and the pioneering initiative of the Centre 42 movement, the study explores how Wesker sought to bridge the divide between intellectual and working-class communities by advocating the dissemination of cultural resources beyond metropolitan and privileged spaces. The paper critically analyzes

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how Arnold Wesker championed working-class empowerment through education, culture, and social expression, instead of relying solely on revolutionary politics. It explores his humanistic hopes for social change, focusing on interpersonal relationships, utopian city planning, and the democratization of art.

*The paper argues that Wesker envisioned culture as a shared human inheritance rather than the exclusive preserve of social and educational elites. His dramatic works consistently foreground the aspirations, struggles, and intellectual capacities of ordinary people, thereby contesting conventional assumptions about class and cultural competence. Through an analysis of selected plays and extra-theatrical interventions, the study demonstrates how Wesker integrated socialist humanism with a profound faith in the transformative potential of education, creativity, and collective cultural participation. Furthermore, the paper explores how his plays (like *The Kitchen*) show the brutal impact of industrial capitalism and the pressure of excessive work on human feelings. This subsequently reflects his understanding of human connection, intimacy, and the belief that creating a better society requires addressing not only material needs but also emotional and cultural poverty.*

The paper situates Wesker's cultural philosophy within the socio-political context of post-war Britain, highlighting both the achievements and limitations of his democratizing project. While many of his initiatives encountered practical and institutional obstacles, they nevertheless reflected a radical commitment to cultural inclusion and social empowerment. Ultimately, the study contends that Wesker's vision remains relevant in contemporary discussions concerning cultural accessibility, educational equity, and the role of the arts in fostering democratic citizenship. His work stands as a compelling testament to the belief that culture can serve as a powerful instrument of individual enrichment and collective social transformation.

Keywords: *Revolutionary education, cultural and intellectual enrichment, creative arts, humanistic values, socialism.*

Introduction

Wesker advocated for a revolutionary form of education that would empower the working class to realize their potential as a political force and as creative artists. He firmly believed that art and education were essential tools for uplifting the working class. *The Trilogy Plays* of Wesker center on the journey of East End Jews seeking to secure social stability, political freedom, impartial justice, and fair and equal economic and educational opportunities. Wesker founded

Centre 42 to advocate the idea that creativity is a 'way of living' powered by a cultural and educational awakening. Centre 42 was to bring art and theatre to a working class constituency. Wesker's ideological disparity with Fascism reinforces his conviction that art must play a role in fostering awareness, preventing apathy, and strengthening humanistic values.

Arnold Wesker was a visionary architect who dreamed of building a "Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land" (*Golden City* P. 157). The deep sense of isolation did not dismay his abilities. Because of their universal appeal his plays have been translated more than 18 languages and performed here, there, and everywhere. Most of his plays are "performed worldwide from Buenos Aires to Tokyo, from Stockholm to Seoul, from Paris to New York, from Lisbon to Prague" (*Ambivalences* P. 106). His central vision is colored with a quality of the dreams for the future.

Unlike the existential despair found in the works of Samuel Beckett, or the disillusioned, anti-establishment anger of John Osborne and John Arden, Arnold Wesker approached post-war British drama with a deeply rooted socialist idealism. Wesker's personal bitterness and ideological friction in his plays was because of his fierce commitment to working-class upliftment. Wesker's significant impact on the post-war theatrical revolution was deeply tied to his upbringing. Heavily influenced by his Jewish, working-class roots and his mother's active involvement in the communist party, he envisioned an elevated, active role for art in the formation of a fairer society. This belief eventually drove his ambitious efforts to organize arts festivals for Britain's trade unions, emphasizing that culture should be an accessible right for the working class.

Like Morris, Wesker argued that engaging with the arts humanizes people. He believed that reading books, attending concerts, and visiting the theatre opened up broader economic and intellectual opportunities. Furthermore, Wesker believed that working class people possess natural mastery of the arts and so should not be left in the hands of the elite. He summed up by saying. "I believe Socialism—and I'm sorry about the number of times I've said this—to be not merely an economic organization of society, but a way of living based on the assumption that life is rich, rewarding and that human beings deserve it" (Clare p.9). Arnold Wesker believed that socialism could ignite the human spirit, unlock individual energy, and foster the highest creative potential within every human being.

Wesker's Mission

Wesker's mission was to address injustices played on uneducated workers shut out by the snobberies of Britain's class system. He believed that self-constructed education in the arts would not only improve daily life but could minimize class differences and open doors for the excluded. In Wesker's mind has a grand dream to build a centre for artists and showcase for the arts where all sorts from the working classes to the leaders of Britain might gather to talk about and enjoy the arts. He said in a letter to the Round House's architect, Ron Allio, "We are not looking for a working class art—we do not know what this is. There is only good and bad art and there should never be any other criterion (Wesker p.61). He envisioned a centre that had a broad educational and social potential with rooms for meeting for the trade unions, the churches, the schools, with an auditorium, technical area, and exhibition areas for the arts. In short, Wesker wanted a building that could begin to integrate the arts with daily activity in a working-class district of London where neighbourhood people could wander in and out, yet one that could still function as a centre for the national and international leaders as well as artists.

Wesker aims to crash all class-conflicts, all exploitative relations, all forms of social inequality, and repression, and all unequal divisions of religion and society by the proper teaching of the proletariats. "Show me love and I'll hate no one. Give me wings and I'll build you a city. Teach me to fly and I'll do beautiful deeds (*Golden City* P. 139). The revolt of the proletariats in *The Kitchen* and *Chips with Everything* is not only against capitalism and existing class system but also against themselves. He expresses rage at class distinctions, takes pride in his lower class mannerisms and dislike for anything highbrow or phoney.

'How can people in post war industrial society fulfill themselves?' is the main theme of his drama. After fifties Wesker is the only playwright who has been in search of this question. Unlike Osborne, he is not satisfied with the presentation of the symptoms of social disease. Nor is he content to lay bare the ulcerous areas of the social structure. Unlike Browning, he is not concerned about the dissection of the motives and motions of his characters. His brush is thick, wide, broad and deep and he likes to depict things in heavy, bold and dark color. Throughout his dramatic career, he asks only one question: what are the avenues and areas of self-realization in modern industrial society? His is the mighty drama to understand modern working class man's struggle to realize him in society.

Wesker offers his characters full freedom to express them. We can see his characters changing, developing, advancing, and evolving under different social circumstances and responsibilities. He has penetrated into the heart of the herring roe. He has touched the untouchables untouched so far. His characters possess a hint of intellect. The thoughts expressed by his characters in his plays and stories are the thoughts which really belong to them. Wesker approves of a system that is based on cooperative, helpful, and impartial lines: "Tension is inevitable because Capital must protect the interests of its shareholders: and trade unions must always protect the interest of their members. What seems to defuse the tension between the two is the recognition that both sides depend upon the economy being strong and running smoothly, and so labour will restrain itself from asking too high a wage, and capital will hold back from antagonizing the work force because it doesn't want the machinery of industry to grind to a halt through strikes.... I can't recall details but I've recently read about small industries that are being successfully run on co-operative lines. It's not a new idea but it's one that's spreading, and I'd like to see such enterprises grow" (*Ambivalences* p.62). Wesker has greater preoccupation with man and his ways.

In 1985, Wesker confessed in an interview with Dornan that he has found his voice as a humanist, as a champion of human rights and its values, while defending the causes of the dispossessed, the aged, isolated women, and Jews. It is not, therefore, his political alignment as much as a Jewish humanist philosophy that shapes his thoughts. "Two human needs—to explain and to make order; to weed the garden and make the part fit; because these are the concerns of many of my characters I hope my plays and stories have universal appeal" (*Ambivalences* p.-39)

Arnold Wesker's Naturalism

Wesker's naturalism lies in his rigorous commitment to depicting working class life with photographic precision focusing on the lived realities of his characters. He uses precise details, linguistic realities, cultural specificity, ordinary working-class experiences with material detail, and environmental determinism, to highlight the emotional and intellectual alienation of the working class. Characters are deeply influenced by their physical surroundings and socio-economic conditions. Repetitive manual labor — eating, cleaning, and cooking, agricultural work, and military training—interspersed with domestic chores and political debates dictate human limitations.

Arnold Wesker emphasized the particulars of daily life and featured everyday characters who become products of an environment by simply living in it. The props for this theatre are realistic; real plates and pots instead of painted backdrops set the scene, and the costume, stage design, and speech are as natural as possible to bring the performance to the highest degree of verisimilitude. Wesker relies on naturalistic conventions to present the finer aspects of human behaviour. Among all the approaches to resolve contemporary reality, naturalism represents for him the most faithful view of human nature, and it is the dramatic form he knows best. Wesker is more interested in naturalism for its theatrical conventions. He read Emile Zola's *Le Roman Experimental* and found it interesting but makes little out of Zola's philosophy in his writing and adopted nothing else from his studies of the psychological effects of determinism. Being self-taught, he is not relying to the European theatrical tradition.

Wesker uses extensive mimed action in his play 'The Kitchen' to depict the harsh, natural reality of daily life. Wesker uses the chaotic, high-pressure restaurant kitchen as a metaphor for society. Despite the intense pressure and the employer's directives to keep working, the staff organically shares intimate conversations, cultural backgrounds, and mutual goals during their breaks. This companionship asserts their humanity and fosters working-class solidarity against an exploitative system. Peter satiates his lust with Bertha and Monique. Paul is under the duress of unsuccessful marriage. He humiliates his wife by calling her a bitch and fool, yet he is concerned about her future. He says, "My wife was a mean-minded woman, Michael. She came from a well-run and comfortable-off home but she was mean-minded" (*The Kitchen* p.37). The individuals are full of fantasy and fight, failure and frailty. Their social relations are at stake. It is the system where the lover asks his beloved to divorce her husband and Raymond remarks, "Sometimes it's good thing to miss a wife". Here is Frank who "flirts with the waitresses, squeezing their breasts and pinching their bottoms." (p.7). Here are all 'bosom and bouncing waitresses who believe in smearing and sexual intercourse, and taking pills to dissolve their illicit pregnancy. Here are the male characters who don't miss the absence of their wives and desire "a new woman every night" (p. 59). The aggressive behavior of the characters lessens the quality of service. Such anxious behavior results from the suffocating and over crowded atmosphere of the kitchen. It is place where "Gaston raise a boning knife, and Peter knock it out of his hand" (p. 17). Wesker includes more stage directions than most playwrights to assure a polished production. In the prologue to *The Kitchen*, for example, he has added meticulous notes based on his four years' experience as a pastry cook that include character profiles,

instructions for laying out the kitchen, for miming the cooking process, and serving. The setting in this case is not entirely realistic, as real food is not used. This is how Wesker sometimes combines slice-of-life naturalism with less realistic forms. It was this mix in *The Kitchen* that gave definition to the term kitchen sink drama.

Wesker's understanding of naturalism is that art is the re-creation of experience, not the copying of it, (*Distinctions* p. 9). He means to say that his plays present action that looks as 'natural' as everyday life. He adds. "I'm not a writer who illustrates ideas, or explores ideas through invented characters and situations, rather I'm a writer whose experience drives me to organize that experience into a play or story because it seems to illuminate some aspect of human behaviour (*Distinctions* p. 142). In Wesker's case naturalism is best defined by his desire to recreate the essence of his life as a working class playwright or to capture the fundamental dynamic of human relationships as he knows them. Arnold Wesker says: "I don't begin with an idea for a play and then invent characters and plot and situation. I begin with experience, an experience of reality which made an impression on me" (*The Wesker Trilogy* p. 6).

The complicated issues of art in 1960s tend to dissolve into simple oppositions—socialism versus Toryism, the new versus the old, experiment versus tradition, the proletariat versus the upper classes, politics versus religion, individual versus group, youth versus age—and everyone connected with the theatre is nearly catalogued. Because of Wesker's working class realistic dramaturgy, his plays were more readily adopted by university and college students, teachers and technocrats—an increasingly large group of the disaffected seeking a voice for the counterculture. Recognizing and embracing the leftist themes, especially his campaign to ameliorate the working-class condition, many young intellectuals began linking Wesker's plays to the trendy socialist theater of the time.

Wesker's Visionary Quest in His Early Plays

"In a rather intellectually cynical and discourage era, Wesker stand alone as a champion of a society that deserve to exist" (*Arnold Wesker: A Casebook* p.120). Arnold Wesker's early plays embody a visionary quest for a more humane, just, and culturally enriched society. Written in the aftermath of the Second World War and during a period of intense social and political change in Britain, these plays reflect his deep engagement with issues of class, social inequality, cultural deprivation, and the aspirations of ordinary people. Through realistic characterization and a keen awareness of working-class life, Wesker explores the tensions

between idealism and reality, individual desires and collective responsibilities, and political commitment and personal fulfillment.

The Wesker Trilogy presents a visionary, deeply humanistic outlook on the British working class. His characters navigate the turbulent shift from collective socialist optimism to disillusioned realism, ultimately championing the power of self-education, individual creative expression, and personal responsibility over utopian political dogma. The three interconnected plays—*Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960)—trace this evolution through specific character journeys: Sara Kahn in *Chicken Soup with Barley* acts as a matriarchal anchor, symbolizing the firm hope of socialist movements. From her experiences, she understands that grand political ideologies are actually hollow without practical, daily empathy and domestic solidarity. He challenged his characters—and his audience—to break free from commercialism, ignorance, and passive compliance. Despite the regular collapse of political structures in his narratives, Wesker's visionary outlook remains fundamentally optimistic because of characters like Beatie Bryant in *Roots*, who successfully find their own unique voice, and individual agency to articulate the realities of the class. Beatie Bryant in *Roots* undergoes the most significant transformation in the trilogy. Instead of blindly imitating the intellectual rhetoric of her urban boyfriend, she discovers her own true voice. When faced with abandonment, Beatie realizes her true power lies not in borrowed rhetoric, but in her own authentic voice and the realization that she must shape her own destiny. Her journey illustrates Wesker's central idea: true freedom for the working class. Her liberation comes not from blind party adherence, but from informed decision-making, critical thinking, cultural awareness and self-reliance.

Ronnie and Ada Kahn in *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* experienced the bitter disappointment of post-war times when their idealistic, craft-based experiments in the countryside—aimed at creating an ideal society—failed due to human limitations and economic pressures. Their struggles reinforce the point that a better and more equal society must be developed not through external, large-scale systems, but within the individual's mind and family. Collectively, Wesker's characters reveal a pragmatic visionary outlook. He asserts that the arts, education, and genuine human connection are the true catalysts for empowering the working class to elevate their lives and break free from generational apathy. But his characters often find their idealistic visions shattered by worldly pursuits, personal desires, social fragmentation, and intellectual compartmentalization.

Both Ada and Dave decide their individual duties which they are to perform in their new Jerusalem: "And the characters of Ada and Dave in *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*, they're driven by an idea that a full and rewarding life can only be achieved in a rural setting where Dave would earn a living designing and making hand-crafted furniture, and Ada would look after chickens, children and the accounts. It didn't work but for thirteen years they lived the life of their dreams, dreams rooted in an idea." (*Ambivalences* P.51)

Disillusioned by his experience in Spain and in World War Second, Dave thinks that mass movements are not able to build the ideal state of life on earth. He thinks that it is only individual action that can build individual Jerusalem. Both the husband and wife plan to retire into the isolation of the Norfolk fens and live off the land, doing everything for them, relying on no one. Dave and Ada's is an individualistic project, seeking not to overthrow capitalism but to set up an alternative way of living. Like a man of innovative ideas, Dave wants to create and invent of his own ideal world. Dave's ideas about factories have similarities to the ideas of direct Dimitri in *The Kitchen*.

Ada and Dave are irrevocable intruders into a society that neither understands nor tolerate their vision. They live in isolation both physically and politically. It is the spirit of owner and apprentice that Dave is dismissed from his service not because he has taken a piece of unwanted and virtually valueless lino that had been lying around in a shed for months, but because he did not ask about it and then lied about it: thus threatening the entire master servant relationship. Dave's efforts to put socialism into action on an individual level fail not only because of "the debased values of a hostile society debauched by materialism and its by-product cynicism." but also because of "inherent, weakness" in Dave's own character." (Robert Muller 1979 p.7).

Wesker's plays set out to diagnose the situation of the working classes and offer a tentative programme for change. He says in the preface to the *Trilogy*: "I am at one with these people: it is only that I'm annoyed, with them and myself (*Trilogy* p.7). His annoyance is at the lack of worthwhile aspiration in his characters, or at their own unwillingness or inability to carry out their most ambitious and utopian dreams. In *The Kitchen*, *Roots* and *Chips with Everything*, the limited social and cultural horizons of the cooks, farm workers and recruits limit their ability to imagine a better life. In *Chicken Soup and Jerusalem*, meanwhile, the politically active Kahn family possesses ideals worth fighting for. But over the course of twenty years, become gradually disillusioned as their expectations fail to come to fruition. "The *Kitchen* had exposed the effects of capitalism on a group of workers-exploiting their labor,

stunting their dreams, and generating an isolated and futile act of sabotage" (Wilcher p.55). The plays about the Kahn and Simmonds families had charted the disillusionment of two generations of working-class idealists in the face of political betrayal and the power of an individualized economy. The victory celebrated in *Roots* has been confined to the awakening of one working-class spirit to the nature and causes of cultural oppression: "The whole stinkin' commercial world insults us and we don't care a damn" (*Trilogy* p. 150).

For Wesker working, playing, laughing, crying, eating, singing, dancing, studying, leisure, and creative art are not separate aspects of living but natural manifestations of the whole act of living. Paul speaks for the rights of the bus drivers, the factory workers, and the cooks to better working conditions. He talks about their collective responsibility to society and their individual rights.

Wesker loves the endeavour of breathing beings. He loves the smell of action in human beings. He has firm faith that man's efforts help him in attaining his Jerusalem: "It seems to me... that all human endeavour since paradise lost has been, in one form or another, an attempt to regain paradise-whether it's the cultivation of deserts and swamps for food or habitation, whether it's the philosophies and religions of the world attempting to explain the chaos of human existence, whether it's the constant weeding of the garden. The polishing of the boot, the shining of the candlestick... All are honorable and glorious attempts to regain paradise" (*Ambivalences* P.28).

In spite of the various warning from their kinsmen, friends and family, Dave and Ada are committed to replace the existing order to bring the peace, prosperity, and justice of Jerusalem but from the beginning misfortune follows them, partly because their feelings remain unrealized by their kith and kin and partly because of the unfavorable circumstances of society and also because of the futility of their own efforts. Wesker is in favour of the hard work. He seems to have firm faith in the maximum: 'work hard, there and there lies the honor'. Like Browning, Wesker thinks that it is better to try and fail than never to try at all. He takes his characters to their extreme position to attain their ideals: "It's not that I approve the pursuit of the ideal but I recognize it as a deep human impulse that, despite the futility of the pursuit, I admire. I admire most human endeavour. The genius that resulted in the science, the medicine and the technology of today fills me with awe; and the persistent hard work that produced the cultivated landscapes we see when we fly over them commands my respect. So, too, those individuals who pursue an ideal or an experimental lifestyle fail, but who survive their failure, and continue living a good, though disappointed life, they also command my respect. They may

have failed but they tried (*Ambivalences* P.27). Dave's plans are shattered, first by the attitude of the Colonel and then in the following act of taking linoleum from the Colonel's barn.

Arnold Wesker's educational ideology often aligns with Paulo Freire's 'critical pedagogy' and his framework of cultural action for liberation. Both thinkers assert that meaningful education begins with a critical awareness of human interaction and view this pedagogical process as a crucial line of defense against oppression. However, Freire's approach goes beyond fundamental literacy, defining true freedom as a cultural literacy that demands a critical understanding of the political, socio-cultural, economic, and historical dimensions that shape society. Whereas Freire consistently inspired learners toward transformation and self-awareness through collective consciousness and actively linked education to social empowerment and political liberation, Wesker, on the other hand, is primarily interested in enhancing individual awareness and fostering human connection. "To me, as a Socialist, if education means anything it means essentially this: The upholding of language as greatest creation. It means a constant freshening, a constant guarding against abuse by demagogues, bureaucrats and copy-writers, whether political or commercial" (*Words as Definitions of Experience*)

Conclusion

Wesker's primary concern is with human beings, and that his themes are far too diverse to be described within the narrow confines of socio-political. The first hand and intimate knowledge of different aspects of the British society which he picked up early in his encounters with his environment has enabled him to write, about them with the authority, conviction and insight in his plays.

Wesker's plays gave voice to the struggles and hopes of a heretofore ignored class of people. With the publication of his earlier plays, Wesker became a celebrated playwright whose works have never left the public's view in one way or another. Unlike Osborne's cynical protagonists, Wesker's idealistic characters affirm the possibility of social reform while espousing fairness to the universal common man, education, and a resistance to dehumanization. Wesker does not praise ignorance like J.B. Priestley. For him, Ignorance continues to cause suffering. "To be ignorant is to be defenseless... spiritually, professionally, and intellectually. And that kind of frustration leads to violence and further suffering." (*Ambivalences* p.9). For Wesker, education is central to all things. He believes in the old adage that knowledge is power. He explains the

need of power not "to conquer but to understand, to defend against exploitation, to recognize the writing on the wall" (*Ambivalences* p.101).

As a major figure in British drama, Arnold Wesker holds a special appeal for academics and educators who support his lifelong advocacy for accessible, transformative cultural education and social change for the working class through self-expression and education. He wrote plays to change the world around him. Believing that works of art are transformative, he vowed to give his working class neighbours 'tools for living.' He urged other artists to do the same: "We must pick up our poems, our plays and films, tuck them under our arms and go out to the public and do battle with them" (*Let Battle Commence* p.98). He urged artists to carry their work straight to the public and to "do battle" with the existing social system.

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