

# The Creative Launcher

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## Theme of Pacifism in John Arden: A Study of Select Plays

**Dr. Gowhar Ahmad Wani**

Research Scholar,  
D. A. V. V. Indore,  
M. P., India

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### Abstract

John Arden is one of the most popular dramatists who found a new place for verse in the theatre and his dramatic nature as covering a wide prospect of themes ranging from political violence, pacifism, repression and anarchy. Pacifism is most relevant theme is the John Arden has broadened his mural by search deep into the contemporary socio-political issues of this era and given voice to them without any hesitation. John Arden is a notable writer among the outstanding dramatists who were held responsible for the revolution in the mid 1950s. The dramatists of this period became popular because of offering many new insights through their dramatic pieces. In the light of these meanings, Arden's plays are examined. Arden is found to be rather uncertain about what he is depicting on the stage, because he presents the conflicting ideas of a social or political problem rather impartially. Arden's basic themes in his drama are based on the social issues related to man's position in society as well as the existence of serious problems that are strongly fatal and lethal in different kinds of societies which are strongly fatal or lethal. John Arden dramatizes the attempts of individuals to deal with the problems of social condemnation. However John Arden felt that such an approach is rewarded not without the danger for the playwright because of the necessary political divisions with the contemporary audience. How can the playwright dramatize these issues of man's conflict with his society in an action that will not isolate his audience? Arden does this by means of common man, changing roles of a character who directly addresses the audience by means of historical ballad form. His function was to draw the audience into the play, while qualities of character are intended to represent that is common to all. On a whole Arden provides a frame work regarding England's corruption, colonialism as part in the procedure of politics.

**Keywords:** Pacifism, Mural, Ambivalence, Alienation-effect, Colonialism

### Introduction

Arden, with his uncertain attitude, achieved success and got recognized as a dramatist of considerable regard. Arden is a skillful craftsman even though the audience find it difficult to understand him at the first instance. Contemporary critics have identified John Arden as one of the, Royal Court Dramatists, each one of whom shows individuality in presenting his

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plays. Arden's individuality is seen in attracting the attention of the audience by his even-handed exposition of things. He is one among the champions of this post-war theatre which includes John Osborne, Ann Jellicoe, Norman Frederick Simpson and Harold Pinter. The first play produced at the Royal Theatre was Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. Following his success, John Arden achieved great popularity through the publication of his play *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* in 1959. Both Osborne and Arden won the "Evening Standard awards for the most promising playwrights of the year. Following Brecht who is noted for the use of the technique called 'Alienation effect' and for various other devices like use of masks, music, dance and mixture of different kinds of language ranging from slang to highly worked poetry, Arden has used these techniques in his plays. John Arden is quite different from all his contemporaries because of his ambivalent attitude towards what he writes. There is a frequent use of songs in most of his plays. Whatever techniques Arden may have in common with Brecht, the world-picture that emerges from his plays is distinctly his own, Whereas, in general, ambivalence is a potential source of undesirable stress. In a writer it is widely regarded as a source of strength and desirable tension.

The theme that is prevalent in the dramas of John Arden is pacifism. Pacifism is defined as "policy or principle that all differences among nations or people should be adjusted without recourse to war" ([www.dictionary.com/ browse/ pacifism](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/pacifism)) It is also defined as "the opposition of war and violence as a means of settling disputes. Pacifism may entail the belief that the waging of war by a state and the participation in war by individual are absolutely wrong under any circumstances." (<https://www.britica.com/topic/pacifism>) "Pacifism, as it is understood in ordinary discourse today, includes a variety of commitments on a continuum for an absolute in all actions to more focused or minimal sort of anti-warism. In contrast to the just war tradition, pacifism rejects war as an acceptable means" (<https://standford.Library.sydney.edu/.../spr2012/entries/pacifism>)

In *Live Like Pigs* pacifism is present at very beginning when a quarrel between the Official and Rosie on water run by Sally in bathroom, Sailor arrives with joy to have a house defending Rosie and dispels the Official out of it. The last scene also show the pacifistic view when Rachel disperses the mob by yelling upon them. And when police comes in the house of Sawney, ends the quarrel, dissipates the mob and saved the family that was threatened by the mob. "[The Sergeant *turns in the door way and calls to the crowd.*] Go on, clear away now, get moving! Saunderson, go round back of the house and break up the mob in the garden.... Sergeant [*to the crowd*]: Go on. Go home!" (Taylor, *Three Plays* 185)

In *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* Arden explores the theme of pacifism in many ways. When Wamphray dies and Lindsay took his death as a political tool goes to Gilkonie castle offers him a letter from the king for peace on both sides of border English as well as Scottish. "There is here an opportunity to put an end to this sad quarrel; for the Johnstones langsyne has been the King's servants, while you are now his officer. Ane mertable wark,

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the conclusion of truce, will ye dae it?... how delightsome it is to be at peace with auld enemies! Peace! Whaur's my piper? Whaur's music." (Arden, *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* 52-53)

In last Act the hanging of Gilnokie may serve a deterrent and Lindsay appears as a Pacifist about its long term operation. Lindsay is also realistic enough to realize that no one particular individual or group is responsible for the disastrous consequence. "...as ane dry exemplar to the world: here may ye read this varieties of dishonor, and determine in your mind how best ye can avoid whilk ane of them, and when." (Arden, *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* 122) The tree also signifies the pacifism on which the Gilnokie was hanged, spreads neither leaf nor blossom means no will spread violence or war on the both sides of border and there will be peace. "That three upon whilk he was hangit spread neither leaf nor blossom... nor bloom of fruit nor sap within its branches" (Arden, *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* 121)

*Armstrong's Last Goodnight* and *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* reflect the affinity to the theme of pacifism. When Musgrave and his fellow men brings the body of dead soldier to his home town in an emplace of coal strike, their leader, Musgrave holds the town at gun point. While in public he shows the soldier's dead body to bring peace and wants people face to face the true picture about the war. "Complete pacifism, writes Arden in the introduction to *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, it is very hard doctrine: and if the play appears to advocate it with perhaps some timidity. It is probably because I am naturally a timed man- and also because I know that if I am hit I very easily hit back". (Hunt, *Arden A Study of His plays 60-61*)

In last Act when Musgrave wants to slaughter the twenty five leading town men, he fails from a purely military point of view because of confused response from the crowd. He has mistaken himself to underestimate his allies or friends. His approach to solution of problem has prevented him in considering conditions as espionage. The arrival of dragons stops the Musgrave's mission. Musgrave and Attercliffe are imprisoned and Hurst is killed. The Colliers were friendly with former enemies. Walsh comments with great bitter: "the community's being saved, peace and prosperity rules. We're all friends and neighbours for the rest of today. We're all sorted out. We're back here, we were. So what de we do?" (Arden, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* 99). At last the officer calls the town men to begin a normal life again. In this scene pacifism appears as Musgrave wants to kill the people but dragons came to control the situation and make peace in the town. John Arden successes with the use of historical material and his approach remains exciting in depicting various themes become valid by which problems of contemporary relevance are explored in his dramas. Arden's own character of intense believer in discipline, politically conscious, intellectual craftsmanship, a poet with great vision, a great command of language and ability to create history and a Jungian chronologer of ancestral memories is strongly

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reflected in all the three dramas. He projected himself as an intuitive political poet, who realized the cultural relationship between the oppressed and their oppressors

John Arden is, no doubt, a playwright with terribly mixed feelings, for he does not stand for a particular view or idea. He neither supports nor opposes. There are neither heroes nor villains nor irredeemably bad ones. Moreover, there is a progress from speech to song, from casual prose to highly formal verse. According to Taylor, “the main characters of Arden’s plays are either simply good or bad; the actions and situations are never clear to be understood, to be approved of or disapproved of. Consequently the audience is given no simple guidance to what its reactions should be.

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