

## **John Osborne's Look Back in Anger: A Critique**

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### **Abstract**

*Considered to be one of the most important plays in the modern British theatre, John Osborne wrote *Look Back in Anger* in the May of 1955. On its opening in the Royal Court Theatre on May 8, 1956, the play received mixed reviews from the English theatre critics. It however managed to earn rave reviews from the Times. The play proved to be the first well-known example of the **Kitchen Sink Drama**, the genre of theatre that explored the drama woven in ordinary domestic life of post war Britain. It also saw the coining of the term **Angry Young Man**, and its protagonist, Jimmy Porter became the symbol of the angst and nihilism that was so characteristic of the post war working class British youth. The **Angry Young Man** motif is also autobiographical and stands for a group of young writers and artists— John Osborne and Kingsley Amis being foremost among them— who personified the frustration of the working class youth with the extant British cultural life.*

### **Keywords**

*Angry Young Man, Kitchen Sink Drama, Three-act play, Animal Fantasy, Post war youth*

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Look Back in Anger<sup>1</sup> is about the psychological impact of the national and international situation in the mid fifties, upon the young generation of England. England had shrunk into a small power after the Second World War. The dismantling of the colonies one after another, and the economic had almost crippled her. The Labour government took some positive measures, of course, and there was an economic recovery after the conservatives came to power in 1951. But this could neither destroy class distinctions nor restore the people's faith in the Church. England had also developed into a pessimistic society after the break-up of all moral values. The international situation was also no less dismal for the English people. The Soviet Union, so long looked upon as the champion of the working classes, got revealed in all her tooth n claw. The possession of the H-bomb by her, and her annexation of Hungary into the Communist Bloc paved the way for the Cold War between the two super powers. This situation necessitated the call for nuclear disarmament. All these and multiple other factors, namely, large-scale immigration, automation and inflation put a great pressure on the mind of that class of young people who liked to consider themselves the have-nots. The sensitive people of the other sections of the society were no less affected by this situation, but their feelings were not as much articulated as the working class people's. Look Back in Anger , when it was first staged on the May 8, 1956, showed the cumulative impact of this "unusual complex" upon the younger generation. It voiced the fears n the despair, the frustrations and the neurotic responses of those who have since then been called the **Angry Young Men**. The play ushered in a revolution on the British stage on its very first appearance.

But inspite of all its revolutionary content and idiom, Look Back in Anger is not much different from the conventional well-made plays preceding it. Like any other play of this kind, this three-act play is divided structurally into three sections: exposition, complication and resolution. The first act presents to us the world in which Jimmy Porter, the angry-young-man hero of the play, is trapped. Two other characters, Alison, his wife and Cliff, his friend also appear in this act . Without them Jimmy's anger, and the situation he is in, would not have found adequate expression. The real dramatic action, of course, starts from the next act with the appearance of Helena Charles on the scene. The events get complicated when Helena and Jimmy begin to live together after the departure of Alison. The events move towards a resolution with the appearance of Alison towards the end of the second act.

The action is, of course, of very little importance in this play. The play can be summed up best as the expression of an intense feeling, a sharp voice crying in the wilderness. It is the expression of an idiom. But the mere expression of a voice cannot make a play. Raymond Williams is of the opinion that the play aptly depicts

the realities of the times in its characters, location, mise-en-scene and specially in its depiction of the pigeon-holed existence of its protagonists set in a working class background.

Though their marriage was the result of romantic love, Jimmy and Alison came from very different worlds. While Jimmy came from a working class family, Alison hailed from an upper middle class background. Alison's mother actually went too far over Jimmy, even in the opinion of her father, Col. Redfern. She treated Jimmy like a 'criminal'. This very naturally embitters Jimmy against his in-laws. In the play, Jimmy spares no occasion to spit his venom upon the very name of his mother-in-law. He says while describing her, "There is no limit to what the middle aged mummy will do in the holy crusade against ruffians like me".<sup>2</sup> Jimmy's attitude towards his father-in-law is comparatively soft. He is very much critical, no doubt, of the old man for his nostalgia for the old world that has lost all relevance in the contemporary situation. But still he is looked upon by him as "Poor old Daddy- just one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian world that can't understand why the sun isn't shining any more"<sup>3</sup> over the British empire. The dual allegiance of Alison towards her parents and her husband is one of the many complications of the play.

Jimmy is not only sharply critical of his in-laws, he is dissatisfied with everything in general- with the establishment, with the politics of the country, with the church, with the hypocrisy, ignorance and the delicious sloth cultivated by the people in positions of power and authority. Alison, being still somewhat loyal to her parents and insensitive to Jimmy's crisis, becomes an easy target. His chief preoccupation is to vent out all his anger and pessimism upon his wife, and to engage in brawls and scruples with his friend, Cliff, who is however all compassion for Alison. From time to time Jimmy, of course, finds an escape into a make-belief world of animal love with Alison. But this is only for the time being, only before another relapse into his usual routine of hurling his tyrads against all and sundry, including his wife.

The entry of Helena, Alison's actress friend, brings about a change in the atmosphere. She is kept in the flat by Alison, much against the wishes of Jimmy, who is very hostile to her for her conventional values and religious orthodoxes Helena shudders at the kind of life Alison has been enduring with her unfeeling and cruel husband. When she comes to know that Alison has conceived, she sends a telegram to her father on her own. It is also at her behest that Alison goes to Church for the first time after marriage. When Alison leaves the flat with her father in the absence of Jimmy, the breach between husband and wife reaches its culmination. Helena, in

no time, replaces her friend, and Jimmy carries in with her, with Cliff in between them, the same sort of meaningless existence that he had carried on when Alison was there.

If Jimmy has no hope for a mission in life, he has no genuine feelings for women either. Just as he is a hater of all programs and ideas, he is an inveterate misogynist. “Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?”<sup>4</sup>, he asks Cliff. His hopelessness and frustration find an eloquent expression in the following words addressed to Cliff:

“I suppose people of our generation aren’t  
able to die for a good cause any longer.  
We had all that done for us in the thirties  
and the forties, when we were still kids...  
There aren’t any good, brave causes left  
.....No, there’s nothing left for it , me boy”<sup>5</sup>

Alison, of course, comes back to Jimmy after she has had a miscarriage, ‘grovelling’, ‘crawling’, with her face rubbed in the mud. There is a reconciliation between the husband and the wife, and they begin their love-game, as they were wont to engage in before, in their make-belief world of animal fantasy. But this reconciliation leaves a question mark- whether the same pattern will not be repeated with his wife again. There is nothing in the play to indicate that Jimmy is at last reconciled with the Universe at large, that he has been able to make peace with his anguishes.

The first act of the play serves as a very good exposition to the action of the play. It not only offers to us the situation in which the characters are placed, but also vaguely foreshadows the complication of the play’s action. The news of the imminent intrusion of Helena into the world of Jimmy and Alison presages a positive threat to whatever is left of the ramshackle relationship between them. Jimmy comes to know of Helena’s arrival at a time when he had just regretted his excesses, and had just managed to win the confidence of Alison once again. Alison was not at first sure of the change in his attitude when he advanced towards her. But given the neurotic obsessions of Jimmy, everything hung in a delicate balance for the couple in so far as their relationship was concerned. When Jimmy got locked into his habitual bear and squirrel relationship with Alison, we could not help feeling that the strange engagement was nothing but a momentary diversion for Jimmy. It was primarily his sudden erotic impulses that drew him towards Alison.

That the love game played by Jimmy and Alison on animal terms was no guarantee for a sound relationship between the couple becomes clear when Jimmy

reacts sharply to the very mention of Helena's name, and to the news of her imminent arrival. His reactions forebode vaguely the breach between the couple in the second act. Jimmy's verbal duel with Helena in Act II, scene i is no less anticipated when he jokes with Alison and asks her if she has warned Helena to bring along her armour.

The events of Act I are almost re-enacted in Act III, scene i, though Alison is now replaced by Helena. Critics have rightly pointed out that the overall pattern of the play is circular. Things roughly end where they began. Helena wears a shirt of Jimmy in the later act, just as Alison did wear a cherry red shirt of his in Act I. So nothing does change at Jimmy's. Now he, Cliff and Helena fight, discuss current events and have fun just as in Act I he, Cliff and Alison fought, talked politics and amused themselves. The sequences of events in the play thus give us a feeling that the characters are trapped in a closed world from which there is no escape.

The large Victorian house in which they live symbolizes the old world, represented in various forms by the Church, the Establishment, the traditional social values and moral standards. Everything in this old world is maladjusted to the changed perspectives of the post-war world. But its life is still preserved by a class of people who belonged to the privileged sections of the society. They are represented in the play by the Redfern clan. Jimmy Porter rebels against this status quo. His anger results from his despair and frustration, from his deprivations and his sense of helplessness. He has tremendous energies in him that do not find an outlet. He would like to change the world, but he cannot even create a ripple in the stagnant waters. He represents the young men of the mid-fifties, disorganised and drifting. But while he represents a class, he is at the same time different from others in being a psycho neurotic and a sadomasochistic. Alison points out this dichotomy in Jimmy's character when she says:

Jimmy went into battle with his axe  
swinging round his head- frail and  
so full of fire. I had never seen anything  
like it. The old story of the knight in  
shining armour- except that his armour  
didn't really shine very much.<sup>6</sup>

The entire first act, where no dramatic action takes place till the announcement of Helena's, is devoted to the purpose of giving the spectators an idea of the complex personality of Jimmy Porter. He is a bundle of contradictory qualities. He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and free booting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates both the sensitive and the insensitive.

From the very moment that the play opens, Jimmy begins to pour, in the opinion of Ronald Hayman, the same sulphuric energy into the attacks he launches on everything that surrounds him- Alison, Cliff, Helena, the Sunday papers, the social system, women in general, Conservative members of the Parliament, Sunday cinema audiences, Billy Graham, the H-Bomb, people who do not like jazz, Wordsworth, Alison's mother, people who have never watched anybody die, the Church and the apathy of everyone else in a generation that scarcely has anything to be positive about. Jimmy takes Alison to task for her lack of enthusiasm and firmness of mind, and for her insensitivity and her capacity to adjust herself to her surroundings. She is sarcastically branded by Jimmy as 'the lady Pusillanimous', 'the monument to non attachment'.

Jimmy is highly allergic in his attitude towards the entire middle class for their numerous vices. What shocks him most is the delicious sloth or the intellectual inertia which cuts right across class distinctions, affecting the common Cliff as much as the well-bred Alison. He thinks of Alison as being absorbed in her beauty sleep. He declares:

Oh heavens , how I long for a little  
ordinary human enthusiasm. Just  
enthusiasm— that's all. I want to  
hear a warm thrilling voice cry out  
Hallelujah!...Hallelujah! I'm alive<sup>7</sup>

Jimmy, as a matter of fact, has grown sick of life and the people around him. As it is in the case of Hamlet, no man delights him, no woman either. But among the many contradictions in his character, a notable one is that Jimmy is an inveterate misogynistic. While he feels drawn towards women, at the same time he hates women in general, with the exception of one or two like Madeleine, for their noisiness and clumsiness. A woman in front of her bedroom mirror appears to him like a refined butcher.

Taken as a whole, there are certain positives in Jimmy's critique of life, of course. But though he is very critical of the ways men and women, politics, religion and everything else that effects life, he has no positive program to offer for the annihilation of the ills that affect society. His trumpet can mock the universe, but not sound a call to battle; he becomes an emotional liability to those he seeks to inspire. Like Hamlet, he sees something rotten in the state. The rottenness is not all his imagining. But his insight is mingled with illusion, his idealism with cruelty, his desire to save with an appalling capacity for destruction.

Jimmy is neurotically obsessed even against people who are in loving alliance with him. He is cruel for no particular reason towards Alison, who left the sheltered nook of her parents' home driven by her love for him, and willingly embraced a life of poverty with him. Jimmy spares no occasion to cock a snook at her even though Alison appears to be a very obliging and dutiful wife. One cannot but suspect that his treatment of his wife is actually due to an ugly type of possessiveness, heavily disguised. Jimmy is also unnecessarily brutal in his attitude towards his friend, Cliff, who is attached to him almost with a canine fidelity.

The picture that we get of Jimmy from the first act of the play is that of an idealist whose vision has been obsessed by his neurotic and destructive impulses. No wonder that Jimmy gets separated from his wife, and starts living in promiscuity with a friend of hers in her absence in the following act.

Alison appears in the first act as a woman of great tolerance. She has enough love for Jimmy and good breeding to wink at the excesses of Jimmy as being mere childish pranks. Jimmy, though, condemns her attitude as patronising. Alison is a sharp contrast to both Jimmy and Cliff. As her creator himself tells us, "she is turned in a different key, a key of well-bred malice that is often drowned in the robust orchestration of the other two"<sup>8</sup> Her wearing a shirt of Jimmy is symbolical of her being essentially loyal to him. Her preference of a cherry red shirt of Jimmy's probably points to her secret admiration for Jimmy's robust vitality.

Alison is very much an incarnation of the womanly qualities of tenderness, tolerance and endurance. She is devoted to her domestic chores against all the verbal onslaughts of Jimmy. She puts up with all the humiliation inflicted upon her by Jimmy. Like a good wife, she is first loyal to her husband before being loyal to her parents. That is why she does not have a word to say when the latter intercepts her mother's letters. Even when Jimmy is callously savage towards her, she has the insight of a loving wife to realize why he is savage at times. She probably can guess about the unfulfilled aspirations and messianic zeal of Jimmy as being the source of all his troubles. Her acceptance of the domination of Jimmy is also so complete that she fears to tell him of her being pregnant. That a woman of her character would condone all the lapses of her husband and come back ultimately to him penitent after the loss of her child, especially, is worth predictable from her characterization in the first act.

Cliff, the other notable character introduced in the first act serves as a foil to Jimmy. If Jimmy is a neurotically obsessed and violent, angry young man, Cliff is easily disposed and relaxed. He is a soothing natural counterpart to Jimmy. His chief justification in the play is to focus upon Jimmy's excess of idealism and his eccentricities by contrast. But he has another important justification of his existence

in between the husband and the wife, as a confidante and a consoler. Jimmy recognises him as the only friend left to him. He has no suspicion of Cliff's deep friendly relationship with his wife, because he is sure of Cliff's basic goodness of heart, honesty and loyalty to him. Jimmy's brawls and scuffles with Cliff have a cathartic effect upon the former's anger, which, for want of a relapse, might otherwise have been channelled towards the weak and helpless Alison.

Cliff is all tenderness and love for Alison for her being a beautiful, tender-hearted, civilized but defenceless woman. He stands between the couple like a wall to protect Alison from the verbal onslaughts of Jimmy. He tries also to assuage her hurt mind. He is indeed a balm to her mind, just like the soap lather he applies to her burnt arm. Cliff is so honestly devoted to Alison that she can very well surrender to him in a friendly embrace. He is the only person before the approach of Helena in the second act, to whom Alison can turn for consolation in her life of confinement and suffering. Indeed, had there been no Cliff as a sure buffer zone where to take shelter in times of crisis, Alison's return might not have been a possibility in the end of the play.

Thus, through the characters of Jimmy, Alison, Helena and Cliff, as also the other minor ones like the Redferns, Madeliene etc, the writer very aptly delineates the angst n class tussle of the post war society of England.

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