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# OSBORNE'S ANGRY YOUNG PLAY

SAMUEL A. WEISS

What's wrong with Jimmy? On first view, *Look Back in Anger* suffers from the apparent chaos of its hero's emotional distemper. But on close analysis the play takes on a coherence and shape that reveals a tight core of related thinking and feeling. The outbursts of Jimmy Porter are much less a discontinuous series of accidental and incidental explosions aimed at arbitrary targets and scattering dirt on innocent and guilty alike than a sustained, keenly alert attack on an enemy who may be partially or wholly obscure to an audience of ostriches but who is maddeningly clear and present to playwright John Osborne and his hero, Jimmy Porter.

The key imagery of *Look Back* is that of war and the hunt. The play fairly bristles with words like *assault*, *pursuit*, *hostage*, *gauntlet*, *war*, *jungle*, *savage*. Jimmy stalks Alison and Helena as a hunter on the scent, seeking to flush his prey and draw blood. He and Alison are bear and squirrel inhabiting a jungle dense with cruel steel traps. Alison sees herself as a "sort of hostage" taken in war, a war which in its micro-social context Jimmy prosecutes against her with all the fury of his passion, pain and pride, his hate and hurt, demanding as his terms of truce unconditional surrender after passage through a purgatory of suffering and humiliation; and which

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in its macrosocial aspects he declares against the entire middle-class of England, "the old gang" which, after a temporary political displacement by the Labour Party, returned to misruling power and reestablished itself, its complacency and callousness, its insensitivity and ignorance.

"You're hurt," says Allison to her father, the former imperial colonel, "because everything is changed. Jimmy's hurt because everything is the same." Society has returned to its drab, grey, flat, passionless bed in which Jimmy sees the "wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying." And men like him, educated beyond their working-class origins yet fiercely conscious of class allegiance, articulate beyond stiff-upper-class reticence, and possessed of and by a "burning virility of mind and spirit," find themselves at war in a world with no acceptable outlets for their energies, a world ostensibly without "good, brave causes" or occupations worth one's efforts. It is surely not fortuitous that Jimmy has tried and abandoned advertising, journalism and selling, three solid callings requiring solid vices.

The war which Jimmy wages is directed against "Dame Alison's Mob," the upper middle class. In describing the early months of her marriage when she and Jimmy shared a working-class apart-

ment with Hugh, Alison remarks: "I felt as though I'd been dropped in a jungle. I couldn't believe that two people, two educated people could be so savage—and so—so uncompromising. . . . They came to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on." The bitter hostility—latent and overt—of submerged groups always comes as a painful and baffling shock to those who can afford to live and let live. In the United States, with its relative social mobility and economic well-being, its publicized myths of a people's capitalism and a universal American middle-class, the attitudes of Jimmy and Hugh are virtually incomprehensible. Little wonder then that American audiences at *Look Back* demand to know what the fuss is all about.

The achievement of Osborne is that he has probed into personal relations and bared their social determinants, that his image of private tensions adumbrates profound public issues. His hero will not rub his nose in the golden trough. He will not be meek and love his foes, but rather is bitterly contemptuous of those whom he indicts of cruel insensitivity and lack of brains and guts. Since Alison, ironically but inevitably, belongs to the very group Jimmy detests, his marriage to her must be regarded not as an alliance with the enemy, but as a marauding venture into his territory. Alison must break unreservedly with her past, wipe away all fond records, and submit herself at the cost of old ties and comforts to a new set of loyalties and ideals. She must endure uncomplainingly cramped living conditions and unspeakable insults heaped upon her family and friends. She may not occupy a middle, neutral position between the combatants. She is with Jimmy or against him. Social clash

and the battle of the sexes become one and inseparable.

At bay in the wasteland where "Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm," Jimmy turns contemptuously from the road marked Religion (Revived, Respectable; in fact, almost Scientific) and only vaguely glances at the escape path labelled Art: he may someday write a book, or go on the stage, or start a jazz band. What remains? The third idol of the fashionable trinity: Love. Jimmy does have an overpowering, indeed childish, need for love. But he will not succumb to dewy sentimentality and resign himself to the domestic pen. In the wasteland of the non-heroes there is nothing to engage a man's passions, Jimmy sardonically reflects, but sexual love, felt deeply but regarded unromantically. Love, it seems, is not the best of all possible goods but all that is left in a world without good, brave causes.

Hence the ambivalence towards sex: the fantasy of the devouring woman and the undercurrents of sexual hostility to women. Women are refined butchers, they bleed one to death, and so on. Jimmy is bitterest towards mothers, including his own. These psychosexual odors have inevitably attracted the Freudian hounds who have promptly turned up their noses at the stale remains of latent homosexuality and castration complex. But such criticism is feeble insight into the bed-pan of art and evades its serious conscious purpose. It is precisely Osborne's ability to look outside the window of sex that gives his play a multi-dimensional quality lacking the narrower vision of, say, Tennessee Williams. In a world without a grand design, the arena of sex is italicized. And marriage between two persons who are drastically unlike in their

patterns of social upbringing, identities, behavior, and ideals must result in head-on collision. Thus Jimmy's diatribes against Alison, her mother, and Helena are not independent of his social conscience: they represent predatory, selfish, ignorant, and insensitive society. He has nothing but fond memories of his former mistress Madeline and is devoted to Hugh's mother who possesses the "working class" virtues of loyalty, sincerity and generosity. He regards Alison suspiciously, despite his aching love, and he rejects her as stupid and cruel. He has known suffering, loss and death, while she has not. Only when she is baptised in the waters of pain and deprivation (the loss of her baby) does she achieve true humanity and cast her lot unequivocally with Jimmy. Having reached some plane of common understanding, Jimmy and Alison are reunited in a scene at once tender and sad.

But is being "butchered by the women" all that truly remains, as Jimmy ruefully maintains? People of his generation, he supposes, cannot die for good causes. "There aren't any good, brave causes left." Apparently nettled by the criticism leveled against Jimmy's alleged short-sighted, sterile nihilism, Osborne has sharply retorted: "It is too simple to say that Jimmy Porter himself believed that there were no good, brave causes left." Exactly. But this is precisely what Osborne himself says through his character. If we are to look below the surface of Jimmy's blunt words, if we are to recognize the exaggerated rhetoric of despair, we must be led to do so by the disparities between conflicting attitudes and actions. But Jimmy Porter does appear submerged in futility, ineffectual in action, and disengaged except in the confines of his garret. The world has left its mark on Jimmy; will

he leave his mark on it? Will this man of volcanic temperament move beyond private statement to public gesture? Will Jimmy ever write that book "in flames a mile high?" Or will he just go on talking? The strength of our doubts is the measure of his weakness.

Or is it? Jimmy possesses the lonely courage of the nay-sayer. Where in the jungle-society can one move securely and shout Yea? Is not modern tragedy, as Stendhal and Balzac perceived, the defeat of the brilliantly gifted idealist in a world of prosaic mediocrity that lacks patience or place for the man of heroic ambition and pure ideals? Like Julien Sorel, Jimmy should have lived during the French Revolution. Both were born too late or too soon. But unlike Julien, Jimmy will not attempt to beat society at its own hypocritical game, which is the only game open to the earlier "indignant plebian." He will not don the mask and walk the tightrope. More hopeful than his friend Hugh, who abandons England, Jimmy apparently senses ultimate defeat of the enemy through open confrontation on home grounds.

Still, troubling questions remain. For all our grasp in the abstract of the social and psychological sources of friction between Jimmy and Alison, we fail to observe in the play any adequate concrete pretext for Jimmy's savage baiting of Alison. His eruptions are entirely in excess of the facts, they lack an "objective correlative." A moment's reflection indicates that the girl of grit and imagination ("guts and sensitivity") who married Jimmy was no wilting lily but a vigorous, independent soul. What crimes, real or imagined, has she committed during their years of marriage to warrant Jimmy's cruel hostility and raw-nerved suspicion? Why, and how, has

communication collapsed between them? We are perplexed.

Even as we are puzzled, along with the Colonel, about the full motivation behind Jimmy and Allison's decision to marry. It is perhaps inevitable that a man of higher education should be unfitted for working-class girls. But does a man of Jimmy's uncompromising social convictions undertake, with clear conscience and pure motives, to storm the ramparts of upper-middle-class respectability and carry off the lovely maid? Alison's suggestions that Jimmy may have sought Revenge and that she responded to Challenge carry in the very terms of her analysis the burden of class clash and invite us to regard Jimmy's conquest of Alison as an act of war and a declaration of right. Besides, like any Hollywood prize, Alison is *very* beautiful and *very* rich, and in his own bitter way, Jimmy loves her. He, on the other hand, may well have exerted a powerful romantic appeal for Alison by his intensity and need to be loved. Nonetheless, these factors remain tantalizing glimpses into complex regions that are only partially explored.

Yielding no quarter, Osborne has proudly declared: Shakespeare doesn't explain his work; Chekhov doesn't explain his work; neither do I. Now this is charming impudence, but it is a misconception. The ambiguities of Shakespeare are not his strength but weakness, reflecting the confusion, uncertainties and moral lack of center of his Mannerist

period. Nor is Chekhov's inimitable combination of subtle comedy and compassion, while subject to romantic misinterpretation, a case for "explanation." One can argue the author's attitudes towards his characters by stressing the comic or pathetic elements in his works, but one doesn't leave Chekhov with a sense of bafflement and feeling that important elements necessary to the understanding of the play have been withheld by the dramatist's negligence or lack of insight.

Yet, the overriding fact is that in *Look Back in Anger* the lagging British stage was justly stimulated by the appearance of a fresh and passionate intelligence wedded to natural theatrical gifts. By focusing upon the psychosexual consequences of caste under contemporary conditions, Osborne has avoided the manhole of artificial "proletarian" art and has dramatized a new hero: up from working-class ranks, knowledgeable and articulate, suffering the current intellectual's malaise of lonely frustration, but—unlike the totally disaffiliated bourgeois hero—retaining firm class allegiances. And without resorting to any of the numerous experimental evasions with which the modern stage has attempted—from the late symbolism of Ibsen to the epic realism of Brecht—to cope with broad social and ethical concepts, John Osborne has taken the old jug of realism and filled it with a strong, heady brew that has not yet had time—thank God!—to mellow.