

Social Discrimination in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

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John Osborne

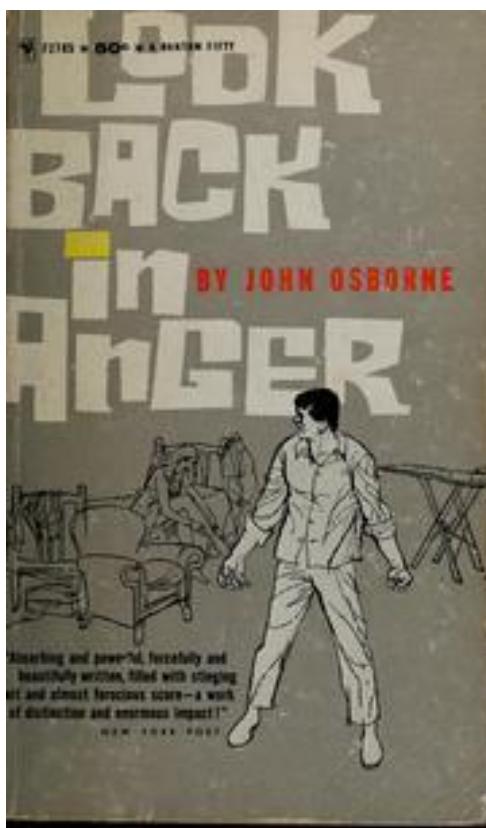
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Abstract

British literature is a mirror initially tied-up with several historical events, reflecting many facets of British identity. English drama rose, with excellent rapidity, to the summit of its

literary glories and is reflected through the imaginative strength of famous playwrights of England. The realistic issues which took place in and around the society are revealed in British plays and that has paved the way for new talents to create awareness among the people. The foremost playwrights who merge in the middle of the fifties are Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and John Osborne. Of these writers, Osborne shows his concerns over the class problems of the society. His plays deal with social discrimination, alienation, man's rebellion against the bonds of custom, anger, despair and frustration of the post-war generation, man-woman relationship and similar socio-psychological themes. He is regarded as the most brilliant dramatist of the post-Second World War period in Britain. Apart from the impressive volume of his writings, his plays have a great literary significance and bring him an enviable position among contemporary British dramatists.

Class Conflict and *Look Back in Anger*



Look Back in Anger highlights the class conflict that exists in the English society. The play is about the class disparity between those who belong to the comfortable upper middle class

and those who fought their way up in the social ladder by their hard work and intelligence. Osborne's deep-rooted wrath and frustrations over his society is presented in his work. He pours out his inner feelings and thoughts in various ways towards the central character of the play Jimmy Porter. He is the representative of the entire culture who remains nostalgic for the past glory. The protagonist, who is born as a revolutionist, fails to be satisfied with almost anything around him. He is dissatisfied with the society, the legal system, the socio-political system, the educational system, the environment, his wife, his friend and with himself. He wants the things to move in his own way but it does not happen; so he is the most helpless being who gets irritated with all the happenings in the society. Gareth Lloyd Evans in his book *The Languages of Modern Drama* (1997) comments that:

It is the language of educated youth feeling its feet and determined to put things right. It is the language of a certain self-conceit often not a vicious or deep one, but a cozy one born of self-awareness of intelligence, a sense of words, and a desire to chalk up a victory in the intellectual stakes. (106)

Alison, Jimmy Porter's Spouse

Alison, Jimmy Porter's spouse never opposes his views and he constantly keeps lashing out at people. Throughout the play he passes scathing remarks, criticizing his friends and in-laws and denouncing his wife mainly because she comes from the upper-class society. Jimmy and Cliff Lewis have a good relationship as friends, both own a sweet stall to run for their livelihood. Alison is constantly attacked by Jimmy due to the fact of her being a female and unenthusiastic attitude. She may be superior to Jimmy because of her upper-class status but he shows the superiority of his gender through each and every word and action. For Jimmy, women are the assassins who want to bleed men to death. As for men, they have little choice but to let themselves be butchered by women. He calls his wife as 'a lady pusillanimous' (20), which means a woman without the firmness of mind, a timid and a coward woman. By hearing these words Alison shouts, "God help me, if he doesn't stop, I'll go out of my mind in a minute". (20) Jimmy feels emotionally hardened to Alison's attitude towards his life.

Jimmy is a Self-Portrait of John Osborne

Jimmy is a self-portrait of Osborne himself. He has the same kind of anger as Osborne; has his roots in a similar socio-economic background and watches his father die at a tender age. Jimmy is a fully drawn individualized character because of his strong resemblance to the playwright. Jimmy and Alison's marriage rapidly gets to a break down under the strain of Jimmy's continuous verbal assaults. At the same time, Osborne shows his hero as an unforgettable character. Jimmy, beneath his crude and offensive behavior, is a sensitive person too. He is profoundly sentimental. His sense of emotional loss is felt in equal magnitude by Alison but is never shared with anyone.

Inner Thought of Jimmy

Osborne beautifully expresses his inner thoughts through the character Jimmy. Class struggle or class discrimination is also a dominating theme in the play. Jimmy's anger is directed towards the members of the upper class to which his wife belongs to. He wages a constant battle against the upper class and treats his wife as a hostage. By attacking his wife, he wants to take revenge on the upper middle class which he detests. He enjoys attacking Alison's mother in the harshest language as possible. Dr. K. Venkata Reddy in the article, *An Angry Young Man whose anger stems from love*, states that:

Jimmy was certainly opposed to many aspects of modern life, striking out, in turn, at the Sunday papers, the church, the apathy of everyone else, women in general, marriage, sex and the "Establishment." Yet his anger was not simply a revenge for the injustices he has suffered. He was capable of vicarious suffering and much of his anger does come from his love of others and his helplessness to change things. (12)

Status of Women

Women's are the victims in the twentieth century. People analyze women to be quite insignificant, a burden for man and a symbol of the frustrations of society. Osborne observes that there is no healthy atmosphere in Jimmy's apartment. Jimmy continuously criticizes his wife for the slightest mistake. He accuses women of bleeding men to death. Jimmy sarcastically comments that there is no good reason for him to die except for being butchered by women.

Alison regrets her behavior and their reconciliation gives a happy end to the play. Osborne gives a complete revolution through *Look Back in Anger*. He shoots out his anger through Jimmy, “One day, when I’m no longer spending my days running a sweet-stall, I may write a book about us all. Written in flames a mile high. And it won’t be recollected in tranquility either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth. It’ll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood.” (50).

The Play and the Playwright

Look Back in Anger is called the best play of its decade. The high praises that are showered on Osborne and his new drama are attributed largely to the revolutionary character, Jimmy Porter, whose anger at the system and sympathy with the downtrodden speaks for a whole generation.

John Osborne has been a trend-setter and the impact of his works has been a revolutionary and far-reaching one. Thus the English drama continues to change, flourish and grow. Osborne’s search for a new dramatic idiom that is to express the contemporary mood of despair departs from the earlier formalistic kitchen-sink drama. As Osborne himself is to recall in his autobiography, the opening of *Look Back in Anger* at the royal court theatre on 8th May, 1956 seems to become fixed in the memories of the theatrical historians.

Anger in the Play

Look Back in Anger is a play about anger at the establishments that evokes an idealized imperial past. It seeks to liberate the under-privileged but it also shows the brutality against women. It is a unique play which revolutionizes and spreads the awareness far and wide among the English. *Look Back in Anger* becomes little more than a half way glimpse into the shadowy origins and morbid effects of pathological behaviour.

Jimmy bursts out in anger and fights alone the battle against the hypocritical attitude all around him. He is dissatisfied with the things as they happen daily in the same way without any

change. He feels that the upper class society must stop its exploitation of the working-class people. He is angry because of these various aspects of life.

Jimmy utterly hates Alison's family for their upper-class behaviour. His mother-in law is against Alison marrying Jimmy because he is from the working-class. Knowing that he is a university graduate she agrees to their marriage. He accounts that, "Yes, that's the little woman's family. You know Mummy and Daddy, of course. And don't let the Marquess of Queensberry manner fool you. They'll kick you in the groin while you're handing your hat to the maid. As for Nigel and Alison, they're what they sound like: sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous". (19) He passes a comment on Alison's brother as, "The straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst?" (18) and her mother as 'evil minded'. (18)

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Jimmy says to Alison, "You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry- angry and helpless. And I can never forget it". (58) The various intensities of love in Jimmy's anger are his compulsive physical desire for his wife, Alison, his affection for his friend Cliff, his tender care for the old woman, and above all his general love for humanity. Thus, Jimmy has compassion and much of his anger is tempered by a plea of justice.

Far from being malicious, his anger concentrates on demonstrating the injustice of the world. According to Roy Huss, in the article, "Osborne's Backward Half-Way Look" in *Modern Drama* (1963), Jimmy Porter's problem is not that women threaten him. Indeed they are propelled towards him by the same sadomasochistic impulses: "To overlay this kind of atmosphere with a theme of social protest as Osborne does, is to sharpen the real dramatic focus of the play". (20)

Conclusion

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* displays the beginning of a new age in the history of modern British drama. It is basically about the class-disparity between those who belong to the comfortable upper middle class and those who fight their way up in the social ladder by their hard work and intelligence. In spite of his cruel treatment and attitude towards Alison, Jimmy genuinely cares for his wife. Apart from the areas of social-discrimination in life in general and the lack of compatibility between people, Osborne reveals that, all that is required in this society is more understanding and adjustment to live a harmonious life.

Works Cited

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