

# *The Criterion*

**December 2012**

ISSN 0976-8165

**Vol. III. Issue IV**

**An International Journal in English**

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

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## A Society that Looks Back in Anger: Studying John Osborne

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### Abstract

The dissatisfaction, disaffection and disapproval of the human condition is always expressed in different ages in different forms. Man as a social being never submits to tyranny or social despotism. If the existing social order is stifling, man does not sit silently and helplessly. He tries to highlight the injustice and disorder. In this context, the present paper looks at John Osborne's groundbreaking play *Look Back in Anger* as a perfect critique of the twentieth-century British society. Osborne depicts the picture of the contemporary society with a tinge of satire through the contemptuous voice of the protagonist of the play. The Osborne hero, Jimmy does not merely participate as an odd spectator in the post-war destruction and confusion. He rages, protests, criticizes the existing order of twentieth-century British society in a very blunt and straightforward manner. Osborne also highlights Jimmy's bellowing hunger for a bigger, better life and a loyal love to share it with.

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The paper seeks to examine John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* as a perfect critique of the twentieth-century British society. It investigates the reasons for the protagonists' rage and the ways the characters reflect their anger onto other people. John Osborne, the British dramatist made his debut in the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 with *Look Back in Anger*, which sent around stunning sensations through the audience and aroused them out of a stupor as it were, by its angry vitriolic and the rhetoric of the invective. Recognizing the popularity of the play, Cecil Wilson wrote in the *Daily Mail*:

They have not discovered a masterpiece, but they have discovered a dramatist of outstanding promise: a man who can write with a searing passion (...). Its essential wrongness lies in its leading character, a young neurotic full of intellectual frustration who lives like a pig and furiously find the whole world is out of step except himself (Taylor 36).

Osborne depicts the picture of the contemporary society with a tinge of satire chiefly through the contemptuous voice of the protagonist of the play. The chaos of all civilized institutions and the resultant confusion came back to the audience through the bantering sarcasm of Jimmy Porter, the protagonist. Jimmy represents a chaotic order of the post-atomic civilized British society, the psycho-social situation of the post-war young generation, who is always found in a frustrated, disappointed mood, finding fault with the existing order of the contemporary society. In this context J.R. Taylor observed:

*Look Back in Anger* seems to me not a crudely protagonist play (...) but a valid study of a highly complex personality at odds with his world. Certain enigmas pertaining to both the hero himself and the validity of his anger are central to the effect. Jimmy Porter is not only a warm-hearted idealist raging against the evils of man and the universe; he is also a cruel and even morbid misfit in a group of reasonably normal and well-disposed people (Taylor 23).

The twentieth century British drama rose in reaction to the chaos that had engulfed the post-war England in all respects: political, social, psychological, economical. *Look Back in Anger* refers to the disorder that came up as a natural consequence of the traumatic experience of the Second World War and of a decade and a half long political and economic management in England in the name of reconstruction. The sufferings of the English people reached the zenith during this decade: with no employment, increasing taxes, inflation, exchange crisis, public interest constantly sacrificed to pander the ego of the politicians. Naturally this caused dissatisfaction in the intelligentsia and especially the sensitive and serious thinking youth were most vehement in their protest against such messy situation. Like all sensitive young men of his time, Osborne too registers his protest through Jimmy Porter. George E Wellwarth in his essay 'John Osborne: Angry Youngman?' noted:

Look Back in Anger was a rallying point. It came to represent the dissatisfaction with society reflected in the novels of such young writers as John Wain, Kingsley Amis and John Braine. Jimmy Porter, its rancorous protagonist, was thought to symbolize the fury of the young post war generation that felt itself betrayed, sold out, and irrevocably ruined by the elders (Taylor 192).

The three-act play *Look Back in Anger* takes place in a one-bedroom flat in the Midlands. Jimmy Porter, lower middle-class, university-educated, lives with his wife Alison, the daughter of a retired Colonel in the British Army in India. His friend Cliff Lewis, who helps Jimmy run a sweet stall, lives with them. The play is about this small group of people, living in a sorry state of emotional and physical disturbances having an element of cynicism and bitterness for the existing order of the society. There is a world of the aggressively young people where it is good to be outrageous; where ideas are louder than deep. Throughout the play the hero shouts, yells, rants. He is an angry young man keenly dissatisfied, disappointed with life in general. His being and sensibility have been hurt to such an extent that he finds fault with almost everything. However, there is no motivation behind the hero's hostility and bitterness. But, while he lambastes widely in every direction, he never realizes and identifies the shadows he is attacking. Out of frustration and humiliation he rebuffs religion, science, morality or politics as having any acceptable solution. While expressing her views on the denunciations of Jimmy Porter, Katherine J Worth reveals, "they are at the same time violent and controlled, sardonically humorous and in deadly earnest, evoking occasional echoes of both Shaw and Strindberg" (Taylor 103).

The economic insufficiency of the contemporary society finds a true picture when Osborne describes the hero as wearing 'a very worn tweed jacket and flannels' (*Look Back in Anger* 13). Alison reveals that they had no money and shelter when they were married. The atmosphere depicted in the play is a kind of gloom that rings of wants, poverty, and despair. Though Jimmy is an 'intellectual' university chap, he is unable to find a job of his choice. He reveals his dissatisfaction about the kind of occupation he is forced to do. Hugh, Jimmy's friend leaves England to start a new life in China, because he is convinced that the prevailing conditions in England are not conducive to his aspiration. Another reason for Jimmy's dissatisfaction is that he is leading a routine, monotonous life which offers no thrills in life, no excitement, no variety. He condemns the so-called 'posh' newspaper, whether 'Conservative' or 'Liberal', for the kind of gossip and conjectures they publish such as the opinion that 'Shakespeare has changed his sex when he was writing *The Tempest*'. He grumbles about the monotony of Sunday: 'Always the same ritual reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing. A few more hours and another week gone.'

Our youth is slipping away' (15). He is feeling frustrated and disappointed because society has not treated him properly and because the contemporary society is callous. He feels irritated by the general apathy and mental inertness of Alison and Cliff, his friend. The callousness of the existing society is obvious through Jimmy's long vicious speeches, such as: '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' (15). In this context, Tom Milne expresses, "Jimmy Porter is devoid of any neurosis or self-pity, and the play is summoned up in his cry against a negative world." (Taylor 192-93). The absence of human feelings of love, fellow-feeling, tolerance of that time through Jimmy's angry vitriolic are expressed when he complains: 'Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no conviction and no enthusiasm' (17).

There are other social problems that the twentieth-century British society confronted is also depicted by Osborne. Twentieth Century British society faced a lack of responsibility and social commitment. There was a marked decline from a work-oriented, duty-bound life to leisure-oriented, fun-loving life.

Jimmy, 'risen' from the working class is now provided with an intellect which only shows him that everything that might have justified pride in the old England - its opportunity, adventure, material well-being has disappeared without being replaced by anything but a lackluster security. He has been promoted into a moral and social vacuum. He fumes, nags at a world which promised much but which has led to a dreary plan where there is no fiber or substance - only fear of scientific destruction and the minor comforts of American mechanic (Taylor 170).

This concern reflects itself in the play when Jimmy tells Cliff: 'But I must say it is pretty dreary living in an American age unless you are an American of course. Perhaps all our children will be Americans' (*Look Back in Anger* 29).

In the play, Osborne depicts the problem of marriage between young people of different classes: 'A worker's son embittered and magnetic; a colonel's daughter, pure and conventional' (Taylor 173). Osborne projects the existing system of class distinction very frankly through Jimmy's cynicism. Throughout the play he harangues his wife Alison continuously in horribly long, vicious, taunting speeches, for her affluent middle class origin. He ridicules Alison's father for living in the 'past'. He describes the protest of Alison's mother against his marriage with Alison as the 'bellowing of a rhinoceros in labour'. He ridicules the mother for having thought of him to be a criminal just because he was keeping long hair. He refers to the lady as an 'old bitch' and wishes her death. When that old woman dies, Jimmy says 'the worms in her grave will suffer from indigestion and belly-ache after eating her flesh'. 'After four years of marriage he has not yet wearied of fuming class-consciously against his mother-in-law', that is what Stephen Williams says in the *Evening News*. He spits venom against everything and everybody and is apparently convinced that for the youth of today the world is an utterly putrid place.

Helena, Alison's friend who came as a sojourner to Jimmy's house, is also criticized in a bitter tone. Jimmy calls Helena an 'expert in the new economics – the Economics of the enemy'. As for Alison, Helena is target of Jimmy's verbal assaults from the very beginning. Jimmy finds fault with her for ironing clothes endlessly, for being too noisy. Jimmy makes so many mocking and disparaging comments on Alison that sometimes Alison closes her eyes in sheer dismay and helplessness. He refers to Alison as 'lady pusillanimous'. He finds fault with her for being 'a monument of non-attachment'. Katherine J Worth in her article 'The Angry Youngman' describes Jimmy's attitude towards Alison: "Like so many of Strindberg's characters Jimmy

seeks from women far more than he could ever hope to get from them and when he is disappointed turns on them with savage resentment” (Taylor 105).

More distressing fact in the twentieth century British society was the change in attitude towards sex and sexuality that has been depicted by Osborne. Sexual passion, which offers Jimmy an intermittent escape, cannot solve his problems. Sex has become an area of challenge and revenge in the deliberate class war between Jimmy and Alison. Jimmy tells about his wife: ‘she has the passion of python. She just devours me every time, as if I were some large rabbit’ (43). Jimmy is even opposed to middle-class morality. According to Alison’s own statement to Cliff, Jimmy was quite angry with her virginity, as if she had deceived him in some strange way. Jimmy seemed to think that an untouched woman would defile him. Loss of sexual morality, is however linked up with another important post-war phenomenon, i.e. the decline of religion. One can find an explicit expression of his attitude in Jimmy’s exclamation ‘Oh those bells!’ His strong objection to Alison’s going to the church with Helena, underlines his sarcastic attitude to both religion and existing order of the church at that time. When he finds that Alison has fallen under the influence of Helena, he addresses her as: ‘you judas! You phlegm!’ (59). He keeps talking not only in a sarcastic and condemnatory manner about Alison’s parents and but treats Alison herself in a most offensive and insulting manner. In attempting to hurt his wife, he violates every decency of love and of life, and he employs every savagery of tone, and mood which he can command. At the same time he himself is extremely sensitive to all kinds of shocks.

Another ticklish psychological problem which touched the post-war British society was the disastrous consequence of nuclear bomb. This type of scientific destruction brought about an end to men’s sense of personal heroism and valour. This is precisely the tenor of the anguish expressed by Jimmy when he says: “I suppose young people of our generation are not able to die for good causes any longer (...). There are not any good, brave causes left” (84-85). This statement expresses political skepticism and personal frustration. It is both a comment on the world and a way Jimmy finds to express his dissatisfaction, disgruntlement, which originates in his inability to communicate with others as clearly and meaningfully as he feels.

Salgado notes that “the younger generation’s frustrated political radicalism found a theatrical focus in the embittered and explosive eloquence of Jimmy Porter” (192). The general image of the politicians in post-war British society and a sad commentary on their lack of conscience and concern for a lot of ordinary people is made clear through the sarcastic attitude of Jimmy to Nigel, his brother-in-law: ‘They are ... they sound like psychopantic, phlegmatic, pusillanimous’ (21). He describes Nigel as that straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst (20). Nigel’s knowledge of life and ordinary human beings is so vague and hazy that according to Jimmy he should be awarded a medal for it. Jimmy Porter thus was ideally constituted to be the all purpose hero of the dissatisfied youth of post war generation. It is the clear expression of his frustration which turns into anger, the drives the depicting the true picture of contemporary society. John Russell Taylor, while summing up the role of Jimmy Porter in the play and the depiction of the contemporary era, comments:

Jimmy was taken to be speaking for a whole generation, of which he and his creator were among the most precious representative (...). Jimmy Porter was linked in a rather improbable twosome with Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim as the cult-figure of the younger generation (...). The main usefulness of Jimmy Porter in this guise is that he is the stuff of which perennial rebels are made (...) there is no denying in the truth of the picture as a



permanent human type – the self-flagellating solitary in self-inflicted exile from the world drawing strength from his own weakness and joy from his own misery (Taylor 76-77).

While drawing A.E Dyson's point of view on the depiction of contemporary society in *Look Back in Anger*, it can be noted that:

In a world which sometimes deals with its most challenging misfits by mocking or martyring them, and later venerating them for the wrong reasons, it is no bad thing to have a reminder like this (...) my own impression is that LBA offers permanent moral insights, and at least one splendid flesh-and-blood character (...). (Taylor 30-31)

Many critics have regarded *Look Back in Anger* as a turning point in the history of twentieth-century British theatre owing to its choice of topics from social and political circumstances of its time, its lower-middle and working class characters, its realistic setting and its everyday language. The dissatisfaction, disaffection, disapproval of the human condition and the society is always expressed in different ages in different forms. Man as a social being never submits to tyranny or social despotism. If the existing social order is stifling, man does not sit silently and helplessly. He tries to highlight the injustice and disorder. In *Look Back in Anger*, the Osborne hero does not merely participate as an odd spectator in the post-war destruction, confusion. He rages, protests, criticizes the existing order of twentieth-century British society in a very straightforward manner, that renders him singularly, though oddly, unique.

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