
Unit-2 □ JOHN OSBORNE: *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

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4.2.0 Introduction

This unit will introduce you to a play written by John James Osborne, born Dec. 12, 1929, London, Eng.—died Dec. 24, 1994, Shropshire, in fact one of the most powerful of the post war plays (the Second World War). After reading this unit you should be able to:

- note the development of trends in twentieth century English theatre
- understand how the dramatist used his source materials to mould a play that has relevance to the present time while trying to portray post-World War II England.
- the age of the ‘angry young man’

John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* as a perfect critique of the twentieth-century British society, the problem of the passing of time and the changing of eras.

- observe how John Osborne found a form that captured the shapeless attitude and dissatisfaction of the audience in 1956 England and gave it voice.
- the disillusionment with post-war England and continuing inequality

4.2.1 John James Osborne: A Literary Bio-brief

John James Osborne, born on December 12, 1929 in Fulham, South West London, was an English playwright, screenwriter, actor and critic of the British Post-war Establishment. His father Thomas Godfrey Osborne was a commercial artist and copywriter. His mother, Nellie Beatrice Grove Osborne, was a barmaid in pubs. The death of his father in 1941 when he was a young boy left a great impact on John. Osborne's childhood was spent in near poverty and he suffered from regular prolonged illnesses. The insurance amount left by his father was his only hope for financing his private education at Belmont College, a minor public school in Devon. Osborne attended state schools till twelve; he was awarded a scholarship to attend a minor private school, St. Michael's College, in Barnstaple, Devon. In 1943 while he was 16 he entered school but was expelled from the school in 1945. He hit back the headmaster who slapped him for listening to a forbidden broadcast by Frank Sinatra. He went home to his mother in London after that and briefly tried trade journalism and went on doing a series of jobs writing copy for various trade journals.

He took interest in theatre while working as a tutor for children, and toured with a repertory company. He involved himself as a stage manager and joined acting, with Anthony Creighton's provincial touring company. He made his stage debut in March, 1948, in Sheffield and for the next seven years made the rounds of provincial repertory theatres as an actor. His first play, *The Devil Inside Him*, was written in 1950 with his friend and mentor, Stella Linden was produced in Huddersfield. His second play *Personal Enemy* was written with Anthony Creighton. *Personal Enemy* was staged in regional theatres produced in Harrogate in 1955. His next play *Look Back in Anger* was staged in 1956 as the third production of the newly formed English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre. The success of *Look Back in Anger* changed the life of Osborne and he came to have a highly successful career as playwright. In 1958, Osborne and director Tony Richardson founded Woodfall

Film Productions and produced motion pictures versions of some of Osborne's plays. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* ushered in a new movement in British drama and made him known as the first of the "Angry Young Men." He married Pamela Lane. His next play, *The Entertainer*, was written with Laurence Olivier. Both *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer* were adapted for film. Following *The Entertainer*, Osborne continued to have a productive career, writing seventeen more stage plays, eleven plays for television, five screen plays and four books, including two volumes of autobiography.

Osborne was one of the first writers to address Britain's purpose in the post-imperial age. He was the first to question the point of the monarchy on a prominent public stage. During his peak (1956–1966), he helped make contempt an acceptable fact, and argued for the cleaning perception of bad behaviour and bad taste, combining harsh truthfulness with devastating wit. Osborne died in Clun, Shropshire, England, on December 24, 1994

To know more about John Osborne read the following books

⇒ **Read-**

Osborne, John (1982). *A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography*

Patricia D. Denison, ed. *John Osborne: A Casebook*

Taylor, John Russell, ed. *John Osborne: "Look Back in Anger," A Casebook*. 1968. London: Macmillan, 1987.

4.2.2 Osborne and Drama

'Come with us, Larry and me, to the National,' [Tynan] had said to me earlier. 'And make history.' 'Thank you,' I replied. 'I've already made it.' (John Osborne, *Damn You, England*, 155)

Both the British theatre and the British Empire were in a state of confusion during the decade of the 1950s. With the loss of African colonies, the independence of India, the Marshall Plan of US aid to the reconstitution of Western Europe that gave financial strength but robbed Britain of its pride, and above all, the formation of the Commonwealth of Nations by the London Declaration of 1949 - the British Empire was all but shrinking. Besides, the futile attempts to demonstrate national virility represented by the disastrous Suez adventure of 1956 was a humiliating experience for England. During 1945, the Labour Party led by Clement Atlee won

victory over the Tories and ended the class system. Prosperity for all was the hope of the people. However, such aspirations were short lived, resulting in the return of the Conservatives led by Winston Churchill to power in 1951. The Church of England, too, was out of contact with the daily lives of most Englishmen. London theatre in 1955 was commercial theatre and became “a vast desert” producing emotionally suppressed, middle-class plays, all set in drawing rooms with no talents. The Arts Council of Great Britain formed after World War II to support the arts nationwide was of not much help due to limited funds.

While war and suffering exploded around the nation, the theatre continued to reflect a tiny segment of society, and ignored the rest. The twentieth century British drama reacted to the anarchy that had surrounded the post-war England in all respects: political, social, psychological, economical. Plays produced during that time were light comedies, farces, and mysteries—including Agatha Christie’s *The Mouse Trap*- a successful production. London theatre remained a middle-class; middle-aged theatre. Theatre houses were under the control of a small number of commercial organizations, preferring commercially successful plays. The prosecution and censorship threat from the Lord Chamberlains office was another danger to theatre. Homosexuality in Britain was considered as a serious criminal offence was not legalised in Britain. Therefore, any work talking about it was under threat of censorship. For example, in 1952, both Rodney Ackland’s *The Pink Room* and Terence Rattigan’s *The Deep Blue Sea* were censored from The Lord Chamberlain’s Office, as both had strong homosexual themes. Most of the writers, actors and directors that dominated the theatrical scene in the early 1950s were in fact gay, but because of the social and commercial climate were forced to produce and perform habitually straight characters. Peter Brook comments,

“The theatrical scene, both within London and within many touring enterprises was dominated by works that “represented the safe middle-class milieu and world-view aspirations of the audiences that would come to see them”.

➤ **Decline of the popularity of theatre**

- The increasing gulf between the British society’s interests and the work shown on stage there caused a rift between the public and the stage.
- Advent of television and its popularity had a direct effect upon the number of theatre goers.
- Cinema had also become a well-established form of popular entertainment,

- Many of the grand Victorian Theatres were converted into cinemas.
- Cinema tickets were cheaper and affordable to the lower classes

The desolate picture of Britain's theatre started to change with the socio-political changes and with the new vibration that signalled the way for John Osborne's theatrical explosion in May 1956. Osborne's drama initiated a cultural moment of the Angry Young Man. He captured the state of mind of Britain in the 1950s at the individual level. The play turned Osborne from a struggling playwright into a wealthy and famous angry young man and won him the Evening Standard Drama Award as the most promising playwright of the year.

Alan Sillitoe writes, 'John Osborne didn't contribute to the British theatre: he set off a land-mine called *Look Back in Anger* and blew most of it up' (quoted, Taylor 1968, 185). The old dramatists perished and replaced by new dramatists speaking for a generation who had for so long been silent. The theatre was changed by *Look Back in Anger*, and that it was destroyed by it.

⇒ **Note** - End of British Empire – an inward-looking Britain

Read more –

Rusinko, Susan. *British Drama, 1950 to The Present*, Twayne, 1989.

This book offers a brief view of developments in British both leading up to and after *Look Back in Anger*.

Taylor, John Russell. *The Angry Theatre*, Hill and Wang, 1969.

Taylor's book deals with the movement in theatre from the production of *Look Back in Anger* to 1968 and examines playwrights who were encouraged and influenced by Osborne.

Elsom, John. *Post-War British Theatre*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976,

Elsom, John. *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981

4.2.3 The Well Made Play, Kitchen Sink Drama and *Look Back in Anger*

Starting from 1950's till the 1970's British theatre saw the rise of one of the most important movements: the **Kitchen Sink drama**.

- In Kitchen Sink Theatre – writers wanted to convey the language of commonplace discourse and to surprise with its straightforwardness. Osborne used one-room flat in England, a space where the sleeping area, living area, and kitchen are the same room. The room represents the lower- working class social status of the characters. In this play the kitchen is turned into a kind of public forum, a space of debate and discussions, dominated by male intruders, the characters Jimmy and Cliff. According to Michelene the relationship between sink and psyche is critical to this play as to many others of the time. At one level it is a very clear class statement about the nature of the world represented on stage but on “another level it is the relationship between sink, psyche and gender which is also important. Whose world, dilemmas, emotions, story, is it we are following?”

British theatre before the staging of *Look Back in Anger* followed the model of Victorian dramas, comedies and classical plays. The Victorian plays dealt mostly with polite themes from the late 19th and early 20th century. The idea of the Kitchen Sink drama was a great exposure for British theatre. They have many characteristics that distinguished them as a break from the forms of theatre that went before them. These dramas gained famous in twentieth century British culture for their undaunted anger and criticism directed towards the social, political, and economic establishment, the plays were also important for the way they portrayed the most unforgettable aspects of domestic life.

✓ **Characteristic of Kitchen Sink dramas**

- They gave social message or ideology. This ideology was most often leftist.
- The settings were almost always working class.
- They bring the real lives and social inequality of ordinary working class people to the stage.
- Portrays people - caught between struggles of power, politics, work and social homogenization.

Osborne’s play depicts the raw emotions and living conditions of the working class. This style of theatre was given the name “Kitchen Sink” because of its emphasis on the core domestic issues and sensitive lives of commonplace people.

Look Back in Anger gave a voice to the cultural dislocation felt by Britain in this period, ‘to a frustrated, disenfranchised constituency of lower-middleclass, first generation graduates of post-war British education policies’, and opened the door for what would be known as the ‘kitchen sink’ dramatists.

➤ ***Look Back in Anger* & the Kitchen Sink Tradition**

The Kitchen is literally a part of the set in the play. The setting of *Look Back in Anger* was in direct contrast to popular classical or Victorian dramas and comedies which largely centred around the public lives of socially established characters. What the Kitchen Sink Dramas did was they moved the action and emotion of the theatre from depictions of the public space of people's lives into the most intimate of settings. Victorian dramas considered the kitchen to be the realm of the domestic, of females and servants, so excluded it. Kitchen Sink dramas, however, turned this notion around and made the kitchen the centre of familial and social life. For example, in *Look Back in Anger* Porter's attic apartment, the kitchen and living spaces were all one room on the stage. This particular play blurs the boundaries of intimate domestic life and public life and created a realism not seen before in British theatre. Whether social or domestic, the Kitchen Sink drama changed the trajectory of British theatres with many of the authors such as Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden adopting the style and form.

British theatre was dominated by Terence Rattigan and his followers, conservative and middle-class dramatists who created 'well-made plays' about genteel subjects. *After Look Back in Anger*, everything changed. Osborne's hero, Jimmy Porter, was considered to provoke and enrage post-war British audiences. Osborne handled the themes like social injustice as done by Ibsen and Shaw. And like Chekhov, he too talked about such themes like personal failure and national decline. However, he introduced a love of criticism, a brutal sense of humour and an honest aversion of authority that transformed drama forever and started a new age of experimental British theatre.

➤ **Positive Criticism**

Osborne influenced and inspired many writers like Alan Sillitoe a working-class prose writer who felt that *Look Back in Anger* gave them the courage and confidence to tell their own stories.

Arthur Miller spoke highly of the play.

George Devine, described the play as: '*the bomb that would blow a hole in the old theatre and leave a nice-sized gap, too big to be patched up.*'

⇒ Take account of the key terms and the difference between **well-made plays** and **kitchen sink plays**.

4.2.4 Sources and Background

The cultural background to the play is the rise and fall of the British Empire. *Look Back in Anger* appeared during Britain's transition from Victorian past into the modern twentieth century.

The play was written in seventeen days in a deck chair on Morecambe pier where Osborne was performing in a creaky rep show called *Seagulls over Sorrento*.

The play was an autobiographical piece based on Osborne's unhappy marriage to actress Pamela Lane and their life in cramped accommodation in Derby. Osborne aimed towards a career in theatre, Lane was of a more practical and materialistic persuasion, not taking Osborne's ambitions seriously while cuckolding him with a local dentist.

4.2.5 Introducing the Characters

➤ Jimmy Porter

Jimmy Porter belongs to working class background, one of the new generations who could attend university due to the introduction of government grants in the 1940s. Well-educated and is working on a sweet stall, Jimmy is intelligent, passionate and an idealist. But he feels disappointed by a society that he finds does not want what he has to offer and still works on a system of privilege and class. Jimmy, who lost his father at an early age, had a bitter feeling about everything around him. He aggressively attacks everything that is stagnant and unjust about society, especially the middle class establishment. He attacks his wife who belongs to middle class as he feels he has failed her in her inability to love or support him. He looks back to a time when there were 'good, brave causes' to fight for and is lost in the changing world of the 1950s. As Helena says 'There's no place for people like that anymore...'

⇒ Jimmy is the protagonist of the play, a representative of the working class man.

➤ Alison Porter

Alison is from an upper middle class background and has married Jimmy against the wishes of her family. She fell in love with him after meeting him at a party: '*Everything about him seemed to burn...*' By the anger, aggressive atmosphere she is exhausted, frustrated and bitter. She is not able to reach out to Jimmy, understand

him and only turns away from him when he needs her most. She leaves Jimmy because she cannot be with him, but returns because she cannot live without him – *'I knew I was taking on more than I was ever likely to be capable of bearing, but there never seemed to be any choice.'* She feels lost at the death of her baby and her complete breakdown forces Jimmy to become supportive of her.

➤ **Cliff Lewis**

Cliff lives next door to Jimmy and Alison. He is a kind Welshman who acts as a shield between the couple. He is very fond of Alison, but does not seem to be in love with her as Helena suggests. He is dependent on the couple; he feels that he cannot live alone. However, when Alison leaves, Cliff too leaves Jimmy.

⇒ He is shown as easy going, a counterbalance to Jimmy and acts as a shield in the quarrels between Jimmy and Alison.

➤ **Helena Charles**

Helena is an actress in Repertory Theatre, an old friend of Alison's. She represents Alison's old life and is shocked by Jimmy's treatment of her friend. However, like Alison, she falls in love with his passion and energy. It is possible that Helena's engineering of Alison's departure is partly or even wholly to get to Jimmy. However, she leaves quickly when Alison returns as she recognises that it is not her place.

⇒ A catalyst or perhaps driving force in ending Alison's and Jimmy's marriage

➤ **Colonel Redfern**

Colonel Redfern is Alison's father. He stands for all the old-fashioned, middle class values that Jimmy hates. However, when he enters we see he is a kind and fair man who has a kind of respect for Jimmy and is embarrassed about the way he and his wife have treated him. Jimmy feels sorry for him as being a remnant of the Empire *'that can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore.'*

⇒ Note- Like Jimmy he is a man out of his time and place.

➤ **Hugh Tanner**

Hugh Tanner is Jimmy's friend. Alison and Jimmy lived with him after they were married. He and Alison disliked each other. Hugh and Jimmy had launched a kind of 'class war' on Alison's friends and family. Hugh immigrated to China to escape the re-elected Conservative government and fell out with Jimmy when he refused to go with him.

➤ **Hugh's Mother**

Mrs. Tanner becomes a surrogate mother for Jimmy; when he talks of her, he describes her as being a 'good friend' to them both, even going as far as to help set him up with employment,

'And there's Hugh's mum, of course. I'd almost forgotten her. She's been a good friend to us, if you like. She's even letting me buy the sweet-stall off her in my own time. She only bought it for us, anyway.' Jimmy, unsatisfied with his own mother, has substituted her with Mrs. Tanner and developed a fondness for her and the maternal love she provides, Jimmy is very close to her whom he sees as a victim. Alison dismisses her as 'ordinary' – 'A charwoman who married an actor'. Jimmy and she are very fond of each other. She represents Osborne's own mother, who was a barmaid. Alison's account of Jimmy and Mrs. Tanner's bond discloses another aspect, 'Jimmy seems to adore her principally because she has been poor all her life, and she's frankly ignorant'.

➤ **Alison's Mother – Mrs Redfern**

Alison's mother never appears in the stage, like Jimmy's mother, Mrs. Tanner she is off-stage but she is referred many a times. In Jimmy's criticism of Alison and her family, Alison's mother is referred many a times. Jimmy hates her for upper class superiority and wishes her death. Readers are shocked at Jimmy's abuses reserved for Alison's mother. "... that old bitch should be dead!"(I,i.p.53). Jimmy insults her: 'Threatened with me, a young man without money, background or even looks, she'd bellow like a rhinoceros in labour—enough to make every male rhino for miles tum white and pledge himself to celibacy' (52). He accuses Alison's mother of spying on him who hires a detective 'to watch me, to see if she can't somehow get me into the *News of the World*' (52). The act of hiring a detective to follow her future son-in-law, allows her to be constructed as appearing to be mistrusting, deceitful and willing to pursue any means in order to protect her daughter. Her resistance to her daughter's marriage to Jimmy was taken by him as an attack on him and all that he represents; a working class, uncouth, stranded young man. Jimmy calls her 'pole-axed rhino', finally defeated on the day of her daughter's wedding.

Jimmy: 'Threatened with me, a young man without money, background or even looks, she'd bellow like a rhinoceros in labour—enough to make every male rhino for miles tum white and pledge himself to celibacy' (52). Alison is constantly criticised for having being born in the upper middle class and scorned at for having

the kind of mother that she has. Jimmy: She will pass away, my friends, leaving a trail of worms gasping for laxatives behind her- from purgatives to purgatory. (11, i. P.53).

Even her husband Colonel Redfern regards her as a dominating and over reactive character.

➤ **Jimmy's Father**

Like many left wing British men, Jimmy's father fought in the Spanish Civil War against the Fascists as a volunteer. He died at home and Jimmy sat with him at his bedside.

➤ **Jimmy's Mother**

Jimmy's mother suffers the same fate that Alison's mother suffers. We get to know her from Jimmy when he describes the death of his father, he reveals about his mother,

'As for my mother, all she could think about was the fact that she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side of all things. My mother was all for being associated with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones'.

Jimmy's description of his mother constructs her as lacking in emotion and missing the nurturing characteristics that are often associated with the maternal female. His mother was incapable of love and could only pity the dying man, 'My mother looked after him without complaining, and that was about all. Perhaps she pitied him. I suppose she was capable of that'.

Osborne had a problematic relationship with his own mother, and like his character Jimmy, he states that he hated his mother because she was "the grabbing uncaring crone of my childhood". It also did not go down well with the young Osborne that she criticized him publicly when he was growing up, and showed no grief when his beloved father died. What irritated him was her refusal to show him the maternal love he craved for.

J.B. Priestley, Alison's friend Webster and Jimmy's former girlfriend Madeline are introduced, abandoned, and then pop up again later in the conversation of the characters only.

Stop and Think

If you see the characters cast above and then read the play, you will see that some characters are not physically present in the text, and yet they matter to the plot. Such characters show the importance of absence/presence or past/present binaries in modern drama.

4.2.6 Summary with Critical Analysis

Setting/Stage direction

“Part of the immediate ‘shock’ of *Look Back in Anger* lay in the impact of its setting”

(Lacey 29)

If you notice the opening of the play, you will find that the setting is a one-room flat in a large Midland Town... a fairly large attic room... most of the furniture is simple, and rather old. There is a double bed, a shelf of books. Below the bed is a heavy chest of drawers, covered with books, neckties and odds and ends...a small wardrobe.... two deep shabby leather armchairs. Osborne made use of a full box-set which is a convention of naturalist fourth-wall drama.

Note- meanings

- **Box-set** - the ‘box set’ is normally used for realistic dramas on stage, consisting of three walls and an invisible ‘fourth wall’ facing the audience.
- **The Fourth Wall** – is a theatrical term for the imaginary ‘wall’ that exists between actors on stage and the audience. Visibly, no such wall really exists; it is only to keep up the illusion of theatre. The actor only imagines that they cannot hear or see the spectators.

Act One

● Stage direction

In the previous Unit on G. B Shaw’s play, you have come across the importance of stage directions that help to script a variety of things. In this play too, you will notice that there are elaborate instructions regarding facial expression, gesture, vocal delivery, actions, costumes, space and props used. For example, the opening scene of *Look Back in Anger* gives details of the scenic arrangements like lay-out of the

stage, furnishings, props, for characters/actors specific instructions like delivery of dialogue, bodily gesture, emotions and feelings. Dialogues contain implicit stage directions. In this sense, modern drama often becomes an author-director's play.

When the curtain rises, we see Jimmy Porter and Cliff Lewis, seated on opposite sides of the stage and reading newspapers. There are other newspapers too beside them and between them, forming "a jungle of newspapers and weeklies." Jimmy is smoking a pipe. In the first stage direction, Osborne defines the nature of the characters of both Jimmy and Cliff and also Alison. He describes Jimmy as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice" and says, "to be as vehement as he is to be almost non-committal." He describes Cliff as much more gentle—Jimmy tends to push people away, while Cliff draws them to him. Jimmy's wife Alison Porter stands ironing clothes on the left side of the stage, near Cliff and looks elegant in this working class apartment. The stage directions say that she is ironing one of Jimmy's shirts and wearing another. She is playing a double role here - servicing the domestic scene and subtly demonstrating to the audience through the visual way that she is Jimmy's property. Jimmy repetitively tries to test the limits of Alison's endurance and patience. The stage directions shed light on his desperate attempt to displease and hurt,

"He looks up at both of them for reaction, but Cliff is reading, and Alison is intent on her ironing... He has lost them, and he knows it, but he won't leave it" (p. 14)

"The tired appeal in her voice has pulled him up suddenly. But he soon gathers himself for a new assault."(p.19)

● Effects and Symbols

Another important aspect is the sound effects used in the play.

Act 1 has one major offstage noise, the church bells which drive Jimmy to distraction; Act 2 begins with another that is Jimmy playing his jazz trumpet. Saxophone playing – denotes Jimmy's presence when not on stage, signifying his psychological dominance.

The selection of visual images like – men sitting reading newspapers, women ironing, the toy bear and squirrel that describing Alison and Jimmy's conjugal-emotional life, and the intelligent and less delicate similarity of later acts with former, the effect of the sound - all function in a way to create a world of familiarity.

All these are put together with a purpose - they hold significance representing the recurring nature of life and that one cannot break from past. For e.g. Helena replaces Alison at the ironing-board; Jimmy and Alison return to their world of bears and squirrels at the end.

● The Action

The play opens with the main protagonist Jimmy Porter and his wife Alison spending a Sunday afternoon together in their small attic flat in the Midlands with their friend Cliff. It is a small room with simple, sparse furniture. There are “*books, neckties, and odds and ends, including a large, tattered toy teddy bear and soft, woolly squirrel.*” The only light comes from a skylight, so the room is somewhat dim. Alison irons, while the men read the newspapers. In the dialogue, we learn that Jimmy has never studied at a “red-brick” university but is from a “white tile” (new) one, and now runs a sweet-stall, helped by Cliff. Jimmy, who is about 25 years old, is described as “*a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike.*” They discuss the articles in the paper by the Bishop of Bromley who urges all Christians to support the manufacture of the H-bomb and denies the existence of class distinctions. Jimmy discusses some of the other odd articles in the paper. When Alison suggests that they go to the movies, Jimmy declares that he will not have his evening ruined.

After sometime Jimmy starts assaulting Alison calling her a member of the satisfied upper class, who can't actually feel anything. He accuses her, calling her friends “militant”. This attitude shows the struggle that he realizes between the upper classes and the working classes. “They're “vague,” he says, signifying that this absence of feeling makes them senseless than Jimmy himself is. For example, Nigel is an example of the ways that upper class people get power. Nigel wants to be a politician, and Jimmy thinks he'll end up a success, though he and his political pals have been “plundering and fooling everybody for generations.” He doesn't have much matter, but he has learnt to “plunder” people through his high-class education. Jimmy continues with his insults hoping for some kind of reaction from Alison. Yet from the stage direction it is clear that she is used to Jimmy's attacks, and won't give him the reaction that he wants.

⇒ Note Jimmy is angry and bitter, yet he is also tender and intense in his zealous love. Osborne attempts to paint Jimmy as a very masculine character. Look at the

stage it has very little props and they represent the working class household. Osborne is very specific with his stage directions.

- What we get from the Opening Scene:

Jimmy and Alison's one room apartment symbolizes 1950's domesticity. The room is filled with old furniture, half-read newspapers, and old clothes. Jimmy's political and social persuasions become evident here as well when he mocks a faux column in the paper written by the "Bishop of Bromley." He is opposed to any kind of organisation whether it is related to politics or to religion. Alison is from an upper middle class family for whom Jimmy has much contempt. In this scene, Jimmy bursts at Alison, Cliff and the world in general, especially attacking Alison's family. The spirited teasing between Cliff and Jimmy contradicts the deep tension and anger beneath the surface of the relationships between the three characters. Jimmy is concerned with "enthusiasm" and "living." He portrays others as inactive and sluggish. Jimmy's anger is a result of his inability to excite similar feelings in the people around him. During a mock fight between Cliff and Jimmy, Alison's arm is burned. As Cliff helps her, she confides in him that she is pregnant.

Alison and Cliff's affectionate relationship is also revealed in this scene. It is a strange relationship because the two seem to have a close connection yet this does not seem to inspire any jealous feelings in Jimmy. This relationship between the three shows how Cliff's character is integral to Jimmy and Alison's relationship. Alison is able to get the affection that she desires from Cliff while Cliff also provides the masculine friendship and confidence that Jimmy desires. Alison gets a phone call from her friend Helena who is coming to stay with them. This provokes a violent outburst from Jimmy, who tells Alison that he wishes she might have a child that would die.

⇒ Note - make an attempt to understand the basis of the argument between the characters and their attitudes and the relationship that they share among themselves.

Notice how the opening scene uses stereotypical gender references to define the characters. For example - Jimmy is smoking a pipe and reading a paper while Alison is ironing.

Act Two Scene One

The scene opens two weeks later. Helena Charles is introduced. Alison and Helena her friend who has been staying with them, are preparing to go to church.

Alison tells Helena about her relationship with Jimmy, their courtship and early days of marriage when he and his friend Hugh had gate-crashed the parties of Alison's friends and family whom they despised. Helena is described as the same age and build as Alison, but with a "sense of matriarchal authority". Helena asks Alison if she is in love with Cliff, and Alison denies it. Helena tells Alison that she must either tell Jimmy that he is going to be a father or else leave him. Alison points towards the stuffed squirrel and teddy bear in the corner of the room and tells Helena that those animals represent the two of them. She tells her about the game they play in which she pretends to be a squirrel and he pretends to be a bear. It was the one way of escaping from everything. Helena warns that she must fight Jimmy or else he will kill her.

⇒ Note - In this scene Alison explains the symbolism of the bear and squirrel. She explains that by taking on the persona of these stuffed animals they both are able to have "dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other." Their games of squirrel and bear show how the only way that both can truly love each other is by being absolutely detached from the real world. As students of drama, you need to understand how symbolism becomes important in conveying the minutiae of the crises of modern life.

Cliff and Jimmy enter for tea and when Jimmy realises that Alison is going to church he verbally attacks her. Jimmy begins to sing a song that he himself has composed. It's a song about how he is tired of women and would rather drink and be alone than have to deal with their problems. Jimmy then criticises Alison's mother. Jimmy is particularly cruel to older, upper class women. Alison's mother is the archetype of such a character. Helena asks why Jimmy is so stubborn and if he thinks that the world has really treated him badly. Alison interrupts, telling her not to take away his suffering because "*he'd be lost without it.*" Jimmy abuses Helena and calls her "*an expert in the New Economics — the Economics of the Super nature.*" His frustration is revealed when tells Helena that "*I knew more about — love...betrayal...and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life.*" Helena rises, tells Alison that it's time to go, and exits.

Jimmy is angry on Alison for not understanding his sufferings. He calls her a "Judas" and "phlegm". She tells him that all she wants is peace and goes to the bed to put on her shoes while Jimmy continues to rant. Helena enters with two prayer books and tells Jimmy that there is a phone call for him. He is interrupted by a phone call. While he is out of the room, Helena tells Alison she has sent a telegram to her father to come and get her. Jimmy informs about Hugh's mother serious health issue

and asks Alison to come with him to see the ailing old woman. Alison leaves and goes to church. Jimmy equates church going with Alison's past, a past that like a knight in shining armour, he rescued her from. Alison's going to church, Jimmy considers, is a breach of allegiance to him and this uses this as justification for his further vicious humiliation of her.

⇒ Remember Jimmy feels the church to be simply a puppet of political and social power. You could relate this with Jimmy's earlier sarcasm on the Bishop of Bromley

Act Two Scene Two

Act 2 Scene 2 begins the following evening. Alison's father has arrived to pick her. In their conversation Alison reveals facets of her relationship with Jimmy. The Colonel is a handsome man in his late sixties. He is slightly withdrawn. He was a dedicated and strict soldier for forty years. He feels disturbed and bewildered by everything that is happening to his daughter. He inquires about Jimmy, to which Alison replies that he has gone to London to visit Mrs. Tanner. Alison even reports how Jimmy insults him. She tells him that Jimmy believes he is a leftover from the "Edwardian Wilderness."

⇒ **Read More-** The Edwardian period in British culture. It was a period in the early twentieth century during the reign of King Edward VII in which elite British culture was influential in both fashion and ideas throughout Continental Europe. This period represents both the high water mark of British culture but also the beginning of the end for the prominence of Great Britain.

Helena arrives and reveals she will be staying that evening. Cliff enters – he is sad to see Alison go and angry with Helena. After Alison leaves, he leaves Helena alone to tell Jimmy when he gets back. Jimmy enters, having seen Alison leaving in the car. He is angry and upset – Hugh's mother has died. He directs his anger at Helena who first slaps and then kisses him.

⇒ Note - How Osborne's argues that the past has definite consequences for the present with Jimmy being compared to Colonel. The uncertainties of both Jimmy's world and that of the Colonel

This scene is symbolic and the main purpose of the scene is only to highlight the complex understanding of Jimmy's view of the past to the audience. As Alison prepares to leave, she tells her father that, "*You're hurt because everything is*

changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it.” Jimmy is disappointed because he views the present-day as the same as the past and sees no future for himself or anyone else. The Colonel is upset because the present is not like the past. He sees his best days as behind him. The problem is same viewed from different angles. In the Colonel’s case, the past creates resignation and confusion in the present. For Jimmy, the past creates sluggishness and anger.

Act Three Scene One

This scene echoes the play’s first scene which was a domestic scene. Jimmy and Cliff are in their same places. Helena, who is now living with Jimmy, is ironing while Cliff and Jimmy read the papers. They read the papers and Jimmy complains about the lack of imagination in what are supposed to be the “posh” papers. Helena irons in a corner just as Alison did in Act I. Things have changed only slightly in their lives. A similar dialogue takes place as in Act One, where Jimmy teases Helena. Helena only brings a kind of bitterness into their relationship. Jimmy, who is fanatically opposed to her religious tendencies, believes that traditional religion represents the past. For Jimmy, religion has no place in modern society, or if it does it must take a vastly different form, such as African American religion which relies on strong expressions of emotion and personal feeling. When Helena leaves the room, Cliff tells Jimmy he is leaving – he feels that ‘it’s not the same’. Helena and Jimmy seem happy together – till Alison returns in the life of Jimmy.

⇒ Note – Jimmy comment on Cliff being a good friend and idealizes Cliff’s friendship just as he does Hugh and Mrs. Tanner and every other relationship in his life.

This scene also contains Jimmy’s most famous speech in the play. He believes that there are no longer any worthy causes to die for. Jimmy Porter clings to the Spanish Civil War, in which his father fought:

‘I suppose people of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes 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, but to let yourself be butchered by the women.’ (Osborne, 1960: 84–5)

Previous generations, represented by Colonel Redfern, were the last to sacrifice themselves for their country and their belief in a right way to live. According to Jimmy, the world is a subjective place now. There is a poverty of ideals in the

modern world. Jimmy, thus, is a character trapped between his nostalgia for the past and his assessment of his present prospects.

⇒ Observe the disappointment expressed end of faith in grand narratives- ‘There aren’t any good, brave causes left.’

Note - the theme– Individualism versus social conformity

Act Three Scene Two

In this scene Helena and Alison talk while Jimmy plays the trumpet next door. Alison has come back ‘out of morbid curiosity’. She tells Helena that she came “*to convince myself that everything I remembered about this place had really happened to me once.*” Her return and the fact that she has lost her baby makes Helena feel guilty and she feels she cannot stay. Helena says that she has discovered what is wrong with Jimmy — “*he was born out of his time.*” Alison agrees. Helena then tells her that things are over between her and Jimmy. She still believes in good and evil and she knows she cannot continue to live in this way with him. Helena’s conclusion at the end of the play establishes her as the moral compass of all the characters. Alison tells her on the one hand that she should not feel guilty for staying with Jimmy while on the other hand her questions and reassurance make Helena re-evaluate her decisions. In the end, it is her sense of wrong-doing — stealing Alison’s husband — that makes her leave. This morality is represented by the church bells that ring throughout various scenes of the play and which ring at the end. With her renewed sense of right and wrong Helena represents an alternative to the subjective meaninglessness that Jimmy projects onto the modern world.

⇒ Note- Who is the moral compass in the play?

Helena’s strong sense of right and wrong allows her to make a final judgment in the play’s last act that her relationship with Jimmy is an illusion of love.

Alison begs Helena not to leave as she is worried about Jimmy but Helena calls Jimmy in and leaves. Jimmy tells Alison how he felt abandoned by her. Jimmy tells them they are both trying to escape the pain of being alive and that one cannot fall into love “*without dirtying up your hands.*” As Helena leaves, Jimmy leans against the window and blurts out, “*Oh, those bells!*” Alison begins to leave but Jimmy stops her. He tells her she denied him something when she didn’t send any flowers to the funeral. He asks her if she remembers the night they met. He tells her he admired her relaxed spirit and that he knew she was what he wanted. Alison moves to the table and cries silently.

⇒ Observe - The problem with Jimmy is he is still so trapped with the past that his extreme emotion and turmoil seem to bring anarchy to his life and to the lives of those around him. Why do you think did Jimmy find a level of comfort with Helena that he never seems to have with Alison?

Alison cries out and wants to be “a lost cause” and “corrupt and futile.” She wished Jimmy to see her and feel her pain, “*so stupid, and ugly and ridiculous. This is what he’s been longing for me to feel...I’m in the fire and all I want is to die!*” She tells him she is “*in the mud at last!*” Realizing her pain, he stops her and kneels with her. He tries to comfort her and then, with a “mocking, tender irony” begins to tell her that they’ll be together as a bear and a squirrel. He tells her he’s “a bit of a sappy, scruffy sort of a bear” but that he’ll protect her from the cruel traps even though she’s “none too bright.” She laughs a bit and then softly adds, “Oh, poor, poor, bears!” They embrace as the curtain closes.

So can you understand the different levels at which Jimmy and Alison’s playful game of bear and squirrel operate in the play?

⇒ Note –Osborne shows how to solve the problems and cope with them - the only way for people of modernity to truly understand and cope with the world around them is to create fiction.

4.2.7 Analysing the Plot / Structure

Osborne uses this closed-cycle technique to restore actual life to the stage and to convey the tediousness and episodic nature of everyday routine life. *Look Back in Anger* has a circular structure in terms of its plot and setting at least: the three acts start and finish in the same place, Jimmy’s flat, at the same time, a Sunday morning, with the same setting with the characters doing the same actions in the third and first act: Jimmy and Cliff engaged in their everlasting discussion about Sunday’s papers and Helena and Alison engaged with the ironing-board and dressed in the same way, wearing a shirt of Jimmy’s. All events take place in one location over several months. Cyclical structure: Act III plays like a repetition of the opening scene, except that Alison has been replaced by Helena. The furniture is simple and rather old: a double bed, dressing table, book shelves, chest of drawers, dining table, and three chairs, two shabby leather arm chairs. The dull setting of the play highlights the difference between the uncompromising Jimmy and the dull reality of the world

surrounding him. The play follows the traditional pattern of the well-made play: exposition, climax or complication or denouncement, final resolution of the action.

Exposition Act 1:

All the major characters are introduced, either on stage or in the dialogue and the audience learns about their lives. Alison's pregnancy is mentioned and Helena's imminent arrival is discussed.

Complication Act 2:

Alison and Jimmy's situation is complicated by: Helena's arrival, the death of Hugh's mother and the arrival of Alison's father with whom she leaves. Helena tells Jimmy about Alison's pregnancy at the end of the Act which leads in to the conclusion.

Denouement Act 3:

Alison returns, having lost her baby, the situation moves to a kind of resolution, with Jimmy and Alison together again. The shift in their relationship leads to a hopeful ending. Thematically however, the element of hope in the ending is a debatable proposition, and we shall come to that later.

KEY ISSUES IN THE MAJOR SCENES

Act One

Provides context of the play and gives background to the action/storyline. The period – over ten years after the end of II World War, austerity, the new importance of socialism, the changing relationship between the classes.

Introduces key characters and establishes central themes and issues –

Education and class: Jimmy is fiercely proud of his working-class origins and despises all other classes. Yet we learn from Cliff that he has 'posh' relatives. He appears to be well educated and taunts Cliff for his attempts to improve his education.

The role of women: Alison is treated as a kind of household servant by both men but especially by Jimmy.

Jimmy attacks modern society. He thinks people lack enthusiasm for life and have little concern for others.

Patriotism - good or bad?

ACT 2 Scene 1

This act introduces the ideas of Religion: one of Jimmy's pet hates. It is connected with his father's death - 'certain god-fearing gentlemen there had made such a mess of him he didn't have long left to live.' The church bells every Sunday are a reminder to him. Alison going to church with Helena looks to him like a terrible betrayal.

ACT 2 Scene 2

This act is important because it gives an idea of Class division and British society in the 1950s. Example: The Colonel's story of leaving India is an example.

Explains the reason why Jimmy married Alison. Friendship between Cliff and Jimmy is also highlighted.

ACT 3 Scene 1

Speaks of Jimmy's relationships with women- What does he want from them? He isn't sure. Jimmy's hostility towards women: '*Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?*' All of his savagery in the play is directed against women - Alison's mother, his own mother, his various lovers, the landlady, Alison and Helena. Significant departures in this regard are Hugh's mom – Mrs Tanner, and Madeline – his adolescent love.

Why do you think do we see these differences in Jimmy's attitude to women?

4.2.8 The Angry Generation in Different Genres

"Angry Young Men" movement Kitchen sink realism is often related to the rise of the Angry Young Men, a category applied to some British playwrights and novelists who became popular in the mid-1950s. Their political views were initially labelled as radical, sometimes even revolutionary, and they described social alienation of different kinds. Authors placed by critics in this category include. John Osborne, whose play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) led to the term "Angry theatre" (coined by critic John Russell Taylor); Arnold Wesker; Harold Pinter; John Braine; and Alan Sillitoe. Drama critic John Heilpern wrote that *Look Back in Anger* expressed such "immensity of feeling and class hatred" that it altered the course of English theatre.

➤ THE ANGRY YOUNG MEN

In the 1950s a new literary movement emerged in Britain: the Angry Young

Men. The great pioneer of this new kind of literature was John Osborne. His revolutionary play *Look Back in Anger* was the beginning of the era of the Angry Young Men. The Fifties became known as “The Angry Decade” (Heilpern, 2006: 164). These young men were not a part of any organized movement but were, instead, individuals angry at a post-Victorian Britain that refused to acknowledge their social and class alienation. The play was a real innovation because the anger of its protagonist Jimmy Porter symbolized the general condition of Britain’s lower middle class in the 1950s:

“What was new and struck the public nerve in Look Back in Anger, was the sense of naked honesty that came from the identification between author and protagonist, and the tone of self-lacerating (but generalized) anger” (Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990* :1890-1990 103).

Jimmy Porter represents a culture that suffered longing for the past glory. Porter is often considered to be literature’s inspiring example of the angry young man. Jimmy is angry at the social and political structures that he believes has kept him from achieving his dreams and aspirations. He directs his anger towards his friends and, most notably, his wife Alison. Jimmy’s rage and anger is his expression of pent-up emotion and his need for life in a world which has become uninteresting. This anger became a symbol of the rebellion against the political and social malaise of British culture. His anger is destructive to those around him.

The works of the Angry Young Men had a rebellious character. Their heroes rejected anything that would hold back their growth as individuals: *“they will not accept anything that dulls the intensity of feeling, the proclivity to act and react to their environment. They refuse to join a society that will deny them anything because it is „out of their class”* (Kroll 557).

Some critics confused their longing for individual development with a total rejection of society. Actually, the heroes’ rebellion is rather quiet:

“They do not reject all society; none of the heroes leave England. They dissent; they run away from what they do not like. Detach, but don’t destroy. If necessary, escape from an impossible situation and find one’s own comfortable niche.” (Kroll 557)

● **Read:**

1. Kroll, Morton. *“The Politics of Britain’s Angry Young Men.”* The Western Political Quarterly 12.2 (1959): 555-557. JSTOR. Web. 19 May 2010.

2. Skovmand, Michael, and Steffen Skvovmand, ed. *The Angry Young Men*: Osborne, Sillitoe, Wain, Braine, Amis. Oslo: Akademisk Forlag, 1975.

The 1950s - the end of an era with social reforms and the beginning of a period with little state interference.

The age of wealth, individual moneymaking and no public commitment nor enthusiasm for political or social reasons caused anxiety and disillusionment, especially among the working classes.

The cynicism and resentment of the Angry Young Men is clear evidence of the despondency inflicted by the wretched state of Britain in the 1950s. (Skovmand, 1975: 18)

⇒ Note - The Angry Young Men were commonly associated with left-wing aspirations. In their works they accused the former political and social situation of Britain, a state being ruled by the Conservative Party.

4.2.9 Themes and Critical Approaches

The major theme of *Look Back in Anger* is social protest. Osborne probed into personal relationships and bared their social determinants. Even though Jimmy Porter was born in a working-class family; the play cannot be labelled as a working-class play. Its protagonist Jimmy Porter no longer belongs to the working classes, because he is “*first-generation, university-educated, emerging middle-class*” (Heilpern, 2006: 174). Jimmy dropped out of university since he no longer felt at ease with his emerging new social status. He did not want to lose his pure link with the working classes in which he was born, but it was already too late. He has arrived in a no-man’s land, stuck in-between “*the working class, to which he belongs emotionally, and the middle classes, to which he belongs by right of education*” (Skovmand, 1975: 86).

Class Conflict

The play announced the emergence of a new class: the educated working class. Jimmy Porter hailed as the spokesman of the new younger generation (Taylor, “Ten Years of the English Stage Company” 123). Jimmy Porter is the bearer of stereotyped class images. He describes his friend Cliff as an unwitting person because he belongs to the working class: “*Well, you are ignorant. You’re just a peasant*” (Osborne, 1960: 3). He continues his conversation by pointing to the supposed literacy of his

upper-middle-class wife Alison: “(to Alison) What about you? You’re not a peasant are you?” (Osborne, 1960: 3). A few moments later, the battle *of the classes returns*:
Jimmy:

Why do you bother? You can’t understand a word of it. Cliff: Uh huh. Jimmy: You’re too ignorant.

Cliff: Yes, and uneducated. Now shut up, will you?

Jimmy: Why don’t you get my wife to explain it to you? She’s educated. That’s right, isn’t it? (Osborne, 1960: 3)

This scene is a good example of Jimmy’s position in-between the uneducated working-class Cliff and educated upper-middle-class Alison. Of course these labels are all Jimmy’s own. Osborne depicted Cliff as the essential counterbalance to Alison in order to present Jimmy’s dilemma physically onstage: “*His attraction towards Cliff as a romanticized image of the proletariat and his ambivalent relationship with Alison – on the one hand repulsion because of the values she represents and on the other sexual and emotional attractions*” (Skovmand, 1975: 87).

The flat is the replica of the outside world where Jimmy wages the struggle of the classes. Jimmy is aware that he is a displaced person in a society in which “*the wrong people [are] going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying*” (Osborne, 1960: 101). His running of a sweet-stall could be an indicator of his denial to recognize his new place in society. Alison’s father, Colonel Redfern, does not understand Jimmy’s choice: “Sweet-stall. It does seem an extraordinary thing for an educated young man to be occupying himself with. Why should he want to do that, of all things” (Osborne, 1960: 66). Skovmand distinguishes two possible reasons for Jimmy’s adherence to a sweet-stall: If this is meant as more than a purely private protest, it is futile; if on the other hand it is as means of keeping his wife in social and economic circumstances which are unusual and embarrassing for her, then Jimmy is definitely successful in his line of work: “The Lady Pusillanimous [Alison] has been promised a brighter easier world than old Sextus [Jimmy] can ever offer her.” (1975: 87)

Heilpern stated reasons behind the popularity of *Look Back in Anger* are that it was thrillingly new in the 1950s: “*It was the first British play that openly dramatized bruising emotion, and it was the first to give the alienated lower classes and youth*

of England a weapon.” (2006: 184) Jimmy Porter spoke for a large segment of the British population in 1956 when he ranted about his alienation from a society in which he was denied any meaningful role. Osborne saw his play as a weapon with which ordinary people could break down the class barriers.

Jimmy’s alienation from Alison comes precisely because he cannot break through her “cool,” her unwillingness to feel deeply even during sexual intercourse with her husband. He criticizes her in a harsh attempt to get her to strike out at him, to stop “sitting on the fence” and make a full commitment to her real emotions; he wants to force her to feel and to have vital life. He calls her “Lady Pusillanimous” because he sees her as too cowardly to commit to anything Jimmy is anxious to give a great deal and is deeply angry because no one seems interested enough to take from him, including his wife. He says, “*My heart is so full, I feel ill—and she wants peace!*”

⇒ **Read** –

Heilpern, John. John Osborne: A Patriot for Us. London: Chatto & Windus, 2006. Print.

Identity Crisis

The question of identity and the confusion over it is one of the major issues that affect all the characters of the play.

Jimmy scolds everyone around him to open up freely to honest feelings. He is trapped in his own problems of social identity. He doesn’t seem to fit in anywhere. As Colonel Redfern points out, operating a sweet-stall seems an odd occupation for an educated young man. Jimmy looks upon enduring suffering and being a participant in the pains of life as the only way to find, or “earn,” one’s true identity. As we see in the play, he can embrace Alison only after she has suffered the unspeakable pain of the loss of her unborn child and has come back to him.

Helena discovers that she can be happy only if she lives according to her perceived principles of right and wrong.

Colonel Redfern is caught out of his time. The England he left as a young army officer no longer exists. Jimmy calls him “just one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian wilderness that can’t understand why the sun isn’t shining anymore,” and the Colonel avers with this view.

Cliff does seem to have a strong sense of 'who he is', accepts that, and will move on with his life.

Anger and Hatred

Jimmy Porter is full of anger. His anger is directed at those he loves because they refuse to have strong feelings, at a society that did not fulfil promises of opportunity, and at those who snugly assume their places in the social and power structure and who do not care for others. He lashes out in anger because of his deeply felt helplessness. When he was ten years old he watched his idealist father dying a painful death for over a year. He vividly remembers his father talking for hours, "pouring out all that was left of his life to one bewildered little boy." Jimmy says, "You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry—angry and helpless. And I can never forget it."

Indifference and Passivity

Alison is the direct target of Jimmy's attack, her indifference and passivity are merely the immediate representations of the attitudes that Jimmy sees as undermining the whole of society. It is the self-satisfied weakness of the society that infuriates Jimmy. When speaking of Alison's brother Nigel, he says, "*You've never heard so many well-bred commonplaces coming from beneath the same bowler hat.*"

The Church according to Jimmy has lost relevance to contemporary life. The Church of England was out of contact with the daily lives of most Englishmen. The Church is not simply a spiritual leader but also owner of vast properties and thus a member of the land-holding class.

Jimmy quotes the fictional Bishop of Bromley that he is upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He denies class distinctions and says, "*The idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by—the working classes!*" Jimmy sees the Church as providing an easy escape from facing the pain of living in the here and now—and thus precluding any real redemption.

Problems of nostalgia

Jimmy Porter's idea of the good society is drawn from the past. His spell of attack on Alison's colonial family is mitigated by jealousy: "The Edwardian brigade does make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms ... if you've no world of your own, it's rather

pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's." (Osborne, 1960) There is also the 1930s and the Spanish Civil War (in which Jimmy's father was mortally wounded), the time he harks back to when he speaks of there being 'no good, brave causes left'. And although still in his twenties, Jimmy seems to have passed his own golden age, represented by his offstage trumpet: "He had his own jazz band once" (Osborne, 1960:44) Alison says. "That was when he was still a student, before I knew him." (Osborne, 1960:44) Jimmy's search for a cause even leads him towards a contemplative nostalgia for the plea of a still taboo subject — homosexuality. He searches for a cause and his sadness that there is no more patriotism left of which he can be a part, seems to lead him to comment on homosexuality:

"Sometimes I almost envy old Gide and the Greek Chorus boys. Oh, I'm not saying it mustn't be hell for them a lot of the time. But, at least they seem to have a cause- not a particularly good one it's true. But plenty of them seem to have a revolutionary fire about them, which is more than you can say for the rest of us..." (Osborne, 1960:36)

Note:

Old Gide: this refers to the French novelist Andre Gide who was homosexual. André Gide was a French author and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1947.

Jimmy's inability to identify a social cause for his heroic passions leads him to pull all his energy into domestic war with Alison. Later, Helena states even more specifically that Jimmy Porter's problem is that he was born not before his time but after it. "There's no place for people like that any longer – in sex, or politics, or anything. That's why he's so futile." (Osborne, 1960: 111) Many of these themes of nostalgia in the play also revolve around Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, who had served in the British army in colonial India. Jimmy says that Colonel Redfern is nostalgic for the "Edwardian" past — early 20th century England, before World War I, when things were supposedly simpler and more peaceful. Other characters also feel for the past, but for different reasons: they long for an era characterized by a leisurely life for rich Britons and greater worldwide power for the British Empire.

Sexuality/Sexual morality

Sexuality is one the agenda of the play both in its text and in its sub-text. In Act 1 towards the climax, Jimmy gives a speech about Alison's sexuality and reproductive

potential which is an example of brutal irony. We know that she is pregnant but Jimmy is not aware of the truth and curses her very badly in a verbal attack:

“If only something- something would happen to you to wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child and it would die.....” (Osborne, 1960: 37)

Jimmy associates sexuality and motherhood as a part of the same link – femaleness. Alison is seen not only as sexually voracious, but as a vindictive mother who is stopping Jimmy from giving birth to himself, finding his meaningful identity as a man. So he desires Alison’s ultimate humiliation and even wishes that her sexuality and capacity for motherhood be simultaneously ‘destroyed’. Therefore, when she returns at the end of the play to him, he is quiet triumphant that she is defeated, lost and suffering therefore able to be ‘tender’.

The post war social reforms were aimed to inspire the traditional model of male breadwinner and female homemaker. Family allowances—weekly cash benefits to families with children—encouraged childbearing. In the twentieth century British society there was a disturbing change taking place in the society in the attitude towards sex and sexuality. In the play Osborne has portrayed it in a striking manner in the opening of the play when Jimmy and Cliff are introduced to the audience from behind the Sunday newspaper. The contents of the paper are an object of Jimmy’s satirical bitterness– bishops, nuclear weapons, and repressive sexual morality. The play explores a particular kind of post war masculine identity. The association between class, social position and sexual anxiety are vividly shown in the play, where class resentment is inseparable from an antagonism towards, and fear of women. The best example is Jimmy’s disregard for Alison’s mother. This is the example of linking of class arrogance with sexual emasculation.

Sexual passion, which offers Jimmy an intermittent escape, however fails to solve his complications. He made sex 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” (Osborne, 1960: 43). ‘Python’ as a metaphor symbolises Jimmy’s fear of female sexuality and maternal power. Alison’s ability to give birth is one of Jimmy’s fears about female sexuality. For that reason, he wants Alison to get pregnant and lose the child.

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. Alison's virginity belongs to her middle class values. In the post-war era, premarital sexuality was not approved by the society. However, Alison's virginity disturbs Jimmy not physically but socially. This virginity reminds Jimmy of middle class morals about female sexuality.

Alison's friend Helena is also targeted by Jimmy; he teases her virginity or the trademark of her dress, which marks her middle class values throughout Act II. Helena's clothes are another indication for Jimmy to tease. She wears fashionable, expensive clothes which signify her financial situation. She belongs to a rich middle class family and is used to such expensive habits. He calls her "evil-minded little virgin" (Osborne, 1960: 73).

Education continued to segregate students by gender: an official 1959 report by the Central Advisory Council on Education advised that girls be taught differently during their last two years in secondary school, with an emphasis on her direct interest in dress, personal appearance and in problems of human relations. Popular magazines such as *Girl* and *Woman's Own* reinforced the image of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers, surrounded by domestic comforts.

In the play the role of women is basically restricted to the conventionally feminine, to a secondary role, to dependence on men, and this is echoed both in the structure and in the content of the play. Alison in the play is defined only in relation to men. She is even seen as a threat when there is any suggestion of the female (i.e., the sexual) which is likely to threaten the Jimmy's concept of identity.

Social change

During the World War II, England was caught between two cultures: the old order and a vision of what was in store for the future of British society. Class distinctions remained, but government reforms began to slowly blur the lines between the upper and middle classes. Jimmy Porter wishes for an active and lively world around him. He hates the idleness of the world around him, he feels that that the world is sleeping and fears the changes that will change their life. Jimmy often criticises the nihilistic attitude of British Empire and expresses his anger as an attempt to awaken those around him from this cultural sleep. Britain had lost her earlier position of reputation. The social structure had been totally transformed in order to preserve the relative equality experienced by the population during wartime. As a result the young generation that came of age in post-war England hardly felt any

positive change, problems continued to remain the same as the attitude of the old Establishment remained intact. The political and social climate in the post war England was turbulent and alien to its people. Actually Second World War exhausted Britain and the nation lost its strength and its power dissolved. The war imposed heavy economic burden, destruction of industry and commercial property. Britain also lost her colonial power and now completely at the mercy of mighty nation like United Nation. The welfare- state had displaced the wealthy and privileged classes but failed in changing the attitudes and prejudices. Class difference was challenged.

With the Conservative Party coming into power in the 1951 election, their slogan “Set the People Free” indicated a change from state control to individual freedom and encouraged radical changes in culture. So the old-style entertainment became enjoyable, affordable, and accessible to a new audience through radio, movies, and television. Jazz music became popular in music halls, which were turned into dance halls or torn down entirely. This new music pushed out the older audiences and made way for a new, younger audience.

Unemployment

The play highlights the post war young people’s frustration and impotency experienced by the middle-class. In the 1951 elections, the Labour Government was beaten by the Conservatives, but there was hardly any difference between the two political parties in Britain. The demand for social reform had put the Labour Party into power, and its leaders enacted social programs that would establish a new “Welfare State” in Britain. The Education Act of 1944 guaranteed free secondary schooling for all citizens. Several new universities were created for working-class students—a radical difference from the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge that were accessible only to the upper class. Jimmy Porter is a product of one such ‘white tile’ institution as opposed to the classy red-brick ones. For Britain’s working classes all of these changes promised more equality, opportunity and visibility. Yet within a few years, however, enthusiasm over the new Welfare State faded. Different proposals were made for full time employment of young people to protect people against large scale unemployment. Though the new government tried to eliminate the unfair advantage enjoyed by the upper class people in Britain and bring uniformity among all classes but still hardly there was any social change. The different social programs initiated proved costly, and the benefits most people received were disappointing. Britain’s economy struggled after the war; the promise of prosperity and comfort was

deferred. Rationing of food supplies, enacted during the war, remained in force until 1954, due to a shortage—in some cases, post war rations were more severe than during the war. The people now found themselves in the situation where as Jimmy comments that the people of his generation were not able to die for good causes any longer. “There are no good, brave causes left in the world,” (Osborne, 1960: 84) says Jimmy Porter.

The absence of social revolution

Another very potent psychological problem which touched the post-war British society was the disastrous consequence of nuclear bomb. The scientific destruction brought about an end to men’s sense of personal heroism and bravery. British society during the post war period 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 lacklustre security. He has been promoted into a moral and social vacuum. He fumes, rages, nags at a world which promised much but which has led to a dreary plain where there is no fiber or substance - only fear of scientific destruction and the minor comforts of American mechanics.” (Taylor, 1964: 170).

Read: Taylor, Russell John. *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger: A Case Book*. London: Macmillan, 1964.

Gender conflict

Throughout the play we can see gender conflict. Jimmy is constantly shown to have problems with upper class and with women in general. He attacks the old class system and their lifestyle. His easy target is Alison’s family and she being part of that family and class is always at the receiving end. In the play gender conflict functions on two levels: first of all, it becomes the site for a banished class conflict, sublimated into sexual hatred and venomous attacks on women in general and his wife Alison in particular. Secondly the battle also signifies his manhood; it’s a fight for sexual identity for him. He has to attack women and Alison is the easy target in front of him.

Though Jimmy rejects women he is not homosexual, but he is pointing to the second issue, that is, of women and domesticity, children and social responsibilities – all of which he believes often stifle creativity. In order to rediscover his own power, he has to destroy whatever remnants of independence Alison has left. The destruction is intimate, sexual and verbally violent:

“Do you know, I have never known the great pleasure of love-making when I didn’t desire it myself. Oh, it’s not that she hasn’t her own kind of passion. She has the passion of a python. She just devours me whole every time as if I were some over-large rabbit.... That bulge around her navel—if you’re wondering what it is—it’s me. Me, buried alive down there and going mad.” (Osborne, 1960: 37-38)

Gender conflict is a battleground in the play. Jimmy comments: “Have you ever noticed how noisy women are...” (Osborne, 1960: 9) Other examples of humiliation of women in general are female surgeons and also on Feminist Movement of the era. The example of female surgeons shows the changes that is taking place in the society and in women’s life during the post-war era. Women leaving their territory; the kitchen and getting into men’s territory is significant as far as the changing roles of sexes concerned. Society during 1950s and 60s extended some sort of sexual freedom of men and women have been enlarged. Legal restrictions on the freedom of married people have been relaxed.

4.2.10 Title of the Play

The title of *Look Back in Anger* hints at the primary theme: the play is “*motivated by outrage at the discovery that the idealized Britain, for which so many had sacrificed themselves during the war years, was inauthentic.*” (Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, 91). Heilpern states that Osborne had considered six other titles for the play: *Farewell to Anger*, *Angry Man*, *Man in a Rage*, *Bargain from Strength*, *Close the Cage behind You* and *My Blood is a Mile High* (2006: 163). Finally, Osborne chose the title *Look Back in Anger*, inspired by the Leslie Paul’s autobiography about “*a disillusioned social philosopher [...] who lost faith in Soviet Russia during the 1930s.*” (Heilpern, 2006: 163-164) His choice made perfectly sense because disappointment in society is a major characteristic of both plays.

4.2.11 Symbols and Images in *Look Back in Anger*

The bear and squirrel toys - The bear and squirrel toys play an important role in the lives of Jimmy and Alison who mimic them. They have kept upon a chest of drawers the toy bear and squirrel in their one room attic flat. Alison points them out to Helena who thinks this is proof of Jimmy's being or of the madness that characterises their conjugality. This animal symbol works in two ways — first, it offers a refuge from the misery of the couple's daily married life, and provides the only way for them to communicate with each other.

Second, it implies that the only way for them to satisfy marital love in their case, seems to be based on not much more than the physical attraction between the sexes, which functions at a level below the rational. The game that they play is a way of forgetting the actual reality. Jimmy and Alison might consequently realise, in order to forget their respective social positions, and the intellectual gulf between them was to imagine themselves as animals, the bear representing masculine strength and the squirrel representing feminine softness and gentleness. Yet it is also a fact that 'bear and squirrel game' is more complex a pattern to highlight the various relationships and solitude. We would better quote where the play unnaturally closes with a repetition of the game:

Jimmy: There are cruel steel traps lying about everywhere, just waiting for
rather mad
slightly satanic, and
very timid little animals. Right? (Allison nods)

(Pathetically) poor squirrels! (Osborne, 1960: 119)

The church bells - The sound/noise of church bells entering the small living space serve as a reminder of the power of the established church, and also that it doesn't care at all for their domestic peace. Jimmy feels irritated when he hears this sound. He is opposed to church-going; he is opposed to religious practices and rituals; and the church-bells, being symbolic of the church, bother him. For example in Act I, he declares about the noise that women make, he hears the ringing of the church-bells and says: "Oh, hell! Now the bloody bells have started". The sound of the church-bells is a nuisance to him, and he feels that this sound will drive him wild. The church-bells remind him of the existence of the spiritual world.

The jazz trumpet - allows Jimmy's presence to dominate the stage even when he is not there, and it also serves as his anti-Establishment "raspberry." It offers

Jimmy an escape from the irksome world of the mundane, and is relaxation to him; so he hardly bothers if it is the discomfiture of others. He feels that those who cannot appreciate jazz can have no feeling either for music or for human beings. But the sound of the trumpet also suggests an atmosphere of breaking nerves. While Jimmy may resort to his trumpet as an escape, the sound of the trumpet annoys others. Other characters in the play like Alison, Helena and Cliff hate the noise made by Jimmy. The sound of the trumpet reinforces the tension of the play by drawing attention to differences between Jimmy and the other inmates of the house.

The ironing-board - and the very act of ironing of Alison (and later Helena too) represent the kind of routine life with which Jimmy is fed up of. The ironing serves to add to Jimmy's boredom and it therefore becomes also a symbol of his boredom. In one of his early speeches in the play Jimmy complains: "Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, and ironing." Afterwards also he shows his annoyance with the ironing. It is ironical that, after Alison has gone away and has been replaced by Helena, we find Helena also ironing the clothes like Alison, so that from one point of view at least there is no change in Jimmy's life. As a counterpoint to this, you must also wonder why Jimmy himself does just nothing to ease out the boredom of the characters in the play.

Claustrophobic confinement in the Porters' attic - The play is set in Jimmy Porter's one-room flat in a large Midland town. The bed-sitting-room setting is important both realistically and symbolically. All domestic functions exist within one space: eating, entertaining, and sleeping. The non-appearance of compartmentalised living spaces shows Jimmy being poor and their house lacks comfort. A strange sense of claustrophobia operates in the play. The characters are trapped they cannot escape, hence they are caught in a small room which they cannot leave. Whatever they do is easily seen as an effort at spending the time so as to feel in their inner emptiness.

4.2.12 Summing Up

You should by now have made an idea of the play, its main characters, Osborne's literary style and note the relevance of the 'Kitchen sink' play in its own time and our own. Your close reading of the text will gradually help understanding all these issues more intricately.

Jimmy as you see is disillusioned with social injustice, but he does not actually

fight for his beliefs. *Look Back in Anger* did not aim at purging the minds of their audience. Osborne wanted to shake Britain awake by teaching his audience how to feel. We can conclude with the words of J.R. Taylor:

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, 1968: 23).

Some important aspects to sum up with:

- The play represents the continuing sense of class division in British society during 1950s despite the post-war changes;
- The play also presents – the issue of clash of generations: that of Osborne, Jimmy and Alison versus the older generation represented by Colonel Redfern and the people quoted in the newspapers;
- The play highlights a sense of disappointment with political developments; the expression of a desire for emotional contact and intensity; and the supposedly sado-masochistic relationship between Jimmy and Alison

4.2.13 Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

1. How does *Look Back in Anger* show John Osborne's success as a dramatist?
2. Discuss *Look Back in Anger* as a kitchen sink drama.
3. What do Jimmy and Alison's playful game of bear and squirrel represent at different stages of the play?
4. Describe the character of Jimmy Porter.
5. How did the decline of the British Empire touch England and its people as different as Jimmy Porter and Colonel Redfern?
6. What elements of British society does Jimmy find so objectionable and why?
7. What are the major themes in *Look Back in Anger*?
8. Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* points to the social anxieties of the post-war period. Explain.

● **Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks**

1. Sketch the character of Alison.
2. What are the images used by Osborne in the play *Look Back in Anger*?
3. What is the importance of the character of Cliff in the play?
4. What does Colonel Redfern represent in the play?
5. Consider the title “*Look Back in Anger*”. What does it mean?
6. Helena Charles is regarded as the moral compass of the play. Why?
7. What lies at the heart of the conflict between Jimmy and Alison?
8. How is the idea of loss of childhood treated in the play *Look Back in Anger*?

● **Short Questions: 6 marks**

1. Describe two features of a typical Osborne hero.
2. Name any three works of Osborne.
3. What do the protagonists in the play *Look Back in Anger* “look back” at?
5. What is the significance of Jimmy’s trumpet playing in the play?
6. Why do you think Alison is different from the rest of her own family?
7. Do you consider Jimmy as an angry young man?
8. “A rebel without a cause?” How true is this of Jimmy?
9. Name the symbols used in the play *Look Back in Anger*.

4.2.14 Suggested Reading

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