

Look Back in Anger



by John Osborne

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Look Back in Anger: Introduction

On May 8, 1956, *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre as the third production of the newly formed English Stage Company. The English Stage Company had been founded in 1955 to promote the production of new plays by contemporary authors that might not find production in the commercial West End theatre (London's equivalent of Broadway in New York City). West End theatre provided quality acting and high standards of production, but very little drama that related to life in contemporary England. Most plays of the time were generally innocuous light comedies, thrillers, and foreign imports—fourteen American shows in 1955 alone. Osborne had submitted copies of *Look Back in Anger* to every agent in London and to many West End producers and had been rejected by all. When the script arrived at the Royal Court, the Artistic Director

George Devine and his young assistant director Tony Richardson knew it was exactly what they were looking for. *Look Back in Anger* was viewed as a play that would, as Devine later put it, "blow a hole in the old theatre."

Critical reception was strongly mixed: some detested the play and the central character, but most recognized Osborne as an important new talent and the play as emotionally powerful. They also recognized the play as one that fervently spoke of the concerns of the young in post-war England. Although the first production of *Look Back in Anger* was not initially financially successful, after an excerpt was shown on BBC the box office was overwhelmed. Osborne was publicized as the "Angry Young Man" and the success of *Look Back in Anger* opened the doors to other young writers who dealt with contemporary problems.

Look Back in Anger: Summary

Act I Summary

Act I

The plot of *Look Back in Anger* is driven almost entirely by the tirades of Jimmy Porter rather than outside forces. The play is set in a one-room attic apartment in the Midlands of England. This large room is the home of Jimmy Porter, his wife Alison, and his partner and friend Cliff Lewis, who has a separate bedroom across the hall.

The play opens with Alison at the ironing board and Jimmy and Cliff in easy chairs reading the Sunday papers. Jimmy complains that half the book review he is reading in his "posh" paper is in French. He asks Alison if that makes her feel ignorant and she replies that she wasn't listening to the question. Immediately one of the main themes is introduced, Jimmy's railing against the inertia of Alison and the inertia of the whole middle-class of England. Jimmy teases Cliff about being uneducated and ignorant and Cliff good naturedly agrees with him. Jimmy says that Alison hasn't had a thought for years and she agrees. Jimmy is depressed by their Sunday routine and says their youth is slipping away. He says, "Let's pretend that we're human beings and that we're actually alive." Cliff complains about the smoke from Jimmy's pipe. When Alison says she has gotten used to it, Jimmy says she would get used to anything in a few minutes. He then rails about the fact that "Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasms." He says that England has lost her soul, that it is dreary living in "the American Age." There is talk of the candy stall that Jimmy and Cliff own and operate in an outdoor market. Jimmy talks about Alison's brother Nigel, whom he has dubbed "the chinless wonder from Sandhurst," and who is a Member of Parliament. Jimmy resents Nigel and all that he stands for, including the fact that he will succeed in the world because of his social class and the schools he has attended in spite of his stupidity and insensitivity. He then turns on Alison, calling her "the Lady Pusillanimous." Jimmy tries to listen to a concert on the radio and complains at the noise made by Alison's ironing and Cliff's rustling of the newspaper. He then harangues against women in general, Alison, and even Mrs. Drury, their landlady. Cliff and Jimmy then playfully wrestle and accidentally push over Alison and the ironing board. Alison has burnt her arm and finally tells Jimmy to get out. Cliff ministers to Alison's burn and calms her. She tells him that she is pregnant. She is afraid to tell Jimmy lest he think she planned it. Cliff holds Alison and Jimmy enters. There is teasing and play as Jimmy reestablishes himself Cliff goes out for cigarettes. Jimmy tells Alison that he wants her; they play a private and affectionate game of "squirrels and bears" and Alison is about to tell him of her pregnancy when Cliff returns to say Helena Charles, an actress friend of Alison, is on the phone downstairs. When Alison returns she says she has invited Helena to stay with them during her engagement at the local theatre and Jimmy launches his most shocking diatribe yet. He tells Alison that if she were to have a child and if that child would die, then she might suffer enough to become a human being. The act ends with Jimmy saying of Alison, "She'll go on sleeping and devouring until there is nothing left of me."

Act II Summary

Act II, scene 1

It is evening two weeks later. Helena and Alison are getting ready to go to church. Jimmy is in Cliff's room practicing jazz on his trumpet. Jimmy's friend Hugh and Hugh's working-class mother, who provided the money needed to start the candy business, are discussed. Alison talks of being cut off from the kind of people she had always known. She still hasn't told Jimmy she is pregnant. After Cliff and Jimmy enter, Jimmy launches into another attack on the Establishment in general and Alison's mother in particular. He then tells of keeping his father company as he lay dying for months and says he "learnt at an early age what it was to be angry—angry and helpless." Jimmy is called to the phone. Helena tells Alison that she has telegraphed Alison's father to come and take her home. Jimmy returns and says Hugh's mother has had a stroke and he will go to London to be with her. He tells Alison he needs her to go with him. She leaves with Helena.

Act II, scene 2

It is the following evening and Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, is visiting. Redfern is bemused by the modern England; he spent his whole career, from 1913 to 1947, in the colonial service in India. He sees some right on Jimmy's side and was horrified by his wife's brutal attempts to prevent Alison from marrying Jimmy. He says he and Alison are much alike in that they both "like to sit on a fence. It is rather comfortable." Alison tries to explain why she married Jimmy: "I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life and suddenly this—this spiritual barbarian—throws down a gauntlet at me." Helena comes in followed shortly by Cliff. Helena will stay one more night so she can attend an audition nearby. Alison asks Cliff to give a letter to Jimmy and he refuses. Alison and her father leave, followed shortly by Cliff. Helena lies down on the bed and looks at the toy bear. Jimmy crashes in. He reads Alison's letter and berates her for being polite and "wet" instead of emotionally honest. Helena tells him Alison is pregnant and Jimmy says he doesn't care. He has watched Hugh's mother die and has no pity for Alison. He turns on Helena calling her an "evil-minded little virgin" She slaps his face; then, as he cries in despair, she kisses him passionately.

Act III Summary

Act III, scene 1

It is early Sunday evening several months later. Jimmy and Cliff are sprawled in their armchairs reading the Sunday newspapers and Helena is at the ironing board. All seems very relaxed. They talk about a newspaper article and Jimmy starts in on religion and politics. They then go into a vaudeville routine and Helena joins in. Jimmy and Cliff do a song and dance and end with playful wrestling. Cliff's shirt gets dirty and Helena leaves to wash it. Cliff says he is going to move out and give up the candy stall. He says he might find a woman of his own. When Helena returns with his shirt, Cliff hangs it over the gas fire in his room. Helena tells Jimmy that she loves him and has always wanted him. The door opens and Alison enters, looking ill and obviously thin. Jimmy exits and leaves the two women looking at each other.

Act III, scene 2

It is moments later. There is the sound of Jimmy's trumpet from across the hall. Alison has suffered a miscarriage. She says she doesn't know why she came, that she doesn't want to cause a breach between Helena and Jimmy. Helena says that it is all over between her and Jimmy, that she realizes that what she has been doing is wrong, and she can't live with that. She calls Jimmy in and tells him she is going to leave, and she does. Alison says she will go. Jimmy berates her for not sending flowers to the funeral. Then he softens and talks of the old bear going through the forest of life alone. He remembers their first meeting and says, "I may be a lost cause, but I thought if you loved me, it needn't matter." Alison cries and says she has found strength in the humility of not having been able to protect her unborn child. She is in the mud now, groveling. Jimmy gently comforts her. They enter into their game of bear and squirrel in what is apparently a loving reconciliation.

Look Back in Anger: John Osborne Biography

John James Osborne was born on December 12, 1929, in Fulham, South West London. His father, Thomas Godfrey Osborne, was then a commercial artist and copywriter; his mother, Nellie Beatrice Grove Osborne, worked as a barmaid in pubs most of her life. Much of Osborne's childhood was spent in near poverty, and he suffered from frequent extended illnesses. He was deeply affected by his father's death from tuberculosis in 1941 and also remembered vividly the air raids and general excitement of war. Osborne attended state schools until the age of twelve when he was awarded a scholarship to attend a minor private school, St. Michael's College, in Barnstaple, Devon. He was expelled at the age of sixteen after the headmaster slapped Osborne's face and Osborne hit him back. After spending some time at home, he took a series of jobs writing copy for various trade journals. He became interested in theatre while working as a tutor for children touring with a repertory company. After an education inspector found him to be uncertified as a teacher, Osborne was relieved of those duties but invited to stay with the company as assistant stage manager and eventually as an actor. 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.

Osborne's playwriting career began while he was still an actor. He wrote five plays before the production of *Look Back in Anger* made him an overnight success. *The Devil Inside Him*, coauthored with Stella Linden, was produced in Huddersfield in 1950; *Personal Enemy*, coauthored with Anthony Creighton, was produced in Harrogate in 1955; and *Epitaph for George Dillon*, also written with Creighton, was later produced in 1958 by the English Stage Company and has been published. The real breakthrough came when *Look Back in Anger* was staged in 1956 as the third production of the newly formed English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre. *Look Back in Anger* was the first play Osborne had written alone. He had submitted copies of the script to every agent in London and to many West End producers and had been rejected by all. After the success of *Look Back in Anger*, Osborne continued to have a highly successful career as playwright. His next play, *The Entertainer*, was written with Laurence Olivier in mind for the central character, Archie Rice. It was produced by the English Stage Company in April 1957 with Olivier giving what has been widely considered to be one of his finest performances. 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 (including *Tom Jones*, for which he received an Academy Award), and four books, including two volumes of autobiography.

Osborne was married five times: to actress Pamela Lane from 1951 to 1957; to Mary Ure, who played Alison in *Look Back in Anger*, from 1957 to 1962; to Penelope Gilliatt, film and later drama critic for *The Observer*, from 1963 to 1967; to actress Jill Bennett from 1968 to 1977; and to journalist Helen Dawson beginning in 1978. He died of heart failure on December 24, 1994.

Look Back in Anger: Characters

Helena Charles

Helena is Alison's friend, a very proper middle-class woman. She is an actress who comes to stay with the Porters while she performs in a play at the local theatre. Jimmy has long despised her, as he considers her a member of the Establishment. When she contacts Alison's father and asks him to take Alison home, Helena seems genuinely concerned about Alison. However, she seduces Jimmy and replaces Alison in the household. When Alison returns, Helena realizes that her affair with Jimmy is wrong and decides to leave.

Cliff Lewis

Cliff is Jimmy's friend and partner in the candy stall business and shares the Porters' flat, although he has his own bedroom across the hall. Cliff is a poorly educated, working class man of Welsh heritage. He is warm, loving, and humorous. He genuinely loves Alison but adjusts when she leaves and Helena moves in. Cliffs

first allegiance is to Jimmy. Nevertheless, ultimately he decides to go out on his own.

Alison Porter

Alison has been married to Jimmy for three years. She comes from the solid upper-middle-class Establishment. Her father was a colonel in the colonial Service and the family lived very comfortably in India until 1947. Her brother Nigel attended Sandhurst, the British equivalent of West Point, and is a Member of Parliament. She married Jimmy partly as a rebellion against the proper, predictable, stultifying precepts of her class. However, she has been molded by her upbringing and it is her "fence sitting," her lack of total emotional commitment, that provokes Jimmy's attacks. Alison is warm and open with Cliff without ever harboring a sexual attraction to him. When Helena takes charge and arranges for Alison to leave Jimmy, Alison does not protest and does indeed return to her parents, their values, and the security they offer. Alison is drawn back to Jimmy at the end after she has suffered the pain and loss brought by the miscarriage of her child.

Colonel Redfern

Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, is a retired army officer who served in India from 1913 to 1947. During that time he seldom spent any time in England. He represents the values and beliefs of another period, a time of British Empire. His values are those of duty, honor, and loyalty to one's country and one's class. His world ended with the independence of India. He is a reasonable man somewhat bemused by the post-World War II England. He does not approve of Jimmy, but he does find things to admire in him and even agrees with Jimmy in some instances. He does not hesitate to help Alison and does not attempt to control her.

Jimmy Porter

Jimmy Porter is a character of immense psychological complexity and interest. He dominates the play through the power of his anger and language. He unleashes his invective on what he calls the Establishment (those "born" to power and privilege), the church as part of the Establishment, and his loved ones. Osborne describes him 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." Critic Harold Ferrar assessed him as a man of decency and charity who is "one of life's beautiful losers," while critic Michael Coveney called him "a lovable monster with the gift of the gab and a talent for resentment." Although Jimmy has graduated from a university—albeit one with no prestige—he works with Cliff as owner/proprietor of a candy stall in an outdoor market. In spite of his tendency to sometimes cruelly insult Cliff, Jimmy genuinely likes him. His assaults on Alison are nasty and sometimes savage. He seems to be trying to force her to have a genuine response, something coming from her that is not colored by her class and upbringing. He says she is not real because she has not suffered real pain and degradation. When she leaves he is hurt but quickly adjusts. Jimmy has hated Helena for the same reasons he hated Alison, namely her social class and "proper" upbringing. While Jimmy apparently hates Alison's mother, he seems to like Colonel Redfern because he can feel sorry for him.

Look Back in Anger: Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

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. Although he was educated at a "white-tile" university, a reference to the newest and least prestigious universities in the United Kingdom, the real power and opportunities were reserved for the children of the Establishment, those born to privilege, family connections, and entree to the "right" schools. Part of the "code" of the Establishment was the "stiff upper lip," that reticence to show or even to feel strong emotions. 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 berates her in a coarse 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!"

Anger and Hatred

Jimmy Porter operates out of a deep well of anger. His anger is directed at those he loves because they refuse to have strong feelings, at a society that did not fulfill promises of opportunity, and at those who smugly 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 for a year from wounds received fighting for democracy in the Spanish Civil War, his father talking for hours, "pouring out all that was left of his life to one bewildered little boy." He says, "You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry—angry and helpless. And I can never forget it."

Apathy and Passivity

Although Alison is the direct target of Jimmy's invective, her apathy and passivity are merely the immediate representation of the attitudes that Jimmy sees as undermining the whole of society. It is the complacent blandness of 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, too, comes under attack in part because it has lost relevance to contemporary life. For Helena it spells a safe habit, one that defines right and wrong for her—although she seems perfectly willing to ignore its structures against adultery when it suits her. 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. Of course, Jimmy has also slipped into a world of sameness as illustrated by the three Sunday evenings spent reading the newspapers and even the direct replacement of Alison at the ironing board with Helena. Deadly habit is portrayed as insidious.

Class Conflict

Jimmy comes from the working class and although some of his mother's relatives are "pretty posh," Cliff tells Alison that Jimmy hates them as much as he hates her family. It is the class system, with its built-in preferential treatment for those at the top and exclusion from all power for those at the bottom, that makes Jimmy's existence seem so meaningless. He has a university degree, but it is not from the "right" university. It is Nigel, the "straight-backed, chinless wonder" who went to Sandhurst, who is stupid and insensitive to the needs of others, who has no beliefs of his own, who is already a Member of Parliament, who will "make it to the top." Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, is not shown unsympathetically, but her mother is portrayed as a class-conscious monster who used every tactic she could to prevent Alison from marrying Jimmy. The only person for whom Jimmy's love is apparent is Hugh's working-class mother. Jimmy likes Cliff because, as Cliff himself says, "I'm common."

Identity Crisis

While Jimmy harangues everyone around him to open themselves to honest feeling, 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 sees suffering the pain of life as the only way to find, or "earn," one's true identity. Alison does finally suffer the immeasurable loss of her unborn child and comes back to Jimmy, who seems to embrace her. 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 agrees. Cliff does seem to have a strong sense of who he is, accepts that, and will move on with his life.

Sexism

A contemporary reading of *Look Back in Anger* contains inherent assumptions of sexism. Jimmy Porter seems to many to be a misogynist and Alison a mere cipher struggling to view the world through Jimmy's eyes.

Look Back in Anger: Style

Setting

The play takes place in the Porters' one-room flat, a fairly large attic room. 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 drab setting of the play emphasizes the contrast between the idealistic Jimmy and the dull reality of the world surrounding him.

Plot

The construction of *Look Back in Anger* is that of an old-fashioned well-made play in the tradition of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Tennessee Williams, or most of Osborne's contemporary commercial playwrights. There is one plot developed over three acts (the expected number in 1956), and the basic plot device is ancient: misalliance in marriage compounded by a love triangle. There is some exposition that has been characterized as clumsy, such as when Jimmy tells Alison, to whom he has been married three years, how his business had been financed. Some plot devices stand out as the author's contrivances, such as Cliff's exit in Act I to buy cigarettes, and his unconvincing reasons for returning a couple of minutes later just as Alison is about to tell Jimmy that she is pregnant; the telephone call from Helena prepares for the Act I curtain and a phone call saying Hugh's mother is dying prepares the Act II, Scene 1 curtain. The end of Act II, Scene 2, with the two women left looking at each other, has been viewed as artificial. Osborne's innovations were not in form but rather in character, language, and passion which, for the most part mask the clumsy mechanics when the play is being acted.

Imagery

Two sound images from off-stage are used very effectively in *Look Back in Anger*: the church bells and Jimmy's jazz trumpet. The church bells invade the small living space and serve as a reminder of the power of the established church, and also that it doesn't care at all for their domestic peace. 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."

Language

Osborne's use of language is basically in the realistic tradition. The characters' speech and rhythms reflect their class and education. Helena is very proper and conventional and so is her speech. Cliff is humble, Colonel Redfern is calm and reflective, Alison is proper and non-judgmental and noncommittal. Jimmy Porter, though, broke with tradition. Working class characters were not new to the English stage, but previously they had been comic figures who were usually inarticulate, or even angry figures who were inarticulate and thus held back by their class and lack of language skills and could thus be pitied. Jimmy is extremely articulate and self-confident. Whatever one thinks of Jimmy, it is not going to be pity. His passion is overwhelming and he has the language to overwhelm others with that passion. His language is not polite, though one suspects it would be a great deal *more* impolite if theatre censorship had not been in effect when it was written. Jimmy can also be very humorous and even poetic, as when he describes Colonel Redfern as a "sturdy old plant left over from the Edwardian Wilderness." Indeed, the powerful use of language seems almost to be a second form of structure for the whole play, one that covers various other faults.

Look Back in Anger: Historical Context

By 1956 the British Empire had been shrinking for decades. With the granting of independence to India in 1947 after Gandhi's thirty years of struggle and the loss of African colonies and the near independence of the Commonwealth nations such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the British Empire was all but gone. The Suez crises in 1956, in which Egypt refused to renew the British-owned Suez Canal Company's concession and which resulted in a disastrous and humiliating intervention by England, simply emphasized the lack of power wielded by Britain in the Post World War II world.

There had also been incursions into the power structure since early Victorian times, with the ruling classes resisting every inch of the way. In 1945, the Labour Party won an impressive victory over the Tories, thus turning the war-time hero Winston Churchill out of office. This was a mandate for the welfare state and the end of the class system. Prosperity for all was the hope of the people. Nationalized medicine became a reality and a social welfare system was constructed. In the words of Harold Ferrar, "an era of affluence was predicted, and a meritocracy that would supersede the reign of old school ties." The new "red-brick" universities were built and greatly expanded educational opportunities, but the old power structure did not simply hand over the reins of control. Price controls and other austerity measures were imposed. By 1951 it was apparent that the land of milk-and-honey had not arrived. Winston Churchill was again voted into office.

The Church of England, too, 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 landholding class. The Church is attacked by Osborne when he has Jimmy quote the fictional Bishop of Bromley as saying 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!"

The international scene was also fraught with dangers. The Berlin crisis in 1948-1949 clearly pointed out that the peace following World War II was fragile. The Boer and Irish risings and the Palestine question further reminded the English that this new hard-won peace was not going to be easy or complete. Everyone lived under threat of instantaneous annihilation from the A-bomb. Jimmy says, "If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-noting-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus." Less than two weeks after *Look Back in Anger* opened the first airborne hydrogen bomb was exploded. In October, 1956, England's first full scale use of nuclear fuel to produce electricity went into effect at Calder Hall. The facility also manufactured plutonium for military use in developing their own H-bomb. That same year there were uprisings in Hungary and Poland and the Soviet Union put them down with military force.

In the United States following World War II there was a period of general and unprecedented prosperity. However, opportunity was "deferred" for some, especially blacks, the rural poor, and women. Movements to challenge the status quo of exclusion were beginning. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., organized a boycott of Montgomery, Alabama, public transportation as a protest against discrimination. The Supreme Court had issued an historic desegregation ruling in 1954 and in 1956 a bloc of Southern Congressmen issued a manifest pledging to use "all lawful means" to upset that ruling.

Among the best selling books in 1956 was the nonfiction *The Organization Man* by William Hollingsworth Whyte, Jr., who argued that a new collective ethic has arisen from the bureaucratization of society. "Belongingness" rather than personal fulfillment has become the ultimate need of the individual, said Whyte.

My Fair Lady opened in New York. The musical is based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* in which a working-class Cockney flower girl who, after learning the language and manners of upper-class society, is able to "pass" as one of them.

London theatre at the time has been described as "a vast desert;" "only interested in innocuous little plays which would provide a vehicle for a star to achieve a long and tedious run;" "fairly frivolous." The Arts Council of Great Britain had been formed after World War II to support the arts nationwide, but it had severely limited funds. London theatre in 1955 was commercial theatre. The most decisive success on every level was Enid Bagnold's glittering and artificial high comedy-mystery *The Chalk Garden*, a play that could have been written any time since Oscar Wilde. Terence Rattigan was represented with his plays *The Deep Blue Sea* and *Separate Tables*. Most plays were light comedies, farces, and mysteries—including Agatha Christie's *The Mouse Trap*, which has continued to enjoy successful productions. The musicals included the contemporary *Salad Days* and *The Boyfriend*, frothy pieces set in what seemed to be an idealized Edwardian England. There were fourteen American shows of one kind or another and six imports from Paris playing in the West End. London theatre remained a middle-class, middle-aged theatre. The fare was dictated by the public and that particular public liked what was given to them. They wanted something "safe."

Look Back in Anger: Critical Overview

Look Back in Anger has been recognized as a bombshell that blew up the old British theatre. However, when *Look Back in Anger* opened as the third play in the repertory of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre (a company that had been founded the year before precisely to stimulate new writing that would have contemporary relevance), it was not an immediate success. The critical reaction was mixed, but many of the critics, whether or not they liked the play, acknowledged its merits and those of its young author. Cecil Wilson in the *Daily Mail* assessed Jimmy Porter as a "young neurotic who lives like a pig," whose "bitterness produces a fine flow of savage talk, but is basically a bore because its reasons are never explained." But Wilson also said that the English Stage Company "have not discovered a masterpiece, but they *have* discovered a dramatist of outstanding promise, a man who can write with searing passion but happens in this case to have lavished it on the wrong play." John Barker, critic for the *Daily Express*, asserted that *Look Back in Anger* "is intense, angry, feverish, undisciplined. It is even crazy. But it is young, young, young." Milton Shulman of the *Evening Standard* attacked the play, saying, "It aims at being a despairing cry but achieves only the stature of a self-pitying snivel." Nevertheless, Shulman admitted that "Mr. Osborne has a dazzling aptitude for provoking and stimulating dialogue, and he draws characters with firm convincing strokes." Philip Hope-Wallace of the *Manchester Guardian* responded negatively to the play as well, calling it "a strongly felt but rather muddled first drama," but conceded that "they have got a potential playwright at last, all the same." Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times* provided a positive assessment of the play and wrote of Osborne: "Though the blinkers still obscure his vision, he is a writer of outstanding promise." The critic for the *New Statesman and Nation* maintained that although *Look Back in Anger* was "not a perfect play," "it is a most exciting one, abounding with life and vitality.... If you are young, it will speak for you. If you are middle-aged, it will tell you what the young are feeling." But it was Kenneth Tynan of the *Observer* who created the most excitement with what is perhaps the most famous review in contemporary theatre. Tynan remarked: "That the play needs changes I do not deny: it is twenty minutes too long, and not even Mr. Haigh's bravura could blind me to the painful whimsy of the final reconciliation. I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of twenty and thirty. And this figure will doubtless be swelled by refugees from other age-groups who are curious to know precisely what the contemporary young pup is thinking and feeling... It is the best young play of its decade."

In spite of the tremendous critical excitement it generated, *Look Back in Anger* was not financially successful during its first run. Part of the problem was thought to be the fact that rotating repertory—a practice new to 1950s London—was confusing to audiences who were unable to determine when any particular play was being performed. It was decided in August to cancel the other plays and run *Look Back in Anger* alone for eleven weeks, but even then the ticket sales failed to meet expenses. A twenty-five minute excerpt from the play was broadcast by BBC on October 16, and following that the play sold out for its run and a three-week run in

another theatre. A production of *Look Back in Anger* then toured England. It received the *Evening Standard Award* as best new play of 1956.

Look Back in Anger opened at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway October 1, 1957, with the original cast and received very strong reviews. It ran for 407 performances, had a second Broadway production beginning in November, 1958, and toured the United States and Canada. It received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as the best foreign play of 1957. It then played all over the world. It continues to be produced, both by professional and amateur theatre groups.

That *Look Back in Anger* still has the power to move audiences was shown by Judi Dench's 1989 revival of the play in Belfast, Northern Ireland, which starred Kenneth Branagh. Maureen Paton, in the *Daily Express*, commented: "This devastating study of a disintegrating marriage has never dated since it changed British theatre back in 1956." Damian Smyth, in the *Independent*, declared: "At the point when Jimmy prescribes for Alison's lack of authenticity that she should have a child and that it should die, when he doesn't know she is already pregnant by him, there went up an instinctive gasp of shock. That's not bad after 33 years, and it is a testimony to the strength of this production in a city not unaccustomed to shock." Michael Billington, critic for the *Guardian*, asserted that "Good plays change their meaning with time; and it is a measure of the quality of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* that it now seems a very different work to the one staged at the Royal Court in 1956." Although to Billington the play "seemed less an incendiary social drama than [a Eugene] O'Neill-like exploration of personal pain," he went on to note that "what is slightly chilling is to realise how topical many of Osborne's ideas remain."

Look Back in Anger: Essays and Criticism

Importance of This Play When First Produced and Why It's Still Dynamic Today

When *Look Back in Anger* opened in 1956 it brought a new force to the English theatre. It was written in the prevailing form of a three-act well-made realistic play, a form that had existed for at least eighty years. The fact that the play was somewhat clumsy in its construction and needed editing was not lost on the critics, even those who championed the play as a major breakthrough in English drama and a new hope for English theatre. Not only that, but *Look Back in Anger* has received many revivals and has continued to speak to audiences, to hold their attention, and even to shock them. Although the form was not innovative, this clearly is no ordinary play.

The subject matter of twentieth-century English theatre until 1956 had been polite, perhaps witty, and even elegant and glittering in the use of language; however, it did not speak to the concerns of the nation, either young or old. It was a theatre of diversion, a theatre careful not to upset the illusions of its middle-class audience, a theatre that had lost all relevance to life as it was in fact being lived in post-World War II England. John Osborne changed that. As Kenneth Tynan said in the *Observer* on December 19, 1959: "Good taste, reticence and middle-class understatement were convicted of hypocrisy and jettisoned on the spot." They were not jettisoned in polite, or even comedic, political or social analysis; they were jettisoned by an articulate, educated, furious young man who pointed out what his contemporary world was really like. It was not the world of egalitarianism and idealism that had been envisioned by the socialist intellectuals. It was a dreary world in which, as Jimmy says, "There aren't any good, brave causes left."

In spite of the broadening of opportunities for university education, the old power structure based on "the old boy" network of school and family connections was still very much in place. The old power structure was cynical and bent on its own perpetuation. The Church of England was as much a part of the

Establishment as the politicians and also seemed out of touch with the everyday realities of the people. For Jimmy, and for Osborne, the answers provided by the Church were a simple bromide that prevented people from looking at their lives and their society honestly. The "Bishop of Bromley" who is quoted by Jimmy may be a fictional person, but his call for Christians to help develop the H-Bomb was not fictional. John Osborne found a form that captured the unformed mood and discontent of the audience in 1956 England and gave it voice. Once the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) had shown a twenty-five minute segment of the play, that broad audience responded with letters asking to see the whole play.

It is not enough simply to point out that people, especially young people, are discontent. The theatre must bring that reality to life in a memorable way. Jimmy Porter is a magnificent character, and the power of his invective is certainly memorable.

John Osborne said many times that his aim was not to analyze and write about social ills but rather to make people *feel*. Jimmy Porter is not a political activist: he is a man living day-to-day in a world in which feelings and imaginative response to others has been deadened by convention. Jimmy's attacks are not against abstract ideas. He realizes what this world of dead ideas and moribund custom is doing to him and to those he loves. It is his desire to awaken them to feelings, to being truly and vibrantly alive, that drives Jimmy Porter. *Look Back in Anger* is a deeply felt drama of personal relationships, and it is because of that personal element that the play remains not only valid but also vivid to audiences today.

Jimmy's main conflict is with Alison. While the marriage is a misalliance, it is not just that of a Colonel's daughter marrying the rough-hewn commoner; it is the misalliance of someone who is alive and suffering to one who shuts off all suffering and sensitivity to the suffering of others to avoid the pain of life. They have been married for three years and their own routine has become deadening.

Jimmy's first direct attack on Alison comes barely a minute into the play when he says, "She hasn't had a thought in years! Have you?" Shortly after, he says, "All this time [have been married to this woman, this monument of non-attachment," and calls her "The Lady Pusillanimous." Alison's cool remoteness extends even to their lovemaking. Jimmy says, "Do you know I have never known the great pleasure of lovemaking when I didn't desire it myself.... She has the passion of a python." He wants to awaken her to life, with all its pain. That his passion and despair lead him to excess is undeniable: he wishes her to have a child and to have that child die. He says, "If only I could watch you face that, I wonder if you might even become a recognizable human being yourself." He later says he wants to watch her grovel in the mud. "I want to stand up in your tears, and splash about in them, and sing."

To be alive is to feel pain. Certainly, the notion that suffering validates human existence is an idea that runs through world drama from the time of Sophocles. Moreover, Jimmy recognizes that Alison's lack of emotional commitment to anything is draining him of his own zest for life. He tells of Alison's mother doing all she could to prevent the marriage, "All so that I shouldn't carry off her daughter on that old charger of mine, all tricked out and caparisoned in discredited passions and ideals! The old grey mare actually once led the charge against the old order—well, she certainly ain't what she used to be. It was all she could do to carry me, but your weight was too much for her. She just dropped dead on the way." Jimmy is fighting for his love and for his own inner life. He needs to break down Alison's neutrality,

It was Jimmy's vibrant life that attracted Alison to him in the first place. In Act II, scene 1, she describes to Helena the time she first met Jimmy: "Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and filled with the sun." In Act II, scene 2, she also shows insight when she tells her father why she married Jimmy: "I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this—this spiritual barbarian—throws down the gauntlet at me. Perhaps only another woman could understand what a challenge like that means...."

Alison does suffer the loss of her unborn child and she does return to Jimmy richer in the humility and pain of living. At the end of the play they have entered into their game of "bears and squirrels," which Alison explained earlier was a place where "[w]e could become little furry creatures with little furry brains. Full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other. A silly symphony for people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer." It seems doubtful that such a withdrawal from the world is likely to last, and it is likely that Osborne recognized the irony of the ending of the play when he wrote it. Jimmy's anger is deep and it is not new or brought on by current circumstances, either in his domestic life or society at large.

At the age of ten, Jimmy watched his idealistic father dying for twelve months, and "I was the only one who cared" He says, "You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry—angry and helpless. And I can never forget it." Jimmy's source of pain and anger seem to come from the same source as that of John Osborne who, at an early age, watched his own father die of tuberculosis.

"Good plays change their meaning with time," said critic Michael Billington in the Guardian after seeing the 1989 revival of *Look Back in Anger*. It is a measure of its worth that even forty-two years after it premiered, the play still rings true and excites as the emphasis moves from the social comment to the personal angst that was propelling it from the first.

Source: Terry W. Browne, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1998

Browne holds a Ph.D. in theatre and is the author of the book *Playwrights' Theatre*, which is a study of the company that first produced *Look Back in Anger*.

Review of Look Back in Anger (1957) in On Stage Selected Reviews From the New York Times, 1920-1970

To see *Look Back in Anger* at the Lyceum, where it opened last evening, is to agree with the British who saw the original performance. John Osborne has written the most vivid British play of the decade.

Since we have had angry young men writing bitter plays for a quarter of a century, *Look Back in Anger* will not be the landmark here that it is already in London. But Mr. Osborne is a fiery writer with a sharp point of view and a sense of theatre. Under the direction of Tony Richardson, five British actors give his savage morality drama the blessing of a brilliant performance.

Mr. Osborne is in blind revolt against the England of his time. In a squalid attic somewhere in the Midlands three young people are railing against the world. They are Jimmy Porter, a tornado of venomous phrases; his wife, who is crushed by the barrenness of their life and the wildness of her husband's vocabulary, and Cliff Lewis, an unattached young man who is the friend of both.

Being in a state of rebellion, neither Mr. Osborne nor his chief character has a program or a reasonable approach to life. From any civilized point of view, they are both impossible. But Mr. Osborne has one great asset. He can write. The words come bursting out of him in a flood of satire and invective. They are cruel, they are unfair, and they leave nothing but desolation as they sweep along.

But they are vibrant and colorful; they sting the secondary characters in the play, to say nothing of the audience. You know that something is going on in the theatre, and that the British drama has for once said a long farewell to the drawing-room, the bookshelves, the fireplace and the stairway. If Mr. Osborne is disgusted with England today, he is also disgusted with the pallor of British drama.

Not that he does not have trouble with the form. After inveighing against everyone and his wife for two acts with a certain malevolent though tolerable logic, he switches to the craft of writing a play. At the curtain of the second act Helena, a girl who despises Jimmy and is despised by him and who has persuaded his wife to go back home to escape further torture, becomes his mistress, and takes over where the beaten wife leaves off. When the curtain goes up on the third act Helena is at the ironing-board, as the wife was in the first act. Everything has been turned upside down.

This is a bit too pat. During the first scene of the third act, Mr. Osborne finds himself more preoccupied with the job of keeping a play in motion than with hurling words at the world. But in the last scene he is in control again. He is back in top form—twisting and turning, sulking and groaning, turning civil morality inside out and doing other things he hadn't oughter. He is not the man for temperate statements.

If *Look Back in Anger* recovers its stride in the last scene, it is partly because the performance has so much pressure and passion. The acting is superb; it makes its points accurately with no waste motion. As Jimmy, Kenneth Haigh absorbs Mr. Osborne's furious literary style in an enormously skillful performance that expresses undertones of despair and frustration and gives the character a basis in humanity. This wild man is no impostor.

As the tormented wife, Mary Ure succeeds in retaining the pride of an intelligent young woman by filling her silences with unspoken vitality, by being alive and by glowing with youth in every sequence. Alan Bates gives a vigorous performance in a more fluid style as the mutual friend. Vivienne Drummond plays the more ambiguous part of the intruding female with charm and guile.

Everything occurs inside a cheerless, slatternly attic room well designed by Alan Tagg. Miserable though it is, it is sturdy enough to withstand Mr. Osborne's thunderbolts. With the lightning that goes with them, they shake quite a lot of complacency out of the theatre.

Source: Brooks Atkinson, review of *Look Back in Anger* (1957) in *On Stage Selected Reviews from the New York Times, 1920-1970*, edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp 388-89.

Review of Look Back in Anger

John Osborne, an actor still in his twenties, wrote a play two or three years ago, *Look Back In Anger* (Lyceum), which has also knocked at the door—this time at the door of British drama. The knock reverberated momentarily through the English theatre, and its echo, slightly muted by its ocean passage, may now be heard on our Broadway shore.

I saw the play at its opening in London, where it was received by the leading critics with an excited gratitude which astonished as much as it pleased me. What the play represented to its English audience was the first resounding expression in the theatre not only of troubled youth but of the tensions within large segments of the middle class in England today. The play is contemporary in a way in which Rattigan on the one hand or Eliot and Fry on the other are not.

The play brings before us two young men of working-class origin in the English midlands who have a candy stand concession in a local cinema. One of them—Jimmy Porter—has had a university education and acts as a self-appointed protector to his Welsh buddy, an uncomplicated person happily free of metaphysical anguish,

Jimmy is married to a pretty girl whom he feels he almost had to steal away from her family, the kind of family whose strength and graces were grounded on England's 1914 Empire. Jimmy not only resents his wife's family and all the institutions that bred them because they led to nothing but the dust and ashes of 1945; he

also berates her for having lost the stamina presumed to be characteristic of her background, without having replaced it with any new values of her own—even romantically negative ones like his.

A fourth character, a young actress, represents that middle class which obstinately holds on to its customary traditions, and there is also the wan figure of Jimmy's father-in-law, bewildered and impotent in an England he no longer recognizes.

Jimmy Porter then is the angry one. What is he angry about? It is a little difficult at first for an American to understand. The English understand, not because it is ever explicitly stated, but because the jitters which wrack Jimmy, though out of proportion to the facts within the play, are in the very air the Englishman breathes. 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 and has led to a dreary plain where there is no fibre or substance, but only fear of scientific destruction and the minor comforts of "American" mechanics. His wife comments to the effect that "my father is sad because everything has changed, Jimmy is sad because nothing has." In the meantime Jimmy seeks solace and blows defiance through the symbolic jazz of his trumpet, while his working-class pal, though he adores Jimmy and his wife, wisely leaves the emotionally messy premises.

Immanent reality plus a gift for stinging and witty rhetoric are what give the play its importance. It is not realism of the Odets or Williams kind nor yet poetry, although it has some kinship to both. It adds up to a theatrical stylization of ideas about reality in which a perceptive journalism is made to flash on the stage by a talent for histrionic gesture and vivid elocution. While the end product possesses a certain nervous force and genuineness of feeling it is also sentimental, for it still lacks the quality of an experience digested, controlled or wholly understood.

Someone asked me if I didn't believe the play might achieve greater dimensions if American actors were to play it in a manner now associated with the generation influenced by the Group Theatre. The question reveals a misunderstanding of the play's nature. It calls for the verbal brio and discreet indication of feeling which it receives from the uniformly excellent, attractive English cast—Kenneth Haigh, Mary Ure, Allan Bates, Vivienne Drummond.

Jimmy Porter, "deepened" in another vein, would prove an intolerable nuisance, a self-pitying, verbose, sadistic jackanapes. He is a sign, not a character. We accept him because in the final count he is more amusing than real. We can look beyond him and the flimsy structure of the fable in which he is involved and surmise some of the living sources in the civilization from which he issues.

That John Osborne is attached and attuned to those sources is the virtue and hope of his talent. It may take ten years for him to achieve what most people have declared he already has.

Source: Harold Clurman, review of *Look Back in Anger* in *Has, Nation*, Volume 185, no. 12, October 19, 1957, p 272.

Look Back in Anger: Compare and Contrast

1956: The welfare state was in place in England with public ownership of the main public utilities, such as the telephone, gas, and electric production, national health was in place, and a national welfare system that provided at least minimal economic security for nearly the whole population.

Today: The public utilities have been privatized, and there have been broad reductions in public programs, including national health.

1956: The European Common Market was still an idea and movement across national boundaries was strictly controlled.

Today: The European Common Market is firmly in place, Europe is on the brink of having a common currency, and borders between countries are practically open.

1956: The Cold War between blocks of nations led by two superpowers was in full effect and nuclear annihilation was felt as a constant possibility.

Today: With the collapse of the Soviet Union the Cold War was effectively won by the West and the threat of nuclear annihilation reduced; however, there are more nations with nuclear weapons ability and the threat of annihilation is still real if not popularly perceived as such.

1956: Rock and roll music was just starting in the United States and was hardly known in England

Today: Rock and roll music has gone through many stages, with many of the most influential strains originating in England, and is the popular music of youth, as well as a powerful means of rebellion.

1956: Radio and television was provided by the state-financed British Broadcasting Corporation, which produced most of what was broadcast.

Today: Commercial radio and television compete with the BBC, satellite transmission and home satellite reception provide an immense choice of popular fare, and the major centers of production are in the United States.

1956: The newly-founded English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre provided the only major outlet for contemporary relevant drama of doubtful commercial value in London

Today: The Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company both provide major outlets for relevant contemporary drama, and there are dozens of "fringe" theatres—the equivalent of New York's Off Broadway and Off Off Broadway—that produce new plays.

Look Back in Anger: Topics for Further Study

Research the "Welfare State" programs and policies in post-World War II England. Why would these not satisfy someone like Jimmy Porter?

Compare August Strindberg's *The Father or Dance of Death* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* with *Look Back in Anger* for both style and content.

Research the decline of the British Empire. How would that decline affect England itself and people as different as Jimmy Porter and Colonel Redfern?

Is Jimmy Porter an "angry young man" with a purpose, or is he merely a tiresome, cruel whiner?

Does rock music of the 1960s and 1970s contain any of the themes of *Look Back in Anger*? Does the rock music of today contain any of those themes?

Look Back in Anger: Media Adaptations

Look Back in Anger was adapted in 1958 as a film by John Osborne and Nigel Kneale. It was produced by Woodfall Films, a company formed by John Osborne and Tony Richardson. It was directed by Tony Richardson, and starred Richard Burton and Claire Bloom. Available on video.

A second film was made in 1980, directed by Lindsay Anderson (a former artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre). It starred Malcolm McDowell and Lisa Banes. Available on video.

The 1989 revival directed Judi Dench for a very limited run in Belfast was filmed for Thames Television. The television version was directed by David Jones and starred Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson. Available on video.

Look Back in Anger: What Do I Read Next?

The Entertainer is Osborne's second play, produced by The English Stage Company in 1957. Osborne offers the outdated and dying English music hall and the main character, second-rate performer Archie Rice, as a metaphor for England.

Luther is Osborne's psychological study of Martin Luther as a private man, rather than as a public religious figure and instigator of the Protestant Reformation.

Inadmissible Evidence is the product of a more mature artistic mind and evidenced that Osborne could successfully break traditional dramaturgical rules. It picks up Osborne's chronicle of the state of contemporary England where *Look Back in Anger* left off.

A Better Class of Person is Osborne's autobiography up to the production of *Look Back in Anger*.

Almost a Gentleman is Osborne's second volume of autobiography and begins with his fame as a playwright that followed the production of *Look Back in Anger*.

Roots is a play by Arnold Wesker produced by the English Stage Company. It deals with a young woman of the rural working class finding her own voice and is an example of the many plays dealing realistically with contemporary England that followed *Look Back in Anger*.

Plays for Public Places are short plays written by Howard Brenton in 1971 which deal with England from a generation after the time of *Look Back in Anger*.

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen is a realistic play written in 1879 that focuses on a marriage in which a wife is seen as a possession and finally asserts her selfhood and independence. It also deals with the stultifying effects of social conventions and structures.

The Father, written by August Strindberg in 1887, is a realistic play which deals with extreme marital stress which results in the husband's mental instability.

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