

**The Futility of Anger in John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger***

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*“There is no place for people like that any longer – in sex, or politics, or anything.*

*That’s why he is so futile” (Osborne, 96)*

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* depicts the disorientation of the post-war British generation. With the loss of the empire, consolidated by The Suez crisis In 1956, and the rise of America, Britain was "struggling to find a place in the new world order"(Royal Lyceum Theatre Company 3). Jimmy Porter, the play's protagonist, encapsulates this inertia in his frustrated confrontation of sex, politics and class. Yet, despite being the only character to directly challenge 1950s society, Helena concludes, "There is no place for people like that any longer – in sex, or politics, or anything. That's why he is so futile" (Osborne, 96). This statement represents the confusion of Jimmy's generation; burdened by Britain's dynamic and purposeful history, he becomes trapped in a state of reminiscence, harking back to Imperialist Britain and his childhood. At face value, his anger towards 1950s disillusionment is attractive, giving Alison a momentary sense of purpose in her challenge of the class system. Yet, ultimately Jimmy's anger is futile; acting out of retaliation towards his mother and reminiscing over imperialist Britain, his displaced rage undermines his socio-political criticisms. The play subsequently becomes a painfully realistic reflection of the audience's own reality, made all the more poignant by Jimmy's (and the audience's) ultimate helplessness.

Initially, Jimmy's anger is engaging for both Alison and Helena, bringing passion and incentive to their lives. Alison describes Jimmy as "the knight in shining armour"(Osborne 44) as he swept her off her feet and away from the comfort of her higher class. It is the fact his "armour didn't really shine much"(44) which draws Alison to him and all that his lower class represents. Subsequently, their marriage forces the breaking down of class barriers and a challenge to Alison's parents' conventional and classist values. Although Jimmy's rage becomes overbearing for Alison, she continues to honour her initial pledge of marriage, reminding her father that she is far from "sitting on the fence"(68), and questioning "I

married him, didn't I."(68). She refuses to be labelled as abstinent, embracing Jimmy's defiance as a way of cutting through the lethargy of her generation. Alison's statement that her relationship with Cliff is "not exactly a consuming passion"(40) consolidates her initial attraction to Jimmy, as despite Cliff's obvious fondness for Alison, he lacks the zest and "passion"(40) which Jimmy holds. Similarly for Helena, Jimmy's controversial nature is alluring against the backdrop of a lost generation. She is initially "shocked"(95) by Alison's "harsh"(95) opinions of Jimmy, but then claims she finds them "rather comforting"(95). Therefore, both Helena and Alison mistake Jimmy's anger as a form of empowerment, in which they both feel "comfort[ed]"(95) by his fearless provocation of life. Osborne uses a virgin motif, whereby Jimmy calls Helena an "Evil-minded little virgin"(77) and alludes to Alison as "suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity"(58) considering she has not seen someone die (yet). This motif of innocence and purity concludes Jimmy as the captivating corrupter – his anger offering a refreshingly raw insight into 1950s society for the two girls. The audience understands both Alison and Helena's appeal towards Jimmy and his invigorating anger at the beginning of the play, especially in the anticlimactic context of post war Britain.

Osborne satirically develops Alison's intrigue for Jimmy in her romanticising of the simplistic life she has chosen to lead married to Jimmy. Alison responds to Helena's comment about going "down to the bathroom every time [she] wants water for something"(38) with the rhetorical question "It is primitive, isn't it?"(38). She romanticises her lifestyle with Jimmy, as although their life is far from the comforts of her upper class upbringing, the adjective "primitive"(38) feels exaggerated, connoting savagery and barbaric behaviour. Therefore, her marriage to Jimmy embodies nothing more than a glorified embrace of poverty. Ultimately, Osborne concludes Alison's rebellious attraction to Jimmy

and his own anger as futile, as their localised subversion of class boundaries fails to amount to anything but the creation of a fantastical world of bears and squirrels.

Jimmy inhabits a liminal space, in which he is unable to escape or change the lethargy of society. It is Alison and Helena's acknowledgment of this fact which leads to their emotional defeat by the end of the play. Helena is ultimately compelled to leave Jimmy, exclaiming "I can't take part – in all this suffering. I can't!"(99), whilst Alison breaks down in tears. Initially it is Jimmy's anger which allows the two to feel empowered to retaliate against society, however it is also his anger which becomes the catalyst for their breakdown. Throughout the play, Osborne emphasises Alison's composure, despite Jimmy's provoking attitude. Helena is surprised by Alison's poised and impassive response to her relationship with Jimmy, claiming she "would have been outraged, but [Alison wasn't]"(95). Yet, Alison surrenders to Jimmy's taunting, concluding the play exclaiming she wants "to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile!"(101). Perhaps it is her miscarriage which stimulates her emotion, confirming Jimmy's quite literal statement that one must watch "somebody die"(58) in order to lose their virginity. Regardless, her reference to futility suggests her acknowledgment of his ineffectual anger – yet in contrast to her original invigorated reaction to his rage, she feels powerless. Therefore, Jimmy's anger and Alison's response highlights the helplessness of post-war society, unable to escape the depressive wake of World War 2 and colonialism.

The play finishes pathetically, depicting Alison and Jimmy embracing the relief of a fictional world. Prior to Alison's miscarriage, the playful use of the couples' terms of endearment, "beautiful, great-eyed squirrel"(32) and a "jolly super bear"(32) meant everything would "[seem] all right suddenly"(33). However, Alison and Jimmy's attempt to retreat into their mystical world in the last scene feels disheartening. Jimmy's attempt to

create a reassuringly childlike narrative of “honey and nuts”(102) is undermined by his ironic tone. He warns Alison of the “cruel steel traps lying about everywhere”(103 – a comment on the inhospitable nature of 1950s society. As Aleks Sierz states, “The bruising contradictions of the couple’s love and hate are resolved not in the real world, but in the world of fantasy”(Sierz, 35). Therefore, beyond challenging social norms through his marriage, Jimmy’s anger fails to inspire further social change. Despite his attempt to retreat into fantasy, he remains tormented by the troubles of his society – unable to escape or confront reality. In turn, Jimmy’s anger feels futile, as he fails to reach any real epiphany or cathartic conclusion which would allow for the rejuvenation of the post-war generation.

Any sense of Jimmy’s anger sparking societal progression is undermined by his fixation on his childhood, consequently acting out of resentment towards his mother. Osborne correlates the increase of Jimmy’s anger towards 1950s Britain and his own processing of his father’s death and mother’s neglect. Thus, Jimmy’s socio-political anger is displaced and subsequently justified by his own self-pity. He is trapped in the past, quite literally looking back in anger, as he recalls feeling “angry and helpless”(Osborne 59), watching his father die. His subsequent child-like provocation of his landlord, Alison and the audience is a means for gaining the control he never had as a child. Jimmy claims that Miss Dury, his landlord “gets more than enough out of us for this place every week”(20). He is trapped under the landlord’s control, thus perhaps the haste with which he accuses Miss Dury of exploiting her tenants stems from his intolerance of feeling helpless. He retaliates playing his trumpet, provoking Miss Dury’s reaction as Alison worries that she “will ask [them] to go soon”(39). Jimmy’s self-sabotaging behaviour – an instinctual retaliation against feelings of defencelessness as a child, can also be seen in his infuriation towards Alison. As Izmir states, “Jimmy’s rage...against his mother on a personal level is displaced by an expression of intimidation,

terror, humiliation and control directed particularly toward his wife”(2020). Jimmy’s inflammatory question, “She hasn’t had a thought for years! Have you?”(Osborne 58) mirrors his frustration with his mother. “All [Jimmy’s mother] could think about was the fact she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side of all things”(58) – a flippant and self-obsessed thought, contrary to the care and support required of her from both Jimmy and his father. Alison bears the brunt of Jimmy’s grudge against his mother, compromising the sincerity in the socio-political message of his anger. At face value, his questioning of Alison’s opinions is a critique of the apathetic upper class. Yet how can Jimmy successfully develop this attack if his anger remains a reaction to his own childhood trauma? He explains that he “was the only one who cared”(58), feeling the “despair and the bitterness, the sweet, sickly smell of a dying man”(59). This evocative description, consolidated in the richness of the adjectives “sweet”(59) and “sickly”(59), reminds the audience of the impact of Jimmy’s father’s death. He touches on his trauma, saying “(to himself) I seem to spend my life saying goodbye”(89), as Cliff announces he is leaving. Again, Jimmy references his father’s death in accordance with Alison’s miscarriage, stating “it isn’t [his] first loss”(98). Jimmy’s hostility can be read as either a cycle of self-pity or a reaction from a traumatised individual. Either way, his inability to escape his childhood determines the futility of his anger, limiting his ability to orchestrate socio-political change.

Whilst Jimmy looks back at his childhood in anger, he looks back to Britain’s imperial past in fondness. In his acknowledgment of his country’s vibrant and purposeful colonial past, he inflicts his anger on the now disorientated Britain. Yet Jimmy’s glorification of a past long gone feels flippant in the face of post-war Britain, desperate to re-identify itself in a modern world. As Pritha Biswass states, Jimmy was “too young to have fought in World War II”, therefore he had no option but to “look back in a kind of muffled anger on the rhetoric of

a diminished empire”(Biswass, 380). Jimmy vindicates Biswass’s criticism in the statement that his “generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer”(Osborne 89). Jimmy fails to provide any solution or incentive to pull the nation out of bewilderment following the fall of the empire in his statement of the loss of “good causes”(89). Osborne concludes his anger as futile, unavailing against the backdrop of his helpless nation. Jimmy uses orientalist rhetoric, specifically in reference to the Jewish term “Hallelujah”(9), in his exclamation, “I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out hallelujah!...Hallelujah! I’m alive!” (8, 9). Therefore, although at face value his appeal can be read as a cry for society ‘to feel’, his allusions to imperialism complicate his desires. Jimmy draws on a more spirited time for Britain, perhaps so far as to suggest that in order to end post – war inertia, one must turn to history. However, with India and Pakistan’s declaration of independence in 1947 and Britain’s failure to assert imperialist power over the Suez Canal, Jimmy’s nostalgia seems flippant – drawing on what is now an unrealistic representation of international relations. Despite Jimmy’s anti-establishment values, he expresses sympathy for Alison’s father, Colonel Redford. He states that he “can understand how her Daddy must have felt when he came back from India”(11), referring to his imperialist community as “the old Edwardian brigade”(11) in their “little world”(11). Jimmy’s tone remains disdainful, mocking his class in his reference to Redford as “Daddy” and use of the patronising adjective “little”(11). Yet he abstains from delivering a verbal attack on Alison’s father, as he does for her mother – calling her a “well-bred guzzler”(52). Instead Jimmy justifies Colonel Redford’s nostalgia, imagining his life was “pretty tempting”(11). He states that “if you’ve no world of your own, it’s rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else’s”(11) – vicariously fulfilling his cravings for a sense of purpose. However, his allusion to past events as a means of highlighting the flaws of the present seem worthless, especially considering the unattainable and now outdated

characteristics of imperial Britain. Therefore, Jimmy's anger is futile, ringing hollow in its failure to offer an innovative solution to a lacklustre generation.

Paradoxically, the insignificance of his anger is precisely the reason for the play's resonance. Osborne raises a mirror up to 1950s society, exposing a painfully true depiction of modern life without resolution. Jimmy's inability to direct his anger constructively serves to intensify the drama's effect. Addressing the post-war inertia experienced by society, he critiques class, politics and sex, yet fails to offer any solution. Edgar responds to the play claiming, "Surely no British play of the twentieth century can have so assuredly and rapidly taken its time by the throat"(Edgar 137). Osborne takes the audience "by the throat"(137), addressing both the disillusionment of the lower and upper class through the eyes of Jimmy and Colonel Redford. Alison's comment that her father is "hurt because everything is changed"(Osborne 70), whilst "Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same"(70), addresses the divide in British society without finding a harmonious resolution. Jimmy remains "a lost cause"(101), retaliating against society, whilst Colonel Redford is left without a daughter again. The fact Jimmy remains just as unfulfilled as Alison's father consolidates the purposelessness nature of Jimmy's anger. Yet, Osborne uses Jimmy's anger as a wakeup call against the perils of a purposeless society. Jimmy's palpable discontentment leaves the 1950s audience grappling with the harrowing realities of their everyday life; as Jimmy attempts to give Alison a lesson in feeling, so too does Osborne to the audience.

Osborne appreciates the notion of a play in his depiction of Alison and Jimmy's squirrel and bear analogy – as Sierz comments "Fiction heals what reality cannot. It is, after all, a play"(Sierz 35). Osborne's embrace of the play's fictional nature allows him to create a startlingly "angry young man"(33). As Dan Rebellato states "the verbal aggression of Jimmy Porter is a symbolic announcement that the audience is to be confronted and challenged, not

wooded and flattered”(Rebellato, 2017). By contextualising his anger in a realistic setting, Jimmy’s character is humanised and subsequently relatable. He begins the play stating that “Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening”(Osborne 10). The fact his anger derides from the passivity of a “Sunday evening”(10) feels disconcerting for the audience as Osborne uncovers the dissatisfaction underpinning everyday life. The play’s ending is agonising for the audience as Osborne leaves Jimmy’s anger futile and unanswered. Instead, he hands the audience the reins in his unresolved confrontation of society.

Ultimately *Look Back in Anger* marks the turning point in British playwriting, challenging Osborne’s own society and the purpose of theatre. Never had an audience been so aggressively confronted with their own reality; as Rebellato confirms, it successfully showcased “Osborne’s blazing determination to bring emotion back into the centre of cultural life”(Rebellato 32). It is the futility of Jimmy’s anger which stimulates the audience’s discomfort, as Osborne leaves them unnerved and unsupported in the face of their own lethargy. Kenneth Tynann claimed he doubted “if [he] could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*”(qtd in Ellis), whilst Milton Shulman reduced the play to “a self-pitying snivel”(qtd in Ellis). Yet, regardless of the play’s mixed reactions, the impassioned reviews are testament to both Osborne and Jimmy’s intentions – to evoke feeling in the muffled post-war generation.

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