

The Genesis of Being an Angry Young Man: A Contextual Analysis of *Look back in Anger*

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### The Genesis of Being an Angry Young Man: A Contextual Analysis of *Look Back in Anger*

The term 'angry young men' represents a group of British playwrights and writers who rose to prominence in the 1950s, primarily from the working and middle classes. Among the group's prominent members was John Osborne. In the play by John Osborne, the concept of the young angry man takes center stage as a portrayal of the societal frustrations, personal struggles, and generational conflicts faced by the youth of the time. Set in post-war Britain, the play presents a vivid exploration of the genesis of being a young, angry man within the context of its characters and their complex relationships. The protagonist, Jimmy Porter, personifies the archetype of the young, angry man. His anger is a manifestation of his disillusionment with a society that seems stagnant and complacent. Jimmy's anger is rooted in his perceived lack of opportunity and his inability to escape the constraints of his lower-middle-class existence. This feeling of entrapment fuels his resentment towards authority figures, institutions, and even his own wife, Alison. The economic and social backdrop of the play plays a significant role in shaping Jimmy's anger. The stifling post-war environment and the widening class divide contribute to the frustrations of the youth. The societal aspect of the play and Jimmy Porter's portrayal as a violent husband are the two narrative motifs that critics use to judge it. But through a contextual analysis of John Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger*, this paper explores the

complex origins of the 'angry young man' phenomenon. The study looks at Jimmy's personal life, the condition of women in society, and psychological factors that helped the 'angry young man' character form in the middle of the 20th century, in addition to sociopolitical and cultural aspects.

Angry Young Men was a term apparently invented by the press to describe, firstly, various British dramatists who started writing plays in the mid-1950s and then, less commonly, certain novelists of the same period. They mostly demonstrate how the 'Angry Young Men' were, of course, angry and usually belonged to the working class. They criticize the socially orthodox, boring and miserable 1950s British society. They weren't especially political, but they did support destroying the present-day establishment. Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* reveals the isolation of the young generation from society, religion, the institution of middle-class marriage, the individual past, and the idea of Englishmen. Their estrangement is a direct result of these five forms of isolation. Osborne's plays capture the optimism, cynicism, wistfulness, and unsolved conflict between the post-war youth and the universe. His plays are all about the breakdown of the individual and the family. Osborne is labeled as an 'angry young man'. All incidents and events in the play are mainly related to four characters. Jimmy, the protagonist; Alison, Jimmy's wife; Cliff, a friend of Jimmy; Helena, a friend of Jimmy and Alison. Jimmy, the 'angry young man,' is not satisfied with his life and society. The play shows anger against people and things around him. Jimmy and Cliff belong to the working class, while Jimmy's wife belongs to an upper-middle-class family. The cause of Jimmy's dissatisfaction is the belonging of Jimmy and Alison's different classes. Throughout the play, we find him fighting against a sense of alienation and an identity crisis.

*Look Back in Anger* is a play that appeared in a time of crucial transition from Britain's Victorian past into the modern twentieth century. Jimmy is primarily concerned with leading a whole and authentic life throughout the play. This is an emotional and experiential life. He believes that his home ties to Alison are preventing him from leading such a life. Because she has not experienced the same level of extreme sorrow as he has, he feels that she was not born into the actual world. Jimmy's outburst of hatred and anger is an expression of his suppressed feelings as well as his need for survival in an otherwise dull and boring world. That anger became a symbol of the rebellion against the political and social malaise of British culture. His anger is destructive to those around him, and the psychological violence of the play received a great deal of criticism.

The play is commonly perceived as a manifestation of post-war frustration, disillusionment, and rage. The theatrical production provides us with a brief insight into the prevailing atmosphere and disposition of England in the aftermath of World War II. Jimmy Porter is widely recognized as the representative figure of the post-war age. The individual experiences a sense of alienation from British society due to a perceived temporal displacement. The individual is currently grappling with the repercussions of their previous experiences. He does not share the same thoughts and feelings as his contemporaries in the play. Helena says about Jimmy, "There is no place for his people like that any longer in sex or politics or anything. That's why he is so futile. Sometimes when I listen to him, I feel he thinks he is in the middle of French Revolution" (Osborne 75). He is like a young neurotic full of intellectual frustration who lives like a pig and furiously find the whole world is out of step except himself.

Critics argue that Jimmy embodies the archetype of a rebellious figure within the context of the French Revolution, which is widely regarded as a pivotal moment in the trajectory of

modern society. During the course of the French Revolution, the individual in question had a sense of detachment from the individuals in their immediate environment. The individual's innovative ideas are unable to establish a connection with the reconstructive mode of thinking. He adopts a negative perspective when evaluating many aspects of his society. Consequently, he strives to dismantle established social structures and moral norms based on his own set of values and ideas. Following World War II, the British youth exhibited a trans-formative disposition towards the reconstruction of institutions and social ideals. The divergence between the illusory realm and the tangible realm engenders a sense of disillusionment among the British youth, ultimately giving rise to feelings of dissatisfaction and subsequent resentment towards prevailing social conventions. Ibrahim Yerebakan gives emphasis on this matter in his “Osborne's Female Portraits in *Look Back in Anger*”:

One of the best indications of his isolation from the accepted social norms is that his higher education did not give him a position in which his qualifications would be useful. He feels lonely and frustrated by the unfulfilled promises of the welfare state. He has no confidence in any of the established institutions because he finds in them a real hypocrisy and insincerity. (82)

His frustration and anger are directed towards the welfare state and its systems due to the hypocrisy exhibited by all the institutions and values in his life. The expectations of the new youth for the upward social mobility determine the politics of the period. In this regard, the postwar era witnessed a redesign of the education system in accordance with Keynesian economics and the changing requirements of the consumerist middle class. The government-established new universities in the postwar era produced a large number of students unable to

achieving upper-class status. Bosede Funke Afolayan emphasizes the role of the education system in the alienation of the post-war youth:

Jimmy Porter criticises the society that gives him an upper class education but does not provide him the necessary relevance in the society. He refers to his university as ‘white-tile’ not ‘red brick’. ‘White-tile’ is an image used to represent the newly created universities by the Mass Educational Act of 1944. This welfarist state is attacked by Jimmy Porter. ‘Red-brick’, on the other hand, represents Oxford and Cambridge-the Etonian Old School boy tradition which connects with the rich. (134)

Osborne's character verbally assaults the newly established universities following the 1944 Mass Educational Act. He is dissatisfied with government decisions especially the new higher education system. Emine Tecimer defends Jimmy Porter's unhappiness and rage because of education:

Jimmy Porter is regarded as an embodiment of the frustrations of a particular age and class especially the generation of young men who have been expecting to leave behind their lower class origins by using higher education. Jimmy is educated beyond his social roots; however, he cannot get what he expects from his education. Despite his university degree he has worked as an advertising salesman, a neophyte journalist, and a vacuum-cleaner salesman. Then he starts to run a sweet stall for a living which is also not a proper job for a graduate man. (11)

Tecimer reveals that Jimmy hopes to change his lifestyle using the school system that provides higher knowledge. The protagonist views education as an ‘elevator’ for social advancement. Jimmy struggles to secure a job despite a higher degree, leading to disappointment after working hard for a better life. The drama explores the frustration brought about by the failure of the new

education regulation by the labour Party through the protagonist. Osborne evaluates the government's new education policies, which aim to provide university students with new opportunities. The current scenario falls short of higher education students' expectations for a better life, contributing to the frustration of post-war youth.

He is experiencing feelings of annoyance and disillusionment as a result of society's callousness as well as the fact that he has not been handled in an appropriate manner. Alison and his friend Cliff both irritate him with their general lack of interest and cerebral sluggishness, which causes him to feel agitated as a result of their behavior. The callousness of the existing society is brought into stark relief by Jimmy's long vicious speeches, such as, "Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm- that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice, cry out, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I'm alive" (Osborne 15). In this context Tom Milne expresses in John Taylor's article "John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger: A Case Book*", "Jimmy Porter is devoid of any neurosis or self-pity, and the play is summoned up in his cry against a negative world." (Taylor 192-93). The lack of human emotions such as love, empathy, and tolerance at that period is seen in Jimmy's expression of anger and bitterness when he laments: "Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no conviction and no enthusiasm" (Osborne 17). There is no one to give him response anywhere. He is annoyed and irritated by the indifferent nature and passive attitude of Alison and Cliff.

Jimmy Porter experiences a state of isolation from religious institutions, including the church and the monarchy. He creates several verbal attacks on the monarchy and the church to get redemption from his inner anger against established traditional norms. Whenever the 'angry young man' sees or hears something connected to religion or tradition, he gets very angry. The

tolling of the church bell elicits a strong sense of anger within him. Jimmy express his anger by these lines:

Jimmy. Oh Hello! Now the bloody bells have started! Wrap it up, will you? Stop ringing those bells! There's somebody going crazy in here! I don't want to hear them!

(Osborne25)

His anger against the bells of the church indicates the anger of the post-war British young generation against the established values related to the church and the traditional monarchy system.

There exists a correlation between the past, the present, and the future within the context of human existence. The potential jeopardy of an individual's personal identity arises when they experience a loss of their past. The play allows critics to gain insight into Jimmy's estrangement from his own history. "He's (Cliff) the only friend I seem to have left now. People go away. You go away. You never see them again. I can remember lots of names-men and women when I was at school-Watson, Roberts, Davies, Jenny, Madeline, Hugh....." (Osborne 33).He can remember the name of his past friend, but he is now disappointed and frustrated because of their absence in his present life. The lack of connection with his past makes him alienated from his current world. So the retrospective approach of him in a mournful mode plainly mirrors his frustration appearing from his past. Tim Armstrong tries to show the consequences of separation on the social and personal level in *Modernism*:

What is produced in the post-war world is a disrupted temporarily in which the dynamic relation between the past, the present and the future, which we saw as intrinsic to



modernity, is forced to co-exist with elements of frozen time: a lost past; a traumatic present; a blighted future.(42)

Jimmy has a desire to make connection among his past, present and future. He is traumatized at present time in the brutal society and unable to think about his precarious future.

*Look Back in Anger* presents the invectives of the protagonist Jimmy Porter. Jimmy's anger is representative of Osborne's critique of the feminization of society in the 1950's, 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" (Osborne 9). Jimmy is a man of dualities; he is a person who is angry and bitter, but at the same time, he is also one who is soft and intense in his love. Osborne makes an effort to portray Jimmy as a character that is strong and masculine. It is like his attitude is love in one hand and hatred in the other. Some critics argued that his attempt was ultimately misogynistic. His perspective on women is profoundly sexist. Consequently, it is entirely justifiable to characterize him as a misogynistic individual who holds prejudiced views against women. His marriage to Alison bears all the hallmarks of an abusive relationship, in which Jimmy's behavior is characterized by the bullying, belittling, and demeaning of his wife. Certain proponents of Jimmy argue that he symbolizes the disorganized structure of post-industrialized Britain, the psychological and social condition of the younger generation after World War II, who are perpetually dissatisfied and discontented with the current social order and find fault with it. He is the victim of the society's cruelty. Given his misogynistic views, there are also some critics who oppose him. Some critics stand against him as he is misogynist. This paper explores how both things work in the form of his becoming an 'angry young man'.

Jimmy Porter belongs to a generation that has lost sight of its glorious past, is presently enduring a dull and uncertain present, and is looking forward to a purposeless future. As a result, a generation marked by disengagement, a lack of goals and direction, a lack of purpose, bewilderment, and hopelessness was produced. Because of his frustrations and ennui, Porter was described as an 'angry young man'. He constantly displays a deep sense of unhappiness with society expectations and social divisions. He is always complaining about the injustice, corruption, and irregularities in society. He says that there are 'no beliefs, no convictions, and no enthusiasm'. He is shown to be only a helpless person to take any action, as we witness him repeatedly and angrily insulting and blaming the system, society, and even his close friends and family. He fails to share his ideals with others and is unable to ease the suffering of himself or the members of his class. He feels helpless and angry because he believes that society is dictating and correcting his values and life goals due to this trauma, which is the only reason he is a member of the middle class. He was facing many questions that remain unanswered, and the main question was about his existence and identity.

Jimmy is frustrated because, despite having a bachelor's degree, he has been a Hoover salesman, an advertising salesperson, and a novice journalist, none of which have been satisfying careers. He and his friend Cliff own and operate a sweet store, which Jimmy sees as an unsuitable occupation for a university graduate. Hugh, Jimmy's friend, leaves England to start a new life in China because he is convinced that the prevailing conditions in England are not conducive to his aspiration. Another reason for Jimmy's dissatisfaction is that he is leading a routine, monotonous life that offers no thrills in life, no excitement, and no variety. He condemns the so-called 'posh' newspaper, whether 'Conservative' or 'Liberal', for the kind of gossip and conjectures they publish. He grumbles about the monotony of Sunday: always the same ritual,

reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing. Berkowitz has stated that "inability to fulfil the anticipations is a frustration" (16). This is why Jimmy is frustrated, because no matter how hard he tries, he cannot change his social class. Despite the fact that he has a degree from a university, it fails to live up to his expectations, and he is unable to find a job that is adequate for him to support himself. So, Bode clarifies that, "Jimmy tried to become a middle-class but he failed" (331). Consequently, this has engendered a state of frustration and transformed him into an individual character driven by anger towards nearly all establishments. Throughout the play, Jimmy's character undergoes a transformation into someone who opposes the established order. This is evident as he progressively reveals his discontent towards political systems, religious institutions, and various other societal constructs.

A lot of psychologists think that anger is a feeling that can range from mild irritation to rage and fury that can make people act aggressively. One could say that Sigmund Freud's Freudian theory is the first theory that tries to explain what anger and violence are all about. Freud claimed that aggressive urges could occur in the absence of sexual conflict: The ego hates, abhors and pursues with intent to destroy all objects which are for it a source of painful feelings, without taking into account whether they mean to it frustration of sexual satisfaction or gratification of the needs of self-preservation (Jamil 167-169). Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of *Look Back in Anger*, is frustrated and angry mainly because of the passivity and insensibility of the people whom he loves. He struggles with feelings of isolation and a lack of purpose. The characters in the drama have difficulty communicating with one another. Jimmy's conduct with Allison and Cliff is arrogant. This communication malfunction is a psychological barrier that causes misunderstandings, frustration, and emotional strife. Jimmy conveys his rage with language that could almost be interpreted as biblical. Throughout the play, Jimmy use the term

‘blood’ to describe his relationships. ‘Blood’ signifies violence and sacrifice. Jimmy feels as if he has sacrificed a significant portion of his existence to his relationship with Alison. Jimmy feels as though he has shed his blood for his mundane domestic existence. Additionally, he has a violent disposition towards Alison. Although there is no depiction of actual physical violence in the play, the frequent use of the term ‘blood’ demonstrates the profound psychological hostility that Allison and Jimmy had for one another. In *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's exploration of these psychological elements provides a window into the characters' inner lives and the societal pressures and personal conflicts that shape their emotions and actions. The play is a classic example of British kitchen sink drama, known for its gritty portrayal of working-class life and its psychological depth.

A contemporary reading of *Look Back in Anger* includes a reading of sexism in which Jimmy's anger and hatred is directed at women in general. Jimmy attacks on Alison and her middle-class demeanour, even though he loves her and has been devoted to her because she is his loving wife. One of the critic Guy Dumur points out that *Look Back in Anger* deals with “the marriage between young people of different classes” (12). Alison has entered into a marriage with Jimmy, an individual from a lower socioeconomic background, of her own volition, against her parents' objections. As soon as she saw Jimmy in a party, she fell in love with him and made up her mind to marry him. Jimmy married her to seek revenge on her and her family, who are the representatives of the upper middle class. Suddenly, a rift has taken place in their love relationship. He started rebuffing, insulting, and scolding her. His main intention was to exasperate and tease her, but she endured everything without saying or presenting anything against her husband. In their four-year married life, Alison seldom got a piece of happiness. If

Jimmy is considered as Hamlet, Alison will be poor Ophelia. Whenever her father speaks to her, she tells him that Jimmy is not except like Shelley.

Allison. Oh yes. Some people do actually marry for revenge. People like Jimmy, anyway. Or perhaps he should have been another Shelley, and can't understand now why I'm not another Mary and you are not William Godwin....For twenty years, I had 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?  
(Osborne 75)

Alison embodies the societal norms and obstacles encountered by women in that particular time period. Alison is shown as a youthful woman hailing from a socioeconomically moderate family who is the representation of the societal constraints and prescribed gender roles imposed upon women throughout the 1950s.

Jimmy frequently expresses his anger at his enduring spouse, Alison. To irritate Alison, he uses several times low-bred language against her father, mother, and brother. He feels disconnected from the rest of his family and felt that no one else cared. He says to Alison when he was not aware that she was pregnant. "If only something... something would happen to you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child, and it would die" (Osborn 37). Jimmy experiences feelings of impotence as a result of Alison's superior social standing, and he is unable to arouse passionate sexual feelings in his wife. Jimmy feels suspicion about her chastity, though they never have any physical intercourse after their marriage. She is mocked by him in terms of virginity. She says "he actually taunted me with my virginity. He was angry about it, as if I had deceived him in some strange way. He seemed to think an untouched woman would defile him." (Osborne45). She encapsulates the challenges faced by women who were compelled

to adhere to prevailing social expectations and assume a subordinate role in their marital relationships. Jimmy also attacks Helena, Alison's friend, because she has middle-class manners. She deserves to be hated, as it is seen that she betrays her friend Alison; however, she is a guest at their house. Jimmy accuses Allison of having been influenced by Helena. Also his hatred for them is shown when he says about Mrs. Red Fern as “an over freed, over privileged, old Bitch” (Osborn 68). He showed his hatred by saying about his wife Alison, her mother and Helena that, “They represent predatory, selfish, ignorant and insensitive society” (Osborne 72). Jimmy hates their upper class in spite of that his mother and his wife’s relatives belong to this class. He blames them to make him a man of no existence and identity. He was ten years old when his father died. His mother who belongs to upper class was indifferent to him and his father. The death of his father greatly influenced his personality as there was no one to care him.

Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, was an 'angry young man' from the 'lost generation' who is disillusioned, unhappy and crying for little affection from the people around him. He was making an effort to find his identity and his place in a culture that was utterly opposed to his viewpoint. He casts doubt on the conventional characteristics. He feels resentful and estranged from society, religion, and his loved ones as a result of his fruitless quest to define his identity. Jimmy has gained knowledge from his pain and is aware that everyone gains knowledge from hardship. It can be recognized that Jimmy does not become angry and attack anyone randomly without having a reason for it. Jimmy, for instance, gets upset and criticises politicians and establishments. Jimmy needs Allison’s assistance and sharing in order to work through the issues with her; this is a right that every husband and wife have for one another. However, Alison's carelessness instills anger in Jimmy. Also, Jimmy's main anger is directed at Alison's mother because she is the one who has the most middle-class manners, which

Jimmy is against. However, Jimmy hates the middle-class manners of Alison's mother, but he still has sympathy for his father, as he is a wise, calm, and experienced man. It shows that Jimmy does not attack anyone without having a reasonable justification. Jimmy also attacks Helena. She deserves to be hated, as it is seen that she betrays her friend Alison; however, she is a guest at their house. So, this reveals the middle-class manner in which they are betrayal and hypocritical people. He becomes angry with his dear friend Cliff because Cliff is not well literate and is somehow ignorant, as he reads too slowly. Here again, it shows Jimmy's quality as a rebellion leader; he indirectly focuses on reading and studying by the lower classes to solve their problems. Jimmy knows that reading and studying are the best weapons to change their terrible life into a better one, and it makes them wiser and more awake so that other people may not be able to take advantage of their ignorance, misguide them, and mistreat them.

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