

Theme of Class Conflict in the Plays of John Osborne: A Critical Overview of “Look Back In Anger”

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Abstract

This paper discusses about the theme of class conflict in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) which is widely regarded as a transformative work in modern British theatre. Osborne presented a criticism of post-war British society via the character of Jimmy Porter who is a working-class yet university-educated protagonist. Jimmy Porter's misery and fury capture was presented in this play along with the disenchantment of a generation unable to balance its intellectual aspirations with its social reality. This paper aims at analysing the themes being used for Class conflicts through the character of Jimmy Porter throughout the play as Jimmy meets the strict British class system; the play described his existential and emotional battle in the novel. As per the play, Jimmy uses strong discourse and emotional outbursts to convey the hopelessness of people trapped in between the immobility of class and the success of an education. This study explored the Osborne's depiction of Jimmy's dissatisfaction, his failed search for identity, and his contempt of the detached attitude of upper-class people. Drawing comparisons with more general literary tendencies in the process, it also looks at how class consciousness, education, gender conventions, and social injustice affect personal connections in the theatre. Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* not only exposes the psychological and cultural ramifications of class conflict but also acts as a strong critique of the illusions of social mobility that permeated Britain throughout the 1950s.

Keywords: John Osborne, Plays, Class Conflicts, Themes

INTRODUCTION

English playwright and screenwriter John James Osborne was well-known for his engaging work and critical attitude against the social and political norms that were in use at the time. Osborne has forty years of experience in which he has penned scripts for theatre, movies, and television. These screenplays address a broad spectrum of genres and subjects. He was rich, not just somewhat ostentatious in his personal life. Even though his political activity and aggressive speech are well-known, he is equally well-known for the violence he inflicts on his own family, which includes his children and his marriage. John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" is widely regarded as a significant milestone in English drama,

marking the beginning of a new era in modern British theatre. Because of its strong language and portrayal of a young man ranting against the small hypocrisies and social injustices that were common in his period, as well as the fact that it featured, it was among the most controversial plays of the middle of the twentieth century (Florman and Kestle, 2016).

One of the difficult emotions to control is anger. Despite the fact that anger has been the subject of numerous books, articles, seminars, workshops, and psychoanalysis for a significant amount of time, it appears that our understanding of it remains largely unchanged from that of our ancestors. In this paper, we will examine John Osborn's drama "Look Back in Anger" and attempt to illustrate the dire consequences of assessments of class conflicts in society.

Jimmy Porter, the young man, is a bitter person who feels let down by the way society runs around him. He snaps at everyone around him, even his wife, realizing he will not be able to live his life in line with his own standards. He dreams of living his life as per his own standards. Jimmy Porter's figure captures all that was wrong with England before rock and roll music started to circulate in Europe. Despite his lack of bravery to take action to improve his circumstances, he feels suffocated by them. Many of the modern writers' characters, including Holden Caulfield from J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, could have similar attitudes. Among those who grew up during this historical period, this kind of annoyance was not rare; many of the characters in modern literature have similar views.

THEME OF CLASS CONFLICT FROM "LOOK BACK IN ANGER"

Look Back in Anger offers Jimmy Porter, the protagonist, the invectives. About 25 years old, Jimmy Porter is said to be "a disconcerting mix of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, important, full of pride; combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive both" (Osborne, 1989, P. 9).

Jimmy is a study in dualisms: "*he is angry and bitter, yet he is also tender and intense in his zealous love. Though the spectator is left to decide how much of that is true and how much of that is an act, Osborne tries to depict Jimmy as a very macho guy*" (Lane. Chazelle, Damien, 2010).

Jimmy first presents stereotypical images of class conflict. This class conflict is a constant theme and a contentious topic in English literature. Osborne favored realism, much like Shaw did. According to him, the aristocracy consistently exerts control over middle-class individuals (Tecimer, E., 2005). He is running a sweet stall even though he is educated at "red brick university" since he cannot get a job. Jimmy strikes up a conversation with Cliff and Alison.

Jimmy: "what's the Bishop Bromley say?"

Cliff: "Oh, it says here that that he makes a very moving appeal to all Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb."

Jimmy: "yes it is quite moving, I suppose. Are you moved, my darling?"

Alison: "Well, naturally".

Jimmy: *"Even my wife is moved. I ought to send the Bishop a subscription. Let's see. What else does he say? Ah, yes. He is upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says that he denies the difference of class distinction"*. (p.13)

Through this humorous interaction, he introduces the concept of a working-class individual who speaks out and highlights the differences between classes. Here is a sample of his venom aimed against Alison in general and the society of the 1950s specifically. The Sunday publication regards him as "ignorant" which emphasizes the social gap between the two. Jimmy uses his speech to express his frustration with the apparent lack of intellectual inertia. Not one person on the planet can answer his questions (Dyson, 1980).

"Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm" (Osborne, 1989, P.9).

He finds it bothersome when people remain in their "delicious sloth" and passivity. He is prepared to endure hardships in order to assist others. His early years signal the start of suffering when his father died. Similarly, his suffering intensifies when he discovers that Mrs. Tanner, the mother of his friend Mr. Hugh, is about to pass away. His upper-class wife, Alison, exhibits little pity for the misery of others even if she is visiting the church with her friend Helena.

His violent speech: *"Oh, my dear wife, you've got so much to learn. I only hope you learn it one day. If something something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognizable human being yourself"*. (p 37)

His estrangement from his life frustrates him since he provided so much to Alison, but she did not repay anything but deserted her after Helena arrived. Jimmy in the drama, not only at home but also in society at large, suffers isolation from the dominant standards of injustice, inactivity, and harsh experiences of life. Osborne paints what it was like to live in 1950s London. The drama concludes that many were furious upon learning the truth that the idealized Britain for which many individuals gave their lives was not real. He utters a speech: *"The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest."*

Jimmy feels quite estranged amid the failed and unstable circumstances. His loneliness and resentment coincide (p. 94). Then in Act II, scene I, Jimmy delivers a monologue on Helena's life. She, he claims, is "a specialist in the New Economic the Economics of the Supernatural (P. 54). Her kind has thrown out "Reason and Progress" and looks to the past, the terrible Ages, to find a way around the terrible issues of the twentieth century. Her faith distances her from all the luxuries we have battled to acquire for millennia. She is bursting with "ecstatic wind..." Sensing a challenge, Jimmy rises and begins to gently advance his face toward Helena, who coolly assures him she will slap it. He asks, "Has she ever watched someone die?" She turns away, but he stares at her. He says he lashes out at her if she strikes him and tries "to cash in on what she thinks is my defenceless chivalry by lashing out with her frail little fists (p.57)". He repeatedly asks her if she has ever witnessed a death. Her response is "no." Jimmy then shares with her the story of how, at the age of 10, he witnessed his father's death over a year. When his father returned from the war in Spain, he said, "Certain god-fearing gentlemen had made such a mess of him, he didn't have long to live." Jimmy tells how his family had left the elderly guy, and only he had been there to hear his father rant: "The despair and the bitterness, the sweet, sickly smell of a dying man" (Davis, Lane. Chazelle, Damien, 2010). "When I was ten years old, I knew more about—

love...betrayal...and death than you would probably ever know in your entire life," he tells Helena (Osborne, 1989; p. 58).

Jimmy whispers his word to Alison. He wonders why Alison doesn't find his suffering to be important. People refer to her as "Judas" and "phlegm," and when Alison finally reaches her breaking point, she throws a glass across the room, causing it to shatter. She tells him that all she wants is peace, and then proceeds to put on her shoes while Jimmy continues to shout from the bed. She proceeds while Jimmy is still speaking.

Jimmy says, "My heart is so full, I feel ill and she wants peace!" Jimmy asks which of them is the one most genuinely offended and outraged (p.59). Then he turns to Cliff and advises him to try loving her so he may face the difficulties involved in such a relationship. Alison tells him he wants to be there to welcome her when she returns, even though she comes back slumming. Helena informs Jimmy that he is about to make a phone call and is carrying two prayer books as she enters. The audience is then briefed on Jimmy's own personal suffering in the next segment; he saw his father die young, and his family did not provide much help to him (p. 57). This early event of suffering haunts Jimmy, making him feel superior to others and giving him the impression that he has been waiting too long for a more authentic way of existence. Jimmy holds the belief that Helena and Alison, who have not experienced this type of trauma, were not born in the traditional sense. Jimmy, unable to cope with Hugh's suffering alone, begs Alison to accompany him on his visit to his dying mother. Knowing that her father is coming to wake her up the next day and take her away, Alison makes the decision to accompany Helena. According to Davis, Lane, Chazelle, and Damien (2010), Jimmy is deeply saddened by Alison's decision, as it represents a world he perceives as fundamentally unattainable.

Jimmy harbors deep resentment towards Alison due to her decision to allow Helena to stay with them. At the end of the first act, during Helena's visit, Jimmy unleashes one of his most unpleasant outbursts toward her. Jimmy clearly states in this rant what he believes is absolutely necessary for someone to be truly alive. One must suffer like he did when his father died to understand life (Helm, S., 2015). The audience can clearly see that Jimmy's own self-perception and understanding of himself depend much on the death of his father. Act II digs more deeply into this. Act II delves deeper into this. This is an ironic as well as a dramatic moment. This situation is paradoxical, as the observer already knows that Alison is present. Jimmy's attack on her foreshadows the suffering she will endure in the future and the death of her child (Osborne, 1989, p. 37).

Within Osborne's critique of the feminizing of society in the 1950s, Jimmy's wrath offers a model. After some time, Osborne asserted that Jimmy's anger mirrors the latent animosity that a generation of men, domesticated by a predominantly feminine society, endured. Through Jimmy's anger, Osborne aims to resurrect authentic masculine emotions within the global cultural landscape. This condition is one of the factors influencing both positive and bad aspects of Osborne's play's popularity and critical reaction. Some critics claim that Osborne's effort was ultimately sexist (Davis, Lane, Chazelle, Damien, 2010; p. 39-49).

In the drama, he expresses his emotions towards society, the social evils, and the mind-set of his own wife and family. "I may write a book about us all," he said in an enraged manner. He writes all of this in

flames, reaching a mile high into the heavens. Auntie Wordsworth won't gather it in peace, choosing flowers. Fire and blood will gather it through play "(My Blood, Osborne, 1989; P. 54)".

John Osborne, John Galsworthy (1867–1933) spoke out in his plays, particularly "The Silver Box," against social injustice and inequality. Osborne employs his character Jimmy to portray the harsh reality. Jimmy Porter's voice and fury highlight his pursuit of a manly identity. The drama reveals his perspectives on humanity's suffering; however, during his conversation with Helena, he describes himself as "angry and helpless" (P.58). In Act I, he tells Alison and Cliff, "Let's pretend that we are human beings and that we are actually alive," just for a brief moment. You say what? Assume for us humans that we are (P. 15).

This criticism is directed towards the entire society, especially the upper class, who have never experienced the hardships that the underprivileged face. A high and sound education does not necessarily translate into a successful career. Only money and wealth enable influence in society. Sensitive authors never remain composed; Jimmy-like characters on the stage seem to be erratic. This is crucial for the entire society, particularly the upper class, as they have never experienced what the underprivileged go through.

Class strife, or class awareness, is among the main topics of the drama. Jimmy's hatred targets an upper-class person while his wife comes from that class. He views his wife as a "hostage" and is constantly engaged in a conflict with the upper class. Through Jimmy, the disadvantaged British children respond to the structure and attitude of the welfare state. He mistreats his wife in an attempt to exact revenge on the upper middle class. He wants a purgatorial of suffering and humiliation so that the "hostess," as he defines it, may embrace his class culture. Jimmy sees himself as a "working-class" spokesperson. On behalf of the working-class people, he declares war against the upper middle class. His target of wrath is Alison's mother, a member of the upper middle class. Using the harshest language imaginable to offend Alison's mother seemed to bring him enormous delight. Jimmy and Hugh go on raids on the houses of Alison's close friends and relatives in order to humiliate her. At times, he also targets Helena with his ruthless attacks, drawing motivation from his wife's relatives. His resentment towards the upper class stems from his sense of being deprived of a suitable career, even though he has received a great education. His cerebral brilliance rebels against what he sees in a societal injustice.

Look Back in Anger (1956) is the first of a series of works that addresses the issue of class conflict within marriage. Jimmy Porter, the main character of the play, is a recent university graduate who has established a sweets booth in a marketplace. Their marriage is on rocky ground; Alison, his wife, is from the upper middle class. Jimmy Porter challenges her upbringing, schooling, and status. He also criticizes her lack of sensitivity, her lack of responsiveness, and her politeness qualities he regards as hypocritical. She has not been able to offer him emotional warmth and love, he believes.

John Osborne initially presents the idea of class conflict in this drama; many of his later works would have their major focus on this topic. Jimmy Porter's aggressiveness toward his wife reflects his wrath toward his own lower middle-class origins. Jimmy Porter's contempt for his wife's upper middle-class background expresses his rage toward those who have prevented him from rising socially.

The major protagonists of the drama are Helena Charles, a friend of Alison Porter, a quiet, timid lady from a middle-class background; Jimmy Porter, a recent graduate from university who has been relegated to running a candy store; and his wife, Alison Porter. However, this does not imply that they share any similarities. Although they come from many backgrounds, the drama revolves mostly around the battle of class. Jimmy's contempt for the upper class, for instance, shows in his disparaging comments about Alison's father. Jimmy and Cliff view education very differently; Cliff's better employment and higher pay result from it, whereas Jimmy's assistant stage manager job is low-grade.

Every character is, at least somewhat, educated. Their social status and their views of one another depend on their degree of education. The university-educated Cliff and the self-educated and self-made Jimmy, who dropped out of school at fifteen to work as a butcher's delivery boy, differ fundamentally. Alison's schooling also influences their perceptions of her; Cliff praises her for being "refined," while Jimmy finds her to be "inhibited."

Jimmy's mistrust of education may stem from his personal experience at grammar school, where he was the "slum kid on scholarship." Despite Jimmy's limited education to a lower middle level, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* clearly highlights the crucial role of class and educational difficulties. Jimmy likely resents Cliff because of his superior education. Play emerged during a period of social transition, coinciding with the growth of the grammar school system and the development of a new meritocracy, during which parents expected their offspring to outperform themselves.

Look back in Anger's social-class problems all follow from the characters' educational backgrounds (Dubey, 2010). Both Jimmy and Alison hail from middle-class backgrounds; Jimmy's college degree instils in him a sense of sophistication, an appreciation for life's finer things, and a vocabulary that surpasses Cliff's. Cliff had limited time for book learning; his schooling consisted of learning how to be a mechanic and on-hand skills (Yaşar, E., 2015).

Jimmy sees himself as an existential hero, constantly ready to toss himself into the conflict, having learned about tragedy throughout his schooling. Despite his ability to interact well with others, he strongly opposes any form of dishonesty. His middle-class expectations of communication abilities exacerbate his frustration with his inability to express himself. Given their equally educational backgrounds, Jimmy thinks Alison ought to be able to read his mind.

Cliff's role effectively illustrates the perception of class in *Look Back in Anger*. More than anybody else in the drama, Cliff speaks truthfully about what he wants, what he feels, and how hard he works to pay for living. Cliff knows what it is to live without; he values what little he has been able to have. He has no expectations.

VERDICTS ABOUT CLASS CONFLICTS OF THE PLAY

Osborne chose to express his dissatisfaction with the depressing conditions that prevailed in Britain after the war in his 1956 drama *Look Back in Anger*. People particularly think of Jimmy Porter as a personification of the disappointments associated with a particular age and social class (Billington, M., 2015). This is especially true for the generation of young men who have been anticipating that they were able to escape their lower-class beginnings by obtaining a higher degree.

Jimmy's education surpasses his socioeconomic status, yet he struggles to find the fulfilment he seeks. In addition to having a degree from an accredited university, he has worked as a salesman for vacuum cleaners, as a novice writer, and as a salesman for advertising. After that, he begins to make a living by operating a sweet stand, which is another professional option that is not appropriate for a recent graduate. Berkowitz makes the observation that "*frustration lies in the inability to fulfil the anticipations (Roots 16)*". Jimmy should have been working in a field that was relevant to the degree he received from the university. Given that Jimmy hails from a working-class background, one could argue that he lacks a suitable job. His degree from a prestigious university does not make him a member of a higher social class. Carl Bode argues that Jimmy is aware of the fact that he is the intellectual who has been displaced, and that this undoubtedly irritates him (pp. 331). He understands that a university degree alone won't be enough to change his social status based on his class, so he must also exert significant effort. Bode characterizes Jimmy as "a man who has tried and failed to become middle-class" (pp. 331), and this is precisely what he means.

CONCLUSION

John Osborne's book "*Look Back in Anger*" offers a critical study of the social injustices and post-war disillusionment that permeated Britain in the 1950s. Osborne presents a very intimate but essentially symbolic portrait of the challenges of an educated working-class man who discovers himself intellectually awakened but socially stationary through the figure of Jimmy Porter. Jimmy Porter's identity helps him to express his discontent with the world. Jimmy's fury, cynicism, and repeated invectives reflect a larger cultural malaise as well as a more general societal malaise based in socioeconomic inequalities, emotional repression, and disappointed expectations directed toward particular people like Alison or Helena. The story makes one realize that outstanding academic performance does not always translate into advancement in social status in a society that is quite stratified. The drama highlighted the distinctions between education and the ability to climb the social hierarchy to elevated positions. Jimmy's dislike of the upper middle class, especially in relation to Alison's background, reflects Osborne's criticism of a society that promises equality but still upholds current class disparities. The drama highlighted the differences that exist between social ladder upward mobility and education. Jimmy's hate of the upper middle class, especially in relation to Alison's upbringing, reflects Osborne's criticism of a society that promises equality but still upholds existing class inequalities. Osborne's criticism finds a vehicle here. His outbursts show not simply a personal suffering brought on by loss and sorrow but also a generational rage at the betrayals of a post-war Britain expected to be progressive. Osborne does not offer a fix for the class conflict; however, he does force the audience to face the psychological and emotional toll it has on people like Jimmy. It is a call for authenticity, respect, and relevance in a society where class still determines identity and chances. Although usually destructive, the protagonist's rage also calls for these things. "*Look Back in Anger*" is thus still a fascinating and provocative study on the battle between social classes, the sense of emotional alienation, and the search for meaning in a society observed between old systems and modern ambitions.

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