

## CLASS AWARENESS IN OSBORNE'S LOOK BACK IN ANGER\*

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The play, first produced at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in May 1956 by the English Stage Company, is concerned with a group of young people living in a tumble-down, squalid one room attic in the Midlands in the mid-1950's. The atmosphere of the opening setting is dark, dingy and rather miserable. The visual impact of the set, with its water tank disguised as a sturdy dining table, shabby old armchairs, gas stove, chest of drawers littered with clothing and books, light from a skylight, invites the audience directly to look into the world which is indeed very unpleasant but nonetheless realistic. At the same time, this sort of domestic setting demonstrates in an immediate and visual way that the play is dealing with the realities of life and the current social problems in a working-class environment(1).

In the first act, we are introduced to the main characters, Jimmy Porter, his wife Alison and their friend, Cliff. Jimmy, the leading character, a young man, 'without background, money even looks', comes from 'working people' and is living in the one room flat with his wife and friend Cliff in comparative poverty. In the course of the play, we are informed that he has recently graduated from one of the newly built, less established and unfortunately less regarded 'red brick' universities,(2) but has chosen to earn a living running a sweet stall because "his education did not provide him with a BBC accent or put him on the Old School Tie network"(3). We also understand that Jimmy is one of the first generation of post-war graduates who found the opportunity to attend a higher education on grants or a scholarship. Ironically Jimmy "tried so many things - journalism, advertising even vacuum cleaners for a few weeks"(4), which are quite irrelevant to his degree. In the printed script he is physically and emotionally described as follows:

Jimmy is a tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a very worn tweed jacket and flannels... He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless,

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importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honest, like his, makes few friends. To many he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is to be almost non-committal(5).

Jimmy's friend Cliff also comes from the same social background as Jimmy's: "we both come from working people.... he [Jimmy] gets on with me because I'm common. Common as dirt, that's me"(6). Yet unlike Jimmy, Cliff is uneducated, and has not attended any university. He helps Jimmy on the sweet stall which they set up with the aid of the mother of Jimmy's working-class friend, Hugh Tanner.

In contrast to Jimmy and Cliff, Alison is drawn "surely as wet a character as has ever been presented on the English stage"(7). She is from a higher class who is "turned into a different key, a key of well-bred malaise that is often drowned in the robust orchestration of the other two"(8).

The dull and squalid conditions under which these characters are living, the choice of place, the slow opening with only the occasional sound of Alison's ironing, the rustling of the papers, the long, boring emptiness of a Spring Sunday evening, capture the mood in a Midland industrial town where there is nothing to do or nowhere to go. This broken down, filthy, one room flat at the top of a large Victorian house also implies the purposeless nature of the way of living in which the three characters are trapped. More significantly, it represents the ivory tower, in which Jimmy is in fact avoiding the realities of the ordinary life by cutting himself off those below him. Some critics find such a slummy setting and the living conditions unconvincing, on the grounds that no educated person like Jimmy could live in such an appalling state. Yet it may be taken as a clear demonstration of the current tension and inequalities between the social classes. As Ian Scott-Kilvert has acknowledged it is "a slap in the face for the bourgeois concept of Home, as an ideal demanding time, money and other forms of sacrifice"(9).

At the outset of the play, we see Jimmy and Cliff sprawled in armchairs reading Sunday papers and Alison ironing one of Jimmy's shirts and dressed in one of her husband's old shirts. Jimmy throws the papers aside and begins to make a vocal attack first on the papers, then Christianity, the English Sunday, the American Age, the upper-classes and his wife. As soon as he starts speaking he expresses his deep hatred for the snobbish tone of the 'posh' Sunday papers, noting that the papers contain some articles about the English novel and some of the columns are written in French. We are immediately reminded of a clear example of social barriers in society:

the upper-classes do not want the 'common man' to take any interest in the English novel and they want to discuss in a language only they can understand. Thus Jimmy is vigorously protesting this kind of social injustice and class barriers.

Jimmy touches on another important reality of post-war life in the opening act; he reads with a terrible relish from one of the papers: "The Bishop of Bromley.... makes a very moving appeal to all Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb"(10). It can be understood from this statement that the relevance of atomic bombs to daily life was obvious to the audience in the mid- Fifties. The reference to the H-Bomb made by Jimmy also suggests the threat of nuclear warfare on the moral imagination of his own generation, as well as double dealings, insincerity and dishonesty of men of organised religion.

Yet there is another important point that looks more frightening to Jimmy than the class problem. It is "the intellectual inertia which cuts right across class distinctions, affecting the common Cliff as much as the well-bred Alison"(11). Jimmy, as a working-class intellectual, as an educated young man, expects that he would find something to raise his enthusiasm in society, but faces irritating debased middle- class values and the apathy of the general public instead. And this single fact colours his whole view of life and even enters into the frustration of his marriage. He despairs at this inertia and the lack of response he saw around his environment:

Why do I spend nine pence on that damned paper every week? Nobody reads it except me. Nobody can be bothered. No one can raise themselves out of their delicious sloth.... 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! I'm alive! I've an idea(12).

Throughout the first act, Jimmy severely launches vocal attacks on Alison's education, her family, her friends and especially her mother who appears to play by the rules by her polite manner, but beneath the surface remains a very hypocritical, vicious and unscrupulous opponent to him and his marriage with Alison. The tone of Jimmy's conversation is fierce, full of anger and complaints. Jimmy's principal target is his wife whom he constantly torments because she symbolises anything he hates, the rotten middle-class values. That is why he sees Alison as the main cause of his anger and calls her 'pusillanimous'(13). By bullying her and describing her as 'having a little mind, mean spirited', Jimmy tries to get revenge on the class she belongs.

Jimmy's strong antagonism towards Alison is mainly generated by his view of her family, particularly personified by her mother and brother who are locked in their petty middle-class morality and reserve. He rejects Alison's brother, Nigel, who is a high Tory member, and despises him with great contempt:

The straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst? I only met him once myself. He asked me to step outside when I told his mother she was evil minded... His knowledge of life and ordinary human beings is so hazy, he really deserves some sort of decoration for it - a medal inscribed "For Vaguery in the Field"... The only thing he *can* do - seek sanctuary in his own stupidity(14).

Basically we find Jimmy full of frustration and hatred towards all Alison's family members, not only because of their middle-class attitudes, but because of their literal acceptance of the trivial. He is infuriated by the stuffiness of the bourgeoisie from which he has chosen a wife. He feels obliged to marry her in order to possess her. As a result of this, he has to submit to one of the middle-class conventionalities he detests. He urges his wife to abandon all middle-class values she has picked up from her environment, because he just cannot tolerate her complete dependence on the bourgeois conventions and her close contact with her family:

She gets letters. Letters from her mother, letters in which I'm not mentioned at all because my name is a dirty word... She writes long letters back to Mummy, and never mentions me at all, because I'm just a dirty word to her too"(15).

He keeps insulting Alison on the grounds that she still holds onto middle-class values; she happened to be a virgin until she married him. So by being a virgin, she pulls Jimmy into the vortex of middle-class convention. She is what she is expected to be in her middle-class milieu, but to Jimmy it is completely intolerable. In fact Jimmy has some expectations too: he expects her to be literal "not only about himself and all the things he believes in, his present and his future, but his past as well. All the people he admires and loves, and has loved"(16). Strangely enough, Alison would never fulfil any of these expectations of Jimmy, for she feels rather hostile to those whom Jimmy loves and she also feels superior to them in terms of class, education and family background.

In fact, this antagonism between Alison and Jimmy is deeply rooted in their class crossing marriage, which has also reduced them to

mutual misery and recrimination. Jimmy is a worker's son, a stall-holder, rebellious, iconoclastic and Alison is, on the contrary, a Colonel's daughter, pure and conventional. One is bourgeois, the other is against bourgeoisie. Naturally this sort of marriage may turn out to be a very distressing and destructive one. Jimmy severely punishes Alison for her class affiliations, but he is equally tormented by this complex relationship with her. In his article, 'The Perils of Hypergamy', Geoffrey Gorer offers a sociological explanation to the disastrous consequences of class-crossing marriage and rightly states that the curse which is destroying "these brilliant young men of working-class origin and welfare state opportunity is what anthropologists have dubbed male hypergamy"(17).

Towards the end of Act One, Jimmy seems to be retreating into his inner world in his dialogue with Alison:

People 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, Madiline, Hugh....  
And there's Hugh's mum, of course. I'd almost forgotten her. She's been a good friend to us, if you like. She's even letting me buy the sweet-stall off her in my own time. She only bought it for us, anyway. She's fond of you. I can never understand why you're so - distant with her(18).

Yet this is a psychological retreat which also leads Jimmy into a recognition that some of the names he mentions above, are the members of the society to which Alison belongs and some others have the same roots and origin as his. It seems quite difficult for him to identify with any of these groups, because it means to him that he would reject his past, his father, Hugh's mother, if he prefers Alison's people. On the other hand, there is no route for him back into the working-class world of his childhood. In a way, he seems to be suspended by two classes. We see him as a helpless individual, confronted with the problems of searching for a class identity.

Jimmy's outburst is intensified with the introduction of a new character, Helena Charles. She is a friend of Alison and one of Jimmy's 'natural enemies'. Now Helena becomes a new target for Jimmy to carry out his vehement attacks on his middle-class enemies. For, Helena's presence as 'the royalty of middle-class womanhood' is enough to anger Jimmy. She belongs to the middle-classes not only by birth, but by instinct and strong belief. Like Alison, Helena is a product of middle-class morality and standards, with a complete allegiance to her traditional and moral convictions.

In the second act of the play, we see Helena acting as a typical middle-class moralising character with her curiosity about what is going on between Alison and Jimmy and complaining of the 'primitive' and 'horrifying' conditions under which Alison continues to live. In other words, Helena acts as a female confidante to Alison. Her presence makes us understand the underlying continuing conflict between Jimmy and Alison. Helena in her narrow mindedness, asserts the continuity in her of traditional moral beliefs, by refusing to give any response to Jimmy's outbursts. To Jimmy, she is just the embodiment of the resilience of the middle-classes and middle-class conservatism.

Through the long conversation between Alison and Helena, we are informed of Jimmy's past, Alison's parents' disfavour of her marriage with Jimmy and subsequent events when Alison and Jimmy began to live together. Alison goes on to tell that Jimmy's childhood was spent in poverty without money, job, even home, and shortly after the marriage, they lived for some time in the flat of Mrs. Tanner, over a warehouse in Poplar(19), a very working-class suburb of London. She also mentions that they had rather a miserable wedding ceremony with some cheap port and with only three people. She confesses how deplorable a time she had in the early months of her married life when she and Jimmy were sharing a working-class apartment with Hugh:

Those next few months at the flat in Poplar were a nightmare. I suppose I must be soft and squeamish, and snobbish, but I felt as though I'd been dropped in a jungle. I couldn't believe that two people, two educated people could be so savage, and so - so uncompromising. Mummy has always said that Jimmy is utterly ruthless, but she hasn't met Hugh. He takes the first prize for ruthlessness - from all corners. Together, they were frightening. They both came to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on(20).

In a sense, Alison implies that she has dropped out of one world into another like Jimmy, but in another direction. She has moved out of the class she was born into and dropped herself in a social limbo where she does not belong and everyone else is the enemy. She is trapped between two uncertain worlds. According to Frederick Lumley:

"Alison is something of a pipe-dream, too good to be true, in this environment. She does not seem to have a mind of her own, but is ready to be moulded, by her parents in their status of upper-middle class comfort and boredom from which she has fled, or moulded by the squalid and frustrating existence she shares with Jimmy"(21).

Alison also explains to Helena how she reacted to the 'raids' which Jimmy and his working-class friend Hugh directed against the middle-class homes of her parents' friends, the raids in which they gate-crashed parties and launched a campaign against the upper-class people they detest. In fact, Alison assumes that Jimmy may have married her as a way of taking revenge upon her class:

ALISON: They soon thought of a way out of that. A brilliant campaign. They started inviting themselves - through me - to people's houses, friends of Nigel's and mine, friends of Daddy's, oh everyone: The Arkdens, the Tarnatts, the Wains -

HELENA: Not the Wains?

ALISON: Just about everyone I'd ever known. Your people must have been among the few we missed out. It was just enemy territory to them, and, as I say, they used me as a hostage. We'd set out from headquarters in Poplar, and carry out our raids on the enemy in W.1. S.W.1., S.W.3. and W.8.(22). In my name, we'd gatecrash everywhere - cocktails, week-ends, even a couple of houseparties. I used to hope that one day, somebody would have the guts to slam the door in our faces, but they didn't. They were too well-bred, and probably sorry for me as well. Hugh and Jimmy despised them for it. So we went on plundering them, wolfing their food and drinks, and smoking their cigars like ruffians. Oh, they enjoyed themselves(23).

In a conversation which follows, Jimmy turns his humiliating attack to Alison's mother, a constant reminder to him of middle-class norms, social inequalities, a caricature of the bourgeoisie, representative of anything he is against. His following speech shows how he is disgusted by her:

Mummy and I took one quick look at each other, and, from then on, the age of chivalry was dead. I knew that, to protect her innocent young, she wouldn't hesitate to cheat, lie, bully and blackmail... She's as rough as a night in a Bombay brothel, and as tough as a matelot's arm... You may have noticed that I happen to wear my hair rather long. Now, if my wife is honest, or concerned enough to explain, she could tell you that this is not due to any dark, unnatural instincts I possess, but because (a) I can usually think of better things than a haircut to spend two bob on, and (b) I prefer long hair. But that obvious innocent explanation didn't appeal to Mummy at all... That old bitch should be dead! Well? Aren't I right? I said she's an old bitch, and should be dead!(24)

With the appearance of Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, our understanding of the character of Alison and Jimmy's problem deepens. As a sensible father he awakens our sympathy for the honesty of his self-examination of the main problem between Jimmy and Alison. For, he is the only sensitive person to be genuinely affected by the present situation. To him the reason for the conflict between Jimmy and Alison is quite clear, Jimmy and Alison are completely two opposite poles, and share opposite qualities in class terms: "Jimmy just speaks a different language from any of us"(25), and "you like to sit on the fence because its comfortable and more peaceful"(26), Colonel Redfern reminds Alison. And in that case, he has never approved of their marriage at all.

It is interesting that the Colonel and Jimmy have never met on the stage although they are important polarities. The reason for this might be attributed to the fact that Colonel Redfern represents to Jimmy the idealised past, 'Edwardian twilight', the time when idealism was capable of shaping whole life and whole generation. What Jimmy is searching for is a belief and complete conviction, quite inseparable from his being. But such beliefs are no longer attainable in the society in which he is presently living. In a way, he envies the security the Colonel's generation had. Helena gets half the truth when she tells Alison:



Do you know - I have discovered what is wrong with Jimmy? It's very simple really. He was born out of his time.... There's no place for people like that any longer - in sex, or politics, or anything. That's why he's so futile. Sometimes, when I listen to him, I feel he thinks he's still in the middle of the French Revolution. And that's where he ought to be, of course. He doesn't know where he is, or where he is going. He'll never do anything, and he'll never amount to anything(27).

At the rise of the third act curtain, we see that both Jimmy and Cliff are still enveloped in the Sunday papers. Nothing seems to have changed; Alison has left Jimmy, but her friend Helena is doing what Alison was supposed to do, washing, ironing, cooking. Jimmy still has a 'hostage' from the middle-classes. Helena seems to assert the continuity in her of a traditional moral belief. In spite of Jimmy's humbling over her religion, she never gives any response to his outbursts, another indication of the resilience of the middle-class.

Having lost her baby, Alison returns to Jimmy with the intention of a deeper committal to Jimmy's values. Although their reconciliation is very remarkable, it is not the final resolution of the play. There are some problems which are left unresolved at the end of the play. The most important problem Jimmy faces now is that he is still in conflict with himself and is still at odds with his environment. He has nowhere to go in the society of a welfare state, from which he was expecting something of a relative social security, but has left him in exasperation instead.

In fact, one can reasonably suggest that many of the causes of Jimmy's anger are related to conflicting class structures of modern society, its awfulness and consequently his inability to find himself a place where he can feel he fully belongs. In a traditionally class-conscious society, Jimmy is unable to identify with any of the social classes. His intelligence, the education he has received and the marriage he has made, put him into a different social environment from where he originally belongs. He is a self-conscious expression of the new unclassed society. "His is the real tragic figure of the declassed. He is a *desperado* in the proper sense of the word"(28). He simply does not fit into post-war British society, and is fully aware of the depressing features of the post-war British class system. Like many of his generation, he is uprooted from his class, heading for a different world and unknown destination. He cannot face squarely his own working-class origin, for he feels uncertain about his past, which is often narrow and

no longer interesting. Equally he is full of revolt against middle-class conventionality too. As Wolcott Gibbs sums up:

"He can take no comfort in belonging to a social class, because he is what might be called a half gentleman sufficiently a man of the people to hate the soft arrogance of the fortunate and gently bred, and sufficiently educated to despise the ignorant sentimentality of the poor"(29).

In addition to his ambivalent feelings regarding social classes, Jimmy appears to hold negative feelings especially towards sex, religion, and even the people of all classes around him. He dissociates himself from his social environment and individuals. He approaches everything with suspicion, which clearly demonstrates his isolation from the environment he lives. 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 qualification 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. He voices the principal indictment of the materialistic society which has left aside a true love of humanity. The organisation of that sort of society has left him no position for his intelligence, talent and imagination, and pushed him into the world of isolation and misery. Jimmy is a new pattern in English post-war life, apparently a very distressing one. Kenneth Tynan offers a more concise explanation of the role Jimmy stands for:

"He represented the dismay of many young Britons whose childhood and adolescence were scarred by the depression and the war; who came of age under a Socialist Government, yet found, when they went out into the world, that the class system was still mysteriously intact. On the other hand he reflected the much wider problem of what to do with a liberal education in a technological world"(30).

Jimmy expresses his frustrations, his anger, his sense of isolation and his anxieties about the current problems in an articulate manner. He appreciates the feelings of ordinary people who are confronted with these problems and associates all good human qualities with the working-classes; he admires his working-class friend Cliff for his 'big heart' and Hugh's working-class mother for her generosity and help. On the other hand, he vehemently despises all representatives of middle-class values; he attacks Alison for being 'phlegmatic', Helena for being 'black hearted, evil minded

and vicious', Nigel for being 'the Platitude from Outer Space'. Although Jimmy puts the blame on the middle-classes for their indifferent attitudes to ordinary people, we do not see him work constructively to improve it. But he attempts to break down the cruelty, insensitivity and the false ideals of the middle-class Establishment.

Jimmy's character is portrayed with such a vivid and often crude colour that the audience is never allowed to criticise him or even to think that Jimmy may be wrong in the play. He is delineated in a generally attractive manner. Osborne does not leave any doubt in the minds of his audience about the correctness of Jimmy's action. As John Russell Taylor has observed:

"It is, however, a general trait in Osborne's work that he tends to sympathise with his hero in his writing to such an extent that the other characters are made to capitulate to him almost without a struggle"(31).

The language each of the characters uses in the play is quite identifiable in terms of class. Osborne makes his characters speak according to the social position they hold. Jimmy uses common speech; he never controls or corrects his speech at all. He never thinks about how he should use language. His is a rather 'angry' language, an absolute reflection of his character, his inner conflict and his disaffection. He is a provincial university graduate, but he still has an accent which derives from the industrial North. He has never gone to Oxford or Cambridge to lose his accent. Cliff, who functions as a foil character to Jimmy uses common speech also. He is basically slow in mind, his vocabulary is rather limited and his accent is typical of his working-class fellows. Yet unlike Jimmy and Cliff, Alison, as a member of the Establishment uses "the language of polite, genteel drawing-room romance, a language totally divorced from the facts of the Porter *menage*"(32). Similarly Helena has a stiff upper lip and speaks a rather eloquent language, which matches her status in her middle-class environment.

It is seen that all individual characters in *Look Back in Anger* are divided along the class lines, and their class background really matters in their relationship with each other. Using such controversial characters in this play, Osborne no doubt expresses his contempt and distrust for the ruling class, the entrenched established institutions of contemporary Britain and, above all, the terrible sense of isolation and disaffection produced by the compartmentalisation of the Post-war British society.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. One of the problems implied in the opening setting is housing shortages. In a sense, Osborne tries to catch the mood of the time by choosing a one room flat as a setting for the play. Besides, the house rents were tremendously high in the mid-fifties.

2. 'Red Brick' University is a phrase which was used in the play originally to distinguish the new city universities such as London, Manchester, Leeds or Liverpool from the old Medieval universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. Jimmy's university is obviously one of these little known universities and he calls his university not even 'red brick' but 'white tile'. Jimmy means by 'white tile' that his university lacks the prestige of Oxford and Cambridge, since it was established after the Second World War to educate students in industrial regions, supported by the Government grants.

3. Alan Carter, John Osborne, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969) p.56.

4. John Osborne, Look Back in Anger, (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) p.64. All other references to the play are from this source.

5. Ibid, pp.9-10.

6. Ibid, p.30.

7. John Mander, The Writer and Commitment, (Philadelphia: Degour Edition, 1962) p.185.

8. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, p.10.

9. Ian Scott-Kilvert, 'The Hero in Search of a Dramatist: The Plays of John Osborne', Encounter, IX, 6 (December 1957), 27.

10. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, p.13.

11. Katharine J. Worth, 'The Angry Young Man', in Taylor (ed.), John Osborne: Look Back in Anger p.104.

12. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, p.15.

13. 'Pusillanimous' is an expression, used in the play as a metaphor of the Roman Games, in order to describe the vicious and depraved reality which Jimmy insists exists beneath the polite, cultivated surface of the English middle-class environment.

14. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, p.20.

15. Ibid, pp.36-37.

16. Ibid, p.42.

17. Geoffrey Gorer, 'The Perils of Hypergamy', The New Statesman and Nation, 4 May 1957, p.567.

18. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, pp.33-34.

19. 'Poplar' is one of the local names used in the play along with other names, which has a class connotation for the British audience.

20. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, p.43.

21. Frederick Lumley, New Trends in 20th Century Drama: A Survey Since Ibsen and Shaw, (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960) p.206.
22. These postal codes are the references to the names of the places in London where upper-middle classes and very wealthy people live.
23. Osborne, Look Back in Anger, p.44.
24. Ibid, pp.52-53.
25. Ibid, p.64.
26. Ibid, p.66.
27. Ibid, p.90.
28. Frank Hilton, 'Britain's New Class', Encounter, X,2 (February 1958), 63.
29. Walcott Gibbs, 'Two Very Sad Young Men', The New Yorker, 12 October 1957, p.85.
30. Kenneth Tynan, Curtains, (London: Longmans, 1961) p.193.
31. John Russel Taylor, 'John Osborne', in Taylor (ed.), John Osborne: Look Back in Anger, pp.81-82.
32. Carter, John Osborne, p.172.