Look Back in Anger Study Guide

Look Back in Anger by John Osborne

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

On May 8, 1956, *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre as the third production of the newly formed English Stage Company. The English Stage Company had been founded in 1955 to promote the production of new plays by contemporary authors that might not find production in the commercial West End theatre (London's equivalent of Broadway in New York City). West End theatre provided quality acting and high standards of production, but very little drama that related to life m contemporary England. Most plays of the time were generally innocuous light comedies, thrillers, and foreign imports□fourteen American shows in 1955 alone. Osborne had submitted copies of *Look Back in Anger* to every agent in London and to many West End producers and had been rejected by all. When the script arrived at the Royal Court, the Artistic Director George Devine and his young assistant director Tony Richardson knew it was exactly what they were looking for. *Look Back in Anger* was viewed as a play that would, as Devine later put it, "blow a hole in the old theatre."

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

Author Biography

John James Osbome was born on December 12, 1929. in Fulham, South West London. His father, Thomas Godfry Osborne, was then a commercial artist and copywriter; his mother, Nellie Beatrice Grove Osbome, worked as a barmaid in pubs most of her life. Much of Osborne's childhood was spent in near poverty, and he suffered from frequent extended illnesses. He was deeply affected by his father's death from tuberculosis in 194! and also remembered vividly the airraids and general excitement of war. Osborne attended state schools until the age of twelve when he was awarded a scholarship to attend a minor private school, St. Michael's College, in Barnstaple, Devon. He was expelled at the age of sixteen after the headmaster slapped Osborne's face and Osbome hit him back. After spending some time at home, he took a series of jobs writing copy for various trade journals. He became interested in theatre while working as a tutor for children touring with a repertory company. After an education inspector found him to be uncertified as a teacher, Osborne was relieved of those duties but invited to stay with the company as assistant stage manager and eventually as an actor. He made his stage debut in March, 1948, in Sheffield and for the next seven years made the rounds of provincial repertory theatres as an actor.

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

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

Plot Summary

Act I

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

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

Act II, scene 1

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

Act II, scene 2

It is the following evening and Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, is visiting. Redfern is bemused by the modern England; he spent his whole career, from 1913 to 1947, in the colonial service in India. He sees some right on Jimmy's side and was horrified by his wife's brutal attempts to prevent Alison from marrying Jimmy. He says he and Alison are much alike in that they both "like to sit on a fence. It is rather comfortable." Alison tries to explain

why she married Jimmy: "I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life and suddenly this□this spiritual barbarian□throws down a gauntlet at me." Helena comes in followed shortly by Cliff. Helena will stay one more night so she can attend an audition nearby. Alison asks Cliff to give a letter to Jimmy and he refuses. Alison and her father leave, followed shortly by Cliff. Helena lies down on the bed and looks at the toy bear. Jimmy crashes in. He reads Alison's letter and berates her for being polite and "wet" instead of emotionally honest. Helena tells him Alison is pregnant and Jimmy says he doesn't care. He has watched Hugh's mother die and has no pity for Alison. He turns on Helena calling her an "evil-minded little virgin" She slaps his face; then, as he cries in despair, she kisses him passionately.

Act III, scene 1

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

him. The door opens and Alison enters, looking ill and obviously thin. Jimmy exits and leaves the two women looking at each other.

Act III, scene 2

It is moments later. There is the sound of Jimmy's trumpet from across the hall. Alison has suffered a miscarriage. She says she doesn't know why she came, that she doesn't want to cause a breach between Helena and Jimmy. Helena says that it is all over between her and Jimmy, that she realizes that what she has been doing is wrong, and she can't live with that. She calls Jimmy in and tells him she is going to leave, and she does. Alison says she will go. Jimmy berates her for not sending flowers to the funeral. Then he softens and talks of the old bear going through the forest of life alone.

He remembers their first meeting and says,"I may be a lost cause, but I thought if you loved me, it needn't matter." Alison cries and says she has found strength in the humility of not having been able to protect her unborn child. She is in the mud now, groveling. Jimmy gently comforts her. They enter into their game of bear and squirrel in what is apparently a loving reconciliation.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The audience is introduced to the scene of the Porters' one-room apartment in the Midlands on an early April evening. The curtain rises on a large Victorian attic room, furnished simply with a dressing table, a double bed, a bookshelf, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a gas stove and a cupboard. Downstage center is a dining table with three chairs, as well as two worn leather armchairs.

Jimmy Porter and Cliff Lewis are seated in the armchairs, surrounded by newspapers. They are both about twenty-five, although Cliff has an easy air about him while Jimmy seems more tightly wound. Alison Porter, Jimmy's wife, a tall, dark girl with a striking beauty, is ironing off to the left.

Jimmy begins his usual tirade against the quality of the papers he and Cliff are reading, and the audience gets the sense that Cliff usually plays the straight man to Jimmy's passionate outbursts. Jimmy begins to turn his tirade against Alison while snatching away Cliff's paper, and Cliff defends her while trying to get back his reading material. Alison answers tersely to whatever Jimmy is flinging at her, deadpanning an agreement even when Jimmy blatantly derides her intelligence.

The argument turns to who drank all of the tea, and who should make more, with comments on the quality of the paper interspersed. Cliff flirts, not covertly, with Jimmy's wife. Cliff asks, "How are you, dullin'?" Alison responds, "All right thank you, dear." Cliff kisses her hand and puts her fingers in his mouth, saying to Jimmy, "She's a beautiful girl, isn't she?" "That's what they all tell me," is all that Jimmy can say.

Jimmy seems not to notice, or at least not to acknowledge, their flirtation.

Jimmy's next comment on an article in the newspaper reveals his contempt for Alison's father. Cliff suggests that a movie might cheer them all up, and Alison declines, while Jimmy rants about how terrible movie theaters are. Jimmy and Alison notice that Cliff's new trousers are wrinkled, and Alison offers to press them, leaving Cliff without pants. After Alison and Cliff both light up cigarettes, much to Jimmy's consternation, Jimmy begins a tirade against the state of the culture of the world, and kicks Cliff after he realizes that no one is listening. Alison's friend Webster is mentioned, whom Jimmy declares he can't take tonight. Alison points out that Jimmy said Webster was the only one of her friends that he felt understood him a little bit.

A discussion of Jimmy's former mistress ensues, obviously annoying Alison. Jimmy then begins a fresh assault on Alison, who is visibly wearing down. It is revealed to the audience that Jimmy possesses not only contempt for her father, but for her entire family, including brother Nigel and her mother. He decrees that Alison is pusillanimous, which he defines as "wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage." "Behold the Lady

Pusillanimous!" Jimmy shouts. Alison continues ironing Cliff's pants, keeping her composure, but just barely.

After a minute's relative peace listening to a concert on the radio, Jimmy abruptly shuts it off, claiming Cliff's paper and Alison's ironing are making too much of a din. He begins yet another harangue of Alison regarding her "primitive hands," and yells at the church bells when they interrupt him. Cliff begins a slapstick dance/ wrestling match with him, which Jimmy is in no mood for, and they end up crashing into Alison and her ironing board, burning her arm. Alison finally snaps, ordering Jimmy out of the room while Cliff bandages her arm. They discuss the awful state of Alison's marriage. She acknowledges that it seems like it's always the things that, for other marriages, are easy, that she and Jimmy can never get right; they can never just agree and move on without having some sort of bickering or needling.

Cliff assures Alison that he won't leave the flat, after which Alison reveals that she is pregnant, a rather desperate state considering the lack of money and the combative atmosphere. She worries about telling Jimmy, saying that it would be all right at first, but after a while, he'll just feel stifled and blame her. She reveals to Cliff that their courtship was very fast, based mostly on the fact that he was different from the privileged life she had known and seemed new and exciting, and he saw her as a rescue case from the wealthy. Cliff kisses Alison, and both ignore Jimmy when he reenters.

After some much more light-hearted bantering, Cliff leaves to get cigarettes. Left alone, Jimmy and Alison are a bit awkward, and Jimmy shows a more vulnerable side after admitting that he burned her on purpose. They kiss and begin role-playing an odd game of squirrel and bear, of which there are two figurines on the chest of drawers. Cliff comes back in with news of a telephone call from Helena Charles for Alison, and she leaves to take it. Jimmy immediately reveals his dislike for her friend, and begins to rant again against all her friends. He rifles through Alison's handbag while talking, and discovers a letter from her mother which she has hidden to avoid his arguments. Alison comes back in and announces that Helena is coming to stay for a while. This immediately angers Jimmy since she is a part of Alison's old life. Jimmy, after one last stab at Alison, exits, leaving Alison and Cliff standing in silence.

Act 1 Analysis

Osborne introduces Jimmy immediately as an abrasive character. The play's description of his character before the opening scene points directly to his alienating tendencies, since his love of spouting scorching truths causes his friendships to turn sour. It is also interesting to note the addition of the modifier of "apparent" when describing Jimmy's honesty. This asks the reader to listen carefully to his upcoming tirades to see if he is speaking the truth, or just saying whatever will get a rise out of the present company.

The relationship between Jimmy and Cliff is set up as a uniquely male one; competitive, with each trying to best the other with wordplay and brashness. This is furthered greatly by their moment of wrestling, which the reader is led to believe is a frequent occurrence.

The newspapers figure heavily in the scenes where Jimmy and Cliff are engaged in their usual competitive banter, giving them a means to tussle without actually doing the physical wrestling. Cliff is contrasted against Jimmy as being a less educated character, which is why he is often the butt of Jimmy's comments on intelligence, but the reader feels much friendlier toward Cliff's character, sympathizing with him when he gets picked on and identifying with him as an easygoing, regular person.

Alison is obviously a meeker character by far, which her short answers to Jimmy's needling confirm; however, much of her reaction to his words may be a sign of her having given up battling him, and instead submitting to whatever keeps the peace. She too is the constant object of Jimmy's insults, especially about her intelligence. The very first thing the reader hears Jimmy say to her is a jibe about the papers being half in French, and we find out she has actually been ignoring the conversation. Here the play immediately compares the static state of society with the listless state in which Alison exists.

Alison's relationship with Cliff is an interesting one, since he is supposed to be the platonic component of this threesome, but he acts more loving toward her than Jimmy does. Whatever she feels about him, she may be acting both out of relief that Cliff is around to take on some of Jimmy's needling and out of a reaction to a lack of affection from her husband. She turns towards whatever affection she can get from whoever offers it. He also is the first person she reveals her pregnancy to, signaling that he is, at the very least, her confidant and friend, although she once again puts him in the middle of their relationship by doing so. Even so, as the play progresses, the reader comes to understand that even though Cliff empathizes with Alison and cares for her very much, he is a comrade-in-arms with Jimmy, and he adapts with him even as the scene changes. They are, after all, partners in a struggling sweet-stall business, and that combined with Cliff's natural easygoing nature is probably why he has stuck around even this long.

Jimmy does little to disguise his contempt for Alison's entire past, revealing his utmost hatred of the classes above him. He clearly sees class-based entitlement as the basis of all that's wrong with the world, and his struggle is quickly revealed to be a classic case of raging against the "establishment," which is a catchphrase for what is ingrained in current society. The "establishment" has been portrayed in literature as including everything from class tendencies to religion to race issues to sexual orientation issues, and in *Look Back in Anger* Jimmy has picked the class struggle as his cause. He is beginning to portray himself as a kind of spokesperson for the lower class. Perhaps this is his calling, or perhaps he is simply too lazy to build up a life of his own and make something of himself. For all his fire and energy, and apparent intelligence, the fact that he career-hops and now owns a sweet-stall, hardly a steady income, is suspect.

In this scene, Alison's brother Nigel gets a personal tirade from Jimmy. Jimmy criticizes Nigel and his politics for being much too vague and blind to the issues. Jimmy meanly jokes that he should be presented with a medal "For Vaguery in the Field." Jimmy lambastes Nigel for the fact that he probably will end up far in his field, which highlights the fact that although Jimmy is quite the opposite of vague in his declarations, he is

lagging behind humanity in the rat race. Here Jimmy is using Nigel almost as a scapegoat for a society that he sees as stagnant. It is an unfair world where somebody like Nigel who fits into the exact mold set for him can get ahead easily but somebody like the person Jimmy fancies himself as gets stuck operating a candy stall for pennies a day.

Act I also introduces Jimmy's use of the word "pusillanimous," which shows up throughout the play. He uses the word, defined as "spineless and faint-hearted," as a jousting sword against his wife, trying to get a rise out of her. The word is perfect for Jimmy to use, since it highlights his intelligence, which he obviously does have, but also his love of waving his intelligence in other people's faces to elevate him above them. Because he does not have the financial means to look down upon the masses, Jimmy seems to take advantage of his eloquence and vocabulary to scramble to whatever height he can.

The stage directions continually point to the fact that Jimmy gets a perverse joy out of getting people to lose their cool. Perhaps as a reaction to the society he sees, he seems to enjoy any display of passion, even if it is shown in anger towards him. Whenever he has a favorable description of anybody, be it Alison's friend Webster or Hugh, it is often for their ability to show some excitement and therefore get Jimmy excited. His most pointed remarks are reserved for Alison in an attempt to get her to build up to having a meltdown in anger, perhaps because he sees it as some kind of passion. Ironically, she has shut herself away from him, possibly because he tries to irk her so. She is also the product of the society he sees as inert, so perhaps a reaction out of her counts as a small victory for him in his struggle against that society. Even Cliff, as Jimmy's best friend, annoys him in his unresponsiveness. It is a requirement of personality that a person be easygoing in order to be able to withstand living with Jimmy, but it is this very characteristic that gets Jimmy all riled up and on the attack.

Even from the first pages of this play, it is immediately obvious that Jimmy's words are his weapons, and he is prone to using them at every available opportunity. If one were to count up the number of words spoken by each character throughout the play, one wouldn't be surprised to find that Jimmy had twice or three times the total of the others. When he gets going on a topic that he knows will provoke the intended person, he retains his eloquence but becomes long-winded, pushing the same point home over and over again with different and increasingly aggressive words. As stated, he is an intelligent man; however, it's almost as if his mind is wasted on critiquing the world around him instead of trying to do something about it.

Jimmy's tendency to act rather like a baby is evident in the demands for somebody else to make tea and get cigarettes. However, it is never as obvious as when he turns off the concert on the radio because he was so distracted by Alison ironing and Cliff reading the paper. It's almost as if the sudden peace made him much more uncomfortable than the constant sparring did. This childish display is an obvious cry for attention, and one sees that Jimmy is never as uncomfortable as when the attention is turned away from him. The audience sees throughout the play that whenever he enters the room, he is

instantly made (or more accurately, makes himself) the center of whatever conversation is happening.

The oddest moment of this act comes after Jimmy admits to burning Alison's arm on purpose when roughhousing, which adds a touch of physical abuse to the mental abuse of their relationship. Alison and Jimmy begin a role-playing game where she is a squirrel and he is a bear, and through this, they are able to show a little tenderness and affection for each other, embracing and giving each other compliments. We see a glimpse of this while Cliff is with them, calling himself a mouse and Jimmy a bear in fun.

However, when Cliff exits, the game takes on a much more tender aspect, and we see Jimmy and Alison at peace with each other for a minute. The silly roles of bear and squirrel provide them cover from having to actually speak fondly and frankly to each other as human beings, out of disguise. It is rare for the reader to see a moment when they are conversing as real people with each other; almost every conversation consists of Jimmy provoking and Alison trying to ignore the comment. This complete inability to interact speaks to how much their marriage has disintegrated, which brings up a question. The reader wonders if there was ever a time when their relationship was whole.

When the game is cut short by the announcement of Helena's phone call, they revert immediately to their hostility. The fact that Helena is calling is enough to set Jimmy off, since she is one of Alison's friends that belongs to the "establishment," and she represents everything he despises about Alison's past. When Alison leaves to take the call, Jimmy goes so far as to rifle through Alison's handbag, something symbolic of a woman's privacy. Cliff even goes out on a limb and mentions this fact to Jimmy, who then rants against Alison (again) after finding a letter from her mother that she meant to keep hidden.

Jimmy then abruptly leaves after berating her for both Helena's visit and the letter; what is significant in this particular monologue is that he makes a specific reference to Alison having a miscarriage if she ever tried to produce a baby, which hurts Alison much more than he meant it to, since he is still unaware about the pregnancy. He means to describe a horrible event that might actually provoke some kind of reaction from her in his frustration with her, and he doesn't realize that he has in fact achieved his goal. The reader sees in the stage direction that he has broken her with that statement.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

It is two weeks later, and Alison is making tea while Jimmy practices his trumpet offstage. Helena enters, attractive and dressed expensively, carrying a large colander. She works in the theater, and is a friend of Alison's from her life prior to Jimmy. The women discuss Helena's help during the week and the two men. Helena asks Alison if Cliff is in love with her, which Alison hesitatingly refutes. Alison says that there's nothing substantial to their flirtation, and it's completely innocent. She explains that Jimmy doesn't mind because it is a "question of allegiances." They begin to discuss Hugh Tanner, Jimmy's childhood friend, who, with Hugh's mother, started him off in the sweet business. Alison disliked Hugh immediately when they moved in with him on their wedding night.

Alison admits the beginnings of her despair, and that she had no one to turn to since she had burned many bridges by marrying Jimmy and Helena was away on tour. She describes how Hugh and Jimmy would use her name and reputation to crash society parties for the free food, cigars, and basically to ruin it for the wealthy people. These were supposed to be raids of a kind of class revolution, but mostly they just seemed embarrassing for Alison and a means to some higher-class living.

Alison further describes why she married Jimmy, stating, "I didn't know I was born, as Jimmy says...Everything about him seemed to burn...and his eyes were so blue and full of the sun. He looked young and frail, in spite of the tired line of his mouth. I knew I was taking on more than I was ever likely to be capable of bearing, but there never seemed to be any choice. Well, the howl of outrage and astonishment went up from the family, and that did it. Whether or not he was in love with me, that did it. He made up his mind to marry me."

Alison describes Hugh's departure soon after, and how Hugh's mother and even Jimmy seem to blame her for it. He left purportedly to go abroad to work on his novel, and although he invited Jimmy and Alison along for the trip, Jimmy ended up refusing and ending their friendship over it. Although Jimmy never actually stated it, she still feels blamed for the incident. Helena points out that while it was all right in the end for Alison to keep herself in this situation, since she had only herself to worry about, after the baby is born she will now have to be responsible for another life, and it wouldn't be a good decision to keep things as they are. Alison reveals to the reader that she has not yet told Jimmy about their pregnancy. She assures Helena that it is his baby, she is sure of it, and that's not why she's stalling.

Alison does admit to Helena that she still is sexually attracted to Jimmy, even after all these years of constant argumentativeness. She tells Helena about their bear and squirrel role-playing game, and how it's all they have left to actually relate to one another. She also implies that even their bear and squirrel game seems to have fallen

by the wayside of late, leaving them with nothing to bridge the gap. Helena advises her that for her sake and the child's, she should take a stand or else be resigned to leaving.

Cliff enters, and they call Jimmy for tea, who has been playing his trumpet offstage throughout their whole conversation. They begin their usual banter over the newspapers, and Jimmy starts in on teasing and baiting both Alison and Helena, even bringing out his new word, pusillanimous. Helena calls him on it, which further inspires his banter. He realizes Alison is getting ready to go out, and she tells him she's going to church with Helena. This angers Jimmy, who accuses Helena of only remaining to win Alison back over to the "other" side. He again starts a tirade against Alison's family and upbringing, seeing Helena as part of that threat. He culminates with harsh words about Alison's mother, and Cliff's efforts to keep the peace fail. He turns his anger toward Helena, how she "[spends her] time mostly looking forward to the past." Helena threatens to slap him, and he assures her that he would slap her as well. He tells the story of his father dying, how he was the only one who cared.

Helena announces that it is time to go and exits. Jimmy's swagger disappears and his final stab at Alison finally breaks her. She smashes her cup on the floor and begins to get dressed amid Jimmy's continued barbs. Helena enters and tells Jimmy he has a phone call, and he exits. Helena accuses Cliff of not doing more and Cliff washes his hands of the responsibility. Helena tells Alison she has wired Alison's father to come get her the next day, and Alison agrees to go. Jimmy enters and announces that Hugh's mother has suffered a stroke. Cliff leaves to order him a taxi so he can go see her. Alison is gentler to him now, but still leaves to go to church with Helena, even though Jimmy asks her to come to the hospital. Jimmy throws the teddy bear from the chest of drawers on the floor and falls to the bed.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Helena has come to stay and help Alison, as she has confided in her regarding her pregnancy. Helena asks her point blank about her relationship with Cliff, and Alison tries to explain it, saying, "[I]t's not exactly a consuming passion with either of us. It's just a relaxed, cheerful sort of thing, like being warm in bed. You're too comfortable to bother about moving for the sake of some other pleasure." This highlights their laziness as well, which is voiced by Helena, who cannot believe that they would settle for that. Jimmy's former friend, Hugh Tanner, whom Alison disliked from the moment she met him much to Jimmy's dismay, is described here. Alison describes Hugh and Jimmy using her to stage crashes on upper-class parties, although from the description it seems more to get free food and drink than to foment any kind of revolution.

She also describes her first meeting with Jimmy, and how he seemed like a new and exciting adventure compared to her normal life. In regards to his feelings about her, Alison states that whatever he felt, it was plenty for him that their marriage would cause an outrage in her family, forcing a near-riot for this particular upper-class family. Thus, they share a marriage based on their rebellion and not necessarily out of love, which sheds light on why Alison and Jimmy are only able to relate through silly games instead

of in real life. Although Jimmy and Alison do sometimes betray a genuine (or seemingly genuine, in Jimmy's case) affection for one another, the reader is led to believe that they really didn't get a chance to get to know each other before Jimmy flung them into a marriage. The word "love" is often used in this play in statements about the horribleness of the situation, with a character implying that they can't deal with love any more, but the reader sees very few instances of actual love in any of the relationships.

After living with Hugh for a while after their marriage, Hugh decided to go abroad and leave them, which Alison says Jimmy blamed her for-another reason in his eyes to detest her. More importantly, she feels that Hugh's mother blames her completely for her son leaving, and since Jimmy nearly reveres this woman, this only adds to the distance between him and Alison. The fact that Hugh decided to go off and work on his novel and invited Alison and Jimmy along for the trip does little to alleviate the blame that Alison feels is placed upon her.

It is revealed that Jimmy still doesn't know about the baby, and Alison goes so far as to say that she loathes the thought of him entering the room, quite an unfortunate feeling to have about one's spouse. When Helena later tells her that she's wired Alison's father to come rescue her from this dreadful situation, Alison does not put up a fight. Perhaps Jimmy has finally broken her spirit, or this is just another example of her inability to act or have a reaction to anything.

Jimmy reveals his contempt for another institution in this scene, church. Once he finds out that Helena is planning on taking Alison to church with her, he mounts a battle against both of them to relieve his irritation. The church bells are a constant presence in their little apartment, drowning out life when they are ringing. By his violent reaction to them every time they begin ringing, it seems as though he regards them as yet another invasion by the aforementioned "establishment." Windows get shut to keep them out, but they can still be heard, compared to the newspapers they read like clockwork every Sunday. The newspapers only bring news that is sure to set Jimmy off and start him on some tirade against a class issue, but he religiously buys them, reads them and discusses them with Cliff anyway. The reader even discovers later on that he is the one that shells out the money for them, so he is actively choosing to invite them into his life, not just borrowing them from Cliff.

In this scene, Jimmy specifically chooses to attack Alison's mother with this lashing, shouting about how she thought she had to protect Alison from him. This was probably just a big bruise to his ego rather than some kind of crusade. In fact, since most of his attraction to Alison was his being able to shake the foundation of an upper-class family and take her away from what he perceived as the "evils of society," he most likely expected the fact that her mother was sure to have an extreme reaction to his appearance. The sudden nature of their courtship and subsequent marriage was sure to set any parents off, not just those in the upper class, and one can't blame a mother for trying to make sure her daughter's best interests are being served. However, given the actual situation, and the very real presence of class division and society, Jimmy surely expected the negative reaction to his lower-class upbringing and current existence.

There is prejudice in his world, but it's a prejudice he's exploiting in order to create the kind of societal shake-up he longs for.

In his tirade against Alison's mother, Jimmy becomes quite vulgar in his description, wanting plainly to shock them rather than argue any point. He calls her a "bitch," and repeatedly mentions that she should die. He goes so far as to describe the stomachache the worms would have after they've consumed her dead body, becoming more graphic and vulgar as he progresses. After he slows down a bit, Helena and Alison offer a rather clear insight into his personality. Helena says, "You think the world's treated you pretty badly, don't you?" Alison interjects, "Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him-he'd be lost without it." After not hearing much from her character aside from a few short responses to Jimmy and some lamenting over the situation to Cliff and Helena, this crystal-clear analysis of Jimmy's character is almost shocking in its directness, accuracy and simplicity. Alison's sentence sums up neatly the underlying motivation for Jimmy's bravado.

He's gotten so good at being downtrodden that he has nothing else to turn to. Even Helena's question is enlightening, serving as a perfect introduction to Alison's assessment, and clearly pointing out the impression that most people probably take away with them after spending some time with Jimmy. He feels entitled to his misery; although in many cases, he has put himself in the position of being the downtrodden one instead of being the one to rise above it. He is downtrodden because he only has a candy stall to make money from, but you do not see him actively going out and trying to find other more lucrative employment. The reader is actually told that it was Hugh's mother who set him up in the business, so who knows where he would be financially if that hadn't occurred.

He is downtrodden because other people, like Nigel, make headway into their careers and into society even though they are vague and not oriented to action, but Jimmy does not try to make headway into any career even though he considers himself to be the kind of person that deserves such gains. He is downtrodden because other people remain stupid and blind to society's needs, even though they are offered a privileged education. However, he does not use the obvious intelligence he has to do anything but think of new ways to criticize everything that is wrong with the world around him, even though he could presumably use it to take the action of which he's so fond.

He offers up a description of Helena as a sheltered woman oblivious to all the troubles of the day in retaliation, and a standoff of sorts occurs when she threatens to slap his face and he offers to slap hers right back. Here he defies usual distinctions again, across gender lines, by not backing down from slapping a woman even though society's rules pronounce that he should do so. Both Jimmy and Helena are very strong characters, juxtaposed against Cliff and Alison's much weaker ones, and it is no wonder that they bristle against each other so. In addition, since Helena is new to the scene, she is not used to ignoring Jimmy and deflecting his abrasive comments as both Cliff and Alison are. Therefore, she is ready with a rebuttal or another insult whenever Jimmy springs into one of his rages, forcing them to butt heads almost constantly while she is in the scene.

Jimmy does show a moment of vulnerability when he finds out that Hugh's mother, a woman he has genuine affection for, has had a stroke. He immediately makes plans to go visit her in the hospital, actually moved emotionally and for a moment, he is caught off-guard. However, he parlays this into a weapon to keep Alison from going with Helena, assuming Alison will now accompany him to visit Mrs. Tanner. He is outraged, not to mention surprised, when she goes with Helena to church anyway. He despairs when she leaves, but it is unclear whether it is despair over her, or over the fact that he is losing control of the situation. This also puts him out of the center of attention once again, a situation that he has already proven to be exceedingly uncomfortable with.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Alison is packing for her departure as her father, Colonel Redfern, looks on. They discuss the ailing Mrs. Tanner and the men's sweet-stall business. The Colonel tells Alison that he actually understands a little of Jimmy's perspective, although his wife surely wouldn't; as parents they do deserve some blame. The Colonel admits that it would probably have been better for all if they had never tried to interfere with the marriage, and tells Alison that they both have the tendency to be unwilling to make decisions. Alison admits she probably married for revenge, although she says that it is probable that her father may not understand that concept, since it would take a female mindset to do so.

The Colonel tells her that Jimmy has taught her a great deal, despite everything. Alison hesitates while packing the squirrel figurine, her part in the game, and decides to leave it on the chest. Helena enters to see if she needs any help, and tells them she's not coming back with them because of a script opportunity, surprising Alison. Cliff enters, and introductions are made. The Colonel exits, taking the suitcase to the car. Helena offers to tell Jimmy that Alison is leaving, since he doesn't know yet, and Alison gives her a letter to give to him. Cliff and Alison make their goodbyes, and she leaves. Cliff and Helena discuss what Jimmy might do when he finds out. Cliff reveals his anger with the whole situation, and goes out to avoid the scene when Jimmy gets home.

Jimmy enters shortly after, angry since he had seen the Colonel leaving with Alison when he arrived. He reads Alison's letter and makes fun of her attempt at niceness. Helena tells him that Alison is pregnant, and Jimmy is surprised but immediately declares that he could care less. He directs his anger at Helena, irritated that she might think he should be overcome with emotion at the news, and she slaps him. They suddenly begin kissing passionately as the curtain closes.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, is introduced here as a much more sympathetic character than the other main characters have been. He seems almost bewildered at the state of affairs his daughter finds herself in, in contrast to his wife, who "would relish the present situation" of having Alison come back home. He surprises his daughter by admitting that he and her mother were probably wrong to fight against the marriage, something her mother would never have admitted to her. Even beyond letting children make their own choices in life, the Colonel rightly analyzes the situation as a consequence of Jimmy having an enemy to fight against-the audience wonders if there would have ever been any marriage at all if there were no family for Jimmy to find pleasure and purpose in opposing. Most likely, Jimmy would have found another version

of Alison in a family that would display the proper outrage he craved, and Alison would have been spared the life she has known for the last few years.

The Colonel depicts himself as the conscience of the play yet again when he accurately describes his daughter and himself as fence sitters: "I think you may take after me a little, my dear. You like to sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful." Thus, not all of Alison's passiveness has come from building a defense against Jimmy; she has always been reluctant to take a stand. It is ironic that Jimmy married her in part to relish the upheaval of taking some action against her family, but then ended up with a wife was nearly the ideal of what he detested so: inaction. Perhaps, also, this is why Alison allowed herself to be whisked away by a man who loved the challenge of getting her more than he cared for her-it was easier to just let it happen.

Alison seems rattled by her father's belated apology, even going so far as to bring up the hurtful things Jimmy has said recently as proof of why they were in the right all along. It is unexpected to hear Colonel Redfern as Jimmy's defender in this scene, even telling her that Jimmy has taught her a lot, about society and life in general, whether she deigns to realize it or not. He acknowledges that Jimmy is probably rather accurate in calling him an "old plant" that's still hanging around from the "Edwardian wilderness," admitting that once he came back to this country everything had become completely different, and he was unsure of how to deal with it all.

Alison responds to his compelling honesty with an equally telling statement: "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it. Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it?" In four sentences, John Osborne has summed up much of the feeling of unrest flowing through both sides of the generation gap. Although this play was written in 1957, this statement rings true in today's modern society, and speaks to the fundamental impossibility of age and youth ever understanding each other, and ever being satisfied with the present. Change is the one constant, and it is also the one thing that most people have a great deal of trouble dealing with. Change is what delivers youth over the gap into age, and change is what makes it impossible to look back and understand the generation coming up behind. It is a theme that can speak to all classes, at any time in history, and this play showcases it very well.

Although this scene is focused on the interaction between father and daughter, there are other major revelations at the end. When confronted with Alison leaving, Cliff finally shows a bit of backbone in refusing to be in the middle of it when Jimmy gets back, leaving Helena as the messenger. After specifically saying that he has served as a middle ground for Jimmy and Alison, and that they probably would not have lasted this long without Cliff around, Cliff finally takes a stand and extricates himself once and for all from the situation.

Once Jimmy comes in, he already has figured out what has happened, and rails against Alison for the spineless Dear John letter she has written him, once again betraying his need to see passion in his partner. He wishes that she had called him all the terrible things that he believes she thinks he is and shown some real feeling for him, even if the

feeling is hatred. However, it is questionable whether Alison does actually feel this way, since even when discussing how much she dislikes the current situation, she never is too harsh about Jimmy; she mostly seems as though she's just given up on the situation, even defending him sometimes when others point out his various flaws.

Perhaps this final lack of emotion is why, after violently lashing out at Helena when he hears about the baby, they kiss passionately-he has been starved for a reaction. It is also important to note that he is offended by Helena's supposed assumption that he would go weak-kneed at the mention of a baby, since that wouldn't fit the image he has built for himself. It would be expected of him to crumble under the news that he has driven away the woman that was carrying his child, and instead of doing what is expected, he becomes angry at the notion that he would ever play into a preconceived role.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Several months have passed, and it is a Sunday evening at the apartment. It is obvious that Helena has moved in, as her belongings have supplanted Alison's on the dressing table, and Jimmy and Cliff are up to their usual discussion of the Sunday papers. The prodding banter is the same, although Helena seems a little more opinionated than Alison was. She seems to be more attentive to their banter than Alison had been, and is ready with a response when asked. She is sometimes amused by Jimmy's declarations, and sometimes caught off guard by his sudden attacks. Jimmy and Cliff begin an old vaudeville routine, each playing a part, including song and dance and Helena also plays a part as the butt of the joke. Jimmy soon has enough and begins wrestling with Cliff, who ends up dirtying his shirt. Helena offers to wash it, leaving him shirtless this time instead of pantsless as before.

She leaves to wash the shirt, and Jimmy calls Cliff on not liking Helena as much as he did Alison. Cliff reminds Jimmy that not too long ago, Jimmy had the same feeling about her, and says that the situation is just different now that Helena has moved in. Cliff reveals that he wants to move out, maybe find a wife and quit the sweet-stall business. Jimmy agrees with him, although he seems to disguise his disappointment by making fun of him. Helena comes back in with the shirt, now clean, and Cliff leaves to dry it over the gas.

Helena and Jimmy talk about going out that night, and they discuss Cliff leaving, which Helena already knew about since Cliff told her the night before. There is a marked increase in affection between them compared to Jimmy and Alison, and they begin to kiss. They talk briefly and whimsically about their dreams for the future, quitting the sweet-stall business and starting their lives over. As they break apart to get ready to go out for the evening, Alison suddenly appears at the door, wearing a raincoat and looking ill. It is obvious that she must have had a miscarriage. Jimmy leaves immediately, telling Helena that she has a "friend" here to see her, leaving Alison and Helena alone on stage, looking at each other in silence as the curtain draws to a close.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

The scene is set exactly the same, substituting Helena for Alison, as it was at the beginning of the play, with the newspapers the basis for the sparring between Jimmy and Cliff. It is interesting to note that Helena is even wearing one of Jimmy's old shirts, as Alison had been wearing in the opening of Act I, as if Helena had completely stepped into the same role that Alison had played for Jimmy without missing a beat. One difference is that Helena seems to have significantly more life in her than Alison had, which obviously pleases Jimmy, although she is still caught off-guard when he does say something heartless. Helena seems at the ready to banter along with the men, instead

of ignoring them the way Alison had. She even takes part in their impromptu performance of an old vaudeville routine, acting in a bit part as the catalyst for the punch line to their old joke (even though it is she who is the professional stage actress).

Since the reader is privy to the information that the relationship between Jimmy and Helena is still in its early stages, one wonders whether this is how Alison may have started out, before being worn down by years of the same tedious and repetitive interaction. The two men go through an elaborate song and dance routine, actually seeming to have fun for a minute and putting their competitiveness aside, including Helena in the comedy. Finally, Jimmy loses patience with it and begins another wrestling match with Cliff, as seems to be the custom; the men are obviously more at ease when competing

Cliff reveals to Jimmy that he is finally considering moving out; he touches on the fact that he misses Alison, but makes other excuses as well. Jimmy seems to summarily dismiss the announcement even though it is clear that he has few friends, even agreeing that it's a good idea for Cliff. The two men seem to adopt the accepted "manly" roles of hiding their emotions, and the stage directions frankly suggest that their air of calm is just a façade. What is strange about this situation is that Jimmy adopts this same attitude. He is clearly going to be affected by the loss of Cliff as a sparring partner, both literally and figuratively, and noting that he has very few friends to begin with since he is rather hard to put up with, he should be pretty broken up about losing Cliff as a flatmate. Remember also that Jimmy is constantly going on about the lack of action and emotion around him. Here is a perfect chance to indulge in those things, and instead he displays a nonchalant attitude and continues on with his newspaper. Cliff adopts the same attitude after seeing Jimmy's lead, seemingly expecting much more of a scene than this. This could be why Cliff told Helena about his impending move before telling Jimmy, to have her support in case Jimmy caused an uproar about it.

Also worth noting here is the fact that, for all his obvious intelligence about the world, Jimmy is constantly the last one to know about things in his own life. Most glaring is the issue of Alison's pregnancy, which Cliff, Helena and probably Colonel Redfern knew about before Jimmy, the father of the child, was let in on the secret. Once again, the news of his flatmate moving out reaches the ears of the newest addition to the space before it reaches Jimmy, the original best friend. Although Jimmy may strive to maintain himself as the center of attention, he is failing at being the center of his world, since his attitude and reactions cause people to tiptoe around him with sensitive news to prevent him from making a scene.

Alison arrives unannounced at the end of this scene, shocking Helena and Jimmy. They have just been making their evening plans and showing each other genuine affection without need of games, an obvious difference from the scene with Alison at the beginning of the play. Helena even tells Jimmy point-blank that she loves him, words that never were uttered in front of the audience between Jimmy and Alison. What's more, they have been casually referring to their great plans for their future together; a future which grinds to a halt the minute the door is opened to show Alison standing there.

Her appearance is meant to instantly convey to the audience that she's been through a miscarriage, since she is obviously no longer pregnant and looks sickly.

Jimmy's reaction to her visit once again brings out the childishness in him, and he blatantly ignores her and bolts for the door. A responsible man, whether angry at her or not for leaving, would have inquired after her health and his own child, but for all his blustering and posturing Jimmy again shows his immaturity.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

A few minutes after Jimmy leaves, his trumpet can be heard. Alison relates how many times she tried to come to the apartment, but she turned back before she got there. She fiddles with Jimmy's pipe and tells Helena about how she even purposely sat behind a man smoking one at the movies, even though she hates it. She laments about arriving there at all, and the two women apologize to each other for the wrongs they each have done. They argue about who is at fault between them, Alison for barging in, or Helena for taking up her place to begin with. Helena points out, quite accurately, that Alison has more of a right to be there than she, Helena, does, since Alison is still Jimmy's wife- revealing that they never had gone through with a divorce, and Helena had essentially become a kind of acknowledged mistress. Helena comments that Jimmy was born in the completely wrong era, which Alison readily agrees with. Helena suddenly declares that it is all over between her and Jimmy, seeing Alison as she is now and realizing what she has done. Alison tries to discourage her, but admits that neither of the women is right for him.

Helena yells out the door at Jimmy to get him to stop playing his trumpet, but he continues unheedingly. She orders him to come in the room. They both comment on how sick Alison looks, and that she obviously had lost the child. Helena tells him that she's leaving, and implores him not to blame Alison for it. Jimmy sweeps everything of Helena's from the dressing table, and hands her a dress out of the wardrobe. She leaves, and Jimmy and Alison are alone. Jimmy laments against the church bells, which are ringing. As Alison tries to leave, he accuses her of not sending any flowers to Hugh's mother's funeral. He desperately recounts their courtship, trying to make her stay. She finally collapses at his feet, giving him the picture of the completely downtrodden human being he seems to have been trying to make her become. He bends to hold her, and suddenly begins their bear and squirrel game. Finally, she responds, as the squirrel, as the curtain closes.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Both Helena and Alison are apologetic, although logically Helena should be the one doing the apologizing since Alison and Jimmy are still married. It is another indication of Alison's weakness of will that she falls all over herself with apologies for coming back when one would expect her to be angry. However, although Jimmy would have quickly interpreted Alison's actions and conversation as another sign of her weak mind and weak will, Helena instead interprets them as a sign of Alison's genuinely good nature. The same traits that would have outraged Jimmy had he been in the room instead serve as an even better reproach to Helena than if Alison had shown up screaming and yelling at her. It is this modesty of character that causes Helena to suddenly decide that she is

leaving Jimmy immediately. Such a weakness of spirit is usually not able to persuade anyone to do anything, as Jimmy would certainly make known.

While the women are talking, Jimmy is once again attempting to put himself in the center of attention. He is obstinately playing his trumpet again, knowing full well how annoying it can be to the other residents of the apartment and also knowing how annoying it must be to Helena and Alison when they are sure to be having a serious conversation. He retreats behind the blare of the trumpet, because even if he cannot be physically the center of the room, he can intrude with his playing and make the interruption the center of the room. Between the trumpet and the church bells, Osborne often uses common loud noises to signify the intrusion of an outside force, be it the outside structure of society with the church bells, or be it Jimmy's presence with his trumpeting.

The conversation between the two women turns to what is wrong with Jimmy, and Helena accurately states, "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's going. He'll never do anything, and he'll never amount to anything."

Jimmy's character is summed up in this statement-since he has no revolution to fight, he makes one wherever he can find one, thus alienating his friends and family and ending up right where he started. This may be where much of his frustration is coming from: he was born out of his time, and finding a completely inert society around him, he is left with his revolutionary tendencies and no outlet for them. As Helena says, he is floundering so badly with a yearning for a time in the past that he cannot get a hold on his place in life.

Instead of an identity crisis, it's an era crisis-he knows who he is, but he doesn't know where he fits in the modern world around him. This also plays into the generation gap theme already discussed-not only is there a gap between Jimmy and the older generation that Colonel Redfern belongs to, there is a gap between himself and his own generation since he seemingly has been born into the wrong one. People often say that they should have been "born in the sixties" or "born in the seventies," because they feel a kinship with a certain time period and out of place in their current time. Jimmy exhibits the same feeling, exhibiting a character that should have been born at the end of the eighteenth century.

At the end of the play, although Helena announces that she's leaving him and Alison seems to be too, Jimmy once again draws Alison back in through a combination of his well-loved suffering and her weakness of character. He laments, and she concedes, and they end the play with the squirrel and bear game they use to hide from each other, exactly in the same place they had started. Once again, Jimmy has not gained a foothold in anything, and the wheel has deposited him right back at the beginning. He rages, but without action, his rage is impotent. One can't tell if it's a misplaced hope that sees them end up together or just fatigue from fighting and fighting against it-what is

common is always easier. Still, the reader leaves hoping, even though all evidence shows us otherwise, that something better will come for them.

Perhaps that's what keeps them in the circle all along: an unfounded hope that it will work out all right. Alison even shows moments of it in the beginning of the play, that she is happy because suddenly, for one moment, everything seems fine. Perhaps everything is fine for the moment for the two playing squirrels and bears, not thinking about what has come before, It can certainly be seen as reflective of how much of the population lives their lives today. People are stranded in the same toil and misery but do nothing to break out of it because they hope that it will somehow work out in the end, because they're used to their own little world and have become blind to making things better.

Characters

Helena Charles

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

Cliff Lewis

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

Alison Porter

Alison has been married to Jimmy for three years. She comes from the solid upper-middle-class Establishment. Her father was a colonel in the colonial Service and the family lived very comfortably in India until 1947. Her brother Nigel attended Sandhurst, the British equivalent of West Point, and is a Member of Parliament. She married Jimmy partly as a rebellion against the proper, predictable, stultifying precepts of her class. However, she has been molded by her upbringing and it is her "fence sitting," her lack of total emotional commitment, that provokes Jimmy's attacks. Alison is warm and open with Cliff without ever harboring a sexual attraction to him When Helena takes charge and arranges for Alison to leave Jimmy, Alison does not protest and does indeed return to her parents, their values, and the security they offer. Alison is drawn back to Jimmy at the end after she has suffered the pain and loss brought by the miscarriage of her child. while critic Michael Coveney called him "a lovable monster with the gift of the gab and a talent for resentment." Although Jimmy has graduated from a university□albeit one with no prestige□he works with Cliff as owner/proprietor of a candy stall in an outdoor market. In spite of his tendency to sometimes cruelly insult Cliff, Jimmy genuinely likes him. His assaults on Alison are nasty and sometimes savage. He seems to be trying to force her to have a genuine response, something coming from her that is not colored by her class and upbringing. He says she is not real because she has not suffered real pam and degradation. When she leaves he is hurt but quickly adjusts. Jimmy has hated Helena for the same reasons he hated Alison, namely her social class and "proper"

upbringing. While Jimmy apparently hates Alison's mother, he seems to like Colonel Redfern because he can feel sorry for him.

Colonel Redfern

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

Jimmy Porter

Jimmy Porter is a character of immense psychological complexity and interest. He dominates the play through the power of his anger and language. He unleashes his invective on what he calls the Establishment (those "born" to power and privilege), the church as part of the Establishment, and his loved ones. Osborne describes him as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike." Critic Harold Ferrar assessed him as a man of decency and charity who is "one of life's beautiful losers."

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Jimmy Porter spoke for a large segment of the British population in 1956 when he ranted about his alienation from a society in which he was denied any meaningful role. Although he was educated at a "white-tile" university, a reference to the newest and least prestigious universities in the United Kingdom, the real power and opportunities were reserved for the children of the Establishment, those born to privilege, family connections, and entree to the "right" schools. Part of the "code" of the Establishment was the "stiff upper lip," that reticence to show or even to feel strong emotions. Jimmy's alienation from Alison comes precisely because he cannot break through her "cool," her unwillingness to feel deeply even during sexual intercourse with her husband. He berates her in a coarse attempt to get her to strike out at him, to stop "sitting on the fence" and make a full commitment to her real emotions; he wants to force her to feel and to have vital life. He calls her "Lady Pusillanimous" because he sees her as too cowardly to commit to anything Jimmy is anxious to give a great deal and is deeply angry because no one seems interested enough to take from him, including his wife. He says, "My heart is so full, I feel ill□and she wants peace!"

Anger and Hatred

Jimmy Porter operates out of a deep well of anger. His anger is directed at those he loves because they refuse to have strong feelings, at a society that did not fulfill promises of opportunity, and at those who smugly assume their places in the social and power structure and who do not care for others. He lashes out in anger because of his deeply felt helplessness. When he was ten years old he watched his idealist father dying for a year from wounds received fighting for democracy in the Spanish Civil War, his father talking for hours, "pouring out all that was left of his life to one bewildered little boy." He says, "You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry□angry and helpless. And I can never forget it."

Apathy and Passivity

Although Alison is the direct target of Jimmy's invective, her apathy and passivity are merely the immediate representation of the attitudes that Jimmy sees as undermining the whole of society. It is the complacent blandness of society that infuriates Jimmy. When speaking of Alison's brother Nigel, he says, "You've never heard so many well-bred commonplaces coming from beneath the same bowler hat." The Church, too, comes under attack in part because it has lost relevance to contemporary life. For Helena it spells a safe habit, one that defines right and wrong for her□although she seems perfectly willing to ignore its strictures against adultery when it suits her. Jimmy sees the Church as providing an easy escape from facing the pain of living in the here

and now—and thus precluding any real redemption. Of course, Jimmy has also slipped into a world of sameness as illustrated by the three Sunday evenings spent reading the newspapers and even the direct replacement of Alison at the ironing board with Helena. Deadly habit is portrayed as insidious.

Class Conflict

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

Identity Crisis

While Jimmy harangues everyone around him to open themselves to honest feeling, he is trapped in his own problems of social identity. He doesn't seem to fit in anywhere. As Colonel Redfern points out, operating a sweet-stall seems an odd occupation for an educated young man. Jimmy sees suffering the pain of life as the only way to find, or "earn," one's true identity. Alison does finally suffer the immeasurable loss of her unborn child and comes back to Jimmy, who seems to embrace her. Helena discovers that she can be happy only if she lives according to her perceived principles of right and wrong. Colonel Redfern is caught out of his time. The England he left as a young army officer no longer exists. Jimmy calls him "just one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore," and the Colonel agrees. Cliff does seem to have a strong sense of who he is, accepts that, and will move on with his life. shelves, chest of drawers, dining table, and three chairs, two shabby leather arm chairs. The drab setting of the play emphasizes the contrast between the idealistic Jimmy and the dull reality of the world surrounding him.

Plot

The construction of *Look Back in Anger* is that of an old-fashioned well-made play in the tradition of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Tennessee Williams, or most of Osborne's contemporary commercial playwrights. There is one plot developed over three acts (the expected number in 1956), and the basic plot device is ancient: misalliance in marriage compounded by a love triangle. There is some exposition that has been characterized

as clumsy, such as when Jimmy tells Alison, to whom he has been married three years, how his business had been financed. Some plot devices stand out as the author's contrivances, such as Cliffs exit in Act I to buy cigarettes, and his unconvincing reasons for returning a couple of minutes later just as Alison is about to tell Jimmy that she is pregnant; the telephone call from Helena prepares for the Act I curtain and a phone call saying Hugh's mother is dying prepares the Act U, Scene 1 curtain. The end of Act JJ, Scene 2, with the two women left looking at each other, has been viewed as artificial. Osborne's innovations were not in form but rather in character, language, and passion which, for the most part mask the clumsy mechanics when the play is being acted.

Sexism

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

Style

Setting

The play takes place in the Porters' one-room flat, a fairly large attic room. The furniture is simple and rather old: a double bed, dressing table, book

Imagery

Two sound images from off-stage are used very effectively in *Look Back in Anger:* the church bells and Jimmy's jazz trumpet. The church bells invade the small living space and serve as a reminder of the power of the established church, and also that it doesn't care at all for their domestic peace. The jazz trumpet allows Jimmy's presence to dominate the stage even when he is not there, and it also serves as his anti-Establishment "raspberry."

Language

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

Historical Context

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

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

The Church of England, too, was out of contact with the daily lives of most Englishmen. The Church is not simply a spiritual leader but also owner of vast properties and thus a member of the landholding class. The Church is attacked by Osborne when he has Jimmy quote the fictional Bishop of Bromley as saying that he is upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He denies class distinctions and says, "The idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by□the working classes!"

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

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

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

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

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

Critical Overview

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

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

sold out for its run and a three-week run in another theatre. A production of *Look Back in Anger* then toured England. It received the *Evening Standard Award* as best new play of 1956.

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

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

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Browne holds a Ph.D. in theatre and is the author of the book Playwrights' Theatre, *which is a study of the company thatfirstproducedLo6k.Ba.dk* in Anger. *In this essay he discusses elements that made Osborne's play important when it was first produced and why it remains a dynamic play today.*

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

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

In spite of the broadening of opportunities for university education, the old power structure based on "the old boy" network of school and family connections was still very much in place. The old power structure was cynical and bent on its own perpetuation. The Church of England was as much a part of the Establishment as the politicians and also seemed out of touch with the everyday realities of the people. For Jimmy, and for Osborne, the answers provided by the Church were a simple bromide that prevented people from looking at their lives and their society honestly. The "Bishop of Bromley" who is quoted by Jimmy may be a fictional person, but his call for Christians to help develop the H-Bomb was not fictional. John Osborne found a form that captured the unformed mood and discontent of the audience in 1956 England and gave it voice. Once the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) had shown a twenty-five minute segment of the play, that broad audience responded with letters asking to see the whole play.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Source: Terry W. Browne, for*DramaforStudents,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

In this review that was originally published on October 2,1957, Atkinson cheers Osbome'splay as "the most vivid British play of the decade." The critic lauds Look Back in Anger *for its courage to challenge complacency and the common perceptions regarding everyday life.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is a bit too pat. During the first scene of the third act, Mr. Osborne finds himself more preoccupied with the job of keeping a play in motion than with hurling words at the world. But in the last scene he is in control again. He is hack in top form□ twisting and

turning, sulking and groaning, turning civil morality inside out and doing other things he hadn't oughter. He is not the man for temperate statements.

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

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

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

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

Critical Essay #3

In this review of a 1957 New York production of Osborne's play, Clurman examines the motivations for Jimmy Porter's anger□which spring from sources that the critic feels are not immediately evident to American viewers. While generally laudatory, Clurman feels that the playwright's talents have been overstated but that his talent clearly promises that greatness in the future.

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

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

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

Jimmy is married to a pretty girl whom he feels he almost had to steal away from her family, the kind of family whose strength and graces were grounded on England's 1914 Empire. Jimmy not only resents his wife's family and all the institutions that bred them because they led to nothing but the dust and ashes of 1945; he also berates her for having lost the stamina presumed to be characteristic of her background, without having replaced it with any new values of her own□even romantically negative ones like his.

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

Jimmy Porter then is the angry one What is he angry about? It is a little difficult at first for an American to understand. The English understand, not because it is ever explicitly stated, but because the jitters which wrack Jimmy, though out of proportion to the facts within the play, are in the very air the Englishman breathes. Jimmy, "risen" from the working class, is now provided with an intellect which only shows him that everything that might have justified pride in the old England□its opportunity, adventure, material well-being□has disappeared without being replaced by anything but a lacklustre security. He has been promoted into a moral and social vacuum He fumes, rages, nags at a world which promised much and has led to a dreary plain where there is no fibre or

substance, but only fear of scientific destruction and the minor comforts of "American" mechanics. His wife comments to the effect that"my father is sad because everything has changed, Jimmy is sad because nothing has." In the meantime Jimmy seeks solace and blows defiance through the symbolic jazz of his trumpet, while his working-class pal, though he adores Jimmy and his wife, wisely leaves the emotionally messy premises.

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

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

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

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

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

Adaptations

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

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

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

Topics for Further Study

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

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

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

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

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

Compare and Contrast

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What Do I Read Next?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Further Study

Browne, Terry W *Playwrights' Theatre, The English Stage Company at the Royal Court,* Pitman, 1975. This book details the first production *of Look Back in Anger* and gives a broad view of theatre conditions, including censorship, both before and after the production

Rusinko, Susan. *British Drama, 1950 to The Present,* Twayne, 1989.

This book offers a concise view of developments in British both leading up to and after *Look Back in Anger.*

Taylor, John Russell. *The Angry Theatre,* Hill and Wang, 1969.

Taylor deals with the movement m theatre from the production *of Look Back in Anger* to 1968 and examines playwnghts who were encouraged and influenced by Osborne

Trussler, Simon *The Cambridge Illustrated History of British Theatre,* Cambridge University Press, 1994

An illustrated volume that places the period of *Look Back in Anger* in a broad context of theatre. It also includes pictures of the Royal Court Theatre and productions of *Look Back in Anger*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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