



## OSBORNE'S *LOOK BACK IN ANGER* : AS A NATURALIST PLAY

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### ABSTRACT

*The son of Thomas Godfrey Osborne, a commercial artist and Nellie Beatrice, a bar-maid, John Osborne was born in 1929 in a London suburb. Thomas Godfrey Osborne died when the boy John was hardly twelve and when World War II was gaining still greater momentum. The boy spent the remaining years of the war with his mother in London and was thereafter sent to boarding school in the west of England where he was far from happy. He left school in 1949 and that was the end of his education.*

### INTRODUCTION

Having got interested in the theatre, John Osborne tried his talent for acting. Soon he became an actor-cum-manager-cum-playwright. It was with the play *Look Back in Anger* that Osborne made his reputation as a dramatist. Osborne was 26 when he wrote this play and submitted it to the English Stage Company which had newly been set up at the Royal Court Theatre and which decision by the English stage the play as its first by a new author. *Look Back in Anger* was a strongly autobiographical piece based on Osborne's unhappy marriage to actress Pamela Lane and their life in cramped accommodation in Derby.

Naturalism is the extreme form of realism. Many writers have a philosophical concept about it. It is after effect of the post – Darwinian biology. Its thesis is that man is a part of Nature. All creatures, including man, follow common principles and patterns. Man's culture and religion cannot keep him apart from the realm of Nature. The Naturalists believe that man is an animal of a higher order, and is guided by heredity and environment. Hunger and sex are instincts and man shares these instincts with the animals of the lower order. But M. H. Abrams rightly points out that man is under the influence of social and economic forces in the

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family, the class and the milieu into which he is born. Emile Zola, an eminent French writer, formulated and popularized this theory. Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, James Farrell and many other American writers followed Naturalism. Thus they had an objective and scientific attitude to literature.

Brutal frankness in manners and actions are the salient features of the modern naturalistic novels and dramas. Yet we may say that the line of demarcation between Realism and Naturalism is very subtle. It is difficult to ascertain what is what. Frank realism is the chief characteristic of this play. This play was written after the Second World War. It was an age of disillusion. Disillusionment was followed by despair, cynicism, ultimately resulting in anger. Amis Kingsley's "Lucky Jim" and John Wain's "Hurry on Down" are a lurid picture of youngmen who are ill mannered and sexy. They take everything lightly. They are rebels, but they do not know exactly what and whom the rebellion is against. They talk blasphemy. They challenge the 'status quo'. They prefer to live the life of Don Juan.

Jimmy Porter is not Lucky Jim. He stands between the cynics and the idealists. But his language is not that of culture and urbanity. His statements remind us of the characters of the Naturalistic plays. His bitterness produces a fine flow of savage talk. He is not an individual but an able and effective representative of class of angry youngmen.

The fifties were a barren period for the British drama. T. S. Eliot was still popular, but his poetic dramas with all their beauties of craftsmanship, had little appeal to the youngmen of the age who wanted things in flesh and blood, in sweat and tears educated youngmen disliked verbal jugglery and magic of expression, elegant phrases and the language of dreams and romance.

Yet in fact, Jimmy is not really a cynic born to castigate the society. He reflects the psychology of a young man who man who is caught in a net. Behind all his toughness, rudeness and even vulgarity, he builds idealised images of man, women, institutions and things unable to reach their ideals, and then turns to bitterness. He believes in idealism. But he finds no cause to which he can dedicate himself whole-heartedly. That way, here is no center on which he can concentrate his adolescent dreams. If he had been born just a few years earlier, he would have been an ardent communist and fought in Spain like Spender and Cdwel. But he was born in age, which offered nothing positive. It was intensely silly and there was vacuum all around. Therefore, he thought about the past where there was something to believe in, something to cling to. He has no emotional maturity. So he goes on thinking and talking because he has nothing positive to do.

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We may consider this play Naturalistic not for its style and language only. It is naturalistic because of its tone and authenticity. It is a photographic play and the author has given no touches of idealism, romance or glamour. It is a photograph with wart and all. As we find in a traditional Naturalistic play, here the room represents a trap from which there is no escape. One is doomed to stay inside. Those who are inside the room feel that they are caught in a trap. There are sounds of the outside world, but they have hardly any contact with them. For this reason, the people inside the room become angry. Jimmy gets angry with himself as well as with others. The room is the world in miniature, and the occupants are the frustrated characters of the post-war period. The society is sick, in fact, it is dying.

Jimmy is the representative of youngmen whom Somerset Maugham describes as Scum. The characters are real, and they speak a direct language. Had Jimmy been in the Victorian or even the Georgian period, he would have been condemned both at home and abroad. He would have been regarded as an individual frustrated idealist. But in the fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he is an ideal hero who represents frustration and despair of millions who are in search of light. Jimmy and his followers have no definite plan and are not well organised like workers. They have no slogans to press their demands. They are like a blind man in a dark room searching for a black cat, which is not there.

Osborne is a social realist, and he has successfully expressed the tone, the sense of frustration of the youngmen of the age. Jimmy is groping in the dark, and he complains that in his age people do not have a cause to fight for. That is what distinguishes him from others who are self-satisfied.

Osborne is often compared with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller who have introduced a new note known as 'blue rhythms', meaning a melancholy tone. Both these American playwrights have a note of despair. But it is different from the Existentialist pessimism. Both of them react to the society in which they are unfortunately born. They express their disgust against the absence of spiritual element. Only animal motivation is present everywhere. In this play there is neither the melancholy tone nor animal motivation. Jimmy looks at women as detestable creatures. His estimate about Alison's mother is brutally frank. He says, 'That old bitch should be dead! I say, she ought to be dead... My God, those worms will need a good dose of salt the day they get through her! Alison's mother is on the way. She will pass away, my friends!' These words are beset with Naturalism. At the same time, there is a touch of idealism when he says, 'I may write a look about us all. It's all here.... written in flames a mile high. It will be recollected in fire, and blood, my blood.' His hatred for women is clearly expressed in these words, 'No, there is nothing left for it, my boy, but to set you be butchered by the women.' There must be some justification behind this hatred. About Alison's love Jimmy says that it is a hindrance to his growth and fruition. He says, 'She just devours me

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whole every time, as if I were some over large rabbit.' We may consider this as love-hate relation, more hate than love. This is why he shifts from Alison to Helena and from Helena to Alison. We should not misjudge him as one who believes in polygamy.

It is something more. Jimmy is sensitive, though not sensible. What he suggests is that women are the most important factors in the society. The society is sick and dying. Such a society has no right to exist, but women are trying to hold it. Therefore, they are the root of all troubles.

Thus the characters in this play personify post-war Britain's condition. Jimmy is an idealist of 'anger-care-love' type. He cares for humanity and refuses to accept the conditions of life as they are presented to him. The result is his anger and dissatisfaction. His anger is not mere neurosis, but in his anger we find a plea for more rights, healthy religion, clean politics, equal and more opportunities for meaningful achievements and true values in life instead of middle class morals. That way, this play vividly mirrors the mood and the feelings of the youth of the Fifties and presents the life and society of the post-war England in a very naturalistic manner.

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