Critical view

Look Back in Anger established John Osborne as the leader and prototype of the so-called Angry Young Men, a group of British playwrights and novelists of the 1950’s who shared leftist or even anarchic political views and wrote to express their disillusionment with the status quo. Although Look Back in Anger is not as unconventional or original as it initially appeared to be—its popular and critical success must be attributed in part to the fact that it appeared after one of the dullest decades in British theater—it is nevertheless of more than merely historical importance.

Osborne’s greatest strengths are in dialogue and characterization. Except for entrances, exits, and an occasional kiss, slap, or scuffle, there is little physical action in Look Back in Anger. Instead, the real drama is found in the verbal interplay between the characters. It is also interesting that in this play, as is generally true of Osborne’s works, there is only one character with a real gift for language. Cliff and Alison, who are both at the mercy of Jimmy’s sharper wit, feel they can fight back only by refusing to respond to his insults. Helena at first exhibits some cleverness, but once Jimmy has chained her to the bed and the ironing board, she simply works at being a good audience for him.

It has been noted that the most dramatic, and indeed the most hilarious, segments of Look Back in Anger are Jimmy’s monologues. This is, of course, consistent with the fact that Look Back in Anger is essentially a one-character play—something that is also true of Osborne’s best-known later works, The Entertainer (pr., pb. 1957) and Luther (pr., pb. 1961). Osborne himself had not intended Look Back in Anger to be centered only on Jimmy. Colonel Redfern is a complex character, not nearly as obtuse as Jimmy suggests, and Helena, who at first appears to be the villain of the piece, develops into a rather fascinating individual by the end of the play. Interestingly, it is not Jimmy but Alison who, according to Osborne’s stage directions, is the most complicated of the three characters onstage at the beginning of the play. The fact remains, however, that Jimmy upstages everyone else because of his verbal brilliance.
Osborne’s theory and his practice are at odds in Look Back in Anger. The play is generally classified as a protest play, one that voices the anger of working-class men at having willingly fought Great Britain’s wars only to return to a caste-conscious society that denied them opportunity, advancement, and even an acknowledgment of their dignity. Although the classless society that Osborne advocated could easily find room for weaker souls like Cliff or the suggestible Alison, it would have no place for a Jimmy Porter, who would refuse or be unable to suppress his insistent self for the common good.

Moreover, the play does not end with the triumph of the revolution or even with a useful martyrdom. If Jimmy Porter’s wife has been brought into the working-class camp, that has been accomplished not by him but by life; only because life has brought Alison pain, loss, and the experience of death does it become possible for her to empathize with her husband and, by implication, to surrender to his enormous ego. When the two are reconciled, they return to the fantasy world of their honeymoon; playing bear and squirrel, they retreat from the world. This is a far cry from the joint plans for social action that could be expected from a protest playwright.

Whatever its deficiencies or its inconsistencies, however, Look Back in Anger delighted contemporary audiences, who, like the playwright himself, saw the play as a comedy. If Osborne is to be faulted for writing a play with much talk and little commitment, one must applaud him for creating at least one unforgettable character and for bringing new energy to the British theater.

**Look Back in Anger Themes**

**The Angry Young Man**

Osborne's play was the first to explore the theme of the "Angry Young Man." This term describes a generation of post-World War II artists and working class men who generally ascribed to leftist, sometimes anarchist, politics and social views. According to cultural critics, these young men were not a part of any organized movement but were, instead, individuals angry at a post-Victorian Britain that refused to acknowledge their social and class alienation.
Jimmy Porter is often considered to be literature's seminal example of the angry young man. Jimmy is angry at the social and political structures that he believes has kept him from achieving his dreams and aspirations. He directs this anger towards his friends and, most notably, his wife Alison.

The Kitchen Sink Drama
Kitchen Sink drama is a term used to denote plays that rely on realism to explore domestic social relations. Realism, in British theater, was first experimented with in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by such playwrights as George Bernard Shaw. This genre attempted to capture the lives of the British upper class in a way that realistically reflected the ordinary drama of ruling class British society.

According to many critics, by the mid-twentieth century the genre of realism had become tired and unimaginative. Osborne's play returned imagination to the Realist genre by capturing the anger and immediacy of post-war youth culture and the alienation that resulted in the British working classes. Look Back in Anger was able to comment on a range of domestic social dilemmas in this time period. Most importantly, it was able to capture, through the character of Jimmy Porter, the anger of this generation that festered just below the surface of elite British culture.

Loss of Childhood
A theme that impacts the characters of Jimmy and Alison Porter is the idea of a lost childhood. Osborne uses specific examples -- the death of Jimmy's father when Jimmy was only ten, and how he was forced to watch the physical and mental demise of the man -- to demonstrate the way in which Jimmy is forced to deal with suffering from an early age. Alison's loss of childhood is best seen in the way that she was forced to grow up too fast by marrying Jimmy. Her youth is wasted in the anger and abuse that her husband levels upon her.

Osborne suggests that a generation of British youth has experienced this same loss of childhood innocence. Osborne uses the examples of World War, the development of the atomic bomb, and the decline of the British Empire to show how an entire culture has lost the innocence that other generations were able to maintain.