

SEX AND CLASS IN JOHN OSBORNE'S *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

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Synopsis—The article takes to task the established critical view of *Look Back in Anger* as an essentially radical play about our class-ridden society. Instead, I attempt to argue and demonstrate by close reference to the text that it is not class but sex that is really the main focus of Osborne's abusive attention in the play. I show that the play is, in fact, a blatant and particularly vicious attack on women. It seems to me that Osborne uses the insubstantial class element in the play not to attack the 1950s world of privilege and snobbery but to disguise in pseudo-social terms his fear and loathing of women.

Look Back in Anger is often taught in Higher Education and is now making an appearance as an 'A' level set text. Its admirers seem to have proliferated since it received its rave review from Kenneth Tynan when it first appeared in 1956. To date, there have been at least four full-length critical studies of Osborne (Trussler, 1969; Carter, 1969; Banham, 1969; Hayman, 1970) all hailing him as a major playwright and acclaiming *Look Back in Anger* in particular as a breakthrough. Any lone voice raised in adverse criticism, however mild, provokes the sort of response that stumbling into a hornets' nest might produce, not least, of course, from Osborne himself. Needless to say, few attempt it since waspishness is Osborne's own hallmark. The real bee in his bonnet, however, has yet to be identified. It is certainly not the worker his apologists would have us believe.

What made *Look Back in Anger* different from other plays in the early and middle fifties was that it brought unbridled abusiveness and sheer savagery on to the stage for the first time and passed them off as working class. This was enough, apparently, for it to be dubbed 'leftwing', a judgement which oddly persists to this day, for there is little (and that is quite spurious) in the play to justify the term, as I shall show. Where Tynan was at least tentative in his pronouncement, 'leftishness' (Tynan, 1961), the four full-length critical studies published since and recently are insistent. This is all the more astonishing in view of the fact that in the last ten years at least, many genuinely leftwing playwrights—such as Trevor Griffiths, Colin Welland and Jim Allen—have been performed on stage and television. With such examples before them, critics should not now find it quite so difficult to distinguish the true from the false.

The fact that the play's set, a rented bed-sitter,

contrived not to be middle-class—though as much cannot be said for its characters, apart from the very minor figure of Cliff—was obviously what went to the heads of the middle-class critics of 1956, for whom, as a more recent one so tellingly reveals, 'working class' was not only a descriptive but also a qualitative term, synonymous with squalid. Martin Banham describes the play's set as 'revolutionary' since it represents 'a world that was singularly sordid but very real'! (Banham, 1969: 12). This is a markedly misplaced critical emphasis, because bedsits do not constitute typically working-class accommodation. They are, however, typical of students (who are, of course, in the main middle-class) and of bit-part actors as Osborne himself was while writing the play.

As far as the *dramatis personae* go, *Look Back in Anger* consists of one sun around which all the other characters revolve as mere satellites. One single character is given all the strong language (often called 'the good lines'), all the abuse, the invective, the caustic 'humour'. All the tirades and harangues are his as well. The other characters exist simply as feeders of his cues and, some of them, as his targets. None is given any 'good lines'; none is strong enough in theatrical terms to stand up to the central character so that in effect the latter has the play all his own way. In fact, all the attention of the play and therefore of the audience is directed to this one dominating character. And all the characters are presented as small-minded, except, of course, for the 'hero'.

To construct a play around one dominating character whose mode of address is the rant suggests two things. One is that the author inevitably endorses the views thrust at the other characters (and at the audience) by such a figure, since the opposition is never given a chance to defend itself.

We are forced to conclude, therefore, that Jimmy Porter is merely the mouthpiece for Osborne's own pet hates. Secondly, to allow a figure that 'outherods Herod' to hog the play makes for very static drama and demonstrates thereby a singularly feeble and untalented approach to the dramatic craft.

Osborne's favourite dramatic strategy in *Look Back in Anger* as in his later plays is the easiest (and cheapest) one in the dramatist's book, namely, to set up targets who are never enacted. We then have only the 'hero's' word for how awful they really are. In other words, Osborne requires us to take Jimmy Porter's objections on trust and expects us to endorse his views and his hates. But, of the upper-class people like Alison's relatives who are supposed to be so awful, none but her father is enacted and, though he is described early on in the play by Jimmy as 'militant, arrogant and full of malice' (Osborne, 1957: 19) and his background suggests he is a 'stiff-necked', dyed-in-the-wool Tory, when he actually appears he comes across as quite reasonable and fairminded.

We are told by the critics that the 'anger' in the play is generated by, and directed at, people like Alison's father; hence the leftwing label. The kind and degree of emotion that pervades the play, however, is in excess of what such apparent targets warrant. Moreover, 'anger' is not quite the word to describe the unmistakable tone of a play whose dialogue veritably drips with bile and spleen and whose every set speech degenerates very rapidly into what can only be described as verbal lashings, rantings and ravings. Indeed, 'anger' seems a strangely dignified misnomer for such manic outpourings.

We should be careful, therefore, that we do not allow critics to do our thinking for us. If it were true that the ruling class was Osborne's target in the play then one might be forgiven for seeing T. S. Eliot's criticism of *Hamlet* (in which he suggests that the play's failure resides in Shakespeare's inability to find an 'objective correlative') as applicable to *Look Back in Anger*. But, as I shall show, it is not surprising that the kind and degree of emotion in the play exceeds and envelopes characters like Col. Redfern, for Osborne's real target lies elsewhere.

All Osborne does, in fact, is to make *token* nods towards leftwing or working-class sympathies. It is quite obvious that Osborne is not interested in the class war at all. There is, for instance, the very perfunctory way he sketches in Jimmy Porter's background. The only information he provides about Jimmy's parents is that they are token Lawrentian figures—a working-class father and a mother of middle-class stock.¹ It is typical of

Osborne's evident failure to be engaged by this aspect of his play that he does not even bother to specify the father's job, though work inevitably bulks very large in working-class people's lives. One has only to look at Dennis Potter's *Nigel Barton* plays, for instance, to realise that the truly committed playwright never shirks this sort of detail.

Furthermore (and this completes the information about his father) we are told that the father died from injuries received fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Again, it would be a mistake to regard this as a sure-fire guarantee of leftwing commitment, for in Jimmy's account of his father's lingering death the emphasis is on something other than the man and what he fought for or against. We are even told that the father talked a lot to his young son during his year's dying but Osborne is so uninterested in the father and his possibly radical experience that he doesn't even bother to mention any of the values the man presumably would have wanted to transmit to his son since he prized them so highly he had shortened his own life in their defence. Instead, and most revealingly, Jimmy's account of his father's death is stuffed with childish self-reference.

'I was the only one who cared! Every time I sat on the edge of his bed to listen to him talking or reading to me, I had to fight back my tears. At the end of twelve months I was a veteran. All that that feverish failure of a man had to listen to him was a small, frightened boy. I spent hour upon hour in that tiny bedroom.' (p. 58).

One is forced to conclude from the giveaway syntax—every sentence puts himself as subject, relegating the father, if he is allowed to appear at all, to the predicate—that what really engages Osborne's interest is his hero's sufferings, real or imagined. This account of his father's death, like that of Mrs Tanner's later, is meant to attest to Jimmy's knowledge of suffering and is, therefore, used by Osborne, not to evoke pity for the dead who hardly come into it, but to arouse the audience's pity for Jimmy and to justify his ranting and his cruelty.²

Moreover, Jimmy's own working-class details are so sketchy as to be non-existent. All we are told is that he has been to university, to the kind designated for the lower orders—hence the contemptuous joke about it being not even red brick but more like white tile. But has he had to struggle via

¹ This is John Osborne's own situation reversed. His father was middle-class, his mother a barmaid.

² The use of the two deaths in the play, like the positioning of one of the vituperative speeches in the play (cf. my comments on p. 508) surely give the lie to R. Williams's strange judgement (in an otherwise perceptive account) that the 'structure of diseased feeling is neither recommended nor valued; the whole form of the play allows it to be taken as a case, without necessary endorsement'. (Williams, 1968: 321).

Secondary Modern to get there or did well wishers of his family send him to public school, as was the case with Osborne himself? Such questions are legitimate and germane since details of this kind would suggest that Osborne was genuinely interested in fleshing out his character as a recognisable working-class figure and that the working-class aspect really meant something more than simply the right noises.

Even Jimmy's gate-crashing at house parties and weekends, plundering the food, drink and cigarettes of Alison's upper-class friends, is recruited by critics as proof of Jimmy's engagement in the class war. Certainly Osborne presents such juvenile behaviour seriously as forays into 'enemy territory' (p. 44). What a facile and adolescent idea he has of how to redress the class imbalance! Such reports fail miserably if their purpose is to associate Jimmy in our minds with social justice, for all they go to suggest is a rampant parasitism, further supported incidentally, by the information that at the start of the marriage Jimmy and his crony Hugh preferred to live off the interest on Alison's shares rather than to work for a living. Perhaps again this is meant to indicate what doughty class warriors they are.

Nor can Jimmy's job running the sweet stall Mrs Tanner has given him be viewed in any way as representative or typical of the working class. It doesn't acquaint Jimmy with industrial relations, industrial warfare, union solidarity or even fatigue or dirt—all the normal concomitants of the working man's daily life. Osborne's 'hero' is in fact a self-employed person, *in business*, albeit in a small and humble way. In other words, he has one foot on the bottom rung of the bourgeois ladder.³

Despite what critics aver, the play embodies no class war at all. What it does offer, very savagely and viciously, is the old favourite, the sex war. The worst abuse in the play is reserved for and directed at women, the female characters—those who appear, such as Alison, the luckless wife, and Helena, the eventual mistress, and those who don't appear, like Alison's mother—and womenkind generally. The spurious but much-mooted leftwing commitment in the play, apparently finding its essential expression in the attacks on Alison's upper-class relatives, provides both justification and opportunity for the excessive cruelty directed at her. If there is no such

commitment, as I have tried to show, it means Osborne is simply but artfully couching his attack on women in pseudo-social terms.

Diatribes against Alison's family are, however you look at them, a very successful way of wounding her feelings. To wound her both emotionally and literally if possible is surely Jimmy Porter's main aim in the play, seeing that he spends so much time at it. He actually succeeds in wounding his wife physically when he deliberately pushes Cliff into the ironing board so that the hot iron will burn Alison's arm.

The germ of the play lies here, in fact, in its bitter loathing of women generally. Osborne gives the game away so frequently it is astonishing that, apart from Raymond Williams (Williams, 1968: 321), critics appear not to have noticed it. For example, Allison is constantly abused; Alison's mother is savagely denounced; Helena is reviled at length; yet Jimmy doesn't stick to the women he knows, individuals conditioned by time, place and class. Every tirade inveighing against Alison and Helena quickly veers off into abuse of women generally, as the following typical example illustrates.

'She's so clumsy. I watch for her to do the same things every night. The way she jumps on the bed, as if she was stamping on someone's face and draws the curtains back with a great clatter in that casually destructive way of hers. It's like someone launching a battleship. Have you ever noticed how noisy women are? Have you? The way they kick the floor about simply walking over it? Or have you watched them sitting at their dressing tables, dropping their weapons and banging down their bits of boxes and brushes and lipsticks? (He faces her dressing table) I've watched her doing it night after night. When you see a woman in front of her bedroom mirror, you realise what a refined sort of butcher she is. Did you ever see some dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle? Well, she's just like that. Thank God they don't have many women surgeons! Those primitive hands would have your guts out in no time'. (p. 24)

Such 'humour', by no means unique in the play, reveals nothing less than hatred of women. The stage direction seems to remind Osborne of the character he started with, though it is not long before his general loathing gets the better of him again. This speech would be ludicrous were it not disturbing in the way it contrives to fabricate charges wherewith to indict women.

'The women are butchering us' is, in fact, the refrain of *Look Back in Anger*, its leitmotif. 'She devours me whole' (p. 37). 'Why do we let these women bleed us to death?' (p. 84). 'There's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women' (p. 85). You seek in vain, however, evidence in the play for any of those accusations.

³ It is being on the bottom rung, one suspects, that gives rise to some of the bitterness and frustration in the play. It has nothing to do with genuine indignation at the inequalities of a class society. And if proof were needed, since the financial success of *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*, Osborne's 'heroes' have had both feet firmly and securely on the social ladder—successful scriptwriter, well-off barrister, film director, Roman patrician, etc.. What is more such figures have been concerned to reject, with marked distaste, their (if any) working class origins.

What is more, it is Jimmy who does the butchering and it is his wife who is the victim, not the reverse. Nevertheless, Osborne obviously intends Jimmy's remarks to be taken seriously as an accurate account of the state of affairs in the play, since he makes his 'objective' spectator, Cliff, endorse Jimmy's complaint, though he does also suggest that Jimmy gives as good as he gets—'I'm wondering how much longer I can go on watching you two tearing the insides out of each other' (p. 28). Nowhere does the play's action offer any evidence of Alison being cruel or vindictive, let alone as savage as this comment suggests. The savagery in the play is simply a one-sided exercise on Jimmy's part. And, incidentally, just prior to this 'significant' comment by Cliff it is Jimmy who has deliberately caused Alison's arm to be burned on the iron (p. 26); and, equally damningly, shortly after this very same comment it is Jimmy we see rifling Alison's handbag, sounding in his defence like a classic case of paranoia—'I want to know if I am being betrayed' (p. 36)—and all because of his wife's receiving nothing more than a letter from her mother!

Equally indicative of egomania is his ranting when Alison decides to go to church with her friend Helena.

'Doesn't it matter to you—what people do to me? What are you trying to do to me? I have given you just everything. Doesn't it mean *anything* to you? (Her back stiffens.) You Judas! You phlegm!' (pp. 58, 59).

Moreover his savagery knows no bounds when his wife invites her friend to stay for a while, although Jimmy's own male friends have been accommodated without any fuss since the start of the marriage. He actually goes so far as to wish on her the miscarriage she later experiences.

'Oh, my dear wife, you've got so much to learn. I only hope you learn it one day. If only something—something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! (Coming in close to her) If you could have a child and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognisable human face emerge from that little mass of india rubber and wrinkles. (She retreats away from him) Please—if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognisable human being yourself. But I doubt it. (She moves away . . .) Do you know I have never known the great pleasure of love-making when I didn't desire it myself? Oh, it's not that she hasn't her own kind of passion. She has the passion of a python. She just devours me whole every time, as if I were some overlarge rabbit. That's me. That bulge round her naval—if you're wondering what it is—it's me. Me, buried alive down there, and

going mad, smothered in that peaceful looking coil. Not a sound, not a flicker from her—she doesn't even rumble a little. You'd think that this indigestible mess would stir up some kind of tremor in those distended, overfed tripes—but not her! (Crosses to door) She'll go on sleeping and devouring until there's nothing left of me.' (pp. 37, 38).

Such an incredible outburst, provoked by nothing more than Alison's suggestion to an old girl friend that she might find some digs downstairs in the same lodging house, must inevitably be regarded as pathological in its loathing and fear of a woman's sexuality.⁴

The dramatic credibility of the play is naturally undermined by the blatant untruth of so many of Jimmy Porter's accusations. 'She devours me whole' (p. 37) he says of his wife; yet the action of the play does not bear him out. Alison is neither sexually rapacious nor even highspirited. In fact, she is shown as quite the opposite. Even Jimmy's abusive jibes fail to provoke her. It's a rare moment when she throws a cup to the floor. For this reason Jimmy complains rightly that she lacks backbone. A woman who is shown to be pusillanimous by the action and who is accused of being so by the author's mouthpiece, the main character, is hardly going to be strong enough to consume that figure. Osborne is cheating, simply trying to have it both ways for the purpose of eliciting easy pity for his 'hero'. Nor is this nasty and neurotic outburst quoted above 'placed' in any way. Quite the reverse in fact, for it is literally given the last word, which inevitably stamps it as an authoritative statement. It ends the first act; the curtain falls at its conclusion so that there is no right of reply for Alison, no attempt by the author at qualification.

It is also noteworthy that as far as the upper class parents go Jimmy hates Alison's mother much more than he hates her father.

'I said she's an old bitch and should be dead! . . . My God, those worms will need a good dose of salts the day get through her! Oh, what a bellyache you've got coming to you, my little

⁴ Some might find it surprising that the obvious fear and hatred of women that the play manifests went unnoticed at the time of its first appearance in 1956. The middle-class male journalists and theatre critics who received the play so rapturously were, I suspect, all ex-public school like Osborne himself. The influential Kenneth Tynan certainly was. Such antagonistic attitudes towards women are not untypical of these exclusively male institutions and would hardly be noteworthy by them. Few plays, in fact, give clearer expression to the sexual norms of the public school male world, whose products invariably end up in positions of power in society, not just deciding literary taste but also, and more importantly, governing us politically, economically and socially.

wormy ones! Alison's mother is on the way.' (p. 53).

Such caustic humour is never aimed at Alison's father.

'He doesn't seem to mind you so much. In fact, he rather likes you. He likes you because he can feel sorry for you' (p. 66) she tells the colonel.

It is interesting how the *ménage à trois* pattern recurs in *Look Back in Anger*. At the start of the marriage the triangle consisted of Jimmy, Hugh and Alison. When the play opens, Cliff has taken Hugh's place. Furthermore, Jimmy gets on so much better with men than with his chosen women. Early on in the play he announces

'I've just about had enough of this "expense of spirit" lark as far as women are concerned. Honestly, it's enough to make you become a scoutmaster or something, isn't it? Sometimes I almost envy old Gide and the Greek chorus boys.' (p. 35).

Later, after Alison has moved out and Jimmy has bedded Helena, he insists that it is male friendship that really counts.

'It's a funny thing. You've been loyal, generous and a good friend. But I'm quite prepared to see you wander off, find a new home and make out on your own. And all because of something I want from that girl downstairs, something I know in my heart she's incapable of giving. You're worth a half a dozen (sic) Helenas to me or to anyone.' (p. 84).

Osborne evidently likes to give the impression that the last thing you could accuse him of is sentimentality. Jimmy's brutal reaction to his wife's pregnancy, for example—'I don't care if she is going to have a baby. I don't care if it has two heads.' (p. 73)—like his other outbursts in relation to Alison quoted earlier, could hardly be dubbed sentimental. Nevertheless, the play is riddled with sentimentality in the conception and presentation of its central figure. As I have already indicated, Osborne attempts to manipulate the audience's pity and admiration on behalf of his 'hero'. This is why we hear so much about Jimmy's reaction to death, first his father's and then Mrs Tanner's. It is after all somewhat superfluous to have two deaths in the play and to treat them in an identical way. But when that treatment consists of stressing the fact that at both Jimmy was the only person who cared, we are left in no doubt that the author wishes his audience to see his 'hero' in a very favourable light.

Not only does sentimentality underpin the conception and presentation of the central character, a particularly pernicious kind of sentimental, sexist cliché is responsible for the flagrantly incredible elements in the play. Helena, for

example, represents all that Jimmy is shown to hate and despise. He never finds a mild word for her and lets her know in no uncertain terms that he will retaliate in kind should she slap his face. At table he venomously reviles her; yet the moment his wife leaves him, Helena falls into his arms and his bed, announcing that she had loved him all along.

Not content with this, Osborne piles contrivance on contrivance. Helena is later made to vacate the place—which she so successfully plotted to get her friend to relinquish—with a sudden access of conscience, conveniently for her friend, the wife, to make her grovelling return. It is necessary that Alison should return to her husband, on her knees and at his feet (p. 95) to fulfil the logic of the play's misogyny. Such a return is prophesied by Jimmy earlier—

'Perhaps one day you may want to come back. I shall wait for that day. I want to stand up in your tears, and splash about in them, and sing. I want to be there when you grovel. I want to be there; I want to watch it, I want the front seat. I want to see your face rubbed in the mud.' (pp. 59, 60).

That his wife should want to return to him when he has made her life a misery by his constant abuse and when he has earnestly invoked her miscarriage on her; that a woman he did nothing but revile should contrive to get rid of his wife, her friend, so as to take her place, are sexist clichés of a particularly nauseating kind, suggestive of that hoary old chestnut, 'Treat 'em rough. That's the way they like it!' Apart from being inept and unconvincing ways of getting characters off stage for a requisite length of time, these contrivances also serve another purpose. They are surely meant to demonstrate, indirectly, just how desirable Jimmy is with his hidden 'charms'.

Childishness reappears in the play's ending, the painful whimsy of which even Tynan balked at. The bears and squirrels game amounts to a desperate attempt on Osborne's part to suggest some touch of humanity in Jimmy. But it emerges as simply twee and infantile, as indeed it must, given Jimmy's proven inability to form adult relationships with women.

Look Back in Anger is no exception among Osborne's plays. Indeed, among influential twentieth-century male writers Osborne is not alone in his fear and loathing of women. D. H. Lawrence, for example, hated women who were active partners in the sexual act and who did not venerate the phallus. For T. S. Eliot, womankind, especially lower-class womankind, was an exceptionally sordid creature, unkempt and unclean, to be equated with 'whore'. Osborne's later plays do not diverge significantly from the lines laid down in *Look Back in Anger*. One male figure in *Hotel in Amsterdam*, for example, calls his mother 'an old turd' (Osborne,

1973: 7); another adds, 'I think my mother would have put me off women for life. I mean, just to think of swimming about inside that repulsive thing for nine months.' (*ibid*: 8). These comments arise in the course of a conversation about parents, in which, significantly, fathers do not figure at all. The womanising hero of *Inadmissible Evidence* is made to lampoon natural childbirth and to use animal terms to describe the actual process of giving birth—'Every time she *drops one* he's (the husband) in there in the room. . . .' (Osborne, 1965: 61).

This is the typical Osborne approach. The audience has to take it for granted that the central character, so obviously Osborne's mouthpiece, is right to make his attacks. No evidence is offered, however, to support his criticisms. Since *Look Back in Anger* Osborne seems to prefer targets who can neither retaliate nor defend themselves (not that he allowed Alison to do much of either) because they are never enacted. This is a cowardly choice and one

that, in terms of drama, produces a talk-ridden, static exercise in self-indulgence.

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