

# Despair and Depression in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of despair and depression in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. The play describes the life of the young intellectual Jimmy Porter who suffers from low self-esteem and depression as a result of marrying above his social status and the solitude that he lives after the death of his father. Jimmy struggles hard to assert himself through directing his rage at his upper class wife, who marries him against the wishes of her family, and therefore suffers from stressful life that develops into depression that negatively affects his social life and behavior. He considers himself as a spokesman for the suffering workers who inhabit a bleak world and live a meaningless life as a result of the strict hierarchical British society that does not recognize their existence. At the end of the play, Jimmy succeeds in teaching his wife, Alison, what real suffering is and what it means to be lonely and helpless after losing her baby, and they both attempt to cope with their anxieties and feelings of despair through playing the bear and squirrel game.

**Keywords:** despair, depression, angry, working class, youth.

## Introduction

John Osborne's play '*Look Back in Anger*' (1956) belongs to the British new wave, commonly known as "kitchen sink" drama, which flourished in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and describes the life of the poor and angry youth. The angry Jimmy Porter in Osborne's play speaks for his discontented and unruly post-war youth struggling against the hostility of a world that does not recognize their existence. As an educated member of the lower class, Jimmy seems to be suffering from low self-esteem and depression, and therefore directs his anger at upper class people around him. Stephen Shafer states that the play depicts "working-class frustrations<sup>1</sup> and the antagonism of the upper class. John Harrop argues that "Osborne is a romantic with a strong sense of compassion and a belief in the free expression of individual emotions and energies<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, he gives the opportunity for his hero in the play to openly express his feelings of anger and criticize the social illness of society. Fredric Busch states, "a series of psychoanalytic theorists and clinicians have suggested that conflicts about anger play a central role in the development of depression".<sup>3</sup> This paper studies the anger of Jimmy as a result of the feelings of despair and depression that make him lose faith in the social institutions and distrust people around him.

Psychoanalysts view depression as an illness that causes a series of mental and physical

disturbances that make patients experience anger and suffer from insecurity as well as lack of self-respect. Sigmund Freud refers to depression as a "psychic traumata"<sup>4</sup> that takes place in a sick individual and affects his thoughts and behavior. Osborne allows the audience to access the subconscious of his characters to understand their needs and existential anxieties. The existential worries and depression of the main character, Jimmy, in Osborne's play can be viewed as a result of the painful life that he suffers because of his low class background where he finds no outlets for his intellectuality and the loneliness that he feels after the death of his loving father. Psychoanalysts argue that "loss of a love object was the cause of many cases of depression"<sup>5</sup> and suggest that undesirable emotional experience affects the life of a depressed individual in a negative way. Therefore, it would be true to say that there are close ties between anxiety and depression as it can be seen clearly through the character of Jimmy in Osborne's play.

The play introduces Jimmy as an educated young man from the lower class who gets married above his social status and treats his wife, Alison, as a threat to his masculinity. Jimmy expresses his frustration and dissatisfaction with the current situation through constant angry tirades directed at his wife, who marries him against the consent of her parents, and her family. Stephen Lacey argues, "it

seems at times as though Jimmy Porter's anger is directed against the whole world, but at others it crystallizes around his wife Alison's family".<sup>6</sup> These furious tirades represent an attempt for self-assertion and highlight the troubles of young working-class people. Jimmy asserts himself as intellectually superior through criticizing the ignorance of others in order to raise his self-confidence. Busch asserts that "hostility can be related to devaluation of others, a defense employed by patients with depression to increase their self-esteem".<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Jimmy can be viewed as a patient who suffers from depression because he feels not important and struggles to defend himself through belittling others. Jimmy satirizes Cliff, who runs a sweet-stall for Jimmy, when he attempts to read a newspaper by saying, "What do you want to read it for, anyway? You've no intellect, no curiosity".<sup>8</sup> He also tells Helena, a friend of Alison, "Perhaps you're not as clever as I thought".<sup>9</sup> The antagonism of Jimmy could be a result of the feelings of social oppression and the social gap between himself and his wife.

The play emphasizes the idea that the antagonism and antipathy of aristocratic members have psychological impact on poor young men and their temperament. This results in disbelief in the institution of church that seems to be controlled by the rich and the practices of clergy. Jimmy expresses his rage when he hears the church bells and cries, "Oh, hell! Now the bloody bells have started! Wrap it up, will you? Stop ringing those bells! There's somebody going crazy in here! I don't want to hear them!"<sup>10</sup> Jimmy voices his anger and frustration while hearing the church bells and expresses disbelief in religion because of the evil practices of some religious figures that use religion to achieve personal interests. This reminds us with the philosophy of the sixteenth century Italian humanist Niccolo Machiavelli that criticizes religious figures who use religion for personal ends and to maintain their influential positions. Machiavelli satirizes politicians who support the practices of church and suggests that those who encourage the church to come to power should not rule because they do not know about politics.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Jimmy parodies the practices of the visiting American evangelists and their attempts to convert people in Britain in the 1950s. Jimmy expresses his grief for the poor woman who "broke four ribs and got kicked in the head"<sup>12</sup> in one of the religious meetings held by American evangelists. This implies the great influence that the clergy play in the life of people and who seem to benefit from their powerful positions. Therefore, these American evangelists can be viewed as hypocrites and Machiavellian characters because of exploiting the poor in the name of religion and results in desperate generation that does not believe in religion or the practices of clergy. Jimmy desperately

recounts the story of the Bishop of Bromley who "makes a very moving appeal to all Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-bomb".<sup>13</sup> The fact that the Bishop of Bromley supports the making of the H-bomb reflects the destructive role that some religious people play in the lives of people through their interference into politics and which results in hopeless and depressed generation.

Osborne's play expresses the aspirations of post-war poor youth and their dream of classless society. Jimmy is educated above his social class, and yet he finds no outlet to express his intellectuality. Therefore, he voices his anger and despair through rebellious tirades that reflect his bleak outlook about the world. The attempts of Jimmy to better his life through educating himself and playing significant role in society are thwarted by the strict class structure. Osborne seems to be sympathizing with the angry young generation that Jimmy represents as he states the purpose of his writing, "I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling".<sup>14</sup> This lack of feeling creates gulf between the proletariat, represented by Jimmy, and the bourgeoisie, represented by his wife Alison. Jimmy seems to be highly critical of class distinctions and describes the insecurity and isolation that his generation lives. He cries, "Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive. Just for a while ... Let's pretend we're human".<sup>15</sup> Jimmy feels insecure and lost because society seems indifferent toward him, so he coarsely shrieks in despair, "our youth is slipping away".<sup>16</sup> Therefore, he criticizes society for not recognizing the intellectuality of poor youth that makes his life full of boredom and agony.

Jimmy finds in his relationship with Cliff a refuge from the hatred and hostility of upper class society. When Alison asks Cliff if he thinks Jimmy is right, he responds,

Well, I suppose he and I think the same about a lot of things, because we're alike in some ways. We both come from working people, if you like. Oh I know some of his mother's relatives are pretty posh, but he hates them as much as he hates yours. Don't quite know why. Anyway, he gets on with me because I'm common.<sup>17</sup>

Cliff shares with Jimmy the values of working class and both seem to be dreaming of "Marxist society".<sup>18</sup> This angry generation embodies rebellion against the values of the upper class that belittle the role of the working class in society. Therefore, the angry diatribes of Jimmy can be viewed as expressions of the class-consciousness of workers and their position within society. Despite his concern for the suffering people, Jimmy seems to be helpless to change the world that he incessantly and bitterly criticizes. Jimmy refers to the injustice of his society by referring to the suffering workers and class

struggle when he says, “The injustice of it is almost perfect! The wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying!”<sup>19</sup> Just like all the workers of his generation, Jimmy seems to be lost and cannot find social class identity that he expresses through his rebellious tirades because the society does not respond to his agony and despair.

Class struggle in the play can be seen through the tension between Jimmy, who represents the workers, and his wife Alison, who represents the upper class. Despite his intellectual superiority, Jimmy seems to be conscious that he is far below Alison socially. Therefore, he struggles to assert his masculine role through expressing rage at Alison and her family who he describes as heartless and unfeeling. Jimmy uses three epithets to describe the family of Alison, “sycophantic, phlegmatic, and pusillanimous”<sup>20</sup> mocking them for their indifference to the pain and suffering of poor people. Class barriers affect the marital life of Jimmy and make him feel isolated and lonely as Shafer argues, “the class structure in British society is seen as an important factor in the alienation felt by the protagonists”<sup>21</sup> Alison’s father, Colonel Redfern, cannot understand the reason that made Jimmy marry Alison if he detests her and her family. This makes Alison conclude that, “some people do actually marry for revenge”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Jimmy, the victimizer here can be viewed as victim of the social hierarchy that makes him perceive the world as insecure place.

The marital instability between Jimmy and Alison parallels the story of John Osborn himself who was not able to find contentment in marriage. Throughout his life, Osborne gets married five times and portrays his unsuccessful marriages on stage. Jeffrey Meyers states, “he [Osborne] satirized his flamboyant wives in his plays, and two of his wives acted in these works, portraying a character based on herself or a previous wife”<sup>23</sup> Osborne was inspired by the suffering he felt throughout his failed marriage to his first wife the actress Pamela Lane, the daughter of a middle class parents who is a model for Alison in Osborne’s play, from 1951 to 1954. Osborne marries Lane against the wishes of her parents who tried to prevent the marriage because he belongs to the lower class, a story that parallels the marriage of Jimmy to Alison that her parents disapproved of him for the same reason. Just like Jimmy who is a university graduate and runs a sweet stall to earn a living, Osborne has already suffered because of his lower class background and was discouraged by his arrogant school principal from applying to Oxford. Therefore, Osborne looks back to his unsuccessful marriage to Lane and the hostility that he suffered at the hands of her snobbish parents who degraded him for his origin. Both Osborne and his hero, Jimmy, struggle hard to direct their anger at society and express dissatisfaction with the circumstances of life

through their attempts to dominate women who are socially superior to them.

Osborne’s play presents Jimmy as a prisoner of his own thoughts and views about middle class society that make him feel a loner. Jimmy hates anyone who is socially superior to him and does not show commitment to his values. He feels depressed and gets furious at Alison because she is not a co-sufferer of him and does not share the working class values with him. Jimmy expresses his anxiety and frustration about the injustice of the world and announces that he has experienced suffering since childhood when he was lonely companion for his dying father. In one of the most pathetic and touching diatribes, he cries in despair:

For twelve months, I watched my father dying – when I was ten years old ... 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 ... He would talk to me for hours, pouring out all that was left of his life to one, lonely, bewildered little boy, who could barely understand half of what he said. All he could feel was the despair and the bitterness, the sweet, sickly smell of a dying man ... You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry – angry and helpless. And I can never forget it ... I knew more about – love ... betrayal ... and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life.<sup>24</sup>

The life of Jimmy has offered him nothing but agony and he is hardened by the painful circumstances that he lived since childhood. Busch argues that “anger in people with depression often stems from narcissistic vulnerability, a sensitivity to perceive an actual loss or rejection”<sup>25</sup> This applies to Jimmy who suffers from depression because of the constant losses that he experienced throughout his life and feelings of denial by upper class society. Sigmund Freud refers to the case of a patient that seems to be similar to the case of Jimmy where this patient falls severely ill while taking care of her dying father that she adores and results in mental and physical disorders, “the illness first appeared while the patient was caring for her father, whom she tenderly loved, during the severe illness which led to his death”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the traumatic life that Jimmy lives after the death of his father while at the same time feeling rejected by society because of his low class background influences his revolutionary character against the strict hierarchical class structure that does not recognize his humanity and intellectuality.

Despite the fact that Jimmy is not entirely content in his relationships with women, it would be erroneous to read him as misogynist because of his incessant attempts to emphasize his patriarchal role as the head of the family. Jimmy takes Alison as “a sort of hostage”<sup>27</sup> because she seems indifferent to his

pain and grief and does not belong to his suffering class. Therefore, he feels that he has been betrayed when Alison refuses to accompany him to visit his mother-like Mrs. Tanner on her deathbed. Jimmy explains the reasons that prevented Alison from visiting Mrs. Tanner, "she [Alison] made the great mistake of all her kind. She thought that because Hugh's mother was a deprived and ignorant old woman, who said all the wrong things in all the wrong places, she couldn't be taken seriously".<sup>28</sup> Jimmy allies himself with the suffering workers who are denied their right to play any decisive role in society. Unlike Jimmy, Alison has not known suffering and does not possess the virtues of loyalty and kindness that Mrs. Tanner shares with the working class.

Osborne, who is inspired by his suffering and discontentment in marriage, does not seem to present his hero Jimmy as wrong and blameworthy. Jimmy succeeds in teaching Alison what true suffering is and what it means to lose someone dear after losing her child. After Jimmy gets to know that Alison has lost her child, he says, "I don't exactly relish the idea of anyone being ill, or in pain. It was my child, too, you know. But (*he shrugs*) it isn't my first loss".<sup>29</sup> Alison learns what it means to be helpless and in pain and hysterically cries, "I was wrong, I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral, I don't want to be a saint".<sup>30</sup> Only after going through purgation and purification of the soul and losing her baby does Alison reach a level of understanding with Jimmy and get reunited in a sad scene. Jimmy feels that he has "liberated the fair maiden from her privileged position"<sup>31</sup> and the values of middle class society. After they reunite, Jimmy and Alison decide to play the bear and squirrel game where they feel happy. This animal imagery represents an escape for both of them from the troubles of the world and seems to be an attempt to eliminate the social boundaries that created friction between them.

In conclusion, Osborne's play addresses the issue of the angry and rebellious youth after the Second World War inhabiting a bleak world and facing a purposeless future. The hero of the play wages a war against the antagonism of upper class people and holds them responsible for the sorrow and pain of workers. Jimmy represents the suffering youth who felt that there are no good causes left worth fighting for and criticizes the social institutions that do not recognize the existence of the working class. As a result of the strict social structure of British society, Jimmy suffers from low esteem and depression and struggles hardly to assert himself through directing his rage at his upper class wife and her family. Jimmy reunites with Alison in the end after she has learnt what it means to be in pain and helpless after losing her child.

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## اليأس والكآبة في مسرحية جون أزيرون "أنظر للوراء بغضب"

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### الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث موضوع اليأس والكآبة في مسرحية جون أزيرون "أنظر للوراء بغضب". تصور المسرحية حياة الشاب المثقف جيمي بورتر الذي يعاني من قلة الإعتداد بالذات والكآبة نتيجة زواجه أعلى من منزلته الإجتماعية والعزلة التي يعيشها بعد وفاة والده. يناضل جيمي بشدة من أجل تأكيد ذاته من خلال توجيه غضبه الى زوجته البرجوازية والتي تزوجته ضد رغبات عائلتها وبالتالي يعاني من حياة مليئة بالضغوطات والتي تتطور إلى كآبة تؤثر بشكل سلبي على حياته الاجتماعية وتصرفاته. يعتبر جيمي نفسه متحدث باسم العمال ومعاناتهم والذين يعيشون عالماً كثيباً وحياة لا قيمة لها بسبب المجتمع الإنجليزي الطبقي الذي لا يعترف بوجودهم. ينجح جيمي، في نهاية المسرحية، في تعليم زوجته أليسون المعنى الحقيقي للمعاناة ومعنى أن تكون وحيدا وبلا حيلة وذلك بعد أن تخسر طفلها ويحاول الاثنان أن يتعاملا مع الهموم ومشاعر اليأس من خلال ممارسة لعبة الدب والسنجاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: يأس، كآبة، غضب، طبقة عاملة، شباب.