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**A Study of Psychotic Marriage Relationship in the Play of John Osborne's  
'Look Back in Anger'**

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**Abstract:**

John Osborne's brilliant play *Look Back in Anger* highlights the class conflict that existed in English society and elsewhere after World War II. In essence, it is the story of an angry and frustrated young man. This angry young man, Jimmy Porter is educated beyond his social origin in the working classes. He has been given a liberal education. As a result, he has come to expect certain things, especially a set of values, which he finds lacking in the society of which he is a member. The consequent frustrations turn his home into a battlefield because his wife belongs to the upper middle class. From the picture of Jimmy Porter's personal life one can generalize upon the conditions existing in post-war English society.

Thus a study of Osborne's plays reveals his pre-occupation with a number of themes. But all his work is coloured by his working-class orientation, and this makes his work distinctive and different. As he himself once wrote his plays are "lessons in feeling" and the tragedies which result from a failure to communicate that feeling.

## A Study of Psychotic Marriage Relationship in the Play of John Osborne's 'Look Back in Anger'

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John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was first staged at the Royal Court Theater in 1956, and it was at once hailed as "an angry play by an angry young man," and John Osborne was called the creator of "the angry young man movement." But in reality the play is not a condemnation of British class system or the British Establishment, but a study of the quest for solidarity in married life on the part of a young intellectual from the working classes. This makes the play a penetrating study of a perverse and unhealthy marriage relationship.

A closer look at the play reveals that class war or social criticism is not its real theme. The description of Osborne as a social critic is misleading. As Katherine J. Worth puts it, "His characters are highly critical of society and their criticism is so forcibly expressed as to make his play seem more like Shaw's *Unpleasant Plays* or *Galsworthy's 'slices of life'* than they really are. But in comparison with Shaw's concentration of dramatic interest on social problems in such plays as *Widowers Houses*, Osborne's handling of social themes seems decidedly haphazard. This is not because he lacks the skills to marshal them differently, but because they are not, for him, of first dramatic importance. Most of the earlier realistic playwrights were dramatizing social questions in order to stimulate social conscience: they had a 'palpable design' upon their audience and this was often the inspiration of the play.

“*Look back in anger* does not come into the category of ‘didactic, realistic’ plays Shaw’s own description of *Widower’s Houses*. Osborne is not concerned with social theories and panaceas. Social questions loom large in his plays only as they are imaginatively apprehended by his characters: they do not from the action. Although so many of the impressive tirades in his plays are concerned with the debased values of modern life, the action of the play is only very indirectly affected by such social questions as the class system. Alison describes Jimmy’s invasion of her upper-class world as part of the class war he is still waging, with his wife as a hostage. His irritation over the absurdities of the English caste system does, of course, colour his whole view of life and enters into the frustrations of his marriage “But what he feels himself to be up against is not simply a class system but something less assailable and more frightening, a kind of intellectual inertia which cuts right across class distinctions, affecting the common Cliff as much as the well-bred Alison.

As George Wellwarth puts it, “Jimmy porter’s problem is not the vicious injustice and hypocrisy of the social order: it is his suppressed awareness of the insoluble psychological paradox caused by his desperate overriding need to possess a woman’s complete, unquestioning love and his simultaneous constitutional inability to get along with anyone. His outbursts are the overflow of his bitterness whenever his wife fails to measure up to the standard of devotion that he expects of her at the same time that he knows them to be impossible. Jimmy is the sort of man who needs, but is too proud to demand, absolute devotion. He needs it all the more from Alison because she comes from the sort of upper-class family which he as a good socialist ,despises as useless and effect and which at the same time he envies and resents because he knows that it looks down on him. In order to possess her he has had to marry her and submit to the conventionality that he hates.

His dilemma is perfectly presented in Alison’s description of his reaction to her virginity: ‘afterwards, he actually taunted me with my virginity. He was quite angry about it, as if I had deceived him in some strange way. He seemed to think that an untouched woman would defile him.’ By being a virgin she is pulling him into the vortex of social convention. She is what she is expected to be in her circle. But Jimmy cannot show pleasure because that would be the

conventional reaction. Though if his wife were not virginal he would have to resent it as evidence of her fickleness. What he really wants as Alison explains to her friend, Helena (who becomes Jimmy's mistress when Alison leaves him), is "something quite different from us. What it is exactly I don't know a kind of cross between a mother and Greek courtesan, a henchwoman, a mixture of Cleopatra and Boswell" Jimmy's tragedy is simply that he will never find this ideal, and he knows it. He will spend the rest of his life bathed in self pity, hammering impotently at the misfortunes he himself has created.

Mary Macarthy also agrees with this interpretation of the theme of the play when she writes, "Jimmy Porter is a completely isolated person whose profoundest, quickest, most natural instinct is mistrust. This is the automatic, animal weariness of creature that feels itself surrounded. Solidarity, a working-class virtue, is for him the only virtue that is real; he exacts complete allegiance and fealty from anyone who enters his life. His woman appear, so to speak, wearing his colours : both girls, While they are his, are seen wearing one of his old shirts over their regular clothes. When Alison is found in a slip, dressing to go out, in the second act, this is proof that she is about to revert, away from him, back to her own kind Jimmy would make his women into men if he could, not because he is a covert homosexual, but because, if they were men he could trust them. Women do not have that natural quality of solidarity that exists between men, and they have always been suspected by men for precisely this reason; women live in the artificial realm of the social and are adepts at transferring allegiances (making new friends) and at all the arts of deception and camouflage of which the dressing-table, stage left, is the visible sign, Alison lets Jimmy down at the crucial moments of the play a thing he finds unthinkable, as does Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, This is followed, appropriately, by another betrayal; Alison's girl-friend, Helena, seizes jimmy for herself."

Jimmy's frenzied mockery springs from his expectation of betrayal. Alison is felt to be allied with the upper classes his enemy, and her secret exchange of letters with her mother is viewed as communication with the enemy Women cannot be trusted because they do not understand that such an act is treachery; they do it "in all innocence." A part from anything else, they do not take in the meaning of declaration of war Jimmy Porter has declared a war on rotten

society and the established order, corrupt and decaying Alison still cherishes the values of that rotten society, she still communicates and cherishes affection for the enemy, while he wants her to be perfectly devoted to him and to his cause. Therefore she must suffer, for regeneration and spiritual reawakening is born out suffering, therefore, he wills that her child should die. She should know what suffering is. She does pass through the ordeal of fire, and when she returns to him she is groveling in the dust. Let us hope she is now ripe to give him at least a little bit of that devotion which his soul craves for.

Imaginative suffering is a profoundly solitary experience and Jimmy knows it. “The heaviest, strongest, creatures in this world seem to the loneliest,” he says to Alison. ; Like the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There’s no warm pack, no heard to comfort him. The voice that cries out doesn’t have to be a weakling’s does it?” Alison is speaking ironically when she says, ”Don’t take his suffering away from him He’d be lost without it.” But the statement is true, Jimmy would be lost without it, yet at the same time, and very naturally, he resents the torment capacity with which he has been endowed. He kicks against the pricks, seeing all round him people who live their lives free of ‘daemons’, the ‘untroubled’. As O’Neill, another creator of haunted heroes, called them. “They all want to escape from the pain of being alive,’ he says, and longs for Alison to be initiated, to have a child that dies,’ Let it grow, let a recognizable human face emerge from that little mass of India rubber and wrinkles’. Such outbursts, on the verge of hysteria, indicate the strain which his sense of difference is placing on him. Alison makes communication between them finally impossible by withdrawing behind a façade of detached indifference. ‘That girl there can twist your arm off with her silence’. Is Jimmy’s bitter comment on her reaction? Her behavior is also, of course, natural in the circumstances; they are both defeated by an incompatibility that goes too deep to be cured by sexual harmony.

*Look Back in Anger* is a play which increase understanding both of the morally tormented and of their torments. But it does more. It is a reminder of what rebel moralist are apt to be like and of the strange mingling of sensitivity and cruelty, insight and willfulness, idealism and cynicism which is not reserved for jimmy Porter, or for his period, alone, In a world which sometimes

deals with its most “challenging misfits” by mocking or martyring them, and later venerating them for the wrong reasons, it is no bad thing to have reminder like this. It is no bad thing, either, to be reminded of the closeness between the rhetoric of failure and the rhetoric of success. My own impression is that ‘look back in anger’ offers permanent moral insights, and at least on splendid flesh-and-blood character.

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