

LOOK BACK IN ANGER

BY JOHN OSBORNE



Classroom Notes for
Any literary enthusiast in general,
and 'MA English, Semester II' in particular
ENGL4007: Modern Drama

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A note on these notes...

- Do you think this PPT can replace an actual classroom, where you gossip with your friends and peacefully sleep during by my long-winded antics?
- **Of course, not.**
- Do you think this PPT can replace the texts prescribed in your syllabus?
- **Of course, not. Then what are these notes worth?**
- These notes are just to excite your curiosity for the ideas discussed. To reap most benefits of the notes, read the texts first.
- By the time, you must have noticed there are two inks used here. It's an interactive PPT. The black ink is for me and the red is yours. Pause and think when the **red ink** appears. Wow end-rhyme.
- Plus, click on the hyperlinks.



Who is John Osborne?

- John James Osborne (1929-1994) was an acclaimed British playwright and screenwriter.
- His notable plays are:
 - *Look Back in Anger* (1956)
 - *The Entertainer* (1957)
 - *Epitaph for George Dillon* (1958)
 - *The World of Paul Slickey* (1959)
 - *Luther* (1961)
 - *A Patriot for Me* (1965)



Was he associated with any movement?

- John Osborne was not directly involved in any literary movement as such.
- His play *Look Back in Anger* created a stir and popularised the term “Angry Young Men”, a group of disgruntled British authors, active in the 1950s.
- The group also included famed novelist Kingsley Amis. (remember *Lucky Jim*, a campus novel: Oh Lucky Jim, how I envy Him. Lemme check some good [campus novel](#)? Any one mentioned Chetan something....)
- The term derived its impetus from the depiction of the post-war British generation’s disenchantment with the new world order, attack on the established order, left-leaning and anarchist ideas in opposition to the erstwhile feudalistic social structures.
- Do you think ‘Angry Young Man’ is applicable in India with regard to the movies of Amitabh Bachchan in 1970s? Contemplate.



So let's dive in. Act 1

- I ought to read the text first. After I am done, this will be more fun. Wow end-rhyme.
- Jimmy Porter feels stuck in a life of mediocrity in a one-room flat with his wife Alison and friend Cliff. His occupation is of a sweet-seller. His graduation from a white-tile university and lower-class upbringing couldn't grant him a white-collar job.
- Wait wait wait...what's a white-tile university? Where the tile is white? Is my university a white-tile university? And what is a white-collar job? Lemme google...
- The frustration of Jimmy with his life, especially due to his unfulfilled desires are manifested in his long tirades against what can be cumulatively termed as "Establishment".
- Many young people are generally against establishment. What is establishment? Does it symbolise all traditional legal-ration authority?



Act 1 continues...

- Jimmy concentrates his wrath against Alison whose strategic silence disembowels him. He offends her father, brother, mother and even herself with the choicest adjectives, but Alison stays unmoved.
- Jimmy uses the word “pusillanimous” to describe Helena? What does it mean?
- Eventually, he almost physically assaults her by throwing Cliff in her direction. At the end of the Act 1, a frustrated Jimmy comes to know of the advent of Helena.
- Helena? Seems like I heard someone named Helen of Troy or something. Didn't Christopher Marlow write a line like “Was this the face...something something”. Yeats also wrote something on Helen. Lemme check.



Act 2

- Unlike Alison and Cliff, Helena matches up to the feisty nature of Jimmy, she is outspoken and has an unequivocal moral stand. Helena learns that Jimmy and her friend Hugh exploited the elite contacts of Alison by inviting themselves to their houses and sponging of the food and alcohol.
- Why is this Helena meddling in Jimmy's life, I wonder...
- They tried to make inroads into their rich milieu which was embarrassing to Alison who finally cut ties with them. It is learnt that Alison is in a love-less marriage with no expectation and no desire to seek any change. She is leading a vegetative life.
- What's a vegetative life? Didn't Andrew marvel write "My vegetable love should grow"? What did he mean by that? Does it sound boring? Who knows...



Act 2 continues...

- Helena's greatest intervention is to persuade Alison to attend the Sunday church services which was against the liberal values of Jimmy. Jimmy brags how her mother had been extremely dissatisfied with Jimmy, and had kept a detective to learn his whereabouts.
- **Is attending a church, visiting a temple against liberal ethos? What does Marx think about religion?**
- By the end of Act II, Helena persuades Alison to move to her parents' house with her father the Colonel. When Jimmy comes and insults Helena by learning that his wife is gone, Helena slaps him. Jimmy finds the passion he desired. They start making love.
- **That Helena is a real meddler. But whatever is happening. Can extreme hatred turn into passionate love? It alters my whole opinion on this thing...**



Act 3

- Helena, Jimmy and Cliff fall into the same pattern that we observed in ACT I, but happier. Helena is ironing Jimmy's clothes as Alison did earlier. All are lively and there is a friendly banter. Perhaps Jimmy is happy with this arrangement.
- Isn't this play copying itself by repeating Act 1? Why is Helena ironing? How many clothes are there to be ironed?
- When Alison arrives, Helena learns instinctively that she has been living happily, albeit in sin. She makes way for Alison by leaving Jimmy's house. Alison suffered miscarriage of her first born as Jimmy had unwittingly wished in ACT I.
- When a play mentions something that happens later, what do we call that? Foreshadowing. Yes...finally,



Act 3 Continues

- Alison is devastated but finds Helena providing Jimmy the “enthusiasm” that she could not. Helena says “He (Jimmy) was born out of his time”. It’s a window to study the character of Jimmy as an “Angry Young Man”, “A Common Tragic Hero”, “A Frustrated Graduate of a White-Tile University”.
- How can a common man be a tragic hero? Shouldn’t he be a prince of something like Hamlet or Oedipus? Lemme read the essay “Tragedy and the Common Man” by Arthur Miller.
- The advent of Alison means the departure of Helena. Jimmy comes to find Alison home and they start playing their amateur games of bear and squirrel.
- All is well that ends well. I am so happy for Jimmy and Alison. Poor Helena though? Why did she leave by the way?



Why is Jimmy Porter so angry?

- The play dealt with an angry young man whose heroism lies in his “anger” and nothing else. Unlike other heroes, he doesn’t achieve great feats, rather he is an underachiever. He doesn’t have noble birth, but is of common parentage. He is tossed around between Alison and Helena and accepts both without resignation.
- There are various causes of his anger: a) the state of England in the changing world order, b) the place of common mass in England, c) the state of under-achieving graduate in feudalistic England, d) the lack of enthusiasm in his family.
- **Questions for you: Do you find any other reasons? As an Indian student of English literature, do you find any cross-cultural resonance?**



Kitchensink drama or Naturalistic play

- The play is a classic example of kitchen sink realism where the squalid domestic problems of lower-class family are depicted candidly. It's not an aesthetically modelled well-made play with a neat plot and structure. It evokes the problems of common masses, their causes, both psychological and social. Therefore, it's also an example of naturalistic play.
- The language of the play is utterly commonplace. While Jimmy has flights of verbosity in his tirades, he also stoops to depths of calumny and crude vernacular in his disparagement of Alison and her family. The language is prosaic, utterly realistic and unassuming. These are also characteristics of naturalistic drama.
- You may have studied Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as a naturalistic play. Try comparing the two.



Tasks for you...

- Major symbols in the play are the ironing board, the trumpet played by Jimmy, and the church bell. **Try to find their significance in the play.**
- **Do you find other symbols in the play? What is the significance of one-storied apartment or the newspapers?**
- **Do English newspapers make you feel as ignorant as Jimmy does? What's the difference between his reading a newspaper and your reading The Hindu or The Times of India for example?**
- **You may study this play as a social play or an autobiographical play and find ample support in your argument. That's your task.**



More tasks...

- One of the interesting ways to read the play is to read it as a play of “love triangle” (or love square) between Jimmy, Alison, Helena, and Cliff. **Do you think this play would be possible in 21st century in India?**
- Assuming you have studied Tennessee William’s *Street Car Named Desire*, **do you see how similar actions unfold in both plays that lead to dissimilar endings?**
- It’s a saying that endings make great show. **Are you satisfied with the anti-climax of the play.** *Candida* is referred to in this play. **Compare the two.**



A great philosopher once said, ***“The world is not perfect and nor is this PowerPoint”***

So, in case you find any error (typo or factual), do this simple task:

- ***Note it down neatly on an A4 sheet paper.***
- ***Fold it vertically once.***
- ***Fold it horizontally once.***
- ***Now keep the folded paper under your bed. Will help you sleep better. No need to send it to me.***

In case of any genuine query, you have my number...

See ya...

