
UNIT 1 BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to provide an idea of the **background** -- social, cultural and political -- against which *Look Back in Anger* was written, as well as a broad outline of the immediately preceding and contemporary state of **drama**, **leading up to** a first look at the play itself.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

While studying this, or indeed any play, a critical vocabulary with words such as 'theatre', 'drama', 'naturalist' and 'expressionist' (among others) is inevitably used. The two such terms that will recur most often throughout these units, '**theatre**' and '**drama**', are often used interchangeably, but they **need to be understood** as different aspects or components of the performance of a play. The 'theatre' is the space **used** for a performance (the stage, and by extension, the auditorium) as well as the entire system that makes it possible for **the performance** to be produced and to **communicate** meaning to the audience. This 'system' **has** visual and auditory components such as lighting, music, props and **costumes** and also includes **the** conventions according to which the performers and the audience interact with each other. These conventions are practices rather **than** hard and fast rules -- for example, one theatrical convention may require the actors to behave as if the audience does not exist and they are **not** aware of being watched, while another may **involve** their addressing the spectators directly. '**Drama**', on the other hand, refers to plays **themselves**, that is to say, to fictions written or designed to be **performed** on stage, and collectively to the **entire** body of such fictions at any given time or place.

As you can see, the explanations given of **both** terms seem relevant only in **the** context of performance. This need **not** be limited to stage performance and could as well be drama for the cinema, television or radio. Where **then** does the act of

reading or studying a play, as we are doing in these units, fit in ? Some theorists of drama answer that there are two kinds of dramatic text, the performance text and the written or literary text, and that these are **entirely separate, almost unrelated entities**. (This does not, of course, apply to those kinds of drama which are not written at all, such as mime or improvised performances). Without necessarily taking such an extreme position, we could see the two texts as different versions of the same play, but — and this is important — since we shall only have to deal with the written version, keep the other performative one in mind.

Drama is among the most public as well as the most immediate of the arts, since it is usually experienced collectively rather than in solitude and unlike the novel or even the short story, it uses spatial **representation** instead of linear narrative. This means, as Martin Esslin points out, that **action** is all-important in drama, which is an interesting idea but might at first seem rather irrelevant when applied to a play like *Look Back in Anger* (henceforth LBA) where speech certainly appears to predominate. This will be discussed in detail in Unit 3, so if we allow for the moment that a stress on action does make most drama an effective tool of communication, and if required of propaganda, we can appreciate the use made of drama by political systems, by social workers and activists (street plays are commonly used thus in India) and by religion (almost all drama originated in religious ritual).

The idea that the theatre, because of its self-consciously illusory nature, in some way both reflects and symbolizes the 'real' world is a very old and widespread one. However, the relation between drama and society is complex, and means that instead of simply mirroring or seeking to change social conditions, plays are also shaped by them, sometimes in ways of which the dramatist may be unaware at the time. This partly explains why different forms of drama have been popular, and the content of plays has varied so widely, at different times. Look for instance at the way in which religious (in the specific sense of theological) concerns, though present in some of Shakespeare's plays, are certainly not a chief area of interest in them, while a century earlier they had formed the main subject matter of the morality plays, and at the way in which his choice of distant or imaginary places—Bohemia, ancient Egypt, the forest of Arden—as locales, changes with Restoration drama's usual setting in contemporary London. Or, for an example nearer home, think of how the figure of the 'NRI' or the Indian brought up abroad, now a commonplace of Hindi cinema (arguably a kind of drama), is largely absent from the films of the 1950s when emigration was rarer.

There is of course always the objection to such an emphasis on the social in the treatment of drama with the argument that a play is not some independently occurring phenomena but is created by one or more persons and can be manipulated and controlled by them in a way that reality cannot be — a fairly obvious point, but one that we do tend to lose sight of while placing the play in its social context. Having said that, however, I think it would be helpful to try and get some sort of picture of the time and place in which Osborne both wrote and set *Look Back in Anger*, before we start our study of the play. Do try and have the text read by the time you finish this unit so that you can make the required connections but while doing so please don't apply this extrinsic information too rigidly to the text by expecting that everything in the play will conform to it.

1.2 BRITAIN IN THE 1950s

It might be useful to begin with an observation which is interesting in that it comes from an Indian visiting England in 1955, on the eve of a general election. Nirad Chaudhary in *A Passage to England* writes—

For individuals, as for nations, doing well in life and doing something in life are contradictory aims. The real test for the Welfare State will be whether it has been able

to merge the two ends, so far as they can be merged. But it seems to me that this very important condition of the Welfare State's success is difficult of fulfilment in contemporary England. This difficulty is not due to an absence of men with a will to do something. The real trouble is that there is very little to do and it is very difficult to arrive at a clear perception of what to do. On this point, ever since the end of the war I have had a feeling that the English people are in the closing stages of one cycle of their existence and have not as yet entered on another.

(*A Passage to England*, pp. 214-5)

Despite the rather vague generalization of its opening statement, I think the passage helps to provide a sense of the ambivalence that came to prevail in British social and political life in the first decade after the country's victory in the Second World War. This victory was followed by the coming to power in 1945 of a Labour government under Clement Attlee and the establishment of the Welfare State which aimed to provide to its citizens social security and benefits such as health care, housing and old age pensions. The idealism attendant on this socialist, utopian vision also resulted, in some quarters at least, from the perception of Britain as beginning to leave behind her imperialist past (starting with the independence of India in 1947) though this was hardly as yet seen as an ongoing process. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953 served as the occasion for a national celebration, particularly since the country saw itself as leaving behind the recent past of war, conflict, depression and poverty. This optimism is evident in the phrase 'the new Elizabethan age', widely used at the time.

J.B Priestley in 1934 described what he saw as the co-existence of three Englands, "Old England, the country of the cathedrals and manor houses and inns, of Parson and Squire ... Nineteenth-Century England, the industrial England of coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool, railways ... and New England", the last of these influenced by American consumerism and egalitarianism and based on mass-production and urbanization. The first two Englands, familiar to us from the novels of George Eliot and Dickens, were probably anachronisms by the 1950s, though remembered and mourned by people like Colonel Redfern whom Jimmy compares to Priestley and who admits to being 'an old plant left over from the Edwardian wilderness' (LBA, II,ii). But there remained some uncertainty about where 'New England' was going.

1.2.1 The Economy

The late 1940s had been a period of slow economic recovery for Britain, further hampered by the fact that she was still using large sums of money to retain her military and political power in many parts of the world and spending beyond her means on defence. The United States, on the other hand, had recently benefitted economically since the war had actually helped to pull the economy out of depression. Britain had been during the latter part of the war, and still was, heavily dependant on American financial aid and only managed to pay off her debts to the United States by giving up all her assets in that country. Under these circumstances, the arts and the theatre could not of course be among the country's most important priorities, and they suffered from a lack of funds and of support from the state,

The 1950s saw the eventual recovery of the British economy, with an end to rationing and a general improvement in living standards. At the time, most people began to see the period as one of prosperity and in 1955 the *Daily Express* described this sense -- '... higher pay packets, lower taxes, full shops and nice new homes' while in 1958, Macmillan was elected as Prime Minister on the strength of his slogan, "You never had it so good!"

Along with Britain's improved economic condition came state support for the arts, since greater attention could now be given to them and to leisure industries. One important development was the National Theatre Act of 1949, which provided for a

new theatre to be financed and built by the Labour government. In practice, however, the implementation of such proposals took quite a long time.

State intervention in the economy through planning or control -- such as bringing the trade unions directly into the government -- saw to it that greater equality, both of income and of opportunities for employment, became the most desired goal and was in fact attained to an extent unprecedented in England. Behind this change was the experience of the war years, not only those of the recently ended war but also the earlier one -- the First World War, which had, in England at least, effectively done away with the old nineteenth century concept of a *laissez-faire* economy.

The acknowledged need for a new system went along with the determination to avoid the mistakes of contemporary Communist and Fascist (ie. the extreme Left and the extreme Right) experiments in planning, and led to the adoption of ideas put forward by liberals in the inter-war years (contained in the Liberal Party's manifesto of 1928, *Britain's Industrial Future*) which stressed state control with a commitment to social justice through welfare. Interestingly, these changes were seen as desirable by all the political parties and if there was any opposition, it came from some among those -- the upper and middle classes -- who stood to lose by them. Even here, resistance was tempered by the realization (though it may seem patronizing) that some return was due to the working classes for the way in which they had fought the war on behalf of a system that had been distinctly unkind to them.

Social conflicts however, remained and were heightened by these economic developments, partly because many were understandably sceptical of the egalitarianism professed by people who were themselves privileged. It is to this that Jimmy Porter sarcastically refers in saying "I ought to send the Bishop a subscription ... He's upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says he denies the difference of class distinctions." (*Look Back in Anger*, I)

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The policies of the Welfare State, when put into practice, resulted in a distinct change in the social structure of Britain. Greater economic equality, brought about partly through discriminatory taxation, led to a further levelling of the classes, a process that had begun during the war. With the increasing prosperity and stability (in material terms) of the working classes, the old 'condition of England' question resurfaced. The 'question' now was not, as earlier, one of the middle classes bringing 'culture' to the masses, but of the idea that class differences must go in order for culture, in its new and extended sense as involving the whole population, to exist. Jimmy Porter is not to be brought to the 'redbrick' university (as Leonard Bast in *Howards End* is 'brought' to Beethoven) rather the importance attached to the redbrick university is to be undercut, and indeed, Jimmy does so effectively. The term 'working class' itself became an increasingly nebulous category since more and better paid jobs had resulted in increasing social mobility. Common styles of living with similar housing, food and clothing, as well as the common forms of entertainment provided by the mass media, especially television, replaced the former clear distinctions between the classes -- a system where it had been possible for an observer to place people socially simply by a glance at their dress. A further blurring of society's old classifications came about with the beginning of the immigration into Britain of many Asians and West Indians, which carried on until the 1970s.

One major change that affected all levels of society in both private and public spheres came about as a result of many women choosing to retain the jobs they had had to take up during the war, and an increasing number choosing to work in areas other than the traditional ones of teaching and nursing, though housework did still remain the woman's charge—notice that in *Look Back in Anger*, Alison is shown as constantly busy either ironing or making tea and is grateful for help in the kitchen when Helena arrives.

The arts now became, more than ever before, one of the concerns of the state, a concern embodied in what had become an English national institution during the war, though I do not suppose it is still thought of as such by most people who watch or listen to it today -- the BBC. State funding saw to it that a number of municipal theatres were built as part of the reconstruction of city centres damaged during the war. 1956, the year in which *Look Back in Anger* appeared, also saw the arrival of rock 'n roll music in Britain through the film *Rock Around the Clock* which actually caused riots in some cinemas. 'Culture' clearly had begun to mean more than the fine arts or 'good' literature, though there were those, like T.S.Eliot, who felt that such democratisation threatened culture which they saw as the creation of an elite group. The state provided, and made compulsory, free secondary education for everyone up to the age of fifteen with the result that people from any social background could now go to university. In practice, of course, not everyone who managed to go to Oxford or Cambridge found life easy there--one novel written around this time that deals with the issue is Philip Larkin's *Jill*.

These new realities and ideas resulted in a certain amount of class tension. Most ordinary people were now better off than ever before, but at the expense of a minority who saw them as a threat, in terms such as, Osborne says, "the monster on the street corner." Osborne goes on to state that his own sympathies are firmly with the 'monster', though he is clearly less concerned with social reform than with the idea of a cause and the character of the rebel. He is also sceptical about the success of the Welfare State as an enterprise, describing it as "everyone moping about, having to bear the burden of everyone else." (Diary entry from 1955)

The other contemporary problem that Osborne deals with at some length is the question of what place the traditional values of patriotism, loyalty to family, and chivalry to women had in the new social order. There were always those, like Jimmy Porter, who felt that these ideals, though highly prized, were at best essentially irrelevant to the lives of most people and at worst an imposition on the rest of the country by the upper classes, almost a conspiracy to keep things going the way they wanted. What, for instance, could 'public service' mean to someone without a job and no hope of getting one, except a polite abstraction? And yet, as Jimmy senses, it was these same loyalties -- to country, family, 'truth' and 'morality' -- that provided the causes people need:

There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. (LBA, III i)

1.2.3 Political Changes

The confusions between a stated social agenda, the failure to know where and how it was to be effectively put into practice, and the resentment it aroused in some quarters, led to a gradual disillusionment with the compromises of the Labour government and to the Conservative return to power under Churchill in 1951.

Another reason for the Labour defeat was the increasing identification, in the eyes of most people, of the party with those sections of the working classes who were poor and labouring. This worked to their disadvantage because larger numbers of people were moving out of this category and because such class-based politics were now beginning to be considered obsolete. Labour was even accused of trying to keep class tensions alive so as to preserve its own votes. But public unhappiness with politicians continued since the Conservative government's decision to retain the Welfare State programme was unexpectedly seen as showing up the lack of a consistent policy of its own. This apparent moving together of the two major political parties seemed to negate the integrity and political convictions of both,

though the Conservative victory was repeated in 1955 and again in 1959. The description of Alison's brother Nigel, though probably meant to be seen as motivated by personal dislike on Jimmy's part, does put across something of this suspicion of politicians:

"He'll end up in the Cabinet one day, make no mistake. But somewhere at the back of his mind is the vague knowledge that he and his pals have been plundering and fooling everybody for generations." (*LBA*, I)

The general mood in Britain was therefore one of disillusionment with the entire political process, along with a divided response to the fact of social change. The dissatisfaction remained however largely aimless and undefined, taking no form of direct political protest, and this inaction was in itself further cause for discontent.

1.2.4 The International Scene

Plenty of events took place on this front that were conducive to public cynicism. This supposed 'time of peace' saw the development of the hydrogen bomb and the beginning of a race for arms that eventually grew into the Cold War. Soviet Russia proved, by militarily crushing a revolution against the Russian-imposed government in Hungary that a Communist state could act in an imperialist manner. At the same time, Britain found herself, together with France, holding onto her imperialist interests by trying to prevent the Egyptian government from taking over the Suez Canal. The United Nations eventually returned the Canal Zone to Egypt and the failure of the attempt only deepened the sense of humiliation in England. This humiliation existed on two levels—practical, since such politically aggressive gestures were clearly no longer possible, and moral, since the failure to refrain from making them was a reflection on the country. The play (*LBA*) also refers to the Spanish Civil War (of the 1930s), which had been seen as a great cause by the previous generation, and in which Jimmy Porter's father received the wounds that killed him.

1.2.5 Reactions in Literature and Drama

What then were the ways in which this general feeling of resentment expressed itself? John Russell Taylor suggests that the expression in literature (and later, in life) took two forms—cynicism and rededication. The first is the position of many characters in the novels of Evelyn Waugh or of a character like Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, who is irreverent and defiant but without any serious aims or a dedication to any cause. Amis describes Dixon in *Lucky Jim* as often giving in to social pressures and realities: "But economic necessity and the call of pity were a strong combination; topped up by fear, as both were, they were invincible.

The same concerns could be seen as present in Amis' poem *Against Romanticism*, a kind of manifesto where a particular view—secular and rational—of the world is advocated for the age, through a rejection of the Romantic stress on passion and rebellion:

Over all, a grand meaning fills the scene,
And sets the brain raging with prophecy,
Raging to discard real time and place,
Raging to build a better time and place...

By showing up the Romantic zeal for reform as both irrational and impractical, the poem could be read as putting forward a certain kind of cynicism, or more correctly a scepticism, about what is to be gained from radical thought or action.

'Rededication', on the other hand, involves active and effective (usually political) protest. Such clearcut distinctions are not quite sufficient to describe a character like

Jimmy Porter. While expressing a cynical attitude, he reveals an anguish that is more than cynical and yet does not lead him to action. I am also not sure how far Taylor's idea can be applied to the domestic, familial level on which Osborne's play takes place, an area that had itself rapidly changed in the post war years, largely due to the change in women's lives when they began to work. I shall return to this issue of the relations and changing equations between the sexes, in greater detail in the next unit (see 2.4) but meanwhile should like to stress that in Osborne's work at least, it seems to function more as a space for the treatment of character and less as a comment on the contemporary state of things. The issue of class might seem to be a relatively more explicit concern, but is also subservient to Osborne's stated aim—to give 'lessons in feeling'. In both cases it becomes important, I think, to see the plays of the 1950s as not simply provoked by prevalent conditions, social or political, but also as informed by them and thus as both reacting to, and reflecting, contemporary 'reality'.

1.3 BRITISH DRAMA FROM 1890 TO 1956

1.3.1 Two Lines of Development

It is not possible to see a single chronological line of development in early twentieth century British drama, but I use the year 1890 as a convenient starting point, following Christopher Innes, who traces the beginning of modern drama in England to the date of Shaw's lecture on 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism'. When the changes in British drama are seen in stylistic and thematic (rather than chronological) terms, we can identify the different genres of Realism, Comedy and Poetic drama. Another, and for our purpose, perhaps more useful method would be to trace two simultaneous progressions in British drama – the Realist / Naturalist and the Expressionist, and then to look at the areas where they overlap.

1.3.2 Realism/Naturalism on the Stage

To begin with a working definition of these terms, **Realism** here means the reproduction or representation of ordinary or 'real' life on the stage. The term is often used interchangeably with Naturalism, a slightly inaccurate usage since Naturalism means the use of realist methods to convey a certain philosophical belief (that everything is a part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes) often doing this through the use of symbols. Naturalism does seek a realistic representation of life on the stage, but at the same time rejects the idea that art should try to show the most beautiful and inspiring aspects of life. **Realism** as a category is better used to define the focus, usually social, of certain plays rather than their form.

Shaw's ideas about theatre and its social role remained very influential even after his death in 1950, and some of Osborne's concerns can be traced to him. Shaw had advocated a direct social function for theatre, in saying that it ought to try and alter public views and conduct -

Can you believe that the people whose conceptions of society and conduct, whose power of attention and scope of interest, are measured by the British theatre as it is today, can either handle this colossal task themselves, or understand and support the sort of mind and character that is (at least comparatively) capable of handling it? For remember: what our voters are in the pit and gallery they are also in the polling booth.

(From the Epistle dedicatory to *Man and Superman*)

Shaw was also influenced by Ibsen's rejection of the earlier prevalent concept of the 'well-made play' and of melodrama with its exaggerated theatricality. His ideal was a 'rational' drama that dealt with, and perhaps offered solutions to, social issues such as those of poverty and the relation of economics to religion, which are his chief

concerns in *Major Barbara*. Abstract ideas such as those of heroism in *Arms and the Man* are also dealt with only in a specific social context.

- Dramatists like Oscar Wilde and later, Galsworthy and Granville-Barker, shared this emphasis on the social, often using comedy and working through distortion to make their points. Wilde's *Lady Bracknell* (in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) to whom Jimmy compares Helena, is almost a caricature of a certain social type, one example of such distortion.

Naturalism on the stage was certainly helped along by the many technical innovations of the time, the most important among which were realistic costumes, and the sound effects and variable lighting that became possible with the use of electricity. When it is seen against the background I have described earlier, which included war, the gradual loss of empire, urbanization and the rise of socialism, it is not surprising that naturalism also brought nationalist concerns back to the British stage (from which they had been largely absent since Elizabethan times) and theatre began to be used for propaganda. The function of plays during each war became to provide entertainment that was both escapist and patriotic. New playwrights who dealt with these developments satirically, emerged after both World Wars – Noel Coward in the 1920s and Christopher Fry in the 1950s. An indication of the importance these nationalist concerns assumed for drama in wartime, is the fact that Shaw, who took an iconoclastic attitude to the war of 1914-18 was temporarily banished from the stage despite his status as a famous and popular playwright.

1.3.3 Expressionistic Drama

Expressionism, the other area mentioned above, began in early twentieth century Germany and was much more a European than a British movement. It substituted, or sought to substitute, the personal vision of the world for the representation of external reality. When applied to the theatre it meant a reaction against realism, with a stress on inner psychological states. Naturalism relied on the cumulative effect of external detail reproduced as closely as possible – this was discarded by Expressionism, which instead sought maximum expressiveness. I use the term loosely to cover a whole set of developments (known as avant-garde) in European drama. These were movements such as the Theatre of the Absurd, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Brecht's Epic Theatre. Except for the last of these (Brecht) the influence of these developments on British drama was both narrow and short lived. Epic Theatre which exposes theatricality and rejects stage illusion (the illusion that what happens on stage is real and actual) became relevant to British drama mainly because of the social and political perspectives it retained, which other avant-garde movements did not.

1.3.4 Effects on Style and Characterization

What were the effects on style of British drama's remaining largely Naturalistic rather than Expressionistic? For one, it meant the rejection of the abstract in presentation and of mythical, allegorical or even historical characters. These survived only in the area of poetic drama which used verse and usually had religious themes – T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* is one example. Image and metaphor, on which most absurdist drama relied, also took a back seat.

Northrop Frye has identified four levels of discourse which apply to drama as well as to the novel: the realm of myth, where the audience looks at the characters as much above them, as gods; the realm of the heroic, where the audience looks up to the characters as heroic; when the audience sees the characters as being on the same level as themselves, this is the realistic style; and if the audience looks down on the characters as contemptible or beneath them, the mode is ironic. Myths and heroic plays will obviously require more poetic, stylised or elevated language than the other categories. Realistic drama, on the other hand, demands everyday prose, which thus became the most common style or form of expression of drama in Britain at this time.

Multidimensional and complex character, realistic situations and conversation, and the relation of the individual to the group, all of which are present in Osborne's work, remained the desired focus of post-war drama in England.

1.3.5 Changing Subject Matter

One development which can be seen as relevant to the entire period we are looking at, and to all forms of drama, was the eventual success in the 1960s of campaigns begun at the turn of the century for the abolition of censorship and the founding of a national theatre. This meant the extension of subject matter in drama to areas that were earlier not considered proper for the stage, among them the details of domestic life. Plays that concerned themselves with such details were called 'kitchen sink drama' by some critics who saw such matters as trivial, drab and too far removed from the glamour that they were used to associating with the stage. Osborne's early plays, as well as those of Arnold Wesker, were included by many in this category, since both depicted domestic tasks being carried out on stage – Alison's ironing in *Look Back in Anger* and the washing-up that is carried on for most of Wesker's play *Roots*, are two often-cited examples.

Another feature of postwar British drama was the effort to make itself once again accessible and interesting to working class audiences, an effort that was required in order to change the general perception of the theatre as the preserve of an educated, cultured elite, as well as to ensure the survival of plays as a form of entertainment in the face of increasing competition from the cinema. Part of this effort was the rediscovery by dramatists of popular culture, particularly of the use of music (in the forms of both song and dance) as an almost necessary part of drama, a common enough device in Elizabethan times as well as in the nineteenth century, but one that had become rare in the recent past. Surprisingly enough, these attempts at 'popularizing' drama coexisted with the writing and production of plays (for example, those of Samuel Beckett) which do not seem to concern themselves with popular taste or with public demand, though of course these are both very generalized categories. But even these 'difficult' plays were largely free of the older ideas that certain types of drama are inherently superior to others—for example, tragedy as being 'better' than comedy—and of the notion that all forms of entertainment are not suitable for every social class.

1.3.6 Irish and Scottish Drama

Though both Shaw and Wilde were Irish, they belonged to the English tradition of modern, realist, prose drama. It was in Ireland, especially in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, that the beginnings of modern poetic drama lay, with the verse dramas of Yeats and Lady Gregory. Synge (who wrote in prose) and O'Casey were two other influential Irish playwrights, and Samuel Beckett became the first Irish dramatist of international importance (though he was actually part of the anti-realist European dramatic tradition.) J.M. Barrie, a Scottish playwright was extremely popular on the London stage, despite –or perhaps as a result of—his moving away from realist conventions by the use of fantasy, something evident from *Peter Pan*, a non-dramatic work which is also his best remembered.

I mention these dramatists in order to qualify the idea of 'British' drama as a unified whole, unaffected by regional differences. In addition, if what we are looking at is a number of patterns and movements with varied influences, rather than a line of progress, we also need to take into account the American drama of the period.

1.3.7 American Drama and its Use of Tragedy

American drama concerned itself with one important area that the British theatre neglected at this time – that of tragedy. Though a vexed term with a complex history of theory and practice, tragedy can be rather broadly defined as an interrogation of

human nature, of its relation to the universe, and how these are affected by and give rise to disaster, as well as being a protest against the inexplicable nature and injustice of suffering. It has been argued that the modern world (and by extension, the modern stage) can provide a space that is only potentially tragic and falls short of actual tragedy as present in classical and Elizabethan models. For example, does Arthur Miller's play *The Death of a Salesman* contain tragedy or merely pathos? I do not think there is a clear answer, but the question could be considered in terms of the new dimension provided by modern psychology, which was not present to classical tragedy. This involves a rethinking of the term itself, or at least a broadening of its critical usage. Raymond Williams argues in *Modern Tragedy* that while tragedy and bourgeois society might appear to be mutually exclusive, to say that tragic concerns like those described above have disappeared from the modern stage would be to ignore, in favour of an abstract theory, a large body of evidence to the contrary. American drama at this time did seem to focus less on society and more on the individual, than did the work of British playwrights like Osborne, Terence Rattigan and Joe Manton. American dramatists like Miller, O'Neill and Tennessee Williams did not see tragedy as incompatible with realism, or for that matter with modernism, as most British drama appeared to. It is interesting to consider the implications of this for Osborne. Could Jimmy Porter be seen as a potentially tragic hero who remains unrealized due to constraints of time and place, of (as he says himself) the lack of causes? Another British dramatist to think of in this connection is Harold Pinter who does seem to use tragedy in a new way – through silence resulting from the breakdown of speech, as happens in *The Caretaker*.

1.4 OSBORNE

1.41 Biography

John Osborne was born on 12 December 1929 into a working class family of pub keepers. This was his mother's family; his father Thomas Osborne, who was a commercial artist, died of tuberculosis while Osborne was still a child. Osborne, though very attached to his father, did not spare in his plays the 'genteel' middle-class to which his father's family belonged. Yet he also mentions happy days spent in his childhood with his paternal grandparents. He describes his mother's family thus:

My mother's parents were publicans ... and whenever they got together for some celebration, there would be plenty to drink, however hard things were: that is something middle-class people find difficult to understand or forgive ... There would be battling shrieks of laughter, yelling, ignoring, bawling, everyone trying to get his piece in ... They talked about their troubles in a way that would embarrass any middle-class observer. I've no doubt that they were often boring, but life still had meaning for them. Even if they did get drunk and fight, they were responding; they were not defeated.

(*Declaration*, ed. T. Maschler, p.80)

This passage makes evident at least two points which are relevant to the play we are studying. Osborne clearly uses the 'middle-class' as a negative standard against which to describe the family he grew up in, thus implicitly allying himself with the 'working class' to which such a family belongs. Jimmy Porter's hatred of the middle-classes – not in either case a particularly clearly defined category – is very similar. Also, a statement like 'they were responding; they were not defeated', serves to romanticize the working class family, however true it may have been of the particular individuals described in the passage.

After attending state schools and later a minor public school (from where he was expelled for retaliating in kind when the headmaster slapped him) Osborne worked at various jobs, writing copy for trade journals and tutoring children in English and

Arithmetic. He then became assistant stage manager to a repertory company and himself began to act in 1948. **A4** to the inevitable question of how his writing might have been influenced by his stage career, Osborne admitted,

Well, I always enjoy acting and if I were offered a really good part, I'd be tempted. But I've never taken myself seriously as an actor, and neither has anyone else. It would be indulgent to do it any more! Of course when I'm writing I see all the parts being played beautifully by me, to perfection! ("That Awful Museum", interview with John Findlater. *Twentieth Century*, February 1961)

In 1951, Osborne married the actress Pamela Lane and though they divorced in 1957, it was while he was living with her that he wrote *Look Back in Anger*. The dramatic situation, especially the portrayal of the married couple was, he himself admitted – saying that the marriage ceremony in the play was "a fairly accurate description of our wedding."—more than slightly influenced by the experience of his own marriage. Like Alison, Osborne's wife left him while she was pregnant, only unlike Alison, she did not return. Her parents' disapproval of Osborne was so strong that they actually had him followed by a detective during the couple's engagement, so Jimmy's accusing Alison's parents of similar tactics is not as far-fetched as it might sound. Pamela, when shown the manuscript of *Look Back in Anger* remarked that it was "dull and boring", but when Osborne took it to the Royal Court Theatre, the response was enthusiastic enough for him to note in his diary –

There was no question in my mind on that muggy August day that within less than a year – and on my father's birthday [8 May]— *Look Back in Anger* would have opened, in what still seems like an inordinately long, sharp, glittering summer.

1.4.2 The Plays

I will here only list Osborne's plays (subsequent to *LBA* in 1956) in order of performance. A more detailed analysis of Osborne's place in British drama will be found in Unit 5.

The Entertainer

Epitaph for George Dillon (this actually predates *LBA*)

The World of Paul Slickey

A Subject of Scandal and Concern

Luther

Plays for England

A Patriot for Me

Inadmissible Evidence

A Bond Honoured

Time Present and The Hotel in Amsterdam

15 LET US SUM UP

The distinction between 'theatre' and 'drama' needs to be kept in mind in order to avoid confusion in our use of the terms. This distinction is also necessary for the placing of a play in its social context, since it highlights the public aspect of the theatre, as against the dramatic text which can lend itself to private reading.

A study of *Look back in Anger* demands a consideration of the social, economic, political and cultural changes that Britain underwent in the period immediately following the Second World War. These changes include the establishment of the Welfare State, its functioning under successive Labour and Conservative

governments, an economic crisis followed by relative stabilization, a weakening of the rigid hierarchies of class, and the beginnings of the disintegration of Empire.

Developments in drama at the time saw a predominance of realist plays on the British stage. The play under consideration here remains true to this category in its form and structure, and many of the changes mentioned above resurface in its treatment of nationality, class and gender,

1.6 GLOSSARY

Ambivalence	Uncertainty, simultaneous but opposing response to something
Anachronism	Something that is out of date, more appropriate to an earlier period.
'Condition of England'	A phrase first used by Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century, expressing concern over the poverty and misery caused by the Industrial Revolution. A body of fiction with such social concerns appeared at the time.
Contemporary	Of the same time or period
Laissez-faire	Literally, leave free to do as thought best. Principle of non-interference by government in trade and industry.
Theological	Pertaining to religious doctrine or dogma or to the study of the precepts and beliefs of a religious system. The term is here used with reference to Christianity.
The 'well-made play'	Term applied to a neatly constructed play with all the conventional requirements of plot and structure. Such plays were especially common in Britain in the 1930s.

1.7 QUESTIONS

- Q1. Differentiate between the terms 'theatre' and 'drama'. What are the implications of this difference for the study of a play?
- Q2. Do the social and economic realities of Britain in the 1950s find expression, direct or indirect, in *Look Back in Anger*? If so, how?
- Q3. Indicate the ways in which Osborne tries to provide 'lessons in feeling' in the play. Do you think the attempt is successful?

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Primary material

Osborne, John . *A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography 1929-1956*,
London: Faber & Faber, 1981

Secondary material

Bergonzi, Bernard *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its background
1939 – 60*, Oxford: University Press, 1993.

Chambers, Colin *Playwrights' Progress; Patterns of Postwar
and Mike Priors British Drama*, Oxford: Amberlane Press, 1987.

UNIT 2 THE CHARACTERS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Character in literature and drama
- 2.2 Different models for character study
 - 2.2.1 The Aristotelian model
 - 2.2.2 The Theory of Humours
 - 2.2.3 Character in Romanticism
 - 2.2.4 Modernism and the Influence of Freud
 - 2.2.5 Flat and round characters
 - 2.2.6 Souriau's Model
 - 2.2.7 Character and critical theory
- 2.3 The Angry Young Man – reality or cliché ?
- 2.4 Class, gender and character
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Glossary
- 2.7 Questions
- 2.8 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to offer one possible point of entry into *Look Back in Anger* through the study of its characters, both in terms of the various methods for such an analysis offered by literary criticism and theory and in terms of the issues of class and gender that are raised in (and by) the play,

2.1 CHARACTER IN LITERATURE AND DRAMA

Do we speak of a character in a play or story as we would of one in life or does such a character require special treatment and if so, of what kind ? While considering such characters, should lifelikeness or 'credibility' be a criterion of judgement or not? Here are some of the models for looking at literary and dramatic character, that different critics and theorists have provided at different times.

2.2 DIFFERENT MODELS FOR CHARACTER STUDY

2.2.1 The Aristotelian Model

Aristotle's view of man as a social animal informs his idea of the types of literary character, each of which he saw as having a definite function in the story or play in which it appeared. Since the dramatic genre he was concerned with was tragedy he focused on characters suitable for tragedy, whom he felt ought to be kings, rulers or other 'great' men whose fortune in some way affected that of society at large. Also, since Aristotle held plot or what he calls 'action' to be the main factor in tragedy, character was given a secondary place, though he does say that action is important mainly because it reveals character,

Clearly, modern drama is much more interested in the individual who does not change the course of society but instead seems trapped in it, as Jimmy does. Neither does action have much place in this drama where 'nothing happens' as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The importance Aristotle gives to the response of the audience by identifying it as a crucial factor in determining the characteristics of tragedy, does however have implications for modern theorists of literature and drama, who often locate 'meaning' in the reader's or spectator's perception,

A popular physiological theory in medieval and Renaissance times, this greatly influenced the contemporary idea of character both in life and on the stage. Four humours of the body were identified, based on four bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. The varying combinations or mixtures of these fluids present in each person were seen as determining individual characteristics, temperament, mind and behaviour, and the way in which the humours worked was to release spirits or vapours which affected the brain. A person was sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric or melancholy depending on which humour with its distinctive colour was predominant.

This theory is interesting today largely as the source of some of the most common expressions in English – 'good-humoured', 'black with rage', 'green with envy' – and because it was behind an idea of personality that in turn caused dramatists (Ben Jonson the best known among them) to create characters who were dominated by a particular mood or temperament. Nor need such characters be as typical or one-sided as would at first appear to result from the application of the theory – Hamlet is among the most complex of characters and has been convincingly shown to be, if not melancholic, then at least deeply influenced by the idea of melancholy. The association of the word 'humour' with laughter and wit did not take place until the eighteenth century and has in fact been traced to the common use of 'humoured' characters in comedy.

All this might appear quite irrelevant to the play under consideration and indeed it is extremely debatable whether Osborne had any thought of it in mind when creating his characters in *Look Back in Anger*. But the theory has been important perhaps less for the instances of its overt use than for the way in which it shapes our thought about all character, not just dramatic character. Being influenced by humanism, it is based on the idea of the human being as the most worthy subject of study. Even more important, it essentializes, that is to say, sees character as inborn and therefore beyond a point both inexplicable and unalterable. While taking no account—as the play does at some length—of the role of upbringing, experience and background in forming temperament, this theory makes it possible to see Jimmy's anger as just such an inherent trait, one that neither the play nor the reader manages to account for in a fully satisfactory way.

2.2.3 Character in Romanticism

One of the defining traits of Romanticism is its interest in the individual and its tendency to exalt individual experience and expression over the collective or the social. In literature this means a strong – sometimes extreme—stress on subjectivity and on the internalising of all experience as well as perhaps leads to the ignoring of realities like race, gender and class in favour of personal sensibility. Boundaries between the inner (mind) and the outer (world) or between subjective and objective reality then become blurred and interpreting any of these calls for taking the others into account. Along with this interdependence goes an emphasis on the importance of spontaneous expression, whether in word or action. The Romantic hero/protagonist, however inexplicably cruel or wrong his behaviour, is always presented as driven or compelled by a nature too extreme and forceful for those around him to understand, and consequently is seen as always isolated from his world. Very much of this is true of Jimmy, at least in his own eyes –

"Was I really wrong to believe that there's a kind of – burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest." (*LBA*, III.ii)

This has, to my mind, more than a touch of self-conscious posturing since surely one of the conditions of such a nature is that it does not see the need to explain itself, and Jimmy spends a large part of the play doing just that. Helena's words about him, "I feel he **thinks** he's still in the middle of the French Revolution" confirm the sense of Jimmy's perception of himself as a Romantic hero. The effect this has on the reader (or spectator) works in two ways. First it serves to provide, in a fairly straightforward way, the picture of a man who cannot help himself and is to be looked at with admiration, less for his nature than for the courage with which he faces up to the truth about it. Then it goes on to demolish to a large extent this very picture and we are made to see with Alison that he is "slightly comic – in a way". Though this double view certainly is effective in adding to the complexity of the character, I am not sure that it works to the advantage of the play as a whole. What do **you** think?

2.2.4 Modernism and the Influence of Freud

Modernism extends the Romantic idea of solitariness by seeing it as a condition of all human existence, not just that of the hero or genius or artist. This means, along with a continuation of the move away from the social (as far as the character of the hero goes) a questioning of the very concept of the hero. One result in literature was the 'anti-hero' who is a protagonist lacking the conventional heroic virtues of strength and courage (though he may possess, as Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* does, the more commonplace ones of thoughtfulness and kindness) and who rarely does much more than speak and think, that is, does not provide physical 'action' of the kind demanded of earlier heroes.

Another result, which became a feature of modernism, was an interrogation of the difficulty of forming human relationships under the condition of solitariness. The modernist hero is also usually confined within his—and, in rare cases, her—own experience in the sense that his concerns are hardly ever social ones, as are those of the protagonist in most earlier, realist literature, say Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, or David in *David Copperfield*.

A third way in which the modernist concept of character differs from the nineteenth-century one is that it no more looks for **consistency** in character but accepts and even celebrates the fact of human changeability, illogicality and resistance to any system of classification. Selfhood is no more seen as a fixed or complete state of being since it changes and fluctuates almost every moment. As you can see, this is a very different way of considering character from the others described above, all of which believe in human nature as fixed and immutable.

Modernism also moved **away** from the idea, prevalent since the Enlightenment, that reason and emotion are strictly separate and mutually opposed categories. One factor behind this move was the enormous influence on literature of contemporary work in psychoanalysis, especially of the work of Freud, whose concept of 'ambivalence' blurred the distinction between another pair of hitherto totally contrary ideas – love and hate. Relationships in literature, whether between parent and child (as in *Sons and Lovers*) or between husband and wife (as in *LBA*) were now not examined in terms of either of these emotions alone. The other contribution psychoanalysis made to literature was the idea that we live on two levels, the conscious and the unconscious or subconscious and that the apparent incoherence of dreams is the mind's way of putting across the latter. Criticism can then begin to read a text looking for its latent (i.e. undeclared, or not made evident) meanings and to appreciate their ambiguity. Such an emphasis on inner psychological conditions has already been mentioned (in 1.3.3) as a feature of expressionistic drama. Try and apply it now to *Look Back in Anger* by asking whether, for instance it could help in providing a valid reading of the relationship between Jimmy and Helena.

2.2.5 Flat and round characters

The terms 'flat' and 'round' were used by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* to describe two different kinds of literary character and two methods of characterization. A flat character is one who does not change in the course of the fiction where he or she is found and is a 'type' with a few (often only one) prominent features and characteristics. Such characters are usually –though not exclusively—used in caricature where comic effects are desired. A round character is one who changes and develops as the story or play progresses. Two examples Forster gives are Mrs. Micawber (in *David Copperfield*) as a flat character and Becky Sharp (in *Vanity Fair*) as a round one.

One of the advantages of a classification such as this, is the way in which it forces us to keep in sight the **created** nature of literary characters and to give some thought to the reasons behind their being made to be either round or flat. A flat character isn't necessarily a failure in development, it is more often the result of the desire to focus on a particular quality or state of mind, such as affectedness (in the example cited above) and results, when pushed to its extreme use, in the personification of vices and virtues in allegory. The use of a round character, on the other hand could indicate an effort to trace personal growth – as is done in the *bildungsroman*—or show a commitment to realism. The **disadvantage** of this grouping that it reduces almost all characters in literature or drama to one category or the other and may involve a one-sided reading in order to make them fit in. Forster's consideration was of course the novel, which is one reason for the reader to be wary while applying the terms to characters in a play or in narrative poetry. It isn't possible for me to say, for example, whether the Host in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a flat character or a round one.

If these terms were to be used with regard to any of the characters in *Look Back in Anger*, I would suggest looking at the way Colonel Redfern is spoken of (by Jimmy) as if he were a flat character irrespective of whether or not he appears thus to the reader or the audience – his self-confessed nostalgia is seen as his defining trait and he is the type of the old English army officer committed to empire. When he does make an appearance, many things about him surprise us by not being true to the picture, and I think this surprise is both expected and intended by the play. Not only has Colonel Redfern changed, as he himself admits, but our perception has also been questioned.

2.2.6 Souriau's Model

Two theorists of narrative, Vladimir Propp and Etienne Souriau suggest models where the actor is seen to be an **agent** in a narrative that performs actions (drama) and since the function of the agent is only to cause or to experience an event, the word 'actor' when used in this special sense need not be restricted to individuals (or characters) but could be any role, event, idea or principle that performs this function. Propp, in an influential study that he made of Russian folk tales, identified seven such roles or '*dramatis personae*' which he called 'actantial roles' – hero, false hero, villain, donor, helper, sought-for person (usually female) and father/protector.

Souriau identified six actants similar but not identical to Propp's and claimed that they were valid for drama of all periods and genres. These were the 'lion' or the hero/protagonist in whom is embodied all the dramatic force of the play; the 'sun' or representative of the good which is sought by the lion (could be a person, or a principle like liberty); the 'earth' the actual receiver (person, community or country) on whose behalf the hero seeks the good; Mars or the antagonist who is the hero's rival; the 'scale' or the distributor of justice (one or more gods, or the human ruler); and the 'moon' or the hero's helper, usually his friend. It should be interesting to try and see whether this model works with regard to Osborne's play, though I think its usefulness as a critical tool does not extend beyond showing that universal dramatic

types do inform the formation of character in what might appear at first to be a play concerned with the specifics of particular personalities.

The 'lion' in **Look Back in Anger** doesn't need any identification – remember that this figure is not required to be virtuous, but only forceful. If indeed there is a 'good' or 'sun' that Jimmy seeks and suffers due to the lack of, it is something to believe in that could give meaning and direction to his life and in his view his country (the 'earth') needs this as much as he does. It is possible to set up Alison's absent mother (the 'Mummy' whom Jimmy abuses) as the hero's rival or at least one who has tried to upset his plans and also to extend this role to the entire upper class whom Jimmy clearly sees as the enemy. I would end the classification here, not because it is impossible to go on but because it would be a futile exercise to identify Cliff as the hero's helper when he is actually characterised by his ineffectiveness. As for the 'scale', one of the most important themes of the play is, I feel, the absence of any principle or scheme of justice that could ensure a change in the situation. Neither God—who is not believed in anymore—nor the attempts of religion and society at setting things right can work here because the problem is not one of circumstance. Nevertheless, a system like this one offers an alternative—not a substitute—to our thinking of the characters simply as 'people'. They are also agents in the structure of the play and if they are effective as agents perhaps one reason why is that they perform these roles which are, very broadly, basic to all drama.

2.2.7 Character and Critical Theory

The notion of character as a stable and coherent entity was, as I said earlier, disputed by modernism (see 2.2.3). Recent critical theory goes further by disputing the notion of character as an entity at all or even as a tenable concept. Some of this follows from models like Souriau's described above—the term 'cancelled character' was coined by Brian McHale to describe a technique (notice that it is not the character who is described) where a literary character is exposed as a 'textual function' and ceases to be seen as having self-identity. McHale says that this demonstrates 'the absorption of character by text.' One reason for such a distrust of character as a category is the anti-humanism of most recent literary theory. It prefers not to see the human being as subject or human nature as an essence which is what humanism does (see 2.2.2) and offers instead the idea of the human being as a **site**. Lyotard explains the use of this term --

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations...one is always located at a post through which various kinds of message pass.

(The Postmodern Condition, p15)

Another phrase, 'character zone' is provided by Mikhail Bakhtin to convey his sense of the character's identity being built up by the reader or audience, both from direct descriptions of action and 'transcriptions' of speech i.e. from the character's voice overlapping with the author's voice. How much of this is relevant to **Look Back in Anger**? For one, it leads to the possibility that language might prove a more important, or at least a more useful, area of critical study than the concept of character is. (I shall go into this in detail in the next unit.) Then it is both possible and useful to see all the characters in the play as sites where the vexed realities of class and gender play themselves out. (see 2.4)

2.3 THE ANGRY YOUNG MAN

This term, coined to describe the condition of unfocussed, but all-pervasive resentment and frustration that many saw as the defining characteristic of post-war youth, soon became a catch-phrase in its application not just to Jimmy but to all other subsequent characters like him in literature, drama and cinema and was not restricted to Britain – witness its being used of Amitabh Bachchan in his film roles of the 1970s.

It was even extended to Osborne himself by those who saw Jimmy as his mouthpiece, though the dramatist tried to shrug it off—

"It was rather tiresome... like being called the Walls Ice Cream man!"
(Interview in 1961)

There is no doubt however that *Look Back in Anger* was considered a revolutionary play by its first audiences and reviewers, some of whom I quote here to give you some idea of the play's contemporary impact—

Look Back in Anger presents post-war youth as it really is ... to have done it in a first play is a minor miracle ... all the qualities are there, qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage – the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness ... the casual promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for ...

(Kenneth Tynan, *Observer*, 13 May 1956)

"The only modern, English play"

(Arthur Miller)

Look Back in Anger was the event which marked off 'then' from 'now' decisively although not in itself a startlingly novel event.

(John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After*, 1962)

Even at the time, some critics did think the play's title misleading – Baiwir held that the dominant note was confusion not anger and thought that "Bewildered Young Man" would fit the case better. What exactly was the anger and against whom was it directed? Kenneth Allsop suggests that it is another way of describing 'dissentience', preferring that term to 'dissenter' because of the latter's connotations of organized protest, and the former's more general applicability. 'Dissentience', is I think, useful in that it does away with the positive direction that 'anger' might possibly be seen as taking, since dissent, of whatever sort, is a purely negative feeling or action and Jimmy does not take any steps to change or remedy the situations with which he expresses such strong dissatisfaction and which he sees as social, or at least as brought about by social realities — he attributes for example, apathy or the lack of feeling on the personal level; to the bourgeois ideals of reserve and politeness. At the same time, Jimmy's complaints against these situations are emotional and not material ones, which is the reason behind the effect of general and undirected rage that comes through in them. The 'anger' is also directed by Jimmy at other people (most evidently at Alison) for failing to live up to his preconceived ideas and expectations of them.

To now concentrate for a moment on the word 'young' instead of on 'angry', you will notice that all four of the principal characters are in their twenties, so youth is in itself clearly an issue the play is interested in. Yet no easy generalisations can be made about it – if youth can be sullen or rebellious in the person of Jimmy, it can also be introspective and self-analytical, as Alison is. Colonel Redfern, the only older person to appear, is shown to be in no way free of the uncertainties and self-doubt that the others are troubled by, and the two deaths in the play – of Hugh's mother and of Alison's baby – bring out the reality of illness and death as something that nobody can escape facing in one form or another.

I would argue that Jimmy is not just a voice for Osborne's views since right from the beginning of the play, he is presented with irony. This is done through the lengthy and descriptive stage directions which serve as commentary, for example:

"To many, he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal."

(Stage direction to Act I).

This, along with the subsequent stage directions, serves to indicate that a double view of Jimmy – taking into account the discrepancy between his self-image and the comments about him—is required by the play. It is because Jimmy's rhetoric is so powerful that the audience instinctively reacts to it by identifying it as what the dramatist wants to say. This is perhaps even more true of the reader, for whom the play reads almost like a monologue—Jimmy's centrality is reinforced by the way the other characters constantly discuss him even in his absence. Yet in performance, Alison's silent presence is probably very effective in undercutting the force of Jimmy's constant speech by showing it up as not much more than invective. Cliff, too is meant to provide, Osborne says "a soothing, natural counterpoint to Jimmy". 'Natural' is the word I would immediately pick up here. Doesn't it effectively imply that Jimmy's behaviour is, compared to that of the others, a pose or the playing out of a role? This is conscious at some times and not so at others. Turn to the moment where he says "But plenty of them do seem to have a revolutionary fire about them, which is more than you can say for the rest of us." (LBA, I) He is here admitting, with self awareness and even with self-mockery, that a 'revolutionary fire' is what he would like to have, and his behaviour and long speeches certainly bear out such a wish, as does his deliberate use of long words –'sycophantic', 'phlegmatic' (see 2.2.2) and 'pusillanimous'.

I am not here suggesting that Jimmy is a hypocrite or that his feelings are no more than a desire for attention from the other characters and the audience, but rather that an element of posturing is inseparable from the very concept of the 'angry young man'. If nothing else this makes such a character more human and fallible and endears him to the spectators, since an essential condition for the success of the character is that he be easily identified with, an aim that is part of the play's thrust toward 'feeling' as being both more honest and more difficult to attain to, than thought is. Still, I think it would be a mistake to judge this dramatic type as anything other than that – however many young people in Britain in the 1950s felt as Jimmy does about the establishment, he does not, as Tynan implies, speak for all of them. In fact, his is much less a collective voice than even that of Colonel Redfern. This might seem to contradict what I said in Unit I about drama giving voice to general, public perceptions, but actually reinforces the point that drama cannot successfully make social statements which are not tempered by a view of what will work on the stage. Here Jimmy's idiosyncracies are precisely what work well.

One of Jimmy's characteristics is, I suggested earlier, a lack of awareness, partly his ignorance of Alison's pregnancy and partly the failure to realize how his own values are subject to the criticism he makes of Colonel Redfern's and how wrong he is to suppose Alison cold and impersonal. Self-pity is another evident trait, as in the scene where he attempts to offer a crudely psychoanalytic explanation for his misogyny, tracing it to his mother's neglect of his dying father. All the same, Jimmy is far from lacking in either sincerity (he feels passionately what he says, or makes himself feel it) or in biting wit. Most of the humour in the play does come from him. And yet, I think, the play's excessive reliance on Jimmy weakens all the other characters by causing them to appear undeveloped, and also, as Taylor points out, reduces the scope of dramatic conflict by making them always subservient to the hero, whose supremacy goes unchallenged. One critic, John Mander, goes so far as to say that the other characters in the play "despite the talk, are not much more than stage-furniture" with the result that the content of the play is reduced to Jimmy's 'views'. Do you agree here? And if so, do you think this a deliberate method of keeping our attention focussed on Jimmy? Try and find instances from the text to substantiate your answer.

2.4 CLASS AND GENDER

To deal with these two areas together is to acknowledge that the play brings into some kind of relation with each other issues such as sexuality, commonly considered an aspect of private life, and public factors like class. Stereotyping, which was not necessarily a negative device in drama before the postwar period, became during this time a failure to address social realities, including the reality of certain constructions and perceptions of women – their identity and experiences—and of their role in the family.

Class and gender serve as neat dividing lines between the characters in the play. Two of the three men in the play are from the working class while both women belong to the upper class. In addition, of the two women who do not make an appearance but are spoken of by the others, Alison's mother and Hugh's mother, one belongs to each class. Marriage between the classes provides an arena for the ongoing conflict. However nobody, with the exception of the Colonel, seems to display traits that might be seen as characteristic of their class. I do not know here whether we are to side with Jimmy in seeing Alison's restraint in the face of attack as typical of upper class apathy and lack of commitment, or simply as her own personal tactic of self defence. Probably a bit of both – Alison is actually anything but unfeeling and her self-control eventually turns out to be as much of a pose as Jimmy's behaviour is, while his own inconsistencies are evident in the way in which he alternates between trying to break her self control and criticizing her for being weak. Both she and her father display a reliance on codes of behaviour which ultimately fail them, but it is unclear whether or not this is a comment on upper class norms in general. The class struggle is conflated with that between the sexes so as to make it impossible to fully separate the two. An interesting perspective on this is provided by Allardyce Nicoll, who locates the main theme with reference not to the character of Jimmy, but to that of Alison, and also identifies this theme as a pre-existing literary one, arising from a social reality:

Basically, *Look Back in Anger* deals with the theme of a gently nurtured girl who is strangely magnetised by a lower-class intellectual... Now all the elements, or ingredients of this theme are exactly similar to those which were largely cultivated between 1900 and 1930... the fact that this play deals with a theme freely exploited during the first decades of this century and only occasionally handled by dramatists of the forties and early fifties deserves to be noted, particularly since *Look Back in Anger* does not in this respect stand alone.

The other area where the class struggle locates itself in the play is that of imperialism. Though not dealt with as a separate issue, the association of the Colonel's class with the maintenance of empire hints that to the other classes, imperialism was not a national, but only an upper class issue. The metaphor of dominance and violence that empire evokes is applicable to both the area of class relations and to that of the relation between the sexes. On the other hand the aristocratic ideal of chivalry has no place here—Jimmy says he has no "public school scruples about hitting girls" and indeed quite a lot of physical violence does go on in the play.

Jimmy is a self-confessedly working class man (as is Cliff) though perhaps not as low down on the social ladder as he likes to suggest. He is clearly well educated and in affecting to despise his education by disparaging the university he went to and by choosing to run a sweet-stall, he achieves the paradoxical effect of arousing curiosity and drawing attention to it. The Colonel at one point says, "Sweet-stall. It does seem an extraordinary thing for an educated young man to be occupying himself with. Why should he want to do that, of all things." Jimmy is also quite proud of his intelligence and education – notice the way he taunts Cliff with his lack of learning—and his pastimes include concert-going. It is his inability to find a worthwhile cause

that causes him to direct his energy towards picking on Alison, thus focusing social frustration onto a personal relationship. Besides effectively bringing together the social and the personal, this also foregrounds the idea of marriage as an inescapably public relationship. Jimmy's relationship with Helena is different in this respect not only because, unlike Alison, she stands up to him, but because they are not under the expectations or the ties that marriage imposes. Helena has not, like Alison 'burnt her boats' and this is what allows her to leave in the end. She also, despite the clever way she manipulates the situation to get Jimmy to herself, does respect Alison's position as his wife—another instance of her internalization of bourgeois values or simply her excuse for getting out?

A great deal of the play's action is centred around the relationship between Jimmy and Alison, the chief characteristic of which seems to be its ambivalence (see 2.2.3). I would see this as having the function of revealing, or even forming both of them, rather than trying to ascertain the complexities of the power equations involved. The treatment of sex in the play, seems to be (on the whole) one where it is seen as a site for the exploration of the self rather than as indicative of concerns about gender identities and roles. Perhaps this is why, both here and in other Osborne plays, these roles are not only left unexplored and unquestioned, but are even reiterated—for example, the allying of women with marriage, domesticity and a family system, all of which are feared by the men in the plays as threats to their selfhood and independence. This fear is behind the speeches that show hatred of women (and of children) and which do offer scope for a criticism of Osborne's plays, not as misogynist, but as centred in and oriented towards the male character(s) and the male viewers whose fears are being voiced. (This is discussed more fully in 4.2.2)

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Various ways of analysing literary and dramatic character, have been used at different times and by different schools of criticism and theory. These include Aristotle's view of character in terms of the requirements of tragedy; character as formed by the predominance of a particular 'humour'; the Romantic emphasis on individuality and solitariness as part of the character of the hero; modernism's destabilization of earlier views of character as fixed and coherent; Forster's model of 'flat' and 'round' characters; narrative theories which see character as playing out 'actantial roles'; and the disputing of character as an entity or concept, in recent literary theory.

The phrase 'angry young man', needs to be understood in terms of the tremendous impact that Osborne's play, and particularly the character of Jimmy, made on its appearance. Such a category should however be interrogated and used as a critical tool while dealing with the themes of dissent, rebellion and 'feeling' in the play.

Class and gender are categories that could be seen as defining character, or as issues that play themselves out in the 'site' provided by character. At the same time, neither category can be considered independently of the other in *Look Back in Anger*, since each is presented in terms of a struggle, and the two struggles are conflated.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Ambiguity	Double or dubious meaning.
Bildungsroman	Literally, 'novel of education'. A novel tracing the development and growth to maturity of the protagonist.
Caricature	Exaggerated portrait which uses distortion, usually for a comic effect.
Dramatis personae	The characters in a play.

Misogyny	Dislike or hatred of women.
Physiological	Belonging to natural science (the study of living things).
Subjectivity	Preoccupation with the self and with personal experience and vision.
Transcription	Reproduction or copy.

2.7 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. Discuss the way in which Romantic and Modernist conceptions of character are combined in the presentation of Jimmy as the play's protagonist.
- Q 2. Do you think of any character(s) in the play as being 'flat' ? If so, why?
- Q 3. What is your understanding of the concept of the 'angry young man' and its implications in the context of this play ?
- Q 4. How do the characters in *Look Back in Anger* function as 'sites' for a discussion of class and/or gender ?

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

- Carter, Alan *John Osborne*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1969
- Hayman, Ronald *John Osborne*, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1968

UNIT 3 LANGUAGE AND SPEECH IN *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

Structure

- 3.0 Objective
- 3.1 Language in Drama
 - 3.1.1 Language as Action
 - 3.1.2 Language as Protagonist
 - 3.1.3 Osborne's Dramatic Language
- 3.2 The Title of the Play
- 3.3 Kinds of Writing and Speech in the Text
 - 3.3.1 Invective
 - 3.3.2 Hyperbole
 - 3.3.3 Parody
 - 3.3.4 Monologue and Dialogue
- 3.4 Imagery and Symbolism in the Play
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to suggest a possible alternative to the focus in the previous unit on the characters as the first point of entry into Look *Back in Anger*., by looking instead at its use of language (and of symbols and images through language) as well as at the importance of speech in the play.

3.1 LANGUAGE IN DRAMA

3.1.1 Language as Action

I said earlier (in Unit I) that drama's chief characteristic is its reliance on **action**, usually action which imitates or represents human behaviour. When we then come to an analysis of language and speech in a play, the question that inevitably arises is whether action is an area that lies outside the words we are studying, or whether it can be seen as inherent in these words, especially in a play like the one under consideration, which does not have any very drastic physical action. Also, are the words of the play, when written down, a different form of 'literature' from the same words spoken on stage? I think that the 'action' of Look *Back in Anger* is primarily psychological i.e. takes place in, and consists of, the fluctuating thoughts, emotions and relationships of the characters and in the expression of these through word, stance or gesture. Or, in other words, in the **interaction** of the characters with each other. The tone of voice or expression is therefore very important since in drama it directly conveys shades of meaning (such as sarcasm or hostility) which in a novel might need a discursive description. (This distinction between 'diegesis' and 'mimesis' which mean respectively 'telling' and 'showing', is one that is very basic to literary analysis). In addition, there are noises or sounds other than language which help to convey the required atmosphere or emotion in performance. An example of this is the sound of the church bells ringing in the following passage, which when heard on the stage, very effectively bring out a sense of urgency:

"You're coming with me, aren't you? She (*he shrugs*) hasn't got anyone else now. I... need you ... to come with me."

He looks into her eyes, but she turns away and stands up. Outside the church bells start ringing. (LBA, II, I)

3.1.2 Language as Protagonist

In Unit 2 we looked at the characters in the play as created entities with personalities which they expressed through language. Let us now go a step further and consider language as itself playing the role of the protagonist in the play, a possibility suggested by critics who see language as putting across its themes and concerns more than any of the characters do. (To further complicate matters, one could also argue that the only way of knowing the characters is itself through language since they are embodied in it.) One such critic, G. L. Evans, goes on to qualify the argument in favour of language as protagonist in *Look Back in Anger*, by saying that two things come in its way. The first of these is the use of melodrama, since language is at many points being used obviously, even crudely, to appeal to emotions, whether those of the characters or of the spectators. The instance that immediately comes to my mind in this connection is Alison's speech towards the end:

"I'm in the fire and I'm burning, and all I want is to die! ... But what does it matter – this is what he wanted from me! ... Don't you see! I'm in the mud at last! I'm grovelling! I'm crawling! Oh, God...." (LBA, III, ii)

Alison's appeal is to Jimmy as well as to us and the fact that exaggerated and melodramatic emotion is a characteristic of the language here, shows up the use of language as the means to an end, taking away its intrinsic importance and role as protagonist.

The second obstacle to language as protagonist is the doing away with of any objectivity it might claim to have, and thus the undermining of its credibility. However impersonal it may seem, we cannot fully trust what the language of the play states, or tells us, because it is always qualified by the emotional motives, sentimentality or self-indulgence of the characters. For example, take Jimmy's description of his father's death:

"But, you see, I was the only one who cared, His family were embarrassed by the whole business. Embarrassed and irritated ... We all of us waited for him to die ... 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 ... 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 know all your life."

(LBA, II, I)

Clearly, the description concentrates far more on Jimmy than it does on his father, with a view to drawing attention both to his suffering and to his desire to be seen as a sufferer. The language, though powerful, is again simply being treated as an instrument to express sentiment and to arouse pity for the suffering expressed.

3.1.3 Osborne's Dramatic Language

One more differentiation needs to be made here – between language in the speech of the characters and the language of the playwright. The playwright speaks directly only through the stage directions but it is possible to trace his voice at places in the speech of a character. For example, look at the following passage:

"... as far as the Michelangelo Brigade's concerned, I must be a sort of right-wing deviationist. If the Revolution ever comes, I'll be the first to put up against the wall, with all the other poor old liberals." (LBA, I)

The view expressed may be Jimmy's own but the reader gets the feeling that the nickname for homosexuals (like the earlier one "the Greek Chorus boys" it is clever in a mildly derogatory way) is Osborne's rather than his, partly since this was an issue Osborne was interested in and went on to explore in other plays, such as *A Patriot for Me*. However, this is too vague and limited a method of understanding the language of the playwright, and when I propose to look at Osborne's **dramatic** language, I mean the language of his plays and his own view of it. Here are two passages from his prose, the first of which expresses how much importance he accorded to language:

"Words are important ... When millions of people are unable to communicate with each other, it's vitally important that words are made to work. It may be old-fashioned but they're the only things we have left." (*On Critics and Criticism, The Sunday Telegraph, 28 August 1966*)

Five years after *Look Back in Anger* was first performed, Osborne wrote:

"Although *Look Back in Anger* was a formal, rather old-fashioned play, I think it broke out by its use of language." (*That Awful Museum, 1961*)

This claim to innovation has been contested (see Unit 5) but Osborne's self-confessed concern with language is evident from the play. It has been suggested that the exact way in which this 'breaking out' takes place is by the introduction of a new theatrical rhetoric into the old, realist form of drama. Osborne uses two kinds of stage language for two distinct purposes, self-expression through monologue, and social debate through dialogue (see 3.3.4). He has, of course been criticized—with some reason, I think—for this language's being limited to a particular kind of voice, like Jimmy's, mocking and passionate. This does mean that the other voices in the play are not as well developed. Yet Osborne's concern in this and other plays is less to allow each character to develop a distinctive voice than to find a language that can express life equally well on both the personal and the social front. Andrew Kennedy offers an analysis of Osborne's dramatic language, where he suggests that the playwright deals with this problem in two ways. First, by treating language as simply one part of the meaning of the characters' lives, as in the following series of questions:

"What is their relationship with one another and with their children, with the neighbours ... What are the things that are important to them, that make them care, that give them hope and anxiety? What kind of language do they use to one another? ... Where does the pain lie ... What moves them, brings them together, makes them speak out?"
(*The Writer in His Age, London Magazine IV, May 1957*)

Secondly, by achieving the opposite effect of organizing the speech around the rhetoric of a central character. This rhetoric uses for effect verbal excess (two examples of which are described in 3.3.1 and 3.3.2) parody and changes in pace, usually beginning in a declamatory style and ending with reiterated questions. This second method supposedly balances the first by making sure that the language now has functions other than just personal communication. How helpful an account of Osborne's handling of language is this? While I agree with the characteristics of the language Kennedy outlines, I am not persuaded that it works quite successfully to express both personal and public life in the play. (This is further dealt with under the discussion of invective.) Such a stress on 'rhetoric' does, however make sure that we see the language as needing analysis over and above its content or what it conveys, and realize that often what a character says is secondary to what he or she does with the words and the effect that they have on the listener. For example, Alison, in refusing to accompany Jimmy to visit Hugh's mother, is actually doing more than just that – she is also telling him that she is breaking away from him in some way.

3.2 THE TITLE OF THE PLAY

What is immediately apparent about the title *Look Back in Anger* is that it reads like an injunction telling one to perform a particular action---that of looking back. Whether this command is directed towards the audience/readers, the characters, or indeed even towards the play as a whole, remains unclear. At the same time, it is possible to read the title as descriptive, as telling us what the play actually **does**, or at least sets out to do.

A third way of studying the title is to divide our attention between the two themes embodied in it, the action of 'looking back', and the emotion of 'anger'. The latter has been dealt with in the previous unit, so I will here concentrate on the former aspect, that of a vision or a gaze that is retrospective. Such a gaze usually has implicit connotations of objectivity and of clear judgement made possible through the perspective brought by time. Yet here it is allied with an intensely subjective emotion – can looking back in anger ever mean looking back objectively? Unlikely though it sounds, I think that this is precisely what Osborne is suggesting through the play's title. We are here meant to see that, contrary to the usual belief, it is strong feeling that makes for clear vision and understanding. The play goes on to show that there are numerous areas of private and public life that are inexplicable or hidden to reason, but that remain accessible to emotion.

The next question that arises is what exactly is to be looked back at. One possible answer points to the time immediately preceding that of the play – the war years as well as the early post-war period. Everyone in the play does some amount of looking back at these years, whether on a personal or a public level. Of these, Jimmy's gaze is the most apparently angry and resentful, both against the older social system and at the (as he sees them) half-hearted attempts at reform. Colonel Redfern looks at the same period with nostalgia and a sense of loss. In fact, the nostalgic vision is itself a minor theme in the play, and attention is paid to its power to beautify and transform the past at the same time that it is seen as creating an essentially false picture. This comes across strongly in the following passage:

"The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not." (LBA, I)

Alison also looks back at her past, at the years of her marriage to Jimmy, usually with regret, or with a longing for missed happiness but most of all with a sense of clarity at being able to see things now that she could not earlier. She spends a good deal of time recounting these memories to Cliff and Helena (this serves to provide a lot of relevant information to the audience) and in the process, revealing her present state of mind:

"I keep looking back, as far as I remember, and I can't think what it was to feel young, really young." (LBA, I)

Another characteristic of a retrospective vision is that it is explanatory, it provides (as well as seeks) answers of one sort or another, though they need not be satisfactory ones. The play doesn't actually offer any solutions to the personal misery of the characters except the retreat into a game for Jimmy and Alison, and even here, we are left wondering how long it will last. Cliff and Helena simply leave and are more or less already forgotten by the time the play ends. I would then see the title as referring not so much to any particular period of time as, in a general sense, to the

nature of the past and to what people make of it through memory, or to be more specific, through the acts of remembering and forgetting.

3.3 KINDS OF SPEECH AND WRITING IN THE TEXT

3.3.1 Invective

Invective means an attack through speech which abuses, rails against and strongly denounces the object of the attack. Almost all the invective in *Look Back in Anger* is Jimmy's, directed at different times against the upper and middle classes, Americans, the clergy, evangelists, imperialists, politicians, academics, homosexuals, women, the older generation and everything that is 'phoney'. The effect of such a wide range of targets – though of course they often overlap – is to focus attention on the invective itself rather than on its object, which is usually embodied in one or more character(s) within the play. Alison, her parents, her brother Nigel, her friends (Webster and Helena), in short what he calls 'Dame Alison's Mob', provide to Jimmy examples of most of the above categories. His attack is full of violent, deliberately crude images and similes, as when he compares women to "some dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle" or when he imagines Alison's mother dying – "She will pass away, my friends, leaving a trail of worms gasping for laxatives behind her – from purgatives to purgatory." He is being more than simply tasteless here, since the desired effect is mainly aimed at Alison and his words are spoken chiefly to hurt her, which he succeeds in doing.

The rhetoric of Jimmy's long speeches is not meant to be taken as containing any message(s) that Osborne, or the play itself, intends to convey through them. Instead they perform the function of revealing a certain state of mind. Those who failed to realize this and chose to read Jimmy's statement "There aren't any good, brave causes left" as the playwright's view, were criticized by Osborne :

They were incapable of recognizing the texture of ordinary despair, the way it expresses itself in rhetoric and gestures that may perhaps look shabby, but are seldom simple."

(Declarations, op.cit.,p.69)

Nevertheless, Osborne is here apparently seeking goals that are, to my mind, mutually irreconcilable. Of course this is problematic only if we choose to see this as a failing, and do not read it as an attempt to make Jimmy's anger justifiable at the same time as it is futile. If we are not to find easy explanations by taking the invective at face value, then our attention is also diverted from the social and other concerns that Osborne wants the play to make us think about. For the invective to function simultaneously on all these levels – bringing out issues, revealing character as well as showing up its own 'rhetoric' , is, I think, not entirely feasible. However, do feel free to disagree with me if you wish to. In your opinion, is the attempt a successful one ?

3.3.2 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a figure of speech which contains exaggeration for emphasis. In *Look Back in Anger*, it usually functions as a part of invective, and serves to strengthen it but it is also used to convey a sense of emotional disturbance and to individualize the speech of the characters in the sense of revealing their varying degrees of articulation. Jimmy's constant use of hyperbole makes his the most vehement speeches in the play, and highlights the element of exaggeration in his character. Alison uses it less than he does, but still quite often, for example in "I want to be a lost cause! I want to be corrupt and futile!" ; Helena and Cliff only use it occasionally, and Colonel Redfern never. This is not to suggest that Colonel Redfern is inarticulate – on the contrary he is even eloquent on occasion, as when describing "those long, cool

evenings in the hills ...” – but that he is, by nature as well as training, more restrained and less readily expressive of strong feeling than the others are.

Hyperbole is also one of the characteristics of dramatic language and when put into the mouth of a character, brings out the level of **performance** in his or her behaviour. Pretence or play-acting, both conscious and unconscious, runs right through *Look Back in Anger*, from the mock play-acting of Jimmy and Cliff to the game that Jimmy and Alison play, pretending to be a bear and a squirrel. At the level of this game, which is close to mime, gestures and animal sounds like ‘Oooooooooh!’ and ‘Wheeeeeeeeeee!’ replace language. Alison significantly describes the game as resulting in “**dumb**, uncomplicated affection for each other.” It is when the couple is ‘dumb’, that is, when they have let go of ordinary speech, that they come across as most intimate and affectionate with each other, while the rest of the time, words seem to drive them apart.

3.3.3 Parody

The language of the play contains parodies of various vocabularies, among them that of the pamphlet, the newspaper and the drama. Once again most instances of parody are to be found in Jimmy’s speech, though often when he is talking to, or acting with Cliff. I shall here outline them through a listing based on whether they are conscious and deliberate parodies or not. Examples are given in each case.

There is conscious parody of:

The evangelical preacher: “I want to hear a warm thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah!

...
Hallelujah! Oh, brother, it's such a long time since I
was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything.”

The salesman / auctioneer: “Reason and Progress, the old firm is selling out!
Everyone get out while the going's good.”

The conversation of a social ‘do’ or polite upper-class gathering:
“Well, shall we dance? ... Do you come here
often?...Do you think bosoms will be in or out, this
year?”

The comic sequence in a music-hall act:
“Ladies and gentlemen, a little recitation ... Will you
kindly stop interrupting *perlease*! Can't you see I'm
trying to entertain these ladies and gentlemen?”

The ‘clever’ academic: “Here it is. I quote: Pusillanimous. Adjective.
Wanting of firmness of mind ... From the Latin
pusillus, very little, and animus, the mind.”

Jimmy **unconsciously** parodies the stereotyped figure of the isolated, solitary Romantic hero (see 2.2.2 above). Another such parody is that of the witty undergraduate’s speech, non-literary but full of literary references from *Ulysses* and *Emily Bronte* to Wilde’s *Lady Bracknell* and quotations from Shakespeare (such as ‘expense of spirit’). Alison also describes Jimmy’s and Hugh’s gatecrashing of parties as parodying a military invasion:

“We’d set out from headquarters in Poplar, and carry out our raids on the
enemy in W.1, S.W.1., S.W.3., and W.8.”

In addition, there is a sort of parody of different local or regional accents and idioms, for example Jimmy imitating a midlands accent:

- "Well, it gives you something to do, doesn't it? After all it wouldn't do if we was all alike, would it? It'd be a funny world if we was all the same, that's what I always say!"

Cliff is of course meant to provide a genuine example of Welsh idiom, by his use of terms like 'girlie', though his 'not 'arf' could as well be Cockney. Try and identify further instances of parody that you might come across in the text.

3.3.4 Monologue and Dialogue

Monologue means only one person speaking or one voice being heard, while dialogue means speech between two persons – I shall here use the term loosely by extending it to include conversation between more than two persons. The language of *Look Back in Anger* varies in a rhythm between the two to provide breaks and contrasts. The monologue consists largely of outbursts but does not serve, as the soliloquies in Elizabethan drama do, to reveal the characters' inmost thoughts. (The difference between a monologue and a soliloquy is that in the latter case, the speaking character is addressing either himself or the audience and his words are not to be heard by any of the other characters, while the former doesn't have this requirement). In Osborne's play, the monologues contain a self-dramatizing rhetoric of which the speaker is often aware but which he or she doesn't rationalize. Self-awareness in *Look Back in Anger* usually means awareness of being inadequate or of being helpless to bring about desired change. There is not much consistent, logically developed argument, with the stress being instead on emotional appeal. The metaphor of play-acting is a repeated one and the characters (not only Jimmy, but also Alison, Helena and, though rarely, even Cliff) watch for the effect of their words while speaking, that is to say, they project themselves consciously as dramatic beings, even their silences are deliberate and have a dramatic purpose and their view of life is that it is theatrical:

"I rage and shout my head off, and everyone thinks "poor chap!" or "what an objectionable young man!" But that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence ... I want to be there when you grovel. I want to be there, I want to watch it, I want the front seat."

(LBA, II, i)

The dialogue is, by contrast, much more neutral and punctuates the long monologues by its attempt at genuine personal communication. On the whole, it certainly takes a back seat. The criticism most frequently levelled at Osborne's extensive use of monologue and of the rhetoric in the monologues is that it results in the language becoming over-externalized in its effect and hence incapable of expressing real inwardness, since it lacks the necessary pauses and silences that such reflection would need.

3.4 IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY

The symbol that seems to me to be the most important one in the play is that of the animals and the game in which Jimmy and Alison impersonate them. They even have a toy bear and squirrel kept upon a chest of drawers, and Alison points them out to Helena who thinks this is proof of Jimmy's being 'fey' or mad. An extension of the game is the comparison of the couple's home to a zoo or a menagerie. This animal symbol works in two ways – first, as discussed above, it offers a refuge (the only one available) from the misery of the couple's daily married life, and provides the only way for them to communicate with each other. Second, it implies that marital love in their case, seems to be based on not much more than the physical attraction between the sexes, which functions at a level below the rational. Yet Jimmy is tied to Alison by more complex ties than those that temporarily attach him

to Helena. These relationships refuse to fall into or be categorized by the common and simplistic distinction between 'love' and 'lust'. The play eventually closes with a repetition of the game:

Jimmy : ...There are cruel steel traps lying about everywhere, just waiting for rather mad, slightly satanic and very timid little animals. Right ?
 [Alison nods]
 [Pathetically]Poor squirrels !

Alison [with the same comic emphasis] : Poor bears ! [She laughs a little. Then looks at him very tenderly, and adds very, very softly.]
 Oh, poor, poor bears !
 [Slides her arms around him]

(LBA,111, ii)

The reappearance of the animal symbols and their complete takeover of the action might appear to give the play a conventional, sentimental happy ending. But when we keep in mind how ineffective the symbols or the game has been in the past, we come to see that they, like the ending, are a contrivance that offers no real solution, only a 'pretend' one.

I would also pick out as a minor structural symbol in the play, the newspaper Jimmy reads, since all three acts open by showing him doing so (thus giving continuity to the play's structure) and it repeatedly surfaces in the conversation. The newspaper helps to create a domestic atmosphere with a rather boring but indispensable Sunday afternoon ritual, as well as providing the starting point for most of the discussions or speeches about religion and politics. It brings the outside or public world into the private, familial setting of the play, and its constant presence makes it, in effect, impossible to clearly separate the two worlds – one invades and informs the other through the newspaper.

The images in *Look Back in Anger* are mainly verbal and descriptive ones – words that form pictures and evoke scenes. Sometimes these scenes are pleasant, romanticized ones, like the 'brief little world' of Edwardian England, but their intention is more often to shock or disgust – two such are described above in 3.3.1; a third example is the picture of a baby as 'a mass of indiarubber and wrinkles', made all the more effective by the knowledge (which the audience has, but Jimmy doesn't) that Alison is pregnant. Animal imagery runs right through the play, and is not restricted to the 'bear and squirrel game'. It is also used to convey the sense of solitude, maybe even the grandeur of a fierce wild animal as in the passage (quoted earlier in another context) where Jimmy speaks of "... the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him." This is very different from the way animals are spoken of earlier – 'very timid, little ...' -- as helpless and diminutive.

3.5 ' LET US SUM UP

An examination of language, like that of character, offers a way of entry into the play. Language could work to constitute 'action', or to function as a protagonist to convey the play's themes and concerns. However, with regard to 'language as protagonist' in *Look Back in Anger*, two points have to be contended with – the use of melodrama and the loss of objectivity by language here.

Osborne's dramatic language can be seen to deal with the problem of finding a language equally effective on both personal and social fronts, by locating language as part of the meaning of the characters' lives. Another method – and a more easily evident one—is to organize the play's speech around that of the central character.

Some of the kinds of speech and writing identifiable in *Look Back in Anger* are invective, hyperbole, parody, monologue and dialogue, and there is , in addition, a set of images and symbols which, through their recurrence in the text, provide thematic and structural continuity to it.

3.6 GLOSSARY

Articulation	Ability to express (articulate) one's thoughts in words
Derogatory	Disparaging, lowering in value or esteem
Evangelist	Person who preaches the gospel (evangel) ie the life and message of Jesus Christ
Explanatory	Containing an explanation or having the function of explaining
Perspective	View from a particular point or distance, in regard to the viewer's relative position, hence a clear view
Retrospective	Directed towards the past

3.7 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 What is the function of invective in the language of the play?
- Q.2 What do you understand by the term 'hyperbole' ? What purpose does its use serve in the speeches of the various characters in *Look Back in Anger*?
- Q.3 Identify instances in the the play where play-acting appears as a metaphor.

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

Kennedy, Andrew K.	<i>Six Dramatists in Search of a Language</i> , Cambridge: University Press, 1975
Evans, Gareth Lloyd	<i>The Language of Modern Drama</i> , Everyman, London: Everyman, 1977
Brown, John Russell	<i>Theatre Language: A Study of Arden, Osborne, Pinter and Cresser</i> . London: Allen Lane, 1972

UNIT 4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Different Critical Approaches to the Play
 - 4.1.1 A Psychoanalytic Reading
 - 4.1.2 The Feminist Perspective
 - 4.1.3 New Criticism
 - 4.1.4 Historicist Criticism
- 4.2 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.3 Glossary
- 4.4 Questions
- 4.5 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to indicate some of the common critical approaches that might be applied to the play and the consequent varying interpretations that would result from such an exercise. Do remember that these approaches can overlap—for example it is possible to have a feminist psychoanalytic reading or one that combines historicism with feminism. The aim is to indicate which aspects of the text these readings would lay their emphasis on.

4.1 DIFFERENT CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE-PLAY

4.1.1 A psychoanalytic Reading

Psychoanalytic criticism uses the techniques and theories of psychoanalysis (therapy which works through investigating the relation between, and the functioning of, conscious and unconscious elements in the mind) and applies them in literary analysis. Such a reading would also entail considering in what way exactly a study of the working of the mind is to be used while studying a literary or dramatic text.

I shall follow Elizabeth Wright's outlining of the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary criticism, which, she says, works in two ways. One, it draws an analogy between mental and linguistic processes. Two, it involves a consideration of the genetic origins of language. (Only the first of these need be used with regard to *Look Back in Anger*). A psychoanalytic reading does not necessarily require a rigid application of theories but does crucially involve paying attention to the presence of sexuality , and an analysis of the unconscious (broadly, this means a stress on the human mind's dark or hidden areas) in connection with the author, the reader, the text and the points at which the boundaries between these begin to dissolve.

Freudian criticism sees the literary work as functioning like the dream to secretly gratify an infantile or forbidden wish. This idea of repression has proved very convenient to critics when trying to explain why a literary work may have a tendency opposed to the author's consciously expressed beliefs. The author's unconscious then enters the text either directly or through a character, and is either fulfilled or left ungratified. This makes sense only if the author is also seen as a reader, his reading determined by the history of his/her life which provides a personal myth or experience which is then looked at in relation to the text.

If we now turn to the play, the most apparent example that strikes me is Jimmy's tracing back his misogyny to his mother's treatment of his father. (The passage has been quoted at length earlier, in 3.1.2) This was an experience from Osborne's own childhood, and one that clearly made a very deep impression on him, since the theme of fatherhood surfaces throughout his plays and, like Jimmy, he mourns his lost father. The drawback of such an approach is, of course, that it relies quite heavily on biographical details. A more straightforward method of going about this exercise would be simply to psychoanalyze the characters in the play. Jimmy's speeches have actually been seen as symptomatic of an inferiority complex and of schizophrenia. The first of these charges is based on the fact of his constant attention-seeking and the second on the way in which he rapidly moves between demonstrating kindness and cruelty and praise and attack. I think such a reading rests largely on a misperception of schizophrenia or to the loose application of the term to what is, more simply, the coexistence in one person of opposing emotions and responses, something not very uncommon.

Freud also accords importance to the dream in seeing it as a space for the manifestation of all the desires, fears or memories which the conscious mind suppresses when awake. Two processes by which real events or feelings are transformed into dream images are displacement, where one person or event is represented by another, and condensation, where many people, events, wishes or meanings combine to form a single dream image. The relevance of this for literary studies, according to psychoanalytic criticism, is that dreams are like literature in 'showing' rather than 'telling', so literature can be seen as using images, symbols and metaphors through the same devices of condensation and displacement. Try and see if you would like to incorporate this idea into the practice of analysing the language of the play, which was done in the last unit.

Another set of concepts (apart from the subconscious and the unconscious discussed above) that psychoanalysis offers to literary analysis are those of the psyche which is seen as having three groups of functions, *id*, *ego* and *super-ego*. This is a **topographical** model of the human mind, that is to say, a model that represents the mind spatially in terms of different mental 'spaces'. The *id* consists of instinctual drives arising from the body and the way in which these drives inform behaviour. Typically, taking account of these drives leads to a study of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Jimmy at one point explains his irrational behaviour (he has first apologized for Alison's arm being hurt, and then says that he did it on purpose—in either case he cannot be taken to unambiguously speak the truth) as resulting from the complexities of his feelings toward Alison whom he desires in a way that he doesn't seem able to handle:

"There's hardly a moment when I'm not – watching and wanting you. I've got to hit out somehow. Nearly four years of being in the same room with you, night and day, and I still can't stop my sweat breaking out when I see you doing – something as ordinary as leaning over an ironing board." (LBA, I)

The *ego* (that agency deriving from and regulating the *id*) here offers a particular account of its own functioning under the influence of the *id*. The *super-ego* which is the mental transformation of social/parental influences on the *id*, has already been identified in this particular case i.e. that of Jimmy. These categories are applicable to all the characters and would attempt to provide some kind of answer to questions such as why Alison marries Jimmy or why Cliff stays on in a situation he professes to hate. But the use of these ideas in literary criticism need not be restricted to the analysis of characters, it has also been used to 'map' aspects of the reader's (or in this case, the spectator's) experience of a text, gradually bringing the reader into the focus of interest which was earlier restricted to the text.

Lastly, another branch of psychoanalytic criticism, called 'schizoanalysis' concentrates on the unconscious, but in a way that sees it as constructed **through language**. The instability of language systems then leads to the attempt to capture pre-linguistic experience, usually a regression to childhood behaviour. This has obvious implications when we are looking at the 'bear and squirrel' game which could then be seen as a symptom of the wish to retreat into childhood and a trouble-free existence, away from adult responsibilities.

Any kind of psychoanalytic reading, therefore, first identifies, and then concentrates on, aspects of the individual psyche, and in doing so privileges what is called 'psycho-drama' above social drama (class conflict, for example) as well as above a social or historical context, such as was mapped out for Look Back in **Anger** in the first unit of this block.

4.1.2 The Feminist Perspective

'Feminism' is a term with a very wide and varying history of usage and practice and will here be used only in the relatively narrow sense of an interrogation of the representation of women in the text and a questioning of the authority of such representations and of the assumptions behind them. This would mean looking at how women are presented in the play, and at the way in which the male characters speak of and react to the female characters.

The obvious starting point is Jimmy's often expressed misogyny, of which the following passage is an example:

"Why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death? Have you ever had a letter, and on it is franked 'Please Give Your Blood Generously'? Well, the Postmaster-General does that on behalf of all the women in the world... There aren't any good, brave causes left... No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women." (*LBA*, III.i)

He does see personal relationships as offering the only alternative to the lack of causes in public life, but views such relationships as giving women a chance to 'devour' and to destroy his (and by implication, all men's) selfhood and autonomy. This goes hand in hand with his being completely tied to women in the sense of being unable to break away from them sexually or emotionally. The notion of female sexuality as threatening is an old commonplace in literature, and I think that Osborne, far from endorsing what Jimmy says, is showing how he spouts the anti-woman rhetoric of the typical misogynist to which his own dependancy on women provides an almost comic contrast. Feminist criticism would also contest this grouping of all women together under what they see as the cultural construction of the 'feminine' – a concept which works to define women negatively—and would analyse language as the means by which such a grouping is effected. In the play under consideration, the grouping seems to work only at the level of language – no justification or evidence is provided for it, but neither is it positively refuted. This is why I would be wary of those critical interpretations which see the play as embodying Osborne's views (whatever they are) about women.

A more relevant focus would be on the way in which rebellion against the social structures of class and family which are seen as oppressive, does not include a view of them as particularly oppressive to women. Jimmy sees himself as suffering under the system of class which privileges Alison and her family, but does not see Alison's suffering under the system of patriarchal marriage that privileges him over her. Though his ignorance, and to some extent, society's attitude to women are shown up in the play, it could equally be argued that these are reinforced by the sequence of events as well as by the characterization which makes Alison and Helena share a similar pattern of behaviour – fascination alternating with resentment and antipathy—with regard to Jimmy. Mary McCarthy points out in *A New Word* (1959), that the

idea of women as all alike, as interchangeable and therefore by implication ultimately dispensable, is most clearly present in Helena's replacing Alison in exactly the same role, that of someone who provides to the men a well run home, cooked meals, ironed clothes, affection and sex :

'At the rise of the third-act curtain, months later, the two male figures are still enveloped in the Sunday papers, while a woman is silently ironing a shirt. Same scene – different girl. Nothing really changes; nothing can change ... Jimmy, a working-class intellectual, still has a hostage from the ruling class doing the washing and the cooking, and his friend, Cliff, an uneducated Welsh boy, who boards with them, is still looking on. There has been a swap of upper-class women, like the swap of posh newspapers: you put down the Observer and pick up the *Sunday Times* – same contents, different make-up.'

To expose within a text, as the above passage does, the social and cultural assumptions which perpetuate inequality between men and women, and the methods used to do so, are the main aims of one strand of feminist criticism. One such assumption exposed here is that household tasks are to be performed by women. This role is one from which no woman is exempt, irrespective of the social class she belongs to, since even if other upper-class women do not find themselves in situations where they have to cook and clean as Alison and Helena do, they still have the responsibility of maintaining a comfortable domestic environment for the men.

Jimmy tries to win not only Alison's love, but also her subscription to his views and vision of life. The play does show Alison abandoning Jimmy or letting him down (by refusing to go with him to visit Hugh's mother) at a moment when he needs her, but that moment is, equally, a decisive one for her – it is the first time she is depicted as making an independent decision for herself or consciously acting against Jimmy's wishes. The question that arises is whether the moment of decision for the woman must also function as her betrayal of the man. The fact that it does seem to be so in Look *Back in Anger*, and that it apparently goes unquestioned, is a problematic one.

Apart from the position that women occupy, the question of whether or not we can locate identity (especially feminine identity) in gender and in the social circumstances of men and women, is a crucial issue in feminism. For example, is it possible to see Alison and Jimmy in terms of essentialized feminine and masculine natures or would doing so mean being taken in by a rhetoric that belongs to the man (Jimmy) and is anti-woman? And does the similarity in Alison's and Helena's behaviour mean to indicate that they share a common feminine nature, or is it traceable to their similar backgrounds and upbringing? At a glance, the play's stress on individuality does seem to be restricted to the men, in fact to just one man. But it soon becomes evident that the differences as well as the common patterns in the women's roles arise equally from the circumstances – both social and marital—in which they are placed.

4.1.3 New Criticism

This is the American equivalent of Practical Criticism, a particular way of approaching the critical reading of texts, especially of poems, advocated by I.A. Richards in the 1920s which became, with some modifications, the basis for a new critical practice that is still extremely widespread.

As a **method**, this would mean looking at the particular text under consideration without any reference to extra-textual information about the author, date of composition and socio-historical background or context. In its application to the interpretation of the text, it would entail a 'close' reading, a study of the words on the page (we will have to temporarily let go of the 'performance text' here) with the reader's attention being closely focused on textual details such as use of metaphor, metrics (where relevant), imagery and symbols, form and structure, among others. As you will immediately see, this is exactly the method of analysis we have been

following in these units, except, of course that socio-historical context has been stressed here. Such an emphasis on form, texture and structure makes the question of belief expressed in content a secondary one.

A discussion of the structure of *Look Back in Anger* might serve to illustrate better this method of criticism. Structure in a play has the functions of the creation of interest and suspense, which is done through presenting the events of the plot at a suitable pace. The play under consideration, it might be argued, does not offer any drastic developments as far as the plot is concerned, but the purpose is fulfilled all the same since there is an adequate level of suspense as to the end. We do not know until the last moment whether Jimmy is going to stay with Alison or Helena. The play also offers unexpected developments such as the affair between Jimmy and Helena, which seems to take even them by surprise, though a psychoanalytic reading would argue otherwise, saying that Helena had been, consciously or subconsciously, preparing for it.

Martin Esslin has traced the development of the conventional structure of drama as consisting of—the statement of the theme and its first variation, a pattern of episodes through which takes place the establishment of the play's main objective; the exposition of this objective, which relies on other factors such as plot (including the development of the story and the sequence of scenes), the casting of characters, the quality of dialogue and spatial and temporal elements (ie the time dimension consisting of the concerns of a sense of timing and economy), the communication of theme(s), which requires a process of decoding, and the establishing of atmosphere. The statement of the theme need not be in words – in *Look Back in Anger*, I would identify it in Jimmy's behaviour, that is, in the very action of launching into long speeches, rather than in the content of what he says. Two of the most important elements, namely character and language, have already been analysed. Now try and locate the rest of these elements in the play, looking for instance, at the way in which atmosphere is built up. Two examples, that of sound effects like the church bells, and that of Alison's iron, were given in earlier units. See if you can find any others.

4.1.4 Historicist Criticism

To be more specific, the method considered here is actually called 'new historicism'. This refuses to privilege the literary text, and is based on the parallel reading of the literary text and a non-literary text belonging to the same historical period. Rather than seeing socio-historical context as providing a 'background' to the literary text (as was done in the first unit of this block) this kind of analysis sees both texts as informing each other, and of equal interest in a reading of either. The first kind of reading (ie. the one that looks at 'background') could conveniently be termed 'old' historicism, and it does clearly privilege the text over the historical context within which it is placed. The view that 'human, social or cultural characteristics are determined in an absolute sense by historical situation', is implied by the term 'historicism', as is an interest in 'history as text'. Such a view has consequently been criticized for reducing the human subject into these non-human, or extra-human factors.

This kind of criticism could be, and in practice, usually is, linked to the analysis of a text's political implications and its handling of class. The more correct term for such an analysis is 'cultural materialism' and I give an extended quotation to help fully explain it :

"... a strategy [which] repudiates the supposed transcendence of literature, seeking rather to understand it as a cultural intervention produced initially within a specific set of practices and tending to render persuasive a view of reality; and seeing it also as re-produced subsequently in other historical conditions in the service of various views of reality, through other practices, including those of modern literary study."

(Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Oxford, 1992)

It has also been pointed out by theorists of cultural materialism that such study is inevitably bound up with the question of ideological crisis and struggle. What are the implications of this for the study of Osborne? The two following passages might help to formulate an answer, through a parallel reading of the play under consideration with either or both of them. The first of them is taken from a commentary on a study of the image of the Labour party among different groups of voters, commissioned by the journal *Socialist Commentary* and published in 1960:

'Labour may "stand for the working class" but not for the increasing number who feel rightly or wrongly that they have outgrown that label... One has only to cast the imagination back to those days to appreciate the extent to which things have changed... Large groups of manual workers have higher earnings than white-collar workers or than sections of the middle class. They are cushioned by the provisions of the welfare state; their children have educational opportunities beyond the dreams of their parents. They now have opportunities for leisure, for the enjoyment of most of the good things of life... But this is not all. The manual workers have not only vastly improved their position as manual workers, they have also *changed* their position; some are no longer manual workers at all. As a result of technological changes some blue-collar workers have become white-collar workers... more cross over the line each day. There is an increasing fluidity in our society... The day is gone when workers must regard their station in life as fixed – for themselves and for their children.'

Taken from a piece of writing that is essentially social documentation, this passage can be read alongside *Look Back in Anger* with interesting results for the latter. To consider only two of them—first, we have to rethink our response to the choices Jimmy makes regarding his occupation, and in view of the education he has received. Secondly, the passage itself is to be subjected to a critical scrutiny, which might (for example) question the assumptions behind the use of the terms 'white-collar' and 'blue-collar'.

The second passage is from the *London Magazine*, inviting nine authors, including Osborne, to answer the following questions:

'During the Thirties it was a widely-held view that poets, novelists and playwrights should be closely concerned in their *writing* with the fundamental political and social issues of their time. Since then, the degree of an imaginative writer's necessary engagement with the age in which he lives has been the subject of constant debate with very varied conclusions. Do you think that today, in 1957, it is a valid criticism of such a writer to say that (1) he appears indifferent to the immediate problems of human freedom involved in, say, the Rosenberg case and the Hungarian revolution; (2) he shows no awareness (a) of the changes that have been caused in our social structure and our way of life by, for instance, the development of atomic weapons and the levelling down of classes through discriminatory taxation, nor (b) of the challenges to our conception of human existence caused by recent discoveries in such sciences as biology, astronomy and psychology; (3) his novel, play or poem could, *judged on internal evidence only* have been written at any time during the last fifty years?'

These questions (rather than Osborne's answers to them) have been chosen as worthy of independent examination for the things they tell us about the people, institution, class and period that asks them, and for the ideas and beliefs which underlie them. For example, a new historicist reading would question the very existence of 'internal evidence' in a literary work. The passage also appears to tell us of the expectations of writers and of their work in the 1930s, but we need to keep in mind that what we actually have is the perception of the 1950s, *about* the 1930s. Do these expectations,

UNIT 5 ANGER AND AFTER : THE PLAY'S SUBSEQUENT IMPORTANCE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Osborne's Place in 20th Century British Drama
 - 5.1.1 His Other Plays
 - 5.1.2 The Impact of *Look Back in Anger*
- 5.2 Common Themes in the Plays
- 5.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.4 Glossary
- 5.5 Questions
- 5.6 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to see *Look Back in Anger* in relation to Osborne's other plays and to trace its impact on contemporary and subsequent British drama.

5.1 OSBORNE'S PLACE IN 20TH CENTURY BRITISH DRAMA

5.1.1 His Other Plays

In the first unit I listed Osborne's plays (except *Epitaph For George Dillon* all were subsequent to *LBA*) in the order of their performance. The more important among them will here be discussed briefly so that it becomes possible for us to draw any comparisons and/or contrasts that might be useful in our study of *Look Back in Anger*. These discussions will not necessarily include descriptions of plot and character in the plays since their aim is rather to locate certain common themes and concerns which are common to Osborne's work, and to trace the progression of his drama.

The play that followed *Look Back in Anger* was *The Entertainer* and here Osborne makes the music-hall, which had provided comic interludes in the previous play (see 3.3.3) the basis for the play's entire structure. He retains the conventional, three-act structure, but divides each act into short scenes which are numbered like acts on a music-hall bill. The action takes place on two main settings – the sea-side boarding house where the Rice family live and a 'comedy spot' where Archie Rice (the protagonist) performs solo scenes at a microphone.

The main difference between the monologues in this play and those in *Look Back in Anger* is that they lack the same vehemence and level of invective, and consequently had less immediate impact when the play first appeared. *The Entertainer* has two distinct kinds of monologue, the monologues in the solo scenes and those in the family scenes. Notice that Osborne here finds a way to introduce soliloquy (which is absent from the earlier play) through these solo scenes. Political and social comments remain part of the monologues, except that since they are now in the form of music-hall songs and solos, they coexist with stories and wisecracks of a kind more light-hearted and less abusive than Jimmy's are.

Osborne had by now self-admittedly begun to be influenced by Brecht's Epic Theatre (see 1.3.3) which meant that he concentrated more on bringing out the theatricality of the play and on discarding dramatic illusion. Though a realistic structure is retained, the vaudeville sequences work against it. The play also makes much more direct references to contemporary events (like Suez and the Trafalgar Square rallies)

and persons, than are found in Jimmy's rather vague allusions. This serves to make the language of *The Entertainer* less opaque, at least on the surface, than that of its predecessor. Even when Archie does launch into a long speech like the one from which the following extract is taken, it is qualified by the audience's knowledge that he has been drinking :

“ But if ever I saw any hope or strength in the human race, it was in the face of that old fat negress getting up to sing about Jesus or something like that. She was poor and lonely and oppressed like nobody you've ever known. Or me, for that matter. I never even liked that kind of music, but to see that old black whore singing her heart out to the whole world, you knew somehow in your heart that it didn't matter how much you kick people, the real people, how much you despise them, if they can stand up and make a pure, just natural noise like that, there's nothing wrong with them, only with everybody else.”

When I say that the language is less opaque, I mean that while undoubtedly rhetorical and self-dramatizing, it shows up these words clearly for what they are – drunken and sentimental. For this reason, this speech is in much less danger of being identified as the voice of the playwright, than Jimmy's speeches are. The gap between the protagonist and the minor characters is lessened here since they are given more interest and impact than are Alison, Cliff, Helena and Colonel Redfern — everyone besides Jimmy is a 'minor' character in the earlier play.

After a musical (*The World of Paul Slickey*) and a television play (*A Subject of Scandal and Concern*), neither of which was a particular success, Osborne wrote the only one of his plays to have a historical subject, Luther. Like *Look Back* in *Anger*, it is almost entirely centred around the personality of one man, but the man in this case doesn't emerge as clearly, partly because of the constraints of creating a character the audience would already know something about and yet keeping him from becoming predictable. It is of course simplistic to see Osborne's Luther as a direct transcription of the figure from history, particularly since the play's emphasis is on the psychological, and Luther's opposition of the Church is explained in terms of an identity crisis, among other private conflicts. This is a useful point of contrast to the play we are studying, which, though open to a reading that stresses the psychological, offers no such overt explanations.

The language of Luther has been criticized for lacking a speech pattern that emerges naturally from the characterization, another problem arising from the attempt at reconciling language that sounds appropriate to the setting with the 'modern' patterns of speech and the colloquial language Osborne is accustomed to writing in. The language therefore varies between passages of quotation, which are recognisable as such, and what one critic calls “ passages of Osborne”. How well the two fit together is extremely debatable, as you can see from this example :

“ ...Oh, thou my God, my God, help me against the reason and wisdom of the world...For myself, I've no business to be dealing with the great lords of this world... my God, do you hear me ? Are you dead ? No, you can't die, you can only hide yourself, can't you ? ... in the name of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, who shall be my protector and defender, yes, my mighty fortress, breathe into me. Give me life, oh Lord. Give me life.”

The passage begins and ends in language appropriate to the period, with quotes from the real Luther, but in between becomes that of a disturbed, 'modern' voice. On the other hand, Luther is not actually concerned with history or with the religious aspect of the subject it deals with, and in that sense is not a historical play at all. It concentrates on the individual rebelling against all other human authority, and in this case, one of the conditions of such a rebel is his isolation. An obvious parallel with Jimmy comes to mind here but there are important differences. Luther has a cause

that he believes in and he also has religious faith, however tormented, both of which are unavailable to the modern world of Jimmy Porter.

Osborne experimented further with different styles in two short plays, *The Blood of the Bambergers* and *Under Plain Cover* which were produced together at the Royal Court under the title *Plays for England*. The first contains the different styles of vaudeville, satire, parody and farce, but since it also has only two acts, the effort to make all these styles effective doesn't really succeed. The second is a one-act play, with similar experiments in style as well as the theme of incest which though a far from unprecedented one, was fairly uncommon on the stage at the time.

The next Osborne play, *A Patriot for Me* is, again, conventional in form and has a sequence of short scenes to show the hero Redl, in varying circumstances. The departure from the earlier plays comes in the depiction of the central character who is this time seen more through other people's eyes than his own. The play's main theme is homosexuality, and though Redl is presented as someone who is a member of not one but two minorities, since he is not only homosexual but also Jewish, the fact of his Jewishness is largely ignored. The social and professional pressures he faces because of his sexual identity eventually lead to his death. For once Osborne concerns himself with dramatic and suspenseful external action along with the inner tensions he habitually explores, and does manage to a large extent to successfully bring together the private and the public in a way that I think *Look Back in Anger* tries, but fails, to do. Neither does Redl conform to any stereotypes of the homosexual as someone to whom society's values are unimportant, and though he chooses in the end to betray his country rather than his real self, this only makes him, for Osborne, a true patriot. The chief concern is, once again, with the man who is placed outside society (and is the target of its prejudices), someone alone and aware of his isolation.

Of the remaining plays, *Inadmissible Evidence*, *A Bond Honoured*, *Time Present* and *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, only the first mentioned requires to be looked at in any detail, though *Time Present* is significant in being the alone among Osborne's plays to have a woman in the central role – the heroine, Pamela, who is an actress out of work at the moment, is strong and highly articulate and holds forth in speeches as full of invective as Jimmy's on various subjects (such as hippies and drug-taking) which in themselves demonstrate the shift from the 1950s to the 1960s.

To return to *Inadmissible Evidence*, the by now familiar pattern of contrasting styles is repeated, this time on the level of form rather than that of language. Naturalistic scenes of office routine alternate with stylized ones showing nightmare sequences, and at moments, the action is viewed through the distorting gaze of one of the characters, called Bill, who is gradually losing the ability to focus on external reality. This loss is depicted by a movement into his mind, through the device of having three different women (all divorce clients whom Bill interviews) played by the same actress. The dialogue in the three interviews becomes progressively more unrealistic and stylized to show the increasing disintegration of Bill's subjective vision. The dialogue thus takes over much of the task usually reserved for the monologues – to reveal the consciousness of the characters – and loses in the process some of its own traditional function of effecting communication. The play has been criticized for trying, like *Look Back in Anger*, to fulfil two contradictory aims at the same time; Bill sees other people as withdrawing from him, he is himself meant to be seen as losing perspective, and the play looks as if it is attempting not just to give voice to both points of view, but to be written equally from both.

5.1.2 The impact of *Look Back in Anger*

Some of the more enthusiastic reviews of the play have already been quoted earlier (see 2.3) so you ought to have a fair idea of the way in which it was greeted as a revolutionary and innovative development in British theatre. These claims, however,

do need to be interrogated. Why was this particular play generally thought of so highly ? More important, are the **claims** made for it - of having changed the face of the stage in Britain -- justifiable, especially in the light of its conventional, 'old-fashioned' (to quote the playwright) formal structure ? I shall try to indicate a possible method of going about the question.

First, try and recapitulate something of the discussion on 'theatre' and 'drama' and of drama's relation to society, given at the very start of this block. It will be immediately clear from it that the success of a play depends on many factors besides its intrinsic worth. In fact it is extremely difficult to gauge exactly what such **worth** might be since it varies, and is a subjective judgement which can be defined only in relation to the particular standards it is being judged by. One **such** standard, which is not perhaps given much importance in classroom study, but which nevertheless determines success, is stage effectiveness. Whatever valid criticism may (and has) been levelled at Jimmy's long rhetorical speeches, they should be, if well delivered, electrifying on the stage. The play also clearly met a certain need of the British stage or of the British theatregoer at the time (see 4.2.3). The question is, were **these needs** - whether for 'causes' or simply for the sympathetic expression of **their feelings** - reflected in the play, or created by it as well ? Osborne, at least in his prose writing, distanced himself from any conscious **attempt** to speak either to, or for, England :

“ ... one constantly feels that discussions about this country like, for example, the one published on this page two weeks ago ... cannot possibly be England, your England. It may be that we **each have** our own, private, intensely personal England so **that** it is always England, **his** England we hear about.” (Schoolmen of the Left, Observer, 30 October 1960)

Such a **questioning** of, and protest against the **appropriation** of a country to one's own needs is precisely what the play itself holds forth against. Yet doesn't it also feed on, and hence further this **appropriation** ? And if we grant that it does not intend to do so (see the analysis of its rhetoric in 3.1.3), are we to accept that as altering the fact that it was, as it happens, taken as voicing public grievances and that for its **immediate** audiences and reviewers this lay behind much of its power ? Although I do not think any one answer is possible, do keep in mind the vexed nature of the question when analysing the play's impact.

The effect Look **Back** in Anger had in purely theatrical terms (as against its social impact) is easier to judge. Along with others among Osborne's plays, it was innovative in the use of language and also of situation. The **domestic** setting was not entirely new but Osborne made a distinctive use of it, combining it with elements borrowed from European drama such as the alienation of the protagonist, and the analysis of class, sex and play-acting in, for example, the plays of Ibsen. Shaw and Wilde had of course already put these problems on the British stage, but they had used the form of social comedy, which Osborne did not. Whether or not the use of language with its large component of **exaggeration**—in the play can be quite made to fit into the predetermined category of 'realism' is itself a debatable question.

5.2 COMMON THEMES IN THE PLAYS

All the plays outlined above share certain **common themes** or concerns. The **most** important among them is the repeated interrogation of the **solitary** individual and his or her relation (usually rebellious) to various forms of authority. The nature of authority, whether social, political, religious, familial, or that of a particular morality, invariably takes second place to the consideration of how it affects the individual. '

The idea of 'the **authority** of a particular morality' needs some elaboration here and opens up the concern with morality that I think is the other major **common** one in Osborne's work. Though we have not paid much attention to 'morality' as an issue in

Look Back in Anger, the play certainly deals with it in the sense of trying to understand what in its particular context, 'right' or moral action is. Jimmy is described as having his own 'private morality'. What this consists of is not spelt out but may be inferred. It means the avoidance of all conscious hypocrisy or of being in any way 'phoney', as well as gratitude for love received. This last might not be evident in his behaviour with Alison, but is so in his relationship with Cliff and with Hugh's mother. Morality here also means the courage to face up to life, to what Jimmy calls 'the pain of being alive', and this, like love, requires 'muscle and guts'. Love is seen as overriding all of society's polite, 'rational' and abstract rules, and means, as the end of the play shows, a readiness to accept the irrational, even give oneself up to it. On the other hand, this depiction of love is not an uncritical one, since investing oneself in a relationship with another human being also means refusing to fully face the condition of human solitariness, of which Jimmy and Alison are both aware. Yet on the whole, 'morality' appears to function more on the level of personal relations than on that of the larger, abstract 'causes' whose lack Jimmy mourns.

In the end, we need to note both the problems in society and in the voice protesting against those problems. The play does not, however, offer any answers to the question of the conduct of the characters and whether or not it fits into any scheme of morality. Is Alison right in leaving Jimmy without telling him that she is pregnant, and having left him, in returning? Is Helena right in engineering Alison's departure and in herself leaving at the end? Is Cliff right in leaving at a point when his presence might be needed? Are Alison and Jimmy right to retreat from reality and responsibility into a childish game? There is no unambiguous way of knowing, but the issue of morality itself is highlighted by such questions. And the issue then leads back to that of authority since right and wrong are defined by authority, a state of things that I think Osborne contests, but which he recognizes as inseparable from all systems of communal life. The only way out that he seems to indicate is that to react with 'feeling' offers us a more honest answer than rational thought can provide.

5.3 LET US SUM UP

Though *Look Back* in Anger clearly had a greater impact than any of Osborne's other plays (the reasons behind this have been looked at) it should not be seen entirely in isolation, or without any reference to them.

A number of themes can be seen to be common to Osborne's work as a whole, since they recur here as well as in his other plays. The most important of these themes are the relationship between the individual and society which seeks to impose its authority on him or her; the gaps and the common areas between private life (largely defined in terms of personal relations) and public life; the search for an adequate morality that can answer human needs in both these areas; the discrepancy between thought and action, and a questioning of the ability of either of them to provide meaning to life; and finally the location of such meaning in 'feeling' or emotion rather than in the intellect or in rational thought.

5.4 GLOSSARY

Colloquial	Everyday, informal speech.
Disintegration	Breaking up, falling apart
Opaque	Something that is not transparent, through which it difficult to see clearly.
Vaudeville	Form of light variety entertainment with skits, songs and dances.
Vehemence	Forcefulness

5.5 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. What do you think the term 'morality' means in the context of the play ?
- Q 2. Identify any other common themes running through Osborne's work.

5.6 SUGGESTED READING

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| Osborne, John | <i>Damn You, England: Collected Prose</i> , London: Faber & Faber, 1994 |
| Taylor, John Russell | <i>Anger and After: A guide to the new British Drama</i> , London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1962 |