

Disillusionment and Nostalgia: A Critical Study of John Osborne's

Look Back in Anger

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Abstract:

This critical study delves into the renowned play, *Look Back in Anger*, by John Osborne, focussing on the themes of 'disillusionment' and 'nostalgia' that permeate its narrative and thus form a base of the play. Osborne's play was published in 1956 and marks a significant turning point in British theatre, as it challenged conventional norms and brought forth the era of the term 'angry young man'. Through a meticulous examination of character dynamics, plot development, and socio-cultural context, this study unravels the protagonist Jimmy Porter's disillusionment with post-war Britain and his yearning for a past that was more stable and worthy of living. The study illuminates Osborne's portrayal of generational conflict, carefully dissecting the characters' longing for an elusive past.

Keywords: (Disillusionment, nostalgia, British theatre, angry young man).

Introduction

Researchers have written extensively on this topic, and their work reflects the widespread anxiety in Western societies since the end of World War I. These works explore various understandings of the modern human situation in the West and address themes related to the social emergencies that have arisen in Western societies. Some of these themes include economic inequality, political instability, and cultural disintegration. The fate of modern man in the West is a complex issue that requires a multidisciplinary approach to fully understand. Researchers from diverse fields such as sociology, psychology, economics, and political science have contributed to this field of research. Their work provides valuable information about the challenges facing modern humans in the West and suggests solutions to meet these challenges.

The period after World War II saw a significant shift in Britain from modernism to postmodernism. During this period, people encountered various ideological conflicts

related to their inability to connect with the institutions, ideas and values that were thought to be the base British culture. Osborne in *Look Back in Anger* (1956) made a notable impact to the literary foundation of 'New Wave British Theatre'. This play primarily focuses on the frustration and isolation that young people experienced after World War II, due to the unfulfilled promises of the welfare state project. Dr. Swati Tande writes in her research paper entitled, "Psychological Insight in Look Back in Anger".

The play reveals the sense of detachment experienced by the early generation of post-war British society in relation to various fundamental aspects that include the society and its religion together with the other social factors such as institutions of middle-class marriage, personal history, and the idea of English identity. This play critically evaluates all the established institutions that existed prior to 1945, thereby leading to the aforementioned isolation. These distinct forms of isolation are the underlying factors that contribute to the alienation experienced by the subsequent generation of the British society after World War II. The alienation of the younger generation primarily stems from these aforementioned forms of isolation. Within this research article, the term "alienation" is employed as a psychological construct to describe the mental state of an individual who experiences discontentment with their present circumstances, societal norms, and the society itself. This dissatisfaction gave rise to conscious frustration, while simultaneously hindering the individual's ability to adapt to the customs and beliefs, whether social or ideological, that governed their way of life.

Jimmy Porter, an individual hailing from the working class society, demonstrates his rebellious nature while simultaneously embodying the characteristics of an educated individual. This is evident through his consistent doubts regarding the attitudes and behaviors of the upper middle class. Furthermore, these sentiments are reflected in his interactions and conduct towards his wife and her parents. The reserved and composed demeanor exhibited by Alison can be attributed to the mistreatment she endures from Jimmy. Lewis Cliff, a compassionate individual hailing from the working class society, possesses a profound understanding of Jimmy's frustration and empathizes with Alison. His ultimate goal is to restore harmony within their marital relationship. Helena, a trusted confidante of Alison, possesses a remarkable intellect and a penchant for candidness. She harbours an immense disdain for Jimmy's abusive treatment towards Alison and aspires to impart a valuable lesson upon him. However, in doing so, she unintentionally developed an attraction towards Jimmy, which she openly confessed to Alison. Nevertheless, upon Alison's return, she maintained her integrity and ended her

relationship with Jimmy, despite having the opportunity to continue it. Colonel Redfern did not approve of Jimmy and Alison's marriage. Nonetheless, he was impressed by Jimmy. He still clung to the illusion of England's glory, as evidenced by his behaviour and attitude. Hence, the characters and their actions propel the play forward.

The theme of alienation holds great significance in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* as the main character, Jimmy Porter, epitomizes the archetype of the highly educated but underemployed labourer. Residing in a garret with his wife, Alison, and his business associate, Cliff Lewis, Jimmy operates a candy stall in an open-air market. Set in the year 1956, the narrative depicts a Britain devoid of its essence, as Jimmy perceives it, trapped in an era characterized by an American influence that has left individuals like him marginalized. He experiences estrangement from the Establishment, the upper echelons of British society, which have barred him from accessing the most lucrative employment opportunities due to his social standing.

He obtained his degree from a university with a reputation that is considered less prestigious, known for its modern architecture and white-tiled buildings, in the esteemed country of Great Britain. Consequently, despite the quality of his education, it holds little significance in the eyes of the British Establishment. Furthermore, he experiences a sense of detachment from his spouse, Alison, whose father holds the esteemed rank of colonel, and whose brother currently holds a position in the Parliament. On a regular basis, he subjects Alison to verbal abuse, asserting himself as the sole intellectual within their domestic setting. To illustrate this claim, he has even bestowed upon her a derogatory moniker: Lady Pusillanimous. This particular nickname serves to highlight both Jimmy's intellectual prowess, as evidenced by his extensive vocabulary, and Alison's meek disposition. It also implies that a portion of Jimmy's alienation is a result of his own conduct rather than his socioeconomic status. Moreover, it suggests that he may find it easier to connect with others if he were to treat them with respect.

Disillusionment

The individual's relationship with social institutions is a crucial aspect of social life. Generally, individuals tend to isolate themselves from social institutions and societal norms due to their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. In the play, Jimmy Porter is portrayed as the embodiment of the first group of scholars (post World War II), characterized as solitary entities lacking connections to religious, ecclesiastical, and royal institutions. He expresses his inner discontent with conventional norms by launching verbal attacks against the Christianity (unambiguously focussed on the Church) and the monarchy as an institution in itself. These things signify the outdated social hierarchy,

which Jimmy criticizes and rejects as well. He being dissatisfied with current economic conditions vehemently condemns them. He takes every opportunity to punish these institutions and the “principles” they defend. Jimmy, described by Osborne as an "angry young man", gets angry whenever he encounters elements linked to such institutions be it religion or tradition. For example, the sound of church bells arouses anger in him:

Oh, Hello! Now the bloody bells have started! (He rushes to the window) Wrap it up, will you? Stop ringing those bells! There’s somebody going crazy in here! I don’t want to hear them!. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* 25)

S. Chelliah in his research article, “Theme of ‘Alienation’ as Projected through the Character – Portrayal of Jimmy Porter in John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger: An Appraisal*” writes:

Jimmy feels himself to be unjustly crushed down in the rotten society with no visible hope of ever getting up again...But in reality, the society is as stagnant and as class-dominated as ever. In the class-conscious society, the working-class people are ignored and insulted. In his despair, he resents his wife Alison who comes from upper-class family and despises her parents and her brother. (143)

Jimmy’s rage towards the “church bells” embodies and symbolizes his growing rage towards the principles and emblems associated with the religion/Church. According to Jimmy, both Christianity in the form of Church and the Monarchy have long served as the preeminent instruments of traditional power for the British populace, yet the waning influence of the obsolete ‘upper class’ within the political sphere hastening the decline of all such instruments of traditional (controlled system based on injustice) authority.

The author artistically illustrates the decline in economic power and social standing of the aristocratic class, while also reflecting the historical context where common man’s resentment towards the established social hierarchy is visible. In this regard, Jimmy Porter’s frustration towards the ringing ‘church bells’ serves as a symbol for the younger generation’s rebellion against traditional authority and its mechanisms.

Reminiscence

The play epitomizes the quintessential theatrical production of the ‘angry young men’ movement in British theatre history, characterized by the composition of plays by working class authors who express their disappointment as well as their scepticism regarding the British society. Within the play, this sentiment is evident through Jimmy’s perception of political hollowness. A portion of Jimmy’s estrangement arises from a pervasive sentiment prevailing in Great Britain during the 1950s, during which the

average British citizen felt neglected by a government that had pledged prosperity for all. Instead, subsequent to the devastation inflicted upon London during World War II, the British populace grapples with novel challenges and a nation reconstructed under a socialist framework devised to ensure societal equality, with the exception of the affluent upper class, who remain situated far above the average citizen. Jimmy harbors resentment towards this state of affairs and possesses the understanding that it will perpetually endure.

Jimmy's sense of self is solid, yet his place in the modern world remains uncertain, which contributes to the theme of a generation gap. This gap is evident not only between Jimmy and the older generation, exemplified by Colonel Redfern, but also within his own generation, as he seems to have been born into the wrong era. The play also brings attention to the class disparity and the resulting problems it entails. Jimmy is perceived as lower class due to his oil-stained dinner suit, which Alison's parents deem unsuitable. This tension and feeling of inadequacy are clearly portrayed in the play.

Jimmy is experiencing a sense of demoralization due to the fact that individuals like Nigel are making progress in their careers and contributing to society, despite their lack of clarity and action-oriented mindset. In contrast, Jimmy lacks the motivation to pursue advancement in any professional endeavor, despite considering himself deserving of such achievements. He holds the belief that others remain ignorant and oblivious to the societal needs, despite being provided with a privileged education. However, he fails to utilize his evident intelligence for anything other than contemplating new methods to critique the various flaws in the world around him. It is notable that he possesses the capability to channel his intellect towards taking the actions he so fervently advocates for.

Jimmy is promptly introduced as an exceedingly combative individual. The portrayal of his character in the play, prior to the commencement of the opening scene, unambiguously alludes to his propensity for estranging others, for his proclivity to utter unpalatable verities engenders a souring effect on his friendships. Nevertheless, when expounding on Jimmy's candor, it is also intriguing to append the adverb "apparent". This serves to draw our attention to the imperative task of attentively heeding his forthcoming outbursts, so as to discern whether he is enunciating the truth or merely uttering whatever will incite a reaction from those present.

Conclusion

The characters portrayed in the play serve as a representation of the time-period spanning from 1950 to 1960. They are a product of an era in which individuals sought to

discover their own sense of self. These characters embody the existential struggles faced by modern man, such as a lack of personal identity, uncertainty regarding oneself and the surrounding environment, the anguish of existing in a meaningless universe, feelings of isolation, and breakdowns in communication. It is crucial to underscore that the conduct exhibited by these characters within the play is not independent, but rather a result of the circumstances they find themselves in.

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