



John Osborne

(1929-1994)

Life and works

John Osborne was born in a London suburb in 1929 into a lower-middle-class family. He was educated in London and at a boarding school in Devonshire. Once back in London, he developed a **passion for acting and for writing plays**. He entered the theatre as an actor and **assistant stage manager**, touring with a repertory company; at the same time he started to write his own plays.

In 1956 his new play, *Look Back in Anger*, about rebellion against traditional mores, was accepted at the Royal Court Theatre in London and first performed. **This theatrical performance was considered a sort of watershed in the British theatre**, and it turned Osborne into one of the spokesmen of the so-called 'Angry Young Men' (→ 7.9).

The angry and rebellious nature of the post-war generation, who felt dispossessed and were unhappy with things as they were in the decades following World War II, was captured by the protagonist Jimmy Porter, raging against all middle-class values and social injustices. In 1959 Tony Richardson shot a film version of Osborne's play.

In 1957, while *Look Back in Anger* appeared with enormous

success in New York, Paris, Turin, Berlin and Moscow, Osborne had *The Entertainer* produced in London. This work, which deals with the theme of Britain's decline and nostalgia for its glorious past, was also made into a successful film in 1959, partly due to Laurence Olivier's superb performance in both the stage and film versions. Osborne went on writing plays, which were **produced with impressive regularity and varying success**, like *Luther* (1961), a historical play in which the central figure is seen as a true rebel, *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964), which resumes Osborne's attack on contemporary values, *West of Suez* (1971), a depiction of Britain's past imperial glories, and *Déjàvu* (1992), with the same characters as *Look Back in Anger*. The Seventies and Eighties saw him writing less and less for the stage and turning to **autobiography**, *A Better Class of Person* (1981), but at the same time engaging in work as an actor, a director, screenwriter and critic. In 1963 he had won an Academy Award for his screenplay *Tom Jones* based on the 18th-century novel by Henry Fielding (→ 3.8). He died as a result of complications from diabetes on Christmas Eve 1994.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ about Osborne's life and works and complete the factfile.

BORN:

EDUCATION:

KNOWN FOR:

THEMES OF HIS MASTERPIECE:

WORKS:

CAUSE OF DEATH:

DID YOU KNOW? *Osborne won an Academy Award*



Look Back in Anger

(1956)

1 COMPLETE the plot and setting of *Look Back in Anger* with the words from the box.

circular
fantasy world
working-class

frustrated
inability
disillusioned

by running
complaints
loss

pregnant
squirrels
graduate

uneducated

PLOT AND SETTING

The play is divided into three acts and takes place in a typical (1) family environment accurately described: a shabby, gloomy attic flat in the Midlands. Jimmy Porter is the main character and emerges as the representative of the (2) British youth of the 1950s. He is an embittered and (3) university (4) and makes his living (5) a stall in a market with his young, (6) friend, Cliff. Jimmy has married Alison, the daughter of a retired colonel in the British army in India, on whom he vents his violent, bitter, but useless and futile (7) His refusal of hypocrisy explains his desire to hurt and his (8) to show genuine tenderness to all around him, but especially his wife. She is (9) but unable to tell him, fearing his outbursts of rage. In the second act she decides to leave him, influenced by her old friend Helena, an actress. In the last act she returns home after the (10) of the baby by miscarriage, and finds Jimmy ready to play with her in a (11) of teddy bears and (12) The plot of the play can be said to be (13) , since in the last act the objective reality is just the same as it was at the beginning.

CHARACTERS

As the title of the play suggests, **the roots of Jimmy's anger lie in the past**, in his father's premature death, and in the need to expiate, by means of a self-imposed proletarian attitude, his mother's inadequate, middle-class compromises. He is **angry at his wife's not being angry** (→ *Jimmy's anger*), at a society which leaves no room for young people. He is **an outsider in rebellion against the whole establishment**, which he sees personified in his wife and her family; he is **the embodiment of the protester** without a clear, definite cause to fight for.

However, he continually searches for one, with courage, honesty and sincerity, but also with morbid self-pity and hysterical excesses. He is **an anti-hero**, since he only speaks but never acts. His psychological attitude clearly shows the consequences of a childhood trauma, a sense of personal failure – though he is well-educated, he has no profession and very little income – and a persecution complex, since he regards Alison's contact with her family as a conspiracy against himself. He is also sexually immature, impatient with good manners and vulgar. He has established a **love/hate relationship with his wife** since he wants to possess her, but at the same time he is afraid of her and tries to destroy their relationship. His long monologues, compared to Alison's virtual silences in Act 2, underline a lack of communication between them.

Jimmy's wife, Alison, stands for the **upper middle class**. She is far more complex than she would appear on the surface: she is Jimmy's victim, but she is so by her own choice, and she is the stronger of the two, since she has had the courage to leave her family and to bear her husband's rudeness. The other female character, **Helena**, is from the **upper class**. She is honest and straightforward and she

believes in the traditional distinction between right and wrong, she never pretends to accept Jimmy's ideas, and so she never betrays him.

Cliff, Jimmy's friend, is a **working-class uneducated man**; he is a pleasant person, who shows none of the neurotic behaviour displayed by Jimmy.

THEMES

The main theme is a **critique of establishment values**. It is developed through the disordered talking and complaining of the young of the 1950s (→ 7.1), who are bored with social injustices and the persistence of strict class privileges, as well as dissatisfied with the stagnation of the economic and intellectual life of Britain at that time.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Like *Waiting for Godot* (→ 7.16), *Look Back in Anger* has a **circular structure**. In fact, the three acts start and finish in the **same place, Jimmy's flat**, at the **same time**, on Sunday. The **characters do the same actions** in the first and the third acts: Jimmy and Cliff are engaged in discussions about the Sunday papers (→ *Jimmy's anger*), and Alison and Helena perform exactly the same actions and are dressed in the same way.

The **structure** of the play is **conventional** and it echoes the eternal triangle theme. What shocked the audience most and marked the actual break with pre-*Osborne* drama was the **language**, which is **spontaneous and vital**, crude and violent, no longer influenced by middle-class conventional diction, **provocative and revolutionary**. Jimmy's vulgar **slang expressions** and **colloquialisms** could be understood by everybody, thus the play was **addressed to a wider public** which had been ignored only a few years before.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 What is the setting of *Look Back in Anger*?
- 2 Who is the protagonist?
- 3 What/Who is he angry at?
- 4 Why can he be considered a sort of anti-hero?
- 5 Who are the other characters of the play?
- 6 What is the main theme?
- 7 Why is it possible to state that the plot is circular?
- 8 What is the structure of the play like?
- 9 What is the main feature of Osborne's style?

**Jimmy's anger**

The play opens with a scene in which Jimmy Porter and his friend Cliff are sprawled out in their attic room reading the Sunday newspapers. Alison, Jimmy's wife, is standing at the ironing board.

John Osborne
Look Back in Anger
(1956)

Act 1, Scene I

- JIMMY** Why do I do this every Sunday? Even the book reviews seem to be the same as last week's. Different books – same reviews. Have you finished that one yet?
- CLIFF** Not yet.
- JIMMY** I've just read three whole columns on the English Novel. Half of it's in French. Do the Sunday papers make you feel ignorant?
- CLIFF** Not 'arf¹.
- JIMMY** Well, you are ignorant. You're just a peasant. [To ALISON.] What about you? You're not a peasant are you?
- ALISON** [absently] What's that?
- JIMMY** I said do the papers make you feel you're not so brilliant after all?
- ALISON** Oh – I haven't read them yet.
- JIMMY** I didn't ask you that. I said –
- CLIFF** Leave the poor girlie alone. She's busy.
- JIMMY** Well, she can talk, can't she? You can talk, can't you? You can express an opinion. Or does the White Woman's Burden² make it impossible to think?
- ALISON** I'm sorry. I wasn't listening properly.
- JIMMY** You bet³ you weren't listening. Old Porter talks, and everyone turns over and goes to sleep. And Mrs Porter gets 'em all going with the first yawn⁴.
- CLIFF** Leave her alone, I said.
- JIMMY** [shouting] All right, dear. Go back to sleep. It was only me talking. You know? Talking? Remember? I'm sorry.
- CLIFF** Stop yelling⁵. I'm trying to read.
- JIMMY** Why do you bother⁶? You can't understand a word of it.
- CLIFF** Uh huh.
- JIMMY** You're too ignorant.
- CLIFF** Yes, and uneducated. Now shut up⁷, will you?
- JIMMY** Why don't you get my wife to explain it to you? She's educated. [To her.] That's right, isn't it?
- CLIFF** [kicking out⁷ at him from behind his paper] Leave her alone, I said.
- JIMMY** Do that again, you Welsh ruffian⁸, and I'll pull your ears off. [He bangs CLIFF's paper out of his hands.]
- CLIFF** [leaning forward] Listen – I'm trying to better myself. Let me get on with it, you big, horrible man. Give it me. [Puts his hand out for paper.]
- ALISON** Oh, give it to him, Jimmy, for heaven's sake! I can't think!
- CLIFF** Yes, come on, give me the paper. She can't think.
- JIMMY** Can't think! [Throws the paper back at him.] She hasn't had a thought for years! Have you?
- ALISON** No.

- 1 Not 'arf. Not half. Ma certo.
- 2 the White Woman's Burden. Il fardello della donna bianca, ovvero, i lavori domestici. Le parole sono scritte con la lettera maiuscola perché si riferiscono ironicamente alla poesia di Rudyard Kipling *The White Man's Burden* (→ Text Bank 42).
- 3 You bet. Puoi scommetterci.
- 4 yawn. Sbadiglio.
- 5 yelling. Di urlare.
- 6 do you bother. Che te ne importa.
- 7 kicking out. Dando un calcio.
- 8 Welsh ruffian. Bullo gallese.



JIMMY [*picks up a weekly*] I'm getting hungry.
 ALISON Oh no, not already!
 CLIFF He's a bloody pig⁹.
 40 JIMMY I'm not a pig. I just like food – that's all.
 CLIFF Like it! You're like a sexual maniac – only with you it's food. You'll end up in the
*News of the World*¹⁰, boyo¹¹, you wait. James Porter, aged twenty-five, was bound over¹²
 last week after pleading guilty to interfering with¹³ a small cabbage and two tins of
 beans on his way home from the Builder's Arms¹⁴. The accused said he hadn't been
 45 feeling well for some time, and had been having black-outs¹⁵. He asked for his good
 record as an air-raid warden, second class, to be taken into account¹⁶.
 JIMMY [*grins*] Oh, yes, yes, yes. I like to eat. I'd like to live too. Do you mind?
 CLIFF Don't see any use in your eating at all. You never get any fatter.
 JIMMY People like me don't get fat. I've tried to tell you before. We just burn everything up.
 50 Now shut up while I read. You can make me some more tea.
 CLIFF Good God, you've just had a great potful! I only had one cup.
 JIMMY Like hell¹⁷! Make some more.
 CLIFF [*to ALISON*] Isn't that right? Didn't I only have one cup?
 ALISON [*without looking up*] That's right.
 55 CLIFF There you are. And she only had one cup too. I saw her. You guzzled the lot.
 JIMMY [*reading his weekly*] Put the kettle on.
 CLIFF Put it on yourself. You've creased up¹⁸ my paper.
 JIMMY I'm the only one who knows how to treat a paper, or anything else, in this house.
 [*Picks up another paper.*] Girl here wants to know whether her boy friend will lose all
 60 respect for her if she gives him what he asks for. Stupid bitch¹⁹.
 CLIFF Just let me get at her, that's all.
 JIMMY Who buys this damned thing? [*Throws it down.*] Haven't you read the other posh²⁰
 paper yet?
 CLIFF Which?
 65 JIMMY Well, there are only two posh papers on a Sunday – the one you're reading, and this
 one. Come on, let me have that one, and you take this.
 CLIFF Oh, all right. [*They exchange.*] I was only reading the Bishop of Bromley. [*Puts out
 his hand to ALISON.*] How are you, dullin'²¹?
 ALISON All right thank you, dear.
 70 CLIFF [*grasping her hand*] Why don't you leave all that, and sit down for a bit? You look
 tired.
 ALISON [*smiling*] I haven't much more to do.
 CLIFF [*kisses her hand, and puts her fingers in his mouth*] She's a beautiful girl, isn't she?
 JIMMY That's what they all tell me. [*His eyes met hers.*]
 75 CLIFF It's a lovely, delicious paw you've got. Ummmmm. I'm going to bite it off²².
 ALISON Don't! I'll burn his shirt.
 JIMMY Give her her finger back, and don't be so sickening²³. What's the Bishop of Bromley
 say?
 CLIFF [*letting go of ALISON*] Oh, it says here that he makes a very moving appeal to all
 80 Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb.
 JIMMY Yes, well, that's quite moving, I suppose. [*To ALISON.*] Are you moved, my darling?
 ALISON Well, naturally.
 JIMMY There you are: even my wife is moved. I ought to send the Bishop a subscription.
 Let's see. What else does he say? Dumdidumdumdidum. Ah yes. He's upset because
 85 someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says he denies the
 difference of class distinction. 'This idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered²⁴
 by – the working classes!' Well!
 [*He looks up at both of them for reaction, but CLIFF is reading, and ALISON is intent on her
 ironing.*]

- 9 bloody pig. Maiale schifoso.
 10 *News of the World*. Settimanale scandalistico della domenica.
 11 boyo. Ragazzo (coll. gallese).
 12 was bound over. È stato condannato con la condizionale.
 13 pleading ... with. Essersi dichiarato colpevole di avere molestato.
 14 Builder's Arms. Nome di un pub.
 15 black-outs. Svenimenti.
 16 to be taken into account. Fosse tenuto in considerazione.
 17 Like hell. Neanche per sogno.
 18 creased up. Sgualcito.
 19 bitch. Lett.: puttana.
 20 posh. Per lettori colti, borghesi.
 21 dullin'. Darling. Cara.
 22 to bite it off. Staccare con un morso.
 23 sickening. Nauseante.
 24 fostered. Incoraggiata.



READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words and phrases with their Italian translation.

- 1 cavolo
- 2 sorride
- 3 fabbricazione
- 4 stai zitto
- 5 teiera piena
- 6 guardiano
- 7 hai trangugiato
- 8 commovente
- 9 recensioni
- 10 settimanale
- 11 ti staccherò le orecchie

2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

- 1 Identify the two parts of this scene and write a heading to each section.
- 2 Read the first part again. Then answer the following questions.
 - 1 What do Jimmy's first words express?
 - 2 What does he denounce in the 'posh' Sunday papers?
 - 3 What does this criticism reveal?
 - 4 What does Jimmy tell his friend Cliff?
 - 5 What does he try to draw his wife into?
 - 6 Is Alison listening to her husband?
 - 7 What do Jimmy's and Alison's words reveal about their relationship?
 - 8 Does Cliff try to stop the argument between husband and wife?
 - 9 What does Jimmy express while picking up a weekly?
 - 10 How does Cliff react to this statement?
 - 11 What does he, then, pretend to report?
 - 12 What does Jimmy ask Cliff to make?
- 3 As you read the second part of the scene again, note down:
 - 1 what happens;
 - 2 what Jimmy and Cliff exchange;
 - 3 how Cliff behaves to Alison;
 - 4 what reference to the past is made by Cliff.
- 4 What is the keynote of the whole scene?
 - A Posh papers.
 - B Jimmy's anger.
 - C Sunday papers.
- 5 Concentrate on the main character, Jimmy Porter. Read his remarks once again and use different colours to underline words and phrases indicating:
 - 1 remarks on Alison;
 - 2 outbursts against Cliff;
 - 3 criticism of the world he himself belongs to.
- 6 What causes Jimmy to treat his wife so badly?
 - A Her lack of response and affection towards him.
 - B His little love for her.
 - C His hatred towards her.



7 What do you think Jimmy is battling against?

- A His friend's apathy.
- B Alison's indifference towards the world.
- C The lack of response he sees around him.

8 Consider what has emerged from the previous tasks and define Jimmy's personality.

- 1 Choose from the following adjectives and provide reasons for your choices in the table below.

angry	nostalgic	domineering	sensitive	
childish	masochistic	irritating	sincere	revengeful
impatient	restless	frustrated	violent	committed
unpleasant	selfish	pessimistic	tender	

Jimmy is...	because...

- 2 Jimmy Porter is the prototype of the 'angry young man'. Can you say what he is angry about?

9 Focus on Alison, the long-suffering wife, and Cliff, the faithful friend. Is their characterisation drawn in detail?

10 Read the stage directions again. Do they affect the overall meaning of the scene? What is/are their function(s)?

11 Define the language. Tick as appropriate.

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Colloquial. | <input type="checkbox"/> Formal. | <input type="checkbox"/> Immediate. | <input type="checkbox"/> Artificial. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Plain. | <input type="checkbox"/> Meaningless. | <input type="checkbox"/> Distant. | <input type="checkbox"/> Figurative. |

12 Osborne is a master of repetition. Underline relevant examples with a wavy line.

13 What are the functions of these repetitions?

- A To make particular points.
- B To slow down the pace of reading.
- C To reproduce the constant repetition and patterns of common speech.

14 The main semantic area of this extract is that of anger. Square the most relevant expressions and state what tone they set.

15 Identify the main themes developed in the text.

> COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

3 **WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph. Refer to 7.9 and write down how *Look Back in Anger* reflected the mood of the post-war generation.

4 **WRITE** a 20-line paragraph to draw a comparison between Osborne and Beckett (→ 7.16) as regards plot, setting, themes, stage directions and language.

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

5 **DISCUSS** other social and literary movements similar to that of the 'Angry Young Men' in their rejection of traditional values and rebellion against social conventions.