



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Exploring Social Realism In John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*

Dr. Sandip Balu Parit<sup>1</sup>, Mr. Santosh P. Kamble<sup>2</sup>

Assistant Professor<sup>1</sup>, Assistant Professor<sup>2</sup>

Department of English, Dr. Ghali College, Gadhinglaj, Dist – Kolhapur,  
State- Maharashtra.

### Abstract

John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is a significant work in British theatre after World War II. It is known for bringing social realism to the stage. This paper looks at how Osborne shows the real struggles of Britain's working and middle classes, especially through the main character, Jimmy Porter. By exploring the main ideas, characters, conversations, and setting, the paper shows how the play reflects the social conditions of Britain in the 1950s.

### Keywords:

Social realism, post-war drama, *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne, class struggle, Angry Young Men

### Introduction:

The ten years after World War II brought big changes in British society. Even though people hoped for a better future, many, especially young people, felt unhappy and disappointed. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* shows these feelings of anger and frustration. It became an important work for the "Angry Young Men"—a group that spoke out against unfair rules and expressed their dissatisfaction with society. The play uses social realism, a style that shows real life and focuses on the daily struggles of ordinary people. *Look Back in Anger* presents the socio-economic and cultural reality of the British youth in the post-war world. An attempt is made to illustrate this reality related to their poverty, exploitation, discomfort, suppression, disillusionment, and violence.

## Understanding Social Realism:

Social realism in literature and theatre focuses on the truthful representation of life, particularly highlighting the struggles and challenges faced by lower- and middle-class individuals. It tackles themes such as social inequality, personal conflict, economic hardship, and emotional isolation. Unlike romantic or idealized storytelling, social realism confronts the audience with the raw truths of life, encouraging awareness and critical reflection. *Look Back in Anger* is a social realistic play that portrays real life in British society. It also brings up the actual living conditions of the youth in England. The term realism is used to any writing that represents life as it is defined in Encyclopedia Britannica,

In literature, the term may be loosely applied to any writing that seeks to portray life exactly as it is without embellishment or idealization (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1970, vol. 19)

## Realistic Use of Setting and Plot:

The play *Look Back in Anger* takes place in a small, one-room apartment in the Midlands, showing the crowded and dull living conditions many people faced after the war. This simple setting helps show the characters' feelings of being trapped and unhappy. It also reflects broader issues like class differences and emotional repression, making the story feel real and connected to everyday life.

Osborne's description of Jimmy's one-room flat in Midland, his keen observation about the structure of the flat, and his detailed description of things such as a dark oak dressing table, a double bed, a heavy chest of drawers, a gas stove, a wooden food cupboard on which a small portable radio, a sturdy dining table, and three chairs, is very realistic. The characters including major and minor are so realistic and appealing that they do not disappear even after a reader finishes the play. In this regard Katherine J. Worth writes,

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, produced there on May 8, 1956, was a forth wall realistic play, technically not different from such a play as Galsworthy's *The Silver Box*, which had been shown in the same theatre in 1906.

## Jimmy Porter: Voice of a Lost Generation:

Jimmy Porter, the central character in the play, represents the anger and frustration felt by many educated but poor people in Britain after the war. Even though he is educated, he still struggles with money and social status, which makes him bitter. He often speaks angrily about the upper class and shows signs of emotional pain and unhappiness. His troubled relationship with his wife, Alison, shows how

communication and personal identity are breaking down in a changing society. Jimmy's strong and sometimes harsh way of speaking reflects the honest and natural style of realistic theatre.

### **Themes of Class and Social Discontent:**

A prominent theme in the play is the difference between social classes. Jimmy's anger toward Alison's wealthy background highlights the ongoing conflict between people from different societal groups. Their constant arguments show how class struggles can deeply affect personal relationships. The character of Cliff, who is kind and supportive, offers a contrast to Jimmy and shows a quieter way of coping with similar challenges. The play also explores changing gender roles, emotional disconnection, and the confusion felt by the younger generation, all reflecting a society going through major changes.

*Look Back in Anger* portrays the realistic life, poverty, exploitation, and frustration of Jimmy as he is from the lower class. Jimmy's vicarious sufferings, his revolt against the upper class, his abuse of his upper-class wife and her parents, and his violence to her brother and friends, as well as Alison's passivity, are realistically depicted by the author. In this regard what T. C. Worsley states is worth considering:

Mr. Osborne understands some aspects of life deeply, and renders them truly, and one of his particular merits is to dare to go further in showing us the things that people do to one another than is usually revealed on the stage.... (Batra 166)

### **Language and Expression:**

Osborne's writing style in the play is marked by natural, everyday speech filled with interruptions, emotional bursts, and informal expressions. This use of language makes the characters feel authentic and relatable. By doing so, Osborne shifted British theatre away from the formal, refined dialogue of earlier plays and brought to the stage the voice of ordinary people — raw, emotional, and real.

### **Significance and Influence:**

*Look Back in Anger* marked a turning point in British drama by portraying real people with real problems in everyday settings. The play inspired other writers to use realism and explore similar themes. It forced audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about relationships, society, and identity, leaving a lasting impact on modern theatre.

**Conclusion:**

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is a powerful exploration of social realism in the context of 20th-century British society. Its authentic characters, realistic dialogue, and honest depiction of class conflict and emotional struggle made it a landmark work. By capturing the frustrations and experiences of a generation in flux, Osborne created a play that still resonates with audiences today for its powerful social commentary and human insight.

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