
Look Back in Anger

(1956) John Osborne

Act 2, scene 1. The Porters' one-room flat in a large Midland town. Evening. April.

Alison (24) has been married for three years to Jimmy Porter, a working-class graduate. She comes from a protected upper-class background. Her childhood was spent in India where her father was a Colonel in the army. Jimmy delights in taunting her as his domestic representative of everything he despises about class, privilege and women. They share their dreary flat with Cliff, Jimmy's partner with whom he runs a stall selling sweets in the local market. 'Hers is the most elusive personality to catch in the uneasy polyphony of these three people. She is turned in a different key, a key of well-bred malaise that is often drowned in the robust orchestration of the other two . . . She is tall, slim, dark. The bones of her face are long and delicate. There is a surprising reservation about her eyes, which are so large and deep they should make equivocation impossible.' Alison invites her friend Helena, an actress, to stay while the latter is appearing in a play at a local theatre. She confesses to Helena that she is expecting a baby and that she hasn't told Jimmy yet. In this scene Helena questions her about Jimmy.

[HELENA. It's almost unbelievable. I don't understand your part in it all. Why? That's what I don't see. Why did you – ?]

ALISON. Marry him? There must be about six different answers. When the family came back from India, everything seemed, I don't know – unsettled? Anyway, Daddy seemed remote and rather irritable. And Mummy – well, you know Mummy. I didn't have much to worry about. I didn't know I was born as Jimmy says. I met him at a party. I remember it so clearly. I was almost twenty-one. The men there all

looked as though they distrusted him, and as for the women, they were all intent on showing their contempt for this rather odd creature, but no one seemed quite sure how to do it. He'd come to the party on a bicycle, he told me, and there was oil all over his dinner jacket. It had been such a lovely day, and he'd been in the sun. Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and full of the sun. He looked so young and frail, in spite of the tired line of his mouth. I knew I was taking on more than I was ever likely to be capable of bearing, but there never seemed to be any choice. Well, the howl of outrage and astonishment went up from the family, and that did it. Whether or no he was in love with me, that did it. He made up his mind to marry me. They did just about everything they could think of to stop us.

[HELENA. Yes, it wasn't a very pleasant business. But you can see their point.]

Jimmy went into battle with his axe swinging round his head – frail, and so full of fire. I had never seen anything like it. The old story of the knight in shining armour – except that his armour didn't really shine very much.

COMMENTARY: Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* detonated an explosive charge that changed the course of British drama when it was first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. Jimmy Porter, impotent with rage at all he sees, became the symbol of the disaffected and 'angry young man' of the post-war years. The play broke with the affected, polite traditions of the British stage where orderly drawing room plays ruled the day. Osborne dared to be both profane and uncouth. Playwrights like Harold Pinter, Simon Gray and Peter Nichols have all, in some way, followed the bilious path laid by Osborne.

Jimmy Porter represented an escape for Alison. He was an odd man out, the complete opposite of everything in Alison's life and

background. Notice how Jimmy comes across as a force of nature. Alison even gives him god-like characteristics. She, however, seems to be a passive agent in the whole affair. She is swept-up in Jimmy's flow and just follows the current. The actor must decide for herself what Alison's real feelings are towards Jimmy. This speech never reveals those attitudes. There may be a clue in her two references to Jimmy's 'frail' boyish qualities. Throughout the play Alison shows a long-suffering ability to withstand mental cruelty, taunts and insults. She patiently and passively endures what she calls his 'guerilla warfare'. She lacks the education that Jimmy possesses so she lacks the language to fight back.