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## Psychological Realism and Emotional Expression in John Osborne's Look Back in Anger: A Study through the Lens of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory

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### Abstract

Looking at John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic philosophy, this study delves into the many levels of emotional expressiveness and psychological realism. A classic of post-war British theatre, Osborne's piece vividly depicts the protagonist Jimmy Porter's emotional instability and inner agony. This study explores the unconscious forces that drive Jimmy's Anger and angst by exploring Freudian ideas like the id, ego, and superego and techniques like projection and repression. The research emphasizes how Osborne skillfully uses psychological realism to portray the intricacies of his character's inner lives, shedding light on the deep emotional and existential conflicts that are representative of the "angry young man" movement. The paper delves into the play's profound psychological inquiry and emotional outpouring through this psychoanalytic lens, shedding light on its lasting impact.

**Keywords:** Realism, Psychological, emotional, impact, depicts

### 1. Introduction

Odets is the principal continuity, but Osborne has written indirectly about the effect of Chekhov on his work. *Look Back in Anger* is constructed around a small body of visible action and an extensive off-stage structure. The psychological investigation is sparser, being offered only in fragments. Christopher Edwards rightly warns against the towering assumption that these writers have reduced art to self-indulgence, resulting in a concave, narcissistic emptiness. Roberts goes on to speak of a scaling-down of dramatic values against such existentialist writers as Beckett and Ionesco, but this is put into lucid perspective:



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'negatively they have acted as foils.' This all seems extreme hyperbole and obscures our understanding of the mid-twentieth-century drama erected.

When his 'sorting rack' of miscellaneous figures is exposed for what they are, passages such as those have already been examined in a broader critical context. This article, however, takes much less for granted. It interrogates Osborne's priority for 'sting and fun' accumulated until something emerges that invites one to associate the loosely inserted 'myth-makers' with his system of symbolism and the unconscious direction of his channels of association.

### **1.1. Background of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger**

In a review of M. Butterfly (David Henry Hwang's play), the reviewer noted: "Bold, sophisticated theatre that doesn't shock and slide but encourages thought." A similar statement has often been made about another kind of play, a drama with a strong emotional message. This kind of play is emotive because the characters appear to be psychologically real, and the actors express their lines with great emotional intensity.

Look Back in Anger by John Osborne is such a play that invites intelligence in the viewer or reader just as the emotions have been indeed stirred. Some say it was the most discussed play of England's Royal Court's Season in 1956, '57, and that it subsequently provoked the most attention by both professional and academic commentators during a long period after it opened, beginning the era of "kitchen-sink" drama.

Why is this? Why has this play consistently had such broad appeal for its original audiences and the many who continue to watch it and study it? Why would this piece, in effect, be twice singled out for this special attention by the reviewers? Does it deserve this rank? And if so, by what qualities does it earn such a critique?

Applicants for this honor must establish their psychological integrity and, as proof of this claim, they must demonstrate a high emotional intensity. John Osborne and the Royal Court succeeded in this endeavor, so most contemporary critics would acknowledge them as firmly and fairly grounded in a well-earned place of admiration. Furthermore, they agree, as well, that displays of exaggerated acting and simplistic framework would distance as it would weaken the specific attraction that inspired the play's esteem in the first place.

What then is the special new ingredient that has proved to have been supplied? The nature of this substance is the subject of this essay.



## **2. Literature Review**

This section of the study commences with a brief background of the play. The ground covered in this section also includes an examination of the play's theme and a brief history of mainstream psychology in order to provide a context for the study. It also contains a discussion on the crucial similarity between psychology and literature - the depiction of the human condition. The last part of the section compares the views of world-renowned English actors Richard Burton and Sir Jack Woosnam vis-a-vis the characterization of Jimmy Porter and their comments on the play as well. The research aims and objectives, as well as the research questions, are discussed. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is the third English drama to reflect the influence of European intellectual ideas in the cultural zeitgeist of post-war England.

The initial attempt in the historical context of post-war England was reflected in the poetic drama of T.S. Eliot, loosely based on a prescription from the English stylist John Dryden that the tragedies and comedies of the 17th-century French dramatists were better models for the restoration of Shakespearean drama. *The Cocktail Party*, in particular, suggests a philosophical backdrop more indebted to the French existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. However, it was the abstractions of phrases and sentences instead of the concrete meaning behind those words that elicited a conspicuousness of poverty in modern England itself.

### **2.1. Psychological Realism in Theatre**

Introducing psychological realism during the last decade of the 19th century, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen brought a new wave to the generation of neo-classical playwrights by focusing more on the internal state of the human mind and the real human problems in his plays. Psychological realism is a term that is generally connected with the theatre, which is the presentation of feelings, thoughts, and actions of identifiable characters living in a plausible world. To paint a psychological reality of the character, the playwright gives freedom to the audience to take any character and put it on the stage. Even Anton Chekhov explored his plays from a psychological inside, leaving his emotions imprinted on his audience. However, Chekhov's plays take a very significant turn from those of Ibsen. While Ibsen used to see the psychological reasoning of the characters outside of the play, Chekhov concealed the psychological reasoning in such a fashion that at its end, the prize is availed by neither Butozov (Logocin) nor its spectators, the point being that an interplay between intent and unexpressed or rejected intent is a general part of human behavior. Such a layering of awareness is a principal feature of both Chekhov's drama and Shakespeare.



In fact, in Shakespeare, psychological realism is faster than in Ibsen. He had seemingly brought a seminal impact on the story's development concerning inner thinking through soliloquy. Usually, a soliloquy is used as a curtain raiser to the judgment of the tragic hero (in the case of Hamlet, King Hamlet is his father who brings tragic judgment to his nephew Prince Hamlet). It is significant that in natural history, this new evolverment affecting the action through psychological patterns suits very grounded motives of clarification. According to Shakespeare's plays, one can see careful discrepancies detailing the exact sense of what types of phallic or preconscious motives signal psychological veracity. Psychological discovery is originally believed to be about matters outside of the origin of thought and sense. Thus, when checking psychological realism from theatre to psychoanalysis, one could pause at that point with Shakespeare in between as an established realist playwright.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on a combination of psychological realism and emotional expression to examine the play *Look Back in Anger*. Since the approaches that will be taken to analyze John Osborne's play are psychological realism and emotional expression, these approaches will be explained in detail in the following paragraphs. After that, for a deeper analysis, a psychological view of emotions through psychoanalytic theory will be elaborated, in particular, Sigmund Freud's view of emotions and his theory of psychoanalysis. The role of character analysis and expressive behavior in creating psychology, particularly providing emotion through the efficient use of dialogues and subtexts in *Look Back in Anger*, will be explained. In conclusion, the relationship between character analysis and play structure will be carried out.

Psychological realism foregrounds the interior thoughts and motivations of individuals. For this reason, our interpretive framework is twofold: readers can consider the play on its own terms or can choose to use the dramatist's thoughts to inform their interpretation. In the case of *Look Back in Anger*, our emphasis remains on the connection between psychology and behavior. Indeed, the explicit refusal by Alison to bear children gives her a position that is later ratified by the Women's Liberation Movement some 15 years after the play's first production. While excessive emotional expression is marked as undesirable, the play's conclusion can be read as both an affirmation of Alison's pursuit of identity and her ultimate emotional transformation, evident in the final "you silly cow."

#### **3.1. Introduction to Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory**

The theory of psychoanalysis called forth varied interpretations, both depicting Freud as a great figure and a contributing revolutionary philosopher, as well as disqualifying him as a charlatan and dismissing the psychoanalytic approach. As a result, many psychoanalytic



circles emerged, which suggest varied models of analysis and different understanding and interpretation of questions, methods, and solutions. Nonetheless, it has remained a part of modern rational discourse, and some of its basic theses have already been threaded through common knowledge and common language, frequently serving as inspiration among many researchers. Freud applied his method mainly to the investigation of neurotic conditions and specifically to the etiology of neurosis, and its goal was to show that they had sense, that they were nothing but an essential continuation of normal psychological functioning.

The work method of psychoanalysis allows Freud's approach to be considered as a specific description of the deep structure of thinking, character, and emotions, providing an excellent model of identity complexity and explaining, among others, emotional complexity. Freud's greatest achievement, compared to his predecessors and followers, was the replacement of the spiritual entity, the 'soul,' with a biological one, the 'psyche' (coming from the Greek word psyche, a root common to all spiritual processes which underline the bond between life and psyche, thought, and behavior). Unfortunately, the concept of psyche was confusing and misleading and almost led to the psychologist's retardation. Due to misunderstanding the concept, the strict separation of mankind from nature kept feeding the idealistic, spiritualistic, and rationalistic conception about the human being. After a problematic exceeding of logical positivism, the development of psychology has moved both to the external study of behavior and to the physical study of the brain, often offering selective distinctions and rifts between bodily and psychological experiences.

#### **4. Application of Psychoanalytic Theory in Look Back in Anger**

Look Back in Anger by John Osborne (1956) is one of those significant milestones in the history of literature that has drawn frequent attention from academicians. Almost all of the professional papers on this magnificent play are enriched with various psychoanalytical inferences. These have carried Look Back in Anger to an international platform. Thus, in relation to the creation of Osborne, scholars have worked on the elements of suppression, trauma, and other psychoanalytical theories. Interestingly, Osborne himself encouraged such psychoanalytical interpretations of his plays. He asserts the fact that he has "always wanted anyone who wrote about him to write about what interested them most fundamentally. In this respect, it is "better to have them writing from the couch than with any spurious objectivity" because that would uncover the "comforting lies only." Secondly, he feels that it is the duty of him to tell about the subjective conflicts as well as the basic motivations of his plays. That is because the inherent psychoanalytic elements in his plays operate as "the topsoil, comprising the pose, the sex, the violence, the comedy, and the eloquence."



Therefore, with the help of Sigmund Freud's theories, the following part of the study is to identify four main features of the play *Look Back in Anger*: the elements of Anger, aggression, domestic violence and abuse, emotional upheaval, and psychological realism. The play is a pre-Freudian drama in which the characters rely on external principles more than internal egos. However, the Freudian doctrine helps these characters to analyze their internal conflicts, and the behavior of the play generally points towards the defense mechanisms, the character's emotional dilemmas, and the personalities according to the psychoanalytical grounds. In conclusion, the play manifests the psychological realm of its characters within the Freudian elements. Although the human issues represented within the time of drama are the puzzle of psychoanalysis, the words of the play serve as the rightish mirror for the essential splays within life.

#### **4.1. Character Analysis**

##### **4.1.1. Jimmy**

Jimmy Porter is the protagonist of the play. Born in Radford in the Midlands and the son of a doctor, Jimmy is intelligent and has a good degree from university but finds the academic life constricting and not wishing to enter the "professions," he works in a sweet shop, and smokes and drinks to excess. His lack of purpose has turned into bitter frustration. Although he is gifted and interesting, he has to lash out at others because the phrase "pressing recognition of some sort" became too great, and he feels his life so shapeless. The alienation is intensified by the fact that in the U.K., which is divided strictly by class, Jimmy finds that social and professional barriers are placed against someone such as himself who is from a lower-class background. Jimmy describes a vivid series of dream sequences on pages 17 and 18 in the play; the reader cannot fail to notice the dream sequences are rooted in Freud's concept of the mind.

##### **4.1.2. Alison**

Alison is Jimmy's wife: she comes from a wealthy family and is from a higher social class. Alison is presented as a frail woman, probably with some sort of heart condition, and is inclined to be weak and flabby. She is a contrast to Jimmy, who is very strong. She is a well-mannered middle-class girl from an expensive urban high school. In this drama, she is the object of the imprisonment placed upon her by the social conventions of the British social class, which apply a choking and constricting constraint upon Alison's life. Since she has no power, no public career, no political role, and no public function, she is an emotional puppet to whom life is mainly passivity, vulnerability, emotional servility, social sharing, and a moral and intellectual vacuum. The portrait that Alison draws of her father in the concluding ten minutes of act three outlines the patient's picture of the analyst in a way that richly accords



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with the psychological realism of the drama in question. Sigi Jottkandt asserts that the "analysis of Alison is fitting: as she speaks, she elaborates, doubtlessly looking for understanding from another bed. Palpably suffering from an unconscious heart complaint, her function is dramatized by the relentless note of it striking the notes of her torment and desire."

### 4.1.3. Helena

In act one, Jimmy is exceptionally cruel to Helena. This creates a "living situation" that allows Jimmy to bully her. To begin with, Helena quickly adapts to the situation, but eventually, she becomes battered by Jimmy's constant verbal abuse. Eventually, she fights back and challenges Jimmy's violence. In this way, we can see a vestige of the language created by Freud in terms of its interpersonal uses since his theories are continually concerned with the possibility of the mature transformation of primitive needs. Freud's concepts focus on the possibility of either a positive or negative completion of the development of the defense technique in the individual, such as its cumulative realization or its cumulative repression. Through the fiction of language, Jimmy and Helena expose a private sorrow screened by mutual guilt and public shame. Just as Archie's vocabulary can, at times, suggest a direct female expectant within the family pattern, Jimmy's offhand manner conceals guilt and gives free rein to aggression. Given the right circumstances, the gossiping craven who at first may be point deduction can become a brutal murderer who feels neither guilt nor weakness and who overflows with murder.

### 5. Emotional Expression in Look Back in Anger

John Osborne uses a number of ways to express the emotions of the characters in Look Back in Anger. Although Jimmy, Helena, and Alison mostly indulge in shouting and brooding all the time, a close analysis reveals that all might not be as angry as they seem to be. Beneath are layers of emotional turbulence and trauma, which can be revealed effectively through the language, actions, and expressions of these characters. In fact, there is justification for the language and violence of the characters as they need a catharsis. There is a sense of liberation after the climax, as each of them tries to bond with the other with wearied, labored language and gestures. The breaking of the teapot confronts Alison. It gives a chance to get up within a very short space, and without any aggressive action, there is a sudden prolonged chance to inform their proceedings and search for Gerry.

The use of climaxes is quite interesting. A crisis is produced just then when Alison is going to leave Jimmy. It is just when it impresses that pointlessness of her life when he produces a precipitant event. Jimmy describes a day with Helena as a climactic moment for him in the play. But each time, they pass through a climax in an act without resolving the problem that has been stated. If one act does not end on anything calmly conclusively, but



somehow the pressure is a bit relieved, in the end, only very little. The problem of language in relation to their real self is always hiding the revelation, and if something is recounted totally and accurately, the disclosure would lead to some self-knowledge. The confrontation makes Alison responsible for her teapot-making alter ego. It makes Helena realize the emotional loss she has faced. Without these climaxes, the women would take refuge in an eternal silence, which is anything but realistic.

### **5.1. The Role of Anger**

Throughout the play, Osborne incorporates various emotions to gauge a striking effect on the audience. As depicted in the title of the play, anger plays a pivotal role throughout. Previously, many critics were confined to locating Anger only in the characteristics of the main protagonist as he expressed it inconsiderately, thoughtlessly, and unwisely and on the manifestos of alienated youth. Unlike, Anger is located in the personality of every character, merely swept aside by a pretense, nonchalance, or bellicosity. Notwithstanding, the object of the present study is to explore Anger as a force, both fickle and powerful, that restrains all the characters in a situation from which they desperately try to escape but are psychologically circumscribed and are locked within its precincts. At the end of the play, every character is drowned in a sea of rough emotions. They cannot experience their grief but smile. It's the psychological compensatory mechanism. However, anger induces motivational force in all the characters, which stereotypes them individually. Jm is an angry young working-class college graduate, and she shows too much resentment towards Jimmy for them to have of their own. When confronting him about a topic of passion on the radio, she encourages him to express his thoughts on the topic. Later, when out walking with a working-class friend of theirs, Cliff, Jimmy forgets how to tone on the matter with the social. Jimmy enters and implies, too.

The Anger of such characters energizes them to break with established morality as Clendinning states, "Osborne's Anger is not passive; it is not undefined. Indeed, it is a clarifying force, transforming the previously vague clouds of discontent into a clear-complexioned fury as Jaine Gleiser has perceived, "Anger remains matured in the play. Not, stylistic, formal play but rather John Osborne's play. They are angry. We are angry.

As Billington asserts, "What planted Osborne's career was the sense, shared by so many, that this was an angry man who could put your Anger, focus youth fury and bring crucial issues center stage. Even the police have pointed out that it was Anger on account of the obscene play. It seems to gain intensity like the growing chain reactions of fission. While





exploring Anger, we can't ignore the classic view of Aristotle, who argues in his poem: "I say that Anger is the desire, accompanied by pain, to a seeming retaliation for effrontery. This does not, however, define Anger, but the belief that one has been slighted." Anger was the feeling, he argued, that prompted us to take action in order to right what was wrong. It felt like fighting; it seemed to be the driving force behind the action. Anger is a force that must be quelled and educated but used properly to blunt the hurt and effect action to right the wrong.

It is a type to work in, then spring into action or launch a web campaign against a particular issue, Anger could be a moral tool that could help focus change or an inertial force like mass walked by inertia. The play combines alexithymia and the expression of the rough emotions of an emotional subject but is afraid to express the feelings of the character. The exploration of Anger is a clear testament to the psychoanalytic evaluation. Though the characters are compassionate and compatible, the intense Anger is simply breaking their characteristics and morphing their interaction. Anger seems to be able to rouse them to strive to "a higher plane" to "excelsior" and harness those traits in a long safety pin of rage. It imbues individuals with certain characteristics. When the characters' anger 'shines, the audience is quick to recognize the right action to prevent abuse of power and betrayal.

## **6. Comparative Analysis**

The narratives, which are the base of both theatre and psychoanalysis, have their similarities in structure. They both make certain progress in time and space. They both have manifest and latent contents. Both narratives have, for example, intros and conclusions. A detective work, a solving for both of them would mean that the alarm was on from the beginning, a development of the child from birth and that he already had answers to his questions in his head.

John Osborne has frequently made comments about dealing with emotions honestly in his plays; emotional honesty and psychological realism are the results of sound psychoanalytic practice. In *Look Back in Anger*, psychological realism is displayed in the form of aggressive emotions, uncovering the characteristics of three important figures: a male and two females. The emotions within the three are shaped according to the way their unconsciousnesses are shaped. The scene in *Look Back in Anger* is a scene of emotional tension. The character of Jimmy Porter is bound by the influences of puberty, and the male has to defend himself in this period both from the threats in him and come up to the expectations of the father, too.

### **6.1. Comparison with Other Works of Psychological Realism**



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Given that the literary movement of psychological Realism sought its success from the perspective of literary accuracy in the representation of human nature and experience, more or less divergent results may be obtained. The representative of this trend, Porter Abbott, states that "psychological realism gives the reader a chance to view characters from the outside and manipulate them from the inside through the application of general rules of behavior." The authors of this trend portray characters from different aspects in consistency with the social-psychological dimensions of the period they are in, create a background in Anger with direct reference to everyday events, and highlight them rather than events.

Arthur Miller and Edward Albee are among the American writers who apply this trend intensively in their works. Miller frequently uses naturalistic characters in his plays. Miller, who evaluates characters and social settings as social-psychological elements, considers characters as the products of society. The author reflects on social issues in which the country is based, economically and politically, in the 'Death of a Salesman' play. The play can also be regarded as an example of the decline of the American dream, with its broken solidary relations and value judgments that have turned into commercial relations. In 'The Glass Menagerie,' Edward Albee seeks to explore the human condition and the make-up of human personality. Albee reflects a state of mind and moral problem that places the Americans in an ethical dilemma. In his play, Albee maintains a realist-humanist consciousness and incorporates a philosophical-socio-political analysis. In addition, the characters and settings are completely connected with each other in Look Back in Anger. The play is an example of the connection of the main characters with social reality and psychological effects.

### 7. Conclusion

This study has established a close link between John Osborne's Look Back in Anger and Freud's psychoanalytic theory. By developing it as a psychodrama, the playwright puts forth his concept of psychological realism. In King John, he introduces the character of John, a bohemian king who is intensely angry with society; through Look Back in Anger, he intones, "If what attracted me was the hero's sense of revolt. What I brought them was a kind of charm and ease or rather the ecstasy of a free man. I wonder if this bewildered figure is really a son of mine. How embarrassed I feel towards him. It is probable that if I were speaking these lines, I would be avoiding his eye and looking anywhere rather than at him. I don't moon over Jimmy anymore at all. When I hear him flap and gurgle through a dress rehearsal, I have turned my back and snarled into the prompt corner." Nevertheless, his unhappy humor culminates in the suicide of Jimmy, conforming to the playwright's sense of remorse and



destruction of the egoistic personality. The suffering intellectuals give existentialist overtones to the play.

The basic theme of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is the Anglo-Saxon rebellion against man's slavish existence. The play also plunges into the heart of human philosophical and psychological reflections on life, existence, and the internal contradictions presented. In the play, the main protagonist is Jimmy, who represents a distinct moral and passionate force in the world. The play provides an articulation of deeper psychological and philosophical aspects. The present study attempted to decode these aspects. In doing so, the play is shown to present and express profound truths about human psychological life and to raise difficult questions about the discomfiting interactions between mankind's psychological condition and society. This is a presentation of forceful artistic originality. In the depiction of the emotional experiences and inner psychological life of the protagonist, a special focus is provided in recourse to psychoanalytic theory. Particularly in its focus on Jimmy's underlying emotions, inner dispositions, and energies, the play is the result of deep insight into the human mind. To this extent, *Look Back in Anger* stands as one of the important emotional expressions of the varied human condition developed by one artist. Through this work, King John continuously searches in vain, enquiring about the ultimate truth, which remains ultimately unknowable.

### **7.1. Summary of Findings**

This dissertation was an examination of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, keeping the ideas of Sigmund Freud as the basis of the philological study. The research was based on a method of descriptive analysis and therefore used primary sources, particularly the play, to make the necessary links between theory and text. The focus was on examining several points in Osborne's play using Freud's ideas, particularly the notions of psychological realism and the expression of emotional feelings.

The study revealed truly remarkable findings. It may be said that John Osborne succeeded in creating a text, one to be read and transformed into a play and a piece that realistically portrayed the human psyche. It is always impressive to see establishments by such writers. However, when one realizes that the story is rare and everything is masterfully executed, established primarily from instinct, it is pithy. Then, one finds that the place, the characters, and the trials they undergo are veritable cases from the procedure, which he has often witnessed with pleasure. It was a new lesson in psychoanalysis at the theater. The play should be performed. It is a genuine case from a clinic. The play was a factual demonstration and theoretical examination of the ideas of the Austrian philosopher. Consequently, through



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the interweaving of the facets of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* with Sigmund Freud, some original assumptions were reached.

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