

Frustration and Aggression in John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger"

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Abstract:

Look Back in Anger is a play that appeared in a time of crucial transition from Britain's Victorian past into the modern twentieth century. Jimmy's rage and anger is his expression of pent-up emotion and his need for life in a world that has become listless and uninteresting. That anger became a symbol of the rebellion against the political and social malaise of British culture. His anger is destructive to those around him and the psychological violence of the play received a great deal of criticism. Critics today agree, however, that the play is central to an understanding of British life in the twentieth century and, thus, a crucial piece of literature in the British canon.

Key words: British literature, Osborne, British Drama, British Theatre.

الإحباط والعدوان عند جون أوسبورن في مسرحية "انظر للخلف بغضب"

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المخلص:

"ننظر إلى الوراء في غضب" هي مسرحية ظهرت في مرحلة انتقالية حاسمة من الماضي في بريطانيا الفيكتوري في القرن العشرين الحديث. الغضب جيمي والغضب هو تعبيره عن المشاعر المكبوتة وحاجته للحياة في عالم أصبح فاتر ورتيباً. وأصبح هذا الغضب رمزاً للتمرد ضد التوعك السياسي والاجتماعي للثقافة البريطانية. غضبه مدمر لمن حوله والعنف النفسي للمسرحية تلقى قدراً كبيراً من الانتقادات. النقاد يتفقون اليوم، مع ذلك، أن المسرحية أمر أساسي لفهم الحياة البريطانية في القرن العشرين، وبالتالي، وعمل مهم في الأدب البريطاني الحديث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب البريطاني، جون أوسبورن، الدراما البريطانية، المسرح البريطاني.

1.1 Introduction

The first performance of John Osborne's famous play "Look Back in Anger" at the Royal Court Theatre on 8 May 1956 is commonly regarded as the beginning of a new era in the British Drama. One of the famous critics of its time, John Russell Taylor, calls the play "the beginning of a revolution in the British theatre. Another critic, George E. Wellwarth claims that "the 'new movement' in the British drama actually began officially on the night of May 8, 1956. Arnold Wesker describes the play as having opened the doors of theatres for all the succeeding generations of writers. **Look Back in Anger** is called a significant play owing to the fact that it can be considered as a moment of change and also a reaction. Since the end of World War II, British theatre was believed to have been in rapid decline. Audiences were falling off and theatres were closing all over the country. Some of the theatre companies were restaging Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw plays and Restoration comedies. Most of the companies were trying to restore Elizabethan theatre by restaging Shakespeare plays over and over. Two of the most successful dramatists in Britain of the time were Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan but unfortunately their celebrated plays dated back to the 1930s, so they could hardly be regarded as rising new and young talents. "The main cause for excitement in the post-war London theatre", it is suggested that had been the unexpected box-office success of a series of verse-plays by T.S Eliot and later his successor Christopher Fry", except for the surprising popularity of T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (1949) verse drama had small audience at this time. Furthermore, as it can be observed, the revival of verse drama did not challenge old theatrical values. The verse drama of Christopher Fry had never represented so real challenge since its weakness always was its tendency to use verse to decorate a romantic action, rather than to touch new dramatic experience. While British theatre was busy with restaging Restoration comedies and Elizabethan plays and verse drama in Europe the epic theatre of Bertold Brecht, the holy theatre of Antonin Artaud, and the absurd theatre of Eugène Ionesco were being praised in 40s and 50s. However, the influences of these writers were only fully absorbed in England around 60s and 70s. Meanwhile in The United States of America realist and naturalist plays of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, which did not get staged in London, were praised by the Americans. One of the main reasons for Osborne's having a different place in British scene might be because of the fact that he was among the pioneering playwrights of Britain to become aware of the changes in the theatre abroad England.

1.2 “*LOOK BACK IN ANGER*”: NEW PERSPECTIVES

Many critics have regarded *Look Back in Anger* as a turning point in the history of twentieth-century British theatre owing to its choice of topics from social and political circumstances of its time, its lower-middle and working class characters, its realistic setting and its everyday language. 1956, the year of *Look Back in Anger*, can be observed as rather rich in causes for disillusionment and despair for the British nation. In the Mediterranean, the Egyptian government announced that it was taking over the Suez Canal; up to then the canal was owned and run by British and French governments. Therefore, Britain and France sent in troops to protect their interests in the Suez area. However, American interference let this canal to be nationalized by Egypt. Another political event of the year was the Russian invasion of Hungary on account of the fact that Hungarians rebelled against their so called Russian-imposed communist government. British government was against this invasion; however, it could do nothing. Meantime, in Britain there was a protest carrying on against the use of nuclear weapons, called Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It is asserted that “these political events left many people in England, especially among the younger generation, embittered and disillusioned about the possibilities of individual political action within existing political institutions”. Furthermore, the gulf between two generations –those who fought in the war and regarded themselves as the inheritors of an imperial past, and those who were born during or just after the war and found many of the values of their society useless and outmoded- was widening. A large number of critics of the time agreed that *Look Back in Anger* would appeal most strongly to those of its audience under the age of thirty. Salgado notes that “the younger generation’s frustrated political radicalism found a theatrical focus in the embittered and explosive eloquence of Jimmy Porter” . Another critic, Katherine J. Worth, explains the reason for *Look Back in Anger*’s impact on the audience: Osborne astonished and fascinated by his feeling for the contemporary scene, and the mores of post-war youth, by his command of contemporary idiom. And his tart comments on subjects ranging from the posh Sunday newspapers and ‘white tile’ universities to the Bishops and the Bomb. It can be noted that Jimmy Porter has become a kind of representative of post-war generation puzzled by the Hungarian revolution, unhappy about Britain’s so called imperialist approach to Suez, and dedicated to protest the Bomb and the nuclear weapons. In this respect, Osborne has been compared with Noel Coward, speaking in the theatre for disillusioned youth after the First World War. Consequently, it can be concluded that the success of *Look Back in Anger* indicates that the social and political expectations of theatre were changing according to the socio-political circumstances of the era. According to Raymond Williams *Look*

Back in Anger is “the beginning of a revolt against orthodox middle-class drama” because he believes that “what passes for realistic drama is in fact telling lies; it is not about real people in real situations, but about conventional characters (superficial and flattering) in conventional situations (theatrical and unreal)” (27). For the great number of the critics Jimmy Porter is regarded as the first non-middle class, provincial, antiestablishment anti-hero in modern British drama. Before Osborne there were successful examples of working class drama for instance in Germany Gerard Hauptmann’s **The Weavers** (1893) and in the United States of America Tennessee Williams’ **A Streetcar Named Desire** (1947). However, what made Osborne different from them was the fact that he was exploring the British scene since; Jimmy Porter is a British man of working-class background with a university degree (not even redbrick but white tile) and working at a candy stall despite his graduate degree. “Part of the immediate ‘shock’ of *Look Back in Anger* lay in the impact of its setting” (Lacey 29). It is: a one-room flat in a large Midland Town... a fairly large attic room... most of the furniture is simple, and rather old. It is a double bed, ... a shelf of books. Down R. Below the bed is a heavy chest of drawers, covered with books, neckties and odds and ends... a small wardrobe.... two deep shabby leather armchairs. (*Look Back in Anger* 9) It can be suggested that Osborne made use of a full box-set which is a convention of naturalist fourth-wall drama. “The realism of a set like this asks to be judged not only in relation to an observable social reality beyond the stage but also against the other kinds of theatre” (Lacey 29). Lacey also claims that this setting can be considered as a challenge to the iconography of the bourgeois living-room and the country-house drawing room. As for the old ‘chest of drawers’ according to Lacey, “it would be likely to be antique and the profusion of books that covered it would be used to denote a ‘profession’ or at least a general level of ‘culture’ (29). It is clear that Osborne makes use of a realist- naturalist setting in *Look Back in Anger* in order to reinforce his point which is to present the living circumstances of post-war generation especially the younger generation of working and lower-middle class origins.

As for the language of the play, it might be said that it is realistic. Jimmy shouts and swears most of the time he opens his mouth to talk. Cliff’s Welsh accent is clearly understood from his speech. The characters can say what they feel or think up to a limit determined by the censorship which was exerted on the play at that time. Osborne’s aim to use everyday language in the play also involves his wish to shock the audience with its bluntness. It can be inferred that *Look Back in Anger* is regarded as a reaction to the affected drawing-room comedies of such writers as Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan and others, which dominated the West End stage

in the early 50s. Because these playwrights wrote about affluent bourgeoisie at play in the drawing-rooms of their country homes, or sections of the upper-middle class comfortable in suburbs. However, Osborne looked at the working and lower middle class people struggling with their existence in bedsits or terraces of their attic rooms in *Look Back in Anger* and in his later plays. It is believed that Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* "started everything off... the play is the first type-image of the new drama.

After the success of the play theatre companies began to provide platforms for a succession of new playwrights such as Shelagh Delaney, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Mortimer. Like Osborne these new and young playwrights were mostly of working class background. They liked to be sensational to surprise and shock with their choice of topics from contemporary social and political circumstances. Most importantly, these new dramatists were mostly involved in the theatre. For instance, both John Osborne and Harold Pinter were actors before they turned to playwriting. When *Look Back in Anger* first appeared, most of the critics of the time regarded the play primarily as a play of political and social rebellion and labeled the movement, as 'angry young men.' Jimmy Porter was considered as the mouthpiece for an angry man's disillusion about the society he lived in. Therefore, John Osborne was reckoned the first of the 'angry young men.' The term was made up by a Royal Court publicist in those times however "it had first been used of Noel Coward at the time of *The Vortex* in 1924" (Leon and Morley 219). Alongside John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Arden were given as the key figures of the 'angry young men.' Nonetheless, Osborne resisted allegiance to any group including the angry young men movement. But it can be observed that what all these dramatists have in common might be the fact that they have remained as a voice in opposition especially to the British establishment. It can be asserted that, as Osborne himself claims, he might not be a member of the 'angry young men' whereas it is for sure that Jimmy is an angry young man and the theme of anger is evident in *Look Back in Anger*. Most of the central characters of Osborne's later plays have something in common in the sense that they are, like Jimmy, angry about the conditions they are in.

Osborne deals with the theme of anger in his later plays as an expression of the other themes such as frustration, lack of communication, alienation, search for compassion and love, disillusionment, suffering, despair and self-pity. The definition of anger is a violent, revengeful emotion that one feels about an action or situation which one considers unacceptable, unfair, cruel or insulting and about the person responsible for it.

Psychologists agree with the fact that anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to rage and fury that might lead to aggressive behavior. Therefore, aggression can be considered as a way of expressing anger. Aggression is defined as “the behavior intended to harm (physical or nonphysical) another individual” (Abeles, Fischer, and Scherer). It can be claimed that theories explaining the essence of anger and aggression begin with Sigmund Freud, namely psychoanalytic theory. Freud has several ideas about aggression. He initially believed that “aggression was a ‘primary response’ to the thwarting of pleasure-seeking or pain-avoiding behavior” (Albert Bandura 12). He thought that all human behaviors were motivated by the libido (sexual energy and instinctive drives) and the repression of libidinal urges was displayed as aggression. Then Freud claimed that there were ‘ego instincts’ that are no libidinal urges the general aim of which was self-preservation. “The major constituent of such instincts was aggression” (Arnold Buss 184). Freud claimed that aggressive urges could occur in the absence of sexual conflict: The ego hates, abhors and pursues with intent to destroy all objects which are for it a source of painful feelings, without taking into account whether they mean to it frustration of sexual satisfaction or gratification of the needs of self-preservation. Indeed, it may be asserted that the true prototypes of hate relation are derived not from sexual life, but from the struggle of the ego for self-preservation and self-maintenance. (Buss 184) Freud was affected by the mass destruction of World War I and he gave much attention to his theory of aggression. Lastly, he added the ‘death instinct’ or Thanatos opposing to Eros that is life instincts. As he himself explains: Erotic instincts always try to collect living substances together into even larger unities; the death instincts act against that tendency and try to bring living matter back into an inorganic condition. (qtd. in Antony Storr 6) Contrary to Eros, Thanatos encourages aggression and destruction. Freud claims that these two instincts are in a continuous conflict and in this conflict the energy provided by the death instincts is redirected toward others not to destroy the organism. That is, people aggress to avoid self-destruction. Freud proposes that the displacement of the energy of the death instinct onto others is the basis of aggression. Buss notes that “the stronger the death instinct in a person, the more necessary is it for him to direct aggression outward against objects and people. Whatever aggression is not vented against external objects will be turned back on the self” (185). As a result, according to Freud aggression against the external world (both animate and inanimate) is the consequence of an innate biologically rooted drive called ‘the death instinct’ being blocked by the sexual, self-preserved instinct called ‘the life instinct.’ For a group of researchers at Yale led by John Dollard man is motivated to behave aggressively by a

frustration-producing drive much like Freud's Thanatos. Their theory is called 'frustration-aggression hypothesis.' They claim that "the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression" (qtd. in Buss 27). That is, frustration and aggression are linked in a cause and effect relationship. Later, this theory was reformed by Leonard Berkowitz who assumes that "the motivational energy that powers aggression is provided by an emotional state such as anger or rage which is a primary inborn reaction to frustration" (Abeles, Fischer, and Scherer 62). Berkowitz proposes that frustration creates an emotional state therefore the readiness to behave aggressively.

James Tedeschi claims that the frustration-aggression theory is a learning theory adaptation of Freud's ideas on aggression. Because he argues that, "according to this theory, aggressive behavior serves the function of reducing arousal built up through experience of frustration" (141). In Freud's view, the destructive energy provided by the death instinct is directed towards external world by expressing aggressive behavior to prevent self-destruction.

In frustration-aggression hypothesis the disturbing emotions of anger and rage aroused by frustration are displaced onto others by the expression of aggression in order to reduce the negative arousal. Berkowitz claims that the emotion of anger is a motivating force until it is discharged through aggressive behavior. It can be suggested that there are similarities between Freud's aggression theory and the frustration-aggression hypothesis in the sense that both theories regard aggression as an instinctual drive and they assert that aggressive energy should be released by aggressive behavior. There are different kinds of expression of anger. According to Buss the aggressive behavior may be classified in two ways. "The first is on the basis of organ systems involved: physical versus verbal aggression. The second is on the basis of the interpersonal relationship: active versus passive aggression."(4). Physical aggression aims at assaulting an organism by using body parts (e.g. slapping, pushing, biting) or weapons (e.g. knife, gun). Verbal aggression includes threats, severe criticism, or verbal abuse. Rejection is another component of verbal aggression. However it "may be both nonverbal (shunning of an individual by avoiding his presence or escaping from it) and verbal; "Go away, I hate you." (Buss 6). It can be claimed that most aggressive behaviors are active, that is open and direct, in the sense that the instinctive way to express anger is to respond with aggressive actions whereas passive aggressive behavior includes avoidance of confrontation. It can also be referred to as silent aggression. Buss asserts that: Passive aggression is a subordinate's best weapon against his superior. Active attack invites retaliation, however when the attack is passive it is

usually difficult for a victim to establish blame or to determine whether aggression has occurred (9). Finally, it can be suggested that there are two ways of analysing anger. Firstly, anger can be considered as an emotional state as in the case of frustration aggression hypothesis. Secondly, the expression of anger, that is aggression can be regarded as a defense mechanism as Freud claims that people express anger or aggressive behavior in order to avoid self-destruction.

It can be observed that the characters of Osborne are angry and aggressive on account of several reasons. Jimmy rails at his wife Alison, especially her middle-class manners, which for him represent the Establishment, and he behaves aggressively. Bill Maitland, the protagonist of *Inadmissible Evidence* is a lawyer who is angry at the whole world since he wants to be taken into consideration; therefore, he frequently gets angry with the people around him. Two characters from Osborne's much later play: *Watch It Come Down*, Ben and Sally, are a married couple having problems like Jimmy and Alison and they rage each other most of the time. All these characters are somehow angry and they express their anger in different ways. Consequently, this thesis is going to analyse the underlying theme of anger in terms of the psychoanalytic theory and the frustration-aggression hypothesis from *Look Back in Anger* (1956) to Osborne's later plays namely *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964) and *Watch It Come Down* (1975) by investigating the reasons for the protagonists' rage, considering anger as an emotional state aroused especially by frustration, and the ways of expressing anger regarding aggressive behavior as a defense mechanism to prevent self-destruction.

1.3 CONCLUSION

This study has aimed at analysing Osborne's underlying theme of anger in his play "Look Back in Anger" (1956). It has claimed that anger can be analysed in two ways considering the fact that there are two main aspects of anger which are the emotional state of anger and the expression of that emotion. In order to explain anger as an emotional state it has made use of Leonard Berkowitz's reformulated version of the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Berkowitz defines anger as an emotional state experienced when a desired goal is blocked, that is, anger is an emotion that is felt when a person is frustrated. According to frustration-aggression theory people feel angry because of the fact that they are frustrated on account of several reasons. It has been looked into the reasons why Osborne's protagonists feel angry, in particular the factors that lead them to frustration. Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of *Look Back in Anger*, is frustrated and angry mainly because of the passivity and insensibility of the people whom he loves. Expression of anger has been demonstrated the fact

that people express anger or aggressive behavior for the purpose of self-preservation. Furthermore, it has investigated the ways that the characters used in order to express their anger such as open aggression, passive aggression, verbal aggression or physical aggression. Having analysed anger as an emotional state and the expression of anger, that is aggression, it can be claimed that the characters of Osborne become angry and aggressive when they feel frustrated, vulnerable and helpless. Therefore, they express their anger either verbally, physically or passively in order to get rid of their angry feelings so that they can prevent self-destruction. *Look Back in Anger* (1956), has been selected for this study due to the fact that each play represents a period in Osborne's career as a playwright. *Look Back in Anger* stands as an example for the early period of Osborne. "Look Back in Anger" displays the energy, enthusiasm and anger of Jimmy Porter and it was regarded as a reaction against the insensibility of the generation which had grown up during World War II. Jimmy Porter was credited with being the first young voice to cry out for a new generation that had forgotten the war, mistrusted the welfare state and mocked its established rulers with boredom, anger and disgust. Moreover, Jimmy Porter was also identified with Osborne when he wrote this play because of the fact that Osborne was also angry at the same things with Jimmy. The analysis demonstrates that Much of Osborne's original anger was directed at England's compromised power and influence following the World War II. The play itself offers signs, that look forward the only hope. Jimmy's angry feelings were the source of his energy and enthusiasm to awake people around him and his generation as a whole. The play assumes the existence of a recognizable "reality", and sets one man at odds with it. This play suggests that Osborne has begun to question the safety of the future because of the fact that he is losing his hopes about the coming times. More than anger, Osborne stresses the significance of love and friendship in this play. He displays the helpless situation of a person who is deprived of love and friendship. Osborne expresses that his anger turns into grievance due to the fact that he and his generation have lost the old happy days of England.

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