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“THE STRUGGLE OF APOLLONIAN ALISON AND THE DIONYSIAN JIMMY IN “ LOOK BACK IN ANGER”

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ABSTRACT—

"Look Back in Anger" presents its hero Jimmy Porter who is taken to be speaking for the whole generation of which he and his creator Osborne were the most precocious representatives. The generation they represent is essentially post-war and they are "Like Lindsay Anderson", "nailed a red flag to the roof of the mess at the fort of Annan Parbat" to celebrate the return of a Labour learn, a university graduate. But he lives in a tumbled down attic flat in a drab midland town and makes his living by keeping a sweet stall in the market.



Government in 1945 and then gradually became disillusioned when a brave new world failed to materialize⁽¹⁾. The significance of Jimmy in this guise is that he is the stuff of which the perennial rebels are made. The picture of his as the play presents is a permanent human type - the self- flagellating solitary in self-inflicted exile from the world, drawing strength from his own weakness and joy from his own misery. He is, we gradually

KEY WORDS: Look Back in Anger , perennial rebels , self- flagellating solitary.

INTRODUCTION :

Osborne presents the conflict between the common man and society which is, of course, one of the basic elements of the Modern tragedy. So the declaration of war by Jimmy against the society had to be realized on the stage itself. For achieving this task, Osborne chooses the 'attic flat' which not only represents the sick culture and living condition of that period, but it also serves as a microcosm of the macrocosmic society, especially the dominating middle- class which has been realized in the characters of Alison, Helena and Col. Redfern. Hence it must also be noted that none of Jimmy's attacks is directed consciously against any of the surrounding characters personally.

In "Look Back in Anger" the major differences between the hero and other characters in their presentation is that Jimmy Porter is possessed with his own "Vision of Life" through which he realizes the complexities and absurdities of existential reality. In a sense he identifies himself with all misery that he perceives and experiences and expects others too, especially his wife Alison, to become one with him. But their lives are devoid of any meaning and purpose. Still they retain the simple will to live and avoid confrontation with the 'truth' as far as possible. And the entire action of the play is Jimmy's relentless efforts to make them aware of the reality and fight against the rotten society. These characters also seem to represent the "Apollonian dreamers" of Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy". The Apollonian dreamer floats calmly in his little row-boat over the vast Dionysiac seas. "Even as an immense raging sea, assailed by huge

wave crusts, a man sits in a little row-boat trusting his frail craft, so, amid the furious torments of this world, the individual sits in tranquility supported by the "principium individuationis" and rely on it..."⁽²⁾.

That means, these characters (Alison, Helena and others who are associated with their class) are those dreamers who exist in an atmosphere of tranquil self-deception. On the other hand Jimmy seems to have comprehended what Nietzsche calls the 'Socratic interpretation of existence'. He stands openly confronted by the terrifying Dionysiac realm and then only longs for death. Nietzsche also draws a resemblance between his Dionysiac men and Shakespeare's Hamlet.

"In this sense Dionysian men might be said to resemble Hamlet; both have looked deeply into the true nature of the things. They have understood and now loath to act. They realize that no action of their's can work any change in the eternal condition of things, and they regard the implication as ludicrous or debasing that they should set right the time which is out of joint. Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion; such as Hamlet's doctrine... What, both in Hamlet and Dionysiac man, overbalances any motive leading to action, is not reflection but understanding, the apprehension of truth and its terror"⁽³⁾.

In this sense Jimmy Porter too becomes the modern version of Hamlet. Mary McCarthy emphasizes the same point: "Both Hamlet and Jimmy Porter have declared war against rotten society; both have been unfitted by a higher education from accepting their normal place in the world. They think too much and criticise freely... Hamlet's tirades and asides are plainly calculated to disturb and annoy the court. He too cannot stop talking and, like Jimmy Porter, who practises vaudeville routines, he turns to the players for relief from the 'real' world of craft, cunning and stupidity... Both have no fixed purpose beyond that of awakening the people around them from their trance of accepting and obliging them to be conscious of the horror and baseness of the world..."⁽⁴⁾

Then Jimmy represents the Dionysiac vision of life who is determined to keep the "Apollonian dreamers" awake and bring them to the grips with reality. It seems as though all these were (Alison, Helena and Colonel Redfern) in the grip of a deathly coma as narcosis that had been spread over all of England by the gases emanating from the press, the clergy, the political parties and the BBC. Jimmy's gibes are a therapeutic method designed to keep a few people alive, whether they like it or not, and patterned as the violent procedures used with patients who have taken an overdose of drugs and whose muttered plea like Alison's is always to be left alone.

Thus with his ideals and convictions he comes into conflict with the rest of the characters in the play in whom the society is represented. The small attic flat in which the entire play is dramatized is, in short, the microcosm of the macrocosmic society. Jimmy pours the sulphuric energy into the attacks he launches on everything that surrounds him- Alison, Helena, Cliff, the Sunday papers, the social systems, conservative members of parliament, Billy Graham, the H. Bomb, the Church and the apathy of everyone else in a generation that scarcely has anything to be positive about. So he cries:

'Nobody can be bothered. No one can raise themselves out of their delicious sloth...'⁽⁵⁾

In this play, Osborne is not just telling a story about characters called Jimmy and Alison. He is using the stage as a platform and the character of Jimmy as a mouthpiece for a large mixture of points that he badly wants to make. Most of them are aimed at the class system and still more at the Establishment. Here is a conflict between individual and the society that is dominated by upper classes.

In the opening of the play itself Jimmy is seen attacking one of the social barriers. As soon as Jimmy speaks he 'decries' the Post Sunday papers noting how even when discussing the English novel, they can make an article virtually unintelligible to most people simply by writing three columns in French. We immediately have an example of the social barriers, the upper class resenting the interest which might be shown in the English novel by 'common' man. Thus they discuss it in a language only they will understand. Jimmy becomes a representative of a generation determined to destroy this kind of injustice.

Then the shift moves immediately on to the political situation which is well described by J.B. Priestly who found the time and enthusiasm to write an article for 'Today' magazine entitled- "What is wrong with British Today"... for too many of the men running this country today have the wrong background, the wrong education and training, the wrong outlook. They may be nice, honest, intelligent fellows, but they are no more fit to run an up-to-date Britain than I am to perform in the Royal Ballet... We know vaguely that we are no longer top dogs in the world, but apart from that, we don't know what kinds of dogs we are. We are in danger of turning into a 'faceless' nation"⁽⁶⁾.

Jimmy's fierce attack at Alison's brother Nigel echoes Priestly's words:

Jimmy : ...Well, you've never heard so many
Common places come from beneath the same
bowler hat. The Platitude from Outer
Space-that's brother Nigel. He'll end
up in the Cabinet one day, make no
mistake. But somewhere at the back of
that mind is the vague knowledge that
he and his pals have been plundering
and fooling everybody for generations.⁽⁷⁾

Jimmy in his outburst touches the nerve ends of the political, social and religious conventions yet always in relation to the way in which they affected ordinary people, never in any abstract sense. Quite apart from the fact that Nigel is irrelevant to the action, dragged in as Alison's brother in order to provide an Aunt Sally representative of the young conservative politician. What is interesting is, the quick shift of the focus of resentment from personal level to public level. The two become almost inseparable. The speech is rooted in its context, dramatically by being aimed at Alison, who goes on ironing in silence while Jimmy tries to bring her into some kind of response. But the personal indignation that Jimmy lashes at Alison (and Nigel) merges into much more generous indignation voiced on behalf of everybody else who had been sold out by politicians. In this way Jimmy's self absorption takes on a tinge of public spiritedness and he becomes more than just a spokesman about the contemporary malaise. His combination of awareness and inaction makes him into a highly successful incarnate of it.

The conservative 'freedom of shortage' led to a vast spending spree and the society is rightly recognized as "the irresponsible society". The 'Old Boy' network still exercised a disproportionate influence on the affairs despite several years of post-war Socialist Governments. Yet there were signs of change, a questioning spirit was growing and treasonable articles were printed and became more numerous: "It is gone. Empire, forelock channel and All... as "the British shorn of their ships and vast responsibilities, reluctantly realized that the world has taken over them. We are getting out-of-date like incipient dodos... We have reached a moment of catharsis, either we purge ourselves, or inertia will stifle us"⁽⁸⁾.

The flail was to come from 'Young Angries' and in its most public form Osborne and through Jimmy. From now onwards, the main focus of the play is centred round the principal characters in the play wherein the conflict is developed mainly between Jimmy and Alison.

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