



SYMBOLISM IN JOHN OSBORNE'S PLAY, "LOOK BACK IN ANGER"

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.74.164](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.164)



ABSTRACT

Symbolism is a literary device which has been used by almost all writers, poets, novelists, and dramatists in their literary works to achieve a special effect in their works. John Osborne is also not an exception to this. He has used symbols in almost all of his plays like *The Entertainer*, *The Making of Moo*, *Plain Cover*, etc. to represent the social, political and cultural condition of England of just after the World War. In the play, *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne has used a number of symbols to highlight the socio-economic situation of the time, the problem of unemployment, leading to the frustration of the highly educated youths, and the problem faced by the working class in the materialistic English society. The game of the bear and the squirrel, the reading of newspapers, the act of ironing by Alison and, later on, by Helena, the ringing of the church bells, Jimmy's playing on trumpet, and many more have been used as symbols, and all the symbols are closely related with the themes of the play. In this paper, we propose to analyze the different symbols and their role in the development of the themes in *Look Back in Anger*. While analyzing the symbols our focus will be on the textual study of the play.

Keywords: Literary device, Symbols, Symbolism, Theme, Working class.

John Osborne (December 12, 1929 – December 24, 1994) was one of the greatest and famous playwrights, actor, screen writer and stage manager of Britain who launched a new movement in the British theatre with the publication and the performance of his unique play, *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 when there was a dearth of realistic plays, which were the demand of the audience of the time. When first performed, the play became a grand success and gave Osborne the title of the 'Angry Youngman'. John Osborne was born in a middle class family in Fulham, London. He was the son of a commercial artist and a barmaid. After the death of his father, Osborne joined a Boarding School at Belmont College, Devon. But, after a dispute with the headmaster, he left the school and returned to

his mother in London. There he tried at many odd jobs like journalism, but finally he got a job of tutoring new actors and, thus he came in contact with the theatre. He started acting in plays and later on he became an actor-manager to various repertory companies. Meanwhile, he was also trying his hand at playwriting. In 1950 he wrote his first play, *The Devil Inside Him*, with his friend, Stella Linden, an actress who was also Osborne's first love. Besides, *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne wrote many famous plays like, *The Entertainer* (1957), *Tom Jones* (1959), *Luther* (1961), *Plays for England* (1962), *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964), *A Portrait For Me* (1965), *West of Suez* (1971), etc. During his forty years of careers, Osborne explored many themes and genres, writing for stage, film, and television.

Look Back in Anger is one of the most admired plays written by John Osborne. The performance of this play on 8 May, 1956 paved the ways for a new kind of drama in the modern British theatre. One of the famous critics of that time, John Russel Taylor, calls the play, "the beginning of a revolution in the British theatre." (John Osborne *Look Back in Anger*, p-11). In 1950s the English drama was declining and the most British theatres staged Victorian dramas or comedies or classical plays which had a polite theme from the late 19th or early 20th century upper ruling class. T.S.Eliot, Christopher Fry and others were also trying to save the theatre by staging their verse dramas, but they failed in their mission because their verse dramas were unable to satisfy the audience of the time because, as Raymond William says in his article, "New English Drama", published in *Modern British Dramatists*, in 1968, "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." But for the first time, *Look Back in Anger*, depicted the real and deteriorated living condition of the poor working class. For the first time the audience saw highly educated youths from the working class on the stage who were talking about the interior domestic lives of the working class, thus the audience related themselves with the characters and felt as if the play was about themselves. This is the reason of the success of the play, even today. It is true that after the performance of the play many drama critics debunked the play by calling it bored. But many critics liked and praised the play for its new themes and issues raised by the dramatist. Kenneth Tyrn, a critic in the *Observer*, liked the play so much that he declared that, "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*." (*Observer*, 1956). Arthur Miller calls the play, "the only modern play", that he has seen. With the performance of the play, *Look Back in Anger*, at the Royal Stage Theatre on May 8, 1956, a new door was opened for the survival of the theatre. Arnold Wesker has rightly described the play as "having opened the doors of theatre for all the succeeding generations of writers". (quoted in John Russel Taylor, p-195). Emily Ray also admitted that, "British

drama renewed its claim on literary eminence with the premier of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*." (*British Drama since Shaw*, p-193). Another critic, George Wellwarth claims that, "the 'new movement' in the British drama actually began officially on the night of May 8, 1956." ("John Osborne: 'Angry young Man'?" in (Jon Osboene *Look Back in Anger*, ed. John Russel Taylor.).

Look Back in Anger is also called the "Kitchen Sink Drama", a drama which depicts the real emotion of ordinary domestic life, specially the life of the poor working class family with pathetic living condition. For the first time the phrase, "Angry Young Man" was coined for the protagonist of the play, Jimmy Porter. Since then the term is used for the entire generation of artists and writers in post-World War II British society. These young writers believed in personification of the anger, the boredom, and frustration, prevailed in the working class families of the British society. The play has been written in the background of the rise and fall of the British Empire. Once at the height of power and influence, the British Empire saw a steep decline after the World War which completely destroyed the British economy. Jimmy Porter, in the play, is the representative of entire culture that remained nostalgic for the past glory of Britain. He praises ideal causes of the past but also at the same time he is mocking at those who cannot understand the causes of the change.

The story of the play, *Look Back in Anger*, deals with the relationship of a husband and wife. Jimmy and his wife Alison live in an old apartment with Jimmy's best friend, Cliff. Although Jimmy belongs to a working class, yet he is highly educated owing to the government policy of free education for all. But, due to his belonging to a working class, he is unable to get a job suited to his educational qualification. So, along with his friend, Cliff, he runs a sweet stall for his earnings. Jimmy's inability to get a good job and a good position in the society and the other injustice he sees around him, make him angry at the society, specially the upper class. He takes out his anger and frustrations by lashing out and mocking at his wife and her family who belong to an upper class family. Jimmy and Alison's marriage is

love marriage but their married life is neither happy nor stable due to Jimmy's cruel treatment of Alison. She is passive and so does not react at all on Jimmy's attack on her parents and brother. For Alison, not to respond or react on Jimmy's lashing out or attacking her family is her best defense against Jimmy's cruelty. This makes Jimmy angrier, frustrated and so feels neglected. He wants Alison to respond and react. It does not mean that he does not love his wife. He loves her but his love for her is also full of contempt because she belongs to upper class of the society. He thinks that Alison does not know the harsh reality of life because she has never suffered in her life. So, he verbally abuses her and curses her, without knowing that she is pregnant, that her child would die, then she would realize the pain and suffering of the world which Jimmy has realized after the death of his father.

At this moment Helena, Alison's friend and an actress comes to her for a short stay. Jimmy dislikes Helen. Jimmy asks Alison to go to visit Mrs. Tanner, a working class poor woman, who had helped Jimmy in the past, but Alison refuses to go with him and, instead goes to church with Helena. Jimmy is shocked and goes alone to see dying Mrs. Tanner. Learning maltreatment of Jimmy, Helena advises Alison to leave Jimmy and to go to her father's house. Alison accepts her advice and goes to her father's house, leaving Jimmy alone. Helen stays there for sometimes. When Jimmy returns from the funeral of Mrs. Tanner, he finds Helena alone at the home. He has a hot argument with Helena. She slaps him but then kisses him passionately and thus she takes the place of Alison in her absence. Jimmy feels far better in Helena's company than his wife, Alison's. Cliff decides to leave the house and goes his own way. After many months, after the miscarriage of her child, Alison returns to Jimmy's house. Jimmy is still angry with her and lashes her out with bitter comments. Alison tells Helena that she has lost the baby but Jimmy does not care. Helena now realizes her mistake in breaking their marriage and, so she decides to leave Jimmy and, finally goes out of the house. Now Alison and Jimmy are left alone. Their love for each other emerges again and so they are reconciled. Now Jimmy and Alison are on the same boat, because ,

like Jimmy, Alison has also experienced the pain and suffering in her life in the form of the death of her unborn child. They indulge in love and take refuge in the game of the bear and the squirrel from the harsh realities of the world and thus, they start the same life again together.

Symbolism as a literary device has always been an integral part of literature and a lot of writers have used this device in their works like drama, novel, poetry, short stories in different context. Through the use of symbols a writer makes his ideas acceptable internationally. In fact symbolism is an artistic and poetic movement to use symbolic images and indirect suggestions to express mystical ideas, emotion, and state of mind. A symbol contains many layers of meaning, concept or ideas which are hidden. The symbolic objects or ideas have some deeper meanings than their apparent meanings. The writers use symbol in order to get a free hand to give different interpretations of their works and to make the characters as well as the themes of their work universal by breaking the boundaries of the locality of the literary works. In fact, the use of symbols in a literary work provides the structural coherence of the work. In short, we can say that the symbols help us in deeper understanding of the richness and depth of the text.

If we study Osborne's technique in *Look Back in Anger* , we find that he was greatly influenced by Henrik Ibsen and Samuel Beckett. So, we find that he has used naturalistic technique in *Look Back in Anger* . His use of symbols and images in the play is for the sake of objectification. He uses both verbal as well as non-verbal images and symbols. "These symbols not only include the structure of the play and the location of action but also stage props, acting postures, sound (both on stage and off), dialogues, character movement, and the human beings themselves." ("life Wrangles and material Struggles". www.gradefixer.com, 06 feb.2018).

In *Look Back in Anger* , John Osborne has used different symbols for different purpose. When he wants to attack the upper class, he uses different symbols and when he wants to show the emotion of

the personal relationship between the husband and wife, Jimmy and Alison, he uses different types of symbols. So, we find a number of symbols in *Look Back in Anger*.

The most important and famous symbol in the play is the game of the bear and the squirrel, which symbolizes different meanings in the play. Sometimes the game is an escape from the harsh realities of life for Jimmy and Alison. They hide their economic problem, and unemployment in the game. This game also indirectly symbolizes the pathetic condition of the working class in the post war English society. Jimmy and Alison, when fade up with their pathetic condition and are unable to bear the harsh realities of the world, escape into the imaginary world of the game of the bear and the squirrel. At a different stage, the game also symbolizes the failure of their marital life. As husband and wife, Jimmy and Alison are unable to lead a happy life and are so unable to enjoy their married life. So, in order to enjoy the bliss of married life, they pretend themselves animals, whose only concern is food, cleanliness, and sex. In the disguise of animals, they forget their differences and so are able to enjoy their married life. The presence of stuffed animals is felt from the beginning of the play. In the opening stage direction, we find the reference of “....a large, tattered toy teddy bear and a soft woolly squirrel”. This hints that the teddy bear and the squirrel game is going to be something very important in the play. Here the large teddy bear is Jimmy Porter and the soft woolly squirrel is Alison.

In the end of Act I, Alison’s hand is burnt with the iron due to Jimmy’s mistake. After bandaging her hand, Cliff leaves the room and Jimmy and Alison are left alone in the room. In the loneliness, they become romantic and Jimmy shows his concerns for Alison. He goes close to her, “ takes hold of her bandaged arm”, and asks with love:

Jimmy: How’s it feeling?

Alison: Fine. It wasn’t anything.

Jimmy: All this fooling about can get a bit dangerous.

(He sits on the edge of the table, holding her hand.) I’m sorry.

Alison: I know.

Jimmy: There’s hardly a moment when I’m not—watching and wanting you....

What are we going to do tonight?

Alison: What would you like to do? Drink?

Jimmy: I know what I want now.

(She takes his head in her hands and kisses him.)

Alison: Well, you’ll have to wait till the proper time.

Jimmy: There’s no such thing.

Alison: Cliff will be back in a minute. (John Osborne *Look Back in Anger*, ed. Neeraj Malik, Worldview Publication, Delhi, 2008. P-28. Subsequent references will be from this edition.)

Here, we find Jimmy in a romantic mood. As a husband, he has great care and love for his wife. It shows that Jimmy is not rude by nature, but the harsh realities of life, his failure in life, and injustice which he sees around him has made him bitter. Alison also shows her romantic shade and teases Jimmy like a traditional wife by telling him that he has to wait till they go to bed. Suddenly, there is a change in Jimmy’s mood when suddenly he becomes nostalgic of his past friends and specially of Mrs.Tunner. Alison, realizing the danger of Jimmy’s being bitter, fetches him into the game of the bear and the squirrel, and as a result, Jimmy forgets his bitter past and both husband and wife are involved in the romance forgetting the world and its problem:

Alison: (Alarmed at this threat of a different mood). Jimmy---please no!

Jimmy: (Staring at her anxious face). You’re very beautiful. A beautiful, great-eyed Squirrel.

(She nods brightly, relieved).

Hoarding, nut munching squirrel. (She mimes this delightedly) .

With highly polished, gleaming fur, and an ostrich feather of a tail.

Alison: Wheeeeeeeeeee!

Jimmy: How I envy you.

(He stands, her arms around his neck).

Alison: Well, you're a jolly-super bear, too. A really sooooooooooooooooooper, Marvelous bear.

Jimmy: Bears and squirrels are marvelous.

Alison: Marvellous and beautiful.

(She jumps up and down excitedly, making little 'paw gestures').Ooooooooooh!

Ooooooooooh!

Jimmy: What the hell's that?

Alison: That's a dance squirrels do when they're happy.

(They embrace again).

Jimmy: What makes you think you're happy?

Alison: Everything just seems all right suddenly. That's all. (*Look Back in Anger*).

Thus we see that, as soon as, they indulge in the game of the bear and the squirrel, both Jimmy and Alison forget their bitterness in their married life and feel happy as if they do not have any problem, and are happily married couple. Thus, the game provides for them a hide out where they take refuge from the harsh reality of their life and forget problems in their life as well as in their relationship, and thus, for them, everything seems alright. Their differences in their married life are due to the class difference between Jimmy and Alison. Jimmy, being from the working class, holds responsible the upper class, from which Alison comes, for the injustice meted to the working class and for their pathetic conditions in post war English society. Otherwise, there is love between husband and wife and they still hope for a normal married life, but the harsh realities and the problem of the real life and moreover, the social and class differences between them have made their lives bitter. The bear and the squirrel in the play symbolize the interference of the social habits, customs and the class differences with Alison's and Jimmy's love for each other. It means that their love has become a victim of social conflict due to the division of the English society after war. But, "when they act like animals, whose only concerns are food, shelter, cleanliness, and sex, they can forget that conflict and feel a simpler version of love for each other." Helem, Sally, (*"Look Back in Anger Symbols: Bear and Squirrel."* LitCharts. LitCharts LLC.26 August,2015). In Act II, Scene I,

Alison explains to Helena the importance of the game of the bear and the squirrel in their lives:

Alison: It started during those first months we had alone together---after Hugh went abroad. It was the one way of escaping from everything—a sort of unholy priest – hole of being animals to one another. We could become little furry creatures with little furry brains. Full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other. Playful, careless creatures in their own cosy zoo for two. A silly symphony for people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer. And now, even they are dead, poor little silly animals. They were all love, and no brains. (*Look Back in Anger*).

Thus, we see that the game of the bear and the squirrel is one of the most important symbols in the play. Through this game Jimmy and Alison make the loss of happiness in their married life. It brings happiness to them, although for a short time. It introduces the audience a unique device of sustaining sexual relationship which also helps in the development of the theme of the play. The game is their own means to achieve love for each other which was impossible in real world due to their class differences. In the disguise of animals they get real and simple love for each other and thus, the game helps them to reconcile and to start a new life again in the end of the play.

The act of ironing is other important symbol in the play. From the very beginning of the play, we find Alison, "leaning over an iron board" and "besides her is a pile of clothes". Alison's, and later on Helena's, repeatedly ironing symbolizes many things. It sets the mood of the play which is going to be monotonous. It symbolizes that the lives of the characters, living in the flat, are monotonous. There is no any colour in their lives. Every Sunday they have the same routine. Even the change of the character, when Alison's place is taken by Helena when Alison goes away, does not bring any change in their lives. The act of ironing symbolizes Jimmy's boredom as he complains:

Jimmy: God, how I hate Sundays! It's always depressing, always the same.

We never seem to get any further, do we? Always the same ritual

Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing. A few more hours, and

Another week gone. Our youth is slipping away...."(*Look Back in Anger*).

Thus, we see that ironing is the symbol of Jimmy's boredom. It also symbolizes the routine life. Every Sunday the same things happen, reading newspapers, drinking tea, and ironing. This is a kind of routine with which Jimmy is fed up. The "occasional thud of Alison's iron on the board" teases him and disturbs him. It also symbolizes his impatience with the ironing as he impatiently asks Alison, who is busy in ironing, "How much longer will you be doing that?" After the war and after the change of the government, Jimmy expects a change in the society, as well as, in the lives of the working class, but he does not see any change. The irony is that even Helena, who has taken the place of Alison after she has gone away, is busy in the same act of ironing. This shows that there is no change in the lives of the working class and so in Jimmy's life even after the change of the government, symbolized by Helena. Thus, we see that the ironing symbolizes Jimmy's anger and frustration with the society which has not changed at all like his routine life. According to some critics a pile of "erased clothes" which are there to be ironed, suggests a number of problems faced by Jimmy and Alison, which should be solved like cleaning and ironing the clothes. Sally Mackey in Drama and Theatre Studies has given a different symbolic interpretation of ironing, "the image of Alison, and then Helena, ironing in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* supports one of the play's underpinning themes: Jimmy's destructive need to attack the middle class and bring them to his own level. This repeated image of a tedious, every day activity emphasizes the 'new social realism' style of the play".

The reading of the newspapers has also been used as a symbol in the play. Throughout Act I and

Act III we find that Jimmy and Cliff are reading the newspapers. "The are both reading. Besides them, and between them, is a jungle of newspapers and weeklies." The newspapers symbolize Jimmy's intellect and education. Jimmy uses newspapers as a means to mock at the habits of the upper class. The reading of newspapers with a cup of tea and smoking pipe at the same time is an imitation of the upper class highly educated people, the status which Jimmy wants to achieve in his life but fails due to his being an educated young man from the working class. Thus, we see that the reading of newspapers has been presented in the play as a status symbol. The newspapers make Jimmy "feel ignorant", and he often mocks at the posh papers, which, according to him, do not have any concern for the working class men like him. "The jungles of newspapers and weeklies" in the apartment symbolizes the nothingness of education in the working class society. A working class man does not get any benefit from the education. Through the newspapers, Jimmy tries to prove his educational supremacy over Cliff and Alison. The newspapers are also the symbol of the hollowness of the British society of that time. The newspapers are reporting the irrelevant news. They are not reporting the real condition of England. "But Jimmy continues his addiction to keeping up with events to feed his need for disgust at the state of the world. They are his prop in the dramatic stages in his home, but they are far from new at all, being symbol of past British Culture." (Coursehero. "*Look Back in Anger* Study Guide." 1 March,2019).

The next important symbol in the play is the Church and its ringing bells. Jimmy is against the Church because he thinks that the Church represents the upper class and does not have any care for the development of the working class. He mocks at the Bishop of Bromly by declaring that "he is upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says he denies the difference of class distinctions. 'The idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by—the working class!' Well!" (*Look Back in Anger*). Thus we see that the Church is a symbol of the respectable upper class. For Jimmy it is the symbol of the oppression of the working class society and that is

why he hates the ringing of the Church bells. The Church sets a rule of morality for the benefit of the upper class only and if someone goes against these rules, he becomes a sinner. Jimmy is against this set of rules which has nothing to do with the welfare of the working class. So, he considers it his duty to fight against these rules of the upper class society made by the Church. He believes that the Church rules are avoided of any emotion for the working class. The ringing of the bells is heard at different points in the play. This ringing of the Church bells symbolizes that the rules, which have been set by the upper class in the form of the Church, are present everywhere in the world and the people like Jimmy, are forced to obey those rules only for the welfare of the upper class. Whenever, Jimmy hears the ringing of the Church bells, he curses and yells at them, "I don't want to hear them", which reflects his anger at the established rules of the Church which do not connect people emotionally. Rather, they create a lack of feeling in English society. Jimmy believes that the promise of the Church for redemption is false. According to him redemption is possible only when all people, irrespective of their class, are emotionally connected with one another. But the Church has divided the people into pious and sinner. Finally, in Act II, Alison's going to church with Helena, instead of going with Jimmy to see Mrs. Tunner, symbolizes Alison's going back to the upper class, leaving the working class which is represented by Jimmy. Thus, we see that the Church and its ringing bells symbolize Jimmy's anti-religious personality.

Finally, the other most important symbol in the play is Jimmy's playing on the trumpet jazz. We often hear him playing on trumpet off-stage. Whenever Jimmy is irritated, he plays on the trumpet jazz, a kind of famous American music in 1900s. So, the playing on trumpet is a means of escape for Jimmy from the irritating world of the routine life. The sound of the trumpet is a source of comfort and solace for him. He loves his trumpet and connects jazz with the philosophy of music and life. He believes that jazz is a real music and "anyone who doesn't like real jazz, has not any feeling either for music or place." Thus the trumpet symbolizes Jimmy's philosophy of music and life.

The sound of trumpet also symbolizes the means of annoy and fear for others. It annoys almost all the characters in the play. Alison is so much annoyed that he wishes, "God, I wish he'd lose that damned trumpet." Helena is so much afraid of the violent way of Jimmy's playing on the trumpet that she declares, "It's almost as if he wanted to kill someone with it. And me in particular. I've never seen such hatred in someone's eyes before. It is slightly horrifying. Horrifying....and oddly exciting." Even Cliff is so much annoyed with the violent sound of the trumpet that he shouts at Jimmy, "Hey, you horrible man! Stop that bloody noise...." Thus, we see that Osborne has used the trumpet to increase the tension of the play.

The other interpretation of the trumpet is that it symbolizes Jimmy's freedom of expression. He plays on the trumpet in another room down the hall where he does not have any restriction of the society. The other room symbolizes a society of his own desire where he finds all the opportunity to act according to his own will, and which is totally different from the cruel English society represented by the room in which all the characters are there. The trumpet also symbolizes an outlet of Jimmy's protest, as we find him playing on the trumpet when he is frustrated, angry, or in an irritating situation. First time we find him playing on the trumpet when Helena comes to his flat for a short stay with Alison. He does not like Helena's stay and so feel irritated. Second time, we find him playing on it when Alison returns to the flat at the end of the play. He expresses his anger by playing on the trumpet.

Thus, we see that the sound of the trumpet symbolizes many things in the play. It shows Jimmy's dominant personality in the play and his dominant power over all the characters. Even when he is not on the stage, his presence is felt by the sound of the trumpet off-stage. In fact, the off-stage sound of the trumpet symbolizes his powerful hold on the other characters of the play. Thus we see that Osborne has used this off-stage technique to assert Jimmy's dominance non-verbally in the play.

In our concluding part, we can say that in this play a number of symbols have been used by the

dramatist to represent the various ideas and to achieve different dramatic purposes. The use of different symbols in the play has made the theme and the characters of the play universal and it is due to the use of symbols that the play is still relevant even in our age. Osborne, in this play has used symbols in different context—from social, political to the religious context. Through the use of symbols, the dramatist has succeeded in showing the anger of the working class people against the injustice done to them in the society. It is the use of symbols in the play which has made the term 'Angry Young Man' famous all over the world. Thus, we see that the dramatist has successfully achieved his dramatic purpose by using different symbols in the play. It is the use of symbols which has given the universality to the characters as well as to the themes of the play in world of literature. It is due to the use of symbols that we understand Jimmy's feelings and associate and identify ourselves with him. Through the use of images and symbols we also understand the cause of his anger and frustration. We also fully understand the love-hate relationship between husband and wife, Jimmy and Alison through the intensive use of symbol of the teddy bear and the squirrel. We understand his anti-religious personality by the ringing of the Church bells which he hates to hear. The playing on the trumpet expresses his anger against the British society which has not given him a proper job, even after his high qualification. Thus, the symbols, in the play, are the means of understanding the realities of the world. They also make it possible for us to understand the relationship among the different characters of the play. Therefore, we can say that Osborne's use of symbols enriches the realism and provides a structural unity to the play. In the end, we can conclude that the symbols provide a deeper understanding of the play which makes it a great play.

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