

John Osborne

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Overview — the story in simple English

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is a three-act play first staged in London in 1956. It takes place in one small one-room attic flat (চিলেকোঠার এক-কামরার ফ্ল্যাট) in a large town in the English Midlands. The central character is Jimmy Porter, a clever, university-educated young man who, in spite of his education, earns his living by running a sweet-stall (মিষ্টির দোকান) in a street market. He is married to Alison, who comes from a higher, upper-middle-class (উচ্চ-মধ্যবিত্ত) family that never approved of him. Their friend Cliff, a gentle Welsh lodger (ভাড়াটে), lives with them and tries to keep the peace. Jimmy spends most of his time attacking everyone and everything — his wife, her family, the Church, the Sunday newspapers, and the whole English "establishment" (প্রতিষ্ঠিত শাসকশ্রেণি). His long angry speeches (tirades — দীর্ঘ রাগী বক্তৃতা) fill the play. To escape their unhappiness, Jimmy and Alison sometimes play a private game in which they pretend to be a bear and a squirrel who love each other simply. Alison, who is secretly pregnant, is persuaded by her visiting friend Helena to leave Jimmy and go back to her father, Colonel Redfern. Soon after, Helena — who had hated Jimmy — surprisingly becomes his new lover and takes Alison's place at the ironing-board. At the end Alison returns, having lost her baby (miscarriage — গর্ভপাত); Helena leaves out of guilt; and the broken couple comfort each other by retreating once more into their bear-and-squirrel fantasy. Nothing is really solved, but the pain and anger of the post-war (যুদ্ধ-পরবর্তী) generation has been powerfully voiced.

💡 **One-line meaning:** *Look Back in Anger* is the cry of a gifted but frustrated young man who has no great cause left to fight for, so he turns his anger on the people who love him and on a class-bound England that has left his generation behind.

Quick Fact	Detail
Published / First performed	First staged 1956 (Royal Court Theatre, London, by the English Stage Company)
Genre	Realist "kitchen-sink" drama; three-act play
Setting	A one-room attic flat in a large Midlands town, England; mid-1950s
Narration / Form	Stage play — dialogue and stage directions only; no narrator
Famous remark	The label "Angry Young Man" was pinned on Osborne by the press, not chosen by him

Themes & Technique

1. Anger and disillusionment of post-war youth. The play's whole mood is anger (ক্রোধ) and disappointment (মোহভঙ্গ). Jimmy belongs to the first generation to grow up after the Second World War, in a safer but duller England. He is angry because his education has given him ideas but no useful place in society, and because life feels empty and without purpose.

2. Class conflict. Jimmy comes from a lower, working background; Alison and Helena come from the upper-middle "establishment" class of army officers, church and privilege. Much of Jimmy's rage is really class resentment (শ্রেণিগত ক্ষোভ) — he cannot forgive Alison's family for looking down on him, so he keeps attacking everything they stand for.

3. The loss of "good, brave causes." Jimmy longs for a great cause worth living or dying for, like the heroic struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. But he feels those days are gone. This longing — and the emptiness left behind — is one of the play's most

quoted ideas and explains his restless fury.

4. Love as a battlefield. The marriage of Jimmy and Alison mixes deep love with real cruelty (নিষ্ঠুরতা). Jimmy needs Alison but wounds her with his words; she suffers in silence. The play shows love and pain as almost impossible to separate, and marriage as a kind of war between the sexes.

5. Escape and vulnerability — the bear and squirrel. Because real adult life is too painful, Jimmy and Alison escape into a childlike game of being harmless animals. This shows how fragile they are underneath the anger, and how they can only be tender when they pretend to be someone else.

6. Nostalgia and a dying England. Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, represents the old, fading Edwardian and imperial England. Even Jimmy, who mocks the past, is oddly nostalgic (অতীতকাতর) for a lost golden age. The play captures a country unsure of its future after the end of empire.

7. Emotional emptiness and boredom. The long, dull Sundays, the church bells, and the endless newspapers create a picture of monotony (একঘেয়েমি). Jimmy cries out for ordinary human warmth and enthusiasm in a world he finds cold and half-dead.

Classroom / dramatic techniques (use these terms in the exam):

- **Kitchen-sink realism** — an ordinary, shabby domestic (ঘরোয়া) setting shown with naturalistic detail.
- **The tirade / long monologue** — Jimmy's great rhetorical speeches, the engine of the play.
- **Repeated stage picture (tableau)** — Act III mirrors Act I: the same Sunday-paper scene, but with Helena at the ironing-board in Alison's place.
- **Symbolism** — church bells, the Sunday papers, and above all the bear and squirrel.
- **Off-stage action** — key events (Hugh's mother's illness, Alison's miscarriage) are reported, not shown.
- **Naturalistic dialogue** mixed with music-hall wit, mockery and invective (গালিগালাজপূর্ণ আক্রমণ).

Key Quotations — memorize

- "There aren't any good, brave causes left." — **Jimmy, Act III.** The heart of his despair: nothing great is left to fight for.
- "I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer." — **Jimmy, Act III.** Directly voices the post-war generation's feeling of purposelessness.
- "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it." — **Alison to her father, Colonel Redfern, Act II Scene 2.** In one balanced sentence she sums up the gap between the fading old order and the frustrated young.
- "Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity." — **Jimmy, Act II Scene 1** (in his speech to Helena about watching his father die for twelve months when he was only ten). His harsh idea that only real suffering makes a person fully alive.
- "Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm." — **Jimmy, Act I.** His cry against the coldness and dullness of the world around him.
- Jimmy nicknames Alison his "squirrel" and calls himself the "bear" — their private animal game, the only safe place their love can survive (paraphrase of a recurring motif, Acts I–III).
- Jimmy repeatedly asks why men let women "bleed" them to death — his bitter picture of marriage as mutual destruction (paraphrase; wording varies, so do not quote it word-for-word).
- At the close, Alison humbles herself completely, saying she is now brought low into the "mud" — her surrender before the couple retreat again into the animal fantasy (paraphrase the reconciliation; the exact wording is easy to get wrong).

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Kenneth Tynan	In his 1956 <i>Observer</i> review he hailed the play as the true voice of post-war youth, famously declaring that he doubted he could love anyone who did not wish to see it.	Contemporary reception; the play as a landmark
John Russell Taylor	In <i>Anger and After</i> (1962) he treated Osborne as the starting-point of the new "Angry" / kitchen-sink wave in British drama.	Placing the play in its literary movement
Raymond Williams	Located the play's power in Jimmy's language and rhetoric, while noting its limitation in being built around a single dominating voice.	Technique; the role of the tirade
Alan Sinfield	Argued that the "Angry Young Man" was partly a media and cultural construction expressing class dissent in post-war Britain.	The angry-young-man label; class and culture
John Osborne (author)	Distanced himself from the "Angry Young Man" tag, pointing out it was invented by the press, not by him.	A note of caution about the famous label
Katharine Worth	Regarded Osborne as helping to renew the emotional energy and spoken language of the mid-century English stage.	Osborne's theatrical importance

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

Passage 1 — "There aren't any good, brave causes left." 💡 **Possible** These words are spoken by Jimmy Porter in Act III of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (first staged 1956). Alison has left him, Helena has become his lover, and in a quieter, tired mood Jimmy reflects on his whole generation. He says that people of their time can no longer die for great causes as their fathers once did; the heroic struggles are finished, and only a small, dull, comfortable life is left. The line explains the deepest source of Jimmy's anger. He is not simply a bad-tempered husband: he is a gifted man with enormous energy and no worthy purpose to spend it on, so his energy turns sour and attacks those nearest to him. The significance is large: this sentence became a slogan for the whole post-war "Angry Young Man" mood, capturing a generation that felt safe, educated, but spiritually empty and without direction.

Passage 2 — "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same." 💡 **Possible** This is spoken by Alison to her father, Colonel Redfern, in Act II Scene 2 of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. The Colonel has come to take his pregnant daughter back home, away from her unhappy marriage. As father and daughter talk, the old soldier — an honest man of the fading Edwardian, imperial world — confesses that the modern world is beyond him, comparing himself to an old plant "left over from the Edwardian Wilderness." Alison answers with this balanced sentence, adding "And neither of you can face it." She sees that her father suffers because the settled world he was raised in has broken apart, while Jimmy suffers because nothing in England has really changed enough to give his life meaning. The significance is that Osborne, through the daughter caught between the two men, shows that the tragedy is not one person's fault: it is a clash between a dying old order and a frustrated new one, and neither can properly face the other.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

Note 1 — The bear-and-squirrel game. 🔥 **Very likely** The bear-and-squirrel game is the private fantasy that Jimmy and Alison share in *Look Back in Anger*. In it Jimmy pretends to be a big, clumsy bear and Alison a small, timid squirrel; they imagine a simple animal world of warmth and instinct, free from the pain of class, money and marriage. It is important for several reasons. First, it reveals the tenderness hidden beneath Jimmy's constant rage: only by pretending to be harmless creatures can this wounded couple show love without hurting each other. Second, it is a symbol of escape (পলায়ন) — they

flee from an adult reality they cannot manage into a childish, protected make-believe. Third, its return at the very end of the play, after Alison's miscarriage, gives the ending its ambiguous (দ্ব্যর্থক) tone: it can be read as comforting reconciliation or as a sad, regressive retreat from real life. Because the game exposes both their fragility and the impossibility of grown-up love in their harsh world, it is central to the play's meaning — which is why examiners set it so often.

Note 2 — Jimmy Porter as the "Angry Young Man." 🔥 **Very likely** Jimmy Porter is the most famous "Angry Young Man" in English drama, and after 1956 the phrase came to stand for a whole generation. He is university-educated yet earns his living from a market sweet-stall — a man of talent with no real place in society. Throughout the play he pours scorn on the Church, the newspapers, the upper classes, political complacency and his wife's genteel family. His anger is partly personal and partly the voice of post-war youth: young people who were promised a better world but found a dull, class-bound, purposeless one. Critics such as Kenneth Tynan welcomed him as the honest voice of that generation. Yet Osborne does not present Jimmy as a simple hero. He is also cruel, self-pitying and a bully to those who love him, especially Alison. This mixture is deliberate: Jimmy is meant to be both admirable and exhausting, a diagnosis of his time rather than a model to copy. That is why "How far is Jimmy Porter a spokesman of the post-war generation?" is a repeated exam question.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

Essay 1 — "In what does *Look Back in Anger* reflect the mood and temper of post-war England?" 🔥 **Very likely**

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is remembered less for its rather ordinary story than for the way it captured the exact feeling of England in the years after the Second World War. Through the anger of one young man, Jimmy Porter, the play mirrors a whole nation's mood: disillusioned, class-divided, bored and hungry for meaning. My argument is that the play reflects the post-war temper in four main ways — through its picture of a purposeless generation, its bitter class-consciousness, its atmosphere of spiritual emptiness, and its hero who speaks for the frustrated young.

First, the play captures the sense that the great causes were finished. Jimmy's generation grew up after the heroic anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. By the mid-1950s the war was won, the welfare state had brought security, yet young people felt flat and useless. Osborne gives this feeling its clearest voice when Jimmy says, "There aren't any good, brave causes left," adding that "people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer." Here is the emotional centre of post-war England: safe but empty, with nothing left worth the sacrifice.

Second, the play reflects the deep class divisions of the period. Jimmy comes from the working world; Alison, Helena and Colonel Redfern belong to the old upper-middle establishment of army, church and privilege. Even though the 1944 Education Act had let clever poorer boys into university, England's real power and confidence still belonged to the old classes. Jimmy's endless attacks on his wife's family, on the "posh" Sunday papers and on the Church are the sound of a talented outsider who has been let in through the door but not given a seat at the table.

Third, Osborne paints the spiritual boredom of the time. The play's long, dull Sundays, the ringing church bells, and the couple reading the same newspapers create an atmosphere of monotony and deadness. Against this greyness Jimmy cries out, "Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm." His hunger for warmth and feeling in a cold, comfortable society is exactly the restlessness that many young Britons felt in the 1950s.

Fourth, the play understands that this is a clash between a dying old England and an unsatisfied new one. Osborne is fair to both sides: Colonel Redfern is given a dignified, sympathetic voice, and it is Alison who sums up the deadlock for him — "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it." The old soldier belongs to a lost imperial world; Jimmy belongs to a future that has not yet arrived. The country in between is uncertain of itself, which is precisely the post-war condition.

Finally, Jimmy works as the spokesman of his generation, which is why the play made such an impact. The critic Kenneth Tynan welcomed it as the true voice of post-war youth, and John Russell Taylor, in *Anger and After*, treated it as the beginning of a whole new "Angry" movement in British theatre. Yet Osborne is not simply cheering Jimmy on; the character is also cruel and self-pitying. The play therefore reflects the temper of the age honestly, showing both its energy and its dangerous frustration.

In conclusion, *Look Back in Anger* is a social document as much as a drama. Its anger, its class resentment, its nostalgia for lost causes and its longing for feeling all mirror the mood of a nation that had won a war but lost a sense of purpose. That is why the play named its moment and why this question returns again and again in the examination.

Essay 2 — "Discuss the autobiographical elements of the play *Look Back in Anger*." 🔥 Very likely

Look Back in Anger has always been read partly as a portrait of its author. John Osborne wrote it very quickly, in a burst of feeling, and much of its raw power comes from his own life and temperament. My argument is that the play is strongly autobiographical (আত্মজীবনীমূলক) in its setting, its central marriage, its hero's voice and its emotional wounds — but that Osborne turns private grievance into a portrait of a whole generation, so it is far more than a simple diary.

First, the social background of the play grows out of Osborne's own. He came from a modest, lower-middle-class family and worked at unglamorous jobs and in provincial touring theatre before success came. Jimmy Porter, though university-educated, runs a market sweet-stall in a dull Midlands town. The cramped attic flat, the small trade and the sense of a clever man trapped below his abilities all echo the poverty and struggle of Osborne's early years.

Second, and most clearly, the unhappy marriage reflects Osborne's own. His first marriage was to an actress whose family regarded him as socially beneath them and disapproved of the match. In the play, Jimmy marries Alison, whose upper-middle-class family — Colonel Redfern, her mother, her brother Nigel — look down on him and try to break the marriage. The bitterness Jimmy feels toward a wife's family who despise him is drawn directly from the writer's own experience of class rejection inside a marriage.

Third, Jimmy's voice is essentially Osborne's voice. The furious speeches against the Church, the newspapers, the establishment and middle-class smugness express opinions and a temperament very close to the author's own. Osborne was known for his sharp tongue and his hatred of English complacency, and he pours that personality straight into Jimmy's tirades. This is why the play feels less like an invented story and more like a man shouting his real feelings aloud.

Fourth, the play's deepest emotional material is autobiographical. Osborne's own father died when he was still a boy, an early experience of loss and suffering that marked him for life. This surfaces in Jimmy's harsh, unforgettable claim that "anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity" — a line that turns the writer's private grief into a whole philosophy of pain and feeling. Jimmy's mixture of love and cruelty toward the women in his life also reflects the stormy relationships of Osborne's own history.

However, we should not read the play as pure autobiography. Osborne shapes and distances his material: Jimmy is both a self-portrait and a created character. Critics like Alan Sinfield have reminded us that the "Angry Young Man" was partly a media construction, a public myth built up around the writer. And the play's most famous idea — "There aren't any good, brave causes left" — is not merely one man's complaint but a statement about an entire generation. Osborne lifts his personal disappointment onto a national stage.

In conclusion, the lasting strength of *Look Back in Anger* is that it is rooted in lived experience yet reaches beyond it. The provincial poverty, the class-crossed marriage, the angry voice and the early wound of death are all Osborne's own; but by giving them to Jimmy Porter he made his private grievance the representative cry of post-war youth. The autobiography is real, but it has become cultural diagnosis — which is exactly why the play endures.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	Jimmy Porter, a clever but frustrated young man, runs a sweet-stall and torments his upper-class wife Alison with his anger. Alison leaves him for her father's home; her friend Helena becomes his lover, then leaves when Alison returns after losing their baby. The broken couple make peace by retreating into a childish bear-and-squirrel fantasy.
2 must-quotes	"There aren't any good, brave causes left." (Jimmy, Act III) • "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same." (Alison to her father, Act II Sc. 2)
2 backup quotes	"Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm." (Jimmy, Act I) • "Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity." (Jimmy, Act II Sc. 1)
2 critics	Kenneth Tynan — hailed it as the voice of post-war youth (1956 <i>Observer</i> review). • John Russell Taylor — <i>Anger and After</i> (1962): the start of the "Angry" / kitchen-sink movement.
Technique words	Kitchen-sink realism; the tirade/monologue; mirrored Act I–III tableau; symbolism (bear and squirrel, church bells); off-stage action; naturalistic dialogue.
Top 3 likely essays	1) Mood and temper of post-war England (🔥). 2) Jimmy Porter as spokesman of the post-war young generation (🔥). 3) Autobiographical elements of the play (🔥). Keep the bear-and-squirrel game (🔥) ready as a short note.

Exam-timing tip: In the 4-hour paper, give each 15-mark essay about 45–50 minutes; spend the first 5 minutes making a quick outline, and never write a body paragraph without slipping in at least one memorized quotation.