

The symbolism in look back in anger



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John Osborne's technique in *Look Back in Anger* reveals his indebtedness to Henrik Ibsen and his contemporary Samuel Beckett in naturalistic plays. He uses images and symbols, both verbal and non verbal for the sake of objectification. These symbols not only include the structure of the play and the location of action, but also stage props, acting postures, sounds (both on stage and off), dialogues, character movements, and the human beings themselves. In fact, Osborne drew inspiration from his personal life and failing marriage with Pamela Lane while writing *Look Back in Anger*.

Osborne's use of elaborate stage direction to situate his plays is a special milieu. The specific mention of the hero, Jimmy Porter "wearing a very warm tweed jacket and flannels" signifies his belonging to a very specific time period, particularly the 1950s and to a certain social order, i. e. the non moneyed middle class. His wife, Alison wearing a "cherry red shirt of Jimmy's" and Helena too being clothed in Jimmy's old shirt symbolize both of them as Jimmy's women, a sign of his personal possessions. The act of ironing of a pile of "erased clothes" also suggests a number of troubles that are infesting their lives that need to be sorted. Along with the background images of stagnation, washing, and the cistern, the symbolic analogy of dirt and squalor that need to be cleansed is highly interesting. One is reminded of the rottenness of the state of Denmark in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that needed the protagonist's intervention.

Both Alison and Helena seem to be occupied with ironing clothes throughout the evening on Sundays. Mary McCarthy points out the stagnant boredom of Sundays in a provisional term when the newspapers and book reviews also appear to be the same. The newspaper itself assumes the symbol of Jimmy's

intellect and he complains at all times that nobody in his family treats it with respect except him.

Jimmy Porter's anger against the earlier generation is one of the most important aspects of the play and it is to be noted that such exasperation and frustration was the most common feature of the post war cohort. The social complacency of the Edwardian era that Jimmy thinks to be responsible for his present plight is the "Edwardian twilight" that Jimmy refers to. It stands for everything that his world lacks. Colonel Redfern, Nigel, Alison's mother, and Miss Drury are all people who are privileged in comparison to Jimmy and hence the subject of his ire. He resents these people and fills and instinctive antipathy for the upper class including Alison and Helena.

Likewise he feels a strong empathy for the poor and suffering like Hugh Tanner, his mother, Mrs. Tanner, and Jimmy's own father whose death is still poignant in his mind. He admires his former lover Madeline in whom he sees an example of the "enthusiasm" that is lacking in Alison; she is vivacious while the latter is almost somnolent. Alison is not only his class enemy but also his sexual antagonist. Her toilet is conceived by Osborne in symbolic terms as weapons in a battlefield, almost like Belinda's toilet in *The Rape of the Lock*.

The church exemplifies a cultural value that Jimmy detests. Thus, when the church bells begin to ring, he expresses his abhorrence: "I don't want to hear them!". The church bell serves as a reminder of his failure to transform the world and bring out harmony in his personal life. He associates a radical orthodox facet of society with the churches, both of which irritates and annoy him to no end. Another auditory image, the sound of his own trumpet

becomes very important. It is his way to protest against what is bothering and annoying him all the time and also channeling out his anger through the monotonous tone.

The bear and the squirrel symbolism is one of the most important in the play: “ a tattered toy teddy bear” and a “ soft wooly squirrel” initially appeared on stage props in the first stage directions. This animal symbolism occur with other brute references such as pig (Jimmy), bitch and rhinoceros (Alison’s mother), and cat (Alison). Jimmy and Alison’s bear and squirrel game is their own way to access a simple affection for each other that they otherwise cannot achieve in their real life. The bear is associated with Jimmy, while his wife embodies the squirrel. It expresses their desire for an imaginative release from the pain of their human existence. As animals depend on their instincts, whose only concerns are food, shelter, cleanliness, and sex, in the same way the couple’s game signifies a nullification of the rational lifestyle. They can forget their conflict and feel a simpler version of love for one another. “ We could become little furry creatures with little furry brains. Full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other...And now, even they are dead, poor little silly animals. They were all love, and no brains.” (Act 2 scene 1).

Thus, symbolism has always been an innate part of literature and a large number of authors have used this device for different cultures, for traditional stories, fables, legends, religious context. It is not only important for providing the writers with a freedom to give different interpretations but has also given universality to the characters as well as to the themes in the world of literature. It is through this extensive use of images and symbols

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that the audience/readers are able to empathize with Jimmy and understand the reason of his extreme anger and frustration. They also serve the purpose of bringing out the dynamics of the different types of relationships that the characters have with one another. Therefore, the elaborate pattern of symbols that John Osborne uses enriches the realism and provides a structural coherence to the play. The symbols do not disrupt the verisimilitude but strive to provide a deeper understanding of the richness and depth of the text.