



Teaching Practice

Looking Back at Osborne's Anger... Worksheets by Kristina Leitner and Andrew Skinner for Vienna's English Theatre 2006/07

Preview

One of the most influential plays of the twentieth century, *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. In an astonishing debut, it established John Osborne as one of the century's leading dramatists with its ruthlessly accurate portrayal of disaffected youth. Jimmy Porter sits in his armchair and rages against the world, his anger mirroring the anguish and uncertainty of a generation in search of itself. In its radical exploration of class, sex and relationships, Osborne's remarkable play is as powerful today as when it was first performed.

Title of Play

The play looks back less with anger, more with regret, with a fierce, despairing nostalgia for a world of real political commitment, back to the 1930s and early 1940s.

- Does Jimmy look back in anger because he can't find his way back to an idealistic world of the past?
- By contrast, does Jimmy actually look forward to anything?

Contemporary Reviews

► Task

Compare and contrast reviews of the play in May 1956. In which ways is the focus different in each one?

Synopsis

Break up the text of a synopsis and jumble the sentences. Students are now invited to reorder them.

Pre-reading

1. What does "anger" mean for you? What sort of things do you do when you are "in anger"?
2. With what emotion do you normally "look back"? (with pleasure, with nostalgia, etc., e.g. 'most people look back on their school days with fondness')
3. What do they "look back" at?
4. Which of the four characters, male or female, is more likely to be "in anger", do you think?
5. How much time do you spend reading the Sunday newspaper? (Notice how much time Jimmy and Cliff spend)
- 6.a Do you know people who frequently become angry? What do they tend to become angry about (themselves, life, society, politics, religion, etc.)?
- 6.b Which of the following things make you feel most angry? Give reasons for your choice (class differences, hypocrisy, snobbery, racism, etc.)
7. *Look Back in Anger* deals with the problems of a married couple. Think of a married couple you know and reflect on which aspects of their relationship make them happy or unhappy. What elements are most important in a relationship? List them in order of importance and discuss and compare them in class.
8. The play is set in a single room, where the characters spend the whole of Sunday without going out. Which tensions do you think can arise from such a situation? (frustration, claustrophobia, argument, conflict, etc.)
9. The play is set in 1956. Important political events were the Suez Crisis, the Hungarian Uprising, and the Cold War. Find out about these events.

While-reading

There are over a hundred questions and tasks available on Vienna English Theatre's website!



www.englishtheatre.at

Post-reading and follow-up

Activities

1. Draw the stage set of *Look Back in Anger*. Use the introductory description of the setting and the text itself as support and guidelines.
2. Draw a sociogram, showing the social inter-relationships of the various characters within a network diagram.
 - Differentiate between primary/central and secondary/peripheral characters.
 - Also include those mentioned in the text, but who are not physically present on stage.
 - Use the vertical dimension to show the social class relationships (upper-middle, middle, working class)
 - Use symbolic visual motifs (e.g. heart, marriage ring, thunderbolt, complete/broken/dotted lines, etc.)
 - Perhaps the sociogram could be a vicious circle within a square room?
3. In order to see how the play is structured, draw a graph showing the ups and downs of the action, key turning points and growing tensions all on the vertical axis, while the horizontal axis shows the time scale of Acts 1-3. Examples of turning points might be: Alison announcing to Cliff that she is pregnant; Jimmy telling of the death of his father, etc.)
4. In terms of its structure, the play contains examples of foreshadowing, that is, where future events are anticipated e.g. when Jimmy says: "If you could have a child, and it would die". Find other such examples of foreshadowing or pre-echo in the text.
5. Performing small scenes from the play (taken from the CIDEB edition)

Work in small groups:

Stage One

Before acting out the following scenes from the play, try to decide exactly what each of the characters is

feeling and thinking. This is necessary so that a performer can give the right tone, intonation, rhythm, and pace to the dialogue.

Stage Two

Decide who is to play the different parts. Read the parts aloud in small groups. Discuss intonation, rhythm, pace.

Stage Three

Decide on movements and gestures. Write down exactly what each character is doing during the scene. Do you need any stage properties?

Stage Four

Perform the scene: first for your group, then for the whole class.

6. Alison is about to tell Jimmy that she is expecting a baby, when Helena's phone call prevents her. Imagine that the phone didn't ring. Now write a dialogue between Alison and Jimmy, in which she explains her situation.
7. When Alison decides to leave Jimmy, she writes him a note. Imagine you are Alison: you are now staying with your father and you decide to write Jimmy a letter explaining why you have left him.
8. Invent an alternative ending to the play. Starting with "He (Jimmy) shakes his head and whispers", create a half-page dialogue between Jimmy and Alison in which they decide to separate (taken from CIDEB edition).

Characterization

A Focus on Character Traits

► Tasks

1. Try and match each of the adjectives in the list to one (or more) of the four characters, namely Jimmy, Alison, Cliff and Helena. Explain why you have chosen these adjectives.
2. Then try and put the adjectives in some order of importance for each character concerned.



Adjectives A-Z

abusive accommodating adaptable
 aggressive alienated altruistic angry anti-
 Establishment caring challenging considerate
 cruel cynical defeated defiant educated
 elegant energetic explosive frustrated futile
 generous good-natured helpless honest
 iconoclastic immature inconsiderate insensitive
 intelligent ironical isolated left-wing
 lovable loving malicious manipulative mean
 narrow-minded nostalgic offensive passive
 patient provocative quiet rebellious reliable
 relaxed religious resentful reserved revengeful
 sadistic sarcastic selfish self-pitying sensitive
 sentimental sincere solid sympathetic
 talkative tender trustworthy unfeeling
 unresponsive unstable vehement violent
 warm well-spoken withdrawn

B Jimmy's Character

Questions

1. For which reasons does Jimmy hit out against everybody and everything?
2. To what extent is he an anti-hero at odds with his world?
3. 'Inverted snobbery'. Find out what the term means and how it might apply to Jimmy and his class identity.
4. In how far is Jimmy's cruelty part of a complex defence mechanism which hides his own basic insecurity? (e.g. Why does he rummage through Alison's handbag? To see if he is being betrayed?)
5. To what extent does Jimmy have a paradoxical nature (e.g. cruel, but tender, etc.)?
6. "Angry and helpless": how does this sum up the contradictions within Jimmy?
7. How true is it to say that Jimmy experiences emotions in isolation?
8. Why does Jimmy feel himself especially needed at people's deathbeds?
9. In which sense is he the anti-hero who rescued the fair maiden (Alison) from her privileged family prison?
10. Are there examples of almost childish behaviour in Jimmy?

11. Why is it that he doesn't really engage with people, but rather alienates them?
12. In which ways is Jimmy stranded between an almost sentimental nostalgia for an idealistic past and his present-day world without ideals? Exemplify.
13. How true is it to say that Jimmy is a man of action who doesn't actually act, a rebel without a real cause?
14. To what extent is his anger unfocused, his energy misplaced, not really channelled into something useful, socially or politically?
15. What does Jimmy's use of words and expressions such as "Shut up", "Like hell", "Stupid bitch", etc. indicate about his character?
16. Is he ultimately an ineffectual character?

C Alison's Character

Questions

1. In which way is Alison different from the rest of her own family?
2. To what extent is Alison caught between her present real perception of Jimmy and the dream image she once had of him as a knight in shining armour?
3. What does Alison's use of words such as "Well, naturally", "Do you want some more tea?", "You are naughty, Cliff", etc. tell us about her character?
4. How aware is Alison of the escapist nature of the squirrel and bear fantasy?
5. To what extent has she changed by the end of the play?
6. Looking back, have you now changed your initial opinion about Alison? In how far would you characterize her differently now?

D Jimmy and Alison: Study of a Marriage

Questions

1. In which ways do both Jimmy and Alison need each other?
2. In which sense is the world of squirrels and bears the only refuge which they can retreat to?



Themes, open to Interpretation

- misalliance and the eternal triangle
- marital problems
- different forms of love
- generation gap
- class differences and class struggle/war
- questioning traditional, social and moral values
- social criticism
- identity problems, sense of belonging
- frustration and alienation, desperation and anger
- egocentrism vs. altruism
- ...

(These themes could be inter-related using a mind map or structure diagram.)

Possible Symbols

► **Task**

How significant are the symbols in the play?

Match up the motifs with what they might mean:

Motifs

- attic room
- day of week
- ironing board
- cup of tea
- church bells
- Sunday newspapers
- squirrels and bears

Meanings

- social routine
- old religious values
- claustrophobia
- boredom
- domestic routine
- escapist fantasy
- intellectual self-indulgence

Which of the symbols do you find (a) most striking, and (b) most telling?

Language

The language is colloquial and vigorous; it also has the power to shock. Jimmy's language is cruel, but also vibrant and dramatic.

Jimmy's long monologues constantly interrupt the dialogue, preventing complex interactions between the characters and development of plot, especially in Act I.

► **Tasks**

1. Match up the adjectives on the left with the nouns on the right to describe Jimmy's language (note that these can be alliterations!)

- aggressive
- daemonic
- devilish
- hateful
- ironic
- ranting
- rasping
- robust
- savage
- terrifying
- satire
- rhetoric
- rail
- tirades
- invective
- assault
- diatribe
- derision
- harangue

2. Collect examples of martial/warlike imagery (e.g. battlefield, etc.) used in the play. Is there a pattern here?
3. Collect examples of animal imagery (e.g. zoo, menagerie, squirrels, bears, etc.).
4. Identify examples of physical gesture (e.g. snorts, fiercely, wildly, etc.).
5. Compare and contrast examples of Jimmy's working-class language with Alison's upper-middle-class language.



Overall Questions to discuss

1. In which ways are all the characters trapped in a restrictive world?
2. In how far is Jimmy more obsessed with the past than concerned with the future?
3. "The man who at the start of the play seemed full of opinion, politics and passion is shown by its end to be a cruel, empty windbag." Discuss critically.
4. "A rebel without a cause?" How true is this of Jimmy?
5. According to the American sociologist Deborah Tannen, women together show sympathetic solidarity. By contrast, men tend to playful or serious rival confrontation. How true is this of Alison and Helena on the one hand, and Jimmy and Cliff on the other?
6. Which different games does each character play?
7. How successful is the play as a drama, especially in view of the fact that it seems to be only a series of obsessional dramatic monologues by one fully realized character.
8. "A play with too much ironing, and not enough irony." How valid is this comment?
9. Is the play now only of historical interest (mid-1950s Britain), or can it be seen as timeless in its themes and ideas?
10. To what extent is the ending of the play pessimistic or not?

Professional Profiles:

Kristina Leitner graduated from the BG Schärding (OÖ) in 2002. From August 2002 - Sept. 2003 she stayed abroad as an Au Pair in Connecticut, USA. In October 2003 she began her "Lehramtsstudium" of English and Spanish, plus her studies of Political Science at the University of Innsbruck.

Andrew Skinner is a lecturer at the English Department of the University of Innsbruck and has been involved in the „Innsbruck model of Fremdsprachendidaktik“, which adopts an integrated multilingual approach in pre-service teacher education; he is co-author of „Meanings in Use“.

