

Look Back in Anger Summary

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Background: John Osborne wrote the play *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. He completed it in only seventeen days. The story was inspired by his own unhappy marriage to Pamela Lane and their life in a small, cramped room in Derby, England. At that time, Britain's social and political system was very class-conscious. The upper and middle classes had more power and respect, while working-class people often felt ignored and undervalued. Osborne himself felt deep anger towards the insensitive British authorities, especially for their attitudes before the Second World War.

This anger became a powerful force in his writing. The play showed the frustration of young people in post-war Britain who felt trapped by social inequality and old traditions. Jimmy Porter, the main character, represents this "angry young man" spirit—full of emotion, disappointment, and rebellion. *Look Back in Anger* was a turning point in British theatre. It broke away from the polite, upper-class dramas of the time and brought real-life struggles, raw emotion, and working-class voices to the stage. The play became a symbol of protest against the political and social culture of 1950s Britain.

Plot Summary

Act - One

Jimmy and Alison's Conflict: The play opens in a cramped attic flat in the English Midlands in the mid-1950s. It is a Sunday afternoon. Jimmy Porter is a smart but hot-tempered young man in his mid-twenties. He is always angry; that is why he is called an "Angry Young Man." He is sitting in a large armchair. He is reading the Sunday newspaper aloud in a sarcastic voice. His friend and flatmate, Cliff Lewis, is also reading the paper. Cliff is kind, friendly, and Welsh. He is less educated than Jimmy. Jimmy and Cliff both come from working-class backgrounds. But Jimmy is more intellectual and outspoken. Together, they run a small, sweet stall in the local market.

Alison Porter is Jimmy's wife. She is at the ironing board, quietly ironing clothes. Alison is from an upper-middle-class military family. Her father, Colonel Redfern, was a British army officer in India. Alison marries Jimmy. It was against her parents' wishes, as they saw Jimmy as socially beneath her.

Jimmy starts talking loudly about the Sunday papers. He mocks the news, politics, and religion. He complains that England has lost its old greatness and entered a dull “American age.” He often turns his attacks toward Alison’s upper-class background. He insulted her parents and her comfortable life before marriage.

Cliff tries to lighten the mood. He was joking and play-wrestling with Jimmy. But during the rough play, they accidentally bump into Alison, and she falls. Jimmy apologizes, but Alison is hurt and asks him to leave the room. When Jimmy is gone, Cliff comforts Alison. They share a friendly, warm moment, and even kiss lightly. Then, Alison confides a secret to Cliff. She is pregnant. She has not told Jimmy because she fears his reaction and his temper. Cliff urges her to tell him soon.

Jimmy comes back but says nothing about what he saw between Alison and Cliff. Cliff leaves, and Jimmy and Alison briefly play their private fantasy game — “bear and squirrel” — where Jimmy pretends to be a bear and Alison a squirrel. They are imagining a safe and loving world. Cliff returns. He says Alison’s old friend, Helena Charles, has called and will be visiting. Jimmy does not like Helena and becomes more annoyed. Out of cruelty, Jimmy says he wants Alison to feel real suffering. He even says that if she had a child, he hopes it would die. He tells Alison that she would understand pain like him. This hurts Alison very much.

Act Two - Scene 1

Helena’s Arrival and Alison’s Departure: Two weeks later, Helena arrives and stays in the flat. She and Alison talk about Alison’s marriage. Alison explains how she met Jimmy at a party. She was attracted to his energy. Then she quickly married him despite her parents’ disapproval. In their early marriage, Alison and Jimmy often went to parties with Jimmy’s friend Hugh Tanner. It annoyed Alison’s family. Hugh and Jimmy are no longer close, but Jimmy still cares about Hugh’s mother. Hearing all this, Helena tells Alison that Jimmy is cruel. He enjoys hurting Alison. She urges Alison to leave him and stay with her parents. Alison hesitates but admits life with Jimmy is exhausting.

Jimmy enters. He mocks Helena and her religious practice when he hears they plan to go to church. He again insults Alison’s family. In a rare moment of vulnerability, Jimmy tells Helena about his father’s slow death. His father died after being wounded in the Spanish Civil War. The incident that shaped his hatred of complacency and emotional coldness. When Alison and Helena are about to leave for church, Jimmy gets a phone call saying Hugh’s mother is dying. He feels heartbroken and asks Alison to go with him to see her. But Alison, avoiding an emotional moment with Jimmy, chooses to go to church with Helena instead. Jimmy sits down, devastated.

Scene 2 - Colonel Redfern Arrives: The next afternoon, Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, comes to take Alison home. He is a polite, reflective man who feels out of place in modern Britain. He admits he and his wife interfered too much in Alison's marriage. He also misses the certainty of the old days in India. He also finds the new world confusing.

Alison says that her leaving will hurt Jimmy. But she feels she must. She packs her things. She takes her toy squirrel from the "bear and squirrel" game, but leaves the wooden cat behind. She gives a farewell letter to Cliff. In the letter, she explains why she is leaving. Cliff blames Helena for pushing Alison away. After Alison leaves, Jimmy returns. He has just had a near accident with Colonel Redfern's car. He is tense. He reads Alison's letter and is furious. Helena then tells Jimmy that Alison is pregnant. Jimmy says it makes no difference to him. In anger, he insults Helena, but she slaps him. Immediately after, in a surprising twist, they kiss passionately. It begins a physical relationship between them.

Act Three - Scene 1

Helena Living with Jimmy: Several months have passed. The attic flat looks almost exactly the same as in Act One. But now the person ironing clothes is Helena, not Alison. She has become Jimmy's lover. Jimmy and Cliff are sitting together reading the Sunday papers, just like before. Their conversations are still full of teasing and jokes. But Jimmy also criticizes Helena's religious faith. There is a sense that Jimmy's life has not really changed. Only the woman in his life has changed.

Meanwhile, Cliff announces he is moving out to start his own life. Jimmy tries to hide his feelings, but it's clear he will miss him. Cliff and Helena share a warm, friendly goodbye with each other. Jimmy tells Cliff he values him more than any other woman. It shows the depth of their friendship. When Cliff leaves, Jimmy and Helena continue their usual domestic routine. But Helena begins to feel uneasy about their relationship. She is starting to question whether living with Jimmy is right. She thinks she helped break up his marriage to Alison.

Scene 2 - Alison Returns: While Helena was living in this state of doubt and conflict, Alison unexpectedly arrived at the flat. She looks pale, weak, and emotionally drained. Helena is surprised to see her. The two women talk privately. Alison tells Helena that she has suffered a miscarriage and lost her baby. She says the experience has changed her. Now, she truly understands the kind of deep pain Jimmy often spoke about. She admits she stayed away because she was afraid to face him after leaving. But now, she feels, she is ready to face him.

Helena listens attentively to her words. She becomes deeply ashamed. She says her relationship with Jimmy is wrong and immoral. She decides to leave immediately. She is telling

Alison and Jimmy goodbye. Jimmy comes in playing his trumpet loudly. He is not yet aware of what has happened. Helena tells him she is leaving. Jimmy reacts with mockery, but Alison stays silent. After Helena exits, Jimmy and Alison are left alone.

At first, Jimmy is cold and bitter. But Alison quietly tells him about losing the baby. Alison tells him that Jimmy wanted Alison to suffer. She suffered a lot both physically and mentally after losing her child. Now, Jimmy can understand her pain. Jimmy softens. He says now she knows what it's like to lose something you love, just as he lost his father. Jimmy feels that now they are equal in knowing the pain of losing a loved one. Their conversation grows gentler. They turn to their old private "bear and squirrel" game. The game symbolizes a fantasy world where they can hide from the cruelty of real life. They hold each other tenderly.

In this way, the play ends with a bittersweet scene. Jimmy and Alison have reunited. But the audience is left unsure whether this cycle of anger and hurt will truly end.