“Picking Daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth”

Class, Intellect, and Virility in John Osborne’s *Look Back In Anger*

John A. Stephenson

Humanities Commons @johnastephenson

Twitter johnasteph12

ORCID 0000-0001-9400-9003

Paper originally submitted to ENGL S-163c British, Irish, and Postcolonial Drama (Graduate credit), Harvard University Extension School, 7 August 2009

“When he stops being angry—or when he lets us in on what he is angry about—he may write a very good play.” Reviewing the first performance of John Osborne’s *Look Back In Anger* in May 1956, *Evening Standard* columnist Milton Shulman directed his criticism equally at protagonist Jimmy Porter’s “self-pitying snivel”, his creator, and the “post-war generation of under-thirties” as a whole (Heilpern, 41). Whether Shulman genuinely regarded Jimmy, Osborne, and British youth of one mind, or merely extrapolated from Jimmy’s diatribes, he was not alone in debating the extent to which Osborne and his work represented the younger generation’s outlook. T. C. Worsley declared in the *New Statesman* “If you are young, it will speak for you. If you are middle-aged, it will tell you what the young are feeling.” (53), whilst Stephen Williams of the *Evening News* was “dismayed to learn that John Osborne … sincerely believes his insufferable ‘hero’ to be representative of the younger generation.” (43). The situating of *Look Back in Anger* as both a turning point in British theatre and manifestation of cultural discontent as noted by John Russell Taylor in his introduction to the *Casebook* on the play (11) prompts analysis of the play’s social resonances along with its overlying and intersecting textual, biographical, and performance aspects. I shall argue that the obvious class conflict that characterizes *Look Back in Anger* is inseparable from and complicated by considerations of education/intellect and masculinity/virility, and relatedly that Osborne’s own location as an “Angry Young Man” intertwines with the work’s manifestations as text and performance. Proceeding with a
brief overview of post-World War II British society and changing patterns of education that served to complicate class-based distinctions, I shall discuss Jimmy Porter’s contradictory, multi-directional assault on his milieu as revealed in the play. Finally, correspondences between Osborne’s own situation, the text, and two dramatic portrayals of Jimmy—by Richard Burton in 1959 and Kenneth Branagh in 1989—will provide overlay to the textual and social analysis, demonstrating the interplay of class, intellect, and virility that churns within and around Look Back in Anger.

Robert Hewison’s survey of post-war British culture In Anger describes the state of mental fatigue following the war years and a corresponding retreat into comforting nostalgia and political dormancy (2, 28). The privations of rationing and general economic hardship coupled with the failure of the Labour government to realize meaningful social reform resulted in a demoralized populace and a degree of cultural stagnation (3–5). Britain’s retreat from empire after the Second World War driven by economic necessity, nationalist movements in the colonized territories, and the anti-colonial stance of the United States forced the British to acknowledge their diminished status as a world power (Roberts, 466). Hewison notes that in 1956, six months after the debut of Osborne’s Look Back in Anger, the disastrous Anglo-French invasion of Egypt constituted a symbolic culmination of this awareness (127). A military coup in Egypt led by Gamal Abdel Nasser increased tensions in the Middle East, eventually resulting in the seizure of the commercially vital Suez Canal. The British and French covertly joined the Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 until pressured into a ceasefire by the United States. This failed attempt to reassert imperial domination humiliated the British and damaged both the country’s reputation and its relationship with America (Roberts, 543–46). According to Hewison, whilst the majority of Britons supported their government’s stance, Suez provided a focus for the grievances of the intellectual left, particularly given anxieties surrounding the nuclear-armed Cold War. However, the Soviet Union’s suppression of the popular uprising in Hungary taking place at the same time as Suez contributed to the disillusionment of the British left and the growth of anti-ideological resentment which came to characterize the phenomenon of the angry young man (128–29). This loose term popularized by the media and applied to Osborne and other socially discontent writers of the period approximates the mood or personality of both these authors and their characters (141).

In the first half of the twentieth century, the development of the Welfare State in Britain had ameliorated poverty and inequality to some extent, but limited social mobility and access to education in particular continued to restrict opportunity for the less privileged. Whilst the growth of industry and commerce had allowed the lower class entrepreneur to “make good” economically, social and cultural distinctions barred access to the elite strata of society. In large part, the education system constituted the means of channelling individuals into their appropriate echelon. Enrollment in one of the more desirable public schools along with family background or other social connections facilitated acceptance at the Oxbridge universities (Oxford and Cambridge) that in turn effectively governed a position in the “Establishment.” Britain’s other universities, popularly known as “Redbrick” enjoyed neither the pedigree nor prestige of the Ancients, and were largely populated by the state schools. Founded at the height of the industrial era in the northern manufacturing towns of Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham (Bristol being the exception), these more pragmatically focused institutions educated those middle class professionals destined to occupy the ranks immediately below the country’s leadership. Access to higher education required sufficient financial means however, and it was not until the passing of the 1944 Butler Education Act that able students
from less advantageous backgrounds attended universities in significant numbers. As Robert Hewison notes, the post-war years saw a rapid increase in the university population and the proliferation of new institutions of learning fueled by the provision of grants to the children of lower middle- and working-class families (39). This widening of opportunity ostensibly lessened class distinctions, but as Leslie Paul mentions in his 1965 retrospective on the “angry decade”, the “poor, but clever boy from the back streets” graduating from a Redbrick or Plateglass university found that British society remained far from a meritocracy (345). Paul identifies the “graduate social problem” described in Morton Kroll’s article on the politics of the angry young man as experienced by those “educated for roles which transcend their class identity” (556). Individuals elevated from lowly origins by means of subsidized education were unable to relate to the culture of the ruling class, being both shunned by the “legitimate” incumbents and at odds with consciousness of their own background. More practically, career opportunities, particularly in areas of power and influence, continued to depend largely upon a respectable upbringing and an Oxbridge education. This frustrated, resentful barbarian at the gates of upper class society constitutes the angry young man persona that Jimmy Porter and to some extent, John Osborne embody.

Superficially, Look Back in Anger is a dramatic rendering of domestic class conflict. Jimmy Porter, a young graduate of indeterminate middle class origins, has rather failed to live up to the promise of his university education and works on a sweet stall in a provincial Midlands town. The shabby attic flat that he occupies with his socially superior wife Alison, and humble working class friend Cliff provides the arena for his ceaseless rants at upper class privilege. Having “married up”, Jimmy is particularly resentful of Alison’s disapproving family and vents his fury on his long-suffering, emotionally exhausted wife and her former social circle, particularly his “natural enemy” Helena, whom he installs as Alison’s temporary replacement after she leaves him. As described above, the interrelation of class and education is a defining component of the angry young man persona and it is frequently difficult to separate the two in the play’s narrative. Jimmy directs his scorn equally at the cultured, educated, but intellectually feeble upper class (Alison, her family, and friends) and the ignorant, uneducated, insufferable lower class (Cliff). The axis of class conflict is thus immediately problematic, and it is necessary to attempt to determine Jimmy’s own (self) location regarding class and education before analyzing his invectives further. Explaining their friendship to Alison, Cliff appears to embrace Jimmy as a working class equal despite his patently middle class origins “We both come from working people, if you like. Oh I know some of his mother’s relatives are pretty posh, but he hates them as much as he hates yours. … Anyway, he gets on with me because I’m common.” (Osborne, 29–30). When it suits his purpose Jimmy presents himself as a wronged working class hero, especially in tirades against his despised mother in law “Threatened with me, a young man without money, background or even looks, she’d bellow like a rhinoceros in labour” (59). His occupation, whether a deliberate rejection of middle class professions or simple lack of achievement, also renders him de facto laboring class. As Alison’s father Colonel Redfern remarks, “It does seem an extraordinary thing for an educated young man to be occupying himself with. Why should he want to do that, of all things? I’ve always thought he must be quite clever in his way” (79). The Colonel, milder than his “overfed, overprivileged” wife (81) nevertheless positions Jimmy in a class hierarchy, his education raising him above the working class but below the “properly schooled” upper classes. Whilst situating himself as intellectually superior, Jimmy derides his education, or rather the education available to his class. Alison corrects Helena’s
implied Oxbridge usage “No—left. I don’t think one ‘comes down’ from Jimmy’s university. According to him, it’s not even red brick, but white tile” (47). Conceivably, Jimmy distorts the already pejorative pink tile to suggest that his university enjoyed all the prestige of a public lavatory. As we shall see, Jimmy frequently couches his contempt for others’ intellectual laziness in class terms, but the very lack of vigor he perceives in the upper class introduces an additional dimension of masculinity or virility.

Despite finding himself adrift in the substrata of the nebulous middle class, Jimmy exercises his anger within a rigidly delineated hierarchy. Perusing the Sunday newspapers, which he also stratifies into “dirty” and “posh” (93), he gleefully pounces upon the Bishop of Bromley’s denial of “the difference of class distinctions … persistently and wickedly fostered by—the working classes” (7). For Jimmy, class is indelible and almost physiological—he fancifully pictures Cliff’s blood as “like cochineal, ever so common” whilst Helena’s would be “much better—pale Cambridge blue, I imagine” (95). The privileged classes are “Militant, arrogant and full of malice. Or vague” (14), whereas according to Alison, he romanticizes his childhood friend’s mother Mrs Tanner—who is “[w]hat Jimmy insists on calling working class” (79)—“principally because she’s been poor almost all her life, and she’s frankly ignorant” (52). Jimmy’s self-definition as a barbarian invader plundering the homes of the well-bred (49) anchors him in the unambiguously underprivileged working class and sidesteps the contradictions encountered by the educated but socially mediocre emerging middle class. This confrontational, invigorating strategy, deliciously encapsulated in Jimmy and Cliff’s comic musical turn “Don’t be afraid to sleep with your sweetheart / Just because she’s better than you” (100–101), is derailed by Jimmy’s contradictory attitudes to intellect and masculinity, however.

Jimmy despises his wife’s education in terms of class privilege, yet derides her lack of mental vigor, equating the perceived idleness of the wealthy with intellectual laziness: “She hasn’t had a thought for years!” (4). In contrast, Jimmy mocks Cliff for his ignorance and lack of culture, abandoning his solidarity with the working class. Impatiently waiting for the newspaper, Jimmy suggests “I’ll have to write and ask them to put hyphens in between the syllables for you” (96). He adroitly launches attacks up and down the social hierarchy from the vantage of the “worthily educated”, simultaneously ridiculing both the assumed limitations of Cliff’s vocabulary and Alison’s snobbish social display of her educated status. Describing Alison and her brother Nigel as “sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous” (16) and thus demonstrating his own command of language, he asks Cliff if he can define “pusillanimous”. Picking up the dictionary to enlighten him, Jimmy snipes “I don’t have to tell her—she knows. In fact, if my pronunciation is at fault, she’ll probably wait for a suitably public moment to correct it” (17). In practice, Jimmy has contempt for the lowbrow, uncultured “lump of dough” (11) Cliff—the un-romanticized representative of the working class with whom he shares his living space. Yet, intellectually he has little in common with the cultured upper classes, which he regards as lacking in mental vitality and unwilling to think critically or challenge the status quo—Nigel apparently “seeks sanctuary in his own stupidity” (15). Alison’s friends are “a very intellectual set” but “all sit around with their mental hands on each other’s knees discussing sex as if it were the Art of Fugue” (56). Thus at its core, Jimmy’s hatred is fired by the absence of intellectual virility that he perceives in others, an inability or unwillingness to “raise themselves out of their delicious sloth” (8–9). “Nobody” reads Priestley’s piece in the newspaper except him, “nobody can be bothered” (8). He has acquired a university education even when class expectations should deny him, and furthermore, he
has not squandered this privilege in pseudo-cultured cocktail party chatter as the indolent rich do. Jimmy merely longs for “a little ordinary human enthusiasm … to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! I’m alive! I’ve an idea” (9). This perceived absence of anger, youth, and manliness intersecting class and educational disparities prompts an examination of Jimmy’s own expressions of masculinity.

The play’s supporting characters frequently describe Jimmy in hyper-masculine terms: as a “savage” (51), a “horrible old bear” (31), going “into battle with his axe swinging round his head” (51). Helena criticizes his lack of emotional reserve, calling him a “soul stripped to the waist” (87), but her words also evoke images of masculine physicality and the manual laborer. Jimmy’s own expressions of masculinity often exhibit aspects of class and intellect—he warns Helena “I hope you won’t make the mistake of thinking for one moment that I am a gentleman. … I’ve no public school scruples about hitting girls.” (68). Love is analogous to hard, physical labor, unsuited to the genteel classes and the intellectually effete: “You can’t fall into it like a soft job, without dirtying up your hands. It takes muscle and guts” (115). However, his raw emotion when not raging at full force can render him vulnerable and feminized, though he expresses this in yet another attack on his “mean and stupid and crazy” wife: “Is it me, standing here like a hysterical girl, hardly able to get my words out?” (71). The facets of class, intellect, and vigor characterizing Jimmy’s anger converge when he attempts to provoke Helena soon after her arrival: “I may write a book about us all. … And it won’t be recollected in tranquillity either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth, It’ll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood.” (63). Concurrently, Jimmy demeans polite, upper middle class culture as effeminate, anaemic, and inauthentic, whilst situating his own intellect in diametric opposition.

I have argued that simple class antagonism is an insufficient description of Jimmy Porter’s resentment in *Look Back in Anger*, and that education/intellect and masculinity/vigor are inseparable constituents of his emotional attitude. At a meta-textual level, I now consider interactions between Osborne’s own location in 1950s British society, stage directions and descriptions within the play with regard to Jimmy as conceived by Osborne, and manifestations of the play and its protagonist as performance.

In his 2006 biography of the playwright, John Heilpern identifies a pivotal moment in Osborne’s early life. He had hoped to attend Oxford, but teachers at his minor public school, Belmont College, haughtily dismissed these unrealistic aspirations: “He was bright enough to go on to university, and he was ambitious. But the headmaster only looked amused at his Oxford hopes, wincing at his presumption.” (68). Heilpern also remarks that the young Osborne affected an upper class accent to disguise his lower class background—the school was “many rigorous middle-class steps up from the cheerless local schools” that he had attended previously, and that he was eventually expelled after striking the headmaster, whose affected upper class pronunciation he despised (65). The press labelled Osborne an “angry young man” following the use of the phrase in the play’s publicity, and it is tempting to view him as a sort of “meta-Jimmy” challenging the British cultural elite with the theatrical bombshell of *Look Back in Anger*. Certainly, there was considerable uproar from the theatrical establishment, art critic Harold Nicholson of the *Times* declaring that “The dandies of the new generation will have dirty fingernails” (173). More interesting though is John Russell Taylor’s observation that dramatic portrayals of Jimmy deviated from Osborne’s conscious construction of
Jimmy Porter as described and directed in the text (Taylor, 79). For Taylor, criticism of Jimmy is implicit in the stage directions, and he appears as a “spoilt, difficult child” (80). Osborne’s opening outline of Jimmy’s character describes him as “alienat[ing] the sensitive and insensitive alike”, exhibiting “[b]listering honesty, or apparent honesty” which “makes few friends”, and “sensitive to the point of vulgarity” or “merely a loudmouth” (Osborne, 2). Throughout the text, stage directions reveal the calculating, manipulative aspect of Jimmy’s outbursts: “Jimmy is rather shakily triumphant. He cannot allow himself to look at either of them to catch their response to his rhetoric” (15), and “He can feel her struggling on the end of his line, and he looks at her rather absently” (63). Osborne does not always depict him as a powerful, masculine, hero of the underprivileged: “His axe-swinging bravado has vanished, and his voice crumples in disabled rage” (70). As Taylor notes, such directions were not evident in performance—Kenneth Haigh (Jimmy in the original 1956 production) and Richard Burton (cast by Osborne in the 1959 film adaptation) were “stocky, substantial, heroic figures rather than the weedy neurotics one might fairly cast in the role” (Taylor, 80). Osborne did not title his play “Look Back in Petulance”, Taylor continues, and to some extent it was necessary to strengthen Jimmy’s character and render him as a highly charismatic figure since he requires an attentive audience both within and outside of the play (81). Whatever Osborne’s conscious intent in the performances with which he was involved, overlap between his own voice and that of Jimmy’s seems inevitable. As the critics of the first performance discerned, the rant of the angry young man in the Midlands attic flat appeared to be synonymous with the rant of the angry young playwright and his fellow young men. If Osborne released a whining, pitiful Jimmy onto the stage, would it belittle his own heroic anger and that of his generation as a whole? Yet the directions stand in the text, suggesting that Osborne as angry young playwright is an unsatisfactory reduction similar that of Jimmy as working-class hero.

Turning to Richard Burton’s portrayal of Jimmy in the 1959 film version of Look Back in Anger (for which Osborne wrote additional dialogue), the actor’s on screen presence is indeed palpable. The opening scene reveals Burton shirtless and hirsute, embodying Helena’s description of Jimmy as a “soul stripped to the waist”. In his delivery of Jimmy’s irritated outburst at the Sunday church bells: “Wrap it up, will you? Stop ringing those bells! There’s somebody going crazy in here!” (Osborne, 21), Burton braces his whole body in the window frame, dominating the shot and communicating Jimmy’s fury both verbally and kinetically (Figure 1). Burton expresses his aggressive physicality unambiguously throughout the film—his boisterous wrestling with the docile Cliff (at one point launching himself aerially across the table), his thunderous, rage-filled, yet exquisitely mellifluous speech that descends at times to an icy whisper. The film score, a belligerent, discordant jazz arms Burton’s Jimmy with an additional weapon—though seen in mere silhouette, his bodily presence and squawking trumpet overshadow the conversation between Alison and Helena, who exclaims “It’s almost as if he wanted to kill someone with it. And me in particular.” (44, Figure 2). Even when not delivering one of Jimmy’s interminable tirades, Burton dominates and challenges the other characters with the force of his physicality, obstructing movement by placing himself in close proximity and withering his victims with a venomous, unblinking gaze. Burton makes his very breathing audible, and punctuates his speech with painfully tense pauses that grip the attention and refuse to release it. In scenes that mirror their successive situations of domination, Alison and Helena both display an expression of dread at the unseen Burton heard ascending the stairs. Again, the actor’s presence is tangible even when he is out of shot. Overall, Burton’s brooding, predatory performance delivers a
powerful, magnetic Jimmy Porter of heroic or antiheroic stature. As discussed above, this plays somewhat against Osborne’s stage directions and character descriptions stripping out much of Jimmy’s overly pathetic whimpering. Though Burton certainly plays the role with subtlety—touchingly burying his face in Alison’s lap after referring to himself as “old stock”, he is an undeniably virile Jimmy evoking admiring or horrified awe. The actor delivers Jimmy’s despairing “hysterical girl” line, but looks anything but (Figure 3). Following his attack on Helena as an “evil-minded little virgin” for which he receives a slap in the face, Jimmy, according to Osborne’s directions reacts thusly: “An expression of horror and disbelief floods his face. But it drains away, and all that is left is pain. His hand goes up to his head, and a muffled cry of despair escapes him. Helena tears his hand away, and kisses him passionately, drawing him down beside her” (91). Unsurprisingly, Burton initiates both the kissing and the drawing down.

Figure 1. Richard Burton in Look Back in Anger (1959). Jimmy shouting at church bells.

[Image redacted: Jimmy seen from behind is braced in the window, arms aloft, challenging the noise of the bells head on.]

Figure 2. Richard Burton in Look Back in Anger (1959). Jimmy playing trumpet in background.

[Image redacted: As Alison and Helena converse tensely in the kitchen, Jimmy is seen in silhouette in the window behind them, trumpet aloft.]

Figure 3. Richard Burton in Look Back in Anger (1959). “Is it me, standing here like a hysterical girl, hardly able to get my words out?”

[Image redacted: Glaring and snarling, Burton’s Jimmy dominates the frame in contrast to the sentiment he expresses.]

Richard Burton’s performance in 1959’s Look Back in Anger is a triumphant presentation of “a Jimmy for the angry young man”—a powerful, utterly captivating icon of the ordinary bloke’s disgust at middle class mediocrity. Tellingly, Burton remarked of the film: “I promise you that there isn’t a shred of self-pity in my performance” (Bragg, 125). In his biography of the actor, Melvyn Bragg notes that Burton could see himself in Jimmy, and it is possible that Osborne was unable to resist casting him as a heroic representation of his own residue in the character. Certainly, it is difficult to embrace another Jimmy Porter post-Burton, and Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 television portrayal is at first viewing insufferably pallid. However, the production’s fidelity to the text and aspects of Branagh’s varied delivery make it an interesting counterpoint to Osborne’s realizations of the play.

Branagh’s Jimmy carries himself much less boldly than Burton’s, and he lacks the pugnacious virility that the latter exudes. The actor is always shirted, and his longer hairstyle (true to the Jimmy of
the text) imparts a softer impression to the character. He voices the part with a querulous, irritable rapidity of speech, rising to a pitch tones above Burton’s fluid growl. Physically, there is an abundance of eye-rolling, head-holding, and gesticulation, evoking an almost feminine hysteria that contrasts markedly with Burton’s manly solidity (Figures 4 and 6). The film’s trumpet score is much gentler than the primal, raucous 1959 jazz-era rendition, and we hear but do not see Branagh playing, unlike Burton who appears to employ the instrument as an extension of his vigor. In fact, Branagh emerges almost apologetically disassembling his “non-erect” trumpet following Alison and Helena’s conversation (Figure 5). Though Branagh presents a neurotic, unattractive Jimmy, arguably his performance draws out the manipulative bully described in Osborne’s text. Branagh confronts the audience with a mundane, petty Jimmy, exposing his inflammatory rhetoric for what it really is—a cowardly hectoring of his wife and friends. Jimmy may be howling against class inequality, but he does so only within his own living room and with the women in his life as the representatives of upper class privilege. Branagh’s depiction of Jimmy highlights the bitter futility of the middle class rebel’s anger that permeates the text.

An intriguing feature of Branagh’s performance is his employment of shifts in register and accent. When delivering Jimmy’s proletarian hero diatribes, the actor slides towards the Cockney dialect of the traditional working class Londoner. This affectation emphasizes Jimmy’s need to align with the ordinary folk in opposition to the loathed middle classes. Branagh also utilizes a supercilious “posh” register when mocking Alison and Helena (“Pass Lady Bracknell the cucumber sandwiches, will you?”) or demonstrating his contempt for the “scruffy little beast” Cliff (Osborne 58, 104). Burton employs a similar tone, but the contrast with his rich, cultured voice is less apparent. Branagh arguably gives us a Jimmy for the late twentieth century—less starkly masculine and helplessly subsumed into an amorphous middle class.

**Figure 4. Kenneth Branagh in *Look Back in Anger* (1989). Jimmy shouting at church bells.**

[Image redacted: Jimmy supports himself against the window frame, his hand covering his eyes.]

**Figure 5. Kenneth Branagh in *Look Back in Anger* (1989). Jimmy enters, trumpet in hand.**

[Image redacted: A sheepish-looking Jimmy holds his trumpet defensively in front of him, pointing downward.]

**Figure 6. Kenneth Branagh in *Look Back in Anger* (1989). “Is it me, standing here like a hysterical girl, hardly able to get my words out?”**

[Image redacted: Branagh’s Jimmy wails the line, his hands clasped to his forehead in anguish.]
*Look Back in Anger* then, exhibits a complex intersection of class, intellect, and virility connected and overlaid by authorial and performance influences. Jimmy Porter is neither unambiguously working class nor a hero, yet from the searing rhetoric of Osborne’s text and Richard Burton’s visceral portrayal of the character he emerges as the archetypal angry young man. Contemporary audiences found a hero or villain in Osborne’s virile manifestations of Jimmy, equating the character with his author and the young generation as a whole. Kenneth Branagh’s portrayal thirty years later perhaps reveals the character stripped of this overlay, and Jimmy’s unappealing diminution to a pitiful middle class domestic tyrant.
Michael Beloff’s 1968 book *The Plateglass Universities* employs this term as an alternative to “Pinktile” alluded to by Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger*. Both descriptions refer to the characteristic modern architectural style of the new universities.

The opening verse contains the line “She may have been to Roedean, but to me she’s still a queen”, referring to the prestigious public school for girls. Whether Osborne’s intent or not, the school’s motto “Honour the Worthy” is particularly apt in the context of the play.

**Works Cited**


Richardson, Tony, dir. *Look Back in Anger*. Woodfall Film Productions, Ltd.,1959. DVD.
