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[JAVORČÍKOVÁ, Jana (100%)]

**HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF THE ANGRY YOUNG GENERATION—CONFORMIST REVOLT OF THE 1950s AND 1960s**

At the beginning of the 21st century, the generation of the Angry Young Men seems to be a closed book to a present-day reader who is probably more aware of the endless conflict of good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings* or Harry Potter’s almost Oedipal struggle to know his ancestors. Or is there anything about the British angry young generation of the 1950s that resonates even today? This interpretative-analytical study attempts to bring up the cultural, political and social context of the angry young men and show the relevance of the play *Look Back in Anger* to a present-day-reader.

To understand the phenomenon of the Angry Young Men means to understand post-war Britain, its **political and social life and culture**. The after-war Britain was a conflicted place. On one hand, the country still felt what L. P. Hartley calls the ‟hangover of the war”—shock from bombarded towns but also shattered ideals. On the other hand, a certain optimism in the society was secured by the fact that the post-war reconstruction of the country provided many labour opportunities, especially in the field of construction. In politics, the Labour Party, represented by Clement Atlee, got to power[[1]](#footnote-1). In the elections in 1945 they earned 47.8 per cent of the vote and even increased their popularity in the elections in 1950 and 1951 (Marwick, p. 15). The Labour Party stood for a strong social program, high taxation and state intervention into economics. By these the Labourists tried to build the so called '**Welfare State**', i.e. a state with strong social certainties, such as unemployment grants, maternity leaves, etc. Therefore, the overall atmosphere of the 1950s, as K. Kumar points out, had a mixed flavour of pessimism and optimism, resignation and hope (Kumar, pp. 20-22).

Education experienced dramatic changes as well. In 1944 a Conservative politician, Home Secretary and later the President of the Board of Education, Richard Austen Butler (1902-1982), introduced an act, later called the **Butler Education Act** which ‟guaranteed (and made compulsory) free secondary education to everyone up to the age of fifteen” (Kumar, p. 23). Many critics call Butler’s reform ‟major educational reform” (Kumar, p. 23) as it for the first time in the British history enabled lower-class students and women to study at high schools and later at universities. The law provided poor students with financial support that helped them to pay for their education (Neville, p. 265). Thus, for the first time in history, working class students got a chance to study at high schools and a ticket to a better paid job. Several scholars speak about a '**status revolution**'—the working class by the means of education approximated to higher classes and generally discrepancies between classes became less dramatic.

As a result of the Butler Act there emerged an urgent need for more educational institutions. The already existing seats of higher education, Oxford and Cambridge, were too elitist and were not sufficient for the new need. Therefore, many new universities and higher-level schools were built. As many of them were built of red bricks, they were nicknamed the ‟**redbrick universities**”[[2]](#footnote-2) in distinction from Oxbridge, built mostly of white stones (the only exception to this is the Keble College in Oxford, which is also built of red bricks). The phenomenon of 'redbrick universities', however, also served as a cultural symbol—it symbolized mass education, quickly gained degrees and generally a kind of lower class, inflated education.

The lower standard of education at redbrick universities even became the target of many humourists. A recognized present-day British humourist David Lodge (b. 1935), for example, describes the shabbiness of redbrick universities in his phenomenal campus novel *Small World* (1984): ‟...The conferees had, by that time, acquainted themselves with the accommodation provided in one of the University’s halls of residence, a building hastily erected in 1969, at the height of the boom in higher education, and now, only ten years later, looking much worse for wear.” (Lodge, 1984, p. 3). Another famous novelist who satirized the phenomenon of redbrick universities was Kingsley Amis.

Even though the Butler Education Act seems a positive and democratic step in British education, it was actually a mixed blessing for the underprivileged class. After graduation there were few white collar jobs available, and thus many young people could not find appropriate jobs and, paradoxically, could not move upwardly. Thus, as K. Kumar points out, ‟…the inequalities of class, and the differential structuring of opportunities, remain marked” (Kumar, p. 45). The Butler law product was an overqualified and underestimated young person. As these problems and the following frustration and anger resonated through the whole generation of young people, many literary scholars labelled them the Angry Young Men.

The generation of Angry Young Men was given voice when writers and dramatists verbalized their emotions on the stage or in their novels. The term the ‟**Angry Young Men**” was coined in 1951 by a recognized literary critic, Leslie Paul, in his autobiography entitled *Angry Young Men* (Holloway, p. 70; Cuddon, p. 40). However, the autobiography did not earn much reputation until the premiere of John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* on May 8, 1956. The play was immensely popular and the term Angry Young Men was used for both the generation of writers writing about social themes and the characters in their novels and plays. However, as J. A. Cuddon points out, the term has become a cliché and ‟…is now hardly ever used” (Cuddon, p. 40).

**Who is an Angry Young Man?** He is an unintended product of the Butler educational law, a young intellectual, most likely a man with a university degree (such as Jim Porter in *Look Back in Anger* or Charles Lumley in *Hurry on Down*), who is either unemployed, between jobs or employed in a low-paid, unsatisfactory job. An Angry Young Man is also angry and frustrated and s/he sees the government or the establishment as the core of the problem. However, unlike the parallel movement in the USA, the Beat Generation, rebelling against authorities and American politics, the Angry Young Men were conformists—they did not take any action to change their life or their current *status quo*. Angry Young Men in literature are often **anti-heroes**[[3]](#footnote-3)—there is nothing heroic, admirable or worthy about them. On the contrary, they are often naive or downright stupid, cowardly, or lazy underdogs.

**Selected representatives of the 'Angry Young Era':**

Many authors were inspired by this mood of frustration which echoed in the British/English society of the 1950s—dramatist John Osborne (born 1929—died 1994), novelists John Braine (born 1922— died 1986), John Wain (born 1925— died 1994), Brendan Behan (born 1925— died 1964), Robert Bolt (born 1925— died 1995), Bernard Kops (born 1926), John Arden (born 1930) and Arnold Wesker (born 1932) as well as Alan Sillitoe (born 1928) and Kingsley Amis (born 1922— died 1995).

The first and the most recognized was probably **John Osborne**. He was born on December 12, 1929 in London. He received very little education and most of what he had learnt about drama was during his career of an amateur playwright and actor. Therefore, many critics criticized in his plays the lack of dramatic qualities, enormously long monologues, lack of dramatic action, and flatness of characters (Neville, p. 266; Pašteka, p. 383). Nevertheless, Osborne wrote several plays such as *Luther* and *Plays for England* in 1962, *Inadmissible Evidence* in 1964and *A Patriot for Me* in 1965, and the most recognized, *Look Back in Anger.* Many critics called him the speaker or the prophet for the young generation (Neville, p. 266; Hatlen, p. 489).

*Look Back in Anger* is a drama in three acts. The genre of the play is difficult to decode—it bears features of a social drama as well as of a psychological drama or what T. L. Hatlen calls the ***drame****—*a play which is serious in its content but lacks a universal message (Hatlen, p. 34). The play can also be classified as a '**kitchen sink drama**'—this term was coined by Arnold Wesker and is connected with his play *The Kitchen* (1957). The kitchen sink drama[[4]](#footnote-4) is an opposition of the **classic Greek tragedy**. Unlike in Greek tragedy, there is no hero, neither heroic struggle nor great universal legacy. The characters are usually spouses, or lovers and their partners, i. e. common people with their petty problems and troubles. The nature of the conflict in kitchen sink drama is very often banal, almost trivial—money, children and relationships. Needless to say, the setting of kitchen sink drama is usually the kitchen.

*Look Back in Anger* is set in a shabby and cheap one-room attic apartment in a large Midland town. There are two protagonists in the play—Jim Porter, a university graduate, currently working in a candy stand and his wife, Alison, born to the upper class family of Colonel Redfern. Other characters include Jim’s friend Cliff Lewis and Alison’s friend and actress Helena Charles. The play opens on an early Sunday evening in April. Alison is ironing; Cliff and Jim are reading the newspapers. Jim seems irritated by movie reviews in the newspapers and he shouts his discontent out. His anger spreads to his wife’s ironing and Cliff’s laziness, and the spectator slowly understands it is the Sunday routine Jim probably hates most. In his anger and rage he is blind—for example, he starts a semi-serious fight with Cliff and unintentionally hurts his wife. After he leaves without apology, Alison reveals to Cliff that she is pregnant. In the second act, Alison leaves Jim and he shares the apartment with Alison’s friend Helen. Even though Helen is no victim-type, she tolerates Jim’s escapades and soon finds herself ironing his shirts in an ironic *déja vu* of the first act. At the end of the play, after much hesitation, Alison returns back to Jim and they settle in some kind of parody of a harmonious relationship.

To understand the theme of the play means to understand who Jim Porter is and what he protests against. As we have mentioned already, Jim Porter is a university graduate, presumably a former student of humanities as his rich Latin and Greek origin vocabulary indicates. He calls his wife ‟sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous” (Osborne, 1957, p. 16) and thus unwillingly reveals his education even though he otherwise likes to pretend to be an ignorant, uneducated guy. Unfortunately, Jim, as a product of the Butler Act cannot find an appropriate job where he could use his verbal talent and outspokenness, such as in advertising, media or the public relations sphere. That is perhaps why he ends up trapped in a low-paid and low-status job, which he finds both unfair and humiliating.

We assume, however, that the key to understanding the play for a present-day-reader is Jim’s relationship to his wife and her family. Alison was born to the relatively wealthy, upper class family of Colonel Redfern and spent a substantial part of her life in India. However, the family had to return from India, presumably shortly before or after 1947 when India gained independence. Colonel Redfern, his wife and their son Nigel personify to Jim the hated upper class—and everything he hates about it. In one of his long monologues Jim poisonously says:

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| I hate to admit it but I think I can understand how her [Alison’s] Daddy must have felt when he came back from India, after all those years away. The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world pretty tempting. All homemade cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney, too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you’ve no world of your own, it’s rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else’s. (Osborne, 1957, p. 11). |

This short extract from a much longer monologue summarizes almost everything Jim consciously or subconsciously connects with the hated upper class. First of all, Jim loathed the stereotype, symbolized by ‟…all homemade cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms” and the repetition, symbolized by the ‟...sameness of the picture”. In a conversation with Cliff Jim reveals more about these emotions:

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| JIM: | ‟God, how I hate Sundays! It’s always so depressing, always the same. We never seem to get any further, do we? Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing. A few more hours, and another week gone. Our youth is slipping away. Do you know that?” (Osborne, 1957, p. 8). |

It is obvious that what Jim lacked was an **authentic, committed life**, filled with strong emotions or action rather than domestic, settled images and games to pass time. The image of ‟youth slipping away”, a life wasted instead of lived is what obsessively haunts Jim. Another thing Jim hates is tradition, symbolized by ‟home-made cakes” but also ‟crisp linen” and also tea at five and well-ironed shirts; things Jim does not value nor wishes to preserve and yet they irritate him beyond belief.

Apparently, what also disturbed Jim was the image of the idle rich who during the ‟long days in the sun” do not have much on their plate but ‟slim volumes of verse” and ‟croquet”. That picture might have been especially annoying to Jim who had to work all day in the job of a shop assistant in a candy stall to earn at least some money. Thirdly, Jim’s monologue accentuates his content for old-fashioned patriotism and gentlemanliness and a certain smoothness, symbolized by ‟bright uniforms”. Patriotism is one of emotions Jim certainly cannot feel as the establishment is the essence of his problems. On the other hand, gentlemanliness was symbolized by Jim’s remark about the ‟old Edwardian brigade”[[5]](#footnote-5). Edward was a British ruler who symbolized the old-fashioned Britishness which seemed to be disappearing in the 20th century.

Finally, Jim cannot stand the image of an upper class harmonious household symbolized by the ironically childish title ‟Daddy”. He probably understands any long-term relationship as a trap leading to repetition and routine. That is perhaps why he breaks almost every intimate moment with his wife by a brutal or tactless remark. Jim also hates romance, symbolized by ‟slim volumes of verse and also ‟a romantic picture”, which Jim treats in a mocking way and ads, ‟...phoney, too. It must have rained sometimes”. That shows Jim’s awareness of anything idealized any fake kitsch or cliché.

In the monologue, Jim even admits sharing some emotions with Alison’s father when he says ‟I hate to admit it but I think I can understand how her Daddy must have felt when he came back from India, after all those years away”—the feeling of loss or not having access to the undeserved advantages and pleasures of the upper class, i. e. of people who did not have to earn what they have but effortlessly inherited it. Alison’s brother Nigel for Jim also represents the inequality of opportunities. Jim describes him mockingly as a ‟straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst” (Osborne, 1957, p. 14) and further says about Nigel:

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| JIM: | He’s a big chap. Well, you’ve never heard so many well-bred commonplaces come from beneath the same bowler hat. The Platitude from Outer Space—that’s brother Nigel. He’ll end up in the Cabinet one day, make no mistake. But somewhere at the back of that mind is the vague knowledge that he and his pals have been plundering and fooling everybody for generations. (Osborne, 1957, p. 14). |

Nigel for Jim symbolizes a smooth and effortless way to success, something that Jim, a child of a working class father, has never experienced himself.

Alison, thus, has a very uneasy position in her relationship to Jim. On one hand, Jim loves her as a woman, as several soft moments reveal. On the other hand he hates her for her ancestry and upper class origin as a symbol of his own unfulfilled life. As a result of his conflicted emotions Jim humiliates her, shouts at her and provokes her. He even says. ‟If only something—something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! [...] If you could have a child and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognizable human face emerge from that little mass of India rubber and wrinkles. [...] Please—if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognizable human being yourself. But I doubt it.” (Osborne, 1957, p. 39). Thus, Jim desires Alison, personifying the upper class, to suffer the same feeling of deprivation as he does and become ‟a human being”, to empathize with him, to understand him.

Jim’s protest is thus multi-layered: on one hand he protests against social injustice when young, talented people do not have a chance for appropriate jobs. On the personal level, he also protests against the stereotype and monotony of the life of the lower middle class—boring, uneventful Sundays, repetitive movie reviews, and the routine of ironing and drinking tea. He hates such a conformist life ‟sipping away” and yet that is exactly the way he lives it, regardless of his choleric outbursts. Not even once does he try to write a better movie review than the one he is discontent with; he does not even try anymore to find a better job. He is paralyzed—he never actually takes any action to change what he dislikes. Thus, his revolt is toothless, unproductive. It is a revolt of a **conformist** who protests vigorously against conformism.

The play *Look Back in Anger* also looks into other issues, such as a woman’s protest, presumably inspired by the post-war feminist movement. By marriage under her standard, Alison loses her upper class status. Even though she tries to preserve good relationships with her mother (she writes her letters), by her marriage she burned the bridges back to the upper class. As marriage out of one’s social class was almost in all societies a kind of social taboo, Alison is in her silent revolt much more revolutionary than Jim’s loud outbursts.

The play *Look Back in Anger* was very popular during the 1950s; not only in England but also in the former pro-soviet 'eastern bloc countries'. As early as in 1964 it was translated in Slovak by Karol Dlouhý and published in the anthology *Modern World Drama* (*Moderná svetová dráma*, Nemsilová, E. (ed.), 1964) as a representative piece of the period. Another volume of the anthology entitled *Modern English Drama* presents the translation of Osborne’s other play *Inadmissible Evidence* (*Neprípustný dôkaz,* 1970;translated by Eugen Klinger)*.*

When asked about his motivation to write the play, John Osborne replied, ‟...I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling. They can think afterwards.” [4]. It is a fact that the mercurial emotions of the play resonate even today as the recent performance of the play on Broadway proves. And why should we let Jim’s anger spread to us? Because, as a literary critics replies, ‟To become angry is to care” [5].

**Legacy of the play:** How can the play *Look Back in Anger* help the present-day spectator at the beginning of a new millennium understand the world better? Is there anything universal about the play or is it just a dated report of a long-gone period of disappointment? The unemployment rate in many countries that have recently joined the EU or the ratio of those who seek better employment and payment overseas proves that unemployment is still a critical issue nowadays. Even though the class problem is not so evident in our society, many young graduates seek employment in vain due to many economic, political or personal barriers. John Osborne’s play shows a negative example of how not to deal with these problems. It is a warning to look back in anger and to check whether one’s anger hits the right spot or just burns everything around.

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1. The Labour Party is the main opposition to the Conservative Party since the 1920s. It first got to power in 1924 and 1929-31, then formed a “war-time coalition” in 1941-45 and became a majority government under Clement Atlee in 1945-1951. The Labourists again got to power under Harold Wilson in 1964-1970 and in 1974-1979. [1]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term **'redbrick universities'** was coined by a professor of Spanish Edgar Allison Peers (pseudonym Bruce Truscot) at the University of Liverpool to describe the type of civic universities that admited a versatile student body and concentrated on “teaching real world skills, often engineering”. The term originally referred to six civic universities, built during the Victorian era. The present-day title refers to universities built between 1850 and 1960. [2]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to J. A. Cuddon, an **anti-hero** is a 'non-hero' or “...the antithesis of a hero of the old-fashioned kind who was capable of heroic deeds, who was dashing, strong, brave and resourceful”. An anti-hero is “...incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, cack-handed, stupid, bufoonish...” Some examples of anti-heroes include the title characters in *Don Quixote* (1605), *Tristram Shandy* (1760-70), *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1920-23), or Charles Lumley in John Wain’s *Hury on Down* (1953), Jim Dixon in Kingley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* (1954) and Yossarian in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (Cuddon, pp. 42-43). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to J. A. Cuddon, the term kitchen sink drama “...became popular in Great Britain in the middle and late 1950s. Often used derogatorily, it applied to plays which, in a realistic fashion, showed aspects of working-class life at the time” (Cuddon, p. 444). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. King Edward VII (Albert Edward; 1841-1910) was the King of the United Kingdom from 1901 to his death in 1910. His reign was named the “Edwardian period“ and brought up many dramatic changes in the British society, such as the rise of the socialist and Labour movements. Edward VII received some criticism for his “apparent pursuit of self-indulging pleasure” as he often took extravagant and costly holidays in Biaritz and Marienbad [3]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)