

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 4

SUBJECT: Literature-in-English
TOPIC: Non-African Drama: "Look Back in Anger" by John Osborne
CLASS: SS1
WEEK: 4

MAJOR AND MINOR CHARACTERS

Jimmy Porter: Alison's husband
Alison Porter: Jimmy's wife
Cliff Lewis: Jimmy's friend and colleague
Helena: Alison's best friend
Colonel Redfern: Alison's father
Hugh Tanner: Jimmy's friend
Mrs Tanner: Hugh's mother

SUMMARY OF THE PLOT

The play is set in a one-room apartment at the top of an old Victorian house. When the curtain rises, we see Jimmy Porter and Cliff Lewis, seated opposite sides of the stage reading newspapers. Jimmy is smoking a pipe. A tattered stuffed bear and squirrel sit on a chest of drawers at the end of a double bed, which takes up most of the back wall. The furniture is simple and somewhat shabby.

The narrative is focused on a love triangle between an angry working-class and university-educated young man, Jimmy Porter, his wealthier wife, Alison Porter, and his wife's best friend, Helena. It is heavily based on Osborne's unhappy marriage. Jimmy and Alison share their apartment with Cliff Lewis, a young working-class man who is best friends with Jimmy. These friends both come from a working-class background, though; Jimmy has more education than Cliff. They are both running a sweet-stall. Alison on the other hand, comes from a prominent family and it is clear from the beginning that Jimmy resents this fact.

The first act opens on a Sunday, Jimmy and Cliff are reading the Sunday papers while Alison is ironing in a corner of the room. Jimmy is a hot tempered young man and he tries to provoke both Cliff and Alison. He is antagonistic towards Cliff's working class background and makes fun of him for his low intelligence. Cliff is good-natured and takes in the antagonism; Jimmy tries to provoke his wife, Alison, by making fun of her family and her well-heeled (affluent) life before she married him. He complains about Alison's brother, a member of parliament, women in general and the sound Alison and Cliff make ironing and rustling pages. He also seems to display nostalgia for England's powerful past. He notes that the world

has entered a “dreary” (lacking in liveliness) American age, he fact, he begrudgingly accepts. Alison is tired of Jimmy’s rants and begs for peace. This makes Jimmy more fevered (excited) in his insults. Cliff attempts to keep peace between the two and this leads to a playful scuffle between them. Their wrestling ends up running into Alison, causing her to fall down. Jimmy is sorry for the incident, but Alison makes him leave the room. After jimmy leaves, cliff stays to help Alison treat the burn she got from the iron when she fell and she reveals to Cliff that she is pregnant with Jimmy’s child. She said she hasn’t told jimmy yet, because she is afraid that he will feel trapped and angry. Cliff comforts Alison and tells her that jimmy loves her, he kisses her and jimmy enters while they were kissing, but doesn’t acknowledge them. Soon later, Cliff leaves and Alison and Jimmy share a tender moment. They play their “bear and squirrel” game, which allows them to escape into affection while pretending to be animals. Later, Cliff returns and says that one of Alison’s upper class friends is on the phone, jimmy’s mood changes. When Alison says that Helena wants to stay with them, jimmy becomes angry; he says he wishes that Alison would have a baby that would die so that she could experience true suffering.

The second act begins when Helena and Alison share womanly duties of the home while jimmy plays his trumpet offstage. Alison tells Helena about her first months with Jimmy, they lived with his working class friend, Hugh Tanner, she says that she felt like “a hostage from those sections of the society that they have declared war on”. Helena inquires about Alison’s affectionate relationship with Cliff and Alison tells her that they are strictly friends. Then Helena asks her why she and Jimmy got married and Alison says that it was because her (Alison’s) parents disapproved. That made Jimmy wants to marry her, no matter what.

Cliff and his friend return to the flat and Helena tells them that she and Alison are leaving for church. Jimmy goes into an anti-religious rant and ends up insulting Alison’s family again. Helena becomes angry and Jimmy dares her to slap him on the face, warning her that he will slap her back. He tells her of how he watched his father die as a young man, his father had been injured fighting in the Spanish Civil War and had returned to England only to die shortly after. Jimmy leaves the room for a phone call, Helena tells Alison that she has called Alison’s father to come take her away from this abusive home. When jimmy returns, he tells Alison that Mrs Tanner, Hugh’s mother is sick and is going to die. Jimmy decides to visit her and he demands that Alison make a choice whether to go with Helena or with him. Alison picks up her things and leaves for church and Jimmy is heartbroken by his wife’s decision.

The next evening, Alison is packing and talking with her father, Colonel Redfern; he is a soft-spoken man, he admits that the actions of him and his wife are partly for their split. Helena and Cliff soon enter the scene. Alison leaves a letter for Jimmy explaining why she has left and she gives it to Cliff. After Alison leaves, Cliff becomes angry and gives the letter to Helena, blaming her for the situation. Jimmy returns and reads the letter, he becomes very angry. Helena tells him that Alison is pregnant but Jimmy tells her that he does not care. He insults Helena and she slaps him, and then passionately kisses him.

The third act opens with Jimmy and Cliff once again reading the Sunday newspapers while Helena stands in the corner ironing. Jimmy and Cliff still engage in their angry banter and Helena's religious tendencies have taken the brunt of Jimmy's punishment. They perform scenes from musical and comedy shows but when Helena leaves, Cliff notes that things do not feel the same with her here. He tells Jimmy that he wants to move out of the apartment. Jimmy takes the news calmly and tells him he has been a loyal friend and is worth more than any woman. When Helena returns, the three plans to go out. Alison enters suddenly. Alison has lost her baby and looks sick, Helena tells her that she (Alison) should be angry with her for what she has done but Alison is only grieved by the loss of her baby. Helena is driven to distraction by Jimmy's trumpet playing and demands that he comes into the room. When he comes back, he laments that Alison has lost the baby but shrugs it off. Helena tells them that her sense of morality – right or wrong has not diminished that she knows she must leave, although, Alison attempts to persuade her to stay. When she leaves, Jimmy tries to once again become angry but Alison tells him that she has now gone through the emotional and physical suffering that he has always wanted her to feel. He realizes that she has suffered greatly, and become like him. So he becomes softer and tenderer towards her. The play ends with them embracing, once again playing their imaginary game of bear and squirrel.

SETTING

“Look Back in Anger” takes place in the Porters’ one-room flat. The apartment is located in the Midlands, a region in the centre of Britain sometime during the 1950s.