
UNIT 3 LANGUAGE AND SPEECH IN *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to suggest a possible alternative to the focus in the previous unit on the characters as the first point of entry into *Look Back in Anger*, by looking instead at its use of language (and of symbols and images through language) as well as at the importance of speech in the play.

3.1 LANGUAGE IN DRAMA

3.1.1 Language as Action

I said earlier (in Unit 1) that drama's chief characteristic is its reliance on **action**, usually action which imitates or represents human behaviour. When we then come to an analysis of language and speech in a play, the question that inevitably arises is whether action is an area that lies outside the words we are studying, or whether it can be seen as inherent in these words, especially in a play like the one under consideration, which does not have any very drastic physical action. Also, are the words of the play, when written down, a different form of 'literature' from the same words spoken on stage? I think that the 'action' of *Look Back in Anger* is primarily psychological i.e. takes place in, and consists of, the fluctuating thoughts, emotions and relationships of the characters and in the expression of these through word, stance or gesture. Or, in other words, in the **interaction** of the characters with each other. The tone of voice or expression is therefore very important since in drama it directly conveys shades of meaning (such as sarcasm or hostility) which in a novel might need a discursive description. (This distinction between 'diegesis' and 'mimesis' which mean respectively 'telling' and 'showing', is one that is very basic to literary analysis). In addition, there are noises or sounds other than language which help to convey the required atmosphere or emotion in performance. An example of this is the sound of the church bells ringing in the following passage, which when heard on the stage, very effectively bring out a sense of urgency:

"You're coming with me, aren't you? She (*he shrugs*) hasn't got anyone else now. I... need you ... to come with me."

He looks into her eyes, but she turns away and stands up. Outside the church bells start ringing. (...BA, II, I)

3.1.2 Language as Protagonist

In Unit 2 we looked at the characters in the play as created entities with personalities which they expressed through language. Let us now go a step further and consider language as itself playing the role of the protagonist in the play, a possibility suggested by critics who see language as putting across its themes and concerns more than any of the characters do. (To further complicate matters, one could also argue that the only way of knowing the characters is itself through language since they are embodied in it.) One such critic, G. L. Evans, goes on to qualify the argument in favour of language as protagonist in *Look Back in Anger*, by saying that two things come in its way. The first of these is the use of melodrama, since language is at many points being used obviously, even crudely, to appeal to emotions, whether those of the characters or of the spectators. The instance that immediately comes to my mind in this connection is Alison's speech towards the end :

"I'm in the fire and I'm burning, and all I want is to die ! ... But what does it matter -- this is what he wanted from me ! ... Don't you see ! I'm in the mud at last ! I'm grovelling ! I'm crawling ! Oh, God....." (*LBA*, III, ii)

Alison's appeal is to Jimmy as well as to us and the fact that exaggerated and melodramatic emotion is a characteristic of the language here, shows up the use of language as the means to an end, taking away its intrinsic importance and role as protagonist.

The second obstacle to language as protagonist is the doing away with of any objectivity it might claim to have, and thus the undermining of its credibility. However impersonal it may seem, we cannot fully trust what the language of the play states, or tells us, because it is always qualified by the emotional motives, sentimentality or self-indulgence of the characters. For example, take Jimmy's description of his father's death :

"But, you see, I was the only one who cared. His family were embarrassed by the whole business. Embarrassed and irritated ... We all of us waited for him to die ... Every time I sat on the edge of his bed, to listen to him talking or reading to me, I had to fight back my tears. At the end of twelve months, I was a veteran ... You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry -- angry and helpless. And I can never forget it. I knew more about—love ... betrayal... and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably know all your life."

(*LBA*, II, I)

Clearly, the description concentrates far more on Jimmy than it does on his father, with a view to drawing attention both to his suffering and to his desire to be seen as a sufferer. The language, though powerful, is again simply being treated as an instrument to express sentiment and to arouse pity for the suffering expressed.

3.1.3 Osborne's Dramatic Language

One more differentiation needs to be made here -- between language in the speech of the characters and the language of the playwright. The playwright speaks directly only through the stage directions but it is possible to trace his voice at places in the speech of a character. For example, look at the following passage:

"... as far as the Michelangelo Brigade's concerned, I must be a sort of right-wing deviationist. If the Revolution ever comes, I'll be the first to put up against the wall, with all the other poor old liberals." (*LBA*, I)

The view expressed may be Jimmy's own but the reader gets the feeling that the nickname for homosexuals (like the earlier one "the Greek Chorus boys" it is clever in a mildly derogatory way) is Osborne's rather than his, partly since this was an issue Osborne was interested in and went on to explore in other plays, such as *A Patriot for Me*. However, this is too vague and limited a method of understanding the language of the playwright, and when I propose to look at Osborne's dramatic language, I mean the language of his plays and his own view of it. Here are two passages from his prose, the first of which expresses how much importance he accorded to language:

"Words are important ... When millions of people are unable to communicate with each other, it's vitally important that words are made to work. It may be old-fashioned but they're the only things we have left." (*On Critics and Criticism, The Sunday Telegraph, 28 August 1966*)

Five years after *Look Back in Anger* was first performed, Osborne wrote:

"Although *Look Back in Anger* was a formal, rather old-fashioned play, I think it broke out by its use of language." (*That Awful Museum, 1961*)

This claim to innovation has been contested (see Unit 5) but Osborne's self-confessed concern with language is evident from the play. It has been suggested that the exact way in which this 'breaking out' takes place is by the introduction of a new theatrical rhetoric into the old, realist form of drama. Osborne uses two kinds of stage language for two distinct purposes, self-expression through monologue, and social debate through dialogue (see 3.3.4). He has, of course been criticized—with some reason, I think—for his language's being limited to a particular kind of voice, like Jimmy's, mocking and passionate. This does mean that the other voices in the play are not as well developed. Yet Osborne's concern in this and other plays is less to allow each character to develop a distinctive voice than to find a language that can express life equally well on both the personal and the social front. Andrew Kennedy offers an analysis of Osborne's dramatic language, where he suggests that the playwright deals with this problem in two ways. First, by treating language as simply one part of the meaning of the characters' lives, as in the following series of questions:

"What is their relationship with one another and with their children, with the neighbours ... What are the things that are important to them, that make them care, that give them hope and anxiety? What kind of language do they use to one another? ... Where does the pain lie ... What moves them, brings them together, makes them speak out?"

(*The Writer in His Age, London Magazine IV, May 1957*)

Secondly, by achieving the opposite effect of organizing the speech around the rhetoric of a central character. This rhetoric uses for effect verbal excess (two examples of which are described in 3.3.1 and 3.3.2) parody and changes in pace, usually beginning in a declamatory style and ending with reiterated questions. This second method supposedly balances the first by making sure that the language now has functions other than just personal communication. How helpful an account of Osborne's handling of language is this? While I agree with the characteristics of the language Kennedy outlines, I am not persuaded that it works quite successfully to express both personal and public life in the play. (This is further dealt with under the discussion of invective.) Such a stress on 'rhetoric' does, however make sure that we see the language as needing analysis over and above its content or what it conveys, and realize that often what a character says is secondary to what he or she does with the words and the effect that they have on the listener. For example, Alison, in refusing to accompany Jimmy to visit Hugh's mother, is actually doing more than just that — she is also telling him that she is breaking away from him in some way.

3.2 THE TITLE OF THE PLAY

What is immediately apparent about the title *Look Back in Anger* is that it reads like an injunction telling one to perform a particular action—that of looking back. Whether this command is directed towards the audience/readers, the characters, or indeed even towards the play as a whole, remains unclear. At the same time, it is possible to read the title as descriptive, as telling us what the play actually does, or at least sets out to do.

A third way of studying the title is to divide our attention between the two themes embodied in it, the action of 'looking back', and the emotion of 'anger'. The latter has been dealt with in the previous unit, so I will here concentrate on the former aspect, that of a vision or a gaze that is retrospective. Such a gaze usually has implicit connotations of objectivity and of clear judgement made possible through the perspective brought by time. Yet here it is allied with an intensely subjective emotion – can looking back in anger ever mean looking back objectively? Unlikely though it sounds, I think that this is precisely what Osborne is suggesting through the play's title. We are here meant to see that, contrary to the usual belief, it is strong feeling that makes for clear vision and understanding. The play goes on to show that there are numerous areas of private and public life that are inexplicable or hidden to reason, but that remain accessible to emotion.

The next question that arises is what exactly is to be looked back at. One possible answer points to the time immediately preceding that of the play – the war years as well as the early post-war period. Everyone in the play does some amount of looking back at these years, whether on a personal or a public level. Of these, Jimmy's gaze is the most apparently angry and resentful, both against the older social system and at the (as he sees them) half-hearted attempts at reform. Colonel Redfern looks at the same period with nostalgia and a sense of loss. In fact, the nostalgic vision is itself a minor theme in the play, and attention is paid to its power to beautify and transform the past at the same time that it is seen as creating an essentially false picture. This comes across strongly in the following passage:

"The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made 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, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not." (*LBA*, I)

Alison also looks back at her past, at the years of her marriage to Jimmy, usually with regret, or with a longing for missed happiness but most of all with a sense of clarity at being able to see things now that she could not earlier. She spends a good deal of time recounting these memories to Cliff and Helena (this serves to provide a lot of relevant information to the audience) and in the process, revealing her present state of mind:

"I keep looking back, as far as I remember, and I can't think what it was to feel young, really young." (*LBA*, I)

Another characteristic of a retrospective vision is that it is explanatory, it provides (as well as seeks) answers of one sort or another, though they need not be satisfactory ones. The play doesn't actually offer any solutions to the personal misery of the characters except the retreat into a game for Jimmy and Alison, and even here, we are left wondering how long it will last. Cliff and Helena simply leave and are more or less already forgotten by the time the play ends. I would then see the title as referring not so much to any particular period of time as, in a general sense, to the

nature of the past and to what people make of it through memory, or to be more specific, through the acts of remembering and forgetting.

3.3 KINDS OF SPEECH AND WRITING IN THE TEXT

3.3.1 Invective

Invective means an attack through speech which abuses, rails against and strongly denounces the object of the attack. Almost all the invective in *Look Back in Anger* is Jimmy's, directed at different times against the upper and middle classes, Americans, the clergy, evangelists, imperialists, politicians, academics, homosexuals, women, the older generation and everything that is 'phoney'. The effect of such a wide range of targets – though of course they often overlap – is to focus attention on the invective itself rather than on its object, which is usually embodied in one or more character(s) within the play. Alison, her parents, her brother Nigel, her friends (Webster and Helena), in short what he calls 'Dame Alison's Mob', provide to Jimmy examples of most of the above categories. His attack is full of violent, deliberately crude images and similes, as when he compares women to "some dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle" or when he imagines Alison's mother dying – "She will pass away, my friends, leaving a trail of worms gasping for laxatives behind her – from purgatives to purgatory." He is being more than simply tasteless here, since the desired effect is mainly aimed at Alison and his words are spoken chiefly to hurt her, which he succeeds in doing.

The rhetoric of Jimmy's long speeches is not meant to be taken as containing any message(s) that Osborne, or the play itself, intends to convey through them. Instead they perform the function of revealing a certain state of mind. Those who failed to realize this and chose to read Jimmy's statement "There aren't any good, brave causes left" as the playwright's view, were criticized by Osborne :

They were incapable of recognizing the texture of ordinary despair, the way it expresses itself in rhetoric and gestures that may perhaps look shabby, but are seldom simple."

(Declarations, op.cit.,p.69)

Nevertheless, Osborne is here apparently seeking goals that are, to my mind, mutually irreconcilable. Of course this is problematic only if we choose to see this as a failing, and do not read it as an attempt to make Jimmy's anger justifiable at the same time as it is futile. If we are not to find easy explanations by taking the invective at face value, then our attention is also diverted from the social and other concerns that Osborne wants the play to make us think about. For the invective to function simultaneously on all these levels – bringing out issues, revealing character as well as showing up its own 'rhetoric', is, I think, not entirely feasible. However, do feel free to disagree with me if you wish to. In your opinion, is the attempt a successful one ?

3.3.2 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a figure of speech which contains exaggeration for emphasis. In *Look Back in Anger*, it usually functions as a part of invective, and serves to strengthen it but it is also used to convey a sense of emotional disturbance and to individualize the speech of the characters in the sense of revealing their varying degrees of articulation. Jimmy's constant use of hyperbole makes his the most vehement speeches in the play, and highlights the element of exaggeration in his character. Alison uses it less than he does, but still quite often; for example in "I want to be a lost cause! I want to be corrupt and futile!"; Helena and Cliff only use it occasionally, and Colonel Redfern never. This is not to suggest that Colonel Redfern is inarticulate – on the contrary he is even eloquent on occasion, as when describing "those long, cool

evenings in the hills ..." – but that he is, by nature as well as training, more restrained and less readily expressive of strong feeling than the others are.

Hyperbole is also one of the characteristics of dramatic language and when put into the mouth of a character, brings out the level of performance in his or her behaviour. Pretence or play-acting, both conscious and unconscious, runs right through *Look Back in Anger*, from the mock play-acting of Jimmy and Cliff to the game that Jimmy and Alison play, pretending to be a bear and a squirrel. At the level of this game, which is close to mime, gestures and animal sounds like 'Oooooooh!' and 'Wheeeeeeeeee!' replace language. Alison significantly describes the game as resulting in "dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other." It is when the couple is 'dumb', that is, when they have let go of ordinary speech, that they come across as most intimate and affectionate with each other, while the rest of the time, words seem to drive them apart.

3.3.3 Parody

The language of the play contains parodies of various vocabularies, among them that of the pamphlet, the newspaper and the drama. Once again most instances of parody are to be found in Jimmy's speech, though often when he is talking to, or acting with Cliff. I shall here outline them through a listing based on whether they are conscious and deliberate parodies or not. Examples are given in each case.

There is conscious parody of:

The evangelical preacher: "I want to hear a warm thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah!

Hallelujah! Oh, brother, it's such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything."

The salesman / auctioneer: "Reason and Progress, the old firm is selling out! Everyone get out while the going's good."

The conversation of a social 'do' or polite upper-class gathering:

"Well, shall we dance? ... Do you come here often?... Do you think bosoms will be in or out, this year?"

The comic sequence in a music-hall act:

"Ladies and gentlemen, a little recitation ... Will you kindly stop interrupting *perlease*! Can't you see I'm trying to entertain these ladies and gentlemen?"

The 'clever' academic:

"Here it is. I quote: Pusillanimous. Adjective. Wanting of firmness of mind ... From the Latin pusillus, very little, and animus, the mind."

Jimmy unconsciously parodies the stereotyped figure of the isolated, solitary Romantic hero (see 2.2.2 above). Another such parody is that of the witty undergraduate's speech, non-literary but full of literary references from *Ulysses* and *Emily Bronte* to *Wilde's Lady Bracknell* and quotations from Shakespeare (such as 'expense of spirit'). Alison also describes Jimmy's and Hugh's gatecrashing of parties as parodying a military invasion:

"We'd set out from headquarters in Poplar, and carry out our raids on the enemy in W.1, S.W.1., S.W.3., and W.8."

In addition, there is a sort of parody of different local or regional accents and idioms, for example Jimmy imitating a midlands accent:

"Well, it gives you something to do, doesn't it? After all it wouldn't do if we was all alike, would it? It'd be a funny world if we was all the same, that's what I always say!"

Cliff is of course meant to provide a genuine example of Welsh idiom, by his use of terms like 'girlie', though his 'not 'arf' could as well be Cockney. Try and identify further instances of parody that you might come across in the text.

3.3.4 Monologue and Dialogue

Monologue means only one person speaking or one voice being heard, while dialogue means speech between two persons – I shall here use the term loosely by extending it to include conversation between more than two persons. The language of *Look Back in Anger* varies in a rhythm between the two to provide breaks and contrasts. The monologue consists largely of outbursts but does not serve, as the soliloquies in Elizabethan drama do, to reveal the characters' inmost thoughts. (The difference between a monologue and a soliloquy is that in the latter case, the speaking character is addressing either himself or the audience and his words are not to be heard by any of the other characters, while the former doesn't have this requirement). In Osborne's play, the monologues contain a self-dramatizing rhetoric of which the speaker is often aware but which he or she doesn't rationalize. Self-awareness in *Look Back in Anger* usually means awareness of being inadequate or of being helpless to bring about desired change. There is not much consistent, logically developed argument, with the stress being instead on emotional appeal. The metaphor of play-acting is a repeated one and the characters (not only Jimmy, but also Alison, Helena and, though rarely, even Cliff) watch for the effect of their words while speaking, that is to say, they project themselves consciously as dramatic beings, even their silences are deliberate and have a dramatic purpose and their view of life is that it is theatrical:

"I rage and shout my head off, and everyone thinks "poor chap!" or "what an objectionable young man!" But that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence ... I want to be there when you grovel. I want to be there, I want to watch it, I want the front seat."

(LBA, II, i)

The dialogue is, by contrast, much more neutral and punctuates the long monologues by its attempt at genuine personal communication. On the whole, it certainly takes a back seat. The criticism most frequently levelled at Osborne's extensive use of monologue and of the rhetoric in the monologues is that it results in the language becoming over-externalized in its effect and hence incapable of expressing real inwardness, since it lacks the necessary pauses and silences that such reflection would need.

3.4 IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY

The symbol that seems to me to be the most important one in the play is that of the animals and the game in which Jimmy and Alison impersonate them. They even have a toy bear and squirrel kept upon a chest of drawers, and Alison points them out to Helena who thinks this is proof of Jimmy's being 'fey' or mad. An extension of the game is the comparison of the couple's home to a zoo or a menagerie. This animal symbol works in two ways – first, as discussed above, it offers a refuge (the only one available) from the misery of the couple's daily married life, and provides the only way for them to communicate with each other. Second, it implies that marital love in their case, seems to be based on not much more than the physical attraction between the sexes, which functions at a level below the rational. Yet Jimmy is tied to Alison by more complexities than those that temporarily attach him

to Helena. These relationships refuse to fall into or be categorized by the common and simplistic distinction between 'love' and 'lust'. The play eventually closes with a repetition of the game:

Jimmy : ... There are cruel steel traps lying about everywhere, just waiting for rather mad, slightly satanic and very timid little animals. Right ?
 [Alison nods]
 [Pathetically] Poor squirrels !

Alison [with the same comic emphasis] : Poor bears ! [She laughs a little. Then looks at him very tenderly, and adds very, very softly.]
 Oh, poor, poor bears !
 [Slides her arms around him]

(LBA, III, ii)

The reappearance of the animal symbols and their complete takeover of the action might appear to give the play a conventional, sentimental happy ending. But when we keep in mind how ineffective the symbols or the game has been in the past, we come to see that they, like the ending, are a contrivance that offers no real solution, only a 'pretend' one.

I would also pick out as a minor structural symbol in the play, the newspaper Jimmy reads, since all three acts open by showing him doing so (thus giving continuity to the play's structure) and it repeatedly surfaces in the conversation. The newspaper helps to create a domestic atmosphere with a rather boring but indispensable Sunday afternoon ritual, as well as providing the starting point for most of the discussions or speeches about religion and politics. It brings the outside or public world into the private, familial setting of the play, and its constant presence makes it, in effect, impossible to clearly separate the two worlds – one invades and informs the other through the newspaper.

The images in *Look Back in Anger* are mainly verbal and descriptive ones – words that form pictures and evoke scenes. Sometimes these scenes are pleasant, romanticized ones, like the 'brief little world' of Edwardian England, but their intention is more often to shock or disgust – two such are described above in 3.3.1; a third example is the picture of a baby as 'a mass of indiarubber and wrinkles', made all the more effective by the knowledge (which the audience has, but Jimmy doesn't) that Alison is pregnant. Animal imagery runs right through the play, and is not restricted to the 'bear and squirrel game'. It is also used to convey the sense of solitude, maybe even the grandeur of a fierce wild animal as in the passage (quoted earlier in another context) where Jimmy speaks of "... the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him." This is very different from the way animals are spoken of earlier – 'very timid, little ...' -- as helpless and diminutive.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

An examination of language, like that of character, offers a way of entry into the play. Language could work to constitute 'action', or to function as a protagonist to convey the play's themes and concerns. However, with regard to 'language as protagonist' in *Look Back in Anger*, two points have to be contended with – the use of melodrama and the loss of objectivity by language here.

Osborne's dramatic language can be seen to deal with the problem of finding a language equally effective on both personal and social fronts, by locating language as part of the meaning of the characters' lives. Another method – and a more easily evident one – is to organize the play's speech around that of the central character.

Some of the kinds of speech and writing identifiable in *Look Back in Anger* are invective, hyperbole, parody, monologue and dialogue, and there is, in addition, a set of images and symbols which, through their recurrence in the text, provide thematic and structural continuity to it.

3.6 GLOSSARY

Articulation	Ability to express (articulate) one's thoughts in words
Derogatory	Disparaging, lowering in value or esteem
Evangelist	Person who preaches the gospel (evangel) ie the life and message of Jesus Christ
Explanatory	Containing an explanation or having the function of explaining
Perspective	View from a particular point or distance, in regard to the viewer's relative position, hence a clear view
Retrospective	Directed towards the past

3.7 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 What is the function of invective in the language of the play?
- Q.2 What do you understand by the term 'hyperbole'? What purpose does its use serve in the speeches of the various characters in *Look Back in Anger*?
- Q.3 Identify instances in the the play where play-acting appears as a metaphor.

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

- Kennedy, Andrew K. *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*, Cambridge: University Press, 1975
- Evans, Gareth Lloyd *The Language of Modern Drama*, Everyman, London: Everyman, 1977
- Brown, John Russell *Theatre Language: A Study of Arden, Osborne, Pinter and Cocker*, London: Allen Lane, 1972