
UNIT 4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LOOK BACK IN ANGER

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to indicate some of the common critical approaches that might be applied to the play and the consequent varying interpretations that would result from such an exercise. Do remember that these approaches can overlap—for example it is possible to have a feminist psychoanalytic reading or one that combines historicism with feminism. The aim is to indicate which aspects of the text these readings would lay their emphasis on.

4.1 DIFFERENT CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE PLAY

4.1.1 A psychoanalytic Reading

Psychoanalytic criticism uses the techniques and theories of psychoanalysis (therapy which works through investigating the relation between, and the functioning of, conscious and unconscious elements in the mind) and applies them in literary analysis. Such a reading would also entail considering in what way exactly a study of the working of the mind is to be used while studying a literary or dramatic text.

I shall follow Elizabeth Wright's outlining of the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary criticism, which, she says, works in two ways. One, it draws an analogy between mental and linguistic processes. Two, it involves a consideration of the genetic origins of language. (Only the first of these need be used with regard to *Look Back in Anger*). A psychoanalytic reading does not necessarily require a rigid application of theories but does crucially involve paying attention to the presence of sexuality, and an analysis of the unconscious (broadly, this means a stress on the human mind's dark or hidden areas) in connection with the author, the reader, the text and the points at which the boundaries between these begin to dissolve.

Freudian criticism sees the literary work as functioning like the dream to secretly gratify an infantile or forbidden wish. This idea of repression has proved very convenient to critics when trying to explain why a literary work may have a tendency opposed to the author's consciously expressed beliefs. The author's unconscious then enters the text either directly or through a character, and is either fulfilled or left ungratified. This makes sense only if the author is also seen as a reader, his reading determined by the history of his/her life which provides a personal myth or experience which is then looked at in relation to the text.

If we now turn to the play, the most apparent example that strikes me is Jimmy's tracing back his misogyny to his mother's treatment of his father. (The passage has been quoted at length earlier, in 3.1.2.) This was an experience from Osborne's own childhood, and one that clearly made a very deep impression on him, since the theme of fatherhood surfaces throughout his plays and, like Jimmy, he mourns his lost father. The drawback of such an approach is, of course, that it relies quite heavily on biographical details. A more straightforward method of going about this exercise would be simply to psychoanalyze the characters in the play. Jimmy's speeches have actually been seen as symptomatic of an inferiority complex and of schizophrenia. The first of these charges is based on the fact of his constant attention-seeking and the second on the way in which he rapidly moves between demonstrating kindness and cruelty and praise and attack. I think such a reading rests largely on a misperception of schizophrenia or to the loose application of the term to what is, more simply, the coexistence in one person of opposing emotions and responses, something not very uncommon.

Freud also accords importance to the dream in seeing it as a space for the manifestation of all the desires, fears or memories which the conscious mind suppresses when awake. Two processes by which real events or feelings are transformed into dream images are **displacement**, where one person or event is represented by another, and **condensation**, where many people, events, wishes or meanings combine to form a single dream image. The relevance of this for literary studies, according to psychoanalytic criticism, is that dreams are like literature in 'showing' rather than 'telling', so literature can be seen as using images, symbols and metaphors through the same devices of condensation and displacement. Try and see if you would like to incorporate this idea into the practice of analysing the language of the play, which was done in the last unit.

Another set of concepts (apart from the subconscious and the unconscious discussed above) that psychoanalysis offers to literary analysis are those of the psyche which is seen as having three groups of functions, *id*, *ego* and *super-ego*. This is a **topographical** model of the human mind, that is to say, a model that represents the mind spatially in terms of different mental 'spaces'. The *id* consists of instinctual drives arising from the body and the way in which these drives inform behaviour. Typically, taking account of these drives leads to a study of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Jimmy at one point explains his irrational behaviour (he has first apologized for Alison's arm being hurt, and then says that he did it on purpose—in either case he cannot be taken to unambiguously speak the truth) as resulting from the complexities of his feelings toward Alison whom he desires in a way that he doesn't seem able to handle:

"There's hardly a moment when I'm not – watching and wanting you. I've got to hit out somehow. Nearly four years of being in the same room with you, night and day, and I still can't stop my sweat breaking out when I see you doing – something as ordinary as leaning over an ironing board." (LBA, I)

The *ego* (that agency deriving from and regulating the *id*) here offers a particular account of its own functioning under the influence of the *id*. The *super-ego* which is the mental transformation of social/parental influences on the *id*, has already been identified in this particular case ie that of Jimmy. These categories are applicable to all the characters and would attempt to provide some kind of answer to questions such as why Alison marries Jimmy or why Cliff stays on in a situation he professes to hate. But the use of these ideas in literary criticism need not be restricted to the analysis of characters, it has also been used to 'map' aspects of the reader's (or in this case, the spectator's) experience of a text, gradually bringing the reader into the focus of interest which was earlier restricted to the text.

Lastly, another branch of psychoanalytic criticism, called 'schizoanalysis' concentrates on the unconscious, but in a way that sees it as constructed through language. The instability of language systems then leads to the attempt to capture pre-linguistic experience, usually a regression to childhood behaviour. This has obvious implications when we are looking at the 'bear and squirrel' game which could then be seen as a symptom of the wish to retreat into childhood and a trouble-free existence, away from adult responsibilities.

Any kind of psychoanalytic reading, therefore, first identifies, and then concentrates on, aspects of the individual psyche, and in doing so privileges what is called 'psycho-drama' above social drama (class conflict, for example) as well as above a social or historical context, such as was mapped out for *Look Back in Anger* in the first unit of this block.

4.1.2 The Feminist Perspective

'Feminism' is a term with a very wide and varying history of usage and practice and will here be used only in the relatively narrow sense of an interrogation of the representation of women in the text and a questioning of the authority of such representations and of the assumptions behind them. This would mean looking at how women are presented in the play, and at the way in which the male characters speak of and react to the female characters.

The obvious starting point is Jimmy's often expressed misogyny, of which the following passage is an example:

"Why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death? Have you ever had a letter, and on it is franked 'Please Give Your Blood Generously'? Well, the Postmaster-General does that on behalf of all the women in the world... There aren't any good, brave causes left... No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women." (*LBA*, III.i)

He does see personal relationships as offering the only alternative to the lack of causes in public life, but views such relationships as giving women a chance to 'devour' and to destroy his (and by implication, all men's) selfhood and autonomy. This goes hand in hand with his being completely tied to women in the sense of being unable to break away from them sexually or emotionally. The notion of female sexuality as threatening is an old commonplace in literature, and I think that Osborne, far from endorsing what Jimmy says, is showing how he spouts the anti-woman rhetoric of the typical misogynist to which his own dependancy on women provides an almost comic contrast. Feminist criticism would also contest this grouping of all women together under what they see as the cultural construction of the 'feminine' – a concept which works to define women negatively—and would analyse language as the means by which such a grouping is effected. In the play under consideration, the grouping seems to work only at the level of language – no justification or evidence is provided for it, but neither is it positively refuted. This is why I would be wary of those critical interpretations which see the play as embodying Osborne's views (whatever they are) about women.

A more relevant focus would be on the way in which rebellion against the social structures of class and family which are seen as oppressive, does not include a view of them as particularly oppressive to women. Jimmy sees himself as suffering under the system of class which privileges Alison and her family, but does not see Alison's suffering under the system of patriarchal marriage that privileges him over her. Though his ignorance, and to some extent, society's attitude to women are shown up in the play, it could equally be argued that these are reinforced by the sequence of events as well as by the characterization which makes Alison and Helena share a similar pattern of behaviour – fascination alternating with resentment and antipathy—with regard to Jimmy. Mary McCarthy points out in *A New Word* (1959), that the

idea of women as all alike, as interchangeable and therefore by implication ultimately dispensable, is most clearly present in Helena's replacing Alison in exactly the same role, that of someone who provides to the men a well run home, cooked meals, ironed clothes, affection and sex:

'At the rise of the third-act curtain, months later, the two male figures are still enveloped in the Sunday papers, while a woman is silently ironing a shirt. Same scene – different girl. Nothing really changes; nothing can change ... Jimmy, a working-class intellectual, still has a hostage from the ruling class doing the washing and the cooking, and his friend, Cliff, an uneducated Welsh boy, who boards with them, is still looking on. There has been a swap of upper-class women, like the swap of posh newspapers: you put down the *Observer* and pick up the *Sunday Times* – same contents, different make-up.'

To expose within a text, as the above passage does, the social and cultural assumptions which perpetuate inequality between men and women, and the methods used to do so, are the main aims of one strand of feminist criticism. One such assumption exposed here is that household tasks are to be performed by women. This role is one from which no woman is exempt, irrespective of the social class she belongs to, since even if other upper-class women do not find themselves in situations where they have to cook and clean as Alison and Helena do, they still have the responsibility of maintaining a comfortable domestic environment for the men.

Jimmy tries to win not only Alison's love, but also her subscription to his views and vision of life. The play does show Alison abandoning Jimmy or letting him down (by refusing to go with him to visit Hugh's mother) at a moment when he needs her, but that moment is, equally, a decisive one for her – it is the first time she is depicted as making an independent decision for herself or consciously acting against Jimmy's wishes. The question that arises is whether the moment of decision for the woman must also function as her betrayal of the man. The fact that it does seem to be so in *Look Back in Anger*, and that it apparently goes unquestioned, is a problematic one.

Apart from the position that women occupy, the question of whether or not we can locate identity (especially feminine identity) in gender and in the social circumstances of men and women, is a crucial issue in feminism. For example, is it possible to see Alison and Jimmy in terms of essentialized feminine and masculine natures or would doing so mean being taken in by a rhetoric that belongs to the man (Jimmy) and is anti-woman? And does the similarity in Alison's and Helena's behaviour mean to indicate that they share a common feminine nature, or is it traceable to their similar backgrounds and upbringing? At a glance, the play's stress on individuality does seem to be restricted to the men, in fact to just one man. But it soon becomes evident that the differences as well as the common patterns in the women's roles arise equally from the circumstances – both social and marital—in which they are placed.

4.1.3 New Criticism

This is the American equivalent of Practical Criticism, a particular way of approaching the critical reading of texts, especially of poems, advocated by I.A. Richards in the 1920s which became, with some modifications, the basis for a new critical practice that is still extremely widespread.

As a method, this would mean looking at the particular text under consideration without any reference to extra-textual information about the author, date of composition and socio-historical background or context. In its application to the interpretation of the text, it would entail a 'close' reading, a study of the words on the page (we will have to temporarily let go of the 'performance text' here) with the reader's attention being closely focused on textual details such as use of metaphor, metrics (where relevant), imagery and symbols, form and structure, among others. As you will immediately see, this is exactly the method of analysis we have been

following in these units, except, of course that socio-historical context has been stressed here. Such an emphasis on form, texture and structure makes the question of belief expressed in content a secondary one.

A discussion of the structure of *Look Back in Anger* might serve to illustrate better this method of criticism. Structure in a play has the functions of the creation of interest and suspense, which is done through presenting the events of the plot at a suitable pace. The play under consideration, it might be argued, does not offer any drastic developments as far as the plot is concerned, but the purpose is fulfilled all the same since there is an adequate level of suspense as to the end. We do not know until the last moment whether Jimmy is going to stay with Alison or Helena. The play also offers unexpected developments such as the affair between Jimmy and Helena, which seems to take even them by surprise, though a psychoanalytic reading would argue otherwise, saying that Helena had been, consciously or subconsciously, preparing for it.

Martin Esslin has traced the development of the conventional structure of drama as consisting of—the statement of the theme and its first variation, a pattern of episodes through which takes place the establishment of the play's main objective; the exposition of this objective, which relies on other factors such as plot (including the development of the story and the sequence of scenes), the casting of characters, the quality of dialogue and spatial and temporal elements (ie the time dimension consisting of the concerns of a sense of timing and economy), the communication of theme(s), which requires a process of decoding, and the establishing of atmosphere. The statement of the theme need not be in words – in *Look Back in Anger*, I would identify it in Jimmy's behaviour, that is, in the very action of launching into long speeches, rather than in the content of what he says. Two of the most important elements, namely character and language, have already been analysed. Now try and locate the rest of these elements in the play, looking for instance, at the way in which atmosphere is built up. Two examples, that of sound effects like the church bells, and that of Alison's iron, were given in earlier units. See if you can find any others.

4.1.4 Historicist Criticism

To be more specific, the method considered here is actually called 'new historicism'. This refuses to privilege the literary text, and is based on the parallel reading of the literary text and a non-literary text belonging to the same historical period. Rather than seeing socio-historical context as providing a 'background' to the literary text (as was done in the first unit of this block) this kind of analysis sees both texts as informing each other, and of equal interest in a reading of either. The first kind of reading (ie. the one that looks at 'background') could conveniently be termed 'old' historicism, and it does clearly privilege the text over the historical context within which it is placed. The view that 'human, social or cultural characteristics are determined in an absolute sense by historical situation', is implied by the term 'historicist', as is an interest in 'history as text'. Such a view has consequently been criticized for reducing the human subject into these non-human, or extra-human factors.

This kind of criticism could be, and in practice, usually is, linked to the analysis of a text's political implications and its handling of class. The more correct term for such an analysis is 'cultural materialism' and I give an extended quotation to help fully explain it:

"... a strategy [which] repudiates the supposed transcendence of literature, seeking rather to understand it as a cultural intervention produced initially within a specific set of practices and tending to render persuasive a view of reality; and seeing it also as re-produced subsequently, in other historical conditions in the service of various views of reality, through other practices, including those of modern literary study."

(Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Oxford, 1992)

It has also been pointed out by theorists of cultural materialism that such study is inevitably bound up with the question of ideological crisis and struggle. What are the implications of this for the study of Osborne? The two following passages might help to formulate an answer, through a parallel reading of the play under consideration with either or both of them. The first of them is taken from a commentary on a study of the image of the Labour party among different groups of voters, commissioned by the journal *Socialist Commentary* and published in 1960:

'Labour may "stand for the working class" but not for the increasing number who feel rightly or wrongly that they have outgrown that label... One has only to cast the imagination back to those days to appreciate the extent to which things have changed... Large groups of manual workers have higher earnings than white-collar workers or than sections of the middle class. They are cushioned by the provisions of the welfare state; their children have educational opportunities beyond the dreams of their parents. They now have opportunities for leisure, for the enjoyment of most of the good things of life... But this is not all. The manual workers have not only vastly improved their position as manual workers, they have also *changed* their position; some are no longer manual workers at all. As a result of technological changes some blue-collar workers have become white-collar workers... more cross over the line each day. There is an increasing fluidity in our society... The day is gone when workers must regard their station in life as fixed - for themselves and for their children.'

Taken from a piece of writing that is essentially social documentation, this passage can be read alongside *Look Back in Anger* with interesting results for the latter. To consider only two of them—first, we have to rethink our response to the choices Jimmy makes regarding his occupation, and in view of the education he has received. Secondly, the passage itself is to be subjected to a critical scrutiny, which might (for example) question the assumptions behind the use of the terms 'white-collar' and 'blue-collar'.

The second passage is from the *London Magazine*, inviting nine authors, including Osborne, to answer the following questions:

'During the Thirties it was a widely-held view that poets, novelists and playwrights should be closely concerned in their *writing* with the fundamental political and social issues of their time. Since then, the degree of an imaginative writer's necessary engagement with the age in which he lives has been the subject of constant debate with very varied conclusions. Do you think that today, in 1957, it is a valid criticism of such a writer to say that (1) he appears indifferent to the immediate problems of human freedom involved in, say, the Rosenberg case and the Hungarian revolution; (2) he shows no awareness (a) of the changes that have been caused in our social structure and our way of life by, for instance, the development of atomic weapons and the levelling down of classes through discriminatory taxation, nor (b) of the challenges to our conception of human existence caused by recent discoveries in such sciences as biology, astronomy and psychology; (3) his novel, play or poem could, *judged on internal evidence only* have been written at any time during the last fifty years?'

These questions (rather than Osborne's answers to them) have been chosen as worthy of independent examination for the things they tell us about the people, institution, class and period that asks them, and for the ideas and beliefs which underlie them. For example, a new historicist reading would question the very existence of 'internal evidence' in a literary work. The passage also appears to tell us of the expectations of writers and of their work in the 1930s, but we need to keep in mind that what we actually have is the perception of the 1950s, *about* the 1930s. Do these expectations.

which the passage sees as changing but still relevant, have any bearing on how *Look Back in Anger* was received by audiences and reviewers, ie did it answer certain, identifiable needs? It certainly appears to have done so, therefore the next step points to an analysis of those needs, as in the above passage.

4.2 LET US SUM UP

This unit attempted to offer a reading of the play from different critical perspectives, or at least to indicate what each of those perspectives would highlight in its reading of the text. Four such schools of criticism were chosen – psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism, New Criticism and historicist criticism. These would emphasize, respectively, a study of language and of an analogy between mental and linguistic processes, as well as of the ‘psycho-drama’ of the characters’ consciousnesses; an examination of the representation of women in the text, and of the assumptions behind such a representation; textual details like form, structure, plot, narrative, imagery and symbols used; and the text’s relation to contemporary texts dealing with socio-historical realities.

4.3 GLOSSARY

Ideological	Belonging or related to ideology (the science or study of ideas).
Metrics	To do with the use of metre (the pattern of stressed and unstressed or long and short, syllables in verse).
Spatially	Using the idea of space

4.4 QUESTIONS

- Q 1 What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of the stress laid on a close reading by New Criticism? Answer with reference to *Look Back in Anger*.
- Q 2 Do you think an analysis of the play from a feminist perspective helps to highlight areas that might otherwise have gone unregarded? If so, which are these areas?

4.5 SUGGESTED READING

- Barry Peter, ed. *Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory* Casebook series, London: Macmillan, 1987.
- John Russell Taylor, ed. *Look Back in Anger: A Casebook*, London: Macmillan, 1968.
- Laing, Stewart *Representations of Working-Class Life 1957-1964*, London: Macmillan, 1986.