

Alison in Osborne's "Look Back in Anger": A Critical Analysis

Alison: Situating the Character in "Look Back in Anger"

John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" explores and exposes the world of the 1950s, drowned in the visible darkness of post-war disillusionment. The despair and frustration, the anger and anxiety is articulated through the character of Jimmy Porter, the central character in the play. However, it is through the parallel presentation of his wife Alison that the play gains a multidimensional expanse.

Alison represents a remarkable presence in elaborating the implications of the play's central theme: protest, though not in its most active form. She is described by the playwright as "the most elusive personality". She is an attractive woman with a tall and slim stature and a long and delicate face. "There is a surprising reservation about her eyes, which are so large and deep they should make equivocation impossible". She is an attractive woman with a tall and slim stature and a long and delicate face. "There is a surprising reservation about her eyes, which are so large and deep they should make equivocation impossible".

Alison: Figure of Resistance and Passivity

With her aristocratic background, Alison represents the society in her own way. She is the embodiment of values of upper-middle class which her husband despises. As a result, she becomes the natural target of Jimmy's verbal abuse. He abuses her continuously to extract some meaningful reaction from her.

However, having discovered that her only defence is her imperturbability, Jimmy gets irritated by her passive resistance: "She is a great one of getting used to things". Alison's ironing board becomes her weapon of endurance. As she smooths out the wrinkled clothes, she possibly gets to smooth out her own inner creases. Her domestic chores become her pivot of survival. She might be accused of sitting on the wall, of not taking stand, of not being actively engaged in Jimmy's intellectual uproars, but she has a different kind of strength: the strength of passive resistance.

Alison: I don't think I want anything more to do with love. Any more. I can't take it on.
Cliff: You're too young to start giving up. Too young, and too lovely. — John Osborne, Look Back in Anger

Jimmy vs. Alison: Conflict of Class and Personalities

Alison is basically a well-bred person who refuses to stoop to Jimmy's level to retaliate on his provocation. She fondly embraces the responsibility and tradition of her upbringing. She keeps faith in an orthodox morality. However, she married Jimmy against her parents' wishes. Perhaps her love was triggered by pity and compassion. Perhaps she saw him as a knight in shining armour because of some misdirected juvenile fantasy. The way she speaks to Helena

about Jimmy is full of these implications: “Everything about him seem to burn...full of sun. He looked so young and frail.” Jimmy, the extrovert, airing his views loudly and blatantly, “riding roughshod” on everyone’s sentiments, appeared to Alison as a stark contrast to her own introvert calm. During the play, she finds it impossible in the beginning to inform him of her pregnancy. It appears clearly that over the years, they have drifted apart. Or, perhaps, they never were close at all. On a human level, they hardly have the ability to reach out and communicate to each other. While on one hand Jimmy abuses her for her middle-class adherence to values, her pre-marital virginity, he openly calls her a python, engulfing his passionate advances with stoical coolness and apathy. She could never accept Jimmy’s permissive sexual code and attitude to sexuality. “It is not easy to explain,” she says to Helena, “it’s what he would call a question of allegiance and he expects you to be pretty literal about them.”

Alison and Jimmy: Beyond Conflict

On a sub-human level, the level of animals, with little awareness and expectation, Alison comes to terms with Jimmy. When they fail to reach a human union, their world of bears and squirrels helps them survive. This makes one wonder if Jimmy too, quite like Alison, is juvenile with a solid faith in the world of fantasy because reality can never give him any relief. However, the world of bears and squirrels lacks retention and permanence. It can only offer momentary respite. However, despite her apathy, Alison knows Jimmy deep down. She knows that Jimmy has suffered intensely but is also shaped by his suffering. If the suffering is taken away, he

She rightly believes that Jimmy married her from a sense of retaliation; by making her suffer, she imagines that Jimmy is reacting against and punishing the society that she represents. Her friendship with Cliff helps her unburden herself.

We'll be together in our bear's cave, and our squirrel's drey, and we'll live on honey, and nuts—lots and lots of nuts. And we'll sing songs about ourselves—about warm trees and snug caves, and lying in the sun. And you'll keep those big eyes on my fur, and help me keep my claws in order, because I'm a bit of a sappy, scruffy sort of a bear. And I'll see that you keep that sleek, bushy tail glistening as it should, because you're a very beautiful squirrel... — Jimmy Porter

Is Alison Really Just About Passivity?

Alison is not as passive as she is claimed to be by her husband. “I keep looking back as far as can remember and I can’t think what it was to feel young.” Alison may be seen as withdrawing behind a façade of indifference, but her apparent apathy need not be perceived only as indication of tolerance and acceptance. Unlike most women of her set, she is neither domineering nor ambitious; she has voluntarily chosen a life of poverty, gladly sacrificing the comfort of her home. She has cast her lot with one who manages a meagre existence. However, this life would have been bearable if Jimmy were a reasonable man.

She leaves him in search of peace. She returns distraught after four months, collapsing at Jimmy’s feet and Jimmy takes her up, probably for the first time, with loving tenderness. After

the death of her baby, Alison comes to realize the spectra of loneliness that Jimmy has always been in and only then can they find each other's embrace an escape out of the prison of agony. This is when they truly communicate, not needing the illusive world of beasts, but as humans, reaching out to each other, no more in anger, but in love.

Reference:

<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Alison-in-Osbornes-Look-Back-in-Anger-A-Critical-Estimate>