

## Helena Charles's Arrival and Departure in John Osborne's Play *Look Back in Anger*: A Study of Structure

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**Abstract:** *John Osborne's play Look Back in Anger created history in England when it was first staged on 8 May 1956. It depicts the disillusionment and rebelliousness of post-war youth in Britain. The suffering hero Jimmy Porter is the representative of this generation with nowhere to go. Having lost the war against society he fights for a place of his own in domestic relationships and dominates the action of the play. Though "Look Back in Anger is the one-man play per excellence."*<sup>1</sup> *Helena Charles, the friend of Jimmy's wife Alison, makes her presence felt in spite of his dominance in the play by her guts who stands up to Alison's defense. Later she falls to Jimmy's bait easily, becomes something like his mistress and then leaves him and thus paves the way for a reconciliation between the husband and the wife. This paper aims at studying Helena's arrival and departure and how do they contribute to the reunion of the estranged couple.*

### 1. Introduction

*Look Back in Anger* is an arresting, painful and somewhat astonishing play by John Osborne. It is about Jimmy Porter, a university chap of lower-class background, who runs a sweet stall finding no other way to earn his livelihood. He lives in a filthy attic in the Midlands with his friend Cliff Lewis and pretty wife Alison Porter whom he harangues continuously in horribly long, vicious, self-pitying speeches. He has married above his own status, apparently out of spite against middle class respectability. He is an extremely "unusual young man"<sup>2</sup> of post World War II youth who spits venom against everything and everybody and is apparently convinced that for the young generation of today the world is an utterly rotten place.

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*Look Back in Anger* is full of Jimmy's monologues and the playwright has created his character thoughtfully. Critic John Mander also says:

“The author invested so much of his thought and experience and energy in the person of Jimmy that he had little over for the other characters.”<sup>3</sup>

Even then one of the minor characters and the friend of Alison, Helena plays an important role in the advancement of the plot by her arrival and departure.

The stage direction describes Helena as being of the same age as Alison, of medium height, and carefully dressed. She is an unmarried woman and an actress by profession. Actually she belongs to the middle class and feels perfectly secure in its basic rights. She comes to stay with Alison for a theatrical engagement. When Jimmy learns that she is coming to stay with them, he regards her as one of his “natural enemies” and asks his “wife sarcastically:” Did you tell her to bring her armor? Because she is going to need it!”<sup>4</sup>

We find Jimmy protesting throughout the whole play since “*Look Back in Anger* is a play of protest, and the only weapon being language.”<sup>5</sup> He wants to change the whole society and being unable to do so he gives vent to his anger by hurling abuses to his wife and friend all the time but they remain silent. For their silence he dominates the action of the play till the arrival of Helena. And we see just after her entrance in the Porter house in the end of Act I, her vibrant and forceful personality tries her best to put Jimmy in his place. She starts to behave with everyone with authority. Just as Jimmy is openly hostile to her, she also does not hesitate to retort back to his verbal attack. She shows her contempt for him to Alison and is quite blunt in her criticism of him. She describes Jimmy as a real savage to her. In this three-act play she is the only match in the battle of words with him because of her sharp tongue, courage and the ability to hit back and also for her feminism.

Jimmy inflicts wounds on his wife continuously as

“Jimmy seeks from women far more than he could ever hope to get from them, and when he is disappointed turns on them with savage resentment.”<sup>6</sup>

This has happened in the case of Alison and he is almost a maniac in conversation with her.

"In fact his sado-masochist trend makes him out to be almost a maniac of sorts whose mindless brutality is single-mindedly directed towards his quiet wife, Alison."<sup>7</sup>

And she tolerates his verbal attack all the time without protest.

So definitely one of the most striking qualities that is attributed to Alison is her tolerance. Even after four years of their marriage she finds it difficult to adapt herself to Jimmy's life style and habits. She gets irritated about the insulting remarks about her and the members of her family. Yet she remains silent and does not give expression to her annoyance. Jimmy tries to provoke her by using abusive language. And her silence annoys him even more. So he says regarding Alison: "Nothing I could do would provoke her."<sup>8</sup>

Although Jimmy and Alison are husband and wife living under the same roof, they are so alienated from each other that she hesitates to reveal her pregnancy to him lest he should suspect her motive. In almost every aspect of life, she differs from her husband as they have come from different social backgrounds, had different upbringing and different sets of social values. And for this her attitude towards her friend greatly differs from her husband's. Therefore, she does not at all mind hearing that Helena is coming to stay with them but the same news upsets her husband. After her arrival Alison puts faith in her and depends on her for moral support. Her friend believes Jimmy tortures her verbally beyond limit and that he will come to his senses only if she leaves him. So she says to Alison:

"Listen to me. You've got to fight him. Fight, or get out otherwise, he will kill you."<sup>9</sup>

She takes the liberty of sending a telegram to Alison's father to come and take his daughter away. Alison does not contradict her friend's decision though she sends the telegram without informing her. Before Helena's arrival she never thinks of leaving her husband.

"It is noteworthy that neither Cliff nor Alison ever alludes to separation or divorce as a possible solution to the conflicts that rage in the house. For them it is a way of life"<sup>10</sup>. Till Helena's entrance in the Porter house.

Helena interferes with Alison's marriage for her good, since she honestly thinks her friend will be better out of the 'mad house.' When Alison becomes the target of Jimmy's verbal attack before Helena, she unhesitatingly threatens to slap Jimmy if he does not stop his rude comments on his wife:"

“It’s a pity you’ve been so far away all this time. I would probably have slapped your face.”<sup>11</sup>

Even she rebukes Cliff for being a silent spectator of his friend’s misbehavior to Alison.

Unless Alison leaves Jimmy, he will never stop insulting her. She realizes it after Helena’s advice and decides to leave Jimmy for peace’s sake. So behind Helena’s instigation there lies a good intention to save a married woman from humiliation. But after Alison’s departure in Act II, her prolonged stay in Porter house as a mistress surprises and irritates us. But this type of behavior is normal considering the complexity and unpredictability of human minds. She takes Jimmy for herself because she finds that she desires him and wants him for a time.

Now Alison’s place is taken by Helena. It is beyond Alison’s imagination that Helena can replace her in Jimmy’s life. Her attention moves from hatred to love for Jimmy though

“Alison apparently never suspects Helena of malintentions and considers her as a good friend.”<sup>12</sup>

But she stays with “Jimmy not with rancor or disgust, but with love and passion.”<sup>13</sup> Though she adapts herself to Jimmy’s resentful comments about things she asks him to refrain from talking about religion and politics. It means she has not accepted all his ideas. Even then they get hopeful about their future relationship and Jimmy says:

“I’ll close that damned sweet-stall, and we’ll start everything from scratch.”<sup>14</sup>

Helena also agrees with it and their repartee is interrupted by the sudden arrival of Alison, untidy and ill in Act III.

The awakening of Helena’s conscience after Alison’s return is a vital psychological fact revealing the corking up of human minds. Her arrival gives a new turn to Helena’s thinking. Her suppressed sense of right and wrong suddenly emerges to the surface when she sees Alison has come back from her parents’ house. But Alison repeatedly stresses and assures her friend that she has arrived not with an intention to cause a breach between Jimmy and Helena. She says: “I must be mad, coming here like this. I’m sorry, Helena.”<sup>15</sup> Though she has realized that her place as a wife has been usurped by her friend, she does not request Helena to leave her husband for her sake. It is Helena who is touched by Alison’s predicament and willingly decides to leave

Jimmy. She also notices that Alison has lost her baby through miscarriage. And her conscience starts to prick her for wronging her friend's life. Her religious sense now proves too strong for her physical and emotional desire for Jimmy as she says:

“You see- I didn't know about the baby. It was such a shock. It's a judgment on us.”<sup>16</sup>

So definitely she has honesty to admit her sin. Alison does not reproach her for being Jimmy's mistress. And for this cool behavior of Alison Helena becomes ashamed of her brief affair with him. She decides to leave him as one cannot be happy after committing this type of sin. But her decision to desert him does not mean that she is not in love with him, because when Alison questions her: “You loved him, didn't you?”<sup>17</sup> She retorts: “And it was true.”<sup>18</sup> Only a few women have such type of courage and integrity to announce it. She could have denied her attraction for Jimmy to Alison but we see she did not. The fact is that she will never love anyone else the way she has loved him. But she wants to withdraw in favor of her friend, Jimmy's lawful wife. And she says: “You are his wife, aren't you? You have all the rights-”<sup>19</sup> Her self-sacrifice and act of giving up Jimmy is only for the awakening of her conscience which makes her feel repentant for removing Alison from her husband's house and replacing her. She also realizes the futility of a mistress. Helena's sudden decision to leave Jimmy, especially after their tender and affectionate moments are implausible to readers and critics. But I think this decision is normal for any woman who has conscience and compassion for a lost woman. And her attraction to Jimmy is also possible to any woman of flesh and blood. Every normal human being succumbs to this type of sin but only a few persons have the honesty to admit it. From this point of view Helena is not a sinner. Besides being repentant for her illegal relationship with Jimmy she also understands her incapability to cope up with a misfit like him as she says to Alison:

“There's no place for people like that any longer- in sex, politics or anything.”<sup>20</sup>

She also fails to understand his sufferings. And this understanding is very important to him and because of the lack of it once Alison has not been able to realize the pang of his sufferings and has had to leave him for the time being.

Jimmy is full of energy as well as sadness. Osborne also mentions it in his *Dejavu*:

“He generates energy, but, also, like, says Malvolio or Falstaff, an inescapable melancholy.”<sup>21</sup>

So when Helena wants to remove herself from the painful situation of life he says to her:

“It’s no good trying to fool you about love. You can’t fall into it like a soft job, without dirtying up your hands.”<sup>22</sup>

She is adamant in her decision to leave him no matter how much he needs her. She takes the right decision at the right moment as she knows if she does not go Alison will not be able to get her right position back. After the loss of the baby Alison is broken-hearted and utterly helpless. There is nobody to whom she can go to relieve her mental turmoil. This moment if Helena clings to him, she will put her friend to further misery. But we see despite her helpless state Alison does not request her friend to leave Jimmy for her sake. Instead of doing this she tells her not to desert him: “Helena, you mustn’t leave him. He needs you, I know he needs you-”<sup>23</sup> But Helena is aware of Alison’s mental and physical state.

Alison’s arrival is sudden and similarly Helena’s departure is also quite unexpected to both the readers and critics. Alison could not think that her friend would give up as easily as she has been informed through letter by Helena that she loves Jimmy. On the other hand, Helena’s decision to go makes Jimmy furious with her. He considers her decision as an escape from life and he says: “They all want to escape from the pain of being alive. And, most of all, from love.”<sup>24</sup> Even after the arrival of his wife he makes no attempt to conceal his contempt for her. He is rather rude in his attitude to her and says to Helena: “What are you looking so solemn about? What’s she doing here?”<sup>25</sup> This is the proof of his preference for Helena to Alison. His remarks are very shocking to any wife especially after the loss of an unborn baby. Helena could have taken advantage of his preferential treatment to her. But we see she suffers from mental agony when Alison returns. She would have lowered her dignity if she had continued her relationship with Jimmy by staying with him in this crucial moment of Alison’s life. By her departure in Act III, scene II, she shows her dignity, honesty, and judicious discretion, which only a good human being possesses. She also proves herself to be a true friend to Alison and shows that outwardly she looks modern but inwardly she is like all typical women who get affected by the distress of their fellows and cannot go beyond their middle class conviction.

Thus Helena's arrival and departure are vital to the structure of the play. She acts as an instrument in bringing the estranged couple together. Because of her arrival and interference Alison once leaves her husband and Alison's unexpected entrance brings about an abrupt and revolutionary change in Helena's attitude towards Jimmy and she decides to leave him. Once Helena's arrival inspires Alison to leave Jimmy for a certain period of time and in her absence from Jimmy she understands what suffering means to him. She also realizes the need of her husband in her life. This understanding results in the reunion of them. And the reconciliation has been possible for the exit of Helena from Jimmy's life. The withdrawal of Helena has been possible because of Alison's return. So the arrival and departure of Helena are inter-related to the departure and arrival of Alison.

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