

## THE ROLE OF COLONEL REDFERN IN OSBORNE'S LOOK BACK IN ANGER: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*Look Back in Anger* is the story of a married couple's stormy relationship. In it the ill-matched couple, Jimmy Porter and his wife Alison Porter come from different classes. He is a worker's son, and she is from an army family. Class tensions are prevalent throughout the play, and much of Jimmy's abuse is directed at Alison's family, which reflects the deep rift between different classes in England of the 50s. Class conflict worries Jimmy greatly and he wants to root out the social disharmony created by it. In Jimmy's view, the upper-class members symbolize the fake aristocratic society which is incapable of genuine feelings for any human being. Besides Jimmy and his wife, there are three on-stage characters. One of them is Colonel Redfern. He is Alison's father who shatters the traditional image of upper-class members and projects a new concept about their nature. His attitude towards his daughter, Alison, and Jimmy is poignantly realized when he has given several very thought-provoking speeches after his arrival at Porter house. Actually, our whole approach to the man alters radically after his arrival in Act Two, Scene Two of the play. The full extent of his good nature is seen in his wisdom about marital relationship. We find him admirable as a father and a human being and he is gifted with self-realization, sensibility, politeness, patience, keen insight and perception. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the role of Colonel Redfern.

**Keywords:** Redern's arrival, his role, good nature, attitude to his daughter and son-in-law

## INTRODUCTION:

According to Hayman in *Look Back in Anger* John Osborne “ . . . focuses so intently on the hero(Jimmy) in the foreground that the group and the background often get blurred” (Hayman,9). But Taylor suggests “ . . . the surprising fact is that the only character apart from Jimmy who is allowed his say and some measure of genuinely independent existence is Alison’s father . . .”(Taylor,49). The minor character Colonel Redfern, a retired army officer who served in India from 1914 to 1947, plays an important role by revealing his humane side. He is also integral to the theme and plot of the play. He is a sensible man who is somewhat puzzled by post World-War II England. Despite being a minor character, Colonel Redfern performs an important role. To understand Jimmy and Alison fully, Redfern’s role should be taken into consideration for he is not soulless and is someone who can empathize with the problems of his son-in-law although he could not understand them before his daughter’s marriage with Jimmy. Through the figure of Colonel Redfern, Osborne negates Jimmy’s assumption that all the upper-class members are unfeeling or egotistical. His arrival at his daughter’s house gives him the opportunity to reassess Alison and her husband, Jimmy and readers then get a chance to know his goodness. Hence, the mould-breaking drama: “. . . stands up as an impassioned domestic melodrama that advances to a truthful climax and projects an intensity of human feeling . . .”( *The Sunday Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1968).

The play is set in a cheerless one-room attic apartment in the Midlands of England. Jimmy stays with his wife, Alison and their Welsh friend Cliff Lewis in this house; however Cliff lives in a separate room. When Alison marries Jimmy, the contrast between the two families and the world views become clear.

This play has two groups of characters. One group belongs to the upper-class and another to the working-class. Colonel Redfern, his wife, Mrs. Redfern, son Nigel and daughter Alison are members of the upper class. Helena, Alison’s friend, is also from the same social class. On the other hand, Jimmy, his friends Hugh, Cliff, and Mrs. Tanner belong to the proletariat.

The arrival of Alison’s actress friend, Helena, near the end of Act I complicates the plot and causes Alison, who, without Jimmy’s knowledge, has become pregnant, to decide to leave him as she has given to Helena a detailed account of her marriage and the kind of pathetic life she has been leading with him. In fact, Helena wants to help Alison out of her difficult situation. Therefore, she has sent a message to Alison’s father without consulting her friend, asking to rescue her from dreadful situation. She also instigates Alison to leave Jimmy to teach him a lesson for his relentless verbal attacks on his wife and his family. She thinks her departure would be better for Alison’s unborn baby also. Alison is stunned and does not put up a fight. This is an example of her inability to react to anything.

Helena’s telegram comes as a shock to Alison’s family and Alison’s father rushes to his daughter’s house dutifully and “. . . looks around him, discreetly scrutinizing everything” (65) but does not find any fault with her claustrophobic house. Colonel Redfern was always curious to know about Alison’s conjugal life and tells Alison: “I’ve often wondered what it was like –where you were living, I mean” (66). “You didn’t tell us very much in your letters (65). After his arrival, he tries not to trespass into a private relationship since he does not want to interfere in his daughter’s life. The situation just compels him to come and his good qualities remain hidden till his arrival at his daughter’s house.

When we see Colonel Redfern for the first time in the Porter house in the Second Act, we get an insight into his character. He displays himself through his speeches and his relationship with his daughter. Osborne says of him that: “Forty years of being a soldier sometimes conceals the essentially gentle, kindly man underneath” (65). By responding to Helena’s telegram, he acts as the father concerned about his daughter and this arrival gives a new turn to his thinking about Alison and her husband Jimmy. After his arrival he does not let us down as a father and a human being. In the Porter house he begins to see both his daughter and son-in-law from a new perspective and is represented much more sympathetically than the other main characters of the play. According to Chakrabarti: “. . . he (Redfern) is an antithesis of his highbrow wife who has sneer for Jimmy because of his plebeian, working-class background” (Chakrabarti, 59). It is true that earlier Redfern opposed Allison’s marriage to Jimmy Before his arrival, from the speeches of Jimmy readers had to conceptualize Colonel Redfern as an unfeeling person. But after his arrival at the Porter house for the first time, he finds some admirable qualities in his son-in-law. He approves his frustration towards society and to some extent also brings out his (Redfern) own hidden qualities. Though Redfern wants to solve Alison’s marital problem, he is not blind to his daughter’s faults. Act Two, Scene Two focuses on the conversations between father and daughter but there contains major revelations of his character. He appears

before us now as an important character, providing abundant evidence of his humane nature. His arrival and insightful speeches also deepen our understanding of the characters of Alison and Jimmy.

He seems almost confused by his daughter's conjugal problem. As Osborne points out:

"... he is only disturbed and bewildered by it" (65). But despite being puzzled, he tries to judge the situation rationally. She is in a complex situation but he understands that there is something wrong in her and realizes that her departure would not solve her problem. After his arrival he could have acted with a biased attitude towards Alison and could have persuaded her to leave Jimmy. He could even have reproached her for marrying against their will. But after his arrival, he considers Jimmy's character in a positive way as he believes that there are sufficient reasons for Jimmy to become hostile towards Alison and her parents. In the words of Clurman: "Jimmy is married to a pretty girl whom he feels he almost had to steal away from her family, the kind of family whose strength and graces were grounded on England's 1914 Empire" (Clurman, 169). Hence, Colonel Redfern requests his daughter to think seriously about her future with her husband. Prema Raman points that: "... he (Redfern) would prefer to steer clear of his marital precincts and is in favour of an amicable settlement of the impasse between Alison and Jimmy Porter" (Raman, 49). But she is resolved to desert Jimmy no matter how much he needs her. From the beginning of the story, Alison fails to feel the pain of Jimmy. But despite his age, her father recognizes that Jimmy is in deep trouble because the couple lack understanding.

"She married Jimmy partly as a rebellion against the proper, predictable, stultifying precepts of class" (www.pilot-theater.com). Now she wants to go back to her own class leaving Jimmy behind. In fact, she wants to return to the values and security of her upper-class life. In other words, although Colonel Redfern has the ability to feel the sufferings of others, his daughter is unable to do so. He also apprehends that she is inconsistent in her character. Therefore, when she decides to leave Jimmy, he gets hurt and says to her: "This is a big step you're taking. You've made up your mind to come back with me? Is that really what you want?" (71). He has insight into the dangers of the situation. In his eyes, living with Jimmy is not a big mistake and her desertion will cause the domestic structure to fall apart. He tries to alert her to her mistake and to bridge the gap between his daughter and her husband by trying to make her see the light when he says: "Perhaps Jimmy is right" (70). In fact, by his effort to stop Alison from leaving Jimmy, he shows his sagacity. But Alison does not try to understand the reasons behind his request. Rather, she bemoans her loss of premarital life, and the years she had been free from any kind of anxiety and care. So she states: "Well, for twenty years, I'd lived a happy life, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this --- this spiritual barbarian -- throws down the gauntlet at me" (69).

In this situation Colonel Redfern also finds his daughter incomprehensible. Though the gently nurtured Alison had married Jimmy by breaking class barriers, she is no longer unwilling to give her marriage a fair try. He thinks Alison might have made a difference in her marriage if she had been able to give Jimmy the unqualified loyalty he demanded. Colonel Redfern also senses that somehow she disapproves of Jimmy and his class and is unable to accept her role as the wife of a working-class member. Hence, Jimmy's anger against Alison and her mother is fully understood by Colonel Redfern. He attaches some blame to Alison and his wife for their troubled marriage. Thus, he is portrayed as the conscience of the play. He wants Alison to realize what is important for any relationship. But Jimmy's anger appears merely as sadism to Alison and her friend, Helena. Alison is not interested in adapting herself to Jimmy's environment for fear of losing her identity. It is quite surprising to Colonel Redfern that despite three years of marriage, she is unable to adjust herself to Jimmy and his family. Colonel Redfern is astonished that his once bewitched daughter is now fully resolved to desert Jimmy though very much unaware of what she wants. But he does not want to hurry to take Alison home and is unwilling to impose his decision on her. According to Allardyce Nicoll "... the girl's retired-officer father, although puzzled, exhibits remarkable understanding ..." (Nicoll, 178) by not even questioning Alison's role as a wife in Jimmy's house directly. Despite getting the opportunity, he does not behave with her with authority. Moreover, he refrains from using Helena, despite her strong influence over Alison to convince her that Colonel Redfern wants to be confirmed from Alison herself whether she has succumbed to Helena's influence and is confused by her instigation to leave Jimmy.

Colonel Redfern arrives at the Porter house when Jimmy is visiting the dying mother of his childhood friend Hugh, Mrs. Tanner, who is in hospital. After arrival Colonel Redfern receives information of Mrs. Tanner's stroke when Alison says: "She's been taken ill -- a stroke. Hugh's abroad, as you know, so Jimmy's gone to London to see her. He (Jimmy) wanted me to go with him" (66). Therefore, her presence in her house at the

time of Jimmy's great distress which has caused him to leave for London is simply unbelievable to her father. Her presence and callous nature also frustrate him. In contrast, Jimmy's kindness to the dying woman wins Redfern over to Jimmy's side, he realizes that Alison could have shared Jimmy's suffering and healed his mind by going with him. But because of her lack of "sympathy" and "companionship" for working-class people, she has not accompanied her husband to London to see his foster mother.

Redfern is really disappointed at her emotional nullity when she ignores the stroke of a dying woman. In this situation, he provides a critical measure of her behaviour towards Jimmy and Mrs. Tanner. He senses that Alison's support for Jimmy is not adequate for the dying woman and that she is indifferent to her husband's problem. Redfern reminds her of Mrs. Tanner's contribution to Jimmy's life: "Didn't she start him off in this sweet-stall business?" (66) In reality, Redfern's point is that Alison should have cared for Mrs. Tanner. He does not say anything directly to her about her lack of concern for the dying woman, but by not criticizing her directly he indicates that she lacks love for the close ones of Jimmy's life although: "Jimmy and she are very fond of each other" (66). He also understands that Jimmy is alone in his sufferings and is a lonely fighter since Alison has been withdrawing from him. He realizes that Mrs. Tanner is of little worth in his daughter's life as Mrs. Tanner is from the working-class. But he reveals that he values gratitude and shows tenderness for an unknown woman. And in Jimmy's helpless situation, Colonel Redfern tries to dissuade Alison from deserting her husband since this act will destroy their relationship forever. Mary McCarthy lends support to this fact, saying that: "Alison lets Jimmy down at the crucial moment of the play --- a thing he finds unthinkable, as does Alison's father, Colonel Redfern." (McCarthy, 154).

Life partners should be comforting to each other in troubled times. But Colonel Redfern realizes that his daughter has failed here miserably. He cannot expect his daughter to be heartless towards Jimmy's feelings. Surprisingly, she does not feel a pang of guilt for her callousness. Redfern is afraid that rejecting Jimmy's request to visit Hugh's mother, she rejects his own ideas, and consequently him and his world. Though Redfern has come to "rescue" her, he wants to keep peace in their life not only as a true father but also as a true guide. For these reasons, he wins our admiration.

Redfern was not supportive to Jimmy prior to his marriage but after his visit to the Porter house his attitudes to both his daughter and Jimmy get changed. His suppresses his sense of right and wrong suddenly comes out. In his eyes Jimmy has become an innocent sufferer in the hands of Alison's family although he complains that Alison has been writing secret letters to her parents --- conspiring against Jimmy, as he sees it. So he expresses his opinion about her letters to them saying: "Perhaps it might have been better if you hadn't written letters to us - knowing how we felt about your husband and after everything that had happened" (68). The critic Mary McCarthy also echoes Redfern as he observes that: "The fact that Alison is secretly exchanging letters with her means that she is in communication with the enemy" (McCarthy, 1968:154). As Jimmy had to campaign hard against her family's disapproval to win her, Colonel Redfern wants her to detach herself from her class. He even surprises Alison by admitting that he and her mother were probably wrong to fight against the marriage: "It's a little late to admit it, I know, but your mother and I weren't entirely free from blame" (67). At one point he blames his wife for appointing detectives to spy on Jimmy. He points out: "I have never said anything - there was no point afterwards - but I have always believed that she went too far over Jimmy . . . I did my best to stop her, but she was in such a state of mind, there was simply nothing I could do so" (67). Thus, he reveals his honesty and helplessness before his class-conscious wife. He also proves that he is more sensitive than his wife and daughter about Jimmy's hurt. Definitely, such sensitivity is a remarkable quality which only a few people possess. He tells Alison that he actually understands a little of Jimmy's perspective, although his wife would not. Alison is really surprised by her father's belated apology. We wonder why, if Redfern was not supportive of Jimmy and Alison's marriage earlier, he is sympathetic to Jimmy now. But as it turns out, Colonel Redfern is quite different from his wife, Mrs. Redfern; both his wife and daughter lack his positive view of Jimmy, his understanding, and his compassion for people, and his wife "would relish the present situation" (65).

The father who earlier went against his daughter's marriage is supposed to have a protective role towards her in this troubled time. But here he tries to size up the situation rationally and the greater part of his sympathy is directed towards Jimmy for showing his honesty before his marriage when he was humiliated by his mother-in-law. In the words of Colonel Redfern: ". . . Jimmy acted in good faith. He's honest enough, whatever else maybe" (68). Colonel Redfern wants to protest against his wife's vulgar reaction towards Jimmy who was not hiding anything from them. Alison is stunned by her father's support for Jimmy.

She expresses her frustration thus: "In spite of all the humiliating scenes and the threats! What did you say to me at that time? Wasn't I letting you down, turning against you, how could I do this to you etcetera?"(68). Actually, she is reminding her father of his reservations about Jimmy because of his inferior origin. Colonel Redfern does not deny her point as he had been unable to appreciate Jimmy's problems earlier. So, he declares: "Perhaps you and I were the ones most to blame" (68). Here, we see, he is blind neither to him nor to his daughter's fault. For this admission, he cannot be criticized by his daughter as it is true. Alison had married Jimmy despite the severe opposition of her mother but now she defends the same woman: "Do you know what he said about mummy? He said she was an overfed, over privileged old bitch" (68). In this situation, Colonel Redfern is expected to be angry with Jimmy for his offensive comments about his mother-in-law. But her rebuff cannot change his positive attitude to Jimmy as he has a broader understanding of Jimmy's turbulent experiences. He takes Jimmy to his heart and forgives him because Redfern is not blameless. He finds that Jimmy is like him in some respects, though we see little of his relationship with Jimmy. Like Jimmy, he finds certainty nowhere. Though Alison is unable to cope up with the strain, Colonel Redfern wants to be a reconciling factor in the quarrels of the couple as he genuinely cares for them. Nevertheless, Alison tries to make her father spiteful towards Jimmy by recounting Jimmy's detestable comments on her parents. On the other hand, Redfern remains sensible and justifies the comments of Jimmy towards his in-laws as he says: "I'm afraid I can't help feeling that he must have had a certain amount of right on his side" (67).

Colonel Redfern also tells Alison that Jimmy has taught her a lot about society and life in general as he says: "I didn't approve of Jimmy at all, and I don't suppose I ever should, but, looking back on it, I think it would have been better, for all concerned, if we had never attempted to interfere. At least it would have been more dignified" (67-8). He also acknowledges that Jimmy is probably right in comparing him with: ". . . an old plant left over from the Edwardian wilderness" (70) as his situation is similar to Jimmy's. When he came back to England from India after the partition everything got changed and he was unsure of everything. He even agrees with Alison when she says: "You're hurt because everything is changed and Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it" (70).

Colonel Redfern also apprehends that Alison has never given herself to her husband with the honesty he demands from her. The most emphatic criticism of her attitude is made by her father when he says: "You like to sit on the fence . . ." (68). This indicates that he is not hesitant to criticize her "fence sitting," and her lack of total commitment to Jimmy. At the same time, Redfern is not hesitant to criticize his neutral nature: "I think you may take after me a little, my dear."(68). Thus, he has shown a sense of similarity between Alison and himself, a sense of the way in which they both have a tendency to: " sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful"(68). He also surprises Alison when he provides a positive assessment of his attitude to Jimmy and tells her: "Your husband has obviously taught you a great deal, whether you recognize it or not"(69). By this speech he means that Jimmy is more aware of society and life in general.

Before leaving Alison's house Colonel Redfern proves himself a dutiful husband towards his wife who is in great tension for their daughter. So he tells her: "Your mother will be worried, I know I promised her I'd ring her when I got her. She is not very well" (71). As a responsible father he responds to Helena's call, but is not forgetful about the waiting wife who is not feeling alright. Earlier the same man had criticized his wife for crossing the limit by appointing a spy against Jimmy. Now he is worried about her. Hence, he shows that he did not belittle his wife illogically. Rather, he just wants Alison not to be biased against her mother.

Alison's friend, Helena, regrets sending the telegram to Colonel Redfern: "I hope my telegram didn't upset her (Mrs. Redfern) too much. Perhaps I shouldn't have-"(71)However, he does not show any hostility towards her and thanks her: "We were very grateful that you did. It was very kind of you, indeed" (71). He is courteous to Cliff too. When he is introduced to him he says: "How do you do?"(72) Thus, he shows that he is pleasant to all. Although he is displeased with Helena's prolonged stay in her daughter's house, he tactfully asks her: "What about your case. Helena? I expect we shall be seeing you again soon, if you are not busy" (70). Here, he could have made Alison doubtful about Helena's motives but he reveals patience with the whole situation. He does not even display any indecent interest in either Helena or Cliff.

Redfern tries to smoothen away the wrinkles of Alison's marital life by trying to persuade her about her decision to leave Jimmy. But when she does not agree with his request, he does not question either Helena or Cliff about Alison's problem. He does not even seek their help. Therefore, he exhibits his prudence as well as self-restraint in a manner that raises him above the ordinary father and human being.



According to Alison, Jimmy married her for revenge. To Colonel Redfern this is quite an unfortunate motive to harbour for one's life partner. Her utterance leaves Redfern with a confused view of the husband-wife relationship: "I always believed that people married each other because they were in love" (69-70). Hence, he speaks of conjugal compatibility which Alison fails to understand.

At one point of time he reluctantly allows Alison to go away with him as he is a powerless witness in front of an adult daughter who can take her own decision about her life partner. Therefore, he hurries her: "Don't be long, Alison" (72).

Life is insecure for everybody and every person must feel this to be the case. It is part of the human condition. But Alison is unable to feel the deep pain of her husband. It seems Alison is regretting her marriage. Colonel Redfern could have rebuked her in this situation as a father but he does not want to disrespect her decision. He does not even try to use his emotion to keep her from going back with him. Earlier he witnessed helplessly the way his wife treated Jimmy. Now he himself is in the same helpless situation. Redfern understands that Jimmy has some good qualities which his (Redfern's) daughter fails to discover. Redfern realizes that Jimmy is quick to blame and cynical. But he does not lack compassion for people and this is a striking quality for any human being.

Despite Colonel Redfern's attempt to 'save' his daughter, he does not allude to separation or divorce as a possible solution to the conflicts that exist. Free mixing, living together and divorce at the drop of a hat were norms in the 50s. Even so, Colonel Redfern finds Alison's decision to desert Jimmy a grave injustice to her husband when he (Jimmy) is concerned about his foster-mother. It means he is true to tradition and is not in favour of unnecessary divorce.

In spite of her more than three-year long married life, Alison is unable to feel Jimmy's despair. However, Colonel Redfern can sense Jimmy's ache though he does not have any exchange with him at all. In the eyes of Colonel Redfern, Jimmy and Alison lack understanding and sharing. At the same time, he shows that to feel the problem of anybody one does not need to go through it. One just needs the kind of sympathetic mind that Mr. Redfern possesses.

Jimmy is a misfit in his society and this problem can be felt by his father-in-law as he puts it: "As for Jimmy - he just speaks a different language from any of us" (65). Redfern apprehends that spiritually and mentally Alison belongs to the world of her parents. Alison senses that she can get away with things around her father Colonel Redfern who knows her best, who loves her regardless of her conduct. But she does not know that her decision to leave Jimmy will end up subverting her relationship. All our relationships follow the contours of life and, they have ups and downs. This is why Colonel Redfern provides a critical measure of Alison's behaviour towards Jimmy.

Colonel Redfern knows that for a happy marriage, life partners need to generate love, generosity, dependability and trust. He realizes that Alison fails to understand that detachment can never guarantee happiness. We admire Redfern as he listens, sympathizes and appreciates. During his short stay he can be perceptive of Jimmy's pain but here the daughter fails miserably as she does not know that Jimmy's tensions are arising out of strains and pressures in marital relationship. Alison wants to escape from life when her husband is in extreme pain for fear of losing his foster mother. Understanding is a prerequisite to love and growth and comes only from within. Hence, she fails to grow as a human being also.

Colonel Redfern wisely exercises his parental responsibility by responding to the call of Helena. His sympathy, tact and practical good sense entitle him to be a considerate human being who is better than his superficial and mindless wife who contrasts strongly with him. Thus, he proves that he does not exhibit his superior breeding or unlimited snobbery and has ample insight in a play which is: "... a well-made problem play of considerable psychological insight" (Trussler, 1969: 54). Earlier, Mrs. Redfern's effort to separate Alison from Jimmy had misfired and had actually united them. Now in Alison's decision Colonel Redfern feels that by marrying Jimmy Alison had degraded herself. Now Redfern is profoundly upset at this as he is a man of good sense. He knows that she is returning to her parents, the security they offer, their values but she is unaware of the fact that: "... human integrity and happiness mean more than the comforts and security of rank and prestige" (Worth, 103). He is a living proof to us that being in upper-class, is no disqualification for being humane.

By the end of Colonel Redfern's conversations with Alison, he has come around to Jimmy's view and is now sympathetic with Jimmy and takes his side against his unfeeling daughter as he studies her psychology who: "... does not know that one must be prepared to be defeated and broken up by life" (Carnall, 129). We

respect him for his integrity as well as for his practical sense that he displays as a father and a human being after his arrival at Alison's house. He also proves that he is perceptive of people's feelings and thus he creates a very favourable impression on the reader.

**NOTES:** All quotations are from John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, London, Faber and Faber, 1957

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