

# 39. Angry Young Men: John Osborne

## John Osborne *Look Back in Anger* (1956)

### Have you ever watched somebody die? 164

In this extract Jimmy is talking to Helen and he is revealing the roots of his anger and disillusionment.

- HELENA                    [*quite calmly*] It's a pity you've been so far away all this time.  
I would probably have slapped your face<sup>1</sup>.  
*They look into each other's eyes across the table. He moves slowly up, above Cliff, until he is beside her.*
- 5 JIMMY                    You've behaved like this ever since I first came.  
Helen, have you ever watched somebody die?  
*She makes a move to rise.*
- No, don't move away.  
*She remains seated, and looks up to him.*
- 10 HELENA                It doesn't look dignified<sup>2</sup> enough for you.  
[*like ice*] If you come any nearer. I will slap your face.  
*He looks down at her, a grin smouldering round his mouth<sup>3</sup>.*
- JIMMY                    I hope you won't make the mistake of thinking for one  
moment that I am a gentleman.
- HELENA                   I'm not very likely to do that.
- 15 JIMMY                   [*Bringing his face close to hers*] I've no public school<sup>4</sup> scruples  
about hitting girls. [*Gently*] If you slap my face – by God. I'll  
lay you out<sup>5</sup>.
- HELENA                   You probably would. You are the type.
- JIMMY                    You bet I'm the type. I'm the type that detest physical  
20 violence. Which is why<sup>6</sup>, if I find some woman trying to cash  
in on<sup>7</sup> what she thinks is my defenceless chivarly by lashing  
out<sup>8</sup> with her frail little fists, I lash back<sup>9</sup> at her.
- HELENA                   Is that meant to be subtle, or just plain Irish<sup>10</sup>?

1. **would ... your face:** would have hit you (it. *ti avrei dato uno schiaffo*)

2. **dignified:** respectful (it. *dignitoso*)

3. **a grin ... mouth:** a smile appears on his mouth (it. *un ghigno che si smorza sulla bocca*)

4. **public school:** reference to the public school manners typical of the upper classes but different from Jimmy's own since he is from the working class.

5. **lay you out:** knock you to the ground (it. *ti stendo*)

6. **Which is why:** That's why

7. **cash in on:** profit by (it. *approfittare di*)

8. **lashing out:** hitting violently (it. *colpendomi*)

9. **lash back:** hit back (it. *le restituisco il colpo*)

10. **subtle, or just plain Irish:** it. *sottile sarcasmo o una minaccia*

*His grin widens.*

- 25 JIMMY I think you and I understand one another all right. But you haven't answered my question. I said: have you watched somebody die?
- HELENA No. I haven't.
- JIMMY Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity.
- 30

*His good humour of*

- 35 For twelve months. I watched my father dying – when I was ten years old. He'd come back from the war in Spain, you see. And certain god-fearing gentlemen there had made such a mess of him<sup>11</sup>, he didn't have long left to live. Everyone knew it – even I knew t.

*He moves R.*

- 40 But you see, I was the only one who cared. [*Turns to the window*] His family were embarrassed by the whole business. Embarrassed and irritated. [*Looking out*] As for my mother, all she could think about was the fact that she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side in all things. My mother was all for being associated<sup>12</sup> with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones.

- 45 *He moves up C again.*

- We all us waited for him to die. The family sent him a cheque every month, and hoped he'd get on with it quietly, without too much vulgar fuss. My mother looked after him without complaining and that was about all. Perhaps she pitied him. I suppose she was capable of that. [*With a kind of appeal in his voice*] But I was the only one who cared!
- 50

*He moves L, behind the armchair.*

- 55 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.

*He leans forward<sup>13</sup> on the back of the armchair.*

- 60 All that that feverish failure of a man had to listen to him was a small, frightened boy. I spent hour upon hour in that tiny bedroom. He would talk to me for hours, pouring out all that was left of his life to one, lonely, bewildered<sup>14</sup> little boy, who could barely understand half of what he said. All

11. **made such a mess of him:** it. *l'avevano conciato talmente male*

12. **My mother ... associated:** She was in favour of

13. **leans forward:** bends forward

14. **bewildered:** confused and stupefied

he could feel was the despair and the bitterness, the sweet,  
sickly smell of a dying man.

*He moves around the chair.*

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You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry –  
angry and helpless. And I can never forget it. [*Sits*] I knew  
more about – love... betrayal and death, when I was ten  
years old than you will probably ever know all your life.