

Inferiority Complex in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*: A Psychoanalytic Reading

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Abstract

This paper concentrates on applying the basic demarcations of the well-known Adlerian concept, the inferiority complex, to John Osborne's dramatic masterpiece, *Look Back in Anger* (1957). This paper attempts to answer the following questions: What are the main aspects of the inferiority complex? What are the various justifications of Jimmy Porter's anger? And to what extent can Jimmy Porter be considered as a true representative character of the inferiority complex as an abnormal state of mind? To fulfill these aims, this paper applies Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology to the scope of the study, Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. The study tackles the three distinguished symptoms of the inferiority complex: first, it is essentially originated by anger. Secondly, it is the neurotic individual's abstract hindrance against any positive achievement. Thirdly, it is demonstrated in the presence of a problematic situation for which the neurotic person is not properly outfitted. The paper concludes that John Osborne is much influenced by this Adlerian concept that each symptom is remarkably applied to Jimmy Porter. Indeed, Jimmy Porter is a true exemplar of the sufferer of this negative psychological condition.

Keywords: Alfred Adler, Inferiority Complex, John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, Individual Psychology.

عقدة الدونية في مسرحية *انظر إلي الوراء* بغضب لأوزبورن: قراءة تحليلية نفسية

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مستخلص

يركز هذا البحث على تطبيق الأعراض الأساسية للمفهوم الأدلري المعروف عقدة الدونية علي رائعة جون أوزبورن المسرحية: *انظر إلي الوراء* بغضب (1957). ويهدف هذا البحث للإجابة عن الأسئلة الآتية: ما هي النواحي الأساسية لعقدة الدونية؟ ما هي التبريرات المختلفة لغضب جيمي بورتر؟ والي أي مدي يمكن اعتبار جيمي بورتر شخصية ممثلة لعقدة الدونية كحالة عقلية غير سوية؟ ولتحقيق هذه الأهداف فان البحث يطبق علم النفس الفردي لألفريد أدلر علي مجال الدراسة وهو مسرحية *انظر إلي الوراء* بغضب لأوزبورن. وتتناول هذه الدراسة الأعراض الثلاثة المميزة لعقدة الدونية وهي: أولاً أن منشأها الغضب. وثانيها أنها بمثابة عقبة معنوية عند الشخص العصابي تعوقه عن أي انجاز ايجابي. وثالثها أنها تظهر في موقف مشكلة يعجز العصابي عن التعامل معها. ويخلص البحث الي تأثر جون أوزبورن الشديد بهذا المصطلح الأدلري (عقدة الدونية) حيث تظهر جميع أعراضه منطبقة بوضوح علي جيمي بورتر. وبالفعل يعد جيمي بورتر نموذجاً واضحاً لمن يعاني من هذه الحالة النفسية السلبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ألفريد أدلر، عقدة الدونية، جون أوزبورن، مسرحية *انظر إلي*

الوراء بغضب، علم النفس الفردي.

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Alfred Adler (1870-1937), the founder of Individual Psychology, is a prominent Viennese psychologist and psychotherapist and one of the most high-ranking figures in modern psychology. He determines the inferiority complex as the feelings of inadequacy which set up stress, psychological dodging, and a compensating drive towards a delusive sense of superiority (*What Life Could Mean to You* 235). He exhibits three main dimensions for this term. First, the inferiority complex is essentially originated by anger. Secondly, it is the neurotic person's abstract hindrance against any positive achievement (on individual or social levels). Thirdly, it is demonstrated in the presence of a problematic situation for which the neurotic person is not properly outfitted.

Adler tackles the first symptom in his clarification that anger is considered as an expression of inferiority complex as well as tears and excuses (41). Consequently, it is necessary first to define anger as a main symptom of the inferiority complex. Robert A. F. Thurman quotes the definition of *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* of anger in which it is described as a strong feeling of displeasure and antagonism that is heightened by the sentiment of injury or insult (*Anger: The Seven Deadly Sins* 29). Furthermore, In *Psychology of Anger: New Research* (2014), Mariko Kaneko and Kosuke Niitsu consider anger as an activator of violence and aggression (Penrod and Paulk 154). Adler confirms that the neurotic individual's severe sense of anger is a major sign of his suffering from an inferiority complex. He states that no individual can endure these feelings of inferiority for a long time. He will fall under a horrible pressure that urges him to act quickly to be released from these agonizing sensations. He may conceive some situations where he can deem his false power. Therefore, instead of guiding himself to be stronger and more sufficient, the neurotic unconsciously directs himself to *appear* stronger. His inferiority feelings will surely remain because of this self-deceit (*What Life Could Mean to You* 40 - 41).

Jimmy Porter, Osborne's most famous protagonist, suffers from an excessive anger that leads to his observable inferiority complex as well as his alienation from any source of superiority. Austin E. Quigley points out that Jimmy's humor and *his cheerful malice* are mingled with his anger and aggression throughout the whole play, bewildering and baffling everyone at one time or another (*Modern Dramatists* 199). Jimmy Porter's anger is justified by various recognizable reasons. When he is ten years old, his father dies because of wounds received in the Spanish Civil War. This painful tribulation greatly affects Jimmy as he first encounters anger, sorrow, and helplessness at such an early stage. He sadly recounts this distressing catastrophe expressing: "I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry- angry and helpless. And I can never forget it" (II. i. 81).

In his introduction to Adler's paper, *Significance of Early Recollections* (1937), Arthur J. Clark explains Adler's opinion that "early recollections of one's life provide perhaps the most important means for understanding the style of life or basic personality functioning of an individual" (Carlson and Maniaci 303). Consequently, Jimmy's beholding of his dear father's death is such a horrible trauma that it acutely influences him later. It represents a mental base for other collecting anguish sensations and an obvious inferiority complex later. Furthermore, it becomes Jimmy's one and only criterion to decide whether an individual deserves his accompany or not. Losing a dear person turns to be Jimmy's sign that any human being has changed from naivety into insightfulness. This point is proved when Jimmy asks Helena, Alison's actress friend: "Helena, have you ever watched somebody die?" (II. i. 79). This crucial question is applicable to Adler's assertion that the significance of the early recollections cannot be rightly evaluated until they are related to the individual's total lifestyle (Carlson and Maniaci 307). Jimmy's question means, therefore that he wants to be sure that Helena has felt the same suffering and can weigh his cumulative anger.

The social gap between Jimmy's poor working class and Alison's upper middle class is another recognizable justification for his anger. Jimmy suffers from the profound British class conflict in the 1950s. He is not internally fulfilled and continuously asks questions. He starts his cruel attacks on Alison and Cliff, his sole friend. Cliff discloses the reason of Jimmy's hatred of the upper-class to Alison: "He gets on with me because I'm ... Common as dirt" (I. i. 49). Consequently, Jimmy suffers from low self-esteem and feels downgraded by his society. He denounces the sweet-stall job feeling that he is worthy of a higher career for being a university graduate. He shows his lack of life zest and his fierce anger at everything even the Sunday paper when he shouts: "Let's pretend we're human" (I. i. 32).

In this situation, Jimmy openly admits his lack of an adequate amount of life interest and zest as if he were an animal. He does not enjoy his credibility statement because of his low self-esteem. He tries to prove his false power through rage and shouting. Most of his loud voice, constant attacks, and abrasive aggression are characteristics of insecurity, irritability, inability to act, lack of belonging, and alienation. More important is that his external behavior is only a disguise behind which there are various mounting up layers of severe inferiority complex. He is a true representative of the inferiority complex victim who considers life just as a battlefield in which only the strongest survive. Way clarifies this Adlerian viewpoint that the neurotic person feels that he must defeat his environment, or it will lead to his choking (95). This negative characteristic appears unmistakably when Cliff "quietly" directs him to stop brawling, Jimmy openly ensures that it is the solely thing left he is good at.

Jimmy's chief obstruction is his failure to know where he precisely belongs in his society. Helena's headful description of Jimmy's disorientation and his inability to determine his life attitude (master plan) matches Adler's notion that the sufferer of an inferiority complex attempts to overcome his life difficulties but in vain because the surrounding situation is still unchanged. In *What*

Life Could Mean to You, Adler maintains that the goal of the patient of the inferiority complex is to be superior, but instead of defeating his obstructions, he will persuade, even compel himself, into his feeling of superiority. Thus, his inferiority feelings will be intensified, because as situation that produces them is unaltered (40-41).

Jimmy's cruelest verbal abuse towards Alison reveals his excessive anger and his total refusal of her passivity. He describes her as a stupid cowardly woman of timid mind. In addition, Jimmy's harsh attack on Alison is connected with his general rigid resentment of women. He observes that women are the symbol of noise and trouble. Cornish and Ketels remark that Osborne supports Jimmy Porter's language with this scathing frankness to indicate the real frustration (among the British youth) at that age (the mid-fifties) (xxi). Thus, Jimmy Porter is described as a spokesman of his generation. Quigley recognizes that when he angrily looks back, he generationally represents the voice of his contemporary youth (*Modern Dramatists* 201).

Jimmy unconsciously conveys his rough censure of his wife's upper-class family onto her personally. He makes fun of her stupidity that she has not had an idea for years. He scorns her and her friends as well. Still more harshly, he compares between Alison's inactiveness and Madeline's (his past mistress) curiosity. He expresses: "Just to be with her was an adventure" (I. i. 36). On contrast, Alison's passiveness is quite refused by him. It really exasperates him and leads to more liberty of his rudeness and insults.

El Touny realizes that the principal reason of Jimmy's contrastive opinions of Madeline and Alison turns back to Jimmy's need of mothering. He presumes that Madeline is the older woman who temporarily provides the inner security Jimmy needs (166). This significant opinion is emphasized by Trussler adding Mrs. Tanner, Hugh's mum, as Jimmy's proletarian mother-substitute (47 - 48). She is an example of the poor working-class woman. Jimmy could not tolerate Alison's underestimation of Mrs. Tanner when Alison goes out with Helena refusing to visit the old needy woman

when she has a stroke. After Mrs. Tanner's death, Jimmy unfolds his burning anger of Alison's great fault to Helena clarifying that again for eleven hours, he has been watching someone he loves very much, Hugh's mum, dying. He laments: "She [Hugh's mum] was alone, and I was the only one with her" (II. ii. 99).

Jimmy's wretchedness because of Mrs. Tanner's death rises his intense grieve of his father's death again. His heart break strengthens his hatred and rage against the upper-middle class. For him, Alison repeats the same unpardonable awful fault of her upper class by neglecting the poor woman in her stroke. Such an underestimation of Jimmy's proletarian mother-substitute is psychologically identified by him as an unbearable underestimation of himself. Moreover, this problematic situation represents a main reason of Jimmy's excessive anger (that functions as the main psychological origin of his inferiority complex).

Another clear example of Jimmy's abuse towards Alison is his cruel wish that she might be subjected to a sorrowful experience to know how to be a recognizable human being. Way explains the Adlerian opinion that the victim of inferiority complex takes pleasure in others' suffering and misfortunes (95). Consequently, Jimmy harshly wishes that Alison would be subjected to the sorrowful experience of a child's death to be awakened from her beauty sleep as he describes her. Accordingly, Jimmy's rough wish reveals his suffering from an inferiority complex. He loves Alison; however, he wants to see her suffering because that misfortune can awake her mind from naivety into insight. Alison comes back at the end lamenting losing her child confessing that this is what he wants from her. She regrets: "This is what he's been longing for me to feel" (III. ii. 123).

Last but not least, there is the influence of the idea of boredom on Jimmy's unquiet character. The nervous Jimmy Porter does not endure the recurrent routine of life. Being continuously exasperated, he rejects the sense of life sameness and seeks to enkindle others' feelings to take part in his rage. He frequently stirs up Alison to change her neutral nature to a more exciting one.

Furthermore, Jimmy cannot stand watching Alison in front of the ironing board. He makes a frantic intentional movement, pushes Cliff on that ironing board, and on Alison. The board collapses and all of them fall down in a heap on the ground. This results in burning her arm. Later, Jimmy holds Alison's bandaged arm apologizing and frankly confessing that he has done it on purpose just because of his being unable to bear boredom.

The second symptom of the inferiority complex is that it is an abstract obstacle for the person's progress. It signifies the neurotic's unconscious mode of behavior. The feelings of inferiority form a barrier against the patient's positive achievement. Way attests that the neurotic individual's distrust of himself as well as his hatred and hostility towards the outer world hinder him to follow the path of achievement (95). Adler adds that each neurotic individual suffers from an inferiority complex. He illustrates that the individual's behavior has to be observed because it reveals his tricks to reassure his worth and significance both to himself and his environment (*What Life Could Mean to You* 39).

The social gap between Jimmy Porter and his community embodies the essence of his inferiority complex. His apparent marginalization prevents him from achieving anything good for himself or others. Jimmy is a graduate of a new red brick university which ensures that his poverty prevents him from joining Cambridge or Oxford. Jimmy is aware of the bitterness of his deprivation. Alison unfolds to Helena that Jimmy considers his university not "even red brick, but white tile" (II. i. 64). Therefore, Jimmy's abnormal behavior is applicable to Way's assertion that the patient of an inferiority complex fills himself with gloomy anticipations and overrates the surrounding difficulties to justify his inability to solve his problems (98 - 99).

However, Jimmy Porter does his best to reassure his worth and significance. He recurrently uses many literary references to display his cultural background. He wishes that one day he will write a book which "won't be recollected in tranquility" (II. i. 76) with Wordsworth. He also refers to other literary figures as Shakespeare,

Milton, and T. S. Eliot. Adler explains that the sufferer from the inferiority complex makes special efforts of concealment (*What Life Could Mean to You* 40). Hayman presumes that Jimmy Porter pours his rage in attacking all including Alison, Helena, Cliff, his society, and even Wordsworth and the Sunday papers. This is interlinked with his deficiency to offer other possible alternatives. He expounds that Jimmy is himself passive because he likes to see things altered without having an idea about what they have to be altered to (2).

A third symptom of inferiority complex is that it is demonstrated in the existence of a problem for which the neurotic is not properly out-fitted. It emphasizes his negative conviction that he is unable to solve it (*What Life Could Mean to You* 41). An evident example of such a problem is Jimmy's discovery that Alison still sends and receives many letters from her mother. Besides, he feels underestimated when Alison neglects mentioning his name in all her letters. While Alison answers Helena's phone call, he finds these letters. His anger outbursts again feeling that Alison deceives him. He nervously shouts: "She writes long letters back to Mummy, and never mentions me at all, because I'm just a dirty word to her too" (I. i. 57). This problem rises with Helena's arrival when Jimmy insults Alison's mum meanly during their first meal. Though Helen tries to stop him, Alison just stares at her plate. This problem reaches its climax after Alison's leaving when Jimmy is enormously overwhelmed by Alison's unforgivable fault, namely, rejecting to be with him in Mrs. Tanner's funeral. For him, she repeats the horrible fault of all her upper-class members in neglecting this old indigent woman.

In the heart of Jimmy's extreme anger, the sole peacemaking escape is the squirrel-bear game. Jimmy describes his wife as a beautiful squirrel, and she finds him as a super bear. Alison unfolds to Helena that they (the animals) are all love without brains. Therefore, it is their strategy of ease and relaxation instead of hatred and revenge. Hinchliffe finds their final reconciliation as a withdrawal into that game (19). Jimmy ends the play by his mocking irony reminding Alison of their game. He tells her that they will be

in their cave because there are cruel traps outside waiting for the very timid animals.

To sum up, this paper tackles the well-known Adlerian concept, inferiority complex, according to its three perspectives: its being essentially originated by anger, its being a barrier against any positive accomplishment/ progress on individual and social levels, and its being asserted in the presence of a problem for which the neurotic is not adequately out fitted/ equipped. The study concludes that John Osborne is much influenced by Adler's concept of inferiority complex that each demarcation is noticeably applied to his most famous protagonist, Jimmy Porter. The psychoanalytic dissection is proved by various dramatic considerations.

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