Look Back in Anger

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN OSBORNE

John Osborne was born in southwest London to lower middle class parents, a barmaid and an advertising copywriter. His father died in 1941, when Osborne was twelve. Osborne briefly attended a public (non state-run) high school, but was expelled after two years when he struck a school administrator who had tried to discipline him. He wrote his first play at the age of twenty-one, in 1950. Around that time, Osborne also married his first wife, the actress Pamela Lane. Look Back in Anger is loosely based on their tumultuous relationship. Osborne wrote it in 17 days while on vacation, and it was first produced in 1956. The production catapulted the 26-year-old Osborne to fame, and ushered in a new era of British theater showcasing working class protagonists in the contemporary, post-World War 2, era. Osborne went on to write many more plays and a two-volume autobiography (in which he reveals a vehement dislike for his mother). Osborne married five times, ending his life happily married to the art critic Helen Dawson. He died in 1994 due to complications from diabetes. His last word, to Dawson, is said to have been "sorry." Look Back in Anger remains by far his most famous work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War 2 ended in 1945, and Britain faced the task of rebuilding their infrastructure, which had been decimated by German bombs, and propping up a struggling economy. Partly as a result of these difficulties, Britain withdrew from their colonies in India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar in 1947. The 1956 Suez Crisis, in which Britain invaded Egypt and eventually withdrew due to political and economic pressure, led to a humiliating recognition that the country was no longer a world power. Further changing the social context in the country, the 1944 Mass Education Act in Britain had made secondary education free, opening of the possibility of higher education to the working classes. This created more class mobility in the post-war era than had existed before it, and economic recovery in the 1950s furthered this trend. At the same time, British class structure remained somewhat static, resulting in a generation of educated children of the working class who found it difficult to put the education they had received to good use.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other playwrights of the Angry Young Men movement include Bernard Kops, Arnold Wesker, and John Arden. Kops's 1956 The Hamlet of Stepney Green and Wesker's 1958 Chicken Soup with Barley are thematically similar to Look Back in Anger, chronicling working class disillusionment and frustration. Novels ascribed to the movement include John Braine's 1957 Room at the top and Allan Sillietoe's 1958 Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. Both follow working class British protagonists as they struggle to achieve their goals and create meaningful lives. British New Wave film of the 1960s, which dealt with similar themes, is also considered an offshoot of the movement.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Look Back in Anger
- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** Osborne wrote much of the play in the beach town of Morcambe in Lancashire, England. He was living in London at the time.
- **When Published:** The play premiered on May 8, 1956 at the Royal Court Theater in London. It was first published in 1957 by Faber and Faber.
- **Literary Period:** Theatrical realism. The play kicked off British theater's "Angry Young Men" movement.
- **Genre:** Dramatic stage play
- **Setting:** A working class apartment in the Midlands, a region in the center of Britain sometime during the early 1950s.
- **Climax:** Alison loses her baby to a miscarriage and returns to her husband, Jimmy.
- **Antagonist:** Both Jimmy and Alison can be considered antagonists, as they fight with and antagonize each other. A broader thematic antagonist is post-war malaise in Britain.

EXTRA CREDIT

Quotable old press officer. The origin of the phrase "angry young men" to describe playwrights comes from a 1957 Daily Telegraph article by Royal Court Theater press officer George Fearon. Fearon had predicted that his own generation was likely to hate Look Back in Anger, while Osborne's generation would love it. "If that happens," Fearon said to Osborne, "you will become known as the 'Angry Young Man.' In fact, we decided then and there that henceforth he was to be known as that."

The Ironing Board. Osborne's play was revolutionary in that it brought a new type of realism to the stage. In fact, audiences were so shocked to see an ironing board when the curtain went up on opening night that an audible gasp could be heard in the Royal Court Theater.

PLOT SUMMARY

Look Back in Anger follows a young husband and wife, Alison and Jimmy Porter, as they attempt to navigate class conflict and deal with a deteriorating marriage in 1950s England. Alison comes from a traditional upper class background. Jimmy comes from a working class background, though he is highly educated. The couple lives with Cliff Lewis, an affable working class man and Jimmy's longtime friend. The scene opens on a Sunday morning in the apartment. Alison irons clothes while Cliff and Jimmy read the **newspaper**.

The play's first act largely consists of Jimmy's angry tirades against upper class complacency and his wife's lack of "enthusiasm." Jimmy thinks that suffering is the only way to experience true human emotion, and that Alison and other upper class people are therefore less "alive" than he is. He also seems to have some nostalgia for a past age in Britain when the country had more power. Jimmy's attempts to shock his wife into some display of emotion escalate as the act progresses—he insults her family and complains that all women are out to destroy men. Cliff, attempting to cheer Jimmy up, begins to banter and roughhouse with his friend. The two fall against Alison's ironing board, and she burns her arm. Jimmy apologizes, but she yells at him to leave, and he exits.

Cliff helps Alison treat the burn, and she reveals to him that she is pregnant with Jimmy's child. She hasn't told Jimmy yet, because she is afraid that he'll feel trapped and angry. Cliff comforts Alison, and tells her that Jimmy loves her. He kisses her. Jimmy enters while they are kissing, but doesn't acknowledge or object (the three live in a non-traditional set-up that would have been shocking to audiences at the time). Soon after, Cliff leaves to get some cigarettes, and Alison and Jimmy share a tender moment. They play their "**bear and squirrel**" game, which allows them to escape into affection while pretending to be animals. Then Cliff returns and says that Helena Charles, one of Alison's upper class friends, is on the phone. Jimmy's mood immediately darkens. When Alison says that Helena wants to stay with them, Jimmy explodes. He says he wishes that Alison would have a baby that would die so that she could experience true suffering.

The second act begins with Helena and Alison sharing the womanly duties of the home while Jimmy plays his **trumpet** off stage. Alison tells Helena about her first months with Jimmy. They lived with his working class friend Hugh Tanner, and spent time going on "raids" to parties of Alison's upper class friends. She says that she felt like "a hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on." Helena asks why they got married, and Alison says that it seemed to be largely because Alison's mother and her father Colonel Redfern disapproved. That made Jimmy want to marry her no matter what.

Jimmy and Cliff come in to eat. When he hears that Helena and Alison are going to church together later that day, Jimmy also becomes convinced that Helena is out to take Alison away from him. He lets fly a series of outrageous insults against Alison's mother. Helena tries, and fails, to reason with him, and Jimmy asks whether she has ever watched someone die. He tells the story of watching his father die from wounds received fighting in the Spanish Civil war when he was ten years old, and claims that this taught him more about life than Helena and Alison know even now. Near the end of the scene, Jimmy leaves to go get the telephone. While he's gone, Helena tells Alison that she has sent a message to Colonel Redfern asking him to come pick Alison up. Alison doesn't protest. When Jimmy returns, he says that Hugh's mum, the working class woman who set him up in his candy stall and for whom he harbors deep affection, is dying of a stroke. He asks Alison to come to the hospital with him. Instead, she goes to church. Jimmy is left alone on stage.

In the next scene, Colonel Redfern helps Alison pack to leave. He reveals that he thinks he and Alison's mother reacted too strongly to her marriage with Jimmy, and that Jimmy might have been right to be angry with them. He says he thinks that Jimmy could be right that he, Redfern, is a relic of an old version of England that has ceased to exist. He also says that he and Alison have a tendency to stay neutral and not take a strong stand on things. She is surprised to hear this from him, and as she finishes packing she briefly re-considers her move. Then Helena enters, and Alison decides to go. She says goodbye to Cliff. Helena stays behind because she has a work meeting the following day. Alison and Colonel Redfern exit, and Cliff, angry that Helena has disrupted their life, leaves before Jimmy comes back. Jimmy returns a few moments later, furious, having seen Alison leaving with her father on his way home. Helena gives him a letter that Alison wrote explaining her decision. Jimmy is angry at her polite, restrained language. Helena tells him that Alison is going to have a baby. He says that he is not overcome with emotion at this news, and insults Helena, who slaps him. This causes Jimmy to collapse in despair. Then Helena "kisses him passionately," and the act ends.

The scene opens several months later, looking very similar to the beginning of Act 1, except that it is now Helena who is ironing. Jimmy and Cliff joke and discuss newspaper articles. They roughhouse, and Cliff dirties his shirt. Helena leaves to clean it, and while she is off stage, Cliff tells Jimmy that he is moving out. Jimmy wonders why he always chooses women over male friendship, even though he value's Cliff's company more highly than he values Helena's. Helena comes back with the shirt, and Cliff leaves to dry it in his room. Helena tells Jimmy that she loves him, and he asks her desperately to never leave him. Then Alison appears at the door, looking sick and disheveled.

The next scene opens a few minutes later, with Jimmy playing his trumpet off stage. Alison tells Helena that she is not angry with her, and is not trying to break up the new couple. Helena,

however, says that Alison's presence has reminded her that what she is doing is wrong. Alison has also had a miscarriage, and Helena considers this a "judgment" on her relationship. She calls Jimmy back, and tells him that she is leaving. Jimmy says that he always knew Helena wasn't strong enough for true love, which requires "muscle and guts." Helena leaves.

Alison apologizes, and Jimmy says that she should have sent flowers to Hugh's mum, and remembers his first meeting with her, when he thought that she had a "wonderful relaxation of spirit." This turned out to be just complacency, he says. Alison lets out a cry, and tells him that the loss of their child has made her understand the depth of emotion that he wanted her to have all this time. She tells him that she wants to be "corrupt and futile," and collapses at his feet. Jimmy can't bear to see her this way, and kneels to help her. Then, "with a kind of mocking, tender irony," he launches into their bear and squirrel imaginary game. "Poor squirrels," he says to Alison, and she responds, "poor, poor, bears."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jimmy Porter – Jimmy is the "angry young man" of the play, usually found spouting tirades against the complacency of the British upper classes, and especially against his wife Alison and then his lover Helena. Born working class but highly educated, like his friend and roommate Cliff, but has an ambivalent relationship with his educated status, seeing himself mostly as a working class man and yet frustrated that his education can do nothing to affect his class status. "He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty." Jimmy "alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike," and his "blistering honesty, or apparent honesty…makes few friends." Jimmy is a frustrated character, railing against his feelings of alienation and uselessness in post-war England.

Alison Porter – A woman from an upper class background, and Jimmy's wife. She is drawn to Jimmy's energy, but also exhausted by their constant fighting. Jimmy accuses her of being too complacent and lacking "enthusiasm," and her own father, Colonel Redfern, agrees that she has a tendency towards too much neutrality. She feels stuck between her upper class upbringing and the working class world of her husband. Alison eventually leaves Jimmy, but returns to him later in the play after she loses their child to a miscarriage. This suffering changes her, and causes her to commit more fully to the intense emotion inherent in Jimmy's world.

Cliff Lewis – A kind man of working class background, and a good friend and roommate to both Jimmy and Alison. He lives with the couple, and helps to keep them together. Cliff is "easy and relaxed, almost to lethargy, with the rather sad, natural intelligence of the self-taught." He and Alison have an affectionate relationship that borders on a sexual one, but both of them are content with comfortable fondness rather than burning passion. Cliff eventually decides to leave to pursue his own life, rather than staying in Jimmy's apartment.

Helena Charles – Alison's upper class friend, who comes to stay with the couple while acting in a play, and ends up having an affair with Jimmy after Alison leaves him. She is described as having a "sense of matriarchal authority" that "makes most men who meet her anxious." Helena has a strong code of middle class morals that eventually force her to leave Jimmy.

Colonel Redfern – Alison's father, a former colonel in the British army stationed in the English colony of India (back before 1947, when India still was a colony of England). He is "gentle" and "kindly," but also "brought up to command respect." After leaving his post in India, "he is often slightly withdrawn and uneasy" because he lives "in a world where his authority has lately become less and less unquestionable." Jimmy says that the Colonel is stuck in a past version of England, and the Colonel himself agrees with this. When the Colonel comes to help Alison pack to leave Jimmy, he shows himself to be self-aware and incisive, commenting that both he and Alison like to stay neutral and avoid showing emotion, to their detriment.

Hugh Tanner – Jimmy's friend, who took Alison and Jimmy into his apartment in the first months of their marriage. He was Jimmy's partner when they went on "raids" against Alison's upper class friends at fancy parties, and Jimmy saw him as a co-conspirator in the class struggle. Then Hugh decided to leave for China to write a novel, and Jimmy felt betrayed. This reveals Jimmy's deep traditional values (he was angry that Hugh abandoned his mother, Mrs. Tanner) and his sense of patriotism.

Mrs. Tanner – The mother of Hugh Tanner, called "Hugh's mum" by Jimmy, she helped set Jimmy up with his sweet stall. Jimmy loves her, and Alison thinks this is just because she is lower class and "ignorant." In the middle of the play, Jimmy learns that Hugh's mum has had a stroke, and Jimmy goes to visit her in the hospital. In one of his few expressions of true vulnerability, he asks Alison to come with him. She refuses, and leaves him shortly thereafter. Jimmy is offended that Alison seems to see Hugh's mum only in terms of her class, and not as a person. He thinks that society in general ignores the humanity of working class people, and that Alison's and other's treatment of Hugh's mum is a prime example.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Webster – The only one of Alison's friends that Jimmy thinks has any value. Webster plays the banjo and is able to talk in Jimmy's "dialect." Jimmy believes that Webster is gay.

Madeline – Jimmy's first love, a woman ten years older than he is. He sees her as an example of the "enthusiasm" that Alison lacks.

Nigel – Alison's brother, a politician. Jimmy considers him "just about as vague as you can get without actually being invisible." Alison wishes that she could have reached out to Nigel during the difficult first months of her marriage, because he would have been affectionate and loving to her.

Alison's mother – Alison's mother strongly disapproved of Jimmy and Alison's marriage, and went to great lengths to prevent it. She did this out of a protective love for Alison. However, Colonel Redfern says that he thinks his wife went too far in her actions.

Miss Drury – The couple's landlord. Alison is worried that she'll evict them for being too rowdy, while Jimmy considers her a thief, reflecting his negative view of people with financial power.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CLASS AND EDUCATION

Look Back in Anger was published in the post World War II period in England, in 1956. In 1944, The British Mass Education Act had made secondary education free for everyone in the country. This meant that whole new swaths of British society were now equipped to write about their lives. John Osborne was one of these. His play broke into a world of British theater that had previously been a polite, upper class environment, and brought a new angry energy and previously unencountered point-of-view to the stage that startled some theatergoers. We see evidence of that new class mobility, and the new reality it created, in the play. Jimmy Porter comes from a working class background, but has been highly educated. He went to a university (though not one of Britain's finest— his upper class wife, Alison, notes that it was "not even red brick, but white tile.") And though Jimmy went to a university, he is still stuck running a sweet stall. He has in some ways left his background behind, but he also doesn't feel fully comfortable and hasn't been accepted into the upper classes. He uses big words and reads the **newspaper**, but he sometimes has to look those words up in a dictionary, and he says that the Sunday papers make him feel ignorant.

Alison and Jimmy's relationship is the main place where class tension unfolds. Alison comes from an upper class background very different from Jimmy's. Both portray the struggle between the classes in military terms, focusing on the ways that these two sectors of society fail to blend. Jimmy and his friend Hugh see her as a "hostage," and they spend time in the early years of Alison and Jimmy's marriage going to upper class parties to "plunder" food and drink. Though Alison and Jimmy try to make their relationship work in the end, we get the sense that it's built on shaky ground, and that they might fall back into the cycle of anger and fighting that they enact throughout the play. Alison and Jimmy may make their relationship work for now, but the divisions between them run too deep to ever fully heal. In *Look Back in Anger*, truces across class boundaries are ultimately brief and inadequate.

SUFFERING AND ANGER VS. COMPLACENCY

Suffering and anger are highly associated with lower class-ness in the play, and complacency with upper class-ness. Jimmy believes that lower class people, who have suffered as he has, have an insight on the world that upper class people lack. He berates Alison for lacking "enthusiasm" and "curiosity." He suggests that her complacency makes her less human, less connected to life than he is. He sees this suffering and anger as an important part of his identity. At a climactic moment in the play, Alison says of Jimmy, "don't try and take his suffering away from him—he'd be lost without it."

In the end, Alison finally experiences the suffering that Jimmy thinks she has been lacking: she loses their child to a miscarriage. This, she believes, forces her to experience the **fire** of emotion that Jimmy had always wished she had. But the play leaves us unsure whether their suffering will actually lead to any redemptive knowledge. The circular structure of the play—the beginning of the first and third acts mirror each other—undermines the sense that Jimmy's life is really as dynamic as he suggests that it is. He seems to be stuck in a routine. Osborne's voice in the play, seen in his stage directions, also tells us that Jimmy's fiery energy can be self-defeating. In his first stage direction describing Jimmy, Osborne writes, "to be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal." When Alison finally breaks down and tells him that she wants to be "corrupt and futile," Jimmy can only "watch her helplessly." The play ultimately suggests that Jimmy's anger is an expression of his social discontentment and suffering, but not an answer to his problems. He doesn't channel it in any political direction, joining a party or holding meetings or organizing his similarly angry friends, or even conceive of any way that it can be channeled. Though it springs from a moral fervor, it dissolves into a diffuse attack on many fronts, rather than pointedly targeting and taking down any oppressive systems.

DISILLUSIONMENT AND NOSTALGIA

Look Back in Anger is the archetypical play of the "angry young men" movement in British theater, which was marked by working class authors writing plays about their disillusionment with British society. In

Osborne's play, we see this in Jimmy's sense of political emptiness. Jimmy complains that, in the Britain of the 1950s, "there aren't any good, brave causes left." Helena observes that he was born in the wrong time—"he thinks he's still in the middle of the French Revolution." Jimmy's angry fervor is out of place in modern society, and this leaves him feeling useless and adrift. Other characters also feel a sense of nostalgia for the past, but for different reasons: they long for an era characterized by a leisurely life for rich Britons and greater worldwide power for the British Empire. Many of these themes of nostalgia revolve around Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, who had served in the British army in colonial India. Jimmy says that Colonel Redfern is nostalgic for the "Edwardian" past — early 20th century England, before World War I, when things were supposedly simpler and more peaceful.

In the end, the play argues that the characters' disillusionment is legitimate. Post-war Britain was marked by a stagnant economy and declining world power, partly due to the fact that it no longer had many lucrative colonies around the world (India, where Colonel Redfern served, gained its independence in 1947). The play argues that these factors have left the country's young people adrift and disempowered. Jimmy's anger is therefore justified. Both Jimmy and Colonel Redfern, from their different places in society, have nostalgia for a time when Britain was more powerful on the world stage. The passing away of Britain's imperial power is thus painted in a negative light—and though *Look Back in Anger* voices a revolutionary social critique of class conditions in England, it stops short of criticizing Britain's exploitation of its colonies. Instead, it argues that the decline of the empire has led to the disenfranchisement of the men of Osborne's generation, and gives those disenfranchised citizens a strong and angry voice in Jimmy Porter.

GENDER

During World War II, many British women had stepped into new roles in the labor force. After the war ended, most were expected to move back into their traditional roles in the household, but many still held jobs outside the home. The play takes a conflicted view of gender that parallels these shifting dynamics. On the one hand, Jimmy's angry, destructive, and typically masculine energy drives much of the action and dialogue. On the other hand, women are given agency, and female characters act in their own interests, independently of men (most notably, both Alison and Helena leave Jimmy).

Femininity in the play is highly associated with upper class-ness, and masculinity with lower class-ness. This leads to clashes between the genders that also have an economic dimension. Sticking to conventional gender roles means sticking to the propriety and politeness of British society (which also means acting along with your class role). For example, in stealing Alison away from her family to marry her, Jimmy took on the traditional male role of a "knight in shining armor." But, Alison says that "his armor didn't really shine much," subverting this traditional gender role by adding a class dimension to it. Jimmy was *almost* heroic, but not quite. There is clearly something attractive in Jimmy's virile, lower class masculinity, as first Alison and then Helena are drawn to him sexually. Yet there is something destructive in it as well, as both also end up leaving him. Further complicating the gender dynamics, women, too, are portrayed as having a destructive power over men. Jimmy says he's thankful that there aren't more female surgeons, because they'd flip men's guts out of their bodies as carelessly as they toss their makeup instruments down on the table. He likens Alison's sexual passion to a python that eats its prey whole. At the end of the play, he says that he and Cliff will both inevitably be "butchered by women."

The muddled gender roles in the play add to the sense of realism that made it such a sensation when it was first performed. Characters defy social convention. Alison disobeys her parents to marry Jimmy. Helena slaps Jimmy at the very start of their affair, and later walks out on him. An unmarried man (Cliff) lives with a married couple. He flirts with Alison, but Jimmy doesn't particularly mind. The fluid and shifting gender roles in the play reflect the more fluid realities of post-War British society, portrayed for the first time in the traditionally staid and upper-class medium of theater.

LOVE AND INNOCENCE

Jimmy believes that love is pain. He scorns Cliff and Alison's love for each other, which is a gentle sort of fondness that doesn't correspond to his own brand of passionate, angry feeling. When Helena decides, suddenly, to leave him at the end of the play, Jimmy reacts with scorn and derision. Love, he says, takes strength and guts. It's not soft and gentle. To some extent, Jimmy's definition of love has to do with the class tensions between Jimmy and Alison. Alison tells her father that Jimmy married her out of sense of revenge against the upper classes. In asking her to leave her background, he laid out a challenge for her to rise to, and their passion was partly based on that sense of competition between classes. This subverts a traditional love story—Jimmy's anger at society overshadowed his feelings for Alison, at least in her eyes.

It's clear that Jimmy and Alison's relationship isn't characterized by much tenderness. However, the two do manage to find some when they play their animal game. Jimmy and Alison as the **bear and squirrel** are able to express more simple affection for each other, but only in a dehumanized state, when they leave their intellects behind. In the final scene, Jimmy describes their game as a retreat from organized society. They'll be "together in our bear's cave, or our squirrel's drey." Jimmy and Alison are not able to enjoy love as a simple

human pleasure. Their relationship is buffeted by class struggle, anger, and suffering. Only when they remove class markers and withdraw from society in their animal game are they able to reach some level of innocence.

This reflects a broader loss of innocence in a generation of post-war Britons that had seen the hydrogen bomb dropped on Japan and 80 million soldiers and civilians die during World War II. Their parents and grandparents were able to grow up with some measure of peace of mind, but these characters (and the real Britons of their generation) cannot. This affects them even in fundamental parts of their domestic lives, like love and marriage. They have trouble experiencing these things as simple pleasures, because the world surrounding them is so difficult and complex. Only by leaving their society, their human-ness, behind, can they find the innocence to enjoy simple love.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

NEWSPAPERS

Jimmy and Cliff read newspapers throughout Act 1 and Act 3, and they are a major visual feature in the apartment. Jimmy uses the newspaper as a symbol of his education. They are a way for him to mimic the habits of the upper class, university-educated elite. He repeatedly comments on what he is reading, sometimes using erudite vocabulary. He also uses newspaper articles as a way to belittle the intelligence of Cliff and Alison, which is one of the tactics he employs to make himself feel smarter and more worthwhile. Yet, Jimmy's relationship with newspapers also shows his ambivalent relationship to his educated status. He says that the newspapers make him "feel ignorant," and he often mocks "posh" papers, which, in his mind, are out of touch with the real concerns of working class men like him. The newspapers in the apartment also form a "jungle," showing that, in a working class environment, this status symbol becomes something that upper class characters like Alison would consider chaotic and dangerous. This reflects the way that greater social mobility has caused social upheaval in Britain.

PIPE

Jimmy's pipe is another example of an upper class symbol that Jimmy uses instead to reflect his working class status. Pipes call to mind old, educated, university professors. Jimmy's pipe is a way for him to dominate the scene and assert himself as a rebellious force in the world (and he uses his force largely to rail against upper class norms). His pipe smoke fills the room, and creates a smell that other characters come to associate with him. Alison says in the first act that she has "gotten used" to it, reflecting the way that she adapts her values and sensibilities depending on the context that she is in. Helena later says that she has grown to "like" the smell, reflecting the attraction that she feels to Jimmy, and also the fact that she retains more of a sense of self than Alison does in the same situation—Helena positively likes the smell, while Alison is merely "used" to it. While living with her parents in the third act of the play, the smell of pipe smoke reminds Alison of Jimmy, and soon after, she comes back to him. Once in the apartment, she absentmindedly cleans up the ashes from the pipe, reflecting the fact that she retains her upper class sense of respectability and order, even as she returns from her parents' home to live in Jimmy's world. The pipe thus becomes a litmus test of Helena and Alison's relationship with Jimmy throughout the play.

BEAR AND SQUIRREL

Alison and Jimmy's bear and squirrel game gives them a way to access a simple affection for each other that they cannot achieve in normal life. The bear is associated with Jimmy, and the squirrel with Alison. The animals symbolize the fact that social norms and conventions interfere with the love that these two characters have for each other. Their relationship is a site of class and societal conflict, and this means that their love becomes fraught with anger and fighting. When they act like animals, whose only concerns are food, shelter, cleanliness, and sex, they can forget that conflict and feel a simpler version of love for each other. The fact that they keep stuffed animal versions of the bear and squirrel in the apartment reflects a childlike innocence that these characters find it difficult to maintain in their troubled world, but that they still hope for.

CHURCH BELLS

The church bells symbolize a respectable middle class morality that Jimmy finds oppressive. Helena subscribes to this version of morality, which posits that some things are clearly right, while others are wrong and "sinful." Jimmy, on the other hand, believes that the rules of respectable society are something to struggle against. In his mind, it is moral to act in allegiance with his oppressed class, and to feel emotions as keenly and intensely as possible. The church bells chime from outside the window at various points in the play, reflecting the fact that these middle class rules are a fact of life in most of the world, and that they often intrude into the apartment, and into Jimmy's life. He curses and yells when he hears them, reflecting his anger at this system of morality. Alison leaves for church with Helena in the middle of act 2, following Helena back into a middle class world.

TRUMPET

Jimmy's jazz trumpet can be heard off stage at various points in the play. Jazz has traditionally been protest music, and is associated with the working classes. It symbolizes Jimmy's desire to be a voice of resistance in society, but it also shows the futility of that dream. It serves largely to annoy and antagonize those around him, not to call a movement to attention. Like Jimmy's **pipe** smoke, the trumpet also allows Jimmy to assert his dominance non-verbally. He disrupts his domestic scene (playing the trumpet only inside), but makes little headway truly disrupting the world around him.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Look Back in Anger* published in 1982.

Act 1 Quotes

He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis

In these stage directions, we're introduced to Jimmy Porter, a young English man around whom the play revolves. Jimmy is married to Alison Porter, but unlike his wife, he wasn't born into a wealthy family. Jimmy is often angry, although it's often hard to understand what, exactly, he's so angry about--Jimmy himself seems not to know. As the stage directions explain, Jimmy's anger is somehow "non-committal"; it's as if his anger destroys everything in its path, including Jimmy's own willpower. He's furious with England for losing its power and for abandoning the lower class; he's furious with his wife and his friends--and yet at the end of the day his fury just cancels out, leaving him right where he was to begin with.

Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm—that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I'm alive! I've an idea. Why don't we have a little game? Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Cliff Lewis, Alison Porter

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Jimmy isn't a particularly brilliant, likable, or extraordinary person--and yet he likes to claim that he's superior to everyone around, for the simple reason that he's more "alive" than his peers. The genius of Jimmy's pronouncement is that it's impossible to disprove: everybody is alive in the literal sense, so it's never entirely possible to *dis*prove Jimmy's insistence that he's somehow "more" alive than everyone else. Jimmy belittles his wife, Alison, and his friend, Cliff Lewis, by accusing them of being too passive and lifeless; somehow, he claims, they're acting like inanimate beings, blundering through life according to other people's rules. Jimmy condescendingly offers to show his wife and friend how to be alive by teaching them a game--the point being that Jimmy lives according to the truth that "we're actually live," whereas Alison and Cliff can only grasp at real life in a performance.

I hate to admit it, but I think I can understand how her Daddy must have felt when he came back from India, after all those years away. The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All homemade cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms...What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Colonel Redfern, Alison Porter

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jimmy looks at a notice for an upcoming

concert, at which the music of the famous British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams will be featured. The mention of Vaughan Williams makes Jimmy think of Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, who had previously complained that modern life "isn't what it used to be." Colonel Redfern is unabashedly nostalgic for England's Edwardian age--i..e, the age when England still controlled a huge chunk of the world's people and resources, and the British Empire hadn't yet collapsed upon itself.

Jimmy has previously been hostile to the Colonel's worldview, claiming that nostalgia is a childish, sentimental emotion. Here, however, Jimmy seems to sympathize with the Colonel, and understands his genuine desire to go back to the past, when life was surely better. The passage illustrates the paranoia and self-contradictions of Jimmy's worldview: for Jimmy, there are no rules or prohibitions except "aliveness." Thus, Jimmy can simultaneously believe that nostalgia is an evil, and yet feel nostalgia himself--the rules don't apply to him.

❝ Pusillanimous. Adjective. Wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage, having a little mind, mean spirited, cowardly, timid of mind. From the Latin pusillus, very little, and animus, the mind. That's my wife! That's *her*, isn't it? Behold the Lady Pusillanimous.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jimmy looks up a word, "pusillanimous," and then defines it for his friend, Cliff. Jimmy uses the definition to allude to his wife, Alison, and her supposed small-mindedness--even though Alison is in the room with them. Further, Jimmy claims that if he were to mispronounce the word, Alison would probably correct him in public.

The passage is an example of how part of Jimmy's anger stems from the fact that he is somewhat insecure about his lower-class origins. In England, speech and pronunciation are crucial to one's success in life, to a degree that many Americans would find unfathomable (as George Bernard Shaw said, "the minute an Englishman opens his mouth he makes some other Englishman despise him"). At the same time, Jimmy uses the definition of this "big word" to hurt his wife, Alison, who has been a calm, passive character so far--i.e., in Jimmy's mind, the definition "pusillanimous."

❝ When you see a woman in front of her bedroom mirror, you realise what a refined sort of butcher she is…Thank God they don't have many women surgeons! Those primitive hands would have your guts out in no time. Flip! Out it comes, like the powder out of its box. Flop! Back it goes, like the powder puff on the table.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Jimmy continues to berate his wife, even while she's performing the most banal of tasks--here, for instance, Jimmy makes fun of Allson for the way she applies makeup to her face and does the ironing, suggesting that Alison, and all woman for that matter, are incompetent when it comes to using their hands.

Jimmy's tirade is a veiled defense of his own masculinity. Jimmy constantly tries to distinguish himself from weak, fragile women like his wife--his speech reinforces some of the classic female stereotypes (they don't know how to do physical work, they're no good with their hands, they're weak, they could never be surgeons). By distinguishing himself from his wife, Jimmy implicitly tries to make himself a figure of importance--even though it's pretty clear by now that he's not.

❝ I don't think I'd have the courage to live on my own again—in spite of everything. I'm pretty rough, and pretty ordinary really, and I'd seem worse on my own. And you get fond of people too, worse luck.

Related Characters: Cliff Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Alison, who's alone with Cliff, confesses that she's unsure if she can survive much longer in the same house as Jimmy, her husband. Jimmy is emotionally abusive with her, to the

point where she's become *more* timid and *more* "pusillanimous" (proving that Jimmy's bullying, quite aside from making her stick up for herself, has actually had the opposite effect).

Alison's confession reminds us that, in many ways, she's closer to Cliff, her husband's friend, than she is to her husband himself. Jimmy treats Alison like a punching bag, an outlet for his own anger and frustration. Cliff, on the other hand, seems more likely to pay attention to Alison's feelings and offer her some emotional support. Alison's speech indicates that she's come to internalize some of Jimmy's abuse: because Jimmy has called her ordinary and ugly, she's come to believe so of herself.

> I can't think what it was to feel young, really young. Jimmy said the same thing to me the other day...I suppose it would have been so easy to say "Yes, Darling, I know just what you mean. I know what you're feeling." It's those easy things that seem to be so impossible with us.

Related Characters: Alison Porter (speaker), Jimmy Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Alison is alone with Cliff, her husband's friend. Alison describes the feelings of loneliness and nostalgia she's often felt. But she also explains that her husband, Jimmy, has felt the same sorts of feelings. Instead of offering her husband comfort, Alison has pretended not to know what Jimmy is talking about. It would be easy for Alison to comfort her husband, but she refuses to do so.

The passage indicates that the toxic relationship between Jimmy and Alison might not be a one-way street: Alison seems to deny Jimmy love in the same way that Jimmy denies her love (though "who started it" remains unclear). The passage reiterates the importance of nostalgia to the characters' lives: they're always thinking about the vanished past, even if they feel guilty for doing so. In the present, the tragedy of "happy couple" is that they're really not so different from each other, but because of failures of communication, they remain constantly at odds and unhappy.

> Alison: He actually taunted me about my virginity. He was quite angry about it, as if I had deceived him in some strange way. He seemed to think an untouched woman would defile him.
> Cliff: I've never heard you talking like this about him. He'd be quite pleased.

Related Characters: Cliff Lewis, Alison Porter (speaker), Jimmy Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Alison and Jimmy didn't have sex before they were married, despite Alison's family's fears that they had. Indeed, Alison was a virgin before she married Jimmy--a fact that she confesses to Cliff in this scene. Cliff says that Jimmy would be happy to hear Alison talking about him so frankly: such talk would fit his notions of "real talk" and "really living." Alison agrees with Cliff, and yet shows no signs of deciding to talk to Jimmy--the alienation between Alison and her husband continues.

The discussion of Alison's virginity would have been shocking to the play's first audiences--and yet here, the point of the speech is how *un*-shocking it really is: there's a fundamental incompatibility between Jimmy's notions of sex and Alison's notions of sex, which would go away if only Jimmy and Alison would be frank with each other. But Alison seems too afraid and spiteful, and Jimmy seems like too much of a bully, to have a frank conversation about sex.

> There's hardly a moment when I'm not—watching and wanting you. I've got to hit out somehow. Nearly four years of being in the same room with you, night and day, and I still can't stop my sweat breaking out when I see you doing—something as ordinary as leaning over an ironing board. Trouble is—Trouble is you get used to people.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we get one of the most complex views of Jimmy's character. Jimmy is a mess of contradictions, especially when it comes to his wife Alison. Jimmy

complains that it's easy to get used to things over time--and yet when he's talking about Alison, he insists that he's still highly attracted to her beauty, even after four years of marriage.

Jimmy gets used to people, and yet he can't ever entirely get used to Alison--he still finds her enchantingly lovely. Jimmy both loves and hates Alison: on one hand, he thinks of her as the "light of his life." And yet, on the other hand, Jimmy thinks of Alison as an outlet for his insecurity and self-hatred.

❝ If you could have a child, and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognisable human face emerge from that little mass of indiarubber and wrinkles. Please—if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognisable human being yourself.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial passage, Jimmy takes his contempt for Alison's way of life even further than we've seen up until now. Jimmy tells Alison that he wants Alison to have a child that dies. He thinks that such an experience would make Alison a tougher, more sincere human being--one who would "live fully," as Jimmy does.

The passage is shocking and, as always with Jimmy, contradictory. Jimmy thinks that pain is the only way to achieve "true life," but in order to lead Alison there, he seems to condone the death of their own child. Furthermore, in wanting to cause so much suffering and pain for Alison (a person he professes to love deeply), Jimmy seems to be turning his back on the full range of human emotions: in other words, by focusing so exclusively on pain and suffering as roads to real life, Jimmy neuters his own understanding of what life can be.

In terms of the plot, of course, this passage is also vital because it shows Jimmy essentially "cursing" Alison to her fate. At this point, Alison really *is* pregnant with their child, though she hasn't told Jimmy yet. And Alison will go on to have a devastating miscarriage, just as Jimmy spitefully wishes for her here.

❝ She'll go on sleeping and devouring until there's nothing left of me.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Jimmy concludes Act I by claiming that Alison is eating him alive. In an uncertain modern-day environment, Jimmy doesn't know what to make of his own life: he's unsure what path to take, who to love, etc. In his frustration, Jimmy takes out his anger on his wife, Alison. And yet Jimmy hypocritically claims that it's Alison who's emasculating *him*, preventing him from living the life he deserves. Jimmy's comments are clearly self-serving: it's easier for him to be an underachiever and blame Alison than it is for him to try to succeed and fail on his own.

The image of Alison devouring Jimmy alive is important for the rest of the play, because it reinforces the fact that Jimmy thinks of himself as a victim, through and through. Even when he has psychologically abused his wife to the point where she can barely open her mouth Jimmy thinks of himself as the repressed, devoured one.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and full of sun. He looked so young and frail, in spite of the tired line of his mouth.

Related Characters: Alison Porter (speaker), Jimmy Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Alison describes how she met Jimmy Porter years ago. Jimmy was sunburnt and red-skinned, the very embodiment of youth and vitality, with a touch of rebellion, sadness, and violence. In retrospect, it's possible to read Alison's interpretation of Jimmy's appearance as almost demonic--a sign that she should never have married him. But at the time, Alison thought of Jimmy as an ideal suitor: he was both strong and weak, masculine and frail. She thought that by marrying Jimmy, they could help one another equally. Furthermore, Alison seems to have thought

of Jimmy as a symbol of rebellion against her upperclass family; Jimmy symbolized everything her stuffy, reserved parents disapproved of.

> We could become little furry creatures with little furry brains. Full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other…And now, even they are dead, poor little silly animals. They were all love, and no brains.

Related Characters: Alison Porter (speaker), Jimmy Porter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Alison describes a game that she used to play with her husband, Jimmy. Alison and Jimmy would pretend to take on the attributes of two animals: Alison would be the squirrel (small, timid, etc.), while Jimmy would be the bear (large, masculine, dangerous). Playing such a game would allow Alison and Jimmy to escape their problems for a little while, and show their love for one another through play and innocent fun.

The passage is interesting because it shows Alison in the throngs of nostalgia: Alison claims that she and Jimmy no longer play the "game" anymore. Actually, Jimmy and Alison *do* seem to play "bear and squirrel" when they're together, in the sense that Jimmy is loud and aggressive and Alison is meek and quiet. Alison's remark suggests that the game used to be a way for her to escape the pressure of being a human being for a while, and yet her *current* situation seems more savage and animalistic still. The passage has a sad, rueful tone, as if Alison is pondering her old mistakes, mistakes that led her into a loveless marriage.

> One day, when I'm no longer spending my days running a sweet-stall, I may write a book about us all…and it won't be recollected in tranquility either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth. It'll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Helena Charles, Cliff Lewis, Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Jimmy is an interesting character because he embraces art and literature, yet sees most traditional literature as being feminized and weak-willed. Here, he tells Alison and Cliff that one day he'll write a book about his experiences, into which he'll pour his own blood and tears. The book, he insists, will be violent and energetic. He contrasts it with the works of the poet William Wordsworth, who wrote about nature, daffodils, and other supposedly "timid" topics. Jimmy sees himself as a potentially great, perhaps Modernist author, and yet he seems not to have the drive or the initiative to write a novel. He's too busy being angry with his friends and his wife.

> Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him. He'd be lost without it.

Related Characters: Alison Porter (speaker), Jimmy Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage--maybe the truest line in the whole play--Alison interrupts Helena as she tries to comfort Jimmy. Helena sees that Jimmy is frustrated and angry with the world, and tries to offer him some encouragement. Alison tells Helena that Jimmy *enjoys* his own suffering; he's basically a masochist.

Jimmy's love for pain and suffering might seem counterintuitive, and yet it fits with everything we know about him. Jimmy a malcontent: he takes out his rage and hatred on his wife and friends, but never seems to do anything to *change* his life in any concrete way. Jimmy is so frightened of failure that he'd prefer to be unhappy and blame others for his unhappiness than to shoot for success and potentially fail. Thus, he'd rather blame his wife for emasculating him than try to write a book about his life. For Jimmy, there's a kind of *comfort* in believing that the world is out to get him, because such a belief absolves Jimmy of any real responsibility for his own suffering (whenever anything bad happens to him, it's Alison's fault, or someone else's).

Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Helena Charles

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Jimmy remembers his experiences during the era of Spanish Civil War (i.e., late 1930s), during which he was only a child. Jimmy's father saw some horrible carnage (he was even wounded in battle, and back at home, Jimmy watched him die slowly). Jimmy is talking to Helena about his life experiences, and Helena is forced to admit that she's never actually seen someone die. Jimmy characterizes Helena's ignorance of death as a form of "virginity."

The passage should remind us of Jimmy's remarks about Alison's (literal) virginity: he seemed to prefer a wife who'd already had sex to one who was a virgin. Here, Jimmy seems to savor the fact that Helena is a virgin to death, because it confirms that Jimmy is the toughest, most mature person in the room. There's an undeniable sexual side to Jimmy's self-touting; he seems sexually attracted to Helena, even as he calls her a mere "virgin" to real life. One could even say that Jimmy's sexual attraction to women is dependent upon his feeling of having more toughness and life experience than they do. As much as he complains about Alison's upper-class roots, he wouldn't dream of marrying anyone who was more working-class and experienced than he.

I rage, and shout my head off, and everyone thinks "poor chap!" or "what an objectionable young man!" But that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Alison Porter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jimmy tries to find the words to express his feelings. He's full of hatred and rage, but can't explain what, exactly, he finds so hateful. Here, however, Jimmy explains that he can't stand the double-standard in his society. People pity him and condescend to him because he's angry al the time, and (implicitly) because he seems like a working-class figure. And yet Alison's passivity in the face of other people's suffering is accepted as a more "natural" kind of behavior. Jimmy argues that to be silent in the face of other people's suffering (whether those other people are the working classes in general, starving people around the world, etc.) is a truly insane reaction.

The passage is one of the best pieces of evidence for the idea that Osborne, even as he mocks his protagonist, doesn't entirely disagree with him. Jimmy is an abusive man, and yet he seems to understand the problems of the world more clearly than Alison does: he refuses to turn his back on other people's poverty, alienation, etc. The passage is also a great example of why John Osborne was known as one of the "Angry Young Men" of England during the 1960s: his writings used angry, unbalanced protagonists to critique what he saw as the injustices of the modern world.

Where I come from, we're used to brawling and excitement. Perhaps I even enjoy being in the thick of it. I love these two people very much. And I pity all of us.

Related Characters: Cliff Lewis (speaker), Jimmy Porter, Alison Porter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Helena tries to understand how Alison and Jimmy's relationship can survive while they're constantly fighting with each other so vehemently. Cliff, who's living in the house as well, explains to Helena that Jimmy and Alison manage to get along in part *because* they fight so much, not in spite of it. Cliff explains that Helena's confusion about Alison's fighting is the result of her upper-class background: in a working-class family, like the one Cliff grew up in, people fought all the time to solve their problems. While such a way of life might seem violent and unorthodox, it's probably more emotionally honest than the other extreme, the one seen more commonly in upper-class environments; i.e., a way of life in which people never have fights of any kind, but just swallow their anger and resentment.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

I think you may take after me a little, my dear. You like to sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful.

Related Characters: Colonel Redfern (speaker), Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Osborne gives us a better idea of why Alison is so timid and meek in her interactions with the other characters. Alison visits with her father, Colonel Redfern, who remembers how she came to marry Jimmy. Alison saw herself as rebelling against a corrupt system of society by marrying someone from outside her social station. And yet she didn't entirely commit to her rebellion. Instead of cutting off all ties with the Colonel and the rest of her family, Alison continued to communicate with them, and seemed not to get along well with Jimmy. The Colonel sums up Alison's weakness by claiming that she prefers to sit on the fence, halfway between the the upper-class and the lower-class.

The Colonel's observations are surprisingly frank: he seems to fault his own daughter for *not* cutting off communication with him. Furthermore, he seems to blame himself for his daughter's inability to commit fully to anything: her weakness was once his weakness. In all, the Colonel is one of the most complicated characters in the novel; like everyone else, he's a biased witness, so we have to take his opinions with a grain of salt, but he gets to the heart of what's wrong with Alison's way of looking at life in a way that no other character, including Jimmy, can.

I always believed that people married each other because they were in love. That always seemed a good enough reason to me. But apparently, that's too simple for young people nowadays. They have to talk about challenges and revenge. I just can't believe that love between men and women is really like that.

Related Characters: Colonel Redfern (speaker), Jimmy Porter, Alison Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Colonel Redfern tries to understand what goes on between Alison and jimmy. Alison insists that she continues to love Jimmy, and Jimmy says the same about Alison--and yet from the Colonel's perspective, they just fight all the time, and aren't compatible in the slightest. Alison explains that their fighting is a part of their love: it's because they love one another that they're so good at getting under one another's "skin." Furthermore, Alison's love for Jimmy is partly the result of her desire to rebel against her parents and her own background; love, by itself, is too simple to explain why she's married to Jimmy.

The Colonel's reaction to Alison is fascinating: instead of denouncing her for staying married to an angry man, he throws up his hands and admits he can't understand his daughter. He reminisces about the "good old days," in which people married for love and love alone (pretty strange to hear the *elder* character in a play talking about marrying for love as a phenomenon of the past--usually it's the other way around). Colonel Redfern, one could say, is a stand-in for the audience itself (most people who saw this play would have been shocked by the idea of Alison's angry marriage to Jimmy). Redfern doesn't understand the marriage, but he comes to accept it.

You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it. Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it?

Related Characters: Alison Porter (speaker), Jimmy Porter, Colonel Redfern

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Alison, who's usually quiet and noncommittal about her feelings, sums up the relationship between Jimmy and Colonel Redfern succinctly. Jimmy is angry because he sees his world as staying "the same"--nothing is changing for the better for the lower class--while the Colonel is sad because the world has changed so much since he was a young man--Britain is no longer a global power, and the "good old days" of colonialism and Edwardian manners are gone. Both the Colonel and Jimmy blame each other for the world's problems, and yet they're both the world's victims.

Alison's observations show that she's a good observer of human nature, and that, during her long periods of silence, she's listening very closely to her husband and father. Indeed, Jimmy seems furious with life for being static: he feels emasculated and isolated by the sameness and

homogeneity of his life. Colonel Redfern, on the other hand, is nostalgic for his youthful days in India--days that he couldn't possibly recreate now that India has fallen out of British control.

> I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker), Cliff Lewis

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

In this famous passage, Jimmy insists that there are no more "good, brave causes"--all the great political causes of the world were fought for in the 30s and 40s, leaving the young men of the 50s and 60s to a dull, morally ambiguous life. Jimmy, who's obsessed with fighting and "real life," wishes that he could fight for a pure political cause of some kind, but no such cause presents itself to him. His father fought in the Spanish Civil War, and Jimmy has spent the succeeding years wishing he could fight in a war of his own. Jimmy is so irrationally nostalgic that he pines for danger and violence, if only to break up the suffocating sameness of his life with Alison (and now Helena).

As many critics have pointed out, however, Jimmy has made up his mind much too soon--in the years immediately after Osborne's play was released, "angry young men" could fight for or against all sorts of great causes, such as nuclear disarmament, the war in Indochina, civil rights for women and minorities, etc. Jimmy isn't unfulfilled--he's just not looking hard enough.

> The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest.

Related Characters: Jimmy Porter (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jimmy Porter has just finished berating Alison for not sending flowers to Mrs. Tanner, who's had a fatal stroke. As he sees it, humans should reach out to one another in times of crisis, no matter what class they belong to. And yet in the passage, Jimmy sums up his position by talking about himself, not Mrs. Tanner or Alison. Strong creatures, he claims, are always the loneliest.

The point of Jimmy's speech seems to be that Jimmy himself, in trying to change Alison and change the way people behave around each other, has actually cut himself off from other people: because he's so pugnacious and so committed to his ideals, he's almost impossible to get along with. As always, Jimmy is both partly right and maddeningly self-absorbed. He's probably correct to say that Alison should have sent flowers to Mrs. Tanner, but he concludes his argument with the arrogant point that he, a strong, heavy creature, has the noble burden of being alone. Jimmy loves the idea of being alone: being alone is proof that he's a real iconoclast, not just a "sheep," like Alison. There's an unmistakable machismo in this quote, summing up Jimmy's worldview.

> I don't want to be neutral, I don't want to be a saint. I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile!

Related Characters: Alison Porter (speaker), Jimmy Porter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

In this climactic passage, Alison finally shows some of the emotion that Jimmy has been craving throughout the play. For the most part, Alison has been shy and closeted, at least around her husband. But here, she shocks everyone, including Jimmy, with a sudden, terrifying emotional outburst. She screams that she has no desire to be neutral and more. Instead, she wants to express her emotions and her visceral humanity, just as Jimmy does. Because Alison has recently had a miscarriage, she now finds the despair and the anger to scream out at the universe. Like Jimmy, she's come to see the world as an unfair, painful place--and just like Jimmy, she wants to strike out against the word, even if she knows that her attempts will always be "futile."

Jimmy has spent the entire play trying to get Alison to show some emotion--i..e, be sincere with him--and now that she's finally shown emotion, Jimmy can barely look at her. (It's characteristic of Jimmy that he gets exactly what he wishes for, and then realizes it's not what he thought it would be.) The passage represents, in short, a moment of catharsis for

Jimmy and Alison: a sudden outburst of pain, grief, and fury. While Alison's cathartic outburst might be painful, it's also reparative. Because she's let out her long-repressed emotions, Alison can hopefully come to live her life more honestly now. The main ambiguity of the ending, however, is whether Alison and Jimmy have really changed their lives, or if Alison's outburst is just part of an endless cycle of repression, catharsis, and more repression.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The play is set in a one-room apartment at the top of an old Victorian house. When the curtain rises, we see Jimmy Porter and Cliff Lewis, seated on opposite sides of he stage and reading **newspapers**. There are others beside them and between them, forming "a jungle of newspapers and weeklies." Jimmy is smoking a **pipe**. A tattered stuffed **bear and squirrel** sit on a chest of drawers at the end of a double bed, which takes up most of the back wall. The furniture is simple and somewhat shabby.

The shabby furnishings mark this apartment as a working class space. The newspapers, which represent Jimmy's attempt to live like a member of the well-educated elite, as does his pipe smoking, nevertheless make the apartment seem less civilized, as they form an indoor "jungle." The bear and the squirrel, which return in the couple's more affectionate moments but whose significance is not clear at this point in the play, add some whimsy to the scene.

In the first stage direction, Osborne describes Jimmy as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice" and says, "to be as vehement as he is to be almost non-committal." He describes Cliff as much more gentle—Jimmy tends to push people away, while Cliff draws them to him. Jimmy's wife Alison Porter stands ironing clothes on the left side of the stage, near Cliff. She is wearing Jimmy's shirt, and looks elegant in this working class apartment.

Right away, we sense that Jimmy has a strong, but unfocused, energy. His vehemence is self-defeating, turning it into something "non-committal." Alison's high-class background is evident, even though she wears Jimmy's clothes. She can't hide the status that she was born into.

Jimmy complains that the Sunday **papers** are boring, and also that they make him "feel ignorant." He taunts Cliff for not being smarter, then taunts Alison, asking her if the papers make her feel stupid, too, even though she's not a "peasant" like Cliff. Alison says that she hasn't read them. Cliff tells Jimmy to leave Alison alone while she works. Jimmy asks if "The White Woman's Burden" makes it too hard for Alison to speak. He complains that his talk seems to bore them, and tells Alison to "go back to sleep." Alison, still at her ironing board, finally snaps that she "can't think," and Jimmy says that she "hasn't had a thought for years."

Jimmy claims his status as a well-educated man by saying that the papers are too boring for him, but then immediately rejects that status, saying that they're also too difficult. This points to the way that mass education has made class boundaries more difficult to define. The idea of the "white man's burden" was used to justify British imperialism and exploitation of non-white people, but here Jimmy twists it to insult Alison and her privilege, suggesting that Alison has a destructive power, as the British empire used to.

Jimmy decides that he's hungry, to which Cliff replies that he'll get fat. Jimmy denies this: "people like me don't get fat," he says, "we just burn everything up."

Jimmy's angry energy is again self-defeating—it burns him up, rather than giving him life.

Cliff reaches up to grab Alison's hand (she is still at her ironing board beside him). He says that she should sit down and join them. Alison smiles, and says she still has work to do. Cliff "kisses her hand and puts her fingers in his mouth." He tells Jimmy that Alison is a beautiful girl. Jimmy responds, "that's what they all tell me," and his eyes meet his wife's across the stage. Cliff says that he is going to bite off Alison's "lovely, delicious paw." Alison says not to—she'll burn the shirt she's ironing. Jimmy tells Cliff to "give her her finger back, and don't be so sickening." Then he asks more about what Cliff's reading in the **paper**.

Cliff, unlike Jimmy, is kind and gentle with Alison. His affection for her is not destructive, though he, like Jimmy comes from a different class background than she does. Cliff's flirtation, which takes place in front of Alison's husband, shows that traditional gender and family roles are fluid in this play. Jimmy and Alison share a charged moment in the midst of Cliff's come-ons—the competition seems to add to their attraction to each other.

Letting go of Alison's hand, Cliff says that he'd been reading a "moving" article by Bishop Bromley, who said that Christians should aid the manufacture of the hydrogen bomb. Jimmy asks if this moves Alison, and she says that it does. He claims surprise. Reading the column himself, Jimmy announces that the Bishop denies any differences between working class people and others. He quotes from the article, in which Bromley argues that this idea is a lie propagated by the working classes, presumably for their own gain. Jimmy says that this sounds like the kind of argument Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, would make.

Jimmy voices his feeling that Alison is cold and unemotional, not given to anger and feeling, as Jimmy himself is. When he reads Bishop Bromley's article, he sees it as an attempt by the upper classes to deny the fact that working class people are living difficult lives. He makes this conflict personal by tying it to Alison's family's vision of England—they too are blind to class difference, to their own benefit.

Jimmy asks Alison to make some tea. She looks up at him, and asks if he wants tea. He says he doesn't, and when Alison asks Cliff, Jimmy interrupts and says that Cliff doesn't want any, either. Then Jimmy asks Alison how much longer she'll be ironing. She says it'll be a while longer.

Jimmy attempts to control his wife by forcing her into a traditionally domestic role, though he doesn't even want tea. There is a sense that he wants the power that the upper class have but doesn't know what he would do with it, as he rejects the upper class's culture in rejecting the tea. He also bullies Cliff by denying him the right to answer for himself. His angry energy dominates the room.

Jimmy says that he hates Sundays. "Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing…Our youth is slipping away." When he realizes Alison isn't listening, he says, "casually," "damn you, damn both of you, damn them all." Cliff suggests that they go to the movies. Alison says that she can't, but that Jimmy might like to. Jimmy says no, and steers the conversation back to **newspaper** articles.

Jimmy is disillusioned by his routine. His youth isn't marked by heroism or excitement, but by tea and ironing. His education has lifted him up out of the working class viewpoint, while his situation gives him no outlet to use it. He takes his feelings out on Alison, Cliff, and the world at large. Yet, Jimmy denies Cliff's offer of a distraction (the movies). His anger again leads nowhere constructive, but he nevertheless wants to maintain it.

He launches into a speech blaming Cliff and Alison's lack of intellectual interest on "sloth." He says they'll drive him mad with longing for a little "human enthusiasm" on their part. He suggests a game: "Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive."

Jimmy launches into his recurring argument that he is more alive than anyone else, and particularly more so than Cliff and Alison. His long, angry speech is meant to show that he believes he, at least, has the virtue of "human enthusiasm."

Cliff brings the conversation back to **newspapers**. Jimmy summarizes another article that he says was written by a man like Colonel Redfern "casting well-fed glances back to the Edwardian twilight from his comfortable, disenfranchised wilderness." Then he asks Cliff what's wrong with the wrinkled trousers that Cliff is wearing—he looks like a "savage." He asks what Cliff is going to do about them.

Edwardian England was peaceful and prosperous, a time when England dominated much of the world with its far-flung colonies. Jimmy distances himself from Colonel Redfern's nostalgia for that era. He suggests that the people who long for that time are out of touch—they believe things were better long ago, even though they are still "well-fed" and "comfortable" today. And yet even as Jimmy dismisses that viewpoint, he also insists that Cliff keep his clothes looking good. Jimmy doesn't want to be seen as a savage by the upper class he scorns.

Cliff grins, looks at Alison, and asks what he should do. She says that he should take his trousers off. Jimmy agrees. Alison says she can iron them now. Cliff agrees, and starts taking off his pants, emptying keys, matches, and a handkerchief from his pocket. Jimmy grabs the matches and lights his **pipe**. Cliff complains of the smell, but Alison says she's gotten used to it. Jimmy says that Alison is "a great one for getting used to things." She'd get used to it quickly even if he died, he claims. Cliff hands Alison his trousers and asks for a cigarette. Jimmy protests that the doctor said Cliff shouldn't smoke, but then gives up—"they're your ulcers." Alison hands Cliff a cigarette, and they both light up. She continues to iron. Cliff sits down in his pullover and boxer shorts and begins to read.

Cliff's flirtation with Alison happens in a domestic context, not a sexual one. He takes off his pants only for her to iron them. Jimmy again does not protest Cliff's come ons, reflecting the more liberal gender rules in this household. Jimmy's pipe is another way for him to assert control, as its smell dominates the room. Alison has "gotten used" to his ways. Instead of seeing that as a good thing for them as a couple, Jimmy sees this as another example of her tendency to be complacent and to lack "enthusiasm." Jimmy sees conflict, sees refusing to get used to things, as essential to being alive.

Jimmy begins to scan the *Radio Times* for a concert, and finds one by Vaughan Williams. He says this is "strong" and "simple" British music. He says, "I hate to admit it, but I think I can understand how her Daddy [Colonel Redfern] must have felt when he came back from India…the old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting." That picture was "phoney," though, Jimmy observes: "it must have rained sometimes." Now, Jimmy says, they're all living in the "American Age."

Though he earlier scorned Colonel Redfern's nostalgia for Edwardian England, Jimmy now says that he understands it. He expresses some patriotism by appreciating "strong" British music, and bemoans Britain's fall from power by observing that they are now in an "American age." Still, he believes that this image of the old world is "phoney." He longs for the simplicity that he sees in Britain's past golden age, but he also knows that this image of simplicity is a lie. This leaves him with no way out of his current disillusionment.

Neither Cliff nor Alison responds to his tirade, even when Jimmy gives Cliff a kick. Jimmy changes the subject, asking whether Alison's friend Webster is coming over that night. Jimmy likes Webster—he speaks a "different dialect" but the "same language." Webster, Jimmy says, has "enthusiasm."

Webster is one of Alison's rich friends who doesn't seem to fall prey to the complacency of the upper classes. This makes Jimmy's constant criticism of Alison even more cutting, because it suggests that there could be a way out, if only she could find it.

Jimmy begins to say that he hasn't felt that enthusiasm since—and Alison interrupts him, saying that it was when he was with his old mistress, Madeline, whom he dated when he was eighteen. Cliff remembers Madeline—"was she the one all those years older than you?" Jimmy says that she was ten years older.

Now, instead of being nostalgic for Edwardian England, Jimmy is nostalgic for a more enthusiastic love interest than his wife Alison. He seems to always want something more or different than what he has. The fact that she was so much older to him adds another dimension to Jimmy's tendency towards unconventional social norms.

Cliff says that he's sleepy, and doesn't feel like going to work at the sweet stall tomorrow. Jimmy changes the subject back to Madeline—"she had more animation in her little finger than you two put together." She took delight in "being awake." Jimmy says that Webster, while not as thrilling as Madeline, is "all right…in his way." He's the only one of Alison's friends that's worth much, Jimmy says, and then stands to look out the window. Webster has both "guts" and "sensitivity," unlike the rest, who have neither.

Running the sweet stall—a small candy store--is Jimmy's source of livelihood, even though it doesn't require his higher education. Going to university gave him a broader outlook and more knowledge, but didn't allow him to work in a better job. Jimmy repeats his argument about Webster and Madeline (working class characters) having more "guts" and "sensitivity" than Alison's upper class friends.

Alison asks Jimmy, "very quietly and earnestly," not to go on. He turns from the window to look at her. Her "tired appeal" has made him pause momentarily, but then he gathers for a fresh round of insults on Alison's friends. He walks to center stage and stands behind Cliff.

This is a moment of almost-tenderness between Alison and Jimmy. That he ultimately refuses to cease his angry jabs at her shows that simple love and affection can't flourish in their relationship—conflict devours them instead.

Cliff tries to get Jimmy to back off from the tirade, but Jimmy says that he couldn't provoke Alison anyways, not even by dropping dead. He returns to his attack on her friends, saying that they're "militant," like Alison's mother and Colonel Redfern, and also "arrogant and full of malice. Or vague." Alison, he says, is "somewhere between the two."

Jimmy's assault on Alison is based on his sense that she, as a member of the complacent upper class, can't actually feel anything. Calling her friends "militant" highlights the struggle that he sees between the upper classes and the working classes. They're also "vague," suggesting that this lack of emotion makes them stupider than Jimmy himself is, and yet Jimmy sees that somehow their vagueness works to their advantage as they fit in with the other vague upper class people in way that the angry Jimmy doesn't.

Jimmy turns his attack to Alison's brother Nigel, saying that he "is just about as vague as you can get without being actually invisible." Nigel wants to be a politician, and Jimmy thinks he'll end up a success, though he and his political pals have been "plundering and fooling everybody for generations." In order to keep this ruse going, Jimmy says that Nigel takes sanctuary in stupidity, which is what he learned at his fancy prep school.

For Jimmy, Nigel is an example of the ways that upper class people get power. He doesn't have much substance (and is in fact almost "invisible), but he has learned to "plunder" people through his high-class education. This reveals Jimmy's disillusionment with those in power in Britain.

Alison continues ironing—this is the only sound in the room. "Cliff stares at the floor." Jimmy recovers from his tirade by again looking out the window. It starts to rain. Then Jimmy returns to his takedown of Alison's family—Jimmy has "been cheated out of his response, but he's got to draw blood somehow." He says that both Alison and Nigel are "sycophantic, phlegmatic, and pusillanimous." Cliff asks if he should put the Vaughan Williams concert on the radio.

Though Jimmy has just let fly another angry speech, nothing changes in the apartment. His anger is impotent. He needs a reaction from Alison, even if it is one of hurt—it is one of his ways of expressing and feeling love. His erudite insults reveal his strong educational background but also his anger at what it has given him (and, interestingly, parallels a comment of Caliban's from Shakespeare's The Tempest in which Caliban, Prospero's enslaved servant, claims that all he gained from the education given to him by Prospero was to learn to use it to curse.)

Jimmy says that he looked up the word pusillanimous recently, and found that it's a perfect descriptor of his wife. He calls her "the Lady Pusillanimous," as if she is "some fleshy Roman matron." Alison leans against the ironing board, closes her eyes, and says, "God help me, if he doesn't stop, I'll go out of my mind in a minute." Jimmy encourages her to do so—"that would be something, anyway."

Again, Jimmy undercuts his own intellect by saying that he had to look up the word "pusillanimous." As Alison tries to avoid losing it, Jimmy encourages her to go over the edge: he thinks suffering and anger is better and more real than her controlled emotions.

Jimmy picks up a dictionary. He tells Cliff that if he's pronouncing pusillanimous wrong, Alison will probably correct him publicly. He reads the definition out loud: "wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage, having a little mind, mean spirited, cowardly, timid of mind."

Jimmy reveals some insecurity about Alison's higher-class status. Then he insults her again by reading the definition of the word that, in his view, so perfectly describes her—cowardly and timid. And it must be acknowledged: Alison has thus far been the most timid presence in the room, and she doesn't assert any bravery here in response to Jimmy's jabs. His insults may be over the top, but they have a grain of truth to them.

Jimmy is watching Alison from across the room. Her "face seems to contort, and it looks as though she might throw her head back, and scream." She doesn't. The stage direction says that she's used to Jimmy's attacks, and won't give him the reaction that he wants tonight. Jimmy crosses and turns on the radio—Vaughan Williams is playing. Jimmy sits back in his chair to listen. Alison gives Cliff back his ironed trousers.

Jimmy is hoping that Alison will give him the emotion that he craves, but she remains in control. The scene stays in its usual domestic pattern. Jimmy turns on the "strong" British music that he had discussed earlier, in an attempt to bring something exciting into his usual routine.

Cliff thanks Alison, and calls her "you beautiful, darling girl." Then he "puts his arms round her waist, and kisses her. She smiles, and gives his nose a tug. Jimmy watches from his chair." He doesn't react. Alison suggests to Cliff that they have a cigarette, and offers one to Jimmy, too. He declines—he's trying to listen to the concert on the radio. "Sorry, your lordship," Cliff says.

Cliff's love for Alison is much more affectionate and less fraught than Jimmy's is, and he can express it more directly. Jimmy refuses to take part in this easy fondness and any sense of community by turning down a cigarette. In calling Jimmy "your lordship" Cliff ironically calls out how Jimmy mocks the upper class and yet seems to want to both control others (as the upper class does) and to focus on things of "high culture" such as the radio concert rather than share a cigarette.

Cliff returns to the **newspapers**, and Alison to her ironing. After a while, Jimmy snaps at both of them for making too much noise. His foot twitches. Then he gets up and crosses towards Alison to turn off the radio. He says he can't focus with all the distraction. He tells Cliff that Alison is always clumsy with household tasks, drawing the curtains "in that casually destructive way of hers." He compares it to launching a battleship. All women, he says, are as noisy and clumsy. He says it's a good thing there aren't many female surgeons, because they'd flip mens' guts from their bodies in the same way that the take a powder puff out of its box.

Jimmy's inability to rest in a tranquil domestic scene shows that calm surfaces can cover up bubbling anger and disillusionment, but only for a while—a broader argument about Britain's post-war society. By comparing curtain drawing to a battleship, Jimmy disrupts traditional gender roles—Alison is like a soldier, and when she puts on makeup, she is like a surgeon. Jimmy's need to point out the ways that his wife would fail in these traditional male roles is a way for him to claim his own masculinity—and the vehemence with which me makes these claims suggests that he may actually be insecure about his own manliness.

The **church bells** begin to ring outside. Jimmy yells out the window at them to stop. Alison tells him to be quiet—she doesn't want the landlord, Miss Drury, to come upstairs. Jimmy says he doesn't care about Miss Drury, who is "an old robber." Cliff closes the window. He suggests that they go out for a drink. Jimmy says the bar won't be open on Sunday.

Jimmy's scorn for the landlord speaks to his feeling that those with financial power are out for their own gain, have in fact stolen from those with less power. Alison, in contrast, cares more for social niceties and being polite. This is one of the things about her that Jimmy objects to.

Cliff, fooling around, says to Jimmy, "well, shall we dance?" He begins to push Jimmy around the apartment floor, but Jimmy isn't in the mood. Cliff attempts to banter with Jimmy, pretending that they are in a bar, and when Jimmy tries to get away, Cliff holds him "like a vice." He says that he won't let Jimmy go until he apologizes for being nasty to everyone.

Cliff's attempt to break the tension highlights the fact that Jimmy and Alison's relationship is full of struggle more than it is full of affection. Yet, even with his friend Cliff, Jimmy has trouble expressing fondness. Jimmy's accusations may have truth behind them, but Cliff is also right: they're nasty and unproductive.

Jimmy and Cliff begin to fight. They fall onto the floor in the center of the stage, near where Alison is ironing. Alison says that it's getting "more like a zoo every day." Jimmy pushes Cliff towards Alison, and the ironing board collapses beneath him. All three fall into a pile. Alison "cries out in pain." Cliff stands up to ask Alison if she's all right, and she snaps, "well, does it look like it?" She has burnt her arm on the hot iron. Jimmy apologizes, and starts to say that he didn't do it on purpose, but Alison tells him to get out. Jimmy exits.

The fight between Jimmy and Cliff isn't malicious—it's a way to break the tension in the room. For Alison, however, it is tiring and frustrating, partly because it doesn't conform to her upper class social norms. This bubbling up of working class culture ends up hurting Alison physically, highlighting both the difficulty that the classes have in understanding each other, and the ways that Jimmy's anger causes Alison personal pain.

Cliff brings Alison to an armchair, where she sits. He says he'll go down to the bathroom to get some soap to wash her wound. Cliff exits. Alison, alone on stage, takes a deep breath and looks up at the ceiling. She "brings her hands up to her face," and "winces as she feels the pain in her arm." She says, "in a clenched whisper," "Oh, God!" Then Cliff comes back in with the soap.

Cliff's attention towards Alison shows that a more simple form of love is possible across class lines. The fact that Alison's emotional break occurs when Jimmy is not watching shows that his belief that she has no emotion is unfounded—but also confirms his suspicion that she is suppressing her feelings.

Cliff kneels next to Alison and runs the soap gently over her arm. He says she's a brave girl. She says she doesn't feel brave, and that she doesn't think she can "take much more." Cliff puts his arm around her and massages the back of her neck. He says that he doesn't think he'd "have the courage" to move out of their shared house. He's "rough" and "ordinary," and has become "fond" of the couple, in spite of their constant fighting. Alison says, "I don't think I want anything more to do with love…I can't take it on."

Alison makes the same argument about herself that Jimmy made about her—namely, that she is a coward. Cliff believes this about himself, too. This shows that Jimmy's taunts have had the effect of cowing his wife and his friend, not inspiring them to greater emotion, as he might hope. Alison also has come to associate love with anger, but she is beginning to find this unbearable.

Cliff says that Alison shouldn't give up, and offers to put a bandage on her arm. He goes over to Alison's dressing table to get one. As he walks away, Alison says that she's forgotten what it's like to feel young. Jimmy said something similar the other day, and Alison pretended not to listen to him, in order to hurt him. He "got savage, like tonight." She says that it would have been easy to sympathize with him, but she didn't: "It's those easy things that seem to be so impossible with us."

Alison shows that she hurts Jimmy intentionally, just as he hurts her. However, her way of hurting her husband is to be silent rather than to yell. This suggests that Jimmy's feeling that his wife's lack of emotion is wrong and bad may partly come from the fact that it is her way of lashing out at him. When he asks for "enthusiasm," he is also asking for love.

Cliff, his back to Alison, wonders aloud how long he can go on watching the couple "tearing the insides out of each other." Alison asks if Cliff would leave the house, and he says no. He begins to bandage her arm. As he's doing so, Alison begins to tell him something, then stops. He asks her what it was, and she says, hesitating, that she is pregnant. Cliff waits a few moments, then asks for the scissors. He goes over to the dressing table to get them, and asks when Alison found out. She says she's known for a few days. They never intended to have a baby, she says, because they don't have the resources to support it. Jimmy resented this aspect of their poverty. Cliff assumes that Alison hasn't told Jimmy yet, and she confirms this.

Cliff's image of "tearing the insides out" recalls Jimmy's speech about Alison as a butchering surgeon. Cliff, however, balances the statement by saying that they are both doing this to each other—neither is the main aggressor. The fact that Alison reveals her pregnancy to Cliff before she reveals it to Jimmy shows that the marriage has very little emotional intimacy. The fact that Jimmy resents being unable to support a child shows that he does want a more financially stable life, but is also another reason why he might be angry about British society that gave him an education and then gave him no options other than to be working class and run a sweet stall.

Cliff finishes tying Alison's bandage, and she gets up to fold the ironing board. Cliff begins to ask a question but isn't able to make himself finish it, so Allison does: is it too late to have an abortion? She says that there may still be time to terminate the pregnancy. Cliff asks what she'll do if it is too late, and Alison, her head turned away from Cliff, "simply shakes her head."

The idea that Alison might get an abortion, and that Osborne would talk about this on stage, would have been shocking to a 1950s audience. This is an example of the ways that the play flouted traditional societal norms to show a new sector of British society on the stage.

Cliff suggests that Alison tell Jimmy now —"after all, he does love you. You don't need me to tell you that." Alison leans down to fold the clothes that have fallen off the ironing board. She says that it might be okay for a night after she told Jimmy the news, but then he would start to suspect that she got pregnant out of malice, "as if I were trying to kill him in the worst way of all." She says that Jimmy has "his own private morality," which Alison's mother would call "loose," but which is also "harsh."

Cliff's vision of how things might proceed—that because Jimmy loves Alison, he will accept her pregnancy—suggests an innocence that Alison has moved far beyond. She understands that Jimmy would feel oppressed and threatened by the pregnancy, even though it was unintended. This parallels his feeling of being unfairly limited by his working class status, and given his focus on the "class war" he would likely see the pregnancy as a way for Allison to punish or mock Jimmy for being working class. Jimmy has strong feelings about right and wrong in the world, even though his ideas don't conform to the social norms of people like Alison's mother.

Alison tells Cliff, to his surprise, that she and Jimmy didn't sleep together before marrying. Once they were married, Jimmy taunted Alison for being a virgin, and felt deceived. Alison says, "He seemed to think an untouched woman would defile him." Cliff says that Jimmy would be "quite pleased" to hear Alison talk about him this way, and she agrees.

The fact that Jimmy didn't sleep with Alison before marrying her highlights the fact that he does not have a "loose" morality, as her mother would think. Yet, Jimmy likes to think of himself as rejecting the morality of the upper classes—hence, a virginal bride threatens his sense of self – he wants someone who has "lived" and been "passionate" and had experiences and been scarred. This kind of frank, cutting talk would endear Alison to Jimmy, but she doesn't talk this way in front of him, further highlighting their inability (or refusal) to make each other happy.

Alison gets up, holding the folded clothes. She asks Cliff whether he thinks Jimmy is right about "everything." Cliff responds that he and Jimmy are both working people, and that they therefore think alike about some things. Jimmy's mother's relatives were "pretty posh, but he hates them as much as he hates yours. Don't quite know why." But Jimmy and Cliff get along because they're "common."

The fact that Jimmy has rich relatives might have alienated him from the lower classes, but instead, he and Cliff share a solidly working class culture. This shows the high value Jimmy places on being working class. Cliff also avoids saying that he disagrees with Jimmy's assessment of Alison, further suggesting that there might be some merit in Jimmy's opinion of his upper class wife.

Alison asks if she should tell Jimmy about the baby. Cliff puts his arm around her and says that it'll be all right. He kisses her. Jimmy enters, and "looks at them curiously, but without surprise." They don't acknowledge that they notice him. Jimmy sits down in the armchair next to them. He begins to look at the **paper**. Without looking at Alison, he asks how her arm is. She says that it's fine. Cliff says that Alison is beautiful, and Jimmy says, "you seem to think so." Cliff and Alison have their arms around each other.

Cliff and Alison's relationship escalates to a kiss. Jimmy is unfazed by this, though many men would consider it a grave insult. This suggests that his anger at other points in the play might be about something deeper than a bad temper (namely, it might reflect a legitimate class grievance). The moment also makes clear the non-traditional set-up of the relationship between these three characters. They rely on each other in ways that defy the usual categorizations.

Cliff says he doesn't know why the hell Alison married Jimmy, and Jimmy asks if the two of them would have been better off together. Cliff says that's he's not Alison's type, and Alison says she's not sure what her type is. Jimmy says that they should sleep together—"I can't concentrate with you two standing there like that."

Cliff's belief that he isn't the one for Alison suggests that he sees her relationship with Jimmy as having a particular spark—they love each other, even through the anger. Jimmy elevates his own intellect in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner by suggesting that he would like his wife to sleep with his best friend so that he can focus more on the newspaper.

Cliff says that he thinks Alison is beautiful, and that Jimmy does too, but is "too much of a pig to say so." Jimmy says that Cliff is just being flirtatious (a "sexy Welshman"). He says that Alison's parents are already scandalized that he's married to their daughter, and that they'd "collapse" if they saw her flirting with Cliff, too. They might "send for the police." Then he asks if Alison has a cigarette.

Jimmy's comments about Alison's parents are meant to suggest that, even though Jimmy himself is common, Cliff is even more so. This strategy of elevating himself over Cliff shows Jimmy's back and forth movement between class boundaries—sometimes he claims upper classness, and sometimes working classness. At the same time, it emphasizes they way he is in-between the classes, raised up by education and forced down by continuing social hierarchy, and therefore stuck in a kind of limbo.

Alison goes to look for one in her handbag. Jimmy, "trying to re-establish himself," begins to tease Cliff, who is getting "more like a little mouse every day." Alison says that Cliff is indeed a mouse, and Cliff plays along, squeaking and dancing around the table saying, "I'm a mouse, I'm a randy little mouse." He starts to tease Jimmy back, calling him a "horrible old **bear**." Cliff grabs Jimmy's foot, and they begin to fight. Alison watches, "relieved and suddenly full of affection."

Cliff, Alison, and Jimmy get a moment of respite from their angry bickering when they revert to a game that lets them act like animals rather than like humans. The choice of the mouse as Cliff's animal recalls Jimmy's claims that Cliff and Alison are overly timid, but in this context, those words don't wound. This moment, in which the characters delight in the innocence of being animals, highlights the ways that class conflicts and the human society that creates them, make the characters unable to relate simply and easily to each other during most of the play.

Alison discovers that she doesn't have any more cigarettes, and Jimmy yells to Cliff (who is "dragging Jimmy along the floor by his feet") to go buy some. Cliff agrees, drops Jimmy's legs, and takes some money from Alison. He kisses her forehead on his way out, and says, "don't forget." Then he pauses at the door to yell back to Jimmy, "Make a nice pot of tea." Jimmy says that he'll kill Cliff first, and Cliff says, grinning, "That's my boy!" Cliff exits.

Again, physical fighting is a way for Jimmy and Cliff to strengthen their friendship. Cliff taunts Jimmy for being both domestic and associated with the upper classes when he yells that he should make some tea. Jimmy rejects both of those roles by threatening violence. This exchange shows that both Jimmy and Cliff want to reject feminization and maintain a working class identity.

Jimmy stands beside Alison, who is still rummaging in her purse. "She becomes aware of his nearness, and, after a few moments, closes it." Jimmy holds her arm and asks her how it feels, and she says that it's fine. "All this fooling about can get a bit dangerous," Jimmy says. Then he holds her hand, and apologizes. She accepts his apology. He says that he hurt her on purpose, and Alison says, "yes."

Still feeling close after their animal game, Jimmy and Alison are able to treat each other with love. Jimmy's "fooling about" — his roughhousing play with Cliff, which reflected their shared working class culture — has hurt Alison, and he apologizes, recognizing that for her, that type of play was "dangerous." This is a moment where reconciliation seems possible, both between Jimmy and Alison and between the class backgrounds that they represent.

Jimmy says that he can hardly get through a moment without feeling attracted to Alison, and that because of that, "I've got to hit out somehow." Even after four years living together in close quarters, he says, "I still can't stop my sweat breaking out when I see you doing—something as ordinary as leaning over an ironing board." "Trouble is you get used to people," Jimmy says, and then all their smallest traits become simultaneously "indispensable" and "a little mysterious."

Previously, Jimmy equated Alison's ability to "get used to things" with her lack of "enthusiasm," which he thinks makes her less human. Here, though, he "gets used" to her while maintaining the high levels of emotion (and physical attraction) that he considers important. This suggests a flaw in Jimmy's view that becoming comfortable with things dampens your ability to feel strong emotions. It seems possible that he might love Alison even more as he gets used to her.

Jimmy puts his head against Alison's stomach, but she is "still on guard a little." Then he looks up, and they kiss, "passionately." Jimmy asks what they should do tonight. Alison asks what he wants to do ("Drink?") and Jimmy says that he knows what he wants to do now (implying that he wants to have sex). Alison "takes his head in her hands and kisses him," then says that he'll have to wait until "the proper time." Jimmy says there isn't any proper time, and Alison reminds him that Cliff will be back soon.

Alison refuses to have sex with Jimmy out of a sense of propriety—it wouldn't be right to have sex when Cliff might walk in on them. This kind of thinking has been associated with her upper classness and her femininity, and Jimmy's disagreement (his view that there isn't a "proper" time) shows that their class and gender conflicts remain, even in the presence of strong emotion (a "passionate" kiss).

Jimmy asks what Cliff meant by saying "don't forget," when he left the room. Alison says vaguely that it was about "something I've been meaning to tell you." Jimmy kisses her again, and remarks that Alison is fond of Cliff. She agrees. Jimmy says that Cliff is his only friend—people seem to always be disappearing from his life. Then he remembers Hugh's mum, who he says has also been a good friend to the couple. She is letting Jimmy pay her back for his sweet stall in his own time, and she has always been "fond" of Alison. Jimmy says he doesn't know why Alison hasn't returned the affection.

Jimmy had previously scorned Cliff and Alison's affection, thinking that love should be passionate and fiery, as his is. Here, he begins to demand that softer "fondness" from Alison towards Hugh's mum, who he sees as an embodiment of goodness in the world. This suggests that there is a gendered element in Jimmy's demand for "enthusiasm." He sees a relationship between two women as a place where "fondness" is acceptable. This suggests that his views on the necessity of suffering are not just about class, but also about the way that he thinks love should work.

Alison is worried by "this threat of a different mood," but Jimmy goes on to call her "a beautiful, great-eyed **squirrel**." Alison "nods brightly, relieved." Jimmy begins to compare her further to a squirrel, with shiny fur and a bushy tail. Alison plays along, pretending to munch nuts, and shouting, "Wheeeeeee!" Jimmy says that he envies her. Then she calls him a "jolly super **bear**." He agrees that bears and squirrels are "marvellous." Alison begins to do a squirrel dance, complete with "paw gestures." Jimmy asks what she's doing, and she says it's "a dance squirrels do when they're happy."

Jimmy and Alison's bear and squirrel game is clearly a longstanding part of their relationship. They use less educated language when they play this game than they do at other times, and they express simple joy and care for each other. They are stripped of class markers—in the animal world, there is no such thing as class. This suggests that it is only by retreating away from their humanity that they can find innocence, and especially innocent love. It also suggests that perhaps Jimmy is right after all that suffering is an integral part of being human, as their suffering drops away when they briefly throw off their humanity.

Jimmy asks why she thinks she's happy, and Alison says, "everything just seems all right suddenly." Then she begins to return to the topic of her pregnancy, but Cliff comes back and interrupts the moment. He says that Miss Drury stopped him before he could leave the house, and that someone named Helena is on the phone for Alison. Alison thanks him, and leaves to take the call.

The animal game almost led to a moment of real intimacy between Jimmy and Alison, but again, that intimacy seems always just out of reach in the play. Class concerns, in this case embodied by Helena, Alison's upper class friend, interrupts their shared moment.

Jimmy's mood has changed. Cliff jokes that Jimmy was supposed to makes some tea, and when he doesn't respond, asks what the matter is. Jimmy says "that bitch," referring to Helena. Cliff asks who she is, to which Jimmy replies that she is one of Alison's old friends, and one of Jimmy's "natural enemies." He also comments that Cliff is now sitting in his chair. Cliff tries to change the subject to where they are going out for a drink, but Jimmy is stuck on Helena. He wonders why she would call, and says that it can't be for any good reason.

Cliff returns to his jab about the tea, which represented upper classness and femininity, but Jimmy is no longer in the mood to joke. He has re-aligned himself with working class identity by calling Helena his "natural" enemy. Though in the animal game, Jimmy had rejected class markers, he now suggests that they are just part of who he is. Jimmy's suspicion of Helena also reflects his misogynistic feeling that women are out to get him.

Jimmy remarks that just a few minutes ago, things seemed to be going well. Quoting Shakespeare, he says that he's "just about had enough of this 'expense of spirit' lark, as far as women are concerned." Referring to French novelist Andre Gide, who was homosexual, he says, "I almost envy old Gide and the Greek Chorus boys." Jimmy says that while gay men have a hard life, "plenty of them do seem to have a revolutionary fire about them, which is more than you can say for the rest of us."

Jimmy shows his educated status by referencing these works of literature to discuss his views of women. Shakespeare's sonnet 129 discusses the "expense of spirit" (semen, and also vital life force) and argues that lustful sex always leads to regret, but men are still unable to resist it. For this reason, Jimmy envies men like Gide, who aren't attracted to women. He suggests that in associating with women, men like him lose their "revolutionary fire." This is part of Osborne's overall argument about post-war British society: men of Jimmy's social station are disempowered and adrift, with no strong causes or social purpose to guide them.

Jimmy says that Webster, who he thinks is gay, is one example. He believes that Webster doesn't like him, and says it's because Jimmy doesn't treat Webster differently as a result of his sexuality. Webster is like a man with a birthmark who always wants to show it off to horrify people, Jimmy says. Jimmy himself has his own "strawberry mark," but it isn't homosexuality.

Many modern critics point to this passage of the play as homophobic, because of the simultaneously flippant and aggressive way that Jimmy talks about Webster showing off his sexuality. Jimmy's statement that he has his own "strawberry mark" suggests that he, too, has things that make it difficult for him to exist in modern British society—likely his lower class status.

As he speaks, Jimmy has been picking through Alison's handbag. Cliff asks him if that isn't Alison's private property, and Jimmy says that it is, but that living with his wife has made him "predatory and suspicious." He wants to look through her things for signs of betrayal. In the handbag, he finds a letter from Alison's mother, in which, Jimmy says, "I'm not mentioned at all because my name is a dirty word." Alison enters. Speaking both to his wife and to Cliff, Jimmy says that Alison responds to her mother with longs letters that also don't mention Jimmy. Then he throws the letter at her feet.

Jimmy is going out of his way to find sources of conflict and to confirm his suspicion that his wife is out to get him. He suspects that his wife disdains him and thinks that he is beneath her. The transition between his speech about disempowerment and his rummaging in Alison's purse suggests that Jimmy blames women, and particularly Alison and her mother, for his feelings of impotence and lack of power.

Jimmy asks Alison what Helena wanted. Alison says that Helena is coming over. Helena is working with an acting company nearby, and has nowhere to stay. Jimmy asks if Helena is bringing her "armour," as she is "going to need it." Alison asks him, "vehemently," to shut up.

Again, Jimmy uses militant imagery to describe class conflict. This suggests first that domestic issues among men and women have become a stand in for other types of political action. It also shows that Jimmy doesn't conform to traditional views that women should be protected—he sees them as dangerous aggressors trying to hurt him.

Jimmy says to Alison that he hopes she will one day learn suffering. He wants something to "wake [her] out of [her] beauty sleep." He wishes that she would have a child, but that it would die. The baby would form a "recognisable human face," and when it died, he says to Alison, "you might even become a recognisable human being yourself. But I doubt it." Alison is stunned, and retreats to the stove. Jimmy stands "rather helplessly" alone.

This is Jimmy's strongest statement yet that Alison needs to learn suffering in order to become a full person. His curse on her unborn child smacks of dramatic irony for the audience (we know that Alison is pregnant, but Jimmy doesn't, and so what he is saying holds a brutal horror for both Allison and the audience). Yet Jimmy's helplessness after his attack shows once again that his anger is self-defeating.

Jimmy says, ostensibly to Cliff but also partly to himself and Alison, that he has "never known the great pleasure of lovemaking when I didn't desire it myself." Alison has some passion, he says, but it is "the passion of a python." She eats him whole, the way a python eats its prey. He points to her stomach, and says that he himself is "that bulge around her navel…smothered in that peaceful looking coil." Though he's "indigestible," he says, eating him whole doesn't bother Alison's indigestion. She could go on sleeping and eating until Jimmy completely vanished. Alison throws her head back as if about to speak or scream, and then stands open mouthed until the curtain falls on Act I.

Jimmy's python image suggests that Alison's lack of emotion is destroying him (note that a python is cold-blooded, too, further linking it with lack of emotion). In his own imagination, Jimmy becomes like the baby in her belly, further showing his sense of powerlessness. Alison, too, is powerless by the end of his speech. She tries to respond, but can't form the words. The act ends by highlighting the stagnant nature of their relationship. Jimmy feels assaulted by Alison's placid emotions. When confronted with Jimmy's anger, Alison feels unable to respond, though we know that his words cause her suffering. They have moved through a full act of the play, and nothing has changed, representing the way that Osborne sees post-war British society as being "stuck."

ACT 2, SCENE 1

The act opens two weeks later, in the same apartment. Alison is at the stove pouring boiling water into a teapot. She wears a slip and no shoes. Jimmy plays the **trumpet** from across the hall. The table in the center of the room is set for four, and Alison crosses to put the teapot there. The "Sunday **paper** jungle" is still strewn about the room. Alison crosses to her dressing table and sits down beside it to put on her stockings. Helena enters.

Jimmy's jazz trumpet is a symbol of his suffering (jazz has traditionally been music of protest and struggle). His anguish dominates the scene even while he is not physically present. His efforts to disrupt domestic peace are certainly succeeding, though his ability to disrupt any social dynamics outside his home has yet to be proven.

Helena is " the same age as Alison, medium height, carefully and expensively dressed." She has a "sense of matriarchal authority" that "makes most men who meet her anxious," because she gives of a sense of "visiting royalty." The stage direction identifies this as the "royalty of middle-class womanhood." This "royalty" is so sure of its own power that it can allow men some measure of freedom, but nevertheless expects to receive respect from all people, including other women like Alison. "In Jimmy," the stage direction says, Helena "arouses all the rabble-rousing instincts of his spirit." She has thus far been able to defend herself from him with "strength and dignity," though she's getting tired of it. Helena carries a salad colander.

The contrast between Helena's and Alison's attire suggests that Alison has assimilated more to working class culture, while Helena retains her middle-class status. At the beginning of the previous act, Alison's rich upbringing was apparent in this backdrop, but with Helena as a foil, we can see that Alison has shed class markers more fully than Jimmy's tirades would have us believe. Helena's strength comes from her class and her gender. The stage direction implies that women are tyrannical by nature—women like Helena allow men "freedom" only when they are sure that this freedom will not interfere with their power. This also speaks to Osborne's feeling that working class men are not allowed their full masculinity.

Alison asks if Helena "managed all right" with the dinner, and Helena says yes. She's already cooked a lot during her weeklong stay. Alison says that it's been "wonderful" to have another woman around to help with the housework. Helena says that it's been fun, although she's not used to having to fetch water from the bathroom downstairs. "It is primitive, isn't it?" Alison says, and Helena agrees. Alison notes that Cliff, at least, takes care of himself. Helena says she hadn't noticed that, and Alison suggests that this is because Helena has been helping her in the ways that Cliff normally does.

Helena and Alison's shared understanding that the apartment is "primitive" shows their common class context. Although Alison might appear to be fitting into the working class apartment, she still retains some sense of scorn for it. The fact that Cliff usually helps Alison with the feminine labor points to the non-traditional gender roles in this household, and also to the feminization of working class men that the play finds objectionable.

Alison comments that Helena has "settled in so easily somehow," despite not being "used to" the surroundings. Helena asks if Alison is "used to" things. Alison replies that things have changed now that she's not on her own. Alison asks if Helena has told Jimmy that tea is ready. She says that she knocked on the door of Cliff's room, where Jimmy is playing the **trumpet**, but that he didn't answer. Cliff is nowhere to be found. Alison says she wishes Jimmy would stop playing the trumpet. Helena says, drily, "I imagine that's for my benefit." Alison worries that Miss Drury will kick them out of the apartment for making too much noise, and says she's glad that the landlady isn't there at the moment.

Helena and Jimmy have strangely similar reactions to the idea of Alison's getting "used to" things. Jimmy had previously scorned his wife as a "great one for getting used to things" when she said she no longer minds his pipe smoke, and Helena is similarly scandalized that Alison could get "used to" a situation that, to her, seems intolerable. This suggests that Alison may, indeed, be particularly prone to avoiding the conflict and "suffering" that Jimmy hopes she experiences – she gets "used" to things, rather than fully experiencing them, liking them or disliking them. Her reaction to Miss Drury (and Jimmy's comparative disregard for the landlady) speaks again to Alison's urge to calm the waters rather than making waves.

Helena asks Alison if Jimmy drinks. Alison, "rather startled," says that he isn't an alcoholic. There is a pause while both women listen to Jimmy's **trumpet**. Then Helena says the music makes it sound like he'd like to kill her. She isn't used to seeing "such hatred in someone's eyes," and she finds it both "horrifying" and "oddly exciting." Alison turns to face the mirror at her dressing table, and brushes her hair.

Helena's statement that hatred is "oddly exciting" speaks to the fact that Jimmy's anger is sexually attractive. It isn't just Alison and Jimmy who feel this mixing of hatred, sexuality, and love—the fact that Helena feels this way too suggests that the couple's volatile love might be the result *of class difference rather than of a simple personality clash.*

Helena asks if Cliff is in love with Alison. Alison "stops brushing for a moment," then says that she doesn't think so. Helena asks if Alison is in love with Cliff, and that they behave strangely together, "by most people's standards." "You mean you've seen us embracing each other?" Alison asks. Helena says it doesn't seem to be happening as much since she's around. "Perhaps he finds my presence inhibiting—even if Jimmy's isn't." Alison says that she and Cliff are just "fond of each other," but Helena says that's nonsense—they must be physically attracted to each other, too.

Helena tries to find a logical explanation for the non-traditional dynamic between Cliff and Alison: he is in love with her. Alison doesn't agree, showing that Helena can't understand the complexity of their relationship. This, and the fact that Cliff feels less able to embrace Alison around Helena, implies that their non-traditional love is something that is possible in a working class context, but that upper class norms are more traditional and constricting.

Alison confirms that she and Cliff feel some attraction, but says that it's not a passionate feeling. They're comfortable with each other, and don't want "to bother moving for the sake of some other pleasure." Helena says it's hard to believe they're so lazy, and asks whether Jimmy approves. Alison says, "it's what he would call a question of allegiances." Then she explains, using confusing and circuitous language, that all of the people that Jimmy loves or has loved in the past (even old flames) are part of the calculation that he makes in thinking about Cliff and Alison. Alison asks if Helena understands, and Helena replies by asking if Alison does. Alison says that, though she's tried to put herself in Jimmy's shoes, she "can't believe that he's right somehow."

This lack of energy is what Jimmy finds so frustrating about Cliff and Alison's relationship, too—he thought it showed too much complacency and too little feeling. Yet Helena's questions suggest that she finds Jimmy's tolerance of a non-traditional cultural standard to be a different kind of complacency. This shows their class conflict—they can't agree on which battles are most important, even if they both object to the laziness of the relationship. According to Alison, Jimmy sees his class allegiance to Cliff as more important than his need to defend his wife against Cliff's flirtations. Alison doesn't share his view. She retains, deep down, a more traditional view of gender.

Alison continues that her relationship with Cliff is a "fluke." They get along well because of Cliff's kind temperament. It was different with Hugh Tanner, Jimmy's childhood friend (Hugh's mum helped Jimmy start his sweet stall). The couple moved in with Hugh soon after Jimmy graduated from university. Alison says that the university wasn't a prestigious one—"it's not even red brick, but white tile."

This passage suggests that Cliff and Alison's relationship shouldn't be taken to suggest that peaceful relationships across class lines are possible—Cliff is the outlier. Alison's scorn for Jimmy's non-elite university reminds the audience that his education has brought him only tenuous acceptance into a higher echelon of society.

Alison says that she met Hugh on her wedding night and disliked him immediately. Jimmy was "pathetically anxious" that his friend and his wife would get along. They all got drunk on "cheap port," and the conversation deteriorated. Alison says that she felt she was "cut off from the kinds of people [she'd] always known." She says, "I suppose I must be soft and squeamish, and snobbish, but I felt as though I'd been dropped in a jungle. I couldn't believe that two people, two educated people, could be so savage." She adds that Jimmy and Hugh thought of her as a "hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on."

Jimmy's hope that Alison and Hugh would get along is a poignant memory. Outwardly, at least, he seems to have given up on bringing Alison into his world without conflict, believing instead that the classes will inevitably clash. The imagery of Alison as a "hostage" conforms to this view, as well. Alison's use of the words "jungle" and "savage" again point to her scornful class-based view of how Jimmy lives.

Helena asks what they were doing for money at this time, and Alison says that her mother had taken stewardship of Alison's wealth after the marriage. Instead, Jimmy and Hugh started using Alison's connections to invite themselves to parties, hoping to find money or food. Alison again uses military language to describe their expeditions, saying that they would launch "raids on the enemy." She says she even hoped a host "would have the guts to slam the door in our faces, but they didn't. They were too well-bred." Hugh and Jimmy hated her friends for their cowardice—but Hugh enjoyed his role as a "barbarian invader." Alison says that he once even got a man to give them money for rent, though they were kicked out of another party when Hugh flirted with a young girl.

The class conflict here is dramatized still further, with the working class men launching targeted attacks on upper class bastions, in an attempt to steal their resources. There is a certain simplicity to the plan that speaks to the genuine idealism that underlies Jimmy's anger. The complicating factor is Alison. She adopts Jimmy's values: like her husband, Alison wishes that her friends would have "guts." Yet, she hopes this so that their plan of attack will fail (a plan that she herself helped to orchestrate). Alison has consistently chosen ambivalence rather than choosing sides in the class conflicts that arise.

Helena says that she can't understand why Alison acted that way—or why she married Jimmy. Alison says that "there must be about six different answers." For one thing, her family, and her father Colonel Redfern in particular, were "unsettled" after returning from India. When Alison met Jimmy at a party, he was sunburnt, and "everything about him seemed to burn…his eyes were so blue and full of the sun." She says that she knew she might not be able to "bear" the relationship, but that it seemed inevitable. It was her family's negative reaction that sealed things for Jimmy, she says, "whether or not he was in love with me." He wanted to marry her as much as her family wanted to stop it. "Frail and full of fire," Alison says, Jimmy fought for her like a knight in shining armor, "except that his armor didn't really shine very much."

Helena notices Alison's ambivalence, and can't identify with it. She is a character who sticks to her values, which are solidly middle class. Alison's mention of India suggests a connection between her relationship with Jimmy and Britain's fall from imperial power. The "unsettled" state of things, both in her home and in the country, laid the groundwork for her marriage. Alison knew that the relationship might destroy her, but still wanted it. For Jimmy, the fight with her parents was more important than love. Their relationship is "unsettled" partly because love is secondary to anger and pain.

Helena brings the conversation back to Hugh. Alison says that her relationship with him only got worse, and that Hugh and Jimmy even disrupted some of Nigel's political events. Then Hugh, who was writing a novel, decided to go to China, because England didn't hold any more appeal for him. Jimmy fought with him about this, and "accused Hugh of giving up" and abandoning his mother. In the end, Hugh left for China "to find the New Millennium on his own," and Jimmy and Alison moved to their current apartment.

Jimmy's anger rarely takes on an explicitly political edge. Here, it does—but then Hugh abandons the cause. This seems to Jimmy a betrayal, and that fact reveals his underlying patriotism and traditional sense of family duty. Hugh goes off into the future, while Jimmy remains stuck and angry, unable to create political change in his country.

Alison suspects that Hugh's mum and Jimmy both blame her for the quarrel, and for Hugh's leaving the country. She doesn't dislike Hugh's mother, she says, though she believes that Jimmy likes her "principally because she's been poor almost all her life." Alison says that, though she knows it sounds "snobbish," she considers Hugh's mother "ignorant." Helena says that it's time for Alison to make up her mind—she has a baby to think of now, and she can't keep going on in this situation. Alison says that she's "so tired."

Alison here criticizes Jimmy's view of right and wrong. He equates poverty with moral superiority, and wealth with moral corruption. Alison is right to find this simplistic, but she also proves that she does look down upon people who are of a lower class status than her. Helena's reaction is practical: Jimmy's morality doesn't particularly matter to her, because she, unlike Alison, is sure of her own.

Helena asks why Alison hasn't told Jimmy about the baby, and Alison assures her that it couldn't be another man's child—"I've never really wanted anyone else." Helena says that she should tell Jimmy about the baby, and that he'll either react well, or Alison will have to leave. Alison points to the **bear and squirrel** on a dresser, and says that the animals represent her and Jimmy. She tells Helena that it's a game they play, and Helena responds by looking "rather blank." The game doesn't seem to be working lately, Alison says. Helena asks if it's her arrival that has made things go downhill. Alison says no—it began as an escape after Hugh left. It was a way for them to show "dumb, uncomplicated affection," and "a silly symphony for people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer." She says that the creatures have died now—"they were all love, and no brains."

Alison thinks that the baby will make Jimmy feel trapped, but Helena doesn't understand this—she thinks that Jimmy should just accept his child and his wife. In her middle class world, values like social disruption and class conflict don't enter into the domestic equation. Jimmy, on the other hand, thinks of his marriage partly as a battleground for the working class. Alison makes explicit the way that their bear and squirrel game allows the couple to escape into simpler affection. She implies, however, that this type of love is not strong enough to survive in the real world. She has come to believe Jimmy's idea that social conflict must enter into personal relationships.

Helena grabs Alison's arm. She says that Alison must fight, or escape—otherwise, Jimmy will kill her. Cliff enters. He asks if the tea is ready. Alison says it is, and Cliff calls Jimmy, saying "hey, you horrible man! Stop that bloody noise." Cliff asks Helena if she and Alison are going out. Helena replies, to Cliff's surprise, that they are going to church. She invites him to come, but he offers the lame excuse that he hasn't finished reading the papers. Cliff sits down at the table, and Helena sets the salad on it. Alison sits at the dressing table doing her makeup. Jimmy enters.

Helena urges Alison to action, as Jimmy has before. Her presence makes it clearer in this act than it was in the first that Alison has neither fully abandoned her upper class ideals, nor embraced Jimmy's working class fervor. Cliff's surprise that the women are going to church illuminates the way that Helena's presence is changing Alison's behavior—she is being pulled back to her old life of traditional values .

Jimmy says that "anyone who doesn't like real jazz, hasn't any feeling either for music or people," and sits down at the table with Cliff and Helena. Helena says that's "rubbish," and Jimmy says she's just proved him right. They briefly discuss Webster's banjo playing. Then Cliff asks Jimmy if he can borrow a paper, and Jimmy snaps that he should buy it himself. Then he asks why Cliff would want it, given that he has "no intellect, no curiosity." Cliff agrees that he is "nothing," and Jimmy responds that Cliff "ought to be Prime Minister," if he has a high-faluting intellectual thought such as that.

Jimmy embraces jazz as a working class art form, and voices his opinion that working class people are more in touch with the real, emotional side of life. Webster, the only one of Alison's friends who he considers worthwhile, also accesses this emotion through music. Jimmy turns around immediately, however, and claims the mantle of the educated man, taunting Cliff for being both too ignorant and too high-faluting. The exchange typifies Jimmy's strained relationship to his own education and how to it placed him in a position that is stuck between working class and middle class.

Then Jimmy launches into another attack on Alison's friends, while Cliff and Helena eat their meal and don't respond. He says that her rich friends "sit around…discussing sex as if it were the Art of Fugue" (a musical composition by Bach). The stage direction notes that Alison and Helena's "silent hostility" has made him combative, and that though he "looks cheerful," his voice suggests otherwise. Jimmy says that Cliff is "too anxious to please," and then he offers Helena tea. She thanks him, and he pours. He says that Cliff will end up "evil minded and vicious." Helena takes the full cup of tea and thanks him again. Jimmy says that Alison's friends are, among other things, "pusillanimous." Helena asks if Alison will have her tea, and Alison says she "won't be long."

Here, Jimmy argues that Alison's friends' high education keeps them from understanding earth-bound pleasures like sex. He suggests that Cliff is like them in his desire to keep the peace. He thus rejects both his wife's absent friends and his own friend at the table, leaving himself socially isolated—Jimmy values his ideals over people. Helena's calm politeness during Jimmy's outburst recalls the high-class composure that Jimmy detests in Alison, and shows Helena's strong belief in the value of politeness.

Jimmy says he's thought of a new song, one that is from the perspective of a prostitute turning away a customer named Mildred. He asks if Alison likes it, and she says that she does. Jimmy tells them all the lyrics, which discuss the prostitute deciding to give up on her work. It includes the refrain "just pass me the booze." Cliff agrees that it's good. Jimmy says that he wrote a poem while at the market the day before. He says that Helena will like it—"It's soaked in the theology of Dante, with a good slosh of Eliot as well." (Dante wrote the famous epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, describing hell, purgatory, and paradise. T.S. Eliot won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948 and was a poet whose famous works include *The Waste Land* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.) Jimmy calls his poem "The Cess Pool."

Jimmy counters Helena's politeness by acting overly bawdy and brash. Yet he also paints himself as an intellectual, a person who composes music and writes poetry on the fly. He quotes famous authors like Eliot and Dante, but then writes a poem with a very earth-bound name ("The Cess Pool") thus differentiating himself from Alison's friends, who compare sex to classical music. This speech also calls to mind Osborne's project with the play itself. He takes a formerly high-class art form—drama—and fills it with realistic, working class content. Jimmy's poem, like Osborne's play, might be a legitimate political statement—while also reflecting the particular and possibly limited worldview of its creator.

Helena asks why Jimmy is being so "unpleasant," "offensive," and "tiresome." Jimmy "roars with laughter," and teases Helena for being stuck up, like the Oscar Wilde character Lady Bracknell. Then Jimmy's "curiosity about Alison's preparations at the mirror won't be denied any longer." He asks if she's going out, and she says that she is. He asks where, and she rebuffs him. Then she sits down at the table. Helena says that they are going to church. Jimmy, like Cliff, is "genuinely surprised."

Lady Bracknell is a stuffy old Victorian woman from Wilde's play The Importance of Being Earnest*, so Jimmy's comparison suggests that he finds Helena old-fashioned. He sees himself as a modern man, and people like her as outdated. His curiosity about Alison speaks to the intense and often uncomfortable nature of their love. Though he has been trying to ignore her, he fails.*

Then Jimmy lets fly an attack against Helena, saying that this is a cheap trick to win Alison to her side. He turns to Alison, saying that he's sick to think how much he endured to get her out of her parents' house, only to see her go back to Helena. Alison sees that an explosion is coming, and responds sarcastically, saying that Jimmy rescued her on a "charger," and that she'd still be "rotting away at home" if he hadn't. Jimmy calms down when he hears Alison getting riled up, and says that she's not too far off—though the charger was "off white," Alison's mother had effectively locked her daughter up in a castle.

Jimmy sets himself up as a rescuer, showing the idealism that he feels about his role in the class conflict. Alison turns this back upon him sarcastically, suggesting that she thinks this is a perverted version of a classic love story. Jimmy himself recognizes that it's not a traditional story of valor—the charger was "off white." This reflects his inability to find a valiant cause to hold on to, a situation that contributes to his general disillusionment.

Jimmy says that he knew from the moment he met Alison's mother that she would stop at nothing to keep him from her daughter. He compares her to a "rhinoceros in labor," whose "bellow" makes male rhinos run away and "pledge celibacy." Yet, he says he "under-estimated her strength." Hoping to shock Helena, he says that Alison's mother is as "rough as a night at a Bombay brothel, and as tough as a matelot's arm." (A matelot is a sailor.)

Jimmy's offensive language ratchets up a notch when he speaks about Alison's mother, suggesting that his dislike of her may be misogynistic as well as idealistic. Here, he suggests that her motherly protectiveness makes her sexually unattractive, and that her un-ladylike "roughness" makes her comparable to a prostitute.

Jimmy gives an example of Alison's mother's dirty tactics of motherly protection. She jumped to terrible conclusions about Jimmy due to his long hair, and had him watched by a private detective. She did all this so that Jimmy couldn't "carry her daughter off" on a horse decked with "discredited passions and ideals." "The old gray mare that actually once led the charge against the old order" could hardly carry Jimmy's weight, he says, and gave up when he loaded Alison on her back, too.

Jimmy mocks Alison's mother's suspicion of him, but he has been equally suspicious of Alison, snooping in her handbag and reading her letters. His morality isn't actually superior to that of this upper class character. Jimmy's statement that his mare gave up under Alison's weight suggests that his quest to improve his working class lot is failing, and that this is largely due to his marriage.

Jimmy asks Alison if Helena has really won her back. Helena cuts in—"You've no right to talk about her mother like that." Jimmy says he has every right, and, of Alison's mother, says, "that old bitch should be dead." Then he asks Alison to confirm his statement, and asks why she doesn't come to her mother's defense. Cliff gets up from the table and tries to stop Jimmy from continuing, but Jimmy pushes him away, then "sits down helplessly, turning his head away on to his hand." Jimmy says that Alison wouldn't come to his defense, either, if someone were attacking him. Then he begins to picture Alison's mother dead, and being eaten by worms. "What a bellyache you've got coming to you, my little wormy ones…she will pass away, my friends, leaving a trail of worms gasping for laxatives behind her."

Calling Alison's mother a "bitch" and painting a vivid, disgusting picture of her worm-eaten corpse seems to show unbridled hatred rather than a moral or political statement. Yet, Jimmy wants Alison to defend her mother, and her husband—the insult is also a test of his wife's moral fortitude. This moral purpose is muddied, however, by Jimmy's personal hatred of Alison's mother, and the word "bitch" adds an element of gendered hatred, as well. Jimmy cannot be said to be purely an idealistic social crusader. His "helplessness" in the midst of his slew of insults shows the self-defeating nature of his anger.

Jimmy smiles at Alison, who is still at her dressing table, and "hasn't broken." Helena is the only one who meets his gaze. She says that she feels "sick with contempt and loathing." Jimmy says that when he's out of the sweet-stall business, "I may write a book about us all. It's all here. Written in flames a mile high." It won't be a peaceful poem of the type that "Auntie Wordsworth" (referring to poet William Wordsworth, who wrote *The Prelude*, "I wandered lonely as a cloud," and other poems). Instead, "it'll be recollected in fire, and blood."

Again, Jimmy plays up his education and intellect. Yet he also rejects the feminization that he sees in Wordsworth, who was famous for his meditations on nature. Jimmy plans to write about social situations, which are his primary concern and a primary cause of his pain. Like "fire," Jimmy's vision of his life can both give energy, and consume or damage people.

Helena decides to try "patient reasonableness," and says that a little thing like going to church doesn't merit all this fuss. Jimmy says that if she can't understand that, she isn't so "clever" after all. Helena says to Jimmy, "you think the world's treated you pretty badly, don't you?" Alison cuts in, "Oh don't try and take his suffering away from him—he'd be lost without it." Jimmy "looks at her in surprise," but then keeps his focus on Helena.

Jimmy insult about Helena's cleverness suggests that his bravado about his own intelligence is overblown. Alison's statement that Jimmy would be "lost" without his suffering shows her clear understanding of the fact that the anger that he often directs at her is something that he needs. It gives him a sense of purpose and direction that he otherwise has no way to find.

Jimmy asks why Helena is still around, given that her play has already finished up. Helena says that Alison asked her to say, and Jimmy asks what they are "plotting." Jimmy tells Alison that she doesn't believe "in anything," and asks why she is letting Helena "influence" her. Alison begins to show signs of stress, covers her ears with her hands, and says that the word "why" is "pulling [her] head off." Jimmy says that he'll continue to use it, and turns to Helena to tell her that the last time Alison went to church was on her wedding day.

Alison's strong negative reaction to the word "why" speaks to the fact that she doesn't understand her own actions. She is still stuck between truly accepting her husband's world, and staying in her own. Helena's presence is bringing that conflict slowly to its climax. Church has become a flash point for Alison's allegiance—with Jimmy, she avoids it, but with Helena, she doesn't.

Jimmy says that on that day, they were in a hurry to marry—it seems hard to believe now. They avoided the city registrar because he was a friend of Colonel Redfern's, and chose a vicar who was less likely to know Alison's parents. But Colonel Redfern and Alison's mother found out nonetheless, and came "to watch the execution carried out." Jimmy had drunk beer for breakfast, and picked a stranger at the bar for his best man. Alison's mother looked like a dead rhino, he said, and Colonel Redfern looked as though he was "dreaming of his days among the Indian Princes." He says that he can't remember the wedding after that, except throwing up later in the vestry. Helena asks Jimmy again whether he's done talking yet.

Jimmy did not take the wedding seriously, further showing the ways that his values diverge from the traditional values of people like Alison's parents (who apparently feel it would be improper not to show up for ceremony, even though they disapprove). The fact that Jimmy doesn't remember saying his vows suggests that the marriage was more about his fight with Alison's parents than it was about marrying Alison herself. Jimmy's sense that Colonel Redfern was nostalgic for the colonial past while watching his daughter marry a working class man dramatizes the idea that Jimmy and Alison's relationship signals the end of a certain era of British history. In modern times, Colonel Redfern is no longer a "prince," and his precious daughter marries a working-class man like Jimmy.

Jimmy asks Alison if she's going to be swayed by Helena. Her friend, he says, is "a cow." Cliff says that Jimmy has gone too far, but Helena says that he should go on. Jimmy accuses Cliff of defecting to Helena's side, too. He says that Helena will "make it pay off," because she is "an expert in the New Economics." Continuing to use economic language, he says that the era of Reason and Progress is over, and that old traditions and beliefs are getting more valuable. "The Big Crash is coming," he says, so people should go to Helena's side to avoid disaster. "Helena and her kind" have overrun Britain, he says. "They spend their time mostly looking forward to the past." The "Dark Ages" seem to her the lightest time, and she lives in her own "soul," "cut right off from the ugly problems of the twentieth century altogether."

Jimmy's use of economic language to describe Helena's worldview suggests that he sees her as an embodiment of the social and political forces in Britain that are trying to erase the plight of the poor and the working class. He accuses her of living in a way that denies reality, and bringing Britain back to the "Dark Ages." This is, more broadly, his critique of society. He thinks that the powerful forces in England are disconnected to the struggles of people like himself, and intent upon preventing progress.

Helena says, calmly, that if Jimmy weren't so far away, she'd have slapped him. Jimmy asks Helena if she has ever seen somebody die. She begins to stand, and he tells her not to move. She sits. Jimmy says that death "doesn't look dignified enough for you." Helena says that she'll slap him if he comes close, and Jimmy replies that he isn't a gentleman, and has "no public school scruples about hitting girls." If she slapped him, he would slap her back. Helena says that this doesn't surprise her. Jimmy responds that he hates violence, and that's why, "if I find some woman trying to cash in on what she thinks is my defenseless chivalry by lashing out with her frail little fists, I lash back at her." Helena asks if that's "subtle, or just plain Irish?" Jimmy smiles, and says that they seem to understand each other.

Helena has previously shown little inclination to respect or obey Jimmy, so the fact that she sits when he tells her to suggests that his statement about seeing someone die comes across as more powerful and true than his previous tirades. His reminder that death isn't "dignified" is powerful evidence for his belief that politeness isn't connected to the real things in life. As is often the case, however, his legitimate moral statement begins to mix with misogyny when he scorns Helena's "frail little fists." He says that this is about his working class moral outlook—he doesn't have the politeness that those who went to fancy "public schools" would have. Yet Helena sees through him, noting that this might be about a "subtle" moral critique, but it also might be "just plain Irish"—a scornful and classist (and even racist) way to say that it might just be about Jimmy's natural inclination towards belligerence.

Jimmy says that Helena hasn't answered his question, and she replies that she has never seen anybody die. "Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity," Jimmy says. He loses his "good humor" as he falls into a memory. When he was ten, he said, he watched his father die for a year. He had been fighting in the (Spanish Civil) war in Spain. He was wounded in battle, and Jimmy knew that he would die. He says that he was "the only one who cared," and turns to look out the window. The rest of the family was embarrassed, he says. His mother "was all for being associated with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones," and his father's conviction that he should fight for democracy in Spain was not well-received by society at large. Jimmy says that his family sent money every month, "and hoped he'd get on with it quietly, without too much vulgar fuss."

Jimmy's criticism of Alison's virginity takes on a different meaning here, when he suggests that "virginity" means one hasn't suffered. This gives us an idea of his vision of sex, which he must see as partly an act of suffering. British soldiers who fought in the Spanish Civil War did so for idealistic reasons, and Jimmy bemoans that lack of idealism in his own generation. His father and others like him had the chance to fight for important causes, but that also caused them grave suffering; Jimmy's generation cannot be ignorant of the costs involved, and has thus lost some sense of innocence. Jimmy's mother had the "fashionable" values that he derides in Alison and Helena, so this gives us an idea of the psychological origin of his outlook—which involves, again, both scorn for a woman in his life, and a valid critique of upper class complacency.

His mother may have pitied his father, Jimmy says—but she didn't care as he did. "At the end of twelve months," he says, "I was a veteran." He learned through that experience "what it was to be angry—angry and helpless." He claims, "I knew more about—love…betrayal…and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know in all your life." The group sits silently. Then Helena gets up and says that she and Alison should go to church. Alison nods, and Helena leaves to get her things.

Jimmy himself ties the origin of his anger to "helplessness," further driving a sense that his vitriol is partly about frustration, rather than about arguing for a just cause. Yet, his statement that he learned hard lessons at ten years old seems also to be legitimate. Helena and Alison deny him the pleasure of a response.

Without looking at Alison, Jimmy asks why she lets people do these things to him, when, he says, "I've given you just everything." Jimmy's voice has weakened. "His axe-swinging bravado has vanished, and his voice crumples in disabled rage." He says that Helena is taking Alison away, and his wife is "so bloody feeble" that she'll allow it to happen. "Suddenly," Alison flings her cup to the floor. She looks at the pieces, and at Jimmy, and then crosses the stage to put on a dress. "As she is zipping up the side, she feels giddy, and she has to lean against the wardrobe." Eyes closed, Alison says, "all I want is a little peace."

Jimmy's emotional pain, and his belief that he has given Alison a good life, shows that, in his mind, he treats her this way out of love. His rage is again "disabled," powerless. Alison's emotional break, and her statement that she just wants "peace," show that his love of passion and suffering has had the effect of pushing her away. At the same time, it shows that Alison really may be closed off to passion and suffering. She just wants things to be easy.

Jimmy is "hardly able to get his words out." "My heart is so full, I feel ill—and she wants peace!" Alison puts on her shoes. Cliff moves from the table to an armchair and looks at a **paper**. Jimmy has regained his composure slightly, and says that people find his yelling objectionable, "but that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence." He says that Alison callously ignores his feelings. "One of us is mean and stupid and crazy," he says. But is it him, "standing here like an hysterical girl, hardly able to get my words out?" Or is it Alison, "sitting there, putting her shoes on to go out?" Jimmy turns to Cliff, and says that he should try loving Alison. Then he goes over to watch Alison rummaging for her gloves.

Jimmy is emotional to the point of discomfort, but, as we have seen many times before, he prefers this to "peace," which he translates as upper class complacency. Jimmy argues that he might seem crazy, but Alison's silence could make her the crazy one, too. This is one of the arguments that the play has been taking seriously. Though Jimmy's anger makes him seem unhinged, he also has flashes of real ideological clarity. Alison, the calm one, is also occasionally shown to be a coward. The play suggests that some iconoclastic thinkers might be personally distasteful, as Jimmy often is.

Jimmy says that Alison might want to return to him someday. When that happens, he says, "I want to stand up in your tears, and splash about in them, and sing." Helena enters with two prayer books in her arms. Jimmy says that he hopes to someday see Alison's "face rubbed in the mud." There is a short pause, and then Helena tells him that there is a phone call waiting for him. Jimmy says that can't mean anything good, and exits.

The fact that Helena witnesses only Jimmy's angry statement that Alison's face should be "rubbed in the mud" parallels the way that upper class observers often see only the ugly side of Jimmy's anger. The two prayer books symbolize the upper class respectability that Helena brings with her.

Helena asks if Alison is ready to leave, and whether she feels all right. Helena says that she is shocked to think of how hard things will be for Alison during her pregnancy, and how it's all due to "these *men*." She turns to Cliff, and berates him for sitting there and doing nothing. Cliff agrees: "I just sit here." Helena asks what's wrong with him. Cliff says that he may not agree with Jimmy, but that doesn't mean that he's on Helena's side. Her presence has made things worse in the house than they've ever been. It was always a "battlefield," but his presence has meant that the couple can stay together. "Where I come from," Cliff says, "we're used to brawling and excitement." He adds, "I love these two people very much. And I pity all of us." Helena asks if he is including her in that statement, but keeps speaking to avoid giving him the chance to reply.

Helena draws the battle lines according to gender, not class—Alison's problem is "men." Cliff, on the other hand, suggests that it is indeed a matter of class. He confirms that Jimmy's way of speaking is partly a result of his class upbringing, and that Cliff himself doesn't find it offensive, given their shared context. He seems resigned to the fact that love entails conflict. He expresses pity, which seems to be an overall pity for the human condition. Cliff's resigned attitude, and his love for both Jimmy and Alison, suggests that he doesn't see their fights as a problem to solve in the way that Helena does.

Helena tells Alison that she has sent Colonel Redfern a wire, telling him to come pick up his daughter the next day. Alison responds, her voice "numbed and vague": "Oh?" Helena springs into action. She says that she felt that she had to do something, and then says, "gently," "you didn't mind, did you?" Alison says that she doesn't, and thanks Helena. Her friend asks if she will go with her father when he comes, and Alison says, after a pause, that she will. Helena is relieved. She says that Colonel Redfern will arrive around "tea-time" the next day. She hopes that Alison's departure will cause Jimmy to "come to his senses, and face up to things."

Alison reacts to Helena's extreme gesture with the "vague" attitude that Jimmy detests. Helena's past tense statement that Alison "didn't mind" shows a desire to avoid conflict (she doesn't ask about Alison's feelings in the presence, but assumes her retroactive approval). Alison's decision to leave seems to come from a sense of inevitability. As Jimmy fears, Helena is indeed in charge. This is beginning to have real, potentially disastrous, effects for the couple.

Alison asks who was on the phone. Helena says it was "Sister somebody." Alison speculates that it was a hospital, as Jimmy is unlikely to know anyone in a convent. She says they should get going. Jimmy enters, and Cliff asks if he's all right. To Alison, Jimmy says that the call was about Hugh's mum, who has had a stroke. After a "slight pause," Alison says that she's sorry. Jimmy sits down on the bed. Cliff asks how bad it is, and Jimmy says that it sounds like she's dying, and that it "doesn't make any sense at all." Cliff asks if there's anything he can do. Jimmy says he should call a taxi. Cliff gets up to do this, then asks if Jimmy would like him to come to London. Jimmy says, "it's not for you to go," given that Cliff had hardly known Hugh's mum. "Helena looks quickly at Alison," who says nothing. Cliff exits.

Cliff springs into action in a moment of conflict, asking what he can do to help, and calling Jimmy a taxi. Alison, who actually knew Hugh's mum, can only apologize repeatedly. Though they at times have similarly unemotional responses to Jimmy's tirades, Cliff holds up much better under strain here than Alison does. We are meant to dislike Alison in this moment—she seems as emotionally callous as Jimmy often says that she is. Cliff's different reaction shows that Alison's behavior is due to cowardice, and not to a peace-loving nature.

To Alison, Jimmy says that he remembers Hugh's mum's reaction to their wedding photo. She rhapsodized over how beautiful Alison was. Alison is standing by the dressing table with her back to him. He asks for his shoes. She kneels to hand them to him. Looking at his feet, he asks if she's coming to London with him. He says, "I…need you…to come with me." Jimmy meets her gaze, but Alison turns away and stands. The **church bells** begin to ring. Helena watches. Finally, Alison crosses to pick up the prayer book. "She wavers, and seems about to say something," but then turns towards the door. In a soft voice, she says to Helena, "let's go."

Jimmy's admission of weakness is the emotional climax of this scene. He has allowed himself to become fully vulnerable, and to admit that he relies on Alison. This could be a moment of affection and love between them, but Alison remains emotionally closed. The church bells call her away with their respectable appeal—she follows, and returns with Helena to her old life, leaving Jimmy alone. In this moment, it is Alison, and not Jimmy, who is an aggressor.

Alison and Helena exit. Jimmy "looks about him unbelievingly," rising to lean against the dresser. The teddy **bear** is nearby. Jimmy lifts it "gently," then throws it to the floor, where it makes a "rattling, groaning sound." Jimmy falls onto the bed, his face in the covers.

The bear symbolizes Jimmy himself. He and it fall at the same time, full of immense suffering and disbelief. The fact that he flings it to the ground himself suggests the way that he welcomes suffering, however painful it may be.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

The scene opens the next evening, with Alison packing her suitcase and Colonel Redfern sitting by. "Brought up to command respect, he is often slightly withdrawn and uneasy now that he finds himself in a world where his authority has lately become less and less unquestionable." Though Alison's mother would find this situation exciting, Colonel Redfern is "disturbed and bewildered by it." He says, to both himself and Alison, that this is beyond him. Jimmy "speaks a different language from any of us." He asks where Jimmy has gone.

Right away, Colonel Redfern's demeanor points to the fact that he represents an old world order that has lost its power. He doesn't understand Jimmy's way of talking. He's used to being respected, but Jimmy instead finds him contemptible. His high-class status has shifted beneath him and come to represent something different, and less admirable, in England than it did in India.

Alison says that Jimmy is seeing Hugh's mum, because she's had a stroke and her son is away. She says that Jimmy had hoped she would go with him. Colonel Redfern remembers that it was Hugh's mum who gave Jimmy the sweet-stall, and asks whether she's anything like her son (Hugh Tanner). Alison says that she's "ordinary. What Jimmy insists on calling working class." Colonel Redfern replies, "so you didn't go with him?" and Alison confirms that she did not.

Colonel Redfern refuses to engage with Alison's attempts to insult Hugh's mum. He also implies that she should have gone with her husband to visit her. He brings an energy that is similar to Cliff's with Jimmy, attempting to calm Alison's anger. In these first moments with her father, then, it seems as though Alison has become more like Jimmy than like her parents.

The Colonel asks who is looking after the sweet stall, and Alison says that Cliff is. Her father asks if Cliff lives here too, and Alison says yes. The Colonel says that a sweet stall "does seem an extraordinary thing for an educated young man to be occupying himself with." He's never been able to understand it, and thinks that Jimmy is probably "quite clever in his way." Alison says, without interest, that Jimmy has tried a variety of careers, and seems to be "as happy doing this as anything else." Her father says that he has often wondered what her living situation is like, because Alison was reticent on this point in her letters.

The Colonel's lack of reaction to Cliff's presence in the apartment is unexpected—a true traditionalist would object. He does, however, wonder why Jimmy is not using his education for better things. This is not a malicious observation, however. The Colonel seems to have a high opinion of Jimmy's intelligence. This view from an outsider (and a former enemy, at that) adds credibility to charitable interpretations of Jimmy's anger, though it perhaps also suggests the ways that the upper class are blind to the fact that the working class may not have the option of doing "something better" despite their education..

Alison says that there wasn't much to say, and the Colonel interprets this to mean that she was "afraid of being disloyal" to Jimmy. Alison laughs at this, saying that Jimmy thought she was disloyal to write to her parents at all. The Colonel remarks, blandly, that Jimmy really does hate them. Alison agrees that he hates "all of us." The Colonel says that this is a "pity," and that the fuss about the marriage was "unfortunate and unnecessary. I'm afraid I can't help feeling that he must have had a certain amount of right on his side." This confuses Alison. He says that he thinks that he and Alison's mother deserve some blame for the nasty battle. He has "never said anything," but he thought that Alison's mother "went too far." He confirms that Alison's mother did hire private detectives, and that he tries now to pretend that it never happened.

Again, Alison has taken a middle path that ends up leaving her to betray both Jimmy and *her parents. Writing at all was disloyal to Jimmy, but she also refrained from giving her parents the information that they desire. This shows her cowardice. The Colonel explains his objection to the "fuss" over the wedding in moral terms, but also suggests that he was ruffled by conflict, showing an upper class sensibility. He, like Alison, mixes upper class and working class ideas. He also shows some of Alison's tendency to avoid entering an argument. He has not questioned or intervened with Alison's mother, though he disagrees.*

Alison says that he shouldn't blame himself, and the Colonel agrees that everyone involved deserves some blame. Yet he says that Jimmy is "honest enough" and that Alison's mother "acted in good faith as well." Of Alison and himself he says, "Perhaps you and I were the ones most to blame." This surprises Alison. "I think you may take after me a little, my dear. You like to sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful." Alison rejects this interpretation, saying that she married Jimmy even though her parents vehemently disapproved. Her father says that this is true, but that it may have been better if she had cut off communication after the fact, given the dislike between Jimmy and her parents. He "looks at her uncomfortably," and apologizes, but "glances at her nervously, a hint of accusation in his eyes, as if he expected her to defend herself further. She senses this, and is more confused than ever."

This is the climactic moment of the play in terms of our understanding of Alison's complacency. Jimmy, Alison's mother, and Helena all fight strongly for their various beliefs and values, even when those values come into conflict. Colonel Redfern suggests that Alison (and himself) do not. Alison herself sees her relationship as a radical act, but the Colonel points out that she has not fully committed to this course of action. His alignment with Jimmy in his assessment that Alison should defend herself more, and his indictment of himself, makes this seem a very credible accusation. Jimmy is right that Alison's temperament is not as radical, nor as honest, as Jimmy's is.

Alison tells the Colonel what Jimmy said about her mother and the worms. The Colonel responds with a mild "I see," and asks what Jimmy says about him. Alison says that he isn't as insulting. He calls the Colonel "one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore." The Colonel says that Jimmy "has quite a turn of phrase," and then, "simply and without malice," asks why he and Alison ever had to meet, and why Jimmy decided to marry her.

Again, the Colonel's reaction to Jimmy's language mirrors Cliff's. He is not overly offended by Jimmy's overblown insults. His comment that Jimmy "has quite a turn of phrase" also adds retroactive clout to Jimmy's tirades, reminding the audience that, while he is volatile and angry, he is also astute and intelligent.

Alison says that she believes it was for "revenge." Colonel Redfern looks baffled. Alison confirms that "some people do actually marry for revenge." Jimmy, she says, complicated her life by throwing down the "gauntlet." Colonel Redfern says, "your husband has obviously taught you a great deal…what any of it means, I don't know. I always believed that people married each other because they were in love." It seems, he says, "that's too simple for young people nowadays," and that her love is instead about "challenges and revenge." Alison says that this is only true for some people, and the Colonel wonders why it should be true for her.

Alison and Jimmy's angry, volatile love is a modern phenomenon, and reflects a general loss of innocence and "simplicity" in their generation. Colonel Redfern, like many of the theatergoers who first saw Look Back in Anger, *feels alienated by their anger. He speaks here for those members of society who do not feel class conflict as acutely as the younger generation does. His comments reflect a sadness about this state of affairs that runs through the play as a whole.*

Colonel Redfern says that Jimmy might be right—he might be a relic of the Edwardian past. He left England for India in 1914, he didn't see the country again until 1947. He heard rumors that it was "going to the dogs," but he was also too busy commanding an army to think about it much. He loved his life in India, and "it looked like going on forever…Those long cool evenings up in the hills, everything purple and golden…I think the last day the sun shone was when that dirty little train steamed out of that crowded, suffocating Indian station." Alison replies, "you're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same…Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it?" The Colonel agrees that it has.

Alison's statement that both Jimmy and her father are "hurt" by the state of the country encapsulates the play's argument about disillusionment and nostalgia. The end of Britain's imperial age has left both the old guard and the new guard adrift, and suspicious of each other. Jimmy and Colonel Redfern each have no feeling of purpose and meaning. Yet, their common feeling does not give them common cause—cultural rifts leave them blaming each other for their own sorry state.

Alison is about the put the **squirrel** in her suitcase, but then puts it back. "For a few moments, she seems to be standing on the edge of choice." Then she turns to Colonel Redfern and begins crying. He tells her that she's taking a big step, and asks if she's sure that this is what she wants. Then Helena enters, saying that she came to see if she could help. Alison closes her suitcase, and says that she's ready. Cliff is going to send the rest of her stuff to her, but he hasn't returned from the sweet stall.

Seeing the squirrel reminds Alison of the moments of affection that she has shared with Jimmy, and this makes her doubt her decision to reject him and his lifestyle. That moment of doubt makes us all the more clear that it is Helena, and not Alison, who feels strongly that upper class values are correct. Alison and Colonel Redfern remain stuck taking the path of least resistance.

The Colonel says that they should get going—Alison's mother will be worried, and she's ill. Helena says that she hopes the telegram isn't to blame, and the Colonel says that it isn't, and thanks her for sending it. He asks if he can take her suitcase, and Helena says, to Alison's surprise, that she is staying the night. Cliff enters. Helena says that she must stay, because she has a work appointment the next day. Alison greets Cliff and introduces him to her father. They exchange awkward greetings. Then the Colonel says goodbye, and exits to pack the car.

We have seen that the Colonel is not sure that Alison's leaving Jimmy is a good idea, yet he treats Helena with the reflexive courtesy of an upper class gentleman, telling her that he is glad that she sent the telegram. As with Alison, Colonel Redfern has a difficult time offending or hurting others, and this leads him to be dishonest about his thoughts.

Cliff says that Jimmy will return soon, and asks Alison to wait for him. She refuses, and Helena says that she'll tell Jimmy what has happened, if she's still there. Cliff says, "quietly," "you'll be here." He asks Alison if she thinks she should tell Jimmy the news herself. She hands him a letter. He says that's a "bit conventional," and Alison confirms, "I'm a conventional girl." He crosses to embrace her, and over Alison's shoulder, tells Helena that he hopes she's right. To Alison, he says that the apartment will be off-balance without her. She kisses him, and says she'll be in touch. She tells Cliff to take care of Jimmy, and glances around the room. Helena kisses her cheek, and says she'll see her soon. Alison nods, and exits.

Cliff, here, is a moral center. He sees (presciently) that Helena is not going to leave the apartment (perhaps indicating that he sees her attraction to Jimmy), and he thinks that Alison should do right by Jimmy, and face up to her difficult decision. Alison, however, has fully embraced her "conventional" persona. This moment of Alison's exit is a second damning example of her cowardice and inability to take a strong stand. Though Jimmy has driven her to this action, the play here paints him as the wronged party, and Alison as the coward.

Helena asks Cliff if he would like some tea. He says no, and she says that she'll make herself some. Cliff asks if she's staying, and she says yes. She asks what Jimmy will do when he finds out, and wonders if he might look up Madeline. Cliff says that he doesn't think so, and when Helena asks him why, he breaks. "Why the hell should I know," he says, in a voice that indicates that "for the first time in the play, his good humour has completely deserted him." Helena is surprised. She asks if Jimmy is private about these things—she would be surprised, given how many "souls stripped to the waist" she has seen in the apartment. Cliff turns to leave.

Cliff's anger at Helena suggests that class tension has been simmering beneath his calm surface. This further drives home the fact that Jimmy's anger is justified—even the unflappable Cliff feels that Helena has unfairly disrupted their world. Helena also attacks Jimmy for being improper and impolite—walking around the apartment shirtless in front of ladies. She implies that he is only out for sex. Cliff sees Jimmy more fully than Helena does, and knows that ideological concerns are perhaps even more important to him than sex is.

Helena asks if he's staying. Cliff says that he's leaving, in case Jimmy is about to come in from the London train. He's had a hard day, and wants to eat and drink before he sees Jimmy devastated. He tosses Alison's letter to Helena, and says "I hope he rams it up your nostrils!" Then he exits. Helena puts out her cigarette, and a door slams downstairs. She looks around the room, and eventually picks up the teddy **bear**, and lies down on the bed with it. Jimmy enters with a crash, and throws his raincoat down. "He is almost giddy with anger." Jimmy says that Colonel Redfern almost hit him with the car on his way out. It was "fitting," he says, that Alison was the "passenger." Then Cliff avoided him on his way out the door. He asks if Helena was "the only one who's not afraid to stay," and she gives him the letter.

Cliff exits because of his concern for Jimmy's feelings, but nevertheless, the move seems callous. He and Alison both feel unable to face Jimmy's anger. Helena, who has experienced less of it than they have, is ready and willing to face him—Jimmy ascribes this to bravery. The teddy bear symbolizes Jimmy himself, and Helena's casual embrace of it suggests both a latent tenderness for Jimmy, and the fact that she is about to displace Alison.

Jimmy reads Alison's letter: "I need peace so desperately, and, at the moment, I am willing to sacrifice everything for just that…I shall always have a deep, loving need of you." Jimmy says this makes him "puke." She should have written angry words, but instead "she has to make a polite, emotional mess of it." He rips Alison's dress from the wardrobe, saying, "Deep, loving need! I never thought she was capable of being as phoney as that!"

Again, Jimmy desires authenticity from Alison, and sees her lettter as a way to avoid intense feeling. She is being "phoney" and "polite." For Jimmy, love is not "need," but rather the choice to feel deeply with another person.

Helena says that Jimmy should stop being so selfish, and tells him that Alison is going to have a baby. He doesn't reply, and she asks if that means anything to him. He says that he's surprised, but isn't going to "collapse with remorse." He doesn't care about the baby, and asks if that disgusts her. Then he reminds her of their previous conversation, and says that he has spent the day watching someone die. "And you think I should be overcome with awe because this cruel, stupid girl is going to have a baby!" Jimmy calls Helena an "evil-minded little virgin," and she slaps him. He looks horrified, then his face fills with pain. "A muffled cry of despair escapes him" as he covers his face with his hand. Helena pulls his hand away, "and kisses him passionately, drawing him down beside her." The curtain falls on Act 2.

Helena has previously thought that Jimmy should love his child and his wife unconditionally, but he here argues that love should be given based on merit, and that Alison has not earned it. Helena responds to Jimmy with the anger that he craves from Alison, and her reaction releases his despair. This suggests both that Jimmy might not be able to withstand the anger that he himself dishes out, and that his anger is in fact an expression of vulnerability. The fact that Helena kisses him underscores the seductive power of his raw honesty and emotion, and perhaps also indicates (now that there is a pattern of upper class women falling for him) that passion such as his really is lacking in the upper classes.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Several months have passed, and it is once again a Sunday. Helena's belongings have replaced Alison's in the apartment. Cliff and Jimmy sit in armchairs reading the **paper,** as they did in Act 1. Helena is ironing. She looks "attractive" and "smart," but "in an unpremeditated, careless way; she wears an old shirt of Jimmy's." Cliff says that Jimmy's **pipe** is stinking, and Jimmy says that Cliff stinks. Then he wonders why he spends so much time reading papers on Sundays.

The allusion to Act 1 is clear in this moment. Helena has taken on Alison's exact role in the household, and Jimmy has even laid claim to her with his shirt. This suggests that the cycle of conflict will continue, because Helena has not changed Jimmy's world—he as changed hers. There is also a sad feeling of stagnancy to the scene.

Jimmy asks if his **pipe** smoke bothers Helena, and she says that she likes it. Jimmy summarizes the week's news for Cliff, which has to do with midnight rituals for the "Coptic Goddess of fertility." He wonders if Miss Drury has "dabbled" in witchcraft, and asks if Helena has. Laughing, she says that she hasn't "lately." Jimmy says that it sounds like her cup of tea, or "cup of blood, I should say."

Alison in Act 1 said that she had "gotten used" to the pipe, but Helena positively likes it. As in the previous act, she takes a stronger stand than Alison did, and this provides the audience with a sense of hope—perhaps Helena will be able to stand up to Jimmy in a way that Alison didn't.

Jimmy says that he suspects "somebody's been sticking pins into *my* wax image for years." Then he says that it must be Alison's mother. He imagines that she does this with a hatpin, and that it might have "ruined her bridge game." Helena suggests that Jimmy should try it himself. Jimmy says that's a good idea—they could sacrifice Cliff over the stove.

Jimmy still has the sense that he suffers more than anyone else does—he here ascribes it to voodoo. The upper class imagery (hat pins and bridge) shows that he ties his personal suffering to his class status. He also mentions Alison briefly—her presence still hangs in the air.

The "whole point of a sacrifice," Jimmy says, "is that you give up something you never really wanted in the first place." People gain unfair recognition for sacrifices of this kind, he believes. He says that rather than admiring them, he should feel sorry for them. Then he returns to his joke, and says that they could also drink Helena's blood, which must be a "pale Cambridge blue." Then they could invoke the fertility goddess. Cliff grumbles that Jimmy doesn't need to invoke that goddess, and Jimmy says that he's right. He asks for the "posh paper," where there is a "savage correspondence" about Milton that he wants to read.

Jimmy makes an incisive psychological commentary about people's tendency to congratulate themselves too much for too little. He also pities those who must fake values, rather than truly having them. His subtle jab at Helena's upper class "blue blood" status goes unremarked upon, but suggests that the same tensions as were present in Act 1 are present now.

Cliff says that he has just read that, and Jimmy says, "I think you're actually acquiring yourself a curiosity, my boy." He summarizes some gossipy articles about Shakespeare, and Helena laughs. She tells Cliff that she's gotten more adept at telling when Jimmy is being serious, and when he's joking. Cliff says he's not sure Jimmy always knows himself. Jimmy tells him to shut up, and asks Helena if she's going to church that evening. "Taken aback," she says that she isn't. Jimmy asks if it's "living in sin" that makes her stay away. Helena "can hardly believe that this is an attack," and is "shaken by the sudden coldness in his eyes." He soon resumes his cheerful joking with Cliff.

Jimmy's fatherly interest in Cliff's intellect paints him as a certain kind of old, upper class patriarch, revealing again his subtle nostalgia for Britain's past. Jimmy's attack on Helena reveals that he wants to keep her under his thumb—he doesn't like feeling laughed at. His reminder that she has wronged her friend is a way of reminding her that she is a hypocrite. He uses a moral argument to hurt Helena, and the pain he causes seems gratuitous—it's not really about ideals.

Then Jimmy asks if he saw Helena talking to a reverend the other day. She says that it was indeed a reverend, and he says that she's acting defensive. Jimmy asks why they shouldn't have the parson over for tea, and whether it's because his moral manliness would overtake Jimmy, the "liberal skinny weakling." Helena asks why they can't have "one day, just one day, without tumbling over religion or politics," and Cliff chimes in his agreement.

Jimmy's sarcasm reveals that he thinks religion is "phoney" morality. He paints himself as the weaker man in order to suggest that the reverend is overcompensating for a failing. The scene from the first act is beginning to re-play. Though Helena has a stronger tie to her own values than Alison did, it is becoming clear that what Jimmy really wants is for a woman to give up her politeness and reserve and fight him toe to toe, to step onto his ground as a full and honest combatant in love.

Jimmy changes the subject to a song that he made up that day, then suggests some names for a band they could form together, but dismisses them as "too intellectual." Cliff begins to brainstorm names, too, and then they fall into a routine, pretending to be a pair of performers. The scene has a vaudeville air, with two men trying to find a man named "nobody." In the end, it turns out that Helena is to play nobody. Jimmy throws a pillow at her, pretending that it is an instrument case, and it hits her ironing board. Jimmy and Cliff launch into a song and dance routine, like the famous British performers Flanagan and Allen. They sing about a suitor wanting to marry a middle class woman, even though her mother doesn't like him. Jimmy tires of the song, and tells Cliff to make some tea.

Jimmy's tendency to make up songs is one of the things that he takes pride in, as evidenced also by the fact that his names are too smart for their own good. This comic break shows the easy fondness that exists between people of the same class background—Jimmy and Cliff. Helena's playing nobody is a small jab at her, and an erasure of a woman in this male dominated dynamic. The song lyrics recall Jimmy's love with Alison, and his decision to stop the song suggests that thinking of Alison might still be painful, though it looks on the surface like he's moved on.

Cliff and Jimmy begin to fight and roll on the floor, and Jimmy begins to gain the upper hand. He dirties Cliff's shirt, and tells him to make some tea. Cliff rises, and appeals to Helena, who says that she'll wash the dirty shirt. Cliff "hesitates" before giving it to her, then takes it off. Helena exits with the shirt.

Like Alison, Helena has taken on the role of womanly guardian over two men who act like ruffians. In this way, the dynamic of the household is intractably traditional.

Jimmy "flops into his armchair," and says that Cliff looks like "Marlon Brando" (in *A Streetcar Named Desire*). Then he remarks that Cliff doesn't like Helena. Cliff reminds him that he once felt the same way. But then says, "quickly," that it's not the same. Jimmy agrees "irritably" that it isn't, because "today's meal is always different from yesterday's and the last woman isn't the same as the one before." Cliff sits on the edge of the armchair, and says that he thinks he's going to leave the apartment somewhere soon. Jimmy asks why, not betraying any emotion. Cliff says he wants to try something different.

Jimmy misogynistically compares women to "meals," and suggests that his dislike of Helena is different from his dislike of Alison. Yet, Cliff never disliked Alison, so he has already accepted the truth of what Jimmy says. It is Jimmy himself who seems stuck in a hopeless pattern. Cliff, as he himself states, is ready to get out.

Cliff goes on to say that the sweet stall suits Jimmy because he is "highly educated," but he needs something "a bit better." The other thing, he says, is that Helena finds it difficult to look after two men, and that Cliff should find a girl for himself. Jimmy says that sounds like a good idea, if he can find someone "stupid enough" to go for it.

Cliff's sarcastic reasoning about the sweet stall is meant to show, gently, that he isn't suggesting that Jimmy himself needs to get out and find something better. This implies that Cliff knows that Jimmy wonders whether he is selling himself short by staying in one place.

Jimmy suggests that Helena find Cliff a rich friend, because that's what he wants. Cliff says, noncommittally, "Something like that." Jimmy says that they could find a respectable woman to clean him up, and then he says, "I seem to spend my life saying good-bye." Cliff says that his feet hurt, and Jimmy suggests washing his socks. Jimmy says, "slowly," that Cliff has been a "loyal, generous, and a good friend." And yet, he is "quite prepared" to let him go, "all because of something I want from that girl downstairs, something I know in my heart she's incapable of giving." Cliff is worth six Helena's to him, he says, and yet they would both let the other go, given the same situation. He looks to Cliff for affirmation, and Cliff agrees.

Cliff subtly rejects the idea that he wants a girl like Helena, and this creates the hope that one of the characters in the play might find a simple, loving relationship. It also suggests, however, that such relationships cannot exist across class lines. Jimmy questions his own reaction to Cliff's leaving, noting that he values this male friendship more than he values Helena, but he still lets Cliff go. This shows, for one thing, the low value that he places on women. He uses them for a selfish need, while he sees his friend as a person in his own right.

Jimmy asks, "why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?" He says that it might be because "people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties." He falls back into the brooding mood that he has been in for much of the play, and observes, "There aren't any good, brave causes left." This means that "there's nothing left for it, my boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women."

This speech crystallizes the play's argument about the threads of love and anger that have been interweaving throughout the play. Jimmy creates drama and anger in his relationships with women because he doesn't have a political outlet for his frustration. He wants to feel the anguish and suffering of a righteous cause, but instead, he picks fights.

Helena enters and hands Cliff his shirt. He thanks her, and she says that he should dry it in his room. Cliff exits. Helena crosses back to the ironing board, and Jimmy says that he's "sick" of seeing her ironing. He tells her to get "glammed up" so that they can go out. Helena asks if something is wrong. Jimmy says that she shouldn't frown, but rather should look "as if [her] heart stirred a little" when she looks at him. Helena says that it does.

Though Jimmy has already shown his attempts to dominate Helena, here he tries to release her from a traditional female role in order to unleash her passion for him. His misogynistic tendencies conflict with his desire for genuine emotion—his dominating tactics can be self-defeating.

Jimmy says that Cliff is leaving, and Helena says that he's already told her. She says she's sorry he's leaving, and Jimmy agrees that "you can forgive somebody almost anything" if they have a big heart, as Cliff does. He has learned how to love. Jimmy beckons Helena to him, and she comes over to his chair, and puts out her hand. He "runs it over his head," and says that Helena has always been the first one to put out her hand to him. He says that she expected "nothing, or worse than nothing, and didn't care." He says that she was a "worthy opponent." Helena says that she loves him. Jimmy says, "I think perhaps you do." He says that she loves him especially when he's "heartily sick of the whole campaign," and lying in her arms. They embrace, and he says, "don't let anything go wrong!" She calls him "darling," and he says, "either you're with me, or against me." She says she has always wanted him, and they kiss.

Both Cliff and Helena are able to give love more freely than Jimmy himself is. Here, when Helena says that she loves him, Jimmy does not return her answer immediately. For him, conflict and love are hopelessly intermixed. It is initially hard to accept Helena's freely given love. Yet, his admission of vulnerability (don't let anything go wrong!) suggests that he has been able occasionally to give up his combative stance, and accept Helena's love. Yet, he still requires her to be "with him" against the world. The conflict may not be between them, but they must be on the same side in a broader societal conflict.

Jimmy says that he'll close the sweet stall, and they'll leave together. Helena agrees. He says that he'll make "such love to [her, she'll] not care about anything else at all." She says that she just has to change her shirt, and Jimmy says that he'll tell Cliff to get a move on. Then the door opens, and there is Alison, wearing a raincoat. "Her hair is untidy, and she looks rather ill." After a pause, Alison says hello. Jimmy says, to Helena, "friend of yours to see you," and exits.

For a moment, Jimmy is able to picture a future that has moved beyond the static picture that we have seen throughout the play. Alison's return, however, reminds us that the suffering and anger that we have seen throughout has a human cost. Jimmy is once again stuck, and it is becoming clear that he always will be.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

The scene opens just a few minutes later. Jimmy is playing his jazz **trumpet** across the hall. Helena is standing at the table pouring tea. Alison sits in an armchair. She bends to pick up Jimmy's **pipe**, and drops the ash from it into an ashtray. She notes that he still smokes the pipe, and says that she had come to miss it. Last week at the movies, she sat behind a man who was smoking the same pipe. Helena brings her a cup of tea and says that it should help. Alison takes it, and thanks her.

Jimmy has retreated into the wordless anger of his jazz trumpet, which is in some ways the equivalent of the animal game—it lets him express his feelings in a non-intellectual way. Alison is still inclined to clean up the apartment, suggesting that she retains some upper class sensibilities. Now she, like Jimmy and Colonel Redfern, has fallen into nostalgia, missing her old life.

Alison says that she must be "mad" to show up at the apartment, and apologizes to Helena. Helena says that Alison, of all people, doesn't need to apologize. Alison protests that it was "unfair and cruel" to return. She has adopted Jimmy's sense of dramatic timing, she says, but it is in "bad taste." She says that she has often prevented herself from coming, but that today, she finally made it. She says that she has often thought of the apartment, but that it seemed like another world. She says that Helena makes a good cup of tea, then covers her face. "You must all wish me a thousand miles away," she says.

Alison and Helena are retreating into a polite, restrained way of talking to each other, but Alison also notes that her decision to return has a flavor of Jimmy to it. She showed up unannounced to provoke strong feelings and reactions. The audience is not yet sure whether Alison's time away has resolved Alison's identity crisis over working class and upper class values.

Helena says that Alison has "more right" to be there than Helena does. Alison protests, "Helena, don't bring out the book of rules," and Helena says that Alison is Jimmy's wife, and that she has never forgotten her friend's "right" to him. Alison says that she "gave up believing in the divine rights of marriage long ago. Even before I met Jimmy." Now, she says, it's a constitutional monarchy. You are where you are by consent." She, on the other hand, has been displaced.

Alison's protestation that the rules of marriage don't apply, and the fact that she felt this way before meeting Jimmy, suggest an iconoclastic streak that might be stronger in her than we had at first realized. Her comment on "constitutional monarchy" reflects the fact that British society, like her love life, has become more chaotic as it becomes freer.

Alison says that she regrets coming here, and that she didn't intend to break up Helena and Jimmy. Helena says that she believes that, but that it makes things seem even worse. Alison "should have been outraged," but wasn't. Helena says that she feels ashamed, and that Alison sounds like she is "quoting" Jimmy. "At last, I still believe in right and wrong," Helena says. "Even though everything I have done is wrong, at least I have known it was wrong."

The question of Alison's muted emotions still has not been resolved. She is not operating under either Jimmy's or Helena's moral code, both of which would require outrage. Yet, she seems to have developed a moral narrative of her own that doesn't quite ascribe to either of their visions. Helena retains her strong and traditional moral sense, as indicated in her belief in the wrongness of her relationship with Jimmy.

Alison says that Helena wrote that she loved Jimmy, and Helena confirms this. Alison says that she couldn't believe this at first, but then she realized that Helena used to say lots of very harsh things about Jimmy, and that made it easier to believe. Helena agrees that she was "over-emphatic."

Alison has adopted the view that insults and anger can be the result of love. Grappling with the love between Jimmy and Helena has helped her reach this realization.

Helena says that she has discovered "what is wrong with Jimmy…He was born out of his time." Alison agrees. Helena says that there's no place for him in the world now, but that he should have been in a time like the French Revolution. This means that he'll never get anywhere. Alison says that he's an "Eminent Victorian."

Helena's observation emphasizes the fact that Jimmy's strong idealism is out of place in the modern state of British society. Jimmy wishes for a time when he could have had a "brave cause," and the fact that his fervor has no place in the modern world leads to a deep and abiding sense of disillusionment. Yet, Jimmy himself understands that his nostalgia is false (that rain fell even in Edwardian times). Helena and Alison paint a simpler picture of a man born in the wrong decade, but Jimmy knows that a thinking man will always find something to be disillusioned about. Nevertheless, he still wishes that he could find a "brave" cause to align himself with.

Helena says that she sees now that it's "over" between her and Jimmy. Alison's presence reminds her how wrong the situation is. She says, "he wants one world and I want another, and lying in that bed won't ever change it! I believe in good and evil, and I don't have to apologise for that." By her own moral code, her actions have been unconscionable. She's leaving, and she thinks Alison would be a "fool" to stay, but she won't stand in her way. Alison protests that Jimmy will be all alone. Helena says that Jimmy will find another woman. "I know I'm throwing my book of rules at you," she says, but Alison won't be happy without it. Helena has tried living that way, and "it just doesn't work."

Helena has had a strong moral code for the duration of the play, and though she has strayed into "sin" by having an affair, her action here accords with the standards that she has set for herself. She begins and ends the play with the same upper class values. Yet, Alison's more flexible moral code might make her able to find happiness with Jimmy where Helena couldn't, even if Helena believes she won't find happiness overall. As opposed to Helena, Alison and Jimmy would not be "lying in that bed" with two totally different worlds in mind. Alison has been trying to bend her imagination to include Jimmy's world.

Helena says that seeing Alison at the door made everything come clear to her, and that she "didn't know about the baby…It's like a judgment on us." Alison says that she "lost the child. It's a simple fact. There is no judgment, there's no blame." Helena says that she still feels it, and that though it isn't "logical," it's "right." Offstage, "the **trumpet** gets louder." Alison says that Helena shouldn't leave Jimmy, because he needs her. He wants something specific from women, she says—a "cross between a mother and a Greek courtesan, a henchwoman." Helena tells Jimmy to stop his "damned noise."

The fact that Helena takes Alison's miscarriage as a "judgment" suggests that her morality is partly religious, meaning that it comes from the upper class world that Jimmy scorns. Yet, she has no desire to question it. She also takes a more feminist view than Alison, and is unwilling to conform to Jimmy's highly demanding view of what a woman should be.

The **trumpet** eventually stops, and Helena calls Jimmy to speak with them. Jimmy asks if Alison is still there, and Helena says that he shouldn't be stupid. Alison is worried that he doesn't want to see her, but Helena tells her to stay. Jimmy enters. He says that Alison should sit down, because she looks "ghastly." Helena begins to explain, but Jimmy says that she doesn't have to "draw a diagram." He can tell that Alison has had a miscarriage. Helena asks if that means something to him, and Jimmy says that he isn't glad to think of anyone being ill or in pain, and that it was his child too. But, he says with a shrug, "it isn't my first loss."

Jimmy's statement that he doesn't want others to be ill or in pain shows that his view of suffering isn't just confined to the moral realm—he also succumbs to genuine emotion, as he does when he sees Alison's pale face. The miscarriage has softened him as it has softened Helena, but it has not shocked him—this is a privilege reserved for those who have not suffered much and, to Jimmy, differentiates those who understand the world from those who don't.

Alison replies that it *was* her first loss. Jimmy looks at her, then looks back at Helena. She crosses to him, and says that it isn't Alison's fault. Jimmy asks what she means. Helena says that she doesn't "want a brawl," and Jimmy tells her to get on with it. Helena says that she is "going downstairs to pack [her] things." It was her own decision, but she realized that she couldn't be happy doing something "wrong" and hurtful. She says that she won't love anyone else like Jimmy, but "I can't take part—in all this suffering. I can't!" Jimmy "looks down at the table, and nods."

Jimmy unknowingly cursed Alison's unborn child in the first act, and now, his prophecy has come true. Alison has suffered as he hoped that she would. Helena's decision to remove herself from "suffering" suggests that her morality also has a tinge of what Jimmy would call cowardice—she doesn't want to take part in the darkest side of life. Alison has deepened her emotional capacity by opening her life to Jimmy, but Helena chooses not to.

Helena says that she'll get Alison a hotel room. Jimmy says that he always knew that Helena would eventually leave him when the going got too tough. "It's no good trying to fool yourself about love," he says. "You can't fall into it like a soft job, without dirtying up your hands. It takes muscle and guts." If Helena doesn't want to dirty her soul, he says, she could become a saint—"because you'll never make it as a human being." As he says this, he takes a dress out of the closet, crosses the room, and gives it to her. Helena takes it, and exits. The **church bells** begin to ring outside, and he curses them.

Jimmy's statement that love takes "muscle and guts" is an indictment of the cowardice that Helena has just displayed. The upper classes maintain their sense of self-worth because they ignore the very real plight of the working class people around them. The bells ringing symbolize the peal of middle class morality, which has caused Jimmy, and the working class in general, so much pain.

Alison says that she's sorry, and Jimmy says that she never sent any flowers to Hugh's mum. She starts to move, but stops when he speaks. He says that the world is full of injustice, with "the wrong people dying." Alison moves again, and he turns to her. He says that "the heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest."

Jimmy here berates Alison for not showing simple human decency by reaching out to Hugh's mum for her funeral, suggesting that to him, politeness is about human connections, not about social rules. This might, however, lead him to a lonely life. His plight is that of any person who stands out from society—he might alienate others as he tries to change the way the world works.

Jimmy asks if Alison remembers the first night they saw each other. He said that she seemed to have "a wonderful relaxation of spirit…You've got to be really brawny to have that kind of strength—the strength to relax." He says that once they married, he realized he had misread her. "In order to relax, you've first got to sweat your guts out," which Alison had never done. Alison lets out a cry, and moves to lean on the table. Jimmy says, "I may be a lost cause, but I thought if you loved me, it needn't matter."

For perhaps the first time in the play, we perceive what Jimmy's personal, emotional goals might be. He hopes to achieve a state of "relaxation" through sweat and suffering. Failing that, true love will do. His anger is meant to achieve both, even as, throughout the play, it has been pushing them away.

Alison is crying. She yells out, "it doesn't matter! I was wrong, I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral, I don't want to be a saint. I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile!" Jimmy watches "helplessly." She says that the "human being inside [her] body" has gone. She had never known pain like that—she wanted to die. She thought of Jimmy. "This is what he's been longing for me to feel…I'm in the fire, and I'm burning." She says that the cost was the child, and all her future children, but that it was worth it, because this was what Jimmy had wanted. She looks up at him, and says, "don't you see! I'm in the mud at last! I'm groveling! I'm crawling!" She collapses on the floor. Jimmy kneels to her. He says, "Please don't…I can't," and tells her that she's all right. She "relaxes suddenly."

In the face of Alison's emotional break, Jimmy's anger dissolves into helplessness. He has driven her to this point, and both he and the audience are shocked by the depth of pain that his anger and tirades have caused. The moment is cathartic, suggesting that Jimmy may have been right to invite such powerful emotion—perhaps it will lead to the release and love that he craves. Yet, it is also terrible to behold. The question of whether Jimmy is right that suffering is the most essential human emotion remains open at the end of the play—it is attractively powerful, but we also wonder whether all this pain would have been better off avoided, if it could have been avoided.

Jimmy says "with a kind of mocking, tender irony," that they'll go be happy in their **bear**'s cave and **squirrel**'s drey. They'll write songs, and live on honey and nuts, and she'll help him stay clean. He'll see that she keeps her tail looking nice, and that he'll watch her, because she's beautiful and "none too bright," so they have to be careful of traps. "Poor squirrels," he says. "Poor bears," Alison says, and then, tenderly, "Oh poor, poor, bears." She embraces him. The curtain falls.

The irony of the couple's return to the bear game is that they both now know that such a simple world is impossible. Before, Alison hoped to remain forever in affectionate love, but now that she has known suffering, that more shallow existence is closed to her. The tender embrace between the couple leaves us with a sense of hope. It seems possible that they will unite their worlds and form a happy relationships—but it is equally possible that they will launch into a cycle of suffering and reconciliation. The class factions that they represent might find a way to live in harmony—or they might remain perpetually at war.

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