

Look Back in Anger, Act 1

Summary

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 the 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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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."

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

Cliff's flirtation with Alison happens in a domestic context. 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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.)

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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 they take a powder puff out of its box.

Analysis

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 he makes these claims suggests that he may actually be insecure about his own manliness.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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 Alison 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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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—"I can't concentrate with you two standing there like that."

Analysis

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 an improper thing so that he can focus more on the newspaper.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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 the 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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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. 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.

Analysis

Alison refuses to be intimate with Jimmy out of a sense of propriety—it wouldn’t be right to do so 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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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, “Wheeeeeeee!” Jimmy says that he envies her. Then she calls him a “jolly super bear.” He agrees that bears and squirrels are “marvelous.” 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.”

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

Jimmy's mood has changed. Cliff jokes that Jimmy was supposed to make 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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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 lust 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.

Summary

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 long letters that also don't mention Jimmy. Then he throws the letter at her feet.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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 Alison and the audience). Yet Jimmy's helplessness after his attack shows once again that his anger is self-defeating.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.”