

## Look Back in Anger: Act 2, Scene 2

### Summary

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 “Brought up to command respect, he is often slightly withdrawn and uneasy now that he finds himself in a world where his authority has lately become less and less unquestionable.”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.

### Analysis

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.

### Summary

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.

### Analysis

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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..

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

Alison is about to 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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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. Cliff sees Jimmy more fully than Helena does, and knows that ideological concerns are perhaps even more important to him than other things.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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!”

### **Analysis**

Again, Jimmy desires authenticity from Alison, and sees her letter 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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.