

## Look Back in Anger: Act 3, Scene 2

### Summary

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.

### Analysis

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.

### Summary

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.

### Analysis

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.

### Summary

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.

### Analysis

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.

### Summary

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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."

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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."

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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."

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.”

### **Analysis**

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.

### **Summary**

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.

### **Analysis**

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 relationship—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.