

Look Back in Anger: Act 3, Scene 1

Summary

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.

Analysis

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 has changed hers. There is also a sad feeling of stagnancy to the scene.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

Jimmy suggests that Helena finds 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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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."

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

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.

Analysis

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.

Summary

Jimmy says that he'll close the sweet stall, and they'll leave together. Helena agrees. 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.

Analysis

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.