

A Taste of Honey



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHELAGH DELANEY

Born in 1938 in a working-class family of Irish ancestry, Shelagh Delaney grew up in a small suburb of the Greater Manchester area in Northern England. Despite some difficulties at school, Delaney soon developed a talent in writing and wrote her first play, *A Taste of Honey*, in ten days, at the age of eighteen. Despite Delaney's later productions in theater, literature, cinema, and television, this play defined her entire career and remains her most critically acclaimed work. In addition to being considered an important contribution to the 1950s working-class and feminist cultural movements, the play became one of the most influential works in the literary movement of so-called "kitchen sink realism," as it portrayed issues of race, sexuality, and class in innovative, complex ways. In 1985, Delaney was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, an elite society aimed at rewarding and promoting literary talent.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, Britain faced the task of rebuilding its entire economy. The 1956 Suez Crisis, in which Britain invaded Egypt and eventually withdrew due to political and economic pressure, led to a humiliating recognition that the country was no longer a dominant world power. Further changing the social climate in the country, the 1944 Mass Education Act in Britain made secondary education free, opening the possibility of higher education to the working classes. This created a greater degree of social mobility in the post-war era than had existed before, as did the economic boom of the 1950s. At the same time, British class structure remained rigid as ever, resulting in a generation of educated working class children with no way of putting the educations they had received toward well-paying jobs. The 1950s is also considered a dismal period for feminism. Britain's new embrace of the welfare state led to an emphasis on the traditional nuclear family, promoting a generally conservative view of women and their role in society, encouraging them to be mothers while discouraging them from going to work. The birth control pill was introduced to Britain through the National Health Service only in 1961, and even then it was for the exclusive use of married women.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Taste of Honey gave greater complexity and depth to a literary movement that developed in England in the late 1950s called "kitchen-sink realism." While this movement often focused on

young, working-class men disillusioned with the conventions of modern society, Delaney expanded its themes to focus on women and to expose complex dynamics of class, sexuality, and race. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), considered by many to be the first example of kitchen sink realism and the "Angry Young Men" movement, portrays class conflict and the difficulties of marriage through the relationship of an upper-class woman and a working-class yet highly educated man. The 1960s British New Wave in cinema, a movement which paralleled the French *nouvelle vague*, is considered an offshoot of kitchen sink realism. In the U.S., notable plays related to kitchen sink realism include Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Frank D. Gilroy's *The Subject Was Roses* (1964).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Taste of Honey
- **When Written:** 1958
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** First performed in May 1958
- **Literary Period:** Modernism; Kitchen sink realism
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A working-class district in mid-twentieth-century Manchester, England
- **Climax:** Helen shows up at Jo's apartment after splitting up with Peter and forces Geof to move out
- **Antagonist:** Helen

EXTRA CREDIT

Theater and Class. Shelagh Delaney's debut play *A Taste of Honey* was initially intended as a novel. Her decision to turn it into a play was moved by her commitment to making important social issues more visible in theater. She felt that English theater at the time only represented the upper class and eschewed important themes such as working-class life, sexuality, race, and, more generally, women's ordinary lives.

Movie. The immediate success of Shelagh Delaney's play led the young writer to sell the film rights only one year after the play's first performance. The movie, *A Taste of Honey*, released in 1961, won four Bafta awards, including best British screenplay.



PLOT SUMMARY

When seventeen-year-old Jo and her mother Helen carry luggage into their new apartment, the two women's conversation soon reveals that their relationship is

characterized by frequent tension, misunderstanding, and underlying resentment—as well as interdependence. While Jo immediately criticizes the apartment’s run-down state, it becomes apparent that her grudge has much deeper roots. She attacks Helen for her excessive drinking and for their unstable lives, as they are forced to move from one apartment to the next according to Helen’s relationship with her “fancy men,” lovers who give her money. More generally, Jo laments Helen’s lack of care. Jo feels emotionally and materially abandoned by her mother, who takes little interest in her life and always follows her selfish whims without considering their effects on her daughter. Jo concludes that all she wants is to start working, so that she can gain financial independence and live away from her mother.

Instead of taking Jo’s complaints to heart, Helen seems detached and indifferent to her daughter’s pain. She argues that she does not believe in interfering in other people’s lives, since it already takes her too much time to take care of her own. A few minutes after they move in, however, she sees her daughter’s drawings and realizes that Jo has talent. She enthusiastically encourages her to attend art school, saying she would pay for it herself. Jo refuses, arguing that Helen has always disrupted her chances of having a stable education, but this episode still demonstrates Helen’s underlying trust in her daughter’s intelligence and artistic capacities—even if, most of the time, she is either incapable or unwilling of fostering it.

While the two women are still arguing, Peter, one of Helen’s lovers, suddenly enters the apartment. Assertive and bold, he begins to flirt with Helen, who is shocked to see him. When Peter discovers that Jo is Helen’s daughter, he realizes that Helen is much older than he thought. As the conversation evolves, Jo realizes that the motive for their recent move is that Helen was trying to flee from Peter, for reasons that remain unspecified. Meanwhile, despite Helen’s rejection of Peter’s advances, Helen seems flattered by the man’s brazen efforts at seduction. Suddenly, Peter jokingly asks Helen to marry him. As Helen refuses, his proposal becomes more serious and more insistent. Initially taken aback, Helen ultimately tells him that, if he proposes one more time, she is likely to accept.

In the second scene of Act One, Jo is walking home from school with her boyfriend, Jimmie, a black sailor who is about to leave with the Navy in a few weeks. While Jimmie assumes that Jo must be ashamed to be seen with him in the street because of the interracial nature of their relationship, Jo sees no reason to hide and her sincerity impresses him. While their relationship is lighthearted and playful, Jimmie suddenly asks Jo to marry him, and Jo accepts. He gives her a **ring**, which Jo ties around her neck, trying to tuck it in so that her mother will not see it. While Jo does not believe that Helen would be bothered by Jimmie’s skin color, she does not want Helen to laugh at her for getting engaged.

When Jo enters her apartment, Helen discovers that Jo has a

boyfriend and interrogates her about him. Later in the conversation, Helen suddenly announces that she is getting married to Peter. While Jo argues that Helen is too old to get married, the young woman’s reaction seems moved by feelings of disappointment, as she feels that Helen is abandoning her once again. Peter then walks in, bearing flowers for Helen and chocolates for Jo. Jo behaves aggressively toward Peter, seemingly trying to provoke him, and Helen tells her to leave him alone. Jo discovers that Peter has bought a house for Helen and himself, which makes her feel completely abandoned. Jo asks her mother why she is marrying Peter, and Helen replies that she is only doing so for his money. After Helen and Peter leave, Jo lies down on the bed and begins to cry. Her boyfriend then comes in and tries to console her. While Jo invites him to stay over for Christmas, she does not seem to believe his declarations of love or his promises to return. Her instinct tells her, instead, that she will probably never see him again.

Helen is getting ready for her wedding. When Helen sees the **ring** that Jo is wearing around her neck and realizes that her daughter has gotten engaged, she attacks Jo for her foolishness and seems truly upset about her daughter’s decision. She tries to convince her not to get married, saying that she is too young to be trapped in matrimony. However, Jo attacks Helen in turn, saying that this situation is her fault. She reveals that, anyway, she is already “ruined”—a comment that only elicits more aggressive comments from Helen. Before Helen leaves, Jo asks her about her father. Helen reveals that Jo’s father was a mentally challenged man, whom she had sex with to compensate for her rich husband’s aversion to sex. As Helen leaves, Jo says that she is neither glad nor sorry to see her go.

Act Two begins a few months later. Jo is living alone in the same apartment and is, by now, visibly pregnant. She enters the apartment with her friend Geoffrey, an art student whom she believes has been kicked out of his apartment for being gay. She interrogates Geof about his sexuality in a rude, mocking way, which offends Geof and makes him want to leave. Realizing that she has hurt his feelings, Jo apologizes and asks him to stay with her, adding that he can sleep on the couch. Geof then interrogates Jo about her pregnancy, showing concern and a true interest in her problems, as well as a willingness to take care of her. The two of them thus begin to live together, developing a close friendship over the course of the next months.

While Jo trusts that her relationship with Geof is entirely non-sexual, providing both of them with much-needed affection and comfort, on one occasion Geof grabs her and forces her to kiss him. He asks her to marry him, but Jo says she does not like him in that way, adding that she does not want to marry anyone. Helen then suddenly enters the apartment. Geof, who believed that Jo’s mother should know about her pregnancy, had contacted Helen so that she would come to take care of her

daughter. However, Jo is angry at Geof for going behind her back, and Helen's visit soon evolves into an explosive fight, in which Helen attacks Jo for getting pregnant and declares that she has no responsibility toward her child and grandchild. While Geof attempts to intervene, Helen and Jo both attack him, trying to keep him out of the fight.

In the middle of this discussion, Peter enters the apartment. He is drunk and begins to mock everyone, making fun of Jo's pregnancy, Geof's effeminacy, and Helen's dependence on him. Showing no concern for Jo's difficult situation, he keeps Helen from giving Jo money or offering her a home. When he finally leaves, Helen initially refuses to leave with him, asserting that she is going to stay with Jo, but finally gives in and follows him out.

A few months later, Jo is in the final stage of her pregnancy. Despite her occasional anger and disgust with the idea of motherhood, she now seems happy in her domestic partnership with Geof. At the same time, she also mentions that she wishes her mother were present to accompany her through this important moment, despite their constant fighting. Helen then enters the apartment, carrying luggage as in the first scene of the play. While Helen pretends that she has returned to take care of Jo, her daughter soon learns that Peter has left her for another woman and that she is thus forced to return to Jo's apartment. Helen shows a strong dislike toward Geof and, through hostile comments and an aggressive attitude, succeeds in making him leave the apartment for good. Geof justifies his decision to leave by saying that Jo cannot handle the two of them in the same apartment. Before leaving, he asks Helen not to frighten Jo unnecessarily about the dangers of childbirth, but Helen simply tells Jeff not to tell her what to do in response.

The play ends as Jo is beginning to feel labor pains. Hiding the fact that she has just forced Geof to leave, Helen comforts Jo in the bedroom until Jo announces that her baby is probably going to be dark-skinned; Helen is appalled, interpreting this piece of information as yet another social disgrace. Instead of keeping Jo company during this crucial time, she decides that she needs to go out for a drink. Jo thus finds herself alone in the apartment again. Unaware of Geof's departure, she smiles as she recalls a **nursery rhyme** that he once sang to her. She softly sings it to herself, seemingly drawing comfort from the playful tune.

feels emotionally and materially abandoned by her mother. This troubled relationship leads Jo to yearn for economic independence from Helen, but also reveals her deep longing for her mother's love and, more generally, her desire for her mother to be more present in her life. Jo's artistic sensibility expresses itself through her drawings, but she does not seem optimistic enough about her talent to want to develop it in any structured way. Throughout the play, she alternates between youthful optimism and feelings of despair, as she attempts to cope with her pregnancy and the daunting prospect of motherhood. Abandoned not only by her mother but by Jimmie, the father of her child, her cohabitation with Geof reveals her need for a stable emotional presence in her life. She is grateful to Geof for making her feel loved and taken care of. Jo's relationships with Geof and Jimmie also reveal her open-mindedness, as she proves herself disinclined to judge others based on their skin color or sexual orientation.

Helen – At the age of forty, Helen leads an unstable life that revolves around drinking and her romantic relationships with lovers, whom she depends on financially. Characterized by a domineering attitude and a tendency to follow only her selfish whims without considering the effects of her actions on others, Helen has an ambivalent relationship with her daughter Jo. While she occasionally demonstrates heartfelt concern for Jo's troubles, she seems incapable of making decisions that will actually serve Jo's interests or make her daughter feel loved and supported. Likewise, she seems to have an ambivalent relationship to money; she looks down on poverty even though she herself is incapable of providing for herself or her daughter. She therefore abandons her daughter midway through the play to live with Peter, her new lover; despite seeming to have a vague distaste for him, she needs his money. Her insensitive attitude toward Geof, and, later, toward the information that Jo's child is the product of an interracial relationship, demonstrates her inability to accept behaviors that deviate from what she considers to be acceptable social behavior. While her intolerance and aggressiveness often prove harmful to others, she rarely seems concerned with anyone's feelings but her own.

Peter Smith – A boldly assertive, often vulgar young man, Peter is a car salesman who follows Helen to her new home and convinces her to marry him. He shows little sensitivity to the subtleties of Helen and Jo's relationship, believing that Jo hates her mother and is a capricious, intolerable young woman. More generally, he shows little understanding of irony and wit, as he proves unable to bear Jo's ironic attacks. Similarly to Helen, he seems concerned exclusively with his own pleasure, refusing to help Jo financially during her time living alone in the apartment and her pregnancy, while spending his money indiscriminately on presents for Helen and on their drunken outings. His alcoholic tendencies lead him to behave aggressively and insult the people around him, showing little concern for others and



CHARACTERS

Jo – Seventeen-year-old Jo is a witty, sensitive character whose rebellious impulses can be seen as the direct result of her feelings of abandonment. She shares a strong bond with her mother Helen—the two women's vicious fighting often demonstrates their profound knowledge of each other—but Jo

treating them with disrespect.

Geoffrey Ingram – Jo’s friend and roommate, Geoffrey is seen by others primarily through the lens of his homosexuality and what others consider to be his effeminate demeanor. Apart from his “pansified” appearance, which sets him apart from the norms of masculinity, Geoffrey proves a devoted friend who cares for Jo’s emotional and material well-being. His devotion to her often leads him to endure her aggressive attacks and bouts of bad temper. However, despite his affectionate attitude, his behavior toward Jo is ambiguous at times: he sometimes demonstrates affection toward her in a purely non-sexual way, and sometimes seems to want a romantic relationship with her, behaving in a rude, forceful manner to make her accept his advances. In the end, his gentleness and meekness keeps him from standing up to Helen’s domineering attitude, and ultimately forces him to leave Jo, whom he had wanted to accompany through her pregnancy and childbirth. Although it’s unclear what the play’s title refers to exactly, it’s possible that it refers to the sweet but fleeting taste of genuine, selfless love that Jo receives from Geof.

Jimmie (“The Boy”) – Jo’s boyfriend, a black sailor who is about to leave for a six-month trip with the Navy, is an affectionate but unreliable character. While he declares his love to Jo, asks her to marry him, and promises her to return, he fails to deliver on his promises, thus leaving Jo to cope with the consequences of their relationship (e.g., her pregnancy) on her own. Despite his generally self-confident attitude, he expects Jo to feel shame at being seen in the street with him because of his skin color, and is surprised to realize that Jo is truly indifferent to the interracial nature of their relationship.

serious questions about whether Helen will be able to change her ways. At the end of the play, it remains ambiguous whether Helen is truly ready to invest in her family, or if she will, once again, follow her selfish whims and leave her daughter to fend for herself. The very uncertainty of this ending confirms Helen’s volatility, emphasizing that, for Jo to accept her mother’s presence in her life without feeling constantly hurt or disappointed, she will have to accept her as an inherently unstable person—one who has not changed and who, perhaps, never will.

The relationship between Helen and Jo is marked by tension and misunderstanding. While Jo feels excluded from her mother’s life and deprived of motherly love, Helen makes little effort to gain her daughter’s trust or affection. On various occasions, Helen shows that she has little knowledge about—or interest in—her daughter’s life. The two of them constantly fight about Helen’s lovers, her excessive drinking, and her neglect of her daughter. Helen often makes decisions without considering the effect they will have on Jo. Indeed, it is only after the two of them move to a new district that she begins to wonder how her daughter will get to school, now that they live so far away from it. With utter lack of concern, she mentions the “shocking journey” her daughter will have, but does nothing to help solve this problem. Her matter-of-fact attitude reveals her detachment from her daughter’s life.

This lack of care is material as well as emotional. Before leaving Jo to move in with Peter, Helen responds to Jo’s complaints about not having food at home by saying that she has never claimed to be a “proper mother” and that Jo, instead of complaining, should either cook for herself or decide not to eat at all. Helen insists that her daughter should manage the details of her life on her own, arguing that it is a waste of time to try to influence other people’s lives. Because of Helen’s cynical attitude, Jo regularly finds herself alone, without the guidance of a responsible adult. At the same time, Helen demands that her daughter respond to her personal needs. She complains that Jo never gives her respect and that she is selfish. However, it soon becomes obvious that Jo is not actually selfish, but that she simply resents her mother’s lack of care. Helen’s tone is ironic and detached, but Jo’s is visibly hurt and exasperated when she responds: “Why should I do anything for you? You never do anything for me.” While it is easy for Helen to adopt a carefree attitude toward her daughter, Jo clearly longs for love and attention that she is not receiving.

However, despite sharing a relationship of tension and frustration, Helen and Jo occasionally find ways of expressing their concern for each other. When Helen discovers her daughter’s drawings, she realizes, with shock, that her daughter has talent—thus demonstrating, once again, that she knows very little about her daughter’s dreams and personality. Yet this time, instead of ignoring Jo, she tries to encourage her to develop her talents by going to art school. “I’ll pay. You’re not



THEMES

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



CARE AND RESPONSIBILITY

A Taste of Honey centers around the relationship between Jo and her mother Helen. Characterized by frequent fighting and animosity, their

interactions subvert expectations about how an adult should care for her child. Indeed, although Jo longs for her mother’s love and care, Helen seems incapable of being a reliable presence in her daughter’s life. Instead, Helen neglects Jo emotionally and materially. After leaving Jo alone to go live with Peter, her new romantic partner, Helen finally returns to her pregnant daughter and promises to accompany her through childbirth. However, this seemingly fortuitous reunion raises

stupid. You'll soon learn," she says, revealing her trust in her daughter's intelligence and talent. "You're wasting yourself," she concludes when Jo rejects her offer. Her words suggest that she is aware that her daughter deserves a better life and a better future—two things that she has until now seemed incapable of providing for her.

Helen also demonstrates motherly concern on another decisive occasion. When she discovers that Jo has gotten engaged, she tries to keep her daughter from making what she sees as a bad decision. "Oh Jo, you're only a kid. Why don't you learn from my mistakes?" she says, showing that she is truly distraught by the prospect of Jo wasting precious years of her life, since Helen has learned herself that marriage is not always the best choice in life. This is one of the few moments in which Helen is clearly upset about Jo's situation and wants to have a positive influence on her. Nevertheless, Helen's commitment is short-lived. She soon proves willing to run off with Peter and leave her daughter alone for an indefinite period of time. Before leaving, after she asks Jo if she is sad to see her go, Jo says: "I'm not sorry and I'm not glad." Jo's seeming indifference conceals the more complex feelings that she has toward her mother: resentment and vexation, but also love and affection—and, overall, the desire for her mother to be more present in her life.

These oscillations between aggressiveness and tenderness seem to find a resolution in the play's ending. Indeed, after Helen abandons Jo for a few months, she finally returns to her pregnant daughter, seemingly willing to accompany Jo through the final stage of her pregnancy. However, Helen's motives remain ambiguous. It remains unclear whether Jo can finally count on her mother, or whether Helen will run off once again, leaving Jo to handle her problems alone. In the end, it depends on Jo to accept or reject her mother's presence in all of its inherent unreliability.

Geoffrey, a friend of Jo's who has been living with her and supporting her through her various ordeals, contacts Helen to tell her about Jo's pregnancy. Helen comes to the apartment to try to help her daughter, but Jo is skeptical of her mother's motives. "What do you think you're running? A 'Back to Mother' movement?" she asks Geof angrily, implying that her mother has already deserted her. She denounces the lack of spontaneity or sincerity of her mother's return by calling it "the famous mother-love act." Her ironic attitude reveals that she is not only angry at her mother's absence, but also deeply hurt, and that she essentially considers herself to be motherless. A few months after this episode, Jo tells Geof: "You know, I wish she were here all the same." Geof is surprised by this comment, since he notes that the two women fight whenever they are together. Even so, Jo feels that Helen should be with her, given that she knows that Jo's due date is approaching. Her desire for her mother's presence does not necessarily reflect the pleasantness of their relationship, but does express a deep longing for her parent to accompany her through difficult times.

In the end, after Peter leaves Helen, Helen returns to her daughter. While it is obvious that Helen has returned not because of moral qualms and a sense of commitment to Jo but, rather, out of pure necessity, she still tries to prove that she will take care of her grandchild. She talks about cleaning the apartment and getting everything ready for the baby. These actions signal a desire to help her daughter as much as they reveal her tendency to dominate the household. For example, instead of thanking Geof for being such a committed friend to her daughter, she indirectly forces him to leave the apartment for good, thereby depriving Jo of the only strong and reliable presence in her life. Finally, when she discovers that Jo's baby might be black, she decides to go out for a drink, leaving her daughter alone in her room even though she is about to give birth. These various actions demonstrate that Helen is more interested in imposing her authority and following selfish whims than in doing what makes her daughter happy. Although the two women are finally reunited, it remains ambiguous whether Helen will truly support her daughter in difficult times or, instead, will follow her egocentric inclinations.

Paradoxically, this uncertainty brings Jo neither hope nor despair. Instead, it merely confirms what Jo has always known: that her mother is an unstable presence in her life. Jo's light-hearted singing, the play's final words, allows the play to end on a soft note. It suggests that Jo's only solution to her mother's absence is to adopt a similar detachment that Helen displays toward her. By lowering her expectations about her mother's behavior and choosing to enjoy life regardless of what her mother does, Jo might finally be able to accept her mother's presence in her life without enduring emotional pain and disappointment.



LOVE, SEX, AND FRIENDSHIP

As Helen's life is characterized by sexual promiscuity and her cynical attitude toward love, Jo often feels alienated from her mother's affection. As a result, she finds herself forced to search elsewhere for the intimacy and affection that is so blatantly lacking in her home. She initially believes she has found love in her relationship with a young sailor, but soon becomes disappointed with the experience. As time goes on and she becomes pregnant, she is forced to face the practical consequences of her relationship. However, instead of enduring this ordeal alone, she finds comfort in the presence of her friend Geoffrey, who moves in with her and takes care of the practical details of her life. Soon, she realizes that the love of a committed friend can be infinitely more valuable and reliable than romantic or familial love.

Sex and seduction are prominent parts of Helen's life. Described as a "semi-whore" in the stage directions, Helen depends financially on "fancy men"—that is, lovers who give her money. Helen's promiscuous lifestyle sets her and her daughter

apart from the traditional, sexually conservative norms of society. When Peter asks Helen to marry him, Jo asks: “You’re not going to marry her, are you? She’s a devil with the men.” Her comment suggests that Helen has no interest in committing to a serious relationship. It soon becomes evident that Helen is interested in men not only for sexual pleasure, but even more importantly because of the money they give her. This leads Jo to consider her mother’s earnings “immoral.”

Despite Jo’s negative opinion of her mother’s interest in sex over love, Jo, too, has sex with men without building committed relationships. Helen worries about leaving her daughter in the house alone, knowing that she would probably invite her boyfriend Jimmie to the apartment. When Helen worries aloud that Jo might “ruin [herself] for good,” Jo replies: “I’m already ruined.” Both women thus see themselves and each other as disreputable because of their sexual behavior—which does not conform to the double standards held by society for women. After Jo’s boyfriend, a sailor, leaves for the Navy, Jo discovers that she is pregnant. When Helen and Peter learn of Jo’s pregnancy, Peter calls Jo “a bloody slut” and Helen tells her daughter that everyone is calling her “a silly little whore.” Instead of feeling shame, Jo provocatively replies: “Well they know where I’m getting it from, too.” Because she is pregnant at a young age and single, it begins to seem that Jo is going to end up living a life of emotional and financial insecurity just like her mother.

Jo’s cynical attitude toward sex does not preclude her from seeking the joys of love. Yet after her boyfriend abandons her, she becomes disillusioned and decides that romantic love only brings trouble. When Jo meets her boyfriend in the street, the scene offers a refreshing glimpse into the innocence of adolescent love, in stark contrast to the relationship between Helen and Peter, which is motivated by the desire for money and sex. When her boyfriend mentions a sexual experience, Jo says ironically that “[t]his is the sort of conversation that can colour a young girl’s mind.” Given her knowledge of her mother’s sexual life, it is unlikely that she is sincerely outraged at the mention of sex. Instead, her words can be taken as a joking comment about the innocence and chastity that society assumes young women should display.

At the same time, Jo also harbors a sincere longing for the intimacy of a loving relationship. This desire is visible in the simplicity and honesty with which she tells her boyfriend that she loves him: “I don’t know why I love you but I do.” When he tells her he loves her and will come back, however, Jo reacts with skepticism. Their dialogue reveals that, while Jo might be able to give her love freely, she is skeptical of others’ intentions, since she has never benefited from the support and commitment that love can bring. This time, her distrust is not proven wrong, since it soon becomes clear that her boyfriend has no real intention of coming back and taking care of her. This period of youthful elation thus gives way to a cynical,

disappointed understanding of the tricky nature of love and commitment. “I don’t know much about love,” Jo reflects. “I’ve never been too familiar with it. I suppose I must have loved him. They say love creates. And I’m certainly creating at the moment. I’m going to have a baby.” Jo’s definition of love has become practical instead of spiritual or emotional, as she now defines love purely in terms of its effect on her body: her pregnancy. She has given up on the idea that love can create anything beyond the purely physical.

Yet this experience does not keep Jo from experiencing love in other forms. Instead of finding trust and reliability in romantic love, Jo discovers that the love of her friend Geoffrey is infinitely more reliable and fulfilling than any love she has experienced to date. During Jo’s pregnancy, when Geof asks Jo if she wishes her boyfriend were here, she responds that she doesn’t—and that, anyway, she is sick of love. She tells Geof that the main reason she enjoys having him by her side is because she knows he will not try to start a romantic relationship with her. Her intense hatred of love can be understood as an expression of disappointment in the two people—her mother and her boyfriend—who were supposed to provide for her and take care of her. Her experiences in life have forced her to give up on both romantic and familial love and, instead, invest her energy in her friendship with Geof.

She realizes that Geof’s presence makes her feel secure. She calls him a “big sister,” an affectionate term that emphasizes their closeness as well as the asexual nature of their relationship. Jo appreciates the effort Geof puts into taking care of the house and making sure she is well. “[Y]ou make everything work. The stove goes, now we eat. You’ve reformed me, some of the time at any rate.” The seemingly transformative effect that Geof has had on Jo’s life demonstrates that simply being present and accompanying her through the emotional and practical concerns of everyday life is an act of love that can be much more powerful than a family tie, and stronger too than elevated but ultimately false promises of romantic commitment. In this way, Jo realizes that the forms of love that are most widely celebrated and recognized as legitimate may not necessarily be the most abiding.



GENDER, CLASS, AND RACE

Shelagh Delaney’s play depicts characters who live at the margins of 1950s English society. Because of Helen and Jo’s social class, Geoffrey’s homosexuality, and Jo’s boyfriend Jimmie’s skin color, these characters all experience social marginalization in different ways. Their nonconformity highlights the generational shift that is beginning to take place, as English social life and culture undergoes a transformation, becoming more mixed and more diverse. Although Helen tends to categorize people according to what constitutes socially acceptable behavior, Jo defends the opposite point of view, according to which social

differences can be met with love and respect. Among all the characters in the play, Jo proves the most capable at accepting others' differences without judging or belittling them, instead giving people the freedom to be themselves. Through Jo's character, the play reveals the potential for a diverse group of people to live together in harmony through openness and mutual respect.

Throughout the play, Jo is confronted to characters whom society has marginalized in different ways, because of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. Instead of seeing these differences as a source of shame, Jo accepts them and embraces the diversity of the people around her. In this way, she proves that social diversity can be a motor for love and compassion. Jo first subverts societal norms by engaging in a relationship with a black boy. When Jimmie kisses her in the street, he notes with surprise that Jo is not afraid to be seen with him. Rather, she is the first person he has known who does not actually mind his skin color. His surprise highlights the conservative attitude that English society had at the time toward interracial relationships, as well as Jo's unique qualities of tolerance and respect.

In addition to racial diversity, Jo also embraces sexual diversity. Her friend Geoffrey is constantly criticized for his feminine qualities and his homosexuality. Jo herself initially asks him provocative questions about his sexual life, hypothesizing that his landlady threw him out of his previous apartment after seeing him with a man. She expresses her curiosity about "people like [him]," thus immediately categorizing Geof as a member of a taboo demographic. When Geof reacts with anger, Jo realizes that she was rude and disrespectful, and apologizes for being so insensitive. As the two of them get to know each other, Jo appreciates Geoffrey for who he is, admiring his capacity to take care of the home and to give her emotional support—two intimate activities that bring her joy and comfort, but are not traditionally expected of a man.

Jo herself occasionally expresses her frustration with rigid gender categories. Her recurrent complaints ("I hate babies;" "I hate motherhood;" "I don't want to be a mother;" "I don't want to be a woman") demonstrate that she associates womanhood with motherhood, and that she embraces neither. Geof finds Jo's attitude surprising, since he thought motherhood was natural in women, but Jo only replies: "It comes natural to you, Geoffrey Ingram. You'd make somebody a wonderful wife." This inversion of traditional gender roles, subverting the idea that the woman is supposed to take care of children and that the man should not invest energy in the household, was highly unusual for the time. Jo embraces the idea that family roles are not necessarily fixed, but that each person should be free to take on the roles that best fit their personality and desires.

In contrast with Jo's open-minded acceptance of diversity, Helen is often brutally judgmental, proving more concerned with abiding by society's expectations than with respecting

people's independence of thought and behavior. While Jo has found peace and joy in her cohabitation with Geof, Helen is unable to treat Jo's friend with respect. Instead, she attacks him for being too feminine and considers his attitude unacceptable. She derogatorily calls him a "nursemaid" and a "pansified little freak," telling Jo that she could have found herself "something more like a man." Helen's lack of compassion toward Geof reveals an entrenched prejudice toward homosexuals and, more generally, a rigid understanding of how women and men should behave according to society's expectations of them.

In addition, while Jo initially believed that her mother would not mind knowing that her boyfriend was black, Helen reacts with shock at the news, realizing that walking around with a black baby is even more shameful than being called a slut or a whore—the names that her daughter has already been labeled. Instead of supporting her daughter, she shows fear and decides that she needs to go have a drink to process this piece of news, thus demonstrating that she is more concerned about her social reputation than her daughter's happiness or well-being.

Helen's rejection of people who do not conform to society's norms extends to her very self. Despite having very limited financial means and leading an economically unstable life, Helen looks down on poverty, therefore refusing to accept that she is poor herself. Not only does she ultimately call the district she has chosen "rotten" and unfit to live in, but she also mocks Jo's ragged appearance, telling Peter to buy a needle and cotton for Jo since "every article of clothing on her back is held together by a safety pin or a knot. If she had an accident in the street I'd be ashamed to claim her." The harshness of Helen's comment is unjustified, given that she is the only wage earner in the family and is therefore responsible for her daughter's appearance. It indicates the shame she feels surrounding her poverty, which she projects unfairly onto her daughter.

The opposition between Helen and Jo's attitudes represents the difficulty many people face in accepting social change and becoming more inclusive. However, through Jo's pregnancy, the play ultimately suggests that social change is on the way—however much people might resist it.

By the end of the play, it remains uncertain whether any of the characters' status has changed. Geoffrey is kicked out of Jo's house and, thus, forced to endure social isolation once again. Similarly, Helen is still leading the same unstable life that she always has, at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Her conservative attitude reveals that she has also not changed her mind about diversity. The selfishness of her decision to go have a drink when her daughter is about to go into labor emphasizes the hypocrisy of societal standards, which are more concerned with appearances (such as the shame of a white woman walking with a black baby) than with deeper values such as family love and support.

Helen's reaction thus highlights the conservative and

prejudicial nature of society. However, Jo's indifference to her baby's skin color or to Geof's homosexuality suggests that generational change is already well underway, and that people can learn to handle unfamiliar social issues in a positive and compassionate manner. Jo's attitude is an optimistic illustration of the possibility for diverse people to live together in harmony and solidarity, without being confined to pre-existing roles or others' expectations of them.

In addition, the fact that Jo is bringing a mixed-race baby into the world serves a concrete signal that society is indeed becoming more socially diverse, regardless of what opinions other people might have on the issue. Jo's personal experience thus has the potential to make inter-racial relationships more visible in society and, perhaps, over time, to make inter-racial relationships seem normal and acceptable. In this way, Jo becomes a powerful promoter of the idea that social diversity does not need to involve exclusion and rejection, but that it can be met with love and care.



REBELLION AND INDEPENDENCE

From the beginning of the play, it is evident that Jo is a young woman yearning to break free from the walls of her home. Moved by youthful rebellion, she

longs to work for herself in order to become economically and emotionally independent from her mother. When she is finally forced to live on her own, she discovers that an independent life also brings its share of loneliness and fear, but that she is capable of finding the strength within herself—and through the positive influence of her friend Geoffrey—to keep on thriving. Her independence ultimately proves limited, as she is unable to fully escape her mother's grasp and the negative influence it has on her. Nevertheless, the strength she has acquired on her own marks a positive change in her life, and speaks to a greater potential for progress and change.

Moved by a desire for privacy and independence, Jo longs to escape her mother and their shared home. When Helen and Jo discover their new apartment, Jo notices that she is going to have to share a bed with her mother once again. "What I wouldn't give for a room of my own!" she says. This situation of forced physical closeness emphasizes Jo's lack of privacy, as well as her economic necessity to rely on her mother. As such, her idea of having a room of her own expresses not only a desire for emotional independence, but also the wish to be financially self-sufficient. Jo confirms this idea by telling Helen that the only thing she wants is to "[g]et out of your sight as soon as I can get a bit of money in my pocket."

Helen herself emphasizes the importance of working to sustain oneself. When her daughter complains about their constant relocation from one apartment to the next, Helen ironically comments that Jo will soon be an "independent working woman," free to make her own living choices. More seriously, Helen later explains her vision of life: "There's two w's in your

future. Work or want [...]. We're all at the steering wheel of our own destiny. Careering along like drunken drivers." For Helen, life should be understood not in terms of youthful desires and idealism, but in terms of material necessities: the need to work and take economic control of one's future, however ignorantly one might manage one's affairs.

When Helen leaves the apartment to move in with Peter, Jo finds herself forced to live on her own. In this situation born out of necessity, she begins to suffer from loneliness. However, with a little help from Geoffrey, she ultimately finds the strength to live her life freely and celebrate both her youth and her independence. While Jo's pregnancy could lead her to seek her mother's help, she insists on preserving her independence, telling Helen that she can handle the situation on her own. This attitude gives her freedom, but is also a source of isolation and loneliness. When Geof notices that Jo has little sustained guidance in her life, he asks her if anyone has ever tried to take her in hand. Jo mentions her boyfriend Jimmie but notes that his efforts were extremely short-lived, since he soon abandoned her. After Geof's questions, it becomes apparent that Jo's fierce desire for independence is also a reaction to the lack of support she has received throughout her life. Instead of relying on people who might disappoint her, she prefers to struggle through life on her own.

However, Jo soon realizes that independence does not necessarily mean refusing everyone's help. Instead, she finds comfort and joy in her cohabitation with Geof, which makes her feel more self-confident and optimistic about the future. In a moment of elation, the two of them celebrate their youthful enthusiasm and energy. Jo says: "My usual self is a very unusual self, Geoffrey Ingram, and don't you forget it. I'm an extraordinary person. There's only one of me like there's only one of you." She aims to acknowledge that, despite their material difficulties, they have in themselves the potential to achieve greatness. She tries not to give in to gloom but, instead, to take pride and pleasure in who they are at this very moment in time.

This attitude contrasts starkly with Helen's more rigid views. Helen does not understand how Jo and Geof's partnership can be based on mutual respect and trust. When Helen tells Jo that she and Geof are a "funny-looking set-up," Jo curtly replies that it is none of her mother's business, defending her right to lead a life far from her mother's judgment. Another time, when Helen mocks them by saying that Geof is providing for Jo, Geof corrects her, telling her that the two of them share everything. These episodes highlight that, however unusual their partnership may be, Jo and Geof have laid the foundation to live a free, independent life together, far from the judgment of other people.

While Jo's sense of freedom makes her believe that she can achieve the impossible, she still seems doomed to suffer from her mother's influence. Ultimately, though, she shows

encouraging signs about her increasing capacity to handle her mother's negativity and take control of her own life. Jo wants to separate herself and her life choices from her mother's. For this reason, Jo is happy to hear her boyfriend insist on how different she is from Helen. However, Geof, who knows Jo more intimately, tells her that she has already adopted some of her mother's traits and that she should be careful not to turn into a domineering, unstable person like her mother.

Jo seems capable of adopting a positive attitude that contrasts with her mother's. While at first Jo complains often about having a baby, she ultimately proves willing to take care of the people in her life. After months of living with Geof, Jo insists that she is finally happy and content. "Do you know, for the first time in my life I feel really important. I feel as though I could take care of the whole world. I even feel as though I could take care of you, too!" she tells her mother. Her attitude is at odds with Helen's, who has neglected her daughter in many ways. Jo inverts the mother-daughter relationship, proving that she has now become stronger than her mother in her capacity to care for other people.

This inversion of the traditional mother-daughter relationship becomes all the more evident when Helen moves in with Jo again. In the opening scene, Helen had criticized Jo for not knowing how to turn on the stove. Exasperated, she told her daughter to turn all the buttons. "She can't do anything for herself, that girl. Mind you don't gas yourself." However, by the end of the play, Jo is the one giving Helen the same instructions: "Turn on all the knobs. Mind you don't gas yourself." This inversion reveals Helen's helplessness and inability to be self-reliant. It also shows that Jo has acquired wisdom and practical knowledge during her time alone, and that she is strong enough to take care of her mother. Although Jo's future remains uncertain at the end of the play, the strength and self-confidence the young girl has acquired set her apart from her earlier self, suggesting her potential to embrace a future path of growth and progress separate from her mother's influence.



ADVERSITY AND RESILIENCE

Faced with economic and emotional hardships, the characters in the play adopt various strategies to confront—or, on the contrary, to escape—the difficulties of life. Although Helen and Jo adopt a common strategy of irony and cynicism to cope with their problems, Helen proves more prone to fatalistic resignation, while her daughter generally attempts to try to change her difficult circumstances. These differences in attitude make Helen more inclined to embrace detachment and negativity, while Jo is more sensitive to her environment's changes, and oscillates between youthful enthusiasm and despair. Ultimately, however, despite their essential differences, both characters prove capable of enjoying moments of hope and positivity, brief

instants in which they enjoy "a taste of honey," a respite from the heavy burdens of adulthood.

In the face of adversity, Helen and Jo often adopt strategies of ironic detachment and verbal attack. While this method gives them a sense of control over their lives, it also highlights the actual dangers and problems they face. Helen and Jo's dissatisfaction with their lives often expresses itself through direct verbal attack. In one instance, they criticize each other's physical condition in order to ridicule the other. Jo mocks her mother for seeming older than she actually is. "You don't look forty. You look a sort of well-preserved sixty." In turn, Helen mocks Jo's physique and Peter declares that Jo "already looks like a bad case of malnutrition." These comments aim to insult the other, but also indirectly highlight the actual insecurity and danger of their lives, revealing that Helen has indeed aged prematurely and that Jo looks seriously ill. Therefore, however intentionally ironic these comments might be, they still indicate that there truly *is* danger in the way the two women are living.

Helen and Jo also exaggerate the dangers in their life in a dramatic way. When the two of them first discover their new apartment, Jo makes bleak predictions about the future, arguing that they will never survive in such an insalubrious place. "Tomorrow? What makes you think we're going to live that long? The roof's leaking!" Her mother takes this cynical attitude one step further. As Jo keeps on complaining about the apartment, anticipating that it will smell bad in the summer, Helen interjects that "this whole city smells." Instead of reassuring her daughter, Helen thus confirms and expands her daughter's worries. She is not merely pessimistic, but fully resigned to living in an unpleasant atmosphere—in their apartment, in the city as a whole, and, more generally, in their life. Instead of using her dissatisfaction to move forward, Helen thus adopts a fatalistic attitude, aimed at accepting the unpleasantness of reality.

While Helen's attitude is characterized by resignation, Jo, moved by hope in the future, proves more inclined to try to change her situation. However, Jo's efforts are often met with resistance, as Helen seems incapable of conceiving of a life defined by hope and positivity. Indeed, although Helen's honesty occasionally appears to be at the service of helping her daughter, she usually fails to accompany her criticism with healing acts. "Look at your arms! They're a couple of stalks!" Helen tells Jo when she sees her pregnant daughter after many months. This observation about her daughter's ill health is meant to encourage her to accept her financial help. However, Helen never actually gives her daughter any money, thus proving that her brutal, often cruel honesty is mostly gratuitous, as she is unable to bring any solution to the problems she identifies.

Jo is incapable of such resignation, because it makes her feel hopeless. Unlike Helen, whenever Jo feels unable to change the situation she is in, she gives in to despair. Obsessed with her

dire material situation and her disgust at being pregnant, Jo becomes so desperate that she tells her friend Geoffrey she wants to throw herself in the river. While Geof manages to reassure her and it becomes apparent that Jo is not actually planning to kill herself, Jo's dissatisfaction with her life thus expresses itself as emotional vulnerability, not cynical resignation. Instead of giving in to fatalism, Jo prefers trying to try to change her situation.

However, Helen often disrupts her daughter's efforts to make life more agreeable. For example, while Helen gives in to excessive drinking to cope with her problems, Jo refuses to drink alcohol and, throughout the play, maintains her commitment to have no alcohol in her home. This represents her effort to separate herself from her mother's bad habits. Yet instead of encouraging her daughter in this healthy path, Helen mocks her and insists that she try drinking. On another occasion, Jo wants to plant bulbs to make the apartment look livelier. Once again, instead of encouraging her daughter, Helen merely asks her: "Why do you bother?" Helen crushes her daughter's optimistic, creative ideas, imposing her belief that any effort to make life more colorful, joyous, or healthy is ridiculous and bound to fail.

By the end of the play, this situation shifts momentarily. While Jo is about to face the pains of childbirth head-on, Helen gives in to a brief moment of emotional vulnerability. In this way, she proves that she, too, can enjoy "a taste of honey"—a brief moment of joy and optimism, providing a respite from the heaviness of adult life. Although Helen criticizes Jo's idealistic views about the future, she admits that being young and hopeful can be admirable. When Jo expresses her belief that she can have a bright future, Helen is both mocking and fascinated. "Listen to it! Still, we all have funny ideas at that age, don't we – makes no difference though, we all end up same way sooner or later." Helen ultimately draws a fatalistic conclusion but still admires her daughter for her "funny," optimistic ideas about life. Her comment thus reveals her capacity to be fascinated by her daughter's eager attitude toward life, which is so different from her own.

At the end of the play, even Helen reveals her own potential to think positively. As she is stroking her pregnant daughter's hair, she recalls her own childhood. In a long speech—the longest in the entire play—she describes the games she used to play and places she used to go as a child. She remembers how she used to sit on a hill all day, without anyone knowing where she was. These lengthy, nostalgic thoughts reveal Helen's pleasure in the idea of escaping her adult responsibilities. Like her daughter, who finds joy in being young and free, she relishes the time when she could be an innocent child, without having to worry about issues such as money and family—in this case, her daughter's pregnancy. Her recollection of this idealized period of life suggests that part of her still longs for such simplicity and insouciance.

By the end of the play, both Helen and Jo thus reveal that, while they confront certain difficulties through irony and cynicism, both of them are also vulnerable in their own ways. This vulnerability reflects their underlying desire for their life to change, even if they do not necessarily know how to achieve this. As a result, every now and then, they both embrace the pleasure inherent in having a hopeful, carefree vision of life, far from the oppression of everyday responsibilities—enjoying a "taste of honey" in an often cruel, oppressive world.



SYMBOLS

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



JO'S FLOWER BULBS

When Jo and her mother Helen settle into their new apartment, Jo unpacks flower bulbs with which she wants to decorate their new home. These bulbs reveal a strong divergence in the attitudes of Jo and Helen. While Jo decides to face adversity by attempting to change her situation for the better, planting bulbs to enliven their run-down apartment, Helen is hostile to any effort at improvement. Instead, Helen advocates resignation, believing that trying to change their condition is senseless and bound to fail. In the end, Jo never plants her bulbs and rediscovers them, dead, months later when she is living with Geoffrey and is close to giving birth. The dead plants cause her to reflect on the chaos of life, leading her to conclude that life is a short-lived series of unpredictable events. The bulbs thus delineate the change that Jo undergoes between the beginning and the end of the play, as her youthful optimism transforms into a more contained, suspicious attitude toward life's difficulties. While Jo does not reach the levels of cynicism and apathy that her mother embodies, the dead bulbs are a reminder—to her and to the audience—that even the best efforts do not always fare well in life, and that one is sometimes forced to face failure and misfortune before moving on.



ENGAGEMENT RINGS

When Helen and Jo get engaged within a few hours of each other, it seems that they are both about to commit to serious, long-term relationships. However, reality soon shows these expectations to be ill-founded. While engagement rings represent fidelity and stability, the non-conforming, precarious nature of the two women's relationships is at odds with such symbolism. When Peter jokingly asks Helen if she wants an engagement ring, Jo makes a derisive comment about the inherently sexual nature of Peter and Helen's relationship, believing that it has passed the stage

of such symbolic attachment. However, moved by youthful enthusiasm, she herself gladly accepts her boyfriend Jimmie's ring, which she wears around her neck—before her mother tears it off her neck in an outburst of anger. In the end, both women are forced to accept romantic failure. As Helen's ring fails to materialize when Peter abandons her after a few months, Jo too finds herself both ring- and boyfriend-less at the end of the play. In both cases, the women's rings thus fail to materialize the stable relationships they are supposed represent. Instead, these symbols of romantic stability only emphasize the contrast between the two women's desire for emotional fulfillment and the inherently insecure nature of their lives, and come to symbolize broken promises rather than dependability and strength of commitment.



CHILDREN'S SINGING AND NURSERY RHYMES

In the apartment, Jo, Helen, and Geof occasionally hear children singing in the street. These playful melodies serve as a reminder of the innocence of childhood, in stark contrast to the sordid atmosphere of the neighborhood and the frequent difficulties of the protagonists' lives. Geoffrey's nursery rhymes, which he first sings to Jo and which Jo later sings on her own, add another dimension of optimism and naiveté to the play. At the same time, both instances of child-like singing also lead the characters to reflect seriously on complex issues of dependence and independence, as well as the relationship between children and parents. While Jo uses these moments to highlight adults' responsibility toward their children and the general need for people to care for each other, Helen uses them as an opportunity to escape her own responsibilities and return to an ideal time of freedom and carelessness. These moments of singing thus both interrupt and reinforce some of the deeper themes in the play. They force the characters to reflect on their own position within webs of responsibility and interdependence, and to examine people's capacity to take care of themselves and of others.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *A Taste of Honey* published in 1956.

Act 1: Scene 1 Quotes

HELEN: When I find somewhere for us to live I have to consider something far more important than your feelings . . . the rent. It's all I can afford.

JO: You can afford something better than this old ruin.

HELEN: When you start earning you can start moaning.

JO: Can't be soon enough for me. I'm old and my shoes let water . . . what a place . . . and we're supposed to be living off her immoral earnings.

HELEN: I'm careful. Anyway, what's wrong with this place? Everything in it's falling apart, it's true, and we've no heating—but there's a lovely view of the gasworks, we share a bathroom with the community and this wallpaper's contemporary. What more do you want? Anyway it'll do for us.

Related Characters: Jo, Helen (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of *A Taste of Honey* show Helen and her seventeen-year-old daughter Jo entering their new apartment, which Helen has rented once again without making Jo part of the decision-making process in any way.

Helen's attitude toward the apartment is ambiguous. On the one hand, she counters her daughter's critiques by defending the various advantages that the apartment supposedly has, such as the view and the bathroom. This attitude of satisfaction culminates in her rhetorical question: "What more do you want?" which aims to discredit her daughter's complaints, attacking them as unfounded and unreasonable. On the other hand, Helen also admits that her criteria for judging the apartment do not necessarily reflect the apartment's actual features, but her low financial means: "Anyway, it'll do for us." She seems to argue that their low budget is not only a constraint, but also something that should define their attitude toward life, forcing them to become more accepting of living in an insalubrious home.

This is precisely the attitude that Jo rebels against. Her complaints have as much to do with the nature of this particular apartment as with their general lifestyle, which forces her to follow along with her mother's unpredictable decisions. Jo's mention of Helen's "immoral earnings" is a condemnation of her mother's lack a stable job, as she relies on her lovers to maintain her financially. Instead of accepting Helen's resignation to living in such conditions, Jo

determines to work hard to achieve her financial independence.

JO: I'm going to unpack my bulbs. I wonder where I can put them.

HELEN: I could tell you.

JO: They're supposed to be left in a cool, dark place.

HELEN: That's where we all end up sooner or later. Still, it's no use worrying, is it?

JO: I hope they bloom. Always before when I've tried to fix up a window box nothing's ever grown in it.

HELEN: Why do you bother?

JO: It's nice to see a few flowers, isn't it?

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

As Jo and her mother begin to unpack, Jo finds flower bulbs that she wants to use to liven up the apartment. The two women's reaction to these bulbs reveals a stark contrast between Helen and Jo's attitudes toward life. Whereas Jo wants to make their general living conditions more pleasant and to take care of something besides herself, Helen finds such efforts senseless. She does not understand why her daughter would want to engage in an enterprise that requires so much effort and has failed in the past.

This highlights Helen's lack of interest in enjoying some simple, natural decoration and, more importantly, in making any kind of sustained effort to improve their living conditions—which are, in fact, her responsibility. On a more symbolic level, the care and control that is needed to make the bulbs grow is reflective of child-rearing, and highlights Helen's unwillingness to engage in any such activity. It further reflects Helen's refusal to improve either her or her daughter's life and her resignation to living in sub-par conditions. Helen's fatalistic, pessimistic attitude thus contrasts with Jo's youthful enthusiasm and optimism, which makes her hopeful about the possibility of changing the world around her.

JO: See yourself. I've got to find somewhere for my bulbs.

HELEN: See yourself! Do everything yourself. That's what happens. You bring'em up and they turn round and talk to you like that. I would never have dared talk to my mother like that when I was her age. She'd have knocked me into the middle of next week. Oh! my head. Whenever I walk, you know how it is! What a journey! I never realized this city was so big. Have we got any aspirins left, Jo?

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen asks Jo to go see if the water for her coffee is boiling, Jo asks her to do so herself while she takes care of her plants. Helen reacts with exaggerated indignation to what she considers Jo's defiance, calling her daughter selfish and ungrateful.

Helen's aggressive words iterate commonplace tropes about rebellious children who fail to respect their parents. This is highly ironic within the context of Jo and Helen's relationship, which is far from traditional because of the instability of their lives and because Helen has failed to instill either respect or a sense of gratitude in her daughter; on the contrary, Helen has done little to actually provide for Jo and "bring [her] up" throughout her life.

Helen's entire speech is typical of her character, as it shows her switching from one topic to the next and complaining—in rapid sequence and in a dramatically self-centered way—about her daughter's behavior, her cold, and the difficulty of moving. In the end, it becomes apparent that she relies on her daughter for the ordinary details of everyday life, swapping familial roles as she makes Jo search for medicine for her and, thus, take on a quasi-parental function. Jo's frequent willingness to respond to her mother's demands demonstrates the hypocrisy of Helen's earlier words, as Helen herself is usually the more selfish member of this relationship.

●● JO: Anyway I'm not getting married like you did.

HELEN: Oh!

JO: I'm too young and beautiful for that.

HELEN: Listen to it! Still, we all have funny ideas at that age, don't we—makes no difference though, we all end up same way sooner or later.

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

After Jo and her mother discuss the possibility of Jo working in a bar and thus, according to Helen, potentially “ruining” her life, Jo accuse Helen of already ruining her own. She concludes that she does not want to get married and end up like her mother.

Helen's ironic comment about her daughter's hopes suggests that she herself has no hope that Jo will make the right decisions in her life, or even that she is special at all. Instead, she believes that everyone ends up “the same way.” This comment might indicate death, since everyone is bound to die, whatever choices they make in life. It is also indicative of Helen's general determinism, according to which all individuals are bound to make mistakes and ruin their lives.

By contrast, Jo believes in the power of her own youth and uniqueness. Aware of her mother's mistakes and failures, she seeks to avoid following the same path. However, this simple trust in herself is unaccompanied by any concrete action or firm plan. As such, Jo, too, later makes the mistake of getting engaged at an early age and, ultimately, becoming pregnant, thus paving the way for her to lead a life similar to her mother's. Although this seems to confirm Helen's pessimistic prediction, the strength and self-confidence that Jo still shows at the end of the play gives the spectator hope that she might be a more loving, responsible adult than her own mother.

●● HELEN: [...] Have you ever thought of going to a proper art school and getting a proper training?

JO: It's too late.

HELEN: I'll pay. You're not stupid. You'll soon learn.

JO: I've had enough of school. Too many different schools and too many different places.

HELEN: You're wasting yourself.

JO: So long as I don't waste anybody else. Why are you so suddenly interested in me, anyway? You've never cared much before about what I was doing or what I was trying to do or the difference between them.

HELEN: I know, I'm a cruel, wicked woman.

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

After Helen discovers Jo's drawings and realizes that her daughter has talent, she becomes enthusiastic and offers to pay for her artistic education. Jo's refusal to let her do so is stubborn and frustrating, given that attending school could potentially give her better opportunities in life. It also reveals the lasting consequences that Helen's upbringing has had on her daughter.

Jo decides not to go to school because she is tired of the instability of her life, which is the result of Helen's precarious financial decisions and of their constant moving. Jo decides that she would rather achieve financial independence right away and escape such turbulence rather than accept tuition money and remain under Helen's influence.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear what else, exactly, is holding Jo back. In this case, Helen seems right in judging that Jo is failing to develop her talent. This represents one of the few times in the play when Helen seems truly motivated to support Jo in her development. Perhaps Jo's refusal is motivated by her belief that Helen would not actually commit to financing her studies, or perhaps she has had too little formal guidance to acquire the self-confidence necessary to trust in her own abilities.

Either way, the refusal to study gives Jo immediate independence yet ultimately leaves her in a precarious situation once again, forcing her to take on multiple jobs and, later, to rely partly on Geoffrey for help.

●● PETER: Is she always like this?
 HELEN: She's jealous . . .
 PETER: That's something I didn't bargain for.
 HELEN: Can't bear to see me being affectionate with anybody.
 JO: You've certainly never been affectionate with me.
 PETER: Still, she's old enough to take care of herself.

Related Characters: Helen, Jo, Peter Smith (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

When Jo first meets Peter, he is flirting with her mother and ultimately asks Helen to marry him. Despite her weak efforts at rejecting him, Helen visibly enjoys her lover's advances and interacts playfully with him. Jo decides to stay in the room and try to interrupt their conversation as often as possible, which makes Helen conclude that she is jealous.

Jo's interference in Peter and Helen's relationship reveals her desire for attention—a desire that is not egotistical and self-absorbed but, rather, the reflection of the very real threat that Helen might once again abandon her for one of her boyfriends. Jo's jealousy reflects the fact that her mother has never shown her love in the same way she has with these boyfriends, as well Jo's fear that Helen's departure on behalf of a man would deprive her daughter of economic subsistence.

Peter and Helen's lack of interest in Jo's feelings is particularly cruel. Both are more interested in mocking and ignoring her than actually addressing her emotions and making her feel welcome in her own home. They both decide to put their romantic relationship before any of Helen's family duties, thus effectively forcing Jo to be on her own—whether or not she actually is old enough to live independently.

Act 1: Scene 2 Quotes

●● HELEN: [...] There's two w's in your future. Work or want, and no Arabian Knight can tell you different. We're all at the steering wheel of our own destiny. Careering along like drunken drivers. I'm going to get married. [*The news is received in silence.*] I said, I'm going to get married.

JO: Yes, I heard you the first time. What do you want me to do, laugh and throw pennies?

Related Characters: Jo, Helen (speaker), Peter Smith

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

When Jo sees an advertisement in a magazine for an Arabian mystic who can read people's destinies, she mentions it to her mother. This leads Helen to give Jo a speech about life, telling her that there is no point in consulting so-called mystics and that she should rely only on her own discipline.

Helen's vision of life involves a paradoxical mix of control and ignorance. While she claims that Jo should take control of her life and that hard work is the only means for survival, she also accepts that this appearance of control can be entirely blind or misguided. As Helen depends on others for financial subsistence, she cannot even serve as a role model for her own philosophy. Her concluding announcement that she is getting married seemingly confirms that she is managing her life in a self-consciously ignorant way, which is bound to lead to disaster.

Jo's unenthusiastic reaction reveals her frustration with her mother's decision. It confirms not only that Helen is behaving thoughtlessly, but also that this behavior has consequences that affect both herself and her daughter. Helen's speech, meant to educate Jo about the concrete realities of life, thus instead reaffirms her own incapacity to lead a healthy, caring existence in which she can be present for the people who most need her.

●● HELEN: There's plenty of food in the kitchen.

JO: You should prepare my meals like a proper mother.

HELEN: Have I ever laid claim to being a proper mother? If you're too idle to cook your own meals you'll just have to cut food out of your diet altogether. That should help you lose a bit of weight, if nothing else.

PETER: She already looks like a bad case of malnutrition.

Related Characters: Peter Smith, Jo, Helen (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen and Peter are about to leave the apartment to go celebrate their engagement, they both say they are hungry and, when Jo says she is too, Helen claims that she has no responsibility to feed her.

Helen's typical way of avoiding her responsibilities is to attack her daughter. Here, to avoid being reminded that she has a duty to provide for her only child, she calls Jo idle and implies that it is her own fault if she does not have enough food. While Helen's reactions are often crude and insensitive, demonstrating a lack of interest in Jo's emotions, in this moment it becomes apparent that she is also unconcerned with Jo's *material* well-being. Peter's comment reinforces the impression that Jo is not being properly cared for.

Helen's vehement rejection of motherhood is not only harmful and cruel, but also contradictory: on later occasions she tries to help Jo and to reaffirm her role as a mother. It remains ambiguous why Helen behaves in such a way toward her daughter—whether it reflects indifference or mere incompetence—but the consequences of her fickleness are obvious, as Jo soon loses trust in her mother's words and actions.

●● HELEN: You stupid little devil! What sort of a wife do you think you'd make? You're useless. It takes you all your time to look after yourself. I suppose you think you're in love. Anybody can fall in love, do you know that? But what do you know about the rest of it?

JO: Ask yourself.

HELEN: You know where that ring should be? In the ashcan with everything else. Oh! I could kill her, I could really.

JO: You don't half knock me about. I hope you suffer for it.

HELEN: I've done my share of suffering if I never do any more. Oh Jo, you're only a kid. Why don't you learn from my mistakes? It takes half your life to learn from your own.

Related Characters: Jo, Helen (speaker), Peter Smith, Jimmie ("The Boy")

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen learns that Jo has gotten engaged to her boyfriend, she reacts with anger and frustration. This is one of the few moments in the play when Helen tries to reason with Jo as best she can and sincerely expresses a desire to help her daughter make the right decision.

Despite Helen's frequent aggression, insults, and threats of physical violence, in this moment she also tries to impart wisdom to Jo and to reason with her. She argues that love and long-term commitment are two separate things, and that Jo is too young to become stuck in marriage. Jo's comment that one merely has to look at her mother to see an illustration of this advice does not discourage Helen. Instead of reacting defensively, Helen agrees with Jo and uses her own example to caution her daughter against making the same mistakes. For once, Helen thus discards her attitude of superiority in order to admit that she has made serious mistakes in her life. As her mix of rage and lucid argumentation confronts Jo's seeming indifference, it appears that their roles have reversed: Helen is now the one trying to change a negative situation, while Jo is content with merely enduring it.

However, Jo's behavior is not simply a rebellious rejection of her mother's advice. Since part of Jo's desperate search for love and care (which, here, culminates in her engagement) is the result of the absence of love in her home, her behavior can be understood as a desire to attract attention—specifically, to elicit from her mother the very love that she has been missing throughout her life. Helen's reaction initially suggests that she might finally be able to give her daughter such affection and guidance. However, when she soon abandons Jo for Peter, she proves that, however sincere, her concern was always bound to be fragile and short-lasting.

●● HELEN: I don't suppose you're sorry to see me go.

JO: I'm not sorry and I'm not glad.

HELEN: You don't know what you do want.

JO: Yes, I do. I've always known what I want.

HELEN: And when it comes your way will you recognize it?

JO: Good luck, Helen.

Related Characters: Jo, Helen (speaker), Peter Smith

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen leaves the apartment to go get married to Peter, she assumes that Jo is not upset by her departure. Jo's equivocal words suggest precisely the opposite. While Jo admits that she is not sorry, thus seemingly confirming her mother's opinion, she also adds that she is not glad, either. This serves as a subtle, yet noticeable hint that she does actually care for her mother, and that at least part of her would have wanted her to stay. Helen's failure to notice this suggests that she is incapable of understanding her daughter's true feelings—or, perhaps, that she does not mind ignoring them.

In addition, Helen's final words have the tone of an underlying threat. While they can be seen as encouragement for Jo to be more assertive, they also imply that Jo is incapable of knowing herself and of living a fulfilled life. Part of this is true, since Jo is still young and has not yet had the opportunity to define what exactly she wants from life. Indeed, Jo's desire for independence is as much a rejection of her mother's upbringing as it is a wish to build a creative life of her own.

However, Helen's comment is unnecessarily harsh and ultimately proves misguided. As Jo later demonstrates through her cohabitation with Geof, Jo is capable of seizing opportunities when they present themselves. When she later asks Geof to stay, she is investing positively in her own future and correctly deciding what is best for her, since Geof soon proves himself a devoted friend and roommate. Therefore, while Jo's exact future still remains uncertain by the end of the play, Helen's words offer more of a pessimistic vision of Jo's character than an accurate reflection of her capacities.

Act 2: Scene 1 Quotes

●● JO: Look, I've got a nice comfortable couch, I've even got some sheets. You can stay here if you'll tell me what you do. Go on, I've always wanted to know about people like you.

GEOF: Go to hell.

JO: I won't snigger, honest I won't. Tell me some of it, go on. I bet you never told a woman before.

GEOF: I don't go in for sensational confessions.

JO: I want to know what you do. I want to know why you do it. Tell me or get out.

GEOF: Right! [*He goes to the door.*]

JO: Geof, don't go. Don't go, Geof! I'm sorry. Please stay.

Related Characters: Geoffrey Ingram, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

When Geof first enters Jo's apartment, Jo can tell that he is hoping to spend the night with her because he has been kicked out of his apartment. Jo intuits that the landlady might have discovered his homosexuality and begins to interrogate him about it, forcing him to share personal details.

Jo's ruthlessness is surprising and her questions lack sensitivity or subtlety. Instead of treating Geof as a vulnerable individual like any other, she considers him representative of an abstract group, "people like you." Her words are reminiscent of Helen's own strategies, which tend to favor brutal honesty—to the point, often, of cruelty—without considering other people's feelings.

However, Geof's refusal to answer Jo and his desire to leave make the young girl realize that her words have hurt him and that she does not want him to go. This episode thus demonstrates the extent to which judging someone only by social characteristics (here, Geof's presumed homosexuality) is unjust and harmful. It also shows that, however judgmental or intolerant Jo might have seemed, she is capable of changing and of asking Geof for a second chance. The necessity for patience and companionship the two forms the basis of their friendship.

●● GEOF: Has anybody ever tried?

JO: What?

GEOF: Taking you in hand.

JO: Yes.

GEOF: What happened to him?

JO: He came in with Christmas and went out with the New Year.

GEOF: Did you like him?

JO: He was all right . . .

GEOF: Did you love him?

JO: I don't know much about love. I've never been too familiar with it. I suppose I must have loved him. They say love creates. And I'm certainly creating at the moment. I'm going to have a baby.

Related Characters: Jo, Geoffrey Ingram (speaker), Jimmie ("The Boy")

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

During Geof's first visit to Jo's apartment, he harshly criticizes her drawings but still recognizes their potential and Jo's nascent artistic talent. He encourages her to think about attending art school, concluding that what Jo needs in life is formal guidance.

Jo's refusal to consider going to art school is intimately related to her rejection of being taken care of (what Geof calls being "taken in hand"). This distrust of other people's care is the consequence of her story with Jimmie, which, as she relates, was short-lived despite the boy's promise to return to her. More broadly, it can also be seen as a rejection of her mother's upbringing, which brought her neither affection, comfort, nor long-term commitment.

As a result of these disappointing relationships, Jo's trust in love has dwindled. She now concludes that she doesn't even know what love is. Instead of still hoping for emotional or spiritual elevation through love, she accepts it as a purely physical phenomenon: something capable of producing babies. While this cynical attitude is reminiscent of her mother's, it ultimately proves capable of adjusting over time, as Jo becomes increasingly involved in her loving friendship with Geof and realizes that some people *do* actually want to give her support and guidance.

●● JO: This place stinks. [*Goes over to the door. Children are heard singing in the street.*] That river, it's the colour of lead. Look at that washing, it's dirty, and look at those filthy children.

GEOF: It's not their fault.

JO: It's their parents' fault. There's a little boy over there and his hair, honestly, it's walking away. And his ears. Oh! He's a real mess! He never goes to school. He just sits on that front doorstep all day. I think he's a bit deficient.

[*The children's voices die away. A tugboat hoots.*]

His mother ought not to be allowed.

GEOF: Who?

JO: His mother. Think of all the harm she does having children.

Related Characters: Geoffrey Ingram, Jo (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the play, most characters comment on how dirty and dilapidated Jo's apartment and neighborhood are. Jo's own criticism is not meant as mere observation or as a simple complaint. Rather, she understands that the circumstances people live in are the result of their parentage. Her criticism, then, is personal as well as social. It reflects her disgust with her environment but brings to light an important reality: the fact that people's upbringing influences their education and opportunities.

After watching a child who seems affected by a mental disability, Jo concludes that his mother is responsible for a lot of harm. Her comment implies not only that the young boy must be suffering, but also that this suffering impacts society as a whole. This mother is giving birth to children whom she is not capable of taking care of, and is therefore bringing unhappy, vulnerable children to the world instead of fulfilled, active individuals.

Jo's anger against this anonymous mother reflects her own resentment toward Helen. Jo feels personally harmed by Helen's parenting of her, which has left her alone most of the time—similarly, perhaps, to this vulnerable little boy, who spends his days with nothing to do and no one to talk to.

However, this very situation also creates a sense of hope, as the children's singing demonstrates their capacity to make the best of difficult circumstances and to enjoy their lives innocently and joyfully, proving potentially resilient even to the negative treatment adults inflict on them.

●● HELEN: Well, come on, let's have a look at you. [*JO turns away.*] What's up? We're all made the same, aren't we?

JO: Yes we are.

HELEN: Well then. Can you cut the bread on it yet? [*JO turns.*] Yes, you're carrying it a bit high, aren't you? Are you going to the clinic regularly? Is she working?

Related Characters: Jo, Helen (speaker), Geoffrey Ingram

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

After Geof tells Helen that Jo is pregnant, Helen comes to the apartment to scold Jo as much as help her. While she initially refuses to accept her responsibilities as a mother, she also proves curious about Jo's pregnancy and wants to observe her daughter's stomach.

This dialogue shows Helen trying to bond with Jo over the shared experience of being pregnant and giving birth. Her comment that "[w]e're all made the same" suggests that the two of them are united by a unique female bond, relating to the very nature of their bodies. On a more abstract level, it also suggests that both are vulnerable to the same experiences: here, falling in love and getting pregnant without planning for the consequences.

This rare moment of tenderness and unity between the two women shows that Jo might finally be receiving from her mother what she has always wanted: a little bit of attention. Helen's interest in Jo's physical condition, however, soon proves short-lived. Helen only sees Jo on this occasion and much later, as Jo is about to give birth, thus leaving the actual burden of taking care of her to Geof, whom she nevertheless does everything in her power to antagonize.

Helen's supposed concern as a mother for her child thus does not transform into reliable commitment, but merely expresses itself as a fleeting moment of curiosity and concern.

●● HELEN: You couldn't wait, could you? Now look at the mess you've landed yourself in.

JO: I'll get out of it, without your help.

HELEN: You had to throw yourself at the first man you met, didn't you?

JO: Yes, I did, that's right.

HELEN: You're man mad.

JO: I'm like you.

HELEN: You know what they're calling you round here? A silly little whore!

JO: Well, they all know where I get it from too.

Related Characters: Jo, Helen (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Before offering Jo money to help her throughout her pregnancy, Helen accuses her of being foolish and misguided. Her various judgments ("man mad," "a silly little whore") demonstrate her preoccupation with social categories and for her daughter's reputation. Instead of helping Jo, these comments are insulting, aiming to add shame and public dishonor to Jo's pre-existing list of troubles.

Jo's reaction is not to justify her choices but rather to declare her independence from Helen's judgment while also comparing herself directly to her mother, who is guilty of exactly the same things as Jo. Jo's resistance to Helen's attacks shows, as usual, her desire to escape her mother's negative influence. On the other hand, her comparison of herself to Helen reveals the similarity between the two women. While this could potentially inspire compassion in Helen, it generates anger and resentment instead—perhaps precisely because Helen knows that Jo's behavior reflects her own mistakes and, therefore, is more an indictment of her own self than of her daughter's choices.

●● JO: It's taken you a long time to come round to this, hasn't it?

HELEN: What?

JO: The famous mother-love act.

HELEN: I haven't been able to sleep for thinking about you since he came round to our house.

JO: And your sleep mustn't be disturbed at any cost.

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker), Geoffrey Ingram

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen asks Jo about her finances, arguing that she should not suffer from any economic problems, Jo reacts aggressively, noting that her mother has never shown such concern for her throughout her life.

In this case, too, Helen's actions do not necessarily reflect true care for another human. Indeed, the only reason for her presence in Jo's apartment is because Geof decided to inform her of Jo's pregnancy. The fact that Geof had to reach out to Helen during this trying time, when Jo has been

living alone, only emphasizes Helen's utter detachment from Jo's life.

Furthermore, Helen does not necessarily concentrate on Jo's well-being but, rather, on the consequences Jo's pregnancy has on her own life—here, her need for sleep. Jo's ironic comment about this selfish attitude underlines that everything Helen does tends to revolve around herself rather than the people who need her the most.

Jo's comment about Helen's "mother-love act" thus suggests that everything Helen does for her is not necessarily a sincere reflection of love but, rather, an "act": a deliberate gesture, superficial in its execution.

Act 2: Scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ JO: You know, some people like to take out an insurance policy, don't they?

GEOF: I'm a bit young for you to take out one on me.

JO: No. You know, they like to pray to the Almighty just in case he turns out to exist when they snuff it.

GEOF [*brushing under the sofa*]: Well, I never think about it. You come, you go. It's simple.

JO: It's not, it's chaotic—a bit of love, a bit of lust and there you are. We don't ask for life, we have it thrust upon us.

GEOF: What's frightened you? Have you been reading the newspapers?

JO: No, I never do. Hold my hand, Geof.

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

When Geof cleans the apartment, he discovers Jo's flower bulbs under the sofa. These are the same bulbs that Jo had brought with her to the apartment on the day she and Helen moved in and had planned to decorate it with. When Jo discovers that her bulbs are now dead, she reflects on death and the unpredictability of life.

Jo realizes that death is so frightening that it can be useful to have hope in something, such as the existence of God, to make its inevitability more tolerable. While it remains unclear whether she plans to try to believe in God herself,

these thoughts—as well as her original desire for her bulbs to grow—demonstrate her desire to make life more pleasant and joyful. She does not believe that life is inherently meaningful—since it is so brief, chaotic, and unpredictable—but she is inclined to seek comfort where she can.

In the end, the bulbs themselves do not provide her the comfort she wanted, but she succeeds in finding happiness elsewhere: through Geof's presence, which gives her the affection and love she needs to get through her troubles.

☝☝ JO: You've got nice hands, hard. You know I used to try and hold my mother's hands, but she always used to pull them away from me. So silly really. She had so much love for everyone else, but none for me.

GEOF: If you don't watch it, you'll turn out exactly like her.

JO: I'm not like her at all.

GEOF: In some ways you are already, you know.

Related Characters: Geoffrey Ingram, Jo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

When Jo asks Geof to hold her hand after becoming scared by the thought of death, she realizes that her friend is giving her the love her mother never has. This moment is poignant because of Jo's evident emotional vulnerability.

At the same time, while Jo aims to use this moment as an occasion to reflect on her mother's lack of care, Geof does not let Jo wallow in self-pity. Instead of comforting her, he wants her to become aware of an ugly truth: her similarity with her mother. While Jo is different from Helen in some ways, other aspects of her character support Geof's warning. For example, Geof might be pointing to Jo's decision to marry a boy she barely knew, her distaste for motherhood, or her frequent vacillations between aggression and kindness. Either way, Jo violently rejects this idea, refusing to accept that she might be like her mother.

Geof's comment nevertheless underlines the danger of Helen's influence, as it becomes obvious that she has already transmitted some of her negative traits to her daughter. Indeed, Helen and Jo's fighting demonstrates their shared tendency to erupt into violence as well as their intimate knowledge of each other, as each knows exactly

what to say to hurt the other and to provoke a fight.

☛ GEOF: That doesn't mean to say it's the truth. Do people ever tell the truth about themselves?

JO: Why should she want to spin me a yarn like that?

GEOF: She likes to make an effect.

JO: Like me?

GEOF: You said it. You only have to let your hair grow for a week for Helen to think you're a cretin.

Related Characters: Geoffrey Ingram, Jo (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

When Geof discovers that Jo believes her father was intellectually challenged (what Jo previously called an “idiot”), he finds the idea preposterous and assumes that Helen was lying when she told Jo the story.

Despite Jo's frequent criticism of her mother and her seemingly lucid knowledge of Helen's flaws, she is surprised to think that Helen could have lied to her. Jo's independence of thought thus proves limited, as Geof is capable of making her see her mother—and her own self—from a different perspective. Indeed, Geof proves to Jo that both Helen and she enjoy dramatizing their lives, exaggerating their feelings or stories to “make an effect” on their audience, however far their story might be from the truth.

In addition, he notes that, unlike Jo, Helen is prejudiced against people who do not conform to societal norms. He mentions that Helen might interpret any sign of deviation from these norms, such as having long hair, as lack of intelligence. Geof later uses his own example as an illustration, since Helen usually looks at him as though he were mentally ill because of his effeminate attitude, whereas he is a perfectly sane, responsible human being.

Geof's capacity to reassure Jo and to illuminate certain truths for her demonstrate the intelligence and care with which he has been caring for her. Unlike Helen, he does not want to humiliate Jo for her mistakes but, rather, to make her more lucid about certain situations—and, therefore, to make her more capable of handling them.

☛ HELEN: What an arty little freak! I wasn't rude to him. I never said a word. I never opened my mouth.

JO: Look, he's the only friend I've got, as a matter of fact.

HELEN: Jo! I thought you could find yourself something more like a man.

JO: Why were you so nasty to him?

HELEN: I wasn't nasty to him. Besides, I couldn't talk to you in front of him, could I? Hey, wait till you see these things for the baby.

JO: You hurt people's feelings and you don't even notice.

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker), Geoffrey Ingram

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen returns to the apartment after Peter has left her, she insults Geof and makes him leave the apartment. Jo attempts to defend her friend and to make her mother understand that her epithets for Geof, which depict him as an effeminate “freak,” are harmful.

However, Jo's attitude is naïve. While she believes that her mother merely doesn't *notice* when she hurts people, she does not understand that Helen is intentionally trying to provoke Geof in order to make him leave—which she ultimately succeeds in doing.

Helen does not want to discuss Geof's presence. Instead, she tries to change the subject, attracting Jo's attention to what she has bought for the baby. This strategy is meant to convince Jo that Helen—not Geof—is the most adequate person to take care of her. It also reveals Helen's sense of rivalry with Geof and her desperation to regain her daughter's attention.

Jo's loyalty to Geof is thus honorable but too innocent to actually put an end to Helen's harmful behavior. In the end, Helen succeeds in antagonizing Geof and making him leave without Jo ever knowing, which demonstrates the extent to which Helen is ready to go to assert her domination over the household. She does not hesitate to use verbal aggression to obtain what she wants, regardless of the effects of her actions on the people around her.

JO: So we're back where we started. And all those months you stayed away from me because of him! Just like when I was small.

HELEN: I never thought about you! It's a funny thing, I never have done when I've been happy. But these last few weeks I've known I should be with you.

JO: So you stayed away.

HELEN: Yes. I can't stand trouble.

JO: Oh, there's no trouble. I've been performing a perfectly normal, healthy function. We're wonderful! Do you know, for the first time in my life I feel really important. I feel as though I could take care of the whole world. I even feel as though I could take care of you, too!

Related Characters: Helen, Jo (speaker), Geoffrey Ingram, Peter Smith

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

By the end of *A Taste of Honey*, Jo and Helen are living together again, just as they were at the beginning of the play. Jo realizes that this situation is one that she has

experienced repeatedly throughout her life, as time and again her mother has left her for her boyfriends and then returned when those relationships have failed. Helen's present return, then, cannot be a reflection of any long-term commitment.

Helen does not try to contradict her daughter. Rather, she emphasizes her independence from any motherly responsibilities, as she explains that her happiness is completely separate from Jo's existence. Even when Jo's problems have affected her emotionally, she explains, she has been unwilling to do anything about it or to try to help her daughter.

While this situation might presage an endless cycle of repetitions, in which Helen's subsequent abandonments leave Jo forlorn and destitute, Jo seems to have acquired extraordinary strength this time, thanks to her relationship with Geof. Jo no longer feels completely dependent on her mother for emotional fulfillment or for material survival. Rather, she feels capable of *sharing* her love and strength with others and even reversing the traditional role between mother and daughter.

Jo's strength thus seems capable of breaking Helen's cycle of abandonments. Jo's optimism gives a hopeful twist to the play's seemingly depressing ending, suggesting that her resilience and fortitude might successfully overcome Helen's neglect.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

ACT 1: SCENE 1

Helen and her daughter Jo are carrying luggage into their new apartment. Jo, who is seeing the apartment for the first time, immediately begins to complain about its run-down state and laments, more generally, having to live off what she calls her mother's immoral earnings. While Helen agrees that the apartment is in a terrible state, she still defends her choice, telling Jo that she will be able to complain when she has a job of her own. Resentful, Jo replies that she cannot wait.

Seemingly indifferent to Jo's remarks, Helen asks her daughter for alcohol. Jo grudgingly hands her a whisky bottle while Helen complains about her daughter's lack of respect toward her. Jo, in turn, denounces her mother's constant drinking. When Jo complains about having to share a bed again with her mother, Helen ironically comments that she cannot stand being separated from her daughter. Jo wishes she had her own room.

While the two of them try to figure out if the apartment has a heating system, Helen tries to convince Jo to drink, but Jo says she doesn't like the smell. When Jo asks her mother why she drinks, Helen sardonically says it consoles her about life and that it allows her to pass the time. Helen asks Jo for a tissue because of her cold and Jo hands her one. Immediately after, Jo tries to shade the unseemly naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling with her scarf, but burns herself in the process, eliciting exasperated comments from her mother about how she cannot leave things alone.

Jo keeps complaining about the apartment's state and, when Helen agrees that it is indeed in bad shape, Jo says that her mother never thinks before making decisions, noting that all the places they have moved have always been exactly the same. Annoyed, Helen asks for peace and Jo decides to go make coffee. After Helen indicates to Jo where the kitchen is, Jo leaves the room and, from the kitchen, asks her mother how to use the gas stove. Irritated at her daughter's lack of independent thought, Helen exasperatedly replies that she should try all the buttons. She ironically adds that Jo should avoid gassing herself in the process. A loud bang concludes Jo's efforts and Helen complains about how noisy her daughter is.

Jo's desire for financial independence contrasts starkly with her mother's seemingly nonchalant acceptance of insalubrious living conditions. Jo's condemnation of her mother's "immoral" mode of life, in which the money she earns depends on her sexual relations with her lovers, highlights her desire to have a more stable, materially and emotionally fulfilling life of her own.



Helen's excessive drinking generates a reversal of roles between mother and daughter, as Jo, behaving as an adult, criticizes what she views as her mother's irresponsible behavior. Helen's ironic comment about wanting to stay close to her daughter also underlines the lack of sincere expressions of love between the two of them, as well as the surprising detachment that Helen feels toward her only child.



Helen's lack of knowledge about the apartment's heating system reveals the lack of care with which she chose their new home. At the same time, she shows utter lack of concern for their inadequate amenities. Whereas Jo's first reaction is to try to make their new environment more pleasant to live in, Helen seems willing to accept the apartment's state of disrepair and resistant to resolving the situation in any way.



The apparent frequency with which the two women move from apartment to apartment reveals the instability of their lives, as well as their incapacity to achieve economic mobility. Helen's attitude toward her daughter is contradictory: although she cannot stand Jo's intellectual independence and her lucid criticism of their situation, she attacks her for being dependent on her help and incapable of performing basic domestic duties. This attitude is highly hypocritical, since Helen herself often proves loath to take care of domestic affairs.



When Jo asks if young people live next door, Helen says that she is not sure but notes that Jo might be able to find a boyfriend, since she has never had one. They begin to talk about Helen's "fancy men" and Jo reveals that she was once secretly in love with one of them, but that he made her cry when he ran off with another girl. She mentions his nose and her mother wryly notes that it was not his nose she was personally interested in.

Jo observes the buildings surrounding their new home, saying she smells the river and that the nearby slaughterhouse will probably smell in the summer, to which Helen cynically replies that the entire city smells. Helen complains about cold air passing through the apartment, which only makes her cold worse. When Jo tells Helen to stop sniffing, Helen tells Jo that she is always selfish and uncaring.

Jo unpacks some **flower bulbs** she wants to use to make the apartment look prettier, saying that she hopes they bloom, but Helen doesn't understand why her daughter is going to so much trouble. She tells Jo to go check on the kettle but Jo tells Helen to go check herself, since she wants to plant her bulbs. This leads Helen to lament the unacceptable way her daughter talks to her, which she would never have dared to do with her own mother.

After asking Jo if she has any aspirins left, Helen notes matter-of-factly that this new move will make Jo's journey to school much longer. However, Jo announces that she still plans on leaving school at Christmas. Helen reacts by saying she is skeptical that her daughter will actually work, and Jo sarcastically replies that her distaste for work must be genetic. Suddenly nostalgic, Helen recalls her first job in a pub and sings a tune that she used to perform. When Jo asks what Helen would do if she accepted a similar job, Helen tells her to ruin her life in her own way, explaining that she doesn't believe in interfering in other people's lives because she already spends so much time taking care of herself.

Upset at her mother's uncaring attitude, Jo says that Helen could probably do a better job of ruining her life, since she's already had a lot of practice. However, Jo asserts that she will not get married like her mother did, because she is too young and beautiful. Helen laughs at her daughter's youthful innocence, telling her that such idealism makes no difference, since everyone is bound to end up the same way.

Helen is clearly unaware of the details of Jo's life, since she does not yet know that, as will soon be revealed to the audience, Jo already has a boyfriend, Jimmie. Her lack of awareness compounds with emotional insensitivity. Instead of feeling concern or sympathy for Jo, who fell in love with one of Helen's own lovers, she makes a sexual joke—emphasizing the gap between her daughter's innocent attitude toward love and her own cynical approach to relationships.



Helen's attitude toward life is marked by pessimism and fatalism. She considers that no apartment is inherently better or worse than another, since the entire city is toxic. Her attack of Jo's selfishness is hypocritical, since she rarely seems concerned about her daughter's well-being. It also highlights the generally precarious and belligerent nature of their relationship.



Paradoxically, despite Helen's complaints about the apartment, she proves irritated by her daughter's efforts to improve their situation. Her rejection of Jo's hope that her flowers might bloom is symbolic of her own inaptitude toward caring for her daughter, as she generally seems unwilling to put effort and love into the act of raising her.



Despite Helen's frequent attacks against her daughter's selfishness, she depends on Jo for many ordinary actions. Previously, she asked her for a drink and tissues, and now she asks for aspirin, as though she were incapable of taking care of herself on her own. This attitude undermines the idea that she effectively takes care of herself, and contrasts starkly with her verbal contempt for influencing other people's lives. Indeed, while she proves unwilling to care for herself, she seems happy enough to receive assistance from her daughter.



Helen's reaction to her daughter's optimistic views about life is both deeply cynical and partly true, since she rightfully predicts that Jo, too, is likely to commit mistakes—such as becoming engaged and pregnant. However, Helen seems unaware of her own responsibility in influencing her daughter, as her lack of guidance only leads Jo to seek love and care in other people.



Jo recalls a dream about her mother that she had the previous night. Policemen were digging in a garden and found her mother's body under a rosebush. Helen makes a sardonic comment about death, saying that she believes everyone should indeed be used for manure when they are dead. She tells her daughter to go make some coffee, which might make her cold better.

When Helen begins to organize some of their belongings, she sees drawings that Jo has made and is extremely surprised to discover that her daughter has talent. Moved by this discovery, she encourages Jo to go to art school, saying she would pay, but Jo does not like the idea of going to yet another school after moving around so much. Helen concludes that Jo is wasting her talent, but Jo asks her why her mother is suddenly interested in her, since she has never cared about her before. Helen mockingly replies that she is indeed a cruel woman.

Jo asks Helen why they had to move yet again. Before her mother has a chance to answer, she hypothesizes that Helen is running away from someone, but this idea makes Helen angry and she threatens to hit Jo. Jo expresses her frustration at her mother's incapacity to take her feelings into account when making such important decisions as changing apartments.

Seemingly resigned, Jo decides to go bathe and Helen tells her the communal bathroom is at the end of the hallway. When Jo notes that they spend their lives living out of their luggage, Helen ironically replies that Jo will soon be an independent, working woman. Jo walks toward the door, telling her mother not to sneeze on her and make her sick. She adds that she does not know why she should go get the coffee when Helen never does anything for her.

Peter suddenly walks in, boldly, with a cigar in his mouth. Helen is surprised to see him and asks him how he found her address, and after a few seconds of hearing their conversation Jo realizes that he is the person her mother was trying to escape. When Peter discovers that Jo is Helen's daughter, he realizes that Helen is much older than he had thought. Jo asks if Peter is going to stay at the apartment and, when Peter confirms that he is, she decides to take her bath later. As Peter begins to flirt with Helen, Helen tries to get rid of Jo by telling her to go check on the coffee. Jo leaves the room but returns soon after because the water is not yet boiling.

Jo's dream introduces a sense of anguish and doom in the play. It also serves to contrast Jo's sensitivity and emotional vulnerability (here, to dreamed images and emotions) with Helen's cynical, down-to-earth attitude toward life's problems. While Jo gives space to imagination, Helen is only concerned with the physical aspects of life.



Jo's refusal to invest in her own artistic talent is surprising, given her often-professed desire for independence. Part of this rejection might be spite, as Jo wishes to show her mother how much her lack of care has hurt her. Part of it, too, can be seen as a lack of self-confidence, perhaps the result of the lack of guidance she has received throughout her life—from her mother as well as from school, since she was never given the academic stability needed to develop her skills. Helen's ironic response demonstrates, once again, her incapacity to take her daughter's emotional pain seriously.



Not only does Helen fail to take her daughter's emotions into account when making decisions that affect both of them, but she also refuses to communicate about the reasoning behind her choices, thus leaving Jo isolated and forcing her to confront her mother about her inability to be a responsible adult.



Helen's ironic responses are yet another indication that she refuses to take responsibility for the consequences of her actions. Faced with Helen's inability to communicate openly about her decisions, Jo resorts to irony and aggressive comments. Her final complaint is less a defiant refusal to help out than a final attempt to express her emotions and her sense of abandonment.



It becomes apparent that Helen dissimulates or ignores the truth not only with her daughter, but also with her lovers. Her failure to tell Peter about Jo underlines her willingness to use manipulation—or, at the very least, lying by omission—in relationships both familial and romantic. Jo's decision to stay when Peter arrives highlights her isolation, as she is forced to fight for her right to stay and be free in her own house.



Full of underlying anger, Jo tells Peter that Helen must never have mentioned to him that she had a daughter. While both Helen and Peter are annoyed by Jo's presence, Peter's expression of irritation leads Helen to remind him that no one ever asked him to come. After complaining about Jo (who has, sometime around now, left the room to make coffee), Peter proceeds to criticize the district Helen has chosen, which he finds dreadful and unfit to live in. He also criticizes Jo's attitude, to which Helen once again replies that she never asked him to come. She asks Peter why he came and he flirts with her, telling her she must be glad to see him, to which Helen replies that she is not. Throughout their conversation, her attitude is one of feigned rejection, as she replies ironically or sharply to his comments but does not seem to actually want him to leave.

When Peter notices that Helen's nose is damp, he gives her a tissue to blow her nose and she does. He tells her that she cannot possibly decide to give him up, but Helen says that she is tired of sex and men and that she is thinking about abandoning these pursuits completely. Peter finds this unfair to men but Helen says it has to do with what she has done, not what others have done to her. Peter keeps on flirting with her as she tries to get him to go. Wanting the two of them to be alone, he replies that she could get rid of her daughter. When she says she doesn't want to, he tells her they could go get a drink. Helen initially thinks that this is a good idea, but then changes her mind.

Finally, Peter nonchalantly asks Helen to marry him. Surprised, Helen tells him she is too old for him, but Peter persists. He tells her that he is giving her an excellent opportunity, since he is young, handsome, and financially successful. While Helen initially tries to reject him, thinking he must be drunk, she tells him that she might actually accept his offer if he makes it again.

Jo, who has left the room to get the coffee ready, returns and coughs to make her presence heard. She interrupts their conversation by sitting down and thus keeping them from talking. Peter complains about Jo's attitude and Helen says she is jealous because she doesn't like seeing her mother behave affectionately toward other people. Jo replies that Helen certainly has never been affectionate with her. Peter finds the coffee terrible and Helen says that Jo always makes it weak on purpose, because she knows Helen likes it strong.

Jo's anger at Helen reflects her desire to be a greater part of Helen's life—a part that Helen does not try to hide, but actively embraces and cherishes. However, while Helen might not show affection to Jo directly, she does defend her against Peter's attacks, demonstrating a certain sense of loyalty to her daughter. Peter's criticism of the apartment emphasizes the inconsistency between what could be expected from a woman like Helen (pride and elegance, for example) and the humble conditions in which she finds herself forced to live.



It remains ambiguous whether Helen's rejection of her sexual habits is feigned, or whether it represents a brief moment of sincerity, the realization that having many short-lived affairs with men does not necessarily bring her (or her daughter) happiness and stability. At the same time, Helen's actions, which do not seem truly intent on making Peter leave, express what her words do not: her willingness to be convinced and seduced, and to forget about her adult responsibilities.



Helen's quasi-acceptance of Peter's proposal confirms that she was not earnest in her rejection of men and sex. Peter's mention of money emphasizes the material nature of this proposal, which is less sentimental than it is financially prudent. It also reflects what must be evident in Helen's attitude: her attraction to money and an extravagant lifestyle.



Helen's mocking comment about Jo's jealousy is doubly callous, as it demonstrates that she is fully aware of her daughter's feelings but chooses to ridicule them instead of trying to mitigate them. Helen even reverses roles when she argues that Jo—not she—is the one who takes pleasure in being malicious. By contrast, the lack of irony in Jo's response emphasizes that, for her, this topic is not a light, joking matter, but one that she wishes her mother took more seriously.



Jo says that Helen should be in bed and asks if Peter is going to leave. Helen decides that he should indeed avoid catching her cold and, when she stands up to accompany him out, Peter pulls her toward him, asking her if she wants an **engagement ring** and saying that he knows she is interested in his money. Jo slyly comments that their relationship is at odds with such symbolism. Ignoring Jo, Peter embraces Helen and begins to tell her a dirty joke but Jo interrupts their conversation again, asking him about his cigar. She then asks Peter if he truly plans on marrying her mother, since Helen is “a devil with men,” to which Helen replies that she does not, indeed, consider herself “a slouch.” Peter finally leaves, making a joke about frail old ladies as he goes.

Helen goes to bed, saying that they can always take care of cleaning tomorrow. Jo, who has noticed the hallway is dark now, decides to take a bath tomorrow. Helen asks her if she is afraid of the dark and Jo says that her mother already knows she is. Helen tells her that she should try not to be scared, but Jo says that that doesn't help. When Helen lies down on the bed, she says it feels slightly less comfortable than a coffin. This leads Jo to ask her if she has ever tried one, and Helen says she certainly will one day.

Jo ironically says that Helen should have made Peter stay, since it is not the first time her mother has kicked her out of bed for such reasons. Helen gets angry at Jo, telling her to shut up. Jo asks if they are going to clean their belongings up, but they both agree that the room looks fine—better, in fact—in the dark. Helen comments that she does not understand why Jo is afraid of the dark, but Jo says that she is only scared of the darkness inside houses. Helen then asks Jo what she would think of her getting married again, and Jo replies that she would send her to a psychiatric institution.

ACT 1: SCENE 2

Jo and her boyfriend Jimmie, a young black sailor, are walking in the street and stop in front of the door to Jo's house. Jo tells him she was not surprised to see him waiting for her outside of school but that she is glad he came, and Jimmie says he is glad too. Jo says she should go inside but Jimmie tries to make her stay. He says he is happy days become dark early in winter, because that gives him more time to kiss her.

Peter's offer of an engagement ring, a formal symbol of serious commitment, contrasts with his attitude, which is generally playful, inconsiderate, and inelegant in its obvious flirting. Jo's interruptions aim to scare Peter off from such a serious commitment, but they fail in their intent, since both Peter and Helen seem well aware of the primarily sexual, informal nature of their relationship. Jo's interference thus reveals her desire for attention and her fear that Peter might take away the minimal time and consideration she receives from her mother.



Helen's advice to Jo about her fear of the dark is both trite and unhelpful, demonstrating no true attempt to understand her daughter's fear or make her feel better. Helen's joking comments about death demonstrate that, unlike her daughter, she is unaffected by topics that inspire awe and fear, since she focuses on their physical—and not their spiritual or emotional—aspects.



Whenever Jo becomes explicit about the ways in which her mother has dismissed her to focus on her lovers, Helen reacts defensively with anger instead of her usual sarcasm. This strong reaction suggests that Helen might very well be aware of the way in which she often abandons Jo—but that she does not want to be forced to face her own unfair actions. Her single attempt to elicit her daughter's opinion is largely perfunctory, given that she ultimately takes a decision about marrying Peter without actually considering Jo's feelings.



The fresh, youthful nature of this scene contrasts starkly with the previous interaction between Helen and Peter—which, while similarly playful, was infinitely less tender and innocent. This scene also shows another side of Jo: the part of her that enjoys lighthearted, affectionate conversations, at odds with the tension and irony that characterizes her relationship with Helen.



When Jimmie kisses Jo, she complains about it, saying that she likes it but doesn't want to do it all the time. Jimmie asks Jo if she is worried that people might see them, but Jo says she doesn't care. Jimmie asks her to repeat this. He is surprised by the sincerity of her answer, and says she is the first girl who has truly not cared. Suddenly, he asks Jo to marry him. Jo says, paradoxically, that she won't marry him but that he has convinced her to do so.

Jimmie asks how old Jo is and she says she is almost eighteen. Still shocked at Jo's agreement to marry him, he asks her again if she will marry him, to which Jo replies that he shouldn't have asked her the first time if he was only joking. Jimmie says he wasn't. He asks her again and she says she loves him. Jimmie asks her how she knows this and she says she simply does. Jimmie says he adores her and gives her a **ring** he bought earlier that morning in a shop.

Jimmie asks Jo what her mother will say and Jo says that she will probably laugh. Jimmie does not understand why Helen would not care to know whom her daughter marries, but Jo says that whomever she chooses to marry has nothing to do with her mother. Jimmie wonders if Helen might disapprove of his skin color, but Jo believes that her mother is not prejudiced in that way.

The two discuss when they should get married and decide to do it in six months, during Jimmie's next leave. Jo tries to put the **ring** on her finger but realizes it is too big. She asks Jimmie for a bit of string to tie it around her neck, commenting that she is going "all romantic." She searches through Jimmie's pockets and finds a toy car, which Jimmie teaches her how to use. When she asks to keep it, he says she can have it along with his soul.

Jo uses her hair ribbon as a necklace for her **ring**. Jimmie says she has a pretty neck and Jo tries to hide the ring away, so that her mother will not see it and laugh at her. She tells Jimmie that she is leaving school this week to start a part-time job at a bar. When she finds a full-time one, she will leave Helen and find a room of her own.

*Jimmie's surprise at Jo's lack of shame highlights the stigma that characterized interracial relationships at the time *A Taste of Honey* was performed. By contrast, Jo is non-judgmental and does not feel constrained by societal categories. Her contradictory reply to Jimmie's marriage proposal suggests that she might be aware that Jimmie is not speaking in earnest, but that she is willing to play along with him.*



Jimmie's true intentions remain somewhat ambiguous. Indeed, while his repeated proposals suggest that he was not taking it seriously, the fact that he bought a ring signals that he has actually considered the question seriously. Jo's simple attitude toward love reflects her trust in the purity of this feeling. However, the similarity between this scene and Peter's earlier marriage proposal to Helen presages trouble, suggesting that the young people's innocence might not protect them from the failure that the two adults will later experience.



Jimmie is surprised by the lack of interest Helen takes in Jo. Jo's reaction is to feign detachment herself, arguing that her mother should have no right to pass judgment on her decisions. However, Jo's optimism about her mother's tolerance later proves mistaken, and suggests that, despite her knowledge of her mother's many flaws, Jo might be blind to some of the darker sides of Helen's personality.



Jo and Jimmie's actions are full of intentional symbolism. Jo's decision to tie the ring around her neck and Jimmie's comment about his soul, which imitates clichés about what lovers traditionally say to each other, are innocent and tender, signaling their desire to respect and honor each other, but will also prove slightly exaggerated, given the lack of serious commitment the relationship will later reveal.



Jo's decision to put her financial independence from Helen before her studies reveals how desperate she is to be on her own, but also signals her lack of foresight in planning her future, as she would rather accept a precarious job instead of investing in her general knowledge and skills—suggestion a short-term vision strikingly similar to Helen's.



Jimmie says that he would like not to be in the Navy so that he could spend time with Jo. He jokes that he is now trapped in matrimony, and the two of them teasingly fight over who first tried to entice the other. They recall meeting at an empty soccer field that Jimmie knew about. Jo says that he took advantage of her innocence there, to which Jimmie replies he did not, since he had scruples. Jo retorts that he had no scruples at all and would have gone as far as she would have let him. Jimmie argues that they both enjoyed it and Jo concludes that this is an inappropriate conversation for young girls, capable of tainting their minds. Jimmie replies that women do not have young minds, for they are born thousands of years old.

Jo tells Jimmie he sometimes looks that old and asks him if his ancestors came from Africa, but Jimmie explains that they came from Cardiff. He mockingly asks her if she is disappointed, but Jo tells him there are still traces of the jungle in him. She then decides to go into the building because she is hungry, and when Jimmie jokingly says they should save up on food and clothes for their marriage, Jo complains about her belongings, saying that she only has one coat which she has to use for everything. Jimmie tries to reassure her by saying she looks fine.

Jo asks Jimmie if she will see him tonight, but he says he is going out drinking with friends. As a result, Jo decides to skip school tomorrow to meet him during the day instead. After planning to meet the next morning, they kiss each other good night. Jimmie tells Jo he dreamed of her the previous night and fell out of bed twice. She tells him she loves him and when Jimmie asks why, Jo says it is because he is silly.

When Jo enters her apartment, Helen notices that Jo is late and says that her eyes betray the fact that she is in love. Helen interrogates Jo about her boyfriend, whom she did not know about. Jo says he is a lovely, twenty-two-year-old sailor who used to work as a male nurse. Helen tells her to be careful with sailors' ardor and asks if Jimmie still has contacts in hospitals to give them free samples. Jo tells her mother to shut up.

Jo asks Helen to look up in a magazine what is playing at the cinema tomorrow. Helen criticizes the cinema in general, saying it is often difficult to understand what the actors are saying, and complains about what she considers to be a pornographic advertisement. They joke about turning Jo into a movie star but Jo says living in the streets would be more honest, to which Helen replies that that might end up happening.

This lighthearted fight contrasts heavily with the resentment and anger that usually characterizes Jo and Helen's discussion. While Jo appears to attack Jimmie for wanting sex, her prude attitude toward such conversations is feigned. Instead of abiding by society's standards for women's naiveté—which define what women should and should not know, do, or say—Jo mocks them, implicitly labeling them irrelevant. Jimmie's admiration of women's minds is not ironic. Instead, he seems truly impressed by women's maturity—a trait that contrasts, perhaps, with his playful attitude toward life.



Jimmie's irony shows self-awareness about the exotic qualities that black people in England at the time were attributed and, while playful, emphasizes that he should be seen as an English citizen in his own right. Jo's concern for her coat, in turn, reveals her own insecurities about her class and her appearance—which, once again, however playful, point to the larger, potentially harmful reality of her deprivation.



Jimmie's mention of his dream emphasizes the sensual, potentially sexual nature of their relationship, while Jo's simple declarations of love highlight her focus on more emotional matters. At the same time, both characters share the same playful approach toward their relationship, refusing to turn it into a melodrama.



Helen's lack of knowledge about Jo's boyfriend is unsurprising, given how out of touch she is with her daughter's life. Her reaction to this news is uninterested in Jo's emotions, focused only on abstract sexual recommendations and her self-interest, as she wants to take advantage of Jimmie's profession.



Despite their low financial means, Jo and Helen's interest in the cinema—and, in particular, Helen's informed, if critical, perspective on the subject—reveals the two women's interest in artistic culture. Helen's ironic comment about Jo's potentially homeless future is particularly gloomy, given their current financial situation.



Suddenly, Jo asks her mother what her birthdate is and Helen admits she doesn't know, ironically saying she has always tried to forget that date. The two of them discuss Helen's first marriage and Helen says her first husband was rich but despicable, and that he divorced her when she became pregnant with Jo. Jo says she, too, would have kicked out a wife who had a baby with another man. Helen, however, says that she does not think she would have done that herself.

In the magazine, Jo notices a commercial for an Arabian mystic who reads people's destinies, and Helen makes a speech about the only two things that matter in life: work and want. She asserts that everyone is in charge of their own destiny, however ignorantly one might be leading one's life. At the end of this speech, she tells Jo that she is getting married.

Jo initially remains silent when she hears about her mother's engagement. However, after Helen incites her to react, Jo says she cannot possibly feel happy for her. Frustrated, she says that her mother is too old to get married, noting that Helen looks sixty instead of forty, and that she hopes to be dead by that age.

Peter then enters the apartment with a bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates. While he looks uncomfortable, Jo ironically calls him "Daddy" and Peter realizes that Helen has already told Jo the news. Helen compliments Peter on how handsome he looks and Jo says he must be insane for asking Helen to marry him. She then proceeds to bitterly criticize her mother's appearance. Peter merely says he finds Helen attractive and hands Jo the chocolate, saying they are for her, which leads Jo to say that he must be buying her silence. Helen leaves the room to get ready to go out with Peter.

Peter criticizes the way Jo is devouring all her chocolates, and Jo in turn tells him not to act like a father. Suddenly, in a fit of mixed tears and laughter, she attacks him physically and Helen re-enters the room, telling Jo to leave Peter alone. Peter asks Helen why she cannot keep her daughter under control and Helen turns to Jo, asking her not to tease Peter.

Helen's desire to forget her own daughter's birthdate is particularly cruel, as it symbolizes the utter lack of interest that Helen has demonstrated toward Jo throughout her life. Helen's sincere admission that she probably wouldn't have behaved like her rich husband did highlights her acceptance of sexual behaviors outside societal norms.



Helen has a cynical definition of life, which eschews all interpersonal concerns to focus only on basic necessities. Her announcement that she is getting married seems to confirm her vision of life as a series of ignorant choices, since this decision is moved by her current fancy, not by long-term considerations.



Jo's attack against Helen's looks can be seen as a defensive reaction to Helen's engagement, since Jo feels frustrated and angry about yet another one of her mother's decisions that is going to leave her feeling abandoned.



Jo's ironic nickname highlights precisely what Peter is not and never will be: a father, someone who shows interest toward her and will take care of her. His offering of chocolates to Jo is sweet but clumsy, since it is unaccompanied by any actual commitment to be a positive presence in her life. Jo's ironic comment about buying her silence emphasizes that the two adults are only pretending to show her attention, and do not actually intend to make her part of their plans.



Jo's words highlight the fact that Peter has no rights concerning her, despite his status as an adult and as Helen's fiancé. It also underscores that all the parenting she ever seems to receive is negative, focused on what she does wrong instead of celebrating her positive sides as well.



Peter and Helen then announce that they are celebrating the fact that Peter has bought a house, which leads Jo, surprised and hurt, to comment that her mother has indeed planned everything behind her back. After Helen leaves the room again, Peter shows Jo the pictures of the house, which has multiple tennis courts and swimming pools.

Believing that Peter might be hiding something, Jo notices that Peter has other pictures in his wallet and asks to see them. Peter reluctantly shows her pictures of his family members, whom he hates. Jo then notices there are other pictures he does not want to share and asks him if they are of other women. She cynically speculates that he must have had thousands of girlfriends and, when she asks him about one of the women in a picture, Peter refers to her as “number thirty-eight.”

Jo then asks Peter why he wears an eye patch. Peter explains that he lost an eye serving as a private in the army. Jo interrogates him about his eye, asking him if he will show her (which he refuses to do) and whether he takes his patch off to sleep (which he does not answer). They look at some more of the pictures in his wallet and Peter says he does not find young women attractive. At the same time, he notes that he does not find Helen old.

Jo asks him why he is marrying Helen and Peter asks her why he shouldn't, to which Jo gives him a frustrated, obscure answer about how strange his generation is. As though stating an obvious fact, Peter asks her if she doesn't care much for her mother and Jo replies that Helen doesn't like her either, which Peter says he can easily understand.

Peter, who has by now become impatient, is about to tell Helen he will wait for her in the pub, but Helen suddenly appears, looking for her hat. She tells Jo, who has been smoking, to put her cigarette out and asks why there are so many books lying about. Peter playfully takes Helen's hat and puts it on, but Helen, irritated, asks him to give it back and Peter complains that she has no sense of humor. Helen notices that Jo's books are all children tales, except for the Bible, which Jo tells her she should read. Helen comments that she prefers to drink and be happy, to which Jo replies that she also lives to regret it. Peter mocks Jo's puritan attitude.

The contrast between the luxury of Peter and Helen's new house and Jo's current apartment reveals Helen's double cruelty: her willingness to abandon her daughter and to selfishly lead a wealthy life while leaving Jo to suffer economic hardship as the result of Helen's own financial decisions.



Peter's hatred for his family and his treatment of women as numbers—whether jokingly or sincerely—reveal his seemingly uncaring approach to relationships and serve as a dark forewarning of how he is likely to feel toward Helen and, ultimately, to treat her. While this moment shows Peter and Jo calmly chatting, Jo is visibly suspicious of Peter and unimpressed by his attitude.



Jo's relentless questioning appears to be an attempt to provoke Peter and make him uncomfortable, more than a sincere effort to get to know him. While Peter's appreciation of Helen seems loving, he is exclusively focused on her physical attributes, which highlights the superficiality of their relationship.



It remains ambiguous whether Jo is frustrated with the superficiality of Peter and Helen's relationship or with the way in which they both fail to care about her. Peter's question about Helen and Jo's relationship proves completely misguided, as he is unable to understand that Jo's feelings toward her mother are infinitely more complex than mere hate.



Jo's later admission to Geoffrey that she only used to smoke to annoy Helen demonstrates that she is always desperately seeking her mother's attention, even if this attention only translates into negative comments on Helen's part. Jo's condemnation of Helen's drinking reveals her dislike of her mother's excessively insouciant attitude in life, as Helen cares little about the serious consequences of her actions. It also serves as a reminder to Helen that she is failing in her responsibilities toward her Jo—and might indeed regret it one day.



Jo asks Helen why she is marrying Peter, and Helen says that it has to do with his money. As the two of them are about to leave, Helen nonchalantly asks Peter to leave Jo some money, since they will probably go on a weekend trip for a few days. Offended, Jo asks Peter if he doesn't think that she is too young to be left on her own, and Peter turns to Helen to ask if Jo will be all right. Helen merely replies that they cannot take Jo along with them.

When Helen and Peter say they are hungry, Jo, trying to remind her mother of her responsibilities, says that she is too and that her mother should prepare her meals. Helen aggressively replies that she has never claimed to be a proper mother and that Jo should either cook for herself or decide not to eat at all. Peter simply notes that Jo already looks seriously thin. Jo also asks for money for a new dress, but Helen says Jo should buy a needle and some thread because all her clothes are falling apart. She says that she would be ashamed to be known as her mother if Jo had an accident in the street. After Peter mentions that he wants to leave this dangerous neighborhood as fast as he can, Helen and he exit the apartment, leaving Jo alone.

Jo lies down on the bed and begins to cry. Soon, however, her boyfriend walks in. He asks her if she is crying but she hides her emotions, saying she has a cold, and Jimmie believes she might indeed have a temperature. When he asks her if she has been eating, she says she hasn't. He proceeds to put a pill in some milk for her, which Jo half-seriously says must be an opium pellet, but Jimmie explains it is a cold cure. Looking around, he complains about how dirty this apartment and the neighborhood children are, but Jo says the children's appearance is the parents' fault.

Jimmie asks her about the couple he just saw exiting the building and Jo tells him it was her mother and her new fiancé. Jimmie notes that Jo would be a lovely bridesmaid but Jo says she would rather go to her own funeral. Jimmie convinces Jo to drink the milk he has prepared, which Jo doesn't like, and comments on how young her mother looks to have a daughter of Jo's age. Jo asks him if he likes Helen but Jimmie says that is an inappropriate question to ask one's fiancé.

Helen is unabashed in her decision to marry for money. She also feels no shame in leaving Jo alone for an undefined period of time. Peter's uncertainty about leaving Jo alone, meanwhile, reflects the concern that Helen herself should be feeling but decides to ignore, focusing instead only on practical considerations.



Helen's clear thoughts about motherhood finally come out, revealing that she does not believe she has any responsibility toward her daughter—not even material or financial. Her mocking comments about Jo's appearance are paradoxical and unnecessarily cruel, since Helen herself is responsible for their finances and, therefore, for her daughter's appearance. They demonstrate a desire to ridicule and hurt Jo, and reflect Helen's refusal to feel any sense of responsibility toward her.



Jo's pain demonstrates that she is not inured to her mother's attacks, as she tends to be much more emotionally vulnerable than Helen. While Jimmie's observation about the state of the apartment once again highlights Jo's dire financial situation, Jo's note about the children's appearance emphasizes that parents should be held accountable—a comment that serves as a direct response to Helen's earlier words about Jo's own appearance.



As a reaction to Helen's intentional detachment from her daughter's life, Jo wants to have nothing to do with her mother's romantic life. Her mother's wedding is, in a way, a "funeral," since it marks yet another abandonment, and the beginning of Jo's life on her own. At the same time, Jo feels threatened by her mother, seemingly considering her a rival.



When Jimmie notices how cold it is in the apartment, Jo explains that the heating doesn't work and asks him if he is going someplace warm with the Navy, which Jimmie says he is. Seemingly obsessed with Helen, Jo continues interrogating Jimmie about her mother, asking him if he finds Helen beautiful and if Jo looks like her. Jimmie says Helen is beautiful but that Jo does not look like her at all. This piece of information makes Jo happy, since she doesn't like the idea of resembling her mother.

Jimmie then tenderly puts on Jo's necklace. When Jo asks him about the **ring**, Jimmie admits that he bought it a supermarket, but Jo still finds his intention endearing. On the bed, as Jimmie embraces Jo, he compares himself to Shakespeare's Othello, asking Jo if she will be his Desdemona. Jo accepts and, in turn, asks him to stay with her during Christmas, which makes Jimmie call her naughty. Jo replies that she must take advantage of the time they have together, since she has a feeling she will never see him again.

When Jo says she merely wants to make the most of the limited time they have together, Jimmie jokes about her believing that he is "only after one thing," but he ultimately playfully agrees that he is. However, when he says he loves her and promises to return, Jo is taken aback and asks him how he can say that. Jimmie says that he is not sure what his words mean, but that they are true. When he embraces Jo she asks him not to do that, saying that she likes it. The scene fades out and wedding bells are heard.

Helen is bearing boxes full of wedding clothes and is excitedly telling Jo to hurry up. Jo, who has a heavy cold, walks in in her pajamas. Helen tells Jo that she is excited because Peter has been spending a lot of money on her and has been giving her gifts. She mentions that she was going to ask Jo to be her bridesmaid but Jo tells her not to be silly.

While getting ready, Helen suddenly notices that Jo is trying to hide something. Aggressive in her curiosity, she finally succeeds in grabbing hold of the string around her daughter's neck and snatches the **ring** off. Jo then reveals that she is going to get married to Jimmie, which leads Helen to explode in a rage, telling Jo she is stupid and would be useless as a wife. Visibly disturbed by this situation, Helen argues that while Jo probably feels in love, this is no reason to make such an important commitment. Jo merely says that she could say the same thing to her.

Jo and Jimmie's relationship is marked by its upcoming ending, as Jimmie is going to leave with the Navy—a fact that Jo never forgets or ignores. Jo's fixation with Helen reveals the depth of her resentment as well as a sense of rivalry and competition, as though Jo has to compete for other people's love and is afraid it will automatically go to her mother.



Jo and Jimmie's gentle actions once again contrast with Helen and Peter's, demonstrating the pleasure they draw from each other's affection. Jimmie's comparison to Othello, a character Shakespeare defines as a "Moor," reveals his self-consciousness about his skin color, as he identifies with this particular character more than any other of Shakespeare's couples. Additionally, since Othello kills Desdemona in the end, it's a pretty bleak comparison to make, and it foreshadows the way Jimmie will abandon Jo



While both Jo and Jimmie seem intent on making the most of their short amount of time together and are both happy to enjoy the sexual aspects of their relationship, Jo proves unwilling to accept promises that will likely turn out to be false—an attitude that Jimmie takes lightly, as he utters words whose weight he does not seem fully aware of.



Helen's appreciation of Peter clearly has less to do with his personality than with his capacity to give her an extravagant lifestyle. Helen's passing comment about Jo as a bridesmaid reveals that she has, for once, thought about Jo, but that she has once again done so in a light, superficial way.



Helen's outburst of anger is different from her previous ones, in which anger was the result of petty irritation or guilt. Here, Helen is truly upset about what she considers to be a serious mistake. While her anger still expresses itself partially as insults, for the first time since the beginning of the play she attempts to take on a motherly role and give advice to Jo. Jo's reaction seems to imply that she is conscious of imitating her mother's mistake—and perhaps even defiantly following Helen's path.



Helen, who seems truly distraught at her daughter's decision, suddenly softens in an effort to convince Jo that she is too young to get married and that she should learn from her mother's mistakes. Helen begins to feel guilty for leaving Jo alone and not being able to make sure that she doesn't get herself into trouble. However, Jo only confirms her mother's fears, saying that she is already "ruined." Helen then reacts with anger, telling Jo she makes her sick. In a final effort to calm down and share her thoughts with her daughter, she tells her to be young and free instead of trapping herself in marriage.

Jo changes the subject to her cold, saying this too is Helen's fault. She asks her mother for some water but Helen hands her whiskey, which leads Jo to complain that Helen has been drunker these past weeks than Jo would have even thought possible. Jo makes jokes about Helen's spiritual destruction, and Helen answers her with even more irony.

Before Helen leaves, Jo asks Helen what her father was like. Helen ends up revealing to Jo that her father was "a bit retarded," "a bit stupid." While Jo initially believes her mother is lying, Helen matter-of-factly insists that she is telling the truth. She explains that their love affair lasted only a short while and that the man later died. Jo asks if madness is hereditary and Helen initially jokes about Jo needing to judge for herself if she is mad, but finally tells her that she is merely joking and that Jo is obviously no less intelligent than anyone else.

Disappointed with what her mother has just told her, Jo complains about her father's story, but Helen retorts that it is simply the truth. Jo asks her how she could have gone out with an "idiot." Helen explains that he had nice eyes and that he provided a respite from her husband, a rich man who hated sex. She recalls this period of her life, and in particular her first sexual experience with Jo's father, with fondness. Finally, Helen announces that she will see Jo after the honeymoon. As Helen is about to go meet Peter, she says that Jo must not be sad to see her leave, but Jo says that she is neither glad nor sorry. Ready for her wedding, Helen exits the apartment, saying that she will be back if Peter doesn't show up, and Jo wishes her good luck.

This is Helen's first notable attempt at effective communication, as she leaves irony aside and tries to convince Jo through reasoning. Jo's defiance can be seen as yet another effort to attract her mother's attention and confront her about her motherly responsibilities. However, these efforts are all short-lived, since despite Helen's professed guilt, she ultimately proves as willing as ever to abandon her daughter.



Jo's accusations against Helen imply that Jo's current actions can be seen as the consequences of her upbringing, in which Helen has been a negative influence. Her drinking is only one aspect of this general lack of care.



While Helen does not seem to understand (or to care) about the impact that her story is having on her daughter, who would have wanted her father to be a more noteworthy man, she does succeed in understanding that Jo is truly worried about the genetic impact of madness. She demonstrates her respect for her daughter by reassuring her—without, however, making her feel particularly special, since she concludes that Jo is just like everyone else.



Jo seems to take her father's story personally, considering that his lack of intelligence reflects on her own identity. Helen's attitude toward romantic relationships seems to have changed little since her first marriage, as both now and then her decisions are less concerned with long-term consequences than with present enjoyment. Jo's evasive reaction to her mother's departure reveals that she does not actually hate her; she is probably feigning indifference in order to hide from Helen how much her abandonment hurts her, and how much she wishes her mother were more present in her life.



ACT 2: SCENE 1

It is now summer and Jo, who is visibly pregnant, enters the apartment with her friend Geoffrey. The two of them are playing with colorful balloons and talking about the fair they have just been to, which they both enjoyed. Jo lies down on the couch and complains about having to get up early the next morning. She boldly asks Geoffrey, who is standing uncomfortably in the room, if he has a home, which Geoffrey says he does.

Jo asks Geof to go get her some biscuits in the kitchen but to keep the light turned off. When Geof bangs into a piece of furniture and hurts himself, Jo tells him to strike a match. This then allows Geof to realize, with surprise, how big the apartment is, and Jo expresses pride and happiness in knowing it is all hers, even if she has to work two jobs to pay for it. Geof notes that it is quite big for one person and Jo deviously asks him if he is thinking of moving in, which she becomes convinced of despite his protestations to the contrary.

Judging by how eager Geof was to accompany her home, Jo becomes convinced that Geof's landlady has indeed kicked him out of his apartment. While he finally admits that this is the case, he explains that it had to do with the rent. However, Jo, finding his answer unconvincing, interrogates him relentlessly, hypothesizing that his landlady must have found him with a man, which she mocks him for. Geof rejects these ideas but Jo still tells him he can sleep on the couch if he agrees to tell her about himself, because she is curious about people like him. Offended, Geof gets angry and stands up to leave, but Jo quickly apologizes and asks him to stay. Geof says that women can be insufferable and that, in general, he hates people who laugh at others. In the end, though, Jo's repeated pleas seem to work and Geof agrees to stay.

Geof begins to look through Jo's book of drawings and criticizes them, saying that they are too unstructured and sentimental. Jo tries to defend herself, explaining that she likes them, but also seems to take Geoffrey's comments to heart. Geof tells her she should go to art school, where she could receive guidance. Jo declines but Geof asks her if anyone has ever tried taking care of her. Jo says that her boyfriend did once, but that he lasted only from Christmas to the New Year.

This playful, lighthearted scene shows that Jo is not all alone, since she is benefiting from Geoffrey's friendship. Her approach to what she instinctively perceives as Geof's possible homelessness is brutal and direct, unaware of the emotional effect her words might have on her friend.



Jo's pride in living in the apartment on her own demonstrates the fulfillment of her desire to be independent and capable of maintaining herself. Jo seems particularly intuitive when it comes to Geoffrey, as she senses his current homeless situation and his desire to stay with her before he even tells her about it.



Instead of trying to make Geoffrey feel comfortable and at ease, capable of having a heart-to-heart about his financial difficulties and his romantic life, Jo questions him brutally without considering his feelings. Her attitude toward his homosexuality—a sexual orientation Geof neither rejects nor confirms—is mocking and offensive, as she considers him an interesting specimen, representative of an entire group, without understanding his individual worth and vulnerability. Geof criticizes such cruel categorizing and Jo's apology recognizes that she is capable of changing her ways, and that she actually cares about not hurting him.



Geof seemingly takes revenge on Jo for her insensitive questioning by criticizing her paintings harshly. At the same time, Geof recognizes that she has talent. His comment about receiving guidance refers to both the intellectual and emotional kind, suggesting that the two go hand in hand. Jo's lack of either is a sad reminder of the lack of stability and care she has received in her life.



Geof asks Jo if she loved Jimmie and Jo says that she is not sure what love is, but that love creates and that she is now about to have a baby. Geof, who senses that the young girl is currently in a complicated, troubled situation, tells Jo that she could have an abortion but Jo immediately rejects the idea, finding the very concept dreadful. Geof concludes that Jo shouldn't be alone during this trying period of her life. He asks her if she has any money but Jo says her wages will only be sufficient to cover her living costs.

Jo says that she does not want to work much longer because she doesn't like people staring at her. Noticing Geof's concern, she tells Geof that he shouldn't worry about her, but Geof says he likes her. He asks about her mother and Jo gives vague information about Helen's plan to marry a man and live in a big house. She tells him that she is an unreliable person but that she has a lot of money. Geof says that Jo should take advantage of that, since she needs to buy things for the baby. He even offers to help her himself.

Jo does not want to hear Geof's ideas because she says planning for the baby before it is born brings bad luck. Geof assumes that Jo must be feeling depressed and says that she will soon be herself again, but Jo playfully and energetically replies that her normal self is truly extraordinary. She shares her enthusiasm with Geof, and the two of them celebrate how young and wonderful they both are. Moved by this excitement, Jo asks Geof which alcohol he likes, as though she were about to serve him some, but she finally admits she has none. Instead, she offers him one of the biscuits she is eating.

Inspired by one of Geof's exclamations, Jo recites a few rhyming poetic lines in a playful tone, calling her creation a dramatic recitation. Geof then recites a couple of **nursery rhymes** that Jo enjoys. The second one ends with the following lines: "If I had half a crown a day / I'd gladly spend it on you" and when Jo asks him if he would indeed do that, Geof answers in the affirmative. Geof offers Jo a cigarette but she says she only used to smoke to bother her mother.

After joking about buying a car with free coupons that Geof collects, the two decide to go to bed. Jo says that Geof will probably not sleep well on the couch, but both agree that they are beggars in their own ways, and therefore cannot be "choosers." When Geof begins to undress, Jo tells him he should turn off the light so that she doesn't make a pass at him. Geof turns off the light.

Jo has clearly transformed from an innocent young girl who believed in the simple power of love to a young woman concerned primarily with the physical consequences of sexual relations. She is more skeptical about the very concept of love and her ability to recognize it. Her independence also proves limited, as she is aware that she might not be able to live on her own much longer.



Geof is the first person in Jo's life who shows an earnest desire to understand her situation and to actually do something about it. The cruelty in Helen's enjoyment of wealth and privilege while her daughter struggles to live on her own is blatant and leads Geof to take on a quasi-parental role when he offers to help Jo, thus filling in for the absent caregivers in her life.



Despite Jo's troubles, she manages to draw hope and courage from her youthful self-confidence. In addition, despite the similarity of some of her actions with her mother's (such as having sex with a man who will leave her and fail to take care of her child), Jo strives to be different from her mother in other ways—for example by refusing to have alcohol in her house. This is a hopeful indication that she might succeed in following a different path from Helen's.



Jo and Geof develop a dynamic of mutual encouragement and playfulness, as they enthusiastically respond to each other's declamations and enjoy celebrating their youth and child-like innocence. In addition to such lightheartedness, Geof seems truly committed to helping Jo financially.



Jo and Geof dream together about a life of economic independence and freedom, a far cry from their actual situation in which they feel constrained by their financial difficulties. Jo's jokes about their potentially romantic relationship are ironic, actually revealing that she does not think any romance is possible between them.



In the dark, Jo then begins to sing a **nursery rhyme** about a black boy and, when Geof asks about her boyfriend, she says he was black. She describes him as an African prince but then explains he was a nurse in the Navy. Geof asks her if she wishes he were here but she says she is tired of love, and that that is why she asked Geof to stay with her, because she knows he will not try to start a romantic relationship with her. After she concludes that she hates love, the two say good night. Geof says he will stay home from school tomorrow, clean up the apartment, and prepare a meal for Jo. Jo laughs and says he is like a big sister.

A few months pass, and Jo and Geof are still living together. While the sound of **children's singing** can be heard from outside the apartment, the two complain about the heat and the smell. Jo points to dirty children in the street and Geof says it isn't their fault, which Jo agrees with, saying that it is their parents' fault. She notices a boy who is particularly dirty and looks like he might have mental problems and concludes that his mother's decision to have children brings harm to the world.

Suddenly, Jo tells Geof the baby has just kicked in her belly. Speaking to her baby, she announces that she is going to look at what Geof is making for them. When she comes close to him, she sees that Geof is making a dress for the baby. Jo wonders at how Geof knows which measurements to use, noting that babies can be born in different sizes. When she describes babies as either dangerously thin or revoltingly fat, she concludes that she finds babies disgusting. Geof is surprised, since he thought motherhood was natural to women, but Jo says that motherhood fits him better, and that he would be a great wife.

Jo asks Geof why he was talking to the landlady yesterday. Geof tells her he gave her the rent and that the lady will make them a wicker basket to use as a cradle for the baby. Jo does not like the idea of other people interfering with her life and complains about Geof never leaving her alone. Suddenly crying, she throws herself on the couch and says that she wants to drown in the river. Seemingly impatient with Jo's mood, Geof tells her that the river is dirty and that she should stop pitying herself. He sees Jo's current emotions as an annoying act. Jo replies that Geof only moved in with her because he has no self-confidence and is afraid of girls laughing at him.

Jo jokingly equates Jimmie's skin color with foreignness and noble exoticism before revealing the young man's true profession. Her rejection of love is more accurately a rejection of abandonment, since this is the most common consequence of relationships that she has experienced. Her rejection of love can thus be understood as a desire to avoid being hurt once again.



While the sound of children's singing could be associated with innocence and joy, here it is linked to poverty and deprivation. Jo likely derives her conclusion about parents' responsibility toward their children from her own experience, showing that she probably considers her current situation to be at least partly her mother's fault.



It is unclear why Jo finds babies so revolting. Part of her attitude can be understood by the fact that she did not actually choose to have a baby, but has been forced to deal with the consequences of her sexual relations with Jimmie on her own—a situation that might inspire anger and resentment. Jo's inversion of traditional gender dynamics demonstrates her openness to the myriad ways in which families can express love and care, without having to conform to fixed roles.



Despite Jo's experience of feeling abandoned, she paradoxically rejects the opposite behavior: someone actually taking care of her and making sure she has everything she needs. However, it seems that Jo's reaction is closely linked to her pregnancy and the fact that she does not want to have a baby that she will need to take care of herself. Her attack against Geof is an attempt to transfer her anger and frustration onto someone else.



Geof tells Jo to keep quiet and to read a book about caring for babies that he got for her. Jo complains about the various tasks involved in raising a child and says that she finds breastfeeding disgusting and cannibalistic. While Geof finds her words inhumane, Jo reaffirms that she truly hates motherhood. However, Geof argues that whatever her feelings might be, she will have to take care of the baby anyway. Changing the subject, Jo says she has a toothache and begins to jokingly annoy Geof, trying to get him to give her a kiss. Still playfully, she asks him if he would like to be the baby's father and Geoffrey says yes.

Jo listens to the **children singing** outside and asks Geof why he is still here, to which Geof replies that someone needs to take care of her. The two of them are quiet for a few seconds and Geof suddenly asks Jo what she would say if he tried to start a romantic relationship with her. Surprised, Jo says that she does not want him, explaining that her decision has nothing to do with thinking that her boyfriend might come back.

Geof then grabs hold of Jo's arm, saying he has never kissed a girl. Despite Jo's efforts to break loose, Geof ultimately succeeds in kissing her. Jo seems upset and Geof apologizes, but while Jo is trying to explain to him that she doesn't desire him in a physical way, Geof asks her to marry him. Jo says she doesn't want to marry anyone but Geof keeps on insisting, saying he is thinking of what is best for her and that he doesn't mind taking care of somebody else's baby. Finally, seeing that Jo is truly not interested in marrying him, he makes a sarcastic comment about the fact she probably didn't struggle when she made love to her boyfriend. Jo replies that things might have turned out better if she had.

After forcing Geof to accept a piece of chocolate, Jo tells him that he should probably leave, saying that leaving would be better for him and that they cannot stay together forever. However, Geof says he would rather die than be separated from her and Jo is shocked to realize that he actually means it. Geof explains that living with her has given him a sense of purpose in life, whereas he used to feel lost and apathetic. Geof tries to convince her to let him stay and, after going to lie down in her bedroom, Jo concludes it might indeed not be necessary for them to separate.

Jo's feelings about her baby are eerily reminiscent of Helen's lack of interest in taking care of her daughter. By contrast, Geof embraces the various actions that form part of caring for someone, as he seems eager to be a father himself, seeing the parental role as a duty rather than something that people can choose to opt out of. Jo's teasing of Geof is playfully annoying but remains ambiguous, as it is unclear what Jo is trying to achieve.



Jo's lack of understanding about Geof's motives shows that she is not used at all to being part of a caring relationship, in which people stay together not purely out of self-interest but as a desire to accompany the other through life. At the same time, Geof's apparent desire for a romantic relationship signals that his own motives might not be as clear as he previously has made them seem.



Geof's brutal attitude toward Jo is striking not only because he is usually a gentle individual and such use of strength to force Jo to kiss him seems out of character, but also because of his presumed homosexuality. His motives for wanting to marry Jo remain ambiguous. Perhaps he does actually believe that he loves Jo romantically, or perhaps he longs for the stability that a married relationship brings. Either way, his behavior and his insensitive comment about Jo and Jimmie shows him capable of resentment and viciousness. The repeated insistence on marriage also appears to echo Jimmie's repeated proposals.



Jo does not seem to harbor hostility toward her friend, but does have enough lucidity and self-respect to see that living with someone who might be in love with her is not healthy nor sustainable. At the same time, it becomes apparent that Geof's desire to stay with Jo might not actually be romantic, but rather can be seen as an expression of despair, of his fear—similar, perhaps, to Jo's—of being lonely and abandoned.



Helen suddenly enters the apartment, loudly asking for Jo and calling Geof Romeo, while Geof, in a meek, submissive tone, begs Helen not to tell Jo that he asked her to come. Helen enters Jo's bedroom and Jo immediately asks her who told her to come, which Helen refuses to answer. Helen initially believes that Geof is Jo's boyfriend, but Jo reveals that their relationship is not sexual. Jo keeps on asking her mother for information about who asked her to come. Finally, Jo turns to Geoffrey, angrily telling him she warned him not to interfere in her life, and ironically asking him if he thinks he is running a "Back to Mother" movement. While Geof defends himself by saying that Helen has a right to know about her pregnancy, Jo says she doesn't consider her mother to have any rights in relation to her.

Geof complains to Helen that Jo never leaves the apartment, which is the main reason he asked for Helen's help. Instead of showing concern, Helen says that she cannot do anything about this and has no obligation toward her child. Shocked by such visible lack of interest in her daughter's life, Geof tries to argue that Helen should care for her, but Helen explains that she has never been able to handle Jo. Helen then mockingly calls Geof a "nursemaid" and expresses her disapproval of their partnership. While Jo tells Geof her mother's harsh words are his own fault, since he invited her, she also tells her mother that she has no right to make judgments about her life.

Helen makes ironic comments about Jo's boyfriend's absence and Geof, in turn, attacks Helen for being gone for a long time as well, but both Helen and Jo angrily tell Geoffrey to stay out of their fight. Helen then looks at her daughter and makes affectionate comments about the size of her stomach. She asks Geof if Jo is getting medical attention and if she is working. When Geof repeats that Jo isn't, Helen says that Jo should work instead of living off of him, but Geof and Jo contradict her, saying that they share everything. Irritated by her mother's disapproving comments, Jo tells her to return to her fancy man, who might be cheating on her at this very moment, and Helen threatens to beat her for her insolence.

Jo's anger at her mother and at Geof reveals her strong rejection of any interference in her life. With regards to her mother, this can be understood in light of the repeated disappointments she has been made to feel, and the fact that her current independence has been hard earned. Her anger at Geof seemingly projects onto him the diffidence that she feels toward her mother, but also emphasizes that Geof has not listened to what she actually wants—acting, instead, based on what he believes is best for Jo. In both cases, Geof and Helen fail to take Jo's opinions into account.



Geof's well-intentioned action soon fails miserably, as Helen immediately overturns any expectations he might have had of her duties as a mother and is confronted with the full-blown violence of her lack of caring. In addition, Helen mocks Geof's seemingly woman-like mode of being, thus revealing her paradoxical rejection of sexual or gender-based behavior that does not conform to the norm—despite her own embrace of non-traditional sexual relationships in her personal life.



Helen's character is highly volatile, as she shifts from one tone to the next, alternating between irony, tenderness, and disapproval in the space of a few moments. The two women's desire for Geof to stay out of their fight paradoxically reveals the strength of their bond, even if it tends to express itself as violent antagonism. It also seems to reflect in Act 1 when Helen defended Jo to Peter—again effectively not letting a man fight with them the way they fight with each other. While Geof might play an important role in Jo's everyday life, her pregnancy is ultimately an issue between her mother and her—a pattern that announces Geof's later ejection from the apartment.



Helen chases Jo through the room while attacking her verbally for the dreadful situation she has put herself in, but Jo says that she will get out of it on her own. In an increasingly fast-paced series of exchanges, Helen criticizes Jo for accepting the first man she saw and Jo says she is exactly like her mother. Helen then tells Jo people are calling her a whore, but Jo merely replies she is like her mother in that sense. When Helen tries to grab Jo to give her a beating, Geof tries to intervene, but the two women keep threatening and provoking each other. Helen mentions that she should have had an abortion instead of having Jo. Finally, when Jo threatens to throw herself out the window if Helen doesn't leave, the two calm down and the fighting stops.

Geof tells the women to stop yelling, to which Helen replies that they enjoy it. Helen proceeds to give Jo a speech about the importance of being independent and self-reliant. She tells Jo that she should not pity herself and deplore the tragedy of her life; instead, she should begin to care for herself without relying on Geof, whom Helen calls a "pansified little freak." While Jo tries to defend Geof, he complains that he wouldn't have asked Helen to come if he'd known how she was going to treat Jo. Irritated by Geof's interventions, both Helen and Jo tell Geof to leave, and he finally leaves the room to go make some tea.

After Geof leaves, Helen laments Jo's thinness and, in a pacifying voice, tells her that she didn't come here to fight but to bring her money. After Jo refuses, Helen concludes that she will leave it on the table. Angry and upset, Jo criticizes Helen's absence and this sudden "famous mother-love act," but Helen defends herself by saying that she has been worrying about Jo and that she plans to send her money regularly. Unconvinced, Jo says that Helen will forget and Helen herself admits that she is indeed terrible at remembering things. When Helen tries to say that she has a motherly responsibility toward her daughter, Jo lashes out at her, reminding Helen that she forgot about her as soon as she left to go live with Peter. Ignoring this comment, Helen asks why Jo didn't tell her about her pregnancy, and Jo replies that Helen doesn't mean anything to her.

Peter then enters the apartment, drunk, aggressive, and angry at having to wait for Helen outside in such a dirty neighborhood. While Helen replies equally aggressively, telling him to go back outside to wait for her, Peter makes fun of Jo's pregnancy and sings a song about being a big girl. When he sees Geof and assumes he is the father of Jo's baby, he is appalled at the idea. Peter sings another song about pregnancy and Helen tells him to leave Jo alone.

Helen's anger at Jo's situation demonstrates that she is not as detached as she may seem, but actually cares about what happens to Jo—even if her manner of showing interest in Jo's life often expresses itself as anger and violence. The women's fight over the term "whore" shows once again that this pregnancy is not merely Jo's problem to solve, but that it ties the two of them together in an intimate, if unpleasant way. What Jo is experiencing is, in many ways, the reflection of her mother's own way of living. It is also opportunity to provoke Helen to take care of her daughter for once.



While it is unclear whether the two women actually enjoy such fighting, since these episodes have affected Jo deeply in the past, Helen's comment shows that she, at least, considers such fighting relatively innocuous—or that she merely wants Geof to stop interrupting them. Helen's speech about self-reliance is highly hypocritical, since she has effectively forced Jo to be independent ever since she left her for Peter, thus leading Jo to rely on Geof—the very person that Helen attacks.



Despite Helen's earlier claim of not feeling any sense of responsibility toward her daughter, she seems sincere in wanting to leave Jo money—a contradictory behavior that is difficult to understand. She seems more willing to assist Jo from afar and give her financial help than actually be a regular, reliable presence in Jo's life. Helen's final question about why Jo did not share the news of her pregnancy with her implies that she still believes her daughter trusts in her, even as her behavior has so often generated disappointment. Jo's reply insists on remembering the weight of Helen's past actions, forcing her mother to acknowledge the consequences of her actions.



The relationship between Peter and Helen has clearly deteriorated. Helen's attempts to defend Jo against him also show how the situation has changed since Peter first met Jo, when Helen would participate in ridiculing or attacking her daughter. Now, she seems determined to at least stand up for her daughter.



Still singing, Peter goes into the kitchen to look for drinks, crashes into objects, and re-enters the room. He mocks Helen's appearance, ultimately calling her a "sour-faced old bitch" and asking her to come out for drinks. Jo tries to kick him but Peter threatens her to attack her as well and then calls Geof "Mary" and begins to tell a dirty story. While Helen and Jo both try to make him keep quiet, Peter mockingly tells the story of Oedipus's incestuous relationship with his mother, which results in him tearing his eyes out. Peter establishes a parallel between this story and his own, saying that he only tore one of his eyes out.

Helen calls Peter a drunkard and tells him to leave. When Peter notices that Helen is giving his money to Jo, however, he takes it back and finally exits the apartment to look for the bathroom, still singing and crashing into objects on his way out. Jo tells Geof to go with Peter for his own safety. After Geof leaves, Helen offers Jo a cigarette, which she keeps for Geof.

Jo chats with her mother about Peter's state, asking her how long he has been like this, but Helen changes the subject and asks what Geof works in. Jo says he is an art student and Helen asks if he lives in this apartment but Jo refuses to answer Helen's questions if she doesn't answer her own. Helen criticizes Jo's disheveled appearance, saying she should have more pride in herself, but Jo makes an ironic comment about Helen, insinuating that pride has led her to an immoral, unstable life.

Taking on a more sincere, compassionate tone, Helen asks Jo to come stay with her, but Jo refuses, which leads Helen to attack her, mocking her for choosing to stay with the "pansified little freak." Geof, who has returned, asks if he should leave and Helen pretends she hadn't noticed his presence. Jo asks Geof if he believes he would go live with Helen if he were in Jo's shoes and Geof says he wouldn't. He comments that he was surprised to discover that Helen was just as terrible a person as Jo had painted her to be. Exasperated, Helen tries to convince Jo that she is sincerely offering her a better place to live.

The relationship between Helen and Peter is fraught with aggression and violence, as well as an excessive indulgence in drinking. It lacks the love and respect that one might expect from a married relationship. Like Helen, Peter also makes fun of Geof for his supposedly feminine attitude. His vulgar, sexual recounting of the classical story of Oedipus confirms once again that he is primarily interested in the basest aspects of life.



Peter confirms his inability to think beyond his own self-interest when he refuses to give Jo money. This reveals that his mocking attitude toward the entire situation actually keeps him from realizing how serious Jo's problems are, and how much she could benefit from some financial help.



Jo once again takes on the role of the adult when she inquires about Helen's health and well-being, implying that Peter is an alcoholic and that the situation is visibly out of control. Helen's inability to share her feelings with Jo reveals her emotional impenetrability. She seems capable of answering honest concerns only with irony and aggression, attacking Jo instead of reflecting on her own situation.



Helen seems, in part, truly concerned for Jo's well-being, but also motivated by a feeling of rivalry; she attacks Jo for choosing to stay with Geof instead of coming with her, thereby highlighting the difference in trust and cooperation between the two relationships. Despite Helen's seemingly heartfelt proposition, Jo clearly stands by Geof's side, emphasizing her independence and her desire to keep on living on her own.



Peter then enters the apartment again, more sober but also more hostile. Helen keeps offering to take care of Jo, but Jo argues that her mother should have done so years ago, when she needed it the most. Helen acknowledges this but wants Jo to think about present necessities. However, Peter interrupts the conversation, calling Jo a “bloody slut” and saying that he does not want her in his home. Helen tries to counter his words by saying that half of the house belongs to her, but Peter says he can kick her out anytime. He adds that he does not want Geof—whom he calls a “fruitcake parcel”—either, saying he cannot stand people like him.

Helen says that she does not want Jo to stay in such a repulsive neighborhood but Geof intervenes, arguing that the people are nice, at least, and that Jo is happier with him. Helen tells Geof to shut up, arguing that she knows what is best for her daughter. Impatient, Peter complains about the filth of this apartment and says he wants to leave, adding that, if Helen wants to stay in this disgusting place he once saved her from, she is free to. While Helen initially says she is going to stay and lets Peter leave, she begins to hesitate and asks Jo if she wants her to stay with her. Jo says no and Helen finally leaves, following Peter, after quickly promising Jo to send her money and telling Geof that Jo should receive medical care and eat properly.

After Peter and Helen leave, Geof is at least relieved that Helen has left Jo money but Jo explains that Peter took it away. She hands Geof a cigarette, calling him “love,” and Geof is suddenly excited because he didn’t have any cigarettes left.

ACT 2: SCENE 2

Months later, Geof and Jo are in the apartment. While Geof is cleaning the floor with a mop, Jo is reading out loud from a book about childbirth that Geof gave her. She makes fun of the book’s tone, which sounds overly enthusiastic and naïve. Jo then ridicules Geof, saying he is old-fashioned in general and that his choices in books reflect his tendency to live in the past. She calls Geof Edwardian, saying that she herself is a pure contemporary, living “at the same time as herself.” Jo gets up and Geof half-angrily pushes her with the mop, saying he just cleaned that section of the apartment.

Helen’s refusal to talk about the past makes her current proposals less credible. Without addressing her prior indifference, her desire to take care of Jo now does not seem any more reliable than her previous behavior. In fact, Helen has already admitted that she might not remember to send Jo money regularly. Helen’s current situation is also clearly precarious, and it remains uncertain whether she actually is in a position to help Jo, even if only financially.



Geof’s passive aggressive comment about how agreeable people are in the neighborhood serves as an attack against Helen, who clearly is not a particularly friendly person. Both Geof and Helen seem intent on arguing about what is best for Jo, thus revealing that part of the dispute revolves around their own competition. Helen’s concern for Jo is cut short when she faces personal consequences, such as losing Peter, and it becomes obvious once again that Helen is not actually interested in a long-term commitment toward her daughter.



This tender scene highlights the spirit of kindness and cooperation that Jo and Geof share, despite their economic difficulties. It also underscores their well-being as partners, in stark contrast to Helen and Peter.



Geof has taken on a quasi-parental role toward Jo, as he gives her information about how to raise children, wanting her to feel as prepared as possible. Jo’s playful attack against Geof for being old-fashioned identifies one of his central traits: his capacity to remain committed to a single goal (in this case, taking care of Jo). Jo’s attitude, by contrast, is more unpredictable and carefree and, perhaps, in that sense, similar to her mother’s.



Jo ironically tells Geof he hasn't admired her house-coat, which she has made herself, but Geof says it looks terrible. Jo then asks him what is cooking in the oven and Geof tells her he is baking a cake. Jo calls him wonderful and admires the fact that he makes everything work in the house, preparing food so that they can eat properly. She feels that he has transformed her.

Jo's house-coat highlights her struggle to take care of herself on her own. Her comments about Geof's cooking confirm that an important factor in the success of her current independent life is his presence, since he is a committed, capable, reliable person.



When Geof moves the sofa to clean, he discovers a hidden pile of garbage, which he finds absolutely disgusting. Jo then realizes that the **bulbs** she had brought with her when she first moved into this apartment are now dead. This leads Jo to reflect about death. She says that some people take out an insurance policy, choosing to pray to God without fully believing in him, in the hope that they might benefit from their praying if they die and God turns out to exist.

The death of Jo's flower bulbs, which she had wanted to decorate the apartment with in Act 1, represent the symbolic death of that dream: to turn her cohabitation with her mother into a pleasant experience. At the same time, Jo establishes a parallel between these bulbs and people's feigned belief in God. Perhaps, she suggests, her hope in the bulbs' growth—just like her hope in making her life more agreeable—was not wholehearted, but mere wishful thinking, a fragile "insurance policy" against the unpredictability of life.



Geof says he never thinks about death, merely accepting that people come and go, but Jo reveals her philosophy about the chaotic nature of life. She believes that life is made up of brutal, unpredictable events that one doesn't choose. Concerned by these gloomy thoughts, Geof asks what has frightened Jo so much and Jo merely asks Geof to hold her hand, which he does, after halfheartedly expressing regret about having to interrupt his cleaning.

Jo seems to relinquish all hope of ever taking control of her life, as she trusts that no one can fully shape one's destiny. At the same time, her relationship with Geof shows that people can support each other and, through love and care, lessen the impact of life's troubles, however unpredictable they might be.



As Geof tries to calm Jo down she admires his hands, saying that she used to try to hold her mother's hands but that Helen would always pull away from her. Jo notes that Helen always had a lot of love for other people but never for her. Instead of reassuring Jo, Geof tells her that she should be careful not to become like her mother. While Jo argues that she is completely different from Helen, Geof says that she is in fact already similar to her in some ways. Jo then angrily pushes Geof's hand away and Geof ironically asks if he can return to his cleaning now.

Jo's comments reveal that her mother's lack of love and support has left a deep mark on her, making her feel abandoned and rejected to this day. Geof's warning about Jo's similarity to Helen contrasts with Jimmie's previous comment that Helen and Jo have nothing in common. Geof thus shows that he is more aware of the intricate nature of Helen and Jo's relationship, and that Jo is at risk of mirroring Helen's mistakes.



Angry and vengeful, Jo then tells Geof that he can stay with her in the apartment only if he tells her more about himself. She hints at his homosexuality by saying that she used to believe he was immoral but has now discovered that he is more like an old lady, boring and asexual. Geof chases her with his mop and Jo playfully asks him if he doesn't enjoy living with her. Geof answers that it is rather difficult to live with her most of the time, despite certain enjoyable moments.

Jo's defensiveness precisely echoes Geof's fear about Jo becoming more like her mother, since her reaction to Geof's sincere warning is to attack him on a personal level, thus effectively cutting short any constructive conversation. However playful they might be, Jo's comments about Geof's sexuality are insensitive, reflecting a desire to hurt him by attacking him where he is most vulnerable.



Jo complains about Geof always wearing black shirts and then begins to yell at him for finding her a job retouching photographs. She seems to feel that she had to prove something by taking on this job, showing resentment at having to demonstrate her artistic worth. Finally, she attacks Geof's status as an art student who goes to fancy art schools and focuses on his artistic talent. Geof complains about her shouting but Jo justifies herself by explaining that she is Irish. Following Jo's comment, Geof agrees it must therefore not be her fault. His response makes Jo laugh and she says that she likes him.

The two joke about the Irish and Jo tells Geof that her father was both an Irishman and an idiot. She summarizes the story that her mother told her, explaining that Helen had sex with an idiot because she never had sex with her husband. Surprised by this story, Geof initially believes that Jo is lying. However, when he discovers that Helen actually told Jo this, he concludes that Helen was probably lying in order to make an impression on Jo. He notes that Helen has the tendency to be overly dramatic, adding that she also tends to judge people by their mere appearance without actually knowing much about their character. He uses his own story as an example, describing how Helen always looks at him as though he should receive medical attention.

Geof laughs at Jo for worrying about her father for so many months, even though this is clearly an untrue story. He asks her if she can actually imagine her mother going out with an "idiot" and Jo admits that Geof is probably right: Helen would never do that. Geof then notes that it is difficult to tell the difference between fools and wise men in life, and the two of them laugh about Jo being potentially crazy. Jo appreciates Geof's capacity to make her laugh but, suddenly nostalgic, she mentions that she would still want her mother to be there. Geof doesn't understand her, since the two women fight whenever they are together, but Jo simply says that she feels that her mother should be with her, now that she is close to giving birth.

Jo asks Geof to put his arms around her. Geof then tells her he has a surprise for her and gives her a doll, with which he believes Jo can practice holding the baby. However, when Jo sees the doll, she becomes angry, saying that the color is wrong. She brutally throws the doll away and says she will kill her baby. She concludes that she wants to be neither a mother nor a woman. Geof tries to reassure her and asks her if she wants him to go search for her boyfriend for her, but Jo says that she doesn't want a man.

Jo and Geof's fights are strikingly different from those between Helen and Jo. Even if Jo might feel anger and lash out at Geof, Geof rarely escalates the discussion. Instead, he tries to calm the situation down and to make Jo laugh. Despite Jo's attacks against him, it becomes apparent that her frustration is less about Geof than it is a reflection of her own sense of inferiority or, perhaps, of jealousy, about Geof's studies and his active investment in his education and artistic talent.



Jo's fears about her father's intellectual capacities reveal that, however often Jo may criticize her mother, she also takes her words to heart. Geof's lucidity about Helen's attitude is helpful to Jo, who realizes that her mother is dramatic to the point of being potentially duplicitous. This proves that even though Geof might not have the strength or personality to stand up to Helen, he is a shrewd judge of her character. He also proves capable of being strong in the face of aggression, as he does not take Helen's insults at heart but understands them as misguided beliefs.



The two characters' laughter at the impossibility of Helen dating an intellectually inferior man reflects Helen's romantic focus on superficial criteria such as money, looks, and reputation. She would probably consider dating a so-called "idiot" to be shameful. Jo and Geof make fun of social categorization, understanding that even the most under-estimated beings are capable of greatness—and, reciprocally, that the sanest individuals can behave in foolish ways. Jo's desire for her mother's presence reveals that Helen's absence remains a source of pain, despite the fact that Jo has endured it throughout her life.



It remains ambiguous whether Jo's anger is directed toward her boyfriend, who has abandoned her, or Helen, who has proven a highly unreliable mother herself. Either way, Jo feels resentment at being forced to take on a motherly role she hasn't fully chosen herself. However, this difficult situation has only reinforced her desire to be independent and avoid romantic relationships.



Geof argues that, in that case, Jo should probably consider giving her baby up for adoption. He wonders if Jo might feel differently about motherhood once her baby is born but Jo denies that possibility. Geof then asks her if she still loves her boyfriend, and Jo explains that he was only a dream of hers, bound not to transform into firm reality. She explains that she wanted someone to be with her at Christmas, since Helen usually leaves her to spend time with her boyfriends, and that Jimmie was able to keep her company and give her affection.

Geof then encourages Jo to forget about that dream and to focus on her present responsibilities. He asks her if she remembers the time when he asked her to marry him. Jo doesn't remember that moment, so Geof reminds her that her reaction was to go lie on the bed. Jo notes that Geof didn't follow her there, using this piece of information to conclude that there has never been any romantic love between them. This makes her feel grateful and relieved.

Realizing that he will never take the place of a romantic partner, Geof assumes that Jo is simply staying with him until she finds a new boyfriend, but he declares himself content enough to give her love in the meantime. Jo finds him funny and says he is unique, because he gives her love without asking for anything in return.

The two go to the kitchen to get the cake ready and Jo playfully notes that they do not need to think about marriage, since they have already been married for a thousand years. Talking about the baby, Geof asks her what she is going to call it, and Jo says she might give it to Geof and call it Number One, arguing that "it will always be number one to itself."

Helen suddenly enters the apartment, carrying luggage in the same way she did at the very beginning of the play. She calls to see if anyone is home and announces that she has come back. Expressing all her thoughts without stopping, she gives Jo flowers, complains about carrying her luggage, and says the apartment looks more cheerful. Jo offers her a cup of tea, which she accepts even though she would have liked alcohol. She looks at her daughter and concludes that Jo is indeed going to give birth soon. She interrogates her about whether she has been receiving regular check-ups and doing the exercises she needs, but doesn't wait for her daughter's answer before asking her if her luggage is ready. Surprised, Jo tells her she is not going to the hospital because she wants to have her baby in the apartment.

Geof's attitude is pragmatic and focused on what would be best for Jo as well as for the baby. His practical approach is all the more relevant given the negative effects that Helen's lackluster parenting has had on her own daughter. Receiving insufficient love from Helen has led Jo to seek it elsewhere, thus leading to a cyclical situation in which she, too, seems at risk of giving too little love to her child.



Geof's mention of one's responsibilities and of his marriage proposal emphasizes his willingness to commit to the long-term project of taking care of Jo. Jo seems to appreciate this partnership all the more because it is non-sexual, and therefore devoid of what she considers to be typical of romantic relationships: fickleness and the possibility of abandonment.



It remains ambiguous whether Geof has actually harbored romantic feelings toward Jo. Despite Jo's conviction to the contrary, he seems intent on mentioning it on various occasions. Jo's admiration for Geof's behavior only highlights the terrible role models she has had in her life.



Jo's optimism about the strength of her relationship with Geof is later proven wrong, as Geof finds himself forced to leave the apartment. Her recognition of the high esteem that the baby will inevitably have of itself insists, beyond all irony, on the necessity to treat children with the consideration and respect they deserve.



The similarity between this scene and the play's opening reflects Helen's utter lack of social and economic mobility, her inability to invest in a long-term, sustainable future for her daughter and herself. This time, Helen is forced to rely on her daughter for help, thus demonstrating that Jo has been more successful than her mother at leading a healthy, stable life. Helen's efforts to interrogate Jo about her pregnancy ring hollow, revealing a shallow attempt to compensate for the lack of actual support she has given her daughter during the entire pregnancy.



Geof joins the conversation and Helen is shocked to note that he is still there, although she also expected it. She then tells Jo that she cannot have a baby in that apartment, since the birth of one's first child can be tricky. Geof intervenes to reassure Jo. He tries to sound confident about the fact that there will be nothing complicated or dangerous about Jo's labor, but sounds a bit insecure when he turns to Jo for her to confirm these thoughts. Geof and Helen begin to argue but Jo ignores them both, telling her mother straightforwardly that she has decided to have the baby in the apartment and will not change her mind. Geof explains that a district nurse will come to take care of everything.

Helen then changes the subject, asking for a cup of tea and complaining that her suitcases were hard to carry. Jo asks her why she is carrying so much luggage and Helen reveals that she has come to take care of her daughter. Slyly trying to force Geof to leave, she mentions that the apartment might become too crowded for the three of them. Geof understands her hint, saying he can move out. Irritated by Geof's submission, Jo tells him not to give in to Helen's domineering attitude.

Helen then directly asks Geof to leave, saying she wants to talk to her daughter, and Geof submissively says he actually wanted to go do some grocery shopping. While Jo tells him he shouldn't let Helen control him, Helen complains about Geof's mumbling. Helen calls Geof a "bloody little pansy" and Jo tells her not to insult her friend, but Helen merely replies that she does not like his style. Geof tells Jo not to worry and decides to leave, asking Jo if she wants him to buy wool, which leads Helen to make a contemptuous comment about the fact that Geof knits. While Jo tries to convince her friend not to go, Geof ignores her and leaves the apartment.

Helen feigns surprise at Geof's departure and Jo attacks her for being rude. Helen defends herself, claiming she did nothing wrong, but Jo explains that Geof is her only friend. Instead of trying to understand this, Helen tells her daughter she could find herself "something more like a man." Jo criticizes Helen for not even noticing when she hurts other people's feelings, but Helen defends herself by saying that she merely wanted Geof to leave them alone for a while.

Jo asks Helen to stop being mean to Geof and inquires whether Peter has kicked her out. Instead of answering, Helen tries to change the subject, showing Jo a dress she bought for the baby and telling her that the reason she is moving is to be with her daughter during this period. She criticizes Jo's living situation, saying that there will be no one to take care of the baby while Jo works, but Jo says she can take care of her problems on her own.

Geof's attempts to shield Jo from her mother's alarming assertions about childbirth demonstrate his desire to protect Jo's feelings. In this way, he attempts to maintain the stability and emotional comfort that the two of them have succeeded in creating in their home. However, Jo proves stronger than both Helen and Geof when she defends her decision, refusing to listen to Helen's warnings or to Geof's fragile reassurance, asserting her choice without asking for confirmation.



Helen's change of subject reveals her weakness, as she understands that she cannot win this discussion. Her desire to kick Geof out is purely selfish, as she wants her daughter to herself and does not consider what consequences this might have on anyone else. She cannot accept that Geof has been such a good friend and roommate to Jo, taking care of her in ways Helen never even tried.



Helen's insults aim to make Geof feel belittled and degraded. Her attitude also demonstrates her intolerance toward anyone who subverts societal expectations about gender, as she shows a rigid understanding of what constitutes male and female activities in the household. Jo's attempts to make Geof stay demonstrate her attachment to her friend and her desire to keep him close to her, a possibility her mother constantly attempts to sabotage.



Jo's belief that her mother does not realize when she hurts other people is relatively naïve. Indeed, it seems equally likely that Helen does understand that her words are harmful, but that she doesn't care or want to do anything about it. Her goal seems to be to dominate and control every situation, regardless of how this might impact others.



Helen's repeated change of subject reflects her incapacity to confront the consequences of her own actions and her general vulnerability. Her attempts to convince Jo of her good will are material, as she gives her baby-related gifts. Jo, however, tries not to let her mother intervene and attempts to protect her independent life and spirit.



While Helen seems contemptuous of Jo's lack of definite plans, Jo criticizes her mother's attitude of superiority, reminding Helen that being offered an **engagement ring** only led to her being kicked out of her marriage and forced to return to this shabby apartment. Helen acts as though she doesn't mind this situation, but Jo calls her a fool and insists that this apartment is now hers, to which Helen replies that she has some money.

Helen finally reveals that Peter left her for another woman, and Jo cannot believe that the two of them are now back to where they were at the beginning. Jo expresses her resentment at being abandoned for yet another man, just like Helen used to do when Jo was a child. Seemingly indifferent to her daughter's pain, Helen merely explains that she never thinks about her daughter when she is happy, but that she felt bothered these last few weeks, since she knew that Jo was pregnant. Jo notes that this clearly did not lead Helen to actually come help her, but Helen justifies herself by saying that she hates trouble. Jo, however, explains that she has been doing perfectly well. She says that, for the first time in her life, she feels important and capable of taking care of everyone—even of Helen herself.

Helen tells Jo that she has ordered a baby cot for her. When Jo shows her the wicker basket that Geof has already gotten for that purpose, Helen criticizes it, as well as the general state of the apartment, which she finds unhygienic. Jo then goes to lie down and Geof returns soon after. When he asks for Jo, Helen curtly says she is lying down and that he should not wake her up, which Geof says he would never do. Helen criticizes everything she sees—the cleanliness of the apartment, which Geof says he has just cleaned, as well as the groceries he bought. When Jo hears Geof's voice, she asks him for headache pills and Geof promises to give her some.

Helen then asks Geof to throw out the wicker basket, saying she refuses to put her grandchild in it. As with Helen's other comments, Geof rebuts her criticisms by saying that Jo likes it. Helen then enters the kitchen, which she finds as messy as the rest of the apartment. When she returns to the living room, she notices that Geof is getting ready to leave. Helen, seemingly unsurprised, merely tells him to take the groceries with him when he goes, as though she had been expecting his departure all along. Geof refuses but, in a subdued voice, while Helen tells him not to mumble, he asks her not to frighten Jo, saying he does not want to scare Jo about the difficulty of childbirth. Instead of feeling compassion or understanding, Helen merely tells Geof not to give her orders about what to do with her own daughter.

Jo highlights the fact the hypocrisy of Helen's attitude, since her attempt to escape poverty through Peter was only based on fragile promises and the desire to lead an extravagant life, instead of a more pragmatic, sustainable approach to her economic problems.



Jo's feeling that her entire life with her mother has been a series of abandonments reveals that her long-desired, professed independence could not exist without the harm that Helen has inflicted on her; Jo's desire to be left alone can be seen as a direct reaction to Helen's unsupportive upbringing. Helen does not attempt to justify her selfishness. Instead, she merely affirms it—an attitude that leaves little space for actual change. Jo's optimistic outlook nevertheless overcomes her mother's selfishness. It reveals that time alone has done her well, as it has given the strength she needs to face life's problems with self-confidence.



Helen's vehement criticism of the apartment can be understood as a defensive reaction to Jo's lack of enthusiasm toward her material gifts. Feeling threatened by Jo's obvious attachment to Geof, Helen does everything she can to try to get rid of him. Her actions are not actually motivated by disgust with the apartment, since she has never shown any concern about the material conditions her daughter lives in, but more accurately by jealousy and resentment toward Geof.



In stark contrast to Helen's aggression and generally critical attitude, which is meant as an effort to dominate, Geof reminds her that Jo's actual feelings are what is most important. Helen shows no genuine concern for Jo's well-being, since she does not hesitate to eject the only supportive, reliable person in her daughter's life. Even on his way out, Geof emphasizes that his concern has always been to protect Jo's material and emotional welfare. Once again unable to face constructive criticism, Helen reacts defensively, showing that she only cares about her pride, and not about ameliorating the situation.



Geof says he is leaving but notes that Jo had said she wanted him with her during labor, since that would keep her from feeling scared. Helen finds the idea of a man's presence during childbirth revolting, but Geof argues that husbands are usually present. Helen then slyly asks him whether he is Jo's husband and Geof is forced to admit he isn't. As Geof is leaving, explaining that Jo cannot cope with both of them at once, Helen tries to force him to take the groceries with him. When Geof categorically refuses, she throws all of them on the floor. Outraged, Geof finally leaves the apartment, cursing women and saying goodbye to Jo even though she is not present.

Helen goes to sit by Jo's side and Jo asks her if childbirth is painful. Helen recalls her own experience giving birth to Jo and tells her that it is not necessarily painful, but that it involves a lot of hard work. Jo tells her that she had a dream while she was sleeping but Helen does not want to hear about it, arguing that her daughter's dreams lead to morbid conversations. Jo asks if Geof has returned and Helen says he hasn't.

Jo then worries about where Helen is going to sleep but Helen tells her not to worry. As she is wondering where Geof might be, she suddenly feels a contraction. Helen tries to help her feel better and Jo kneels on the bed, saying that she feels a bit better. Faced with the stress of the situation, Helen concludes that she needs a drink.

Helen then hears **children singing** outside and recalls her own childhood. She gives a long speech about her childhood activities, remembering the games she used to play and the places she used to go. She nostalgically recalls sitting on the top of the hill for the entire day, watching the landscape, while no one knew her whereabouts. Concluding her speech, she offers to prepare some tea, but when she enters the kitchen she realizes that she doesn't know how to use the stove. Jo tells her to turn all the knobs but to be careful not to gas herself.

Jo then announces that her baby is going to be black. Taken by surprise, Helen at first doesn't understand what Jo is saying and thinks Jo is merely giving in to a moment of fright. However, when Helen realizes that Jo's boyfriend was black, she begins to panic, imagining the shame she will feel to carry her black grandchild in the street. Filled with self-pity, she decides she needs to go out for a drink. She wonders if they should drown the baby or give it up for adoption to the district nurse Jo and Geof have contracted, whom Jo says is also black.

Helen proves incapable of understanding (or, perhaps, eager to ignore) the strong bond that exists between Geof and Jo, which cannot be represented accurately through the traditional category of matrimony. At the same time, Geof's furtive departure reveals his cowardly nature, as he does not even inform Jo of his choice and allow her to fight for him. Helen's violent action reveals her frustration and that she wants to be as aggressive toward Geof as possible.



Helen's outright lie to her daughter once again confirms her unwillingness to be held accountable to her actions and behave as a responsible adult. Her aversion toward her daughter's dreams also shows her lack of interest in the more imaginative, fantastical aspects of life.



Jo's concern for Helen contrasts with the lack of concern Helen has shown for Jo's well-being throughout her life—revealing that Jo is more generous and understanding than her mother, who tends to disappear at the mere sight of trouble—such as the pain of her daughter's labor.



Helen's nostalgic recollection of her childhood is unprecedented, as she rarely reflects on her past. Instead of reminding her of her daughter, the children's singing reveals her desire to escape her adult responsibilities completely and to return to the innocence of childhood, when she could be entirely on her own. Jo's instructions about the stove serve as a complete reversal of one of the opening scenes, thus proving that Jo is now the one behaving in the way a parent should.



Helen's reaction to her grandchild's skin color is not only disrespectful, as she is unable to accept the reality of racial equality, but also entirely selfish, since she only shows concern for her own reputation. It becomes apparent that she has not given up her bad habits, such as drinking, and that she will probably never be able to face problems head-on without seeking an escape.



Irritated, Jo tells Helen that she can leave if she is not satisfied with the situation. Helen gets ready to go for a drink, angrily telling Jo that she doesn't know what to do with her. When she sees her mother preparing to leave, Jo asks her if she is just going out for a drink and if she will come back, to which Helen curtly says yes, though she is clearly focused on her own thoughts and preoccupations.

Before leaving the apartment in a rush, Helen concludes that what she will with the baby is to "put it on the stage and call it Blackbird." After Helen hurriedly leaves the apartment, Jo looks around the room and remembers the playful **nursery rhyme** that Geof once recited to her. Smiling, she recites it again, concluding her speech with the two verses that had intrigued her when she first heard it: "If I had half a crown a day, / I'd gladly spend it on you."

Helen becomes aggressive once again, exchanging compassion and support for insults and anger. Jo's questions aim to probe whether her mother has truly changed, or whether she will merely abandon her as she has in the past. Her awareness of her mother's unreliability, however, does not seem to make her doubt the honesty of her mother's replies.



Helen's final words break the imaginary boundary between the play and the spectators, recognizing the existence of a "stage" on which she is performing. This highlights the fact that many of the social issues the characters deal with in A Taste of Honey are pressing social issues in real life as well. Finally, the comfort that Jo finds in Geof's nursery rhyme serves as a reminder of the commitment that Geof was ready to make in Jo's regards and the hope that people might show compassion and solidarity to each other. It also emphasizes Jo's enduring innocence and, as such, her capacity to face her troubles with youthful strength and courage.





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