# Alec - Act one

 Alec, aged 11, in tears, and as a teenager carrying school books

The play switches between the present and flashbacks to when Alec was younger. In the present, he is an older teenager of about 17 or 18, having just sat his exams, and is looking forward to university in Glasgow. At the start of the play, in the first flashback, he is 11 and is informed by his father of his mother’s death. He is presented as naive and childlike as he struggles to cope with this traumatic experience,

***I was standing there, crying – real big deep sobs.***

The audience sympathises with him as the whole experience is surreal to him,

***I was me and I was not-me, almost as though it is happening to someone else.***

The older Alec reflects on this and realises he was unsure of what to expect.

***Everything was the same. It was very ordinary … I don't know what I had expected. A sign. Jesus to come walking across the back and tell me everything was alright.***

Both his religious faith and intelligence are demonstrated here, although he is mature enough to understand that faith does not always provide a solution. However, as the clouds separate, he imagines the patch of blue sky to be a sign from the heavens that his mother is safe and this comforts him. He tries to explain this later to Ian, but his less sensitive cousin does not understand and thinks.

***“That’s creepy.”***

As a child, Alec is proud of his father’s trade as a sailmaker and boasts about this to Ian. His cousin, however, is much more pragmatic and realistic.

***“Your da sells stuff on the never and collects the money round the doors. He’s a tick man.”***

Alec is not yet ready to face this reality, and prefers to show pride in his father’s skills and believe his version of events.

The upbringing of Alec and Ian is contrasted when it is clear that Alec is taught to study and work hard to secure a job which will provide an escape from poverty and his social class.

 Ian believes that ‘***Ye need a trade***.’

Alec’s intelligence is emphasised in his imaginative games when the boys are playing pirate and cowboy games, and in his interest in the new comics his cousin Jacky sends him from America.

We see Alec continue to defend his father, Davie, when he hints that he is not being well looked after as,

***He’s no very good at cookin***,

before going on to proudly show Ian his father’s sail making tools, some of which they use in their pirate games. Ian's words have made some impact on Alec, however, as he asks his father

***How come ye chucked yer trade?***

Alec then learns that traditional industries such as sail making are no longer required and the factory closed.

The relationship between father and son remains close, although cracks are beginning to emerge as Alec's intelligence and desire to succeed contrast with his father’s lethargy. Even the fact that Alec finds the illegal bookie creepy suggests a sense of disapproval of his father’s drinking and gambling.

Alec has been influenced by his father and uncle to support Rangers and follow the Protestant way of life and this is seen in his choice of paint colour for the yacht. However, his interest in the Catholic badge earlier on reflects his open mind, influenced by his father. Alec's enthusiasm for ‘Protestant’ colours is less keenly expressed than his cousin and uncle's and he lacks their sectarian influence.

By the end of Act 1, there is a sense that Alec is intelligent, able to think for himself and has coped with the loss of his mother better than his father. He recognises they will struggle financially when Davie is sacked, and Alec's symbolic act of putting away the yacht into the glory hole suggests he realises he will have to mature further to cope with their situation. This act also symbolises his growing disillusionment with his father and the empty promises he makes.

**Alec - Act two**

At the start of Act two, Alec has become involved with religious activities at the Mission and has demonstrated his intelligence by coming equal top in the Bible exam with the Minister’s son. However, there is a sense that he is engaging in all these activities as a means of avoiding an awkward situation at home and to plug the gap left in his life by his mother's death:

***I felt this glow, It was good to feel good. It had come on stronger since my mother died.***

This becomes clearer when he reveals he came top in the Bible exam simply by remembering facts and he admits

***The questions were a skoosh … Just a matter of rememberin***.

However, when challenged to think about his own faith by the African visitors,

***When did the Lord Jesus come into your heart?***

 he is afraid and runs away, never to return to the church.

Prior to this, he has withstood some criticism from both Davie and Ian. Davie sees Alec's faith as a passing phase,

***Ach well, keeps ye off the streets***

Davie admires Alec’s ability and encourages him to stick in …

***Get yerself a good education. Get a decent job. Collar and tie. Never have to take yer jacket off.***

Alec's working class background is emphasised when he sees Norman, the Minister’s son, as a snob and refers to him as

***a big snotter who Thinks he’s great***.

 His brief scene with Ian as he makes his way to the Mission, however, suggests Alec may be moving away from his social class as Ian complains

***Ye never come ootwi us these days***.

As he walks to the Mission, some distance away, he hears Ian and his friends

***makin a rammy. Somebody kicked over a midden bin, smashed a bottle.***

Alec feels he no longer identifies with these pastimes and

***got [his] head down, hurried through a close and out into the street,***

putting a metaphorical distance between his and Ian's social classes. Symbolically, after he runs away from the Mission, he kicks over a midden bin, suggesting that is the class where he is most comfortable.

Following the tension of this scene, there is a humorous scene with him and his father in which they engage in a pretend boxing match. Alec's desire to find a hobby is reflected in his asking his father to teach him to box and suggesting he could join a club. Davie’s response is

***Boxin’s a mug’s game***;

his father displays common sense in his advice, but in general his own life is sadly lacking in this respect. He is looking for something to fill the gap in his life or perhaps searching for his identity.

Alec has the opportunity to move out of his social class through education when he takes the entrance exam for a private school. The scene is humorous as he is seen to struggle with the maths problems, and his intelligence is clear when he questions the logic of some of the tasks and relates them to his own experience.

Like many pupils, he assumes he has failed, and so is happy to learn that he has not only passed but secured a bursary, meaning money will not be an issue. This opportunity to better himself and move out of his social class will lead to a breakdown in his relationship with his father which was so important at the beginning of the play when his father acknowledged it is

***Just you and me now, son.***

Ian also realises this symbolises the end of their relationship in his comment,

***Aw well, that's it then.***

His criticisms of the school and its pupils are largely ignored by Alec who has learned to rise above such comments.

Alec's education is clear in his soliloquies when he provides a summary of his work in Latin, music, science, geography, mathematics, religious studies and English. However, compared to the modern day curriculum, much of what he has learned is from memory. It is made clear he still has some growing up to do, as he ends the soliloquy in a way reminiscent of the game Hide and Seek:

***University here I come. Ready or not.***

# Davie - Act one

 Davie, grief-stricken and in funeral attire, and a cracked shaving mirror

Davie, Alec's father, finds himself in a challenging situation at the start of the play. Struggling with his grief following the death of his wife, he has to force himself to bottle this up and be a role-model for Alec. Davie is suffering from depression and grief, and his blunt words,

***Ah’ve got a bit of bad news for ye son … Yer mammy’s dead***

echo in Alec's mind. Men of his social class and generation were not expected to display emotion and his attempt to continue as normal contrasts with his son’s

***real big deep sobs.***

He highlights the importance of family relationships when he tries to comfort Alec by saying

***There's just you and me now son. We’ll have tae make the best of it.***

He is determined to make a good impression, telling Alec they need to tidy up as

 ***Folk’ll be comin back after the funeral.***

He reveals his feelings of grief to the audience: he is determined to keep busy to forget his grief but then something trivial reminds him. His repetition of

***Just you and me now son*** emphasises the importance of family for him.

However, Davie’s grief and depression are preventing him from being a good parent and role-model as he acknowledges that the house is still a mess but it can be tidied tomorrow. This sums up Davie’s way of life and tomorrow never comes.

Davie is an intelligent man. He is seen to question why particular words are used,

***Isn't it funny the words ye use to describe things? Shattered.***

His statement, ***Ah’m shattered***, after the funeral has two meanings - he is referring both to how tired he feels and to his broken life.

In the early part of Act 1, Davie is working as a tick man, going door-to-door collecting credit payments. This is a thankless job and well below his skills and experience. However, traditional industry was in decline and there were no jobs,

***The chandlers ah worked for shut doon. … Naebody needs sailmakers these days.***

Davie feels worthless and unfulfilled as he is unable to use his skills and intelligence. He promises to make a sail for Alec's model yacht, and the young boy is full of pride and hope. Speaking of his dad, he tells Ian: …***he’s really a sailmaker. That's his real job.***

Davie struggles to cope as a single parent, as revealed when Alec tells Ian they are having fish suppers because Davie is ***no very good at cookin***.

He has been spending time in the pub, possibly for company and also as a means of release from his frustrating job and lonely life: ***wee half at the end of the day. Just helps me tae unwind.***

He has been illegally gambling and is desperately hoping his luck will change. However, like much of the rest of his life, this too will fail. He finds himself having to ask his brother, Billy, for more time to repay the money he borrowed, and is forced to admit he is struggling to make ends meet.

Work is not going well as he collects very little and, therefore, does not earn much commission. He is in debt to the bookie, who has his own violent means of dealing with debtors. Billy, although sympathetic to an extent, seems to be losing patience with Davie and does not understand his grief. Davie feels he is going mad and wonders if he will ever be able to move on with his life.

Predictably, Davie does not make the sail for Alec’s yacht, much to Alec's disappointment. This contrasts with the more practical Billy, who paints the yacht within a few days. Davie describes what is required to make the sail, using technical jargon and demonstrating knowledge. However, he has lost the drive to complete the practical task.

The sailless boat symbolises Davie’s position – going nowhere. Also, Alec will have to provide his own ‘sail’ for his personal voyage through life.

Despite Billy's attempts to protect his brother by ‘dealing with’ the bookie, Davie is beaten up and robbed, leading to the loss of his job:

***Ah just got ma jotters. Week’s notice.***

This adds to his frustration and feeling of worthlessness. Perhaps feeling responsible, Billy offers to find him a basic job in his place,

***doin yer sweeper up***, which might lead to a storeman’s job.

Davie tries to put on a brave face when he tells Alec***, Ah’m better off out ae it***.

Despite his apparent optimism, ***Never died a winter yet,*** the Act closes with Davie’s feelings of low self-esteem and grief intensified.

# Davie - Act two

Davie is not entirely supportive of Alec's interest in the Mission and sees it as a passing phase. However, Alec is perhaps similar to his father who was a member of the Boys’ Brigade and earned a long-service badge. Davie was promoted to sergeant which demonstrates his leadership qualities and ability to stick at something, a skill he has largely lost in his adult life. He had ambition once which he reveals when he says his reading of The Life of David Livingstone made him want to be a missionary, but he

***just drifted away fae it***

ending up with a dull life of poverty and underachievement. This is why he values education and encourages Alec to

***Get yerself a good education. Get a decent job. Collar and tie. Never have to take yer jacket off.***

This well-meaning advice leads to the breakdown of the relationship he so values with his son, as he cannot find the drive and self-belief to match Alec's ambition.

He contrasts the stereotypical working man by having intelligence and being well-read: Davie recalls the Minister’s visit,

 ***Ah think he got a surprise. Wi me no going to church an that, he must've though ah was a bit ae a heathen… But ah wisnae. Ah showed him a long-service badge fae the BB. Even quoted scripture at him.***

However, the fact he

***cannae be bothered going to church***

reflects his outlook on life, largely resulting from his depression and low self-esteem. This is further evidenced when Alec considers joining a boxing club and is put off by his father:

***Boxing’s a mug’s game. Ye don't want tae waste yer time. Ah didnae stick it,***

although it appears he gave up boxing when he met Alec's mother.

Symbolically, Alec complains about the crack in Davie’s shaving mirror,

***There's a big crack doon the middle. The two halfs don't sit right***

and this reflects Davie’s life, distorted and broken following the death of his wife. The fact he is not keen to replace it,

***Does me fine for shavin***

suggests he is not ready to move on with his life.

Davie feels he has not been successful in his life and continually encourages Alec to study hard, as education holds the key to his future in the same way that boxer Benny Lynch used his talent to escape poverty:

***Course the likes ae Benny Lynch an these blokes it was the only way tae get out. Fightin. …Ye’ll get out using yer brains but.***

It comes, therefore, as a surprise to the audience that, when Alec receives the letter telling him he has been successful in the entrance exam for private school, Davie remarks

***Yer teacher’ll be pleased***.

Davie, once again, shows little emotion, stereotypical of a man of his age and generation. He does go onto tell Alec,

***This is a great chance yer getting son. Great opportunity. Get yerself a good education. Nothin tae beat it.***

But he never actually states he is pleased.

Shortly afterwards, in contrast to his son’s success, Davie is again made redundant, with no hope of redundancy pay because of his short length of service. The sense of waste of his abilities is again hinted at when he recalls the range of classical and popular music he owned, reflecting a self-educated and knowledgeable man who has made little of his life. His frustrations spill out in the argument he has with Alec over the trivial matter of what to have for tea. Perhaps he resents Alec's opportunities, reflected in his interest in vegetarianism and wider knowledge of cooking and sarcastically classes these as passing phases;

***The next craze, We’ve been through the dinky toys and the fitba and the pop stars. Is it gonnae be long hair an ban the bomb noo?***

 It is unfortunate that, having encouraged Alec to work hard at school, he is not more encouraging. As it is, he provides a poor role model for his son and the relationship breakdown which follows becomes more predictable.

It must, however, be embarrassing for him to admit to Alec that their electricity has been cut off as he ***Couldnae pay the bill***.

He is forced to borrow again, this time from his son’s bursary money. When he later returns, drunk, having gambled and not paid the bill, he comes into conflict with an angry Alec who is now fed-up with his lack of action. Davie has gone to the pub for company as he is lonely and feels distanced from his son, who is now climbing the social ladder. They no longer really communicate and lead separate lives. Davie sums this up when he asks,

***Can you no talk to me these days? Can ye no tell me anything? Think ah came fae another planet.***

He must have felt hurt when Alec confronted him with the fact he always gives up.

Interestingly, Davie contrasts Billy in a different way, as revealed when Billy and Ian are talking while working overtime on a painting job. Billy reveals that he and Davie had planned to go into business as poultry farmers after the war. Davie had the ideas and drive, but Billy opted out, feeling

***it was takin too much ae a chance***.

Davie must have felt rejected by this, and simply gave up instead of pursuing his ambition alone.

Alec and Davie argue over a woman. Clearly a sensitive subject for both of them, Alec upsets his father when he recalls a childhood incident when Davie teased him about a girl. Alec, embarrassed, slapped him, only for Davie to shove him away and tell him he was a ***bad, bad, bad boy.***

Words hurt Alec much more than physical punishment. The roles are reversed when Alec sarcastically teases Davie about Peggy and says

***Why don't ye just admit that ye fancy her?***

The stage direction,

**DAVIE slaps him, exits,**

illustrates that Davie is still grieving and unable to move on with his life, and this is poignant for the audience to watch.

In the present day final scene, nothing has changed for Davie and Alec as they are

***freezing***

and out of coal, with Davie awaiting his dole money to buy some. When they decide to burn items from the glory hole, Davie’s comments suggest he still lives in the past and hasn't moved on, whereas Alec's words reflect his new-found education and learning. Davie recalls the Catechism he learned off by heart, without question, but cannot think back to his earliest memories and is uncomfortable when Alec discusses the different beliefs of other faiths. While Alec would willingly burn the hymn-book, Davie believes

***It’s just no right to do that,***

demonstrating a deep-seated morality.

When they find the battered torch from Davie’s encounter with the bookie’s heavy men, he recalls the

***Terrible job that was***

and believes ***Ah’m better on the broo than daein that, any day,***

 but concedes that the bookie’s drive and ambition has led to him owning two shops these days, contrasting with Davie’s life of unemployment. When Alec reads the section about bookmakers from the history book, it is clear that Davie has realised gambling is for

***Mugs! Like me!***

but he continues to do it as he clings onto ***the feelin you've at least got a chance.***

He reveals that, during his days as a sailmaker, he ***Used tae make leather wallets and things,***

demonstrating the practical skills he has failed to use in later life. He simply accepted the changing industrial nature of the country, but unlike Billy and Ian, did not move to find work elsewhere. Rather than try to make something of his own life, he continues to encourage Alec to ***dae something wi your life.***

Burning his furniture from the early days of his marriage symbolises the end of Davie’s past. There is little optimism at the end of the play about his future, especially when Alec explains he intends to find a place of his own.

Davie is a frustrating character as he has skills and talents, but grief and depression, coupled with low self-esteem and lack of drive, means he achieves little.

Billy, painting Alec's yacht blue and white, and the grocer's shop green and gold

Billy, Davie’s younger brother and Ian's father, contrasts Davie in many ways and this is his role in the play. Both fathers have influenced the way their sons think. Billy is a practical man, who has always been employed, and encourages Ian to be the same: Ye need a trade. That's what ma da says. He’s gonnae get me in wi him at the paintin when ah’m auld enough. Billy is a practical man, who is keen to get the job done. This is demonstrated when he paints Alec's yacht within a few days, whereas Davie never makes the sail, despite being the more skilled and specialised tradesman.

Billy is sympathetic to a point when Davie cannot pay back the money he lent him and questions him about why he is skint, suggesting bevvying and bettin too heavy as contributing factors. Their relationship is good enough for Davie to confide in him about the difficulties he has at work and his illegal gambling debts with the bookie. Billy is wiser than Davie when it comes to money and has not been drawn into gambling, seeing it as a waste of money and a mug's game. Billy looks for a practical solution, unlike his brother who seems to accept his fate. He tells Davie There must be some way tae get this bookie aff yer back for a start and hints he will deploy a few hard men to resolve the situation. Sadly, this results in Davie taking a beating and losing his job.

Feeling guilty about his involvement, Billy resolves to put in a word for Davie at his work. He is prepared, once again, to seek a practical solution, whereas Davie wallows in self-pity: Scrubbed. Get yer jacket on. Pick up yer cards. On yer way pal! Out the door. Yet, from their memories, it seems that Davie was the active and clever one as Billy recalls them fighting and Davie was too fast for him. Quick on yer feet. … Ma only chance was tae get ye in a bearhug.

Where Billy is not sympathetic, largely due to his lack of understanding, is over Davie’s state of mind. He does not understand that Davie is depressed and still grieving, and thinks he simply has to pull himself together, screw the heid. The traditional working man did not show his feelings and Billy represents this stereotype.

He is not interested in the books that Davie has read and prefers football. He is also influenced by sectarianism as he detests anything Catholic and criticises Celtic: Ye don't like green do ye? …It’s maybe no bad in itself, but they Catholics have made it bad. The much more open-minded Davie dismisses this and does not approve of Billy influencing his son with such bigoted rubbish, pointing out It takes a green stem tae haud up an orange lily. Even the seemingly trivial discussion about a name for Alec's yacht provides Billy with the opportunity to allude to the Protestant victory over the Catholics when he suggests the name No Surrender, in contrast to Alec's Star of the Sea and Davie’s City of Glasgow. He is seen singing sectarian songs, much to Davie's horror and remarks It’s a Protestant country isn’t it? An Ah’m not ashamed tae show ma colours. Even when they discuss great Rangers’ players from the past and Davie praises the skills of Alan Morton, Billy's reply is A protestant!

His influence is shown to have affected Ian as, when playing ‘Martian’ football, Alec humorously imagines The centre-forward’s got four heids, to which Ian replies Typical fenians. This sectarian response can only have been learned from his father and in this respect Billy is not a positive role-model for his son.

# Billy - Act two

In Act 11, we see Billy and an older Ian, who has now left school, working overtime on a Saturday painting a licensed grocer’s shop. They continue to have a close relationship. In their conversation over cheese and spam sandwiches, Billy reveals he turned down the opportunity to go into business with Davie after the war. He thought it was takin too much ae a chance and he has always played safe in his life, rather than seeking opportunities. He likes the idea of being his own boss, but would never do it.

He recalls his wartime army service, acknowledging he was lucky… Didnae see a lot of action but does not encourage Ian when he mentions the army. He is practical again, warning his son, They don't show ye the haufae it [on the adverts] … It’s no just playin at cowboys ye know. Here Billy shows shrewd insight in being unsupportive of his son’s notion of joining the army and tries to point out to him the false glamour the adverts portray.

He also suggests that London is not worth seeing. Ian is a little disappointed and there is a sense that he would like to spread his wings and experience new places, but Billy is either over-protective or unambitious for him. Either way, there is an impression that he is limiting what his son could achieve when he says don't rush intae anything. Throughout the play, we see Billy and Ian together, whereas Davie and Alec drift apart as Alec seeks out new opportunities and experiences.

Ian is Billy's son and Alec's cousin. The boys are about the same age. Ian's function in the play is to provide a contrast to Alec, and this is largely because of his father’s influence. At first, the boys play together but, while Alec is a dreamer and keen on stories, Ian is a realist with a more practical ambition. When Alec finds the broken yacht, Ian sees it simply as,It’s got nae sails or nae mast or nothing” whereas Alec sees an opportunity, Ah’m gonnae get my da tae fix it up. Ian tries to stifle Alec's pride when he points out that Alec's father is not a sailmaker any longer but a 'tick man', and questions whether he wrote the ‘poem’ which Alec quotes. He makes it clear that he intends to work with his father as a painter in the future as Ye need a trade.

The boys share an interest in supporting Rangers Football Club, but Ian's views are narrow-minded and sectarian, whereas Alec is willing to look beyond the constraints of the stereotypes. When Alec finds the holy medal, Ian recoils in horror at the sight of it, whereas Alec admits he likes it. Ian criticises Catholicism when he teases Alec Next thing ye’ll be carrying a rosary and crossin yerself.

Ian's lack of imagination and inferior intellect are clear in the scenes where the boys are playing or when Alec remembers being confused when hearing the word “bookie” as a child. Ian's response is to tease Alec, largely because he doesn't understand him. However, the boys work well together when they make bows and arrows.

In Act 11, when Alec matures and tries different experiences, such as the Mission, Ian remains with his childhood games of playing football in the street. In keeping with his character, he teases Alec for going to the Mission and complains Ye never come oot wi us these days. This attitude is seen again when he and Alec discuss the private school. Ian hates school and is desperate to leave at the earliest opportunity and go out to work: Soon as ah’m auld enough ah’m chuckin it. Getting maself a job. He doesn't understand why Alec would want to continue with his education and criticises the private school boys’ uniform, sports and sexuality, ah’d watch ma bum if ah was you!

This point marks the end of their relationship: Alec is going to private school and Ian and his father are likely to be moving away to find work, as Billy is facing redundancy.

Soon after we see Billy and Ian working closely together on a painting job; their close relationship contrasts with Alec and Davie who are drifting apart. Ian has changed his priorities and is willing to forego the football match in order to earn money working overtime. Their cheese or spam sandwiches link them to the working-class. Ian has some ambition to be his own boss or experience working in a different environment, such as the army. These ideas, however, are not encouraged by his father who believes that Ian has no idea what the army is really like.

**Family relationships**

Themes of Sailmaker: family relationships, grieving, social class, and religion

A main theme of the play is family relationships. The four characters belong to the same family, although the two father-son relationships differ. Alec and Davie’s family situation is forced to change at the start of the play with the death of Alec's mother. At the end, it changes again, as Alec chooses to leave the family home and live by himself when he goes to university. Billy and Ian's home life remains static throughout. This symbolises their lives and ambitions as, even when redundancy forces them to seek work elsewhere, they both move to Aberdeen.

Davie is presented as a traditional Scottish working man who cares about his family and shows few feelings. Even when Alec recalls learning of his mother’s death, his father’s words are honest, blunt and unemotional Ah’ve got a bit of bad news for ye son… Yer mammy’s dead. Davie makes no attempt to soften the blow and no reference is made in the stage directions to him holding or comforting his son.

We learn that he turns away and says Ah’ll make a cuppa tea... It is only in a soliloquy that he reveals his feelings of grief. This indicates that, while Davie cares deeply for his son, they are not close and cannot communicate in an open way with one another. This is why it is perhaps easier for Alec to choose his own direction in life at the end of the play.

At the start of the play, Alec is both proud and supportive of his father. He boasts about his father’s trade as a sailmaker to Ian, whose attempt to deflate this by reminding Alec his dad is a tick man is ignored. He sees an opportunity for Davie to return to his trade when he finds the yacht and asks Davie to make a sail, only to be let down when Davie does not get around to it. Billy, by contrast, promises to paint the yacht, and he and Alec enthusiastically discuss colours. The job is completed within a few days.

Cousins Ian and Alec get on well at the start of the play and are seen playing action and adventure games, football, discussing comics and making bows and arrows together. They have a mutual interest in Rangers and like the same music. However, even at this young age, Alec is seen as more sensitive and intellectual than Ian, who is practical and loves football.

Ian has no interest in girls and teases Alec when he admits he likes Maureen. He also mocks Alec when he finds the holy medal and is shocked his cousin would keep a Catholic symbol. Davie’s influence is clear when Alec does not reject the medal as a symbol of another faith but keeps it, reasoning A just sorta … liked it. This demonstrates his open-mindedness.

Billy is largely supportive of Davie, although he fails to understand his grief and believes he needs to pull himself together. His attempt to scare off the bookie to whom Davie owes money ends in failure when the firm closes and all are made redundant. The family separate when Billy and Ian move to Aberdeen in search of work, leaving Davie and Alec behind in Govan.

It is clear from his reading that Davie is a clever man and he impresses upon Alec the importance of a good education and a decent job. Ironically, this leads to the final breakdown in their relationship as Alec's learning encourages him to seek out new opportunities and distances him intellectually from his father. When he goes to private school Alec is already climbing the social ladder out of Govan, leaving behind his father, who is upset over their lack of communication, Can ye no talk tae me these days? Can ye no tell me anything? Think ah came fae another planet.

# Grieving

This is significant at the start of the play and is explored in contrasting ways through the characters Alec and Davie. As an eleven year old child, Alec has no inhibitions and is not constrained by stereotypes. He cries freely for his mother, deep big sobs, and this allows him to deal with her death. His religious feelings also help as he hopes for A sign. Jesus to come walking across the back and tell me everything was alright. A window in the sky to open and God to lean out and say my mother had arrived safe. Shortly afterwards, the clouds move across the sky, exposing a wee patch of clear blue, which Alec takes to be the requested sign. This gives him the peace of mind that his mother is safe and he can now begin to move on with his life.

In contrast, Davie struggles with his grief and becomes isolated and lonely. He cannot talk to his young son and his brother, Billy, does not understand his deep-seated feelings. Davie tries to divert his feelings by keeping busy at home, As long as ye keep movin it doesnae hit ye. Get the fire goin clean the windaes dust the furniture think about something for eatin don't stop keep yerself going. His language here is a series of imperatives with no separating punctuation, which suggests a long list of jobs to keep his mind free from thinking about his late wife. However, it doesn't take much for him to think about her and he sees only a bleak future.

Davie’s grief seems to become depression and he loses his enthusiasm for life. He begins drinking and this is noticed by young Alec. He also gambles and takes no interest in his work. His job brings him little fulfilment, but he cannot find the motivation to do something about it. Meals are not being cooked, possibly because Davie does not know how, and he and Alec are living on fish suppers. His gambling gets out of hand and he is in debt, firstly to the bookie, then to Ian and finally to Alec. This leads to conflict between him and Alec.

Even at the end of the play, when Alec is ready to move onto university and seize new opportunities, Davie is lonely and grieving. He and Alec argue over women. Alec tries to encourage his father to form a new relationship, but goes about it in an unsympathetic way by mocking him. Every time ye meet a wumman she’s a really really really nice person. Why don't ye just admit that ye fancy her? Alec receives a slap for this. Despite all his education, Alec has failed to understand that his father is lonely and seeks company in the pub, but is not ready for a new relationship.

The symbolic burning of the items in the glory hole and his rehousing by the council may provide Davie with the opportunities to move on, but only time can determine whether he will. The end of the play is rather poignant as the audience sees him alone.

# Social class

The family belong to the traditional Scottish working class. Men would leave school, often at the earliest opportunity, become apprentices to a trade (such as painting) and lead a practical life, working and providing for their families. They were the head of the family and viewed this with a sense of pride. Alec is proud of his father’s trade as a sailmaker and sees it as superior to the job he is doing at the start of Act 1 – working as a tick man.

Moving from this to the middle classes was viewed with some scepticism, for example in Ian's scathing comments after Alec sits the entrance exam for a private school. Education is seen as the key to social mobility and the writer explores the idea of private versus state education. For Alec, private education leads to university, opportunities and risks, but for Ian, state education leads to a trade and a steady job.

Although Davie does nothing about his own employment situation, he is determined his son will have the opportunities that he did not and impresses upon him that education is the key to success in life. Goin tae a good school. Go on tae the University. Decent job. For Alec, this links to social class, and his private school education opens his eyes to a variety of subjects and philosophies. By the end of the play, he knows that lignum vitae is Latin for ‘wood of life’ and he has learned much about science, literature and the arts, albeit learning by rote rather than the modern approach of investigation and problem solving.

Structurally, it is interesting that the scene revealing Alec's new studies is followed immediately by Davie’s redundancy, thus highlighting the importance placed on education in the play. Alec is taking advantage of his education and opportunities whereas Davie did not. He considered setting up a poultry farming business with Billy after the war, but, when Billy would not take the risk, Davie simply forgot about the idea rather than attempting to realise his ambition. This stage in his life would be another opportunity to take a risk. He is unemployed anyway and has nothing to lose but he does not take it.

Ian and Billy do not value education as a means to building a future. Ian hates school, cannot wait to leave and cannot understand why Alec is still there and not out working. Ian mocks the private school, insinuating that all the boys there are snobs and homosexuals, and that rugby and cricket are not suitable sports for boys.

Prior to this scene, Alec might have agreed to some extent when he admits to Davie he does not particularly like Norman, the Minister’s son, describing him as a big snotter. Thinks he’s great. This may be entirely down to Norman’s personality – he never appears in the play – but is more likely an uncharacteristic judgement of Alec's. It is interesting to note that the more middle class Norman does not have his name abbreviated, unlike Alec, Davie and Billy, who represent the working class.

# Religion

Religion features throughout the play. It is first referred to in an innocent, child-like way, when 11- year-old Alec hopes God has taken his mother safely to heaven and seeks a sign that this is the case. He is pleased when he looks up and the clouds have parted, revealing a patch of blue sky.

When Alec is seen going to the Mission at the beginning of Act 11, he has become almost fanatical about it, having come equal top in the Bible exam with the Minister’s son. He feels the Mission provides him with security and he felt a glow. It was good to feel good. It had come on stronger since my mother had died. This interest is revealed to be part of Alec's grieving process when he does not have an answer to Mrs Latula’s question, When did the Lord Jesus come into your heart child? The answer to this question does not lie in the Bible and Alec cannot learn it off by heart as he did the answers to the questions in the Bible exam. Struggling to deal with his emotions, as the answer is personal, he runs out of the Mission, never to return.

or Alec, religious faith is over because the answers are too much of a challenge. This is symbolised in his willingness to burn his hymn-book at the end of the play. By contrast, Davie, who admits to not being a churchgoer, although he is knowledgeable about the Bible and was a long-serving member of the Boys’ Brigade in his youth, finds this idea horrific, suggesting he has the deeper faith.

There is also a passing reference to Buddhism at one point, when Alec, responding to his father’s uneasy and uncompleted assertion, Ye have tae believe in somethin. Otherwise…, says that in one of the Buddhist books he has read there was a story about a monk who burned a wooden statue of the Buddha, in order to keep warm. He further concludes: Ah think the idea was that everythin’s holy – or nothing. This is a semi-playful allusion to the author’s own serious interest in Buddhism, as well as a hint in the play that there are other religious dimensions in the world that exist outside the narrow sectarian divide of Glasgow.

Billy and Ian refer to religion in a sectarian way, illustrating their allegiance to Protestant Scotland and Rangers, and criticising anything linked to Catholicism simply because it is not protestant. Davie points out the stupidity of this to Billy, but his comments are ignored as Billy does not have the intellect to consider the bigger picture, he simply repeats the stereotype.

**Act one yacht**

Alec's yacht in three states: in the glory hole, newly painted, and burning on the fire

The play opens with 11-year-old Alec recalling the death of his mother. His recollections are interspersed with the words of Davie, his father, bluntly telling him the news. Alec recalls the untidy home, the funeral and the point where father and son were left to continue with their lives alone.

Alec is then seen with his cousin, Ian. However, it is clear from the boys’ dialogue that Davie is no longer working as a sailmaker but as a tick man, collecting money owed. Alec and Ian display their imagination in a variety of adventure games. They discuss their cousin, Jacky, who has emigrated to America and sends them comics.

Life for Davie and Alec is hard and Davie is struggling to cope, as Alec reveals when he says He’s no very good at cooking and that they regularly have fish suppers. The boys then discuss their interest in Rangers and music, and Alec mentions that he thinks he saw the Virgin Mary not long after finding a holy medal.

Alec is concerned when his dad comes home after being in the pub. Davie is struggling to collect money from his customers and is also finding it difficult to deal with his grief. They discuss Davie’s trade as a sailmaker and he explains the decline in skilled industry meant the factory closed. He promises Alec he will repair the model yacht before asking him to place a bet with the bookie. Alec is reluctant to do this as he finds the bookie creepy.

Davie is seen with his brother, Billy, from whom he has borrowed money. When Billy quizzes Davie about his inability to pay him back, he discovers Davie is in a lot of debt to the bookie through illegal gambling. He is sympathetic up to a point and implies he will threaten the bookie to leave Davie alone. The dialogue also makes it clear that Davie is continuing to struggle with his grief following his wife's death.

Davie has not yet repaired Alec's yacht. In contrast, Billy offers to paint it for Alec and they discuss colours. Ian and Alec are then seen making bows and arrows, and Ian is a patient teacher, revealing his skills in practical work. Billy returns after a few days having painted the yacht. This is in contrast to Davie who has still not made the sail. Billy's bigotry is apparent when discussing colours. Davie, however, is more of a thinker and does not make such judgements.

Despite Billy's promise that he will take care of the situation with the bookie, Davie is beaten up and robbed which leads to him losing his job. He puts on a brave face when he shares this news with Alec, but the Act ends on this note of pessimism.

# Act two

This Act begins some time after the end of Act 1. Alec has changed and matured, and has new interests. He zealously attends the Mission several times a week, and has come equal first in the Bible exam. This contrasts with Ian, who still wants to play football and is annoyed when Alec does not and mocks him. Davie is not entirely supportive of his son either, although he too participated in church activities when he was younger. He attended the Boys’ Brigade, rising to the rank of sergeant and earning a long-service badge. Davie reminds us he is well-educated, having read The Life of David Livingstone and, at one time, dreamt of a life as a missionary. He sees the value of education and encourages Alec to work hard and secure a decent job.

In a soliloquy, Alec reveals he had found peace in his religious faith, I felt this glow, which he struggles to explain both to himself and to Ian. He is seen to reject Ian's pastimes such as football and playing in the streets. However, Alec's interest in the Mission comes to an abrupt end when he is challenged with a probing question by Mrs Latula, an African visitor.

It becomes clear that Alec has been looking for ways of occupying his time and is content to learn his bible by rote, but has not yet matured enough to form a religious faith that would stand up to scrutiny. He runs away from the Mission and, symbolically, kicks over a midden bin. On his return home, Davie asks him about his mood and the two engage in playful sparring. This leads Alec to wonder whether he should join a boxing club, only to be discouraged by Davie who tells him Boxin’s a mug’s game.

In the next part of the scene, Alec is about to sit the entrance exam for a private school. He is seen struggling with the maths paper and does not believe he has passed. His cousin Ian mocks private education and the pupils who attend the school. A short while later, it is revealed Alec's fears were unfounded and he has passed the exam. This move will create a divide between him and his family.

In contrast, Davie and Billy learn that they are being made redundant as the factory is closing down. Alec is frustrated that his father seems unable to return to his trade and the subsequent argument over what to have for tea illustrates these frustrations. His financial problems are further highlighted when Alec discovers Electricity got cut off son. Couldnae pay the bill.

For Billy and Ian, things are different. They are working together as painters and are taking advantage of Saturday overtime to complete the work on a new licensed grocer’s. Billy recalls a time after the war when he and Davie considered going into business together, but Billy was not prepared to take the risk, thus he is unsupportive of Ian when he considers joining the army. Despite their disagreement, there is still a closeness between them that is less apparent between Davie and Alec.

Davie enters having had a small gambling win, which he has spent in the pub. He asks what book Alec is reading, and on hearing David Copperfield enthuses about the character Mr Micawber, who displays similar traits to Davie. Despite financial setbacks both are eternally optimistic that something will turn up.

Davie's high spirits are deflated by Alec's anger that he didnae know where ye wur and frustrations spill over into an argument over money, then about Davie and a woman. Alec recalls a time when he was a child and Davie teased him about playing kissing games at a party. Embarrassed by this, Alec recalls hitting his father who shoved him away and told him he was a bad, bad, bad boy. He challenges his father about giving up and criticises the untidiness of the house, with echoes of the opening scenes of Act 1.

Soon after Alec, as an older teenager, is seen with Davie looking through items in the glory hole, many of which were mentioned earlier in Act 1. One by one the items are cast into the fire, symbolising the end of an era for Davie and Alec. This is reinforced when Alec tells his father he wants to find student accommodation when he begins university. The final item to be burned, symbolically, is the yacht Davie never repaired.