

# **Arsenic and Old Lace Film Summary**

## **Arsenic and Old Lace by Frank Capra**

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## Context

*Arsenic and Old Lace* explores the challenges of family, especially when your family happens to be insane. Cary Grant plays Mortimer Brewster, who discovers terrifying secrets about his sweet old aunts.

While Mortimer is visiting home before going on his honeymoon, he learns that his aunts have kindly been putting lonely men out of their misery for years. He cannot believe that these sweet old ladies could be serial killers, but he is forced to and wants to protect them anyway.

Then, Mortimer's long lost brother, Jonathan, returns home after a long absence. Jonathan is a cruel criminal, a killer with a record as good as his aunts' - almost. As Mortimer and his aunts try to outwit Jonathan, Mortimer becomes increasingly concerned about the insanity running rampant through his family. Mortimer finally defeats Jonathan and has his aunts and uncle committed to the insane asylum, right after he discovers that he is not biologically related to the insane Brewsters. He is thrilled and runs next door to be with his new wife.

Frank Capra was one of the best directors of his time and made his mark on the profession in such works as *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *The Younger Generation*, *Ladies of Leisure*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Meet John Doe* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. His funny, surprising comedies and his moving portrayals of an idealistic vision of American life keep viewers laughing and crying to this day. Moving from the realm of the silent film to that of talkies early in his career helped Capra make his mark, as the new genre became increasingly popular. Because of his enterprising and unique ways, Capra was known as an important director long before *It's A Wonderful Life*, one of his most famous films.

Cary Grant had roles in over 60 movies and was the main star in dozens of those films. *Arsenic and Old Lace* was one of Grant's most successful roles, and no discussion of his success would be complete without it. Grant starred in such films as *Once Upon a Honeymoon*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Bishop's Wife*, *I Was a Male War Bride*, *An Affair to Remember*, *North by Northwest*, *The Grass is Greener*, *Charade*, *Father Goose*, and *Walk Don't Run*.

Peter Lorre is quickly recognized as one half of a famous pair, partnered with Sydney Greenstreet in both *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Casablanca* (1942), two of his best known films. Lorre started in such films as *Crime and Punishment* (1935) and several Mr. Moto films during the 1930s. Lorre plays the perfect scary doctor in this hilarious film.

Although hilarious and fun, *Arsenic and Old Lace* didn't even receive any nominations for Academy Awards. Usually awards go to dramatic films, particularly in the era of this film, and as far as the Oscars are concerned, this production doesn't measure up as the right type of serious film.



## Summary and Analysis

This Halloween tale begins in Brooklyn at 3:00 p.m. At a baseball game, everyone is going crazy as the baseball players get into a huge fight. On the other side of the river, though, people are falling in love. Two reporters pop in to see if there is anyone famous applying for marriage licenses, and suddenly they spot Mortimer Brewster, a famous critic who is outspoken against marriage. They think they're mistaken, but they wait around for a few minutes to be sure.

When the clerk can't hear him, Mortimer must yell his name. The reporters begin to chase him, and he and Elaine, his fiancée, run out. Mortimer pulls Elaine into a telephone booth and begins to yell at her. He has spent his whole life writing against marriage, and he doesn't want to mess up his reputation. Finally, he gets frustrated and kisses her, and they get back in line.

Back in Brooklyn, the scene is a cemetery built in 1654. Two policemen walk down the row as one prepares to give over his district to the other. He says that the Mortimer sisters are wonderful. They have a room for rent sign in front of their house. The policeman explains that they are well off, but they put up the sign so that they can help people.

Inside the house, Aunt Abby talks to Mr. Harper, Elaine's father and a reverend, who disapproves of Mortimer dating Elaine since Mortimer has such a negative attitude on marriage. While they talk, Uncle Teddy plays the piano. Aunt Abby and Aunt Martha are thrilled with the match because Mortimer comes to see them more often now. The policemen go to the house, and Officer O'Hara is introduced to the family. As the officers pick up some donated toys for charity, Teddy goes running around yelling, "Charge!" Then, he starts playing a trumpet upstairs, and the older officer warns him not to play again. O'Hara learns that Teddy believes he's Teddy Roosevelt.

Outside, Elaine and Mortimer celebrate their marriage. They are on their way to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon, but first they have to figure out how to tell her father. She goes inside to finish packing so that they can finally leave. Mortimer runs inside and tells his aunts, who pretend to be surprised. He then calls to have flowers delivered to all the places they'll be visiting.

Mortimer's aunts tell him that a little party is about to get together. They knew that the two would get married, but Mortimer seems to still be a little shocked about the event. His aunts even have a wedding cake ready for the happy couple.

Mortimer and his aunts talk about the reverend's reaction to the marriage, since he's not happy about Elaine seeing Mortimer. Then, they begin looking for copies of Mortimer's new book, *Mind over Matrimony*, so that they can hide them before Elaine sees them. As Mortimer begins his search, Uncle Teddy comes down dressed as if he were about to go on safari. He announces that he's off to Panama to take care of the Canal.



While Aunt Abby is looking for pictures, she finds a picture of Mortimer's brother, Jonathan. They debate what happened to him. He was a terrible boy, and they assume he is probably in prison by now. Mortimer says he saw a play recently that reminded him of Jonathan; it was called *Murder Will Out*.

When the curtain of the play went up, the first thing the audience saw was a dead body. Mortimer says this as he raises the top of a window seat. He closes it, then opens it again and says, "Hey, Mister." He is very concerned and begins to whistle for Elaine. He gets a look of realization on his face and sits quietly.

The aunts come in to bring the wedding cake, and Mortimer begins talking to them about sending Teddy to the sanitarium. He thinks Teddy should go immediately. Mortimer then reveals that Teddy has killed a man. There's a body in the window seat. The aunts, though, say that they already know this. They reassure him that everything's okay and ask him to forget about it. They didn't think he'd peek.

All the aunts know about the dead man is that his name is Mr. Hoskins, and he was a Methodist. Mortimer asks what he's doing in the window seat. They tell him that he died, but Mortimer wants to know how it happened. They ask him to not be too inquisitive, but then they explain that the man drank wine with poison in it. When Mortimer asks why, they simply tell him that in the tea it smelled too strong. Mortimer cannot believe that the aunts poisoned a man and then put him in the window seat because the reverend was coming.

The aunts feel that they have the right to their own little secrets. Then, they talk about how they're going to help some neighbors in a few days and walk into the kitchen while Mortimer stares after them in shock. He goes to the phone, calls the operator and asks if she can hear his voice. Since she can, he decides that he must not be dreaming.

When Mortimer hears Elaine's whistle, he tries to explain things by motioning to her, but he realizes it's just not possible to explain what his aunts have done. He goes into the kitchen while his aunts are giving candy to trick-or-treaters. He wants to know what they plan to do about Mr. Hoskins, but they just want him to forget about it. They explain that Teddy is down in the cellar digging a burial plot, what Teddy thinks is a lock in the Panama Canal. Mortimer can't believe it, but his aunts say that's what they did with the others. It turns out that this is the twelfth man they've killed.

The phone rings, and Mortimer hears Elaine whistling. He doesn't have time to talk and hangs up, but then he tries to apologize. Instead, he runs into the dining room and tries to find out who the first person was that his aunts killed. They say that a man, Mr. Mitchom, came looking for a room, and he was so lonely that they felt sorry for him. Then, he had a heart attack, and he looked so peaceful. From there, the aunts decided to help other lonely old men. They already know exactly what to do, so they don't think Mortimer should worry. The women tell him their recipe for poisoning men with elderberry wine; they're very proud of their accomplishment.



As the women walk back into the kitchen, they mention giving Mortimer some wine, and Mortimer gets scared. A cat walks into the house as Mortimer opens the door to listen to Teddy singing downstairs while he digs the grave. Mortimer tries to come up with a plan, and then Elaine walks in while he's looking in the window seat. He tells her to go home until the next day. She thinks he's lost his nerve, but he tries to explain that something has happened.

The phone rings, and Mortimer has to talk to the judge about Teddy. He wants to get Teddy into a good place as soon as possible. Elaine doesn't leave and sits on the window box. Mortimer sees her and screams at her to get up and go away. Finally, he throws her out of the house, and she gets angry that he would drop her so quickly after their marriage.

A moment later, the doorbell rings. A man named Gil comes in to find out about the room for rent. He lives in a hotel and doesn't like it. He doesn't have any family. The aunts decide that he's come to just the right place. Martha gets the bottle of wine down, and the aunts try to give him a drink before showing him the room. He says he doesn't touch alcohol, but when he finds out that it's elderberry wine, he decides to take a drink.

In the meantime, Mortimer is yelling on the phone trying to get through to the sanitarium while the aunts watch Gil closely as he begins to drink a sip. Mortimer comes over to get a drink, and the aunts tell him not to drink that wine. Realizing that the wine's poison, Mortimer yells at the man and sends him away before he drinks any. Then, Mortimer begins trying to explain to the women that it's not nice to kill people. They are sad and begin crying.

The phone rings, and the operator has the sanitarium on the phone. The head of the sanitarium is concerned that they would be getting another Teddy Roosevelt in the asylum since they already have too many. The man agrees to take Teddy, though, and Mortimer goes to get the papers from the judge. Before leaving, he tells the women not to do anything. They finally promise not to let anyone in the house until he gets back.

Outside, Mortimer gets another cab to go see the judge. Inside, the women are concerned about Mortimer. Aunt Martha puts up Mr. Hoskins' hat with all the other hats. They think that Mortimer's so upset because he's just been married and he's nervous. As they look for another hymnal for Mortimer to use at the service, two men begin knocking on the door. The women are nervous and decide to pretend they're not at home, but a moment later, the men outside open the door.

The first man is tall and scary, while the other looks small and sneaky. The first talks about how he grew up in this home and couldn't wait to escape it. Now, he can't wait to escape back into it. He is Jonathan Brewster. He hopes that his family has a fatted calf ready for him, the prodigal son. The two men find the wine on the table and are about to take a drink when the women confront them. They can't believe that Jonathan has returned and don't believe that he really is Jonathan at first because he looks so different. His face has changed, and it is covered in scars. Dr. Einstein is responsible for the surgery that changed Jonathan's appearance and caused the scars on Jonathan's



face. Aunt Martha says that in the last scary picture she saw, Jonathan's was the face that scared her. Einstein was drunk the last time he operated, and now Jonathan looks like Boris Karloff, the famous horror movie actor. Einstein gets scared and says he's glad to be home again.

The two women go into the kitchen to finish fixing dinner, but before leaving, they remove the wine from the table. Jonathan and Einstein wait and try to decide what's next for them. Einstein knows that they must operate on Jonathan's face soon so that no one else will recognize them. Plus, they have a dead man in their car that they must do something with. Jonathan isn't worried, and Einstein promises that he will take care of Jonathan's face tonight.

At the judge's house, Mortimer forces the man to sign the commitment papers for Teddy. The judge wants to carry on a long conversation, but Mortimer runs out. The judge wants Mortimer to let the aunts know that he's going to come visit soon because he's feeling lonely, but Mortimer warns him not to say that or to drink their wine.

At the aunts' house, Teddy comes downstairs and demands that Dr. Einstein come down to the basement to inspect the Canal. The women try to keep Jonathan from going into the cellar, but finally Jonathan insists that Einstein go down.

When the women talk to Jonathan, they refuse to let him stay. He becomes threatening and reminds them of his actions as a boy. They agree to let him stay, and then Einstein runs upstairs to get Jonathan to take a look at the perfect grave that Teddy has dug in the basement, the ideal spot for the dead man they've got stowed in their car.

Before going downstairs, Jonathan warns the women that the men will be using the laboratory as an operating room. The men decide it will be a good joke on his aunts to bury a man in the house, not realizing that a dozen dead men are already buried in the cellar. Jonathan and Einstein move the car to the back of the house so that they can get the corpse in.

After Jonathan and Einstein go out to move the car, the women have Teddy move Mr. Hoskins (whom they tell Teddy is a yellow fever victim) downstairs immediately so that the two criminals won't find him. When everything gets dark, Teddy is to move the body, and then later they plan to have a service. Aunt Martha wants to take a look at the body since she was out earlier.

As the aunts go toward the window, Jonathan pops through the window and says they're bringing everything in this way instead of around to the door. Jonathan tries to send the women to bed, and they are finally forced to give in. Aunt Abby thinks of coming back out, but Jonathan simply says her name. She runs back inside her room.

Downstairs, a cat howls as Teddy walks past into the cellar with the body after taking it out of the window box. The door to the cellar closes, and a terrible clattering can be heard. Dr. Einstein appears by candlelight, saying that Jonathan needs to carry the dead man. Dr. Einstein is alone inside when he hears a terrible sound. Then, Einstein hears a knock on the window, and Jonathan begins shoving the body inside.



While trying to take care of everything, Jonathan and Einstein hear a knock at the door. They try to hide as Elaine comes in and begins calling for Mortimer and his aunts. Jonathan begins questioning her about why she is there, and he explains that they live there. He then introduces himself and Dr. Einstein. While they talk, Jonathan tries to figure out where Einstein hid the body. Elaine is scared when she discovers his identity and tries to leave immediately.

Jonathan asks what Elaine has heard about him. She says that she came in because she saw the car and thought Mortimer had come home. Jonathan grabs her because he believes she's dangerous. What has she seen? Suddenly, Teddy comes up from the cellar and says that no visitors are allowed because this is a private funeral. Then, he walks upstairs without telling the men who Elaine really is. She begins screaming in terror, and Jonathan and Einstein decide to take her to the cellar.

Then, the two aunts come out of their rooms in their mourning outfits, trying to find out what is happening downstairs. Jonathan tells them that he surprised a thief, but Elaine suddenly runs up from the cellar and into Aunt Abby's arms. Mortimer is at the door, and he asks who Jonathan is. Jonathan reminds Mortimer of how he tortured him as a child. Mortimer insults Jonathan's face, and Jonathan almost becomes violent. Mortimer demands that Jonathan and Dr. Einstein must leave immediately. He even tries to give Jonathan money for a hotel.

Mortimer and Dr. Einstein go upstairs, and Elaine runs into Mortimer's arms. She's upset that Jonathan tried to kill her, and Mortimer sends her home so that he can take care of everything. She's insulted that his call to the asylum is more important than her. She yells at him and runs out. He tries to call to her, but she's already across the way in her house.

While downstairs, Mortimer finds the other dead body and begins screaming for his aunts. He's furious that they have killed another person. Aunt Abby looks in the window seat, and she doesn't know how this body got there. Mortimer accuses them of killing the man, but they deny it. She is insulted when he doesn't believe her and says she would never stoop to telling a fib. Jonathan comes downstairs and tells Mortimer that he's staying and that Mortimer should leave immediately. When they both hurry for the window seat, Mortimer realizes that his problems are solved.

As the phone begins to ring, Jonathan warns Mortimer not to call the police. Then, Officer O'Hara shows up at the door. Mortimer and the aunts invite him in. O'Hara thinks Jonathan looks familiar but doesn't know exactly who he is. O'Hara prepares to leave but realizes that Mortimer is the famous critic. He wants to be a writer, and Mortimer offers to help him. Mortimer gives Jonathan the next five minutes to get himself, Dr. Einstein and the dead man out before they are faced with Officer O'Hara.

Dr. Einstein tries to convince Jonathan to go ahead and leave since they already have enough trouble, but Jonathan wants to put things to rest with Mortimer. He decides that they'll drop the dead guy in the bay and then come back to get rid of Mortimer.





In the kitchen, O'Hara tells Mortimer about his family. Dr. Einstein goes downstairs for a minute, and then he comes up to tell Jonathan that there is a dead man in the hole downstairs. While Jonathan is downstairs, Mortimer comes in and thinks they're gone. Jonathan, though, enters and says that he and Einstein won't leave. He threatens to tell O'Hara about Mr. Hoskins. Mortimer offers to meet O'Hara later to talk about the play and gets him to leave immediately.

After O'Hara leaves, Mortimer refuses to give in. He runs out to find the doctor, though, so that he can get the committal papers for Teddy signed, thinking that the bodies in the basement can be blamed on his insane uncle. The aunts are surprised that Jonathan is still around, and they tell him they don't want Jonathan's man downstairs. Jonathan is shocked that they know about the man, and they simply explain that there are already twelve graves downstairs because of their charity. Dr. Einstein laughs and explains to Jonathan that the women have done just as well as they have, only the aunts stayed in the same house. Jonathan doesn't like the idea that the old ladies are as good as he is, but he only has to get one more kill to be equal with them, and he knows who the perfect victim is.

Mortimer talks to the doctor outside and doesn't want him to come in when he hears the aunts singing. The cab driver is still waiting outside trying to get the money for his fare (bringing Mortimer and his fiancée to the house), but Mortimer is preoccupied. Mortimer comes back with Uncle Teddy so that the doctor can interview him.

Then, Mortimer remembers Elaine. He goes to her window to talk to her. She's not sure he still loves her, but he explains to her that he loves her enough that he can't go through with the marriage. He tells her that insanity runs in his family. She can't even begin to understand their problems. The first Brewster who came over on the Mayflower scalped Indians instead of vice versa. Elaine is certain that the aunts are sweet, sane women. She says she loves him even if he is crazy. Finally, he gives in and kisses her. The doctor comes over and signs the papers after he's done interviewing Teddy.

Inside, the aunts lecture Jonathan about what he's doing downstairs. They don't want a Methodist and a foreigner buried together. They plan on going to the police, but Mortimer stops them. He agrees to let them go to the police the next morning if Jonathan is still there. Downstairs, Dr. Einstein wants to rest after finishing the burial, but Jonathan wants to get rid of Mortimer. In addition, Jonathan wants to do something a little special for this occasion.

Mortimer talks to Uncle Teddy and convinces him to sign the papers. While Mortimer waits, Dr. Einstein comes up to talk. Teddy sends the papers under the door, and Einstein tries to get Mortimer to leave because Jonathan's in a bad mood. Mortimer then pours himself a glass of wine. He demands to stay so that he can wait on the people from the asylum.

Mortimer tells Einstein about the terrible show he saw about a killing where a man sits in the chair while he's about to be tied up and gagged. Mortimer thinks the man must be stupid, but in that moment, the same thing happens to him, as he is bound and gagged



by Einstein. Then, Jonathan begins to light candles and talk about how he dreamt of Mortimer while he was gone. Then, he opens a case full of knives. Mortimer is tied up so that the more he struggles, the more he will strangle himself. Jonathan tells him that this may be a blessing later.

Dr. Einstein begs Jonathan to do things the quick way, but Jonathan wants to perform well before a critic. Jonathan wants to torture Mortimer until he dies. Einstein says he must have a drink to do this. He remembers the wine the aunts put up earlier and goes to get it. Einstein pours drinks for both him and Jonathan, and they toast Mortimer. As they are about to drink, though, Teddy comes out and blows the trumpet so that they drop their glasses. The men decide that they must do it the quick way now, but then O'Hara begins knocking at the door.

O'Hara comes in to talk to Teddy about the bugle and sees Mortimer tied up. Jonathan and Einstein tell the police officer that Mortimer was simply telling them about the play. O'Hara is upset that the scene is similar to his play. Rather than untie Mortimer and remove his gag, O'Hara decides to hold him hostage to tell about his own play. In the meantime, Jonathan draws his knife and begins walking down the stairs behind O'Hara. Mortimer tries to warn O'Hara, but O'Hara is oblivious. Dr. Einstein decides to save O'Hara by knocking Jonathan out.

When a knock comes at the door, O'Hara invites the visitors in. Two more policemen come in and begin to untie Mortimer. The men call the station to tell them that O'Hara has been found. Jonathan wakes up and thinks they're talking about him, so he starts telling about the bodies his aunts have buried. Mortimer is still not completely untied, so he can't give any information. After one man insults Jonathan's looks, they all get into a big fight, and Mortimer breaks free. While they fight, Mortimer sits on the stairs and smokes a cigarette.

Mortimer calls the men at the asylum to see if they're on their way. Finally, the police knock Jonathan out, and then the doorbell rings. The police chief walks in. When they describe Jonathan's looks, the police chief is curious about his identity. He realizes that Jonathan is wanted for escaping from an asylum for the criminally insane in Indiana. Then, they suspend O'Hara because he overlooked the obvious identity of this criminal.

When Teddy comes down, he informs the chief that there actually are thirteen bodies in the cellar. The chief stares at Teddy in amazement. When he begins to take a drink, Mortimer stops him. Mortimer introduces himself and refuses to give any reason for Jonathan not to be returned to jail. Finally, the man from the asylum arrives, but the chief discovers that Teddy has signed the papers Theodore Roosevelt instead of with his legal name.

Mr. Witherspoon walks in as they try to convince Teddy to sign the papers correctly. Mortimer convinces Teddy that Brewster is code for Roosevelt, and Teddy finally agrees. Mortimer finally meets Mr. Witherspoon and gets a promise that Teddy will be treated well. Mr. Witherspoon is excited to meet Mortimer and wants to show him his play. Mortimer finally lets the police chief in to see Mr. Witherspoon and tries to get rid of him



as quickly as possible. Finally, they convince Teddy that he's about to head out on his trip to Africa.

Aunt Abby and Aunt Martha come downstairs as Teddy runs up to pack. The aunts don't want Teddy to leave, and they decide that they should leave as well. Mr. Witherspoon doesn't want to take them, since he believes they are sane. The chief speaks of the thirteen bodies, and the aunts admit to having bodies buried in the cellar. They tell the man to ask Mortimer. He tries to indicate that his aunts are crazy and that he is just humoring them by acting crazy.

Elaine watches through the window as Mortimer looks stressed and as the women tell him about their project. Finally, Mr. Witherspoon agrees to let the women commit themselves, believing that they are delusional. They are excited to sign the papers while the chief goes out to talk to Jonathan. In the meantime, Elaine climbs down in the cellar while Dr. Einstein tries to sneak out the back. Mortimer stops him because he is a doctor and has him sign the papers so that the women can be committed. The police get a description of Einstein as he's leaving, but they don't realize who he is, so Einstein gets away.

Mr. Witherspoon goes up to help Teddy pack while the women tell him that they're worried that something might go wrong. They tell Mortimer that they're worried about his signature. It turns out that Mortimer's not really their next of kin. He's not really a Brewster. His mother was a cook for them, and after she had her baby, their brother married her. Mortimer is thrilled at the news and yells through the window for Elaine.

Suddenly, a scream comes from downstairs, and Elaine runs up yelling that there are thirteen bodies downstairs. Mortimer begins kissing her passionately to stop her from talking and runs with her out of the house. The cab driver tries to get them to pay for their cab but can't get their attention. Instead, Mortimer picks up Elaine and runs inside her house.



# Characters

## Mortimer Brewster, played by Cary Grant

### Description

Mortimer Brewster is a famous, wealthy critic. Everywhere he goes, people recognize him and try to show him their own plays. He tries to avoid the conversations, but most people simply won't let him get away from his job.

When the audience first meets Mortimer, he is with Elaine getting a marriage license. After recently writing a book on the difficulties and horrors of marriage, he can't believe that he's actually agreed to get married now. However, he has fallen madly in love with Elaine and can't help himself.

Mortimer is from a crazy family. Insanity runs rampant in their relatives, but Mortimer believes that his aunts have avoided this horror until he finds out that they kill people. When his cruel brother, Jonathan, shows up, everything begins to be turned upside down for Mortimer. Thankfully, though, he does finally learn that he is not actually related to his aunts and his uncle by blood, so he does not have to fear the curse of insanity.

### Analysis

Mortimer is a confident, independent man. He has no desire to get married and actually thinks it is a horrible arrangement. When he meets Elaine, though, he falls deeply in love and finally decides that it is worth the sacrifice.

Mortimer marries Elaine, but while he is packing for the honeymoon, he learns some disturbing news. There is a man in the window seat. Although he knows that Uncle Teddy is crazy, he has never suspected his aunts of having any problems. He is shocked to discover that they have been killing lonely men for years.

Mortimer is most scared because he realizes that insanity runs in the family. He doesn't want to have children lest he pass on the terrible curse. Mortimer receives the greatest gift before his aunts go to the asylum when he learns that he is not actually related by blood. He embraces Elaine passionately and carries her off to start their new life together.



## **Aunt Abby Brewster, played by Josephine Hull**

### **Description**

Aunt Abby Brewster is the first aunt that the audience meets. She seems sweet and unassuming until we realize that she has a dead body hidden in the window seat. She and her sister have been killing lonely men for several years so that the men will no longer be miserable.

Aunt Abby can't understand why Mortimer is so upset that they are killing these men. She is even willing to tell the police about their project. Finally though, he gets both of them to go to the asylum with Uncle Teddy right before he discovers that he is not actually part of the family.

### **Analysis**

Aunt Abby kindly tries to help people. When lonely men come in to rent a room, she and Aunt Martha poison them. They have perfected the technique over the years and feel like they're doing a good deed for society. Just when the audience thinks that the insanity has skipped these two kind and loveable women, we realize that the aunts are even worse off than Uncle Teddy.

## **Aunt Martha Brewster, played by Jean Adair**

### **Description**

Aunt Martha Brewster is the quieter one of the two aunts. She is a sweet older lady who is loved by the neighborhood. However, she and her sister have spent the last few years killing lonely men to put them out of their misery. Martha sees nothing wrong with their actions and believes that they are actually performing a kind deed for their victims.

### **Analysis**

Like everyone else in the family, Martha is not mentally stable. She has been killing people for years to "help" them. She doesn't realize that this is wrong. She believes that keeping people from being lonely is just the right thing to do.

## **Jonathan Brewster, played by Raymond Massey**

### **Description**

Jonathan Brewster is Mortimer's evil older brother. He disappeared many years ago and suddenly appears while everything else is going on. Jonathan has been in prison for murdering people in many different states and countries. He is cruel, sadistic and wants



to control everyone. His hatred for Mortimer is intense, but he is eventually captured by the police after they realize who he is.

## **Analysis**

Jonathan is a terribly cruel man who enjoys others' pain. Although the sisters are crazy and have killed men, Jonathan is simply mean. Their crimes are the same, but their motivations are opposite. The aunts kill for mercy, while Jonathan kills out of sadism. Jonathan has treated everyone, especially Mortimer, cruelly, but his capture puts everyone's worries to rest.

## **Dr. Einstein, played by Peter Lorre**

### **Description**

Dr. Einstein is a small, evil-looking man who helped Jonathan Brewster escape from prison. Dr. Einstein is a plastic surgeon who has worked on Jonathan so that his face will be different and he can hide from the police. Einstein is able to escape because the police do not recognize him from his description.

### **Analysis**

Dr. Einstein tries to keep Jonathan's wrath to a minimum. After getting drunk before working on Jonathan recently, he got into a lot of trouble with him for messing up his face and making him look like Boris Karloff. Einstein only stays with Jonathan because he is scared of what might happen if he leaves. Finally, when Jonathan is arrested, Einstein escapes.

## **Elaine, played by Priscilla Lane**

### **Description**

Elaine is Mortimer's new wife. They get married at the very beginning of the film, and then the audience doesn't see much of her for the rest of the show. Mortimer sends her home when he realizes all the crazy things that are going on at his house. She finally reappears at the end and sees the bodies, but Mortimer kisses her and carries her out of the house so that they can move further away from the crazy family.

### **Analysis**

Elaine is sweet and unassuming. She trusts Mortimer completely and relies on him for everything. Although Mortimer is not very interested in getting married, he has fallen completely in love with her. Elaine is shocked by the aunts' activities, but Mortimer carries her away before things get more difficult.



## **Uncle "Teddy" Brewster, played by John Alexander**

### **Description**

Uncle Teddy Brewster is Mortimer's crazy uncle. He believes that he is actually Teddy Roosevelt, and he's even digging the Panama Canal in the basement. Teddy has several funny habits: he runs up the stairs yelling "Charge!" and blows a bugle that drives the neighbors crazy.

### **Analysis**

Teddy is completely crazy, and Mortimer is scared that one day he'll find out that he is also becoming insane. Surprisingly, Teddy actually turns out to be one of the most normal people in the family when the audience learns more about the Brewster sisters' unusual hobbies.

## **Officer Patrick O'Hara, played by Jack Carson**

### **Description**

Officer Patrick O'Hara is new to the neighborhood, and he believes the Brewster sisters are two of the sweetest old ladies he'll ever meet. He thinks they are wonderful and never suspects all the crazy things going on in their home.

### **Analysis**

Officer O'Hara is new to the force and knows little about reading other people. He makes a lot of mistakes when trying to help the family, and he almost lets Mortimer get killed by Jonathan in the process.



# Themes

## Dealing with Family

Anyone who thinks dealing with family is easy must come from a very unusual family. Most families, like Mortimer's, are often difficult to deal with. Mortimer's family, however, is a little more unusual than others.

Insanity runs in Mortimer's family, and he is terrified that he will lose his mind someday too, although he does initially believe that mental illness has skipped his aunts. Mortimer is shocked to discover that his aunts are just as crazy as the rest of the family when he discovers their habit of murdering lonely men.

The most difficult person in Mortimer's family is Jonathan. He is mean and cruel and has spent time in jail. As Mortimer tries to deal with everyone in the family, he discovers the difficulties involved. The good news is that he's not related by blood, so no matter how much he cares for them, he will never inherit their mental defects.

## Patience of Love

Love will allow people to deal with things they never would accept otherwise. Mortimer is terrified of getting married, but when he falls madly in love with Elaine, he knows that he has no choice. He marries her, but even when he gets scared, she remains completely patient with him.

After Mortimer and Elaine's marriage, Elaine is forced to put up with even more from Mortimer. After he returns home, he finds a dead body in the window seat. He at first believes that his aunts don't know about the body, but when he learns of their current hobbies, he is shocked.

Mortimer spends most of the film ignoring Elaine, who although frustrated, remains very patient with him under the circumstances. She tries to understand why he neglects her, and eventually her patience pays off as he comes and sweeps her off her feet so that they can begin their life together.

## Possible Destructive Nature of Secrets

Secrets generally cause more problems than they're worth. Mortimer learns this the hard way. Although he knows that Uncle Teddy is crazy and that his brother Jonathan was always cruel, he has no idea how many secrets are held in his home.

The Brewster sisters have terrible secrets that almost destroy Mortimer's life and theirs. When he discovers that they have killed twelve men, he does his best to try to protect them. Although they don't understand, Mortimer knows that they might have a terrible



life in jail and so works to have them commit themselves to the institution. He is able to protect them from their own secrets, but he almost dies in the process.

The Brewster sisters also have another terrible secret. Mortimer is not actually related to the family by blood. He has been terrified of marriage for years because of the possibility that he might become insane as well, but when he finally knows the truth, it sets him free from fear.

## Style and Cinematography

*Arsenic and Old Lace* is a funny, intelligent mystery-comedy. Viewers are never sure what to expect next with this film. First, Mortimer is hiding from reporters while getting a marriage license, and then he finds a dead man in his aunts' window seat. From there, things become even stranger as Mortimer's brother Jonathan reappears.

Although Frank Capra is best known for his Christmas drama *It's a Wonderful Life*, his comedies such as *Arsenic and Old Lace* are classic. This film touches the hearts of all people because most have some type of semi-crazy person in their family. Everyone understands the exaggerated plight of Mortimer and laughs hysterically when the film finally comes to a close.

The cinematography of the film is also impressive. The darkness of some parts of the film simply enhances the mystery. For example, when Jonathan comes in, the audience can't see his face at first, and then the candles show the terrible face and awful scar. Light and dark play a major role in the film and help viewers to understand the characters and events.



# Motifs

## Crazy Relatives

Everyone has at least one crazy relative, so people can easily relate to this film. Mortimer has avoided getting married for years not only because of a fear of commitment, but also because insanity seems to run in his family. As the film goes on, Mortimer's fear that his own marriage will perpetuate the insanity becomes apparent.

When Mortimer comes home from getting married, he realizes how very messed up his family really is. He discovers that his aunts have developed a dangerous habit of murdering lonely men to put them out of his misery. In addition to his two crazy aunts, Mortimer has an uncle who thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt and a cruel brother who has murdered a dozen people. Viewers' lives suddenly seem a little more normal as they meet this family, and they can relate to Mortimer and his fears.

## Long Lost Brother

Although Mortimer remembers his brother Jonathan from when they were children, he has not seen him in many years. He is ready to put that part of his life to a close since Jonathan was so terrible to him. However, just as everything else starts to fall apart, Jonathan shows up. Jonathan is the past cropping up in the present, much as the past insanity in the family resurfaces in each generation.

Jonathan wants to destroy the entire family - especially Mortimer - so that he can carry on his terrible deeds and be the most successful killer of all. Jonathan comes back, bringing hatred and destruction with him. Finally, with the help of police, Mortimer is able to put an end to Jonathan's reign of terror, ending the past once and for all.

## Secrets

Secrets can make or break a home, family or organization. In Mortimer's family, secrets abound. Although he thinks that he already knows all the secrets, he quickly discovers that his family's lives are made of multiple layers of secrets. As he begins to dig through the lies and secrets, Mortimer discovers an entirely new world.

Mortimer cannot understand how his family could have, quite literally, buried so many people. He is terrified that someday he will also become insane, since it runs in the family. Thankfully, though, before his aunts and Uncle Teddy go to the asylum, Mortimer learns a final secret: he is not actually related to the family by blood. Mortimer runs to Elaine, his new wife, and carries her off to celebrate.



# Symbols

## The Bugle

Insanity runs - or gallops - in Mortimer's family. Uncle Teddy is the most obviously crazy. He believes that he is actually Teddy Roosevelt, and he tries to get everyone to address him as President. Teddy is constantly blowing a bugle and running up the stairs yelling, "Charge!" to the great annoyance of the neighbors.

Uncle Teddy's bugle is symbolic of the insanity in the family. He is constantly trying to prove his exceptional position as the President of the United States. Uncle Teddy is so convinced of his identity that he's even digging the Panama Canal in the basement.

Ironically enough, Uncle Teddy's bugle is the least of Mortimer's worries. Although Teddy is obviously insane, the sisters' activities are far more dangerous. As they kill lonely men to put them out their misery, they are by far the most confused of the entire group.

## The Marriage License

Mortimer Brewster is known for two things: his job as a critic and his book against marriage. He has been terrified of commitment for years, believing that marriage destroys all relationships. Mortimer, though, falls in love with Elaine and finally decides to marry her.

Mortimer is scared that someone will recognize him while he and Elaine stand in line to get their marriage license. The license is symbolic of true love. Mortimer cannot understand why he would let himself get married after all this time, but he does know that he can't live without Elaine.

## Jonathan's Scar

Jonathan's scar is symbolic of his evil nature. He has been treating everyone terribly for years, and Mortimer was terrified of him as a child. When the audience first sees Jonathan, he is obviously a dangerous man who is running from the authorities.

Jonathan has had many surgeries to change his appearance, since he is on the run, having killed a dozen men. He is being chased by police in various states and countries. Jonathan has scars from his surgeries, especially the last one, where Dr. Einstein got drunk before beginning to operate on Jonathan.

Jonathan's looks make him even more upsetting than his already evil nature. He looks like horror actor Boris Karloff, which only angers him. He wants to be considered handsome while looking different to remain free. Finally, Jonathan is defeated by the police, and everyone is free from his evil influence.



## Essay Questions

Why doesn't Mortimer want people to recognize him?

Describe Mortimer's feelings about getting married.

What does Mortimer discover when he returns to his aunts' house?

How do the aunts explain their situation?

How does Uncle Teddy help them with their plans?

Why does Jonathan return?

How does the family feel about Jonathan?

What is Mortimer's plan for his family?

How does everything resolve?

What great news does Mortimer get at the end of the film?