

Arsenic and Old Lace Study Guide

Arsenic and Old Lace by Joseph Kesselring

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Plot Summary

Abby and Martha Brewster are two “old maid” sisters in their mid-60s who live in a quiet neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York with their nephew Teddy, who believes that he is Theodore Roosevelt. The sisters are kind and well-loved by their neighbors. Early in Act One another nephew – Mortimer Brewster, who is a theater critic – visits his aunts, as he does almost daily, and proposes to his long time girlfriend Elaine, who lives with her father in the house next door. After Elaine goes home to tell her father of her engagement, Mortimer starts looking for some papers he left there earlier and eventually looks in the window seat – where he finds the dead body of an elderly gentleman, Mr. Hoskins. Mortimer at first believes that it is his brother Teddy – who everyone already knows is insane – who killed the man, but Abby and Martha soon tell him that they are the ones who killed him, and then tell him that they have killed 11 other “gentlemen” and had Teddy bury them in the basement; they poisoned each of their victims with arsenic, strychnine, and cyanide mixed in elderberry wine. When asked why, the sisters tell Mortimer that the men were lonely and miserable, and they were doing them a kindness.

Mortimer immediately sets about trying to figure out how to cover up his aunts’ crimes and, although he and Elaine were going to the theater that night to see a play Mortimer was supposed to review, he rudely sends her home and tries to find someone to cover for him. When he is unable to do so, he heads out to the theater alone, after making Abby and Martha promise not to let anyone in the house, and not to have Teddy bury the body until he gets back. A short time after he leaves a knock comes at the front door and even though Abby and Martha pretend they are not home, two men come into the room. One of the men is their nephew Jonathan, who is the black sheep of the family and who has a face that looks like Boris Karloff as the result of a botched plastic surgery that was done by the other man, Dr. Einstein. (Note: In the original stage production, Jonathan was actually played by the actor Boris Karloff.) Jonathan and Einstein are criminals who are on the run and have come to the house in Brooklyn to hide out. Although Abby and Martha try to get rid of them, they end up staying to dinner as the first act ends.

After dinner, Jonathan tells his aunts that he needs a place to stay, and they reluctantly agree that he can stay in his old room for one night. Teddy then takes Dr. Einstein down to the cellar to show him the new “lock” he has dug in the Panama Canal; the “lock” is actually the grave the sisters had him dig for Mr. Hoskins. As Abby and Martha head upstairs to prepare his old room, Dr. Einstein comes back and tells Jonathan that the hole in the cellar will be the perfect place to bury Mr. Spenalzo – a man who gave the two of them a ride, and who Jonathan strangled after he said that his face looked like Boris Karloff’s. They agree to bring the body inside through the window and bury it after everyone has gone to bed, and a few minutes later, they head up to their room to unpack after Jonathan orders Abby and Martha to go to bed. When everyone is upstairs, Teddy comes in and moves the body from the window seat to the cellar. A few minutes later, Jonathan and Einstein come downstairs and bring Mr. Spenalzo in through the window, but are interrupted by Elaine who comes back into the house

looking for Abby and Martha. Einstein manages to get Mr. Spenalzo into the now empty window seat before Elaine sees the body.

Mortimer returns from the theater as Elaine is being taken to the cellar by Jonathan, and Elaine runs to his arms. Mortimer orders Jonathan out, but reluctantly agrees that he can stay since his aunts invited him. He then rudely sends Elaine home again, telling her that he can't marry her because madness runs in the Brewster family. Mortimer, who thinks that Mr. Hoskins is still in the window seat, says that he will sleep downstairs, but Jonathan insists that he and Einstein will sleep downstairs. When he has a moment alone, Mortimer looks in the window seat and sees Mr. Spenalzo in there rather than Mr. Hoskins. When he questions them, Abby and Martha tell him that they have no idea who the man is – that he isn't one of their gentlemen – and Mortimer understands that this is one of Jonathan's victims. He tells Jonathan that he knows about the body, and gives his brother one chance to get out, and take Dr. Einstein and Mr. Spenalzo with him. Officer O'Hara then enters because the neighbors have complained about Teddy blowing his bugle and, after he tells Mortimer that he is an aspiring playwright, Mortimer offers to listen to the plot of his play as a way to keep him there until his brother leaves. As he is about to leave, Jonathan sends Dr. Einstein to the cellar to get a case of instruments they stored down there, and Einstein sees the body of Mr. Hoskins in the open grave. He returns and tells Jonathan they don't have to leave, that they have an "ace in the hole". Jonathan tells Mortimer what they have found in the basement and asks if O'Hara would like to go down there. Mortimer then leaves with O'Hara to listen to the plot of his play, and Jonathan and Einstein prepare to bury Mr. Spenalzo.

The third act begins with Mortimer returning after ditching Officer O'Hara, just as Jonathan and Dr. Einstein are finishing burying Mr. Spenalzo and Mr. Hoskins in the same grave. Abby and Martha are very upset about this and threaten to go to the police, but Mortimer tells them he will take care of everything, and they head to bed. After Dr. Einstein tries to get Mortimer to leave for his own good, Jonathan sneaks up behind him and ties Mortimer to a chair and gags him, and then makes plans to kill him using the "Melbourne method" – which usually takes two hours – even though Dr. Einstein begs him to use the quick way. As they are about to start, Officer O'Hara comes back into the house because Teddy has blown his bugle again. He sees Mortimer tied and gagged and, rather than releasing him, takes the opportunity to tell him the plot of his play as the curtain comes down. When the curtain comes up again, it is several hours later – early morning – and O'Hara is still telling the bound and gagged Mortimer the plot of his play. Jonathan is asleep on the sofa, and Dr. Einstein is listening seated at the table, drunk.

Two police officers then enter the living room; they have come to arrest Teddy for blowing his bugle during the night. They free Mortimer and arrest Jonathan, who is recognized as being an escapee from a prison for the criminally insane. Elaine then enters with Mr. Witherspoon – the director of the Happy Dale Sanitarium – and it is agreed that Teddy will go there that very day. Abby and Martha are upset by this and after they tell the police that there are 13 bodies buried in the basement (which no one but Mortimer, who knows the truth, believes) Mr. Witherspoon agrees to let them commit themselves to Happy Dale and be with Teddy. Dr. Einstein is allowed to escape after

signing the commitment papers for the sisters. Abby and Martha then reveal to Mortimer that he was actually adopted and is not really a Brewster, and he is overjoyed as he realizes that he will not go mad like the rest of the family and can marry Elaine. As the curtain goes down, Abby and Martha are offering Mr. Witherspoon – who has told them that he is lonely and unhappy – a glass of elderberry wine.

Act One (Late afternoon, in September)

Summary

The curtain rises on the living room of the Brewster house in Brooklyn, where all of the action in the play takes place; Abby Brewster, Dr. Harper – the elderly pastor of the church located directly across a graveyard from the Brewster house – and Teddy are having tea. The living room is described as being “Victorian” and old-fashioned. Abby is in her mid-sixties and is quite prim and proper, as is Dr. Harper. Teddy is in his early 40s, has a large mustache, and is wearing a long coat and old-fashion pince-nez glasses. The action is set “in the present,” which in this case means 1941, the year of the play’s publication, just before America entered World War Two.

Dr. Harper and Abby are discussing the fact that Abby’s nephew Mortimer is dating Dr. Harper’s daughter Elaine, and that the two of them have become quite serious. Harper is concerned about Mortimer’s connection to ‘the theater’ and the sort of people it attracts. Mortimer is a theater critic. Abby tells Harper that Mortimer hates the theater, and would be much happier if the paper had let him continue covering real estate and not made him take the “horrible night position”. A knock comes at the door and two police officers named Brophy and Klein enter. They have come to collect toys for the Christmas Fund. Teddy asks them what news they have brought him, and one of them addresses him as Colonel and says there is nothing new to report. Abby tells Teddy to go upstairs and get the box of toys they are donating from his Aunt Martha’s room. Teddy walks to the base of the steps leading upstairs; he stops, draws an imaginary sword, yells “Charge!” and runs up the steps. The others in the living room pay no attention. Abby enquires about Officer Brophy’s wife who has been ill with pneumonia, and then goes to the kitchen to get some beef broth for the officer to take to her.

Teddy reappears at the top of the steps and blows a bugle; Brophy scolds him saying that he promised not to do that anymore, and Teddy exits. The two police officers and Dr. Harper discuss how sweet and kind Abby and her sister Martha are, and what a shame it is that two such wonderful people have a crazy person like their nephew Teddy in their family – who thinks that he is Theodore Roosevelt. Officer Klein mentions that Teddy’s grandfather was rumored to be a little crazy too, but made a million dollars in patent medicines, which he produced in a lab right in that very house which he left to Abby and Martha.

Martha then comes into the room through the front door. She is another prim and proper looking woman in her mid-sixties, dressed in an old-fashioned Victorian manner with a high lace collar that covers her neck. She greets everyone in the room individually by name as Abby comes back in with a container of broth for Brophy’s wife. Martha has been out visiting a sick neighbor who is going to be having his leg amputated; when Abby asks hopefully if they can be present for the amputation, Martha tells her with regret that it is against hospital rules. A moment later Teddy comes down the stairs with a box of toys, and the two officers leave with the toys and the container of broth, after



saluting Teddy. Teddy then runs back up the stairs, imaginary sword drawn, shouting, "Charge! Charge the blockhouse!" When Dr. Harper asks what the blockhouse is, Martha tells him that the stairs are always San Juan Hill – the blockhouse, presumably, is at the top. Dr. Harper asks if they have ever tried to convince Teddy that he isn't Theodore Roosevelt, and they tell him that once they suggested that he be George Washington, but he hid under his bed for a week. Dr. Harper gets up to leave, and hands Abby a set of legal papers; they are commitment papers to Happy Dale Sanitarium for Teddy to sign. Harper has made arrangements for Teddy to go there after Abby and Martha die, and as he is leaving he informs them that the director of the sanitarium – Mr. Witherspoon – will be stopping by tomorrow.

After Dr. Harper leaves, Teddy starts to come back down the stairs, and Abby tells him that he will have to "dig another lock in the Panama Canal." He replies by saying "Bully! Bully!" and goes back up the stairs. Martha excitedly – and knowingly – asks what has happened, and then heads for the door to the cellar. Abby tells her that there wasn't time for the cellar, with Dr. Harper coming over, and tells Martha to look in the window seat. Just as Martha reaches it, a knock comes at the door, and she stops just short of opening it. Abby answers the door and Elaine, an attractive, smartly dressed young woman in her early 20s enters. She is meeting Mortimer there before the two of them head to the theater. Mortimer is late and Abby decides to head home to see her father, but as she is about to leave Mortimer enters. He is a good looking young man in his early thirties. Martha and Abby quickly start to clean up the cups and saucers from tea, and exit to the kitchen, leaving Mortimer and Elaine alone.

Mortimer and Elaine flirt with each other in the way that people who have been dating for a while and who are comfortable with each other do. They discuss the theater and how the months since Mortimer became a theater critic have been wonderful for her as she is able to go out most nights. Mortimer then – jokingly, but with some sincerity – tells Elaine that he wants to marry her that night and that while he will wait a short time, he wants it to happen no later than next month. They kiss and Teddy comes back down the stairs dressed in "tropical clothes" and a pit helmet. He walks to Mortimer – who addresses him as 'Mr. President' – shakes his and Elaine's hands and tells them that he is off to Panama. He then exits through the door to the cellar and Mortimer explains that the cellar is Panama. Elaine comments that it is very sweet the way Mortimer treats Teddy. Mortimer tells her that Teddy is his favorite brother. He then tells her that there is another brother – Jonathan – but that he left Brooklyn years ago, by request, and that he hasn't seen him since. As there is an hour before they have to leave for the theater, Abby decides to go home to tell her father about the engagement and exits through the front door.

Abby comes in and Mortimer tells her that he is going to marry Elaine. Abby is thrilled and calls for Martha, and they both tell him that they had been hoping things would turn out this way. Mortimer then sets about looking for an envelope that he left in his aunts' house a few days ago. He looks in a few places while Abby and Martha talk to him about wedding plans, and then they go back into the kitchen chattering to each other about having a celebration for the young couple when they get back from the theater that night. Mortimer, continuing to search for the envelope, finally walks over to the



window seat and opens it, looks inside, closes it and starts to walk away, and then freezes, a look of panic on his face. He goes back and slowly opens the window seat again, then slams it shut as Abby walks back into the room.

In a strained voice Mortimer tells Abby that they have to make arrangements to commit Teddy to Happy Dale Sanitarium immediately, and Abby tells him that it has been all arranged and Teddy will be going there when she and Martha pass on. Martha comes back into the room from the kitchen as Mortimer says that they can't wait that long, and that Teddy needs to be locked up immediately – that night. Martha tells him that Teddy is harmless and that they won't be separated from him and Mortimer tells them that Teddy was harmless, but that has now changed. He asks them to remain calm and brace themselves, and then tells them there is a dead body in the window seat. Abby then calmly tells Mortimer that they know all about the body, but that it has nothing to do with Teddy; she put the body in there herself earlier that afternoon.

Abby tells Mortimer that the man's name is Mr. Hoskins and that she put him in the window seat because he died after drinking elderberry wine with poison in it. She didn't want Dr. Harper to see the body and there wasn't time to get him to the basement before he arrived, so she put him in the window seat. Abby and Martha then exit back into the kitchen chattering away, while Mortimer starts to panic and talk to himself. After a moment he calls his aunts back in from the kitchen and asks them what they are going to do about the body. Abby tells him that Teddy is in the basement digging a "lock" in the Panama Canal, and when Mortimer asks if they intend to bury the body down there, Martha tells him of course – that is what they did with all the others. When Mortimer – in a panic – asks what others, Abby and Martha can't make up their minds as to whether Mr. Hoskins makes 11 or 12 gentlemen they have killed; it depends on whether they count the first one, who died of natural causes and was the only one they didn't poison.

The telephone rings, and a stunned Mortimer answers it as his aunts continue to discuss the number. It is his editor; and Mortimer says that he will need to find someone to cover the play tonight, as he won't be able to make it. He then hangs up and his aunts explain to him that after he moved out of the house they put an ad in the paper to rent his room. The first man who came to see it was elderly, lonely, and unhappy, and died suddenly of a heart attack in the living room; that gave Abby and Martha the idea of 'helping' other lonely old men. They had Teddy bury the first man in the basement – after telling him that the man was a yellow fever victim and had to be buried immediately – and had since killed 11 others by giving them elderberry wine with a mixture of arsenic, strychnine, and cyanide in it – all of which they got from his grandfather's old laboratory. Abby and Martha then disappear back into the kitchen to start dinner.

Mortimer stands there dazed for a moment, and then walks back and looks in the window seat again, closing it quickly. There is a knock at the front door, and Elaine comes back into the living room. She apologizes for taking so long and Mortimer, still dazed, tells her to go home and that he will call her in a day or two. When Elaine reminds him they are going to the theater, he becomes irritated and insists that she go home. Elaine doesn't understand, and heads over to sit on the window seat, but



Mortimer intercepts her and guides her to the door. The phone rings, and Mortimer answers it; it is his editor again, and Mortimer asks him to hold, and then finishes guiding Elaine to the door. She storms off and Mortimer calls after her, then remembers that he left his editor on hold, and runs back to the phone, but he has hung up. Mortimer starts to call him back as Martha and Abby enter from the kitchen.

The doorbell rings and Abby answers it, and a moment later ushers an old man into the living room, and invites him to sit down. Mortimer reaches his editor on the phone and starts talking, not noticing that the man has entered. The old man is named Gibbs, and has come to see about renting the room; he tells Abby and Martha that he doesn't have a home or family. Abby offers him a glass of wine, and when Gibbs says he never touches it, Martha tells him that it is elderberry wine that they make themselves, and Gibbs agrees to have a glass. Mortimer shouts that he hasn't been drinking but that he is going to start now into the phone and then slams the receiver down. He walks over to the sideboard, but notices the bottle of elderberry wine on the table and starts to pour a glass. Martha stops him, and Mortimer sees Gibbs for the first time as Abby tells him not to drink that wine. Mortimer screams at Gibbs to get out before he is killed, hustles the old man to the door, and slams it behind him. When Mortimer tells his aunts that they have to stop doing that, Abby tells him that they don't stop him from doing the things he likes to do, and Martha says that they shouldn't have told Mortimer about what they had been doing.

The phone rings again, and Mortimer answers it. After a moment he finally agrees to go and see the first act of the play he is supposed to cover, and then tells his aunts that he wants them to leave Mr. Hoskins right where he is in the window seat, and not to let anyone else in the house until he gets back later that night. When Martha says that they were planning to have a service for Mr. Hoskins, Mortimer agrees to join them if they will wait until he gets back. After they promise, Mortimer leaves and Martha heads upstairs to look for a hymnal for Mortimer to use at the service. When she is halfway up the steps, the doorbell rings; Abby joins Martha on the steps where they look out a window and see two men that they do not recognize. Because they have promised Mortimer not to let anyone else in that night, they decide to pretend they are not home.

A moment later the front door opens and a large, sinister looking man who bears a striking resemblance to Boris Karloff enters the room. He takes a quick look around and then softly calls for the other man to come in; the second man is smaller and slightly ratty in his appearance, with a benevolent expression on his face that suggests he has spent most of his life drunk. The large man says that when he was a boy he couldn't wait to escape from this house, and that now he is happy to escape back to it. The smaller man, who calls him "Chonny", says that the place is a good hideout, spies the wine on the table, and immediately heads for it. As he is about to reach for the wine, Abby and Martha come down the steps, and Abby demands to know who the two men are. The large man tells them that he is their nephew Jonathan, and that the smaller man is Dr. Einstein – Dr. Herman Einstein, not the famous one. The sisters don't believe him, but Jonathan identifies a piece of jewelry that Abby is wearing, and mentions that Martha is still wearing high lace collars to cover where his grandfather burned her with acid.



Becoming convinced that he is Jonathan but still slightly skeptical because he doesn't look like what he used to, Abby asks if he has been in an accident, and Jonathan tells them that Dr. Einstein is a plastic surgeon and gave him this face. When Martha says that she has seen that face somewhere – and then remembers that it was in a horror movie she had seen – Jonathan becomes irritated. Einstein then tells the sisters that this is the third face he has given Jonathan in the last five years; he had seen the same movie as Martha just before the operation, and had been intoxicated during the surgery. He assures them – and Jonathan – that he will be giving him a new face as soon as possible. Jonathan then turns on the charm, asking about the sisters and Teddy, and says how wonderful it is to be home. Martha and Abby look at each other with dismay as Jonathan sits down and makes himself at home, and then retreat into the kitchen – after first taking the bottle of elderberry wine with them, leaving Jonathan and Einstein alone.

Einstein asks Jonathan what the plan is, and is particularly worried about what they are going to do with Mr. Spenalzo – a man who gave the two of them a lift and who Jonathan strangled after he said that he looked like Boris Karloff; Mr. Spenalzo is currently in the rumble seat of their car. As they are talking Abby comes back from the kitchen and walks up to Jonathan while Martha stays in the doorway; she tells Jonathan that she and Martha want him and Einstein to leave. Jonathan turns on the charm again and apologizes for all the pain he must have caused them in the past, and then says that his greatest disappointment is that Dr. Einstein won't get to taste any of Martha's wonderful cooking. Martha takes the bait and invites them to stay to dinner, after which Abby reluctantly says that he and Einstein can freshen up in the old laboratory and then heads into the kitchen to help Martha.

Jonathan is delighted to learn that the old laboratory is still there, and tells Einstein that it is the perfect place not only for the doctor to repair his face, but also for them to set up shop – since most everyone in Brooklyn needs a new face. When Einstein points out that Martha and Abby don't want them there, Jonathan tells him not to worry, they will be invited to stay – one way or the other – and that the house will be their headquarters for years. Dr. Einstein then agrees that the house would be the perfect place for them to set up shop, because it is so peaceful. At this moment Teddy comes into the living room from the cellar, blows a loud blast on his bugle, walks to the stairs and yells "Charge!" as he runs up. The curtain falls ending Act One.

Analysis

Act One is the longest of the three acts in *Arsenic and Old Lace* and serves to introduce and develop, to some extent, all of the major characters in the play, as well as set up the play's major plotline. The action is fast-paced and continuous, and there are no long pauses, or periods without dialogue in the first act.

While all of the main characters are introduced in Act One, it is Martha and Abby who are the most well developed, and who are on stage for the majority of the act. The reader understands that neither sister has ever married, and the first several minutes of

the act are specifically designed to present the sisters as charming, kind, and even saintly old-fashioned women who do their best to help their neighbors and friends, and never have an unkind word to say about anyone. Even after Mortimer discovers the body in the window seat and learns that Abby and Martha have killed 11 (or 12) men and had Teddy bury them in the basement, the reader understands that the sisters believe that they have been “helping” the older gentlemen by killing them, and feel no guilt for their actions. In their minds they have done absolutely nothing wrong, and don’t really fully understand why Mortimer is so upset by the killings. Abby and Martha’s relationship with Teddy also provides a lot of insight into them. At no point do they ever find Teddy’s actions to be odd, and in fact actually use his delusion that he is Theodore Roosevelt to their advantage by claiming that the gentlemen they kill are “yellow fever victims” and need to be buried immediately. The sisters are devoted to Teddy, and the fact that he has absolutely no grasp of reality doesn’t matter to them; all that matters is that Teddy is happy.

Mortimer is presented as being the most “sane” of the Brewster family in Act One; however, his actions and re-actions after finding the body in the window seat provide some of the most outrageous and “crazy” comedic moments in the entire play. It is interesting to note that while his first reaction – when he thinks that Teddy is the killer – is to have him committed, when he finds out that it is actually his aunts who are the killers, he immediately changes direction and looks for ways to ensure that no one ever finds out what they have done. Although it is clear from the start that Mortimer loves Elaine, she becomes completely secondary after he discovers the body, and his treatment of her when he throws her out actually risks their relationship.

Even though Jonathan and Dr. Einstein make their first appearance near the end of Act One, their introduction into the already tense atmosphere in the Brewster home completely changes the dynamic of the situation. The audience immediately understands that Jonathan is a dangerous and frightening character – and the fact that he has strangled a man simply for suggesting that he looks like the film actor Boris Karloff shows that he is also very likely insane. While at this point the audience is only aware of his one murder and knows of a dozen committed by Abby and Martha, the sisters remain sympathetic characters, and it is obvious from the first that they are in danger as long as Jonathan is around. While Dr. Einstein is not as well developed as Jonathan in the first act, he is portrayed as a drunk and an incompetent surgeon, and the reason why Jonathan remains with him and wants him to operate on his face yet again is a mystery.

While Act One – and indeed the entire play – is a pure comedy and has no deep meaning, there are several concepts that run through the story line. Madness – and the fact that it seems to run in the Brewster family, dating back several generations – is central to the story and the action. The fact that for the most part this madness is viewed benignly is part of what makes the first act so entertaining. Also central to the story is the idea of loyalty – and particularly loyalty to family. Abby, Martha, Mortimer – and even Teddy in his own way, by unquestioningly doing what his aunts ask of him – are all fiercely loyal to each other. The one exception to this rule is Jonathan, and this is a large part of why he is immediately viewed as a menacing character.

Vocabulary

sideboard, pince-nez, quince, charitable, trepidation, intimacy, complacently, discarded, dyspepsia, cuckoo, autopsies, acquainted, Victorian, amputate, blockhouse, sanitarium, coyly, cemetery, parsonage, embroider, inventiveness, humanizing, authentic, rationalize, legalities, officiating, pedestrian, banns, humored, inquisitive, kith, forlorn, immersed, cadaver, laboratory, arouse, masterful, disgruntled, engrossed, stationary, bombazine, benevolent

Act Two (Later that night)

Summary

The curtain comes up on Jonathan sitting at the table with Dr. Einstein, smoking an after dinner cigar, while Abby and Martha are seated nervously on the window seat. Jonathan is talking about his life and his first meeting Dr. Einstein in London; Einstein gave him a new face there, which made it possible for him to return to South Africa, and they have been together since. He takes a picture from his pocket which he hands to Martha and which she says looks more like the way she remembers him. Jonathan tells Dr. Einstein that he wants to go back to that face, to which Dr. Einstein replies that it should be safe now. Abby mentions how late it is getting and that she is sure Jonathan has other places to go, but he protests that he is so full he couldn't move a muscle, obviously not intending to go anywhere.

Teddy comes down the stairs carrying a book, which he sets in front of Einstein after calling him "General", and points out a picture which he thinks shows the two of them together. He then invites Einstein to inspect the new lock that he has just finished in Panama. Abby protests that it is late, but Teddy commands Einstein – as President of the United States – to inspect the Canal. Abby suggests that Teddy go to bed, and that Jonathan and Einstein head to their hotel. Jonathan then instructs Einstein to go with Teddy to the cellar, and after they two of them leave tells his aunts that he and the doctor need a place to stay, and that he would hate to have to become "disagreeable" on the subject. Martha is frightened and says that perhaps Jonathan and Einstein could stay in Jonathan's old room just for the one night, after which Jonathan informs them that he and Dr. Einstein intend to set up shop in his grandfather's old laboratory. Abby tells him that he can stay for one night only, and she and Martha head upstairs to get his old room ready.

Einstein excitedly comes back from the cellar and tells Jonathan that Teddy has dug a "lock" down there that is four feet wide by six feet long, and will be the perfect place to bury Mr. Spenalzo. They decide that after everyone has gone to bed they will drive their car around the back of the house and bring Mr. Spenalzo in through the window above the window seat. Abby and Martha return, saying that the room is ready, and Jonathan tells them to go to bed; he and Dr. Einstein will be along after they get their luggage and move the car around the back of the house. They exit out the front door. Abby and Martha come down into the living room, agreeing that Jonathan and Einstein can only stay the one night, and wonder what they are going to do about Mr. Hoskins. Teddy enters from the cellar, and Abby tells him that there has been another yellow fever victim, and that he will need to be buried in the new lock as soon as possible. She tells him to go back to the cellar and wait until she turns out the lights, then come back up and take him from the window seat down to the lock.

After Teddy goes back to the cellar, Martha mentions that she hasn't seen Mr. Hoskins yet and Abby takes her over to the window seat. As she is about to open it, Jonathan



thrusts his head through the window curtains, and the two sisters jump back in fright. Jonathan climbs in through the window, announces that they will be bringing their luggage in through it, and tells Abby and Martha to go to bed. When Martha says that they aren't planning on going to bed yet, Jonathan sternly tells them that they must go now. Several pieces of luggage are passed through the window, followed by Dr. Einstein, and Jonathan tells Einstein to take the bags upstairs. He then tells the sisters that he will be going to bed too, and Abby says that she will just wait until everyone is upstairs and then turn off the lights, which she does.

The stage is completely black for a moment and then Teddy opens the cellar door. He looks out and sees no one there, and then switches on the cellar light. He moves to the window seat and a few seconds later the audience sees the shadow of Teddy carrying something to the cellar and closing the door, again leaving the stage completely dark. A few seconds later Jonathan and Einstein come to the top of the steps; Jonathan lights a match and they come down. After agreeing that Jonathan will hand Mr. Spenalzo through the window above the window seat to Einstein and then they will take him down to the cellar and bury him, Jonathan exits out the front door. Einstein lights a match and heads to the window; the match burns his fingers, and he continues in darkness until there is a crash. He lights another match, and the audience sees that he has fallen into the window seat, which Teddy left open. There is a tap at the window and a moment later Jonathan passes Mr. Spenalzo through – which is heard rather than seen. A soft knock comes at the front door, and an instant later the door opens slowly and Elaine peers into the living room; she is seen in the dim light of a streetlamp that leaves the rest of the room dark.

Elaine enters the room and calls softly for Abby and Martha. Jonathan enters after her quickly, and closes the door behind him, and then tells Dr. Einstein to turn on the lights. Jonathan asks who she is and what she is doing there. He moves toward the window expecting to find Mr. Spenalzo's body, and is confused when it isn't there. Elaine says she is looking for Abby and Martha, and asks what Jonathan and Einstein are doing there. Jonathan – looking outside the window and around the room for the missing Mr. Spenalzo – tells her who he is. Elaine is frightened when she hears Jonathan's name after what Mortimer said about him earlier, and heads back to the front door to leave, only to find it locked. She asks Jonathan to unlock the door but he doesn't let her leave, and instead asks her again what she is doing there at that time of night. She tells him that she saw what she thought were prowlers around the back of the house, and then tells him that she saw him unloading something from the car, but didn't know what it was. Einstein says that he thinks she is telling the truth and that they should just let her go, but Jonathan thinks she is lying. Elaine takes a step towards the door, but Jonathan grabs her wrist.

The door to the cellar opens and Teddy walks into the living room. Elaine begs him to tell Jonathan who she is and Teddy says that she is his daughter Alice, then walks over to the stairs, draws his imaginary sword and yells "Charge!" – racing up the steps. Jonathan asks Einstein for his handkerchief, and stuffs it in Elaine's mouth, but not before she screams. Einstein opens the cellar door and Jonathan forces Elaine down the steps as Einstein moves to the light switch and turns out the lights. A moment later,



in the darkness, Abby and Martha call down, asking what the matter is. Abby switches on the upstairs lights as Jonathan leaves Einstein holding Elaine in the basement; Abby and Martha are dressed very formally – for Mr. Hoskins' funeral.

Jonathan tells his aunts that he has caught a burglar, and is holding her until the police come; he then orders them back to their room. There is a knock at the front door and Jonathan shouts for them not to answer it as Elaine bursts out of the basement with Einstein following her. Abby quickly opens the front door and Mortimer enters the room. Elaine immediately rushes into his arms as Einstein and Jonathan move towards the kitchen door, ready to run. Abby introduces Jonathan – who Mortimer does not recognize – and Dr. Einstein. Mortimer makes a comment about Jonathan's face, and the two of them exchange insults, after which Mortimer tells Jonathan to get out. When Jonathan says that he and Einstein have been invited to stay, and Abby confirms this, Mortimer reluctantly agrees that they can stay one night, and tells his aunts that he has decided to move back in, and that he wants the room that Jonathan and Einstein were going to take. Einstein says that they will be delighted to sleep downstairs – Jonathan can take the sofa, and he will sleep on the window seat. Mortimer remembers about Mr. Hoskins, and says that since they already have their luggage upstairs, they can have the room and he will sleep on the window seat – at which point Einstein tells Jonathan that all this arguing makes him think of Mr. Spenalzo. When Jonathan mentions that he has lost track of Mr. Spenalzo, Einstein says that he will tell him the whole story while they pack their bags, and then pulls Jonathan up the steps.

Elaine then rushes back into Mortimer's arms and tells him that she was almost killed. When Mortimer immediately looks at his aunts, they tell him that Jonathan mistook her for a burglar, but Elaine tells him it was more than that, and that his brother is some kind of maniac. Mortimer asks Abby and Martha to fix them some sandwiches and coffee, then notices how they are dressed, sees the open basement door, and immediately tells Elaine to go home. Elaine refuses, and when Abby and Martha say that they want to celebrate their engagement, Mortimer reluctantly agrees. The sisters go into the kitchen, and Elaine demands that Mortimer explain what is going on. One minute he is asking her to marry him, and the next he is throwing her out. She asks if Mortimer really loves her, and Mortimer tells her that he loves her so much that he can't marry her. When she asks him if he has gone crazy, he says no, but that it is only a matter of time. He tells her that insanity runs in the Brewster family, and that no Brewster should marry. Elaine argues with him and turns her back while he makes his way over to the window seat and peeks in – seeing Mr. Spenalzo and not Mr. Hoskins. Elaine turns back to him and he closes the window seat, walks to her, and leads her to the front door, demanding she go home. She asks him to at least kiss her, and after he pecks her on the cheek she storms out, slamming the door.

Mortimer calls Abby and Martha and when Abby comes in alone he asks her who is in the window seat. When she says that it is Mr. Hopkins, Mortimer opens the window seat and Abby is confused, and assures him that the body is not one of their gentlemen. Mortimer doesn't believe her, and Abby says that she would never stoop to telling a fib and retreats indignantly back to the kitchen. Jonathan then rushes down the steps, and sees Mortimer standing by the window seat – where he now knows Dr. Einstein put Mr.



Spenalzo. The two men argue, and both demand that the other leaves the house at once. Abby and Martha then enter from the kitchen, and Abby – oblivious to the two men arguing – tells Martha to go and see what is in the window seat, whereupon both Mortimer and Jonathan sit down on it to keep Martha from opening it. A flicker of understanding comes on Mortimer's face as Jonathan tries to convince Martha not to look in the window seat, and he stands up and tells Jonathan that he really should let Martha see what is in there. He then tells his aunts that Jonathan, Dr. Einstein, and their "cold companion" will be leaving. Jonathan tells him that what happened to Mr. Spenalzo could happen to him too, but Mortimer says that he will give him just this one chance to escape, and stands his ground.

As the two brothers stare each other down, there is a knock at the door and a police officer sticks his head inside the door. Abby greets him as Officer O'Hara who says that he saw the lights on and wanted to make certain things were okay. As he starts to leave Mortimer pulls him into the room and the sisters introduce Mortimer and Jonathan. Jonathan starts for the stairs, and Mortimer explains that his brother is leaving. Jonathan exits, and Mortimer insists that O'Hara join them for coffee and sandwiches. O'Hara says that he only has a moment as he is supposed to call in soon, and then asks if Mortimer is the Mortimer Brewster, the theater critic. When Mortimer says he is, O'Hara tells him that his mother was a stage actress and that he is a playwright. He has been a police officer for 12 years, but it is only temporary while he collects material for his play. O'Hara then tells him that he really needs to go call the station, but Mortimer says that he might be able to help him with his play, and O'Hara says that he will tell him the plot.

Jonathan and Einstein appear at the top of the steps carrying luggage. As they head for the door, Mortimer indicates the window box and tells them that they can't leave without taking all their things, then walks over to O'Hara, tells him that it was great meeting him, and that they will have to talk about his play sometime. Confused, O'Hara says that he isn't leaving, and sits on the window seat. Jonathan tells Mortimer that he and Einstein will be running along, and Mortimer tells them to stop, and then hustles O'Hara into the kitchen, telling him that they will have their coffee and sandwiches in there. Mortimer tells Jonathan to get Mr. Spenalzo and never come back, and then exits into the kitchen, leaving Jonathan and Einstein alone.

Einstein tells Jonathan that they should just get the body and escape – that Mortimer is doing them a favor by giving them a chance and that they should take it – but Jonathan tells him that the business between himself and his brother needs to be settled once and for all. They will take Mr. Spenalzo and dump him somewhere, which will get rid of the evidence of any wrong doing, and then return to have it out with Mortimer. He tells Einstein to take the bags down to the cellar while he gets Mr. Spenalzo. Einstein exits with the bags down the cellar steps, and returns a moment later, excited, telling Jonathan that he needs to come down to the cellar at once because they have "an ace in the hole." Jonathan follows Einstein down to the cellar.

Mortimer comes back to the living room and immediately opens the window seat. Finding Mr. Spenalzo still in it, he opens the window and calls Jonathan's name softly.



Jonathan comes back up from the basement and informs Mortimer that they are staying. When Mortimer threatens to tell O'Hara about the body in the window seat, Jonathan threatens to tell him about the elderly gentleman who is dead in the cellar. O'Hara then walks in from the kitchen and Mortimer immediately hustles him towards the front door so that he can call the station. He tells O'Hara that he will go with him to a bar to hear all about his play. Mortimer leaves with O'Hara, saying he will dump him quickly and be back in five minutes. Abby and Martha come back into the living room to say goodbye, but Jonathan tells them that he and Einstein will be staying, and that they will be burying Mr. Spenalzo in the basement with a "friend of Mortimer's" who is already down there.

Abby and Martha tell Jonathan that the dead man in the basement isn't a friend of Mortimer's, but one of their gentlemen, and that there is simply no room down there for Mr. Spenalzo. When Jonathan asks why, Abby tells him that there are 12 graves down there already. Jonathan is impressed, and Einstein says that Abby and Martha have killed as many men as Jonathan has – and that they didn't travel all over the world to do it. Jonathan says that he has 13, and starts listing them off, ending up with only 12. Einstein tells Jonathan that the old ladies are just as good as he is, and Jonathan tells him that he only needs one more to beat them. Mortimer comes back through the front door and says, "Well, here I am!" The curtain falls, ending Act Two.

Analysis

While Act Two continues to develop the characters who were introduced in Act One, the majority of the comedy comes not from the peculiarities of the characters, but rather from the circumstances in which they find themselves. For the majority of Act Two, there are two unburied dead bodies in the Brewster house, each one of which only half of the main characters know are in the house. The absurdity of this situation is increased by the introduction of Officer O'Hara into the action, which Mortimer at first views as a savior who he attempts to get to stay at any cost, and then sees him as a threat that needs to leave. During this act, both Mortimer and Jonathan go back and forth believing that they have the upper hand when, in reality, they are both in the same position.

Act Two also serves to flush out the characters of Jonathan and Dr. Einstein, who were only introduced near the end of the previous act, but who really take center stage in Act Two. While Jonathan is perceived from the start as a dangerous and frightening character, the menacing tones he uses to intimidate Abby and Martha as well as his rough and almost homicidal treatment of Elaine, firmly cements the fact that Jonathan is an evil man long before he starts listing off all his victims at the end of the act. Surprisingly, however, Dr. Einstein is portrayed as a gentle and agreeable person throughout the act – first suggesting to Jonathan that they let Elaine go, and then telling Jonathan that they should leave while they can, and be grateful to Mortimer for giving them a chance to escape. It is obvious that Einstein's meeker nature is overshadowed by Jonathan's strong personality, and the audience wonders why the two of them remain together.

Perhaps the most important exchange in this act which does not involve Jonathan and Dr. Einstein is the one between Mortimer and Elaine in which he tells her that he loves her so much that he can't marry her, because of the madness in his family. While Elaine doesn't understand and is at first hurt and then angry, Mortimer is unable to explain anything to her, which frustrates both of them even more. This scene not only portrays Mortimer as a caring and decent man, but further cements the idea that his loyalty to his family outweighs his love for Elaine.

Act Two makes use of darkness and shadow during several pivotal points in the action – particularly during the times when the bodies are being moved around. The audience only sees a shadow as Teddy moves Mr. Hoskins to the basement, and hears rather than sees Mr. Spenalzo being brought in through the window. In both instances, the playwright uses the audience's own imagination to carry the action forward, with great comedic effect.

Vocabulary

delicious, adjustment, parlor, lodgers, swig, instruments, burden, balcony, peering, untimely, bewilders, distinction, magician, prowling, tomboy, mourning, peremptory, detestable, venomous, gallops, patent, maniac, desultory, poise, fury, fib, appetite, finale, trouper, wheeling

Act Three, Scene One (Still later that night)

Summary

The curtain comes up on an empty stage, and the audience hears voices through the open basement door. Abby and Martha can be heard telling Jonathan to stop what he is doing; the two then enter from the basement, and look around for Mortimer. When Abby asks where he went, Martha says that he stormed out after telling Jonathan that he would “settle things”. They then talk about what a terrible thing it is to bury a good Methodist in the same grave as a “foreigner”.

Mortimer then enters from the door to the outside carrying Teddy's commitment papers, which he has had signed by a neighborhood doctor. He tells Abby and Martha that since they told Jonathan about the graves in the basement, the only way he can protect them is to blame the murders on Teddy. Martha and Abby don't see how committing Teddy will stop what is going on in the basement, and decide to call for the police. Mortimer attempts to explain to them that if they tell the police about Mr. Spenalzo, Jonathan will tell the police about the 12 bodies they have buried down there, to which Abby says that the police wouldn't meddle in “their business”. Finally, the sisters agree to give Mortimer until the morning to get Jonathan and Dr. Einstein out of their house, or they are going for the police. Mortimer then exits up the stairs to find Teddy.

Jonathan enters from the basement, saying that the job is finished, and asks his aunts if he heard Mortimer; they tell him that he is back, and that Mortimer has promised to have him and Dr. Einstein out of their house by morning. They wish him goodbye, and then head upstairs to bed. Dr. Einstein then enters from the basement, exhausted after 48 hours without sleep, and wants to go to bed, but Jonathan tells him that before they can sleep, they have to kill Mortimer. Einstein protests and begs Jonathan to wait a day or two, but Jonathan gives him a look that tells Einstein it is no use arguing, and he reluctantly agrees. He then asks Jonathan if they can please do it “the quick way”, to which Jonathan says that this murder calls for something special, and that they will be using “the Melbourne method”, which takes two hours. Einstein begs for the quick way, but it is no use, and Jonathan exits to the basement, leaving Einstein pacing unhappily.

Teddy and Mortimer then appear at the top of the steps; Teddy is about to blow his bugle, and Mortimer stops him. He hands Teddy the commitment papers and tells him that it is a secret proclamation, which he must sign at once. Teddy then exits to sign the papers, and Mortimer comes down the steps. Einstein meets him and tells him that he needs to get out of the house. Mortimer tells Einstein that he seems like a nice fellow and that he should get away from Jonathan before he gets into trouble. When it becomes obvious that neither of them is going anywhere, Mortimer starts telling him about the play he saw that night as Jonathan enters silently from the basement; Mortimer's back is to him. The play was a mystery and as Mortimer tells Einstein how



the victim was captured, tied to a chair, and gagged, Jonathan does exactly what he is telling Einstein happened in the play, resulting in Mortimer being tied to a chair, and gagged.

Jonathan tells the bound and gagged Mortimer that he has been waiting for 20 years for this moment. Einstein again begs for the quick way, but Jonathan insists that the murder must be an artistic achievement. Einstein and Jonathan then decide to have a toast before they start, and Mortimer watches hopefully as they each pour a glass from the poisoned elderberry wine bottle. Just as they raise their glasses to their lips, Teddy appears at the top of the stairs dressed formally, and blows a loud blast on his bugle. Jonathan and Einstein drop their glasses, and Teddy marches out again. Jonathan says that now they will have to use the quick method on Mortimer and that when they are done, Teddy will be next; Einstein says that he will not hurt Teddy. Jonathan steps behind Mortimer, pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and puts it around Mortimer's neck. At that instant there is a knock at the door, and Officer O'Hara walks into the house.

O'Hara says that he heard Teddy blow his bugle, and that the neighbors will complain. Jonathan tells O'Hara that they have taken the bugle away from Teddy, and O'Hara notices Mortimer for the first time, tied to the chair. He complains that he waited for him for an hour at the bar where they were supposed to meet, and then asks why he is tied up. Einstein says that Mortimer was telling them about the play he'd seen that night and when O'Hara asks if that is true, Mortimer nods. O'Hara then says that they must have stolen it from his play, and he then starts to tell Mortimer, who remains bound and gagged, the plot of his play as the curtain falls.

Analysis

Act Three, Scene One is the shortest "segment" of the play, and serves to bring the conflict that was first developed in Act Two between Jonathan and Mortimer to a head. The audience learns just how deep Jonathan's hatred of Mortimer is, and any possible doubt as to Jonathan's being a psychopath is removed as he insists on using the slow and (we assume) very painful "Melbourne method" to kill his brother. Dr. Einstein continues to try to keep Jonathan from killing people, first by attempting to get Mortimer to leave before Jonathan returns from the basement, and then by absolutely refusing to harm Teddy. Yet again, Jonathan's overpowering presence – and insanity – wins, but the doctor is now viewed as a sympathetic character by the audience.

The other major characters – with the exception of Elaine – are all on stage for a short time, and serve to move the action to a conclusion. Although Abby and Martha are well aware of – and offended by – what Jonathan is doing in the basement, that is where their grasp of reality ends as they threaten to get the police, and assure Mortimer that the police would never pry into their private affairs if they asked them to not pry. The most surprising character is O'Hara who, rather than freeing Mortimer, chooses instead to tell the plot of his play to a captive audience.

Vocabulary

undone, Melbourne, Methodist, election, appreciable, operate, anticipate, aesthetic, proclamation, cabinet, madman, convenient, imagination, simultaneously, candelabra, potential, accessories, torture, squirming, intercepts, mumbles, hesitates, mustache, enthusiastically

Act Three, Scene Two (Early next morning)

Summary

When the curtain comes up it is 8:00 AM. Dr. Einstein is seated at the table with a bottle of whiskey in front of him; Jonathan is asleep on the sofa. O'Hara is still telling the plot of his play to Mortimer, who is still tied and gagged. A knock comes from the door and Einstein sees that it is the police. He shakes the sleeping Jonathan and then runs upstairs as O'Hara, oblivious to everything, continues telling Mortimer the plot of his play. A moment later officers Brophy and Klein enter. They have been sent there by their lieutenant because the whole neighborhood has complained about Teddy blowing his bugle earlier, and they inform O'Hara that half the force is out looking for him because he didn't report in after his shift. Klein unties Mortimer, and he heads weakly towards the steps, telling O'Hara – who is still telling him the plot – to get away from him. Brophy calls into the station on the phone and tells the lieutenant that they have found O'Hara, and that Teddy is there too. He then hangs up, saying the lieutenant is on his way.

Jonathan, who awakened while Brophy was on the phone, stands up to find that he is between two police officers; he assumes his brother has turned him in and asks if Mortimer will be splitting the reward with them. At the mention of a reward Klein and Brophy grab Jonathan and he tells them that he won't be going to prison alone – that there are 13 bodies buried in the basement. Jonathan offers to show them, and Brophy tells Klein to go with him. When Klein says that he would rather not because Jonathan looks like Boris Karloff, Jonathan tries to strangle Klein. Brophy hits him with his nightstick, and Jonathan falls to the floor unconscious.

There is a knock at the door, followed by Lieutenant Rooney – a tough looking cop – bursting through the door. At first he thinks that the unconscious Jonathan is Teddy – who he has come to take away – and then realizes that Jonathan is the escapee from a prison for the criminally insane who has been described in Wanted Posters as “looking like Boris Karloff.” Rooney tells Klein and Brophy to take Jonathan into the kitchen and bring him to, as Teddy comes down the steps. Klein says that Jonathan said something about 13 bodies being buried in the basement, and Teddy says that there are 13 bodies down there – yellow fever victims. He then follows Brophy and Klein into the kitchen, as Mortimer comes down the stairs. Rooney tells Mortimer that Teddy has to be committed that day, and Mortimer tells him he will be heading to Happy Dale Sanitarium that afternoon. Rooney says that along with blowing his bugle all hours of the night, now he is telling stories about there being 13 bodies buried in the basement, and trying to start a yellow fever scare. Mortimer laughs with great relief as it is obvious that Rooney doesn't believe a word of it.

There is a knock at the door, and Elaine enters with a stern-looking elderly man. After giving Mortimer a chilly greeting, she introduces him as Mr. Witherspoon, head of Happy



Dale Sanitarium. Witherspoon thinks he is just going to meet Teddy, but when Mortimer tells him that he needs to take Teddy with him that morning and shows him the commitment papers, Witherspoon reluctantly agrees. Teddy returns from the kitchen, and Mortimer tells him that his term as President is over, that it is time for him to start off on his safari in Africa, and that Mr. Witherspoon is his guide. Teddy charges upstairs to get his safari equipment, as Abby and Martha come down. Mortimer introduces Rooney and Witherspoon, and tells the sisters that the police insist that Teddy go to Happy Dale that very day. Abby and Martha become upset, and say that they won't be separated from Teddy while they are alive. When Rooney tells them that he has to go, they say that if Teddy goes, they will go too. Mortimer, seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, asks why not, but Witherspoon says they cannot take sane people at Happy Dale. Rooney then tells Abby and Martha that Teddy has to go not just because he blows his bugle but because he is starting a rumor about 13 bodies being buried in the basement, and Abby and Martha then tell him that there are 13 bodies – all in nicely marked graves, except for Mr. Spenalzo, who is sharing a grave with Mr. Hoskins. Rooney suggests to Witherspoon that he find room for the sisters, and Witherspoon says that if they commit themselves, he will take them with Teddy.

Witherspoon produces a set of commitment papers as Dr. Einstein appears at the top of the steps and makes his way down silently. Martha and Abby sign the papers as Rooney goes to the telephone and calls into the station. Witherspoon then says they will need the signature of a physician. Mortimer sees Einstein slipping out the door, and brings him over to sign the papers. Mortimer then notices Elaine seated on the window seat, and asks her to stick around. Rooney, on the phone, repeats a description that he is getting of Jonathan's accomplice who poses as a doctor which fits Einstein perfectly, as Einstein hurriedly signs the papers. Rooney hangs up as Einstein finishes signing, shakes the Doctor's hand, and exits into the kitchen. Shocked at not being arrested, Einstein exits quickly as Witherspoon tells Mortimer that he needs to sign as next of kin. This upsets the sisters, who then send Witherspoon upstairs to get Teddy.

After Witherspoon has left, the sisters tell Mortimer that they are leaving the house to him, so that he and Elaine will have a nice place to live after they are married. When Mortimer says that the marriage might be off, Elaine calls over from where she is on the window seat that it most certainly is still a plan. The sisters then tell Mortimer not to be upset, but that he really isn't a Brewster – his mother came to them as a cook when he was a baby, and their brother married her and gave him the Brewster name. Mortimer is overjoyed, and takes Elaine in his arms, and the two of them exit after she tells him that her father is away and they can be alone together. Rooney and the other police officers then enter from the kitchen with Jonathan, who is in handcuffs. He bids his aunts goodbye, telling them that while he can't better his 'score', neither can they and that they will remain tied at 12 to 12. Jonathan and the police then exit.

As Martha is commenting on what a mean boy Jonathan has always been, and Abby says that she wishes they could show him that he wasn't so smart, Mr. Witherspoon comes down the steps carrying a number of canteens. Abby and Martha start asking him about his family, and when he says that he has no family and no friends at Happy

Dale, the two sisters look at each other knowingly, and offer him a glass of their special elderberry wine. The curtain falls.

Analysis

The second scene in Act Three serves to bring all of the major plotlines to a more or less happy ending. Abby and Martha get their wish not to be separated from Teddy, while Jonathan is taken back to prison. Dr. Einstein, who was continually trying to keep Jonathan from killing people throughout the play, remains a sympathetic character in this scene, and the audience is relieved when he is allowed to escape. Perhaps the most amusing part of this scene is the fact that although Abby, Martha, Jonathan and Teddy all tell the police that there are 13 bodies buried in the basement, the police never even consider that it could be true.

The most important revelation, of course, is that Mortimer is not really “a Brewster”, and so most likely does not have the madness that runs in the family, and can safely marry Elaine. The fact that the curtain falls with Abby and Martha about to poison Mr. Witherspoon is actually seen as yet another “happy” ending, as it will allow them to pass Jonathan’s “score” of 12, by one.

Vocabulary

semi-conscious, inferno, transferred, vacant, warpath, lieutenant, impression, cornered, instinctively, puss, dominating, prostrate, circulars, lifer, nuthouse, typewriter, suspended, cockeyed, insubordination, mollycoddle, safari, canteens, stealthily, accomplice

Characters

Abby and Martha Brewster

Abby and Martha Brewster are two sweet, elderly sisters in their mid-60s who have never married, and live together with their nephew Teddy – who they care for – in the family home in Brooklyn. They are loved by everyone in their neighborhood – including the local precinct police – and are always ready to help wherever they can. Early in Act One it is also revealed that they have poisoned 11 “gentlemen” – including one currently in the window seat – to put them out of their misery, and have had their nephew Teddy bury them in the basement.

Abby and Martha are continually together throughout almost the entire play, and often finish one another’s sentences. Abby is the braver of the two, and the more aggressive – particularly with her nephew Jonathan – while Martha is more clever, and is the one who concocted the formula they use to poison their gentlemen. They are devoted to their family, particularly Teddy. It is continually made clear that they do not think that their killing 11 people is wrong.

Mortimer Brewster

Mortimer is an attractive man in his early 30s; he is the nephew of Abby and Martha, and brother of Teddy and Jonathan. He is a theater critic and is in love with Elaine – the girl next door. It is Mortimer who finds the body in the window seat, and after his aunts tell him they have killed 11 men, he spends the rest of the play attempting to cover up their crime. Though he often acts in the craziest manner, he is the sanest of the Brewsters, and is fiercely loyal to his aunts. He despises Jonathan because of how he tortured Mortimer when they were boys, and Jonathan also hates him, to the point of planning to murder him. Though he loves Elaine, he comes to the conclusion that he can’t marry her because the Brewsters are mad, and is relieved at the end when Abby and Martha tell him that he is adopted.

Teddy Brewster

Teddy is in his early 40s; he is the brother of Jonathan and Mortimer, and lives with his aunts Abby and Martha. He believes that he is Theodore Roosevelt, and everyone in the play treats him as though this is the case. He believes that the steps leading upstairs are San Juan Hill, and that the basement is the Panama Canal. It is Teddy who buries the men that Abby and Martha kill in the basement. At no point in the play does he ever think he is not Theodore Roosevelt.



Jonathan Brewster

Jonathan is the oldest of the three brothers, and is an escapee from a prison for the criminally insane. Due to a botched operation on his face by Dr. Einstein, Jonathan looks like Boris Karloff, and becomes enraged when anyone mentions this to him. Jonathan has returned home on the run from the law, and intends to set up a business with Dr. Einstein in his grandfather's old laboratory. Jonathan has killed 12 people in several different countries, and is intent on making Mortimer his 13th victim. He is portrayed as a thoroughly evil and menacing character.

Dr. Einstein

Dr. Einstein is an incompetent, alcoholic plastic surgeon who has performed three operations on Jonathan, the last of which left him looking like Boris Karloff. He is in his mid-50s, and speaks with a German accent. Although it is made clear that he has been with Jonathan for years and knows all about the murders he has committed, he spends much of the play trying to keep Jonathan from killing people. He is a sympathetic character, and escapes at the end.

Elaine Harper

Elaine is Mortimer's fiancée, and lives in the parsonage next door with her father, Dr. Harper. She is deeply in love with Mortimer, but spends most of the play being thrown out by him as he tries to cover up the murders his aunts have committed. She keeps coming back, however, refusing to give up on Mortimer despite how he treats her, and gets him in the end.

Officer O'Hara

Officer O'Hara is a beat cop who also thinks that he is a playwright. After Mortimer offers to listen to the plot of his play to keep him in the house while Jonathan and Einstein are leaving, he is stood up at a local bar later by Mortimer, and returns to the Brewster house to find Mortimer tied to a chair, about to be killed by Jonathan. Seizing the opportunity, he spends hours telling Mortimer, who he leaves tied to the chair, the plot of his dreadful play.

Officers Brophy and Klein, Lieutenant Rooney

All three of these police officers work in the precinct where the Brewster house is located. Brophy and Klein are regular guests in the house, while Rooney is their commander and arrives in the third act to arrest Teddy. It is he who recognizes Jonathan as an escaped criminal.

Dr. Harper

Dr. Harper is Elaine's father, and pastor of the church next door. He disapproves of Mortimer's connection to the theater, and obtains the commitment papers for Teddy to go to Happy Dale.

Mr. Witherspoon

Mr. Witherspoon is the director of Happy Dale Sanitarium, and shows up at the end of Act Three to take Teddy. The audience is left with the impression that he is the sisters' final victim.

Mr. Spenalzo/Mr. Hoskins

Not seen other than in shadows, Mr. Hoskins and Mr. Spenalzo are the two corpses in the play.

Objects/Places

Window Seat

Mr. Spenalzo and Mr. Hoskins – the dead bodies that the various characters in the play are trying to hide – are both hidden in the window seat for a time.

Bottle of Elderberry Wine

The poison that Abby and Martha use to kill their victims is placed in a bottle of elderberry wine.

Bugle

Teddy blows a bugle throughout the play, which eventually gets him committed.

Commitment Papers

Teddy, Martha, and Abby all must sign commitment papers to go to Happy Dale Sanitarium.

Front Door

Throughout the play, characters enter and exit through the front door.

Steps Upstairs/San Juan Hill

Teddy believes the steps leading upstairs are San Juan Hill, and always charges up them.

Basement/Panama Canal

Teddy believes that the basement is actually Panama; he buries the gentlemen Abby and Martha kill in the “locks” that he has dug in the Panama Canal down there.

Kitchen

When not on stage, Martha and Abby spend much of the play off stage in the kitchen, cooking.

Grandfather's Laboratory

Never seen, this is where Jonathan wants to set up a business “changing faces” with Dr. Einstein.

Brooklyn

The Brewster house, where all the action takes place, is located in Brooklyn, New York.

Happy Dale Sanitarium

This is where Teddy is to go once the sisters have passed on, and where he, Abby, and Martha go at the end of the play. Mr. Witherspoon, the sisters' last victim, is the director of Happy Dale.

Themes

Insanity/Madness

At the time that this play was written – 1941 – many people believed that if one member of a family was “mad”, there was an excellent chance that the rest of the family would be mad as well. This play uses this theme extensively, and takes it to the extreme by portraying every member of the Brewster family (and referring to previous generations) as being insane on one level or another. The single exception to this is Mortimer who, although he actually acts “crazier” in several scenes than any of the other characters in the play, is revealed at the end to be adopted. The audience is left with the idea that as he is not a Brewster, he is not insane.

The insanity in the Brewster family is portrayed on a number of levels ranging from Jonathan’s manically homicidal anger when the fact that he looks like Boris Karloff is mentioned, to Teddy’s more benign – but all-consuming – belief that he is Theodore Roosevelt. Although Abby and Martha have killed as many people as Jonathan has, they are portrayed as sympathetic – and very at-risk – characters whose insanity, though deadly, is portrayed as kindness.

Some of the most hilarious of the comedic moments come from the supposedly “sane” characters acting crazy as a result of the circumstances in which they find themselves. While the most obvious victim of this is Mortimer, Officer O’Hara not freeing Mortimer and rather telling him the plot of his play for hours, as well as every other character’s unquestioning acceptance that Teddy is Theodore Roosevelt, shows a level of insanity that appears to have spread beyond the family.

Loyalty

Loyalty – sometimes misplaced – is central to the plot of this play, and is exhibited in one form or another by the major characters. Abby and Martha are fiercely loyal to Teddy – to the point of being willing to commit themselves to a sanitarium to remain with him – while Mortimer is willing to go to any lengths to cover up his aunts’ crimes. Elaine remains loyal to Mortimer, even though he spends most of the play either ignoring her, or throwing her out of the Brewster house. Even Dr. Einstein – although he does what he can to keep him from committing further murders – remains loyal to Jonathan. Jonathan is the only major character who does not show some level of loyalty, and this is part of what makes the audience consistently dislike him.

Murder/Death

Murder and death are also central to the plot and the play has a remarkably high body count, with 25 separate victims being listed between Jonathan and the sisters. The play starts with a murder just having been committed, and ends with one just about to be

committed, although no murder is ever shown as it happens. Central to the comedy is the fact that while we view Jonathan's murders as being crimes, we look at Abby and Martha's killings – as do they – as kindnesses.

Style

Point of View

Arsenic and Old Lace is a stage play and is therefore written to be seen and heard by an audience, rather than be read. The characters never interact with the audience; the majority of the information is presented via dialogue between the characters, although a small amount is conveyed via actions which are suggested in the “stage direction” notes in the text of the play. Essentially the audience (or reader) is viewing what is happening through a window into the living room of the Brewster home, and their point of view is that of an observer.

Setting

The entire play takes place in the living room of the Brewster family home, which is located in Brooklyn, New York. The play is set in the “present”, which in this case indicates the year the play was written, 1941. The living room is described as being “Victorian”, and “old fashioned” even by 1941 standards, indicating that the furnishings and décor probably date from closer to the turn of the century. The audience is led to believe that the neighborhood is friendly and safe. It should be noted that even though the play is set in 1941, and the Second World War had been raging in Europe for several years, there is no reference made to the war in the play, although one comedic reference is made to Adolf Hitler.

Language and Meaning

Some of the language and references used throughout this play will seem to be somewhat dated to modern audiences, although the language was most likely considered to be current and even “cutting edge” when the play was written. In particular, some of the references used in the play (for example, Mortimer’s references to the Zolotow list, and Walter Winchell’s radio program) will be unfamiliar to many readers, and the particulars of Theodore Roosevelt’s life (as presented by Teddy) will not be as well known to audiences today as they were when the play was first staged in 1941. However, by and large the ‘madcap’ nature of the comedy holds up well, and the play remains entertaining even 70 years after it was first performed.

Structure

The play is presented in three acts; the third act is divided into two separate scenes, and a considerable passage of time is indicated between the scenes. The entire play takes place in the space of less than 24 hours, starting in the late afternoon and ending early the following morning. Act One is the longest act, while Act Three is the shortest. As is the case with many plays, *Arsenic and Old Lace* is structured so that the first act

introduces the major characters and setting, the second act provides the conflict/danger, and the third act is where everything is resolved. As was usually the case with comedies of that time, the play provides a happy ending.

Quotes

It may not be charitable of me, but I've almost come to the conclusion that this Mr. Hitler isn't a Christian. (Act 1 paragraph Page 6)

No, we don't like to talk about Jonathan. He left Brooklyn very early – by request. Jonathan was the kind of boy who liked to cut worms in two – with his teeth. (Act 1 paragraph Page 33)

Martha: 'Well, Mortimer, for a gallon of elderberry wine I take a teaspoonful of arsenic, and add a half-teaspoonful of strychnine, and then just a pinch of cyanide.' Mortimer (appraisingly): Should have quite a quick. (Act 1 paragraph Page 48)

Oh yes, Mr. Hoskins. It can't be very comfortable for him in there. He's been so patient, the poor dear. I think Teddy ought to get Mr. Hoskins downstairs right away. (Act 2 paragraph Page 87)

You see, insanity runs in my family ... It practically gallops! (Act 2 paragraph Page 107)

O'Hara: 'Yeah, Sioux City, Iowa. I was born in the dressing room at the end of the second act, and mother made the finale.' Mortimer: 'What a trouper! (Act 2 paragraph Page 121)

Mortimer, we know the police better than you do. I don't think they would pry into our private affairs if we asked them not to. (Act 3 paragraph Page 141)

Klein: 'He said there was 13 bodies buried down there.' Rooney: '13 bodies in the cellar? And that didn't tip- you off he came out of a nuthouse? (Act 3 paragraph Page 165)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the various forms of “madness” portrayed by the author in this play. Is there a difference between the madness that has caused Abby and Martha to kill 12 people and the one that has caused Jonathan to kill the same number? Do Abby and Martha have the slightest idea that what they have done is wrong? Do Abby and Martha kill Mr. Witherspoon at the end because he is unhappy, or because they want to surpass Jonathan’s “count”? Does madness run in families?

Topic 2

Discuss the relationships between the members of the Brewster family. Why are Abby and Martha so fiercely loyal to – and protective of – Teddy? Why do they have almost exactly opposite feelings about Jonathan? Is how they treat Mortimer at all affected by the fact that they know he is adopted? Why are they afraid he will feel bad about being adopted? Why does Teddy unquestioningly do what his aunts and Mortimer ask of him?

Topic 3

Is Mortimer doing the right thing when he tries to cover up Abby and Martha’s crimes? What are his motives? Why does he attempt to cover the murders up when he realizes that Abby and Martha committed them, but doesn’t when he thinks when they were committed by Teddy? Why does he offer to let Jonathan and Dr. Einstein escape even before Jonathan learns what the sisters have done? Why does Mortimer choose to allow Dr. Einstein to escape in the end.

Topic 4

Why do Jonathan and Mortimer hate each other as much as they do? Why does Jonathan insist on killing Mortimer using a slow and painful method, when the quicker method would be far safer? Is Jonathan telling the truth when he tells Mortimer that he has been dreaming of killing him for 20 years? Does Jonathan have any redeeming qualities? Why does Dr. Einstein remain with Jonathan?

Topic 5

Discuss the relationship between Mortimer and Elaine. Does Mortimer really love Elaine? Could he have treated her any differently than he does during the play? Is Elaine right to try and keep him after being treated so badly?