

# **Lost in Yonkers Study Guide**

## **Lost in Yonkers by Neil Simon**

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# Plot Summary

Lost in Yonkers is a Pulitzer Prize-winning play written by legendary stage and screenwriter Neil Simon. It premiered in 1991 and won the Tony Award for Best Play, Best Leading Actress, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Supporting Actor. The story follows Jay Kurnitz, a sixteen-year-old boy living with his grandmother while trying to help raise his younger brother, Arty. His highly dysfunctional family provides little support for Jay. In fact, they all call upon Jay to help them with their own problems and insecurities. Jay, however, forges a bond with his strong-willed grandmother, and he learns to be strong for everyone else.

The play opens with Jay and Arty Kurnitz, two teenage boys, dressed in formal 1940s attire. They are in the living room of their grandmother's house, which is located above the family's candy shop, discussing how much they hate being there. Jay says the entire Kurnitz side of their family is disturbed, and it's their grandmother's fault. Their father, Eddie, enters through a door a few times. He is visiting his mother in her bedroom. He tells the children to mind their manners and to look presentable for their grandmother. Later, he stays and explains to his children why they are there. Eddie goes into debt when his wife is sick, and he owes a loan shark \$9,000. He has decided to leave and work collecting scrap iron for the war effort. Since he will be gone a year, Eddie asks his mother if Jay and Arty can stay with her. Even though Grandma protests, Eddie's sister, Bella, says yes to Eddie's request.

Weeks later, Jay and Arty are in their beds reading a letter from their father. Bella comes in from the movies, but Grandma is furious she is coming in so late. Later, Jay and Arty are alone in the house. They notice a black car waiting outside when Bella comes back. She tells them she wants to get married. She has met a man named Johnny, an usher at a movie theater. During this conversation, she tells the boys that Grandma has \$15,000 put away somewhere in the candy store below.

Later, the boys are out of bed. Jay is rummaging around downstairs trying to find the \$15,000 so he can send some money to his father. A man comes up to them in the dark, and they realize it is their Uncle Louie. He comes into their bedroom and tells them to be careful when trying to steal from Grandma: he never got away with it when he was a child because she notices everything that goes missing. The boys tell Louie a black car and two men have been coming around the house for a while. Louie bribes the boys to tell the men that he isn't at the house. He informs the boys that he will be staying with them for a while.

When Act Two begins, Arty is sick in bed with a fever. Jay brings up some soup Grandma made. Arty doesn't want to drink it, but Grandma comes up and forces him to finish the whole bowl. She doesn't like Arty being sick because he can't earn his keep. Both he and Jay work for Grandma in the candy shop to pay for their expenses while living with her. Louie tells Arty Grandma doesn't do mean things to them because she wants to; instead, she is preparing them to fend for themselves. Bella comes upstairs and reveals that she wants to tell her family about marrying Johnny that night. Then the



boys ask Louie if they can leave with him. However, he gets upset because they think he is a gangster.

That night, Bella gathers all the members of her family, except for Eddie, into a room to try to tell them her news. When nobody seems supportive, she falters. However, Jay helps her begin talking about marrying Johnny. Her family is appalled by Bella's disclosure. When Grandma tells Bella she doesn't want to hear anymore of Bella's talk, Bella begins to break down. She says her babies would be happy and healthy, unlike herself and her siblings. Grandma still leaves, and Bella has a meltdown.

Bella goes missing for a few days, and Aunt Gert is taking care of Grandma. Bella comes back to talk with Grandma, and the boys leave. Grandma doesn't think Bella could be a good wife or mother because of her diminished mental capacity. She also doesn't think Bella can handle the physical aspect of a relationship because Bella would become too attached. But Bella tells her she has done things with men before when she was a teenager. Bella admits the only reason she did those things was because she wanted some sort of affection she never received as a child. Bella says she won't leave and marry Johnny now, but she wants to get married and have children eventually.

The play skips to nine months later. Jay and Artie are dressed in their formal attire. Their father has returned to take his sons back. Grandma admits she thought about sending him the \$9,000 he needed, but she said Eddie needed to work this out for himself. Jay and Artie say goodbye to their grandmother and thank her for teaching them how to be strong. After they leave, Bella tells Grandma she is meeting some friends later. It seems like life is going to be more relaxed now that Bella is acting like an adult.



# Act 1, Scene 1

## Summary

The story begins in August 1942 in the apartment above Kurnitz's Kandy Store where Bella and Grandma live. Jay and Arty Kurnitz are in the living room while their father is in their Grandma's bedroom. Jay is almost sixteen years old, and Arty is thirteen. The two are dressed up in their best clothes. They are discussing how much they dislike Grandma. According to their mother, who died recently, the Kurnitz children all have issues which developed after two of Grandma's children, Rose and Aaron, died a few years before. The issues stem from their mother's treatment of her surviving children after the two deaths. The boys discuss how Grandma apparently beat Bella with her cane, which is why she is so flighty and childish. As a result, Bella's mental capacity was greatly diminished.

They see their Aunt Bella coming down the street. When Bella comes in, she asks if they want an ice cream sundae, which their father has forbidden. They try to turn her down politely, but she gets upset because she feels like they don't appreciate her. Eddie, the boys' father, comes out of Grandma's bedroom and tries to console Bella. When Bella leaves to tend to Grandma, Eddie begins to tell his sons about why they will be staying with Grandma.

When Eddie's wife was sick, he spent around \$9,000 keeping her comfortable. He went deep into debt, though, and got the money from a loan shark. The only way for him to make the money back was to work for a scrap iron company for just under a year. In order to do his job, though, he would have to leave his children behind at their grandmother's. This visit to Grandma's house was to show her how Jay and Arty are neat and clean. The boys are against the plan, but there is nothing they could do about it.

When Grandma comes out, she is dressed and loudly commands immediate attention. With her thick German accent, she tells the boys that she does not want them to stay. Because she is old and set in her ways, she knows Jay and Arty will have a terrible time. She is also very strict about cleanliness, and she says the boys would dirty her place. Just when Eddie and his sons go to leave, Bella speaks up and says Jay and Arty can stay.

## Analysis

The play is set in 1942 Yonkers, New York. Yonkers had a large Jewish population, many of whom were first- and second-generation immigrants from Europe. During the 1940's, there was an even larger influx of Jewish immigrants because of World War II. The play is initially set in August 1942, so America has been in the war for almost a year. This is important to the play because the war is what sets the action in motion.



Without the war, Eddie could not have gotten a job collecting scrap iron for the war effort. He mentions a great number of jobs had opened up, and the war would be good for business. He knew, if he was careful, he could save the \$9,000 he owes the loan shark in under a year.

Normally a prudent man, Eddie has spent all his money, and even gone deep into debt, trying to make his dying wife comfortable. Eddie truly loved his wife, especially because his wife was very loving and gentle. Eddie's mother was harsh and cold, so Eddie naturally turned to someone affectionate who would love and care for him unconditionally. This is what he becomes used to, and this was also what Jay and Arty become used to.

Even with the hot August weather, Jay and Arty mention how their grandmother is always cold. This is the first mentioning their grandmother is a hard, cold woman. Because she didn't cry at their mother's funeral, they believe she is uncaring and mean. They hated being at her house. Jay knew, too, their Grandma's behavior had hurt her children's emotional and mental states. According to his mother, all of the Kurnitz children suffered because of Grandma's lack of emotion.

Simon also creates a juxtaposition of the cold grandmother against her profession, given that she runs a candy shop. Generally, people who run candy shops are warm, friendly, and congenial. Grandma, though, was none of these. She watches over her candy shop like a prison warden, making sure that nobody steals any of her goods. This juxtaposition of setting and character makes Grandma's candy shop an ironic symbol.

## Vocabulary

sultry, apprehensive, crease, doilies, laundered, henchman, hunchback, congenial, arrested, perspiring, deluxe, disrespectful, bedraggled, strained, semiprivate, wards, hock, collateral, interest, painkillers, bearable, grateful, obligated, scrap, deafening, astonished, pitcher, terrific, drawer, howls, whacked, dangles, disapprovingly, beams, sternly, interrupt, buxom, slight, rimless, complexion, cameo, broach, overriding, cue, announcement, stunned, impervious, imposed, dumbstruck



# Act 1, Scenes 2-3

## Summary

The next scene begins with Jay reading a letter from his father aloud to Arty late at night. He bemoans that they are so poor, and he wants to figure out a way to help Eddie make money. At that moment, Bella walks into the apartment. Grandma appears and interrogates Bella about where she has been. Bella says she went to the movies. She also bought a magazine. Grandma is upset Bella was doing “adult” activities, so she forces Bella to give her the magazine. Bella runs into her room, visibly upset. Grandma turns to the boys and demands for them to turn off their light and stop wasting electricity.

Weeks later, Jay and Arty have the apartment to themselves. They both notice a black car circling the house. They mention the two men driving are the same men who came asking for their Uncle Louie. Bella comes home and tells the boys her secret: she has been going to the movies to see her boyfriend. Bella has met Johnny, a forty-year-old usher, and the two have fallen in love. He has a mental disability like she does, but they get along well. She tells the boys she and Jonny are going to get married and have children. She and Johnny want to start a family and a restaurant together. The only problem is neither of them has the \$5,000 necessary for the start-up costs. She tells the boys Grandma has \$15,000 hidden away in the candy store, but she knows Grandma would never give her the money. When she leaves, the boys say they want to find the money and send some to their father.

## Analysis

In Scene 2, Jay begins to show he wants to take on responsibility in order to help his family. He sees living with Grandma will be difficult and unpleasant for both him and Arty. He also wants to help his father get the \$9,000 to pay off his debt so they can be together again. Jay is willing to do hard work in order to made “real” money for his family, meaning he is one step closer to being more mature and coming of age.

Even though Scene 1 showed Bella with a diminished mental capacity, Scene 2 shows her beginning to throw her normal life aside to try and achieve something more. She comes home late at night from the movies in a state of dream-like happiness. Though she won't tell anyone, her forays to the movies and her magazine show she has dreams to leave her life taking care of her mother and do something for herself instead. However, Grandma brings her down back to reality. She tells Bella it was irresponsible to be walking around Yonkers alone at 11 o'clock at night. She also doesn't like Bella getting the magazines because they put lofty ideas into her head.

Because of Bella's mental disability, it was a shock to the boys she wanted to get married and have children, especially with someone she met only ten days beforehand. However, it speaks to her state of mind that she would do this. She doesn't see



Johnny's handicap as a limitation of their ability to be partners. Instead, she sees Johnny as an equal, and Johnny most likely sees her as an equal, too. It also suggests she has been looking for a way out of her current life and that marrying Johnny so quickly is an opportunity to escape.

## Vocabulary

minor, setback, irregular, embarrassed, nods, disgust, tuckered, upraised, jubilant, peeks, trolley, sacred, swell, usher, polite, handicap, anxious, sudden, grateful, loaned, envelope





# Act 1, Scene 4

## Summary

About a week later, at midnight, both boys are out of bed. Arty is the look-out for Jay, who is in the candy shop trying to find the \$15,000. Jay comes upstairs empty-handed. A few seconds later, their Uncle Louie enters the front door. He tells Jay he was watching him rummage through the candy shop. He tells them he and Eddie used to do the same when they were boys. Eddie always felt guilty, so he admitted to stealing. Louie, though, never felt bad about it and always welcomed his mother's harsh stares.

The boys tell Louie two men have come around the apartment looking for him. He gives them both \$5 to keep telling the men he isn't around. Louie has apparently been sleeping with someone's wife, and that's why the men are after him. He completely disregards their suspicions about him being a gangster even though his dress and mannerisms suggest otherwise. He also carries around a medium-sized black satchel. The boys notice it, but they can't investigate because Louie never lets it out of sight. The scene ends with all three going to bed.

## Analysis

The \$15,000 is one of the MacGuffins in *Lost in Yonkers*. A MacGuffin is a mysterious element of a plot that serves to further the action. In this case, the boys begin to feel hope when they learn about the \$15,000 hidden somewhere in the candy store. The boys risk their grandmother finding them in order to search for the money.

Even though Scene 3 opens the mystery surrounding Uncle Louie, his plot doesn't formally begin until Scene 4. While nobody knows exactly who or what he is, it is obvious he is in trouble. The two men in the black car are a symbol of his shady lifestyle, one that involves a lot of money and secretive transactions. His unexpected arrival and mannerisms solidify his status as "gangster" in the boys' minds. Louie's satchel is another MacGuffin in the plot. It creates more mystery and intrigue surrounding Louie, mostly because he is so secretive and possessive about it.

It is during this scene the boys start to understand the reasoning behind Grandma's stern nature. Louie tells the boys Grandma loved his insubordination because it meant he could take care of himself. According to Louie, that is all Grandma wanted for her children - for them to be strong and independent. However, it is obvious the other children didn't understand that lesson. Louie says Eddie was terrified of his mother's glares and would always cave in to pressure. Louie, though, was the steadfast one.



## Vocabulary

synagogue, dialect, shivers, cartons, frostbite, double-breasted, satchel, fedora, musses, midsection, middleweight, pistachio, confession, revealing, holster, ballerina, resumes, bodyguard, prominent, distinguished, repeat, thrill, expenses, garter, unfolded, violinist, cuff, incredible, contentedly, grouchy, unforeseen



# Act 2, Scene 1

## Summary

At the beginning of Act 2, Arty is sick in bed. Jay comes upstairs with a bowl of mustard soup from Grandma. They discuss how the two men with the black car have come around more frequently, and then Grandma comes upstairs. She yells at Jay for taking too long and tells him to go back downstairs. She wants him to watch a couple of customers to make sure they don't steal anything. After Jay leaves, Grandma forces Arty to drink her soup. He begins to yell at her, saying she is an evil, mean-spirited person who only wants to make others feel bad. However, she tells Arty that it doesn't matter what he thinks of her. The most important thing is that he lives and is healthy. Nothing else matters.

After Grandma leaves, Louie enters and begins telling his nephew about growing up with Grandma. Whenever he broke a cheap dish, she would lock him in a closet for hours to teach him a lesson. At first he was upset, but then he learned to respect both his mother and her things. It was her strict discipline that made him careful. He also told Arty she had been beaten as a child in Germany. During a police fight, a horse fell on her leg, and it was permanently disfigured. Instead of getting surgery or complaining, though, she spent her money on a passage to America for her husband and children. Louie then leaves to take a shower.

Jay comes back upstairs, furious. While he was gone, three pretzels went missing. Instead of writing it off, Grandma charges Jay's wages for the stolen food. He admits to Arty he wants Louie to take him away and teach him how to be a gangster. He thinks he can make decent money to send to his father. Bella enters and says she wants to tell her family about Johnny that night. Because she is so nervous, she has eaten three pretzels from the candy store. It turns out that Grandma knew Bella had taken the pretzels, but she still wanted Jay to be vigilant. Louie comes back in and says his mother did the same thing to him, when she herself had stolen a bag of pistachios. Then Grandma charges Louie for the theft because he had not caught her stealing the bag.

Jay brings up the possibility of helping Louie with his "business." Louie becomes extremely upset and begins to yell at the boys for thinking he is a henchman. He says he is a financial advisor who helps people invest their money. Jay still asks for a job, and Louie turns him down saying he is relocating to another place. Louie grabs the black satchel and yells at the boys to open it. He knows they have been curious about its contents. The boys, though, don't open it. Jay confronts Louie and calls him a bully for being so angry with them over a misunderstanding.

Grandma comes back upstairs and tells Jay a jar of pistachios has gone missing. Louie tells his mother he's leaving town, but she is indifferent. She hands him a wad of money



and says he accidentally left it on her dresser drawer. He tries to offer it back to her, but she says she doesn't want his money.

## Analysis

It isn't until Act 2 that the boys discuss the difference between their mother and Grandma. When Arty is sick, he tells his grandmother she is mean and hateful. His mother was always kind to him, and she allowed him to rest through his sickness. Grandma, though, forced the mustard soup down his throat so he could get back to work sooner. Grandma doesn't see these words as insults, though. She brushes them aside and reminded Arty he was alive and well because of her soup. In her mind, being alive and healthy was the greatest gift. Survival is the key to life, she believes, and being coddled doesn't make a survivor out of anyone.

This scene shows another one of Louie's anecdotes about his mother. Because of her strict punishments, he realizes how great it is to be alive, and to be careful. Though he doesn't like his mother, he respects her tremendously for the values she has instilled in him. By citing the incident about Grandma's childhood, he means to convey that Grandma lived by these principles herself. Louie wants the boys to know their grandmother is a strong person, a woman who carried her family single-handedly to America and created a successful business on her own.

Louie shows his flaws though, as he flies into a rage when the boys mention his possible employment as a gangster. Whether he was truly insulted or just covering his tracks, his blow-up shows Louie has his faults. This is even more prevalent when Louie has the conversation with Grandma about the money. She doesn't want his "filthy" money because she doesn't think Louie learned anything from her. According to Louie, Grandma taught him everything. However, Grandma thinks Louie took his own "lesson" from her. He turns to stealing as a means of survival, and she did not see that as respectable. She said Louie started stealing when his siblings died. Rather than his immoral habit dissipating over time, though, he has only become more skilled at thievery.

As for Louie's black satchel, it truly is a MacGuffin for the boys. The contents of the satchel are not important; however, it furthers the plot because it shows the boys how much of a cowardly bully their uncle is. Rather than going out and facing his problems, he is hiding in his mother's house and paying off two children to lie to the men about his whereabouts. At this point, they don't need to know what is in the satchel anymore because their image of Louie is sullied.

In the last section of conversation between Louie and Grandma, Louie compares his mother to a battleship. This isn't the first time, nor the last the Grandma has been compared to a strong metal. On the one hand, metal is cold and hard. It is unfeeling, gray, and difficult to work with. The flip side, though, is that metal is a steadfast material that doesn't break easily. Grandma embodies both these qualities. Whether this is seen



as a positive or negative trait, though, is up to each individual character. Louie sees this as a positive. Bella, though, hates that her mother is so impersonal.

## Vocabulary

exhaustion, tasting, suspiciously, rotten, sweeper, malted, obviously, miserable, moxie, defiant, radiator, furious, aspirin, gangsters, expensive, transportation, liquor, compliment, free-lance, manager, investment, advisor, relocating, urgent, advantageous, pester, tanks, cannons, gesture, scowl, bills, filthy, ferocious



## Act 2, Scene 2

### Summary

Later that evening, the entire family has gathered in Grandma's house. Aunt Gert has joined them as well. Gert speaks with a strange habit; she speaks the first half of her sentence normally, but the second half, she sucks in the words. Louie looks anxious to leave, but Bella is nervous and doesn't want to begin talking about her announcement yet. She is currently upset with her family because they aren't sitting exactly where she imagined they would. As the family settles in, though, she is still nervous. She tells someone else to start, and Louie becomes angry that Bella is being ridiculous. Jay, however, takes the initiative and begins asking his aunt leading questions about the movies.

Bella gets around to telling her family about Johnny. Once they hear about Johnny's age and handicap, her family gets upset. Louie interrogates Bella and begins attacking her perfect fantasy life with Johnny. As he digs deeper into finding out about Johnny, he gets more upset with the situation. He believes Johnny is cheating Bella out of \$5,000 somehow. Grandma tries to interrupt and end the conversation, but Bella flies into an emotional rant. She tells her mother she wants to get married and have children. She believes she would be a good mother, a better mother than Grandma. She begs her family for their support and blessings, but Grandma gets up and leaves the room. Bella is left in an infantile state of mind.

### Analysis

This scene is one of Bella's triumphant moments. While she doesn't get the reaction she wanted, she takes a stand and tells her entire family she wants a different life. For Bella, this is incredibly difficult, as portrayed by her inability to start the conversation. However, she needs to speak with her family and tell them she is more than an incompetent child. She is a woman with feelings, and she needs those feelings to be validated.

However, it is still obvious Bella is a child, mentally. She retreats to an infantile state when her mother walks out on her. She also pitches a fit when people aren't sitting in the right seats, or when nobody will open the conversation. Even her rationalization is flawed because she isn't thinking of the consequences. Instead, she is just following her emotions blindly.

This scene also shows Jay taking a stand and helping his family. By initiating the conversation with Bella and guiding her through her confession, he shows a great deal of fortitude. He is able to take Bella's inane dream of marriage and help carry the burden. Whether he knows it or not, his grandmother's might is wearing off on him, and he is becoming a stronger person for it.



## Vocabulary

straightening, crocheting, needlepoint, unseen, strudel, hoarsely, swallow, exasperated, affliction, apparent, arrangements, sulks, content, disbelief, illiterate, pointedly, ox, deathly



## Act 2, Scenes 3-4

### Summary

A week passes, and Bella disappears after the failed dinner. The boys discuss where she could have gone. Gert has been taking care of Grandma since Bella's absence, and Gert secretly lets the boys know that Bella has been staying with her. When the boys mention something about the way she talks, Gert says she only inhales her words when some comes to her mother's house. Gert leaves, and Grandma comes out. She tells the boys to go outside and play so she can have some quiet time alone. However, Bella appears and begins talking with her mother.

Bella and her mother discuss how long she will be staying, and Bella doesn't know exactly. Bella is upset her mother is angry with her for leaving. However, she still wants her mother's approval of having adult relationships. Grandma, however, tells Bella she is too much like a child. She's neither stupid nor crazy, but is just childlike. Grandma dismisses the earlier rumor her beatings made Bella the way she was. Instead, she claims Bella was born simple. Bella doesn't understand how the world works; instead, she needs someone to take care of her so she doesn't get hurt. It was Grandma who realized early in life she would have to take care of Bella until she died. Bella, though, wants to know why she has adult feelings if she is only a child. She tells her mother she has had sex with boys and men since she was a teenager.

Grandma is shocked to hear this, but Bella explains she looked to these men for comfort. She knew they only wanted sex, but they still touched her and treated her warmly. She looked to these men for a connection she didn't have with her mother. Johnny, though, was the only one who loved her wholly. She reveals that it is Louie who has given her the \$5,000 to start a restaurant with Johnny. Johnny, though, was too intimidated by the real world and decided to stay with his parents. Bella tries to give her the \$5,000, but Grandma refuses. Grandma tells Bella to do whatever she wants, and to make and her own mistakes. But Bella says she will wait, even though someday she wants a family of her own.

Scene 4 begins nine months later. The boys are dressed in their nice clothing and discussing Uncle Louie. He has joined the army to escape the two men who have been looking for him, and he has given all his money to his mother before leaving. Bella comes in and gives the boys a football and a basketball. They begin to play with them, and Eddie comes out of his mother's room, along with Grandma. Grandma is upset the boys are playing in the house, but Eddie says it is time to go. Grandma tells Eddie that she thought about sending money to him, but she knows he needed to make his own way in life. After Eddie leaves, Jay and Arty say their goodbyes. Jay mentions he has learned a lot since moving in with their grandmother. He is grateful to her for teaching him about hard work and living with hurt. On their way out, she tells the boys they should have looked behind the malted machine for the \$15,000 they were searching for earlier. Bella then talks with her mother and says she has plans to meet a few friends.





She exits happily, and Grandma is left, sitting in a chair, and looking exasperated by the whole affair.

## Analysis

The penultimate moment of *Lost in Yonkers* is Bella's conversation with her mother. This is when Bella reaches her full potential (as full as it can be) and thoroughly explains her feelings to her mother. Rather than retreating to her room or bursting into tears as a safe-haven, Bella boldly tells Grandma she is a woman with needs and desires. She needs her mother to recognize she isn't just an inept child anymore.

At the same time, this conversation is much more informed and mature than her confession to her family. Bella has thought things out with Johnny and realized getting married and having children right now isn't the best option. Instead, she needs to grow and learn more about the world. She also needs to explore her emotions and learn more about herself.

Grandma also realizes she needs Bella whether she wants to admit it or not. Bella has been a constant companion and help for the aging woman. While she yells at her daughter for being an imbecile, Grandma knows Bella is an important part of her life. And in order to let Bella be happy, she needs to allow Bella to have some freedoms.

As for Jay, his journey has taken a turn for the positive. Although the months seemed laborious, he knows now the only way to make his way in the world is with hard work and perseverance. Most importantly, though, he cannot complain about the pain or hardships he experiences. He has learned pain is a constant part of life; the only way to survive is to push through it.

## Vocabulary

captured, interrupt, suitcase, satisfied, dismissing, courage, disdainfully, stoically, stifling, overcome, mackerel, sincerity, approve, stupidity



# Characters

## Jay Kurnitz

Jay Kurnitz is the main character in *Lost in Yonkers*. He is an almost sixteen-year-old Jewish boy who currently lives with his brother, aunt, and grandmother in Yonkers. He doesn't like his grandmother because he thinks she is difficult and cold. Jay wants to provide for his younger brother as well as his father, but he's not entirely sure how. Because the Kurnitz family has a problem being strong, Jay finds out he has to be the source of strength for his father's side of the family.

Because Jay has a lot on his mind, he is more serious than his younger brother. He tries to please his brother Arty, his father, his grandmother, his aunt Bella, and his uncle Louie all the time so he can help them with their problems. Jay tries to figure out different ways to help each family member out of their situations.

## Arty Kurnitz

Arty Kurnitz is Jay's younger brother. He is thirteen years old and lives with Arty, Grandma, and Bella. Arty is less serious than Jay. He also doesn't try to please every member of his family like Jay does. Because of this, Arty is considered more honest and straightforward than his brother. However, Arty whines more than Jay because he doesn't have the same pressure Jay feels. He is used to being pampered by his mother, and Arty cannot understand why Grandma is so cold and authoritative.

## Grandma Kurnitz

Grandma Kurnitz is the grandmother of Jay and Arty. She is a Jewish immigrant from Germany who suffered discrimination. She opened a candy shop in Yonkers to support herself and her children. After two of her children died, though, she closed herself off emotionally from her other four children. She disciplines her children harshly and wants them to be self-reliant. However, she doesn't want to admit she became reliant on Bella's help and companionship. At the same time, though, Grandma is very protective of Bella and her mental handicap. She doesn't want anyone to take advantage of her daughter because she knows her daughter can't take care of herself.

## Bella Kurnitz

Bella Kurnitz is the daughter of Grandma and the aunt of Jay and Arty. Bella has a mental handicap which means she acts like a child. She also has a learning disability, so it is difficult for her to read or count. Even though Bella acts like a child, she knows she is a woman. She wants to get married and have children of her own, but Grandma doesn't want her to become emotionally attached to a man because of her mental state.



She flies into emotional fits, and she is extremely dependent on others to make her happy. Even though she is usually submissive, she finds the strength to stand up to her mother a few times within the play.

## **Louie Kurnitz**

Louie Kurnitz is the son of Grandma and the uncle of Jay and Arty. He is extremely secretive about his work as well as the contents of a black satchel he carries. Louie is a low-time gangster who tries to convince his family he is a financial manager. However, everything about his personality, demeanor, and dress gives away his secret. He has a soft spot for his family and their financial problems. He gives \$5,000 to Bella to open a restaurant, and then he gives the rest of his money to his mother before joining the military.

## **Eddie Kurnitz**

Eddie Kurnitz is the son of Grandma and the father of Jay and Arty. Eddie's wife passed away before the play's setting, and he went into debt trying to make her last few years and months comfortable. He tried to stay afloat financially, but eventually had to borrow \$9,000 from a loan shark. He became estranged from his mother after he got married, but now he needs her help. He became a buyer of scrap iron to try to earn the loan shark's money back, so his sons need to stay with Grandma while he travels around the country. According to his mother, Eddie is a soft man who cannot do anything on his own.

## **Gert Kurnitz**

Gert Kurnitz is the daughter of Grandma and the aunt of Jay and Arty. The boys make fun of her for the way she talks; she speaks normally for the first half of each sentence, but she inhales the second half of the sentence. At one point, the boys hear that she used to sleep with her head inside of the pillow so her mother wouldn't hear her talk at night. However, she later reveals she only speaks like this whenever she goes to her mother's house.

## **Johnny**

Johnny is an usher who works at a local movie theater. He is mentally handicapped like Bella, except his reading disability is more severe than hers. Johnny is interested in Bella and proposes to her. He wants to own and manage a restaurant with her. However, he finds the comfort of living with his parents is more secure. In Bella's life, he represents a chance at happiness she never had before. He is the one man that has been interested in her mind and personality. Johnny never appears onstage, though. All his characteristics are described by Bella.

## **Rose and Aaron Kurnitz**

Rose and Aaron Kurnitz are the two dead children of Grandma. They died very young in their lives. After their deaths, Grandma became emotionally cold. She stopped being a warm and loving mother and instead focused on surviving.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Yonkers, New York**

The Kurnitz family lives in Yonkers, New York, where the play takes place.

### **Germany**

The Kurnitz family comes from Germany. Grandma immigrated from Germany after she has her children decades before.

### **The American South**

Eddie travels to the Southern United States to collect scrap iron for the war effort.

### **Kurnitz's Kandy Store**

Grandma and Bella live above the Kurnitz's Kandy Store, the shop the Grandma owns. The boys work in the store to pay for their keep.

### **The Movie Theater**

Bella attends a movie theater three or four times a week to see her love, Johnny.

### **Louie's Black Satchel**

Louie keeps a black satchel with him at all times. The boys want to know what is inside but never discover the contents.

### **\$15,000**

Grandma has \$15,000 somewhere in the candy store. The boys try to find it so they can send money to their father.

### **Pretzels**

Bella steals pretzels from the candy store, and Grandma blames Jay for letting her take them.



## **Pistachios**

When Louie worked at the candy store, Grandma steals a jar of pistachios and blamed Louie for letting her take it.

## **Letters from Eddie**

Eddie sends letters to his sons while he is away in the southern United States.



# Themes

## Family

Family, and the influence it can have, is a major theme in the play “Lost in Yonkers” by Neil Simon. At the beginning of the play, Jay tells Arty that their mother always said something was different about the Kurnitz children because of how their mother raised them. At first, this statement is just a supposition, and seems to be what everyone says of every family. But when the text slowly reveals each of the Kurnitz children, it appears the boys’ mother was correct in her assessment. According to the rumors, Grandma kept hitting Bella on her head with a cane. When Louie broke a cheap plate, his mother locked him in a closet for hours. Others suffered similar repercussions if they did anything wrong. Most of these stories are true.

In these cases, the children all learned different lessons. However, it is easy to tell their mother had a significant influence on their psyche. Louie was the only child who understood his mother’s actions, but he lacks the moral fortitude to become everything his mother hopes. Eddie could never stop crying, and he begged his mother constantly for things that he wanted. Gert develops a psychological breathing problem. Bella develops mental instability and she cannot stop behaving like a child.

As for the two young boys, their two families have a profound influence on them. While she was alive, their mother pampered them and gave them love and affection. When they visited their grandmother, it was easy to tell they were soft and could not handle disciplinary authority. By the end of their visit, though, the boys know they can now better face the world. Because of Grandma’s influence on their lives, they are stronger and know they can survive.

## Respect

Respect, and the process by which respect is earned and given, is major theme in the play “Lost in Yonkers” by Neil Simon. In the play, Jay and Arty have serious reservations about staying with their grandmother for just under a year. They even admit to hating her because she is so cold and angry. Grandma is not excited about having them at her house, either. She refers to them as “strangers” rather than as her own grandchildren. Throughout the course of the play, though, the boys and Grandma come to terms with each other. The boys learn to respect their grandmother and everything she is trying to teach them about living.

At the same time, Bella and her mother are undergoing the same process. Each knows they need each other, but they cannot admit it to one another. In their climactic fight, though, they work through their problems and each realizes how important the other is. Bella respects her mother for trying to protect her, and Grandma realizes Bella is not only a child, but she is growing up.



## Self-Reliance and Survival

In the play “Lost in Yonkers” by Neil Simon, the most important aspects of life to Grandma are self-reliance and survival. Even before her two children died, Grandma was a stoic and uncomplaining woman. However, the death of her two children left her emotionally closed and unresponsive. She didn’t want to appear weak or feeble in front of her children, so she made sure she was a pillar of strength in her family. She tried to teach her children not to cry, so Grandma was a strict disciplinarian. Nothing in life -love, family, children, work, anything -can be taken for granted. People must ultimately rely on themselves.

The only person in the play who completely understands Grandma’s lessons is Jay. Even though Jay doesn’t particularly like his grandmother, he respects her for her strength and ability to survive at any cost. Louie understands this as well, but Louie sees thievery and crime as the best means of survival instead of honesty and hard work.





# Style

## Point of View

The play is primarily from Jay's point of view. However, there are a few scenes where Jay is not a part of the action. These mostly serve to establish the personalities and identities of the other characters. Regardless, the reader and audience mainly see Jay's growing admiration and respect for Grandma as he and Arty learn more about her. More importantly, his progression can be seen as he learns to become more responsible and strong.

## Setting

The play takes place in Yonkers, a section of New York north of Manhattan. At the time of the play, the area was the home of a very large Jewish immigrant neighborhood. The story takes place during World War II, 1942 specifically. The war effort played a major role in the establishment of the country. The setting is significant because the plot heavily relies on World War II as well as the neighborhood's history of immigration. It was the war that allowed Eddie to leave and gain money in the scrap iron industry and forced the boys into their grandmothers' home.

At the beginning of the play, the heat informs the tone. The boys complain about how hot their grandmother's house is, and the characters discuss how the heat is sweltering. The heat is symbolic of the tension the family feels through most of the play. The tension in Grandma's house is thick and uncomfortable, much like the temperature.

Grandma's house is an apartment above Kurnitz's Kandy Store. Grandma has owned the store since she moved to Yonkers from Germany. Owning a candy store is ironic; usually, candy store owners are considered sweet and friendly people. However, Grandma is not a sweet and friendly person. The environment she creates is uninviting and bitter.

## Language and Meaning

There is a variation of language and dialect in the play. The most distinct dialect comes from Grandma, who speaks with a heavy German accent. She doesn't speak in German except for one or two exclamations. However, the text is interesting in how it portrays the accent. Rather than just including a note describing how Grandma's accent should sound, Grandma's lines are spelled out phonetically. When reading, this gives the reader a visual portrayal of the accent, making it easier to hear in one's mind.

The other interesting language occurs in Louie, a "gangster" type character. While he does not have any prompts as to how he should act, his language suggests he has the stereotypical gangster accent. While typical, it adds a touch of realism and veracity to

his character as well as to the time setting. As for the other characters, they speak normally. This contrast emphasizes Grandma and Louie's unique accents.

## **Structure**

Split into two acts, *Lost in Yonkers* follows the normal play structure. Each act has four scenes, some longer than others. Each scene reveals new secrets about the Kurnitz family, leading up to the admissions between Bella and Grandma. After that, the dénouement sees the two boys leaving Grandma's home. It is an even closure to the play's opening where the children first arrive at the house.



## Quotes

Did you ever notice there's something wrong with everyone on Pop's side of the family? (Act 1, Scene 1)

Mom says she talks that way because she was so afraid of Grandma. She never allowed her kids to cry. (Act 1, Scene 1)

There's a lot of Germans in this country fighting for America, but there are no Americans over there fighting for Germany. (Act 1, Scene 1)

Dot's how I was raised. To be strong. Ven dey beat us wit sticks in Germany ven ve vere children, I didn't cry... You don't survive in dis world vitout being like steel. (Act 1, Scene 1)

No! My money. I pay for everything here. You don't have anything unless I give you. (Act 1, Scene 2)

You think the Germans would let some Jew in Poland send nine thousand dollars to some Jew in Alabama? (Act 1, Scene 3)

Nothin' sweeter than danger, boys, am I right? (Act 1, Scene 4)

I'd stare her right back until her eyelids started to weigh ten pounds each... And she'd turn away from me, down for the count... And you know what? She loved it... because I know how to take care of myself. (Act 1, Scene 4)

You know, we could make a great living just from this family. (Act 1, Scene 4)

You're just mad at my mother and you're taking it out on me. You don't care about your rotten soup or making me get better. You just want me to be miserable because somebody made you miserable in Germany. Even Pop said it... Well, that's not my fault. Take it out on Hitler, not on me. (Act 2, Scene 1)

It's not so important dat you hate me, Artur... It's only important dat you live. Dot's something dot I could never teach your father. (Act 2, Scene 1)

She used to lock me in a closet for breakn' a dish. A ten-cent dish, I'd two, three hours in the closet. And if I cried, I'd get another hour... No light, no water, just enough air to breathe. That's when I learned not to cry. And after a few times in the closet, I toughened up. But I also never broke another dish... No, I didn't like her, but I respected her. (Act 2, Scene 1)

When she was twelve years old, her old man takes her to a political rally in Berlin. The cops broke it up. With sticks, on horseback. Someone throws a rock, a cop bashes in her old man's head, a horse goes down and crushes Ma's foot. Nobody ever fixed it. It hurts every day of her life but I never once seen her take even an aspirin... She coulda



had an operation but she used the money she saved to get to this country with her husband and six kids. That's moxie, kid. (Act 2, Scene 1)

You make fun of my father because he cried and was afraid of Grandma. Well, everyone in Yonkers is afraid of Grandma. (Act 2, Scene 1)

Live—at any cost I taught you, yes. But not when someone else has to pay the price. (Act 2, Scene 1)

Eddie's out there lookin' for scrap iron and the chump doesn't know he's got a whole battleship right here. (Act 2, Scene 1)

Do you know what it's like to touch steel, Momma? It's hard and it's cold and I want to be warm and soft with my children. (Act 2, Scene 2)

You'll always be a child, Bella. And in dis world, vere dere is so much hate and sickness and death, vere nobody can live in peace, den maybe you're better off...Stay a child, Bella, and be glad dot's vot Gott made you. (Act 2, Scene 3)

Thieves and sick little girls, that's what you have, Momma...Only God didn't make them that way. You did. We're alive Momma, but that's all we are...Aaron and Rose are the lucky ones. (Act 2, Scene 3)

When Louie left for the army, I thought about sending you the money. Even Bella asked me to. But then I said no...Eddie has to do things for himself. And you did. That's good. (Act 2, Scene 4)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Discuss the time setting for the play. When does the play take place? Why is this time so significant? What is going on in the world? How does this further the plot?

## Topic 2

Discuss the location of the play. Why does the Kurnitz family live in Yonkers? Why did Grandma immigrate?

## Topic 3

Why does Grandma walk with a limp? What happened to her in Germany? How did she handle the accident? How did this change her life?

## Topic 4

Why do the boys hate going to their grandmother's house? How do they see their grandmother? Why do they not like her?

## Topic 5

How does Grandma see the boys? Why didn't she see them often? Does she want the boys to live with her?

## Topic 6

Discuss Jay. Describe his personality. What changes does he undergo throughout the play? What significant events happen to change his perspective?

## Topic 7

How is Arty different than his older brother? Why doesn't he have to be as strong as Jay? Why does his grandmother force him to drink the soup? What does he think about this?



## Topic 8

Describe each of Grandma's children. How did each cope with their childhood? How is each different from the other? How does Grandma act toward each one?

## Topic 9

Discuss the steel and iron imagery in the play. Which characters are compared to these metals? Why?

## Topic 10

Who are Johnny, Rose, and Aaron? Why don't they appear in person in the play? What influence does each have on the other characters?