Once in a Lifetime Study Guide

Once in a Lifetime by Moss Hart

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Introduction

Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's *Once in a Lifetime* was one of the pair's best collaborations, the first of eight they wrote together in the 1930s. Inspired by the rise of the talkies movies with sound and the excess of Hollywood, the play is a wisecracking satire, though not particularly mean or bitter. Hart had originally written the play in 1929. Kaufman, a more established comic playwright, collaborated with Hart on several rewrites in late 1929 and early 1930. After several problematic out-of-town tryouts, *Once in a Lifetime* opened on September 24,1930, at the Music Box in New York City. It ran for 406 performances and won the Roi Cooper Megrue Prize for comedy in 1930. The play was very popular with both critics and audiences, giving them something to think about other than the growing economic depression. Since its original production, *Once in a Lifetime* was revived regularly through years, both on and off Broadway, as well as regionally and in Europe. Subsequent critics saw the play as a product of its time, but many believed its humor stood up well. The excesses of Hollywood were still contemporary, though some of the plays' references were dated. As the *New York Times*' Howard Taubman wrote in a 1962 review "*Once in a Lifetime* is still pertinent and funny. The film industry has been through more upheavals than an old-time banana republic, but the more it changes the more some of its foibles remain the same."

Author Biography

Hart was born on October 24, 1904, in Bronx, New York. He was the son of Barnett Hart, who was born in Great Britain and worked as a cigar maker, and Lillian (nee Solomon) Hart. Hart grew up in poverty after the advent of the cigar rolling machine made his father's profession outdated. When Hart left school in his mid-teens, he was already a confirmed fan of the theater. He got a job as a clerk to a theater producer, Augustus Pitou, Jr., and wrote a script for him, submitted under a pseudonym. The previews of *The Hold-Up Man or The Beloved Bandit* were awful, and Hart was fired.

While spending several years directing small theater groups and working as a social director at resorts during the summer, Hart continued to write plays, turning out one per year, none of which were produced until he got a break in the late 1930s. In 1929, Hart wrote *Once in a Lifetime*, based on what was happening with the advent of movies with sound. The only way Sam H. Harris would produce it, however, was if Hart rewrote it with a more experienced playwright, George S. Kaufman.

Kaufman was born on November 16, 1889, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the son of Joseph S. and Nettie (nee Schamberg) Myers Kaufman. He moved to Paterson, New Jersey with his parents while a teenager. After studying law for three months, before taking on a series of low-level jobs. Kaufman soon turned to the written word. After contributing occasionally to a column in the *Evening Mail,* Kaufman wrote his own column in the *Washington Times* in 1912. He wrote a column for several different papers before becoming a drama critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *New York Times* through 1930.

Kaufman began writing plays in the late 1910s. His first play, *Going Up* "was not made, but led to more work." In 1921, he wrote his first play with Marc Connelly called *Dulcy.* The play was a big hit, and led to long-term success in the theater. While Kaufman had some successful collaborations with Connelly, including *Merton of the Movies* (1922), not all the plays they wrote together were successful.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, Kaufman wrote on his own again. He had several solo successes, including *The Coconuts* (1925) *and Animal Crackers* (1928) for the Marx Brothers. But Kaufman worked better with a co-writer, because, while he was good at developing interesting characters, plots were not his forte. Still, it was hard to find a good collaborator; and he worked with many over the course of his career.

In late 1929 and 1930, Hart and Kaufman rewrote *Once in a Lifetime* several times during out of town tryouts before it came to New York and was a box-office smash. At the time, Kaufman told audiences that most of the play was still Hart's. Hart and Kaufman wrote seven more plays together in the 1930s, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *You Can't Take It With You* (1937). By 1940, the pair had gone their separate ways. Hart wanted to have an identity separate from Kaufman, who was still better known.

Hart both wrote his own material and collaborated with others in the 1930s, but spent the 1940s and 1950s writing primarily on his own. Beginning with *Lady in the Dark* (1943), Hart also directed many of his own plays, as well as plays of other playwrights until his death. Hart's writing was not limited to plays. Beginning in the early 1930s, he also wrote screenplays for major motion pictures. Hart wrote his last play in 1952, *The Climate of Eden*. Hart died December 20,1961, survived by his actress wife, Kitty Carlisle, and their children, Christopher and Cathy.

Kaufman continued to write with and without collaborators throughout the 1930s and 1940s. He also directed many plays, including the 1941 hit Mr. *Big,* and later movies. In fact, many of his plays turned into movies. Kaufman both wrote and directed 1947's *The Senator Was Indiscreet*. He continued to work until his death. Kaufman was married twice. First to Beatrice Bakrow (with whom he adopted daughter Anne), who died in 1945, and later to Leuenn McGrath, an actress and playwright whom he divorced in 1957. Kaufman died of a heart attack on June 2, 1961, in New York.

Plot Summary

Act I, Scene 1

In a small furnished room in New York City, vaudeville partners George Lewis and May Daniels talk about their immediate future. Their third partner, Jerry Hyland, is supposed to be working on a booking for them. May worries because they have only $128 in their bank account. George is less concerned, sure that something will turn up.

When Jerry arrives, he announces that he has sold their act for $500. Jerry believes he has seen the future in the first sound movie, *The Jazz Singer.* Despite May's protests, Jerry insists that the three of them go to Los Angeles and get into the movies. Because films have been silent until this point, actors did not have to speak well. Jerry believes that stage-trained actors, who have voice training, will be in demand.

After agreeing with Jerry's decisions, May comes up with an idea about what they will do there. They will open a school of elocution (the art of public speaking) to teach film actors and actresses how to talk. They believe it will make lots of money, though none of them have actually taught it before.

Act I, Scene 2

On the train to Los Angeles, the three prepare to open their school. May discovers that Helen Hobart, the foremost film critic in the United States, is on the train. May knows Helen because they used to be in an acting troupe together. May convinces her to talk to them. They tell Helen that May taught elocution in England, Jerry is May's business manager, and George is a doctor and May's technical advisor. Helen becomes interested in their project, and agrees to introduce them to Herman Glogauer, the owner of Glogauer Studios.

Susan Walker, a young wannabe actress, finds Helen in the threesome's car. She is trying to get Helen to help start her acting career. George becomes interested in Susan, and escorts her back to her mother.

Act I, Scene 3

Inside the Gold Room of the Hotel Stilton in Los Angeles, actors, actresses, and wannabes work to see and be seen by others. Everyone, even the workers, has some connection to film. Susan and her mother, Mrs. Walker, come in. Susan is impressed by everyone in the room. George, May, and Jerry show up to meet Helen and Glogauer about their school. George sees Susan and promises to help her meet the studio owner. May and Jerry are not pleased that he has made this promise.

After Glogauer makes a sweeping entrance, Helen, May, Jerry and George meet with him. They convince him that their school would put him ahead of other movie moguls, playing on the fact that he passed on Vitaphone, the technology behind the talkies. George has Glogauer meet Susan, but her presence does not impress him.

Act II, Scene 1

At the reception room of the Glogauer Studio, the secretary, Miss Leighton, manages the chaos of calls and visitors. A playwright, Lawrence Vail, waits for a meeting with Glogauer. Vail has been bounced between many people, and unhappy. His meeting is put off, and he is bounced around again.

May's school is in full swing. She is overworked, but Jerry and George are little help. Jerry is busy playing the Hollywood game, to the detriment of his relationship with May. George inquires about Susan's progress in her class, informing her that they will marry when she has a career. May tells him to talk to her before he does anything rash.

Their conversation is interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Walker. She needs to take Susan to the hotel so they can take a long-distance call from Mr. Walker. George escorts the pair out. In the meantime, Vail is still waiting. Miss Leighton cannot remember who he is. He becomes angry that he cannot meet anyone and does not have enough work to do. Soon after he leaves, Helen comes looking for him. Miss Leighton does not know who he is when the movie critic asks.

May runs into Helen. Helen implies that the life of the school will be short. After she leaves, a man, Flick, comes to take their names off the door of their office. This confirms the school's status. Jerry and George show up, and May tells them they have been fired.

George's first thought is of Susan and her career. Susan returns. Her father wants her to come home. George decides to look for Glogauer. He comes across Vail, who is shocked to learn that George has actually met Glogauer. Vail vents his frustrations on George, and Vail announces that he is quitting.

Glogauer appears, arguing with German director Rudolph Kammerling. Kammerling is angry about the casting of an actress who is totally wrong for the role. George steps in and suggests Susan would be more appropriate. When Glogauer tells him that they must have a name actress, George tells him off, using many of the same words that Vail used to describe the movie industry.

Glogauer is impressed by George's ideas. After casting Susan in the role and arranging for the publicity machine to go to work on her, Glogauer appoints George as the supervisor of the studio. George immediately hires May and Jerry, over the objections of Glogauer.

Act III, Scene 1

On the set of Kammerling's movie, *Gingham and Orchids,* all is chaos on the last day of shooting. As Kammerling starts to explain to everyone how the scene on the church steps will be shot, Susan claims she does not know this scene. May reminds Susan that they rehearsed it just five minutes ago, though it was called another name.

May's sarcastic attitude catches the attention of Jerry. While Jerry is enthusiastic about the movie and its future, May points out every fault. George appears and, the set temporarily focuses all its attention on him. Just as Kammerling and company return to work, Glogauer shows up. He is impressed that the movie is exactly on schedule. As a token of his appreciation, he gives George a solid gold dinner set.

Finally, the scene is shot. After it is over, Glogauer realizes that George had Kammerling do the wrong movie script. Glogauer suspends production and takes back his present to George. Jerry chides May for being sarcastic to Glogauer, while May points out that Jerry just kissed up to him. Susan refuses to speak to George. Glogauer fires everyone.

Act III, Scene 2

May is on the train back to New York. Vail comes aboard at a stop near a sanitarium. May has Vail read the reviews for *Gingham and Orchids.* To her surprise, they are very positive. Everything that was a mistake is praised. A telegram is given to her. It is from George who wants her and Jerry to come back. May decides she will return, if only to promote her agenda.

Act III, Scene 3

At Glogauer's studio, George is back in charge. Many demands are made on his time. Susan visits him, telling him about a premiere. George tells her that he has bought a number of aeroplanes. Glogauer appears and demands to know why he has bought 2,000 planes. He is extremely angry.

May enters, and George immediately wants to know where Jerry is. George tells her that Jerry went to find her when she left. While May wants to know more about that situation, George is more concerned about what to do with the aeroplane situation. Jerry appears and reassures her about their relationship. George is still worried about the aeroplanes. Glogauer interrupts, calling George a genius. Because he has bought all the planes, they are in demand by other studios. Glogauer is extremely happy with George's work. George is seen as even smarter as he allows the studio to be torn down so that a bigger one can be built.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Once in a Lifetime is a lighthearted play about some New York stage performers who head to Hollywood to make their fortune at the onset of talking pictures. The three primary characters are May, Jerry, and George. The first scene opens in a two-bit hotel room, where George is happily thumbing through a copy of *Variety* magazine and is rudely interrupted by May, a high energy worrywart. May is anxious for their other partner, Jerry, to return with news of a sorely needed job for the trio.

Jerry's good news is not quite what May and George are expecting. Instead of landing a contract, Jerry has sold the vaudeville act, so the three of them can go to Hollywood; a decision he made after watching Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* this afternoon. There is a fortune to be made with the advent of this new technology, and Jerry has bought tickets for the three of them on the next train to Hollywood, even though his plan falls short at that point.

It is May who has the idea of opening a diction school for actors. Jerry and George agree that it seems like a monumental idea to capitalize on the conversion of silent movie stars to the new medium of talkies.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The characters are identified quite easily by their looks and speech patterns. George is not an intellectual, and his perpetually happy temperament is pleasant, yet irritating, in its obtuseness. Jerry dresses and acts like the front man, and he is perfect at making a deal. However, it is May who is the intellectual power behind the trio, and she thinks well on her feet and is very resourceful. Given the play's debut in the 1930s, it must have appealed to audiences anxious for an escape from the Great Depression, while offering a bit of hope that, if this second rate vaudeville trio has the possibility to make it big, perhaps the chance exists for anyone.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

The glow of the new money-making idea, which started in New York and the lights of Hollywood, is at completely opposite ends of the desert that Jerry, May, and George are crossing. Train travel cannot be fast enough for these three to hatch their new idea in Los Angeles, and May, especially, is struggling to control her nervous energy.

With another stroke of good luck, May encounters an old friend, Helen Hobart, who is now a leading Hollywood gossip columnist and very powerful in the town. Being mentioned in Helen's column can make or break a career. Fortunately, Helen remembers May fondly and thinks the diction school idea is a definite money maker, offering to help promote it and to introduce the trio to a studio head, in exchange for fifty percent of the business.

George is not quite in the league of the fast talking May, Jerry, and Helen. George meets a girl named Susan, who is heading to Hollywood to become an actress. Susan is beautiful but not too bright, and seems to be perfect for George. They form a fast friendship.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The newly hatched plan is painfully coming together on the train trip to California. Symbolically, the dust from the desert covers everything inside the car, while May and Jerry struggle with the details. The closer they get to Los Angeles, their fortunes change with the chance meeting of Helen Hobart traveling on the same train. Helen is quite the opportunist and seizes onto May, Jerry, and George's idea. Helen seems particularly taken with the dim-witted George for some reason. The only problem is that the trio has positioned itself as experts in the field of diction education, and they clearly are not. Perhaps their acting skills will serve them well, after all, while they launch their new careers off the stage.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

This scene takes place in the heavily gilded interior of the Hotel Stilton in Los Angeles. Hopeful actors and actresses work as waiters and cigarette girls in the hopes of being discovered by some movie industry executive. A parade of movie stars through the lobby sets off squeals from autograph seekers, who are more often than not rebuffed by the silent celebrities.

Jerry, May, and George wait for Helen who will introduce them to Mr. Glogauer tonight. Helen arrives to as much pandemonium as the movie stars do and she basks in her celebrity. Her obsequious behavior comes into play when Mr. Glogauer arrives and Jerry, May, and George join her in compliments to this man who they hope will put their futures on the fast track.

A bellboy announces that Mr. Glogauer's presence is requested by the twelve Schlepkin brothers also dining at the hotel tonight. The mention of the Schlepkin name sends Glogauer into fits because of their ruthless and relentless success in the industry lately with Al Jolson and the talking picture. The brothers are the stones in Glogauer's shoe and he agrees to the diction school so that he can take the lead by training his actors and actresses.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Jerry, May and George have impeccable timing with their business idea, which is validated even further by the ego and competition between Glogauer and the Schlepkins. Now that the deal is done, they will have to quickly produce articulate movie stars. Hopefully, they will be up for the vast challenges ahead.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

This scene is set in the Glogauer Studios reception area, which is decorated in a very modern style, meant to impress even the most jaded and avant-garde visitor. There is constant motion in the room with the entrances and departures of pages, secretaries, assistants, and other support staff. There is a sense of much movement but not much progress. The one constant is Lawrence Vail, a playwright, who has been waiting for days to see Mr. Glogauer, to no avail.

Eventually, May and Jerry cross paths in this room, and May shares her concern that the screen tests of their first pupils have not been received favorably by Mr. Glogauer. Jerry is fully immersed in Hollywood mode, giving no credence to her worries. George appears too, and is oblivious to anything other than his love for Susan and his efforts to make her a talking picture movie star.

May's suspicions about the closing of the diction school are confirmed by Helen Hobart, and May watches as Jerrry's, George's and her names are removed from their office door. May and Jerry leave to pack up their things amid the continuing office chaos.

Soon, the reception area is quiet, with the exception of George and Lawrence Vail, who remain. Vail shares his angst about being hired as a playwright, leaving his home in New York and coming to work at a job where he has nothing to do. The compensation and accommodations are more than adequate, but he has not been given an assignment in the six months he has been in Hollywood.

Vail continues his soapbox speech about the ineptitude of the movie making industry, which appears to be led by buffoons, but he may as well be talking to the wall when talking to George. Vail senses this and leaves to go back to the East coast.

George is alone in the reception area when Glogauer finally emerges, engaged in an argument with the director of his next picture. The director is not satisfied with the casting of a scandalous actress in the role of a simple, country girl. George offers Susan as perfect for the part, but Glogauer wants an established star. That is when George launches into Vail's speech about the futility of the film industry and reminds Glogauer of his failure to have bought Vitaphone, the company that brings sound to movies.

Momentarily stunned by George's audacity, Glogauer recognizes the insight and courage and promotes George to head of studio productions. George's first act of business is to hire Susan for the role of the country girl and plans begin immediately to launch the public relations that will make her a star.

Act 2 Analysis

The playwrights interject much humor and confusion into this scene to exemplify the inefficiencies of the Hollywood film industry. They send the message about the legitimacy and presumably nobler career on the legitimate stage, opposed to the façade and shell game of the film business. Lawrence Vail, the frustrated, serious playwright, could represent the authors who have written their plight and uncertain future directly into the scenario.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Susan Walker is about to shoot the last scene of her first movie. Dressed like a bride, she is beautiful but not at all bright, evidenced when she speaks anything other than her one line. There is an air of excitement on the set, because everyone knows the picture is finishing ahead of schedule and under budget. Mr. Glogauer is expected at any minute to commend George publicly for his management success.

Before Glogauer's arrival, May and Jerry discuss the numerous flaws in George's first film effort, but their discontent is overshadowed by Glogauer's appearance, speech, and presentation of a 106-piece, solid gold, dinnerware set. George is immensely pleased with himself and Glogauer settles in to watch the filming of the last scene. Upon its completion, Glogauer discovers, to his rising horror, George has produced the wrong movie. The script he used is from an unsuccessful film made twenty years ago. Jerry, May, and George are fired, once again, and Glogauer leaves the, set followed closely by pages, who carry away the gold dinnerware.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

This scene depicts the ultimate example of buffoonery and inept management of those in charge of major organizations. George is not known to his friends to be an intellectual power, yet he rises to the top, placed there by someone who doesn't delve too deeply into anything and makes rash decisions without much discovery. The analogy is complete with the early completion of a project, based on twenty-year-old material.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

May heads back to New York in the same Pullman car that brought her to California with Jerry and George not too long ago. She recognizes another passenger, Lawrence Vail, whom she had met in Glogauer's reception area. Vail has been recovering at a sanitarium that caters only to playwrights and he, too, is going back to New York.

May's hesitancy and fear of reading the dismal reviews of George's movie in the Los Angeles newspapers are unfounded, because the movie premiers a huge success. A telegram from the now triumphant George asks her to return to Hollywood, and she does so, with the intent of making some long, overdue changes to the mechanics of the industry.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

In an ironic twist of fate, the blundering George has stumbled onto another huge success. To his credit, he is not changed by the extravagant life and undeserved acclaim. George remains loyal to his original partners, May and Jerry. The authors show that there are some redeeming qualities in the business of film making, but on an even higher level, George is the message of hope for those who are underprivileged or otherwise unequipped to realize success but can achieve it anyway.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

Back in Glogauer Studios reception room, portraits of George hang above each doorway and are lit up every time one of those doors opens or closes. George's presence is felt everywhere. When the scene opens, George tells Susan he has received the gift of a new airplane, because he has purchased some for the studio. The glow of Susan's affection for him is short lived, though, when Glogauer appears in a rage over the news that George has purchased over two thousand airplanes.

In the meantime, May has discovered Jerry has left Los Angeles to find her. Eventually, the two reconnect and realize the emotional bond they had back in New York has not been lost in Hollywood.

Amazingly, George's airplane purchase is not the gross blunder originally thought. Glogauer returns to thank him for his uncanny insight in buying up all the planes, just when a new trend of airplane movies is about to start. Studios all over town are offering Glogauer any price he names for the purchase of the planes.

At this point, Glogauer's secretary announces that the workmen are outside, ready to begin the demolition of the studio so that the building of the new one can begin. Glogauer is surprised to hear this, but a smile from George is all he needs to give his approval for the destruction to begin.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

Incompetence has risen to new heights in the form of George, but he is such a likable character that any possible negative perceptions are dismissed. Jerry and May have reunited after surviving the artificial world they have found in Hollywood. Despite the shallow characters that surround them, and the fickle nature of their new lives, Jerry, May, and George are still centered, with their priorities intact. Maybe that is the most that can be asked of any person. This very witty play has particular relevance in the dire times of its release, but its core messages of loyalty and hope are timeless. The play still entertains.

Characters

May Daniels

May is one of the three vaudevillians who form the core of the play. Of the three, May is the worrier. From the beginning, she is well aware of how little money they have, and how much they need to work. She cannot believe that Jerry sold their act without her input. Yet May is also a survivor. She immediately forms the plan for what they can do in Los Angeles: open an elocution school. It is she who has the contact (Helen Hobart) that gets them the studio school. At the studio, she does most of the work at the school.

May sees through the falseness of Hollywood and takes no guff. When Jerry begins ignoring her, she calls him on how he has changed. May takes a similar attitude towards George when he screws up, as well as Herman Glogauer and others. May leaves Los Angeles alone when she knows the move is right. Though May believes that Gingham and Orchids is garbage, she takes advantage of situations when they present themselves. The movie is a hit, and May returns to Hollywood to work for George and reunite with Jerry.

Mr. Flick

Mr. Flick is a door painter who works at the movie studios. He changes the names on the doors, using temporary paints because of the constant turnover.

Phyllis Fontaine

Phyliss Fontaine is a somewhat famous silent film actress. The switch to sound movies puts her at a disadvantage because of her accent. She attends May's elocution school at the studio so that she can work in talkies.

Herman Glogauer

Herman Glogauer is the owner of Glogauer Studios. He is a powerful mogul in Hollywood, who is vulnerable when Helen, May, Jerry, and George bring their elocution school idea to him. Glogauer turned down the Vitaphone technology that created the talkies, and does not want to miss out on the next big thing. Glogauer takes on the elocution school for a short time before getting rid of it. Glogauer is an impulsive man, trying to stay ahead of the game in Hollywood. He is also not used to being challenged, so when George tells him off, Glogauer immediately hires him as the studio head. Glogauer sees George's mistakes as genius, as long as they can benefit him in the end. Glogauer's only concern is the bottom line.

Helen Hobart

Helen Hobart is the foremost movie critic in the United States. She is also an acquaintance of May Daniels. They previously worked as actresses in the same troupe. May uses this relationship to get their elocution school idea heard in Los Angeles. It is Helen who arranges the meeting with Herman Glogauer, the owner of Glogauer Studios. Through this contact, the school gets started, though Helen gets half of the profits. When the school is about to be closed, Helen is not at all friendly to May. Helen is only interested maintaining relationships that are beneficial to her. She plays the Hollywood game well, so well that the studios have bought her a house and kennel full of dogs.

Jerry Hyland

Jerry is one of the three vaudevillians who form the core of the play. Of the three, he is the doer. After seeing *The Jazz Singer* the first sound movie with spoken dialogue Jerry sees that the future is in the movies and that with their skills, the three could be a success in Hollywood. Without consulting his partners, Jerry sells their vaudeville act for $500 and decides that they are moving to Los Angeles. This does not sit well with May, with whom there is some romantic tension.

Once the three arrive in Los Angeles, Jerry does everything he can to be successful in the movie industry, though May does most of the work. May feels ignored in favor of Jerry's fast Hollywood life. It is only when she leaves after George is fired as studio supervisor that Jerry seems to realize what she means to him and what is important. Jerry goes after her, and when he catches up to her, declares his feelings. They are together at the end of the play.

Rudloph Kammerling

Rudolph Kammerling is a German movie director working in Hollywood. He is extremely frustrated that Dorothy Dodd has been cast in the lead role of the film he is directing. When he meets Susan through George Lewis's intervention, he sees that she is perfect for the role. Kammerling gets to direct *Gingham and Orchids* with her in the lead. After Herman Glogauer shuts down the production because George has given Kammerling the wrong script, Kammerling considers returning to Germany.

Florabel Leigh

Florabel Leigh is a somewhat famous silent film actress. The switch to sound movies puts her at a disadvantage because of her accent. She attends May's elocution school at the studio so that she can work in talkies.

Miss Leighton

Miss Leighton is the harried receptionist at Glogauer Studios. She does her best to keep everything she is juggling numerous phone calls, people, and their needs straight, but she forgets Lawrence Vail entirely. It her treatment of him that contributes to his quitting.

George Lewis

George is one of the three vaudevillians who form the core of the play's story. He is an actor, rather young, and single, and is somewhat carefree and oblivious. George follows the lead of May and Jerry at the beginning of the play. When Jerry announces that he has sold the act and they are moving to Los Angeles, George goes along. When May decides that they will open an elocution school, George goes along. He just wants to get along. One of his only decisive actions is to notice and fall for Susan Walker. He uses his good fortune to help her.

It is when George tries to further Susan's career that he lucks into his biggest break. George, May, and Jerry's school has been closed and they have all been fired. George hears that Rudolph Kammerling needs a new lead actress for his movie, and suggests Susan. After George stands up to Glogauer, Susan gets the part and George is appointed supervisor of the studio's production. Despite two setbacks, George manages to hang on to the job, keep his friends together, and get the girl. George is lucky, and he knows it.

Lawrence Vail

Lawrence Vail is a well-known playwright who is employed at the studio as a scenario writer. Vail is extremely frustrated. He cannot get a meeting with the studio head and is shuffled from person to person. Even the secretary, Miss Leighton, continually forgets who he is. Vail believes he is underemployed and does not like his job. He left behind a happy life in New York City to come to Hollywood, and while he draws a salary at the studio, he has not received one assignment. Vail finally quits and checks into a sanatorium that only takes such playwrights as patients. He meets May on the train back to New York City. Though she changes her mind and decides to go back to Los Angeles, he continues on to New York.

Mrs. Walker

Mrs. Walker is Susan Walker's mother. She does not know much about Hollywood, but supports her daughter's ambitions. Mrs. Walker does what she can for her before and after Susan has been case in *Gingham and Orchids.*

Susan Walker

Susan Walker is a nineteen-year-old wannabe actress from Columbus, Ohio. She is traveling to Los Angeles with her mother to pursue her career when she meets George Lewis. Susan is not particularly talented, but because George is enamored with her, she ends up starring in a movie. Susan has agreed to marry him after her acting career has started, and they are a couple at the end of the play.

Themes

Friendship and Loyalty

At the center of the *Once in a Lifetime* is the loyal friendship of May, George, and Jerry. From the beginning, they stick together they even have one bank account. The three had a vaudeville act, which Jerry sold when he thought there was better chance for them in Los Angeles. Though May, and to some degree George, did not like the fact that Jerry did not consult with them before making such a big decision, they go along with it. May comes up with their elocution school plan, uses her contract to get it going, and does most of the work when it is open.

Though their friendship is challenged by life in Hollywood, it does survive. May becomes somewhat resentful that she has to do much of the work and that Jerry, her love interest, has become wrapped up in life in the fast land. George does not like always feeling like the other two do not respect his intelligence or abilities. Jerry is temporarily oblivious of his responsibilities towards the other two. But when the chips are down, they rally around each other. After George is appointed head of the studio and insists that May and Jerry are hired as well, the pair comes through for George when he really needs their support. By the end of the play, their friendship is as strong as ever. *Once in a Lifetime* shows the importance of such relationships in an unstable world.

Hope and Optimism

Throughout *Once in a Lifetime,* there is an undercurrent of hope and optimism. No matter what life throws at May, Jerry, and George, or most of the other characters, they always have some positive feelings for the future. Jerry believes he, May, and George will improve their lot in Los Angeles. George believes that Susan will be a successful actress. Their optimism pays off in both situations: both of their hopes come true. Even the wannabe film-types, the actors, actress, and scenario writers who work in the hotel, do not have any doubts about their futures. They believe they will work in the movie industry.

The only person seemingly without hope is Lawrence Vail, the underused playwright and film scenario writer who is shuffled from person to person in an attempt to meet with someone about his work at the studio. Vail is frustrated because, while he draws a paycheck, he also has had no writing assignments. Though Vail is frustrated by the runaround he is getting, he knows that a better life is out there. Vail was happy in New York City as a playwright, and in Act III, he returns home, after a brief stay in a sanitarium just for playwrights such as him. *Once in a Lifetime* offered unbridled optimism in stark contrast to the economic situation in the United States at the time. It harkens back to the attitude of the Jazz Age of the 1920s, before the start of the Great Depression.

Success and Failure

Related to the idea of optimism, the theme of success and failure is also important to Once in a Lifetime. Nearly everyone is successful in some way in the play. There are no true failures depicted, save perhaps for Lawrence Vail, but even Vail fails only to get a meeting. He is still paid, though he does no work. May, Jerry, and George's elocution school at the studio fails and they are fired, but this is only a temporary setback. By standing up to the studio owner, Herman Glogauer, George is hired as studio supervisor, and insists that his two friends be hired as well. Though George gets himself in some sticky situations as studio head he is fired when studio owner Glogauer realizes that George has ordered the wrong script to be shot and when he buys 2,000 aeroplanes for the studio he retains his position and solidifies his status as resident genius in Glogauer's eyes. Success is depicted as easy in Hollywood, though sometimes short-lived.

Style

Setting

Once in a Lifetime is comedy/satire that is set in New York City and Los Angeles in the late 1920s, when sound movies were coming into their own. The action of the play takes place in several locations. Act I, scene i occurs in a small, shabby furnished room in New York City where George and Jerry live. This setting emphasizes the desperate straits the vaudevillians have found themselves in. Act II, scene ii and Act III, scene ii both take place on the train between New York City and Los Angeles. In the former, May, Jerry, and George formulate the plan for their future. In the latter, May and Lawrence Vail, the frustrated playwright, share their disillusionment about the movie industry. The rest of the scenes take place in Los Angeles, at the Gold Room of the Hotel Stilton, the Glogauer movie studio, its reception area, and on the set of *Gingham and Orchids.* In all of these scenes, the absurdity of Hollywood is front and center. As a whole, the setting of *Once in a Lifetime* provides the context for the comedy of the play.

Costumes and Props

In Hollywood, image is everything. Hart and Kaufman use this fact in the costumes called for in the directions of *Once in a Lifetime.* To add some visual comedy to the play, Miss Leighton, the receptionist at Glogauer, is supposed to wear a black evening gown and pearls, even though her scenes take place in the morning. Helen Hobart, the famous movie critic, dresses in similar fashion. Hart and Kaufman write "Her ensemble is the Hollywood idea of next year's style a la Metro-Goldwyn." Glamorous is what is expected from Hollywood, even among its receptionists and film critics.

A similar excess is portrayed in the props of the studio reception. Everything there is bigger than life, especially the furniture and fixtures. This is in stark contrast to the furnishings of the room where some of the vaudevillians lived in New York City. The fleeting nature of Hollywood success is emphasized by another prop inside the reception room. One of the doors leads to the office of May, Jerry, and George, and their elocution school. May confirms that they have been fired when Mr. Flick comes to remove their names from the door. Such visual elements emphasize the humor in *Once in a Lifetime.*

Playwright as Actor Playing a Playwright

In the original production of *Once in a Lifetime,* Kaufman took on the role of Lawrence Vail for about eight months. Hart took over the role in the following year, still in the initial run. These casting choices added an element of realism and contributed to the comedy and irony of these productions. Both Hart and Kaufman had only written plays, and were not really actors. Neither of them had worked in Hollywood or the movies when they wrote the play, though they knew others who had. The frustrations they imagined for Vail

were very real to them, and easy for them to portray. It was also a new gimmick that brought people into the theater, ensuring more would see the play.

Historical Context

Life in the United States changed dramatically on October 29, 1929. On that day, the stock market crashed. This marked the end of the Jazz Age and the beginning of the Great Depression. The 1920s had been an unprecedented age of prosperity in the United States. The stock market had captured the interest of the general public for the first time in the 1920s. People from all walks of life played the stock market.

In the summer of 1929, this interest turned into a craze. Warning signs of an impending crash were ignored: people traded more, creating an endless backlog of paperwork. After October 29 (called Black Tuesday), 1929, the American economy quickly slipped into a depression. President Herbert Hoover was not reelected in 1932 because of his perceived mishandling of the crisis. Life quickly grew grim in the United States. Unemployment increased exponentially. Banks failed (13,000 in 1930 alone), taking the savings of their depositors with them. Many people lost their homes. Hoover's federal government did not do much to relieve these conditions. Uncertainty ruled many people's lives.

Life for women in the United States changed greatly in this time period. Women had just gotten the right to vote in 1920. In the 1920s, more women went to work. Their numbers in white-collar office jobs especially increased. By 1930,24.3 percent (11 million) of all women were in the workforce. But women were paid significantly less than men for the same work, especially in manufacturing jobs. Even educated women were restricted to so-called women's work, such as teaching or nursing. Before the Depression, 29 percent of married women worked. As it took hold, many single women called for married women to quit so that those without other means of support could find work. The rates of marriage, divorce, and childbirth changed during the Depression. It cost too much to get a divorce, so the procedure was put off. It became more common for women not to marry or have long engagements because their potential mates could not find employment. This also affected the birth rate in 1930. Fewer children were born because of the cost of rearing them.

One industry thrived during the 1930s. The movie industry came into its own, and made lots of money. The industry had been turned on its head when the first movie with spoken dialogue was made in 1927. Until that point, movies had been silent, with live music played at local music theaters. In 1926, the first movie with a synchronized music soundtrack was released, *Don Juan,* but the technology was not great and it was not particularly successful. *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was the first film with spoken dialogue and singing. It was made with Vitaphone technology. *The Jazz Singer* was a blockbuster smash.

The popularity of *The Jazz Singer* and sound movies changed the face of the movie industry. It affected how scripts were written, and how actors acted. Movie cameras had to be made differently, and theaters had to be rewired for sound. The question of how to deal with foreign-language markets had to be answered. By the end of the 1920s, as technology caught up, the number of talkies increased and silent films were generally

no longer made. Musicals were especially popular. The popularity of the talkies killed off vaudeville, and provided serious competition for live theater. The 1930s proved to be the golden era of cinema, an escape from the upheaval going on outside of the movie palace.

Critical Overview

From its first run at New York City's Music Box in 1930, *Once in a Lifetime* has been popular with both audiences and critics alike. Of its opening night performance, J. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* wrote "It is all swift shrieking and lethal. It is merciless and fairly comprehensive. If the fun lags a little during the middle sketches, it is only because the first act is so hilariously compact and because the best scenes all the way through are so outrageously fantastico."

Many critics of this first run had similarly minor problems with the play, couched always in the most positive terms. The unnamed critic in *Commonweal* took issue with the pacing of Hart and Kaufman's play, but ultimately found the production humorous. "The movies are delicious satirical meat, which the authors have served up most humorously even if the meal drags a bit at the end. Broadway now has its happy chance to even up an old score with its ancient enemy, the cinema, and to prod it nicely. In *Once in a Lifetime* the laugh is on the movies."

Hart and Kaufman's satirical take on the movie business was quite popular with drama critics. Another review by the *New York Times*' Atkinson later in 1930 claimed that "The dialogue is a St. Vitus dance of wit. .. Satire likes nothing quite so much as stupidity. Since Hollywood manufactures that commodity on the basis of large-scale production, the authors of *Once in a Lifetime* have an abundance of general material.

Once in a Lifetime was revived regularly over the years, to nearly universal praise. Though many critics noted that the play was somewhat dated in its references, they believed that most of the humor held up well. Most only took issue with the actual productions and the choices made by directors. For example, an unnamed *New York Times* critic did not like (soon to be famous Hollywood) director Peter Bogdanovich's 1964 stage revival. The critic writes "Nearly everything has changed since 1930, including Hollywood... But enough of the fun is left in *Once in a Lifetime* to warrant a revival if the director were thoughtful enough not to get in the way." Bogdanovich and other directors often added material to the play that diminished it in the eyes of critics.

The 1975 production at New York City's ETC Theater, directed by Frank Bongiorno, was similarly described by Mel Gussow of *New York Times.* The critic writes that "Frank Bongirno' s production mistakenly presents the comedy as a play within a television play.... The concept may have been motivated by a desire to comment on the play, to use television as a contemporary stand-in for the movies. If so, the result is no comment. It is merely a time-wasting intrusion that vitiates the satire."

The 1978 revival at the Circle in the Square Theater in New York City was arguably the most successful since its initial staging. Richard Eder of the *New York Times* wrote that" [S] ome bones have fallen from the meat of the 1930 comedy; its insane logic has lost some of its logic, but there is plenty of insanity left." T. E. Kalem of *Time* thought it light, though still enjoyable. Kalem argued that "[T]his show is a roller coaster of merriment, with hairpin turns of plot, zany swoops of emotion and a breakneck tempo. But for

fanciers of substance in entertainment, soap bubbles would be solider." John Simon of *New York* had the most negative reaction, writing that "the entire play is about the purblind leading the blind by the nose, a spectacle as unfunny as it is intellectually unsatisfying."

Yet twenty years later, when *Once in a Lifetime* was revived at the Atlantic Theater in New York City, Simon had tempered his criticism at bit. Simon, still writing for *New York*, did not like this production any better, labeling the play "strained but occasionally funny satire about a Hollywood the authors had not set foot in." Later in the same review he claims "It is the sort of play that, in a perfect production ... is worth seeing once in your lifetime." Robert L. Daniels of *Variety* saw the play's merits despite its age: "while some situations and characters have become cliches, the satirical romp remains an innocent nod to a bygone era."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Annette Petruso is a freelance author and screenwriter in Austin, TX. In the following essay, Petruso discusses the depiction of female characters in Once in a Lifetime *and compares this with the reality of women's lives in the late 1920s and early 1930s.*

One interesting aspect of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's play *Once in a Lifetime* (1930) is its depiction of women. In this time period, the perception and status of women in the United States had recently undergone a fundamental change, and the play reflects the inherent contradictions. Some female characters have some complexity to them. This essay looks at the status of women in America in this time period, then the female characters in *Once in a Lifetime.*

By the late 1920s, many women in the United States had more power and much different social values than even a decade early. In 1920, women were finally given the right to vote, a fight that had been going on for many years. During the so-called Jazz Age of the 1920s, young women rejected the values of their mothers and grandmothers, wearing shorter skirts and bobbed hair as well as intensifying their social contact with young men. According to *American Decades: 1920-29,* 11 million women were working by 1930, about 27 percent of the total workforce. Women worked in all areas of the economy office jobs, factories, servants, farming, and professional but those in manufacturing jobs, at least, made less than their male counterparts for the same work. Most professional women did what was termed "women's work," including teaching and nursing.

According to Sara M. Evans in *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America,* the workplace, especially offices, were seen as places were one could meet a husband. Despite the fact that many women worked, marriage was still the ideal for them. They were expected to marry and lead domestic lives. While this expectation changed a little as the Great Depression deepened, and while marriage was seen as economically unfeasible for many, wife and mother were still the primary accepted social roles for women.

Yet in *Once in a Lifetime*,only Mrs. Walker clearly is married, and she is functioning away from her home and husband. Nearly every woman depicted in the play is single and has or wants a career. While show business was a semi-acceptable place for women at this time, the number of independent, sometimes powerful, women in the play is still extraordinary. Characters like May Daniels, who was part of a vaudeville act with two men and at the age of twenty-five still unmarried, and Helen Hobart, described as the foremost movie critic in the United States, are strong and in charge.

Most minor female characters do what were considered women's jobs. In Act I, scene iii, the cigarette girl and the coat check girl are both young women in the service industry. While they have aspirations to become more successful actresses they take roles as they are available for now they work in the hotel and search for their next part. Neither is married, and neither seems to be looking for a husband. A similar statement can be

made about the maids to the famous actresses depicted in the scene, Phyllis Fontaine and Florabel Leigh. While they do domestic labor, they also look for acting work as well.

The receptionist at Glogauer Studio, Miss Leighton, does clerical work, another common job for women at this time Like the characters mentioned above, she is not obviously in pursuit of a husband. Though she is forgetful of the frustrated playwright for Lawrence Vail, Miss Leighton juggles phones, people, and information with calm ease, emphasized perhaps by her choice of an evening gown for daytime office attire.

Two women with more nontraditional career choices are Fontaine and Leigh, the successful actresses. Stars of silent film, Fontaine and Leigh do not seem particularly concerned with the advent of talkies, that is movies with a prerecorded, synchronized soundtrack. Like the other female, neither seems to be married or particularly concerned about it. Though Hart and Kaufman do not depict them as particularly bright in Act II, scene i, May tells them that "I won't be happy till you get the rigor mortis," a quip the actresses take as a compliment they are prosperous single women with careers.

Similarly career driven is Susan Walker, the teenage wannabe actress who is on the train to Hollywood in Act I, scene ii. Escorted by her mother, Susan wants to become a famous actress, though she does not exactly know what that means. When she sees Helen Hobart, the famous movie critic, on the train, she tries to enlist her help. Susan later tries to get noticed at the Hotel Stilton. It is only through her relationship with George, and his connections, that she achieves her goal. She succeeds despite the fact that she is a horrible actress, as dumb as Leigh and Fontaine. Yet Susan has one very interesting characteristic: she will not marry George until she has become a successful actress. Her career is more important than love and marriage.

The woman enjoying the most abundance is Hobart, described as "America's foremost film critic" by May. Again, she seems husband-free. Her occupation is somewhat unusual for a woman at this time, and her power as a film critic most certainly is. She is syndicated in 203 papers in the United States, and respected by men in lofty positions. Indeed, Hobart brags to May, George, and Jerry in Act I, scene ii that the studios shower her with gifts, including a twenty-two-room home in Beverly Hills. Hobart calls it Parwarmet, named after the first syllable in each of the major studios names: Paramount, Warner Bros., and Metro-Goldwyn. Fox Studios gave her a dog kennel, and she named each of the animals after an a studio executive.

May, Jerry Hyland, and George Lewis, appreciate her position. In that scene, they realize that her support could get their elocution school off the ground in Hollywood, and they get her on their side by lying about their background. Hobart arranges their meeting with Herman Glogauer of Glogauer Studios, and the school does open. However, Hobart gets a significant percentage of the profits. She is also a savvy businesswoman who knows how to get what she wants. Though in many way Hobart is a cog in the public relations machine that is the movie industry, she has milked it for all it is worth. She is the epitome of powerful woman in this play.

May Daniels, though, is the primary female character, just as powerful in her own way. She is one of the three vaudevillians who are looking to better their life in Hollywood. Of the three, May is the only woman and, in many ways, the center and leader of the group. George is malleable and goes along for the ride, while Jerry takes chances and arranges for their trip to Los Angeles. But it is May who comes up with the idea for the elocution school, and it is May who uses her connection to Hobart to get them jump-started in Hollywood. May takes the lead, and the others follow.

Yet when the three arrive in Los Angeles, and the school is opened, May does most of the related work. She teaches all the classes while Jerry leads a life in the fast land and George swoons over Susan. Thus while May is a leader among the three, she also fulfils a typical role for women of her day, that of teacher. After the school fails, May plays more of a supporting role to the men. Through a number of satirical twists, it is hapless George that ends up becoming a production supervisor at the studio. He needs May's expertise, as well as Jerry's help, for him to succeed and he knows it. George insists that she is hired, and though he and Jerry test her limits, May is there for them. She becomes something of a mother hen, all-knowing but supportive.

Unlike most of the female characters in *Once in a Lifetime,* May has a love interest, Jerry. This relationship, however, is subtle, if not underdeveloped, over the course of the play. In Act II, scene i, May chides Jerry for not spending any time with her. He broke a date with her to be with some Hollywood-types. Later, in Act III scene i, she becomes angry with Jerry for nearly selling her and George out after George has his director shoot the wrong script. She breaks up with him, telling him "as far as I'm concerned, that's that." May leaves Hollywood in the next scene, intending to return to New York. She changes her mind after reading the reviews of *Gingham and Orchids* and returns in the next scene. It is only then that she learns that Jerry has left to look for her. When he comes back, they make up and it is implied that they are back together again. Thus May's future as a wife and mother seem assured.

Countering these strong, if not sometimes contradictory, images of women in *Once in a Lifetime* are the more conventional characters and characterizations of women. Mrs. Walker is retiring. She supports her daughter's ambitions because she wants the best for her, yet when her husband calls them from Ohio, she wants to please him as well. It is only through George's intervention that Susan does get a role that allows them to stay, but Mrs. Walker would have gone home if her husband had demanded it. Also, on the film set, men and women play their traditional roles. The only women working on the film are May, Susan's coach, and the script girl. All the scenario writers are men, as is the director, the studio head, cameraman, electricians, and pages. These are minor details, however. In the big picture, *Once in a Lifetime* was ahead of its time in its portrayal of women.

Source: Annette Petruso, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the historical context of this play.

The play *Once in a Lifetime,* by Kaufman and Hart, takes place during a very particular phase in the history of the Hollywood film industry: the transition from silent film to sound film, or "talkies." In order to fully appreciate the play itself, it is helpful to have a grasp of the specific elements of this era of Hollywood history which are referred to in the play.

This play was originally performed in 1930, and takes place in 1927, during the period of transition from silent film to "talkies," or movies with synchronized sound. The initial incident of the play occurs when Jerry returns from attending the film *The Jazz Singer,* which was the first feature-length sound film to be released by Hollywood, by Warner Brothers in 1927. Al Jolson (1886-1950) plays a Jewish boy who runs away from home to become a jazz singer and minstrel performer on the stage. *The Jazz Singer* featured four singing numbers in synchronized sound, while the rest of the film used standard silent film titles for dialogue. Between 1927 and 1930, all of the studios converted to sound film production, and by 1930 Hollywood was producing only "talkies."

In the play, Jerry explains to May and George that the "talking picture" he has just seen was made possible by the newly developed technology under the brand name Vitaphone. Vitaphone was developed and marketed as a subsidiary of Warner Brothers in partnership with General Electric in 1926. Vitaphone technology, however, had various problems and was replaced by more advanced sound film technology in 1931. In the play by Kaufman and Hart, George makes a big impression on the studio head, Mr. Glogauer, by pointing out that he had made a huge mistake in "passing up Vitaphone." In other words, this fictional head of a fictional studio within the story had passed up the opportunity to be at the forefront of the transition to synchronized sound. Mr. Glogauer at one point laments that the pioneering of sound film by the "Schlepkin Brothers" has forced the other studios to make this costly and complex transition; the fictional "Schlepkin Brothers" are clearly meant to represent the real life Warner Brothers who did, in fact, pioneer the production of "talkies."

This play refers to most of the major Hollywood studios and studio heads of this period in the history of the film industry. In order to appreciate the significance of these references, it is helpful to understand the structure of the film industry at this time. From the beginning of the sound era until 1948, the Hollywood film industry was dominated by five major studios, known as "The Big 5," which included: Warner Brothers, Paramount, Twentieth-Century Fox, Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corp. (RKO), and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). All of the major studios are mentioned at various points throughout the play. For instance, the stage directions describing the character of Helen Hobart, the film critic, state that the outfit she is wearing "is the Hollywood idea of next year's style a la Metro-Goldwyn." Metro-Goldwyn, which later merged to become MGM, was known for the

elaborate and sumptuous sets and costuming in their films. Later, Helen Hobart explains that she has named her home Parwarmet, after the three studios Paramount, Warner Brothers, and Metro-Goldwyn. She explains that she also has a kennel of dogs, all named after studio executives at Fox (which in 1935 merged with Twentieth Century studios to become Twentieth Century-Fox). Mr. Glogauer in the play also makes reference to the tendency during this era of Hollywood history for studios, such as MGM and Twentieth Century-Fox, to "merge"; he complains that the Schlepkin Brothers are "always wanting to merge, merge, merge."

The major Hollywood studios during this era were also known for their famous executive producers, referred to as "movie moguls," and included: Jack Warner at Warner Brothers, Louis B. Mayer at MGM, Y. Frank Freedman at Paramount, and Darryl F. Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox. The fictional character of Mr. Glogauer in this play is meant to represent a caricature of the famous movie moguls, known for their extraordinary power at all levels of the film industry.

The play also makes specific reference to such famous early movie moguls as the Laskys, the de Milles, and others. Jesse L. Lasky (1880-1958), in partnership with Samuel Goldwyn and Cecil B. De Mille (1991-1959), formed the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company in 1913. In 1916, they merged with the Famous Players company to become the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. This company later became Paramount, one of the major Hollywood production studios. De Mille's reputation as a successful producer is indicated in a line of the play by George. While they are on the film set, someone questions whether the pigeons that are supposed to be released during a wedding scene will know what to do; George replies, "Those pigeons know what to do. They were with Cecile De Mille for two years."

This play also makes reference to D. W. Griffith (1875-1948) and the Biograph production company. D. W. Griffith is known as the master director of the silent film era. Many of his films were released through Biograph studios. D. W. Griffith is also controversial, however, for what some consider a masterpiece of American cinema, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). While in many ways a brilliant work of cinematic art, *The Birth of a Nation* is an extremely racist depiction of the South during and after the Civil War. In the play by Kaufman and Hart, when someone refers in passing to the Civil War, another character responds, "The Civil War? Didn't D. W. Griffith make that?" The joke is in part that, while the first character was talking about the actual historical Civil War, the second character can only conceive of this historical event as a cinematic production. The play later refers to Biograph as a more significant element of the story. It is discovered after George directs his fist movie that he has directed from the wrong script. He has accidentally used a script for a movie made in 1910 by Biograph.

This play also refers to the development of early color film technology. Technicolor was originally a trademark name for a color film process; the first time a feature length movie was produced in Technicolor was 1917. In 1922, Technicolor incorporated to become the Technicolor Corporation. In the late 1920s, several feature films were produced in Technicolor. But, because the process was expensive, most films that used Technicolor had only one color sequence. By the early 1930s, with the Depression forcing the

studios to cut costs, almost no color features were produced. In 1932, however, developments in the processing technology lead to a rise in the production of color films, and from 1932 to 1957 all color films were made using the Technicolor process. In this play, Mrs. Walker, the mother of the wannabe starlet Helen Walker, mentions that May had said Helen might do better on film in Technicolor. This comment is merely a joke at Helen's expense, implying that only extravagant film technology could counteract her poor acting abilities.

Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) is perhaps the most famous Russian film director and pioneer in the field of film theory. He is famous for his epic productions of events from Russian history, such as *Strike* (1925) and *October* (1928), about the Russian Revolution, as well as masterpieces such as *Battleship Potempkin* (1925). Eisenstein is best known in film theory for his theory of film "montage," by which films are edited in such a way as to juxtapose images to create a symbolic set of meanings with the greatest impact upon the viewer. In the play by Kaufman and Hart, the fictional foreign director Kammerling makes reference to Eisenstein when he is fed up with the American film industry, and cries out, "What a country! Oh, to be in Russia with Eisenstein!"

Will Hays was an important figure head of the film industry beginning in 1922, when he was appointed head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), an association of Hollywood studios founded for the purpose of addressing public relations issues. The Hollywood industry had met with various forms of protest over the years in regards to the moral value of film content. Various sets of written guidelines for what was and wasn't considered acceptable film content were produced throughout the 1920s, but it was not until 1930 that the MPPDA adopted the Motion Picture Production Code, which became the standard basis of industry censorship until 1968.

In this play, reference is made to Will Hays when the receptionist at the film studio mentions that there had been a drunken man in the office. Helen responds that, "they'll soon be weeded out. Will Hays is working on that as fast as he can." One of the concerns of the Production Code administration was that Hollywood movies not depict excessive consumption of alcohol. The joke is about Will Hays, suggesting that his crackdown on Hollywood morality threatens to extend to control of the behavior of those within the industry, as well as that of characters on the screen.

While all of the characters who actually appear in the play are fictional, reference is made to some of the most famous and successful film actors of the time, including: Gloria Swanson, Gary Cooper, Greta Garbo, Mae West, John Barrymore, Elsie Barrymore, and Janet Gaynor.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2001

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Daniels provides an overview of the satire in "Once in a Lifetime."

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's 1930 satire on the dawn of talking pictures, *Once in a Lifetime,* still produces a goodly sampling of verbal and sight gags, and director David Pittu has whipped a cast of 21 actors (in more than 40 roles) into a briskly paced send-up. Pittu trusts his authors, and while some situations and characters have become cliches, the satirical romp remains an innocent nod to a bygone era.

Attempting to cash in on the Hollywood gold rush, three second-rate vaudevillians sell their tired act and head west to open an elocution school. Gaining the favor of a movie mogul, the trio gain a certain amount of influence in the industry before bringing near-ruin to the studio.

Peppered with extravagant performances and delightfully silly cartoon characters, the show never seems crowded on the Atlantic's small stage. Bellhops, porters, chauffeurs and leggy starlets flit about trains, soundstages and hotel lobbies with giddy abandon. The break-neck tempo is vital and the antics suffer from any stalls along the way.

John Ellison Coulee is grand as a doltish vaudevillian who blunders into success by repeating simple words of theatrical wisdom he has read (most often in Variety). Johanna Day captures the flavor of the era as his aggressively flippant partner. When Larry Bryggman, as the hot-tempered, bumbling studio chief, points a dictatorial finger, it becomes a peninsula.

Cynthia Darlow is a gushing syndicated columnist from the Hedda Hopper mold, Kate Blumberg a winsome ingenue, and Peter Jacobson raps his riding crop with frequent frustration as the German film director.

Kaufman not only co-wrote the play, he also staged it and appeared as the neglected playwright in the original 1930 production; in homage to him, Pittu appears in that role of Lawrence Vail. (But he misses the manic desperation Max Wright summoned for the 1978 Circle in the Square revival.)

The period costumes are dapper and colorful, and the compact set changes, wrapped in a golden-edged proscenium, arch, boast a Technicolor gloss.

Adolph Green and Betty Comden May have refined the familiar elements of spoofing early talkies with their classic screenplay for *Singin' in the Rain,* but Kaufman and Hart got there first. Sixty-eight years years later, their first collaboration remains an amiable antic treat.

For the record, *Once in a Lifetime* opened at the Music Box on Sept. 24, 1930, and ran for 406 performances. Peter Bogdanovich directed a York Playhouse revival in 1964,

and Adam Arkin appeared in an ETC Theatre Co. production in 1975. The 1978 Broadway revival at Circle in the Square featured John Lithgow, Treat Williams, Jayne Meadows Allen and George S. Irving.

Source: Robert L. Daniels, "Once in a Lifetime," in *Variety,* Vol. 371, No. 5, June 8, 1998, p. 81.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Eder details the comical absurdities that take place within "Once in a Lifetime."

When *Once in a Lifetime,* the first play that Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman wrote together, was revived here a number of years ago it ran for exactly one performance.

The Circle in the Square's leisurely but delightful version, which opened here last night, should do a great deal better. Some of the bones have fallen from the meat of this 1930 comedy; its insance logic has lost some of its logic, but there is plenty of insanity left.

And with John Lithgow sagging gently into a very large comic performance as George, the Heaven-favored fool who out-imbeciles Hollywood, and George Irving as athundering film tycoon constructed entirely of tiny gas-filled balloons, the Circle production surmounts the play's weakesses and its own blank spots to give New York something pretty close to ideal summer theater.

At its most alive, *Lifetime* has the wacky, mounting, improbable comic climaxes that distinguish the humor of the 1930s. The Marx Brothers had it, and at their best it was in a rhythm that raced and slowed but never dropped.

Quite a bit of *Lifetimes* drops. There is a lot of carpentry showing by now in this tale of the three out-of-work actors who set up an elocution school in Hollywood. It was the time when the talkies came in, and the stars who were the plumed swans of that particular puddle turned out to be as inaudible as swans.

There are grand chains of lunacy to the scenes in a Hollywood studio. A small but deadly not of bitter satire Kaufman and Hart were New Yorkers, and Hollywood, which ate playwrights alive, was a joke that was no joke gives the play some real bite. There is, as well, a good deal of stilted dialogue, particularly in the occasional scenes of sentiment. Caricatures wound better than they kiss.

But a lot of the limitlessness of the comedy of that time, the feeling that a joke could end up almost anywhere, remains. Sometimes it made for silliness and contrivance; sometimes for a beautifully irresponsible inspiration. Take the play's final joke.

Mr. Lithgow's George, whose mistakes that turn out lucky keep getting him alternately fired and promoted by the irascible Glogauer, makes one final mistake. He buys 2,000 airplanes. Now, at 50 years distance, this is something of a bald and heavy joke, especially for the climax of a long play.

But then somebody remarks hopefully that there must be some way you can use 2,000 airplanes. "Sure," says May, the acid, good hearted heroine. "Make applesauce." That afterthought, pure comic madness, is worth a ton of machinery and all the humor in a year's worth of *Saturday Night Live.*

The Circle production, directed by Tom Moore on a bare stage upon which furniture is toted in and out, does very well by the best moments, and nurses the longer worn spots with reasonable cheerfulness.

Mr. Moore is particularly good at some of the visual absurdities. The first entrance of Mr. Irving as Glogauer is a dignified retreat from the portable mob of sycophants he carries with him. He is pursued by a pair of emoting bellboys who, like everyone else in this hectic Hollywood of the imagination, are always auditioning. Even two electricians, having lunch, begin to improvise a song it is "Pretty Baby" but they get it wrong and wash off, presumably to see their agents.

Mr. Lithgow, as the bumbling George, is tall as Jacques Tati is tall. Like a mountain, his peak disappears into a cloudy of tentativeness. He looks like a cartoon of the 1930s, hips thrust forward, rocking back on his heels, and with one slow tugboat pulling bargeloads of silliness across his face. He moves in jecks, as if he were a sideshow.

In a scene with Max Wright, a playwright demented by underwork he has been kept in an empty room for months and nobody has asked him for anything Mr. Lithgow shows his art. Mr. Wright's performance, all hisses and jerks and twitches, embroiders its own embroideries. There is skill there but it is a sideshow and stops things dead.

Mr. Lithgow, drooping, simply listens. He follows Mr. Wright's gyrations as a sunflower turns with the sun. He does nothing, in effect; he just stands there, and it is quite the best thing to do.

Mr. Irving is a comic roarer, a source of energy and noise but of considerable subtlety as well. His chin is an offshore continent, a kind of Iceland that precedes, the rest of his face and is full of glaciers an dvolcanic activity.

May, the heroine, is a fairly straight part, and difficult to do. Deborah May translates her gestures and expressions back into the 1930s; she is pert, tart and radiant.

Treat Williams is agreeable as Jerry Hyland, the ambitious but ultimately decent boyfriend of Miss May's. Julia Duffy makes a fine, brassy-haired and brassy-voiced young girl who possesses ambitions for stardom and the total doglike devotion of Mr. Lithgow.

MacIntyre Dixon, Jayne Meadows Allen, Beverly May and Bella Jarrett are all amusing in smaller parts. Jack Straw makes a fine screen bishop, who bets on horses between takes, and the rest of the cast is mostly good, too.

Source: Richard Eder, "Stage: 'Once in a Lifetime,'" in *New York Times,* June 16, 1978, p. 237.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Mason shows the collaboration between Moss Hart and George Kaufman and the styles that each employed to the making of "Once in a Lifetime."

Undoubtedly, Hart was fortunate in that his "formula" had a parallel in the work of George S. Kaufman, with whom he entered into a most fruitful collaboration after the success of *Once in a Lifetime.* In between, however, he had tested this formula as it buttresses many a musical book or revue sketch. Later, he was less fortunate in seeing fit to extend this formula into some serious works which reflect an ambition for his craft as do his comedies for his career.

Throughout this study distinctions between drama (content) and theatre (drama on stage) are continually made and must be continually understood. Such a distinction is inevitable in considering comedy which gains so much from performance.

Further, comedy is accepted as [what Robert Lewis Shayon identified as] "a form of rational discourse, questioning and exposing absurdities and vices." Although the comic form may range from slapstick to verbal gymnastics, Louis Kronenberger, a connoisseur of comedy, identified a consistent characteristic when he writes [in *The Thread of Laughter]* that it is "a trenchant way of regarding life."

The nature and the effect of the comic have intrigued the poet and the philosopher from Aristotle to Sigmund Freud. Indeed, the theatre's comic mask has as many expressions and evokes as many varying responses as there are mirrors of distortion in an amusement park, but in pinning labels on them all, one runs the risk of echoing Polonius' category of plays.

Moss Hart took to the stage as a writer of comedy at the end of one of its most productive periods, and was highly active during its bleaker period when laughter was a precious commodity and cultural introspection unavoidable. We propose to gauge how Moss Hart met the challenge of his time, his theatre, and the venerable tradition of comedy. Hart's autobiography ended with the successful premiere of *Once in a Lifetime.* This study begins with it.

There is little doubt or mystery that Hart's involvement with Kaufman made a deep effect on his work. An investigation of Hart's plays can neither neglect *Once in a Lifetime* nor observe it cursorily. Fortunately, two versions exist: Hart's original, submitted to Kaufman, and the final, collaborative result. A comparison not only reveals the development of a play from its rough beginnings to a craftily polished stage piece, but it also indicates the authors' disposition toward the nature of comedy, their audiences, and the demands of their theatre as well. Importantly, a comparative study reveals characteristics repeated in the body of Hart's subsequent work, whether it be the product of collaboration or of solitary labor. These plays, *Once in a Lifetime* included,

must be viewed partially in light of Hart's own recorded sentiment concerning an important aspect of his dramatic material:

An audience is not interested in how hard an author has worked at his research, or how much material he has unearthed, and they do not take kindly to his parading in front of the footlights his hard-earned knowledge. They are quite right. They have not come to a school room; they have come to a theatre.

This was the theatre for which he desired to write, an inspiration notably described and detailed in his famous autobiography. Even its title, *Act One,* becomes particularly interesting in the context of Hart's lifelong preoccupation with the theatre world. It offers a somewhat tantalizing self-view of the author as a man of the theatre whose life runs like a play, and entices one to investigate the playwright on a psychological level. His plays, coupled with the available library of his personal papers, offer ample evidence that the work was an exceedingly personal extension of the man. . . .

Although Kaufman wrote in a fairly late letter to Hart "of those twin targets at which I have aimed so many times, business and politics...." He too, had an affinity for the theatrical theme which must have contributed to the bond that was established between them with *Once in a Lifetime. ...*

Admittedly, it is Kaufman rather than Hart upon whom the spotlight is mainly turned whenever their collaboration is under focus. In his eulogy to Kaufman, Hart admitted his "debt to George is incalculable." The beginnings of indebtedness would seem to have been established some time before Kaufman ever saw the young Hart's script, for there is much evidence of the strong influence of Kaufman's comedies in *Once in a Lifetime.* This initial influence stimulated Hart into (1) treating a theatrical milieu in (2) a farce frame.

Once in a Lifetime, a Comedy with Sound and Fury by Moss Hart, reads the title page of the script. It bears no copyright date but was written in either September or October of 1929. The garish film industry and its newly found "sound" are the subjects of Hart's play. This original version of *Once in a Lifetime* is obviously an apprentice work, but a highly promising one when it is considered that Hart was just past twenty years old, had never visited Hollywood, nor even written a comedy. [The critic adds in a footnote: "Hart tells us he had already written six serious plays."] What it lacks in structure and character development, it compensates for in energy and extravagance, and a sense of parody and satire. It is certainly "native" in its lack of cerebral subtleties, in the popularity of its aggressive farce form, and in its theme of the innocent (a Kaufman analogue) who stumbles his way to success, winning a beautiful bride along the way.

The script is so topical in its theme that the passage of time and the passing of a particular Hollywood era have robbed it of much of its original pertinence. Yet, Hart's script can claim an abundance of amusing moments and comic invention of situation and character. Although unsatisfactorily episodic in its dramaturgy, it is in its Hollywood caricatures that Hart's original is the most theatrically telling: Dahlberg, the man who rejected sound, who will not make a film without a "name" no matter how miscast the

"name" may be, and to whom everything, regardless of subject, is "just too colossal," is in performance actually more humorously drawn than a description might indicate. It is the same with the narcissism of the mass-manufactured starlets; the ire of the foreign film director; and the ubiquity of the Hollywood hopeful, auditioning by way of vigorous, kaleidoscopic facial expression whenever important studio personnel appear.

It is of particular interest to note the grandly intense and "tragic" demeanor of the studio receptionist, a pose which anticipates the "bravura" manner of the theatrical and royal folk of the later comedies.

But for all the theatrical heightening and comic absurdity, one repeatedly concludes that the reach exceeds the grasp as one fertile idea after another fails realization in a dramatically sustained way, or is so overdrawn as to blunt the edge of laughter. Repeated promise of genuine satire is lost or weakened amid the general and increasing extravagance.

The impression emerges, at least from a reading of *Once in a Lifetime,* that the play is a series of comic vignettes held together by a loose narrative rather than a dramatic plot. A lack of development in character treatment accounts for much of this. There is little conflict or story development, since Hart sacrifices narrative for burlesque sequences.

This native facility for "extravagance" can be traced throughout Hart's work. It contributes not only to the unique character of the comedies, but also to the later theatrical ingenuity of *Lady in the Dark* and the dramatic weaknesses of *Christopher Blake.*

Although the intent and spirit of the collaborative version sustains intact those of the original, it may be called an entirely new play in light of its more deliberate comic air and direction. The quality of burlesque remains the same as often does the incident of the original, but the accumulative effect is overwhelmingly superior to Hart's. This is mainly achieved through the infusion of an obvious theatrical skill and sureness of effect, a more sophisticated narrative, more dimensionalized characters, and smoother dialogue. A filling out of the drama's connective tissues has been added to Hart's skeletal schemes. An impression is gained that where Hart worked through intuition and an imitative sense, producing but the healthy embryo of an idea, Kaufman's theatrical disciplines helped "humanize" it.

Should one, however, find it failing to achieve on a satirical level what it has the potential to achieve, one could predicate of it the following view (expressed by James Agee in *Films in Review)*:

Farce, like melodrama, offers very special chances for accurate observation, but here accuracy is avoided ten times to one in favor of the easy burlesque or the easier idealization which drops the bottom out of farce. Every good moment frazzles or drowns.

Even this collaborative version of *Once in a Lifetime* is, essentially, a parody less of Hollywood life and film-making than it is a parody of a typical genre film story, film decor,

and the people involved in their production. Although possessed of moments of satire and satirical allusion, it is essentially a sympathetic lampoon.

On the other hand, as a carefully constructed farce containing timely and irreverent allusion, the collaborative version of *Once in a Lifetime* certainly possesses the merit to be included in the comedies which reflect the American scene as described by Alan Downer (in *Revolution in the American Drama):*

Here, in the mockery of the serious, the classic, the formal, and the eventual victory of the much-beaten underdog, is the theatrical equivalent of the tall talk and the comic folk story which reflect so accurately the American temper. Here, waiting for a playwright to put them to use, or give them form or purpose, were the elements of American comedy.

Twenty-four years later, Hart looked over his original script. He recorded his reaction in his journal:

It was quite well constructed, the lines extremely funny, and I think perhaps, if a manuscript like this were submitted to me today, I would have to admit that the author had real talent for the theatre.

In 1954, Moss Hart entered the following observation in his journal:

Again, I was struck by the fact that the three biggest hits of the season *Teahouse Of The August Moon, Tea and Sympathy, and The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* violate almost every theatre rule. It is a lesson that there are no rules whatever about the theatre, but one which is very hard to remember.

Yet, guided by principles of the theatre which had made their *Once in a Lifetime* a notable success, Hart and Kaufman apparently established a set of rules for themselves which they applied to their joint comedies and to which Hart returned with his *Light Up the Sky.*

A certain pattern emerges from the merest reading or viewing of these plays, and certain broad judgments are unavoidable. *You Can't Take It with You* is the most imaginative and exudes the most warmth and sentiment. Tonally, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is reminiscent of the earlier Kaufman satires. It is of superior construction and, by way of Sheridan Whiteside, its caustic and principal role, proves a particularly effective sounding board for Kaufmanesque dialogue. Neither a reading nor viewing can disguise the fact that *George Washington Slept Here* is the weakest of the group, and strong in evidence that the collaboration was wearing thin or losing fire. Their joint authorship terminated with this play, but the influence of Kaufman thoroughly permeates the writing *of Light Up the Sky.* Although varying in degrees of accomplishment, the comedies suggest, by their very similarities, that the authors were writing for a theatre they knew and that they knew what that theatre wanted.

Once in a Lifetime proved to be the prime example of a formula constructed earlier by Kaufman and his various collaborators: the successful rise in a jungle world of the helpless innocent almost despite himself. Although such a theme has been replaced in

the comedies written with Hart which are under scrutiny here, the formula persists in the theatrical frame and theatrical devices which are common to both.

Source: Richard Mason, "The Comic Theatre of Moss Hart: Persistence of a Formula," in *The Theatre Annual,* Vol. 23, 1967, p. 60.

Adaptations

Once in a Lifetime was adapted as a film in 1932. Directed by Russell Mack, this version starred Jack Oakie as George, Aline MacMahon as May, and Russell Hopton as Jerry.

A made-for-television version was aired in 1988, as an episode of *Great Performances* on PBS. Directed by Robin Midgley and produced by Shaun Sutton, it starred Zoe Wanamaker as May.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of the American entertainment industry in the late 1920s and early 1930s. What affect did the advent of sound movies have on vaudeville, theater, and radio, and those who worked in those mediums?

Compare and contrast May in *Once in a Lifetime* with Karen in David Mamet's *Speed the Plow* (1988). How do both work to achieve success in Hollywood? How does the status of women in the United States affect their depictions?

Use psychology to explain why George, Jerry, and May stick together throughout *Once in a Lifetime.*

Research the changes in the United States economy from the late 1920s to the early 1930s. How did the faltering economy affect the common people, like George, Jerry, and May?

Compare and Contrast

1930: The American economy is in a downward spiral after October 29, 1929 stock market collapse. By the end of the year, more than 4.5 million will be out of work and the Great Depression would take hold.

Today: The American economy is experiencing an unprecedented economic growth, seemingly without end. With a carefully regulated stock market, unemployment is very low.

1930: Sound movies are still a novelty, with the full impact yet to be seen. Theaters are the only places to see movies. While early prototypes of televisions have been made, radio is the primary form of home entertainment.

Today: Movies can be seen in a variety of places, not just movie theaters. Video, DVD, and other technology can be used to view movies in the home and on the go. There is uncertainty about how interactive games and computers will affect the film industry.

1930: Most people travel the country by train; and commercial passenger air travel is only in its infancy.

Today: Air travel is the preferred way of traveling the country. The appeal of train travel is limited, and Amtrak, the national passenger service, is subsidized by the government.

1930: Only 27 percent of all women are in the workforce in the United States. Most are confined to "women's work," and paid less than the men for the same work. During the Depression, women are paid even less than men.

Today: While some of these conditions have remained the same (women still make less than men for the same work) and a glass ceiling (an unofficial but real barrier) exists, there are many more women in the workplace, working in nearly every occupation, and some hold positions of power.

What Do I Read Next?

Merton of the Movies, a play written by Kaufman and Marc Connelly in 1922, also concerns the absurdities of life in Hollywood. It was one of the inspirations for *Once in a Lifetime.*

Speed the Plow, a play written by David Mamet in 1988, also concerns the inner-workings of Hollywood. The story focuses on two film industry insiders, and the maneuverings of a woman to break in.

Which Lie Did I Tell?, a memoir by WilliamGoldman published in 2000. The book recounts Goldman's life as a Hollywood screenwriter at the end of the twentieth century.

Merrily We Roll Along, a play written by Hart and Kaufman in 1934, focuses on the pitfalls of success.

The Last Tycoon, an unfinished novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald published posthumously in 1941. The novel is based on Fitzgerald's frustrating experiences as a Hollywood screenwriter.

Further Study

Flexner, Eleanor, *American Playwrights: 1918 1938,* Simon & Schuster, 1938, pp. 216-20.

This book considers the careers of the most important playwrights on the American stage, including Hart and Kaufman. Flexner considers and compares *Once in a Lifetime* and other plays.

Hart, Moss,Acf *One: An Autobiography,* RandomHouse, 1959.

This memoir covers the whole of Hart's professional life, including details surrounding the conception and production of *Once in a Lifetime.*

Pollack, Rhoda-Gale, *George S. Kaufman,* Twayne Publishers, 1988.

This critical biography on Kaufman's professional life includes a chapter on his collaborations with Hart.

Teichmann, Howard, *George S. Kaufman: An Intimate Portrait,* Atheneum, 1972.

This biography includes Kaufman's personal and professional life, including his work on and in *Once in a Lifetime.*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
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- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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