You Can't Take It with You Study Guide

You Can't Take It with You by Moss Hart

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Introduction

You Can't Take It with You relates the humorous encounter between a conservative family and the crazy household of Grandpa Martin Vanderhof. Grandpa's family of idiosyncratic individualists amuse with their energetic physical antics and inspire with their wholehearted pursuit of happiness. Kaufman and Hart fill the stage with chaotic activity from beginning to end. Critics have admired me witty one-liners, the visual theatricalism, and the balanced construction of the play's three acts. Although *You Can't Take It with You* is undeniably escapist theater which prompts immediate enjoyment rather than complex analysis, it has clearly influenced American comedy. The formula originated by Kaufman and Hart a loveable family getting into scrapes and overcoming obstacles has been adopted as a format by most of today's television situation comedies.

Author Biography

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart are remembered as masters of comedic playwriting. Each made important contributions to the American theater on his own, but they are best known for the successful and influential comedies they wrote together in the 1930s.

George S, Kaufman was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 16, 1889, the descen-dent of early German Jewish immigrants. After graduating from high school in 1907, he briefly attended law school. Disenchanted with legal studies, he dropped out and proceeded to take on a series of odd jobs, ranging from salesman to stenographer. At the age of twenty he left Pittsburgh for New York City and began writing for the *New York Evening Mail.* After a stint as a columnist for the *Washington Times* which ended when his editor objected to the young columnist's harsh satire Kaufman returned to New York and soon became a theater news reporter for the *New York Times*. Later he was promoted to drama editor, a post he never gave up, even when he attained success as a playwright.

Although he rarely smiled and sometimes appeared almost gloomy, he was famous for his devastating sense of humor, particularly his one-liners. His peers considered him to be, as his friend Alexander Woollcott described him in Brooks Atkinson's *Broadway,* "the first wit of his time." Kaufman began applying this wit to playwriting in 1917. He would eventually become known as the "Great Collaborator," after a long career during which he collaborated on more than 40 plays. A gifted writer of dialogue, Kaufman had little interest in forming plots and left this up to his many writing partners.

Kaufman's first big hit -*Dulcy,* written with Marc Connelly was produced in 1921. Both Connelly and Kaufman were part of the influential and now famous intellectual group called the Algonquin Round Table. These literary friends, who lunched and exchanged witticisms weekly at the Algonquin Hotel, included Tallulah Bankhead, Dorothy Parker, and Robert Benchley as well as several Kaufman collaborators such as Woollcott, Edna Ferber, and Ring Lardner. But it was not until he was 40, that Kaufman teamed up with the partner with whom he would find his greatest success, Moss Hart.

Moss Hart, born October 24,1904, was brought up in relative poverty by his English-born Jewish immigrant parents in the Bronx, New York. Inspired by an aunt who loved the theater, Hart was stagestruck at a young age. While still a teenager, he worked as an office boy for a theater manager; this manager produced Hart's first dramatic effort, *The Beloved Bandit,* in 1923. The show opened in Chicago and immediately flopped one critic wrote a review in the form of an obituary for the play and Hart's boss fired him after losing $45,000 on the production. Hart, still only nineteen, went on to take ajob directing social activities at resorts in the Catskills. He gained somewhat of a reputation for the amateur theatricals he organized, but the six plays he wrote during this time were all rejected by producers.

Finally, in 1929, producer Sam H. Harris agreed to stage Hart's comedy *Once in A Lifetime* on the condition that the young writer revise the play with the well-known

Kaufman. The twenty-six-year-old Hart idolized Kaufman and was thrilled at the prospect of working with him. This initial collaboration proved difficult, but when *Once in a Lifetime* opened in September, 1930, it was an unqualified success. This play, a satire of the movie industry, introduced the elements that would reappear in future Kaufman and Hart productions: numerous characters, chaotic activity, and witty dialogue. In the next ten years Kaufman and Hart would collaborate on seven more plays. Their third effort, *You Can't Take It with You*, (1936) was their most successful and longest-running work, claiming among its honors a Pulitzer Prize. (Kaufman's second; in 1931 his *Of Thee I Sing,* written withMorrie Ryskind, had been the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama). Some critics consider the duo's next play, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939) another story about a house filled with - charming eccentrics to be their best work.

Kaufman and Hart ceased collaborating in 1940 but both men continued to find success in the theatrical world. Kaufman collaborated on numerous popular plays throughout the 1940s and 50s, though most critics find that these works do not match the quality of his earlier efforts. He died on June 2, 1961. Hart went on to write six more plays on his own, as well as four screenplays, including those for *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and *A Star Is Born* (1954). He won a Tony Award formally known as an Antionette (or "Tony") Perry Award in 1957 for directing the original production of Alan Jay Lerner's *My Fair Lady*. Not long before he died, on December 20, 1961, Hart completed an autobiography, *Act One*, which was praised by critics for its candor and insight.

Plot Summary

Act I, Scene i

You Can't Take It wilh You takes place in the living room of Grandpa Martin VanderhoFs home in New York City. The action begins on a Wednesday evening in 1936. The curtain rises on an eclecti-cally decorated room containing a solarium full of snakes, a xylophone, and a printing press in addition to more common furniture items like chairs and tables.

The first scene of the play introduces the members of the eccentric Vanderhof-Sycamore household as they come in and out of the living room. Grandpa's middle-aged daughter Penny Sycamore sits at a rickety card table industriously typing a play. She is joined by her twenty-nine-year-old daughter, Essie Carmichael, who makes and sells candy but really wants to be a dancer. Essie wears ballet slippers and dances rather than walks from place to place. Next, Rheba, the family maid, comes in and listens to Penny explain that her play's heroine has entered a monastery, and Penny can't think of a way together out. Then, Penny's husband Paul Sycamore emerges from the basement where he's been making fireworks. He is soon followed by his assistant Mr. De Pinna, a sort of permanent house guest who came eight years ago to deliver ice and has never left. Essie's husband, Ed Carmichael, comes in and goes to the xylophone and begins playing a tune. Essie is immediately up on her toes dancing to it. When the song is finished Ed goes to work at his printing press while Rheba's boyfriend Donald enters, bringing flies to feed the snakes.

At this point, Grandpa, the family patriarch who gave up business thirty-five years ago and now does whatever he likes, enters the bustling living room. He has just returned from watching the Columbia commencement exercises, one of the many activities -such as stamp collecting and going to the zoo which he pursues just because he enjoys them. Not long after Grandpa arrives, Penny's younger daughter, Alice, enters. Alice is the one "normal" member of the family who has a secretarial job on Wall Street. After a few cheerful exchanges with her various relatives, she quiets down the group in order to tell them that her boss's son, Tony Kirby, will be calling for her later in the evening. She asks them all to behave as normally as possible because she likes this young man. She then goes upstairs to change.

When the doorbell rings, however, it turns out to be, not Alice's young man, but rather an Internal Revenue Agent named Henderson who has come to inform Grandpa that he owes twenty-two years' worth of unpaid income tax. But Henderson is scared off by a firecracker explosion before he can even get Grandpa to admit that the government does anything worth paying taxes to support. Finally, Tony arrives and gets a brief glimpse of Alice's family. As Alice whisks Tony back out the door, Essie's dance instructor, a loud Russian named Mr. Kolenkhov arrives. Kolenkhov and the rest of the family then sit down to dinner and Grandpa says grace, asking God to let them all continue living life just as they like.

Act I, Scene ii

Scene ii takes place later that same night. Alice and Tony have returned to the house after their date. They begin a conversation confessing how much they love each other. Alice admits she loves Tony but does not think they can ever marry because his traditional family could never accept her unconventional relatives. Tony does not think this is necessarily the case and convinces Alice that all that matters at the moment is their love for one another. The two become engaged and Tony departs.

At different points during this conversation Alice and Tony are interrupted by various family members who demonstrate the very eccentric behavior Alice thinks the Kirbys will be unable to accept. Penny comes through in her bathrobe looking for her play, "Sex Goes on Holiday." Essie and Ed return from the movies arguing about Ginger Rogers's dancing skill and casually mentioning that Grandpa thinks they should go ahead and have a baby. Donald passes by in his nightshirt carrying his accordion, and Paul emerges from the basement where he has continued making fireworks.

Act II

Act II opens a week later. Penny is talking to a drunken actress, Gay Wellington, who soon passes out on the couch. Tony Kirby and his parents are coming for dinner the next night, and Alice is getting things ready, consulting a list of things that need to be changed and put away. The rest of the family engage in their various amusements. Penny decides to complete a painting of Mr. De Pinna as a discus thrower which she began years ago, so he puts on a Roman costume and poses for her. Kolenkhov arrives to give Essie a dancing lesson, and she energetically pirouettes and leaps through the room while Grandpa throws darts.

At this moment, the Kirbys, in full evening dress, arrive. Tony has brought them a night early by mistake. The Kirbys are as shocked by the chaotic scene as the Sycamores are surprised to see the unexpected guests, but everyone tries to make the best of the situation. Penny gives hurried instructions about dinner to Rheba and they send Donald running to the market while everyone tries to sit down and have a conversation. But everything goes laughably awry as the drunken actress arises from the sofa, Kolenkhov seizes upon Mr. Kirby in an attempt to wrestle, and Penny starts a word association game which embarrasses the guests Just when the Kirbys decide they can't stay for dinner after all and are about to leave, three F.B.I. agents show up and block the door. They have come to arrest Ed for the seemingly subversive circulars he has been printing. They search the house, and when they find the "munitions" (Paul's fireworks) in the basement they arrest everyone in the house, including the astonished Kirbys. And to top it all off, Mr. De Pinna has left his lit pipe downstairs with the fireworks, resulting in a large explosion at the close of the act.

Act III

Act III opens the next day as Rheba is setting the dinner table and Donald is reading to her a newspaper report of last night's arrests stating that all thirteen people were given suspended sentences for manufacturing fireworks without a permit.

Alice has broken off her engagement and is packed and ready to leave town. No one has called her a cab as she requested, and while she waits for one, Tony arrives to try and talk her out of leaving. At this point, Kolenkhov shows up with his friend, a former Grand Duchess named Olga who is now a waitress. He has brought Olga to make blintzes for the family and takes her into the kitchen to cook. Then, Mr. Kirby appears at the door looking for Tony. Alice is still trying to leave, but Grandpa stops her from going and gets everyone to stay and talk.

In the course of the ensuing conversation, everything gets resolved. It comes out that Tony purposely brought his parents to dinner on the wrong night because he wanted them to see Alice's family as they really were. Tony has decided to leave his job at Kirby & Co. and instead do something he really likes. Grandpa helps persuade Mr. Kirby that he should let his son pursue his dreams, since there is more to life than accumulating money. After all, 1 'you can't take with you" when you die. To cap off the happy moment, a letter arrives from the I.R.S. saying that Grandpa's tax problems are resolved. The play concludes with everyone happily sitting down to a bountiful meal of Olga's blintzes.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

You Can't Take It With You is a romantic comedy about Alice Sycamore and Tony Kirby, two young people trapped between the eccentricities and foibles of their families in New York City in 1936.

The play opens in the cluttered and chaotic living room of Grandpa Vanderhof. It is obvious that this room serves more than one purpose with its eclectic elements, including live snakes, a xylophone, and a printing press. The characters are introduced as they come in and out of this room, beginning with Penny Sycamore, Grandpa Vanderhof's fifty-year-old daughter who is typing away at one of the many plays she is writing.

Penny's daughter, Essie Carmichael, is a twenty-nine-year-old frustrated ballerina who wears ballet slippers at all times and is currently making candy because her husband, Ed, has taken orders for the sweets that need to be filled today. Rheba, the family's Negro maid, enters the room to check on the dinner count and gets waylaid by Penny, who consults Rheba on the plot of the play she is working on.

Soon after, Paul Sycamore, Penny's husband, emerges from the basement where he and a friend, Mr. DePinna, have been experimenting with the production of fireworks. Ed Carmichael, Essie's husband, is the most aimless of the household and periodically plays notes on the xylophone so that Essie can dance. Ed also works on the printing press and asks Rheba about the dinner menu so that he may begin the typesetting. Soon after, Rheba's boyfriend Donald arrives with flies to feed the snakes in the solarium.

Finally, the patriarch of this zany family, Grandpa Vanderhof, comes home from attending a commencement ceremony at Columbia University. Grandpa does not know any of the graduates, but he attends as many commencement exercises as possible because he enjoys them.

Alice Sycamore, Penny's daughter, arrives home from work, where she is a secretary at a Wall Street firm. Alice is the most normal family member, and she adores her family in spite of their quirkiness. Penny comments on the new dress Alice is wearing, the second new dress this week, and Alice reveals that she is going out to dinner with Tony Kirby, a vice president at the firm where she works. Tony is fresh out of Cambridge University in England and also the son of the firm's owner. Alice really likes Tony and asks her family to please behave tonight. She goes upstairs to get ready for her date.

The sound of the doorbell prompts Alice to call out to see if the visitor is Tony. Penny answers the door, assuming that the man standing there is Alice's date. The man is Mr. Henderson from the Internal Revenue Service, and he has come to speak to Grandpa.

Apparently, Grandpa has never paid any income taxes and has not responded to the government's letters regarding the issue. Mr. Henderson's job is to explain the situation to Grandpa.

Grandpa can see no need for his money to be put to something that he cannot see, and he challenges Mr. Henderson to provide some evidence of where the funds will go. The operation of the federal government is not a good enough reason for Grandpa to part with his money, and Mr. Henderson leaves in a huff when he can make no progress with the cantankerous old man. An explosion from the basement is enough to scare Mr. Henderson out of the apartment without another word.

Passing Mr. Henderson in the hall is Mr. Kolenkhov, Essie's Russian ballet instructor, who has come for dinner with the Sycamore family. Grandpa says a poignant prayer before dinner asking God to allow the family to continue living in the manner it has become used to.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The authors use comedy as an overriding theme, and the play is fast-paced with lots of banter, which mirrors the chaos in the minds of the quirky members of the Sycamore family. The story is a common one in which a boy and a girl from different family backgrounds fall in love and try to overcome the liabilities of family life.

Historically, it is important to note that the play was produced in 1936, a time in American history when the country had yet to recover from the Great Depression. The simple plot gave the audiences comic relief from the pressures of everyday life in America in the mid-1930s. The dire economic situation also accounts for the introduction of Mr. Henderson from the Internal Revenue Service, who is flatly rejected and sent away from the house. This metaphor for the people's anger at the federal government's operations is introduced with humor, but the anti-government message is loud and clear.

In the years before World War II, there was much suspicion about Germans and Russians. Mr. Kolenkhov symbolizes the lurking presence of these foreign powers. Ironically, Mr. Sycamore and Mr. DePinna are building fireworks, the most patriotic of American symbols, in the basement and are oblivious to the turmoil going on within the family.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

The curtain goes down temporarily and rises on the same scene later that night. There are unusual noises throughout the apartment, and then all is quiet as Alice and Tony return from their date at the Monte Carlo Ballet. The couple is tenderly romantic, and Alice and Tony declare their love for one another amid interruptions of the family members.

Exasperated, Alice tries to make Tony understand that she cannot marry him because he can never understand her family and she loves them too much to ever cut them out of her life. Tony declares that he also loves the Sycamore family and reminds Alice that every couple has challenges with family dynamics.

Alice finally relents and agrees to marry Tony. The two must part for the evening, but Tony asks Alice to meet him before work in the morning because he will have thought of so many new things to say. Alice bids Tony goodnight and re-enters the living room where her father, Paul, shows her his most recent fireworks masterpiece. Alice declares that the fireworks' red glow and everything else in the world is beautiful.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Ironically, Alice, who comes from a family that accepts anyone, regardless of nationality or profession, initially refuses Tony's proposal on the grounds that her own family will not be accepted in Tony's world. Alice finally relents, and the authors show her love for the family in spite of difficulties and differences, a scenario that mirrors the challenges of the American people whose family dynamics underwent major shifts during the dire economic times of the Depression.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

The second act opens in the same living room where Penny is talking to an actress, Gay Wellington, who has come to the apartment to read for one of Penny's plays. Gay, however, is more interested in drinking gin than in acting. Alice is happily giving instructions to family members about their roles in tomorrow night's dinner to which Tony and his parents have been invited. The menu has been finalized, and the family agrees to behave in the company of Tony's parents.

Life in the household continues as usual tonight for this unusual family. Mr. DePinna emerges from the basement with a painting of himself as a discus thrower that Penny had begun eight years ago. Enthused at the prospect of a new creative outlet, Penny changes into her artist costume to complete the painting, which requires Mr. DePinna to don a Roman toga.

Ed needs to make his candy deliveries but is hesitant to leave the apartment because a man is following him wherever he goes now. Essie urges Ed to stop complaining and return as soon as possible so that he can play the xylophone for her lesson with Mr. Kolenkhov. Paul Sycamore has brought his latest erector set creation of the Queen Mary upstairs but descends again into the basement to finish the fireworks order that must be driven to Mount Vernon tomorrow in time for the Fourth of July. Meanwhile, Grandpa throws feather darts at a target amid all the chaos in the room.

The doorbell brings the unexpected arrival of the Kirbys, who have come one night too early for their dinner invitation. The distinction between the two families is immediately clear as the formal dress of Mr. and Mrs. Kirby starkly contrasts with the Sycamores and their houseguests. Alice is mortified at the mistake, and that the family has nothing available to serve the Kirbys on such short notice. Ed and Donald run to the corner grocery to buy some suitable dinner items, but nothing is appropriate for the occasion.

To ease the tension, Penny initiates a word game that reveals the Kirbys' hidden emotions. Mrs. Kirby reaches her tolerance level and announces that she and her husband are leaving. Tony decides to stay with Alice and her family because he enjoys the convivial atmosphere of the household.

As the Kirbys prepare to leave, three men from the Justice Department arrive to arrest Ed, who they believe is spreading Communist propaganda with the candy deliveries. A search of the apartment uncovers Paul's fireworks operation, which the agency men construe as weapons and provide enough evidence to arrest everyone in the house. Suddenly the apartment explodes as a result of Mr. DePinna's abandoned lit pipe in the basement.

Act 2 Analysis

The authors use humor, both in language and in the physical comedy of the characters. The physical traits of the characters are defined by wardrobe and exaggerated movements to show how this family is completely out of the norm yet comfortable in their individuality. Even the characters' reactions are unusual, making each person wacky but engaging.

Alice and Grandpa seem to be the most normal of the household, and Grandpa tries to maintain the balance by allowing the others their zaniness but accommodating Alice's need for an established, secure life soon to be made possible by her marriage to Tony. The Kirbys stand in stark contrast to the Sycamore family, and they represent the establishment and security Alice craves. Mr. Kirby's position on Wall Street symbolizes the financial security that the American people desperately need at this period in time as well.

The introduction of the men from the Justice Department symbolizes the growing suspicions of Communist infiltrators into the United States during this time. Several allusions to the government are made in the play, the most important one being Grandpa's successful tax evasion, a topic that would be immensely satisfying to many American citizens at any time.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The next day Donald reads the paper, which has a story about last night's arrest, as Rheba prepares for dinner. All thirteen people of the household, including the Kirbys, receive suspended sentences for their alleged contributions in making fireworks without a permit. Rheba recalls Mrs. Kirby's mortification at being in the same cell with a strip-tease artist who sang as the dignified Mrs. Kirby disrobed in the jail. There is some compassion from Rheba and Donald for the Kirbys, who are not comfortable with disruptions to their schedules, let alone the public humiliation of arrest.

Completely destroyed by last night's activities, Alice prepares to leave for a trip to the Adirondacks so that she can be alone to think. Tony's pleas to speak to his fiancye have gone unheeded, yet he remains undaunted in his vigil to reach Alice before she leaves.

To add to the confusion in the house, Mr. Kolenkhov arrives with his friend Grand Duchess Olga, a Russian aristocrat who now works as a waitress in a coffee shop. The Grand Duchess has not had a good meal since leaving Russia, and Kolenkhov has brought her to the Sycamore house for dinner. Olga is anxious to eat and offers to make blintzes for the dinner, as her new job has turned her into a good cook.

The doorbell announces the arrival of Mr. Kirby, who has come to find Tony. Tony, however, will not leave without speaking to Alice to try to convince her not to leave. Grandpa finally reaches Alice and persuades her to at least stay through dinner. Mr. Kirby and Tony also agree to stay, and the dinner takes a turn when Tony admits to purposely having brought his parents to the Sycamore house on the wrong night for dinner. Tony wants his parents to realize his love for Alice surpasses any quirks of the Sycamore family, and he hopes the Kirbys will realize what has been missing from their own lives.

Tony further shocks Mr. Kirby by announcing plans to leave the family firm to pursue work that will make him happy. Mr. Kirby is incredulous at this announcement, but Grandpa calms Mr. Kirby by reminding the man of how he was at Tony's age. According to Grandpa, youthful enthusiasm should not be squelched in favor of empty goals that do not provide long-term satisfaction.

The pursuit of money can be an especially empty life, and Grandpa reminds Mr. Kirby that life should be enjoyed and although financial security is nice, you cannot take your money with you when you die.

Mr. Kirby is touched by Grandpa's philosophizing and joins the family in the evening's dinner. Grandpa's Internal Revenue Service problem is resolved with a letter releasing him from all debt, and the family sits down to dinner as Rebah and Donald carry in stacks of blintzes prepared by Grand Duchess Olga.

Act 3 Analysis

The authors have presented a delightful story for audiences in a discouraging period in America. The ultimate message that you cannot take your money with you when you die is a philosophy that is most welcome at this time when the economy is just rebounding from the Great Depression and money is scare for the average person. The message of being spiritually and soulfully complete with an authentic life is favored over the pursuit of hollow goals and shallow lives. Ironically, Tony and Alice love each other but secretly crave the lifestyle in which the other has been raised. The authors leave the reader with the idea that the marriage between Alice and Tony will blend the best of both worlds, providing an element of hope for the state of the world and the audience's own lives.

Characters

Ed Carmichael

Essie's husband Ed, as the stage directions inform, is a "nonedescript young man" in his thirties. He is a musician and composer who likes to play the xylophone as well as ply his trade as an amateur printer. As a hobby, he uses his hand-press to print sayings which he comes across in the writings of the revolutionary Russian Communist Leon Trotsky, such as "God Is the State; the State is God." Proud of his work, he encloses these printed bills in the boxes with Essie's candy. Although Ed prints his slogans just for the fun of it, their political messages attract the attention of the F.B.I., who believe Ed is an insurrectionist attempting to undermine the United States government.

Essie Carmichael

Mrs. Sycamore's eldest daughter, Essie Carmichael, is a 29-year-old aspiring ballerina. She dances her way through the play, improvising steps to her husband Ed's xylophone music and eagerly following the instructions of her dance instructor, Mr. Kolenkhov. She makes candy, naming her newest confections "Love Dreams," but she never takes off her ballet slippers even when she dons her candy-making apron. Like the other Sycamores, Essie is both happily absorbed in tasks which amuse her and wholly undisturbed by the eccentricities of her family.

Mr. De Pinna

Described in the stage directions as a "bald-headed little man with a serious manner," the middle-aged Mr. De Pinna arrived at the Vanderhof residence eight years ago to deliver ice and ended up moving in. Although a minor character, he shows how open and accepting the Vanderhof-Sycamore family can be: everyone is obviously welcome in mis house. Mr. De Pinna has clearly taken to this family's way of life. He helps Paul make firecrackers, poses in Roman costume for Penny's painting of a discus thrower, and remains undisturbed by the chaotic household.

Donald

Rheba's boyfriend, who, like her, is described in the stage directions in racist terms such as "a colored man of no uncertain hue." Cheerful and at ease in the household, he is a minor comic character who willingly runs errands and occasionally offers amusing comments.

F.B.I. agents

The three F.B.I, agents (G-men)who come to investigate the seemingly political papers Ed Sycamore has been enclosing in candy boxes.

Grand Duchess Olga Katrina

See Olga

Henderson

Henderson is the Internal Revenue Department agent who comes to collect twenty-two years' back income tax from Grandpa Vanderhof.

Wilbur C. Henderson

See Henderson

Anthony Kirby, Jr.

See Tony Kirby

Anthony Kirby, Sr.

See Mr. Kirby

Miriam Kirby

See Mrs. Kirby

Mr. Kirby

Tony's father, the middle-aged Mr. Kirby, is a successful Wall Street businessman. He is a traditional authority figure who represents the conventional worldview the Vanderhof-Sycamores reject. Conservative and repressed, he has perpetual indigestion and tells his wife he thinks "lust is not a human emotion." He is initially shocked by Alice's family and says Grandpa Vanderhof s idea of doing only what makes you happy is a "a very dangerous philosophy ... it's un-American."

Mrs. Kirby

Tony's mother, the middle-aged Mrs. Kirby, is the conservative female equivelent of her businessman husband. She, too, is shocked by the unconventional Vanderhof-Sycamores. She is affronted when Penny says spiritualism is "a fake" and seems to reveal she is dissatisfied with her marriage when in the word game she associates "honeymoon" with "dull" and almost admits that Mr. Kirby talks about Wall Street even during sex.

Tony Kirby

Tony Kirby is a Vice President of Kirby & Co., his father's business. The stage directions tell us he is a "very nice young man" who has recently attended Yale and Cambridge. He has fallen in love with Alice Sycamore and wants to marry her. Now that he's done with college he believes, as he tells Grandpa Vanderhof, that now "the fun's over, and I'm facing the world," but his contact with Alice's family teaches him that if he makes the right choices his fun may just be starting. He purposely brings his parents to the Vanderhof-Sycamore house on the wrong night because, as he says to his father, "I wanted you to see a real family as they really were A family that loved and understood each other." Determined to do something that he wants to do, Tony rejects his father's business and embraces the Vanderhofs philosophy of seeking happiness over wealth.

Boris Kolenkhov (ko-len-kawv)

Essie's dance instructor Boris Kolenkhov is introduced in the stage directions as an "enormous, hairy, loud" Russian. A stereotypically- depicted comic character, he contributes to the chaotic activity in the Vanderhof-Sycamore home, encouraging Essie to dance and wrestling with the unsuspecting Mr. Kirby. He has a habit of conveniently arriving just in time for meals.

Olga

The Grand Duchess Olga is a Russian friend of Kolehnkov's who has fallen on hard times following the Communist Revolution in Russia. She is now a waitress and has a talent for making blintzes. She prepares the bountiful meal of blintzes which everyone sits down to at the conclusion of the play.

Rheba

Rheba is the Sycamore family's efficient, practical, and adaptable "colored maid." The stage directions introduce her in stereotypically racist terms "a very black girl somewhere in her thirties" common during the years preceding the Civil Rights movement. During the course of the play's action, however, Rheba emerges as a distinct individual, speaking her mind and holding her own within the eccentric household.

Alice Sycamore

Alice Sycamore is Penny's attractive younger daughter. The twenty-two-year-old Alice has, according to the stage directions, "escaped the tinge of mild insanity" that pervades her relatives, but her "devotion and love for them are plainly apparent." The only member of the family with a regular job, she is a secretary at a Wall Street firm and has fallen in love with the boss's son, Anthony Kirby, Jr. Although she loves Tony, she fears his conservative parents will never accept her family's eccentricities. Since Alice is a "normal" and likeable character, the audience is likely to sympathise with her and share her point-of-view.

Paul Sycamore

Penny's husband Paul Sycamore is in his mid-fifties. Quiet, charming, and mild-mannered, he never loses his composure, even when the fire crackers he makes in the basement with Mr. De Pinna unexpectedly explode. Like his wife and father-in-law, Paul possesses what the stage directions call "a kind of youthful air." A complete contrast to a disgruntled businessman such as Mr. Kirby, Paul contentedly pursues his chosen activities, such as making new "skyrockets" and building things with an Erector Set.

Penny Sycamore

See Penelope Vanderhof Sycamore

Grandpa Vanderhof

See Martin Vanderhof

Martin Vanderhof

Grandpa Vanderhof, as Kaufman and Hart describe him in the stage directions, is a 75-year-old "wiry little man whom the years have treated kindly." One day thirty-five years ago he gave up his business career, since, as he explains to Mr. Kolenkhov, it struck him that he "wasn't having any fun," So he "just relaxed" and has "been a happy man ever since." He now has "time enough for everything" and, as he tells Mr. Kirby, he no longer has "six hours of things *I have* to do every day before I get one hour to do what I like in." Grandpa collects stamps, throws darts, attends the commencement speeches at Columbia University, and encourages his family to follow his example and do only what makes them happy. He hasn't payed income tax in twenty-two years because he doesn't think the government does anything useful with the money. He provides the philosophical center of the play, explaining the folly of seeking material wealth at the expense of personal fulfillment, and asking only, as he says while saying grace before dinner, that their family be allowed "to go along and be happy in [their] own sort of way.1'

Penelope Vanderhof Sycamore

Grandpa Vanderhofs daughter, Penny Sycamore, is the first character on stage in *You Can't Take It with You*. Kaufman and Hart describe her in the stage directions as an endearing "round little woman" in her fifties, who loves nothing more than writing plays. As eccentric as the other members of her family, Penny was an enthusiastic painter but gave up this hobby for writing when a typewriter was delivered to the house by mistake eight years earlier. Charmingly blunt, she causes some embarrassment during the Kirbys' visit, first by calling Mrs. Kirby's beloved spirtualism "a fake," and then by proposing a word association game and asking what everyone associates with the words "sex," "bathroom," and "lust." Penny's enjoyment of life and direct speech are in marked contrast to Mrs. Kirby's seeming discontent and reserved acceptance of social conventions.

Gay Wellington

Gay Wellington, described in the stage directions as "an actress, nymphomaniac, and a terrible souse," comes to the Sycamore house to discuss a script with Penny but then passes out on the couch. She occasionally awakens, usually just in time to contribute to the chaos that erupts following the Kirbys' unexpected visit.

Themes

American Dream

The two families in *You Can't Take It with You* each represent different definitions (perceptions) of the American Dream. Mr. Kirby has attained financial success and a position of social and economic power. The play, however, asks its viewers to evaluate whether Americans should aspire to be like Mr. Kirby. His achievement is contrasted with Grandpa Vanderhofs' version of the American Dream, earning just enough money so that one can survive and do exactly what one wishes. Mr. Kirby may initially think Grandpa's ideas are "un-American, " but the Vanderhofs' infectious happiness and love for one another encourages the audience to revise their definition of the American Dream to include attainment of both material success and personal fulfillment.

Success and Failure

Throughout the play, the Vanderhof-Sycamore way of life calls into question conventional definitions of success and failure. Although Essie and Penny might be called "failures" because they lack talent in dancing and painting/playwriting respectively, the play depicts them as successful because each clearly finds joy in what she does. Tony Kirby initially thinks that in order to be "successful" he must forget about the dreams he had in college and accept his position as a vice president at Kirby & Co. But his contact with Alice's family convinces him that it is a mistake to give up one's dreams, as his father did when he was a young man. In the world of the play, failure to follow one's dreams and desires is the only genuine failure. The audience is encouraged to re-define "success" in terms of happiness rather than in terms of just money and status.

Individualism

The positive portrayal of eccentric and singular behavior in *You Can't Take It with You* also reflects the American belief in individualism. Many works in American literature celebrate individuals who rebel against the restraining conventions of society at large. All the Vanderhof-Sycamores could be classified as "rugged individualists" who follow the dictates of their own hearts and disregard those in the majority who disapprove.

Difference

The Vanderhof-Sycamores not only stand apart as "different" from the conventional world around them, but they also are willing to accept others who are different. Their openness is reflected through humorous exaggeration in the way that they allow anyone to move into their house or sit down at their dinner table. And although the play's ethnic characters are depicted in a stereotypical manner which might offend late-twentieth-century sensibilities, the acceptance of African-American and Russian characters as part of the family was seen as quite liberal and open to the value systems of most 1930s audiences. The play's happy ending also reveals that differences may only be superficial, since Mr. Kirby, who once had dreams of being a trapeze-artist, may be more like Grandpa than anyone suspected.

Culture Clash

Much of the humor in *You Can't Take It with You* derives from the clash between the lifestyles of the two families. The Kirbys might be seen to reflect mainstream upper-middle-class American culture, while the Vanderhof-Sycamores resist the conventions of that same culture, making up their own rules. While themes of culture clash can often be used to show how divergent groups can come to understand each other, this is a secondary concern in Kaufman and Hart's play. The primary purpose of introducing a straight-laced family such as the Kirbys into the wacky world of the Vanderhof-Sycamores is to watch the sparks fly. The first act clearly establishes the goofy nature of the family and raises audience expectation as interaction with citizens of the "real world" approaches. Laughs are generated from bodi the eccentric behavior of Grandpa Vanderhof and his family and the shocked reactions the Kirbys have to this oddball group.

Style

Farce

You Can't Take It with You employs many elements of farce, which is defined most simply as broad comedy mixed with a healthy dose of improbability. Farce typically takes highly exaggerated characters and places them in unlikely situations. Key elements include witty wordplay and physical humor for broad comic effect to provoke simple, hearty laughter from the audience. Clearly, the dancing, xylophone-playing, firecracker-making members of the Vanderhof-Sycamore household are exaggerated, make witty verbal jokes, and engage in physical horseplay.

Romantic Comedy

The basic plot of *You Can't Take It with You* is that of a romantic comedy, a story of a love affair in which the couple must overcome obstacles usually with comic results before they can marry. Like many young lovers in Shakespearean comedy, Kaufman and Hart's Alice and Tony face difficulties on the path to their eventual happy ending. While straight-up romantic comedy is often derided by critics for being too cute or overly sentimental, Kaufman and Hart balance this element of their play with frequent interuptions from the loony family members.

Satire

Satire typically attacks political or social philosophies, showing them to be false or misguided through mockery and ridicule. Although *You Can't Take It with You* is not a harsh satire, it does gently ridicule the American tax system, welfare, and market capitalism through its ludicrous presentation of Henderson the I.R.S. agent, Donald and Ed's comments about "relief," and Grandpa's anti-materialist views. It also pokes fun at the typical perception of the Amercian Dream one that encourages individuals to exert themselves in the pursuit of money and status without any regard for happiness and leisure activity.

Historical Context

In the mid-1930s when Kaufman and Hart wrote *You Can't Take It with You,* Americans were suffering through one of the worst economic periods in the history of the United States, an era known as the Great Depression. Many Americans lost their life savings, homes, and jobs in the stock market crash of 1929 and the numerous bank failures which followed. Unemployment rose to record heights for the time, reaching over 20% in 1935. Hopes raised by an apparent upturn in the economy in 1936 were dashed when the recovery collapsed in 1937.

After his election in 1932, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted his "New Deal" legislation, a series of liberal reforms which put in place welfare, social security, and unemployment benefits. These relief efforts dramatically changed Americans' relationship with their government, which now provided many with a living either in the form of a job in a federal program or through welfare benefits. The nature of the presidency changed at this time as well; the executive branch gained powers no president since Roosevelt has seriously attempted to invoke.

Although the New Deal eased the effects of the Depression, the 1930s were an exceptionally tough time for the majority of Americans. The enormous hardships endured by ordinary people led many to question free market capitalism. Left wing ideas, such as socialism, gained in popularity during this decade, and labor unrest led to strikes across the country.

Not surprisingly, these political and economic factors influenced American popular culture. The art and literature of the 1930s gave rise to both works intended to argue political ideas and works intended to provide escape from the rigors of daily life. Newspapers contained more editorial columns than ever before and politically oriented magazines such as the *Nation* and the *New Republic* flourished; yet papers also included more comic stops and serialized stories than they had previously, and pulp detective and mystery fiction prime escapist fare flourished. Radio offered frequent news reports but also gave listeners lighthearted comedy programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy and Fibber McGee and Molly*. In the theater, propaganda plays such as Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) were balanced by farces such as Kaufman and Hart's plays.

Movies, too, touched on the harshness of the times with films like *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1936). More frequently, however, films offered optimistic escapism. Hollywood produced excellent slapstick and screwball comedies starring actors like Katherine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, and Gary Grant, as well as classic animated features such as Walt Disney's *The Three Little Pigs* (1933) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937). Also enormously popular were upbeat films featuring the child actress Shirley Temple, *including Little Miss Marker* (1934) and Heidi. With little money to spend on entertainment, Americans also embraced a series of amusing "fads," often activities which were inexpensive (dance marathons, chain letters) or could be done at home (jig-saw puzzles, bridge).

The decade of the Great Depression is thoroughly documented both by still photography and motion pictures. Late-twentieth century society is familiar with images for example the Dust Bowl, bread lines, and sit-down strikes captured by 1930s photojournalists such as Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans. Magazines such *as Life and Fortune* published these photos and gave Americans a new perspective on themselves and their nation.

During this time of struggle and societal stagnation, ironically, a few women found their opportunities in the public sector expanding. The rapid growth of New Deal offices in Washington D.C. led to unconventional appointments and brought women into such government positions as the cabinet, treasury, and higher courts. Occasionally, as would be the case during World War n, women stepped into men's traditional role of family breadwinner especially given that many men refused to work in clerical and secretarial positions that were typically identified with women. And despite open discrimination against married women (because many people believed wives shouldn't be allowed to work if their husbands already had jobs) the number of women in the labor force increased throughout the decade. Although the basic cultural assumptions about "women's place" in the home remained largely unchallenged in the 1930s, some women were drawn into newly active roles in government and the workplace.

Unfortunately, many ethnic minorities in America did not find even slightly increased in opportunities in the 1930s. At the start of the decade, three-fourths of all African Americans in the United States lived in rural areas. Existence for farm workers had already been harsh in the agriculturally depressed 1920s; conditions deteriorated during the depression of the 1930s. In urban communities as well, unemployment, worsened by discrimination, made life severely difficult for black workers. African-American leaders protested that New Deal programs did not offer equal relief or eliminate discrimination against black citizens. Although a legally supported system of segregation stayed in place in the Southern states and racist bias was in evidence throughout the country, some reform did begin in 1935 when President Roosevelt banned discrimination in the federal relief programs and African Americans made some gains in attaining their deserved rights and recognition during the second half of the decade.

The 1930s were a time dominated by economic and political concerns. Americans faced difficulties at home and saw unrest abroad, as civil war waged in Spam (1934-1936), Joseph Stalin exercised totalitarian power m Russia, and Hitler installed a fascist dictatorship in Nazi Germany. At the end of the decade the United States faced the frightening prospect of going to war as diplomacy throughout Europe and Asia failed and political tensions rose.

Critical Overview

On its opening night in December of 1936, *You Can't Take It with You* became an instant commercial hit. Since then, the play's popularity has never waned; it has been successfully staged by theaters of all sizes for over six decades. Yet even while praising the skill with which Kaufman and Hart constructed their clever comedy, critics have generally categorized the play as an escapist farce, enjoyable yet lacking any significant content. When the play won the Pulitzer Prize in 1936, some questioned the choice, saying judges played it safe, choosing a popular work rather than a more controversial drama with greater depth and artistic merit.

In his *New York Times review*, Brooks Atkinson described *You Can't Take It with You,* as "a spontaneous piece of hilarity" composed with "a dash of affection to season the humor" by two writers with "a knack for extravagances of word and episode and an eye for hilarious incongruities." Most other reviews of the first production were equally positive, though some expressed surprise that the play was less satirical than Kaufman's earlier works. But perhaps because its humor was gentle and its message palatable, *You Can't Take It with You* appealed to audiences all across the country and touring companies shared the success of the Broadway production. The strong ticket sales were all the more remarkable considering the tough economic conditions of the Great Depression and speak volumes of the play's appeal as escapist fare.

Over the years, critics' comments regarding *You Can't Take It with You* have been remarkably consistent. Frank Hurburt O'Hara, in his 1939 collection of essays *Today in American Drama,* praised Kaufman and Hart for creating a play that despite being "hilariously preposterous" still manages to be "more persuasive to audiences than most farces. " Almost thirty years later, Richard Mason, in a 1967 *Theater Annual* article, would still admire the imagination and warmth in this play where "neither satire not any weighty preoccupation with issues is allowed to get in the way of the comedy ... any metaphorical values possessed by the play are quite overshadowed by its farce exuberance."

Pleasantly escapist, *You Can't Take It with You* is, as Ethan Mordden wrote in his 1981 book *The American Theater,* "one hit whose popularity is easy to understand." First opening in a decade when, as Mordden puts it, many "plays dealt with disoriented characters alienated either by epic environmental pressures they don't understand or because they understand and dislike their environment," *You Can't Take It with You* offered audiences an amusing reversal: "the screwballs have their worldin order; it's everyone else who's disoriented." And most critics would, along withMordden, attribute the play's enduring appeal to the fact that although "very much of its time" Kaufman and Hart's comedy is "not dependent on timely allusions;" we can still easily understand Grandpa's message to "do what you want before it's too late."

In the 1990s, more criticism has been written on Frank Capra's 1938 film version of *You Can't Take It with You* than on Kaufman and Hart's original play. This reflects the burgeoning of popular culture and film studies, fields more interested in the 1930s

Hollywood screwball comedies than the Broadway stage of the same era. But the lack of recent criticism may also indicate that many late-twentieth century scholars agree with Mason's judgement of all Kaufman and Hart's comedies: they "are there to be thoroughly enjoyed on the stage, but it is fatal to think about them."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In this essay Kreger places Kaufman and Hart's play within the context of the Great Depression, noting that the work served as a welcome escape from the trials of 1930s America.

In the 1930s, Americans needed to laugh. The United States was suffering through the harsh economic times of the Great Depression and people went to theaters and movie houses to forget their troubles. So it is not surprising that in 1936 George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's You Can't Take Itwith You was a commercial success. This screwball farce filled the stage with eccentric characters who did silly things and made witty remarks while fireworks literally went off in the background. Both frantic and funny, the play gave audiences just the sort of escapist entertainment they wanted.

You Can't Take It with You not only pleased Depression-era theater-goers, it went on in the decades which followed to become a classic American comedy, continually produced by theater companies of all kinds.

Why has this play enjoyed lasting popularity when many other clever farces from the same era have been forgotten? Perhaps this well-constructed work endures both because it skillfully employs classic comedic techniques and because it celebrates individualism, reiterating ideas Americans have embraced since the country's inception. Without exaggerating the philosophical importance of Kaufman and Hart's loveable bunch of screwballs, it is safe to say that *You Can't Take It with You* repackages, in the congenial form of Grandpa Vanderhof s worldview, the individualistic and anti-materialist ideals of American thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. As the idiosyncratic Vanderhof-Sycamores amuse, they also encourage the viewer to resist conformity, question the dominant culture's social and economic values, and seek personal fulfillment. The play fulfills its obligations as a farce, delivering verbal and physical comedy aplenty, but it also offers, with an appropriately light-touch, a message Americans want to hear.

But, as many critics have pointed out, any message *You Can't Take It with You* delivers is secondary to its main purpose: producing laughs. From the moment the curtain goes up, Kaufman and Hart keep audiences amused with sight gags and witty lines. Act I introduces the wacky Vanderhof-Sycamore family. They all follow their dreams, making the best of what life and chance have presented them: Penny writes plays because a typewriter was once delivered to the house by mistake, Essie dances and makes candy, Ed plays the xylophone and prints circulars on a hand-press, Paul make fireworks with the assistance of Mr. De Pinna, and Grandpa collects stamps and attends commencement exercises. None of them seems of mind that young Alice actually has a job as a secretary on Wall Street. In fact, no one seems to mind much of anything at all. No explosion is so loud and no behavior so strange as to disturb this family's balance.

Kaufman and Hart begin their play in a liberated realm Grandpa Vanderhof s living room. This is a reversal of the traditional comic model literary critic Northrop Frye once proclaimed, where, as in many Shakespearean romantic comedies, the protagonists must escape a world of hypocrisy and habit and create their own new society of truth and freedom. In *You Can't Take It with You*, there is no need for Alice and Tony to run away and make a new community, for they start out in a fully formed alternative society. The "real world" remains safely off stage, and the Vanderhof-Sycamore world order no jobs, no taxes, no formalities holds sway. The humor and fun, of course, comes from watching the conservative Kirby family at first clash with and later attempt to adapt to this unorthodox world. The overall structure of the play, however, is quite traditional; three balanced acts, in turn, set-up, complicate, and resolve the humorous situation.

After Act I has introduced the unconventional cast of characters and made clear the problem of the play, that Alice and Tony want to marry but fear that their families are incompatible (a lighter version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), Act II generates hilarious complications by bringing Tony and his parents to dinner at the Vanderhof-Sycamore house on the wrong night. (This formula of a likeable but unusual family placed in ludicrous circumstances is a familiar one. Many critics credit Kaufman and Hart with originating this sceneno so often adopted by television situation comedies such as The *Addams Family* and *The Simpsons .*) This second act illustrates the broad comic techniques of farce, which place exaggerated characters in awkward physical positions and silly costumes. Kaufman and Hart start off with Essie, in her tutu, leaping through the living room, the balding Mr. De Pinna dressed like a Roman discus thrower, and Penny in the caricatured costume of "the artist." All funny sights even before the Kirbys show up m full evening dress (formal gown and tuxedo) to provide contrast. And the physical comedy continues throughout the scene, with Mr. Kolenkhov accosting the uptight Mr. Kir-by in an attempt to wrestle, Donald running in and out to the store, and finally the chaotic arrival of the F.B.I., which is capped by a fireworks explosion and pandemonium. When reading a comedy (as opposed to actually seeing it produced), it is easy to overlook the importance of the visual and physical elements which are a crucial part of the humor. Kaufman and Hart certainly intended You Can't Take It with You to entertain both eye and ear; Kaufman in particular was well- known for adroitly choreographing the on-stage mayhem in productions he directed.

The play is filled not only with clever sight gags but also with great one-liners. Audiences never fail to laugh when Penny muses about her play's plot ("you know, with forty monks and one girl, something ought to happen") or when Grandpa sums up his sense of the government's value ("well, I might pay about seventy-five dollars, but that's all it's worth"). The caricatured Russian Kolenkhov energetically delivers some of the silliest lines in the play ("Life is chasing around inside of me, like a squirrel") and performers love the part. As the actor Gregory Peck said in A *Celebration of Moss* Hart about playing Kolenkhov, "it had that marvelous line 'Confidentially she stinks' in it, I had the privilege of saying that, I think, four times at every performance, and for the first time in my life hearing an audience just tear the joint up. That was the surest-fire laugh line that any actor ever had." Hart and Kaufman's verbal wit shows up throughout the play, but perhaps a particularly good example of their ability to get big laughs from short lines is Penny's word game, where Mrs. Kirby's associations of bathroom Mr. Kirby, honeymoon dull, sex Wall Street, are revealingly suggestive.

You Can't Take It with You might stand as a model for aspiring comedic playwrights, illustrating balanced structure as well as a skillful blend of physical and verbal humor. But its enduring appeal more likely can be credited to the other lesson it has to offer, that of Grandpa Vanderhof s life philosophy. Living out Grandpa's notions, the Vanderhof-Sycamores illustrate Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea, famously expressed in his 1841 essay "Self-Reliance," that to be an individual one must be a "nonconformist" and reject the "joint-stock company" of society which asks citizens to sacrifice their "liberty and culture." As Alice says about her family, "they do rather strange things" but "they're fun, and ... there's a certain nobility about them." American audiences raised on individualistic beliefs are inclined to agree that there is something noble about folks who "just don't care about things that other people give their whole lives to." Society demands conformity, but in the world of Kaufman and Hart's play, those who follow society's dictates get little satisfaction from life, while those who make up their own rules find contentment. Echoing Emerson, You Can't Take It with You emphasizes the pleasure of following one's bliss. In this comedic world, nonconformists have fun. It really is a play about "play," in the sense of games and entertainment.

Grandpa laments the fact that most people have forgotten about having fun: they work because they are supposed to but no longer know what they are working for. He asks, "why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" Grandpa himself used to "get down to the office at nine o'clock sharp, no matter how [he] felt" and "lay awake nights" worrying about contracts. He had been "right in the thick of it fighting and scratching, and clawing"; the working world was a "regular jungle." Then one day he realized he "wasn't having any fun" so he "just relaxed" and has "been a happy man ever since." Grandpa's experience and realizations echo the well-known statements of Emerson's contemporary Henry David Thoreau, who in his 1854 book Walden, declared that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Thoreau argued that people "labor under a mistake." Even when they try to have fun, an "unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called... games and amusements... there is no play in them, for this comes after work."

As theorist Stanley Cavell suggested in his discussion of 1930s film comedies, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, characters with individualistic and anti-materialist ideals like the Vanderhof-Sycamores underscore the difference between those who know what has true value in life and those who have forgotten what really counts. In Cavell's words "happiness is not to be won just by opposing those in power but only, beyond that, by educating them, or their successors." We see this in *You Can't Take It with You* where the happy ending depends upon Mr. Kirby and Tony learning to share Grandpa's ideals. In "screwball comedies" like this, as Cavell argued, fulfillment "requires not the fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs." Grandpa wants Tony to make such a reassessment so that he will not "wake up twenty years from now with nothing in his life but stocks and bonds." Grandpa's advice to the Kirbys is very much in the tradition of Thoreau who wrote that he went to live at Walden Pond so that he would not "discover that I had not lived." "You've got all the money you need," Vanderhof tells Mr. Kirby, "you can't take it with you." So now is the time to consider what will bring happiness. As Grandpa goes on to say, "how many of us would be willing to settle when we're young for what we eventually get? All those plans we make... what happens to them? It's only a handful of the lucky ones that can look back and say they even come close."

Certainly the Vanderhof-Sycamores are just such a "handful of lucky ones." They all seem to have followed the approach to life put forth in *Walden*, which encourages its readers to "simplify, simplify," to get back to the basics, and to relax like Thoreau for whom "time is but a stream I go a-fishing in," Although the disasters of Act n cause some doubts about this philosophy at the opening of Act ffl when Paul wonders if he's been wrong to have "just been going along, enjoying myself, when maybe I should have been thinking more about Alice" and Alice herself wishes her family "behaved the way *other* people's families do" the play's happy resolution affirms that Grandpa's way really is best.

Given the economic hardships of the 1930s, we can see why audiences of the time would want to believe Grandpa when he says "life is simple and kind of beautiful if you let it come to you." Of course Kaufman and Hart, through occasional satiric moments, point out the impracticality of their philosophy with quips like Kolenkhov's reminder that "you cannot relax with Stalin in Russia. The czar relaxed and what happened to him?" Reminders of Depression-era reality aren't totally absent either, although they are always played for laughs. Donald's remark that going to pick up his relief check "breaks up his week," the peculiar dinner menus, Kolenkhov's just-in-time-for-a-meal arrivals, and theF.B J.'s investigation of Ed's seemingly subversive circulars bring to mind welfare, hunger, and bureaucratic paranoia respectively. But *You Can'tTakeltwith You* does not aim for political satire but rather hopes to generate mirth, to, at least temporarily, help the audience forget the trials of the real world. The satire here is gentle and the hint of "bad times" only emphasizes the light-hearted good times we see depicted on the stage.

Comedy traditionally affirms the possibility of change and growth. There is always a new and better day to come. As Thoreau wrote, "it is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof." So even the older Mr. Kirby can learn to change his mind and see the world through Grandpa's eyes. When considered in the context of traditional American individualism, as expressed in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, the Vanderhof-Sycamore philosophy which Mr. Kirby initially thinks is "dangerous" and "un-American" seems just the opposite: distinctly American. *You Can't Take It with You* deserves recognition not only as an excellent farce but as a classic celebration of American individualism. As Moss Hart said, "I do not look down my nose at comedies; they are an ancient and honorable form of making certain truths palatable with laughter, and an age can be understood as well by its comedies as by its tragic dramas."

Source: Bnka Kreger, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this review that first appeared in the New York Evening Post, December 15 & 19, 1936, Brownpraises the lighthearted nature of You Can't Take It with You.

Brown was an influential and popular American drama critic who wrote extensively on British and American drama.

In a world in which the sanity usually associated with sunshine is sadly overvalued, *You Can't Take It With You* is something to be prized. It is moonstruck, almost from beginning to end. It is blessed with all the happiest lunacies Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman have been able to contribute to it. The Sycamore family is the most gloriously mad group of contented eccentrics the modern theatre has yet had the good fortune to shadow. Its various members comprise a whole nest of Mad Hatters. They are daffy mortals, as lovable as they are laughable. Their whims are endless. So, too, for that matter, is the fun they provide, except when Cupid is foolish enough to force his way into the family circle.

The Sycamores, bless them, live uptown in New York. They are, however, not nearly so far removed from Wall Street as they are from the rent-day worries to which most of us are heir. Grandfather Vanderhof... has for some years now refused, on very sensible grounds, to pay his income tax. More than that, though he still has some money, he has long ago retired from business in order to seek happiness in attending commencements, visiting zoos, and collecting snakes and stamps. All the members of his demented household have hobbies of their own and practice the gospel of relaxation which he preaches. His daughter, Mrs. Sycamore..., has abandoned painting, to which she temporarily returns, for playwriting because eight years ago a typewriter was delivered by mistake to the Sycamore bedlam, (pp. 177-78)

The quiet lunacy of the family is established by ... Grandfather Vanderhof, [who] is as lovably gentle as he is unworldly.... Old though he is, he is happy because he has been able to remain a child of impulse in a sternly coercive world. He is more than strange. His strangeness is the measure of his wisdom and the point of his philosophy. His is a serenity and a goodness which make it possible for him, when saying "grace," to speak directly to his Creator with a reverent simplicity such as has not been equaled hereabouts since *The Green Pastures* and such as should be the property of all bishops and archbishops in a Panglossian universe, (p. 179)

[Mrs. Sycamore's] head may be light, but her heart is filled with the same kindness which floods Grandfather Vanderhof s. She, too, sets about the business of being flighty and foolish with a blessed unconsciousness of how laughable she succeeds in being. So, also, does ... her amiable husband. And so, for that matter, do the rest of the agreeably demented Sycamores.

It is only when workaday reason invades the Sycamore home; when dull normalcy makes its appearance; when an orthodox Cupid bursts into this inspired bedlam, that

You Can't Take It With You suffers. The Sycamores ... are too fortunate in their nonsense ever to be disturbed by something as illogical as ordinary common sense, (pp. 179-80)

Source: John Mason Brown, "The Sensible Insanities of *You Can't Take It with You"* (1936) in his *Two on the Aisle: Ten Years of the American Theatre m Performance,* W. W. Norton & Co, 1938, pp. 177-80.

Critical Essay #3

In a review that first appeared in the New York Times on December 15,1936, noted critic Atkinson related the simple pleasures of Hart and Kaufman's play, particularly its eagerness to please an audience.

Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman have written their most thoroughly ingratiating comedy, *You Can't Take It With You,* which was put on at the Booth last evening. It is a study in vertigo about a lovable family of hobby-horse riders, funny without being shrill, sensible without being earnest. In *Once in a Lifetime,* Mr. Hart and Mr. Kaufman mowed the audience down under a machine-gun barrage of low comedy satire, which was the neatest trick of the season. But you will find their current lark a much more spontaneous piece of hilarity; it is written with a dash of affection to season the humor and played with gayety and simple good spirit. To this column, which has a fondness for amiability in the theatre, *You Can't Take It With You* is the best comedy these authors have written.

To people from the punctilious world outside, the Vanderhof and Sycamore tribes appear to be lunatics. For thirty-five years, grandfather has done nothing but hunt snakes, practice dart throwing, attend commencement exercises and avoid income tax payments. His son-in-law makes fireworks for a hobby in the cellar; various members of the family write plays, study dancing, play the xylophone and operate amateur printing presses. Being mutually loyal they live together in a state of pleasant comity in spite of their separate hobbies. If Alice Sycamore had not fallen in love with the son of a Wall Street banker there would be no reason for this comedy The contrast between his austerely correct world and their rhymeless existence in a cluttered room supplies the heartburn and the humor. By the time of the final curtain even the banker is convinced that there is something to be said for riding hobbies and living according to impulse in the bosom of a friendly family.

Not that *You Can't Take It With You* is a moral harangue. For Mr. Hart and Mr. Kaufman are fantastic humorists with a knack for extravagances of word and episode and an eye for hilarious incongruities. Nothing this scrawny season has turned up is quite so madcap as a view of the entire Sycamore tribe working at their separate hobbies simultaneously. When Mr. Kirby of Wall Street and the Racquet Club walks into their living-room asylum his orderly head reels with anguish. The amenities look like bedlam to him. What distinguishes *You Can't Take It With You* among the Hart-Kaufman enterprises is the buoyancy of the humor. They do not bear down on it with wisecracks. Although they plan it like good comedy craftsmen, they do not exploit it like gag-men.

And they have assembled a cast of actors who are agreeable folks to sit before during a gusty evening. As grandfather, Henry Travers, the salty and reflective one, is full of improvised enjoyment Josephine Hull totters and wheedles through the part of a demented homebody. As a ferociousminded Moscovite, George Tobias roars through the room Under Mr. Kaufman's direction, which can be admirably relaxed as well as guffawingly taut, every one gives a jovial performance Paula Trueman, Frank Wilcox, George Heller, Mitzi Hajos, Margot Stevenson, Oscar Polk. Well, just read the cast. The setting is by Donald Oenslager, as usual.

When a problem of conduct raises its head for a fleeting instant in the Sycamore family, grandfather solves it with a casual nod of philosophy, "So long as she's having fun." Mr. Hart and Mr. Kaufman have been more rigidly brilliant in the past, but they have never scooped up an evening of such tickling fun.

Source: Brooks Atkinson, review of *You Can't Take It with You* (1936) m *On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from the New York Times, 1920-1970,* edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp. 182-83.

Adaptations

Frank Capra produced and directed an Academy Award-winning film version of *You Can't Take It with You.* The film stars James Stewart and Jean Arthur, Columbia, 1938; available from Columbia Tristar Home Video. The film adaption does alter the plot in some ways. Excerpts from Robert Riskin's screenplay were published in *Foremost Films of 1938*, edited by Frank Vreeland, New York: Pitman, 1939. Copies of the unpublished screenplay are available at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the University of California, Los Angeles Theatre Arts Library.

CBS produced a television adaption of the play featuring Jean Stapleton and Art Carney which aired May 16,1979.

A 1984 taped performance of the play featuring Colleen Dewhurst and Jason Robards is available from Columbia Tristar Home Video, Vestron Video, and Live Entertainment.

The Moss Hart Papers at the Wisconsin Center for Theater Research include the script for an October, 1950, Pulitzer Prize Playhouse television adaption of the play, as well as an undated radio adaption by Tony Webster.

Topics for Further Study

Look up a classic discussion of comedy such as Aristotle's Poetics, Charles Baudelaire's *On the Essence of Laughter,* Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and the Comic,* or Northrop Frye's *TheMythos of Spring: Comedy* and evaluate the form and content of *You Can't Take It with You* according to your chosen theorist's definition of comedy.

Read either Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" (1841) or the chapter "Economy" from Henry David Thoreau's Walden (1854). Consider how the ideas in your chosen text are reflected in *You Can't Take It with You*.

Compare and contrast Frank Capra's film adaption of *You Can't Take It with You* with Kaufman and Hart's original play. What alterations did Capra make which reflect his definition of family and community? How do the depictions of the business world in the play and film differ? Do the two versions emphasize the same political, economic, and social philosophies?

Research the living and working conditions of minority groups such as African Americans and Eastern European immigrants in mid-1930s New York. What would life have been like for a real African American domestic worker or a Russian escaping persecution? Find authentic accounts to compare with the joking stereotypes presented in Kaufman and Hart's play.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: During the Great Depression unemployment reaches a high of 20% in 1935. In 1938, unemployment is at 19.1%, which means 10.39 million Americans are unemployed.

Today: In the mid- 1990s unemployment runs as low as 5%. With 66% of Americans in the labor force, a larger proportion of Americans are working than ever before. Yet the disparity between the wealthiest 10% and the poorest 10% of the population is greater in the United States than in any other industrialized country except Russia.

1930s: Starting in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal legislation combats the economic hardships of the Great Depression, introducing social security, acts creating jobs in the public sector, welfare, and unemployment benefits.

Today: Social Security funding is endangered and economists warn that the system could collapse in the near future. Congress passes a Welfare Reform Act in 1996 limiting lifetime benefits to five years and requiring all welfare recipients to participate either in job training or employment programs.

1930s: Beginning in 1938, Joseph Stalin, the communist dictator of the Soviet Union, kills 8 to 10 million people in an attempt to eliminate all his political enemies in an event later called the "great purge." In this same year, fascist general Francisco Franco starts a revolt in Spain which leads to a three-year civil war.

Today: In Europe, genocidal slaughter takes place in Bosnia-Herzegovina during a civil war in the 1990s; thousands of people are killed in the name of "ethnic cleansing." In Africa, during the civil war in Rwanda, mass killings also take place in 1995 as two ethnic tribes attempt to eliminate one another.

1930s: In 1930, life expectancy for American men was 58.1 years; American women were expected to live 61.6 years. By 1940, life expectancies for American men and women had risen to 60.8 years and 65.2 years respectively.

Today: In 1990, the average life expectancy for men in the United States was 71.6 years, for women it was 79.2 years.

1930s: In 1933, Frances Perkins becomes the first woman cabinet member when she accepts the post of Secretary of Labor,

Today: Madeline Albright becomes the United States's first female Secretary of State in 1997.

1930s: According to census records, the population of the United States rose from 123,202,624 in 1930 to 132,164,569 in 1940, an increase of approximately 7%.

Today: In 1980, the U.S. population was 226,504,825. It grew to 248,709,873 by 1990, an increase of approximately 9%.

What Do I Read Next?

Harvey, Mary Coyle Chase's 1944 comedy. This play, like *You Can't Take It with You,* won a Pulitzer Pnze, and tells the story of another classic American eccentric, a charming man who keeps company with a huge, imaginary rabbit named Harvey.

Act One, Moss Hart's well-received 1959 autobiography. This work offers insight into both the Broadway theater at mid-century and the Hart-Kaufman collaboration.

The Man Who Came to Dinner, Kaufman and Hart's 1939 play. This fourth Kaufman-Hart collaboration, like *You Can't Take It -with You,* depicts a crazy family and a rambunctious social occasion. Some critics consider this to be Kaufman and Hart's best work.

Ah Wilderness!, (1933) by Eugene O'Neill. This nostalgic play, the only comedy O'Neill ever wrote, looks at family life in 1906 Connecticut.

Dorothy Parker's essays, book reviews, and drama reviews from the 1930s can be found in *The Portable Dorothy Parker* as well as other anthologies of her work. Parker's famous satirical wit reflects the tone of the Algonquin Round Table, an intellectual group which influenced Kaufman.

The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People, (1895) a play by Oscar Wilde. This well-constructed comedy filled with famous witty lines is about the complicated courtship and betrothals of two upper-class English young men.

Further Study

Atkinson, Brooks. "The Giddy Twenties" in his Broadway, MacMillan (New York), 1970, pp 227-37.

In this chapter from his book-length history of Broadway, Atkinson describes New York theater at the time George S Kaufman came on the scene, discusses the influence of the Algonquin Round Table, and touches on the beginnings of Kaufman's collaborations with Moss Hart.

Cavell, Stanley. Pursuits of Happiness; *The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage,* Harvard University Press, 1981, pp 1-42.

Cavell's introduction provides a useful interpretation of the film version of *You Can't Take It with You*, and his discussion of screwball comedies in the body of the book illustrates strategies for analyzing farce in both film and theater.

Frye, Northrop "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," in his *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 163-186

Frye's classic analysis of comedy does not deal with Kaufman and Hart specifically but offers a useful overview of the development of comic form from the Greeks through Shakespeare to the Victorian era.

Goldstein, Malcolm. *George S Kaufman: His Life, His Theater,* Oxford University Press (New York), 1979.

In this detailed and readable biography, Goldstein examines both Kaufman's life and work Chapter 15, "The Birth of a Classic," explains the development of *You Can't Take It with You* offers a reading of the play, and considers its influence on both collaborators

Gould, Jean "Some Clever Collaborators" m *Modem American Playwrights*, Dodd, Mead & Co. (New York), 1966, pp. 154-167.

Gould provides concise biographical sketches of Kaufman and Hart, then moves on to a discussion of their most successful plays, devoting several paragraphs to *You Can't Take It with You*

Hart, Moss. "No Time for Comedy . or Satire. My Most interesting Work" in *Theatre Arts*, Vol. 38, no. 5, May, 1954, pp 32-33.

An article written by Hart that discusses a number of his better-known works and presents his philosophy toward drama

Mason, Richard "The Comic Theatre of Moss Hart: Persistence of a Formula" in *Theatre Annual,* Volume 23, 1967, pp 60-87

Mason discusses all of Moss Hart's comedies, examining closely the structure of each and arguing Hart contributed important comic elements to the farce form

Mordden, Ethan. The American Theater, Oxford University Press, 1981

Mordden's book provides an excellent overview of the history of *American theater.* He charts the development of comedy as well as serious drama and offers an insightful discussion of Kaufman and Hart.

O'Hara, Frank Hurburt. "Farce with a Purpose" in *Today in American Drama,* Greenwood Press (New York), 1969, pp. 190- 234

O'Hara includes a brief, complimentary discussion of Kaufman and Hart in this chapter dealing with 1930s farcical comedies

Pollack, Rhoda-Gale. George S *Kaufman,* Twayne (Boston), 1988.

Pollack devotes a chapter of her brief biography to "The Years with Moss Hart" She discusses the critical response to *You Can't Take It with You* and its impact on Kaufman's life rather than attempting any analysis or interpretation of the play itself.

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A Celebration of Moss Hart, University of Southern California, April 12,1970, p. 16

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*, Bantam, 1989, pill, 172-73,178.

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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.□
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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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.

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

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