

Anti-establishment vs. Pro-establishment in Drama “You Can’t Take It with You” by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman

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Abstract

This article examines a drama of American life in the early thirties. When the impact of the Great Depression in the late 1930s still left an impression, Hart and Kaufman, the writers of the play "You Can Take It with You," seem to deliberately highlight the social life of two groups of people in the United States. Each is the Kyrbi family, representing a few lucky Americans, and highly praises the economic establishment—the Martin Vanderhov family seems indifferent and enjoys life in moderation. As in most comedies, the feud between the two families is highlighted through the forbidden love story between Alice, Martin Vanderhov's granddaughter, and Tony, Kyrbi's son. Differences in lifestyle and economic status gave birth to the Kyrbi family's refusal to marry their son to Alice. On the other hand, it is shown that Tony, the crown prince of the Kyrby family business empire, refuses to continue his father's business and demands marriage to Alice. As in other comedies, the story ends with a happy ending. This drama, from the point of view of the story, does not give anything new. However, in terms of messages that can be gleaned, this drama is still relevant to study when reflecting on Indonesian society's social and economic conditions today. Material things only measure many things in our lives today. A person's life achievement is measured by how much and how much material he has. It is no wonder that various crimes, including corruption, are carried out shamelessly to get more. The method used in this research is a descriptive method with a historical-biographical approach. With this approach, the writer tries to understand this drama and analyzes how social phenomena in that era contributed to the creation of literary works. From the analysis of the drama "You Can Take It with You," economic stability cannot always guarantee happiness. Conversely, within economic limitations, humans can still enjoy their days because happiness is a choice. In addition, the freedom to choose a way of life is a right that cannot be forced, even by parents.

1. INTRODUCTION

The drama "You Can't Take it with You" is exciting and enjoyable. It depicts the life of two families with two different appreciations and attitudes toward it. There are a Martin Vanderhof family with some other people around and the Kirby family. The drama involves twenty characters with two significant characters, namely Martin Vanderhof, the grandpa, and Mr. Kirby. The drama in grandpa's house is divided into three acts. The first Act takes place in the house's living room, although it is more like the every-man-for-himself room. Everybody is busy with their activity; Penny with her writing the play, Rheba with her cooking and preparing for the dinner, Essie with her making candy, Ed with his xylophone, Paul and Mr. De Pina with their firecrackers and rockets, and so on. Long after, grandpa gets home from the commencement, and Alice gets home from work. In the evening, Tony, Alice's boyfriend, comes.

The second Act takes place a week later at the same place. It is the visit of the Kirby family. The guests have come earlier. They are expected to come the next evening for dinner. This unpredicted visit surprised the host; consequently, they needed more preparation for dinner with respectful guests. However, the family tries for the best. Donald, the black servant, is sent to the next-door store to buy things for dinner. Not only grandpa's family is shocked by the situation, but also the Kirbys, especially Mr. and Mrs. Kirby. To neutralize the situation, Penny suggests that everybody in the room play a game. It is at the moment the Kirbys are going back home when suddenly three men loom up. They are from the Department of Justice. They come to arrest Ed for the suspect of planning a terror. Ed has been followed for several days. The family is suspected of planning a terror as they find the circulars Ed inserts in candy boxes. Those circulars are "Dynamite the Capitol!", "Dynamite the White House!", "Dynamite the Supreme Court!", "God is the State; the State is God!". Suddenly, from the cellar comes a voice of explosion. "It is a whole year's fireworks – bombs, big crackers, little crackers, sky crackers, pinwheels, everything." Consequently, the whole persons, thirteen altogether, must spend the night in jail.

The third Act is taking place the next day. It is when everybody in the family is prepared to see Alice leave the house, for nobody can succeed in persuading her to stay. Alice is disappointed with the incident the night before and decides to leave. Tony is also there at that time but fails to keep her stay. The only person to stay relaxed and calm is grandpa. He invites everybody to calm down and not be panicky

because he believes Alice will return soon after she gets bored of being alone and away from the family. He also asks everybody to look at the bright side. There is also Grand Duchess Olga Katrina, who, at the moment, is in the kitchen preparing the meal for dinner. Then comes Mr. Kirby asking Tony to go home for his mother is sick. When there is no hope for the marriage of Tony and Alice, grandfather comes up with his brilliant and wise thought. The problem is overcome, Alice postpones her departure, and everybody sits for dinner.

The drama represents the encounter of two highly different families or people. The first group is the Martins and their companionship. This group represented most of the United States people in that era, the 1930s. They are confronted with the small or minority group of the country's elites or established ones, which the Kirbys represent. The encounter of the two different families is made possible through the romantic relationship between Alice, the granddaughter of Martin Vanderhof, and Tony Kirby, the son of the rich man Anthony Kirby, JR. Like many other old fashion love stories, Alice, who realizes the different backgrounds of the two families, considers this love affair impossible. Alice, who also works at Kirby's company, where Tony is the vice president, is still determining the possibility of continuing their relationship, not only because of their different economic background but also because of the different lifestyles of the two. The Martins are easygoing, anti-establishment, relaxed, art-minded, freedom-oriented, democratic, moderate, every-man-for-himself, indifferent, and so on. At the same time, the Kirbys are pro-establishment, well-educated, future-oriented, well-arranged, serious, money-hunter, capitalistic, overprotective, and so on. The differences between the two families consequently lead them to different attitudes toward life and pursuing happiness.

To Martin, everybody is free to decide what he is supposed to do as long as it can make him or her happy. They believe that happiness can only be obtained if one is left free to decide what he or she wants to do. For instance, Essie, the eldest daughter of Paul and Penny Sycamore, is let to continue her ballet course only to show their appreciation for her preference, even though he has taken the course for as long as eight years without any significant progress. Other people in the group are similarly left free to pursue what they want to do. Essie herself wants to avoid developing her business of making candy only because she wants to go on practicing ballet dance, although the orders increase. "That is what Ed was saying last night,

but I said No, I want to be a dancer." Paul Sycamore and Mr. De Pina are always busy making firecrackers. Grandpa himself is busy with leisure activities such as collecting stamps, and snakes, visiting places, and playing darts, while Penny, the mother of the daughters, is writing plays. Ed enjoys his life by pursuing his hobby of playing the xylophone, besides helping his wife, Essie, pack and deliver the candies to the sellers. Moreover, Rheba and Donald, the black servants, are also left free and enjoy being together with the family.

On the other hand, Mr. Kirby, who is always busy with his job as a businessman, believes that one should do what he or she has to do and not merely what he or she is willing to do. He has made Tony, his son, work in that office, and he is supposed to continue the business. However, Tony wants to do something other than doing so. Tony himself is simply an idealist young man. "... Although he fits all the physical requirements of a Boss' son, his face has something of the idealist in it" (p. 242). Tony's rejection of being arranged by his father is depicted in the following quotation when he is expressing his anger toward his father's attitude, "No, I want to talk about it now. I think Mr. Vanderhof is right – dead right. I am never going back to that office. I have always hated it, and I am not going to go on with it. ..." (p. 271). Like many other conventional dramas, the one I analyze here is composed similarly. The plot of the drama is identified simply with the introduction or exposition, the rising action, the climax, the falling action, or the resolution. It is also considered a closed plot drama because the end of the story is relatively easily predictable.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The drama is also gripping because it attracts me as a reader to dig more to understand the social phenomena and its pictures. Christopher Russell Reaske, in his "How to Analyze Drama," says, "A drama is a work of literature or composition which delineates life and human activity utilizing presenting various actions of – and dialogues between – a group of characters. (1966: p. 5). Departing from the definition, I would like to present a brief analysis of the drama "You Can't Take it with You" by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman, following the real situation as the setting of place and time of the drama. It is inevitable that as the analysis is based on the social life of the two families, the writer cannot force himself to analyze the drama

without considering the social or cultural phenomena of the American society in which the drama is produced. To aim at this purpose, the writer would like to apply Historical-Biographical Approach. It means that he would look back to the history of the United States when the drama was written and published in 1937. Wilfred L. Guerin, in his "A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature," says, "Put simply, this approach sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of it is author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in work." (1979: p. 25).

Understanding a literary work, especially this drama, the writer believes that the analysis can be done more comprehensively by looking into the social and cultural phenomena where the author lives and sets his work. This drama, "You Can't Take It with You," as summarized above, is considered a meaningful contribution to understanding American society in a certain period. Of course, it is always far from enough to say that a literary work can explain one specific phenomenon in a particular society to readers. Nevertheless, at least it helps readers share the writer's experience on a particular situation.

In order to enrich and broaden the analysis, the writer does some library research by trying to collect any potential information through written materials. Unfortunately, there needs to be more information written about these two authors of the drama. While Kaufman is mentioned only once in "Literary History of the United States, Hart is not.

3. RESULT

America in the 1930s was not a promised land anymore, at least during that remarkable period when the Great Depression hit the country's economic life. Reaching its peak achievement in the 1920s, the era of the industrial boom, the next decade is considered the opposite. Many industries fell, and the number of unemployed men and women increased.

"In the wake of the stock market crash of October 1929, the Great Depression spread rapidly throughout the country. National income dropped by nearly 50 percent, from \$81 billion in 1929 to \$40 billion in 1932; unemployment rose to an estimated 25 percent for the labor force; the nearly 20 million Americans turned to public and private relief agencies to prevent

starvation and destitution. Such institutions were soon overwhelmed by the rapid spread of hunger and homeless." (Trotter, JR; 2001: 434-435).

Previously, in the era of industrialization, the American people enjoyed economic prosperity. Capitalism, as the essential economic development of the country, triggered the emergence of new made-men. The situation altogether led to the emphasis on materialism and the desire to get rich quickly. Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, in their "The Rise of the American Nation," stated: "...the 1920s were characterized by widespread prosperity, by an unusual outpouring of energy, by a sharp increase in the productivity of American industry, by disillusionment with the outcome of the crusade to make the world safe for democracy, by an emphasis on materialism, and by the desire 'to get rich quick' and to have a good time." (1972: 656). In my opinion, this drama, which was published in 1937, depicts the phenomena.

Mr. Kirby, the writer supposes, is representing the minor elites. His attitude toward business and economic prosperity forces him to believe that the only thing he can do is to keep on his business. "A man cannot give up his business." Even though the depression had passed by the time this drama was published, its impact was still shadowed. America was still in a period of economic recovery. President Roosevelt, who took office on March 4, 1933, amid the Great Depression, issued a New Deal program. The program was divided into three essential parts: (1) measures to provide relief to the unemployed; (2) measures to speed the recovery of agriculture, industry, commerce, and labor; and (3) measures to remedy specific weaknesses in the economic system. (Op. Cit: 682).

The impact of the economic difficulties first can be seen through the way the family was kept together in the house of Martin Vanderhof. Without any specific job, the family members try to get along with life by doing some odd job. Ed, as an example, helps his wife sell the candies she makes on her own. When asked by a man from Internal Revenue Department about his last- year's income, Ed says his income is only twenty-eight dollars and fifty cents. On the other hand, his father-in-law, Paul Sycamore, is making firecrackers and skyrockets for sale.

Paul: Sure. We made up – oh, here we are.

(Mr. De Pina comes up from the cellar.

A bald little man with a severe manner,

and carrying two good-sized skyrockets)

Look, Penny. Cost us eighteen cents to make
, and we sell them for fifty.” (P. 235)

Besides, grandpa seems to live on a pension, for he has quit the business for as long as thirty-five years. However, they all live together in harmony. It seems to the writer that a house is simply a heavenly place for every member of the family as well as their companionships; Mr. De Pina, Mr. Kolenkhov, Gay Wellington, and Grand Duchess Olga Katrina. Although everything in the house is not in its place or well arranged, each of them still can enjoy his or her own way of living. Of course, this way of living performed by the family is strange to the Kirbys. As a family with an established social status, the Kirares can accept the lifestyle of Martin Vanderhof’s family. Nothing in their first visit to the family gives a favorable impression; the dinner is not prepared, although this is not the fault of the host, for they have come earlier than they expected; everything is just everywhere around; a person, Gay Wellington, lays down drunk; people shout to call out somebody’s name; the strange hobby each of the family members has; the visit of men from Justice Department to arrest them; the explosion of crackers; and finally their being taken to jail and spend a night there, an incident that could be very embarrassing for the Kirbys. While that accident could mean nothing to the Martins as their life can go on the way it did, it severely impacts the Kirbys. Mrs. Kirby fell sick the next day, and Mr. Kirby returned to the Martins to ask Tony to go home and signal that the marriage of Tony and Alice could not be conducted. However, Mr. Kirby admits that another reason led them to the decision to postpone the engagement.

“Kirby: Mr. Vanderhof, it was not merely last night that convinced
Mrs. Kirby and myself that this engagement would be unwise.” (P. 270).

In this situation, the grandpa comes up with wise arguments to defend himself and the family. Grandpa tells Alice, who he knows has loved Tony, but is ashamed of her family’s conduct.

Grandpa: Alice, you are in love with this boy,
and you are not marrying him because we are the
kind of people we are.

He then continues as Alice tries to interrupt,

Grandpa: I know. You think the two families

would not get along. Well, they would not –

However, who says they are right and we are wrong? (P. 270)

The following is grandpa's statement protesting how Mr. Kirby faces his life and tends to force his son in the same way. Grandpa criticizes Mr. Kirby by showing his sympathy for Tony.

“Grandpa: Well, what I *feel* is that Tony's too nice a boy to wake twenty years from now

with nothing in his life but stocks and bonds.” (P. 270).

To grandpa, this is not the kind of life a human should have. When Mr. Kirby reacts with the question to grandpa's statement, he answers.

“Grandpa: (*turning to MR. Kirby*). Yes. Mixed up and unhappy, the way you are.” (P. 270).

He accuses MR. Kirby for having denied his desire. MR. Kirby is also said to have sacrificed everything he ever wanted to do in his youth to follow his father's preference. To grandpa, MR. Kirby has unconsciously done things that are not of his ideals. It leads him to an unhappy life. Even to grandpa, the indigestion Mr. Kirby has is not from happiness. According to grandpa, he gets it because most of his time is spent doing things he does not want to do. Grand reminds him of what he said the night before,

Grandpa: Yes, you do. You said last night that at the end of a week in Wall Street, you are pretty near crazy. Why do you keep on doing it? (P. 270)

Compared to Mr. Kirby's life, grandpa convinces him that he is happy. He says he has much fun. He has enough time for everything – read, talk, visit the zoo now and then, practice darts, and do other things he wants to do. (P. 270)

4. DISCUSSION

Here, the authors of the drama present an idea about how useless life can be if one is unaware of its existence. Money cannot buy happiness. Both authors criticize the materialistic attitude that alienates men from their human nature. One of the examples of how this can lead to a fatal life is when in a moment when they are playing the game performed by Penny. It is a psychological game to discover the association one makes when an idea comes to mind. When Penny mentions

'sex,' Mrs. Kirby writes down Wall Street. When asked by Mr. Kirby why she puts 'sex' and 'Wall Street,' Mrs. Kirby says, "It is just that you are talking about Wall Street, even when – (*She catches herself*) (P. 262). It could mean that Mr. Kirby always talks about his business, even when they are in the bedroom. It can implicitly mean something is wrong, at least to Mr. Kirby.

Mr. Kirby can also represent the American elites' attitude toward the country's economic system, capitalism. The industrialization boom in America has benefited the new self-made men. These elites enjoyed the economic opportunities and racing for them. In this situation, communism, which tends to limit possession and income, is seen as a horrible idea. Mr. Kirby's reaction to grandpa's argument about why he quit his job on Wall Street shows that.

Kirby: Yes, I do see. Furthermore, it is a very dangerous philosophy, Mr. Vanderhof. It is – it is un-American.

Moreover, it is why I am precisely opposed to this marriage.

I do not want Tony to come under its influence.

When Tony asks, "what's the matter with it, father?"

Mr. Kirby answers, "Matter with it? Why, it's – it's down-right Communism, that's what it is." (P. 271)

At that time in America, Communism was appreciated in two different ways. On the one hand, some people saw the increase of communism not to be worried. They even saw positively that the increased trade flow between the two countries would benefit the United States, and they reminded that they shared a common concern about the threat of Japanese aggression. (Todd; 1972: 710). On the other hand, some people were the opponents. "The opponents of the recognition pointed out that Communism made no secret of their dream of world conquest" (op. cit. 710). Mr. Kirby belongs to the second group. To make it worse, Tony is on grandpa's side. He also criticizes his father for what he has been doing to him. Their visit to Alice's family happened earlier than expected, which Tony had already planned. Tony has a purpose when doing that because he wants his father and mother to recognize the family in the situation. He also wants his father to know that he does not intend to go on working with the company.

Tony: No, I want to talk about it *now*. I think

Mr. Vanderhof is right – dead right. I am never returning

to that office; I have always hated it and am not going on with it. Moreover, I will tell you something else. I did not make a mistake last night. I know it was the wrong night.

I brought you here on purpose. (P. 271).

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Tony: Because I wanted to wake you up. I wanted you to see a real family – as they *were*. A family that loved and understood each other. You do not understand *me*. You have never had time. Well, I am not going to make *your* mistake. I am clearing out. (P. 271)

Tony also uncovers realities that his father experienced the same things he did now when he was still young. It was Mr. Kirby's father that had forced him to pursue business. He had his own preferences, which his father had put aside. At the age of fourteen, he wanted to be a trapeze artist. He also wanted to be a saxophone player when he was eighteen.

Nevertheless, he still keeps the saxophone in the closet. Mr. Kirby once ran away from home as a protest to his father, who wanted him to go into business. By saying those things about his father's past, Tony explicitly means he refuses to be treated the same way.

Tony: I will not be pushed into the business because I am your son. I am getting out while there is still time.

Mr. Kirby: (*Stunned*). Tony, what are you going to do?

Tony: I do not know. I may be a bricklayer, but at least I will be doing something I want to do. (P. 271)

Without explicitly stating what Mr. Kirby decides to do after the debate, readers can conclude that Mr. Kirby finally recognizes his mistakes and accepts the engagement. It is seen in the way he responds to the dinner and also through the two lovers hugging.

Alice: Mr. Kirby – Tony – oh, Tony! (*and she is in his arms*)

5. CONCLUSION

This drama shows that human being is not merely flesh and bone. He has a heart that has its own need to be fulfilled. There is always something else besides material that a human need to obtain. Happiness cannot be found by compiling materials and money. Everybody has his or her preference in life. Nobody can be forced to accept any idea he or she does not intend to have. A person should be free to decide what to do for his or her advantage. A proverb says, "you can lead a horse to the river but cannot make it drink." The drama, more or less, reflects the episode of life in American society in the 1930s, when America was still covered in the cloud of economic depression. On the other side, there was also a Communism phenomenon, which was starting to threaten democracy, and liberal economic America was to spread out.

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