

THE PHILADELPHIA STORY

by Philip Barry

A STUDY GUIDE FOR THE PARDOE THEATRE PRODUCTION, MAY 30–JUNE 16, 2001

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BACKGROUNDS

PHILIP BARRY

“One of the most prominent American dramatists during the 1920s and 1930s, Barry was best known for his sophisticated comedies of manners. His work combines witty repartee and amusing plots to satirize the values and mores of the upper class. Barry’s dramas consistently examine such aspects of marriage as love, adultery, and divorce, as well as the ‘well-bred’ individual’s search for self-fulfillment. In addition to his comedies, Barry wrote several psychological dramas. Although these works were not as successful as his humorous plays, they deal with similar motifs and are praised for their innovative use of psychoanalytic techniques, such as role-playing and dream analysis, within the confines of drama.

“Born in Rochester, New York, to a middle-class Irish-Catholic family, Barry was educated in Catholic schools and at Yale University. While at Yale he contributed short stories and poetry to the Yale Literary Magazine and the college newspaper. After a year of service in the American Embassy in London during World War I, Barry returned to the United States and enrolled in Harvard’s Workshop 47, a dramatic composition course conducted by George Pierce Baker. The well-known workshop was attended by several important writers, including Eugene O’Neill, S. N. Behrman, and Thomas Wolfe. It was in this workshop that Barry received the encouragement and training that helped him develop his playwriting skills. In 1922, his drama *The Jilts*, retitled *You and I* for its Broadway engagement, was enthusiastically received by audiences and critics. It was the first of Barry’s plays to deal with the frustration of unrealized ambitions. The serio-comic treatment of the subject and the lively dialogue throughout the drama are mainstays of Barry’s work. *You and I* was the beginning of a career that spanned three decades. During that time, Barry achieved financial success as a dramatist and became well-acquainted with the social elite he portrayed. Though he was disappointed that critics preferred his comedies to this more provocative works, such as the psychological drama *Hotel Universe*, he continued to produce serious plays in addition to his more popular comedies. Barry worked in the theater until he died of a heart attack in 1949.”

—*Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*

AMERICA FROM 1935-1940

International Affairs

- 1932** Antonio Salazar becomes Premier of Portugal and rules as a dictator for 36 years.
- 1933** In Germany: President Hindenburg appoints Adolph Hitler Chancellor of Germany. The Nazis burn the Reichstag and accuse the Communists of doing it. The democratic Weimar Republic falls. The government outlaws all parties other than the National Socialists (Nazis). Adolph Hitler rises to power, ousting the President and establishing himself as Führer and supreme ruler. In the USSR, Stalin begins the great purge of the Communist party. He arrests, imprisons, and executes many old Bolsheviks. The purges continue until 1939.
- 1936** Germany invades the Rhineland, which it had lost to France in WWI. Italy annexes Ethiopia. The Spanish Civil War is fought.
- 1938** President Roosevelt sends private memoranda to Britain, France, Germany and Czechoslovakia recommending arbitration of the Sudetenland crisis. This sets the stage for the Munich Pact (Sept. 29). Neville Chamberlain, British Prime Minister, declares “peace in our time” after Hitler agrees to sign the nonaggression pact.
- 1939** **August 23**, Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact signed, including the Secret Additional Protocol regarding the division of Poland between Germany and the USSR. **September 1**, Germany invades Poland. **September 3**, Great Britain and France declare war on Germany. The U.S. and Belgium declare neutrality, as World War II begins in Europe.
- 1940** **May 10**, Winston Churchill becomes Prime Minister of Britain after the resignation of Neville Chamberlain. **September 27**, Germany, Japan, and Italy sign the Axis, or Tripartite, Pact. Germany occupies Norway, Denmark, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. The Battle of Britain begins.

U.S. Politics and Government

- 1931** **September**, a bank panic spreads across the nation. Over 800 banks shut down in September and October. Unemployment reaches 13,000,000. Two and a half years after the 1929 stock market crash the U.S. economy operates at less than half its precrash volume.
- 1932** **November 8**, Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected President in a landslide.
- 1933** Frances Perkins becomes Secretary of Labor, the first woman cabinet member in U.S. history. The new FDR administration demands and receives unprecedented power in an attempt to control an economy that has spiraled out of control. The new program, known as the New Deal, restructures the monetary system and creates an array of federal agencies to regulate private industry and find jobs for millions on government-sponsored projects. The New Deal agencies created this year include the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). The CCC is established to create more jobs by employing people to take part in a national reforestation campaign. The AAA restricts the production of crops and pays farmers a bounty for their unused land. **March 12**, President Roosevelt's first "Fireside Chat" is broadcast on radio. These chats are an attempt to calm people during the tumultuous years of the Depression. **December 5**, the 21st Amendment to the Constitution repeals Prohibition, allowing the manufacture and sale of liquor once more.
- 1935** The Social Security Act is passed. WPA (Works Projects Administration) hires 10,000 unemployed professional writers, performers, designers, and technicians, etc. to produce live theatre around the country through the Federal Theatre Project. A thousand productions are mounted in forty states during four years.
- 1936** Part of Roosevelt's New Deal policies, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), is deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.
- 1938** Wheeler-Lea amendments to the Federal Trade Commission Act granted the FCC added power to curb false advertising. **May 26**, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) is created.
- 1939** Congress terminates Federal Theatre Project.
- 1940** **November 5**, FDR is elected to an unprecedented third term.

Companies, Inventions, Discoveries and Technology

- 1932** The first Polaroid glass is devised by Edwin H. Land.
- 1934** Nylon is first produced by a chemist in DuPont Labs. Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad buys a diesel-powered passenger train, the Burlington Zephyr, which sets a speed record for the trip from Denver to Chicago. Lines begin to adopt diesel-powered locomotives because of their speed, relatively low noise levels, and cleanliness compared to steam engines, which virtually disappear by 1960.
- 1936** The perfusion pump, the first artificial heart, is invented by scientists at Rockefeller University in New York. The National Guard prepares to assault strikers at the General Motors (GM) plant in Flint, Michigan. At the last minute Walter Knudsen, head of GM, agrees to recognize the United Auto Workers union.
- 1937** **May 6**, first coast-to-coast radio broadcast is a report of the Hindenburg disaster. The Hindenburg, a transatlantic lighter-than-air floating passenger ship, crashed and exploded upon landing in New Jersey.
- 1939** **June 28**, the first regular transatlantic passenger air service begins when Pan American Airways (PanAm) flies 22 passengers from Long Island to Lisbon, Portugal. The trip lasts 23 hours, 52 minutes. **October 25**, nylon stockings are first sold.
- 1940** Radios are in 30 million American homes. Rh factor in human blood is discovered.

Humanities and the Arts

- 1931** William Faulkner publishes Sanctuary.
- 1933** Aaron Copland composes "Short Symphony," considered one of the finest works of classical music of this era.
- 1934** Tender Is the Night by F. Scott Fitzgerald.
- 1936** Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell. Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck.
- 1937** **December 21**, Disney releases Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the first animated feature film.
- 1938** **October 30**, Orson Welles broadcasts an adaptation of H. G. Wells's book War of the Worlds. Hysteria ensues across the country, especially in New York and New Jersey, as many listeners mistake the dramatic play for actual news coverage of an alien invasion of the United States.
- 1939** Gone with the Wind is released as a movie.
- 1940** For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway.

THE THEATRE GUILD

“A theatrical society founded in New York City in 1918 for the production of high-quality, noncommercial American and foreign plays, the Theatre Guild, founded by Lawrence Langner (1890–1962), departed from the usual theatre practice in that its board of directors shared the responsibility for choice of plays, management, and production. The first two seasons, which included plays by Jacinto Benavente, St. John Ervine, John Masefield, and August Strindberg, demonstrated the artistic soundness of the plan.

“Following the world premiere of George Bernard Shaw’s *Heartbreak House* in 1920, the guild became Shaw’s American agent, producing 15 of his plays, including world premieres of *Back to Methuselah* and *Saint Joan*. Eugene O’Neill’s long association with the guild began with its production of *Marco Millions* in 1928. Other American authors whose works were produced by the guild included Sidney Howard, William Saroyan, Maxwell Anderson, and Robert Sherwood—all Pulitzer Prize winners.

“Many distinguished actors appeared in Theatre Guild productions, including Helen Hayes in *Caesar and Cleopatra* and Alla Nazimova in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt first acted as a team there in Ferenc Molnár’s *Guardsman* and went on to act together in many other notable guild productions, such as *Arms and the Man* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

“The Theatre Guild contributed significantly to American musical theatre by producing George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy and Bess* and by bringing Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II together for such collaborations as *Oklahoma!*

“The ‘Theatre Guild of the Air’ (1945–63) had a distinguished record of radio and television play productions, and the guild’s subscription series enabled audiences in 23 cities from coast to coast to see its major attractions and those of other managers.”

—Encyclopædia Britannica

THEMES, ISSUES, AND DRAMATIC STRATEGIES

“It is not surprising that [Barry] was frequently tempted to abandon comedy. If he did manage to become, with Behrman, one of our two most consistently successful writers of high comedy, his manner, nevertheless, distinguishes him from most European writers of comedy. Their steel is more tempered, their point sharper. They appear to be, at least on the surface, more acute observers of folly because less tender-minded. Barry seems to care too much for his characters to seem as astute as, let us say, Carl Sternheim. He could rarely sting.”

—John Gassner

“Why should a talent for comedy of manners be held in low esteem? Curiously enough, it is. Students of world polity look down upon it from a dizzy height and many people who really enjoy it feel apologetic about their delight. Comedy ought always to be at least the funny-bone of the amusement business. . . . It is easy to account for the change in tone in the theatre. In competition with the screen and the radio the theatre has had to cultivate a more serious field; furthermore, the baleful world we now inhabit does not encourage light-mindedness.”

—Brooks Atkinson

“When the record is carefully studied, it becomes apparent that Philip Barry was a scrupulous artist of the theatre who faced and assigned to himself the difficult task of standing between extremes—between social satire and vacuous entertainment, between social passion and theatrical tomfoolery, between crass realism and poetic drama. In all respects, he tried to arrive at a reasonable position in an increasingly unreasonable world that placed a premium on excess.”

—John Gassner

“In his comedies, Barry was an accurate chronicler of a tiny but important fraction of the American population. One of the curious attributes of that fraction is that it has no desire either to be chronicled by others or to chronicle itself. The rich and well-born produce few historians and even fewer novelists, dramatists, and poets, and perhaps this is less curious than it looks at first glance. The fact is that they have little reason to go to the trouble of telling us who they are, or where they came from, or where they may be going. In the most serious sense, they have got past having to know anything about themselves. It is the middle-class stranger on sufferance among them who has something to gain by close examination of their ways. For him they are instructive; the more he learns about their class, the better he will be able to pass over into it, if that is what he intends to do, or to behave correctly in their presence, if for some reason he should wish to remain outside the pale.”

—Brendan Gill

“There is nevertheless something wrong with Lincoln Center’s *Philadelphia Story* [1980]. What’s amiss may be this. Mr. Barry wrote the play so explicitly and so thoroughly for Katharine Hepburn that it is just may not be possible to play it without imitating Katharine Hepburn. Which, of course, is something that an actress of Miss [Blythe] Danner’s integrity and distinction simply would not do. Much too much her own woman. But, then, look at the problems that crop up for at least three scenes out of

four. . . . There she is . . . throwing open imaginary French windows to look out at the weather and then exclaim 'Good for you, God!' What is she—what is anyone other than Katharine Hepburn—to do with those four short syllables to keep them from sounding falsely fey, cute as kittens. . . . Miss Danner speaks them sweetly, discreetly, as plausibly as she can; but they do make her sound as though she might be losing her mind.”

—Walter Kerr

OVERALL INTERPRETATIONS

“From this circumstance, however, also arose the distinctive savor of his writing, its truly civilized taste and its humane considerateness for people whatever their station in life and whatever their errors of impulse or judgment. There was no acid in the composition of his writing in spite of his amused attitude toward the social set so well expressed in Mike’s line in *Philadelphia Story*, ‘The prettiest sight in this fine pretty world is the Privileged Class enjoying its privileges.’ Despite such apt observations on the social scene as Dexter’s reminder to Tracy in the same play, ‘You’re a special class of American Female now—the Married Virgin,’ Barry was not truly a satirist. In spite of his ability to write many amazingly well-turned lines in his plays, it was not even wit that he specialized in. His forte was something warmer, a suspension of judgment as a way of life. It is well expressed in *Philadelphia Story*: in Tracy’s jibe at that ‘pin-feather in the Left Wing,’ Mike Connor, when she tells him, ‘You’ve made up your mind awfully young,’ and in her blanket statement: ‘The time to make up your mind about people is never.’ If wit emanates infrequently from such an attitude, and excitement even less frequently, other qualities pertaining to high comedy, as well as to whimsy and fancy, do stem from it—amusement, of course, and also a feeling very rare in our theatre that one is in the presence of a civilized soul. It may not invigorate us, but it puts us at ease and in sympathy with humanity, which is one of the saving graces of Barry’s art.”

—John Gassner

“Barry’s aim [in *Philadelphia Story*] was at least in part a reevaluation of the merits and basic humanity of the upper class after the flogging that it received at the hands of the social revolutionary playwrights of the Depression years. After an analogous flogging of ‘the establishment’ in recent years [the 1960s and ’70s], the production of this play seems to plead for a binding of social wounds as much now as it did nearly forty years ago.”

—Albert Wertheim

“In his sophisticated comedies Barry presented a scene of character and social conflict in which decisions are made from a sense of personal freedom. He felt very strongly that man must have the opportunity to find out about himself if he is to achieve some meaning in life. If Barry did not moralize—in fact, some critics thought him quite immoral, a view which disturbed him greatly—neither did he try to force solutions. Placed in certain situations, usually involving marriage, his characters invariably make discoveries about themselves, become more tolerant of humanity and take that first step—a decision for freedom—towards a discovery of truth. . . . In each play there was a social problem which Barry viewed in his distinctive manner, but within the slight framework of comedy he deliberately obscured the deeper significance of his constant theme in all of these plays—that man without freedom will suffer.”

—Walter J. Meserve

“Certainly it falls far short to dismiss Barry as a witty writer of high comedy of manners, bantering, facile, and superficial. He was that and more. Beneath his flippancy and his ‘chit-chat’ was a sensitive and deeply spiritual writer coming to grips with the psychology of his times and expressing a yearning for maturity and emotional wholeness. No other American playwright was able to transmute the raw elements of unconscious life into a work of art so delicate, so subtly ingratiating, and so fresh in form, as did Philip Barry.”

—W. David Sievers

“Probably it is misleading to describe *Philadelphia Story* as a study in the moral code of human beings. For Mr. Barry’s style is buoyant; his dialogue is silken and comic and his characters are witty, worldly folks with a reticent feeling about solemn topics. By an ingenious turn of story-telling, Mr. Barry has made his narrative a full one. . . . It is the genius of the comedy of manners to spin through the lives of recognizable characters with complete plausibility.”

—Brooks Atkinson

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