

## Heaven Can Wait (1943) Ernst Lubitsch (1892-1947)

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur:* Ernst Lubitsch was a German-American film director, producer, writer, and actor. He is famous for urbane comedies of manners. With the growth of his prestige, his films came to be known as having *the Lubitsch touch*. Lubitsch was born in 1892 in Berlin, as the son of Simon Lubitsch, a tailor, and Anna (née) Lindenstaedt. His family was Ashkenazi Jewish. He did not enter his father's tailoring business, and by 1911, he was a member of Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater. Lubitsch was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director three times for *The Patriot* (1928), *The Love Parade* (1929), and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943). In 1946, he received an Honorary Academy Award for his contributions to the art of motion pictures. His best-known works are *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Design for Living* (1933), *Ninotchka* (1939), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943). Lubitsch died of a heart attack on November 30, 1947, in Hollywood at the age of 55.

*Film:* *Heaven Can Wait* is a 1943 technicolor American supernatural comedy film directed by Ernst Lubitsch. The screenplay is by Samson Raphaelson which is based on the 1934 play *Birthday/Születésnap* by Leslie Bush-Fekete. The music score is by Alfred Newman. The cinematography is by Edward Cronjager. The film stars Gene Tierney, Don Ameche, and Charles Coburn. The supporting cast includes Marjorie Main, Laird Cregar, Spring Byington, Allyn Joslyn, Eugene Pallette, Signe Hasso, Louis Calhern, Tod Andrews, and Clara Blandick. The film is about a man called Henry Van Cleve who has to prove he belongs in Hell by telling his life story to who he calls "His Excellency" that is the Devil. *Heaven Can Wait* was nominated at the Academy Awards for Outstanding Motion Picture, Best Director, and Best Cinematography – Color. The film won the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation – Long Form and Gene Tierney and Don Ameche won the Photoplay Awards for Best Performances of the Month (September).

*Historical background:* *Heaven Can Wait* is Ernst Lubitsch's first color film and also one of the last because until his death, he only shot *Cluny Brown* (1946) and parts of *That Lady in Ermine* (1948). The screenplay of the film is based on Leslie Bush-Fekete's (László Bús-Fekete or Ladislaus Bus-Fekete) *Birthday/Születésnap*. Leslie Bush-Fekete (1896—1971) was a Hungarian-American playwright and film writer. Bush-Fekete initially worked as a critic for the Hungarian theater magazine Színházi Élet. He later worked as a journalist in Vienna and reported, among other things, on the 1936 Olympic Games. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Bush-Fekete enjoyed success as an author of comedy theaters in Budapest, Vienna, and Berlin. Around 1937, he moved to the US. He wrote countless storylines and screenplays for Hollywood productions, including *Heaven Can Wait*. A contemporary review by Bosley Crowther in The New York Times describes *Heaven Can Wait* as 'a comedy of manners, edged with satire, in the slickest Lubitsch style' although the 'picture has utterly no significance. Indeed, it has very little point, except to afford entertainment [...]it does [that] quite well'. A review of the film in *Variety* reports that: 'Provided with generous slices of comedy, skillfully handled by producer-director Ernst Lubitsch, this is for most of the 112 minutes a smooth, appealing and highly commercial production. Lubitsch has endowed it with light, amusing sophistication, and heart-warming nostalgia. He has handled Don Ameche and Gene Tierney, in (for them) difficult characterizations, dexterously.'

### CHARACTERS

*Henry Van Cleve:* The main character of the film, a man who tells his life story to the Devil  
*Martha:* Henry's beloved wife, she is married to Henry for twenty-five years  
*His Excellency:* A man at the reception desk that determines who is accepted to Hell, the Devil  
*Hugo Van Cleve:* Grandpa of Henry, a down-to-earth and rather wise man

*Bertha Van Cleve:* Mother of Henry, a mother who loves her son and spoils him  
*Albert Van Cleve:* Cousin of Henry who plans to marry Martha  
*Randolph Van Cleve:* Father of Henry who is a conservative and naive man  
*Jack Van Cleve:* Child of Martha and Henry who grows to be a man fond of showgirls  
*Grandmother Van Cleve:* Grandmother of Henry, wife of Hugo Van Cleve  
*Mrs. Strable:* Mother of Martha, wife of E.F. Strable, a woman who has frequent quarrels  
*E.F. Strable:* Father of Martha, husband of Mrs. Strable, a butcher  
*Peggy Nash:* A showgirl who dates Jackie for some time and demands money  
*Mademoiselle:* The French nanny of little Henry, a mischievous woman  
*Flodgell:* Van Cleves' butler  
*Jasper:* The Strables' butler  
*Mrs. Cooper-Cooper:* A friend of the Cleves' who loves singing operas

## SYNOPSIS

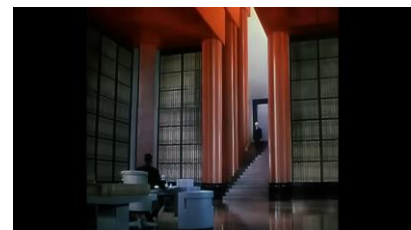
Henry Van Cleve enters the reception of Hell in the afterlife where he is greeted by whom he refers to as *His Excellency*, in other words, the Devil. Henry requests to be admitted to Hell. However, because His Excellency has doubts regarding the sufficiency of his qualifications, Henry begins to tell the story of his life to prove that he indeed belongs to Hell.

Henry is born in Manhattan on October 25, 1872, as the only child of wealthy and rather naive parents called Bertha and Randolph. He is spoiled by his parents and grows up to be an idle young man. One day, Henry overhears a young girl lying to her mother on the telephone. Intrigued by the lie he hears, he follows the young girl into Brentano's bookstore. There he pretends to be an employee to get to know her better. He makes romantic advances toward her even though he finds out that she is engaged to marry. Finally, he reveals that he is not an employee of the bookstore after which the young girl departs. Henry has a cousin called Albert who introduces to the family his fiancé, Martha, and her quarreling parents, the Strables. Martha turns out to be the same young girl Henry had followed into the bookstore. Henry is devastated to find out about this. Albert is the only person whom both of Martha's parents approved of as a suitor and it turns out Martha accepted to marry Albert only because she did not want to spend the rest of her life in Kansas with her parents. Henry persuades Martha to elope with him. Their elopement is perceived as a scandal but they are eventually accepted in the family. Henry and Martha stay married for ten years and have a boy called Jackie. However, on the eve of their tenth anniversary, Martha finds out that Henry bought some jewelry for someone without Martha knowing about it. Henry's supposed relationships with other women cause Martha to go back to her parents. Henry and his grandpa follow her into her parent's house. Henry explains to Martha that everything is a misunderstanding and convinces her to elope with him a second time. Fifteen years later, Henry is a man in his fifties and meets a showgirl named Peggy Nash. Henry tries to turn her away from his son Jackie who has been dating her. Henry ultimately gives her 25,000 dollars to get rid of her so she will not pursue his son anymore. Martha dies after their twenty-fifth anniversary. Henry dies the day after his seventieth birthday under the care of a beautiful nurse whom he had seen in a dream beforehand.

After Henry completes his story, the Devil denies him entrance and suggests that he try *the other place* (Heaven) instead. Henry goes to an elevator to go up to Heaven's gates.

## SCENES

**Henry Van Cleve arrives at the gates of Hell** *As Henry Van Cleve's soul passed over the Great Divide, he realized that it was extremely unlikely that his next stop could be Heaven. And so, philosophically, he presented himself where innumerable people had so often told him to go.* We see an old man running down the stairs of a great hall, supported by huge, red columns. The man holds a walking stick in his hand and greets the receptionist who is standing up.



**The welcoming receptionist** The receptionist and the old man shake hands. We hear the old man being called Mr. Van Cleve. The receptionist asks Van Cleve to sit down and talks about how busy they are: 'Sometimes it looks as if the whole world is coming to hell.'



**Mr. Van Cleve's case** The receptionist does not know well about Van Cleve's case so he asks him for the details about it. Van Cleve says he died at 9:36 in the evening. After he died, he heard all his relatives speaking in low tones and saying the kindest things about him. We learn that Van Cleve believes everybody had a good time at his funeral as they all cried. He only regrets that Mrs. Cooper-Cooper sang a coloratura as Van Cleve had succeeded all his life to avoid hearing Mrs. Cooper-Cooper sing. The receptionist tells Van Cleve that Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart are all up above in Heaven. Van Cleve responds it will be sad not to hear the masters again and that in particular, there is a dear one that he would love to see again in Heaven. But he has no illusions about the fact that he belongs in Hell: 'I know the life I lived. I know where I belong.' The receptionist is *welcoming* and says he would be glad to accommodate him if he meets the requirements and asks the old man to talk about any of the crimes he committed. However, it turns out he committed none. He adds nonetheless: 'But I can safely say my whole life was one continuous misdemeanor.'



**Egna Craig is complimented by Mr. Van Cleve** At that moment, an old woman arrives at gates of Hell. The woman is called Edna Craig. Mrs. Craig thinks this is a charming place but she thinks she does not belong there. Then she notices Mr. Van Cleve. She seems to know him. She reminds him of 'the little brownstone house around the corner from the old Waldorf' where they were all dressed as children at a party. Mr. Van Cleve starts complimenting the woman: 'No girl in New York walked on two more beautiful legs than you.' The woman is very flattered: 'Well, Henry, I still walk—and on the same two legs.' As she giggles, the receptionist pushes a red button and the woman falls to a fireplace down below which is Hell.



**Mr. Van Cleve starts to narrate the story of his life** The receptionist says he is getting interested in Mr. Van Cleve and that he can spare the time to listen to his story. Van Cleve says: 'Perhaps the best way to tell you the story of my life...is to tell you about the women in my life.'



**His mother and grandmother dispute over baby Henry** He starts recounting about his mother. From then on, we are presented with flashbacks of memories of Mr. Van Cleve's life. Henry narrates that his mother was a lovely but prejudiced lady as she thought he was wonderful. His grandmother was just as prejudiced as his mother. We see both ladies arguing over the baby. The grandmother thinks Bertha (Henry's mother) is jealous of her taking care of the baby: 'First, you take my son away, and now you want to alienate my grandchild.' Henry says that already women were fighting for him.



**Henry's first love triangle** He further narrates that he was not even two when he got involved in a triangle. At home, he was the only man in her nurse's life but in the park, she spent time with another man and stopped taking care of him: 'Ah, shut up, you nasty little brat.' It was no wonder that Henry became a cynic.



**Henry and his beetles** His next lesson comes from Mary when he is about seven years old. Mary does not want to speak to him as Henry is a 'bad boy'. Henry offers her beetles which interest little Mary very much. She takes from him two beetles and then allows him to walk with her to the corner. From that event, Henry understands that: 'if you want to win a girl, you have to have lots of beetles.'



**A French maid enters their lives** As he grows up, New York becomes more cosmopolitan: 'And no household was considered fashionable without a French maid.' So, one day, a woman referred to as Mademoiselle enters his life. Her name is Yvette Blanchard. Henry's mother comes to talk to Mademoiselle and asks for her references which are all in French. Mademoiselle says she has great references: Her last employer Baroness Lalotte wishes her to be a grand success in America and that she shall never have the desire to return to France which seems to be a rather ironic reference and to which Mrs. Cleve responds by saying that: 'The French have such a...continental way of expressing their gratitude.' Mademoiselle asks for twenty dollars a month as her wage. Mr. Van Cleve says that she has never gone higher than fourteen dollars a month for a personal maid.



**Henry's French is backward** At that moment, young Henry enters the room. Mrs. Van Cleve introduces her son to Mademoiselle and mentions that Henry studies French. Mademoiselle asks Henry something in French but Henry has a puzzled look on his face. Her mother sends him away and says laughingly: 'A brilliant child, but a little backward in his French.' Mademoiselle says it would be her pleasure to talk only in French with Henry: 'With me in house, in one month I assure Madame will not recognize own son.' Mrs. Van Cleve hesitates but accepts to pay her twenty dollars a month in the end.



**Mademoiselle gives advice to Henry about the age they're living in** Meanwhile, Henry has been eavesdropping on the conversation. After Mademoiselle leaves the room, he tells her to come to him. Henry says that he'll see that she will not work in their house. He says *mama, papa, grandpapa, and grandmama* are the trouble for him: 'It's a conspiracy to keep me in short pants. They think they own me, body and soul.' Mademoiselle says she understands Henry perfectly and that he needs a very warm friend with sympathy and that she will be his friend. After this, Henry shows her his black cigar that he carries in his pockets. He further says that he is going to get married. He confesses that he climbed with a neighbor girl into a policeman's shed and he kissed her, so now he has to marry her. Mademoiselle asks whether he ever thought about not marrying the girl. Henry says this would destroy him socially. Mademoiselle explains that things are different now in 1887: 'People have a new idea of the value of kiss. What was bad yesterday is a lot of fun today.' She says he can kiss a girl, ten times or twenty times with no obligation which would come afterward. Henry is very pleased to hear this: 'This is a wonderful age I'm living in.' After Mademoiselle leaves the room, Henry goes directly to her mother's room and tells her that Mademoiselle is worth the extra six dollars.



**Cousin Albert is the pride of all the Van Cleves** Henry narrates about his cousin Albert, the pride of all the Van Cleves: 'He was the fulfillment of a parent's dream. Always the highest in his class. Never had he thrown a stone into a window.'



**Henry becomes sick** It is Henry's fifteenth birthday. We see Henry's father come down the stairs and tell the butler to call a doctor because Henry is ill. We see Henry's mother crying. Henry's father says they must keep a stiff upper lip. Mrs. Van Cleve: 'Randolph, he's talking all the time as if he were in delirium. He's talking French. Nothing but French.' Mr. Van Cleve asks the butler to call Mademoiselle to Henry's room. We see the grandmother complaining that Grandpa won't let her rub just a bit of garlic on Henry's chest. The grandmother thinks Henry is poisoned. Henry hiccups. The grandfather has a more down-to-earth attitude: 'If I had my way, I know what I'd do. A big glass of cold water right in that boy's face, and I think he'd start talking English.'



**Mademoiselle thinks Henry's disease must be contagious**

Mademoiselle enters the room but she goes outside and she, too, hiccups. When she comes to look at Henry, he talks in French. Mademoiselle remarks that Henry has such beautiful grammar. Later, Henry hiccups once again. Soon after does Mademoiselle too. Mademoiselle says that the disease must be contagious.



**Grandfather knows what is going on** At that moment, the grandfather asks Mr. Van Cleve to step out with him. The grandfather asks his son whether he really does not know what is the matter with Henry. He says he must break his childhood illusions.



**Mademoiselle is fired** However, before the grandfather reveals the truth of the situation, the women come out and tell Mademoiselle to get out of the house. They want Mr. Van Cleve to call the police which the grandfather says there is no need for. The Grandfather tells Mademoiselle to pack her things and leave the house. Mademoiselle hiccups again and leaves.



**Henry's intoxication and mischievousness** Mr. Van Cleve still does not understand what is going on. At that instant, Albert interrupts and says he has understood the conversation between Henry and Mademoiselle. The grandfather reveals that Henry had a glass of wine. Albert then explains that before slipping out of the house, Henry wrongfully took possession of his father's dress clothes and his twenty dollars. Henry also dropped a nickel on the décolletage of Mrs. Asterbrook. The women of the family are all shocked. Mrs. Van Cleve says she cannot ever face Mrs. Asterbrook anymore. Mr. Van Cleve wishes to spank Henry. Both the mother and grandmother ask him not to do that as he is *such a baby*.



**Playful grandfather** The grandfather tells Henry that he is a real credit to the family. However, as Henry walks downstairs and prepares to leave the house, the grandfather pours a glass of water down his head.

**Henry is not home on his twenty-sixth birthday** It is Henry's twenty-sixth birthday and he is not in the house. Mrs. Van Cleve is worried about her but she is content that Grandmother was spared from seeing a day like this (as she has passed away in the interim). Mr. Van Cleve tells his wife to keep her chin up. Mrs. Van Cleve asks repeatedly: 'Oh, Randolph, where does he get it from?' Her husband



tells that he never gambled in his life, nor did he get entangled with a girl before he met his wife: 'Believe me, Bertha, I never knew what a musical comedy girl looked like.' Further, he adds that his father built up the Van Cleve Importing Company from nothing. He emphasizes that he earned every dollar he ever spent. We learn Mr. Van Cleve gives money to his son without making him work for it because he has to save the family name. The grandfather also admits he gives hundreds of dollars to Henry because he likes him.

**Albert has become a successful young man** Albert comes in. He is a successful lawyer. We find out that he is engaged. It turns out Albert's father-in-law is a butcher from Kansas. As they converse about Albert's in-laws, the butler informs the house that Henry has come home and Mr. Van Cleve swiftly goes into Henry's room. Meanwhile, Albert says to Mrs. Van Cleve: 'Aunt Bertha, when you see Henry, will you tell him that as a Van Cleve...I have the right to demand that he keep the shadow of scandal off our name?'



**Henry asks for money from his father** Mr. Van Cleve comes out of the room. We learn that Henry asked for a hundred dollars but he told him he'd let him have only fifty.



**Henry has seen the girl of his dreams, his mother continuously spoils him** Mrs. Van Cleve enters Henry's room. She wishes him a good birthday and hugs him. Henry begins to talk about a girl whom he couldn't get out of his mind. Mrs. Van Cleve, on the other hand, is more interested in whether she comes from a good family. She compares Henry to her cousin Albert who is now a successful corporate lawyer. She advises him to settle down. Henry says about the girl he met: 'Mother, I don't think I'll ever find this girl, but if I did, then all your troubles would be over. If she didn't want me to gamble, I wouldn't look at another card. I'd stay home every night. Mother, I might even go to work.' Henry's desire to settle down makes her mother very happy. It turns out he has been riding for hours to forget about this girl. Henry asks her mother for money to give to the cab driver. Mrs. Van Cleve says she put something under his pillow the other night which turns out to be money. Henry says to her: 'Oh, Mother. Sometimes I wonder if you're not spoiling



**Albert's fiancé Martha and in-laws** It is the birthday evening of Henry. At the gathering, Albert introduces his fiancé and in-laws to the Van Cleve family. Mr. and Mrs. Strable soon enter the room and talk about their pride about Kansas, the city where they come from. Martha also enters the room and is a charming and beautiful young lady.



**Henry is shocked to see Martha** At that moment, Henry goes down the stairs and talks with Flogdell, the butler of the house. Flogdell tells Henry who Mr. and Mrs. Strable and Martha are. Henry is shocked to see who Martha is. He immediately wants to go out.



**Henry and Martha's secret** However, before he does, Albert comes and introduces Martha to him who likewise looks shocked to see Henry. After Albert goes in to talk to Mr. Strable, Martha says to Henry: 'I should have told him. It would have been the thing to do.' Henry assures her that this will remain their secret.



**Henry hears Martha lying to her mother** Henry narrates about the secret they share. In Wannamaker's Department Store, he overhears a girl (Martha) lying to her mother on the telephone who interests him at once and he starts following her.



**Henry pretends to be a bookseller to meet Martha** But as Henry says: 'But even if she hadn't lied to her mother, I would have followed her anyway.' So, Martha goes into a bookstore where Henry pretends to be an employee to talk to her. It turns out she wants to buy a book called *How to Make Your Husband Happy*. Henry tells her that she doesn't need such a book as she is 'so charming, so young, and so beautiful'. Martha says that he shouldn't say such things and insists on buying the book. Henry keeps on making romantic advances toward her: 'I understand. But for the sake of discussion, let's say we are getting married. Believe me. I don't want anybody to tell you how to make me happy. The greatest gift you could bring me is to be just as you are—adorable.' He finally confesses that he is not an employee and has followed her into the bookstore. Martha hastily leaves the bookstore. Henry still goes after her. She says she thinks that Henry's behavior is outrageous and mad. Finally, she gets on a carriage and leaves.



**Martha interrupts Mrs. Cooper-Cooper's performance** We go back to the day of Henry's birthday celebration. Martha sneezes five times during the aria performance of Mrs. Cooper-Cooper. So, Albert takes her out and kindly tells her to spend some time in the library.



**Martha explains why she agreed to marry Albert** Henry is also in the library. As Martha tries to look at one of the books, Henry comes near her and kisses her all of a sudden. Martha is shocked and leaves the library. She sneezes once again and goes back into the library. Martha thinks what Henry did is outrageous. Henry asks her if she loves Albert. Martha talks about how she is going to make Albert a fine wife but ultimately she starts sobbing. It turns out she agreed to marry Albert because she didn't want to stay in Kansas as an old maid and Albert was the only person whom both of her parents approved of. Henry tells her that she doesn't need to marry Albert and offers her to marry him. After Henry asks Martha if she loves her and she says that she hardly knows him, Henry replies: 'You don't need to know anything when you love. Love needs no introduction. You love or you don't.'



**Martha and Henry elope** Ultimately, they elope which causes a scandal in the family. Mr. Strable says that he will disinherit Martha. After everyone goes back into the salon, the grandfather asks Flogdell whether he knows where they are going. He tells him to get a cab and gives money to Flogdell to be used for their honeymoon.

**Jack, Henry and Martha's son, enquires about his father's childhood** In the next ten years, Martha and Henry have a beautiful marriage. They have a son called Jackie. One day, Jackie asks his father what kind of a son he was as a child. Henry, who is now thirty-six, answers that he was very obedient: 'When my parents told me to go to bed, I went without arguing. I did my schoolwork, brushed my teeth every morning.' Jackie says that he must have been a wonderful boy and 'then old Grandpa must be a terrible liar.'



**Henry receives a telegram** At the breakfast table, Henry receives a telegram. His facial expression changes and he goes up to Martha's empty room.



**Grandfather is angry about Martha's leaving** The grandfather comes to the room and asks Henry about the telegram. In the telegram, it says: 'Please don't try to follow me. As soon as I have settled down I will make plans about Jackie. Don't let him know anything. With your ingenuity, it will be easy to make up a story.' Henry says that Martha's leaving him just doesn't make sense: 'I don't know how I can go on living without her. Grandpa, I love Martha. I love her more than anything in the world.' The grandfather says that if a woman like Martha runs away from her husband, there must be a reason for it. He makes it clear that he will hit Henry with a baseball bat if he can't make Martha forgive him.



**Albert visits the Strables** We see the estate of the Strables. Mr. and Mrs. Strable are having breakfast and arguing about who shall read the funny papers. As their arguments heat up, a servant comes in to notify them a man called Van Cleve has arrived. It turns out the visitor is Albert whom they haven't seen since 'the ill-fated occasion 10 years ago'. Albert shares that he accidentally met Martha on the train whom he believes has amply paid for 'her mistake'. In Albert's words: 'and I am sure there is nothing she'd like better than to come back to the paternal nest.' Mr. Strable doesn't think there is a chance but when Albert mentions that she is in front of the very house, both the parents agree to see her.



**Martha is back at home after ten years of marriage** After Martha comes in, Mrs. Strable says to her: 'It took you ten years to find out that we were right.' The father adds: 'After all, you were young, and it probably was all the fault of that—', but Martha does not want to hear from them a single unpleasant word about the last ten years of her marriage.

**Henry and grandpa come to take Martha** In the next scene, we see Henry and the grandfather standing behind the window looking into the main room where Mrs. Strable is sewing. They also see Martha, Albert, and Mr. Strable. Suddenly, a dog begins to bark. Jasper the butler informs Mr. Strable that there are prowlers on the grounds. Mr. Strable tells Jasper to keep after them.



**Albert still has feelings for Martha** After this, Martha goes upstairs. As she is on her way, Albert comes near her and says to her that her troubles are finally over. Martha, however, does not want anybody to think that she's been the victim of ten years of misery. There were times when she was lifted way up to the sky. Albert, however, is more cautious as he views that: 'That's not the purpose of marriage. Marriage isn't a series of thrills. Marriage is a peaceful, well-balanced adjustment of two right-thinking people.' He further confesses to her that his feelings for her have not changed.



**Martha knows all of Henry's tactics** When Martha goes into her room, she finds Henry waiting for her. Henry starts complaining to her immediately: 'Martha, darling, sweetheart —How could you do a thing like this to me? Don't you realize what I went through? Running away like that without a word! Can't you imagine how I suffered?' Martha responds: 'Henry, it won't work anymore.' Henry bluffs and pretends to leave the room. However, Martha is well aware of his every move: 'his outraged indignation; the poor, weeping little boy; the misunderstood, strong, silent man...' As they keep on talking, Henry admits that at the Plaza there was a handsome lady at the table with him but he didn't mention this to her as he didn't want to make her uncomfortable. Later, Henry gives her the anniversary present he bought for her. Martha says it must have cost at least \$10,000. She further explains that the other day she found in his wallet a receipt in which it is written that Henry bought a bracelet for 500 dollars on May 2 which Martha never received. Henry laughs and explains that it is all a mistake the jeweler made: 'Darling, I love you. I think you're the





most beautiful, adorable thing in all the world. Do you really believe there's any woman good enough to take me away from you?'

**Martha and Henry elope for a second time** At that moment, the grandfather steps in and tells Martha she is coming with them back to New York. He helps to pack things. Martha cannot believe that they are eloping a second time. And they do elope. As they elope, Mr. Strable is snoring in the main room. He sees them, and Albert and he run after them but the three have already hopped in their carriage and ride away.



**Henry learns about the showgirl Peggy Nash** The years go by and Henry becomes 45, 46, 46, and eventually he stops counting. On one of these birthdays, Martha and he go to the Follies. At the show, Henry notices a very attractive girl and later he hears things about her which make him eager to meet this girl who is called Peggy Nash.



**Henry buys Peggy Nash off** Later, it turns out Henry sent her a note with roses which Peggy thinks was very quaint. Henry gets a little bit offended as he would not like to be admired as a 'museum piece'. They later talk about bracelets. However, Peggy is worried about how she could explain such a gift to her friend if Henry happens to buy her one. This friend of hers is Jack, Henry's own son. Peggy explains that she didn't fall into Henry's trap and that she knows all about the great cavalier of the gay 1890s. However, Henry offers her money so she stops dating his son. Peggy demands 25,000 dollars from him which Henry agrees to send her.



**Martha is more comfortable about whom Jack is dating** Henry is back at home and talks to Martha about the fact that Jack 'got into the clutches of a certain girl'. He is surprised to learn that Martha knows all about Peggy Nash. Henry gets angry about why she didn't tell him about Peggy Nash and how she could be so placid about this. Martha believes on the other hand that the less attention one pays to these things, things work themselves out. Henry thinks after almost 25 years in New York, she is 'still the innocent little girl from Kansas'. Further into their conversation, Martha also finds out how Henry bought the girl off.



**Henry is worried that Jack is fond of musical showgirls** At that moment, Jack comes in. He looks very happy and says he could use a hundred dollars to throw a party and take someone out. Henry mentions Peggy Nash's name and Jack admits he's had a crush on her but got tired of her after some time. So, he wanted to get rid of her and to his surprise, she was big about the whole thing and let him off so easily. At this point, Mr. Van Cleve says that Jack should start looking around for a suitable girl for himself. It turns out Jack is with a girl from Earl Carroll's Vanities show. Henry cannot understand what the matter is with his son but his wife assures him that Jack will be fine.



**Henry's getting heavy makes Martha feel safe** In their bedroom, Henry asks Martha whether she thinks he's getting heavy. Martha admits: 'Nearly 15 years ago when you and Grandfather brought me back from Kansas...I still didn't feel that you really belonged to me, and only to me...whenever I wasn't with you I was always a little uncertain...and nervous about my little Casanova.' But when Henry started to get heavy, then she knew she'd be safe and Henry would settle down.



**Martha and Henry reminisce about old days** It is Henry and Martha's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Henry finds Martha sitting by herself in the library. Martha says she got a little sentimental, so she went to the place where it all started. They talk about the day when Henry made romantic advances toward Martha. They reminisce about the whole event and laugh.



**Martha's telephone conversation** Soon, Martha makes a phone conversation. However, she does not want to tell Henry whom she talks to. Henry soon gets jealous which surprises her. She finally admits that she's been going to a doctor. Henry worries about her but she insists that it is nothing serious and they'll both live to celebrate their golden anniversary.

**Martha and Henry's last dance** They go out to dance but this is their last dance together and Martha passes away after a few months.



**Henry's sixtieth birthday** It is October 25, the year 1932 and Henry is sixty years old. Henry narrates that Jack insisted on celebrating and the total age of the relatives who came to the party amounted to 1400 years.



**Jack is a busy businessman** Jack is now a Mr. Van Cleve, engaged in family business. It turns out from an employee of his that his father wrote to the board of directors to ask for a bonus. This drives Jack angry.



**Jack wants his father to pull himself together** Meanwhile, Henry sneakily comes into the house. However, Jack notices him and talks to him: 'You ought to be ashamed, coming home at all hours, making a wreck of yourself.' Henry defends himself that he is feeling very lonesome as Jack is always away for business. He further tells Jack that the other day he felt like reading a book and thought about how nice it'd be to have a reader. Jack soon understands that his father is talking about a young lady is the reader of the old Wilson Weatherby. As Henry mentions that he thinks it is such a dignified thing to have someone read to him, he pulls out a book from the library which happens to be *How to Make Your Husband Happy*. Henry grows silent. Jack gets sorry too and says to his father: 'Father, her last thought was that you should be happy. I promised her I'd see to it. So, if you want this young lady to read to you, go ahead with my blessing.' Soon, the telephone rings, the call is for 'Poochie' or Mr. Henry Van Cleve.



**Henry's last dream** Henry turns seventy years old. A nurse is waiting by his bedside, ready to administer medicine. Henry soon wakes up and he narrates a dream he had: A man comes to take him on a trip from which he'll never come back. The man comes with a luxury liner where instead of funnels, there are cigars, and sitting on a lifeboat is a beautiful blonde. A man plays 'The Merry Widow Waltz' and Henry and the girl start dancing when all of a sudden the nurse wakes him up. After this narration, Henry makes it clear that he doesn't want to take any medicine.



**The night nurse** Soon, the night nurse arrives who is indeed a beautiful blonde.



**Back to the reception hall** Flashbacks of memories are over and we come back to the scene where Henry is conversing with the receptionist at the gates of Hell. Henry narrates that when he woke up, he saw Nellie Brown, a registered nurse. When she took the thermometer and put it in his mouth, his temperature went to over 110 and he died. Henry then adds: 'Who could ask for a more beautiful death?'



**His Excellency denies Henry entrance to Hell** The story of Henry is over: 'Your Excellency, that's the story of my life...and I'd be grateful if you'd push the button and have it over with.' His Excellency rejects his wish: 'I hope you will not consider me inhospitable if I say...sorry, Mr. Van Cleve, but we don't cater to your class of people here. Please make your reservation somewhere else.' Regarding Heaven, His Excellency says: 'Sometimes they have a small room vacant in the annex' and Henry might find a place there. His Excellency thinks Henry will find quite a few people who might give him good references. Referring to Martha, he adds: 'She's up there and she will plead for you'. Henry and His Excellency say goodbye to each other and Henry proceeds into an elevator. When the elevator operator asks whether to go *down*, His Excellency says: '*Up*'.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Henry Van Cleve

Henry is the main character of the film who narrates his life story. He is born in 1872, in New York to wealthy parents. His wife is called Martha with whom he elopes. They have a twenty-five-year-long marriage. They have a son called Jackie. Henry believes that because of his *continuous misdemeanor* he belongs to Hell but the receptionist decides that Henry should try the other place (Heaven) after listening to his story.

**Casanovanic (ladies' man):** From his birth on, we see that Henry is constantly surrounded by women. Furthermore, as he begins to narrate his story, he says: 'Perhaps the best way to tell you the story of my life...is to tell you about the women in my life' acknowledging the significance of women who all played major roles in his life. On his twenty-sixth birthday, we see that he is not home and find out from his parents that he is involved with a lot of musical showgirls. This *Casanovanic* behavior of his worries Mr.- and Mrs. Van Cleve. After he sees Martha, he falls in love with her at first sight and is loyal to her throughout their marriage. However, he does not stay away from the company of beautiful women. He even admits to Martha that he has been sitting with a handsome lady at a table when a relative of theirs saw them. After Martha's death, he wants his son to hire a reader for him who happens to be a beautiful girl he saw reading to the old Wilson Weatherby. Moreover, despite being sixty-year-old at the time, Henry never stays at home and always goes out to have a fun time, presumably among a company of charming women. Another scene where we witness the *Casanovanic* character of Mr. Van Cleve is at the very beginning of the film where at the reception of the gates of Hell, he starts complimenting Elsa Craig, another arriver to Hell, for her beautiful legs. So, he is indeed a ladies' man, that is, a man who enjoys spending time and flirting with women or shows a marked fondness for the company of women.

**Mischievous:** Henry is a mischievous young boy, that is, he likes causing or shows a fondness for playfully causing trouble. When he is a teenager, he and his nanny Mademoiselle slip out of the house and go to drink wine. At the place they go to, Henry drops 'a nickel on the décolletage of [a] Mrs. Asterbrook'. What he does is considered to be very inappropriate for the period he lives in. His parents are all ashamed of the deeds he has done. Later on, he *steals* Martha from his fiancé who happens to be his cousin Albert. They elope which causes a scandal in the family. In all these instances though, it must be admitted that Henry ultimately has good intentions. The fact that he has good intentions is probably the reason why the receptionist at the gates of Hell does not admit him to Hell.

**Loving:** Lovingness, in the sense of feeling or showing love or great care, is one of Henry's characteristics. He loves and cares about Martha to a great degree. Likewise, he loves his son and his

parents. We witness his love for them in the way he behaves toward them, his gestures, and his facial expressions. Therefore, despite playfully causing a lot of trouble; he is loved and accepted by his family.

*Idle:* Henry grows up to be an idle man. As a young man in his twenties, he avoids work, spends time with musical showgirls, and is ultimately spoiled by his parents who provide him with as much money as he needs. However, his character develops after he meets Martha and he transforms into a more responsible figure. Nevertheless, after Martha's death, he returns to his *Casanovian* lifestyle and spends every night outside. In the words of his son Jack, he 'ought to be ashamed, coming home at all hours, making a wreck of [him]self.'

## **Martha**

Martha is the wife of Henry. She comes from Kansas. Her parents are quarreling characters who seldom agree with each other. She is firstly engaged to Albert Van Cleve but she elopes with Henry. They have a twenty-five-year-long marriage and have a son called Jack. Martha is the most important character in Henry's life and the one that is dearest to him.

*Beautiful:* Martha is a beautiful, radiant, and charming lady whose beauty is perceived and acknowledged by those around her. The day she is introduced to the Van Cleves, both the butler Flodgell and Grandpa make comments about her charm and beauty. Naturally, Henry also tells her how adorable she is in Brentano's bookstore and compliments her looks.

*Naive:* When she comes to New York from Kansas for the first time, Martha is a naive girl who lacks experience in the world. It turns out she only agreed to marry Albert because he was the only suitor whom both of her parents approved of. However, she has doubts about whether she can be truly happy with Albert because of which she goes to the Brentano's to buy a book called *How to Make Your Husband Happy*. This shows us her innocence, naiveté, and lack of experience. Likewise, she feels helpless when Henry first suggests that they should elope together because she has never done such a thing in her life. However, as the film continues, she goes through character development and becomes a wise woman. We can most clearly see this when Henry is too much worried about his son's future as he likes to date musical showgirls. In comparison with Henry, Martha is placid about her son's situation. She is confident that things will work themselves out. Her confidence shows that she has developed into a more self-confident, wise, and mature woman.

*Loving:* Martha loves Henry dearly. They have a successful marriage even though it is not always smooth and monotonous as most marriages are supposed to be. She also loves and cares for her son, her parents, and the members of the Van Cleve family. Her loving attitude toward Henry can best be seen when she tries to hide her medical situation from him so as not to make him too worried about her. She knows that Henry is prone to making a mountain out of a molehill, therefore she hides that she is gravely ill. We learn from Jack that she made him promise to her that he will see to it that his father is happy. All these instances prove how loving and caring a character she is.

## **His Excellency:**

His Excellency is the way Henry refers to the receptionist man waiting at the gates of Hell. He is the one who examines cases and determines who goes to Hell. His Excellency or the Devil strikes us as a well-dressed man, a professional in his job, well-mannered, and dedicated to his work. He even has a sympathetic and agreeable side to him, looking mellow and easy-going.

*Well-mannered:* His Excellency or the Devil is a well-mannered man. He is polite, refined, and civil. He talks most respectably with Mr. Van Cleve. His Excellency is also welcoming, and hospitable, as he says he would be glad to accommodate Henry if he meets certain requirements for entrance to Hell. Moreover, his final judgment regarding Henry is also delivered in the most polite way possible: 'I hope you will not consider me inhospitable if I say...sorry, Mr. Van Cleve, but we don't cater to your class of people here. Please make your reservation somewhere else.'

*Dutiful:* A responsible and dutiful supernatural being, His Excellency asks for details about Henry's life so as to learn whether he committed a great crime or performed any action which would make him a good candidate for entrance to Hell. He also says to Henry that he can spare the time to listen to his case. All these examples of his behavior show us that His Excellency excels in his duties and is a responsible receptionist.

### **Hugo Van Cleve**

Hugo Van Cleve is Henry's grandfather. He is a down-to-earth, practical, intelligent man with good judgment and no pretensions. He plays a considerable role in Henry's life, financially supporting Martha and Henry when they first elope, and helping Henry to elope with Martha a second time.

*Intelligent:* Hugo Van Cleve is an intelligent man. We witness his intelligence and good judgment first when young Henry is lying sick and talking in French as if he were in delirium. He understands before everybody else that Henry has consumed alcohol. Another instance where we witness Grandpa's intelligence is when he understands from the change in Henry's facial expression, that the telegram he's received contains a negative message. Grandpa goes into Martha's room to enquire about her and he knows that if a woman like Martha runs away from her husband, there must be a reason for it. From these scenes, we can infer that Grandpa perceives what is going on in the environment rather quickly and intuitively, and is sensitive to the intricacies of events.

*Playful:* Grandpa is playful. After the incident of Henry consuming wine, Albert tells the whole family the details of the conversation between Mademoiselle and Henry. Grandpa tells Albert he is a real credit to the family. However, as Albert walks downstairs and prepares to leave the house, the grandfather pours a glass of water down his head. We do not exactly get to know why he does that. However, we can see a glimpse into Grandpa's playful, childish, and mischievous attitude through this scene.

### **Bertha Van Cleve**

Bertha Van Cleve is Henry's mother. She is married to Randolph Van Cleve. She is one of the most important women in Henry's life, perhaps second only to Martha. She is a naive lady who wants the best for her child and tries to make him live as comfortably as possible. However, we can say she is *too* fond of her child as she frequently spoils Henry which turns him into an idle, young man.

*Spoiling:* The most prominent characteristic of Bertha Van Cleve is she loves her son and there is nothing she cannot do for him. She gives him a lot of money which Henry lavishly spends. Although she is worried that he spends too much time with musical showgirls and compares him to his cousin Albert who is a successful corporate lawyer, she does not criticize his son. She is lenient and forgiving toward him. When Henry mentions on his twenty-sixth birthday that he might eventually settle down as he has seen the girl of his dreams, Bertha Van Cleve gets very happy. When Henry mentions he needs money to give to the cab driver, it turns out Mrs. Van Cleve had already put money under his pillow beforehand. This act of putting money under Henry's pillows emphasizes how much Bertha spoils her son.

### **Albert Van Cleve**

Albert is Henry's cousin. A successful student, an obedient and hardworking child, he becomes a successful corporate lawyer. He is engaged to Martha. He does not get married after Martha elopes with Henry. Albert's feelings for Martha remain unchanged even after ten years of her marriage to Henry. He seems to be successful at everything in life except love.

*Successful:* Henry describes the young Albert: 'He was the fulfillment of a parent's dream. Always the highest in his class. Never had he thrown a stone into a window.' Albert is a very hardworking student. He has a very good vocabulary and also understands French. As a young man, he becomes a successful lawyer and is the pride of the whole family.

*Persistent:* Albert is persistent in his love for Martha. His feelings for her remain unchanged for years. He even makes romantic advances toward Martha when she comes to her parents' house after leaving Henry.

*Self-aware:* Self-awareness is knowing one's weaknesses and strengths. We find out how self-aware Albert is when he tries to explain himself to Martha in her parents' house. He describes himself this way: 'Naturally, I'm not the flashy type, like some people. I'd say I was rather on the conservative side. If I were, for instance, a suit of clothes, you wouldn't call me a stylish cut. And I prefer it that way. But I can safely say I'm made of solid material. I'm sewed together carefully and my lining is good, Martha. Frankly, I believe I wear well. I'm... not too hot in the summer...and I give protection in the winter.' Martha acknowledges that he's given a complete and accurate description of himself. From this rather visual description of Albert, we can conclude that he is well aware of his character and qualities.

### **Randolph Van Cleve**

Randolph Van Cleve is the father of Henry, married to Bertha Van Cleve. He is a Harvard graduate and is in charge of the Van Cleve Importing Company. There is not much that makes him stand out, he is not a flashy character. He is rather plain and narrow-minded. He frequently repeats himself in the film.

*Plain:* He is a plain character. As he tells his wife on Henry's twenty-sixth birthday, he never gambled in his life, nor did he get entangled with a girl before he met his wife: 'Believe me, Bertha, I never knew what a musical comedy girl looked like.' He further emphasizes that he earned every dollar he ever spent. So, we can conclude Randolph Van Cleve is a rather hard-working, ordinary man who neither gambles nor is particularly fond of music and art. We also find out Mr. Van Cleve gives money to his son without making him work for it because he has to save the family name. This means he gives importance to what others say and think. All these qualities point to the fact that he is a rather plain character without any flashy or ostentatious qualities.

*Narrow-minded:* We can say Randolph Van Cleve is a man who is rather set in his ways and has a narrow-minded worldview. We hear him frequently repeating the *same* phrases whenever Henry is in trouble and Bertha voices her worries about Henry. He tells his wife either to keep a stiff upper lip or keep her chin up which are all *stock* phrases and expressions about not showing one's feelings and keeping cheerful and hopeful. The frequent use of these stock phrases shows us that Randolph Van Cleve is far from original and rather unwilling to change one's habits, behaviors, opinions, etc.

*Naive:* In contrast to his father, Randolph is a naive figure. When Henry is lying sick and talking in French and hiccuping, Grandpa understands that Henry has been drinking alcohol. However, Randolph Van Cleve is not aware of what is going on and is the last one to understand that Henry became intoxicated. Therefore, it can be said that he has a certain naiveté and is not as quick-witted as his father. He also does not know what to do with Henry when he stays out late and does not come home. As he is not a strict figure, he does not punish his son in any way. We also learn that when Henry asks for a hundred dollars his father tells him he will let him have only fifty which again shows us Randolph Van Cleve's leniency, tolerance, and naiveté.

### **Jack Van Cleve**

Jack is the son of Henry and Martha. An outgoing and fun-loving young adult, he later grows up to be a responsible and dutiful businessman. He loves her mother and father.

*Outgoing:* In his young adult life, Jack is an outgoing and social young man. He dates Peggy Nash, a musical showgirl, whom Henry does not approve of. However, he soon grows tired of her and finds another girl from Earl Carroll's Vanities. He likes throwing parties.

*Responsible:* As an adult, Jack turns into a responsible and dutiful businessman. He even scolds his father for coming home at all hours and making a wreck of himself. Nevertheless, he makes sure that her

father is well taken care of in his old age. From this, we can conclude that Jack fulfills his responsibilities regarding his parents.

### **Mrs. Strable**

Mrs. Strable is Martha's mother and wife of E.F. Strable. She lives in Kansas. She does not talk to her daughter after she elopes with Henry. However, she accepts her when Martha comes to their house ten years later after leaving Henry.

*Quarrelsome:* Mrs. Strable cannot get along with her husband. They always quarrel about something, even something as trivial as reading funny papers. We learn from Martha that whenever Mr. Strable approved of one of Martha's suitors, Mrs. Strable didn't which show us the great degree of their disagreements.

*Loving:* Despite not talking to her daughter for ten years after her marriage, she invites Martha into her house and welcomes her warm-heartedly. She says she is ready to *let bygones be bygones*, meaning that she is ready to accept Martha despite her perceived flaws.

### **E.F. Strable**

E.F. Strable is Martha's father and Mrs. Strable's husband. He is a butcher.

*Quarrelsome:* Like Mrs. Strable, E.F. Strable is also a quarrelsome figure. He constantly quarrels with his wife about something. Their disagreements do not seem to come to an end. It is curious to note that Martha does not seem to have any of her parents' characteristics.

### **Peggy Nash**

Peggy Nash is a musical showgirl. She dates Jack for a while. He is very important to her. However, she agrees to accept money from Henry Van Cleve and stops dating him.

*Greedy:* Henry offers Peggy 5000 dollars in order for her to stop dating his son. However, Peggy says: 'Oh, Jonesy, you underestimate me. I'm much worse than that. To get rid of somebody as terrible as me is worth—Well, I'll make you a bargain— \$25,000'. From this, we can infer that Peggy does not care about Jack as much as she has claimed before and is greedy for money.

### **Mademoiselle**

Mademoiselle is Henry's nanny. She works for twenty dollars a month and teaches French to the young boy. She does not, however, last long in the Van Cleves' house as she gets fired after being involved in a mischievous incident.

*Mischievous:* Mademoiselle is a mischievous person. One night, she and Henry slip out of the house and Henry drinks a glass of wine and becomes intoxicated. He engages in rather playful and troublesome behavior which his family finds out about the next day. Because of being the initiator of all this trouble, Mademoiselle is fired. Her mischievousness and playful attitude provide the film with comic relief.

## **THEMES**

### **RELATIONSHIP**

**Marriage** Marriage is a major theme of the film as the film mostly consists of events related to Henry's relationship with Martha. Despite being a young Casanova and a ladies' man, Henry has a surprisingly successful marriage with Martha. Throughout their twenty-five-year-long marriage, he is devoted and loyal to her and does not betray her, although it must be said that he does not shy away from being in the presence of handsome women either. Martha believes she has found evidence of his infidelity when she

sees on a receipt that he has bought a necklace that he has not given to her. However, all this turns out to be a misunderstanding, and Henry never betrayed Martha. As Henry explains to her mother on their tenth wedding anniversary about his successful life: 'Well, it's all Martha. And only Martha. You know, Mother, I'm the luckiest man in the world.' As Henry finds out that Martha has left him, he tells his Grandpa: 'I don't know how I can go on living without her. Grandpa, I love Martha. I love her more than anything in the world.' All these utterances express Henry's deep love for Martha and how she has had a good influence on Henry and made him a better and more responsible human being. We conclude from Henry's narration that marriage can be a successful institution if it is between the right people who have a good influence on each other.

**Friendship** We do not get to learn about Henry's friendships as he is a ladies' man and always in the company of his family and various women. However, it can be said that his French nanny is one of Henry's first friends as they engage in mischievous behavior together. She not only teaches him French but also causes him to engage in disobedient behavior as friends do. Under her influence, Henry wrongfully takes possession of his father's dress clothes and his twenty dollars. He has a glass of wine in the restaurant which makes him sick the next day. We can thus affirm that the fun Henry and Mademoiselle have together shows us their friendship.

**Love** As Henry narrates his life story, we get to learn how he loved various people in his life, ranging from his grandparents and parents to his nanny, the women whose company he enjoyed, his wife Martha, and his son Jack. As he emphasizes in different scenes of the film, his love for Martha is different from all his loving relationships. When he arrives at the gates of Hell, he mentions in particular, there is a *dear one* that he would love to see again in Heaven who is Martha. After he has narrated his story, the receptionist tells him about Martha: 'She's up there and she will plead for you'. This expresses that the receptionist also knows how Martha has been the special woman in Henry's life. We can even assert that it is because of Henry's pure and loyal love for Martha that he is denied entrance to Hell.

## PSYCHOLOGY

**Sadness** We witness emotional pain associated with feelings of disadvantage, loss, despair, grief, and helplessness in certain scenes of the film. One of these is when Martha sobbingly explains to Henry in the library that she only agreed to marry Albert because he was the only suitor both of her parents approved of. This shows us that she does not love Albert and is ultimately sad that she will have to marry him. When she cries out of helplessness, we observe her sadness about the fact that she is dependent on her parents for making major life choices. Another scene where sadness is evident is when sixty-year-old Henry wants her son to hire a reader for him. While he is talking, he grabs a book from the library which is *How to Make Your Husband Happy*, the book Martha had wanted to buy on the day they first met. Seeing this book takes Henry to another time and reminds him of his memories with his wife with whom he spent twenty-five years. It is one of the rare scenes in the film where we are met with utter silence as Henry cannot speak anymore because of his deep emotions, nostalgia, and longing for Martha's presence.

**Jealousy** On their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Martha sits by herself in the library. Soon, Henry comes and they reminisce about the day they decided to marry each other. After this, Martha is wanted on the phone. However, she does not want to give Henry the details of her conversation. Henry at first becomes suspicious and soon after jealous. Martha says the person on the phone was her lover which makes Henry angry. Martha is surprised by her husband's jealousy. Henry adds: 'But why can't you tell your husband whom you talk to over the telephone? Besides, I wouldn't have brought it up right now, but just the same...for the past several weeks you've been going out in the afternoons...and you've always managed to avoid telling me where you were.' Martha becomes so happy that Henry is finally jealous after their twenty-five-year-long marriage. We might say that the type of jealousy presented in the scene is of a *good* kind and shows us how much Henry loves and cares for his wife.

**Loss** As *Heaven Can Wait* is about the entire life story of a man, we witness his many personal losses. Throughout his long life, Henry loses his grandmother, father, grandfather, and mother. However, we do not see any feelings of sadness associated with these losses presented in any of the scenes in the film. Nevertheless, when Henry loses Martha after their twenty-five-year-long marriage, it is a big loss for



him that he tries not to think about by engaging in reckless behavior such as 'coming home at all hours and making a wreck of himself'. We might say that he tries to grapple with Martha's loss by distracting himself with the entertainment and company of women and thus escapes from facing the reality of transience and human mortality.

## FLAW

**Greed/Ambition** We witness greed in the character of Peggy Nash. She is a musical showgirl and dates Jack. She even has a photo of him in her house from which we can infer that she cares about him. However, Henry comes to buy her off to distance her from Jack. When offered 5000 dollars, she responds to Henry by saying that: 'To get rid of somebody as terrible as me is worth—Well, I'll make you a bargain—25,000 dollars.' This shows us that she does not truly care for Jack as she can easily let him off for a certain amount of money. Secondly, this reveals to us the viewer's her greed for money and her high ambitions for a luxurious and wealthy lifestyle. We do not know what happens to Peggy Nash afterward, so we cannot say that she has to face certain consequences for being greedy. But we get to know her personality and character for certain.

## QUEST

**Explore** The whole life story of Henry that he narrates can be seen as an exploration of the world from Henry's unique perspective. From the moment he is born, he starts engaging with the environment surrounding him, makes observations, and comes to certain conclusions. In particular, he gets to have many experiences with women, starting from his mother and grandmother, through his nanny, the showgirls he meets, his beloved wife Martha, and his relatives. Henry is *not* a particularly ambitious character who has aspirations about certain things. However, he is a ladies' man who enjoys the company of women and explores the *woman's perspective* of the world.

## APPEARANCE

**Dreams** Henry narrates his dream to the nurse taking care of him when he is seventy years old. In the dream, a man comes to take him on a trip *from which he'll never come back*. This refers to the fact that Henry will soon die and can be seen as a foreshadowing. The man comes with a luxury liner floating on an ocean of whiskey and soda where instead of funnels, there are cigars, and sitting on a lifeboat is a beautiful blonde. A man plays 'The Merry Widow Waltz' and Henry and the girl start dancing. This dream refers to the fact that Henry has been a hedonistic man all his life, he was always engaged in the pursuit of *pleasure*. Cigars, alcohol, and the presence of a beautiful woman express his hedonistic side. It is most probably because Henry is well aware of being a hedonistic ladies' man that he believes he belongs to Hell. Later on in the film, Henry's dream comes quasi to life as he is attended to by a beautiful, young, and blonde nurse. Henry says regarding her: 'Who could ask for a more beautiful death?' emphasizing once again his flirtatious nature.

## PAST

**Memory** *Heaven Can Wait* consists of a series of flashbacks of memories from Henry Van Cleve's life. Therefore, most of the film is not set in the present but rather past time. We learn about Henry's life from his unique perspective. The memories he talks about range from his babyhood to old age, covering the years from 1872 to 1942 when he passes away. The main story is thus the totality of Henry's memories, in particular memories about the women in his life. The frame story, on the other hand, is a supernatural one, tackling the question of whether he will be permitted entrance to Hell.

**Nostalgia** Nostalgia is a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past. *Heaven Can Wait* can be considered to be a nostalgic film in total as it mainly consists of Henry's narration of his life events. One particular scene where we witness nostalgia in the main story is when Henry finds Martha sitting by herself in the library on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Martha says: 'Well,[...]I was being a little sentimental...so I came in here for a few minutes.' They reminisce about the old days and talk about how everything started in the library. Henry says that he

was standing over by the desk which Martha corrects as he was sitting in a chair. Martha also confesses that she was not afraid of Henry approaching her at all. The reminiscence and sentimentality, sentimental longing or wistful affection for the first day of their marriage forge a nostalgic scene within Henry's already nostalgic narration of his life.

**Transience** *Heaven Can Wait* covers seventy years of Henry Van Cleve's life. We see his life unfolding starting from the last decades of the nineteenth century. We see how people enter and disappear from Henry's life. Moreover, we witness his physical transformation from a baby to a young boy, a young adult, an adult, and an old man. Therefore, everything including time, family members, relatives, butlers, and Henry himself change throughout the film. The only thing that does not change is the physical setting, which is the gray-stone building where Van Cleves live. As Henry narrates, 'In the [...]10 years [of their marriage], old houses were torn down. New houses rose taller and taller. New York was changing all over. But [their] marriage had lasted just like [their] two-story gray-stone house.' So, one of the constants in Henry's life is also his marriage with Martha. Yet, even they have to separate following Martha's death which emphasizes the fragility and temporariness of human life. However, there is always the hope that they will reunite as in the supernatural portion of the film, the receptionist at the gates of Hell affirms that Martha is up there and she will plead for Henry. Therefore, the supernatural part of the film assures Henry and us that there are things that last.