

The Last Laugh (1924)

F.W. Murnau (1888-1931)

OVERVIEW

Auteur: Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau was a German film director, screenwriter, and producer. Murnau had an obsession with film since his childhood. He studied philology at the University of Berlin; and art history, and literature at the University of Heidelberg. In WWI, Murnau served as a company commander. He joined the Imperial German Flying Corps and flew missions. After the end of WWI, he established his film studio with Conrad Veidt. His noteworthy films are *Der Januskopf* (1920), an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; *The Last Laugh* (1924), a cinematic example of the *Kammerspielfilm* or chamber-drama; *Faust* (1926); *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927); *City Girl* (1930); and *Tabu* (1931). Murnau died in a car accident in 1931.

Film: *The Last Laugh* is a 1924 German silent film. The director of the film is F.W. Murnau. The screenplay was written by Carl Meyer. The film stars Emil Jannings and Maly Delschaft. The story is about a hotel doorman who loses his job and his psychological responses to what befalls him. *The Last Laugh* is a *Kammerspielfilm*. As such it offers a cinematic portrait of lower-middle-class life. It is focused on the psychology of the characters rather than an intricate set design. Unlike the parallel Expressionist movement, *Kammerspielfilme* seldom used intertitles. The reason for this was that the visuals carry most of the meaning of the film. The film is famous for its use of elaborate camera movements which was a technique called unchained camera or *entfesselte Kamera*. *The Last Laugh* was released in 1924 in Germany, and in 1925 in the United States. The film was a major critical and financial success.

Historical background: During the production of the film, F.W. Murnau was at the height of his career. He observed and stated that: "All our efforts must be directed towards abstracting everything that isn't the true domain of the cinema. Everything that is trivial and acquired from other sources, all the tricks, devices, and clichés inherited from the stage and from books." He thus wanted to reflect the pure essence of the cinema in *The Last Laugh*. The film was made at the time of the Weimar Republic, which was a historical period in Germany from 1918 to 1933. Following WWI, the country was suffering from inflation, economic collapse, poverty, food shortages, and hunger. Germans were looking for some hope that might make their situations better. This hope of the masses, although unrealistic, was reflected in the epilogue of the film.

CHARACTERS

Hotel doorman: A man proud of his occupation as a hotel doorman who is devastated by losing his job
Hotel doorman's niece: A lively girl who is the hotel doorman's niece
Bridegroom: The man who marries the hotel doorman's niece
Bridegroom's aunt: The aunt of the bridegroom who does not show pity for the hotel doorman
Hotel manager: A serious man who does not have any qualms about firing the doorman
Neighbor: A curious woman who loves eavesdropping
Night watchman: The only person who shows compassion to the hotel doorman
Young guest: A guest of the Atlantic hotel
The guest with the pot belly: A guest who is irritated with the slowness of the old man

SYNOPSIS

An old hotel doorman who is the protagonist of the film is someone proud of his job and uniform. However, he is not capable of carrying heavy pieces of luggage anymore, so his manager decides to demote him to the job of washroom attendant. The hotel doorman is devastated at this news, he tries to conceal his demotion from his family and neighbors. Meanwhile, his niece marries. His demotion, however, is discovered by the bridegroom's aunt. His family is ashamed because of his demotion and rejects him. His neighbors make fun of him. The only person who shows pity and empathy for him is the night watchman. However, the events take a turn for the better. He inherits a fortune from a millionaire who dies in his arms in the hotel washroom. He returns kindness to the watchman by sharing his money and luxurious lifestyle with him.

SCENES

Happy hotel doorman The film begins with an intertitle which says: "Today you are preeminent, respected by all, a minister, a general, maybe even a prince. But, what will you be tomorrow?". This intertitle sets the stage for what is to come, that is an old hotel doorman losing his job, and thereby his prestige and identity. Then begins a scene accompanied by powerful and lively music that shows us a hotel and the crowds in it. It is raining outside and the hotel doorman helps the guests departing from and arriving at the hotel.



Happy Home The hotel doorman lives in an area that is lower-middle-class. When his neighbors see him, they all greet him with great respect, in particular, because of the uniform that he carries and the prestige associated with it. The lights are turned off as the neighborhood starts to sleep. When the new day breaks, we see the people going out and shaking up the blankets and pillows. Then we see the niece of the hotel doorman shaking up and removing the dust from the uniform of her uncle. Later she bakes a cake for her wedding guests. Meanwhile, the hotel doorman is giving shape to his hair and grooming himself. He sees the cake that she baked, then looks at her bridal dress with rather sad eyes. They hug each other. The hotel doorman leaves the house. The neighbors greet him with reverence and respect. In the neighborhood, he sees a child who fell and is crying, and he helps the child. Meanwhile, the hotel doorman's niece is preparing for her wedding. The hotel doorman walks the streets with great pride and with an air of boastfulness.



Old Age The doorman seems to be very happy with this job, however, he has difficulties when it comes to carrying pieces of luggage. He looks for help from the others, but since no one comes, he tries to carry the luggage of the guests all by himself. He decides to rest for a bit since he is very tired. However, the hotel manager sees him sitting and drinking, and he is utterly displeased with the lack of discipline and not putting in enough effort by the doorman. The rain stops, and the doorman takes off his raincoat. He seems to be proud of wearing his uniform. He looks at himself in the mirror, seeming proud and happy.



Demotion The next morning The doorman sees another doorman in front of the hotel. The hotel doorman goes to talk to the hotel manager who looks rather indifferent, and apathetic, and gives him a piece of paper which says: "In consideration of your many years of service with us, we have arranged a different position for you, now that one of our oldest employees is being sent to a retirement home. Beginning today, you will take over his duties. The reason for these measures is *your age and frailty.*"



The hotel doorman cannot take his eyes off the words of *age and frailty*. He is utterly shocked and devastated at this news. He goes near the hotel manager, but the hotel manager seems to not be interested in or sorry for his situation at all. Then he sees the luggage that he could not carry near the wall. The piece of paper falls from his hand. With some last piece of hope, he tries to lift the luggage, but to no avail. The luggage falls from his hands to the ground. The old man also falls to the ground, hopeless and defeated. In a parallel scene, we see the new hotel doorman easily carrying the luggage. The hotel manager calls for someone to take care of the old man. He seems annoyed that he has to deal with him. As one of the employees helps the old man, the hotel manager washes his hands. The employee takes off the uniform of the man, thereby both symbolically and literally depriving him of the pride and prestige that he has been holding onto all his life. The hotel manager and the employees leave the old man on his own. He looks at his past uniform with wistful eyes. The camera zooms in on the uniform which represents status, respect, prestige, and reputation for him.

Dreams The hotel doorman's niece gets married in a beautiful ceremony, and the newlywed couple waits for their uncle to arrive to celebrate the merry event. The old man, however, sneaks into the place where his uniform is. He hides from the night watchman who is patrolling and takes his uniform. He runs from the hotel as if he is a thief. Further, he hallucinates a building falling toward him. He wears his uniform and walks away from the Atlantic Hotel.



When he gets home, he sees people happily celebrating the wedding ceremony. Even though he is utterly shattered because of his demotion, he soon adapts to the joyful atmosphere of the wedding celebration. He drinks a lot of alcohol and soon forgets all that has happened to him during the day. The scenes where he is intoxicated and drunk provide the viewers with comic relief as everyone, and in particular, the hotel doorman seems free of their daily struggles and grave problems. We see the unchained camera freely floating in the room, and hear a piece of powerful and joyous music. The old man soon falls asleep and dreams that he is back in the hotel wearing his uniform. Six men try to lift a heavy suitcase, but they cannot. The hotel doorman stops them and carries the suitcase with just one hand. Everyone in the hotel's restaurant applauds him. He finally has the respect he deserves.

Reality the next day The keyholder woman asks the old man to come with her. She gives him clothes for his new wash attendant role. She further gives him a pile of clothes that make it impossible for the viewers to see his face. This scene shows us that for the functioning of an institution, the individuals and their feelings do not matter in essence. Individuals can easily be replaced. Who was once a very high-ranking individual can be degraded to a lower position if that person is no more qualified for the occupation. This shows us not only the *supremacy of the institutions over individuals* but also the *impermanence of our ranks and positions in society*.



Wash attendant When he wakes up, he sees the aunt of the bridegroom pouring him coffee. He is still not fully awake. The aunt helps him wear his uniform and sews a button that was missing. Half awake and half asleep the old man wobbly and waveringly leaves his apartment. Everyone in the neighborhood greets him and he greets everyone. He still seems not to have gained full consciousness until he reaches the Atlantic Hotel, sees the new doorman, and thus remembers all that has occurred. He goes to the train station and leaves his uniform for a few hours. He comes to the hotel to fulfill his duty as a wash attendant. He looks fatigued and emotionally exhausted, but he wears his new uniform as a wash attendant and tries to work as best as he can. A young guest laughs at his comic, half-awake half-asleep state. The old man looks at the reflection of the light on the window pane. The light rays might be taken to represent better days and freedom which the long man longs for. Meanwhile, the aunt of the bridegroom comes to the hotel to bring him food. The old man eats his lunch in the laundry room while in the restaurant everyone is having a luxurious lunch which builds a great juxtaposition with his poor state. The aunt of the bridegroom sees the new hotel doorman, to her utter shock. Meanwhile, the old man is sweeping the ground. She screams when she sees him as a wash attendant and runs home. The old man is ashamed, but cannot do anything about his situation. He goes back to his work and helps a man with a pot belly who is irritated by his slowness. The man with the pot belly asks him to polish his shoes which the old man seems barely to accomplish. He seems to be overly interested in his appearance. He scolds the old man because of his slowness and leaves to talk to the hotel manager. The poor old man stands still, not able to move because of being emotionally overwhelmed.



The neighbors and family The aunt of the bridegroom runs into the neighborhood. She tells to the old man's niece that he is a wash attendant now. Meanwhile, one of the neighbors eavesdrops on their conversation. The neighbor gossips to the other neighbors about the old man's situation and soon everyone in the neighborhood knows about what happened to him.



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There is a luxurious life that goes on in the hotel and the city. However, the life of the old man is utterly changed. He seems confused and lost in the streets. He goes to take back the uniform that he had left earlier at the train station. After he has taken his uniform back, he walks in a hunched way to his neighborhood. He is afraid to step into his neighborhood, anticipating the taunting of the neighbors. His neighbors laugh hysterically about his situation, what is called in German '*Schadenfreude*' which is taking pleasure derived by someone from another person's misfortune.

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The old man can hardly knock on the door. The bridegroom opens the door with a serious look on his face. His family seems disappointed and angry because of his demotion. They are ashamed of him. The old man can hardly walk after having faced the rejection of his family. He goes back to the Atlantic Hotel. In the hotel, he encounters the night watchman. He gives the night watchman the old uniform that he is holding. The night watchman seems to be sincerely sorry for the situation that he is in. He takes the uniform and puts it in the cupboard and locks the cupboard. Then the night watchman covers him with his own coat and thus shows an act of kindness that no one has shown him.

Happy ending Everyone in the hotel looks overly happy and laughs. They are laughing at the newspaper article that talks about a sensational inheritance. The famous multimillionaire, Mr. U.G. Money, expired in the washroom of the Atlantic Hotel as he was washing his hands. A sensational will is found which names as sole heir of his immeasurable fortune the person in whose arms he dies. The old man is the inheritor of this immeasurable fortune. Next, we see him dining at a luxurious table with all the waiters eager to serve him. Then comes the night



watchman in brand new, and expensive clothes and joins him for the dinner. They all look happy with this extravagant lifestyle. Next, the hotel manager comes and is irritated to see the old man, but greets both men. Everybody treats him differently now that he is a multimillionaire. The keyholder woman opens the door for him with the utmost respect. The old man goes to the washroom to wash his hands. There is now another man as a wash attendant. He gives him a lot of money for his work and a cigar. Later, the old man and the night watchman leave the Atlantic Hotel with hotel staff lined up along his way. He gives tips to all the staff. Before they are about to leave with the carriage, a beggar asks them for money. The old man tells the beggar to come to the carriage. They leave while the old man waves looking to the Atlantic Hotel.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

HOTEL DOORMAN Agreeable (*Prideful, Vulnerable, Good-hearted*)

The hotel doorman who is unnamed throughout the whole film is someone who is prideful about his job at the Atlantic Hotel. He is boastful that he has a prominent job and works as the *face* of the hotel. He is an old man, therefore he cannot lift the pieces of luggage properly anymore. He lives with his niece who is soon to be married at the beginning of the film. His demotion to the role of wash attendance shatters and destroys his whole world. His demotion causes his family to reject him and his neighbors to make fun of his misfortune. There is only one person who shows kindness to him at his lowest point. That person is the night watchman. His fate takes a strange turn once again as he inherits a fortune from a multimillionaire who dies in the old man's hands in the washroom. He becomes a much *worthier* man in the eyes of the people and enjoys luxurious dinners.

Prideful: The hotel doorman is very prideful and boastful because of his job. Because of his job and in particular, the uniform he wears, which is a sign of authority, everybody has great respect for him. Both the guests of the hotel, people on the streets, and his neighbors deem him to be an important man who ranks high in the social hierarchy. However, their respect is not unconditional, and the hotel doorman loses all his pridefulness and boastfulness once he loses his job. His pride is not based on his self-worth or self-esteem, but rather on his occupation. Therefore, his prideful attitude is not something stable and is subject to demolishing as he is demoted to wash attendant.

Vulnerable: The pridefulness and the vulnerability of the hotel doorman are inherently connected. Because his pride is built upon his prestigious job and the status that his uniform signifies, he is ultimately vulnerable, that is ultimately exposed to the possibility of being emotionally and mentally harmed. As the hotel manager realizes that the doorman can no longer carry heavy items of luggage and thus indifferently demotes him to the role of wash attendant, the happiness and the pride of the old man are no more. The way he walks changes, he walks in a hunched way, and he can no longer look at the eyes of his family. He tries not to run into or see his neighbors whom he prior to his demotion everyday warmly greeted. He is in a very unfortunate situation as he understands that his lovability and the respect that others have shown him have always been dependent on his status.

Good-hearted: The hotel doorman is a good-hearted person which the viewers concretely see in a couple of scenes. One of these scenes is when he helps a child who fell to the ground whom the other children do not help. He helps the crying child and gives him something sweet to eat. Another scene is when his niece has baked a cake for her upcoming wedding and the hotel doorman looks at the wedding dress with sad eyes, feeling bittersweet that his niece has grown up and is soon marrying. His concern for and wishes for the well-being of his niece are visible in his wide eyes. Another instance of his good-heartedness is when inherits a fortune and becomes a multi-millionaire, he shares his money with all the hotel staff, and most importantly, with the night watchman who was the only person who showed him kindness at his lowest point. Thus the old man returns the kindness.

HOTEL DOORMAN'S NIECE Open (*Lively*)

The hotel doorman's niece is a lively young woman who is soon to be married. She is first seen baking a cake for the wedding guests. She seems to love her uncle. She gets married in a beautiful ceremony.

After her uncle comes home after being demoted, she wishes to open the door to him, but the aunt of the bridegroom stops her. Although she loves her uncle, she nevertheless rejects him like the others do, too.

Lively: The hotel doorman's niece is full of life, energy, and vitality. She is very happy to be married. Her lively nature is seen in her enthusiasm for preparing the cakes, in her wedding ceremony, and her love for her uncle. She is also sad about the news of her uncle's demotion and she wants to talk to him about this, but the aunt of the bridegroom stops her from talking to her uncle. Thus, it might be said that she is rather passive regarding the sad series of events that befall her uncle.

BRIDEGROOM'S AUNT Disagreeable (*Snob*)

The bridegroom's aunt is an old woman who seems joyful at the wedding celebration. After the night of the celebration, she brings food to the old man's workplace. However, she is shocked to see that there is another man in place of the old man. After she sees the old man as a wash attendant, she screams in a state of utter shock. Because her love and respect for the old man are intertwined with and dependent on his social rank, she no longer respects the old man. She runs back to the neighborhood and tells the news to the old man's niece in a hurry. She rejects the old man and stops the niece of the old man from speaking to him.

Obsessed with social status: Bridegroom's aunt is obsessed with social status. She categorizes people according to the rank they have in society. That is the reason why she screams when she sees the old man as a wash attendant as working as a wash attendant indicates that one is of a much lesser rank than a hotel doorman. Moreover, the way she stops the niece from talking to her uncle suggests to us viewers that she does not care about the familial ties that they have, rather she only cares about the *uniform*, or the prestige and social status associated with the uniform.

HOTEL MANAGER Disagreeable (*Cold-hearted*)

The hotel manager is someone who only cares about the profits he makes and the image of the Atlantic Hotel. When he first sees the old man unable to carry the pieces of luggage, he takes notes and soon informs the old man that he is demoted to another position because of his age and frailty. He is utterly cold and indifferent to the shock and despair that the old man is going through. When the old man falls to the ground he does not want to deal with him. Therefore he calls some other employee to deal with the man and to take off his uniform. His behavior toward him changes when the old man becomes a multimillionaire and he has to greet both him and the night watchman as they have become rich and respectable people. Thus the hotel manager is ultimately not different from the bridegroom's aunt or the neighbors regarding their obsession with status and social rank.

Cold-hearted: The hotel manager shows no understanding or does not feel sorry about the suffering of the old man when he is demoted to the position of wash attendant. His lack of feelings and cold attitude are in nature similar to the neighbor's joy in the old man's suffering or the rejecting attitude of the aunt. His cold-heartedness does not change throughout the film. However, he *has to* change his behavior toward the old man at the end of the film because of the fortune he inherited and because the old man has now climbed the social ladder.

NEIGHBOR Disagreeable (*Gossipy*)

The hotel manager is someone who The neighbor is a curious middle-aged woman who loves eavesdropping on conversations and gossiping. It must be said here that although the neighbor that is considered here is one person, the characteristics of this neighbor are seen in most of the neighbors of the old man. Thus, the neighbors can be considered to be a monolith, which is an impersonal social structure, exhibiting a fixed uniformity. A curious feature about the characteristics of the neighbors is that they think of status and social rank as of utmost significance. They have great respect for the old man as long as he is the hotel doorman that is as long as he has his *uniform*. The uniform symbolizes authority, the system, dominance, and power. Thus, the respect that the neighbors have toward the uniform is the respect for authority and its supposed or assumed infallibility.

Gossipy: The neighbors are all characterized by their gossipy nature. They love talking about what happens to whom. The middle-aged neighbor eavesdrops on the conversation between the aunt of the bridegroom and the hotel doorman's niece and finds out that the hotel doorman lost his job and was demoted to wash attendant. After she finds that out, she spreads the news to all her neighbors. The neighbors seem to be particularly entertained by the news, what might in German be called *Schadenfreude* which is pleasure derived by someone from another person's misfortune. Their collective gossipy, unsympathetic, harsh, and unfeeling nature builds a sharp contrast to the individual kindness of the night watchman.

NIGHT WATCHMAN Agreeable (*Kind*)

The night watchman is the only person who shows kindness to the old man at his lowest point. He tries to console him and gives him his coat so that he is not cold and sad. His benevolent acts do not go unnoticed by the old man such that when the old man inherits a fortune, he shares his fortune with the night watchman.

Kind: The night watchman is not someone who ranks high in the social hierarchy. He is someone who is probably overlooked by everyone. He works at night, his work is not seen by those who work during the day that is the guests and most of the hotel staff, including the hotel manager. However, even though it seems like there is no benefit he can get from helping and behaving kindly toward the old man, he behaves affectionately and considerately anyway. This shows us that he is not concerned about social status like most of the characters in the film do, rather he is someone who has certain values that he follows because these values are inherently important to him.

THEMES

SOCIETY (Class)

Class One of the important threads that can be observed in the film is the noticeable distinction between the upper class and the lower middle class. The hotel doorman works at the Atlantic Hotel, an institution that serves people from the upper classes. However, the man himself belongs to the lower middle class and the neighborhood he lives in is also poor. Because the old man works at a place that serves the higher classes, his neighbors treat him with respect and reverence. When he gets demoted, however, their attitude toward him changes immediately. They start gossiping about him and get entertained by his misfortune. Thus, it can be said that people from the same class do not support one another but are in a state of competition and always looking to get higher positions in the social hierarchy. The fact that people treat each other differently based on one's social class shows us that they do not see each other as human equals or do not give to others unconditional respect. Another curious fact about the film is that the only thing that gets named is the hotel, the Atlantic Hotel. None of the people have a name. This shows us that the institution is considered to be worthier than the individual human beings who are only considered worthy if they have climbed the social ladder successfully.

RELATIONSHIP (Caring)

Caring There are a few scenes in the film where people are seen as caring for each other. One scene is when the hotel doorman's niece is soon to be married, the hotel doorman looks at the wedding dress of his niece and becomes melancholic. Then they hug each other. Another scene is when the old man helps a child who fell to the ground and gives him something to eat. His caring attitude shows us the viewers how good a person he is. The third instance is when the night watchman cares for the old man when he loses his job and comes to the hotel to spend the night as he has been rejected by his family. The night watchman covers the old man with his coat. This scene is particularly noteworthy as the night watchman is the only person who does not judge people by their social status. These instances of caring show us that there is still hope when it comes to human nature and that even though most people are conditioned to evaluate others based on their social ranks, there are exceptions to that conditioning as seen in the caring attitude of the night watchman.

PSYCHOLOGY (Sadness)

Sadness The hotel doorman is utterly sad and devastated when he gets demoted. He is also filled with feelings of shame. However, he has to process his emotions of sadness all by himself as he cannot turn to others in this time of distress since he knows that others will be quick to judge him about his being demoted to the wash attendant. His sadness and despair are seen in the way he walks in a rather hunched manner and his facial expressions. His shame is seen when he tries to steal the uniform from the cupboard so that he can still go to the neighborhood with his uniform on. He does not go to his neighborhood until late hours because he does not want anyone to see him in this *degraded* state. The old man is struck with deep sadness once again when his family rejects him as they all find out about him losing his job. Since he has now nowhere to go, he goes back to the Atlantic Hotel so that he can hide from the judgments, rejection, and ridicule of others.

FLAW (Pride)

Pride Pride is 'the quality of having an excessively high opinion of oneself or one's own importance'. Nonverbal expressions of pride also may signal high social status. From the beginning of the film, we see the old man as being excessively proud of his job. The way he carries his uniform, the taking care of his hair and mustache, looks at himself in the mirror, the way he walks as someone of high importance, the way he greets his neighbors and so on all indicate his pride in his job and status. When he reads the note from the hotel manager that he is being demoted because of his age and frailty, he is filled with shame which demonstrates that his self-esteem is something vulnerable and the pride he has, is like a paper-thin wall susceptible to being demolished by a change in his social rank. His flaw is not only an individual flaw but something brought about by the mechanism of a society that values hierarchy and social ranking above all. Therefore, the hotel doorman is not completely to be blamed for his fault, but the whole society that reveres the uniform and authority it represents, more than the individual human being wearing the uniform.

APPEARANCE (Dreams)

Dreams The old man comes to the wedding celebration of his niece and drinks a lot of alcohol there. There he becomes drunk and soon falls asleep. In his dream, he sees that he can lift a piece of luggage with only one hand that even six men together cannot lift. He is more proud than ever before. When he steps into the restaurant, everybody applauds him for his work and power. Everybody seems to respect and revere him as they used to or even more than they used to. Then they all applaud him for his incredible feat. This dream symbolizes all that he longs for, that is respect, admiration, and high social status. It can be said that the story that his mind creates while he is asleep provides a consolation for him. His dream comes true at the end of the film when he finally inherits a fortune from a multimillionaire. Even though he still cannot carry the pieces of luggage because of his age and frailty, he ultimately has the respect he always longs for.