Life in the Big Picture with Frank Capra and William Wyler

Adapted from Men and Women in Love: The View from Classic Hollywood, 1940’s Movies and The Business of Life, The Films of Jimmy Stewart and Radical Choices in the Crossroads of Life (EGI Study Guides available on Amazon authored by Dr. Onalee McGraw)

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Overview

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” - T.S. Eliot

We all have very different life experiences and, yet - we share the same human nature! A truly great classic film shines the light of truth on our lives and illuminates our common world. Classic films are remembered and viewed again and again because they help us discover who we are and how to live together in the human family.

The films included in the Educational Guidance Institute Study Guides have been chosen according to the highest aesthetic standards for screenplay, direction, acting, casting, and artistic integrity. The clear and consistent moral content of these films serves to elevate the human spirit and inspire the moral imagination for the good, the true and the beautiful.

Young people are told in this postmodern culture that they are nothing but a ‘clump of cells’ and at the same time exhorted to be ‘all you can be’. Yet none of us can thrive if we carry within our hearts and minds this diminished view of our humanity.

The study of classic film provides opportunities to gain a deeper perspective on the meaning of life, the nature of the human person, and the natural moral law written on every human heart.

Together we can restore our diminished treasury of social and moral capital. We can deepen our understanding of our shared human condition and rebuild civic friendship.
For Discussion Leaders...Inspiring the Moral Imagination through the Universal Appeal of Classic Films

These classic movies presuppose a moral universe where the human powers to know, love, and serve the good are at the center of each film’s narrative. Different aspects of each film’s artistry will appeal to each individual viewer in a unique way. Yet for all there is inspiration for the Moral Imagination. To meet the varied needs of each classroom or group session participant, we have included discussion handouts that feature (1) film history and background facts, (2) the film’s artistry in direction, dialogue and performance, and (3) discussion points on the deep existential questions of love and life dramatized in the film. Exploring all these aspects of the art of classic cinema can result in an unforgettable group or classroom discussion.

Why does a good story light up our brains and warm our hearts the way it does? Why do we remember so fondly and so clearly a great film we have seen? The answer is found in the human imagination. It is through the cognitive faculty of our imagination that we take in what we see and hear from our senses.

Images and ideas pass through our imagination to our reasoning capabilities. It is through the medium of our imagination and moral intuition that we have the capacity to grasp what is real, beautiful, good and true.

These movies take us over three decades of Hollywood’s Golden Age. Viewing and discussing these films help us recover aesthetic sensibilities of life in the big picture. It’s a Wonderful Life and The Best Years of Our Lives reflects a spirit of gratitude and new beginnings in the post-World War II era. Roman Holiday portrays the ideal of sacrificial love between a man and a woman from the early 1950’s. Mr. Smith Goes to Washington and The Big Country depict the enduring civic virtues we must sustain to live together in a free society.
It’s A Wonderful Life

It’s a Wonderful Life stands as Frank Capra’s most widely acclaimed film. It is listed as number one on the roster of the “100 Most Inspiring Films of All Time.” by the American Film Institute in 2006. For generations of film viewers, Bedford Falls, George Bailey’s hometown in the film, has come to represent the universal longing for community in the human heart. Of all the romantic comedies that Capra did, this film brilliantly connects the love story in the narrative with life in community.

Frank Capra invites us to become part of the community in Bedford Falls where we witness George and Mary give up their honeymoon money to save the Bailey Building and Loan. In an interview in the 1980’s, on British television, Jimmy Stewart said that It’s a Wonderful Life was both his and Frank Capra’s all-time favorite movie.

Storyline

The thread of the story that relates to George and Mary begins in the famous scene at the drug store when George and Mary are growing up. He is characteristically talking about all the adventures he is going to have when he grows up while she whispers in his bad ear George Bailey, “I will love you until the day I die.”

Years later George discovers Mary again at the high school dance. Their brief interlude is touched by tragedy as he learns that his father has had a fatal stroke.
When George and Mary get married their honeymoon is put on hold because of the crisis at the Bailey Building and Loan. In a matter of moments after this scene in the cab, they will give up their honeymoon to save the Bailey Building and Loan.

In a series of film sequences director Capra shows George and Mary raising their children in Bedford Falls interwoven with scenes that show the deep inner conflicts George is experiencing.

Capra’s genius is to portray this couple in a complementary way showing that Mary is really the key person who helps her husband in his greatest crisis. As Uncle Billy says, “Mary did it, George. She just went out and told everybody that you were in trouble.”

In the fantasy sequence it is the sight of Mary as a lonely librarian who has never married that causes George to finally completely break down and beg God to give him his life back. The universal theme – that every life is irreplaceable – is ultimately what gives Capra’s masterpiece its unchallenged place as one of the most inspiring films of all time.
Film Facts: *It’s a Wonderful Life*

**Year:** 1946

**Featuring:** Jimmy Stewart & Donna Reed

**Director:** Frank Capra

**Viewing Time:** 130 minutes

**Setting:** Bedford Falls, (Created at the Encino Ranch of RKO Studio)

**Academy Award Nominations (1947)**

- James Stewart, Best Actor in a Leading Role
- Frank Capra, Best Director
- William Hornbeck, Best Film Editing
- Best Picture (Liberty Films)
- Best Sound, Recording
- John Aalberg (RKO Radio SSD), Best Sound, Recording

Movies like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) reflected Frank Capra’s desire in the late 1930’s to make films that, in his words, “said something.” Capra in fact stated explicitly that as an artist he had decided to “serve man and the Almighty, instead of the picture business.” Frank Capra purchased the story, which originally appeared in the form of a Christmas card created by author Philip Van Doren Stern. The idea captured Capra’s imagination and, as he tells us in his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*, “It was the story I had been looking for all my life.”

There was only one man Capra knew who could play George and of course that man was Jimmy Stewart. Capra describes his efforts to tell his friend about the story, but words seemed to fail him and he almost gave up on the whole project. In an interview, Jimmy Stewart tells us what he said to Capra in this famous moment,

“*Frank, if you want me to be in a picture about a guy that wants to kill himself and an angel comes down named Clarence and he can’t swim. . . I say, when do we start?*”
Film Critic’s Corner

Men and Women in Love: Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Frank Capra wrote in his autobiography, The Name Above the Title, that he wanted his films to “explore the heart not with logic, but with compassion.” He quotes the French scientist, Blaze Pascal who said, “The heart has its reasons which reason knows not.” Pascal’s famous phrase touches on the power of the human heart to intuitively grasp profound truths.

Capra knew how to create love scenes that pull an audience into the couple’s emotional unity rather than their physical unity. Capra’s filmmaking expresses the mode of depicting romantic love that characterized classic cinema: If a film shows too much, the viewer can be reduced to the role of an observer instead of a participant. Classic films invite the audience into the story where they get to know and love the couple as human persons.

As in life itself, joy is followed by tragedy; tragedy turns to hope. A love scene is followed by a challenge to the life of the community. The love story of George and Mary is from beginning to end the story of a man and a woman who fall in love, get married, and raise their family. When Uncle Billy loses the $8,000 and he is facing ruin, George lashes out at Mary; “You call this a happy family? Why do we have to have all these kids?”

Clarence shows George the value of his life and his family. On the bridge where he is going to commit suicide George cries out, “Get me back to my wife and kids. Help me, Clarence, please. Please! I want to live again! I want to live again. Please, God, let me live again!”
Community Connections: Bedford Falls vs. Pottersville

Community is a vital part of life that is universally cherished because in our human nature we are social beings. *It’s a Wonderful Life* gives us a “big picture” view of what makes a community strong, real, and vibrant. Even in a time when so many of us have not experienced genuine community life, with the “reasons of the heart” Frank Capra helps us to recognize it.

The people who live in Bedford Falls are a part of something greater than themselves, and any community that is going to survive must have enough people living there to know this is the case.

Strong communities do not just happen. In Capra’s vision of genuine community, *sacrifices* have to be made, *personal time* must be invested, and *sustained effort* put into forming friendships.

The marriage of George and Mary Bailey is seen as the foundational structure that frames a way of life in community and civil society.

When the hard times come, we have to be able to rely on people whom we can trust and they must be able to rely on us. This assumes that we must know one another well enough for trust to be possible. Capra grasps these concepts and depicts them brilliantly in the sequences right after George and Mary get married.
On the way out of town to their honeymoon, George and Mary witness a run on the bank and decide to stop. George has the difficult task of persuading his fellow citizens to act for the common good of the town. He explains to them that the investment in their homes is really an investment in everyone else’s home as well.

Encouraging the sense of **solidarity** they must maintain in a time of panic, he says, “Now, we can get through this thing all right. We've got to stick together, though. We've got to have faith in each other.”

**Pottersville and the Loss of Community, Love, and Friendship**

We only see glimpses of life in Pottersville, but we do see that people are not happy.

Ernie is an unfriendly, bitter and divorced man.

Nick is no longer a kind bartender but a bully.

Violet is being arrested as a town bad girl.

Christmas Eve on Main Street in Pottersville is a glaring confusion of neon lights and noise.

Clarence brings the lesson home: "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"
Post-Viewing Discussion on *It’s a Wonderful Life*

Explore the vital elements that strengthen the marriage of George and Mary Bailey.

- Marriage as a genuine partnership
- A marriage interwoven into the life of the Bedford Falls community

Describe the generosity of spirit of George and Mary that sustains the common good of the community of Bedford Falls.

Contrast the elements of community life we see in Bedford Falls with what we do not see in Pottersville.
Notes for Post-Viewing Discussion

George and Mary’s marriage - a genuine partnership and a marriage interswoven into the life of the community

It is Mary who aids George in his constant interior struggle between personal ambition and the common good of the community. She stays steady throughout every challenge. She lifts him out of his depression after he has rejected Potter’s tempting offer to work for him. She is George’s partner in his constant waging of “the battle of Bedford Falls.” The fruits of George and Mary’s partnership are especially visible in the scene in Bailey Park at the blessing of the Martini home. When Sam Wainwright and his well-dressed wife roll up in their new car, George is frustrated once again, but Mary’s dismissal of these materialistic goods helps him to keep things in perspective. In the moment of crisis, when George is deep in despair, Mary knows that he is in big trouble. She rallies everyone to come to George’s aid.

Generosity of spirit that sustains the common good of the community of Bedford Falls

George and Mary give up their honeymoon money to save the people of the town from becoming financially beholden to Potter. They also work together to start Bailey Park so that people can move out of Potter’s slums and own a home of their own.

The elements of genuine community we see in Bedford Falls as compared to Pottersville

In Martini’s Bar (renamed Nick’s), instead of being a place to enjoy a drink in fellowship, is now a place to get drunk. In downtown Bedford Falls there is no theatre or Bailey Building and Loan. Now we see saloons and pawn shops. Bert the policeman and Ernie the cabdriver are just people doing their jobs; they have no connection with their neighbors or fellow citizens. Friendship, love, and trust are all absent in Pottersville. There is only pure survival for each individual as the social fabric that binds people together has been destroyed.
The Heart Has Its Reasons

Reflections on *It’s a Wonderful Life*

Life is Worth Living

Capra’s masterpiece is an unforgettable vision of human flourishing and the good life that is possible when the common good for both the individual and society is realized in genuine community. Marriage, family and friendship are interwoven into the life of Bedford Falls and tragically absent in Pottersville. It is the loss of Mary and his family that finally brings George to the bridge to ask God for his life back.
“The Business of Life”

The Best Years of Our Lives

(1946)

Directed by William Wyler
The Best Years of Our Lives

In today’s world, it may be difficult to imagine what it was like at the end of World War II. The nation and the world were at war from 1941 with the bombing of Pearl Harbor to the surrender of Japan in June of 1945. William Wyler’s masterpiece captured the imagination of a nation longing for peace and stability.

Storyline

Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), and Al Stephenson (Fredric March) meet while they are flying home to Boone City at the close of World War II. Fred is a decorated Army Air Forces captain and bombardier in Europe. Homer lost both hands from burns suffered when his aircraft carrier was sunk. He has mechanical hooks which he can use with great skill in place of his hands. Al served as an infantry platoon sergeant in the Pacific. The story revolves around the difficulties that all three men encounter in adjusting to civilian life.

William Wyler created an unforgettable scene of the reunion of Frederic March’s character with his wife Milly played by Myrna Loy. Al is one of the fortunate returning veterans that can go back to a good job as a bank loan officer. Al plays a major role in approving loans for other returning servicemen.
When Al approves a loan (without collateral) to a young Navy veteran, the president of the bank is not happy. But Al is expressing the higher standard of judgement that director Wyler wants to teach the audiences of 1946. Later at a banquet held in his honor, a slightly inebriated Al expounds on his belief that the bank (and America) must stand with the vets who risked everything to defend the country and give them every chance to rebuild their lives.

Before the war, Fred had been an unskilled drugstore soda jerk. He wants something better, but the tight postwar job market forces him to return to his old job. Fred had met his wife, Marie (Virginia Mayo) while in flight training and married her shortly afterward. Marie makes it clear she does not enjoy being married to a lowly soda jerk.

The audiences of today can reflect on the changes in American life witnessed in the scenes in the drug store where Fred works. Eventually Fred is fired but finds a new opportunity in turning old fighter planes into homebuilding material.

The most unforgettable story in the film revolves around the character of Homer Parrish and his childhood sweetheart and next door neighbor, Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell). Homer does not want to burden Wilma with his handicap and pushes her away, although she still loves him.
Film Facts: *The Best Years of Our Lives*

*Year:* 1946

*Featuring:* Dana Andrews, Teresa Wright, Frederic March, Myrna Loy, and Virginia Mayo

*Director:* William Wyler

*Viewing Time:* 172 Minutes

**Academy Awards**

- Best Picture
- Best Actor in a Leading Role, Fredric March
- Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Harold Russell
- Best Director, William Wyler
- Best Writing, Screenplay, Robert E. Sherwood
- Best Film Editing, Daniel Mandell
- Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture, Hugo Friedhofer

**Academy Award Nomination**

- Best Sound Recording, Gordon Sawyer

In addition to his Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role, disabled World War II veteran Harold Russell was awarded an Honorary Oscar for “bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans” through his role as Homer in *The Best Years of Our Lives."

Legendary song writer Hoagy Carmichael plays Homer’s Uncle Butch.
Film Critic’s Corner

Dialogue, Direction and Performance in *The Best Years of Our Lives*

Samuel Goldwyn, the producer of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, was inspired to create this film after reading about the difficulties experienced by service men in World War II readjusting to civilian life. Director William Wyler had flown combat missions over Europe and worked hard to get accurate depictions in the film of the combat veterans he had encountered. Wyler sought out Harold Russell, a non-actor, to take on the exacting role of Homer Parrish.

After the war, the combat aircraft featured in the film were being disassembled for reuse as scrap material. The scene with Dana Andrews as Fred Derry walking among aircraft ruins was filmed at the Ontario Army Air Field in Ontario, California. The former training facility had been converted into a scrap yard, housing nearly 2,000 former combat aircraft in various states of disassembly and reclamation. Wyler and cinematographer Gregg Toland used innovative camera techniques to help the audience capture the feelings and interior state of mind of Dana Andrews’ character.
Post-Viewing Discussion: *The Best Years of Our Lives*

William Wyler presents a mosaic of American life, using his characters to illuminate the meaning of culture and community in the post-war year of 1946.

Discuss the turning points in the lives of Fred Derry, Homer Parrish, and Al Stevenson when they return home from the war.

**Fred Derry – loss and gain**

Knowing Marie only a few hours, Fred has married a woman he does not know. After complaining to Fred that she has "given up the best years of my life," Marie tells him that she is getting a divorce.

Al’s daughter Peggy has fallen in love with married Fred. Al insists that Fred stop seeing Peggy.

Fred decides to leave town, and gives his father his medals and citations. His father is unable to persuade Fred to stay. After Fred leaves, his father reads the citation for his **Distinguished Flying Cross** as composed by **General Doolittle**.
Post-Viewing Discussion (Continued)

Discuss how Fred uses his own difficult experiences to help his friend, Homer, in his moment of need.

Fred Derry has had to endure the failure of his own marriage. But this does not prevent him from helping his friend Homer to put his misgivings behind him and marry Wilma. Fred offers to be his best man.

*Kid, I will stand up for you until I drop.*

Wilma and Homer

One evening, Wilma visits Homer and tells him that her parents want her to leave Boone City for an extended period to try to forget him. Homer bluntly demonstrates to her how hard life with him would be. What Homer and Wilma find out is that they love each other.

The interwoven nature of personal relationships and life in community is depicted in the film’s final scenes.
William Wyler’s Vision of Culture, Community and Relationships

Every point in the film, director Wyler is showing his post-World War II audiences how the lives of his characters intersect in their families, their community and in society. The strength of solidarity, loyalty and commitment that people had for one another in that era is cherished in our fragmented and divided world of today.
Roman Holiday

Roman Holiday is often cited by film critics and classic film fans alike as one of the greatest films ever made in the romantic comedy genre. We actually witness what genuine love looks like in its essential elements. Many films in this genre depict a romantic chemistry, but rarely do we encounter a romance that takes us to the deep and true elements of authentic love – Trust, Constancy, Loyalty and Understanding.

Audrey Hepburn’s Ann and Gregory Peck’s Joe are expressing love as mutual self-giving and making sacrificial choices for the good of each other.

Storyline

Roman Holiday centers on Princess Ann (Audrey Hepburn), who is unhappy with the stressful life of a princess. While on a state visit to Rome, she runs away and is discovered on the streets by newsman, Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck).

Bradley discovers Ann’s true identity and pretends not to recognize her.

The two, along with Peck’s photographer pal (Eddie Albert), spend a happy, fun-filled day in Rome as the princess gets a taste for life outside the palace walls. Bradley meanwhile plans his sensational story on the princess, until he realizes he is falling in love. Princess Ann is in love with Joe and she must make the difficult choice between her duty to her country and her love for him.
Film Facts: Roman Holiday

Year: 1953

Starring: Gregory Peck, Audrey Hepburn and Eddie Albert

Director: William Wyler

Viewing Time: 118 minutes

Setting: The entire movie was filmed on location in Rome.

Academy Awards (1954)

- Audrey Hepburn, Best Actress in a Leading Role
- Edith Head, Best Costume Design - B & W
- Ian McLellan Hunter and John Dighton (Dalton Trumbo, originally blacklisted, was re-credited in 2003 DVD) for Best Screenplay

William Wyler directed more Oscar winning performances than any other director in Hollywood history. At the American Film Institute Salute to Wyler, Audrey Hepburn credited him with teaching her the basic techniques of acting that helped her throughout her career.

This was the screen debut for Audrey Hepburn. Audrey went on to become an icon of feminine beauty and grace for decades until her death in 1993 and still is today. Gregory Peck, said of her “It was my good luck to be her first screen fellow, to hold out my hand and help her keep her balance while she made everybody in the world fall in love with her.”

In the filming of the scene in front of the Mouth of Truth, there was nothing written into the script about Joe pretending to get his hand attacked. Gregory Peck did this trick on his own and Audrey’s reaction to his improvisation was so good that they kept the clip in the final cut.
Film Critic’s Corner

Men and Women in Love: Getting to the Heart of the Matter

William Wyler’s talent as a director, the truth, imagination, and beauty in the dialogue of Dalton Trumbo’s screenplay, and the realism and charm of Audrey Hepburn as Princess Ann and Gregory Peck as reporter Joe Bradley, are all irreplaceable elements of this enduring film.

The Beauty of Authentic Love

With its compelling theme of self-sacrificing love, we get a chance to see two people who witness to us the images of romantic love that transcend time, trends, and cultural eras.

We see Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck as whole persons going through an interior struggle. We can relate to them as we go through our own struggles for self-discovery, integrity, and wholeness.
William Wyler’s Masterpiece  
A Unique Blend of Reality and Fantasy

The pairing of the princess and the reporter is sheer fantasy, but the choices the two must make and the way they act on these choices are very real and completely believable in a way that is universal. The love that grows between these two is a study in reason and emotions flowing in the same direction.

At Joe’s apartment, Ann and Joe must confront the reality that they will soon part. Joe says, “life isn’t always what one wants, is it?” Ann says simply, “No, it isn’t.” The relentless passage of time hangs over their conversation as an announcement about the princess interrupts the romantic music on the radio. They express their love in an embrace that is deeply symbolic of authentic love.

In the final scene at the press conference, Ann and Joe again give expression to the universal language of authentic love. She tells him of her love in a public statement meant for him alone: “I will cherish my visit here in memory as long as I live.”
Post-Viewing Discussion: *Roman Holiday*

Ann and Joe have a deep and true love for each other, even though they never actually say the words “I love you.”

Discuss the ways that Joe helps Ann to become a more mature woman and she helps him to become a more trustworthy man of integrity.

Explore the hallmarks of authentic love portrayed in *Roman Holiday*.

What makes this film different from other classic romantic comedies?

Compare this film to contemporary romantic comedies.
Notes for Post-Viewing Discussion

We see the depth of the love between Ann and Joe in the film’s final scenes. When they are back in Joe’s apartment, she tells him that she can cook and sew, but she hasn’t “had the chance to do it for anyone.” He says, “I’ll get myself a place with a kitchen.”

They use a different language than most lovers would use to express their total commitment to one another. At the press conference, Ann sees Joe as a member of the press, but she remains calm and confident of his love for her. When she speaks of how she has “faith in relations between people,” she is really telling him how much faith and trust she has in him. Her statement that she will cherish her visit to Rome for the rest of her life is her pledge of lasting love to Joe.

Ann now has the confidence she needs to fulfill her role as princess. Ann shows how much she loves Joe when she tells the Baroness: “Were I not completely aware of my duty to my family and to my country, I would not have come back tonight...or indeed ever again.”

She will make her duties as princess worth the sacrifice. Joe gives up his chance to make a small fortune by telling his boss: “There is no story.” He is also able to persuade his friend, Irving to also do the right thing.

Roman Holiday is unique in the Hollywood history of romantic comedies. Although the two lovers do not end up together at the film’s end, the elements of true and authentic love have been dramatized in an unforgettable way. The audience is in a state of peace and harmony along with the characters in the story.
The Heart Has Its Reasons
Reflections on *Roman Holiday*

Love and Responsibility

Audrey Hepburn’s Princess Ann says to the man she loves, “I will cherish my visit here in memory as long as I live” and we witness the dramatic expression of deep and lasting love.

The film’s lasting appeal goes way beyond the charm, personality, and beauty of leading lady Audrey Hepburn. The enduring popularity of this 1950s romantic comedy says something profound about the human condition and how our imagination - even in our postmodern world - can be inspired by the *Love and Responsibility* shown by this couple.
MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON

(1939)

Directed by Frank Capra
Frank Capra had all the ingredients for a successful film: a powerful screenplay, an excellent cast that included Jimmy Stewart in the lead role of Jefferson Smith, and Jean Arthur as Saunders the woman who helps him become a statesman instead of a hapless politician.

Storyline

When the death of a senator creates a vacancy, James Taylor, a corrupt politician whose machine runs the state, behind the scenes, appoints Jeff Smith to fill the appointment. Taylor thinks the idealistic young Smith will be easily manipulated once he gets to the Senate. Joseph Paine, senior senator from the state, was the best friend of Jeff Smith’s father. Paine has been built up by Taylor to be the “Silver Knight,” a politician who appears to be above corruption. Unfortunately, Paine has sold out his ideals in exchange for political perks and power.

When Smith realizes he is just filling a chair, he persuades Saunders to help him introduce a bill for a National Boys Camp. The Taylor machine works to have Smith expelled from the Senate. With the help of Saunders, Smith conducts a filibuster. By directly confronting Paine with the truth, Jeff is able to rekindle the conscience of the senior senator.
Film Facts: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*

**Year:** 1939

**Starring:** Jimmy Stewart, Jean Arthur, Claude Rains

**Director:** Frank Capra

**Screenwriter:** Sidney Buchman (screenplay), Lewis R. Foster (story)

**Viewing Time:** 129 Minutes

**Studio:** Columbia Pictures

**Academy Award:** Best Writing, Original Story, Lewis R. Foster

**Academy Award Nominations:**

- Best Actor in a Leading Role, James Stewart
- Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Claude Rains
- Best Director, Frank Capra
- Best Music, Scoring, Dimitri Tiomkin
- Best Picture (Columbia)
- Best Writing, Screenplay, Sidney Buchman

**Jimmy Stewart as the “Common Man”**

A film critic for the *Nation* Magazine gave this prophetic assessment of Stewart’s performance when the film came out in 1939:

“Now he is mature and gives a difficult part, with many nuances, moments of tragicomic impact and he is able to do more than play isolated scenes effectively. He shows the strength of the character through experience. In the end he is so forceful that his victory is thoroughly credible. One can only hope that after this success, Mr. Stewart in Hollywood will remain as uncorrupted as Mr. Smith in Washington.”
Film Critic’s Corner

Jimmy Stewart on the “Tiny Moments” in Film We Never Forget

Several years after his retirement, America’s most beloved leading man reflected on the enduring power of the ‘film moment’ to stay in the memory of the audience even when the details of the film may be forgotten.

“The fact that people remember these tiny moments - when they don’t necessarily even remember the name of the picture or the plot- just shows that people remember the abstract idea or theme through the human moment in film. They don’t remember it abstractly; they remember it because it had some sort of emotional effect on them.”

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington in Film History

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* opened in October, 1939, a few weeks after war had broken out in Europe. Hitler invaded Poland on September first. Two days later England and France declared war on Germany. Frank Capra vividly describes what people were feeling in that terrible moment,

“The speed and light of Hitler’s blitzkrieg terrified the free world.”

Although Stewart did not receive the Academy Award that year for Best Actor, his performance was so compelling that the newspapers devoted more space to him than to the winner.
Capra won his third Oscar for Best Director during the filming of *Mr. Smith*. However, as he and screenwriter Sidney Buchman became immersed in the atmosphere of Washington, D.C. to prepare for the filming in the fall of 1938, Capra could feel the thick clouds of war descending on the nation. Capra began to worry that his film would be viewed as an unsuitable *satire about government officials* because the threat of war was hanging over the whole world. To gain direction and inspiration, Capra imitated his hero, Jefferson Smith. He visited the Lincoln Memorial, where, along with other tourists, he read the words of the Gettysburg Address. Next to him a young boy was reading Lincoln’s words aloud to his grandfather. All doubt left him. Capra described his feelings in his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*,

“The soul of our film would be anchored in Lincoln. Our Jefferson Smith would be a young Abe Lincoln, tailored to the rail-splitter’s simplicity, compassion, ideals, humor, and unswerving moral courage under pressure. And back we went to Hollywood to get to work on *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. The panic was over.”

Sidney Buchman was one of the most successful screenwriters in Hollywood during the 1930’s and 1940’s. He received an Academy Award nomination for his screen play on *Mr. Smith* (1939), and an Oscar for *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941).

About the casting of Claude Rains as the “Silver Knight, Capra said: “*He had the artistry, power, and depth to play the soul-tortured idealist whose feet had turned to clay.*”

Director Capra describes his leading man and leading lady, Jimmy Stewart and Jean Arthur, as a “*made-to-order natural team—the simon-pure idealist, and the cynical, fed-up-with-politics Washington secretary with a dormant heart of gold.*”
Civic Friendship, Solidarity and the Common Good in *Mr. Smith*

*Public virtue cannot exist in a nation without private virtue, and public virtue is the only foundation of republics.*

– John Adams

Six decades after its release, *Mr. Smith* was chosen by over ninety percent of both Republican and Democrat classic movie fans as their all-time favorite film with a political theme. The results of this Turner Classic Movies survey, conducted in the election season of 2004, are an indication of the longing for national unity many of us carry in our hearts. Whatever our political affiliations may be, civic friendship, solidarity and the common good are cherished by Americans across the generations. Jimmy Stewart as Mr. Smith learns and practices the essential civic virtues and principles of statesmanship that bring human flourishing for a free people.

When Jeff Smith confronts Senator Paine (Claude Rains) with the words, “*I guess this is just another lost cause, Mr. Paine*” his humility and fortitude awaken the corrupted politician’s deadened conscience. Jeff Smith is showing his fellow Americans how to behave as engaged citizens in overcoming faction and division in a free society. The lesson came home to the people of France as they watched Hitler’s Nazi armies invade their country. Three years after *Mr. Smith* premiered; the nation was in the midst of WWII. Capra’s wife sent the following account to her husband in the army overseas as recounted in *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 4, 1942:

**Last Cheers of French Audience for *Smith Goes to Washington***

Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, chosen by French theatres as the final English-Language film to be shown before the recent Nazi-ordered countrywide ban on American and British films went in to effect, was roundly cheered by French audiences.

When the ban became known, the French people flocked to the cinemas to get seats for the last showing of an American film. In many provincial theatres, Frank Capra’s, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, in the original English version, was chosen for the occasion and a special farewell gala performance was staged.

Cheers and acclamation punctuated the famous speech of the young senator on man’s rights and dignity. It was as though the joys, suffering, love and hatred, the hopes and wishes of an entire people who value freedom above everything, found expression for the last time.
Post-Viewing Discussion: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*

What **civic virtues** are seen in the conversation between Saunders and Jeff at the Lincoln Memorial?

What **qualities** in Jeff’s character come out as Saunders persuades him to stay in Washington and fight for the causes of justice and truth?

Jeff: *I'm getting out of this town so fast. Away from all the words, the monuments, the whole rotten show.*

Saunders: *I see…. What will you tell the kids back home?*

Jeff: *The truth. They might as well find out now as later.*

Saunders: You *can't quit now. Not you. They aren't all Taylors and Paines in Washington. That kind just throw big shadows, that's all. You didn't just have faith in Paine or any other living man. You had faith in something bigger than that. You had plain, decent, every day, common rightness, and this country could use some of that.*

*Remember the first day you got here? Remember what you said about Mr. Lincoln? You said he was sitting up there, waiting for someone to come along. You were right. He was waiting for a man who could see his job and sail into it, that's what he was waiting for. -- A man who could tear into the Taylors and root them out into the open. I think he was waiting for you, Jeff. He knows you can do it, so do I.*

Jeff: *Do what, Saunders?*

Saunders: You *just make up your mind you're not gonna quit, and I'll tell you what. I've been thinking about it all the way back here. It's a forty-foot dive into a tub of water, but I think you can do it.*
Post-Viewing Discussion: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Continued)

What civic virtues do we see in the filibuster sequence that could bring greater civic unity in our public life today?

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**Civility and Respect**

Jeff’s fellow senators are beginning to listen to him.

**Truthfulness**

The fundamental honesty in Jeff’s character enables him to confront Senator Paine.

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Sharing a vision for the common good – Jeff is learning how to articulate his vision:

“It seemed like a pretty good idea to me to get boys out of crowded cities and stuffy basements for a couple of months, out of the year and build their bodies and minds for man-sized jobs – because those boys are going to be behind these desks. Getting boys from all over the country, of all nationalities and ways of living – getting them together. Let them find out what makes different people tick the way they do – because I wouldn’t give you two cents for all your fancy rules if behind them they didn’t have a little bit of plain ordinary everyday kindness, and a little looking out for the other fella too. It’s just the blood and bone and sinew of this democracy that some great men handed down to the human race – that’s all!”
Post-Viewing Discussion (continued)

Jimmy Stewart’s Jeff Smith and Jean Arthur’s Saunders

Discuss how the friendship of Jeff and Saunders grows into love as they come to share a common vision

Aristotle said that the people in a *virtuous* friendship will have a mutual desire for each other’s well-being. True friendships develop over time and are strengthened through hardships. True friends help each other to grow in virtue and demonstrate self-giving love. A *virtuous* friendship is long-lasting and reciprocal.

Saunders helps Jeff to remember his mission

“You can’t quit now. Not you. They aren’t all Taylors and Paines in Washington. That kind just throw big shadows, that’s all. You didn’t just have faith in Paine or any other living man. You had faith in something bigger than that. You had plain, decent, every day common rightness, and this country could use some of that.”
When civil discourse is lost, political ideology and demonizing of one’s political enemies takes over. The various conversations that take place in Mr. Smith give us some valuable clues for renewing our civil discourse on a fragmented political landscape. Consider the ways that the reporters in an early scene do Jeff Smith a favor by telling him what they really think of him. Reflect on the comments of real life reporter of the day, H. V. Kaltenborn, playing himself in the filibuster scene. He tells the radio audience that anything can happen in the Senate because Jeff’s fellow senators are finally beginning to listen to him.

*Without the standard of truthfulness in our public conversations, we cannot trust one another in the work of solving the nation’s problems.*
The Big Country

*The Big Country* is a story that embodies many of life’s contradictions. Gregory Peck, co-producer with William Wyler, spoke in later years about the difficulties caused by overnight script changes during production. History is the best judge of the quality of any film and any difficulties with the script seem unnoticeable today. William Wyler had the ability to connect his characters intimately to the audience. His confidence as an artist and a director is reflected in a comment he made in 1947: *You have to have the passion to tell the story, and you have to know how to tell it with style.*

**Storyline**

Gregory Peck, as Jim McKay, heads west to marry Pat Terrill (Carroll Baker), the daughter of wealthy rancher Major Terrill (Charles Bickford). The Major is embroiled in a feud with Rufus Hannassey (Burl Ives) over the rights to the “Big Muddy.” Julie Maragon (Jean Simmons) had inherited the property from her grandfather, and she allows both clans full access to the water for their cattle. The Major’s right-hand man Steve Leech (Charlton Heston) is jealous of Jim because he also loves Pat. Steve is constantly trying to engage Jim in a fight.

When Rufus challenges the Major at Jim and Pat’s engagement party, Jim is made aware of the seriousness of the “Big Muddy” dispute. He is disturbed when the Major describes Rufus and his clan as “nothing but animals.” Deciding to explore the country on his own, Jim comes upon Julie Maragon at the Big Muddy. In the course of their visit he buys the precious land from her. He promises her that both clans will have access to the water. Soon Jim realizes that Pat shares her father’s individualistic view about the land and that their engagement must end. Steve Leech in the meantime is beginning to see that the Major is using him to destroy Rufus. There is a “duel” between Jim and Buck which results in Buck’s death. Jim confronts Rufus with the truth that this is a “personal feud” that must not take any more lives. Rufus sees that Jim is right and engages in a final conflict with the Major, after which the common good and peace of the community is restored.
Film Facts: *The Big Country*

**Year:** 1958

**Starring:** Gregory Peck, Jean Simmons, Carroll Baker, Charlton Heston, Burl Ives, Charles Bickford

**Director:** William Wyler

**Screenwriters:** James R. Webb, Sy Bartlett, Robert Wyler

**Viewing Time:** 165 Minutes

**Academy Award:** Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Burl Ives

In his autobiography *In the Arena*, Charlton Heston describes his impression of William Wyler as a director: *Off the set, he was a warm and delightful man; we remained friends until his death, more than 20 years later. Shooting a film, he was very different. He was abstracted, digging inside himself for the scene until he got to the root of it, then giving it to the actors.*

While he was playing the character of Steve Leach in *The Big Country*, William Wyler decided that he wanted Heston to play the lead for *Ben-Hur*, a role that brought him the Oscar for Best Actor.

*Willy Wyler announced that I would play Judah Ben-Hur. Much later, he told me he decided that while we were still shooting Big Country, weeks before he finally agreed to direct the picture. That was very like him; he weighed his creative choices carefully and privately, consulting no one. Casting the role was the easier exercise; directing Ben-Hur would be a staggering task - physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting.*
Film Critics Corner

The Big Country in Film History

Director William Wyler, and star, Gregory Peck, having enjoyed a great success in their collaboration for Roman Holiday in 1953, decided that they would collaborate as co-producers several years later for The Big Country.

The Brilliance of Motion Picture Art: Dialogue, Direction and Performance

The complex social nature of our human condition is seen in the intertwined lives of each character in this ensemble cast. The performance of Burl Ives as Rufus is original and brilliant, winning the folk singer turned actor the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in 1959. The final scenes are unforgettable: Rufus is vainly trying to maintain his crumbling world by conducting a duel between his son Buck (an outstanding performance by Chuck Connors), and Peck’s character, Jim McKay. Rufus has failed to set an example for Buck or give him guidance. He resorts to verbal put-downs and threats of violence to control Buck. When he is forced to shoot Buck to prevent him from killing Jim unfairly, the audience sympathizes with a man who must choose between justice and the life of his son, a man whose bad decisions have made such a choice inevitable.

Charlton Heston notes that the fight scene between himself and Gregory Peck was intended by William Wyler to convey the futility of violence that comes from the vice of pride we all observe in human nature. In his autobiography, Heston comments:

We worked through it doggedly, blow by blow in the stifling August heat of the prairie for two endless days. At one point, Willy moved the camera up on a ridge two hundred yards away. I thought I must be hallucinating; I knew enough about lenses by then to see we’d be the size of ants on the screen. This was Willy’s point, of course—the insignificance of two tiny figures struggling in the dust of this vast land. In the end, there was no winner.
Civic Friendship, Solidarity and the Common Good in *The Big Country*

The worldview of Major Terrill and his ruthless use of power, which he disguises as ‘law and order,’ are clear from the beginning of the film. Jim has a moral responsibility to challenge the Major’s beliefs and unjust actions. He explains to the Major that his riding on the Hannasseys is not a matter of honor or of protection of the innocent; it is a matter of pure aggression. *Major, you’re riding on the Hannasseys for reasons of your own. Not because of anything that happened to me.*

At one point in the story Jim says to Pat, *I'm not going to go on living in the middle of a civil war.* With this comment, Gregory Peck’s character is speaking the truth that the audience knows as well; it is not possible to live a good life in a community plagued with constant conflict.

With his decision to buy the Big Muddy from Julie, Jim sees a way to find a place for himself in “The Big Country” and simultaneously serves the common good of the community.

He tells Julie that he will allow access to the water for all the neighbors, including the Hannasseys and the Terrills. Throughout the film Jim McKay resolutely avoids unnecessary conflicts, but when Julie is kidnapped, he knows he must take action. He risks his life in defying Major Terrill and riding past Terrill’s men into Blanco Canyon.

One enduring strength of *The Big Country* is its classical presentation of the human condition. The film reflects the common human experience: we live *simultaneously in three spheres of life — family, community, and society.*
Post-Viewing Discussion: Civic Virtue and the Common Good in *The Big Country*

Three Elements of the Common Good in Community and Society

*The Big Country* dramatizes the essential link between personal virtue practiced by individuals and the civic virtue required for the common good of a community in civil society. Three elements commonly associated with the care and defense of the common good are seen in the film’s events. *The first element* is the formation of conscience and development of civic virtue in each person. The second element is the joining together of enough individuals in the community who know they are essential; citizens who work in solidarity and make sacrifices necessary for the sake of the common good. The third element is the strength, resolve, and determination of citizens to maintain the common good over time. This third element is a challenge for citizens in any community; it requires the practice of civic virtue in daily life beyond crisis mode.

The First Element: Formation of conscience and civic virtue in each and every person

Discuss and contrast the characters of Jim McKay and Steve Leech.

Steve Leech and the other men have blindly followed the Major’s orders, but with the courageous act of Jim McKay, opposing the Major and entering Blanco Canyon to rescue Julie, Steve sees the Major’s true character and finally stands up to him.

> There’s not much you could ask that I wouldn’t try to do… I just don’t hold with you on this. I just can’t do it, Major. I can’t.” “you call me whatever you want but I’m not beatin’ up any more men for you...

Steve’s example in turn affects the rest of the men, and they see the Major in a new light. When Steve and the men follow the Major, they are intending to protect him, not perform acts of violence Wyler conveys this distinction; the men do not support his decision. Terrill has lost both the authority over and respect of Steve and his men.
Post-Viewing Discussion (Continued)

First Element: Formation of conscience and civic virtue in each, and every person

Jim McKay and Steve Leech

The worldview of Major Terrill and his ruthless use of power, which he disguises as ‘law and order,’ are clear from the beginning of the film. Jim accepts the moral responsibility to challenge the Major’s beliefs and unjust actions.

Early in the film Jim explains to the Major that his riding on the Hannasseys is not a matter of honor or of protection of the innocent; it is a matter of pure aggression. Major, you’re riding on the Hannasseys for reasons of your own. Not because of anything that happened to me. At one point in the story Jim says to Pat, I'm not going to go on living in the middle of a civil war. With this comment, Gregory Peck’s character is speaking the truth that the audience knows as well; it is not possible to live a good life in a community plagued with constant conflict.

Pat Terrill and Julie Maragon

Compare the character qualities of Pat and Julie.

How do these two women differ in their awareness of, and willingness to serve, the common good?
Post-Viewing Discussion (Continued)

The Second Element – The gathering of enough individuals in the community committed to sacrificing for the sake of the common good.

Discuss and contrast the character qualities of Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey.

When an appeal to the common good is made to them, how does each man respond?

In the climactic final scenes, Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey are both ultimately held morally accountable for their actions. Throughout the film, Major Terrill uses his prestige as a retired military officer in the Civil War, and his position as a wealthy landowner, to take advantage of the absence of law enforcement. He makes his own law.

Rufus Hannassey sees through the Major and challenges him in a high point of the film. Unfortunately, Hannassey cannot see in his own character what he sees so clearly in the Major.

The case of Rufus Hannassey is more tragic than the Major’s. Once Buck dies, Rufus takes to heart the truths that Jim McKay has spoken: the violence that has taken lives and destroyed the peace is nothing more meaningful than a “personal feud between two selfish, ruthless, vicious old men.” Rufus sees that what Jim has said is true and he goes to confront Major Terrill in a last fight.
Post-Viewing Discussion (Continued)

The Third Element - The strength and determination of ordinary citizens to work for the common good must be maintained in a free society.

When Julie Maragon’s grandfather owned the Big Muddy, both the Terrill and the Hannassey clans had access to all the water they needed for their cattle. The film’s events make clear that Julie’s grandfather had not only ownership of the Big Muddy, but the *moral authority* to maintain the peace between the two factions.

Jim McKay resolves to buy the Big Muddy from Julie, not only to work it for himself, but also to work for the common good of the community.

Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey, each in their own way, disrupt the good efforts of Jim and Julie to bring peace and order to the community. Clearly the task of defending and maintaining the common good must *continue on after the deaths of these two men.*

Scenes in *The Big Country* give evidence that even if events bring peace for a time, enough engaged citizens *must continue the struggle to maintain the common good over time and in every season.*
Reflections on Civic Virtue & Care for the Common Good in 
*The Big Country*

What is right and true is also eternal and does not begin or end written statutes.  

~Cicero

Law is nothing other than a certain ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by the person who has the care of the community.  

~Thomas Aquinas

*The Big Country* portrays the essential link between personal virtue practiced by individuals and the civic virtue required for the common good of a community in civil society. Fundamental elements associated with achievement of the common good are seen in the film’s events. Gregory Peck’s character Jim McKay takes on the critical role of *the person who has the care of the community.*

People with deeply diverse opinions must come together for the sake of the common good.

In *The Big Country* we see two major characters, Major Terrill and Rufus Hannassey, who are forced to confront the disconnect between the public good they claim to support and the private self-interest they are determined to protect. The two characters, brilliantly played by Charles Bickford and Burl Ives, fail to rise above their own self-interest and ambitions.

On the other hand, the dynamics in the relationship between Gregory Peck’s Jim McKay and Charlton Heston’s Steve Leech dramatizes an essential element for preserving the common good in the public square. Heston’s character *must face up to the reality that his mentor, Major Terrill, is using his power for evil purposes.* As the story reaches its climax, Steve Leech now shares with Jim McKay the same understanding of the common good.
One Final Note: These five great films created by Frank Capra and William Wyler can be shared with young people in virtually any social or educational setting. The transcendent goods and virtues of the better side of human nature are presented so winsomely that they appeal to virtually any viewer if properly introduced.

For questions regarding the implementation of EGI’s classic film study guides, please contact:

Onalee McGraw, PhD, Director
Educational Guidance Institute
Email: egiatthemovies@gmail.com
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