

# Evangelization CULTURE

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Featuring **Onalee McGraw** in  
*Seeking Truth and Renewing Culture through the Art of Classic Film*

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# *Seeking Truth and Renewing Culture through the Art of Classic Film*

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*Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it.<sup>1</sup>*

—C.S. LEWIS

*The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us.<sup>2</sup>*

—ST. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

## CLASSIC MOVIES AS VESSELS OF TRANSCENDENT REALITY

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis shows us how classic storytelling can carry us past the “watchful dragons”<sup>3</sup> of ideology and darkness. He asks us to think of ourselves as a “fleet of ships sailing in formation.” Two things, he says, will make the voyage of life a success: first, “if the ships do not collide and get in one another’s way,” and secondly, “if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order.”<sup>4</sup> The great classic films of Hollywood’s Golden Age allow us to “sail in formation” with the winds of God’s natural law in our sails. They give us a way to join together in solidarity and community and explore the transcendental realities of our common home.

Having piloted and developed curriculum for classic film study for over two decades, I have witnessed firsthand how classic films transport us along an Aristotelian road that is both accessible and inclusive. Along this way we step together into a formal or informal “classroom” where we can engage in deep conversations about moral truth. The very best of these films supply a cinematic metaphysics of human nature as God made it, dramatized in dialogue, direction, and performance. Believers and atheists, aspiring evangelizers and searching “nones,” with God-given imagination, will, memory, and reason, can get past the watchful dragons—the *isms* that pervade our postmodern culture. The *isms* on the one side of this centuries-long debate—like materialism and fatalism—deny our powers of free will and moral choice; those on the other side, subjectivism and radical individualism, insist we have the power to define ourselves and reality. The beauty of classic cinema elevates us to a higher plane as we engage each other, moving to understanding, solidarity, and moral action.

The greatest of the classic films presuppose a moral universe where our power to know, love, and do the good is at the center of the drama. From the mid-1930s to the early 1960s, this art form occupied the center stage of our popular culture. God has placed in us a universal yearning for the transcendent. From informal gatherings at coffee shops and college campuses, to structured parish events, high school and college classrooms, and even prison ministries, classic films elevate, educate, and inspire all at the same time. One thing is essential: allowing the films themselves to bear the weight of truth as they draw us in. We are *participants*, not mere *observers* being entertained.

"DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?"  
IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946) AND A RAISIN IN THE SUN (1961)

One of the biggest obstacles to finding truth in the universal, Thomistic sense today is the loss of *shared cultural meaning*. The most important things in life are often boxed up into separate containers marked "my personal truth." Our culture tells us that everything is personal, everything is political, and everything is only in the moment. What films like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *A Raisin in the Sun* do is carry the *philosophia perennis* of Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Aquinas, and Jacques Maritain along with them through the characters in the story. We are members of the community along with the Baileys in Bedford Falls, and we are invited guests into the Chicago apartment where the Younger family lives. Two pieces of dialogue from these films illustrate this power of dialogue and image to convey shared meaning. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, Clarence tells George, "You see George, you really did have a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to throw it away?" And in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama Younger describes the transformation of her son, Walter (Sidney Poitier's very best performance), in the moral choices he has made that day: "He came into his manhood . . . like a rainbow after the rain." What is meant by the words "wonderful life" and "manhood" is indisputable to each one of us, no matter how diverse in life experience and sensibilities we as viewers may be.

THE ROLE OF THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION CODE  
AND DOUBLE INDEMNITY (1944)

The inescapable presence of a moral order in the films of the classic era—taken in by sensory experience and passing through to our imagination with shared meaning—is not an accident or a coincidence. These films were produced in the period from 1934 to the early 1960s, when the Motion Picture Production Code was operational. The Code was developed by Fr. Daniel Lord SJ with the support of Archbishop Mundelein of Chicago and other bishops. The Code had the metaphysics of the natural law built into it, as seen in this introductory clause: "By natural law is understood the law which is written in the hearts of all mankind, the great underlying principles of right and justice dictated by conscience."<sup>5</sup>

Father Lord explains that motion pictures are an art form uniquely suitable for a mass audience: "The motion pictures, which are the most popular of modern arts for the masses, have their moral quality from the minds which produce them and from their effects on the moral lives and reactions of their audiences. . . . The exhibitor's theatres are built for the masses, for the cultivated and the rude, mature and immature . . . law-respecting and criminal."<sup>6</sup>

The deep influence of the Code on filmmaking in Hollywood, especially in the 1940s, is illustrated by the making of *Double Indemnity*. In its production, it took eight years for the filmmakers and the Production



Code Administration to come to terms. Code officials demanded that the character of Phyllis, played brilliantly by Barbara Stanwyck, be seen as having a minimal capacity for moral choice. And although he commits two murders, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray in his finest performance) redeems himself by taking moral responsibility for his evil actions.<sup>7</sup> Behind the scenes is a rich story of how a forgettable work of pulp fiction became the definitive *film noir* tale, unfolding the dark side of our human condition.

*THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES (1946) AND ROMAN HOLIDAY (1953)*

As Bishop Karol Wojtyła (St. John Paul the Great) knew from his experiences in Krakow, matters of human nature, love, sex, marriage, and family are fundamental moral battlegrounds. He taught that “love between man and woman cannot be built without sacrifices and self-denial.”<sup>8</sup> How can essential truths about men and women in love be conveyed in our toxic moral climate? William Wyler—whose performers won more Oscars than any other director of the era—knew how to make his audience fall in love with his characters. Consider Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in *Roman Holiday*. As Princess Ann and Joe Bradley, these gifted performers show us the meaning of self-giving love. They model what John Paul II says in *Love & Responsibility*: “To give oneself means just that: to limit one’s freedom on behalf of another.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the greatest of Wyler’s films is *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the Oscar winner for Best Picture of 1946. Wyler enlisted disabled veteran Harold Russel to play Homer Parish. The narrative focus is on Homer and his two friends and how, as returning vets of World War II, they adjust to civilian life. Homer and his childhood sweetheart Wilma struggle, as he has lost his hands and doubts that she can both love and care for him all their lives. This love story asks one of the timeless questions about love and life, and it answers it through the art of the cinema. Pope Benedict XVI in his address to artists speaks to the mysterious powers of art to reach the human heart: “Art, in all its forms, at the point where it encounters the great questions of our existence, the fundamental themes that give life its meaning, can take on a religious quality, thereby turning into a path of profound inner reflection and spirituality.”<sup>10</sup>

*IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT (1934)  
AND LOVE WITH THE PROPER STRANGER (1963)*

These two films work so well as a “double feature” for exploring the timeless story of men and women in love and coming to grips with postmodern distortions involving sex, love, marriage, and family. They reliably earn critical praise from two completely opposing groups: those who *applaud* the sexual revolution and those who *deeply regret* it. Made thirty years apart, they weave together the social norms, sexual mores, and family/community dynamics that shape the culture of a society in any era. Consider George Weigel’s explanation of the historic flow of culture: “History is driven, over the long haul, by culture, by what men and women honor, cherish, and worship; by what societies deem to be true and good.”<sup>11</sup> In our postmodern world, classic films are providentially still cherished and deemed “true and good” by persons across the social and cultural spectrum. *Love with the Proper Stranger*, made on the cusp of the sexual revolution, features the contemplation of an abortion, and in a pivotal scene, abortion is seen as harmful and evil. If the college course I taught on the natural law in classic film is any indication, young people today welcome opportunities to explore the nature of love between a man and a woman in the mode of classic movie storytelling.<sup>12</sup>





BUILDING CIVIC FRIENDSHIP AND CARE FOR THE COMMON GOOD WITH  
MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (1939) AND 12 ANGRY MEN (1957)

Our efforts to engage in conversations with others about the way things are in the world take place in a time of deepening political and moral divisions. But through the arts, human beings together face the big moral questions of the universal human drama. As Bishop Fulton Sheen once said, in our day “religion has moved . . . down into the subconsciousness . . . where the dramatists work on it.”<sup>13</sup> Two great films, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *12 Angry Men*, allow us to explore human nature as we live it out as social beings in political community. As stated in the *Catechism*, “Realizing the common good calls for a continually renewed *conversion* of the social partners.”<sup>14</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* confirms: “The political community and public authority are based on human nature and therefore . . . belong to an order established by God.”<sup>15</sup>

The truth of the natural law concerning the human condition is also supported by research in the science of neurology. Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has developed his moral foundations theory from neurological data drawn from people across cultures and tribal allegiances. Haidt’s research documents innate understandings of moral goods across tribal boundaries—goods such as justice, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity.<sup>16</sup> Like the natural law we see dramatized in the great cinema classics, Haidt’s moral foundations theory simply rings true to most reasonable people, whether atheists or believers. In our Spotlight study guide for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, we built Haidt’s moral foundations theory into the lesson plan.<sup>17</sup> A pivotal moment of *conversion* occurs when Jimmy Stewart as Senator Jeff Smith confronts the corrupt senator played brilliantly by Claude Rains: “I guess this is just another lost cause, Mr. Payne.” A moral standard for good over evil is visible in this scene to all viewers, regardless of their politics.

To be sure, classic cinema with its insights into the base and the divine can serve as a meaningful tool of evangelization. St. John Paul reminds us precisely why our mission to evangelize matters: “What is at stake is the dignity of the human person, whose defense and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator, and to whom the men and women at every moment of history are strictly and responsibly in debt.”<sup>18</sup>



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—ST. JOHN PAUL II

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 1952), 8.

<sup>2</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman Reader website, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/chapter4-2.html>.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1982), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Television and Juvenile Delinquency: Report of the Committee on the Judiciary* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1955), 88.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas P. Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 349.

<sup>7</sup> See Onalee McGraw, “Double Indemnity: Classic

Realism in ‘Code-Sealed’ Hollywood,” *Classic Films and Our Common World*, <https://dronaleemcgraw.wixsite.com/classicfilms/post/double-indemnity-classic-realism-in-code-sealed-hollywood>.

<sup>8</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 208.

<sup>9</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Artists,” address, Vatican website, November 21, 2009, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20091121\\_artisti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091121_artisti.html).

<sup>11</sup> George Weigel, “Europe’s Problem—and Ours,” *First Things*, February 2004, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2004/02/europes-problemmdashand-ours>.

<sup>12</sup> See Onalee McGraw, *Men and Women in Love: The View from Classic Hollywood* (Educational Guidance Institute, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> The Catholic World, “Guilt | Bishop Fulton J. Sheen,” YouTube video, June 23, 2014, <https://youtu.be/8gfkCSgaU1Y>.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1916, Vatican website, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM).

<sup>15</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1920 (*Gaudium et Spes* 74 para. 3), Vatican website, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM).

<sup>16</sup> See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> See Onalee McGraw, *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington: Defending Justice and Truth in the Public Square* (Educational Guidance Institute, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1929 (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 47), Vatican website, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM).