

Big Fish Film Summary

Big Fish by Tim Burton

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Context

Many people have heard stories from their parents and grandparents growing up; they understand that sometimes truth and fiction become so closely related that they cannot be told apart, even by the storytellers themselves. Will goes through this experience with his father, Ed, who has been telling tall stories all Will's life, or at least when Ed was around.

Now that Ed is dying, Will is committed to finding out the truth. He begins to ask questions of everyone around so that he can discover the truth. When he meets Jenny, Will finally learns where his father was all those years and all the wonderful things he did for others.

When Ed finally dies, Will tells him a story of how it happens so that he can go in peace. At the funeral, all the people Will always thought were make believe come to show their love for Ed. Finally, we hear Will's son telling his friends stories about Ed and realize that Ed will be immortal in his stories.

Tim Burton directs *Big Fish*. Although he got a start working at Disney, Paul Reubens (better known as Pee-Wee Herman) saw creative genius in Burton and hand-picked him to direct his first feature-length film, *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985). Burton went on to direct *Beetle Juice* (1988), *Batman* (1989), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Batman Returns* (1992).

Ewan McGregor gives an exceptional performance as a young Ed in *Big Fish*. Although the other characters have some importance, they are mainly set as a backdrop to Ed's search for himself and the type of life he wants to live. Before *Big Fish*, McGregor was cast in many small parts, but after his 1994 work in *Shallow Grave* followed by the success of *The Pillow Book* and *Trainspotting*, McGregor became a major player as an internationally known actor.

Albert Finney began in Shakespearean performances before taking up film. His exceptional performances include roles in *Tom Jones* (1963), *Two for the Road* (1967), *Scrooge* (1970), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) and *Miller's Crossing* (1990).

Big Fish was loved by audiences. It was nominated for one Oscar for Best Music, Original Score for Danny Elfman. The Golden Globes, though, nominated the film for four awards: Best Motion Picture - Musical or Comedy; Best Original Score - Motion Picture for Danny Elfman; Best Original Song - Motion Picture for Eddie Vedder for the song "Man of the Hour"; and Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role in a Motion Picture for Albert Finney.

Summary and Analysis

Big Fish is the story of a father's tales to his son, and the film evaluates the line between fact and fiction. As the film starts, Ed Bloom is telling his son Will a story about catching the biggest catfish in the world on the day Will was born. Viewers watch as he tells the story over the years as Will grows up. Finally, he tells it at Will's wedding reception. Will gets upset and walks out. His mom reassures him that it's still his night, even though his dad is telling the story to everyone. He points out that sometimes the only way to catch an uncatchable woman is to offer her a wedding ring.

Outside, Will yells at Ed for telling his stories and taking all the attention for himself. Will knows that the story isn't true. After that, the two don't speak for three years. Then one day, Will gets a letter from his mother telling him that his father is now sick.

The story then goes back to Will's childhood, and Ed tells him the story of a Witch. Ed and several other boys were out that night looking for the Witch with the magical glass eye. They dare Ed to go in and get the eye, so he goes. He meets her at the door and shows him her eye.

Back in the present, Will and his pregnant wife arrive at his childhood home to see his father, who is dying of cancer. Upstairs, Will sees his father for the first time in three years and tries to get him to eat something. Ed tells Will that he's in for a surprise, since having a child changes everything. Ed says you try to corrupt a child with nonsense for years, and he still turns out fine. Ed tells Will that this isn't how he'll die, because the Witch's eye showed him his death. He refuses to share the knowledge with Will, though, because he wants to keep it a surprise.

Will wants to talk to Ed about the true things in his life. He wants to know his father for who he truly was. Ed tells Will that he's tired of lying in bed dying. Then Will begins to remember when he was sick, and his father told him that one time he had to stay in bed for three years. The audience watches the story that Ed told; in the story, he begins to grow up too quickly and has to read the encyclopedias when he stays in bed. During his reading, he finds out that goldfish will grow bigger in a larger bowl. Ed decides that he must be meant for bigger things. When he quits growing, he begins to make a name for himself playing football and basketball.

Then, the people in his town ask him to talk to a giant to get it to move on. He goes to a cave by the lake to meet it. Since Ed knows that the giant can't kill him, he's not scared. The giant tries to send him back, but he begs to be dinner rather than a coward. The giant says he doesn't want to eat anyone. Ed tells the giant that perhaps he's not too big but that the town is too small. They get the giant ready for the city, and he and Ed set off together after a celebration by the town.

The giant and Ed take different roads at one point, and Ed is stuck in the darkness of the deep woods. Finally, he arrives at a small town where people have been waiting on



him. They're excited that he made it earlier than planned. Ed finally gets to meet a poet from Ashton who has been gone for years. They talk together about life.

As Ed and the poet sit beside the lake, Ed sees something huge in the water, and Ed tries to catch a woman in the lake. A little girl comes by and tells him that the woman he saw was actually an uncatchable fish. She also points out that when they get older, the ten-year difference in their ages won't be much at all.

That night, there is a big party in the town. The poet, Norman, has written a poem and reads it to all the young women. Then, everyone gets up and dances. The women think Ed's quite a catch, but Ed tells them that he has to leave. They don't want him to leave, and though he doesn't expect to find a better place, he has to leave for now. He promises Jenny that he'll come back someday when he's really supposed to. The town watches sadly as he leaves. Back on the road, Ed finally finds the giant again.

At the dinner table in the present time, Will tells his parents about Josephine's success in her career. Ed tells her that in the jungle, the parrots speak only French. They don't speak about religion, though, because you never know who you might offend. She's actually been to the Congo, and Will makes sure to mention this.

Later that night, Josephine comes up to talk to Ed. He tells her that sometimes he dreams about things that are going to happen. He once had a dream that a crow told him his aunt would die. His parents told him that he was just dreaming, but his aunt was dead the next morning. Soon after, he dreamed his father would die, and then his father walked around terrified. Though he was fine, the milkman died on the porch; that was apparently his real father.

Josephine asks to take a picture of Ed, and he agrees. She asks to see pictures of his wedding to his wife, but they didn't have a proper wedding. His wife was actually engaged to marry someone else. The audience returns to watching Ed's story.

After leaving Specter, Ed stops at a circus, and the giant gets job. At the circus, he also sees the woman he's going to marry, and he plans to look for her for the rest of his life or die alone. The circus director tells him that she's out of his league. Ed doesn't have a plan or a job, and the director finally agrees to tell him one thing about her for every month he works free for him. Ed has to do horrible jobs like putting his head in a lion's mouth just to find out more about the girl.

One night, Ed goes to see Mr. Calloway, the director, and when he opens the door, a wild animal attacks him. One of the clowns tries to shoot the animal but misses and hits Ed. Ed throws a stick, and then the animal runs to fetch it. He discovers that most things considered evil are simply lonely. The next morning, Calloway comes back with a stick in his mouth. He asks if he killed anyone, and Ed says no. Calloway tells him that he could get any girl, and Calloway finally tells Ed the girl's name - Sandra Templeton. She goes to Auburn University, so he needs to hurry to see her. Ed runs off.

Ed arrives at her door and tells her who he is and that he loves her and is destined to marry her. She's heard of him by reputation from Don Price, the boy from Ashton that



she's engaged to. There, Ed was always getting the glory while Don got none. Ed congratulates her on her engagement, gives her flowers and leaves. She feels bad for him. Ed is especially disappointed because she's engaged to a jerk. He then stands outside and yells that he loves her and will marry her.

Sandra sits in class one day and a note comes up on the slides that says, "I love Sandra Templeton." Then another time, a plane writes it in the sky. One day, there's a field of daffodils, her favorite flower, outside her window, and Ed is standing in the middle. She is upset that he doesn't know her, but he tells her he has the rest of his life to find out. Ed promises not to hurt Don, and Don comes up and punches him when he sees the display. Ed gets a beating, but Don ends up dying because his heart isn't strong enough after Sandra tells him she won't ever marry him.

Back in the present, Josephine gives Ed a drink of water, and he tells her he's been thirsty his whole life. Will wakes up and sits outside the room to hear the stories. The film returns to scenes of Ed's life.

While Ed is in the hospital recovering from his beating, he's drafted by the army. He takes all the hazardous assignments he can in order to try to get a shorter time in the army. He is once given a mission to steal plans for a power plant. While soldiers are watching a beautiful woman, Ed fights a man and gets help from the two actresses, conjoined twins. He offers to help them get to America in return for their help to get the plans.

Ed and the twins begin journeying half way around the world. Since no one in America knows where he is, the army tells Sandra that he is dead. She falls to the ground outside their house. After four months, she is hanging laundry and sees Ed's shadow. He is on the other side of her sheets. She begins to cry, and they embrace.

The next morning in the present, Josephine tells Will about her talk with Ed. Will tells her that most of it never happened, but she likes it because it's so romantic. She asks if he loves his father, and he says that everyone else does. Will tries to explain that his father was hardly there when he was growing up. He believes his father had a second life away from them. Will no longer knows what's true. She suggests that he talk to Ed.

The next morning, the family all eats breakfast in Ed's room. He begins to tell a story, but Will doesn't want to hear it. Will asks his dad to talk, and Sandra and Josephine tactfully leave the room. Will explains that he feels like he only knows a little of his dad. He wants to know who his father really is. Will points out that he tells amusing lies, not facts. With a kid of his own on the way, Will realizes that he wants to know his dad. Ed explains that he's always been himself.

Later that evening, Will finds out that his father really was missing and thought to be dead while he was in the army. His mother even shows him the note from the war department. Sandra goes up to see Ed, and Josephine goes to lie down. Then, viewers travel back to Ed's youth.



Ed takes a job as a traveling salesman because he is considered to be dead and has difficulty finding a regular job. He is gone all the time, but he is setting money aside for a good house for himself, Sandra and Will. After a few years, his territory is from the coast to Western Texas. One day at a bank, Ed gets behind a creepy looking pale man, Norman Winslow, the poet from Specter. He left Specter as well and began to travel, but now he's robbing this bank. Norman makes Ed his partner in the moment, and a woman lets Ed into the vault. The bank is completely bankrupt, though. They hop into Ed's car and drive away.

When Norman sees what Ed got from the vault, he's disappointed. Ed put his deposit slip in the bag so that Norman wouldn't have to leave empty-handed. Norman concludes that he should go to Wall Street. He expects Norman's career in thievery is just beginning. After earning his first million, Norman sends \$10,000 to Ed, and he can finally buy a new house.

Upstairs in the present, Sandra watches as Ed stays underwater as long as he can in the tub. He has all his clothes on in the tub. She climbs in fully clothed. She slides over to him and lays down on his chest. He asks her not to cry, but she doesn't know how to live without him.

Will drives out to the old house by the lake where the Witch is supposed to live, since his father actually owns the house. A woman, Jennifer Hill, answers the door and recognizes him. A little boy is practicing piano, and she sends him home so they can talk. Jenny knew Ed because the town was on his sales route. Will flat out asks if they were having an affair. Jenny asks Will why he didn't just ask Ed, but he tells her that Ed's dying. Jenny hates to change the image Will has of his father, and he tells her that he just wants to know the truth. She tells him that his father never meant to end up in Specter. One time he was early, and the next time he was late. Viewers return to watch Ed's story as it played out in his life.

One night, Ed gets stuck in a thunderstorm and ends up running his car into the lake. He sees a naked woman swim past and up to the door of his car. He smiles, and then everything goes black. The next day, he finds that his car is at the top of a tree, and since he has nowhere to go, he begins walking. Then he finds a key in the mud. He ends up walking into Specter and sees that it has grown much older. Debt and sadness have come to the town. They are auctioning off the town, and Ed decides to buy the town. He gets the help of Norman, Mr. Calloway and the twins to save the town. The people are asked to take care of the town without having to pay rent or any other costs.

Ed then goes to visit the Witch's house, where Jenny now lives alone. She plays the piano and realizes who he is immediately. He wants to remedy the problem of this house that they need to keep the town running. She wants to know why he wants to buy the town. It makes him happy to do this, and she's mad at him for coming back so late. She refuses to sell him the house. When he tries to leave, though, he can't get the door to open, and finally he breaks it down. He apologizes, but she tells him to get out.



Rather than accepting failure, Edward begins fixing the crooked house. He visits with Jenny and tells her the stories of his travels. Finally, the shack is a beautiful house, and there's nothing else to fix. She tries to kiss him, but he refuses. He explains that he's in love with his wife and will never stray. Before he leaves, though, she runs into the next room and signs over the deed to him. Then one day, he just leaves and never returns to the town he saved.

Back in the present, Jenny explains to Will that people began to believe that she was a crazy Witch. Will says it's not logical for her to be the Witch. Jenny realizes that she was living in a fairy tale since Will's father couldn't love her back. She could never be as important as Will and Sandra. Will was his real life.

As Will drives back to his parents' house, he arrives to find that the house is empty and the light on the answering machine is flashing. He arrives at the hospital, and Josephine tells him that Ed had a stroke. They're not sure he'll make it. Will offers to stay with Ed for the night while Sandra and Josephine go home. Sandra visits with Ed first before she leaves.

When Will goes in to sit with Ed, he hears the real story of his birth. Sandra came in one afternoon without Ed because he was away on business in Wichita. Ed was upset not to be there, but since he couldn't be in the room anyway, it wouldn't have made much difference. The doctor says if he had to choose between the real and the pretend version, he'd choose the fancy, pretend version.

Ed then wakes up, and Will begins to talk to him. Ed mentions the river and wants to know how it happens, how he dies. He wants Will to tell him what he saw in the eye. Will doesn't know the story, but he tries anyway. Ed tells him that it starts with him in the hospital bed. As Will finishes the story, the audience sees it played out on the screen.

Will begins the story. Will wakes up in the hospital, and Ed is suddenly better. They escape the hospital and hop into the car to drive to the river. They race there, and on the way, they see the giant. Will then carries his father down to the river, where everyone Ed has ever known is already there. Will says it's unbelievable, and Ed leans over and says, "The story of my life." No one is sad. They're just happy to send him off right. In the water, they meet Sandra, his girl in the river. Then, he pulls off his wedding ring and hands it to her. Everyone watches as Will carries Ed to the center of the river, where Ed crosses his arms. Will drops him into the water. Ed becomes what he always was - a very big fish. In the hospital room, Ed then passes away.

Will goes and calls his mother and Josephine to tell them the news. Then, the audience sees the cars at the church for the funeral. There are hundreds of people there. All the people of Ed's life come to say goodbye, from the giant to Mr. Calloway to the twins. Will stares in amazement that all the stories were actually true, or at least had some grain of truth. After the funeral, Will, Josephine and Sandra talk to everyone and hear the stories.

Will's son now tells Ed's stories to his friends, and Will backs him up. Ed told his stories so many times that he became the stories, and they live on after him. In that way, he becomes immortal like the uncatchable fish.



Characters

Ed Bloom, played by Ewan McGregor (Young) and Albert Finney (Senior)

Description

Ed Bloom has been telling stories all his life. While his son Will was growing up, he wasn't around much, but he always made sure to tell his stories whenever he could. Will believes most of them are lies, much to Ed's grief. After Ed becomes ill, he and Will finally come to terms with their relationship.

Much of what the audience sees of Ed is through his stories from when he was a young man. We watch as he meets Sandra, falls desperately in love and sweeps her off her feet. Viewers also watch him save an entire town and help Jenny when she can't help herself.

As Ed nears his end, he wants Will to understand his life. He also wants his stories to be passed on to his unborn grandchild. While Ed lies in the hospital bed dying, Will lets him know that he finally understands by telling Ed the story of his death.

Analysis

Ed is a man made immortal by stories. He has been telling his stories to everyone he knows for as long as he can remember, and the stories have finally become a part of him in everyone else's eyes. Ed is pained that the only person who refuses to believe his stories is the one he needs to believe them the most - his son Will. While he tries to pass on his stories through other family members and Will's wife, Ed only comes to final peace when his son relives his stories through his friends and finally believes in the truth and the hope of this legacy. Then, Ed can pass on in peace.

Will Bloom, played by Billy Crudup

Description

Will Bloom has spent his whole life resenting his dad and his dad's stories. He is sick and tired of his dad always being gone and then trying to take the spotlight when he is around. At Will's wedding, he blows up at Ed, and the two stop talking for several years until Ed learns that he is dying. Finally, Will goes to visit his father thanks to some begging from his wife and mother. He is about to be a father, and he wants to know the truth about his own father at last. As Will seeks the truth, he finds that the truth is even more strange than he imagined.



Will finally comes to terms with his father's life just as he's about to have to cope with his father's death. Will tells his father the story of his death in the last moments and helps his father die peacefully. Will is amazed when all the people of his father's stories show up at the funeral.

Analysis

Will is a natural skeptic. He doesn't want to trust anyone, especially not his father. He has heard stories his whole life, but he doesn't believe any of them. Will wants to know his real father rather than just a bunch of stories. Will finally discovers by the end of the film that his father has become his stories. Everyone believes them, and many are at least partially true. Will gains respect for his father just in time to become a father himself, and he also learns that storytelling itself has value and meaning.

Sandra Bloom, played by Jessica Lange (Senior) and Alison Lohman (Young)

Description

Sandra Bloom is the girl Ed sees during his travels. He works for months to learn just a little about her. When he finally knows who she is, he sets out to find her and win her. The moment he saw her, he realized that she was the woman he was going to marry, and he plans to do just that.

Sandra is engaged to marry a man that Ed knows when he finally finds her. Rather than accepting no for an answer, Ed goes to extravagant lengths to win her heart. He finally succeeds, and they marry and start a family.

Ed spends his life trying to care for his family and give them a nice place to live. Sandra is completely in love with Ed and commits her life to him. She stays by him even in the difficult times and serves as a liaison between him and Will when they stop speaking for several years.

Analysis

Sandra is a kind, beautiful woman. She falls for Ed because he is the most romantic man she has ever met. Throughout their lives together, he never takes her for granted. She in turn raises their son mostly on her own.

Sandra keeps the peace in the family when Ed and Will begin to have troubles. She loves them both, but she can't seem to explain to Will the truth about her life. When Ed gets worse, Sandra is completely distraught and stands next to his side with unflagging strength.



Jenny & The Witch, played by Helena Bonham Carter

Description

Jenny is the young girl that Ed meets in the town. She thinks he is absolutely wonderful and is terribly upset when he leaves. However, she makes him promise that someday he will return. When he does, though, he is married and has a child, and Jenny has become older. Ed feels a certain responsibility to Jenny and takes care of her house. He wants the deed so that the town will be taken care of forever, and after months of work, she finally agrees to give it to him.

Will finds the deed and goes to meet with Jenny. He learns the truth of the story and discovers that Jenny is also the Witch in Ed's story. Jenny explains a lot about Ed to Will, and he finally realizes that Ed's first love wasn't his travel, but Will and Sandra and their family.

Analysis

Jenny is a special woman. She always believed that she would end up with Ed, but because of his choices, the timing was all wrong. She becomes lonely and lives quietly in her house. When Ed finally returns, he barely even recognizes her because she has aged so much.

Jenny also serves to reveal the truth about Ed. Since she has known him for so long and he saved her town, she is able to give Will more information than anyone else. After visiting with Jenny, Will can finally appreciate his father and returns to help his father die in peace.

Dr. Bennett, played by Robert Guillaume

Description

Dr. Bennett is Ed's doctor and long-time friend. He gives good advice and comfort to the whole family. He also tells Will the true story about the day of his birth and points out that the story Ed told was much more interesting than fact.

Analysis

Dr. Bennett serves as an outsider from the family. He gives Will even more information about Ed, and Will automatically trusts him completely because he's known the doctor all his life. Dr. Bennett teaches Will an important lesson about the value of storytelling through choosing the imagined story of Will's birth.



Josephine, played by Marion Cotillard

Description

Josephine is Will's young wife. She loves her in-laws very much and can't completely understand Will's dislike for his father and his stories. She tries to learn the stories now that she is pregnant so that she, at least, can pass them on to Ed's grandchild.

Analysis

Josephine is a kind-hearted woman who only wants peace in her husband's family. She works to bring him and his father together through their separate stories.

Karl the Giant, played by Matthew McGrory

Description

Karl the Giant is terrifying Ed's hometown when he's a teenager. Ed realizes that if he takes care of the Giant, then he will be a hero. He will finally be able to get away from the small town life. Karl trusts Ed, and they head out on the road together.

Over the years, Ed and Karl become good friends. Karl works at the circus while Ed works for Calloway. Later on, they meet again, and viewers see Karl again at the funeral. Their friendship helped save Ed and lasted a lifetime.

Analysis

Karl is a constant throughout Ed's life. They continue to meet along the way, and viewers are able to see the changes in Ed's life through his interactions with Karl. Karl is a kind, friendly man who is treated terribly because of his looks, but Ed sees beyond Karl's looks to his heart.

Norther Winslow, played by Steve Buscemi

Description

Norther Winslow is a great poet. Ed has always been a huge fan, but Norther eventually disappears. Ed finds him in the small town of Specter, where he has hidden away. Norther and Ed become good friends while there, but Ed finally has to leave.

Later, Ed meets Norther again while Norther is robbing a bank. He left the town after Ed left and is now making his living this way. Ed helps him and creates a relationship that will help him for years. Norther helps Ed and Sandra buy a new house, and later he helps save Specter by buying it and caring for it for free.



Analysis

Norther is a strange man who has become famous as a poet, but he gives it all up when he moves to Specter. Norther later becomes a very rich man on Wall Street who saves the town of Specter and helps Ed throughout his life.

Amos Calloway, played by Danny DeVito

Description

Amos Calloway owns the circus where Karl works. He allows Ed to work for free in exchange for information about Sandra. When Ed finally discovers that Amos is a werewolf, Amos gives him Sandra's name and allows him to go free.

Analysis

Amos is a good man who is focused on his success. He is an outcast like everyone else in the circus and most of the people Ed knows. Amos works Ed hard but finally realizes that enough is enough and gives Ed the information he wants about Sandra.



Themes

Living Forever

Ed tells his stories over the years to everyone he meets. At first, he does it to make up for the time he spends away from Sandra and Will. Later, he tells them because everyone enjoys the stories so much, and he loves the feeling of telling the stories. Eventually, Will realizes that his father will live forever through his stories. Every time Ed told a story, a piece of him went into all those who heard the story and passed it on through the years. Ed's legacy will allow him to become immortal.

Will tells Ed the final story of his life and his death. This allows Ed to pass away in peace, and it also shows that Will, Ed's progeny, will also become his legacy in storytelling. Will helps Ed live forever by passing the stories on to his son and even telling his son's friends that the stories are true. Ed lives on forever through his stories.

Love of a Family

Will has felt neglected by his father all his life. He has believed that his father did not love him or his mother and that he only cared about himself. Now that Ed is about to die, Will discovers the truth that he and his mother were all Ed ever cared about.

The love Ed has for his family exceeds the love he has for anyone else. Although he saves a town, Ed would still rather be with his family than anywhere else in the world. Everyone who meets him knows his stories about Sandra and Will.

Finally, Will realizes that the love his parents have for him and the love he enjoys in a family is the strongest love of all. He follows his father's legacy by loving his family as much as Ed loved them.

Generosity

Ed is one of the most generous people imaginable. He spends his time away working so that he can support his family like he has always wanted to. After he builds a large house for them and takes care of their needs, he is then drawn away to help others.

Ed takes care of the small town he visited as a young man. When he stumbles upon it again, he finds it in ruins and uses his wealthy connections to take care of the people who live there. He spends months of his life taking care of these sweet people and making sure that the town will survive.

Ed's generosity spreads to everyone he meets. He first helps the giant and then spends months working to get Sandra's name from the circus owner. He finally receives it by

helping Mr. Calloway. Ed is generous and kind to everyone, and he creates a legacy as seen by the large attendance at his funeral.

Style and Cinematography

Big Fish is a true fantasy. The entire film is made up of stories that connect to make Ed's life. He tells his stories to Will, Sandra and everyone he meets, much to Will's chagrin. With time, everyone realizes that whether Ed's stories are true or not no longer matters. He is his stories, and they have value beyond the truth.

Director Tim Burton uses cinematography to create a believable fantasy world. With bright colors and flawless shots, viewers feel as if they are in a dream. This other worldly feel helps viewers imagine that the events could actually be true.

The actors in the film do a great job creating this fantasy world as well. Between the twins and Karl the Giant, we are quickly transported into this other world. The greatest surprise is when we find out that most of Ed's stories are true. Ewan McGregor also creates a wonderful young Ed who has all the joy and spontaneity of youth as well as the belief that nothing can stop him from reaching his goals.

Motifs

Journey

The journey is arguably the most popular motif in film and literature. Once again, it is used in *Big Fish*. Ed is a small town boy who's simply too big for his surroundings. He finds his way out to pursue his big dreams by taking care of Karl the Giant.

Ed continues his journey with a stop in Specter before he hits the circus and sees Sandra. From that point on, he makes it his purpose to find and win her. Although it takes him almost a year to find and win Sandra, his journey still doesn't end there. He goes on to have Will and pass the stories on down.

Will also takes a journey, but it's a mental and emotional one. He doesn't believe his father's stories, and as his father dies, Will wants to know the truth behind the man. After talking with Jenny and others, Will finally learns the truth, and in the end, he realizes that with time, Ed has become his stories.

Past and Present

Throughout the film, the story moves back and forth between the past and the present. As the film begins, the audience sees Will's wedding and the fight he has with Ed. Then, we are transported to the present, as Ed is sick and beginning to die.

The movement between past and present helps viewers to learn more about Ed's life and to create a depth to the characters and the lives of Ed and those he loves. We are able to see the truth just as Will discovers it. Thus, viewers feel that they also are part of the search for the real Ed.

Tall Tales

Ed is full of tall tales. He has spent his life creating stories for the enjoyment of others. He also uses the stories to make himself feel better about the parts of his life that he's ashamed about. Because he helped so many people, Ed often neglected his family and never wants to admit that to his son.

The tall tales also make viewers evaluate the difference between fact and fiction. Throughout the film, Will hears more and more stories both from Ed and from others, and both he and the viewers must decide on the truth of the stories. Ed learns through his experiences that the tales have value beyond their truth. Eventually, Will realizes that the tall tales are important to Ed, and he discovers that many of them are true, though exaggerated. Will realizes in the end that with time Ed has become his stories, and they will live on after him.



Symbols

The Fish

Ever since Will's birth, Ed has been telling the same story. He says that the night Will was born he caught an uncatchable fish but had to give up his wedding ring to it. The night of Will's wedding, Ed tells the story again, and Will blows up.

Throughout the film, Will seeks to find out the truth about this story and all the other stories Ed tells. Will discovers that many of them are true but have been changed so that they are more entertaining for everyone. Will even uses the fish in his story about Ed's death.

Finally, Will realizes that over the years Ed has become his stories. He has become immortal through them, and Will passes the stories down to his son as well. Ed is truly the big, uncatchable fish that lives on forever, a fish that symbolizes dreams and imagination.

The Witch

One of Ed's stories is that when he was a child, he and some friends went to a haunted house. The others dared him to go to the door, so he agreed. The Witch had a glass eye, and when he looked in it, Ed saw the story of his death.

The Witch is symbolic of death. She reveals Ed's death to him, but he never shares that story with anyone else. When Will meets with Jenny, he learns that she was really the Witch of Ed's story.

Will's Story

When Ed finally comes to die, he asks Will to tell him the way his story ends. Although Will doesn't know what Ed has in his head, Will tells him the one story he thinks Ed will love. Will tells him that it ends with Ed becoming stronger and then going to the river and saying goodbye to all his friends before turning at last into the uncatchable fish of Ed's favorite story. Will's story symbolizes that Will has come to see the value of Ed's storytelling and that through his stories, Ed will live on in his son and in the world.



Essay Questions

What is Ed's story about the day of Will's birth? How does this story first cause a rift between father and son and then bring the two together?

Why is Will at first unable to make a connection with his father, when everyone else seems to love him?

Describe the relationship between Sandra and Ed.

Why does Will finally return to see Ed?

What truths does Will learn about Ed?

How did Ed win Sandra's heart?

Who was the Witch of Ed's stories?

How does Josephine feel about the stories?

What story does Will tell Ed as Ed dies? Explain the significance of this story.

Who attends Ed's funeral?

What does Will finally realize about the stories after his father's death?