

The Best Years of Our Lives Film Summary

The Best Years of Our Lives by William Wyler

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Context

The Best Years of Our Lives chronicles the experiences of three World War II soldiers who are returning home after spending several years abroad. Each man struggles to find purpose as his old profession turns into a nightmare or no job is available at all.

In addition, the men must learn to show emotion again as they interact with their families. After years of trying to stay strong, they have difficulty relating to their loved ones, who have grown and changed. Each man goes through a process in which he grieves for his old life and comes to terms with his new life.

Viewers were experiencing similar situations in their own lives, as World War II veterans were returning home at the time of the film's release. This film taught viewers about the problems returning soldiers were facing and provided their families with insights on how to help them. Veterans and their loved ones felt less alone as they watched the men and women on screen struggle with similar heartaches, frustrations, and sorrows. In the end, the film's characters discover that the best years of their lives have not passed, but rather are just beginning.

Before *The Best Years of Our Lives*, William Wyler had directed dozens of films including *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) and *The Memphis Belle: Story of a Flying Fortress* (1944). Wyler had a classy touch, and all of his films are extremely entertaining. After *The Best Years of Our Lives*, he went on to direct *Roman Holiday* (1953), *The Children's Hour* (1961), *How to Steal a Million* (1966), and *Funny Girl* (1968).

In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Myrna Loy plays the role of Milly Stephenson, the wife of the frustrated and confused Al. Loy often played smart, successful, working women in her films, and she is best known for her role as Nora Charles in *The Thin Man* (1934) and its five sequels. In 1937, Myrna Loy was declared the "Queen of Hollywood" while Clark Gable was declared "King of Hollywood." Loy also starred in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950), *Midnight Lace* (1960), and *Airport 1975* (1974).

Fredric March won an Oscar for his role as Al Stephenson in this *The Best Years of Our Lives*. March's first major role was in *The Royal Family of Broadway* (1930) for which he earned an Oscar nomination. His role in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932) won him his first Oscar and is widely considered his best work. He also appeared in *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934), *Anna Karenina* (1935), *The Road to Glory* (1936), *A Star is Born* (1937), and *Inherit the Wind* (1960).

Dana Andrews performs the role of Fred Derry with panache. Andrews is best known for his roles in this film and in *The Westerner* (1940), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), and *Laura* (1944). Harold Russell also gives a brilliant performance. After losing his hands while training paratroopers, Russell was picked to star in several Army films. Russell became the only actor to receive two Oscars for the same role when his performance in

The Best Years of Our Lives won him the Best Supporting Actor award along with an Honorary Award for bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans.

The Best Years of Our Lives won numerous Oscars including Best Actor in a Leading Role for Fredric March; Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Harold Russell; Best Director for William Wyler; Best Film Editing for Daniel Mandell; Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture for Hugo Friedhofer; Best Picture for Samuel Goldwyn; and Best Screenplay Writing for Robert E. Sherwood. It was also nominated for an Oscar for Best Sound Recording for Gordon Sawyer (Samuel Goldwyn SSD). Harold Russell also received an Honorary Award for bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans through his appearance in *The Best Years of Our Lives*.



Summary and Analysis

The Best Years of Our Lives begins in an airport as Fred Darry, a captain, tries to get a flight home after fighting in World War II. George H. Gibbons walks over and picks up his tickets as the ticket lady tells Fred to try the ATC. Fred walks across the field to the Army Air Forces Air Transit Command, and a man begins calling out to the men about a cancelled flight. Fred and another man sign up for flights.

Fred sits down to relax, until finally his name is called along with that of Homer Parrish, a sailor from Boone City. Homer has two hooks for hands, and he's offended when another man tries to help him write his name. He and Fred learn that there is finally a flight for them, but it makes lots of stops, so they won't get home for awhile. They climb into the hold of the plane with Sergeant Al Stephenson, and the three men talk about the war as they travel home. Homer says he hadn't really seen a lot of action, but that his ship had been hit; his hands had been burned off. The hospital staff had taken good care of him and shown him how to do things again. He is worried, though, because he has a girl back home; she knows about the accident, but Homer is concerned, since she hasn't actually seen him with the hooks. The other men assure him that Wilma will understand, though they are worried about the difficulties Homer will have adjusting. Fred and Al are nervous about going home too, but their concerns stem mostly from a fear of having people try to rehabilitate them. They also have some concerns about reconnecting with their families. Al has been married for twenty years, but Fred had only had 20 days with his wife before going overseas. During the flight scene, we also see a view of an airport junkyard as the plane flies over it.

Finally back in their hometown, the three men share a taxi to head back to their loved ones. They remark on the things that have changed and also on how many things have stayed the same. When they get to Homer's place, he tries to convince the others to go get a drink with him, but they tell him that he's home now, and should spend time with his family. His little sister runs all around yelling to everyone that Homer is finally home. He receives a warm reception from his family and Wilma as the other two men look on; however, he can't manage to put his arms around Wilma. The moment the other men drive away, everyone sees his hooks, and his mother begins to cry.

Al tells Fred that his own home is next, but he is nervous about returning there. When they arrive, Fred comments on the elegance of Al's building, and Al tells him that he had been a banker before the War. Al gets out of the taxi and watches Fred leave before he goes inside. The concierge tries to stop Al from going up, but Al insists that he be allowed to go see his wife without being announced. He rings the doorbell, and his excited son answers it. He also sees his daughter, but he makes them both be quiet. Milly, his wife, calls to ask who is at the door, and then she realizes who it must be and runs out to him. Al is excited to embrace his children and is ready to get to know them again, but he is confused about why neither the concierge nor a friend of Milly's knows who he is.



The scene changes to show Fred arriving at his parents' small house. His father and stepmother are very proud of him, but his wife, Marie, is not there. Fred's parents tell him that Marie now has an apartment downtown and that she has taken a job at a nightclub. They tell him they had seen Marie the year before and that she had been doing well. Fred finds out where she lives and goes to find her.

Meanwhile, Al gives a samurai sword to his son Rob, who isn't as excited about the gift as Al had expected him to be. Rob then surprises him by asking about the effects of radiation on the people at Hiroshima. Al tells him that he hadn't really seen anything and says that he feels he should have stayed home and found out about the important things. Al is also surprised that the family no longer has a maid. Eventually, the children leave so that their parents can talk, and Al tells his wife how hard it is to adjust to the fact that his children don't really even know him. In his attempt to reconnect, Al drags his family out into town so that he can rediscover civilization. We see them at a nightclub, but his family doesn't have quite as good of a time as he has.

The scene changes to Homer's house, where he sits with his family and Wilma's parents, talking about the bad times impending for America. Homer tries to offer Wilma's father a light, but Mr. Cameron feels bad about it and gets his own light. He asks about Homer's plans for finding employment and even offers him a job, since, as he says, men with disabilities do well selling insurance. Then, Homer accidentally drops a drink. Frustrated and embarrassed, he decides to get out for a walk, leaving everyone else staring at the door.

On the way home from their night on the town, Al makes his family stop for one final drink at Butcher's, a bar that is owned by Homer's uncle. Homer had walked into Butcher's a few minutes before and met Fred there. Butch asks why Homer isn't at home, and he seems concerned about his nephew's well-being. Fred tells Homer that he can't seem to find his wife and has just finished telling Homer that Al is at home in a swanky apartment, when Al walks into the bar. Butch pulls Homer aside and plays a song he likes and then tells him that Wilma had phoned looking for him. Homer is frustrated and tells Butch that he just wants to be treated like anyone else. Butch tells him to give it time. As Butch plays, Al asks his wife to dance.

Al's daughter, Peggy, and Fred begin to get on quite well as everyone else is busy. Fred begins to fall asleep on Peggy and tells her that he can't call his wife. Everyone leaves Butch's and heads to their respective homes. The Stephensons drop Fred off where his wife is supposed to live. Peggy wants to wait to make sure he gets in, and they see him pass out on the stairs. She and Milly put Fred in the car and take the men home. Fred grabs Peggy as she tries to get him settled in bed, but she pulls away. In their room, Milly tries to get Al ready for bed. The two women finally go to bed as well.

During the night, Fred begins to have a nightmare and starts yelling. Peggy goes in to check on him and wakes him up. He is crying, and she comforts him. The next morning, Fred wakes up as Peggy comes in to get in her closet. Rob wants to know what's going on with Fred, but Peggy sends him off to school. She makes Fred some eggs, and he asks her where she slept. She explains that she had slept on the couch, and Fred feels



bad about that. Peggy replies that she had been happy to have him and offers to drive him to Marie's apartment on her way to work. Meanwhile, Al finally wakes up, and like Fred, he has trouble remembering where he is. He drops his shoes out the window and wanders around the room. He finally takes a shower and wakes up.

As Peggy drives Fred across town, she asks him what he had done before the war. He says he had worked at a soda shop fountain. Now, he doesn't know what he is going to do, but he plans to find something. She speculates that Boone City must be dreary after all of the places he's been, but he looks at her and says that it looks pretty good from where he's sitting. The scene cuts to show Milly bringing breakfast to Al, and he is excited to realize that he really is home. They embrace passionately and really celebrate their homecoming. Meanwhile, Fred says goodbye to Peggy, and she invites him and his wife to come for dinner sometime. He apologizes for bothering her with his dream and says he appreciates her silence on the subject that morning. She waits, but he can't seem to get into the apartment building. She feels for him, but he finally follows another man in; Peggy obviously hates to see him go. Upstairs, Fred rings the bell on Marie's door. She screams when she sees him, and they embrace. He explains to her that he couldn't seem to find her the day before.

Al wonders about Fred, thinking that coming out of the air will be difficult for him. Then he receives a call from Mr. Milton, his boss at the bank, and he tries to be happy about talking to him. Milly tells Al to rest for a little bit before returning to work, but he says that he needs to make money. Al is not happy about going back to the bank, though, because he thinks of the other men who aren't as lucky as he is.

Fred goes to a grocery store and meets with Mr. Bullard, who had been his boss at the soda fountain. Mr. Bullard had sold out to a chain so that he could make some money, and he introduces Fred to the manager of MidWay. The manager tells him that he might be able to give him a low-paying position; Fred doesn't have the necessary education or experience to get a better job.

Al's job prospects are much better. He speaks further with Mr. Milton, who says that things are not going well at the bank. Milton wants Al back, but Al is worried about pushing Steve out of his old job. Milton responds by offering Al a promotion to Vice-President. They want someone who knows the GI Bill and soldiers' problems but who also knows all about banking. Milton gives Al a packet of papers to look over while he is on his short break.

Marie calls to quit her job since Fred doesn't want her to work nights anymore. She is surprised to see Fred in civilian clothes and says that she wants him to wear his uniform when they go out, because she is so proud to be seen with him. He agrees but says that this will be the last time he goes out in it. Marie is excited to have a real honeymoon now that they don't have any cares.

Wilma goes over to see Homer, who is practicing shooting so that he can go hunting. Wilma wants to talk about their relationship, and she tells him that things are not okay. She wants to get married now that he's home, but she's upset that he hasn't said



anything about it. She tells him that she's still in love with him. As they talk, Homer sees his little sister and her friends looking through the window at his hooks. He yells at them and breaks out the window. His sister begins crying and runs away. Wilma wants to help him, but Homer says he has to work things out for himself and that he's tired of being pitied. Wilma begins to cry and runs home.

Fred comes home and tells Marie that they are out of money. They've been out too much, and he tells her that he can't get a job. She's upset about the opinion of others who think that he should go to trade school. She is concerned about his mind, and she asks about his dreams. Fred tells her that she needs to stay with him because this is the "worse" part of their marriage vows; she asks when they get to have the "better" part. Marie pouts while Fred fixes supper. Finally, Fred takes the job at the grocery store.

Al returns to his own work, and he gets all of the paperwork for a Mr. Novak, who is applying for a GI loan. Novak wants to buy a farm, but he doesn't have any collateral. Novak points out that with a food shortage, farming is the most important job. As they talk, Al sees Homer come into the bank and hurries over to talk to him. Homer is excited about his disability money and tells Al that Fred has a job at the grocery store. They say goodbye, and Al comes back and gives Novak the loan.

At the drug store, Fred helps a woman pick out some perfume. The woman's son messes up the store, and then Peggy walks in. He explains that he can't talk to her unless he's selling her something, so she starts looking at the products. She says that she'd heard he was working there and just wanted to say hello. He invites her to lunch. While they eat, Fred tells Peggy that before the war, he had been sure he would never go back to the drugstore and had dreamed of having his own home. The two are obviously crazy about each other, but they can't admit it because of Marie. When they get out to the car, though, they kiss. Fred apologizes, and Peggy leaves.

Al is called into his boss's office concerning Novak's loan. The other bankers are concerned about Novak's lack of security and collateral. Al replies that he had seen something in Novak that made him know he could succeed with his farm and repay the money. They agree to approve the loan, but in the future, Al is expected to exercise more caution.

When Fred gets home that night, Marie is getting ready to go out to the Embassy Club. They had been invited by Peggy and her boyfriend as guests. Fred doesn't want to go, but Marie becomes angry and tells Fred to get used to accepting handouts, since his paycheck won't give them enough for any fun.

Al and Milly get ready to out, and Milly is concerned that Peggy is crazy about Fred. Peggy admits that she's in love with him but says that she doesn't want to be. She feels that once she gets to know Marie, she'll be able to stop being silly about the whole thing.

At the bank dinner with Mr. Milton, Al is honored for his heroics in the war. Al gives a speech as Milly counts his drinks. He sarcastically says that he had been a good soldier



because of his job in the bank and then illustrates that fact by telling a fictional story about refusing to take a hill in battle because of insufficient collateral and excessive risk. The future of the country, he implies, rests on the necessity of taking risks, and Al makes a strong statement against the practice of refusing loans to former soldiers who had risked and lost so much.

Meanwhile, at the club, both couples have a fairly good time, although Fred and Peggy have trouble concealing their feelings for each other. They are left together at the table while Woody and Marie dance together, and Peggy explains that she has been trying to prove to herself that what happened in the afternoon didn't really happen. Fred tells her that it had to happen, and that if they keep seeing each other, it will happen again. Later, Marie and Peggy go to the powder room, and they talk about Woody. Marie thinks Peggy should grab the good-looking, well-off Woody while she can. She says that while Fred was away, she had been getting Fred's money as well as her own pay, but that now they don't have enough to have a happy marriage. Peggy reassures her that Fred will get a better job later, but Marie says she isn't willing to wait for that to happen. They take a photo as Marie snuggles up to Woody.

Later that night, Milly expresses her concern that Al will lose his job over the speech he had made at the dinner. Peggy comes in and tells her parents about her difficult night and says that she's made up her mind to break Fred and Marie's marriage up. She can't stand seeing Fred in a loveless marriage. Her parents think she is jumping to conclusions, but she tells them that Fred is in love with her. She doesn't believe her parents can understand, having never had any trouble in their own relationship. Milly informs her daughter that she and Al have said they were tired of each other and hated each other more than once, and that they have had to fall in love all over again many times. Milly holds Peggy as she weeps.

Al meets Fred the next day and asks him if he is in love with Peggy. Fred tells him that he is, and Al thanks him for a short and honest answer before asking how Marie fits in the situation. Al is concerned about Peggy's involvement in this kind of a scenario and tells Fred that he plans to find her a good respectable man she can marry and be happy with. Fred agrees not to see her anymore, and he even offers to call and tell her so. He leaves, angry and hurt, and on the way out, he stops to call Peggy. Homer comes in, sees Al, and talks with him. He shows Al how well he's learned to play the piano as Al continues to watch Fred on the phone calling Peggy. Homer sees Fred as he walks out, but Al tells him he had to go back to the drugstore.

Peggy walks into the kitchen and tells her mother that Fred had called, apologized for what happened, and said it wouldn't be fair to his wife if they continued to see each other, since Peggy takes things like this seriously. Peggy says that her career as a home wrecker is at an end. She tells her mother not to feel sorry for her, because she's glad to be out of the mess and never seeing Fred again.

Fred is at work in the soda shop when he sees Homer walk in. Homer asks about what happened at Butch's with Al. As they talk, another man at the bar asks Homer whether he can ask him a personal question. Homer explains about his hooks, and the man tells



him that they had fought the wrong people in the war. Fred sends the man away, and Homer follows him. Homer tries to start a fight, but Fred runs over and punches the man himself. Fred quits his job before he can get fired and meets Homer outside. On the floor, Homer finds a small pin of an American flag. The two men walk together, and Homer apologizes to Fred for making him lose the job. Fred asks about Wilma and tells Homer to go to her, hold her, kiss her, and marry her as soon as possible.

Homer goes home, but he doesn't see Wilma. Instead he looks at old pictures of himself playing sports and goes downstairs for a snack. Suddenly, Wilma comes to the door and insists on talking to him. She tells him that her family wants her to go away to her Aunt Vera's place the next day. She doesn't want to go, because they just want her to forget about Homer, who they think doesn't want to see her anymore. Homer says he thinks the trip to her aunt's house is a good idea. She asks if he wants her to forget about him, and he says that he wants her to be free to live her own life. Wilma asks why Homer can't understand how she really feels. He replies that she doesn't know how it would be to face being with him everyday. Wilma insists that she wants to try, so Homer tells her that he's going to bed but that he wants her to come up and see what happens. He shows her how hard it is for him to get ready for bed and shows her his arms without the hooks. She helps him button his top since he can't. Homer says that he feels the most helpless when he takes off his hooks, because he can't put them back on without help. Wilma tells him that she loves him and will never leave him, and Homer is shocked that she doesn't mind anything she sees.

At the unemployment agency, Fred waits in line. Meanwhile, another man is in his apartment, looking at a picture of Fred and Marie. Marie doesn't expect Fred home for an hour, but then Fred walks in. She tells him that Cliff is an old friend and that she's going out with him no matter what Fred says. Fred watches as Cliff puts his jacket on, and he realizes that Cliff is an ex-service man as well. After Cliff goes out, Marie tells Fred that he isn't worth her time and that she is getting a divorce. Fred tells her not to keep Cliff waiting and says that he's going as far away as he can. As he picks up his things, he sees the picture from the club with Peggy in it. He takes it and tears it up, then goes back to his parents' house to pack. Fred's parents find the paper citations that go along with his medals, but he doesn't want to take them with him. He says goodbye to his family and leaves.

Fred goes to the airport and chooses the plane that leaves first. As his father reads over the citations, he shows his wife their son's merits. Fred walks through the plane graveyard as he waits for his flight. He climbs into one of the planes and sits looking out of its nose, remembering his war days until a man comes over and asks him what he's doing. He gets out and tells the man that he used to work in a plane like these, and the man replies that the planes are being broken up to be made into prefabricated houses. Fred asks if they need help, but the man says that he doesn't feel sorry for Fred's lack of employment. Fred replies he knows how to learn a job like this one, just as he learned to work in a plane. The man finally offers him a job.

At Homer's house, everyone is getting ready for Wilma and Homer's wedding. Al and his family show up for the ceremony, and Fred is the best man. Homer gives Fred the ring,



and then Al comes out to speak to them. Al has heard that Fred moved back home, and he toasts Homer. Milly comes out to say hello for everyone, and then Fred goes inside and finally finds Peggy. She spots him and comes over. They shake hands, and he tells her that he found a job. The wedding is about to start, though, so Fred goes to get Homer instead of continuing the conversation. The couple is happily married, but Fred looks on sadly and glances at Peggy every few minutes. After the wedding, he finally goes over and kisses her. Afterwards, he tells her that they will have no money and that it may take them years to get anywhere, but she smiles happily and kisses him again.



Characters

Milly Stephenson, played by Myrna Loy

Description

Milly Stephenson is Al's wife. While Al has been away at the war, Milly has worked and run the family on her own. Unlike many women she knows, she has become very independent and self-reliant while her husband has been away.

Milly's biggest issue with Al's return is learning to relate to him again. She finds that he has changed, and so have Milly and the children. Al cannot seem to get his life together when he first returns, and Milly must continue running the family until Al can get back on his feet.

Analysis

Milly is a strong, independent woman. She has been able to hold the family together during Al's absence, and she is patient as he adjusts following his return. Milly is an example for her daughter, Peggy, and the two become very close during Al's absence.

Milly deals with Al's problems with patience, but she also realizes that she must push him to pull himself together for the sake of their marriage and children. After she helps him return to normal life, they experience a reawakening in their marriage.

Al Stephenson, played by Fredric March

Description

Al is a captain in the military who is finally going home after having been away for almost four years. He has not seen his wife, Milly, or his children during this time, so when he surprises them, they do not know how to react. Al is hurt at first, but then he realizes that he does not know his family at all after all this time.

Although Al is dealing with his own issues, he becomes something of a surrogate father for Fred and Homer. Since they have all been through the same experiences in the war, Al can relate to the younger men more effectively than their own fathers. They often come to him for advice as they try to readjust to normal life.

Analysis

Al struggles to find a purpose within his family. They have been functioning without him for four years, and he is not sure where he fits within the family structure once he



returns. His children are not excited by the gifts he brings, and he can barely relate to them as young adults.

Al mentors two younger men, Homer and Fred, whom he meets on his way home from the war. Although Al has many of his own problems making the adjustment to civilian life, Homer and Fred rely on him for advice and guidance. Because of their faith in him, Al is better able to return to normal life himself.

Fred Derry, played by Dana Andrews

Description

Fred Derry had been a pilot in the Air Force during World War II, and he now has to deal with the realities of life at home. Dashing and debonair, Fred had been worry-free before leaving to fight, but now he has seen the harsher realities of life. Upon returning home, he finds that he must deal with decisions made before the War that are not turning out the way he had expected them to.

Fred is married to Marie, whose interest in him stems largely from his free-flowing money and handsome uniform. As Fred and Marie's relationship becomes increasingly strained, Fred finds himself drawn to Al's daughter, Peggy. Fred is not quite sure how to handle the attraction at first, but when his relationship with Marie ends, Fred is finally free to pursue Peggy, his true love.

Analysis

Before the war, Fred had been a carefree, hot shot young pilot. After fighting for several years, however, he has become a strong, mature young man. Fred's old life and his new attitude cannot mix, and his marriage to Marie quickly begins to fall apart. At the same time, he meets Peggy, who is exactly the kind of woman he now wants. Fred struggles to find a way to be with her without upsetting her family or hurting her in the meantime.

Fred's marriage to Marie finally ends once she realizes that he will never be rich. Since he had received no formal training in anything before the war, Fred cannot find a decent job anywhere. Marie finally leaves him to live a life filled with wealthy men and parties, so Fred is able to win Peggy at last.

Peggy Stephenson, played by Teresa Wright

Description

Peggy Stephenson is Al and Millie's daughter. She is a bright, independent, level-headed girl who has worked hard in school and has a good job. When Al returns, Peggy has difficulty relating to him at first, since she had been a young girl when he left. Over



time, though, the two begin forming an adult relationship, and Peggy helps her parents adjust to all of the changes that they are going through.

In the meantime, Peggy meets Fred Derry through her father and falls in love with him. Peggy cannot bear to think that Fred will have to stay with Marie throughout his life. They begin a small romance but keep things under control for their own sakes and the sake of Peggy's parents. Eventually, Marie leaves Fred, and Peggy is finally able to be with the man she loves.

Analysis

Peggy is a bright girl. Unlike Marie, she has her feet on the ground and can take care of herself. She is not particularly interested in money; rather, she wants to build real relationships with her parents and with Fred.

Peggy wins Fred's heart with her unassuming ways. She helps him when he is in trouble while remaining true to herself. Besides being very kind, Peggy is also very independent and stubborn. While her parents believe that pursuing a relationship with Fred is futile, she stands up to them and shares her viewpoint.

Marie Derry, played by Virginia Mayo

Description

Marie Derry is Fred's selfish young wife. The couple had married while Fred had been home on leave, and they had never really gotten to know one another before he left again. When Fred returns from the war, Marie has moved out of his parents' house and is working full time. Marie seems solely concerned with Fred's money and looks.

Analysis

Marie is a selfish woman who has little concern for anyone other than herself. She marries Fred on a whim, excited to be seen with this dashing young soldier. Little does she know that when he returns, he will be poor and unemployable. When Marie discovers that marriage will actually require work, she decides that she cannot deal with the pressure. She begins working and seeing other men and tells Fred that she wants a divorce.

Homer Parrish, played by Harold Russell

Description

Homer is a young man who has lost both of his arms during his wartime Navy service. Upon returning home, he struggles to find acceptance from his family and friends, as well as a purpose for his life.



Analysis

Homer struggles with issues of self-doubt and inferiority as he works to come to terms with his war injuries. Having lost both arms below the elbow, he feels that he is no longer good enough for his fiancé, Wilma, and that he is a disappointment to his family.

Through the loving support of Wilma and his parents as well as the encouragement of Fred and Al, Homer eventually learns to accept himself. One night, Wilma helps Homer get ready for bed and sees him without the hooks he wears in place of arms. She still accepts him, and Homer finally understands that she loves him no matter how he looks.

Wilma Cameron, played by Cathy O'Donnell

Description

Wilma Cameron is Homer's fiancé. She loves him very much, but she is shocked to see that he has lost most of both arms when he returns home.

Analysis

Wilma remains strong after Homer returns, even though Homer at first refuses to believe she could still love him. Despite Homer's resistance, Wilma eventually convinces him that her love is real and that she wants to marry him.

Uncle Butch, played by Hoagy Carmichael

Description

Uncle Butch is Homer's uncle, who owns the bar where all the men go to meet. He also helps Homer come to terms with his injuries.

Analysis

Uncle Butch helps Homer realize that his life is not over simply because he has been injured. Homer goes through a phase where he feels sorry for himself, but Uncle Butch helps pull him out of it.



Themes

Surviving Life After War

After World War II, many men came back to their homes with no idea how to live their lives after the war. Since so many had gone away as very young men, they had no education beyond high school and no real skills that would market them to the jobs they wanted.

In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, we watch as these men, young and old, return after four or more years of fighting and try to reconnect with the family and friends they had left behind. In Al's case, he had left two young children when he went to war, and he returns to find that they have both grown up. One of the challenges he faces is learning to relate to them as young people instead of as children.

Fred, on the other hand, had gotten married just as he was leaving for the war and had only known his wife for a few days when he left. At the time, he had been a young pilot with a lot of money, but when he returns, he is older, wiser, and poorer. Fred must deal with his failing marriage at the same time as he comes to terms with the fact that he is not eligible for any job.

Homer probably has the most difficult situation. After leaving for the war as a strong young man, he has returned with hooks for hands. Although he can do most things, he feels that he is strange and odd, especially in the eyes of his family.

All three men experience different problems and challenges as they return home after war. Men coming home are reminded to give things time as they readjust, while families are reminded to be patient and understanding of the men they love.

Working With Love

Each of the men who comes home must re-learn to navigate his own life. After being overseas for so long, the men no longer know the women and families that they loved. This is especially obvious in Al's situation, in which his children have become young adults during the time he has been away.

In order to make a return to their normal lives, these men must reacquaint themselves with their loved ones. They learn to relate to their families and friends again while trying to understand the feelings of those they love. Homer has an especially difficult time, since his family is shocked to discover his condition.

The love of family and friends keeps these men alive, and they work through love to find answers to their questions and problems. Without this help, the men would be lost in the seas of their new lives. Both veterans of wars and their families can learn a lot about dealing with the return of a loved one from watching this film.

Patriotism

Patriotism is also an important theme in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Despite the problems that these men face when returning from the war, they are heralded for their courage and patriotism during war time. Although they at first feel that they lost the best years of their lives while at war, they soon realize that they are just discovering the best years because of their patriotism and their loved ones.

We see men who have sacrificed the most important parts of their lives - time with loved ones - in order to protect their country and families. Throughout the film, we watch their struggles and see them continue to survive. Viewers are encouraged to sympathize with their challenges and respect their patriotism.

With so many men returning from the war around the time the film was released, the real veterans of the war and their families were able to relate to this film. The patriotism of the men is applauded, and the patience of their loved ones is admired.

Style and Cinematography

The Best Years of Our Lives was created at an opportune moment in history. As the veterans of World War II returned to the United States, they experienced difficulty finding jobs, since so many had gone off to war straight out of high school. Many men felt like failures when they could not support their young families.

In addition, many men had married just days before leaving to fight overseas. Although some had known their spouses for awhile, others had just met before they married. Thus, the men returned and had to get to know their wives. Couples who had dated longer and married couples also had to readjust to living together, and fathers had to get to know their children who had aged, usually by years.

This film's style is simple and straightforward. It reaches directly to address a need felt by the veterans of World War II and their families. All of these people were trying to readjust to their own lives, and this film gave their feelings and experiences validation, while also giving them a roadmap to follow.

The cinematography and acting in this film are excellent. Every scene seems real and heartfelt. Although the film was obviously reaching out to fill a need that viewers had, it never gives the viewer a feeling of being patronized. The actors portray their characters with honesty and care while the cinematography vividly brings the characters, their experiences, and their feelings to life.

Motifs

War Memories

As the three men try to return to their normal lives, they continue to meet randomly in town. Each time they meet, they discuss their lives during the war. In order to come to terms with their new lives at home and put their memories of the war to rest, the men seem to need these times of reliving their glory days overseas.

The meetings and the sharing of war memories allow viewers to see how the men change their relationships with their families and themselves throughout the film. In the beginning, the men want to relive war memories so that they can ignore the difficulties they now face as they reunite with loved ones. Instead of facing their current problems, the men find it easier to focus on the past.

Later in the film, though, the three men discuss their lives during the war in order to share their experiences with their families. They are finally ready to share their difficult memories and strained emotions with those they love the most. Not only do they make sense of their pasts, but they also bring their families into those pasts and take their first tentative steps into their futures as civilians.

Chance Encounters

Chance encounters are a recurring motif in this film. The men struggle to find their places in their new civilian lives, and as they do so, they meet many people who help them. Sometimes the chance encounters are with the other men and their families, while other times they are with people who oppose them.

One of the first chance encounters is when all three men stop at Butch's at the same time. Throughout the film, the three continue to run into each other there. Each time, they have the opportunity to discuss their families and the progress they have made in coming to know their loved ones again. Additionally, Peggy and Fred run into each other numerous times on their path to love.

Other chance encounters also impact the ways in which the men view the world. When Al meets the young man wanting to purchase property after the war, he learns that the bank cares little for the needs of people and more for its own security. Similarly, Fred and Homer meet a man who opposes the war, and they become involved in an altercation with him after he insults their efforts overseas.

Jobs

Each man tries to find a purpose for his life by finding a job. As they search for this purpose and seek to support their families, the men struggle to admit that they are still unprepared to deal with the problems of daily life.

Al struggles as he returns to his former job at the bank. He wants to give loans to men who have returned from the war, but none of these men have collateral. After giving one man a loan, Al is called into the president's office and admonished for making such a risky deal. Al despises his new job, as worthy men who have spent years protecting their country are turned away from having a chance to build new lives. Although Al takes the president's speech well, he tells everyone at the bank how he feels during a later dinner.

Fred discovers that he is not qualified for any type of job after he returns home. Having only finished high school and having never had any formal training, Fred cannot find a decent job anywhere. Thus, he is forced to return to his old job at the soda shop. Fred's pride is hurt, and his new wife only makes the situation worse as she demands fun and money. Fred finally finds a job working at an airplane graveyard, and he finds love with Peggy around the same time; he has finally found fulfillment.

Homer has the worst situation, since he is unable to work at all. Although he is a strong young man, his hooks make any type of job difficult. At first Homer feels like a failure, but we watch as he learns to play the piano at Butch's. Although he may not be able to find a normal job, Homer gains a sense of self-respect and independence as he becomes a unique and talented pianist.



Symbols

Airplanes & Hooks

During the war, both men and women lost many things. They lost parts of their lives; they lost their loved ones; they lost their senses of purpose. In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, we learn a little more about what the soldiers sacrificed during the war. In the film, airplanes and hooks symbolize just two things that many men in the war lost.

Fred had had few work experiences before going to fight in the war. In the air force, he had been the person who helped drop bombs from the noses of airplanes, and now he is not trained for anything except working in planes. Although he has sacrificed a lot of time for his country, he is not eligible for a decent job because he does not have previous experience. He loses his sense of purpose when he can no longer work with planes, and we see this in a dramatic scene in which he visits the airplane graveyard.

Homer has lost more than many people, for he no longer has his arms. His hopes for a good job are consequently gone, but he has lost even more than that; he has lost much of his ability to be independent in even the simplest of everyday tasks. His struggle will continue for years, and viewers have a poignant view of just how much some people sacrificed to protect their country.

Soda Shop

Throughout *The Best Years of Our Lives*, we watch three men try to come to terms with the changes in their lives. After having had an important purpose during the war, they feel that their sacrifice is overlooked at home and that they no longer have anything to give. The soda shop symbolize these feelings of inability to contribute to society in their new lives.

When Fred had left for the war, he had only a high school diploma and no formal job training. Although he had worked at a soda shop in high school, he had never had a chance to train for a higher level position. Then, during the war, Fred had been trained to drop bombs from airplanes, a skill that is no longer helpful when he returns home.

The soda shop symbolizes the ultimate failure in Fred's eyes. He believes that he has matured too much to work there, but he eventually realizes that it is his only chance to make a living. Fred's defeat is similar to the defeat felt by many men who returned from the war; however, when he gets the job working at the airplane graveyard, he suddenly becomes a symbol of hope for those same men.

Bar

The bar is symbolic of the relationships that the men who fought together in the war forged. Although Al, Fred, and Homer did not meet each other until they were on their way home from fighting, they were automatically bonded by their similar experiences and love for their country and families.

As the men meet time and again at the bar, from their first nights home to the final days in the film, we see that their relationships to one another only become stronger. Each man faces more difficulties at home than he had ever imagined, and the men rely on each other to get through the tough times.



Essay Questions

Which war has just ended as the film begins?

What happened to Homer's hands?

Why can't Howard embrace his girlfriend?

Describe Al's reception at his home.

What shock does Fred return home to?

Describe the developing relationship between Fred and Peggy.

Why does Fred and Marie's marriage finally end?

What does Wilma do that convinces Homer that they should get married?

Describe how the three men come to terms with their experiences in different ways.

If faced with this situation, how could you welcome home a soldier?