

# **It's a Wonderful Life Film Summary**

**It's a Wonderful Life by Frank Capra**

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## Context

Over the years, *It's a Wonderful Life* has become the premier classic Christmas movie in the United States. What most viewers of this beloved favorite don't know, however, is that the film did poorly at the box office compared to what was expected for a Jimmy Stewart/ Frank Capra film. *It's a Wonderful Life* was an independent film with an expensive budget for the time - \$3.7 million. After the film was released, it only grossed \$3.3 million. *It's a Wonderful Life* became popular in the 1970s after the rights to the film were released and it was shown on cable channels for weeks before Christmas.

*It's a Wonderful Life* was based on a short story by Philip Van Doren Stern called "The Greatest Gift." However, the only credited work for the screenplay goes to Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, and Capra, with additional scenes by Jo Swerling. Other uncredited work on the script was completed by Dorothy Parker, Dalton Trumbo, and Clifford Odets.

Frank Capra was one of the best directors of his time and had made his mark on the profession in such works as *The Younger Generation*, *Ladies of Leisure*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Meet John Doe*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Moving from the realm of the silent film to that of talkies early in his career helped Capra make his mark as the new genre became increasingly popular. Because of his enterprising and unique ways, Capra was known as an important director long before *It's a Wonderful Life*, but for lovers of Christmas, this film will always be Capra's defining moment.

Although to modern viewers Jimmy Stewart seems like the perfect person for the part of George Bailey, he almost didn't take the job. Having only recently returned from World War II, Stewart felt the experience was too fresh on his mind. (In the scene in the bar when Bailey breaks down, viewers are actually watching Stewart break into tears due to his own feelings.) However, after many negotiations and much encouragement, Lionel Barrymore convinced Stewart to take the part, and Stewart's part in the traditions of Christmas was made.

Stewart was also nervous about the passionate kiss scene by the phone. Having just been away to war, Stewart was uncomfortable with performing the scene with Donna Reed. However, with Capra watching over the project, the kiss scene turned out to be one of the best in the film, and part of it even had to be cut to get past the censors.

Reed and Lionel Barrymore were also popular actors by the time they made this film. Reed had already played major roles in *Gentle Annie*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Faithful in My Fashion* before taking the role of Mary Hatch Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Reed gives a stellar performance as the strong but gentle wife of George Bailey and is probably best remembered for this role. Lionel Barrymore had been in dozens of movies before taking the part of Mr. Potter. As the brother of John and Ethel Barrymore, Lionel was destined for a career on the screen. His parts in such films as *Treasure Island*, *Sweepings*, *You Can't Take It With You*, and *A Free Soul* made him a much-

loved actor at the time, and his portrayal of Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life* was exceptional.

The picture earned five Academy Award nominations: Best Picture, Best Actor (Stewart in his first film in almost six years), Best Director (Capra), Best Sound Recording and Best Film Editing. However, it won no Oscars, beat out by the famed William Wyler's award-winning *The Best Years of Our Lives* that truly sparkled that year.



# Summary and Analysis

As the film begins, we see a sign saying "You are now in Bedford Falls." Then, we hear people praying for George Bailey, everyone from his friends to his mother to his brother to his children. We see that their prayers are going up to God, and Joseph and God discuss sending down someone for George. Joseph is told to send the clockmaker Clarence even if he is odd. Clarence asks whether the man is sick, but God says, "Worse. He's discouraged." Clarence is told that at 10:45 p.m., this man will be considering giving up his life, and his job is to get to know Bailey and help him realize that his life is worth so much. Clarence asks if he will finally get his wings after 200 years if he does well with George; he is told that he will. They then sit Clarence down to tell him about Bailey's life.

The story of George's life begins in 1919, when he was 12 and he and his friends are sledding. His kid brother, Harry, falls into the ice, but he is saved by George. However, George catches a cold and loses his hearing in one ear. Weeks later, George can finally go back to his after-school job at Mr. Gower's drug store. As George is on his way to work, he and his friends see a nice carriage belonging to Mr. Potter, "the richest and meanest man in the county." George's friends drop him off at his job, and we see Mr. Gower in the back drinking. Mary is waiting for George at the store, and we can tell that they like each other.

As George and Mary talk, Mary leans to his bad ear and says, "George Bailey, I'll love you until the day I die." George doesn't hear her. George finds a telegram telling Mr. Gower that his son has died. George goes to the back, and Mr. Gower sends him to drop off a prescription for someone. However, George is concerned that Mr. Gower gave him the wrong medicine. George runs up to see his father for advice, but Mr. Bailey is in a meeting with Mr. Potter. Potter is threatening Mr. Bailey, who tries to explain that times are hard and people must take care of their children. When Mr. Potter is rude, George takes up for his father and is sent out of the office. He returns to the pharmacy. Mr. Gower is just getting off the phone with the person needing the prescription when George walks in and begins to hit George. George tells Mr. Gower that he knows he feels bad because of the telegram, but he also knows that Mr. Gower accidentally put poison in the capsules. Mr. Gower hugs George and thanks him.

The scene then moves to an older George talking to a boy in the pharmacy. God tells Clarence that George never did tell anyone about the capsules, but when Clarence starts asking more questions, he is told to be patient. George has gone in to pick up a suitcase left for him as a gift from Mr. Gower. He has been working at the Bailey Building and Loan, but is now getting ready to go to Europe for the summer and then off to college. Harry, George's brother, is hurrying off to the graduation dance, but George decides to stay home. George explains that Harry can take his job at the Building and Loan, and then later George can pay for Harry's education. Harry tells him that he's excited to graduate with a degree and start building things. George tells him that he wants to do something big and important, not work in an office. Their father explains that



they are doing great things by helping other people get what they need. Mr. Bailey wishes George luck, and George tells his father that he thinks he's great.

In the end, George decides to go to Harry's party and has a good time. Mary's brother asks George to dance with her. When George sees Mary, he stops and stares. The two hit it off and begin to dance. Two guys at the party realize that there is a swimming pool beneath the floor, and that George is dancing right over it. One of them has the key, and they open the pool. After several minutes of dancing, George and Mary fall into the pool, and then the rest of the party joins them.

George walks Mary home; she is now wearing a bathrobe. As they talk, George realizes that he is falling for Mary. George decides to make a wish and throw a rock through the window of the Granville House. He tells Mary that he wants to get out of this town, see the world, and build skyscrapers. As he speaks, Mary throws a rock through the window and makes her own wish, but she refuses to tell him her wish. A man outside on his porch tells George to kiss Mary instead of talking her to death. Mary runs away, but George is standing on the tie of her robe. Her robe comes off and she rushes into the bushes. George finally gives Mary her robe back as a car drives up and tells him that he has to hurry home because his father had a stroke.

The next scene shows George in a Board meeting for the Building and Loan. He has skipped his trip to Europe in order to get things in order there, but he is leaving for college later that day. Mr. Potter gets up and announces that he doesn't think the town needs the Building & Loan. Everyone says that Mr. Bailey died too recently to close down the company. Mr. Potter talks highly of Mr. Bailey, but he says that common sense has ruined the business. Mr. Potter speaks badly about the working class and Bailey's idealism, but George stands up and speaks for his father and the working class. George says, "Just remember this, Mr. Potter: that this rabble you're talking about, they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath?"

George tries to leave to go to his train, but the Board comes out and tells him that George has to be the Executive Secretary or the Board will vote with Potter. George stays home and sends Harry to college instead. When Harry finishes college, George expects him to come back and take over the Building & Loan. However, Harry returns with a new wife, Ruth, to the shock of Uncle Billy and George. Ruth's father has offered Harry a job. Harry says he never said he'd take it, because he knows that George has been waiting around for four years. George pulls Harry aside to ask about the job and tells him what a wonderful opportunity it is.

After the welcome home party, George tells his mother that Ruth will keep Harry away from Bedford Falls, and she tells him that Mary Hatch is back in town and encourages him to call on her. He leaves the party to go find Mary. On the way, he is cornered by Violet; but she does not agree with his idea of a good time. George finally arrives at Mary's, and she catches him pacing back and forth in front of her house.



George and Mary are a little awkward at first, but then they begin talking like normal. They get into an argument when he doesn't say what he means, and Mary's mother reminds her that Sam Wainwright is supposed to call from New York. As George leaves, the phone begins to ring. As Mary answers the phone, George returns to get his hat. When Sam finds out George is there, he asks to talk to him. We see Sam in his office flirting with one of his workers. George and Mary lean close together to hear Sam, and Sam tells them they will all be rich soon. George tells Sam that he can start his business in Bedford Falls more cheaply, and he even offers George a job. George and Mary turn toward each other and George tells her that he only wants to do what he wants to do. George then takes her in his arms and kisses her. The next scene shows them leaving from their wedding.

George and Mary drive off in a cab, with a bottle of champagne the police chief sent over. They are headed off on their honeymoon to New York and Bermuda. As they pass the Building and Loan, they see the townspeople gathered there. George runs over to see what's going on even though Mary asks him not to. The bank has called the Building & Loan's loan, and everyone has gathered to withdraw their money. Potter calls George to make sure they're still open and tells George that he has offered Bank money to meet the peoples' needs, and he's also willing to guarantee their loans. Potter tells George that "if you close your doors before 6:00 p.m., you will never reopen."

George tries to reassure the people, but they want a guarantee from the Building & Loan. One man comes in and tells them about Potter's offer, and everyone begins to leave. George explains that Potter wants to control the town and keep everyone living in slums. At that moment, Mary comes in and hands their honeymoon money over to George to keep the Building & Loan open. He loans people the money they need to stay afloat. They are able to remain open until 6:00 p.m. with two dollars left. When Uncle Billy starts handing out wedding cigars, George realizes that he has to find Mary. She calls him and tells him to come home to their new house. George walks up to the old Granville House and sees a sign that says "Bridal Suite." Mary is waiting for him inside the leaky house, and he sees a table and a bed for their honeymoon. She spent the day getting everything ready for a romantic wedding night. She reminds him of the night they broke the windows in the old house, and she tells him that this is what she wished for.

The next scene introduces us to a man who has just bought his first home with the help of George and the Building & Loan. George has created Bailey Park to help people purchase homes of their own. Sam Wainwright and his wife wait for George outside. In Mr. Potter's office, his businessmen warn him to take notice of Bailey Park and its threat to him. Potter kicks Sam out, and he tells Potter that he will someday ask Bailey for a job. At the house, Wainwright invites George and Mary to join them in Florida, but George tells him that he has too much work to do. George kicks the door of his car after they drive off, regretting that he is not wealthy like them.

Potter calls George to his office and offers him a job. George tells Potter that he will go home and think about the offer, but then George comes to his senses and tells Potter that he will not work for him. As George goes home that night, he thinks about Potter's



offer and his lost dreams. When Mary wakes up, George asks her why she would marry him, and she tells him she is pregnant. George is very excited.

God tells Clarence that he's probably already realized that George never leaves Bedford Falls. George and Mary have a baby boy and then a baby girl, and Mary restores the Granville Place. When World War II begins, Mary runs the USO and has two more babies. Sam makes a fortune manufacturing plastic planes, and Potter runs the draft board. Harry goes off to war and shoots down 15 planes. George stays home because of his ear and fights "the Battle of Bedford Falls." Finally, Joseph shows Clarence what happened that day.

George reads the newspaper and shows off the headline that Harry has won the Congressional Medal of Honor for saving a transport full of men. George is proud of his brother, and he gets a call from Harry in Washington when he gets into the office. Harry asks for Uncle Billy, but he is at the bank. The man from the bank has arrived in the office again, and he wants to finish working with them today. Uncle Billy is at the bank depositing \$8,000. He stops to talk to Mr. Potter and looks at his newspaper. However, when he hands back the newspaper, he also accidentally hands the money to Mr. Potter. The bank cashier points out that he didn't hand him the money, but Uncle Billy can't find it. Potter finds the money and sees Uncle Billy trying to find it frantically, but he does not return it. Uncle Billy runs out of the bank as Potter contemplates the situation.

Back at the Building & Loan, Violet comes to ask for money to start her life over in New York, and George helps her. As she steps out, she says, "I'm glad I know you, George Bailey." A moment later, Uncle Billy confesses that he has lost the money. They both search frantically for the money but cannot find it. George begins yelling, "Where's that money? Do you realize what this means? It means bankruptcy and scandal and prison. That's what it means. One of us is going to jail. Well, it's not gonna be me!"

Angry, disappointed, and depressed, George goes home and takes his anger out on his family. He also yells at one Zuzu's teacher, Mrs. Welch, blaming her for Zuzu's illness. After tearing up their home that is decorated beautifully for Christmas, George apologizes to Mary and his family, but they all just stare at him. George leaves the house while Mary calls Uncle Billy. Mary tells the children to pray for their father.

George goes and talks to Mr. Potter about getting an immediate \$8,000 loan. He offers to do anything to get the loan, telling Mr. Potter that the money is missing. George refuses to call the police because of the publicity and Harry's homecoming the next day. Although George tried to call Sam, he's in Europe for the holiday. George tells Mr. Potter that he has a life insurance policy worth \$15,000, and Mr. Potter says, "Look at you. You used to be so cocky. You claimed you were going to go out and conquer the world. You once called me, 'a warped, frustrated, old man!' Who are you but a warped, frustrated young man, crawling in here on your hands and knees begging for help. No securities, no stocks, no bonds. Nothin' but a miserable little \$500 equity in a life insurance policy. You're worth more dead than alive."





Instead of helping George, Potter tells him that he is calling in a warrant for his arrest. George leaves and wanders down to Martini's bar to drink. He begins to pray to God for help. In the bar, Mr. Welch punches George for being rude to his wife. Nick and Martini beg George not to leave in his condition, but he leaves anyway. After running his car into a tree, a man yells at him for hurting the tree. George wanders down the street and is almost run over by a car.

As George walks onto the bridge, a man in the water begins yelling for help. George jumps in and saves the man, who turns out to be Clarence. They go inside the booth at the bridge and talk to the man working there. Clarence tries to dry out the copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* he always carries with him while explaining that he jumped in to save George. George was planning to commit suicide, and Clarence explains that he's the answer to his prayer. Clarence scares the man working the bridge, who runs away. Clarence tries to explain that he is George's guardian angel and knows all about his life, but George is skeptical. George says, "Well, you look about the kind of angel I'd get. Sort of a fallen angel, aren't you? What happened to your wings?" George tells Clarence that he's worth more dead than alive and that everyone would have been better off without him. George then says that it would be better if he hadn't been born at all.

In order to prove to George that his life is important, Clarence decides to show George what the world would be like if he had never been born. George no longer exists, and he can suddenly hear out of his bad ear. George tells Clarence to fly, but Clarence explains again that he doesn't have his wings yet. Nothing that George remembers has ever happened to him. When he looks for his car, it is no longer there. The man who was mad at George doesn't remember him and calls the town Pottersville. Martini no longer owns the bar, but Nick does. Nick doesn't know George, and he has become a rude, harsh man who yells at Clarence. Clarence hears a bell and explains that "every time you hear a bell, an angel gets his wings." Nick humiliates Mr. Gower, an old drunk, as well. Nick tells them that Gower spent 20 years in jail for poisoning a kid, then he throws them out.

Out in the snow, Clarence explains that George wasn't around to stop Gower from putting the poison in the bottle. Clarence explains that there is no longer a George Bailey, and he explains that "You've been given a great gift, George: a chance to see what the world would be like without you." As George walks through Pottersville, he sees that it has become a drunken, low-class town filled with bars and gentlemen's clubs. He also discovers that The Bailey Building and Loan went out of business years ago, and that Violet has become a scandalous prostitute. George gets in Ernie's cab and starts driving to what George believes is his home. However, he learns that Ernie doesn't remember him and that no one has lived in the house for 20 years. Bert, the cop, tries to arrest George, but Clarence attacks him and George gets away. Thankfully, Joseph helps Clarence disappear, and he goes to find George.

George finds his mother running a boarding house and barely surviving on her meager income. She doesn't remember him either, since he was never born. He also finds out from her that Uncle Billy has been in the insane asylum ever since he lost his business.



Clarence appears and says, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" George tries to find Martini in Bailey Park, but Bailey Park doesn't exist because George wasn't there to build it.

Clarence also tells George that his brother, Harry, died at the age of nine in a sledding accident, because George wasn't there to save him. Additionally, every man on the transport that Harry saved has died, because George wasn't there to save Harry. George finds Harry's grave, and Clarence says, "You see George, you've really had a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to just throw it away?" George then demands that Clarence tell him what has happened to Mary. Clarence tells him that she's now an old maid and is just closing up the library. George finds and follows her, but she doesn't know him. The townspeople call the police on George, but he escapes to the bridge.

As George stands on the bridge, he calls out for Clarence. He says, "Clarence! Clarence! Help me, Clarence. Get me back. Get me back. I don't care what happens to me. Get me back to my wife and kids. Help me, Clarence, please. Please! I want to live again! I want to live again. I want to live again. Please, God, let me live again."

Bert pulls up because Mary has called him to look for George. George begins to run home, screaming, "Hello, Bedford Falls! Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas, movie house! Merry Christmas, Emporium! Merry Christmas, you wonderful, old Building & Loan! Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter!" to which Potter replies, "Happy New Year to you... in jail."

At George's home, the bank examiner is waiting for him. He goes upstairs and embraces his children. Mary finally comes home from trying to find him, and they embrace too. She pulls him downstairs and then all the townspeople enter. Uncle Billy is the first, and he pours out a bucket of money. When the people found out he was in trouble, they all began to pitch in to help. George stares in wonder at the love of his fellow men and women. Even Violet returns her money, having decided to stay in town. A note from London also comes from Sam with word that he instructed his office to wire George up to \$25,000. Everyone rejoices and begins to sing.

The prosecutor and bank examiner tear up the papers against George, and Harry comes home a day early. Harry offers "A toast to my big brother, George - the richest man in town!" Everyone begins to sing *Auld Lang Syne*, and George notices a copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* on top of the money brought by the town. A note inside says, "Dear George - Remember no man is a failure who has friends. Thanks for the wings! Love Clarence." Mary asks what it is, and George tells her it's a gift from a very dear friend. A bell on the tree begins to ring, and Zuzu tells George, "Look, Daddy. Teacher says, every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings." George says, "That's right; that's right." Then he winks to the sky and says, "Attaboy, Clarence." George's family joins in the song, and the picture fades out.



# Characters

## George Bailey, played by James Stewart

### Description

George Bailey is the son of the owner of the Bedford Falls Building & Loan. George has spent his whole life trying to get out of Bedford Falls, but each time he seems to have a chance, he ends up having to stay. When his father dies, George is elected to the head of the Building & Loan, so he gives up his chance at college and lets his brother, Harry, go instead. Later when Harry gets married and receives a great job offer, George sacrifices to stay home once again.

George eventually marries Mary Hatch, who has had a crush on him since they were children. Although Mary went to college, she returns home because she loves Bedford Falls. They fall in love, and together they start a family. One Christmas, George's life seems to be falling apart. His business is on the verge of closing and depression is setting in, so George decides he is worth more dead than alive. As he tries to kill himself, George is visited by Clarence, an angel who helps him to see how much his life has truly been worth.

### Analysis

George is a selfless man who has spent his whole life trying to make others happy. When he was young, George saved his brother from drowning and saved Mr. Gower, his boss, from poisoning a little boy. He later gave up his dreams to take over the family business. George never fails to be the sacrificing son, always doing the right thing for everyone, and never making a lot of money. When things finally go terribly wrong after Uncle Billy loses the company's money, George decides that he has had enough.

Although George is through with his life, he receives a visit from an angel. As he sees what the world would be like if he had never been born, George begins to appreciate his impact on all those around him. His small sacrifices and heroic acts, such as keeping Mr. Gower from delivering the medicine, saving Harry, and staying home instead of going to college, have changed the lives of all those around him. When the town comes to his rescue on Christmas Eve, George finally learns that he has all he's ever needed or wanted when surrounded by his loving family and friends.

## Mr. Potter, played by Lionel Barrymore

### Description

Mr. Potter is George's foil in every way. Mr. Potter is a lonely old man who has spent his whole life focused on making money. Working in the building industry as well, he spent



years trying to get his hands on the Building & Loan, but George kept the business afloat just to be sure that wouldn't happen.

When Uncle Billy accidentally gives the money to Mr. Potter, Mr. Potter finally believes he has George just where he wants him. However, while Mr. Potter has been making enemies, George has made friends, and the whole town comes to help George. When we last see him, Mr. Potter is sitting in his office alone watching as George runs by, excited about his life as he now sees it.

## **Analysis**

Mr. Potter allows us to take a better look at everything George Bailey is. George could have run the Building & Loan in the same way Mr. Potter ran his empire, but George is a good-natured man who wants to see his fellow townspeople do well. Mr. Potter has always been "above" the rest of the town because of his money, but even when it looks like he has George just where he wants him, George is saved because of the relationships he has made.

## **Clarence, played by Henry Travers**

### **Description**

Clarence is an angel sent by God to save George's life. George has run out of options and is terribly depressed. Because he has been such a good man, God sends an angel to help him. Clarence is actually working as a clockmaker in heaven, and he is hoping to get his wings this time. He is assured by God that if he can save George then he will finally get his wings. Clarence visits George and helps him put his life into perspective.

### **Analysis**

Clarence is the angel sent to open George's eyes. By changing the world into a world where George was never born, Clarence helps George see the importance of his life. Clarence follows George as he visits people who were important in his life, offering sound advice and insight when needed. The real story centers around George, but Clarence helps George understand what he is seeing. In the end, George chooses life—even his old, unexciting life—over death, and Clarence gets his wings.

## **Mary Hatch Bailey, played by Donna Reed**

### **Description**

Mary Hatch Bailey has a crush on George from their earliest years. We first meet her in the soda shop where she tells George (in his deaf ear, of course) that she will love him forever. Mary proves her love as they grow older and start a family together. Even when



she doesn't like what George does, Mary remains the faithful and loving wife we expect her to be.

### **Analysis**

Mary is George's strength. He falls in love with her, and she changes his life for the better. Mary helps George see that there are more important things in life than getting out of Bedford Falls, including making a home for themselves and their children.

## **Uncle Billy, played by Thomas Mitchell**

### **Description**

Uncle Billy is George's sweet but forgetful uncle. Billy helped George's father start the Building & Loan business, but he is not a competent enough businessman to keep the company afloat alone. Billy and the rest of the workers at the Building & Loan rely on George for advice and leadership.

### **Analysis**

Uncle Billy is the instigator for George's desired suicide. By losing the money, Uncle Billy gives George the one final disappointment that he cannot bear. However, without the character of Uncle Billy and his silly ways, George would never have the opportunity to see what life would have been like without him. Although Uncle Billy is not a terribly important character, his mistakes provide the catalyst for the plot.



# Themes

## Each Life is Important

One of the reasons that *It's a Wonderful Life* is such a popular movie around the holidays is that it emphasizes that each life is important. During a season of magic and wealth, people often begin to feel that their lives have not been good enough. This film reminds viewers that even those who have the least important looking lives may be making the greatest impact on their fellow men.

George's life seems wasted on doing the normal, daily things of life. Rather than becoming a big-name engineer or being a war hero, George takes life as it comes and makes the best of his circumstances. Although George does not feel that he has done anything important, the truth is everyone he knows would have suffered terribly had George not been born.

## Your Dreams Are Not Always What You Expect

Through his experience, George learns that even your greatest dreams are not always the things that you really need or even want. George wanted to be a famous engineer and make a lot of money, but the way he lived his life gave him more than fame: he had friends and family who loved him dearly.

Although George's dreams did not turn out the way he expected them to as a young man, his later dreams and achievements were important. By being a good man, raising his family, and remaining true to the family business, George wins the dream of being a pillar of his society and the hope of his friends and family.

## Hope Always Remains

After Uncle Billy loses the money, George seems to lose hope as well. He decides that since his life insurance policy is worth more than anything else he owns, he is worth more dead than alive. Despite George's sudden loss of hope, Clarence brings hope back into his life.

Because of Clarence's influence, George sees that his life is important and that he has much to hope for. His children, his wife, and his town all love him, and George discovers that even in the worst of times, he is the richest man in town when it comes to the things that really matter.



## Style and Cinematography

*It's a Wonderful Life* was created as a type of fable for the life of the normal person. By using George Bailey as the main character, Capra brings the viewer into Bailey's realm of experience, making George equal to the viewer. From the beginning, George is played up to be a normal, everyday guy who is just doing his best to make those around him happy. Stylistically speaking, the story of the depressed man at the holidays could have hit too close to home for viewers. Instead, they fell in love with George, even though the greatest appreciation of the film did not occur until the 1970s. Even with the handsome Stewart playing George's character, Capra was able to create shots that kept George on an equal level with the audience, partly because he used some of Stewart's real emotion to portray scenes. In the scene at the bar, for instance, Stewart actually did break down, and Capra took advantage of a close shot to grasp Stewart's true emotion for the viewer.

When filming *It's a Wonderful Life*, Capra used a new technique for making snow. Previous films had used cornflakes painted white to portray snow, but since Capra wanted to film the audio live, he came up with a new way to create the effect of snow. Using soap, water, and foamite (a chemical used in fighting fires), Capra and his crew created a mixture that could be blown through high-powered fans to create snow scenes. They used 6,000 gallons of the fake snow for filming. The Motion Picture Academy gave a special award to the RKO Effects Department for developing this new technique.

# Motifs

## Holiday Depression

Holiday depression has been a major problem for centuries. With the cold weather and many demands of the holidays, many people find themselves down in the dumps during the Christmas season. George has the same problems, and this helps viewers relate to him.

George's depression over the possibility of losing his business, as well as his general depression from the holiday, forms a story through which we get to learn about him and his life. We see that his life has actually been very important even though he does not feel that he has made a major impact on those around him. While George starts out as a depressed failure in his own eyes, he soon learns that he has given much to those around him.

## Overshadowed By Family

George deals with another common plight in the film - being overshadowed by his own family. In many ways, George's whole life is caught up in his family and that remains his only identity. George's small successes at home are no match for his brother Harry's war hero stories and adventures.

George plays second fiddle to his brother, but the story of George's life shows us that none of Harry's success could have been possible had George not been there to save him from an accident as a child.

## The Faithful Son

George is the ever-faithful son to his family. Much in the way of the Prodigal Son story from the Bible, Harry gets to go off and have fun while George stays home to work in the family business. Although Harry does good rather than evil, George still feels that he has somehow missed out on part of his life by helping his family.

Because of George's personality and his penchant for doing the right thing, viewers assume he should be rewarded. Instead, he seems to suffer through much of the movie. After realizing his worth and receiving the support of the town, however, George becomes the much-applauded faithful son who finally sees that he is loved.



# Symbols

## Money

Money and its importance to humans is a major theme in the film. Every time we see money in a person's hand, we see a different aspect of using money for either good or evil. When George uses his honeymoon money to keep the Building & Loan open, we see George and Mary's goodness and interest in others in Bedford Falls. Additionally, George uses his own money to send Harry off to college when he needs to stay in Bedford Falls to run the company. In his hands, money is always working for the good of others and the community.

In Potter's hands, however, we see the misuse of money. Potter uses his wealth to trample on others, forcing them to buy poor, shabby houses that no one deserves to live in. Potter even keeps the money that Uncle Billy accidentally handed him, hoping that he can now close the Building & Loan for good. Unlike George, Potter never learns the true goodness that can come from using money to help others.

## Bells

"Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings." Almost everyone who has ever heard of *It's a Wonderful Life* knows this one line. Clarence's receipt of his wings is symbolic of George coming to terms with his life. Had George decided to kill himself, Clarence would not have received his wings, nor would George have discovered how much his family and friends loved him.

## The River

The river from which George saves Clarence is symbolic of George's life. As the water flows under the bridge, George sees his own life rapidly coming to a close. All his hopes and dreams have been dashed, even the hopes of running the Building & Loan. George decides to use the river to end his life.

At the end of the film, however, George again stands on the bridge and looks out over the river. He now has a new understanding of himself and his life. George has finally realized that although small and seemingly unimportant, his life has changed the lives of countless others through the years. The river symbolizes the journey George makes to reach this conclusion and all the people whose lives George has touched.



## Essay Questions

How does George save Mr. Gower in the beginning of the film?

Does George realize Mary's feelings when they are younger? How could that have changed the outcome of the film?

What is George's main goal in life when he is young?

Why does George never leave Bedford Falls?

What is the fate of Mary and the others if George is never born?

Why is Joseph skeptical about sending Clarence on this mission?

What keeps George from joining Sam's company?

What is the significance of the film being set at Christmas? How does the setting enhance the themes?

Why does Mr. Potter get away with his crime? Does he end up winning in the end?

What does it mean when a bell rings?

Bibliography

<http://imdb.com/title/tt0038650/>