

# **La Vita i Bella (Life is Beautiful) Film Summary**

**La Vita i Bella (Life is Beautiful) by Roberto Benigni**

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## Context

*La Vita i Bella* is set during the Second World War. Guido, Dora, and Giosuy live in the city. The first half of the movie tells viewers how Guido and Dora fell in love. We watch as Guido meets Dora when she falls on top of him from out of a barn. Then we see him continue to find her and make her laugh. Finally she runs away with him during her engagement party to the rude Rodolfo.

On Giosuy's birthday one year, Dora comes home to find that Guido and Giosuy are missing. She hurries to find them and discovers that they have been put on a train heading toward a concentration camp. She is not required to go, but she demands that the soldiers allow her on the train.

The whole family ends up in the camp, but Dora is alone on the women's side. Guido makes up a story about a game they are playing where a tank is the prize so that Giosuy will do everything he tells him to do. Guido's love saves Giosuy's life, and although Guido is killed, Dora and Giosuy reunite at the end of the war.

Roberto Benigni is the director and the lead actor in this film. He is the only actor other than Laurence Olivier to have directed himself. Benigni also directed *Non ci resta che piangere* which received high praise. He also went on to direct *Little Devils* (1988) with Walter Matthau and *Johnny Stecchino* (1992). Benigni gives an excellent performance as Guido, telling stories and creating comedy when humor is clearly not the first reaction.

Nicoletta Braschi who plays Dora is Benigni's wife off-screen. She has appeared in most of his films as well as many others. Her role as Dora is lovable and fun. Viewers can see the difficulty Dora has in choosing Guido over Rodolfo, the man her family wishes her to marry. Her ability to carry the role is impressive.

*La Vita i Bella* was nominated for seven Academy Awards and won three. The film was nominated for Best Director for Roberto Benigni; Best Film Editing for Simona Paggi; Best Picture for Elda Ferri and Gianluigi Braschi; Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen for Vincenzo Cerami and Roberto Benigni. Also the film won awards for the Best Actor in a Leading Role for Roberto Benigni; Best Foreign Language Film for Italy; Best Music, Original Dramatic Score for Nicola Piovani.

When Benigni won the Best Actor Academy Award after already accepting the Best Foreign Language Film award as its director, he said, "Thank you. This is a terrible mistake because I used up all my English!"



## Summary and Analysis

*La Vita e Bella* begins with the sound of wind and the words: "This is a simple story but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable, there is sorrow. And, like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness."

Switching to Arezzo, Italy, in 1939, a man is telling a story to his passenger. Their brakes go out and they begin careening across fields. They come back on the road behind two motorcycles and come upon a town. The town believes that they are royalty, so when the royalty actually arrives, the guests are disappointed at the reception. At a nearby house, Guido introduces himself as Prince Guido and tells the young girl a great story. A woman, whom he begins to call "princess," falls out of the top of the barn, and he catches her on top of the hay. She was stung by a wasp, and he begins to suck poison out of her leg. She assures him that she's okay and introduces herself as Dora.

Guido and his friend pull up to his Uncle Eliseo's house just as he is being attacked. He shows them his house before he returns to the hotel where he lives and works. Guido goes to try to get permission to open a bookstore. The man he needs rudely leaves early, and as Guido tries to file a complaint, he accidentally knocks a flower pot off on the man's head. Guido hurries away, and in the process, runs into Dora. He runs away as she watches him with a smile.

Guido then goes to an interview at a restaurant. He humorously explains how to fix food and how to bow. The owner says that even as a server, you are not a servant. Guido talks to his friend, Guicciardini, who explains how to fall asleep quickly. Guido then tries to wake him up, and he is so proud that he has proven his theory.

The next morning they go walking, and Guido spots Dora again. However, the guy from the office the day before drives up to the women, so Guido hides for a few minutes. The man embraces Dora, but Guicciardini tells Guido that they simply talk. As the women walk toward them, Guido jumps out to surprise Dora. Guido asks her out, but the other teacher says they must leave. Dora says she hopes they will meet by chance again.

Guido brings a meal to a doctor and solves a riddle more quickly than the doctor could. A gentleman from the ministry arrives late, and Guido serves him. Guido convinces him to order the meal the doctor has decide not to eat. The doctor leaves, calling out the answer to the riddle, and the man asks about it. The man says he is going to the school the next morning.

The next morning, the teacher instructs the students to pay good attention, and then they announce that the inspector has arrived. He greets Dora, and the principal introduces him to others. He asks each teacher a question, and he asks Dora what she's done this weekend. She tells him that she has theater tickets, but the principal interrupts. Guido prepares to leave, but the principal tells the students that Guido will demonstrate that their race is superior to all others. He jumps onto a table and tells them that he is obviously the best specimen of the race. He explains that their ears are



amazing. The real inspector arrives as Guido is partly undressed, showing the kids the belly button. The children laugh as he dances on the tables. When he sees the inspector, he runs out through a window quickly but tells Dora he will see her in Venice, referring to the show she plans to see.

Guido attends the opera and watches Dora. He tries to cause her to turn toward him with his thoughts. When she finally looks at him, the woman next to him looks also. Dora is told by Rodolfo that they are going to dinner at the prefect's house. She says she does not want to go. He begins to agree with her until they run into the prefect. Guido trades his hat with someone else's. Dora convinces Rodolfo to get the car; and he says will pull up and honk the horn. Guido gets the keys, pulls up, honks the horn, and picks up Dora. Dora never even looks at her companion, and she lectures him for being rude. She is upset and begins to hiccup.

Finally, she turns, sees Guido, and screams. She says he owes her an explanation, but he says after she falls into him all time, she should owe him one. He asks her where she wants to have dinner, and she says they should go back. Suddenly, he asks how to turn on the windshield wipers. He goes off the road and the top comes down off the car, and he gives her an umbrella. He says he only learned to drive ten minutes ago. They go down some stairs and he rolls out a red carpet. He tells her that they've been here before when he made things perfect for her and she kissed him. As he dances around, he tells her that her dress is torn. She tells him that for her to open up; he must have the right key. He makes a key appear, and she is surprised. She covers her behind with a pillow as they walk. Guido asks her to have ice cream, and she begins to refuse. However, he says he'll pray to find out how long they will have to wait, and the doctor walks up and says, "Seven seconds" in answer to an earlier riddle.

When they arrive at Dora's home, Guido says he wanted to set up his bookshop there, and he would be able to see her everyday. Guido tells her that no one could convince him to tell her "That I want to make love to you - not just once, but over and over again! But I'll never tell you that. I'd have to be crazy to tell you. I'd even make love to you now... right here for the rest of my life." She prays for it and the man whose hat he stole before returns the old hat.

At the restaurant, Guido runs into Rodolfo. At her home Dora's mother threatens never to speak to her again if she doesn't get out of bed. Dora is wearing a beautiful dress, and she gets up and begins hiccupping. At the restaurant, Guido announces that the scary man (Rodolfo) is getting married, but his bride seems to be standing him up. He is called outside to see that his uncle's horse has been painted green and someone wrote "Jewish horse" on it. His uncle tells him that they were trying to send a message and that eventually the same will happen to Guido. Dora arrives in the restaurant and looks terribly depressed about the situation. Guido spots her and hurries to surprise her. Suddenly, Rodolfo comes to meet her, and Guido hides. The doctor leaves for Berlin immediately, and he thanks Guido for a wonderful time.

At dinner, a woman talks about how much the state would save if sick people were eliminated. The woman tells them that in Germany seven year olds are expected to



solve these difficult math problems. Suddenly, a cake arrives at the table that reads "Buongiorno, Principessa!" Dora realizes Guido must be there, but she cannot spot him. Rodolfo drags her off to dance, and Guido watches as Rodolfo announces that they will be getting married in a few months. Guido trips over a chair as he listens. When he cleans up, he ends up walking off with a poodle on his tray. As Guido brings out more food, someone bumps into him. He crawls under the table to clean up, and Dora slides under and meets him at the other end of the table. She kisses him and asks him to take her away.

In honor of the occasion, an elaborate cake is brought to the table. However, suddenly in rides Guido on the green horse. Everyone stops and stares, and he asks the musicians to begin playing. He gives the man wine, and Guido invites Dora to join him on the horse. She climbs over the table, and they ride out of the room together. Rodolfo recognizes him, and when the wine cork knocks an egg on his head, he puts the clues together and chases them. Guido takes Dora back to his uncle's house, but the house is locked. Dora walks into the garden, and Guido follows.

Time passes, and a little boy named Giosuy comes out of the garden area. The family goes for a bike ride through the city together so that Dora can go to work. On a store, Giosuy reads a sign that says, "No Jews or dogs allowed." Guido tries to explain why the sign is there by saying that other people don't want Chinese and kangaroos. At the bookstore, a man comes in and says that Guido needs to go to the prefect's office. Guido agrees to go but tells Giosuy to stay put. Dora's mother comes in to look around, but Giosuy doesn't seem to know her. She gives him a note for Dora and tells him to tell her that it's from Grandma. He says that his Grandma never comes to visit, but she says that Grandma will show up the next day for his birthday with a grand surprise. He says, "Grandma, you forgot to take your change." The next day they prepare for the big event. Giosuy hides in the nightstand in order to avoid a shower, and Guido has him walk over so that Dora can have the flowers on the table.

Dora goes to pick up her mother, but when they arrive the door is open and Guido and Giosuy are gone. The scene then moves to Guido and Giosuy in the back of cart with several other men. Giosuy keeps asking where they are going, but Guido tries to distract him with the fact that it is his birthday. Finally, Giosuy becomes tired and goes to sleep. Guido asks his uncle where they are going, but no one knows. Guido and Giosuy then get in line to get on the train. Dora arrives at the place where the train is leaving and tells a man that there has been an error. Her husband, his uncle, and her son are on the train, and she wants to go too. He tells her to go home, but he finally stops the train to allow her to get on board. He obviously thinks she is crazy but allows her to go. Giosuy spots Dora and tells Guido that they stopped the train to let her get on.

The train finally arrives, and the men and women are sent on separate sides. Giosuy tells his father that he didn't like the train, so Guido reassures him that they will take the bus back. Guido explains this new game to Giosuy, and he tells Giosuy that you have to be very careful to follow the rules that the soldiers lay out so that they can win the great prize of a brand new tank. Eliseo is sent away from them, and they say goodbye.



Giosuy becomes upset when the room smells and they haven't eaten. Guido tells Giosuy that the person who wins 1,000 points first will win the tank.

The soldiers come in to explain the camp rules, and they request someone who knows the language. Although he doesn't know the language, Guido volunteers. Instead of giving the real rules, he says, "The game starts now. You have to score one thousand points. If you do that, you take home a tank with a big gun. Each day we will announce the scores from that loudspeaker. The one who has the fewest points will have to wear a sign that says "Jackass" on his back. There are three ways to lose points. One, turning into a big crybaby. Two, telling us you want to see your mommy. Three, saying you're hungry and want something to eat. It's very easy to lose points here for being hungry.... I'm sorry I have to but I'm playing hide and seek."

For their work, Guido and the others must carry anvils. Guido decides to put it down, but when he learns he will be killed otherwise, he continues walking. When they return to the barracks, Giosuy is waiting. Guido is exhausted, but he still picks up his son. Guido explains that the number is important for the game. Giosuy says that the other children don't know about the game, but Guido assures him that they just don't want him to win. On the other side of camp, Dora learns that old people and children don't work because they are killed. When the children are called to the shower, they are actually taken to the gas chamber. Giosuy shows up at Guido's work and says that all the children were told to take a shower. He ran away so that he wouldn't have to take a shower. Guido tries to convince him to take a shower, but finally he agrees to let him hide outside. Eliseo is taken to the shower, and he is killed.

That night, Guido tells Giosuy that he must stay hidden all day, never letting the soldiers see him. When the men go out to work one day, Guido pushes a cart, but Giosuy begins hiccupping. They find a microphone, and they say hello to Dora over the speaker. She hears them and is relieved to know they are alive. The other men come in from work, and they find out that some of the men didn't make it back. The men are forced to go through a physical, but Giosuy stays hidden in the barracks. The doctor who is inspecting them is the doctor from the hotel, and Guido answers the final riddle he gave. The man looks sad, but he makes sure that Guido is sent back. He hires Guido to serve at a big dinner for the officials. Guido looks for Giosuy, but he has changed his hiding place. He finally finds him because Giosuy is hiccupping. Giosuy tells Guido that he heard that everyone is burned and turned into buttons and soap. Guido tells him that this is absurd, but Giosuy says that he wants to go home immediately. Guido prepares for them to leave, but when Giosuy finds out that they are in first place, he decides they should stay.

Guido prepares to serve at a dinner when he sees that there are no children in camp. Guido shows Giosuy the little boy so that he knows that there are other children. However, the nurse sees him, and Guido tells him that he cannot say a word. Giosuy goes off with the German nurse. The doctor secretly tells Guido that they must talk. When Guido serves Giosuy, he says "Thank you" in Italian, and a soldier overhears. Guido hurries to teach all the children how to say the words before the German nurse returns. Guido encourages Giosuy not to make a mistake now as the game may almost



be over. In the other room, the doctor tells Guido a riddle whose correct answer is a "duckling." The doctor asks Guido for his help in solving the riddle. Giosuy falls asleep at the table, and Guido puts on a new record. He opens the window so that the music will carry outside, and he hopes that Dora will recognize it as music from the opera. She hears and recognizes it immediately.

Later, Guido and Giosuy head back to their barracks. The music plays in the background, and Guido says that maybe all of this is just a dream and Dora will wake them up in the morning to make milk and cookies. As they walk, they go the wrong way, and Guido sees a huge pile of bodies. Later, they hear shooting outside and learn that the war is over. Bartolometo tells Guido that they are trying to kill all the evidence, but Guido takes Giosuy and hurries to get away. Guido tells Giosuy that they are mad that Giosuy is still in the game. He says that the next morning the game will be over, and if he can hide until then, he will win the game. Guido sends him to hide in the box where he saw the little boy hiding before. He also gives him a blanket and then runs to find Dora. He runs back and takes the blanket from Giosuy. He warns him that even if he is late getting back, he must not leave until everything is completely quiet and no one is around.

A dog finds the crate where Giosuy is hiding, and Guido uses the power of his brain to get the dog to leave. Guido goes to the women's side to find Dora, but all the women are gone. Guido is spotted, but rather than being killed on the spot he is taken across the camp. Giosuy winks at him from his box, and Guido begins to do a funny march to make everything seem okay. However, Guido is simply taken to another part of camp and murdered. The next morning, all the German soldiers leave, and the area is empty of life. A few survivors finally come out of hiding and begin leaving the camp. Hiding in his box, Giosuy is left behind. When the coast is clear, he finally comes out. He walks to the center of the camp and stands alone. Suddenly, he hears a loud noise, and a tank drives directly toward him. He begins yelling, "It's true!" An American soldier climbs out of the tank and invites him up on the tank. They pass through the people leaving the camp and suddenly Giosuy spots Dora. He runs to her and tells her, "We won! We won the real tank!" Over the talking, we hear the narrator, the older Giosuy, say, "This is my story. This is the sacrifice my father made. This was his gift to me." She embraces him, crying, and the scene and the film come to a close.





# Characters

## Guido Orefice, played by Roberto Benigni

### Description

Guido Orefice is a sweet, goofy man who is always telling stories. Guido has a variety of different jobs, but his dream is to open his own bookshop. When we first meet Guido he is riding with one of his friends, and he meets the beautiful young Dora. For many months, Guido runs into Dora at the oddest times, and they begin to fall in love. He finally sweeps her off her feet at her engagement party.

Guido and Dora lead a happy life with their son, Giosuy. However, one year on Giosuy's birthday, he and Guido are dragged from their home and sent to a concentration camp. When Dora arrives back at the house, she discovers their disappearance, goes to the train station, and demands to be allowed to follow her family. Guido and Dora never see one another again though he keeps romancing her, and he makes up a story about the game they are playing so that Giosuy will survive.

### Analysis

Guido is a lovable character. Through everything he remains hopeful. He works hard to win Dora's love even though she is engaged to another man. Guido is willing to make a fool of himself for love, and his persistence pays off.

Guido perseveres through the time at the concentration camp. He keeps his son from being murdered by telling him that they are playing a game where the winner will receive their own tank. Guido's optimism is contagious, and his son's life is saved because of his love.

## Dora, played by Nicoletta Braschi

### Description

Dora is a beautiful young woman who meets and falls in love with Guido. She is engaged to a cruel man, but Guido's love gives her the strength to break the engagement. As a young mother, she is very happy until Guido and Giosuy are taken, and then she rashly demands that she be allowed to follow them. Dora spends lonely days in the concentration camp, separated from her family, but finally as the war ends she is reunited with her son.



## **Analysis**

Dora is an exceptionally brave woman. Most women would have been satisfied to be left at home if their families were taken away to the concentration camp, but she demands to join them. Even though she is alone on another side of camp, she is joined in their suffering and sometimes she finds out that they are still alive, such as when they talk to her over the microphone or Guido turns the phonograph out the window. Dora perseveres as many other women become bitter and worn. Finally, she is reunited with her beloved son as she leaves the camp.

## **Eliseo Orefice, played by Giustino Durano**

### **Description**

Eliseo Orefice is Guido's uncle. Uncle Eliseo is carted off to the concentration camp with the others; however, he is sent straight to the gas chamber. Before he leaves, though, he helps Guido come up with the story of the game that helps keep Giosuy alive.

### **Analysis**

Eliseo remains a positive force through his time in the film. He helps protect young Giosuy by making the prize of the game be a tank.

## **Guicciardini, played by Lidia Alfonsi**

### **Description**

Guicciardini is Dora's mother. She does not approve of Dora's marriage to a commoner and a Jew such as Guido. However, she does try to remain kind so that she can sometimes visit with her grandson.

### **Analysis**

Guicciardini is a kind but haughty woman; she tries to convince Dora to marry the cruel Rodolfo for his social standing. Dora refuses and a rift grows between them. However, she tries to stay in touch so that she can watch Giosuy grow up.



## **Rodolfo, played by Amerigo Fontani**

### **Description**

Rodolfo is the man Dora is engaged to at the beginning of the film. He is also a government official who refuses to see Guido when he inquires about opening his bookshop.

### **Analysis**

Rodolfo is rude and conceited. He cares much more for his social standing and reputation than Dora, which is why she easily falls in love with Guido.

## **Dr. Lessing, played by Horst Buchholz**

### **Description**

Dr. Lessing first meets Guido when he is staying at the hotel where Guido works. The two men amuse each other by telling and solving riddles. A friendship is formed, and when they meet again at the concentration camp, Dr. Lessing tries to help Guido.

### **Analysis**

Although Dr. Lessing is involved in terrible things as he sends men, women, and children to their death, he is a kind man as well. When he recognizes Guido, he helps to keep him alive, and later he warns Guido about the events that are going on. Despite the terrible things that he does, we see a kind aspect of Dr. Lessing's personality.

## **Bartolomeo, played by Pietro de Silva**

### **Description**

Bartolomeo is a man that they meet in the concentration camp.

### **Analysis**

Bartolomeo is skeptical of Guido's plan to protect his son, but he helps Guido.



# Themes

## Power of Love

The true power of love is explored in this masterpiece. Guido's love keeps Giosuy alive through the harsh truths of the concentration camp. As always, Guido makes everything into a story and a game so that the little boy will remain hidden throughout their time there. Even when all the other children are murdered, Guido's stories convince Giosuy to remain hidden from the soldiers. Giosuy's desire for his very own tank keeps him focused on winning the game that Guido has created.

Not only does Guido show great love but so does Dora. Since she is not Jewish, Dora is not threatened by the concentration camps. However, when Guido and Giosuy are taken, she demands to go with them. Dora never sees either of the people she loves nor does she have any more time with Guido, but her love brings her to the concentration camp to share their fate.

The powerful love of Guido and Dora for each other and Giosuy helps Giosuy survive life in the concentration camps. For all practical purposes Giosuy should have died when the other children did, but Guido's love helps save him until the very end. Dora also survives because of her love for her family, and Giosuy is able to live his life with at least one of his parents.

## "Hope Springs Eternal"

Despite all the terrible things that Guido experiences, he remains hopeful through everything. Guido uses his hope to instill Giosuy with that same hope in life and in their situation. Guido tells stories to prevent Giosuy from finding out the truth about the camp and what happened to his uncle. Although Guido has no reason to hope that either he or his son will make it out of the concentration camp alive, he refuses to give up.

Not only does Guido's hope affect his son, Giosuy, it also affects the other men in the concentration camp. Although most of them do not show any change in attitude, just the fact that they are tolerant of Giosuy's presence and Guido's stories to keep Giosuy safe shows that they do have some hope that Guido's plan will work.

Giosuy also remains hopeful. He works very hard in order to try to win the "game" which will eventually result in him winning a tank. Although the circumstances are very difficult, young Giosuy retains his hope that someday he will win the game, win his tank, and get to return home.



## Discrimination

Discrimination is one of the most powerful and dangerous actions in the world. Discrimination during the Holocaust cost millions of Jews and other people their lives. This film helps to speak out against discrimination as we come to know and love the characters, and then we see the terrible actions against them.

Even in the beginning of the film we see the problems that discrimination can cause. Dora's family believes that Guido is not good enough for her and Rodolfo looks down on him because he is poor. Even the simple fact that Guido is not allowed to meet with Rodolfo is an instance of discrimination. Rodolfo loses Dora to Guido because Guido's heart is kind, and he treats everyone equally.

Speaking out against discrimination is an important theme in the film. Not only should people not discriminate against others, but also when we see discrimination we should speak out. Because the rest of the world took so long to discover and speak out against the plight of the Jews, thousands, even millions, of lives were lost that could have been saved.

## Style and Cinematography

*La Vita e Bella* is a touching but tragic film. Although the specific story is not based on fact, the setting of the film is based on historical fact. By the time *La Vita e Bella* was filmed many young people were too far from World War II to completely appreciate the horrors of the war and the beauty of survival; however, this film helped to bring this time to life for many people.

Despite all the horrors of concentration camps, Roberto Benigni manages to bring warmth to the story. One of the reasons for the warmth is that viewers meet the characters when their lives are simple and happy. We see them first as Guido and Dora fall in love and begin to share their lives together. Additionally, we understand the characters because they are so well-developed. The viewer completely understands why Guido would make a game of the concentration camp since he creates a story or a game for every other part of his life.

The film's setting is magnificent. The background and sets make the story come to life. Since it was shot in Italy, the landscape rings true, but so do the scenes shot in the concentration camp. The realism of the camp does not make the film less optimistic, but rather it provides a real background to show the triumph of the human spirit as optimism wins out over hate. Throughout the film, we see the story of Guido, Dora, and Giosuy play out against the settings of both beautiful landscapes as well as the horrible scenes of discrimination, hatred, and war.

# Motifs

## Holocaust

*La Vita e Bella* is set during the Holocaust. The Holocaust occurred during World War II when Hitler imprisoned and killed millions of Jews. Hitler wanted an entire race of Anglo-Saxons, and he felt the dark-skinned Jews were getting in his way. Hitler's Holocaust is the worst mass killing the world has ever seen.

The themes in the story could have been put into many different plots, but they truly are memorable in the context of the Holocaust. Some of the worst horrors man has known are coupled with a great and sacrificial love. Guido could have sacrificed his life for his son anywhere, but for him to sacrifice in the midst of the horrors of the concentration camp is more than anyone could have asked.

The film was made many years after the Holocaust, and it served to remind viewers of the horrors of that time. Many people were not born during the Holocaust, and this film helped them to understand the terrors of it without being depressing or gruesome. The film is laced with humor that helps make the Holocaust all the more serious as Guido tries to protect Giosuy during their time at the concentration camp.

## Stories

Guido's stories are compelling. From the first time we see Guido, we realize that he is always making up stories and games. Guido wins Dora's love because of these stories and his efforts to win her heart, even when he has to humiliate himself to do it.

Guido uses the game with Giosuy to try to protect his son. Giosuy does not like having to leave home on his birthday, but Guido doesn't want him to realize the truth. So, with the help of Uncle Eliseo, Guido makes up a story about a game they are playing in which the prize is a brand new tank. Throughout their time at the concentration camp, Guido is always getting others to play along so that Giosuy does not learn the truth. Guido's stories save his son's life. He even uses the game to hide Giosuy away on the last night at the concentration camp.

Not only do the stories help us relate to Guido and see his love for his child, but also we see that the different stories help make up different sections of the film. For example, his stories to Dora are part of the happy times in the film when they didn't have anything to be scared of while the stories about the game for Giosuy take place during the darker time at the concentration camp. The stories serve as an easy marker between these two times.



## Sacrificial Love

Sacrificial love is a common motif in film and books. Generally, it is portrayed as a person giving their life to protect another person whom they love. The motif partially comes from the famous Biblical stories about Jesus. The motif is used in *La Vita e Bella* to help show the true personalities of the characters and highlight the horrors of the concentration camp.

Guido gives his life because of his sacrificial love for his son. While terrified for their lives, Guido comes up with a story about a game and a tank so that he can convince Giosuy to do what is needed to stay alive. Guido hides Giosuy and tries to make sure his young son has the happiest life possible under the circumstances.

Dora also offers her sacrificial love by following her family to the concentration camp. Since she was not captured, she didn't have to go, but she refused to be left behind. Dora's bravery helps to keep Guido going as he tries to keep her updated about their lives even when it could easily cost him his life. The sacrificial love of both of these people serves to highlight the cruel situation they live in and the themes of hope and love.





# Symbols

## Box

Guido sends Giosuy to hide in a box next to a wall. This box is shown several times during the film and becomes a symbol of being in hiding. The first time we see the box, it is simply focused on by the camera as everyone enters the concentration camp. Although we don't know it at the time, the box will eventually become a major symbol of the film. The concentration camp is a hidden place in Germany, and the rest of the world was also hiding from the reality of the war at the time.

The second time we see the box, Guido shows Giosuy that a young boy is hiding inside. Giosuy has stopped believing Guido's story that many other children are around the area hiding as well. When Guido notices a young German boy playing hide-and-seek with his friends, he quickly shows him to Giosuy. Little does Giosuy know that one day he will also hide in the box.

At the end of the film, Guido forces Giosuy to hide in the box and makes him promise to stay there until everyone else has left. With all the fighting and the Germans trying to destroy the "evidence," hiding is the only hope for Giosuy's survival. Guido's plan works as Giosuy remains in hiding and is eventually found by the American soldiers.

## Riddles

Dr. Lester's riddles are symbolic of the riddle of life. Everything in the film and during the Holocaust seems to be completely turned upside down. Nothing makes sense anymore during the film as people are killed for no reason and Guido must fight for his life and the lives of those he loves.

Additionally, the riddles are a means of communication for Dr. Lester and Guido when they are in the concentration camp. Dr. Lester cannot be seen fraternizing with one of the Jews, but he can tell and respond to riddles. Dr. Lester's help is invaluable in helping Guido save the life of his son.

## Music

One night when he is working, Guido finds a record playing a piece of music both he and Dora loved. Guido has not been able to see Dora since they entered the concentration camp, and he decides to let her know that both he and Giosuy are still alive and safe. So, he puts on the record and turns the speaker out the window so that she can hear the music.

The music Guido plays is symbolic of hope. Dora is alone, and she seems to be losing hope quickly as she cannot see her family. However, once she hears the music, her

hope for the future is renewed. She realizes that her family is still alive, and she must keep going until she can see them again.

The music is also symbolic of Guido's love for Dora. With all the other problems he's facing and the difficulty of keeping Giosuy safe, the fact that Guido even thinks to play the music for Dora proves his love. To the end, he is always thinking of his family whom he loves dearly.



## Essay Questions

How do Guido and Dora meet?

What is Dora's relationship with Rodolfo?

How do Guido and Dora leave her engagement party?

Describe Guido and Dora's courtship.

Why does Dora's mother dislike Guido?

How does Dora end up getting to go with Guido and Giosuy?

How does Guido manage to keep in touch with Dora in the concentration camp?

How does Guido's knack for riddles come in handy in the concentration camp?

What method does Guido use to keep Giosuy safe and happy in the camp?

Describe the end of the film after Guido's death.