

M*A*S*H Film Summary

M*A*S*H by Robert Altman

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Context

Most people know *M*A*S*H* as the popular television series with Alan Alda, but the film version directed by Robert Altman came first. The television series was a successful spin-off from this antiwar film.

*M*A*S*H* is the story of doctors and nurses working in a mobile army surgical hospital during the Korean War. They see terrible injuries and deaths every day, but they use humor to help them survive with their sanity. Their delightful escapades keep viewers laughing throughout the film.

Robert Altman had directed several television shows a couple of films before *M*A*S*H*, but *M*A*S*H* was his first major success, one which received an Oscar nomination. Audiences fell in love with the characters as they saw their daily struggles in the camp. Some of Altman's other popular films include *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *Nashville* (1975) and *Popeye* (1980).

After receiving some recognition in *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), Donald Sutherland became a star with the role of Hawkeye Pierce. Over the years, Sutherland has been in dozens of films - some successful, some not. A few of his most popular films include *Klute* (1971), *The Day of the Locust* (1975), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), *Murder By Decree* (1979) and *Backdraft* (1991).

Elliott Gould catapulted to success with his sensational, Oscar-nominated performance in *Bill & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) and after *M*A*S*H*, his success was certain. His performances in *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *Nashville* (1975) were two of the most notable roles of his career.

Tom Skerritt's career primarily began with television series such as *Combat!* and *Gunsmoke*. *M*A*S*H* was a big break for him. Over the years, he has appeared as quirky, lovable, though sometimes strict, characters in films such as *Top Gun* (1986) and *Steel Magnolias* (1989).

Robert Duvall is one of the classic American stars. First seen as the miserable Boo in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), Duvall garnered the praise and notice of many in Hollywood for his acting skills and performances over the years. He is probably best known, though, for his part in *The Godfather* series and a few other films such as *True Grit* (1969), *Network* (1976), *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), *Tomorrow* (1972), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Tender Mercies* (1983).

*M*A*S*H* was an excellent film and received praise from many people. The film won only one Academy Award, going to Ring Lardner Jr. for Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium. The film was nominated for numerous awards, though, including Oscar Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Sally Kellerman; Best Director for Robert Altman; Best Film Editing for Danford B. Greene; and Best Picture for Ingo Preminger.



*M*A*S*H* also won one Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture - Musical/Comedy. It was nominated for Golden Globes for Best Motion Picture Actor - Musical/Comedy for Elliott Gould; Best Motion Picture Actor - Musical/Comedy for Donald Sutherland; Best Motion Picture Director for Robert Altman; Best Screenplay for Ring Lardner Jr.; and Best Supporting Actress for Sally Kellerman.



Summary and Analysis

Set during the Korean War, *M*A*S*H* begins with the scene of a helicopter flying into a war hospital. As the commander gives orders, Radar anticipates them, speaking over him. Several soldiers stand around, concerned and not following what needs to be done. The commander says he's given everything to Radar.

Quotes from generals during the Korean War roll across the screen as the soldiers carry on with their daily activities at the hospital. The quotes help remind viewers of the difficulties of the war and bring the memories to life.

Meanwhile, a captain, Hawkeye Pierce is reprimanded by another captain, who is in charge of the motor pool," and is told to wait for a driver to take him to his camp. Several men drive up and get off a truck. One of them, Captain Duke Forrest, is going to the same camp, *M*A*S*H* 4077. 'He thinks that Hawkeye, waiting by the jeep, is his driver, and Hawkeye plays along, taking off with the motorpool's jeep.

The man in charge of the motorpool chases them, since they have just stolen a jeep, but his car's tire has a blowout first. As the two men drive up to their barracks, they stop to stare at a beautiful woman, Lt. Dish. Then, they sit down beside her for dinner.

At dinner, Lt. Col. Henry Braymore Blake introduces himself to the men, Capt. Augustus Bedford 'Duke' Forrest and Capt. Benjamin Franklin 'Hawkeye' Pierce, who reveals to his companion that he's not a driver. Lt. Dish is on her way out, and the men stop eating to stare at her. Then, Blake talks to the men about the Jeep they stole and how they should report in to their commanding officers.

The men have been drinking all morning, and they start asking for more information about the nurses until Blake distracts them by introducing them to Father John Patrick 'Dago Red' Mulcahy, Capt. Walter Kosciusko 'Painless Pole' Waldowski, Cpl. Walter 'Radar' O'Reilly and Capt. 'Ugly John' Black.

Because Duke and Hawkeye are the new surgeons for the hospital, they will stay in the officer's tent. They find Ho-Jon, a local boy, in their tent, and Maj. Frank Burns is teaching him how to read from the Bible. One of the arriving officers gives the boy a girlie magazine instead, and Ho-Jon takes off.

Next, the audience sees several of the men and the nurses chatting and working during a surgery. The announcer's voice over the camp speakers reminds everyone of an inspection later that day. While Hawkeye and Duke drink that evening, Frank prays for the men on the field and the President. Hawkeye and Duke make fun of Frank's praying and start singing "Onward Christian Soldier." A group of people walks, picking up the song, as Frank cries. Hawkeye and Duke request to have Frank removed from "their" tent immediately, although Frank was there first. They also insist that the unit needs a heart surgeon, and that Henry must get one. Though Henry Blake objects, the new officers get their way.



Duke sends Ho-Jon to look for Hawkeye, and he is pointed to a small tent. Ho-Jon hears Hawkeye and Lt. Dish talking about how she plans to be faithful to her husband as they begin making out on the floor. Ho-Jon interrupts them and tells Hawkeye that the new heart surgeon has arrived. When Hawkeye returns to their tent, he meets the new man, who won't reveal where he is from. Hawkeye believes the man looks familiar.

The hospital watches the new surgeon perform an operation, and the announcer's voice comes on the speakers to remind people to take down nude calendars and photos. A helicopter arrives, and Maj. Margaret O'Houlihan, the new head nurse, arrives at the hospital. She is introduced to everyone.

Frank Burns earlier accused a young soldier of causing a patient's death by not bringing him the right needle, and Trapper John, the new surgeon, takes this opportunity to punch Frank in the jaw, accusing him of being a poor surgeon and a poor human being. Henry Blake and the new head nurse witness this, and Henry orders that Trapper John be arrested. Major O'Houlihan wonders what she's gotten herself into.

Hawkeye and Margaret talk at lunch later, and she tells him that she's been observing the nurses on his shift and wants to discuss them and his treatment of them. He says that he believes the nurses are doing fine. The lights suddenly go out, and flashlights light up. People begin singing.

After Margaret meets Frank, she is impressed with him. On the other hand, she does not approve of people calling Hawkeye by a nickname. Hawkeye tells her that he's mad now and won't give her the privilege of coming back to his bed. Later that evening, all the men are drunk and yell that they want sex with the nurses, who are insulted by their attitudes.

Margaret writes a letter in the interest of Army morale. She wants to let her superiors know how she feels about the men's attitudes. Then, Margaret and Frank, who wrote the letter together and share similar feelings, begin to make out. Margaret suddenly stops and leaves to mail the letter about the situation to the general. Margaret and Frank wish one another good night, and she leaves.

Later, Frank comes to Margaret's bunk and apologizes for the way the men act toward her. Frank tells her that he's certain that God meant them to find each other, and then they make love. Some of the men listen in outside until they hear Major O'Houlihan talk about her hot lips. They start calling her "Hot Lips" and broadcast the two making love over the loudspeakers with the rest of the camp. When Hot Lips and Frank hear themselves, they suddenly stop.

Margaret is terribly embarrassed that the entire camp heard her and Frank. She decides to write another letter to the general so that the nurses can gain more respect in the camp. She angrily writes the letter and hopes for good results.

The next morning, Hawkeye harasses Frank about his performance the night before until Frank finally breaks and attacks him. Frank is shipped off in a straightjacket as a result of the attack.



Elsewhere, the unit's Catholic priest, Dago Red, explains to Hawkeye that "Painless" Waldowski has a problem and needs help. Waldowski is upset that he couldn't perform sexually with a girl the night before. He is a consummate womanizer, notoriously large, and he's engaged to three girls back home. After reading about being a "Don Juan" as a cover for homosexuality, "Painless" believes that he's a homosexual. He is so horrified that he's turning gay that he tells everyone that he's going to commit suicide. One guy asks for his record player. They all ask how he'll do it, and he wants their advice. They tell him that they will give him a pill to kill himself with.

The camp has a going-off ceremony for Painless's suicide, and they give him their pill, which is a fake. Painless rests in a coffin, and everyone walks past to tell him goodbye in a fake funeral, since he believes he's going to die. Lt. Dish comes to meet Hawkeye, and they embrace passionately. She is leaving the next morning. She is happy to go home, but she will miss Hawkeye desperately. She is ready to have sex with him, but Hawkeye says that he wants her to be with someone else.

Hawkeye brings Lt. Dish in to see Painless so that she can help him with his psychological problem by sleeping with him. At first, she refuses, but Hawkeye lifts up the sheets and tells her to just look at him. As she sees Painless's famously large member, she gets into bed with him to help him solve his problem. Hawkeye talks to Painless the next morning, and he is doing just fine, as if nothing ever happened. In the meantime, Lt. Dish flies away from the hospital with a wistful smile on her face.

While all the guys sit out in the sun, they bet on whether Margaret is a true blonde or not. They decide that in order to finish their bet, they need to all see Margaret naked at once. Radar arrives looking for some papers. While Margaret is taking her shower, the men line up outside to listen to Margaret singing inside. The men decide that they are going to find out the truth about Margaret's hair, so they devise the perfect practical joke. Everyone gathers around from doctors to nurses, and the soldiers pull up the sides of the tent. The whole camp sees her; Margaret is furious. Margaret finally gets to her clothes, grabs them and runs back toward the tents.

Margaret immediately runs in to see Lt. Col. Blake, screaming about her terrible situation and threatening to resign. He's in bed with another woman and sits quietly as Margaret screams. He tells her to go ahead and resign. Finally, she leaves screaming and crying to go write a letter to Blake's superiors about the situation.

Hawkeye, Trapper John and Duke bring Ho-Jon into the city in a jeep. He is being given a medical exam to serve in the Korean army. The doctor finds that Ho-Jon's heart rate and blood pressure are too high. Suspecting the truth, the doctor insists on keeping Ho-Jon there overnight, since he could have "accidentally" taken some drugs at the hospital to artificially increase his heart rate and blood pressure. The doctors are frustrated. Their efforts to get Ho-Jon out of the army have failed.

At the hospital, Hawkeye and Trapper John have created their own driving range, and they hit golf balls while a helicopter lands nearby. A man runs toward the camp with news for Capt. McIntyre. Hawkeye and Trapper John pretend that the messenger is ill,



comically fussing over him and asking him to take his shirt off. Meanwhile, they find that Trapper John has been called for a special assignment in Japan to operate on a VIP's son. He and Hawkeye go so that they have a chance to play golf while they're there. As usual, they are just as worried about having fun as they are about doing their jobs.

When Hawkeye and Trapper arrive in Japan, they are refused entrance to the hospital at first, but they force the secretary to let them in. They demand to go ahead and start surgery so that they can get to the golf course before dark. The people at the hospital cannot stand against their antics, and the men begin their surgery while flirting with the nurses.

Finally, the doctors finish the surgery and prepare to go play their round of golf. As they leave though, they're captured by the military police, who are alerted because one of the women recognizes them. The guys refuse to be arrested since they have been called in by the soldier's important father. They are able to resist and go have fun.

Later in the evening, the men go to a restaurant and brothel combination for dinner. The brothel is used to pay for a hospital for the impoverished Japanese. One of the prostitutes had a baby a few days before, and the baby is very sick. The child is half-American, and the doctors call and have the operating room set up so that they can take care of the baby. The administrator at the hospital catches them using his equipment to help the Japanese baby and threatens to have them arrested. They overwhelm him and take him back to his brothel to take blackmail photos of him with the prostitutes so that he can't prosecute them for misusing army equipment.

When Hawkeye and Trapper John return to the M*A*S*H unit, they go straight back to work. Later, Blake gets a call from his friend, the general, who lets him know the status of a battle and what the group at M*A*S*H can expect next. He also wants to talk to Blake about the allegations made by Margaret.

The audience learns that Margaret wrote to the general after the incident with the shower, trying to get more respect for her and the other nurses. The general says that he would hate to believe the charges. Since the general doesn't want to believe them, Blake tells him simply not to believe them.

The general then shows up at the camp the next day with his men to check out the camp and the nurses. While the general is talking to the doctors, the subject of football comes up. The general decides that he wants to gamble with the men on a football game between his outfit and Blake's. Blake and the doctors plan to transfer ex-pro-football star Spearchucker Jones, who is also a surgeon, to their unit as a ringer for the game.

The men begin to practice in preparation for the big game. Spearchucker is ready and willing to play, and he has even come up with several plays for the team. The nurses even get in on the fun by being cheerleaders for the team. They plan to leave their ringer, Spearchucker, out of the first half of the game so that they can double the bet



during halftime, get good odds and then come back to win in the second half with Spearchucker.

When the football game is finally about to start, everyone is thrilled. They can hardly wait to enjoy some of the fun and competition they had at home in America. The cheerleaders begin cheering as the men run out to begin the game, and the crowd gathers in the stands.

The other team is winning during the first half of the game, since they have their own ringer, while Spearchucker is out of the game. *M*A*S*H* 4077 planned to do poorly during the first half, but the other team's ringer is unexpected. He is too good for them to handle. Finally, the other team's ringer is drugged by the *M*A*S*H* 4077 players.

In the second half of the game, the bets are doubled, and *M*A*S*H* 4077 puts Spearchucker into the game. No one can stop him. The team begins catching up to their opponents' lead, as the other team realizes that they've been tricked. *M*A*S*H* 4077 wins the game and thousands of dollars in the bet. They celebrate their victory.

Later that night, the men play cards and bet part of the money they've won. During a surgery, Hawkeye comes in and tells Duke that they have orders to return home. Duke imagines the homecoming and can barely contain himself to finish the surgery before he leaves. Father Mulcahy blesses the Jeep that will be taking the men away - the same stolen jeep that Hawkeye and Duke arrived in.

As Hawkeye and Duke drive off, the voice over the loudspeakers announce that this evening's movie was *M*A*S*H*, which followed the escapades of several surgeons and nurses, and then, each character is shown as the voice gives the name of the actor who played the character. Finally, the announcer says, "That is all," and the screen goes black.



Characters

Capt. Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce, played by Donald Sutherland

Description

Hawkeye is the newest member of M*A*S*H 4077. He and Duke meet on their way to their new assignment, and now they feel like big shots and make their place known. Hawkeye, especially, is quite a womanizer.

Hawkeye and Duke are both surgeons. They have worked in many stressful situations during the war and have learned many important lessons. The best lesson they learn is that humor can heal. Though their struggles are great, they and the others use laughter to make their situations bearable.

Hawkeye is also a big prankster. He is always trying to pull a funny trick on Margaret or one of the other officers. Hawkeye also tries to use humor and charm to get out of assignments. He wants to work less than he plays, and he keeps everyone having fun as well.

Analysis

Hawkeye lives his life looking to have fun. He has no desire to take things too seriously, and given the circumstances at M*A*S*H, he has little choice but to use humor to make the load of the war and the injuries a little lighter. Hawkeye and Duke add life to M*A*S*H. They come in playing by their own rules when they steal a car. They refuse to be taken too seriously and keep everyone else on their toes. When they go to other places, they shake things up there as well while trying to get in another round of golf.

Capt. Augustus Bedford "Duke" Forrester, played by Tom Skerritt

Description

Duke comes to M*A*S*H with Hawkeye. Duke may not be quite as outgoing and charming as Hawkeye, but he wants to have just as much fun. Duke also is interested in women and in getting out of work. He is a southerner, and he seems to reveal underlying racism when he is reluctant to share a tent with Spearchucker Jones. However, at the end of the film, he gives Spearchucker a warm goodbye indicating that ultimately, humanity is what matters to Duke after seeing the horrors of war.



Analysis

Duke loves playing pranks with Hawkeye. He realizes that M*A*S*H is a place where either you can get depressed or make the best of a difficult situation. In order to make the work bearable as they deal with being away from home, Duke and Hawkeye make their situation as interesting and exciting as possible.

Maj. Margaret "Hot Lips" O'Houlihan, played by Sally Kellerman

Description

Maj. Margaret O'Houlihan joins M*A*S*H to be the head nurse. She is very stuck up when she arrives and does not fit in well with the rest of the group. She feels that they are not respected by the other officers and tries to put an end to it. However, she has no luck with Blake.

Margaret and Frank are having a hot affair, and the entire camp finds out when she and Frank are broadcast over the loud speaker so that everyone can hear them having sex. She is then called "Hot Lips" by the rest of the camp after she says during the broadcast that her lips are hot.

Analysis

Margaret doesn't fit in well at M*A*S*H because she has no sense of humor and can't deal well with the pranks of Hawkeye, Duke and the others. She tries to go above their heads, but Blake thinks the jokes are funny. After being insulted by his lack of concern, she even goes above his head only to find that the Army is not kind to women.

Margaret looks down on most of the other people at M*A*S*H without realizing that she has her own flaws. Besides having an affair with Frank, who is always feeling guilty about it, she also takes away some of the joy that the others need to survive. Her efforts to protect her nurses just make people miserable and make her the laughing stock of the camp.

Maj. Frank Burns, played by Robert Duvall

Description

Major Frank Burns is a religious man. He spends much of his time reading the Bible and praying. At the same time, though, he is having a hot affair with Margaret. Most people make fun of him. At one point in the story, Frank discovers that a patient's heart is not beating, and he yells at a young soldier to get adrenaline and a heart syringe. The boy doesn't know medicine, and comes back with the wrong needle. Although the patient is



already dead and probably had no chance to survive, Frank yells at the boy and tells him that he killed the patient. This shows that, although Frank may pray and read the Bible, he doesn't understand how to love his fellow man.

Analysis

Frank tries to make up for his sexual sins by praying and communing with God the rest of the time. He realizes that everyone makes fun of him, but because of his religious conviction, he must try to push his sexual guilt out of his mind through prayer.

Lt. Col. Henry Braymore Blake, played by Roger Bowen

Description

Lt. Col. Blake is in charge of M*A*S*H 4077. He likes his women and keeps a relaxed, easy-going attitude. When Margaret complains about her treatment, he doesn't even take notice.

Analysis

Blake is easygoing and keeps everything running well, if not fairly.

Capt. John Francis Xavier "Trapper John" McIntyre, played by Elliott Gould

Description

Trapper John is another member of M*A*S*H. He knows Hawkeye from college, and he is always in on the hijinks with Hawkeye and Duke. Trapper is an expert heart surgeon, and he is invited to Tokyo to perform surgery on a VIP's son. He brings Hawkeye along to make a golf vacation out of it, and together they take the opportunity to save a half-American, half-Japanese baby.



Analysis

Fun-loving and interesting, Trapper John is always ready to get into the pranks being, played by the rest of the crew in M*A*S*H. He shows the humanity behind his jokes when he works with Hawkeye to save the baby. Like the other disrespectful and glib members of the M*A*S*H unit, Trapper John is ultimately a humanist.

Description

Analysis

Father John Patrick "Dago Red" Mulcahy, played by Rene Auberjonois

Description

Dago Red is the unit's Catholic priest, and he serves to help everyone with any feelings they may need to deal with while they are overseas. He gives the last rites to soldiers who have died, and in some ways he seems a little lost among the surgeons' mad rush to help the still-living survive.

Analysis

While Frank Burns shows a negative side of religion - one that concentrates on performing the acts of praying and reading the Bible while ignoring kindness to others - Father Mulcahy represents a more positive view of religion. He quietly and unostentatiously goes about his work, and he is truly interested in helping others, as when he enlists Hawkeye to help Painless with his problems.

Lt. Dish, played by Jo Ann Pflug

Description

Lt. Dish (a nickname based on her looks) is a beautiful, accomplished woman. All the men are in love with her, and Hawkeye is especially interested in her. Although she claims that she wants to be faithful to her husband, they make love one night. Also, when Painless Pole thinks he might be gay, she helps him figure things out.



Analysis

Lt. Dish is the beautiful lieutenant that everyone wants and only some can get. Not only are the men lusting after her, but she wants them as well. We discover that while the war is going on, most of the other rules go out the door as she cheats on her husband and helps "cure" Painless.

Cpl. Walter "Radar" O'Reilly, played by Gary Burghoff

Description

Radar is involved in many of the capers happening at M*A*S*H. He helps make the group interesting, and he moves both information and materials around the camp, including delivering important papers to others.

Analysis

Radar is just one more example of a person using humor to survive the horrible events and injuries they see in the war.

Capt. Oliver Harmon "Spearchucker" Jones, played by Fred Williamson

Description

Spearchucker is chosen to come to the outfit so that he can play as a ringer in the big football game. Having been a professional football player, he helps M*A*S*H 4077 to win against all odds.

Analysis

Spearchucker is both an excellent doctor and a professional football player. His role as a ringer is limited, but he acts kindly toward the muddled Henry Blake and acts as a true team leader. Spearchucker is also used to briefly explore Duke's latent racism.



Themes

Comedy Relieves Stress

At *M*A*S*H* 4077, the men and women use comedy to relieve their stress. Everything there is difficult, and they struggle to survive at all either mentally or physically. As they deal with their challenges, they use comedy to make their lives more bearable.

With all the jokes and pranks, everyone in the camp, including the patients, is able to ignore the problems in their lives. They can laugh and cut up even when performing dangerous surgeries on their patients. This ability to laugh even during a crisis helps everyone survive with limited negative effects.

*M*A*S*H* helps prove that laughter can help heal. Rather than dwelling on their problems, the members of the group are able to enjoy the fun available to them. Viewers can also enjoy the powers of laughter for healing as they watch the film and take the lesson into their own lives.

Persistence

The men and women at the hospital are very persistent. They are living in difficult conditions and dealing with hard times, but they remain persistent. Everyone works to keep not only their own spirits up, but also the spirits of those around them.

The men are also persistent in pursuing the women in the camp. Hawkeye relentlessly pursues Lt. Leslie even though she has a husband back home. She has tried to remain faithful, or so she says, but he believes that sex can be an effective outlet for their extreme stress. Although there are obviously many types of persistence, the men and women of *M*A*S*H* find that they must remain persistent and optimistic through all their difficult times.

Sexual Freedom

During the time of filming, sexual freedom was a big deal. People around the country were focused on it, and the women were especially interested in being freed from old stereotypes about women's roles both in the home and out. Throughout *M*A*S*H*, there are many sexual scenes and innuendoes. Even Frank, the most religious man in camp, has an affair with Margaret. Although he seems to feel guilt about many things, he is completely given to having this relationship.

Lt. Leslie even rationalizes cheating on her husband with Hawkeye while she is at the camp. Both she and Hot Lips, as well as the men, move away from the traditional sexual stereotypes found in most films and in life in the United States. This sexual freedom depicted in the film was reflective of a changing culture.

Style and Cinematography

*M*A*S*H* is a funny film that celebrates life in a war hospital. While war is a common motif in many films, this film does not take the serious approach to war that most films take. Instead, *M*A*S*H* approaches the film with a sense of humor which makes the difficulty of the war all that much more poignant.

The film is shot in a way that catches the gritty reality of working at *M*A*S*H*. The realistic filming helps bring the characters, setting and events to life. Viewers are able to relate effectively to the characters and understand their needs, hurts and joys.

The cinematography of the film is also impressive. There are many scenes where the camera pans out so that the audience can see how desolated the area around the hospital is. Thus, we understand more how isolated the characters are from reality. Viewers give them the benefit of the doubt for their actions and hope that their laughter will help them survive through the war.



Motifs

Operating Room

Throughout *M*A*S*H* the operating room enhances the story. From start to finish, the audience sees that the characters' entire lives revolve around their work in the operating room. They see many terrible things there, so they have to use the rest of their time trying to pretend that things are easier than they really are.

When in the operating room, though, life is still not completely serious. Although the problems of the patients are serious and can be life threatening, the doctors must remain optimistic so that they can deal with their situation.

The audience also sees the relationships between doctors and nurses. Margaret is appalled at the explicit relationships and sexual conversations between the doctors and nurses. She believes that the nurses not only deserve more respect but should want it as well. Despite Margaret's best efforts, life continues as before so that they can deal with the situation around them.

Speakers

The loud speakers are a constant in the film, and they help tell the story. From the beginning, the audience learns that all the important information for the people in the camp comes over the speakers. They are often difficult to understand but give a helpful insight into the life of the camp.

The speakers are also used by the men to play their practical jokes. They find it difficult to amuse themselves in the middle of nowhere, so they are always trying to make their own fun. One of the funniest examples of this is when the guys record Frank and Margaret making love and play it over the speakers for the entire camp - much to the embarrassment of Margaret.

Finally, the speakers conclude the story. As the audience sees Hawkeye and Duke leaving the camp, the voice on the speakers begins introducing all the main characters so that we know who played which role, and the film comes to an end as they drive away.

War

War has always been a common motif in literature and film. Many people have seen war firsthand, known someone in the military or read about the horrors of war and understand its impact on anyone involved. Thus, everyone can, to some extent, relate to the situation and learn from the film in order to better understand life during war.



While Hawkeye and Duke would be hilarious in any setting, their antics are especially funny and poignant in the middle of wartime. They try to keep their spirits up by having fun rather than giving in to hopelessness.

The other people involved rely on these pranks and other activities to keep going. The football game isn't just about proving who is best. Rather it's about keeping up the spirits of the men and women who are dealing with life during wartime. By having something else to focus on, they gain greater strength for dealing with their difficult situation.

Nicknames

Everyone in the film is given a nickname at one point or another. These nicknames not only help viewers learn more about the characters, but also they help differentiate the characters from one another by their personalities.

For example, Margaret receives her "Hot Lips" nickname after her affair with Frank is sent over the loudspeakers. Although the name doesn't really describe her, it functions as an ironic element, since it is the exact opposite of the way she usually acts. In this way, it reminds viewers of her many different attitudes and her complexity.

Additionally, Hawkeye receives his nickname for his good eye in surgery. He is one of the best surgeons in the military, and everyone recognizes this simply from hearing his nickname. For viewers, the nicknames help make the characters more memorable and real.



Symbols

Frank's Prayers

Frank spends all his time praying so that he can feel better about his sins. He believes that he is in trouble with God because of his affair with Margaret. Frank also worries about the problems of everyone else in M*A*S*H and spends his time praying for them as well.

Most of the people in M*A*S*H make fun of Frank. He drives them crazy with his incessant praying and Bible reading. Although they mock him, Frank remains true to his habits and beliefs.

Throughout the film, Frank's prayers help tell the story. His affairs with Margaret are followed by prayers. When he hears the men talking about their escapades, he prays for them as well. Frank's concern, however annoying, is well-meaning and symbolic of the way that some people deal with war and stress. The film, though, looks poorly on Frank's prayers as useless in the face of reality.

Football Game

When the M*A*S*H unit and another unit decide to have a football game, the excitement can't be stopped. Everyone is thrilled at a chance to enjoy some goodhearted competition. They have little time for rest and relaxation, and the football game is a great excuse for a little fun.

Before the football game, everyone is involved in practicing for the game. Even the nurses get involved by becoming cheerleaders for the big game. Through this activity, the doctors and nurses are finally focusing on something besides the horrors of war and the illnesses and injuries that surround them.

The football game is symbolic of the ability to have fun and the challenge of taking minds from terrible situations to prevent despair. Instead of focusing on their problems, everyone is finally able to focus on having fun. Still, on another level, the football game serves as a metaphor for the war. Both sides compete to win, receiving injuries, fighting dirty and at one point trampling some helpless and injured onlookers.

Practical Jokes

Hawkeye, Duke and the others are constantly involved in practical jokes. From their first moment in camp, they steal a Jeep and rush off to the scandal of the camp, and they keep causing laughs and problems throughout their whole time in M*A*S*H or out on other missions.



The camp's practical jokes usually center around Margaret. Since she is so uptight, they like to harass her and try to get her to loosen up a bit. First of all, they record her and Frank having sex and play it over the speakers. This gives her the nickname Hot Lips. Soon after, they pull the shower down around her.

The practical jokes are symbolic of the power of laughter to heal. Without the jokes and the fun the soldiers would take their work too seriously. In order for them to survive the difficulties of the war, they must keep laughing rather than give up and become frustrated with the situation.

The Baby

While Trapper John and Hawkeye are in Japan, they visit a brothel where a woman has a very sick baby that is half-American. Without emergency surgery, the baby won't survive, but since he's half-American and half-Japanese, no one will take care of him. Hawkeye and Trapper John take him to the hospital and demand to be allowed to do surgery to save the child.

The baby represents the prejudice in the area. The child is hated because of its heritage. After going through so many difficult situations, Hawkeye and Trapper John are not interested in these stereotypes. They gallantly save the child against all protests by the commanding officers.



Essay Questions

What is M*A*S*H?

Why are Hawkeye and Duke in the camp?

Why does Margaret get offended?

What is Frank's usual activity?

How do messages get passed at the camp?

Why is Painless worried?

Why does Leslie cheat on her husband?

Where does Hawkeye visit?

What is the importance of the football game?

Why is it important that there are practical jokes in the camp?