

The Best Years of Our Lives (1946): realism and reformism

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One measure of growing disgust and anxiety with the war on Iraq is the news that three movies about returning veterans from that war will be released over the next six months (*In the Valley of Elah*, September 14; *Grace is Gone*, October; and *Stop-Loss*, next March), while the war itself shows no signs of ending.

Traditionally, American filmmakers have waited some period of time before telling the story of its veterans. In the case of the Vietnam War, the release dates of *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1979) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) speak to the difficulty America and its filmmakers had coming to grips—or attempting to come to grips—with the imperialist war and its consequences.

The 1946 release date of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, directed by William Wyler, certainly the most well known and honored of the movies about World War II returning veterans, would seem to argue that America had less trouble coming to terms with that conflict. At the popular level, this is true; after all, this was the “good war,” and most importantly (especially in relation to the wars that followed), America had won.

But the Second World War left many worrisome, unanswered questions, too. Europe and Japan had been devastated, economically and culturally, and the American ruling elite knew that without monetary stability and markets for their commodities, global social upheaval threatened (hence the Bretton Woods Agreement and the Marshall Plan). A massive strike wave erupted in the aftermath of the war. The official launching of the Cold War was still some time away, but the end of the US-Soviet alliance set the stage for the propaganda wars to come. The veterans were returning home to a changing economy and everyday life.

These questions inform much of *The Best Years of Our Lives*’ tension and realism, but the liberal “answers” to these questions are contrived and they accept uncritically the social reformism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which

was about to come to an abrupt end. In the film’s general anxiety and sense of unease are perhaps contained its most profound truths.

Three veterans, Air Force Major Fred Berry (Dana Andrews), Seaman Homer Parrish (Harold Russell) and Army Sergeant Al Stephenson (Frederic March) fly home on the same P17 airplane to an American town that seems too busy with navigating a post-war world to celebrate their arrival or even listen to their concerns and ideas.

Fred Berry, who returns to the impoverished side of town where he grew up, quickly discovers that his status as an Air Force major counts for nothing in the job market, forcing him to return to his pre-war job as a soda jerk in a drug store. His wife, Marie (Virginia Mayo), whom he married weeks before leaving for the war, has become a nightclub entertainer in his absence and expects their lives to be the same as when her husband left, right down to asking him to wear his Air Force uniform when they go out. When Fred refuses to meet her demands (and loses his job as a soda jerk after defending the handicapped Homer Parrish against a customer who accuses America of having fought the “wrong enemy”—i.e., the Axis powers instead of the Soviet Union), they divorce.

Parrish, who entered the war immediately after graduating high school and has lost both hands in the war, returns to his working class parents’ home. He has been trained to use the prosthetic hooks he now wears and takes pride in not asking for help. But when his girlfriend Wilma’s (Cathy O’Donnell) father tells Homer, “We’re headed for bad times in this country” and that he should work for his (the father’s) insurance company because “servicemen, men who have suffered some kind of disability, make good salesmen,” Homer slumps in his chair and remains silent in the realization that to gain a job, he must sell himself as an object of pity.

An upper-class banker, Al Stephenson has no problem

returning to his job; in fact, the bank president, wanting to take advantage of Al's veteran status, promotes him to Vice-President of Small Loans to administer the new GI Bill of Rights for veterans. In one scene, a veteran tells Al that he wants a loan in order to buy a farm to fight the global food shortage. However, when Al tells the president that he gave a loan to a veteran without collateral on the basis of the young man's "heart and hands"—signs he learned to read as an Army Sergeant—the president warns him never to make a loan again without receiving collateral. The callousness and coldness of a money-driven, profit-driven society is brought home.

Each of the veterans has learned valuable skills during the war. Their survival and success in combat depended on placing their reasoning faculties in the service of the group's needs rather than the whims of the individual, and the consequence of this objective necessity was the development of different, more humane values and morals. Moreover, in their own minds, they had fought a war against fascist dictatorship and for "democracy."

However, their efforts to bring these values and morals to post-war American society are dashed by the general anarchy of a capitalist economy and the specific reality of this society's acquisitiveness and shortsightedness.

The insuperable contradictions of the veterans' situation, as well as the narrowness and limitations of the filmmaker's—or the American film industry's—answer to these problems, are expressed in their contrived acceptance (with a verbal protest here and there) of their fate.

Homer's mortification at hearing the terms of his employment at the insurance firm unconvincingly turns into happiness at receiving a \$200-a-month disability check from the government. And Homer's marriage to Wilma at the movie's end can occur only after Homer learns that Wilma accepts his prosthetic hooks. Perhaps one is to understand by these actions that Homer has matured, but one is left to wonder how the couple will live on \$200 a month.

Al Stephenson's uncomfortable position at the bank, along with the distance that four years in the war have created between himself and his family, results in alcoholism—an affliction shared by many veterans of World War II—on display at a bank gathering. As featured speaker, Al satirizes the bank's collateral policy with a war story, but he concludes his speech with an assurance that the bank will do all it can to help veterans and a firm handshake for the bank president.

Is one meant to understand that Al's speech has

changed not only the bank's policies but also the cold calculus of capitalism? Is one to believe that all is now well for Al, as his sober appearance with his wife at Homer's wedding suggests? Perhaps, but on the basis of so little proof?

After losing his soda jerk job, Fred finds a job with the government turning metal from unused warplanes into prefabricated houses. The expression on Fred's face at receiving this job is meant to convey a realization: like the planes, he can be reborn and once again useful. Though contrived, the reformist analogy might work were it not for the fact that Fred's job depends on a finite number of planes.

Credulity is tested even more when Fred appears at Homer's wedding. His divorce now allows him to see Al's daughter, Peggy (Teresa Wright), openly—Fred and Peggy's attraction for each other was obvious from their first scene together, but Fred's marriage had kept their growing affair clandestine. Fred embraces Peggy in the final scene and tells her, "You know how it'll be, Peggy. It may take us years to get anywhere. We'll have no work, no decent place to live. We'll get kicked around." And the movie ends on this rather unsettling note.

The embrace and Fred's manly acceptance of the trials to come are typical Hollywood stuff, i.e., one is to believe that the attainment of the private goal of an imminent marriage and the public goal of a rebirth of society have been attained; but Fred's words, if taken in their literal meaning, instead of signifying Fred's manly acceptance of the trials to come, would lead one to wonder what rough beast these two (and America) are slouching toward.



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