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COM-260-American Cinema

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March 21 2019

### The Hardest Years of Our Lives

William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* is an honest view into the lives of military veterans returning home from war. The film shows the realism of the transition into a post war era of America. The whole cast does an incredible job of diving into the compassion and humanity these characters share. Coming out of WWII, America had changed significantly because most men went off to fight. Wyler does a great job of starting a discussion of all the harsh realities of adapting to a different life. The historical context is perfect in reflecting the problems soldiers faced after war. The three soldiers returning home all have their problems whether it be physical, psychological, or being out of touch with their families.

Fred Derry is returning home to a wife after serving as Air Force Captain. Before going to war, a lot of men got married so they could come home to someone, but this warranted problems because it wasn't real love. It becomes apparent that Fred and his wife, Marie, weren't in love. Fred was a soda jerk before the war, and struggles to find a job after coming home. America during WWII had to replace most of the workers and soldiers weren't given their places back. The stress of not having an income and having nothing to do would make soldiers diminish their value because they thought they needed to work. Women had to take over and made up most of the workforce while the men were away. Marie Derry had to get a job and it's implied that she had relationships with other men while Fred was gone. Fred's worst problem is his

PTSD. This was occurring during a time where we didn't know much about the effects war had on the mind. Marie certainly didn't care about it, and simply wanted Fred to move on. Many soldiers had to live with some survivors guilt and it could turn into a suicide problem. The most heartfelt scene in the film is when Fred's parents read his citations and learn what Fred has endured while at war.

Homer Parrish's problems come mostly because of his injuries. He lost his hands and now has two "hooks" for hands. Harold Russell, who plays Homer has the standout performance while not even being an actor. Homer returns home, but fears how his love, Wilma, will take his injuries. Homer's emotions poured out in the scene where he and Wilma are in the garage. He subtly questions how he can take care of her. The scene is interrupted by Homer's sister and her friends who are staring at Homer. He takes it as an insult as they are looking at his hands, which leads him out of control in the scene. Veterans had returned home with missing limbs and they stood out because of their deformities. People think they can't do anything for themselves, which creates insecurities. Homer runs into a man who questions if the war was even real. To question a soldier's injuries related to a new generation of people who made conspiracy theories and questioned everything. Al's son asks Al about the radiation that he learned about in school, and Al had no clue. This connects with Homer's experience because it marked a transition of new learning and social views.

Al Stephenson returns home to a family he feels he doesn't know much anymore. In once scene he's dancing with his wife while drunk and says how he can't wait to get back home to his wife. His family does a good job going along and getting him back to the speed of things. Al has the most common problem that real veterans would have. His son and daughter have grown up

and he didn't get to experience some of their childhood. He's worried about Peggy dating boys and he experiences his son is turning into a man now. William Wyler's view of how veterans should be treated is portrayed through Al's actions. Al gets his job back and gives a loan to a vet without getting collateral. Al goes against his bank because of what he knows about coming back to a new world.

The theme of transitioning into a new age is most realistically played out in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. William Wyler's approach addresses his personal views and experiences because he was a veteran who had to endure coming home. This classic will always stand the test of time for veterans and soldiers experiences. It should be pointed as a way to be compassionate and help the harsh adaptation into a different time.