

The Best Years of Our Lives (1946)

Directed by William Wyler and photographed by Gregg Toland (who also photographed Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*)

Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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Principal actors: Milly Stephenson (Myrna Loy), Al Stephenson (Frederic March), Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), Peggy Stephenson (Teresa Wright), Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), Wilma Cameron (Cathy O'Donnell), Marie Derry (Virginia Mayo), Butch Engel (Hoagy Carmichael)

Observations and Questions for Discussion and Writing:

1. In the very first scenes of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, we learn that things are different for Fred (and by extension, the rest of the returning veterans) now that the war is over. How is the change revealed to us?
2. Once Al, Fred and Homer meet, their camaraderie is reinforced in the cramped spaces (the *mise-en-scene*) of the B-17 and the taxi. They are grouped together in a series of three shots throughout the "coming home" sequence. Clearly, they are comfortable in these tight quarters. Fred points out that a B-17 like the one they are in was "his office" during the war. Then, as they leave the comfort of this grouping, the individual and material circumstances of their lives before the war begin to emerge. What are those circumstances and what do we learn about each of them? About their class backgrounds? Homer's hooks signify the literal damage the war did to him, but what about the other two? How is Fred damaged? Al?
3. What kind of a city is Boone City? It is initially introduced in a Hollywood-style "montage" of images with music, as we see the hometown from the POV (point of view) of the men in the taxi.
4. In her book *Master Space: Film Images of Capra, Lubitsch, Sternberg, and Wyler*, Barbara Bowman says that the women in this film (Milly, Peggy and Wilma) offer "a healing social perspective." Do you agree with this interpretation? What evidence can you cite to support or refute this idea?
5. What function does Butch's bar serve in the film? Notice that Homer points it out to Fred and Al as they ride home together in the taxi, and on their first night home, they all end up there. We see Butch's bar at the

end of a long montage sequence in which Al, Milly and Peggy are shown drinking in nightclubs and bars, all of which are crammed with bodies and loud music. Butch's bar is set apart from these other places in a number of ways. What are they? We return to Butch's once during the film, and our memories of the previous scene in this bar enhance our understanding of the subsequent scene. In what way?

6. How are mirrors and photographs used in the film? Recall some specific scenes which feature one or the other, or both, prominently, and discuss what the filmmakers may hope to achieve by using them as important parts of the *mise-en-scene*.

7. Another powerful scene (and masterful use of *mise-en-scene*) in the film is the "airplane graveyard" scene, where Fred walks among the scrapped bombers. Why is this scene so powerful? What does it tell us about Fred?

8. *The Best Years of Our Lives* offers a critique of the situation American servicemen found themselves in after the war. What issues and problems are raised and dramatized here?

Bibliography:

Bowman, Barbara. *Master Space: Film Images of Capra, Lubitsch, Sternberg, and Wyler*. NY: Greenwood Press, 1992.