



April 2009

## Christian Signature and Archetype in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*

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### Recommended Citation

Riccomini, Donald R. (2009) "Christian Signature and Archetype in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13/iss1/7>

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## Christian Signature and Archetype in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*

### Abstract

*It's A Wonderful Life* is both a sentimental holiday entertainment and a serious examination of a search for meaning and spiritual fulfillment. As a psychodrama that externalizes George Bailey's values and desires in the surrounding characters, the film creates a narrative we can easily relate to, but arranged as an archetypal journey that reveals a deeper spiritual significance by identifying George with Christ's quest for salvation. The increased psychodramatic density, combined with the archetypal structure, transforms a sentimental holiday entertainment into a serious work of art with lasting religious and spiritual meaning, thereby accounting for its enduring popularity.

Frank Capra's Christmas movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*, is sentimental film for a sentimental season, but also carries a serious theme of Christian spiritual redemption. What matters, the film contends, is not what we achieve for ourselves, but what we give of ourselves, for that alone redeems our existence. In its thematic emphasis on sacrifice as the essence of spiritual salvation, as well as in its dramatic depiction of angels, prayer, and the Christmas setting itself, the film is firmly Christian in tone and message.

Indeed, the decisive moment in George Bailey's life occurs in the bar scene where, facing loss of reputation and actual jail time for embezzlement, he emotionally calls upon God to show him the way. The scene emphasizes the presence of Christianity in George's values and initiates the intervention of the spiritual in the natural in the shape of Clarence Oddbody, guardian angel second class. By foregrounding the Christian motif in this dramatic way, Capra imbues his narrative with a religious theme and tone, but without lapsing into didacticism. He shows, rather than tells, what the struggle of the soul for salvation is like, and where that struggle leads us. In doing so he generates, through the pervasive Christian motif, an archetypal depth and resonance that elevates the film from the sentimental to the sublime. And this, in turn, engages the audience at such a fundamental level of human experience that their repeated viewing of the film is assured.

Capra's major technique in uniting the sentimental with the spiritual and the everyday with the archetypal is to organize details from a realistic, representative story of contemporary American life in such a way as to reveal an underlying, universal experience. The resulting archetypal patterns emerge in two major ways: through "psychodrama" and "monomyth."

Psychodrama, as Raymond Carney defines it, is a narrative "in which each of the major characters around George externalizes an imaginative contradiction or division of allegiance that already exists within him."<sup>1</sup> In Carney's view, George never fully resolves the divisions and duality of his character. Though he rejoins his society "physically and socially in the final grouping of the characters," he remains "simultaneously somewhere outside of it too," "left in essential doubleness" (419). Carney does allow that through his experiences George, unlike his friends, ends up aware of his own imaginative powers, so that he can at least fantasize about his desires, but for Carney this awareness ironically isolates George even more his society; despite his new found awareness, George remains unable to realize his dreams. Thus "Capra's is finally a tragic sense of life" (433). In such a world, we are free to dream, and our ability to dream grants us greater knowledge and awareness than our fellows, but we can never translate our dreams into reality.

It is true that George does learn that his childhood dreams will never be unrealized, that he will not become a great architect or bridge builder; and it is true

that he can never escape his awareness of this reality. But it is also true that he learns to understand his fate, and his life, from a different perspective. Through his nightmarish experience in Pottersville, a kind of journey of discovery into the inner self or unconscious, George realizes that his selfishness has blinded him to his true purpose: to give and sacrifice in order to build not the houses and bridges that would bring him fame and wealth, but the homes and relationships that confer spiritual meaning on his family and friends. As such, George ultimately experiences a comic, not a tragic, anagnorisis. He learns to accept the limits reality places on his childhood dreams, but also comes to realize the spiritual difference his sacrifice makes in the lives of others. He discovers that the limitations he confronted were also gateways to a different set of values – not the values of desire, such as money and fame, but the values of the spirit, such as friendship and love. It is not, therefore, a question of whether George is forever denied his dreams, but rather a question of what really matters in life, and whether any amount of worldly success, if unleavened by the spirit of giving, can achieve it.

In undertaking this exploration of the self, George's life assumes the archetypal pattern of a journey, presented as a particularized version of the "monomyth," in which the hero detaches himself from a society in a state of disorder or stress, undergoes suffering and tribulation, and returns with deeper insight into his own psychological and spiritual self and with the means to transform

his world.<sup>2</sup> This pattern is readily discernible in George's experience: he feels alienated from the society of Bedford Falls, suffers a nagging sense of frustration and failure, undertakes a journey into the underworld (Pottersville), and returns to his society with new knowledge that enhances the spiritual significance of daily life. In a religious and specifically Christian sense, George's journey mirrors the archetypal journey of Christ, who distances himself from his society through his radical teachings, suffers and dies on the cross in the ultimate sacrifice, experiences resurrection, and returns to provide mankind with the way to spiritual salvation. Of course, George's journey does not compare to Christ's in its suffering or scope, but George does come to a vital and very Christian realization: that redemption lies not in the grandiose, self-centered gestures he dreamed of in his youth, but in small, intimate acts of kindness and care for others. As his father might say, he discovers that he has lived, "in his own small way," the spiritual and religious lessons of Christianity.

In fusing the realism of his character and situation with the archetypal and spiritual journey of Christ, Capra creates a work of art that challenges the audience to engage the surface material of the plot at a level deeper than mere entertainment. The psychodrama of George's struggle for meaning prompts the audience to understand the characters as representing, in their own behavior, the alternatives George Bailey could take in defining himself. Thus Sam Wainwright represents

everything George dreams of becoming: he makes a fortune in plastics, travels the world, enjoys beautiful women, and becomes well-known. He represents the path George would like to have taken, but didn't. However, Sam's path also comes at a price: though outwardly successful, he seems to lack George's insight and sensitivity; he is, in a sense, a positive version of Potter, driven purely by money, albeit, unlike Potter, willing to share it. Even Sam's generosity, however, seems shallow: it is awarded in a perfunctory way, with the sense that it's not a big deal to share because he can so easily make more money when he needs it. It is as though Sam remains detached from the emotional investment of actual giving. Sam therefore has what George dreams about but will never have: the adventure of making money and living an unreflective life filled with parties and travel; but he also lacks what George has, but doesn't appreciate yet: a fully human sense of empathy and generosity. After all, it's easy to be generous when it costs you nothing, as in Sam's case; only when the sacrifice is real, when we have to go without something we really care about, as in George's case, does generosity and sacrifice assume moral and spiritual authenticity.

Harry, like Sam, also externalizes George's desire for achievement and public recognition, but not in strictly material terms. Harry's nature and destiny is to be a true hero, in the sense that he does great things that, if not lucrative, are nonetheless distinguished. Hence Harry is something of an idealist; rather than

running the business, he pursues research; and his greatest accomplishment is not getting rich, but winning the Medal of Honor for saving the troop transport. These are accomplishments that, like his athletic prowess, testify to heroism of his deeds rather than to the wealth he has accumulated, that make him famous and respected, but not necessarily rich. He does marry money, in exactly the way George does not, but money is not his goal. He does not seek power, but rather heroism in the guise of the great scientist and the great warrior. In that sense, Harry's exploits reflect the romantic myth of the hero slaying the monster – all very noble and dramatic, but somewhat unrealistic. He is a hero so committed to the great deed that he seems less than fully human and real.

Thus Harry's sense of responsibility to George, though genuine, is not finally deep enough to compel him to run the savings and loan while George goes to college. He doesn't insist on taking over the business so George can go to school, but lets George's giving nature release him from his promise and responsibility. Harry is not a bad person, but a somewhat self-centered one. When he toasts George as the "richest man in town," his tone is appreciative, admiring, and sincere, and also somewhat envious, as though he recognizes in some way that for all his accomplishments, he still does not quite measure up to George's fully realized humanity. For all his great deeds, then, Harry, like Sam, remains somewhat shallow, ultimately more concerned with overcoming the next challenge than with

the welfare of the people immediately around him. And like Sam, he remains an alternative George finds attractive, but cannot bring himself to emulate without denying the sense of moral responsibility he carries within him. Harry and Sam therefore stand as essentially negative options for George in defining himself.

Among the externalizations of George's psyche are various father figures, and of these, George's moral self, his sense of doing what is right, is exemplified by his father's character and spirit. Like his father, George has always been a moral leader: as his father remarks, George was "born old," that is, he was born with an overriding sense of responsibility that compels him to carry the moral weight as the leader and protector of others, even at his own expense. It is George who organizes the rescue of his brother from the icy water, but loses hearing in one ear; who takes the initiative of not delivering the wrong medicine for Mr. Gower, but suffers a beating; who prevents Potter from taking over the savings and loans, but foregoes college; who supports Harry in starting his career, but again foregoes college; who rescues the savings and loan from a run on the bank, but loses his honeymoon money; who jumps in the water to save Clarence, only to endure the nightmare of Pottersville; and who protects his uncle, but has to go to jail for embezzlement he didn't commit.

In each case, George sacrifices something and gains something, and what he gains is more significant than what he loses. George's sacrifices define him as a

true Christian: his behavior exemplifies true Christian brotherly love; he really does love his neighbor as himself. And he doesn't just talk about Christian morality; he lives it, without expecting a reward for his sacrifice. George also has, in his lack of awareness of his own moral goodness, the same "innocence of a child" we see in Clarence, and perhaps even more so. Though Clarence has a sincere interest in helping George, he expects to be promoted to angel first class if he saves him, suggesting that even an angel's motivation isn't necessarily entirely pure. George, in contrast, never asks for something in return when he gives of himself.

Through his journey, then, what changes is not George's authentic Christian love for others, but his awareness that his love has made such a difference in their lives. He learns that what matters is what the heart can give. Thus, although George retains what Carney calls a double consciousness – an awareness of the limits the world can impose on dreams of wealth and success – the end result of his journey also endows him with a mature grasp of his own spiritual as well as material purpose. He learns that material achievement, in itself, is not enough to define his humanity. It is valuable ultimately only if it is mitigated by love, care, and giving to others, that is, by spiritual motives that give but seek nothing in return – the very essence of Christian belief as illustrated in the actions of Christ.

Potter, of course, stands in direct opposition to Peter Bailey as a father figure. He is the spiritually dead, materialistic hoarder whose only interest is in

gaining power through wealth. He is indeed a "warped old man," his spiritual emptiness reflected in his crippled body. He has no family, no one to care for, and no one who cares for him; all of his relationships are reduced to economic transactions – people are either employees or business partners, nothing more. Notably, unlike Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Potter is not rehabilitated at the end of the movie, but is left a permanent, threatening presence in Bedford Falls. There is no sign he will return the money, no sign he will be punished for keeping it, no sign he will change for the better. Capra's decision to leave Potter unchanged saves the film from pure sentimentality, so that it retains a hard, realistic edge that says, yes, you can create spiritual meaning in your life and that of others, as George has done, but it is an ongoing struggle and you will not eliminate the temptation of pride and power.

The angel of darkness, in the guise of Potter, co-opts the wayward soul by preying on its innermost desires, as Potter does when he offers George a high-paying job. His greatest power over George is his understanding of George's desire for money and success, and his power stems precisely from its promise to alleviate the frustrations that nag at George continuously. Only by rejecting Potter, by denying his own materialistic desires, can George neutralize (but not eliminate) Potter's power over him and lay the groundwork for his final spiritual transformation. From a Christian perspective, in offering George a job, Potter acts

like Satan tempting Christ in the desert or Eve in the garden. Like Satan, he attempts to maneuver George into wanting to accept the temptation: essentially, Potter offers George everything he thinks he wants. He does not overtly force, but rather covertly enables George to act. Initially George is seduced by Potter's tempting offer – after all, in one aspect he is exactly like Potter, hungry for power, wealth, and fame – but as he listens his moral sense begins to awaken and he realizes that he's being manipulated. Like Christ in the desert, George must, and does, find the resolve to reject his tempter's subtle overtures. The key is to acknowledge the potential for evil within us, and in the face of it, to choose good. George does so when he realizes what Potter is up to, and rejects the offer. To do otherwise would be to deny his own potential for spiritual growth, to deny that other aspect of himself that makes giving a higher priority than taking. In this scene, then, George has, as a Christian, confronted evil directly, allowed himself to be tempted by it, and rejected it.

The females in the film also provide George with externalized choices reflective of his own inner nature. Mary, as her name suggests, is the Madonna figure, the nurturer who puts her children and family first; Violet is the sexual temptress, the Mary Magdalene figure who puts her enjoyment first. In choosing Mary, George rejects the prurient promise represented by Violet, and chooses instead to unite the spiritual with the physical: he does have a sexual relationship with Mary (they are seen in bed several times) but imbues it with a deeper sense of

commitment and love, something he cannot have with Violet, who, it is implied, remains unsettled, with no meaningful relationships, despite having had many men. At the same time, George does have a tender concern for Violet that transcends the purely sexual, as when he gives her money so she can go to New York, but his giving is more in the spirit of agape than eros. Of the female figures, then, Mary represents his most loyal and direct alternative to discovering the true meaning of his life – as his mother tells him, "She's the kind that can help you find the answers."

Mary is therefore George's complementary opposite, his Jungian anima. By marrying her, he attains the unified self he has been seeking, and establishes the structure that will eventually lead him to an awareness of what his spiritual purpose has always been. It is no accident, then, that it is Mary who helps George by getting his friends to contribute money: as his alter ego she makes indelibly and concretely clear the moral and spiritual good George has done in helping others. Her guiding presence in the frame story – at the beginning and end, outside the flashback, calling upon his friends to pray for him, and serving as the focal point of the final ingathering – allows her to externalize George's inner goodness in such a way that even he can see it. As Uncle Billy puts it, "Mary did it! Mary did it, George! It's Mary!" Or, as we might put it: George did it, and through the complementary agency of Mary, in a way that resulted in a unity of deed and spirit, and with it, the path to redemption.

Thus the psychodramatic and archetypal aspects of the narrative allow Capra to foreground George's inner conflicts as a Christian journey of the soul seeking salvation. In this way Capra raises George Bailey's character and story from stereotype to archetype, and imbues a holiday entertainment with deeper religious meaning. Like children who want to hear the same story over and over again because it magically echoes our deepest concerns, we return to Capra's film repeatedly, to relive George's – and our own – profound spiritual and religious experience. The film therefore takes on the feeling of a fable or parable – stories so fundamental in their reference to human experience that they lodge in our imaginations forever, and with them, their underlying spiritual and religious meanings, especially the values of sacrifice and giving, and through those values, the power of redemption.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Carney, *American Vision: The films of Frank Capra* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 381. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Carney.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Schneider, "A Defense Of It's A Wonderful Life," online at *Cosmoetica*, <http://www.cosmoetica.com/B295-DES235.htm>, notes that "The film opens as if a storybook, telling the viewer that this may indeed be just a fable."