

JIMMY STEWART AND THE GOOD CITIZEN

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Films play an active role in the way people develop their ideas about life. For example, some movies teach us how to be a good citizen or how to serve others. While this is usually not the main purpose of the movie, we are often presented with examples of both good and poor citizenship. Two movies that present such examples are Mr. Smith Goes to Washington and It's A Wonderful Life, which star Jimmy Stewart, one of the most popular actors of the 1940s. In Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Stewart plays an idealistic senator named Jefferson Smith, and in It's A Wonderful Life, he plays a altruistic dreamer named George Bailey. Both movies have different outlooks on the way a citizen goes about the betterment of his community; Smith affects change in the government, while Bailey affects change in his town.

In Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Jefferson Smith is chosen to replace the senator who has just died. While he is new to politics, he knows that he will not disgrace the office of a United States Senator. Senator Smith wants to help his state by building a boys' camp that uses state land at Terre Canyon. However, the other senator for his state, Senator Paine, has other plans for the land. Senator Paine uses his power in the Senate to try to override Senator Smith's idea. He calls the newspapers from their home state, tells them lies about what Senator Smith is doing, and turns his whole state against him. However, Senator Smith and his assistant, Miss Saunders, figure out what is going on and use a filibuster to pass the bill.

It's A Wonderful Life chronicles the life of George Bailey, a citizen of Bedford Falls. Due to a sense of responsibility, George takes over the Bailey Building and Loan after his father's death. George hopes that his younger brother, Harry, will eventually assume control of the building and loan, so that George can fulfill his dreams of traveling around the world. However, when Harry is offered a job in New York, George puts his brother's needs before his own. Meanwhile, George falls in love and marries. He and his new bride are about to leave Bedford Falls when a run on the building and loan threatens its survival. Their honeymoon is doomed as are George's chances for ever leaving Bedford Falls. He leads a normal life, but he seems restless. His partner, Uncle Billy, ends up losing \$8000, and George wants to commit suicide. At this point, an angel, Clarence, comes down and shows George just how "wonderful" his life is. He has impacted many people, and all the people he has impacted end up helping him out with his money problems in return.

Society has many ideas of what a good citizen should be and these ideas are evident in both movies. The two characters that Jimmy Stewart plays are the good citizens, while his opponent in each movie reveals characteristics of poor citizenship. A good citizen works hard to better his home, his family, and his friends. Sometimes he does this by setting a strong example for others to follow like Jefferson Smith, or by performing duties to his town like George Bailey. A good citizen also follows all the rules and tries to contribute to society. However, the ways the two characters display their good citizenship are different; Jefferson Smith serves in the public eye and is obligated to serve his state, while George Bailey chooses to serve quietly within the confines of small town business.

Jefferson Smith is chosen as Senator and must go to Washington, D.C. at a moment's notice. He is not really given a choice as to whether or not he wants to be senator; he is informed that he has been chosen. It is his duty as a citizen to follow the rules set by the governor, so when the governor tells him to go to the Senate, he must go. Therefore, he is following his obligation of society and being a good citizen. On the other hand, George Bailey is not under obligation to be a good citizen. He can choose how he acts and why he acts and when he acts. His choice ends up serving his town. For example, George chooses to run the Bailey Building and Loan when he could have traveled around the country or attended college. He realizes how important the Bailey Building and Loan is to the Bedford Falls community and realizes that he must stay and be in charge of it. Also, as a good citizen, he chooses to sacrifice his honeymoon and all his wedding money to save the Building and Loan. All the choices that George Bailey makes are for the betterment of his town, not for his own gain.

Service is another part of citizenship, and it can be either deliberate or unintentional, as the two films reveal. Jefferson Smith shows service and knows he is serving his state. When anyone takes a position in politics, it should be to serve others. While some politicians do not make that their main goal, a good citizen would. That is exactly what Jefferson Smith does. All he wants to do by being a Senator is to help the boys in his state by giving them a place to have fun and camp. He wants to serve them, and, in effect, teach them to serve others by being part of an organization similar to the Boy Scouts. His service is a good quality of citizenship. However, George Bailey does not necessarily consciously do what he does to serve others. He does what he does because he feels he is being a good friend.

He saves his brother, Harry, from the frozen pond, causing him to go deaf in his left ear. He does not even think about what could happen to him; he just wants to help his brother. Also, when he works at the drug store for Mr. Gower, he informs Mr. Gower when he has messed up the recipe for a certain prescription. This ends up saving Mr. Gower's career as a druggist. All that George Bailey does ends up having an impact on someone else's life, and that truly is a virtue of a good citizen.

When one is a good citizen, it usually has a positive outcome in your life and the life of others. For Jefferson Smith, he has a successful career as a senator and helps the boys in his town by having the Senate pass his bill. He accomplishes what he wants, and he also finds a girlfriend. So, not only does his good citizenship help others, but it helps himself. For George Bailey, the outcome is similar. He helps many people in his town, and they, in return, come to his aid. In the end, George needs the \$8000 and realizes he is worth more dead than alive. He decides to commit suicide, but he ends up meeting Clarence the angel, who saves his life. Clarence causes George to realize that, "Each man's life touches so many other lives that when it's not there it leaves such a strange hole." George thinks that he is a failure, but Clarence also shows him that "No man is a failure who has friends." Through his adventures with Clarence, the film shows how George Bailey changed and bettered the lives of many people in Bedford Falls. The people he helped gave him the money to pay off his debt and helped him to realize how much he is loved.

In contrast, there are citizens who try to make life miserable for others and better for themselves. A bad citizen does not follow the rules and is a trouble to society. In Mr. Smith Goes To Washington, Senator

Paine is the corrupt citizen. While he does work to serve his state, Senator Paine seeks to serve only himself. He uses people to his advantage and double-crosses Smith. Senator Paine does not uphold good citizenship when he lies about Senator Smith's goals in Washington. He tells the people back home lies about what Jefferson Smith is trying to accomplish, and they lose faith in him. The corrupt citizen in It's A Wonderful Life is Mr. Potter, the bank owner. He wants to make money, plain and simple. He tries to buy the Bailey Building and Loan when George's father dies. When George cannot find the \$8000, which Potter has taken, he encourages George to commit suicide because his life insurance policy is worth more than he is alive. Everything that Potter does is looking out for himself and not society. A confirming event in Potter's corruption is his keeping of the Bailey's money; even when he accidentally stumbles upon the Bailey's mistake, he will not change his selfish nature.

However, in Stewart's films, the good citizen always overcomes the self-serving one in the end. Jefferson Smith overcomes Paine by using the filibuster to deny Paine's bill and pass his own. Smith's filibuster causes Paine to feel guilty and confess all his wrongdoing. George Bailey realizes what Bedford Falls would have become if he had not been around to stop Potter, the sleazy town Pottersville. So, by George Bailey being there to help others, he stopped Potter's evil from spreading. Many of the townspeople are eager to help George Bailey repay his \$8000 debt, showing that he truly is "the richest man in town."

Citizenship is an important theme to these different, yet similar, films. It is surprising that Jimmy Stewart appears in two films where he is an extraordinarily good citizen. However, Stewart established this typecast early

in his career, and it wasn't until his later roles that his characters would exhibit moral uncertainty and disillusionment. These movies also show the different ways good citizenship occurs. Watching movies can have a positive impact on viewers if they take away the lessons of how good citizenship can have a positive impact on society.