

The Meaning of Life in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

SANJA MATKOVIĆ* – BILJANA OKLOPČIĆ**

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* Sanja Matković,
MA in English
Language and
Literature, MA in
German Language
and Literature, Jesuit
Classical Grammar
School in Osijek, Trg
Vatroslava Lisinskog 1,
31000 Osijek, Croatia,
smatkovic87@gmail.
com

** Full. Prof. Biljana
Oklopčić, Ph.D.,
Faculty of Humanities
and Social Sciences, J. J.
Strossmayer University
of Osijek, L. Jägera 9,
31000 Osijek, Croatia,
boklopcc@ffos.hr

Summary: *This paper will analyze the concept of the meaning of life in Frank Capra's film It's a Wonderful Life (1946) from a logotherapy aspect and with the support of Catholic theory. Namely, the film depicts how George Bailey, faced with a major life difficulty, self-transcends himself and discovers meaning through work and deeds, love, and the attitude toward unavoidable suffering. The notions of the responsibility of every human being to their life and God, the uniqueness of every individual and the specific tasks life sets before them, and the acceptance of one's own position will also be examined with regard to Bailey's actualization of the meaning of life. The paper will conclude by identifying the effect this film has on its viewers due to the way it tackles the topic of the meaning of life, which makes it suitable for a therapeutic method cinematotherapy, used in logotherapy.*

Keywords: *Frank Capra, It's a Wonderful Life, the meaning of life, Viktor Frankl, responsibility, self-transcendence, Catholicism.*

Introduction

It's a Wonderful Life is a classic-Hollywood fantasy drama from 1946, directed by Frank Capra. Upon his return from the Second World War, Capra considered the script for this film to be »the perfect antidote for threatening disillusionment [in this postwar context] because it portrayed in starkly resonant terms the value and meaning of an individual human life« (Sullivan 119). Depicting the value

of a little fellow's life and good deeds as a contrast to greedy and manipulative behavior of a villain, it is dubbed the most »Capraesque« film. After the initial mixed reviews and being a box-office disappointment, *It's a Wonderful Life* was put into the public domain in the 1970s, after which it has cemented its place as a holiday classic, becoming deeply interwoven into the American culture for decades. Today, the American Film Institute recognizes *It's a Wonderful Life* as one of the best one hundred American films ever made and considers it to be the most inspirational American film of all time. Taking into consideration the immense popularity of the film both in the United States of America and worldwide, it is reasonable to assume that it reflects the fundamental values of its audience. Believing that it was the best film he had ever made, Frank Capra declared that its theme of a man who discovers what the world would be like if he never existed »probably epitomizes everything [he had] been trying to say in all the other films« (McCaffrey 119):

It was the story I had been looking for all of my life! Small town. A man. A good man, ambitious. But so busy helping others, life seems to pass him by. Despondent. He wishes he'd never been born. He gets his wish. Through the eyes of a guardian angel he sees the world as it would have been had he not been born. Wow! What an idea. (*The Name Above the Title* 376)

Capra was raised in the Roman Catholic faith, and although he was only a »Christmas Catholic« (67) in his early adulthood, as he writes in his autobiography *The Name Above the Title*, he later became a »Catholic in spirit; one who firmly believes that the anti-moral, the intellectual bigots, and the Mafias of ill will may destroy religion, but they will never conquer the cross« (*The Name Above the Title* 443). It seems that his conversion started under the influence of an anonymous man, who allegedly visited him during the sickness that had been triggered by his fear of failure as a director. The man called Capra a coward and inspired his ensuing directing career with the following words: »The talents you have, Mr. Capra, are not your own, *not* self-acquired. God gave you those talents; they are His gifts to you, to use for His purpose. And when you don't *use* the gifts God blessed you with—you are an offense to God—and to humanity« (*The Name Above the Title* 176). After this encounter, Capra started to make more meaningful films with a Catholic moral view, and the theme of *It's a Wonderful Life* is strongly reminiscent of this event. After the death of their son, Capra's wife converted to Catholicism and in time managed to persuade her husband to convert as well (McBride 396).

Capra claimed that entertaining and presenting a Christian doctrine are his two motives in making films (McBride 548). Namely, the underlying ideas of his films, including *It's a Wonderful Life*, are the Sermon on the Mount (Kuntz 121), »com-

passion and (...) 'love thy neighbors' stuff« (McCaffrey 118). Specifically, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, the perception of the human person, its relationship to other people and God, as well as an angel's vision of a parallel reality convey a Catholic moral vision. However, in it, Capra also thematizes the Puritan interconnection between an individual and the community (Costello 32) as well as the materialism of the American Dream and the Puritan philosophy on the meaningfulness of earthly events because, for the Puritans, »every earthly event, however seemingly casual, was a part of God's timeless and all-encompassing plan« (Brooks et al. 15). He resolves this conflict by illuminating the universal and fundamental truths that the value of each human life is not measured by material but by moral-spiritual standards, that »true wealth, spiritual wealth, comes from an orientation toward others« (Sullivan 120), that what matters »is not what we achieve for ourselves, but what we give of ourselves« (Riccomini 1), and that the American Dream is actually a universal dream, whose »central prerequisite is loving your neighbor« (Sullivan 120), which connects the Catholic and (Puritan) American aspects of Capra's worldview. In other words, the acceptance of life as given by God as well as self-transcendence are identified in *It's a Wonderful Life* as the embodiment of the meaning of human life.

The concept of the meaning of life is also the focus of logotherapy, the so-called »Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy,« and existential analysis, its anthropological theory, which were founded by Viktor Frankl, a Jewish neurologist and psychiatrist, who applied his concentration camp prisoner experience to empirically validate his previously conceived theory. He named it »logotherapy,« using the Greek word *logos* »in the twofold sense of 'meaning' and 'spirit'« (Tweedie 28) to signify both the primary motivational force of human beings to search for a meaning (»will to meaning«) and the spiritual dimension of human personality. It is important to note that Frankl returns the spirit into the anthropological image of a human by adding it to the two human dimensions, body and psyche, recognized by Freud and Adler. What is more, not only does logotherapy acknowledge the spiritual dimension, but it actually starts from it (*The Doctor and the Soul* 10), thereby bridging the gap between psychology and religion (Tweedie 22-23). Consequently, Tweedie observes that »[l]ogotherapy is a religiously oriented theory« (146), with an undeniably »close affinity to a Christian view of man« (161). Generally, it views every person as a free being, whose freedom is a freedom *for* something, emphasizing the responsibility of every individual to discover the meaning of *his own* unique life by self-transcendence, which can be achieved by deeds, experiences, and by the attitude toward unavoidable suffering.

Logotherapy and existential analysis deal with a phenomenological manifestation of meaning, to which Christianity provides an ontic foundation in the person of

God since, according to Ratzinger, human beings cannot give meaning to themselves and the world; by becoming a man, God becomes one with the world, and by participating in this unity, a person can gain the full meaning (*O smislu kršćanskog života* 36–37). Specifically, »[t]o live in grace is the same as to exist in love. (...) To live in grace means to live according to the original intention for our existence, to live in accordance with the truth about us, with the creative idea of our existence, to unite our ‘yes’ with the ‘yes’ addressed to us, thus uniting our life with God’s« (*Ljubav koja spašava* 12, 14–15).¹ Moreover, taking into consideration that God is love, the experience of meaning must also be in the experience of love, so the Christian answer to the question of meaning lies in the two commandments of love: »*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself.*« (*Jerusalem Bible*, Matt. 22.37–39), which is also the center of the Jewish Law (Lev. 19.17–18). In Christianity, the life of every person and every event are meaningful, and the ultimate meaning of life is the salvation of one’s soul, which is manifested through the realization of God’s love for man, to which man responds with love for God and his neighbor.

Generally speaking, logotherapy and religion have a lot in common, but we must have in mind that there are boundaries between them. Firstly, »[t]he goal of psychotherapy is the healing of the soul—and the goal of religion is the salvation of the soul,« although they can sometimes have each other’s effects (*Bog kojega nismo svjesni* 94–95). Secondly, logotherapy takes the religious dimension of a man into consideration, and although it does not provide values, it leads him to the need for values as well as to the unconscious spiritual values in his personal worldview, thus bringing him »to the boundary of Transcendence wherein he may find the ground of meaning for his life,« and where the motives for his responsibility and the strength for his suffering may be discovered (Tweedie 150–51). »However, Logotherapy can only lead the patient to the door of Transcendence. He must enter by himself« (Tweedie 152). If we weigh Christianity against Frankl’s theory, we will discover the following:

Logotherapy, while not being a religious system, gives an honest appraisal of the religious factors of human existence, as well as the spiritual dimension of man from which they stem. When related to the specific religious system of a Christian *Weltanschauung* based upon the biblical data, it, as a phenomenological analysis of human existence and an empirically

¹ If not otherwise stated, all the translations from Croatian to English were done by the authors of the paper.

validated psychotherapeutic theory, is seen to be of inestimable value in its complementation. (Tweedie 179)

Taking into account many parallels between the worldview of *It's a Wonderful Life* and logotherapy and existential analysis, we will, in what follows, analyze what constitutes the meaning of life in Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* with the help of Frankl's logotherapy, supported by Catholic theories, and explain why this film would be appropriate for use in cinematherapy, a therapeutic method used by psychotherapeutic approaches, including logotherapy.

1. Responsibility and the Uniqueness of Life

A Catholic theologian Tomislav Ivančić observes that human beings act in a spiritual realm, and that spirit is »freedom, and freedom is responsibility, from which arises either a sense of guilt and meaningless or a sense of meaning and peace« (34). Comparably, logotherapy views man as a free spiritual being, but warns that »freedom is not only *from* something, but (...), in addition, and most importantly, is freedom *for* something« (Tweedie 61) and »'freedom before' somebody« (Tweedie 33). Therefore, man is »free only insofar as he fulfills his freedom to responsibility« (Tweedie 61) to actualize and realize the meaning of *his own* life:

Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual. These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements. »Life« does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life's tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man's destiny, which is different and unique for each individual. No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response. (*Man's Search for Meaning* 98)

However, what or who is man responsible to? To answer this question, logotherapy refers to transcendence and thereby provides an answer compatible to Christianity. According to »Gaudium et spes«:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His con-

science is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. (qtd. in *The Catechism of Catholic Church* 1776)

Similarly, Frankl states that we are responsible to our conscience, »the organ of meaning« (*Bog kojega nismo svjesni* 107), which makes sense only if it has an extra-human source, a Creator, God (*Bog kojega nismo svjesni* 65; Tweedie 62). Frankl's theory can be supplemented by the ideas of Catholic theologians, who claim that accepting one's position means accepting God's will and thereby saving one's soul. For example, in his »Principle and Foundation,« St. Ignatius explains:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.

The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.

Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him.

Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things.

Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created. (12)

In the same way, a Catholic theologian Karl Rahner asserts that salvation means accepting one's own self in the freedom of will (66), while Karol Wojtyła states that in order to achieve your purpose, you are obliged to be yourself (57). Joseph Ratzinger suggests that God has assigned us a task in this life, about which He will eventually ask us, so that we should stream toward the eternal life, if we want to be successful in this life (*O vjeri, nadi i ljubavi* 123). These concepts are going to be examined in relation to the film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey might embody what Frankl terms a responsible individual/life. When faced with life challenges, he always makes the right decisions, even though they demand sacrifice: he sacrifices his wishes, plans, health, money, and education for others—for his family, friends, but also for the whole community. More specifically, he shows mercy, »an attitude that transcends one's own egoism and self-centeredness« by forgetting oneself (Kasper 36). For-

getting oneself, according to Frankl, represents giving oneself through serving a higher cause or loving somebody (*Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* 138). Capra demonstrates George's sense of responsibility and mercifulness by putting him in numerous situations in which he forgets himself in order to serve others. For example, George saves his brother Harry from drowning in a frozen lake despite an infection that ensues, deafening him in one ear for a lifetime. He prevents a distraught pharmacist from accidentally poisoning a child, although the pharmacist, angry with George for not delivering the medicine, hits him so hard on his sick ear that it bleeds. George, however, promises he will never tell anyone about it, justifying the pharmacist's act by the pain of losing his son. During his youth, George dreams of having a lot of money, travelling, going to college, and working as an architect. Yet, just before his long-planned journey and forthcoming studies, his father dies, and he is the only person able to save the Building and Loan family business. Although the last thing George wants is to stay in his hometown of Bedford Falls («crummy little town,» as he calls it [*It's a Wonderful Life* 26:16]) and work in a «shabby little office» (*It's a Wonderful Life* 17:26) in the Building and Loan, he nevertheless takes the responsibility, postpones his travelling, even postpones his studies in favor of his younger brother, and accepts the job. Several years later, when his brother graduates and is supposed to take over the Building and Loan during George's studies, George convinces him to accept a good job opportunity instead, which means that George will stay trapped in Bedford Falls again. Even his attempt to go on a honeymoon fails because he sacrifices his savings to keep the Building and Loan solvent. In fact, because of his sense of responsibility, he never manages to leave his hometown—with every right choice, »his chances of escape diminish« (Mortimer 661). According to Riccomini, in each case, George gains something more meaningful than what he sacrifices, and his sacrifices demonstrate his true Christian values: »his behavior exemplifies true Christian brotherly love; he really does love his neighbor as himself« (7–8). In Frankl's terms, George fulfils the tasks life (God) sets for him by making the right choices, thus forming his destiny in a meaningful way, even though he is not aware of it, which causes his dissatisfaction.

Finally, when George's absent-minded uncle Billy misplaces eight thousand dollars of the Building and Loan's cash just before a bank examiner arrives to review their records, George assumes responsibility for his uncle's action and is consequently threatened with prison and bankruptcy. At this point, he does not see a way out, which evokes a sense of despair in him. Daniel Sullivan compares him to the biblical Job, whose righteousness, commitment, and sacrifice do not protect him from catastrophe and ruin: »They both question whether the life choices they have made were correct, whether their faith in God, family, and community serves any purpose if it cannot protect them from shame and grief« (121). Desperate and

hopeless, George considers taking his life as the suffering is too much for him. Not being able to deal with it alone as he has always done and believing that God does not hear his prayer, he decides to commit suicide, thus rejecting the responsibility and thereby the purpose of his life for the first time in his lifetime. According to Frankl, the impulse to commit suicide mostly derives from the sense of meaninglessness and is overpowered by man's awareness of his purpose (*Man's Search for Meaning* 166). Correspondingly, Ivančić explains that the experience of meaninglessness, the futility of life, and aimlessness might lead to suicide (13), which, for Christians, »involves the rejection of love of self and the renunciation of the obligation of justice and charity towards one's neighbor, towards the communities to which one belongs, and towards society as a whole. In its deepest reality, suicide represents a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death« (»*Evangelium Vitae*«). In the film, Capra makes George realize his purpose, accept the love of himself as well as his obligation toward others and God's will through angel Clarence, whose faith is as simple as a child's and who is sent directly from Heaven to discourage George from this horrible deed as an answer to the prayers of his family and community. As »[t]here is no life situation that would really be meaningless,« a correct attitude can transform the seemingly negative aspects of human life, such as suffering, guilt and death, into a strength (*Patnja zbog besmisljena života* 26). In other words, Clarence shows George that, by taking the right attitude toward his problems, he can give this seemingly unavoidable situation meaning and simultaneously mature and self-transcend (cf. *Patnja zbog besmisljena života* 28).

The irreplaceability and uniqueness of every human being are also pointed out by Peter Kreeft who, after asking »Why did God create you? He created billions of other people; were they not enough for him?«, continues by asserting »No, they were not. He had to have you« (*Three Philosophies of Life* 124). When a person realizes that he is irreplaceable, he becomes aware of his responsibility toward life—that is, toward other people or unfinished work, and is not able to take his life: »He knows the 'why' for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any 'how' « (*Man's Search for Meaning* 101). As everyone has to carry out a specific task in life, he cannot be replaced, which means that everyone's life purpose and ability are unique (*Man's Search for Meaning* 131). George's problem, however, is that he is unable to see his own worth (Walters 119) and irreplaceability. Although he always does the right thing, he pursues »aspirations that are expressions of certain desires through his life, but which involve a rejection of his present life« (Walters 119): he always wants to be somewhere else, doing something else, which makes him unsatisfied and brings him to the crucial point of his life—the suicide decision. After George wishes that he had never been born, Clarence shows him what Bedford Falls, his family, and friends would be like if it were true as »only by negating what

he possesses (...) George [will become] able to reassess the value and meaning of his life« (Levy 89). Horrified by the nightmarish vision of his hometown and its residents in this alternative reality, George sees Bedford Falls transformed into Pottersville, a town owned by the wicked and avaricious Henry Potter. Instead of being moral and altruistic as they used to be in Bedford Falls, the citizens of Pottersville are surprisingly immoral and hard-hearted. In addition, the pharmacist is a ruined man as he spent twenty years in jail for poisoning a child, the Building and Loan is closed, uncle Billy has been in an insane asylum ever since he lost his business, there is no Bailey Park, a housing development financed by the Building and Loan, George's brother drowned as a child, so he could not have saved people in the war, his wife Mary is a spinster, he has no children, and nobody knows him because he does not exist.

George thus realizes what an impact his life had on others—nobody could have replaced him in saving his brother, or managing the Building and Loan, or even marrying Mary and fulfilling her life with happiness and purpose. And nobody could have made Bedford Falls such a virtuous town as it is. All this occurs because, as Clarence observes, »[e]ach man's life touches so many other lives. And when he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 1:58:00–1:58:07). Realizing that Clarence is right, George grasps his irreplaceability as well as the value of his life despite all the hardships and imperfections. He, therefore, eagerly wants his life back in spite of the threatening arrest, now accepting all the tasks and suffering life brings, realizing that his life is wonderful. He pleads desperately: »Get me back. I don't care what happens to me. Get me back to my wife and kids. Help me, Clarence, please. Please. I want to live again. I want to live again. I want to live again. Please, God, let me live again« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 2:01:35–2:01:53). When he returns, he euphorically wishes merry Christmas to everyone, even to Potter and Bedford Falls. Even though he appears insane when he exclaims: »Isn't it wonderful? I'm going to jail« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 2:03:51) or »Oh, look at this wonderful, old drafty house« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 2:04:55–2:04:57), his exclamations, nevertheless, confirm that he has accepted the unique position that God gave him. In Christian terms, by accepting his life as it is literally (by not killing himself) and figuratively (by accepting everything that life brings him), George's life and soul are saved, which is why God sent Clarence in the first place.

2. Self-Transcendence

In Christianity, dying to oneself, »coming out of oneself, and not focusing on oneself, helps to align with Transcendence and to encounter the mystery of God« (Calavia 136). By seeking himself only, a man loses himself, however, by not seeking for his own life, but fearlessly putting himself to the disposal of God's love, a man

finds God and thereby himself (*Ljubav koja spašava* 15). In other words, the more one loses oneself, the more he is finding oneself (*O vjeri, nadi i ljubavi* 115). A similar concept dominating Frankl's texts is self-transcendence. For Frankl, »being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself (...). The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself« (*Man's Search for Meaning* 133), the more he experiences self-transcendence, which is »the essence of human existence« (*Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* 138). A person cannot thus view their actions through the lens of pleasure they bring him but through how much they serve the purpose that represents the objective good (Wojtyła 73). In this sense, a meaning in life can be discovered in three ways: »(1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering« (*Man's Search for Meaning* 133).

2.1. CREATING A WORK OR DOING A DEED

As discussed above, George does a myriad of good deeds, which, as he realizes in his nightmarish vision, have given meaning to his life and the lives of others. We will, however, focus here on his work in Building and Loan, which does not provide him with great financial resources, but rather serves »a philanthropic purpose« (Cohen 394) and enriches his life with meaning by helping the society. According to Frankl,

Work usually represents the area in which the individual's uniqueness stands in relation to society and thus acquires meaning and value. This meaning and value, however, is attached to the person's work as a contribution to the society, not to the actual occupation as such. Therefore it cannot be said that this or that particular occupation offers a person the opportunity for fulfillment. (*The Doctor and the Soul* 120)

When George declares that he does not want to work in the Building and Loan, which helps people build their own houses, but do »something big and something important« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 17:26), his father teaches him that »in a small way, we are doing something important, satisfying a fundamental urge. It's deep in the race for a man to want his own roof and walls and fireplace« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 16:45–16:53). However, after his father's death, George accepts the job in the Building and Loan out of duty. Not only does he take the job unwillingly, but he also gives his honeymoon savings to keep the Building and Loan solvent, doing the right thing. He eventually establishes Bailey Park, a housing development financed by the Building and Loan, so that people can own their own homes rather than pay

rent to live in Potter's overpriced slums. The Building and Loan represents a »primary metaphor for community in the film« and »constitutes the heart of the filmic community in Bedford Falls« (Garbowski 40). The impact of George's job on the community of Bedford Falls is indeed immense and is best depicted by the delight on the faces of the middle-aged Martinis when George and his wife help them move into their first owned home, wishing them joy and prosperity. Grabias-Zurek explains that this »scene serves as a proof that George's sacrifices were not in vain, and shows clearly that to the families rescued from Potter's 'slums' and degrading conditions, George's painful decisions in the past were of priceless value« (172).

However, instead of working in the Building and Loan, George longs for a completely different life path: he wants to travel the world, build skyscrapers, and have a million of dollars. After telling Mary about his grandiose plans, he promises her that he will lasso the Moon for her, which symbolizes his irrational goals. Nevertheless, when Potter offers him a job that includes travelling and an extremely high salary, which is everything George has always dreamed of, George asks him what will happen to the Building and Loan and, after several moments, rejects the offer, because he does not want to get entangled in Potter's web. He realizes, at least unconsciously, that Potter's offer would not fulfill him as much as his job, in which people matter, does. This realization finally hits him after the Pottersville sequence, when he wishes merry Christmas to the »wonderful old Building and Loan« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 2:03:19–2:03:21), implying that one of the purposes of his life is not travelling and building skyscrapers, as he believed, but helping people have their own decent homes, which proves to be more purposeful than his grandiose dreams.

2.2. EXPERIENCING SOMETHING OR ENCOUNTERING SOMEONE

According to Frankl, people can also discover a meaning of life through experiences or love:

The second way of finding a meaning in life is by experiencing something—such as goodness, truth, and beauty—by experiencing nature and culture or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness—by loving him. (...) Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be

and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true.
 (*Man's Search for Meaning* 133–34)

Catholic philosophers Peter Kreeft and Josef Pieper share similar opinions. Kreeft states that to love means to truly know a person (*Smisao života* 21). What is more, »[t]he lover sees the beloved not as one among many but as the center of the universe; not as an ingredient but as a whole; not on the periphery of his mind's circle but at the center, standing at the same place as himself, his own center, his own uniquely individual I« (*Three Philosophies of Life* 124). Comparably, Pieper points out that to love somebody means to confirm »[i]t is good that you exist; how wonderful that you are!« (*An Anthology* 30). In this way, human love repeats God's love, through which He created a person, confirming it is good that this particular person exists (*Tri spisa* 215). Pieper even believes that a true human love can finish God's creating process (*Tri spisa* 218). Similarly, Frankl writes that the beloved wants to be so worthy of love that he begins to resemble God's image of him more and more (*The Doctor and the Soul* 146). Their points are perfectly embodied in one of the last scenes of *It's a Wonderful Life*, when George weeps and prays on the bridge, and his friend Bert, the policeman, calls his name. At this point, George »recognizes himself, for the first time, in the recognition of another« (*Wineapple* 10). This is, however, just one of the instances in the film depicting George experiencing a meaning of life through love. Many other occur throughout the film as George realizes that the meaning of his life represents the love between him and the community, and, more importantly, the love between his father and him as well as between his wife Mary and him.

Let us first look at George's relationship with his father, Peter Bailey, and how this experience helps George realize a meaning of life. George deeply loves and respects his father, and these emotions go as far back as he can remember. One particular incident from George's childhood illustrates the powerful emotions he has for his father: when, in a heated conversation, Potter harshly criticizes Peter's altruism, this infuriates George to such an extent that he, a boy interrupting a business meeting, stands in zealous defense of his father, arguing that he is not a failure but the greatest man in the town. As an adult, although he does not understand his father's commitment to the Building and Loan, George affectionately calls him a great guy. After Peter's death, when Potter wants to close the Building and Loan, George defends his father's honor in a similar way he did as a child, arguing that this company was his father's whole life and that he never thought of himself but always helped people, who were human beings to him, which is why he died a richer man than Potter will ever be. Frankl claims that true love is eternal, and that not even death can affect it (*Tweedie* 137), which Capra illustrates in the case of George and his father. Through the love for his father even after his death, George experiences him

in his uniqueness and is fully aware of his father's essential traits to such a degree that George eventually becomes his worthy successor, who respects and helps people in the same way Peter Bailey did. In fact, several years later, George's brother will describe George as the richest man in the town, echoing George's words about their father.

George further actualizes a meaning of life through the experience of love in the relationship and marriage with Mary. As a child, George wanted to have a couple of harems and three or four wives; as a young adult, he did not want to get married because he wanted to do what he wanted. However, even as a child, Mary seemed to know what was best for George: she, namely, promised that she would love him till the day she dies, which is a rational desire that Capra juxtaposes to George's unrealistic plans. Her unconditional love will also prove to be crucial for George's life. Ratzinger points out that love is directed to a person with all its flaws and »to the truth of this person, which may be undeveloped, hidden, or deformed« (*O vjeri, nadi i ljubavi* 104–05), which is recognizable in Mary's love for George. Namely, Mary has always recognized George's potential, although he was at first unable to see it himself. With Mary, he realizes what he can be and should become: a husband, a father, and a person everybody can always turn to for help. Unlike his wishes, hers are down-to-earth: her only desire is to have a home and family with George, whereas money and status matter nothing to her. This is demonstrated on two occasions. First, when George uses their honeymoon savings to keep the Building and Loan solvent, Mary is not resentful. Instead, she turns a derelict house into their honeymoon destination and gradually into a comfortable home. Second, after turning down Potter's offer, George feels unsuccessful since he does not earn enough to provide abundant material comfort for Mary, but she convinces him that she does not need money—she only needs George to be her husband and the father of her children. As Mary does not recognize George in the Pottersville sequence, he understands that »her special knowledge of his existence was existence itself,« and that taking his life would mean taking life from their relationship and Mary herself (Walters 130). Walters also adds that, after getting his life back, George finally understands and accepts the fact that Mary is the crucial part of his life (130). Namely, when George begs Clarence to get him back, he mentions neither getting back to his job nor to his mother, brother, or friends—he only wants to return to his wife and children, and when he does, he is bursting with joy, incessantly hugging his children, and showering his wife with kisses. This delight is not even exceeded by his realization that he will avoid imprisonment after all. In this way, Capra confirms Lukas's viewpoint that »family happiness is irreplaceable. It means a peace of mind. It means to be at home. It simply means to be able to be what we are« (*Sreća u obitelji* 11). »Through this journey, (...) 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« (Riccomini 8). By realizing this, George finally understands that he does not want to end his life because »a man is not alone in the world, and his own well-being cannot be the only purpose of his life« (*Što nas u životu pokreće* 20).

2.3. THE ATTITUDE TOWARD UNAVOIDABLE SUFFERING

According to Frankl, a meaning of life can be found even in a hopeless situation that we cannot change (*Man's Search for Meaning* 135)–in unavoidable suffering. Frankl, as well as Catholic theologians, devotes a lot of attention to suffering in his writings. This is not surprising since suffering asks »the question of the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of life and pain, the question of the existence or non-existence of God, the question whether God is good or evil, and the question whether there is a future at all or suffering completely kills man« (Ivančić 277). If »there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete« (*Man's Search for Meaning* 86). In a hopeless situation, the only thing that can never be taken away from a man is his freedom to choose his attitude regardless of the circumstances he faces (*Man's Search for Meaning* 86):

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not. (*Man's Search for Meaning* 88)

In other words, when confronted with a situation that we cannot change, we are faced with a challenge to change ourselves (*Man's Search for Meaning* 86). It is also worth noting that, for Frankl, »[s]uffering can only be understood in reference to something beyond the suffering man« (Tweedie 145–46)–Transcendence. Catholic writings supplement Frankl's theory. Kreeft writes:

[P]aradoxically, the essence of suffering (death to self-will) can become its opposite (perfect joy) when it is undertaken freely for love of God. God not only compensates us for suffering, he turns suffering itself into perfect joy if only we obey his first and greatest commandment wholeheartedly, if we only love and will and worship him alone and above all. (*Making Sense out of Suffering* 145)

Furthermore, in his apostolic letter »Salvifici Doloris,« Pope John Paul II ponders on Christian suffering:

In the Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul deals (...) with the theme of this »birth of power in weakness,« this *spiritual tempering* of man in the midst of trials and tribulations, which is the particular vocation of those who share in Christ's sufferings. »More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.« (Rom. 5, 3–5). Suffering as it were contains a special *call to the virtue* which man must exercise on his own part. And this is the virtue of perseverance in bearing whatever disturbs and causes harm. In doing this, the individual unleashes hope, which maintains in him the conviction that suffering will not get the better of him, that it will not deprive him of his dignity as a human being, a dignity linked to awareness of the meaning of life. And indeed this meaning makes itself known together with *the working of God's love*, which is the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit. The more he shares in this love, man rediscovers himself more and more fully in suffering: he rediscovers the »soul« which he thought he had »lost« (Cfr. Marc. 8, 35; Luc. 9, 24; Io. 12, 25) because of suffering.

In simpler terms, suffering offers us a chance to give life a deeper meaning, to grow spiritually beyond ourselves (*Man's Search for Meaning* 93), which happens with George upon reaching his lowest point and growing beyond his unrealistic dreams and ideas of happiness and pleasure. The peak of his suffering occurs after he takes the blame for the lost money and finds himself in a hopeless situation as expressed in his emotional prayer: »I'm at the end of my rope. I... Show me the way, God« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 1:36:17– 1:36:23). James Stewart, the actor who plays the role of George Bailey in the film, could not escape the power of this emotional prayer as well: »As I said those words, I felt the loneliness, the hopelessness of people who had nowhere to turn, and my eyes filled with tears. I broke down sobbing. This was not planned at all, but the power of that prayer, the realization that our Father in heaven is there to help the hopeless, had reduced me to tears« (qtd. in Schneider 122). At this point, George has two options: to forget his human dignity and to commit suicide or to testify to »the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph« (*Man's Search for Meaning* 135). Through a divine intervention from heaven, he is offered a unique opportunity to see the world as it would have been had he not been born, which enables him to realize that every suffering he has endured was in fact a meaningful part of his life and

the lives of others. Without suffering, there is no existence, so in order for Clarence to show George what life would be like without suffering, he must eliminate existence: »You've never been born. You don't exist. You haven't a care in the world. No worries, no obligations, no eight thousand dollars to get, no Potter looking for you with the sheriff« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 1:44:30–1:44:38).

George becomes aware of the fact that if he rejects his present suffering, he is rejecting his previous suffering and all the good that has resulted from it, such as his brother's life, the pharmacist's conscience and freedom, or the existence of the Building and Loan. For that reason, he accepts his life as a whole, with all the suffering and joy, even if he is going to jail. In such a way, he changes himself, gives his life a deeper meaning, and self-transcends himself. From his sacrifice for others and for higher goals, George learns what is important in life. He grows beyond himself and realizes that wealth are not millions of dollars, traveling the world, or building skyscrapers—his wealth are, in the first place, his wife and children, but also the whole community, which is here for him as he was there for it—praying for him and helping him when he desperately needs help. In other words, he realizes that the value of each human life »is measured by moral-spiritual, rather than material, standards; that true wealth, spiritual wealth, comes from an orientation toward others; and that no material condition can prevent a man from attaining his wealth« (Sullivan 120). Consequently, his brother is right when he proposes a toast to »George, the richest man in town« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 2:08:29–2:08:31).

3. The Helpers

According to Nikčević, in affirmative plays (the ones depicting plots with happy resolutions of life situations) and, we may add, in affirmative films, there is always a figure of helper, who assists with advice, favor, or money (129). Similarly, Frankl believes that in difficult moments, there is always somebody looking after us—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, God—somebody who does not expect us to disappoint him (*Man's Search for Meaning* 104). In *It's a Wonderful Life*, there are thus several helpers, who do not want to be disappointed.

The most important helper is, of course, Mary. She is patient with George after he returns from work upset, even though he hurts her and their children with his tactless and insensitive behavior. The moment he leaves the house, she instructs their children to pray very hard for him. Not only does she pray herself, but she also calls the Building and Loan to inquire what has happened and consequently invites the family and friends to collect money. She loves George deeply, so she does everything in her power to get him out of his spiritual and financial troubles because, by losing her beloved husband, she and their children would be lost too.

Secondly, George's friends and community help him by praying for him and giving him their whole savings without asking any questions. For instance, his friends pray: »I owe everything to George Bailey. Help him, dear Father« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 1:24–1:28) or »He never thinks about himself, God. That's why he's in trouble« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 1:40–1:42). Similarly, a man donating money admits: »I wouldn't have a roof over my head if it wasn't for you, George« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 2:06:52–2:06:54). Seeing the love and respect of George's friends, even the bank examiner donates money for their cause. All of them would be disappointed if George took his life, which would mean that the Building and Loan would cease to exist, they would not have their homes and a friend who has always been there for them.

Since »the Catholic imagination inclines toward accepting the closeness of God to creation« (Garbowski 36), even God Himself intervenes and helps George by sending Clarence to prevent him from throwing away His greatest gift–life. Clarence jumps off the bridge, knowing that George will jump to save him, which gives Clarence an opportunity to save George's life and soul by making him realize the importance of his life. However, not only is Clarence helping George, but George is also helping Clarence—to get his wings. Moreover, despite thinking that his life is falling apart, having found himself in a parallel reality and not comprehending what is happening, George nevertheless worries about Clarence, a complete stranger, and inquires whether he has any money and a place to sleep, leaving his own worries aside. In his simple and lovable way, Clarence epitomizes this concept of mutual help, which permeates the whole film, in his note to George at the very end of the film: »Dear George! Remember no man is failure who has friends. Thanks for the wings! Love, Clarence« (*It's a Wonderful Life* 2:08:46–2:08:54). To sum it up, George has helpers, but is a helper himself. By realizing this, he understands that he is not a failure and that his life has a meaning—forgetting himself and joyfully serving others.

Cinematotherapy

According to Sever Globan and Bošnjaković, stories (in literature or in film) »talk to us and about us, about fundamental life experiences, about everything that is the subject of our most intense feelings and values,« thereby representing a model that we can imitate in our real lives (220). Namely, »reading a story or watching a film can help a person to gain a new insight into his own reality, situation, and problems« (Sever Globan and Bošnjaković 226). This fact is the foundation of a therapeutic method called cinematotherapy, which is used by numerous psychotherapeutic approaches, including logotherapy (Sever Globan and Bošnjaković 227). Viktor Frankl believes that literature (and, by extension, film, as it is just another

way of presenting stories), by depicting somebody going through the hell of despair over the apparent meaninglessness of existence, can help the readers (and, by extension, the viewers) who are suffering because of a meaningless life, »either to feel that they are not alone in this regard, or to feel that the *absurdity* turns into a sense of *solidarity*« (*Patnja zbog besmislena života* 108). In this sense, Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* has touched the hearts of many people, some of whom wrote their testimonials in letters to him (*The Name Above the Title* 383). In addition, Johnston reports about a woman who was a victim of a robbery and rape, which resulted in PTSD, depression, and suicidal thoughts. She claims that watching *It's a Wonderful Life* was a »life transforming« experience for her (25). It is, therefore, not surprising that Zur Institute recommends this film for cinematherapy on the therapeutic themes of »sacrifice« and »spirituality and spiritual awareness.« By pointing out that there is always a meaning in life, be it realized through work or a deed, through love, or through the attitude toward unavoidable suffering, the film shows that we, in our uniqueness and irreplaceability, can discover the meaning of life by forgetting ourselves and serving others, thereby making a difference. Or, as Frank Capra beautifully puts it:

I thought it was the greatest film I had ever made. Better yet, I thought it was the greatest film *anybody* ever made. (...) It was my kind of film for my kind of people (...).

A film to tell the weary, the disheartened, and the disillusioned; the wino, the junkie, the prostitute; those behind prison walls and those behind Iron Curtains, *that no man is a failure!* To show those born slow of foot or slow of mind, those oldest sisters condemned to spinsterhood, and those oldest sons condemned to unschooled toil, that *each man's life touches so many other lives*. And that if he wasn't around it would leave an awful hole. A film that said to the downtrodden, the pushed-around, the pauper, »Heads up, fella. No man is poor who has one friend. Three friends and you're filthy rich.« A film that expressed its love for the homeless and the loveless; for her whose cross is heavy and him whose touch is ashes; for the Magdalenes stoned by hypocrites and the afflicted Lazaruses with only dogs to lick their sores. I wanted it to shout to the abandoned grandfathers staring vacantly in nursing homes, to the always-interviewed but seldom-adopted half-breed orphans, to the paupers who refuse to die while medical vultures wait to snatch their hearts and livers, and to those who take cobalt treatments and whistle—I wanted to shout, »You are the salt of the earth. And *It's a Wonderful Life* is my memorial to you!« (*The Name Above the Title* 383)

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SMISAO ŽIVOTA U DIVNOM ŽIVOTU (1946.) FRANKA CAPRE

Sanja MATKOVIĆ* – Biljana OKLOPČIĆ**

Sažetak: Ovaj članak analizira koncept smisla života u filmu Franka Capre *Divan život* (*It's a Wonderful Life*) (1946.) s aspekta logoterapije te uz pomoć katoličke teorije. Naime film prikazuje kako George Bailey, suočen s velikom životnom poteškoćom, nadilazi sebe te otkriva smisao u poslu i djelima, ljubavi te u stavu prema neizbježnoj patnji. Pojmovi odgovornosti svakoga ljudskoga bića prema vlastitom životu i Bogu, jedinstvenost svakoga čovjeka i specifičnih zadataka koje život stavlja pred njega te prihvaćanje vlastite pozicije također će se proučiti u odnosu na Baileyjevu aktualizaciju smisla života. Članak naposljetku pokazuje kakav utjecaj taj film ima na gledatelje zahvaljujući načinu na koji se bavi temom smisla života, zbog čega je prikladan za terapijsku tehniku filmoterapije, koja se koristi u logoterapiji.

Ključne riječi: Frank Capra, *Divan život* (*It's a Wonderful Life*), smisao života, Viktor Frankl, odgovornost, nadilaženje sebe, katoličanstvo.

* Sanja Matković, mag. philol. angl. et mag. philol. germ., Isusovačka klasična gimnazija u Osijeku, Trg Vatroslava Lisinskog 1, 31000 Osijek, Hrvatska, smatkovic87@gmail.com

** Prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić, Filozofski fakultet Osijek, Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Lorenza Jäger 9, 31 000 Osijek, boklopccic@ffos.hr