

2024 AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION
SECTION II
Total time - 2 hours

Question 1: The Impact of Holiday Films on Cultural Norms

Christmas movies play a significant role in shaping cultural traditions and community spirit. Many films highlight the importance of togetherness, generosity, and the joy of giving, which resonate with the core values of the holiday season. They often depict small-town life, community gatherings, and the warmth of family connections, reinforcing the idea that the holidays are a time for unity and celebration.

However, some of these films have been criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes or unrealistic expectations. Consider the influences that holiday films have on cultural norms and evaluate the role of Christmas films in shaping societal expectations and traditions.

Read the following sources carefully. Then, in a well-developed essay, synthesize material from at least three of the sources and develop your position on whether holiday films reinforce positive values or perpetuate unrealistic ideals. Clearly defend, challenge, or qualify the idea, supporting your argument with appropriate evidence.

Approach for Students:

- Examine the positive messages of hope, generosity, and family unity in holiday films.
- Analyze any harmful stereotypes or unrealistic expectations promoted by these films (e.g., idealized family dynamics, consumerism).
- Consider how films reflect or influence the culture and traditions of their time.

Source A (*Smithsonian.com*)

Source B (Blog post)

Source C (*The Heartful Parent*)

Source D (*IAPP*)

Source E (*Reason.com*)

Source F (Political Cartoon)

Source A

Excerpt from: Wilson, Christopher. "What 'It's a Wonderful Life' Teaches Us about American History."
Smithsonian.Com, Smithsonian Institution, 16 Dec. 2021,
www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/what-its-a-wonderful-life-teaches-us-about-american-history-180979223/.

Beyond the inspirational qualities and memorable moments that make the movie a beloved holiday staple, *It's a Wonderful Life* can be explored and viewed in another way: as a presentation of history on the screen. In 2015, staff at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History started the [History Film Forum](#) to explore film as public history. Many Americans and people from all over the world learn history from movies; the discussions we've hosted among scholars, filmmakers and audiences explore that dynamic [in valuable and meaningful ways](#). This year, the forum examined both narrative and documentary films ranging from Questlove's remarkable [Summer of Soul on the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival](#) to [The Courier](#) with Benedict Cumberbatch, which looks at [the thrilling tale of a Cold War-era spy](#). Every year, films such as these are explicitly intended to present historical stories and impress upon viewers a little-known narrative of the past. But other films that don't have that educational intention nevertheless end up edifying (or miseducating) their viewers about history, particularly when watched decades after their release. In fact, as my colleague, the museum's entertainment curator [Ryan Lintelman](#), said in our recent discussion on *It's a Wonderful Life*, "Some of the movies that are seen by the most people around the world probably have had the most impact even though they're sometimes not directly dealing with weighty political issues."

Lintelman suggests that Capra uses history to establish themes of prayer and grief and loss right at the start of the film to connect with themes that would be very familiar to 1946 audiences just coming out of the death and destruction of World War II. Audiences today will learn (or relearn) the terrible toll of the 1918 influenza pandemic that took the lives of about 675,000 Americans and recognize parallels with the uncertainty and devastating grief of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lintelman adds that Capra presents a version of history through [Lionel Barrymore's](#) spectacularly monstrous character Henry F. Potter that places blame on unbridled capitalistic greed. He states that in Capra's history, Potter "is the ultimate villain, not only of the film but of the Great Depression... these unseen people behind their mahogany desks that are controlling the futures and the fortunes of the people, of the nation and were able to manipulate this global crisis that consumed everyone." For audiences today, this presents a story of 1930s America that is less defined by historical research than by Capra's worldview and compelling storytelling.

When presenting history, because of Hollywood's own historical lack of diversity, films often fall short in giving an accurate picture of the racial diversity of the past. *It's a Wonderful Life* struggles with presenting a multidimensional story of women in America in the first half of the 20th century. Minow argues that the portrayal of Mary and other women in the film is the film's greatest weakness. "Donna Reed brought everything she had to this role, which was a considerable amount, but Mary isn't portrayed as a real person," she says.

Higgins agrees that much of the time Mary is presented as an ideal of "[republican motherhood](#)" that centers women's roles on domestic affairs and educating children as civically responsible citizens. She does break out of that mold in many parts of the film, Higgins cautions, to be a more real and empowered character. "At the end, it's really Mary who saves George. ... She's the one working at the grassroots level to really save her family. Isn't that an expression of feminism in itself?"

When Clarence finally uses his supernatural power to show George what the world would be like without him, Minow notes that this plot line takes all the agency from Mary. Without George, Mary is alone, weak and unfulfilled, closing

up the library on Christmas Eve. “The idea that without having a husband that she’d become this skittish old maid is kind of horrifying,” he adds.

The portrayal of early-20th century women in *It’s a Wonderful Life* is further complicated by its lack of dialogue with race in America. Played by Lillian Randolph, the character of Annie is a middle-aged Black woman and the Baileys’ domestic worker. Her time on screen amounts to about 2 of the 131 minutes of the total movie’s run time. In that short time, Annie’s role, and by extension the place of Black people in this story, is presented as service to, and comic relief for, the white characters. Randolph, a supremely talented actor and singer, took the roles she was offered, which often forced her to play one-dimensional and demeaning characters, and the Annie role holds true to that paradigm.

Annie is portrayed as being a fixture for years in the Bailey family, as she is seen preparing and serving food, assisting in Harry Bailey’s wedding reception, and engaging in family politics and discussions. In one scene, as George and his father sit at the dinner table deep in conversation about the future of the Bailey Building and Loan, Annie pauses from clearing dishes to eavesdrop on George’s reply about delaying college to continue working there. George, noticing her interest in their conversation, playfully, but in a way that clarifies her inferior status in the household, invites her to “draw up a chair. Then you’d be more comfortable, and you could hear everything that’s going on.” According to Higgins, this dynamic between white families and Black domestic workers “goes back to an era of slavery in which enslaved women in the domestic households would often serve as a central point of communication among enslaved populations, as they would take news that they overheard and then share it with the community as an act of resistance.”

“If you were to talk to Frank Capra, he would say that his efforts in diversity in the film were to include an Italian family, which he based on his own family, and by Hollywood standards that was diversity back then,” says Minow. According to Higgins, about four million Italians immigrated to the United States between the 1880s and 1920s, and many faced discrimination, resulting in around 10,000 Italian Americans being incarcerated when the United States and Italy fought in World War II. This prejudice is alluded to in the film when Mr. Potter tries to buy George off with the promise of a high-paying job to bring an end to Bailey Park. The greedy capitalist asks the idealistic George if he is really going to waste his life “playing nursemaid to a lot of garlic-eaters.” At a time when, as Landis pointed out, Catholic immigrants in rural communities and small towns were the subject of threats, harassment and terrorism by the Ku Klux Klan, the portrayal of the Americanization of an immigrant family like the Martinis, despite the stereotypical elements we see in their depiction in the film, was Capra’s ode to the American Dream.

Seeing this powerful, wealthy, and uncaring man having such control over other men’s lives presents a sobering way to remember the war. While Harry Bailey makes headlines as a Navy flyer who shoots down two kamikaze planes and prevents them from crashing into a transport ship full of soldiers, George and Mary and others in Bedford Falls support the war effort the way millions of Americans did. Mary ran the USO and George served as everything from air raid warden to organizer of paper drives to scrap drives to rubber drives. As Higgins points out, the actor behind George, Jimmy Stewart, commanded four engine bombers in World War II and came home suffering from PTSD to the point that he questioned how he could ever go back to acting in Hollywood. The dark and tortured emotional struggles that George endures throughout the film speak to the trauma millions of Americans were living with following the war just as Stewart was.

Source B

Bruncati, Danielle. "Will Ferrell's Elf: 5 Reasons Why I Think It's Still One of the Best Holiday Movies 20 Years Later." *CINEMABLEND*, Cinemablend, 7 Nov. 2023, www.cinemablend.com/movies/will-ferrell-elf-reasons-think-one-best-holiday-movies-20-years-later.

November 7th marks the 20th anniversary of one of the best Christmas movies ever made, *Elf*. Since its release, the Will Ferrell-led flick has become a holiday staple for so many people. I know it doesn't feel like the holidays until I've watched Buddy the Elf frolic through New York City, narrowly avoiding yellow cabs.

Jon Favreau's yuletide romp is one of the few modern Christmas movies that has truly cemented itself as a classic. And that's an impressive feat, given that so many new holiday movies are released every year. For the most part, the flick has aged fairly well (though one of CinemaBlend's own writers raised some sobering questions about it). Nevertheless, it holds up better than some other holiday movies like *Love, Actually* that haven't aged well. With *Elf* turning 20, this is the perfect time to take a look at why exactly it's still one of the best holiday films even after all these years.

It's Not Just A Christmas Movie, It's Also A Romantic Comedy

The Hallmark Channel seems to have the romantic holiday movie market on lockdown (and its imminent Countdown to Christmas slate is an annual treat). But it's not the only entertainment entity that can create heartwarming and festive fare. When you think about it, *Elf* actually could be defined as a Christmas romantic comedy, thanks to the relationship between Buddy and Jovie (Zooey Deschanel). I don't know about you, but I definitely think it fits the bill.

The character's relationship checks all the boxes when it comes to rom-coms. Buddy and Jovie have an electric meet-cute that takes place at Gimbels department store, where she's decorating a tree. They personify the grumpy/sunshine trope, thanks to Jovie's cynical outlook and Buddy's enthusiasm for just about anything -- including spinning doors and random cups of coffee. And ultimately, they help each other become better people by the end of the movie.

Though their romance isn't at the center of the story, it does add an extra layer of depth that so many other holiday classics lack. All in all, their love story is one of the reasons why I hit play year after year.

The Movie Puts A Lot Of Positive Emphasis On Family

When it comes to families in holiday-centric motion pictures, things are usually chaotic and messy. *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* is all about familial ties, yet the Griswolds and their clan spend much of their time arguing. *Home Alone*, meanwhile, has to send an entire brood to a different country for Kevin to realize how lucky he is. And *The Santa Clause* features a messy custody battle that leaves both parties miserable for a stretch. It's so rare to see a holiday movie focus on the positive parts of the family, which is why Jon Favreau's film deserves its spot on every list of best Xmas movies.

Sure, *Elf* has its fair share of troubles regarding relatives. For instance, Papa Elf (Bob Newhart) never thought to tell Buddy he was adopted, and Walter (James Caan) is extremely hesitant about welcoming him into his family. But, by the end, family is what saves them all. It's Buddy's presence that helps Walter realize how much he's been prioritizing work over his relationship with his other son, Michael (Daniel Tay).

The 2003 comedy is also a great holiday movie that shows that families come in all shapes and sizes. Even though Buddy reconnects with his biological father, he never loses the love and adoration he has for Papa Elf, who raised him. At the end of the day, you can never have too much of this kind of love!

Elf Pays Homage To Several Holiday Classics

An underrated element of the movie that so many people miss is how much it pays homage to other classics from the genre. Case in point, Buddy's costume is nearly identical to the clothes worn by the elves in the animated classic *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

In fact, the costumes were so similar that the production almost didn't happen because lawyers were concerned about potential lawsuits. (Anyone with an active Netflix subscription can check out Season 3, Episode 8 of the docuseries *The Movies That Made Us* for more BTS *Elf* facts.) Both the Jon Favreau-helmed movie and the Rankin/Bass *Rudolph* special also feature talking, wise snowmen that are eerily similar to each other.

The film also has a very special cameo that some may have overlooked, largely because he goes uncredited in the actual film. Ming Ming, the head elf at Santa's workshop, is played by Peter Billingsley, a.k.a. Ralphie from *A Christmas Story*. It's a special nod for fans of the genre, and it always puts a smile on my face.

The Jokes Are Still Hilarious As Hilarious As They Were 20 Years Ago

Yes, the David Berenbaum-penned flick may tell a great romantic and familial love story. However, at the end of the day, the reason it's arguably so beloved by so many is because it's incredibly hilarious. I've seen the movie enough times to quote it in its entirety, and yet I still laugh at so many gags, even though I know they're coming.

Comedy is subjective, but many can probably all agree that this movie absolutely knocks it out of the park.

There's just something for everyone to laugh at here. Do you like physical comedy? Great, then you'll love when Buddy gets hit by a taxi or wrestles with a mall Santa. And the dialogue contributes to a considerable amount of the humor as well. One instance of that would be the scene in which Walter finds out Buddy cut down a Central Park tree. There are also plenty of goofy antics that'll have you clutching your stomach.

Sometimes that always stands out to me is that this production doesn't use verbal and physical comedy. It also uses set design to get laughs out of audiences. So many of the jokes in the first act hit because Buddy is so much larger than the set pieces he's interacting with. That's a testament to the hardworking designers.

This Story Absolutely Nails The True Nature Of Christmas Spirit

In recent years, a theme of so many Christmas movies has been the idea that the holiday spirit is waning, which affects how Santa Claus gets around. It's common because it works, but the resolutions often feel cheap. However, the team behind *Elf* absolutely nails how to pull off and solve the conflict in a refreshingly heartwarming way.

While Buddy struggles to get acclimated in New York City, he unknowingly passes his elf wisdom on to everyone he interacts with. At the climax of the movie, Michael, Jovie and so many other characters we met along the way come together to sing Christmas songs to spread the cheer and help Santa's sleigh fly. It's at that moment that a major theme is conveyed -- Christmas is all about being there for one another and believing in each other.

I don't know about you, but I definitely want to rewatch *Elf* now. In celebration 20th anniversary, the movie is being re-released in theaters starting November 17th. If you don't want to wait that long though, grab a Max subscription and stream it now. Also, keep an eye on our 2023 Christmas movie schedule so you remain in the know new holiday movies.

Source C

Reese, Hope. "The Gendering of Holiday Labor - Jstor Daily." *JSTOR Daily*, 16 Dec. 2021, daily.jstor.org/the-gendering-of-holiday-labor/.

Happy holidays! It's that special time of year to gather with cousins, nephews, and in-laws, as we wear ironic sweaters, drink mulled wine, and reinforce traditional gender roles.

Women in heterosexual relationships still do the lion's share of the housework. During the holiday season, the tasks multiply. On top of the everyday work of cooking, cleaning, and organizing, there's the added shopping, trip-planning, and party-throwing. In 2015, Judith Shulevitz, a journalist and author of *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*, wrote about the "worrier" role of women. Essentially, Shulevitz argues, even if men and women seem to distribute housework evenly, women are still in charge of "managing" the home, resulting in increased pressure and anxiety. "You could call it the 'triple shift,'" Shulevitz tells me. "The holiday shift."

Michelle Janning, a sociologist and professor at Whitman College, studies how contemporary families define themselves through domestic objects—photograph displays, decorations, etc.—and spaces. She calls these displays "the taking and managing of the family story," which, she notes, women feel responsible for. Research bears this out. Although men and women perceive cleanliness equally, an unclean house evokes more anxiety in women. And during the holidays, Janning tells me, the presentation of the home is "more visible, and has a heightened meaning attached to it."

"The worrying about the Christmas picture or card is more likely to happen with women—and the responsibility of sharing it outside of the family is more likely to fall on the shoulders of women," Janning explains. "Like creating a Shutterfly album, or making sure the address list is up to date."

A 1990 study examined the different ways men and women perceive holiday shopping. Women in the study felt "compelled to do the 'work,'" which often involved "kin-keeping," or maintaining social ties. Christmas shopping was determined to be "women's work:" they were the primary gift-givers and spent more on shopping than men. According to the study, "women appear to be socialized to take it quite seriously as real and important work."

Thirty years later, Christmas labor still seems to be considered "women's work." "The amount of time spent and money spent [on Christmas]," Janning tells me, "is a gendered thing." And in a 2017 study of kinkeepers, conducted by Dawn O. Braithwaite at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 91 percent of self-identified kin-keepers were women. "For women who are already stretched thin during the holidays, as so many of these activities converge at once," Braithwaite wrote to me, "kinkeepers would likely be stretched even more."

The pressure of kin-keeping is heightened in families with children. A lot of childless couples seem to distribute household labor and even the kin-keeping labor more equitably. But even as married women and mothers may feel a greater pressure to project the image of the ideal household, single women are not immune. When it comes to planning parties and decorating the home, single women invest more time than single men. The same goes for housework.

“It’s not just getting married that makes them do this,” Stephanie Coontz, director of research and public education for the nonprofit group Council on Contemporary Families explains. “They’re socialized at a very early age. Girls are given more chores around the house and paid a lower allowance than boys are, even now.”

Janning agrees. Decorating your space, she says, is “still something that women want to do, feel the pressure to do, stress out about—and then do.”

“The representation of your home as a beautiful place is still prioritized for women,” she says. Same-sex couples generally tend to carry out housework evenly. “The real unevenness,” Coontz says, “is in heterosexual couples.”

It’s important to note that the tradition of family gatherings during the holidays is relatively recent. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Christmas was more a time for celebrating with neighbors than a family occasion, Coontz tells me. The roles of men in society required interpersonal connections, which meant that they organized social gatherings.

The nineteenth century saw “a much more bureaucratic world, politically and economically,” Coontz says, where “personal ties are separate from political and economic ties—men take care of political and economic ties, the breadwinning. And women come to take over the interpersonal relations—the kin-keeping, social-networking with neighbors and friends.”

Making sure the home looks good, for instance, “is still a woman’s responsibility, and during the holidays, that expectation is notched up,” Janning tells me. “You’re more likely to have spaces in your home on public display. You’re more likely to have things come out of storage that you need to organize, display, curate. You’re more likely to have an event where there’s a hosting duty, food and drink, all that. There’s a heightened amount of labor.”

And in the age of Instagram, the presentation of our homes and families takes on an increased importance. During holidays, Janning says, we share more images focused around this representation of ourselves and our families. “If you add that the holidays are a difficult time emotionally for many people, it makes a lot of sense for me to believe that the difficulty of this season, emotionally, is heightened,” she says. “And if you have groups with different stress levels, it’s heightened for women.”

However uneven the playing field is, we should not view women simply as victims of these circumstances. In fact, many women report pleasure in engaging in holiday activities. And “even in the most liberated households, it’s hard to escape the kind of relentless pressure that accompanies these seemingly charming rituals—who doesn’t want to do things like decorate the house or stuff like that?” Coontz says. “But they certainly bring with them all the baggage of those old expectations.”

“It is real **emotional work** and the pleasure is accompanied by much more stress than the men feel,” Coontz says. There’s a pressure, she explains, that comes from “the tremendous weight of 150 years of being told that this is our special skill, our special contribution to family life and community life, which can be very gratifying—and which is why women hold onto it very often.”

Some of it comes from the “gatekeeper” role that women often adopt. Even when the work is anxiety-inducing, women may still want to be recognized for our “special authority.” And this ambivalence is heightened around the holidays.

Times are changing. More women are telling their partner, “I want you to share this with me,” Coontz says. And single men are responsible for maintaining their own social relationships. Also, married men are taking much more responsibility for shopping.

But even when women report getting joy out of holiday labor, there are reasons to question it. Female friends often tell me that their male partners just aren’t as *good* at this work as they are—that they do it partly because it would cause more stress to hand over the tasks. But, as Coontz points out, “we will be a lot better off when we can begin to trust men to do these things. Just as we let kids set the table wrong in order that they learn to do it, we need to let go.”

“If your male partner has been infantilized that way by his mother and by a hundred years of socialization, then let them screw it up one time,” she says. “You know, he’ll learn.” She adds that, “sometimes we women might even learn from the different methods that men use as they gain more experience doing these tasks.”

Another reason to correct the balance is that couples are happier when the perceived breakdown is viewed as equitable, according to Daniel L. Carlson, an assistant professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Studies at the University of Utah.

But since most couples **do not divide the work evenly**—only about three couples out of ten do, Carlson says—the workload during holidays is “likely to exacerbate current patterns in relationships.” As women do end up doing more work during this time, however, he suspects it does not mean that the couple will correct the imbalance. “Most likely,” he tells me, “it will reinforce divisions that already exist.” Carlson offers an explanation: “In the face of normative pressures, people tend to retreat to traditions.”

Dividing work according to traditional gender roles isn’t necessarily a problem—if everyone is on board with the arrangement. But the problem, Carlson says, is that “the vast majority of women don’t want to do it this way.” If a man, for instance, insists that his partner enjoys the work, it’s possible that the couple’s communication skills are lacking.

Shulevitz views the issue in broader terms. “Women should be paid for the work they do,” she argues. “It’s just as valid and important, and in some ways more important, than what people do in the marketplace.” The unpaid work, mostly by women, produces value that, she says, is not calculated in our gross domestic product—and that should be corrected. Carlson adds to this, saying that it’s often a struggle for couples in the U.S. to achieve a fair division of labor, since “there’s little or minimal structural or cultural support for it.”

Christmas labor is more clearly visible than the year-round work that women are doing. But “it’s the day-to-day,” Shulevitz says, “that doesn’t get noticed.”

Source D

Rutledge, Pamela. "Why Christmas Movies Make Us Feel Good." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 4 Dec. 2022, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/positively-media/202212/why-christmas-movies-make-us-feel-good.

There's no better way to start the holidays than with a Christmas or Holiday movie. Lists of the "Best Christmas Movies" are everywhere, and Hallmark Channel launched its *Countdown to Christmas* over Thanksgiving, with ratings that were only bested by ESPN football coverage. Hallmark's promise of 40 new holiday movies this season is a drop in a bucket already filled with old holiday classics from *A Christmas Story* and *White Christmas* to new ones like *Love Actually* and the *Christmas Chronicles*. Yes, holiday movies are formulaic, predictable, and often cheesy. But they also offset the stress, family pressure, and gloom from shorter days and less sunshine (in the northern hemisphere). An evening spent watching a feel-good movie can be an easy, low-cost, and rewarding form of self-care.

The Benefits of Holiday Movies

There are several benefits from a journey into Christmas movie land. Holiday movies can boost mood and relieve symptoms of depression by providing an escape from daily stressors and increasing perspective-taking. They are heart-healthy, reducing stress hormones like cortisol that can damage the cardiovascular and immune systems. Positive emotions, like hope, joy, and gratitude, can stir personal and social reflection and inspire new activities and goals. Sharing a movie increases intimacy and can even improve relationships. And they are easy, uncomplicated, and have happy endings (Wildschut & Sedikides, 2020).

Nostalgia Triggers Emotion

Christmas movies are designed to activate emotional resonance through **nostalgia**. They rely on our desire to visit the "good old days" with images, stories, and music that stimulate our sentimental and wistful associations from the past. Christmas movies remind us of times in our lives that were simple, hopeful, fun, and happy (Newman et al., 2020). We have a cognitive "nostalgia" bias that makes us think things were better "before." Some people see memories through rose-colored glasses because the negative emotions of the past fade faster than positive ones for them. As time goes on, the good things get better; the bad ones recede, making us yearn for those better days (Routledge et al, 2013). Christmas movies trigger those psychological longings to feel loved and safe. Several theories of motivation are based on the need for human connection. It is at the core of healthy psychological and physiological development. We all want to be loved and included, to feel protected and safe and we respond instinctively to social connection, even in media. Christmas movies capture that sense of safety by taking us on a journey into a world of childlike simplicity and innocence—where families are warm, welcoming, and fun, where friends and partners bask in the glow of good cheer, and where we feel embraced, protected, and loved, and where there is still a promise of magic and wishes fulfilled under the tree.

Feel-Good Stress Busters

Since very few of us have "Hallmark Christmas" lives, the movies provide a welcome escape from the pressures and demands of the real world. The holiday season can bring unwanted guests and annoying family members and the burdens of gift-giving and entertaining. Holidays can exacerbate financial strain and emphasize our loneliness and isolation. Images of Christmas can also make us aware when our lives, families, jobs, or friends don't live up to our aspirational ideals and desires. It's no wonder that

depression and anxiety spike during the holidays. It also explains the relief we feel when holiday movies wildly exaggerate those holiday woes, like *Christmas with the Cranks*, *Bad Santa*, or *Bad Moms Christmas*.

Christmas movies allow us to flee the stressors of the holiday and forget our troubles. They provide easy access to an effective coping strategy: a healthy, time-limited escape traveling into a story that makes us feel good, reminds us of the meaning of love, helps us feel gratitude for family and friends, and even have a little vicarious romance. The predictability of holiday movie plots and characters is part of the appeal. Pick your fantasy: rekindled relationships, mismatched lovers, small-town antics, royals in disguise, discovering the real meaning of Christmas, snow on Christmas morning, or overcoming the odds. Whatever the conflict, the genre guarantees a feel-good, grant-your-wishes ending to anticipate (Walters, 2019).

Family-Friendly Bonding Traditions

It's an added benefit that most holiday movies are family-friendly, providing a way to create new traditions. When we watch with others, we create shared memories, amplify positive emotions, and strengthen relationships (Fiese et al., 2002). The laughter and joking about unrealistic movie tropes create a positive bonding experience; the stress and conflict in dramas provide a safe space to process personal struggles and feel supported by others—especially when we know they have a happy ending. For years, our kids watched *Charlie Brown Christmas* and *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Now all grown with families of their own, they still make a point of watching them together—even if some join via Facetime.

Happy Brain, Happy Body

Our brains find comfort in patterns. The predictable happy endings combined with joy, laughter, and happy tears trigger our neural rewards center. Changes in mood affect our body chemistry; lifting our spirits makes us feel good physically. Laughter becomes a literal antidote to stress without involving pharmaceuticals.

Feel-good movies do more than just make us happy for a moment. While there's nothing wrong with enjoying fleeting hedonic experiences, drama with resolution can also provide a longer-lasting form of happiness that increase well-being. Feel-good movies can be inspirational, uplifting, and profoundly moving, provoking us to reflect, see things in a new way, or feel inspired to make new plans (Raney et al., 2019).

When we rewatch a favorite movie or talk about them with friends, we mentally replay scenes and reexperience emotions. The anticipation of the emotional journey we know is to follow creates a neural reward before the movie even starts. When the characters feel like old friends and the settings like familiar places, these parasocial connections trigger the oxytocin-induced warm fuzzies of real social experience.

Positive Media Consumption

Positive psychology represented a shift in how psychologists approached the spectrum of human experience. The focus on pathology made room for the scientific study of the things that helped people flourish. This extends to media consumption. Media gets a bad rap, but there are recognized benefits of media-related activities like watching movies, from mood-boosting and stress release to personal and social reflection.

So, if you're starting to feel the holiday stress, make some popcorn and take a holiday movie vacation. Consider it a form of self-care. Remember that positive emotions encourage productivity that will make your chores go faster, and resilience that will make any testy relative a little easier to bear.

Source E

Excerpt from: Hummel, Tyler. "Does Consumerism Ruin Christmas? ." *Geeks Under Grace*, 29 Nov. 2024, www.geeksundergrace.com/christian-living/does-consumerism-ruin-christmas/.

Art vs. Money In Filmmaking

The irony is that, for a story about why the true meaning of Christmas isn't consumerism, the movie only exists for consumerism. It's a product. It exists to be a new version of the original story that can be widely disseminated to the public for the benefit of Universal Pictures. It wants to be the focal point of plushie Grinch sales and holiday licensing agreements.

This dilemma though isn't unique to *The Grinch*. The film industry exists in a precarious state by its nature. Cinema only exists due to the convergence of art and capital. Since Thomas Edison invented the camera, cinematic storytelling has required expensive equipment, specialized talent, and ideal sets for the story being told—either on soundstages or actual locations. The camera doesn't lie and it costs money to trick it. Films cost money.

The industry requires investment, executives who follow trends, millions of dollars in advertising and distribution, and structured planning to make even a modestly budgeted film profitable.

This reality creates tension at the heart of the art form, given that most filmmakers are temperamentally progressive artists. There is a rivalry between money and talent, where both sides hold each other hostage until a film finally escapes the process. This perverse relationship can allow great art to escape from it, but it means the artists are incentivized to draw within the lines. Artists who dislike consumerism and materialism have to tell authentic stories that can be commercialized. Corporatism and anti-corporatism are forced to exist in parallel.

For Christmas films, this tension creates a bizarre combination of corporate movies about the evils of consumerism—consumer products complaining about consumer products. Christmas is about more than consumerism but films have to play into the process that creates them. Charlie Brown feels lost in the consumerism of the holidays while his melancholy is branded onto millions of Christmas Cards and plushies. The message becomes "The true meaning of Christmas is X, but why not buy a Snoopy doll while you're at it?"

A Brief and Nominal Defense of Consumerism

Despite my cynicism toward consumerism, commerce is not the problem. As the [late libertarian journalist, Roman Catholic, and comedian P.J. O'Rourke](#) writes, the Bible is not an anti-commerce book. The Old Testament has much to say on right commerce. The Eighth Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," presupposes private property ownership is a God-given right that others need not infringe upon. And given that Jesus' first Christmas presents of gold, frankincense, and myrrh would be worth more than \$22,556 in modern currency, heavy holiday spending is not a sin in the right context.

"Despite what you may have heard, the commercialization of Christmas is a virtue, a Christmas virtue," O'Rourke argues. "So powerful is the spirit of Christmas that even Ebenezer Scrooge embraced it at last. And, as befit a 'squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner,' Scrooge celebrated the spirit of Christmas in a thoroughly commercial way. Read, if you can through your tears, the final stave of *A Christmas Carol*, the chapter where Scrooge awakes after visits by the ghosts of Lonely Christmas Past, grimly Christmas Present, and dead-buried-and-forgotten Christmas Yet To Come. Scrooge then buys a prize turkey as big as the errand boy, tips the errand boy munificently, makes a large cash donation to the

poor, gives Bob Cratchit a raise, and pays for Tiny Tim's medical treatment rather than abandon young Timothy to the tender mercies of Victoria-care."

Historically, the Christian solution called for a rejection of both extremes; the excesses of capitalism and anti-capitalism. Pope Leo XIII's famous 1891 encyclical [Rerum Novarum: On the Conditions of Labor](#) famously lambasted BOTH capitalists and socialists for working against the gospel. The revolutionary socialists would deprive men of liberty and create chaos, but a renewed relationship between the proletarians and workers was still necessary. The Pope ultimately advocated fair wages, unionization, and collective bargaining rights and argued that the state must ensure the dignity and needs of the poor.

How Christmas Movies Grapple With Consumerism

Since the beginning of Christmas movies as a subgenre in the 1940s, consumerism has been on the minds of filmmakers as they grappled with the season. Filmmakers have long sensed the need to offer comfort and meaning during the holiday season. Their films have reflected the film industry's strange relationship between art and capital and tried to offer relief from commercialism. There's little better example than the 1947 masterpiece *Miracle on 34th Street*, in which an old man claiming to be the real Santa Claus arrives at Macy's in New York City with a personal mission to remind people about the true spirit of the holiday by working directly with the heart of American commerce.

The New York City depicted in the film is not dissimilar from modern day, with a world of aggressive consumerism, corporate decision-making, and general cynicism. Its characters from the outset are skeptics who dislike fairy tales and superstitions like Santa Claus. However, Kris Kringle's remarkable actions stop the gears of modernity in its tracks. Despite the store's order for employees to push overstocked toys on suggestible children, Kris starts encouraging parents to shop at other stores with their desired toys in stock. Instead of getting fired, his honesty turns Macy's into a customer-service giant that drives sales through good service rather than hard sales. This frame of mind leads the skeptical people around him to believe in Christmas and improve themselves.

"For the past 50 years or so I've been getting more worried about Christmas," says Kris. "It seems to me we're all so busy trying to beat the other fellow and making things go faster and shinier and cost less, that Christmas and I have gotten lost in the shuffle. Christmas isn't just a day, it's a frame of mind and that's what's been changing. That's why I'm here, maybe I can do something about it."

[A Charlie Brown Christmas](#) picks up in the world that *Miracle On 34th Street* warns about; a world where technology and commercialism have drowned the spirit of the season. Although Linus immediately rebukes Charlie Brown for overreacting, his emotions are valid expressions of a melancholic who can't see the forest through the trees. Lucy rightly suggests that he needs an outlet and puts him in charge of a school nativity play. Unfortunately, Charlie's efforts to do so are similarly rebuked by the students who don't respect his leadership or decisions. This creates the significance of the infamous lonely tree. Charlie sees authenticity, life, and potential in the dying twig, while everyone around him just wants a trendy metal tree. However, he's proven right as the spirit he sees in that tree ends up being the thing that ultimately makes it beautiful and brings the kids together.

Similarly, Dr. Seuss's *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* grapples with consumerism by showing that the outward signifiers of Christmas are not the point of the holiday. Grinch wants to cruelly steal Christmas from Whoville by stealing their presents, but on Christmas morning the entire town is unbothered because the spirit of Christmas isn't rooted in their gifts. They sing through the morning, and seeing this causes

Grinch's heart to grow with the realization that he was wrong (although he returns the presents anyway because they're not bad per se).

A Christmas Story is actually curious in this regard because of how little it discourages consumerism. The film's beautiful opening scene looks romantically through the eyes of a child up at the toy display at Higbees; what Ralphie describes as "a golden tinkering display of mechanized electronic joy." The movie looks warmly at the toys of childhood rather than with skepticism. And while receiving his Red Rider BB Gun is touching because it reflects his growing relationship with his father, the movie doesn't discourage Ralphie from wanting to buy things. His experience of getting excited about the Little Orphan Annie decoder pin, only to discover it is an ad for Ovaltine, doesn't take away from the joy of "pulling off" his quest to get the toy and hide the injury it gave him. Consumerism wins in this story.

Is Christmas Just A Crummy Commercial?

None of this changes the fact that Christmas movies are very much products. *It's A Wonderful Life* had mostly fallen into obscurity when it was released into the public domain in 1974. Within two years, television broadcasts had turned it into a royalty-free television staple and it had become a classic by the 1976 holiday season. *A Christmas Story* has the same story, being licensed by Turner Classic Movies to TBS for its annual 24-hour marathons starting in 1997. [As film writer Dan Olson argues](#), the popularity of one of everybody's favorite Christmas movies is "a marketing stunt younger than *Men In Black*." And sadly, that's true of a lot of Christmas content.

There's a reason the South Park special ends with an ironic ad for a then-upcoming South Park video game after spending three episodes deriding American consumerism—it's inescapable.

Christmas suffers from corporate astroturfing. It is kind of inevitable that the things we love are compromised by being "crummy commercials," in the words of Ralphie. Christmas art sits at a precarious place as a result of this. Christmas movies can thematically explore why the holiday's consumerism is stifling and materialistic, but these movies are also products. The market is selling the antidote to itself, acknowledging the problem just enough to get you to buy another Grinch ornament for the Christmas tree.

A Charlie Brown Christmas even suffers from this malady, with [the original broadcast version](#) of the special including animated sponsorships for Coca-Cola, with the current version having had the ads hacked out and leaving awkward transitions where the ads once were. Ironically, a Christmas special about escaping consumerism and finding the true meaning of the season was once, itself, an advertisement, with those original ads having [long since been lost to history](#) until they were uploaded on YouTube. It also certainly doesn't help that Peanuts has been commercialized into one of the most recognizable consumer brands in the modern day. The removal of the original ads just makes the modern admiration of the squeaky clean commercial-free version more commercially accessible.

It's easy to get frustrated by this reality, especially when its output creates frustrating and annoying films like *The Grinch*, but the solution is simple if it bothers you—turn off your television, go to church, and talk to your family. Christmas can only be sold to you if you let it. You can fix the worst part of it with the flick of a switch. Christmas isn't about television and the best Christmas movies make it clear that the point of the season that's important is the part that happens when you aren't watching screens. But as O'Rourke would argue, there's also nothing wrong with the commerce. The joy of Christmas is giving, not receiving. There are healthy ways to go about it.