English 30-2: Film Study *Life is Beautiful*

"Life is Beautiful" has been characterized by some as making light of the Holocaust. In it, a man, his wife, and son in Italy find themselves deported to a death camp run by Germany (though we are not sure which camp or where it is). In this picture, the father, Guido, must somehow find a way to explain what is happening to his five-year-old son. Obviously, he cannot find a normal and "accurate" way to do so--to realistically describe and make sense of the horror that surrounds them. What he does do is utilize humor to help his son cope and to try to save his son's life. Yes, comedic elements are ever-present in this film, and yes, you may (and I think I can say "will") laugh. However, I can't call this film a comedy. Instead, I consider it an exploration of the human capacity to use whatever a parent has available to construct some sort of sense out of madness and chaos for their children and, further, to shield innocence from horror and hopelessness. Guido's strength is incredible. He has the gift of humor and quick-thinking. This gift helps the father to do what he can to save what is most important in life, and to go to that well of life inside him to protect his child when he has nothing but his mind and spirit to offer. Guido rallies every remnant of goodness in his heart and soul to create a legacy of love for his child. What moral courage; what testimony to the power of love.

“Life Is Beautiful”, then, is not about Nazis and Fascists, but about the human spirit. It is about rescuing whatever is good and hopeful from the wreckage of dreams. About hope for the future. About the necessary human conviction, or delusion, that things will be better for our children than they are right now.

After viewing the film critically, I ask that you carefully consider the relevance of the following quotation in preparation for your final exam:

> We have a society populated by people who accept the way things are because they don't believe that they could possibly make things different - not because they think things are so wonderful the way they are. It is inside our own heads, and it is recreated by us in every thought that assumes that “how things are” is the equivalent of “reality”.  
> - Michael Lerner

If you can appreciate the message of the above statement, you have learned more than the English 30-2 curriculum this year; you have learned to be a critical thinker .....and your journey has just begun.
**“Life Is Beautiful”**

Directed by  
**Roberto Benigni**  
**Writing credits**  
Vincenzo Cerami and Roberto Benigni

**Genre:** Comedy / Romance / Drama / War

*An unforgettable fable that proves love, family and imagination conquer all.*

**Plot:** A Jewish man has a wonderful romance with the help of his humour, but must use that same quality to protect his son in a Nazi death camp.

**Cast overview, first billed only:**

- **Roberto Benigni** .... Guido Orefice
- **Nicoletta Braschi** .... Dora (his wife)
- **Giustino Durano** .... Guido's uncle
- **Sergio Bini Bustric** .... Ferruccio Papini
- **Giuliana Lojodice** .... School principal
- **Amerigo Fontani** .... Rodolfo
- **Pietro De Silva** .... Bartolomeo
- **Francesco Guzzo** .... Vittorino
- **Raffaella Lebboroni** .... Elena
- **Giorgio Cantarini** .... Giosuè Orefice (his son)
- **Marisa Paredes** .... Madre di Dora
- **Horst Buchholz** .... Dr. Lessing
- **Claudio Alfonsi** .... Amico Rodolfo
- **Gil Baroni** .... Prefect
- **Massimo Bianchi** .... Man with key

Italy's rubber-faced funnyman Roberto Benigni accomplishes the impossible in his World War II comedy *Life Is Beautiful*: he shapes a simultaneously hilarious and haunting comedy out of the tragedy of the Holocaust. An international sensation and the most successful foreign language film in U.S. history, the picture also earned director-cowriter-star Benigni Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Actor. He plays the Jewish country boy Guido, a madcap romantic in Mussolini's Italy who wins the heart of his sweetheart (Benigni's real-life sweetie, Nicoletta Braschi) and raises a darling son (the adorable Giorgio Cantarini) in the shadow of fascism. When the Nazis ship the men off to
a concentration camp in the waning days of the war, Guido is determined to shelter his son from the evils around them and convinces him they're in an elaborate contest to win (of all things) a tank. Guido tirelessly maintains the ruse with comic ingenuity, even as the horrors escalate and the camp's population continues to dwindle--all the more impetus to keep his son safe, secure, and, most of all, hidden. Benigni walks a fine line mining comedy from tragedy and his efforts are pure fantasy--he accomplishes feats no man could realistically pull off--both of which have drawn fire from a few critics. Yet for all its wacky humor and inventive gags, *Life Is Beautiful* is a moving and poignant tale of one father's sacrifice to save not just his young son's life but his innocence in the face of one of the most evil acts ever perpetrated by the human race.

**La Vita è bella: A few excerpts...**

*Guido*: You can lose all your points for any one of three things. One: If you cry. Two: If you ask to see your mother. Three: If you're hungry and ask for a snack! Forget it!

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*Guido*: What kind of place is this? It's beautiful: Pigeons fly, women fall from the sky! I'm moving here!

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*Guido*: Buongiorno, Principessa!

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*Guido*: I forgot to tell you.

*Dora*: Go ahead.

*Guido*: You can't imagine how much I feel like making love to you. But I'll never tell anyone, especially not you. They'd have to torture me to make me say it.

*Dora*: Say what?

*Guido*: That I want to make love to you - not just once, but over and over again! But I'll never tell you that. I'd have to be crazy to tell you. I'd even make love to you now...right here for the rest of my life.
1. Is life “beautiful”? In the first column write 10 things that truly make life UGLY. Then in the next column write 10 things that truly make life beautiful. In both cases use specific examples if you can.

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2. Why is the first half of the film so light? What purpose does that serve? Is it effective?

3. There is an interesting sub-plot that at first seems inconsequential, but upon reflection truly adds to the serious meaning of the film. *Life is Beautiful* makes a telling observation about the impermanence of shallow friendships when self-interest is involved. With whom is such a relationship established and what is its thematic effect?

4. The most significant theme that is explored would read something like this: *People will do what is necessary to protect what is most dear to them.*
   a) Respond to this thought. What real life examples can you use to support this theory.
   b) Now connect this theory to other literature you have studied this year. Make a few notes for each so that we can discuss this.
5. Even the narrator of the film voices-over to say that *Life is Beautiful* is a fable. In what way is this so? What is the effect of labelling it thus?

**Fable** is a literary genre. A fable is a succinct fictional story, in *prose* or *verse*, that features animals, *mythical creatures*, plants, inanimate objects or forces of nature which are *anthropomorphized* (given human qualities such as verbal communication), and that illustrates or leads to an interpretation of a *moral* lesson (a "moral").

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6. Ferruccio, Guido’s dear friend, offers him some special wisdom through the philosophy of Schopenhauer: *With will power, you can do anything.*

a) Do you agree? (Be specific)

b) How often does this mantra help Guido?

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7. Is Giosue a pivotal character? How?

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8. Giosue declares “we won”! We know that he believes he has merely won the game. What else has been won?
9. Make a list of the humorous elements of the play:

Now make a list of the serious elements of the play:

We have been talking about the concept of *reverence* all year long. How important is this concept in life? Does it add meaning and dimension or is it merely a hollow word?

10. “*We need more people who specialize in the impossible.*”

Do you agree or disagree with this quotation? Has attempting to do what other people have thought impossible always led to gains for humanity? Support your ideas with examples from this literature, (its history) and your observations about “life” and “Life is Beautiful”.
“We need more people who specialize in the impossible.”

Do you agree or disagree with this quotation? Has attempting to do what other people have thought impossible always led to gains for humanity? Support your ideas with examples from this literature, (its history) and your observations about “life” and “Life is Beautiful”.