

THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS (1942)

Orson Welles

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OVERVIEW

Auteur Orson Welles is one of the most important and influential filmmakers in American film history. After making a name for himself in theatre and radio, Welles signed with the RKO Pictures to write and direct two motion pictures, a deal that was unprecedented at the time in terms of the creative control Welles enjoyed. His directorial debut, *Citizen Kane*, would go on to become arguably the greatest film ever made thanks to its innovative techniques and unconventional narrative style. He quickly became a household name releasing a total of twelve movies that include critically-acclaimed films like *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). He won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Citizen Kane* with Herman J. Mankiewicz, and *Othello* (1951) won the prestigious *Palme d'Or* at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival. Orson Welles died in 1985.

Film *The Magnificent Ambersons* is a Shakespearean tragedy set in the American Midwest at the beginning of the 20th century. It tells the story of a powerful family losing its status and wealth against the backdrop of booming automobile industry. It is about love, horseless carriages, regenerative and destructive power of time. The second feature in Orson Welles' oeuvre, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is considered to be one of the greatest movies ever made. Welles himself rated it higher than *Citizen Kane*. Unfortunately, the studio took control of editing and reduced the original 131-minute cut to its current 88-minute version, turning the movie into a "mutilated masterpiece," to quote François Truffaut. The film received four Academy Awards nominations.

Background An adaptation of the 1918 novel of the same name by Booth Tarkington, the film created great controversy when it was released. After the disastrous screening, the studio deleted more than 40 minutes from Welles' rough cut and reshot the ending they thought was too "downbeat." Welles was powerless to prevent the studio's version from being released for theatres as he was at the time in South America as a goodwill ambassador. Twenty years later, he wanted to finish his movie as he intended, but "couldn't swing it".

CINEMATIC NARRATION

The movie's timeline is straightforward in contrast with *Citizen Kane's* puzzle-like narration. Similar to *Kane*, however, it still makes substantial jumps in time without any visual cues. We are taught to trace the flow of time via its impact on individuals and society: People get older, the town changes, death and carnage inevitably arrive. Since Gregg Toland wasn't available at the time, Welles worked with Stanley Cortez, who still managed to capture Welles' signature storytelling that involved long takes, deep-focus *mise-en-scène* and high-contrast lighting.



Deep-focus mise-en-scène: Gives the viewer a choice to place the story within a scene



Chiaroscuro lighting: Use of shadows and contrast to create depth and story within a scene



The sound designer had the actors repeat their singing on a vibrating seat to mimic bumpy road

MAIN CHARACTERS

Eugene Morgan	A successful businessman and an inventor of the horseless carriage.
Isabel Minafer Amberson	Daughter of Major Amberson and the widowed mother of George.
Lucy Morgan	Eugene's daughter and pursued by George.
George Minafer Amberson	Isabel's spoiled son and the only heir to the family fortune,
Fanny Minafer	George's lonely and jealous aunt who is in love with Eugene.
Jack Amberson	Isabel's brother is a Congressman.
Major Amberson	Family patriarch, the father of Jack and Isabel.
Wilbur Minafer	Isabel's husband and the father of George
Narrator	Orson Welles, as the narrator, tells the story.

SYNOPSIS

At the beginning of the 20th century, in a small town of America's Midwest, the wealthy Ambersons and the family's spoiled grandson George is the talk of the town. George is a troubled kid, beating up neighbourhood kids and looking down on everyone who is not an Amberson. Things don't change when he grows up as the world still keeps revolving around him. Everybody wonders: When will he get his comeuppance? In the meantime, his mother, Isabel, is suffering in a loveless marriage. She only married Wilbur because her real love, Eugene, embarrassed her years ago in a failed attempt to serenade for her. Years later, Eugene is back in town as an inventor of the automobile and Wilbur has recently passed away. There is now tension and intrigue: Will Eugene and Isabel get together? George won't allow it. After his aunt Fanny tells him about the gossip involving his mother, George intervenes. Isabel decides to end the relationship and leaves town with George. When they return from Paris, things have changed: Automobiles have taken over, Eugene has become rich and powerful, and *The Ambersons* have fallen out of favor. Isabel dies without seeing Eugene for one last time. Following the death of Major Amberson, Aunt Fanny and George are thrown out of the mansion. George kneels beside his late mother's bed and asks for forgiveness. In a car accident, he breaks both of his legs, finally getting his "comeuppance." Eugene and Lucy visit him at the hospital and agree to take him under their care.

SCENES

Spurned lover A narrator introduces the town and setting as well as the wealthiest family living in that town: The Ambersons. Their daughter, Isabel, is being chased after by a wild youth, Eugene. He wants to serenade her, but trips over and breaks his bass fiddle. Embarrassed by his behavior, Isabel rejects Eugene and marries a young businessman, Wilbur Minafer.



George's arrival George Amberson Minafer is born to Isabel and Wilbur. He is a troubled kid, spoiled by his mother and his grandfather, the Major. He fights neighborhood kids and uses bad words. The townspeople gossip about when he will get his comeuppance. Nothing changes when he grows up to be a young man. While riding his carriage around town, he hits an old man with his whip for fun.



The Dance Eugene is back in town. George is introduced to Eugene whom he calls a “queer-looking duck.” He dances with a beautiful girl, Lucy, who seems to know everyone. George mocks automobiles and Eugene, who is revealed to be Lucy’s father. After the party, an angry George interrogates if his father has invested in Eugene’s automobile business.



Sleigh Ride The whole family goes for a joy ride in Eugene’s horseless automobile while George and Lucy are riding a sleigh separately. Turning a corner, they are thrown off the sleigh, roll over in the snow and George kisses her. Soon, they join the others in Eugene’s automobile, which breaks down in the middle of the ride. Everybody is in a good mood. The only missing person is Isabel’s husband, Wilbur.



Wilbur’s death During the funeral, Aunt Fanny cries for his brother while wistfully watching Eugene and Isabel. George and Uncle Jack tease Fanny about her feelings about Eugene. Fanny leaves the kitchen in tears, tired of everyone making fun of her. Uncle Jack tells George maybe they are teasing her about the wrong things. He says Fanny doesn’t have a career, and in fact has got nothing to hold onto in her life except for her love for Eugene.



Old love rekindled Eugene, Isabel, Fanny, George and Lucy are taking a tour in Eugene’s automobile factory. Eugene and Isabel look happy, ignoring Fanny who follows them close behind. Isabel is thankful that the three of them are back together again. After the tour, Eugene and Isabel are seen alone on a hill, discussing their reunion. Eugene tells Isabel that they should tell George about them, but Isabel isn’t yet ready to talk to her son.



Envy resurfaces During a horse ride, George wants to propose to Lucy, but she changes the subject. George says he doesn't want to hold a job, which disheartens her. At dinner at the Ambersons mansion, George attacks Eugene's automobile business. Eugene agrees with George in that even he doesn't know if automobiles will help humanity, but they have already arrived. Aunt Fanny berates George afterwards, but George is nonplussed.



Gossip revealed Fanny lets slip the town gossip about Eugene and Isabel getting back together. George is furious after learning that his mother and Eugene had a history and that they have been spending time together. When Eugene arrives to pick up Isabel, George tells him to go away.



Farewell Eugene writes to Isabel, asking her to make up her mind: If she is going to live her own life or George's life. Isabel lets her son read Eugene's letter and asks her about his opinions. George is undecided, but looks broken. Isabel decides to break off the relationship. She and George leave town.



The return Eugene is now rich and powerful. Uncle Jack visits him and Lucy in their new mansion. When Isabel and George return from Paris, they find the town changed. Isabel is sick. After learning about her return, Eugene wants to visit Isabel, but is rejected once again. On her deathbed, Isabel tells George she would have like to have seen Eugene for one last time. She dies.



End of the Ambersons After Isabel's death, her father, the Major, is on the verge of dementia, speaking in a disjointed and nonsensical way. Following the patriarch's death, Jack and George say farewell to each other. Jack tells George he was always fond of him, but he never liked him because they all spoiled George. Uncle Jack leaves, promising to send George money as soon as they pay him.



George's comeuppance Aunt Fanny reveals that she has only 28 dollars left, meaning that George will have to work to provide for them. Fanny falls into a hysterical tantrum. George quits his dream of making a career in law and instead decides to take a job at a chemical plant. George returns to the mansion for one last time, walking through the changing town. He kneels by his mother's bed and begs for forgiveness, ultimately getting his comeuppance.



Reunion A newspaper column announces that George Amberson Minafer breaks both of his legs in a car accident. Lucy and Eugene rush to the hospital to visit George. Fanny is there as well. Eugene tells her that George was happy seeing Lucy and told Eugene that her mother wanted Eugene to come here so that George could ask for forgiveness. He tells Fanny that they shook hands. Eugene felt Isabel's presence in the hospital room.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

George Amberson Minafer The protagonist, George, is a tragic character whose story ultimately mirrors the decline of the family he belongs to.

Short-sighted George has always lived his life without making any plans or preparing for the future because he had his family's fortune and status to fall back on. He wanted to become a "yachtsman" instead of holding a job. He underrated automobiles simply due to his hatred for Eugene. Quick, momentary gratifications always took precedent over slow, surefooted plans. His "comeuppance" in a way points to his family's fall in that their pride and their failure to adapt to the evolving times have eventually determined their fate. The poetic justice has George break both of his legs in an accident involving an automobile, an agent of change that he's refused to acknowledge all his life, while the booming car industry brought about the financial end for the family.

Self-involved bully George's privileged upbringing grants him an invisible shield to bully everyone around him. His entitlement originates from the status of his family. Even as a kid, he is aware of this power, which he wields to wantonly harass those he believes are below his station. He grows to be a hollow youth as well. Since the world revolves around George, he treats everyone

either as a nuisance who gets in the way or a tool who helps him get his way. He likes Lucy, but their relationship is regulated by George's expectations. He prevents his mother's happiness just because he is in a toxic competition with Eugene. He teases Aunt Fanny about her feelings and, when she cries, he accuses her of being "so sensitive". All because he is constitutionally incapable of seeing past his own world. In essence, it is his insecurity that drives him to become a bully. He harasses people so that *he* doesn't have to sort out his complicated feelings. He is an enlarged baby rather than a grown adult. It is safe to stay as a spoiled child and rely on the protection his powerful family has granted him.

Fragile George's tragedy is what propels the story. It's his fall and, by extension, that of the Ambersons' that the movie is chiefly concerned about. Both of them refuse the moment in order to live in the glorious past, but the future arrives just the same at the expense of them. George's redemption arc appears two-fold: The literal "comeuppance" comes in the form of an automobile accident, while the symbolic one reveals his true character: Alone and defeated, by his mother's empty bed, he asks for forgiveness from God and from Isabel that he will never receive. And yet, it makes all the difference because, for once, he does something that reveals his vulnerability, his terrible fragility and his loneliness.

Eugene Morgan He starts out as a silly romantic out of a Shakespearean comedy: preparing a serenade for his beloved. Then, he is spurned both by his lover and external forces, which transforms him into a tragic Shakespearean character. Though he succeeds as an automobile inventor and a visionary businessman, he remains what he has always been: a spurned lover. This is what foregrounds Eugene's story in the movie while his entrepreneurship provides us with the background.

Visionary Eugene points to a complicated moment in American history. The age of the automobile brought about a significant transformation both on individual and societal levels. It was so powerful that those who couldn't keep up fell into irrelevancy as the result of this existential clash between Urban and Rural, Progress and Tradition, Future and Past. Eugene in his visionary mode represents the agent of change. George's animosity towards him can be explained by the former's subconscious fear that Eugene (=the new) will one day be the end of the Ambersons (=the old). This fundamental fear is confirmed by Eugene. When George calls automobiles "a nuisance," Eugene first agrees with him, but then adds: "Automobiles have come." Resistance is futile. The future will arrive and already has.

Romantic Eugene's love for Isabel foregrounds his character as well as the movie itself. The narrator (Orson Welles) introduces the town and the setting through Eugene's love—or more specifically Eugene's love for an Amberson. As the narrator discusses how people and traditions have changed over time, it is Eugene who is always shown on the screen, helping us trace the progress. When the narration focuses on vanished customs like the serenade, we watch Eugene break his bass fiddle trying to impress Isabel Amberson. The movie bookends itself with Eugene's love. At the beginning, it is silly and performative. In time, it gets hardened and becomes a tragic stone that Eugene cannot get out. It becomes such a blind spot that he is unable to notice Aunt Fanny's similarly hardened love for him. Even though the target of his love is long dead, Eugene stays true to his love and his beloved. His final act in the movie is to take the son of his beloved under his care so that he'd "been true at last to my true love."

Isabel Amberson Minafer Described by the townspeople as "pretty sensible for such a showy girl," Isabel is the daughter of the family patriarch, Major Amberson. After Eugene embarrasses her, she rejects him and marries a dull man in Wilbur Minafer much to everyone's astonishment. Isabel emerges as yet another tragic figure, for whom love turns into a maternal duty. She devotes her life to her spoiled son, George, who ironically takes everything from her.

Prideful We never hear from Isabel herself why she rejected Eugene. The information about her being embarrassed by Eugene's silly serenade attempt comes from the town gossip, and this is important. The movie tells us that lives are not only lived in this town, but constantly reproduced by talk. Within the context of Isabel's rejection of Eugene, the gossip angle makes even more sense because she is an Amberson. She cannot be embarrassed by a silly drunken lover no matter how much she may love him. She cannot star in a comedy script. Her rejection is as punitive as it is prideful.

Maternal Eugene, in his letter, tells Isabel that she was a "selfless and perfect" mother. One

can argue that her enabling and spoiling George is the reason for George's cruelty, which puts a serious dent on the "perfect" part of her motherhood. That said, it is undoubtedly correct that Isabel selflessly sacrifices her life for her son. In the same letter, Eugene begs her not to strike down his life a second time. She's been a mother long enough; now it's her time to be a lover. "Will you live your life your way," Eugene asks, "or George's way?" Eugene's mistake here is to assume that motherhood has an expiry date and that Isabel should at some point stop being a mother. At least in Isabel's case, it is not possible. Even on her death bed, Isabel is worried that George will catch cold. For Eugene, it takes Isabel's death and George's accident to finally acknowledge how important her son was for her. He tells Fanny at the end of the movie: "And that through me, she brought her boy under shelter again."

Lucy Morgan Eugene's smart and lovely daughter dotes on her father. At first, she seems to be bewitched by the Ambersons and the aura surrounding the family. Her relationship with George parallels the one between her father and Isabel in that it's doomed to failure. Though she ends up falling in love with George, her reason appears to be stronger than her emotions.

Decisive Lucy's dominant personality trait is her steadfastness and her insistence to follow her logic rather than her heart. From the moment she meets George and up to the moment they split up, she knows they are incompatible. She is shell-shocked by George forcefully inviting her to the sleigh ride. When he tells her he wants to be "a yachtsman," this is not the answer the daughter of an inventor wants to hear. She is insistent that they will not marry, "Not for years." During the send-off, she pretends she doesn't care about whether they may never see each other again. She knows she is in love, but she also knows that there is no future in and with George. Just like the head-strong Isabel she is supposed to replicate in the movie, Lucy trusts her instincts and spurns a man she loves.

Career-oriented Lucy believes that people will have to have a profession because life should be earned. She is fully committed to her father's automobile business and supports the future his father's inventions will bring. Things are not settled for her unless she knows the shape of the future. The only thing that guarantees stability is the profession one chooses. Therefore, George is not "it." He functions as a litmus test for Lucy's character. "You haven't decided on anything to do yet," she bemoans when George wants to learn why she thinks things are unsettled. And we understand her: She cannot build a future with someone who doesn't "intend to go into a business." George cannot earn a life. Therefore, George doesn't deserve Lucy.

Fanny Minafer George's aunt is the loneliest character in the movie. She lives with the Ambersons after her brother, Wilbur, marries Isabel, and she keeps living in the mansion until the very end.

Anchorless Fanny never gets a moment in the movie that is only about her. She is always brought up and shown on the screen in connection with other characters: When she gets teased, it's Eugene she's tied to. When the subject is money, it's either her father or George who is relevant. Even when we hear about her life, we learn about it through other characters while Fanny stays off-screen. Her life trajectory is decided the moment she falls for Eugene, an unrequited love that has forever demoted her to being a side character in other people's lives. The movie makes this clear by never allowing us to see Fanny from her perspective. "You know, George, just being an aunt isn't really the great career it may sometimes seem to be," Uncle Jack tells George. "I really don't know of anything much Fanny has got. Except her feeling about Eugene."

Manipulative After her brother's death, Fanny now knows what is coming: There is nothing left that prevents Isabel and Eugene from marrying. Once she figures out that the couple are spending time in secret, she baits George into breaking them up. She packages her own thoughts as town gossip: "Everybody in this town knows that Isabel never really cared for any other man in her life." Her scheming works because she knows everyone, having lived with them for so long. She knows their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. She uses George's hatred for Eugene. She uses gossip to take the blame off herself. And she accomplishes what she sets out to do: The lovers never get together.

THEMES

1. Romantic Love *The Magnificent Ambersons* demonstrates the destructive power of love in its many incarnations. Between Eugene and Isabel, it is disguised as pride, terminating a relationship before it begins. Between Eugene and Fanny, it manifests itself as envy and grudge, which leads to

scheming and manipulation. Between George and Lucy, it becomes a subtle power play between the parties: the former trying to dominate the latter and the latter trying to shape the former. In every occurrence, love is destined not to be consummated between the lover and the beloved. Even the marriages—between Wilbur and Isabel and Eugene and his wife—have dead spouses. Nobody can survive love in *The Ambersons*. If there is love, then there is destruction and death.

2. Maternal Love Married with a man she doesn't love, Isabel directs all her attention and love towards her son, George. He becomes the centre of her life. She dotes on him. She spoils him. And like a moon, she cannot help but orbit around her son disregarding her own wants and wishes. This borderline oedipal relationship ultimately decides Isabel's life trajectory. George grows up to be a spoiled, entitled, self-centred person who cannot even tolerate the idea of his mother being with another man. Isabel is too powerless to go against her own son. She sacrifices her happiness and her life for George, who ultimately pushes Isabel to a lonely death.

3. Jealousy As alluded to in the movie, Aunt Fanny's only role within the Ambersons family is to be an aunt. Unmarried and unemployed, she has nothing to hold onto in her life except her undying love for Eugene. Unfortunately, this is also unrequited as Eugene has been in love with the Ambersons' pretty daughter Isabel. Fanny has no choice but to endure their love from afar. What is worse is that she also has to endure being teased about it constantly. Her sorrow turns into bitterness, which in time turns into toxic jealousy. After Wilbur's death, Fanny is so envious of the possibility that Eugene and Isabel can get together that she manipulates Isabel's son into breaking up the couple. Alas, Eugene never considers Fanny even after Isabel's death. The final scene shows who she has always been: a woman in tears.

4. Technology The age of automobiles is the movie's second engine. The automobile, in the words of its inventor, is inevitable as fate. It has arrived and will never go away, which can also be construed as a commentary on the scientific and technological progress overall: Once it starts, there is no stopping it. It changes individuals as much as societies. It alters the fabric of existence, creates new habits and kills traditions. Eugene becomes rich and powerful as the "obsolete" Ambersons lose their power and status. Eugene reaps the benefits of being on the right side of history while the family is being punished by rejecting progress. But the movie makes its final point: technology, like love, has many disguises, and one of them is destruction as observed in George's accident. Technology brings about "comeuppance" as well as progress.

5. Time "When times have gone, they aren't old, they are dead," Eugene says during the dance scene. "There aren't any times but new times." One can argue that old times never die or go away, but emerge as memories, grudges, hatred and love. And new times are not always shiny and welcoming because they can also destroy, kill, or amputate individuals, societies and families. The movie's treatment of decay has two dimensions: one is related to individual time and the other is about societal time. In the former, people remember, people get old and people live the consequences of their actions, whereas, in the latter, technological progress manufactures a slightly different time, out of synch with individual time, in which interactions are forever altered. *The Magnificent Ambersons* demonstrates the tragic friction between these two forms of time: for individuals, time is never dead, but frozen in memories and remembrances; for society, time is forever changing, creating new history every moment. It is ultimately the language of death and decay. "The point of *The Ambersons*," Orson Welles says in the 1982-documentary *Arena*, "everything that is any good in it is that part of it which was really just a preparation for the decay of *The Ambersons*."

6. Transience The small Indiana town where the film is set provides the audience with a strong symbol of impermanence. The message is clear: even a powerful and wealthy family cannot fight against the current of time and progress. Eugene's prescient soliloquy is most illuminating in highlighting the precarious nature of power, wealth, progress and status as they relate to families, towns and civilizations. "With all their speed forward, [automobiles] may be a step backward in civilization," he says. "It may be that they won't add to the beauty of the world or the life of men's souls. I'm not sure. *But automobiles have come.*" Change is here: Adapt, or perish. It is almost as if the fates of the small town and the Ambersons have already been decided the moment the idea of automobiles came about.