

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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CITIZEN KANE (1941)

Orson Welles

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 *Citizen Kane* tells the tragic story of its titular character, Charles Foster Kane, using innovative technical solutions, unusual photography and a complicated narrative structure. The movie is both a technical spectacle and a cinematic meditation that blends the craft and art of storytelling in unprecedented ways. The main character's story is not so much told as patched together through interviews with five narrators, each of which provides a different version of the man known as Charles Foster Kane—a complicated character who has left an everlasting legacy in motion picture history.

Background The composite character Charles Kane was, at the time, chiefly considered to be a stand-in for the media mogul William Randolph Hearst, who threatened the production company RKO, as well as other Hollywood studios and movie theatres, not to release it, or he would unleash his wrath on the industry.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

Despite this, the movie reached a wide audience and garnered favourable reviews from critics both in the US and abroad. Famous theorist André Bazin celebrated the movie's clever use of *mise-en-scène* and long takes suggesting that it constituted "a revolution in the language of the screen." The celebrated cinematographer Gregg Toland's use of crane shots, chiaroscuro lighting that created depth, and special optics added to movie's visual poetry. Having worked in theatre and radio before arriving in Hollywood, Orson Welles was also one of the pioneers in prioritising sound design. The film used sound perspectives to indicate physical distance, while also highlighting the miscommunication between characters.



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



Reflective surfaces: Use of mirrors and glass to highlight the story-within-story structure of the film

SYNOPSIS

Inside a daunting castle, an old man is seen lying on his death bed, clutching a snow globe. Before expiring, he whispers the word "Rosebud." A newsreel obituary introduces Charles Foster Kane as one of the most powerful and influential businessmen of America after giving a brief overview of his life as a journalist and a public figure. One reporter, Mr Thompson, is tasked to find more about Kane the Man and what "Rosebud" may have meant for him, interviewing several people from Charles Kane's life. All stories, told in flashbacks, reveal personal and intimate details about Kane; however, nobody knows what or who Rosebud is. After the interviews, Mr Thompson returns to the castle where Kane's belongings are sorted out and classified. He concedes that one word cannot describe a man. In the final scene, a snow sled bearing the word "Rosebud" is thrown into the fire and slowly burns.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Charles Foster Kane Influential and wealthy businessman who owns and controls several newspapers as well as many other companies.

Mr Bernstein Kane's business partner, manager and life-long friend who is with Kane from the very beginning.

Jedediah Leland Kane's closest friend and confidant, he helps Kane build his newspaper empire and ran his political campaign.

Susan Alexander Kane Kane's second wife who is forced to become an opera singer.

Walter Parks Thatcher He takes Kane under his guardianship when the latter was a kid and manages his fortune until Kane comes of age.

Mr Thompson Tasked to find out what Rosebud is, the reporter Mr Thompson interviews several people from Kane's life to learn the truth.

SCENES

A Dead Man A "No Trespassing" sign is seen at the gate of a giant castle. An old man is lying on his death bed, holding a snow globe in his hand. He says the word "Rosebud" before dying. A nurse comes in and pulls the cover over the dead man.



Quest A 10-minute NEWS ON THE MARCH montage, chronicling the life of Charles Foster Kane. The editor is not satisfied with the coverage. He asks his reporter Mr Thompson to add a personal angle to it and to find out what "Rosebud" means by interviewing Kane's people. He first visits Kane's second wife, Susan Alexander, who refuses to talk to him



Leaving His Family

Mr Thompson arrives at the Thatcher Memorial Library to read the memoir manuscript of Kane's personal guardian, Mr Thatcher. A flashback shows Charles Kane when he was little, playing with a sled in the snow. Mrs. Kane leaves her son's legal guardianship to Mr Thatcher.



Guardian From Mr Thatcher's memoir: The boy Kane is given a snow sled as a birthday gift; the young Kane takes control of his fortune and is interested in running a small newspaper, *The New York Inquirer*; Mr Thatcher and Charles Kane fight over Kane's political agenda in support of the man on the street; finally, the older Kane relinquishes the majority control of his newspapers to Mr Thatcher.



Newspaper

Charles Kane's long-time business manager Mr Bernstein tells the reporter how Charles Kane transformed the *Inquirer*. Kane publishes his Declaration of Principles. He poaches all the journalists of a rival paper. They celebrate their success with a party.



Failure of Marriage

Kane's friend Jedidiah Leland talks about Kane's first marriage to Emily Norton, the niece of the President. The deterioration of the marriage is shown through a series of breakfast table scenes spanning several years.



Infidelity Mr Leland tells the story of Charles Kane and his lover Susan Alexander meeting for the first time. They go to Susan's apartment, and she sings for him. Kane tells her that his mother had just died, and he was on his way to check the stuff his mother left in the storage. Susan and Kane get closer.



Politics Mr Leland discusses Kane's political career. He helps Kane run his Governor campaign. At the rally, Kane gives a speech about protecting the underprivileged. Charles Kane gives a strong speech about protecting the underprivileged. He threatens to investigate and lock up his political rival, Jim Gettys.



Affair Discovered Kane's wife, Emily, reveals that she knows about his mistress, Susan. After the speech, they drive to Susan's place, where they find Kane's election rival Jim Gettys waiting for them. Gettys blackmails Kane, who refuses to be extorted. Kane chooses to stay with Susan. The scandal gets into the newspapers. Kane loses the election.



Friendship Ended Mr Bernstein picks one of the two pre-designed headlines for the Inquirer: "Fraud at Polls". Leland learns about the infidelity scandal from the papers. He gets into an intense argument with Kane, accusing him of trying to own the people he was supposed to represent. He leaves for Chicago.



Second marriage Kane marries Susan Alexander, whom he forces to become an opera singer. He builds an opera house in Chicago. At the premiere, Susan does not perform well. Mr Leland writes an unfinished negative review of her performance. Kane completes the review and then fires his friend.



Failed Career Susan is ready to talk. In flashback: Susan receives singing lessons, but the teacher is unimpressed. Kane forces the teacher and Susan to continue with the lessons. The premiere is repeated from Susan's point of view.



Susan's Suicide Susan is upset about the negative reviews. Sitting in the middle of several newspapers, she announces that she wants to quit, but Kane won't allow her. In order to make Kane understand, Susan attempts suicide. Kane finally relents, agreeing that she is done with singing. They move to Xanadu.



Isolation at the Castle Kane and Susan live a lonely life in a giant castle. Susan spends her time playing with jigsaw puzzles. She wants to get back to New York and have fun. Kane refuses. Susan complains about Kane not giving her anything valuable. Kane slaps Susan.



Susan Leaving Kane Susan packs her things up. Kane begs her to stay. He says she can't do this to him. Susan says that she can indeed do this to him and leaves. Back to present: Mr Thompson tells Susan that he feels sorry about Kane. She feels sorry about Kane as well.



Kane's Anger Mr Thompson interviews Kane's butler. The scene picks up from the dressing room. Kane demolishes everything inside until he stumbles upon the snow globe. He whispers "Rosebud" with tears in his eyes. He leaves the room, walks by the guests and disappears into the corridor after passing between two mirrors.



After Kane Dies Back to present. The castle is full of Kane's belongings. Mr Thompson and his entourage take a walk around them. Thompson says one word cannot explain a man's life. They leave Xanadu to catch the evening train. Among the furniture is Kane's boyhood sled, on which the word "Rosebud" is etched. The workers throw it into the fire. Nobody witnesses this. The black smoke of the fire is carried into the air from the chimney. The camera pans down the gate to stop at the sign "No Trespassing." The End.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Charles Foster Kane Separated from his family at an early age, Kane grows up to be one of the richest businessmen in the world as well as a restless man. Welles portrays Kane from multiple perspectives, but never through his own. Even the objective facts about his life are shrouded in a subjective tone. Kane is less a person to be understood than a puzzle to be solved. He's charismatic, decisive, powerful, but most importantly, he's enigmatic. That the movie opens and ends on the same image—"No Trespassing" warning sign—further the point that the mind and soul of Charles Foster Kane will remain enigmatic. The movie's two endings, in which characters don't know what Rosebud means whereas the viewer does—strengthens the interplay between objective and subjective nature of Kane the Man.

Idealist Even though he owns the 6th largest fortune in the world, Kane chooses to be the publisher of a small New York paper as "it would be fun." Instead of focusing on making more money, Kane decides to become a champion of the underprivileged. His Declaration of Principles sets him up to be the voice of the common people. By doing so, he also goes against his own business interests. When confronted, he admits he is actually two people: one of them is the rich Kane and the other is the Kane with a duty to protect "decent, hard-working people."

Domineering As he amasses more power, though, he turns into a tyrant who shapes public opinion in the service of his own political interests (e.g., "Fraud at the Polls" headlines) and his love interest (promoting his wife's opera performances). The main impetus behind his dictatorial tendencies is not the desire for ultimate power, but a childish hope to re-create his happy moments on the sled—his Rosebud. As he says: "If I hadn't been rich, I might have been a great man."

Lonely Charles Foster Kane has always been a lonely man. Both his wives leave him. His only son gets killed in a car accident. His mother dies. He loses elections. He loses his newspapers. He drives his best friend away. Even his castle Xanadu is an unfinished monstrosity. When he dies, he dies alone, holding onto a snow globe that hides a decrepit hut similar to the boarding house he used to live in as a child.

Nostalgic All his life, he tries to purchase back that happy moment with statues, material goods and even love from people, but the nostalgic past is proved to be as far away from him as anyone. His lonely tragic walk from the dressing room shows an infinite reflection of him between two mirrors, highlighting his many identities and personas. Who he is, we can never tell. The irony here is that everything Kane has bought only worked to prove that he could never buy the only thing he longed for—his Rosebud.

Mr Bernstein He is Charles Kane's general manager, his right-hand man and lifelong friend. He emerges as the only person who speaks about Kane positively to the point of apologizing for his eccentric lifestyle and tyrannical nature. Even after Kane's death, Mr Bernstein stays loyal to Kane's legacy, glossing over his mistakes. His tragic tone is filled with sympathy and deep respect.

Loyal Mr Bernstein is a true Charles Kane loyalist, "from before the beginning ... And now after the end." Even Kane's objectively questionable motives and actions are not enough to sway Mr Bernstein. For instance, on the subject of Kane stoking the Spanish-American war, Bernstein offers an apologetic angle to defend Kane's warmongering: "That was Mr. Kane's war ... Do you think if it hadn't been for that war of Mr. Kane's, we'd have the Panama Canal?" He protects Kane's bruised ego by choosing a headline that suggests fraud in the elections. When Leland expresses his concerns over the newly hired editors changing Kane's agenda, Bernstein categorically defends Kane. He *is* the father figure Kane never had in his formative years.

Wistful One interesting thing about the Rosebud quest is that the characters' answers, sometimes, reveal as much about themselves as the Rosebud itself. This is perhaps most evident in Mr Bernstein. When he offers that maybe Rosebud "was something [Kane] lost," he not only correctly contextualizes the mystery, but also opens up his character for further analysis. Mr Bernstein *also* lost something he cannot bring back. Just like Kane, forgetting is not an option for him, *either*. "A fellow will remember a lot of things you wouldn't think he'd remember," he tells Mr Thompson. For both these men, remembering is a curse, not a reward. For Kane, it's Rosebud. For Bernstein, it's the girl he saw for just a second on the ferry decades ago. "I'll bet a month hasn't gone by since that I haven't thought of

that girl," he says in a wistful tone. Through Bernstein, Orson Welles transforms Rosebud into a metaphor, a symbol for a past lost in remembrance.

Jedediah Leland Kane's closest friend Leland functions as the conscience of Charles Foster Kane as well as a foil, against which we are invited to interpret Kane. In his old age, he lives in a nursing home, surrounded by nurses and memories. During his interview, he keeps interrupting his own narration to ask Mr Thompson for a cigar, which makes us question his capacity.

Loyal During their early years, Kane and Leland are on the same page in terms of utilizing the power of newspaper business to support working class. The Declaration of Principles, in which Kane promises to tell only the truth, strengthens the bond between them. Leland regards Kane not just as a good friend, but as a historical figure who may change the course of history. He believes that this document "might turn out to be something pretty important like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution."

Embittered He even campaigns for Kane during the latter's race for Governor. However, his romantic idealization comes crashing down as Kane's moral shortcomings are slowly surfaced: He cheats his wife. He considers his voters as his property. He desires power for himself. Before parting ways, Leland announces the death of Charles Foster Kane as a revolutionary project. Kane's failure to realize his potential feels like a betrayal for Leland. He cannot separate the man from the politician. Their companionship has to end as well: Kane is proved to be yet another tyrant of the ruling class; how can he stay friends with the man?

Resentful Leland never hides his resentment. According to him, Kane might have had a private sort of greatness, but he never gave himself away—meaning that he never wanted to be vulnerable. When he confronts Kane by accusing him of trying to own the people, he says: "You persuade people that you love them so much that they ought to love you back." Love has always been an unequal exchange for Kane in which Kane does all the taking, but does not do any giving. In the final analysis, Kane has become the very thing Leland and Kane were supposed to fight against. The idea of Charles Foster Kane was, therefore, better than Charles Foster Kane himself, a realization that ultimately breaks Leland, turning him into an alcoholic and a bitter man.

Susan Alexander Kane Kane's second wife, Susan, is an uneducated, very pretty young woman. At first, she is simple and childish enough to laugh at Kane wiggling his ears. She even admits to being ignorant. Kane characterizes her "a cross-section of the American public." But she is also decisive and bold enough to invite an old man she doesn't know to her place just because she likes him.

Weak Susan is a person whose choices and wishes have been ignored by everyone including people who supposedly loved her. Her mother wants her to become an opera singer though Susan knew that her voice "isn't that kind". Kane treats Susan not as his wife, but as his project, trying to shape her based on his wishes, not hers.

Submissive During the confrontation between Gettys, Emily and Kane about Kane's illicit affair with Susan, nobody cares about how the scandal might impact *her*. It takes Susan's suicide attempt for Kane to realize that Susan is a person, not his clay, who has her own wishes and her own dreams. Unfortunately this is Susan's tragedy, not her success: that her life is only noticed at the moment of her death. "You don't know what it means to know that the whole audience just doesn't want you," she tells Kane.

Transformation Though Susan is portrayed as a childish, vulnerable woman, she comes into her own towards the end of the movie. Her attempted suicide is not an event that grants her agency as it is still Kane who makes the ultimate decision about her singing. Her genuine moment of power comes when *she* decides to leave Kane. He begs her not to go, saying, "You can't do this to me." It is at this moment Susan acknowledges that it will be herself, for probably the first time in her life, who will make the ultimate decision. Her agency grows out of her courage to leave a powerful man like Charles Foster Kane and her own power to understand who he really is: a self-centred sad child. "I see," she sees with a hint of a grin. "It's you that this is being done to. It's not me at all. Not what it means to me. I can't do this to you? Oh, yes, I can."

Walter Parks Thatcher Charles Kane's legal guardian, "a grand old man of Wall Street," is a one-dimensional character, a stand-in for a stereotypical capitalist. He doesn't understand why Kane is interested in running a newspaper when he can make more money.

Ultimate capitalist Thatcher sees the world strictly from a material perspective while Kane puts aside his wealth to focus on a more spiritual self-realization "Still the college boy, eh?" he mocks Kane, considering Kane's newspaper antics as nothing but a childish adventure. Thatcher the Capitalist provides the viewer with a useful contrast with respect to Kane the Marxist. He is a filter, just like Leland, through which we appraise Kane. According to him, Kane's social beliefs are an affront to "American traditions of private property." How can Kane attack the Public Transit Company, an entity in which Kane is also one of the largest stockholders? For capitalists like Mr Thatcher, this is morally incomprehensible. Therefore, Kane deserves the biggest existential insult: he is "nothing more or less than a communist."

Controlling Thatcher's guardianship of Charles Kane plays out in a rather circular manner. He takes charge of the boy Kane and manages his money until Kane comes of age. And when Kane eventually bankrupts and relinquishes his control to Thatcher, he becomes his guardian once again, agreeing to pay to Kane an allowance "as long as he lives." In a way, Thatcher never stops being Kane's guardian because Kane never stops being a child. "Your methods," Thatcher complains, "you always used money to buy things."

Thompson The reporter is tasked to add "an angle," a personal dimension to the "man who could have been President." All throughout the movie, he is hidden in the dark so as to be rendered as part of the audience. He's a motivated, perceptive and a sincere character that we are indeed invited to identify with.

Quest Mr Thompson's quest for Rosebud is qualitatively immersive journalism, in which the interviewer chases the human story by immersing himself or herself in the life of his or her subject. At the beginning, Mr Thompson is solely motivated by this mystery to the point that he is dismissive of the larger tale: He wants the information, not the story. However, as he learns more and more about Kane the Man, he starts paying attention to the story of the man as well. He tells Susan: "You know, all the same, I feel kind of sorry for Mr. Kane," suggesting a change in his character: He's not the tabloid reporter who wants the sensational answer anymore. He now cares. He is immersed.

Perceptive Though his quest for Rosebud reveals nothing—at least to the characters—it isn't a totally useless endeavour. His journey points to the larger project of *Citizen Kane*. In his words: "Anyway, it wouldn't have explained anything. I don't think any word can explain a man's life." The dramatic irony Orson Welles creates at the expense of Mr Thompson also serves as a lesson for us, the viewer. We may have learned about Rosebud, but we may never know what it actually meant for Charles Kane. There are a lot of mysteries about the man we may never know. The "No Trespassing" sign broadcasts our ignorance: "You cannot trespass on Charles Kane territory any more than Charles Kane allows." And Mr Thompson is aware of this by the end of the movie.

THEMES

1. Romantic Love Love appears as contentious as it is multi-faceted between Kane and his wives, albeit toxic at times. Many characters point to Kane's hunger and search for love, but the discussion is always marred with negative connotations. According to Leland, Kane loved nothing and nobody but himself. According to Susan, Kane loved so that he could be loved back. The insinuation is that love was just a trade, an investment for Kane. He was going to get something out of it, one way or another, otherwise love wasn't worth this time. From Emily: her status as the niece of the President. From Susan: the project of an opera singer. Kane's love was contingent on the fact that he had to be loved back. That's why he failed to love.

2. Compassion There is the maternal compassion Mrs. Kane displays for her son so powerfully that she agrees to part ways with him. She makes sacrifices so that he could have a better future without being abused by his father. There is the paternal love, not from Kane's biological father but from his business partner, Mr Bernstein, who supports his decisions no matter what, encourages him in his actions though they might be unethical, and protects his legacy. Finally, we see Mr Thompson feeling sorry for Kane after learning more about his tragic life. Though he is supposed to be an objective

journalist, he is impacted by Kane. Like every person who has known Kane, Mr Thompson cannot help but feel compassion towards the man.

3. Friendship The fraternal homoerotic friendship between Kane and Leland is contested and complicated at every turn. At first, Mr Leland supports Kane in his quest to be the voice of the working people. He even idealizes Kane, imagining that he'd become a history-altering figure in American history. When the newly-hired journalists arrive, he worries that they would change Kane. He wants to protect both Kane and his fight. He campaigns for Kane for political power. Unfortunately, when Kane as a revolutionary project fails, he also ceases to be a friend. Kane's infidelity, betrayal and tyrannical nature cannot overcome the power of friendship for Leland.

4. Power Power could be analysed in many different ways in the interpersonal relationships. Kane's innate power comes from his wealth, but he also garners an additional power through his newspapers. While the former gives him the opportunity to purchase material goods, the latter bestows upon him an authority that he abuses to further his social, political, and personal interests. What defines Kane and his legacy is chiefly the power he has over people: the way he wields it to manipulate his friends, his business partners, and most importantly women into becoming minions of Charles Kane. He demands that the chief of editor fabricate stories so that his newspaper can compete with his rival; he pushes for the Spanish-American war by manipulating public opinion so that he can increase his circulation; he refuses to accept being blackmailed by his political archenemy, which ironically strips him of political power; he forces Susan to take opera lessons though Susan does not want to; he publishes fake reviews to promote his wife's performance. At every turn, he refers back to his innate and tyrannical power to course-correct, but nothing prevents him from dying alone in a castle. From Kane's perspective, power emerges as a vulnerability that only reveals the weakness in him. Aside from Kane's fragile masculinity, there are two other characters who discover and utilize their power much to Kane's detriment—Leland and Susan. The former rejects Kane's \$25,000 check and sends it back in an envelope, which also contains the original document of Declaration of Principles. For Susan, the moment arrives before she leaves Kane for good. She realizes that this decision alone is hers. As she says to the reporter: "Everything was [Kane's] idea except my leaving him."

5. Gender Even though the movie reinforces patriarchal gender relations and roles, a close reading also reveals that women are not always placed in a subordinate position against men. In the final moment, it's women who make choices *despite* Charles Kane. His mother, Mrs. Kane, sends her son away so that he can have a better future despite her husband's complaints. She successfully swats him away to achieve what she wants to achieve: a better life for her son. Similarly, Charles Kane's first wife, Emily, decides to confront Kane's lover and eventually makes the decision to leave him of her own volition. Her indictment of Kane is also spot on. When he says, "There's only one person in the world to decide what I'll do. And that's me," Emily answers: "You decided what you were going to do, Charles, some time ago" suggesting that Kane's corruption has already begun. And Susan, who has been ignored by everyone throughout the movie, realizes her power in the final scene and leaves Kane to gain her independence. It's her choice that triggers the domino effect of Charles Kane's downfall.