



Seeing 'Citizen Kane' Again Now That I'm Older

The classic film, like life, looks different from the vantage point of age

By Richard Chin

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The 100th anniversary of Orson Welles' birthday was last month, which naturally had me thinking about Welles' greatest work.

If you're like me, you might have been introduced to Citizen Kane in a film studies class in college. It would be hard for any serious young film buff to avoid seeing what has frequently been described as the best movie ever made.

Depicting the rise and fall of a fabulously rich newspaper tycoon, Citizen Kane is famous for its groundbreaking "deep-focus" photography, interwoven narrative, unusual camera angles and the backlash and attack it provoked from William Randolph Hearst, the powerful, real-life media mogul who was its inspiration.

But watching Citizen Kane now, more than 30 years after I first saw it, I find that Welles' saga of Charles Foster Kane seems less about the corrupting influence of wealth and power, and more like a cautionary tale about growing older and the regrets one experiences at the end of life. (More on that later.)

Watching the film again also served as a reminder of the value of revisiting works of art at different stages of your life. A movie, poem, novel or painting that you knew well as a youth can have a different and maybe deeper meaning as you age.

Welles' film begins at the end of Kane's life. Alone in an enormous, gloomy mansion, he utters a mysterious dying word: "Rosebud."

Kane's life is told in a series of flashbacks as a newsreel reporter tries to uncover who or what Rosebud was.

Youthful and Headstrong

Kane is a brash young man with a trust fund who thinks “it would be fun to run a newspaper.” And he’s willing to lose \$1 million a year and ignore the advice of older men like his banker and his editor to do it his way.

He builds a media empire, molds public opinion, strives for political power and becomes an old man himself. He dies in an estate stuffed with priceless possessions, but is described as “a man who lost almost everything he had.”

When the newsreel reporter interviews the old men who were Kane’s associates and former friends, he finds them similarly haunted by the past.

Kane’s business manager, Bernstein, is now an idle executive, ignored in his huge office. “Who’s a busy man? Me? I’m Chairman of the Board. I’ve got nothing but time,” Bernstein tells the reporter.

When the reporter dismisses the idea that Rosebud was a woman from Kane’s past, Bernstein tells him that’s because he’s not an old man.

“A fellow will remember a lot of things you wouldn’t think he’d remember,” Bernstein says. “You take me. One day back in 1896, I was crossing over to New Jersey on the ferry and as we pulled out, there was another ferry pulling in. And on it there was a girl waiting to get off. A white dress she had on. She was carrying a white parasol. I only saw her for one second. She didn’t see me at all. But I’d bet a month hasn’t gone by since that I haven’t thought of that girl.”

He ruefully concludes, “Old age. It’s the only disease, Mr. Thompson, that you don’t look forward to being cured of.”

The Curse of Memory

Kane’s former best friend, the once idealistic Jedediah Leland, is now in a hospital, grousing that the nurses are unattractive and trying to persuade the reporter to sneak him some cigars that the doctor has forbidden.

“I can remember absolutely everything,” Leland tells the reporter. “That’s my curse. That’s one of the greatest curses ever inflicted on the human race, memory.”

Eventually, the movie reveals that Kane at the end of his life is longing for the time before wealth and power fell on him, when he was just a poor boy playing in the snow.

Citizen Kane, produced, directed, co-written and starring Orson Welles, was Welles’ first movie, made when he was in his mid-20s. He was a boy wonder already celebrated for conquering the New York theater scene by directing and starring in innovative Shakespearean productions.

Then Welles achieved worldwide fame when his radio theater adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* ended up scaring listeners who thought the planet actually was undergoing a Martian attack.

Welles died in 1985 at age 70 after a long movie-making career. But he never quite matched the movie he made when he was only 26.

A Dim Ending

In his old age, Welles, like his hero Kane, would be shadowed by disappointments, frustrations and humiliations.

Welles was forced to hustle for money to fund movie projects that never quite got finished. Later generations who never saw his movies best knew him as the television pitchman for Paul Masson wine, intoning, “We will sell no wine before its time.”

The former Shakespearean actor ended his career using his resonant voice as the robot Unicron in the 1986 animated movie, *The Transformers: The Movie*.

Is Regret Inevitable?

Unlike Kane or Welles, I won't have to worry about dealing with the toxic effects of wealth, power and fame. But *Citizen Kane* still has me wondering if regret is something we'll all experience in old age.

When the days ahead are fewer than the days behind, reminiscing is a universal and natural activity, according to Erlene Rosowsky, a psychologist and director of the Center for Mental Health and Aging at William James College in Massachusetts.

According to Rosowsky, thinking about the past can be a useful tool for self-understanding. “It involves the active reworking and reinterpreting of life events,” she said.

You can acknowledge the choices you didn't make and the paths not taken. But ultimately, the goal is to be able to feel that our existence meant something.

“You need to know it was all worthwhile, that your life mattered,” Rosowsky said. Despite his material success, Kane apparently realized it wasn't enough if he hadn't lived up to his youthful ideals.

Might Have Been Great

In the movie, he declares, “If I hadn't been very rich, I might have been a really great man.”

Said Rosowsky: “He ethically failed himself.”

Many of us can find our life meaning in the relationships we've created with friends and family. But Kane ends up alienating everyone who was close to him.

"He wasn't successful in any kind of relationship," Rosowsky said.

At the end, the only thing that wasn't lost for Kane was the love he felt as a boy, embodied in the mysterious Rosebud.