

It's often right at the top of the list as the #1 greatest movie of all time, Orson Welles' 1941 classic, *Citizen Kane*. Prior to the movie, Orson Welles was only in his early twenties, but was famous for his cutting-edge radio plays and stage plays. And RKO studios gave him an unprecedented deal—the ability to come to Hollywood and make a movie with complete creative control from start to finish. And the result was *Citizen Kane*.

Citizen Kane is such a rich subject—I could spend a lot of time speaking about the creation of the movie, the way it pioneered film-making techniques we now take for granted. I could talk about the opposition it received from media magnate William Randolph Hearst, who was the partial inspiration for the lead character, Charles Foster Kane. Both of those themes are so rich that they are explored in 2 later award-winning movies about the making of *Citizen Kane*: the 1999 film *RKO 281*, and the 2020 film *Mank*. I could talk about the movies pioneering special effects—*Citizen Kane* has more special effects shots than *Star Wars* does.¹ But I don't have time to pursue all of those wonderful tangents. Rather, I want to focus on the story line.

The movie opens with the death of Charles Foster Kane. And that's immediately followed up by a newsreel documentary telling us of the entire outline of Kane's life. Because the movie spirals back, revisiting events in Kane's life with its pioneering flashbacks, this overview gives us the road map we need for the rest of the film.

The plot basically centers on a reporter trying to find out the meaning of Kane's cryptic dying word, "Rosebud."

The reporter first visits the archives of the late banker who became Kane's guardian when he inherited an enormous sum of money as a child, which would make him one of the richest men in the world.

Then the reporter visits the three people who should have known Kane best: his business manager, his former best-friend and co-worker, and Kane's second ex-wife. One would think that these people should have known Kane best, but none of them really knew him. That's an important point of the movie—Kane keeps even those closest to him at a distance.

And as we learn more about Kane, we see the wonderful and then terribly tragic arc of his life.

Kane starts out full of passion and idealism. Amongst his vast holdings is a small New York newspaper—and he pours his energy into it, building it up into a major newspaper, which then morphs into a huge media empire. Kane is so idealistic he publicly prints in the newspaper his declaration of his high-minded principles when he first takes over the paper.

And Kane becomes a crusading force, trying to defend the rights of working people against big-money interests, even though that will negatively affect some of his other business interests. He famously marries the president's niece, and it looks like Charles Foster Kane is building for himself a marvelous life.

¹ According to Roger Ebert, in his wonderful scene by scene commentary for the entire movie in the special features section on the DVD

But in mid-life, things start to fall apart. His first marriage becomes strained, then it crumbles. He alienates others who are close to him. He begins to focus on building an enormous estate in Florida, named Xanadu, after the poem of same name, in which the protagonist builds a "stately pleasure dome." Kane also tries to build and shape his second wife into an opera star. But her career crumbles, and eventually their marriage crumbles. And thus Kane rattles around Xanadu by himself surrounded only by servants. He has filled his estate with treasures and artworks he's acquired from his travels around the world. Yet Xanadu is so grandiose that he's not even able to finish building it.

In our Gospel Jesus cautions us about starting to build but not having the resources to finish. A prudent person, Jesus is telling us would not do that. Otherwise, when he is not able to finish, the person is open to public derision. That's an apt picture of Charles Foster Kane towards the end of his life.

So at the end of *Citizen Kane*, Charles Kane has anything approaching a relationship with, Kane is left in Xanadu as a lonely recluse. And he dies all alone, clinging to a snow globe with a cabin that looks like his childhood home. And his last word is "Rosebud." I won't give a total spoiler here in case you haven't seen the movie, but Rosebud does represent Kane's lost childhood, the last time he was truly happy before he inherited his vast wealth.

Jesus famously asks, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"²

The New Testament word "soul" can also be translated as "life" or even "self." It's a word we still use: psyche.

What good is it to gain the whole world but lose who you are? To lose your psyche?

Kane seems to have everything, but actually has nothing that really counts. In the book of Genesis, there's another person named Cain. And that name derives from the Hebrew verb, *qanah*, which means "acquire" or "buy" or "purchase." That's certainly what Charles Foster Kane has done.

He has acquired and amassed great physical wealth and treasures. But it's cost him every significant human relationship in his life. And it's cost him his youthful idealism and principles. And he dies alone, bereft of everything that could have been important in life. A very tragic end.

In the middle of the film, though, there is a great exchange, that perhaps gives us our best insights into the character of Charles Foster Kane. His former school chum, and the only man who even approaches being a friend, is Jedediah Leland.

He lays into Kane for the way Kane treats the public who reads his newspapers.

² Mt 16:26 NIV

He says to Kane,
"You talk about the people as though you owned them, as though they belong to you. Goodness. As long as I can remember, you've talked about giving the people their rights, as if you can make them a present of Liberty, as a reward for services rendered."

And a few moments later he says,
"You don't care about anything except you. You just want to persuade people that you love 'em so much that they ought to love you back. Only you want love on your own terms. It's something to be played your way, according to your rules."

That's the heart of *Citizen Kane*. A man who wants people to love him but ONLY on his terms. And that eventually pushes them away. And in the end, no one really knows who he is. And no one knows enough about him to solve the mystery of the meaning of the word, "Rosebud."

It's no accident that the very first shot in the movie is of Kane's Xanadu estate in the darkness, surrounded by a fence, with a sign reading, "No Trespassing." And the film ends with exactly the same shot. "No Trespassing."

Kane won't truly let anyone into his life, except on his own very limited terms. And that's not enough for other people. Kane devotes himself to his work, his wealth, his possessions. And he tries to treat people almost as if he owns them. And in the end, though he has amassed every possession he could ever want, none of them are satisfactory. He has no one to love, and no one who loves him.

In our catechism, the mission of the Christian church is described in the following way. It says,

"The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."³

The tragedy of *Citizen Kane* is not only that Kane did not seek any sort of unity with God. He also did not help people find any unity with each other, or with him. He had high and lofty youthful ideals. But by demanding that everyone play according to his rules and under his terms, he alienated anyone who might have been close to him.

Our psalm today contrasts those who seek to live according to God's ways, with those who don't.

It describes the former as being like "trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither."⁴

By contrast, those who don't seek to live according to God's ways are like "chaff which the wind blows away."⁵

³ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 855

⁴ Psalm 1:3

⁵ Psalm 1:4

God intends us to live in relationship with him and relationship with others. And if we don't, our lives will end up being dry and empty, like dried chaff blowing away in the wind.

Today is Labor Day weekend. Much of our time and identity is tied up in our various occupations. And God gives us talents to use in different ways to earn a living, and to use in service to others in our world.

How will you spend your working years?

Seeking only to acquire money or possessions? Or to use your God given talents to serve others and build up our community and our world?

How will you spend your retirement years? To just sit on your nest egg until you die? Or will you live to serve others? Will you seek to nurture and deepen relationships?

And in the midst of work or retirement, will you seek to deepen your relationship with God? To seek greater unity and union with him?

Citizen Kane shows us a life that is ultimately wasted.

How will you live the rest of your life?