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*Citizen Kane: A Parable of Ecclesiastes and Perils of the American Dream*

The film *Citizen Kane* has been widely acclaimed as one of the best films, if not the best, ever made. Directed by Orson Welles and released in 1941, *Citizen Kane* centers around the life of newly deceased media mogul Charles Foster Kane, whose famous last words, “Rosebud”, cause one reporter to wonder if there was more to the man than met the eye. The film follows the reporter, whose interviews with Kane’s close friends and loved ones give insight into the person of Charles Foster Kane. The story of his rise and fall is portrayed through the lens of his close friends and loved ones, who perhaps knew his demons better than he did himself. Like all great works of art, the film is by nature a parable. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes the parable as a tool intended to reorient our imagination toward new meaning or interpretation of beliefs (Ricoeur, 218). Put another way, a parable is an anecdote that has a literal meaning, but challenges the listener, reader, or viewer to interpret a figurative meaning from the parable, enabling them to see the world in a new way. The film *Citizen Kane* is parabolic in nature, highlighting biblical lessons from the book of Ecclesiastes about the nature of happiness, and what really matters in life.

The book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament is an examination of how best to spend one’s limited time on earth. The identity of the author is not revealed to the book’s readers; instead the author goes by the name “Qoheleth”, which roughly translates to ‘Preacher’ in

Hebrew. The book of Ecclesiastes is a record of Qoheleth's endeavor to find meaning in life and to find humanity's purpose and place on earth, but also his discovery of what brings humanity happiness. Through his investigation, Qoheleth finds that the impact of any given form of enterprise on earth is ephemeral, "a chase after wind" compared to the everlasting effects of death and the cumulative amounts of all of humanity's accomplishments before one's life and after. He surmises that a life of unrepressed wisdom, pleasure, or conquest is not enough to stop the inevitability of death (Eccles 2). He also surmises that in death, since we are born with nothing and die with nothing, all things between men are equal regardless of accomplishments in life. Therefore, Qoheleth concludes that the only good that comes from toiling in earthly endeavors is the enjoyment that comes from it.

"Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, because it is now that God favors your works. At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of the fleeting life that is granted you under the sun. Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going" (Eccles. 9.7-10).

The film Citizen Kane is parabolic of the lessons Qoheleth discovered in Ecclesiastes by serving as a tale of warning. The plot structure and mise-en-scene elements of the film work together toward this end.

On simple examination of the title of the film, there already bears a connection to the Bible. In the Bible, Cain is mentioned in the Book of Genesis as the son of Adam and Eve, and the brother of Abel. In Genesis, Cain is jealous of his younger brother Abel because God loves Abel more, although Cain has done little to earn God's love. Cain ends up killing his brother out

of jealousy. In a similar fashion, Charles Kane alienates those who love him most, his best friend and both of his wives, in his quest for power.

The opening scene of the film sets up the premise for everything that comes after it. The shot opens with a close up of a no trespassing sign on a white fence and moves on to a montage of the grounds of a shadowy, decrepit palace. The scene quickly reveals that the palace is nothing more than a tiny cabin within a snow globe, which is sitting in the palm of a hand. A man, Charles Kane, whispers two final words, "Rosebud", and the hand holding the snow globe goes limp, dropping the ornament to the ground where it shatters. The palace montage into the snow globe is a foreshadowing sequence, signifying that on Kane's mind are happier times from his childhood in Colorado. A maid hears the noise and rushes into the room to drape a sheet over the man's face, presuming him dead. This shot is the first in the scene where we get a good look at the room surrounding the man. The large room is dark and filled with shadows, which indicates despite the metaphor with the snow globe, Kane is located one of many rooms in his mansion. Despite the fact that he was in a deathly condition, the scene shows no loved ones by his bedside. Even the maid stays outside of his room, despite being on call. By beginning the film with this scene, Orson Welles shows what Kane has become: a man who has all the wealth in the world, but no one that cares enough about him to be at his side while he passes away.

After the somber scene of Kane's passing, trumpets blare for the "News on the March!" highlight reel of Kane's life. The ten-minute montage impersonally features Charles Kane as a titan of industry and public figure. Newspaper man, opinion maker, gubernatorial candidate, and subject of scandal. A man that both shaped the news and was news himself. Once the reel

finished, the projector cuts out to a room with reporters discussing the piece they had just viewed. The room is extremely dark, lit only by the projector and two small square windows up by the ceiling. The film's first impression of the Newspaper business, Kane's former business, is one that of gloom and darkness. The shadows used in this scene are a recurring theme that influences the mise-en-scene throughout the film. The shadows intend to convey negative emotions or elements to an otherwise harmless interaction between colleagues. After agreeing that their newsreel needs an angle, a reporter named Thomson is tasked with finding that angle by following up on Kane's last words. "Rosebud, dead or alive. It will probably turn out to be a very simple thing" one of the men says. However, human nature is never a simple thing, and Thomson is destined to find out Kane's was no exception.

Following the reporters' meeting, Thomson goes looking for an explanation to Kane's last words. The first place he finds answers as in the private memoirs of Kane's childhood guardian, Thatcher. This is a scene of immense consequence, in both mise-en-scene and plot structure. Since Kane is technically deceased in this point in time, the film's directors chose to show scenes of Charles Kane's life exclusively through flashbacks. Each time Thomson interacts with one of Kane's friends or loved ones, the directors use at least one flashback to portray that character's memories of Kane. The film's story continues on two different timelines: Kane's life portrayed through memory flashbacks and Thompson's interactions after Kane's death. This plot structure creates a distinct effect. The film is clearly centered around Charles Kane's life. However, Kane's story is told through the memories of those around him, which are biased and therefore unreliable. The creators lean into the uncertainty that the plot structure provides by *inferring* Kane's perspective instead of explaining it through dialogue and other means. This

plot structure adds to the parabolic nature of the film, because the film's meaning is up to the viewer.

This scene is the first time that the film dips into the timeline of Kane's life. While chronologically first in the order of Kane's life, it is also of great importance in determining the direction of the film. The flashback begins with a shot of a boy playing with a sled on a snowy hill. Dreamy, encouraging music is playing in the background. The camera tracks backward to reveal the border of a window through which three figures are witnessing the boy play. Through dialogue the characters are revealed to be Mr. and Mrs. Kane along with Mr. Thatcher, which makes the boy to be Charles Kane. The camera continues to track back as the characters walk through the house. Mrs. Kane and Mr. Thatcher sit down at a table to discuss the terms for the boy's transfer of guardianship to Thatcher and relocation to New York, all while the camera holds a clear shot through the window of young Charles playing in the snow. In one shot, the directors show Charles, happy and innocent, while decisions are being made about that will affect the entire course of his life. This is the first iteration of a scenic theme that is reintroduced throughout repeatedly throughout the flashbacks that illustrate Kane's life. During events in which Kane is happy, the producers chose to feature characters other than Kane in the foreground. This recurring theme serves to underscore the negative moments in Kane's life, in addition to the fact that his story is being told by someone other than him. In addition, this emotional and psychological impact of this scene will have consequences on Kane's behaviors down the road, consequences that he never fully understands.

The flashback continues on to Kane's adulthood. The twenty-five-year-old Charles Kane, while the owner of the 6<sup>th</sup> largest fortune worldwide, chooses instead to focus his attention on

the New York Inquirer, a small newspaper. The flashback scene depicts an argument between Thatcher and Kane over Kane's populist newspaper articles that go after companies that they both have investments in. Kane indicates a preference for looking out for the underprivileged, highlighting his original idealism. Kane wasn't always a monster. In the beginning he was a good person, which means that circumstances changed him. The flashback moves on to ten years in the future, during the start of the great depression. Thatcher agrees to buy out Kane's failed newspaper business. After signing the paperwork Kane, Thatcher, and Kane's right-hand man Bernstein engage in a discussion. Talking to Mr. Bernstein, Thatcher poses "did you know, Charles never made a single investment? He always used money to...", "Buy things" Kane finishes after Thatcher trailed off, "... to buy things". This bit of self-reflection by Kane is accompanied with a look in Bernstein's direction, and with a facial expression that is best described as embarrassed or repentant. Kane clearly knows that he has a habit of buying things he likes, but not why he does it. This is the first instance of foreshadowing Kane's impulse to purchase material goods, which only grows from here on out.

The reporter Thomson's second source is Mr. Bernstein, Kane's old friend and colleague. Before delving into his stories and experiences alongside Kane, Bernstein doled a piece of advice to Thomson: "It's no trick to make a lot of money, if all you want to do is make a lot of money. Kane didn't care about money, and that's why Thatcher never understood him". With this in mind, the directors dive into Bernstein's flashback. The flashback details the start of the New York Inquirer. Kane, along with Bernstein and close friend Leland, publish the paper's declaration of principles. These principles proclaim the paper's mission to fight for the common man. The declaration of principles shows the audience that at this point in time, Kane still has

his idealism. That idealism is questioned in the next scene, when the flashbacks show Kane throwing a party for the Inquirer's acquisition of rival newspaper the New York Chronicle. During the party, while Kane is off being the center of attention and dancing with girls, Bernstein and Leland have a discussion in the corner of the room in which they debate of, with Kane's choice to keep on the old Chronicle executives, how the Inquire can continue to uphold its idealistic principles. Like the shot of Kane, his parents, and Thatcher in the Kane Colorado home, this scene is another instance where the directors chose to arrange the shot focused on others, in this case Leland and Bernstein, with Kane celebrating happily in the background. The next scene in the flashback has a similar portrayal. When Kane returns from Europe with not only cart loads of statues but the president's niece as his fiancé, Kane is once again in the background while Bernstein and Leland discuss Kane's meteoric successes in the foreground. The ending of Bernstein's flashback details Kane's successes, but also alludes to his behaviors that set him down the wrong path. His pattern of collecting things he doesn't need just to make him happy only grows. Not only that, but Kane has found a vice that he seems to love more than possessions: the spotlight. Most ordinary people in Charles Kane's position would be happy with their life. Kane's business ventures are thriving. He is doing work he loves and according to his own principles. And he has friends and a new wife to share his successes with. But Mr. Kane wasn't an ordinary person. Nothing was enough, not a successful business, not possessions, and not a wife from a prominent family. Kane always sought more, and this trait ultimately led to him losing everything.

The Book of Ecclesiastes shares an important lesson about life, which is that all of power or money in the world is useless unless you have happiness also. Money and possessions are

nice, and may bring a fleeting happiness, but lasting happiness is built on quality lasting relationships. “Again I found this vanity under the sun: a solitary man with no companion, with neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his toil, and riches do not satisfy his greed” (Eccles. 4.7-8). Charles Kane learns this lesson too late, and instead pursues further power and riches to fill the void in his heart.

The film from here on out charts the story of Kane’s demise. Thomson’s last two sources are Leland, Kane’s former friend, and Susan, Kane’s second ex-wife. Leland, Kane’s oldest friend, is given two different flashbacks by the directors, the only character in the film that has more than one. Leland’s first flashback scene is one of the most famous scenes in the film. The scene shows the marriage of Charles Kane and his first wife Emily deteriorate over a period of decades. The montage shows the couple at the breakfast table in every shot, but in each iteration of their breakfast conversations, Kane becomes less loving and colder toward his wife. The changes to mise-en-scene elements in this scene are significant. In every iteration, Kane was made to look increasingly older and grouchy. In the first shot, the couple is youthful and full of adoration for each other. By the end of the montage, Kane is twenty years older, with a soured personality, and barely spoke to his wife at all. Their clothes and surroundings were much nicer but in terms of love for each other they were very poor indeed.

Leland also describes Kane’s political career. In his second flashback, Kane begins his run for governor of New York. Using his newspaper business as a basis to captivate the public, Kane soared to ahead to be the favorite to defeat Governor and party boss Jim Gettys. The highlight of his campaign was his campaign speech in an assembly hall in front of hundreds of people. His family, close friends and business associates were all in attendance. Like the party



at the Inquirer, Kane was the absolute center of attention. But unlike the previous flashback, he was being adored by more than just friends. His stage was in front of the entire New York state.

Leland put it best during his conversation with Thomson:

“He married for love. That’s why he did everything. That’s why he went into politics. It seemed we weren’t enough; he wanted the voters to love him too. That’s all he really wanted out of life, is love. That’s Charlie’s story. How he lost it. You see, he just didn’t have any to give.”

Similar to Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes, Kane builds up enormous wealth, amasses an abundance of possessions, builds a media empire, and competes in the political arena. Unlike Qoheleth, Kane lacks the wisdom to realize that these pursuits do not lead them where he wants them to. Kane is looking for love and happiness everywhere but where they would be found.

The mise-en-scene elements of Leland’s flashbacks follow the patterns of the ones that come before it. During Kane’s campaign speech, Kane’s facial expressions are as such that one can clearly tell he is reveling in having a captive audience. Kane is once again the focus of the energy in the room, yet not the focus of the camera. The directors refrain from capturing a close up shot of Kane standing at the podium, and instead chooses to capture Kane in the larger context of his relation to the room. He is always in the shot with other people, and the room is filled with deep shadows. He wears a prominent piece of jewelry on his chest, a gold medallion shaped in a “K”. The K is shining and straight as could be, which matters only because this little trinket becomes an emotional barometer for Kane’s ego. The directors chose to focus frequently on the displeasure of Kane’s wife Emily, who is supporting her husband but clearly unhappy. This scene is in contrast to moments later, when Jim Gettys is threatening to expose

Kane's affair in order to get him to drop out, the spotlight is directly on Kane, and his face is center frame. In that scene, Kane chooses to rip his family apart, in addition to his political career, instead of letting go of the love of the people. His affair is exposed, his family broken, and all for an electoral defeat.

Kane's quest for the love of the people hurts ends up hurting not only his first wife and son, but his second wife and best friend as well. His friend, Leland, asks to move to the Chicago office after Kane's electoral defeat. After marrying his mistress, an opera singer, Kane pushed her to further her singing career. After her opening performance, a drunk Leland starts a draft of a sub-par review of her performance, and Kane finishes it. This betrayal, along with other abuses, cause Susan Kane to attempt at taking her own life. The attempt fails, and Kane lets her spend her time in his mansion, occupying herself with puzzles until she is bored senseless. Like he's treated so many others, Kane tries to buy her love with expensive gifts and vacations, but never actually cares for her. Susan finally makes plans to leave Kane, and his first reaction was "but everyone around here will know". During their last conversation, Kane reveals his true state of mind. He begs her "Please Susan, you mustn't go. You can't do this to me". Her response is "I see, it's you that this is being done to. Not what this means to me". Susan sees Kane for what he really is, a man that never really learned to love someone else. After Susan leaves Kane goes into a fit of rage and, having no further need of them, smashes the numerous possessions in his bedroom. It is in that palace that Kane lives out the rest of his life, surrounded by a near priceless amount of possessions, but with no one to love and no one to love him back.

One can argue that in the end, Kane did realize where his life had gone wrong. Although Thomson never found the meaning of Kane's last words, the directors chose to show the audience the meaning. After Kane's death, when all his possessions are being destroyed or removed from his palace, the camera focuses on a wooden sled with the word "Rosebud" printed on the front, slowly burning in a fire. By showing the meaning those words rather than explaining, the film intends to spark the imagination of its viewers to come to their own conclusions about what Kane's last words meant to him. At the very least, Kane realized that his childhood home was the only place he ever felt loved. Those of us who examine Kane's life, characters and audience included, know that Kane's possessions never really healed what broke that fateful day long ago in his parents' home. Kane learned he was on the wrong path too late, but this film, being a parable, gives the audience a chance to think about how not to model their lives on Charles Kane's. As seen in Kane's life, possessions and power are independent from happiness or love. This too is the problem with the American Dream. The American Dream is an economic one and creates a society in which happiness is falsely tied to wealth. Some of the happiest cultures in the world are also the poorest. Wealth is good for alleviating suffering and want, but beyond that it has no application to happiness. Only love through meaningful relationships can create happiness and meaning in one's life.

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