

Citizen Kane



Level 3 English
The American Tragedy

“American” Tragedy

There is a body of literature that exists that people commonly refer to as The American Greats. While it cannot truly be called a tragedy (these exist only in dramatic form), many of the ‘Great American’ texts have strong tragic traits.

They deal with the society of their time and provide a commentary on the moral state of this society. Given the nature of the characters, it is easy to class them as “American Tragedy”.

There are several dramatic works that also spring to mind when discussing this style of literature, both by Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*.

Notable Authors of this period: *F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Herman Melville, Arthur Miller, Ernest Hemingway.*

Review

Below is the link to the 1941 review we read in class last period:

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/citizen-kane-review-1941-movie-998891>

The American Dream

“The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

James Truslow Adams

What has it become?

What has it become?

- A measurement of 'success'
- Materialistic
- A social ideal that inspires people to continue working and striving
- An excuse

The Critics Thoughts

“Citizen Kane” knows the sled is not the answer. It explains what Rosebud is, but not what Rosebud means. The film's construction shows how our lives, after we are gone, survive only in the memories of others, and those memories butt up against the walls we erect and the roles we play. There is the Kane who made shadow figures with his fingers, and the Kane who hated the traction trust; the Kane who chose his mistress over his marriage and political career, the Kane who entertained millions, the Kane who died alone.

Roger Ebert's review of Citizen Kane

The Tragic Hero

Hamartia

Hubris

Peripeteia

Anagnorisis

Nemesis

Hamartia

The Fatal Flaw

There is no 'one' moment that you can pinpoint hamartia in this film. Kane's fatal flaw unfolds throughout the entire narrative. He is careless about life and looks to fill his world with possessions rather than meaningful experiences.

You could argue that following the political speech and the discovery of his mistress, his words that he can "fight this alone" are his key error in judgement. In this moment, he overlooks his family and their support and believes himself invincible.

Hubris

The excessive arrogance and pride.

Kane has this in spades. Everything is his way or the highway and he cannot accept anything less than full control.

He believes, as many do when they reach a certain social status, that he is untouchable. Nothing will prevent him from achieving whatever it is that he wants to.

“Kane helped change the world...”

“...as loved and hated as any man in our lifetime.”

“It’s no trick to make a lot of money.”

“You’re making a bigger fool of yourself than I thought”

“You talk about the people as if you own them”

“You want love on your own terms”

“He was always trying to prove something”

“Everything was his idea”

“People will think...” “...what I tell them to think”

Peripeteia

The change in fortune.

Kane builds to his peak in the middle of the film. He has it all: the family, power, wealth, status and influence. He is living the American Dream.

He slowly begins to lose it all (the family, the election, his power in the media world, his friends and his second wife), eventually dying alone in his palace, surrounded simply by people who are paid to be there.

Anagnorisis

The realization that this fate is your own making.

When Kane's eyes land on the snow globe, he utters the word 'Rosebud' and proceeds a very solitary and reflective walk through the halls of his palace. We infer, at this moment when his wife has left him, he is reflecting on the materialistic state he has lived in for so many years.

The connection to the last time he possibly felt a true, wholesome joy in just experiencing something was on the sled named Rosebud, at his home with his family. He recognizes that this is now what he is missing and in pursuit of "The American Dream" he has let this truly valuable side of life slip away.

Nemesis

The final fate the character must face.

Kane dies alone in an empty palace surrounded only by paid servants. He has no one to turn to and must suffer the fact that his life, though it has left its mark on thousands, has failed to truly touch one person.

Ideas

The American Dream

Materialism

The Value of Family and Relationships

Control and Obsession

Human Nature

Like all tragic works, *Kane* is an examination of human nature. It allows us to explore the complex side of humanity without experiencing the suffering ourselves. We gain moral knowledge from looking into how and why these characters met a tragic conclusion and it is hoped that we take a good look at ourselves, our own choices and consider the consequences of future choices.

We experience relief (this is the catharsis) that this story is not our story and gain the understanding that there is time to write something different for ourselves should we chose to.

The warning is clear: we must be aware of ourselves and our natures. To be ignorant is to risk far too much. It is to risk all.

Is *Citizen Kane* a work of tragedy?