

FORGOTTEN CLASSICS: FAMILY, WEALTH, AND MODERNITY IN *THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS*

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The Magnificent Ambersons engages with issues of technological and social change in modernity. But it is also a very human story, focusing on a single family, detailing the lives of its members as change rocks their way of life

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When 25-year-old Orson Welles' first film was released, it was met with immediate critical success. 1941's *Citizen Kane*, though not initially a commercial success, in time became a legendary film, regularly topping lists of the greatest movies ever made. It tells the life story of media tycoon Charles Foster Kane, a fictitious character based on William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, Samuel Insull, and Harold McCormick. Amazingly, Welles co-wrote, produced, directed, and starred in *Citizen Kane*. Despite his young age, this man was able to spearhead the movie that is looked to whenever a film viewer wants to see the American story.

However, Welles never considered *Kane* to be his masterpiece. That honor was bestowed on his second film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which was released just a year after *Kane*. Detailing the downfall of a fabulously wealthy family in a Midwestern American town—never named in the novel—at the turn of the 20th century, the film showed Welles at the height of his power. From the moment the movie's opening scene fades in from darkness, the viewer knows that he is watching not just a piece of entertainment, but a work of art.

<https://youtu.be/ND1X594F1wY>

Despite *The Magnificent Ambersons*'s place in the canon of film history, you will never be able to watch it. That is because the movie studio that released it, RKO, thought the ending wasn't 'happy' enough, and therefore completely re-cut the film, excising over an hour and bastardizing Welles' vision. The removed scenes were destroyed, and there were no other copies. Like the Colossus of Rhodes and Sutherland's Churchill, it is lost forever.

However, unlike *Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons* was not an original story from Welles' own imagination. Instead, it was based on the 1918 novel of the same name by Indiana author Booth Tarkington. This book we thankfully still have with us, and, though it of course lacks the film version's audiovisual nature, it is a phenomenally written tale which provides readers with the chance to consider family, wealth, and urbanity within the context of modernity.

Magnificent Ambersons, minuscule George

At the beginning of the novel, the Amberson family is fabulously wealthy. Unlike many other such families, the Ambersons are nowhere near centers of power like Washington, DC, Boston, or New York. Instead, they live in a small Midwestern town, serving as the center of gravity for everyone living in the area. The patriarch of the family, Major Amberson, owns much land in the city and builds a stunning mansion for himself and his family. The home is ostentatiously adorned, even featuring cast iron outdoor sculptures of figures like Minerva.

The Ambersons are the kind of family that does not need to *do* anything professionally; they need only manage their wealth. True, from time to time they will have a family member work as a senator in Washington, DC, but that is for the position's usefulness, not its pay. The best members of the family belong to a distinctly American aristocracy, taking on responsibilities to help their community despite having no formal obligation to do so. Like any true aristocrat, they have a sense that they have valuing being someone over doing something. However, they find it difficult to instill this kind of *noblesse oblige* in

their clan's youngest member, the protagonist of the novel, George Amberson Minafer.

George, the grandson of Major Amberson, can be understood only within the context of his family, especially his mother. Isabel Amberson Minafer, the boy's mother, was a belle as a young woman, turning the head of every young man who saw her. She had two notable suitors, Eugene Morgan and Wilbur Minafer. As you've no doubt surmised from her eventual surname, she chose the latter. Her choice was made, however, more out of annoyance at Eugene over a mistake than out of any kind of healthy judgement. Isabel never had any real love for her husband Wilbur, and thus she lavished all her love and affection on their only offspring, George. As a result, as a young boy George was clearly taught that he could do no wrong—leading him to get away with quite a lot of wrongdoing.

As a result of this upbringing, George develops a sense of superiority without any *noblesse oblige*. Instead of valuing being good over doing a job, he thinks that he himself simply *is* better than people who work. When a young lady asks him what he hopes to do after college, he is not so much bemused as he is disgusted and insulted. Tarkington describes him as "being sincerely annoyed by a suggestion which showed how utterly she failed to comprehend the kind of person he was." He eventually responds to her by bitterly gesturing towards the professionals nearby and saying:

Just look at 'em! ... That's a fine career for a man, isn't it! Lawyers, bankers, politicians! What do they get out of life, I'd like to know! What do they ever know about real things? Where do they ever get?

On first reading, it may seem as though George's point is a noble one; well-used leisure time is, in the view of most ancient and medieval philosophers and theologians, a higher thing than time spent laboring. However, this is not George's point. He does not wish to spend his time in study and contemplation. He does not even want to spend his time serving others in ways only the wealthy can. Instead, he wishes to laze about, enjoying himself, and be admired. Morally, George remains a bratty child well into adulthood.

With this kind of a protagonist, some readers might be turned away from picking up the novel, but George is not a static character. The experience of love and of the changing times work their effects on him. And besides, even when George is acting horribly, the novel is deeply enjoyable, and it allows readers to reflect on the changing nature of society in modernity. *The Magnificent Ambersons* focuses on George, but the story it tells is a much larger one. Though tragic, this story is a powerful one and, in Tarkington's hands, a beautiful one.

Spreading and darkening

Just like in Orson Welles' film adaptation, Tarkington's novel begins with a captivating description of the Amberson's town from the 1870s as it grew and changed into a bustling city in the 20th century. The town is built (almost literally) around the Ambersons and their fortune. As Tarkington puts it, the Ambersons' "splendour lasted throughout all the years that saw their Midland town spread and darken into a city."

This "spreading and darkening" occurs both literally and metaphorically. Like virtually every un-walled city in modernity, the Ambersons' midland town has no easily apprehensible form, and thus its growth is sprawling and disordered. In addition, the coming of factories blackens everything from the skies to the buildings. A similar effect occurs in men's relationships (and maybe even souls) as the city grows. At the beginning of the novel, there is a clear unity to the town, particularly a social unity. As the novel puts it, "all the women who wore silk or velvet knew all the other women who wore silk or velvet." This example, of course, refers only to the well-to-do, but it is clear that this scale of relationship spans the whole town.

In addition, the relationship with time was different in the early days of the town. In the opening chapter, Tarkington describes how people riding on mule cars were in no hurry to get where they were going, and were thus far more courteous to other passengers:

A lady could whistle to it from an upstairs window, and the car would halt at once and wait for her while she shut the window, put on her hat and cloak, went downstairs, found an umbrella, told the 'girl' what to have for dinner, and came forth from the house. The previous passengers made little objection to such gallantry on the part of the car: they were wont to expect as much for themselves on like occasion. In good weather the mule pulled the car a mile in a little less than twenty minutes, unless the stops were too long; but when the trolley-car came, doing its mile in five minutes and better, it would wait for nobody. Nor could its passengers have endured such a thing, because the faster they were carried the less time they had to spare! In the days before deathly contrivances hustled them through their lives, and when they had no telephones—another ancient vacancy profoundly responsible for leisure—they had time for everything: time to think, to talk, time to read, time to wait for a lady!

That being said, change has been central to this town's story since the beginning. Unlike centuries-old towns with settled ways of life, this town is American, and it was thus founded in modernity. Speed of change and the dictates of fashion exert a strong influence on the town. The opening chapter describes the changes that slowly but constantly occurred, with people changing hats, dances, and styles of address.

The speed of these changes is constantly increasing. This is something that we, living in the 21st century, can understand. News comes at us more and more quickly with every passing year, and every year there are at least five new supposedly ground-breaking apps and websites with which we must familiarize ourselves. At the same time, the Ambersons' city has to integrate a single invention that completely remodeled its physical surroundings and ways of life: the automobile.

One of the characters in the novel, Eugene, is the prototypical man of the early 20th century: an inventor and manufacturer. Profoundly dedicated to his craft, he develops a smooth-running automobile that takes the city by storm. He is lauded from many quarters, but he is simultaneously unsure of the effects of his labor. Eugene, making his money from

'doing things,' seems to see that invention, industrialization, and modernity encourage us to value *doing* over *being*, and thus to lose a sense of leisure.

When confronted by George with the accusation that the automobile is hurting the nation, Eugene is not defensive. Instead, he responds reflectively:

With all their speed forward[, automobiles] may be a step backward in civilization—that is, in spiritual civilization. It may be that they will not add to the beauty of the world, nor to the life of men's souls. I am not sure. But automobiles have come, and they bring a greater change in our life than most of us suspect. They are here, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They are going to alter war, and they are going to alter peace. I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles; just how, though, I could hardly guess. But you can't have the immense outward changes that they will cause without some inward ones, and it may be that George is right, and that the spiritual alteration will be bad for us. Perhaps, ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend the gasoline engine, but would have to agree with him that automobiles "had no business to be invented."

Living a century later, we see that Eugene's concerns were far from groundless. Though it is highly convenient, the automobile has radically transformed our outer and inner lives. This transformation has, I would propose, been largely for ill. While the car has made it far easier to, for instance, visit an ailing neighbor or elderly relative, it has also contributed to a culture in which doing such things is far less valued.

Tarkington's novel, which won him a Pulitzer Prize, engages with these and many other issues of technological and social change in modernity. But at the same time, it is a very human story, focusing on a single family, detailing the lives of its members as change rocks their way of life.

Though it is a tragedy that the full form of Orson Welles' film adaptation has been lost forever, there is something fitting about this fact. Tarkington's novel details a world that is no longer with us and indicates many of the reasons that world is gone. However, this does not mean that we are stuck with every horrible aspect of the world modernity foists upon us. Though we are unlikely to see a future without cars and iPhones, we can interrogate the roles these and other creations of modernity play in our lives. We may not rule history, but we can, at least, aspire to a certain kind of self-rule. Our lives need not be dominated by driving and scrolling, and they might be improved by time spent with a good novel. Might I suggest *The Magnificent Ambersons*?