

# Lovers in citizen kane and the lady from shanghai: a comparison



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Orson Welles' films *Citizen Kane* and *The Lady from Shanghai* each pivot on a central pair of lovers. Despite the differences of the movies, each set of main characters share a set of characteristics. Both pairs of lovers (Susan Alexander and Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*, and Elsa Bannister and Michael O'Hara in *The Lady from Shanghai*) contain a powerful person and a less-powerful person; thus, the dynamics of power, desire, love, ambition, and evil form similar patterns in each couple. Though on the surface these people appear to be dissimilar, not only in sex but in position in life and temperament, the underlying motivations and the outcomes from those motivations are much alike. Orson Welles explores the idea of power and manipulation in sexual relationships in each film. Berg and Eskine, in their article on Kane, explain that "Thematically, Welles was always interested in power and love - and failure. Contrary to the conventions of the Hollywood success story with its happy ending...Welles was determined to make a 'failure story.'" (Berg and Eskine, 54). This kind of failure of not only love, but of ambition, is a theme in both Kane and Lady. The excess of power on one side of a relationship ruins any chance of success, Welles seems to be saying. This exploration of power and love, and the consequences on relationships and ambition, direct the stories of both films. In both films, the more-powerful lover is the "point" in a love triangle. In *Citizen Kane*, Charles Kane is married, unhappily, to a politically and socially advantageous woman. Emily Kane, we are lead to believe, might not have been the true love of Charles, but rather a charming and pretty high-society political asset. The beginning scene of the breakfast-table sequence leads us to believe there may have been youthful affection between the couple, but that the relationship deteriorated into a marriage only of form. Charles stays married

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to Emily for the sake of his son and his political career. Not only would divorce from any woman ruin his political chances (in that respect Emily has “got something on” Charles), but Emily has powerful relations who could scuttle Charles’ career. The bond of marriage, for the high-powered character in Kane, is therefore power, not love. Similarly, in *The Lady from Shanghai*, the Bannister marriage is based on power and domination rather than love. Elsa is the character with power, having both money and the control of others through her deviousness; she does not love Arthur, her husband. As Michael asks her, “What has your husband got on you?” The question is never answered, but from the context of the film, it is obvious that either Bannister knows of her sordid past in the Far East, holds her gambling debts, or has some other way to keep her married to him. It is a more overt example of the kind of hostage-marriage that Charles has with Emily. Both Charles and Elsa are in marriages that they cannot break, which provides not only the tension necessary for an effective love triangle, but a plot point showing a further example of the helplessness of the less-powerful characters, Susan and Michael. Susan Alexander is the more extreme case of the powerless character. Young and naive, she happens upon Charles by accident. After the initial welcoming of him into her room in the boardinghouse, she does not pursue him, but rather allows Charles’ advances. When confronted with his status as not only a married man but also a political opportunist for whom she is a dangerous liability, she has a hysterical and self-protective reaction. It is clear that she does care for Charles; indeed, Kane was “drawn to her because, unaware of his fabulous wealth and power, she liked him for himself” (Berg and Eskine 53). She is completely unaware that she holds the power to break up not only a high-

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profile marriage, but also jeopardize a political and business career. Her power is entirely accidental, and not wielded directly by her, but rather by the people around her. Charles' marriage is broken not by her, but by the sensationalist media and by the accidental death of Emily and Charles, Jr. Susan is awarded to Charles almost as a consolation prize, with the marriage of the two the only option, after Emily's death, to attempt to repair Charles shattered public image. The relationship between them is never equal. Susan even says, on the first night of their meeting " I'm awful ignorant, but I guess you know that." Thus, it is not only her relative innocence that renders her powerless, but her own admission of intellectual inferiority. The powerlessness and naïveté of Michael O'Hara is better disguised than Susan's, partially because he is a male character. Naremore calls him a " naïve vagabond" (126), but it appears from the first scenes that he has a masculine, even brutish kind of innocence. He rescues Elsa from several thugs with his fists; as Goldfish says of him in the Sailors' Hall " Mike's got a lot of blarney, but he knows how to hurt a man when he wants to." It is a bit of a red herring thrown to the audience, which may be beginning to think that Michael will turn out to be a strong enough man to get himself out of the mess he has already warned us about. But there is a double message; like Susan Alexander, he admits to us in the beginning of the film, and several times thereafter, " I am a fool." On the surface, Michael appears physically larger and more powerful than all of the other men (Grisby, the handicapped Arthur Bannister, Goldfish, Broome), and he certainly throws his weight around. But essentially he is an admired and petted child - one coveted for various reasons by the other characters but initiates or controls none of the action himself. For Elsa he is a sexual amusement and a tool in the

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complicated double-cross she has concocted to rid herself of both Grisby and Arthur. Arthur uses him as amusement for his wife (a substitute child, perhaps, or at least a man whom his wife admires that, through employment, he is able to control – and Arthur is therefore able to control his wife by extension) and also as part of his plan to entrap his wife and divorce-proof their marriage. Grisby uses Michael as part of the scheme with Elsa, and also, it appears, for his own deranged amusement. All of them use Michael as a legal scapegoat and as a foil for their various levels of distrust and dysfunction. It is as if they feed off his youth, strength, honesty, and innocence. In Citizen Kane, the manipulation and control of Susan's life and career by Charles shows his high status. Charles takes her small singing ability and uses it as a new ambition for himself. "An outgrowth from his journalism, Kane's politics were both progressive and domineering, as if each of his life's tasks tripped a mechanism that mitigated against the full acceptance of his being – by himself or others. The destructive nature of his quest to manage the public – via the opera career of his second wife, Susan – calcified Kane's character and worked to isolate him from all that made him alive" (Castle, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/45/kane.htm>). "We're going to be a great opera star," Charles says on the day of his and Susan's wedding, rather than "she's going to be a great opera star". Susan's talent is merely a commodity to be used by Charles. Charles' control over Susan is more overt than Elsa's control over Michael, but Elsa's control is no less effective. Throughout the film, Michael does what Elsa wants, or what he thinks Elsa wants. He seems to lose any kind of control over himself, in action or in morality. He collapses psychologically "as his last illusions are stripped away"; not the man he thought he was, his moral center, weakened, <https://assignbuster.com/lovers-in-citizen-kane-and-the-lady-from-shanghai-a-comparison/>

cannot “ maintain the authority or power it once had” (Castle, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/45/fake.htm>). He also is a slave to Elsa through his own desire. He would not have taken up the cruise through the Panama Canal if not for his desire for Elsa, and through this personal weakness she controls him in every other way. The only thing that would possibly have convinced him to follow Grisby’s fantastic scheme was the desire for money to provide for Elsa, rather than any greed for himself. Likewise, Susan’s inability to resist Charles’ manipulation, and her lack of confidence in her own worth and intelligence, makes Susan a pawn of Charles for a large part of the film. She never had ambitions to opera stardom, and even laughs at her mother for supposing that she should. She compromises morality the first time she meets Charles by asking an unknown man into her room. She does not seem to have any will of her own when it comes to Charles—until, of course, the end. Susan and Michael’s status as the outsider in Charles’ and Elsa’s worlds also strikes a similar note in the stories. Susan is a complete outsider to the high-society world of Charles, Emily, and Jed Leland. Not only is her social standing and education level different, but the very sound of her voice proclaims her foreignness. Susan speaks with what sounds like a cross between a Brooklyn accent and a south-side Chicago twang, in sharp contrast to the slightly Southern genteel voice of Jedidiah, Emily’s beautiful and entirely correct diction, and the measured, urbane tones of Charles. Similarly, Michael comes in as a complete outsider into the world of Arthur, Grisby, and Elsa. He is completely different socially, and, quite literally, is from a foreign country, his Irish brogue separating him from Elsa (who, inexplicably, was raised in China by Russian parents, and somehow acquired an American accent), Arthur and Grisby. Michael starts out as an outsider, <https://assignbuster.com/lovers-in-citizen-kane-and-the-lady-from-shanghai-a-comparison/>

and is brought in by the machinations of Arthur and Elsa, but he never becomes a part of the group. During the picnic scene, Grisby and Arthur and Elsa sit exchanging insults in their beach chairs, and when Michael is called to join them, he lectures them with his parable of the sharks. Michael, though employed by the Bannisters, makes it clear that he is not part of their group. He never sits down with them (with the exception of when he gets Arthur drunk in the sailor bar), or joins in their conversation other than being questioned by them. Even at the end of the film, while Michael watches Elsa die, “ Michael is in the frame, but out of focus in the background, stressing his status as the outsider” (Berg and Erskine 206). Susan, similarly, in the scene in her boardinghouse when Gettys and Emily confront Charlie, is an outsider of the least important kind. During this scene, Gettys, Emily, and Charles talk to each other, but never address their remarks to Susan. Even when Susan shouts and runs right up to them, saying “ But what about me?” her concerns never elicit a response. Generally Gettys, Charles, and Emily are shown in shadow in this room, while Susan remains in the light most of the time. It is as if she is the only person lit because she is not privy to the shadowy world of compromise and deals that Gettys and Charles and Emily inhabit. She understands little of the conversation, and her role in it the least of all. Later, at Xanadu, she is almost always shown alone. She sits for hours employed in the fruitlessly idle pursuit of jigsaw puzzles, and is never shown with her guests or even enjoying the comfort of one friend. In her scenes with Charles he either listens to her ranting, or gives her lectures or decisions as from on high. Susan may live in Xanadu and bear Charles’ name, but she never has become part of his world or even truly part of the house. And in the end, of course, she leaves that house, and leaves Charles

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alone in his own world. The seemingly magical aura given off by both Charles and Elsa is another proof of their high-powered status. Charles builds a castle “like the home of a sorcerer,” (Naremore 55), and has “fantastic wealth.” Charles Foster Kane is not treated like any other human being on his death, but has to be investigated by Thompson and the “News on the March” team. His enigmatic status makes him special and somehow other than human. He builds a home, Xanadu, patterned on a fantasy from a Coleridge poem. His stature, both physical and figurative, separates him from everyone else in the film. From the beginning, when he is made different from other boys by not only his wealth but by being sent away to be educated apart from his parents, he is somehow special and different from the rest of the world. Elsa, also, is portrayed as semi-magical: “In The Lady from Shanghai [Elsa] sings the siren song of gold, or compromise...and Welles’s romantic fool follows” (Haskell, 204). Not only the reference to her status as Circe, the mythical enchantress who turned men into swine, or at the very least a Siren, a nymph who lured men to their deaths, sets her apart as quasi-magical. When everyone else is sweating in the heat of the tropics, Elsa remains unflinchingly cool and coiffed. While the rest of characters fret and rant and rave, Elsa always remains calm. When Elsa sings, Michael cannot help but be drawn up to her, as if in a trance. By contrast, Susan and Michael are both completely human and down to earth. If anything, they are artistic failures. Michael has pretensions of being a novelist, but supports himself by being a sailor. Susan, less ambitious and arguably even less talented, has a small talent for singing which she had no intention of using as a career. Again, these characters stress that they are “a fool” or “just a girl” or “a dope”, and are easily led and duped by the power characters - either for the high-powered

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character's own unfulfilled ambitions or devious plot. Michael sweats right along with Arthur and Grisby, and Susan ends up a penniless alcoholic. Thus, human faults and foibles are amply represented in Susan and Michael. By analyzing the meeting scenes between Elsa and Michael, and Susan and Charles, this pattern of high power/low power is further revealed. Michael pursues Elsa, whom he admires while she is riding a carriage in the park, in a rather supplicating rather than dominating way. He tells her, after offering her a cigarette, "It's me last one, don't disappoint me." Even though he "rescues" her from the muggers in the park, it is clear that she is in power all along. She has a gun in her purse, and, rather than using it on her attackers, leaves it in the purse for Michael to find. Though she strokes his male ego enough to make it appear that he is rescuing her in the sex-specific way that is required by romantic convention, there is little doubt that the person in power is Elsa. Furthermore, Michael does not know Elsa's surname or her high status as Mrs. Bannister until after he has left her. He learns from the men in the garage that she is the wife of "the world's greatest criminal lawyer." A similar scenario takes place between Susan and Charles. Again, the couple meets in the street, but with another power-bending twist of having Susan laughing at the mud-spattered Charles. In a slightly suggestive moment, she offers him hot water and brings him to her room. The power, like with Michael in the meeting scene with Elsa, appears to be lying with Susan, but the situation is soon reversed. Charles is certainly not as devious as Elsa, but, just as Elsa took a chance meeting and turned it into an acquisition of a human being, Charles does the same. Charles takes a liking to Susan, and she to him, and (as stated above) like Michael of Elsa, Susan doesn't yet know how powerful Charles actually is. It appears to be a

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meeting of equals, but as soon as the knowledge of the relationship between Susan and Charles becomes public, Charles utterly controls Susan's life. She could have escaped from the sphere of Charles' influence, as Michael could have, but both of Susan and Michael instead remain in the thrall of their high-power lovers. This leads, of course, to their near ruin. The parallel of attempted suicide by drugs is more than a coincidence for Michael and Susan. Michael grabs at Arthur's pills in despair at the coming verdict against him, driven to it not only by the horrible mess he is in but also by Elsa's tacit suggestion. Susan is driven to overdosing on sleeping powder because Charles will not stop driving her to become his "great opera star". It is their embroilment in the high-power lovers' plots that drive these low-power characters to the point of self destruction. It is significant, too, that the method of suicide is a passive rather than active one. These low-status characters do not attempt to shoot themselves, or throw themselves off a bridge - they take the "cowardly" method of poison, and, in fact, of soporifics to end their lives as painlessly as possible. In both cases they fail. The high-power characters in these films not only control the actions and emotions of their low-power lovers, but also appear to almost have the power of life and death over them. Cinematically, the power-up-power-down duality is shown quite obviously in both films. Upon Elsa and Michael's first meeting, she is, though inches shorter than him, shown above him riding in the carriage. Charles' obvious advantage of height and bulk over Susan provides a built-in visual cue to power, but lighting of Charles also shows his power. In the scenes after they are married, Charles (mostly shown above her, standing while she is seated on the floor, as in the hotel room or the picnic, or at a table in the jigsaw puzzle scene) is often shown in the dark, <https://assignbuster.com/lovers-in-citizen-kane-and-the-lady-from-shanghai-a-comparison/>

while Susan is harshly lit. The darkness shows Charles's ability to hide his feelings, as Susan is never able to, and the power of being able to see Susan clearly while she cannot see him. In *The Lady from Shanghai*, whenever Elsa can be raised above Michael, she is, such as in the scene on the boat when she lies on top of the cabin, or when she is seated on the high rock on the shore while Michael watches from the boat. The final scenes of each character show that, while nominally free of their high-status lovers, the low-status characters are forever tied to their controlling partners. Michael leaves Elsa on the point of death, but walks down the pier ruminating that it may take until his old age to completely forget her. She has forever changed Michael, and he is inextricably linked to her. He does the final walking away, for he could have stayed and tried (probably in vain) to save her, but it is not the liberating kind of release. He will have to live the rest of his life with the knowledge of what he has not only done to her at the end of her life, but what he has done for her during his lifetime. He is less of a man for having known her. Susan, likewise, though she wielded some power by actually performing the abandonment of Charles, was destroyed by that very action. She does not survive and prosper after leaving the control of Charles. Even the money she had from him is "lost", and she is reduced to circumstances considerably more grim than when she met Charles. After Charles, she has only alcohol and the remnants of a mediocre singing career. Neither Michael nor Susan gains anything from their association with their high-power lovers. They survive them—but, as shown in the lives of Michael and Susan, that seems hardly to be an advantage.

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