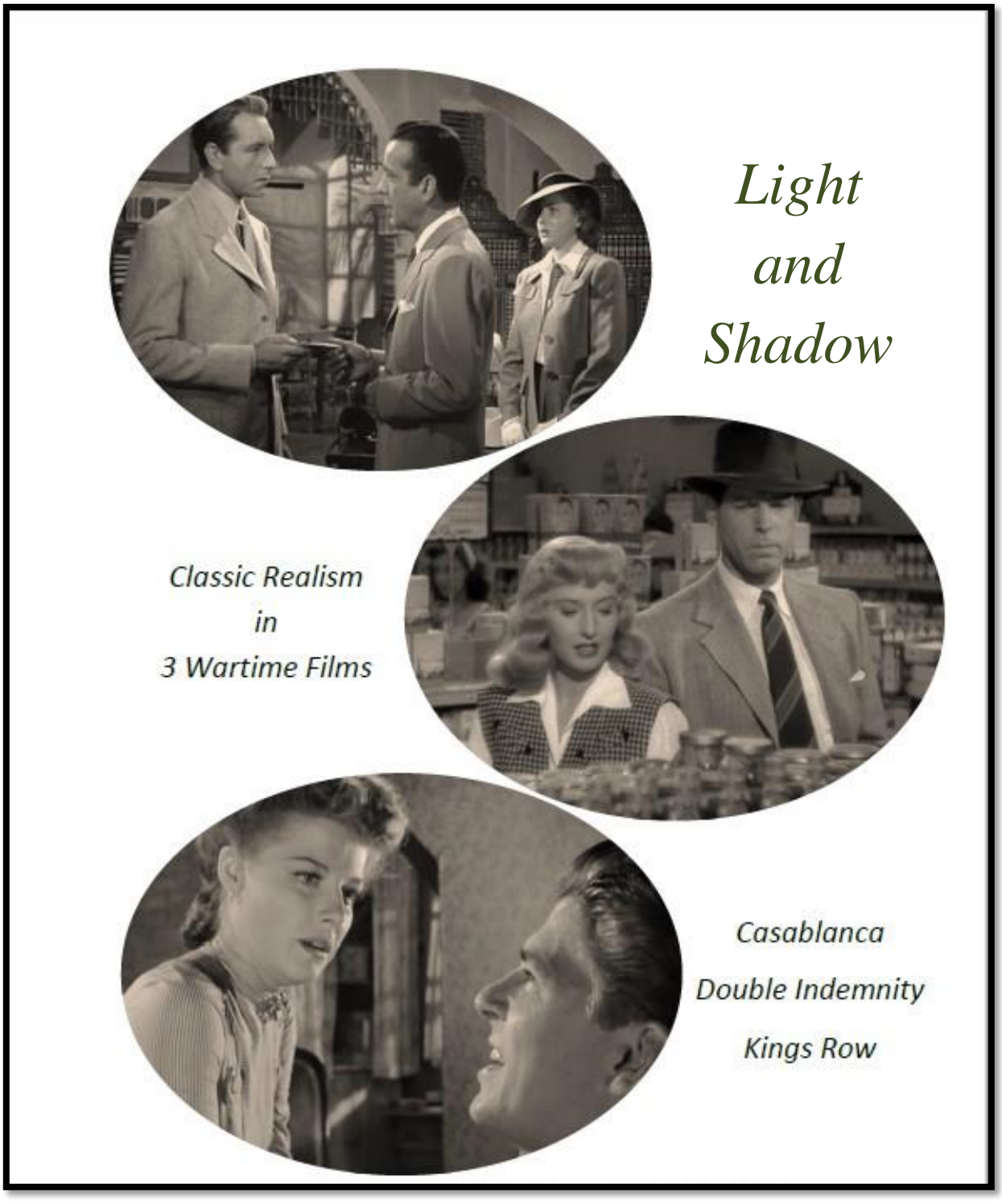


Adapted from *Radical Choices in the Crossroads of Life* ©2020

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Casablanca



Casablanca was released for Thanksgiving of 1942, eleven months after the attack on Pearl Harbor that took place on December 7, 1941. The audience shares with the performers a sense of the world in crisis. As a study in classic realism, the moral choices of the primary protagonist, played by Humphrey Bogart, are at the very center of the film's narrative. In classic storytelling human beings have the capacity for moral choice in matters of life and death. The drama teaches us that we are not merely victims of forces beyond our control. No matter how dark the circumstances, moral choice is a fundamental capacity of our human nature.

Film Facts: *Casablanca*



Starring: Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Paul Henreid, Claude Rains, Sidney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre, Dooley Wilson, S. Z. Sakall

***Director*:** Michael Curtiz

Producer: Hal Wallis

Screenwriters: The Epstein brothers and Ken Koch

Viewing Time: 102 minutes

Casablanca dramatizes the centrality of moral choice in moments of historic crisis. The film reminds us that human beings are the only creatures on earth who are capable of thought and authentic freedom to accept moral responsibility. The meaning of moral choice we can grasp with our moral intuition is captured by 20th century philosopher Jacques Maritain, in this quote below:

"It is the human person who enters into society ordained to the absolute and summoned to a destiny beyond time."

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Film Critics Corner

Dialogue, Direction and Performance: What Does It Mean to be a Human Person?

Casablanca's characters live out deep thematic truths of universal human experience. Because the screenwriters were often writing pages of dialogue on the set, the film has a quality of spontaneity. Life is unfolding in the moment in the story as it does in real life. This mystique might have been a deciding factor in *Casablanca* winning the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1942. *Casablanca* brings to life the cultural ethos that marked the historic period of World War Two. This ethos says plainly that we have a moral responsibility to each other that is not optional. We are hardwired as social beings and our moral choices cannot be determined by our feelings and emotions in the moment.

"You must remember this" - The lives of three people deeply intertwined in a world at war



Rick tells Ilsa that he has a job to do. "*It doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world."*



The life and death decisions made by these characters give us timeless lessons in moral action. *It is a fragile world, and, in every season, human beings must make the inevitable moral choices that life presents to them.*

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Classic Cinema as the Definitive Collaborative Art Form: *Casablanca's* Supporting Cast

In classic movie storytelling the supporting players provide insight into our human condition. They provide crucial understanding of "the way things are" in the world and what makes the lead characters do what they do. The audience grows to understand the real character of Humphrey Bogart's Rick through his interactions with each of these five characters.



From Sam, Dooley Wilson's character, we learn more about the human capacity for deep friendship. Sidney Greenstreet's persona lets us know by contrast how idealistic Rick is. Greenstreet tries to hire Dooley Wilson away from Bogie, but it is *no dice.*



Peter Lorre was a good friend of Bogie's in real life and appeared with him in *The Maltese Falcon*. Peter Lorre's character has the letters of transit that frame the narrative. We witness this murderer's desperation.



Claude Rains portrays the cynical and self-serving official whose character grows in virtue through his friend Rick's example.



Even though Rick presents himself as a cynical opportunist, the expression on the face of beloved character actor S. Z. Sakall tells us that Bogart's character in his interior life is a man of virtue.

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Human Nature and Moral Freedom in a World Crisis: The Ideas in the Images

The film reveals human realities that viewers can recognize as true. We see on the screen a truth about our human nature: we are social beings, not atomized individuals tossed around by forces beyond our control. The airplane that flies its passengers to freedom in America shows Rick's café as a kind of safe but temporary haven in a world in crisis.





The couple longing to be on that plane appear later in a crucial scene. Rick displays the moral authority his character requires for the story to make sense. We learn about the magnanimity that is central to his character.

This scene lets the audience know Rick's integrity prevails even in matters that do not *affect him personally*. He arranges for the couple to win their passage to America at the gambling table, thus preserving the young woman's dignity as well. This choice to help a desperate couple is a foreshadowing of the ultimate life-changing decision he will make.





The famous scene when Paul Henreid as Viktor Lazlo risks his life to lead the band in playing the French national anthem. In this scene we are reminded that there is *an objective moral order in the universe where each of us has an essential role to play.*

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Post-Viewing Discussion: *Making Decisions on the Better Side of our Human Nature*

Gradually it became clear to me that the line separating good and evil runs not through states, nor between classes, nor even between political parties, but right through the center of each heart. And every human heart.

~Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (Russian philosopher and author of The Gulag Archipelago)



This quote from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn can be kept in mind as a guide to moral decision making in any age and concretely it is witnessed in *Casablanca.* Rick and Ilsa are challenged to channel their emotions and their reason together for the common good in a world at war.

-----What virtues are Rick and Ilsa called upon to practice?

Moral Choices: Sentiment vs. Convection



The Inspector uses the word "sentimentalist" to describe Rick's character. The word *sentimentalist* implies a moral sensibility based on mere feelings and emotins. Does anyone risk their lives for a good cause acting on sentiment? By our own human experiece we know people do risk their lives for deeply held *convictions about common truths.*

Rick's Moral Choice: Classic Realism vs. Utiiltarianism



Human beings have an ability to reason, to choose good over evil and some people are unexpectedly better at choosing the good than even they originally thought.

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Double Indemnity

A Film Noir Tale of Love Gone Wrong

Double Indemnity is famous in film history for becoming the film that defined the *Film Noir* genre. In *Film Noir*, love between a man and a woman almost invariably goes wrong. In this story an insurance salesman just happens to visit a potential client and winds up plotting murder with the man's wife. The narrative of the screenplay is celebrated for its brilliance by film critics and fans across the decades. The genius of the script lies in the simultaneous depiction of Walter's subjective interior state of mind and his account of the objective acts of evil he has joined in with Phyllis.



Walter reveals his very soul to his colleague and close friend Keyes through a Dictaphone Dictating his account of the murder he has committed with Phyllis Dietrichson he says:

Yes, I killed him. I killed him for money - and a woman - and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. Pretty, isn't it?

The story is told in flashbacks. Barbara Stanwyck plays Phyllis, an evil woman determined to get what she wants.

And nobody's pulling out. We went into it together, and we're coming out at the end together. It's straight down the line for both of us, remember?



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Film Facts: *Double Indemnity*



***Year*:** 1944

Starring: Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson

Viewing Time: 107 Minutes

Setting: Los Angeles

***Academy Award Nominations* (1944)**

- Best Picture
- Best Actress in a Leading Role: Barbara Stanwyck
- Best Director: Billy Wilder
- Best Writing, Screenplay: Raymond Chandler, Billy Wilder
- Best Cinematography, Black-and-White: John F. Seitz
- Best Sound, Recording: Loren L. Ryder (Paramount SSD)
- Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture: Miklos Rozsa



Los Angeles police officers are on the set of the original Los Angeles supermarket where the conspirators plot the murder



Major scenes in *Double Indemnity* were filmed in this Southern California Spanish stucco residence that still stands today.

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Film Critics Corner

Dialogue, Direction and Performance in *Double Indemnity*



Some years ago, when introducing *Double Indemnity* on Turner Classic Movies, Robert Osborne, the late and very much loved host for TCM, explained how it took *eight years* for the Paramount studio to negotiate a script that satisfied all the film's stakeholders. The stakeholders included director Billy Wilder and his screen writing partner Raymond Chandler, original author James M. Cain, Paramount Studio executives, and the Production Code Administration. Why would it take eight years for these stakeholders to unite behind a script for *Double Indemnity*? The answer is found in the complex pattern of relationships that existed in this Hollywood era between the Production Code Office and the studios. The challenging task for filmmakers would be the adaptation of morally ambiguous novels, plays and short stories for the screen. Among other factors, the Production Code came about because the art form of the motion picture is by its, nature accessible to a *mass audience.* Parents in this era might bring their children along to movies aimed at adult audiences, even *Double Indemnity.*

In the best of classic films, the lead characters embody a believable moral authenticity

In the original story, writer James M. Cain has his murderers, Phyllis and Walter, unrepentant as they commit suicide on a cruise ship. *What happens to these characters in the film is quite different.* The Code had become operational in 1934. By 1944 the studios and the Production Code Office had structured their relationships into a predictable pattern centered around the screenplay. In the philosophical sense, at the *core* of the Production Code was the classical concept of characters *acting with the capacity for choosing right from wrong*. The Code, in both letter and spirit, proposed that right and wrong exist and human beings have the capacity to know the difference. Under Code principles, the *moral of the story* was expressed through the actions of the lead characters.

James M. Cain's original story has sleazy characters that start and end badly. The idea of Fred MacMurray's character, Walter Neff, telling his own story of the crime he has committed was a breakthrough in the Film Noir genre. The film's narrative is classic realism in contrast to the naturalistic account in the novel. The character of Keyes, played brilliantly by Edward G. Robinson, becomes the figure of moral authority that affirms good over evil.



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In the novel, Phyllis is a criminally insane psychopath. By contrast, in the film's final scenes, Phyllis expresses a minimal moral awareness; she agrees with Walter that they are both "rotten." *This nuanced character change reflects the idea that human beings are morally responsible for their actions*. Moral cohesion and consistency in lead characters was normative in 1944, according to the guiding principles of the Production Code.

Two Major Elements of Classic Film Noir Created in *Double Indemnity*

The audience is caught up in the drama as participants

Edward G. Robinson, who plays Keyes, explains the difference between great dramatic storytelling and mere entertainment in his autobiography, *All My Yesterdays* Robinson argues that the secret of any great drama is "*The audience must participate in the play to bring about the true art."*



With brilliant aesthetic instinct, director Billy Wilder had the idea for their car to run out of gas right after the murder is committed. Fred MacMurray expressed doubts that the audience would believe it. Yet, sure of his craft, Wilder knew this incident would build incredible tension for the audience.



In Film Noir, evil deeds can be unfolding in ordinary places in daily life

Billy Wilder found the perfect small supermarket location in Los Angeles as the scene of the covert meetings between the two conspirators. They conduct their evil business in the ordinary surroundings of a local supermarket.

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Post-Viewing Discussion: *Double Indemnity* and the Claims of Conscience

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Discuss Walter Neff's character and some of the major events that eventually make a claim on his conscience.

Shortly after the murder, Walter's soul is stirred by what he has done.

> *Suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong. It sounds crazy, Keyes, but it's true, so help me. I couldn't hear my own footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man.*



Walter risks his own life to save Zachetti.



Even though he does not like Zachetti, Walter's conscience will not allow Zachetti to be arrested for the murder he has committed

Tough, aren't you? Take the nickel. Take it and call her. She wants you to… She's in love with you. Always has been. Don't ask me why…Now beat it.

The character of Phyllis and her minimal moral awareness

Do you believe that Phyllis is sincere when she proclaims her love for Walter in the final scenes?



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A note from the film critics corner



Director Billy Wilder intuitively knew the importance of the audience being able to relate to the character of Walter Neff. He wanted Fred MacMurray to play the part of Walter because the genial actor was, in his words, "basically a good guy who was a leading man in light comedies."

Screenwriter Raymond Chandler added the vital element of first-person narrative that allows the audience to witness Walter Neff's interior life. Chandler also enlarged the character of Keyes from the original story, transforming him into the moral conscience of both the two lead characters and the audience.

For Discussion:

How does the moral integrity of Keyes impact Walter's conscience? What role does friendship play in Walter's eventual change of heart?

What are the qualities of their friendship that would make it hard for Keyes to suspect Walter?





Billy Wilder brilliantly captures the moment when Walter accepts the consequences of his evil actions. Throughout the film, Walter lights Keyes cigar. In this final scene, Keyes lights his fallen friend's cigarette.

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Explorations on Moral Truth and our Better Human Nature in *Double Indemnity*



Culture and society may change but what it means to be a human person does not change. The lasting appeal of great classic cinema lies in its enduring power to reach the human soul. Cinematic art touches us deeply when, in the words of Edward G. Robinson who plays Barton Keyes, the drama is powerful enough for the audience and the performers to be "playing together." As Robinson explains in his autobiography, *All My Yesterdays,* "The audience must participate in the play to bring about the true art." As it happened audiences then and now can participate in the drama while learning a moral lesson about good and evil.

A backstory told by film historians is that both Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray were reluctant to play these unsavory lead characters who might negatively impact their fans. The affection of movie audiences for their stars in the Golden Age is well known. We cannot help but admire Barbara Stanwyck's talent in her compelling portrayal of such an evil person as Phyllis. Film critics comment on her ability to persuade us that Phyllis really does love Walter in the final scene.

More difficult to take for the viewer is Fred MacMurray's brilliant performance as Walter Neff. From the beginning of his fatal partnership with Phyllis, we sense that here is a man who is very wrong but who is capable of redemption. In the end even after he has committed two murders, he is willing to risk his own life to save a man he does not even like.

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Kings Row

A Naturalistic Novel Becomes a Film Study in Classic Realism



The story chronicles the lives of five young people coming of age in small town America at the end of the 19th century. Ronald Reagan as Drake McHugh, Ann Sheridan as Randy Monoghan and Robert Cummings as Parris Mitchell play characters who overcome the narrow and often cruel class divisions in this small town. The central role played by the Motion Picture Production Code in this era of filmmaking ensured that Casey Robinson's screenplay would omit controversial parts of the book. Critics and fans alike are drawn to the authenticity and pathos of the book's primary theme: the mysterious nature of evil that might be hidden in small town life under the cloak of respectability and social status. In the book the characters are mainly victims of cruel fate beyond their control. In the film they become *acting persons making moral choices in the timeless struggle of good and evil.*

Film Facts: *Kings Row*



Year: 1942

Starring: Ronald Reagan, Ann Sheridan, Robert Cummings, Charles Coburn, Judith Anderson

Viewing Time: 127 minutes

Cinematographer: James Wong Howe

***Academy Award Nominations* (1943):** Best Picture, Best Director (Sam Wood), Best Cinematography, Black-and-White (James Wong Howe)

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Film Critics Corner

Kings Row: The Naturalism of the Novel and the Classic Realism of the Film

In the film version of *Kings Row,* in stark contrast with the novel, characters do not just move through the world of good and evil as if "things just happen." Screenwriter Casey Robinson allows the characters to become genuine moral actors. Unlike the novel, the film's lead characters move through the story confronting moral reality along the way An example of how the film is grounded in classic realism, as opposed to the fatalism of the novel, is seen in the events surrounding the character of Dr. Tower, played brilliantly by Claude Rains. In the novel Dr. Tower commits incest with his daughter, and then in despair and madness he murders both his wife and his daughter. In the book the author detaches the character of Dr. Tower from our moral gaze. The novel presents a man driven by Freudian forces beyond his control, a person who cannot help doing what he does. He is an experimental psychologist victimized by his own obsession with scientific explanations for human behavior. In the film, Dr. Tower still commits the evil of murdering his daughter, but he is seen as a man making this terrible choice with his free will.



Life and the Elevation of the Human Spirit – Ronald Reagan's Character, Drake McHugh

Screenwriter Robinson preserves the attractive personalities of the novel's three lead characters while creating on screen a flow of believable moral action. In the novel the characters are mostly unhappy victims of fate while in the film they are portrayed as people who experience *elevation.* Drake, Randy, and Parris rise above the evil forces that would otherwise bring them down. The events surrounding Drake McHugh, Ronald Reagan's character, are central to the story.



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The Mysterious Nature of Evil in the World



Dr. Gordon is a sadistic doctor who performs cruel and unnecessary "operations" on his helpless patients. Dr. Gordon is furious when his daughter Louise wants to marry Drake. When Drake has an accident, this evil man cuts off Drake's legs claiming that it was to save his life.



At the end of the novel, Drake dies of cancer after surviving all his other misfortunes. By contrast, the screenplay gives vision to the triumph of the human spirit, and Drake not only lives but thrives.

The Passage of Time and the Dawn of the 20th Century is Portrayed in *Kings Row*



The brilliant cinematography of James Wong Howe conveys the intangible realities of a century passing away as Parris Mitchell's grandmother goes upstairs.

King's Row's Deep Existential Themes



True love respects the person and does not use or abuse them.

Evil is sometimes hidden and must be uncovered.

Selfless love can overcome the worst of calamites that befall us.

Suffering can help us to grow stronger and closer together.

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Post-Viewing Discussion: *Central Theme - Loss and Gain in Human Life*



Discuss the events and challenges each of the three leading characters must face. Reflecting on the theme of *loss and gain in life*, how do the characters confront their challenges? How does each of them grow in virtue and overcome their weaknesses?

Parris Mitchell and the Claims of Justice in a Difficult Situation



What lesson in morality and ethics does Parris learn in his dealings with Louise?

Parris at first thinks that if he can silence Louise by putting her in an asylum, then he can keep Drake from finding out. He finally learns we cannot live by controlling the environment to suit us. He realizes that the end does not justify the means.

Randy must face the challenge of accepting her state in life, and she must also learn that we cannot shield our loved ones from the truth



In a town driven by class, status and position, Randy makes the best of what she has been given and she knows her worth as a human being. Initially she lacks the courage to allow Drake to learn this as well.



Discuss how the external factors of class and status can become ways of judging others unjustly.

How does Randy overcome her fear that Drake will not be able to face the truth?

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The Life Challenges of Drake McHugh



Although he is a playboy, Drake loves Louise Gordan and wants to marry her. This marks the beginning of Dr. Gordon's deep hatred of Drake.





Drake stands up for Parris in a crisis, an action which incurs even greater hatred from Dr. Gordan.



Drake loses a life of ease and entitlement when embezzlement wipes out all his personal wealth. Resolved to earn a living, Drake seeks a job from Randy's father.



Parris tells Drake the truth with a line from the poem "Invictus": *Under the bludgeonings of chance, my head is bloody, but unbowed*.



"Did he think my spirit was in my legs? For Pete's sake I feel fine."

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The Motion Picture Production Code, Classic Films and *Kings Row*

Part One: Historic Background on the Motion Picture Production Code

In 1929 at the request of Hollywood studios Father Daniel Lord SJ set to work on a document that became the Motion Picture Production Code. Hollywood studio executives in that time were concerned with the threat of censorship from the federal government and state and local censorship boards. With the election of FDR in 1932, there was a cultural as well as a political reset. The threat of federal censorship became very real with FDR in office. In 1934 the Code became fully operational with the establishment of the agency formally called the Production Code Administration but known generally as the Hays Office. The Hays Office was in a full partnership with the studios in the making of films from 1934 to the mid-1950s. Beginning in the late 1950s the influence of the Code in shaping the content of films gradually diminished. The balance of power tipped to Hollywood's independent producers in the early 1960s. Eventually the Code was replaced in 1968 by the ratings system still in place today.

Film historian Thomas Doherty has said the era of Hollywood's Golden Age *began with the Code and ended with its demise*. Father Lord, as the principal author of the Code, provided an understanding of the art of cinema. Lord described what is happening when we are watching a movie as *the presentation of human thought, emotion, and experience, in terms of an appeal to the soul through the senses.*

The *General Principles* of the Production Code provide a classical philosophical perspective on human nature and affirm a cinematic sensibility that is all at once cultural, aesthetic, moral, and psychological. Under the Code (which became operational in 1934), Hollywood films would be oriented to the psychological sensibilities of a *mass audience.* The Code Principles presuppose a natural law and a moral order in which all human beings are morally responsible to each other; the philosophical assumption that objective standards of right and wrong that can be known by reason. The three principles are:

1. *No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence, the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.*
2. *Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.*
3. *Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.*

Under the section on film depiction of sexuality, the Code says the following:

"The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing. And further the Code states that, *Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively".*

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Part Two: The Production Code and *Kings Row*

Classic Films under the Code seen as a *''Cultural Commodity of Great Price"'*

Film historian Thomas Doherty gives this assessment of the close alignment between the Motion Picture Production Code and the films made in the era when it was operational under the Production Code Office:

> *"Hollywood's vaunted "golden age" began with the Code and ended with its demise. An artistic flowering of incalculable cultural impact, Hollywood under the Code bequeathed the great generative legacy for screens large and small. The Code gave Hollywood the framework to thrive economically and ripen artistically and Hollywood in turn gave the Code provenance over a cultural commodity of great price . . . what makes Hollywood's classic age 'classical' is not just the film style or the studio system but the moral stakes"*

The Code and Kings Row

In studying the impact of the Production Code on the making of motion pictures in the Golden Age, *Kings Row* is a good example of how popular novels were transformed into films. What seems remarkable with hindsight is the ability of screenwriters like Casey Robinson to transform naturalistic novels like *Kings Row* into films with an elevated yet realistic view of our common humanity. An example would be the catastrophe of the life and death of Dr. Tower and his daughter Cassie. In the novel, incest is at the center of the Tower tragedy. For the film, however, the audience is left to put the pieces together while grasping the characters' human qualities.





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