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There Will Be Blood: Greed and Family

The film reel sputters and flickers at the beginning of a starlit evening. At the core of a film experience, one looks at what they do not see. The emotions underneath a character's persona are the pinnacle aspects to what we do not see. In Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film, *There Will Be Blood*, the audience is turned on their side as Daniel Day Lewis' character, Daniel Plainview, goes against the general character coherence, in that his internal desires are opposite of his external values, actions, and behaviors¹. As the film progresses, the audience is given a deeper look into a mind that is plagued with greed and corruption. Through an overly theatrical performance by Day Lewis, Anderson directs this anti-family melodrama that shows the unrelenting desire for greed and the facade of the family structure in one's fantasy of success. Points of distinction throughout the film that emphasize this theory are found within Plainview's adoption of his son, his feigned baptism, and the final interaction with Plainview's enemy- Preacher Eli Sunday.

Entering into the confines of Daniel Plainview's mind is a march placed in the murky and muddy estuaries of a black soul. Within the point of the film where Plainview is at his most human, there is still a lack of warmth and overall humanity. He takes on the role of a father to a newborn, in this the audience sees a man at a point of potential compassion. Years pass, and the viewers then sutured² into a town-hall discussion. The theatrical lighting sets the scene in a very inauthentic view where the audience is given

¹ Values, actions, and behaviors act as three assumptions or models in Character Coherence (FE. 226)

² Suture-our sense of being inserted in a specific place in the film (Corrigan, 149)

the outlook of an impure or unreliable nature to what Plainview is pitching to the townspeople. The reason the cinematography was shaped in such a way as to almost put a spotlight on Plainview was to help emphasize the inauthentic relationship between Plainview and his son, H.W. Plainview.

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan formed a theory on the father (père) separating the roles or types of a father into a three-pronged approach: the symbolic father, the imaginary father, and the real father³. What is being demonstrated in the scene of Daniel and his son is a clear representation of the symbolic father theory. The theatrical lighting as well as the pan shot from son (terrified) to father (inauthentic) are both giving reference to a father “imposing the Law” towards the son, showing clear control over a voiceless individual. The son is literally terrified to the point of speechlessness. What is absent from the “symbolic father” is the Oedipus complex, which would normally cause distance between the two. The way this rift in the relationship seems to plague the relationship is that the son has no way to communicate with the father, or distance himself from the father. While there is clearly an importance given towards their “partnership,” the point of the scene as a whole (including the discussion with the old maid in regards to where the mother is) is to show that they are not fully connected. In a sense, a triangle is broken in the family system. The father and son are represented, but without a motherly attachment, the son is forever in a perpetual state of fear and isolated thoughts.

As the scene continues, the area of space is generally fixed upon Daniel Plainview. The room is in a spotlight type of lighting, which shows the theatricality, and

³ Lacan’s view found within the text support given by Professor Mancuso (Father, 61)

inauthenticity of Plainview. A key component to the progression of this circus act that is being performed is within the point-of-view⁴ change throughout the scene. The audience is being moved from one place to another, and is being sutured into the scene by taking on the vision of one of Plainview's potential backers. What this change in position is showing is not only the suturing aspect, but also diving into the character depth⁵ of Daniel, in how his menace and greed is being covered by a layer of deception and a façade of being good and caring. The change in angles is to show his top-notch portrayal of a wholesome individual. You can take a multi-degree look at him and see that he has no faults on the surface, the cadence of his voice presents a foreign being within him, it is clear that with his forming narrative, Daniel is not whom he presents himself to be.

While the façade of a family is shown in the scene of H.W. and Plainview's partnership, the point of true disassociation of the father figure is shown in the baptism of Daniel Plainview. In the scene, an atmospheric realism⁶ presents an embodiment of the evangelical movement of the early 20th century and soon gives way to how the movement of popular trends and time itself, have no effect on Daniel. He had abandoned his son, and with his abandonment he must be washed away from his sin with the blood of the Lord. The townspeople see Daniel as he is baptized, with immense backlighting⁷ of a cross-like hole in the film, and the mise-en-scene which gives off an uncomfortable

⁴ Point of view- refers to the position from which a person, an event, or an object is seen or filmed. (Corrigan, 105)

⁵ Character depth: associated with the unique character becomes a way of referring to personal mysteries and intricacies that deepen and layer the dimensions of a complicated personality (Corrigan 226).

⁶ Atmospheric Realism establishes a convincing realism through the physical, historical, and cultural verisimilitude of the sets and settings, regardless of how the characters or story may be exaggerated or romanticized (Corrigan 71).

⁷ Backlighting is a highlighting technique that illuminates the person or object from behind; it tends to silhouette the subject (Corrigan 82).

forced religion environment- we watch Daniel again put on a persona which does not represent his true self.

The scene is a representation of the imaginary father that Lacan depicted. The role of Daniel as a father is no longer needed in his life, yet he puts on the face of the “God-figure” as Lacan put it, yet in reality, Daniel is more in line with the imaginary father which Lacan described as, “the terrifying father of the primal horde who imposes the incest taboo on his sons, and the agent of privation (Father, 62).” For Daniel, he places ultimate importance around himself, yet he fakes a type of character development⁸ to show he is trying to reform, yet in reality, his only care is for the “pipe-line” (a phrase he utters immediately after being baptized).

The level of greed and sin found within Daniel is represented in his willingness to conform to attain his desire for money. In a group discussion, a true and present point was brought to attention in regards to what Daniel desires- Oil, and the water and blood that are suppose to cleanse⁹. The point brought up was that Daniel desires oil, which is what brings sin into his life, yet as a townspeople tries to cleanse him with “the Blood,” and Daniel is then baptized with water. One has to point out that the three entities do not mix, nor do they cleanse one or the other. The agents within each element are so different that it is impossible to have any of them combine into one. Even though the shot is at eye level (which is suppose to project honesty and truth), the confessions by Daniel are inauthentic, because of the impossibility of combining his greed (oil), Christ (the Blood), and baptism (water) into one flowing entity.

⁸ Character Development: the patterns through which characters move from one mental, physical or social state to another (Corrigan, 245)

⁹ Ashley Laliberte’s compelling symbol of how water, blood, and oil are not to be mixed together.

Transitioning between two crucial scenes (the baptism and the conclusion) in the film, the emphasis in both is on Daniel Plainview's desire. What Lacan wrote in regards to desire matches with the themes of Paul Thomas Anderson's film. To Lacan, there is an "incompatibility between desire and speech¹⁰." And for this point to be better understood, there is a distinction between desire, demand, and need. While on the surface they may seem to be synonyms, the three instead are affected by one another. In the writing about Lacan, "needs which were articulated in demand have been satisfied, the other aspect of demand, the craving for love, remains unsatisfied, and this leftover is desire. Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of first from second (Desire, 37)."

What this type of triune relationship means is that desire for Daniel has no love at all. In the final scene of the film, the medium shot of Daniel and Eli Sunday is created to set the stage for Daniel's elimination of Eli. He has no care for Eli, all that Plainview seeks is vengeance and satisfaction, love does not factor into the picture. The *mise-en-scene*¹¹ of the final scene evokes the naturalistic tradition¹² of placing one into the life of a millionaire's estate. While Eli comes out of peace and desperation, Daniel fulfills the role of a cold and heartless capitalist and bludgeons Eli not only with truth, but also his physical state.

¹⁰ Lacan was fixed on desire in how "it is not a question of seeking a new means of expression for a given desire, for this would imply an expressionist theory of language. On the contrary, by articulating desire in speech, the analysand brings it into existence. (Desire, 36)

¹¹ *Mise-en-scene* refers to those elements of a movie scene that are put in position before the filming actually begins and employed in certain ways once it does begin (Corrigan, 64).

¹² Type of *mise-en-scene* which shows how a place looks is what it should look like, i.e., the rich estate mansion, the town hall meeting, and the church all fit into the projected view of what that era and place were supposed to look like (Corrigan, 88).

In regards to the naturalistic type of mise-en-scene, the mansion is a perfect representation of the era's type of decadence, and the furniture that fills the room is a symbol to how Daniel chooses to live his life. The scene is within a bowling alley, and as one could go into the details of bowling being a single person sport (Daniel looks only to himself as being essential to his life), Daniel still keeps the façade of thinking of others. The score board in the background of the shot shows slots open for many people, yet if one looks closely, no one has played with Daniel, in fact, Daniel has not even played. The desire for wealth is embodied in his alley, and the reality of Daniel only wishing for power and isolation can be seen through the lens of the mise-en-scene.

The scene continues to morph and is a deliberate parallel between the shots of the baptism. The important point in the scene within the bowling alley is that Daniel is reversing the roles that were originally in place between Eli and himself. In the earlier scene, Eli was chastising Daniel, for sinning and abandonment. In the bowling alley, the roles are switched in that Daniel is now beating Eli with the truth. What is striking about this scene is a realization of the social blocking¹³. While on the surface, the two show developing characters that are opposite, one a preacher, the other a lusting oil man. Yet, what is paramount in the scene is the realization that the two are in fact the same beneath the thin film of society, which keeps them within their societal roles. At their core, the two both desire power, money, and desire a singular existence. It is with this that the real father is revealed. Instead of the biological father being fulfilled, the term Lacan created is represented by how the two characters are copies of one another; Eli fulfills the role of a son by embodying the nature of Daniel, with his lust for wealth and power.

¹³ Social blocking: describes the arrangement of characters to accentuate relations among them (Corrigan, 76).

The scene concludes with Daniel Plainview avenging the loss of his dignity in the earlier baptismal scene. The blood of Eli is seeped into the wealth of Daniel's life. As the pool of blood collects around Daniel's feet, the desires of Daniel's isolation and overall power are met. When his butler confronts Daniel, he utters the words "I'm finished," to show to the butler that he no longer has a need for power or isolation. But, much like in scenes prior to this, Daniel's voice and cadence is again inauthentic. He is never going to be satisfied, his desire for power is never ending, his cry for singularity will never be met, he will forever be in search of more, and forever keep the mask that society thinks to be his true identity.

In retrospect, the pieces of this film that resonate most are what are not "seen" on the screen. The undertows in the waves of Daniel Plainview's true desires are all rooted in Paul Thomas Anderson's focus on the performance by Daniel Day Lewis and his portrayal of a truly menacing individual. Plainview is a character that on the surface is a developed character seeking family and redemption, but underneath, his passions are as unwavering as the North Star, a constellation of unending greed and a desire to be the ultimate power.

Works Cited

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