



October 2008

There Will Be Blood

Scott Clyburn

University of Portland, clyburn@up.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Clyburn, Scott (2008) "There Will Be Blood," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 16.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol12/iss2/16>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

There Will Be Blood

Abstract

This is a review of *There Will Be Blood* (2007).

The first scene of Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* presents a blistering 1898 New Mexico landscape, accompanied by a sound wall of frenzied, reverberating strings. The tonal achievement of this combination lingers for the duration of the film.

The main plot follows the rise and decline of Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis), a compelling anti-hero who mines the coarse Western soil with tireless ingenuity. In the opening scenes, Daniel toils unattended, pick-axing the earth's rocky innards. Yet he soon adopts the strategy of parading around his quiet, adopted son, H.W., in order to weasel drilling rights out of rural communities on the supposition that he, unlike other "oil men," is also a "family man." Daniel is later, in the cavernous depths of his own deterioration, shameless about this tactic. He scares an adult H.W. away by shouting after him, in a wooden, whiskey-and-tobacco-stained cadence, "Bastard from a basket! Bastard from a basket!"

The theme of family and its betrayal persists when H.W. loses his hearing in an oil derrick accident. Daniel does not know how to suffer H.W.'s loss, so he "abandons" him to a boarding school for deaf children. Then a man looking for work appears, purporting to be Daniel's long lost brother, Henry. After discovering the man as a fraud, Daniel reaps swift, cold vengeance. But the man's advent occasions one of a few tender glimpses of Daniel we are given throughout the film. After his killing, Daniel finds in the man's journal (previously belonging to the real

Henry Plainview) a daguerreotype of himself as a child. He weeps in contrition and confusion for his lost innocence, his fading humanity.

All the while a subplot advances, uncovering the conflict between Daniel and a local preacher, Eli Sunday (Paul Dano). By 1911, Daniel has located a pristine slab of undrilled territory thanks to a tip from Eli's twin brother. Daniel moves in on the opportunity. Meanwhile, Eli is eager to tap into the public interest raised by the discovery of oil in order to promote his church. Just as Daniel uses H.W., Eli wields his community's trust in his spiritual authority as capital to secure and distribute power. Throughout the film, Eli and Daniel make near-perfect foils as each courts power and prestige through the ill-treatment of their respective "families."

Eli and Daniel, each in their own way, recklessly seek their salvation. (The parallelism is the point.) In Daniel's case, his salvation is that which ultimately alienates him from all others, even himself. Indeed, oil and its smeary, oozing relative, blood, represent tendentious holy grails, the media of a false redemption. The magical but macabre scenes in which Day-Lewis and Dano trade off playing puppet to puppet master are some of the most captivating in 21st century film. First, in a raucous baptismal service, Eli impels Daniel to "beg for the blood" of forgiveness. Forcing repetition of Daniel's plea, Eli prompts another glimpse of softness in Daniel. A miraculous shift from contempt to true repentance registers in

Day-Lewis's features, and when he rises to sit with the congregation, he is welcomed as "Brother Daniel." But in the last scene, Brother Daniel returns the favor: he coerces Eli into denouncing his faith with the same fervency he had often used to preach it. The result is a harrowing confession of doubt: "If I could grab the Lord's hand for help I would, but He does these things all the time ... these mysteries that He presents and while we wait ... while we wait for His word!"

The liturgical significance of these scenes seems clear. Anderson wants to draw attention to repetition's role in creating belief. If one says something enough times, one begins to hold it as truth. An anti-foundationalist criticism of belief might be mounted on the sturdy hide of this observation, but Anderson seems to want to balk at conclusive judgment. What we see in Eli's confession is an authentic believer angrily wrestling with disappointment—not a one-sided caricature of fanaticism.

As with Anderson's earlier work (readers will remember the all-too literal adaptation of Exodus 8 in *Magnolia*), *There Will Be Blood* unfolds in a cosmos pregnant with biblical occurrences. Prophecy is fulfilled; the sins of fathers are visited upon their sons; blood divides the elect from the reprobate. Does Daniel eventually find tangible redemption? Although Daniel's last words echo those of Christ on the cross, this question, like Eli's faith, remains shrouded in doubt. But we ought not expect more. Rather, we ought to be overjoyed that, in an age when

many live and think by news headlines, Hollywood has favored a film so theologically complex.