



# There Will be Blood

## Darkness of the Human Heart

**A** year on and I still can't decide if I really liked the slow-moving *There Will be Blood*. Rather than having the typical hero arc, it had a self-destructive anti-hero. Nevertheless, it was a powerful movie with an Oscar-winning performance by Daniel Day Lewis as Daniel Plainview, a cold and heartless oilman.

Unlike most movies where the hero's goal is set out in Act I, it is not until late in the movie when we really discover Plainview's goal: "I want to earn enough money that I can get away from everyone." Moreover, he self-discloses: "I have a competition in me. I want no one else to succeed. I hate most people." So, here is the premise of the movie: What will success look like and what will it do to a man who is driven to succeed, to win at all costs, who hates most people? How will he handle success, family, community? More importantly perhaps, how will he handle faith?

The movie opens with an expansive shot of a New Mexico landscape set against severely discordant music. In fact, the prolonged establishing scene plays without dialogue for almost twelve-minutes. During this time, we meet Plainview and see him mining on his own for silver at the turn-of-the-century. We see him as a determined man, who will single-handedly ac-

complish his goals, regardless of the challenges and obstacles that come his way, whether they are broken bones or resistant landowners.

Having found little silver, he finds liquid gold – oil. Little by little his operations grow, and he starts buying or leasing land-rights in his insatiable ambition. At this point he meets Paul Sunday (Paul Dano), who offers to sell him information on the location of oil fields in Little Boston, California.

Fast forward to California where Plainview has set up camp with his "son" H.W., who is in fact the son of one of

his workers killed working the mine early in the film. The heart of the movie is here, especially in his growing competitive interactions with Paul's twin brother Eli, who is the charismatic and manipulative preacher for this small community.

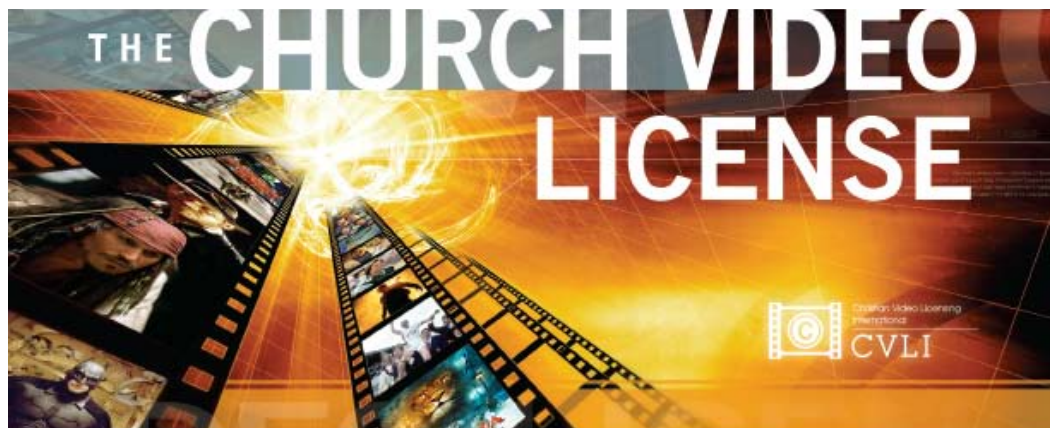
In Eli we see a foil to Plainview. We see greed and ego, just a quieter, more sanctified version. Both lead characters struggle with these

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character flaws. Plainview says at one point that he prefers “plain speaking,” yet he says anything to get his way. His name appears as a symbol for his character – he is not in plain view. He is deceptive, manipulative, and completely controlling.

Plainview’s approach to family and community is strictly pragmatic. He appears to love H.W. but his love is put to the test and it fails. In the middle of the movie, just as oil gushes out of the new well, an accident occurs where H.W. is hurt, his hearing destroyed. As H.W. lies on Plainview’s table, the oil ignites and Plainfield leaves him to go deal with the conflagration. From here on, H.W. is damaged goods. Plainview sends him away, and this is indicative of his discarding of people whom he no longer needs or can use. He has no significant relationships, other than those that benefit him, such as his right-hand man Fletcher Hamilton (Ciaran Hinds).

At one point in the movie, someone suggests Plainview does not know how to run his family. At this, Plainview becomes angry and in rage threatens to kill him. Not only does he want to



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win, he is not willing to be perceived as a failure or in need of anyone’s help. Success must be accomplished by his own hands, through his own efforts.

Two parallel scenes drive to the heart of the movie and illustrate how Plainview handles success and faith. The first is the “redemption” and “baptism” of Plainfield in Eli’s church. Plain-

view needs to build a pipeline to the ocean, but there is a holdout whose land lies between the oil and the sea. This holdout offers to sign the contract if Plainview joins the church, which is only possible if he converts. So, he comes to church and comes forward as a “sinner.” As Eli berates him, Plainview has to admit his sin. This continues with Eli physically abusing him, humiliating and humbling him until Plainview shouts out in anger, “I want the blood!” Whose blood does he want? Is it Christ’s, or Eli’s? Or is this blood he wants simply the oil itself?

Jeffery Overstreet, in his Christianity Today on-line movie review, sees the oil as a metaphor for blood. This may be so. But I see it as a metaphor for money and wealth. In this sense, we see the conflict between God and Mammon. The Bible says “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt 6:24). Plainview understands this and serves his god. Eli may have deceived himself, because by the end he makes his choice, too. So, Plainview’s approach to faith is the same as his approach to life – he chooses whatever will help him succeed and others fail. He will deceptively choose another’s faith if it gets him closer to his goal. He will deceive others for an advantage.

Blood shows us that though wealth may look good on the outside, when our heart is focused on money Mammon owns us. We become driven, soulless and heartless, a servant to this unforgiving god. In contrast, the forgiving God “looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7) and his “yoke is light” (Matt. 11:30). Money will not solve our problems because most of our problems come from within – from our character flaws. They usually catch us out, as the next key scene illustrates.

In this second scene, years later, Plainview has grasped his goal. He has more than enough money and he lives apart from people, except for his servants. He has even severed any lingering relationship with H.W.. Eli, now a polished and

dapper preacher, comes to visit him, finding him drunk and unconscious. Like his brother earlier in the movie, Eli offers him oil. This time, however, it is nothing new. And Eli is himself after money. Plainview, realizing he now has the upper hand, agrees to the offer provided Eli will renounce his faith to him. In a parallel to the earlier scene, Eli has to humiliate himself in plain view of Plainview. And he does renounce his faith . . . all to get his hands on his desired money. He has control. He has won. But by this time winning is no different than losing. They have become one. The moral disintegration of the man is complete. Plainview has attained his vision of success but at what cost? Jeremiah said, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jer. 17:9). Plainview is a picture of the darkness of the human heart, when love is absent.

Blood shows us that as humans we cannot live without relationships. We were made for community. “It is not good for the man to be alone,” said God in the beginning (Gen. 2:18). We need others, not just for what they can do for us, but for what we can do for them. Competition, though beneficial in its place, can be severely hazardous to the health of all when it becomes more important than community.

Blood shows us that hatred will destroy, like a cancer eating away at our soul until we are left shriveled and numb, selfish and uncaring, dead while still living. Hate is self-centered and self-serving, causing the horizons to collapse; love is selfless and giving, causing lives to expand. What a contrast!

When grace is absent, when love is missing, life is not life. Success by the world’s standards is a poor epitaph for an eternity alone.