CHAPTER 8

DEATH, WEALTH, AND GUILT: 
AN ANALYSIS OF THERE WILL BE BLOOD

Daniel Sullivan

P. T. Anderson’s film There Will Be Blood (2007) has been praised and awarded for its technical execution, its cinematography, production design, and for the Academy Award-winning performance of its lead actor, Daniel Day-Lewis. While these technical aspects of the film are indeed masterful and worthy of study, the film’s narrative—as rewritten by Anderson from the Upton Sinclair novel Oil! (1927/1997)—is also ingenious and deserving of analysis.

That narrative centers on Daniel Plainview (Day-Lewis), a ruthless capitalist who amasses a fortune through oil-drilling in the early years of the twentieth century. The film is the story of Daniel’s relationships with three individuals who serve, in different ways, as his foils: his son, H. W. Plainview (Dillon Freasier/Russell Harvard); the youthful preacher Eli Sunday (Paul Dano); and the man who impersonates his brother, Henry Plainview (Kevin J. O’Connor). By the end of the film, Daniel’s relentless pursuit of personal gain will have caused the death or physical impairment of each of these characters.

Like the novel on which it is based, There Will Be Blood may be read as a critique of capitalism, with a focus on how this economic system has developed in the United States, and its potentially corrosive effects on social life and individual psychology. I intend to argue that although this is one layer of meaning present in the film, a detailed analysis of the
choices made by Anderson and his collaborators in constructing its narrative (and translating that narrative into film) reveals depth-psychological themes not readily apparent from a superficially critical perspective on capitalism. Specifically, I will try to show that Daniel and the characters around him may be understood as incarnations of the individual’s psychological experience of wealth-pursuit in capitalist modernity, driven as it is by fundamental concerns with guilt and mortality.

Such a perspective on the film stands to illuminate three themes that recur throughout its development: the salience of death established early in the film; a concern with issues of authenticity, deception, and hypocrisy; and the importance of guilt and its repression. These three psychological problems were highlighted by Norman O. Brown in a book entitled Life against Death (1959). Brown’s work may be profitably supplemented by the writings of Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as findings derived from terror management theory (TMT), to bring There Will Be Blood’s thematic strands of death, authenticity, and guilt together into a coherent analysis. The film is an allegory of how the human motive to deny death undergirds both religion and the pursuit of wealth, and how the related denial of personal guilt in modernity provides the psychological impetus for much of the aggressive strain in capitalism.

**Terror Management Themes in There Will Be Blood**

*There Will Be Blood* opens with an extreme long shot of desolate desert mountains and an ominous, discordant drone supplied by the film’s composer Johnny Greenwood. Immediately afterwards, we are introduced to the physical presence of Daniel Plainview lodged in a black hole in the earth. The first 15 minutes of the film consist of a series of sequences, set in the late 1800s, depicting Daniel’s early evolution from a lone gold prospector to a wealthy “oil man.”

Much of the action occurring in this short prologue takes place underground, in Daniel’s makeshift mine shaft and first oil well. The opening shot of a bright panoramic Western vista is thus counteracted in the remainder of the prologue by several dark, claustrophobic close-ups and medium shots marked by low-key illumination and top lighting. This underground atmosphere, which suggests the living burial of Daniel and his employees as they toil in pursuit of gold and oil, is augmented by the early narrative presence of death.

Within the first five minutes of the film, Daniel falls from a considerable height into his mine and nearly dies; the first word spoken in the film is the “No!” he exclaims in denial of the possibility that he has