

There Will Be Blood

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue



I often tell screenwriting students not to avoid the difficult scene. By “difficult scene” I mean one involving a serious confrontation, a declaration of love or infidelity, or a confession of sin or weakness. These are scenes that lesser writers try to work around, since they are so difficult to write. But these scenes are the cornerstones of a meaningful story. Without them, the script will sag and perhaps collapse.

Writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson doesn’t avoid the difficult scenes. On the contrary, he embraces them. His films *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* are chock-full of them. And though his penchant for wrestling with raw emotions can lead to a bumpy ride, one has to admire his ambition as a filmmaker and storyteller.

Anderson’s fifth film, *There Will Be Blood*, is laden with difficult—and powerful—scenes. He takes the first third of Upton Sinclair’s less-than-celebrated 1927 novel *Oil* and spins an epic tale of power, greed and hypocrisy amid the early years of the oil industry in California.

When we first meet the lead character in this drama, Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis), he is a struggling silver miner. In a masterful opening that contains no dialogue, we see Plainview battling his makeshift mines, challenging death as he chips and claws his reward out of the ancient ground. He soon moves on to the greater rewards of oil, and one day receives a mysterious tip about a parcel of oil-

soaked land in central California. There Plainview meets a young preacher, Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), and their relationship turns into a long struggle between body and spirit, money and faith, the earth and the heavens.

As the film pounds along and as both men become more successful at plying their trades—Plainview as an oil tycoon and Eli as a hell-and-damnation preacher—we see that questions of good versus evil are not so obvious. Both men are being swallowed by their larger ambitions.

The story calls for complex scenes that spell out the important differences and curious similarities between the two men. One of the best is a tense moment in Plainview's office. Eli wants the burgeoning oil baron to allow him to bless the well before the digging starts. Plainview seems to agree, since he needs the support of the small town, but when the day arrives he not only ignores Eli but gives the blessing himself, setting up a power struggle that fuels the rest of the film. Day-Lewis is superb in this scene, as he is in many others in which we sense the deceit dripping off of him as he flashes a toothy smile.

Other characters of note in this long, freewheeling film include a long-lost half brother looking for help, members of the pious Sunday clan, Plainview's co-workers and competitors—and most important, Plainview's son H. W. (Dillon Freasier), who is not his son at all but is useful in convincing innocent landowners that Daniel Plainview is a family man.

There Will Be Blood fits the definition of an epic for many reasons, starting with its massive themes and the mammoth performance by Day-Lewis. Also contributing mightily are the glorious widescreen cinematography by Robert Elswit and the strange, piercing soundtrack by Jonny Greenwood, best known as the lead guitarist for the rock band Radiohead.

The film gets a tad unwieldy in the third act, as Anderson takes leaps through time to suggest how things both change and remain the same, opening up the film to questions about oil and power in today's world. The movie ends with a truly bizarre scene in a bowling alley. It may be over the top, but I would call it Anderson's noisy salute to the joys of risky filmmaking.