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Plainview vs. Dodd: Paul Thomas Anderson's Rival Roads to Godhood

In 2007, *There Will Be Blood*, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, demanded the attention of nearly every filmgoer and critic who witnessed the Machiavellian tale of early twentieth century American greed. The story of Daniel Plainview's insatiable quest for wealth, power, and oil feels nearly Biblical in its exploration of themes such as egotism, godhood, the dangers of unfettered personal autonomy, and the sacrifice required for the formation of a *magnum opus*. Anderson's 2012 follow-up film, *The Master*, fared moderately well critically, but it failed to make the same cultural impact as *There Will Be Blood*. *The Master* uses the rise of a post-World War II religion called The Cause and the effect that the cult has on a troubled veteran as a premise to explore questions relating to master/pupil dynamics and the psychodynamic battle of animalistic desire versus otherworldly ideal. What has gone overlooked in many critical analyses of both *There Will Be Blood* and *The Master* is the plethora of correlative themes that run through both movies. *The Master* and *There Will Be Blood* are companion films that make alternate statements about the path to transcendent experience and the lack of value present in that transcendence.

The films articulate their individual sentiments on manufactured godhood primarily through the actions and internal struggles of *There Will Be Blood*'s unstoppable oilman, Daniel Plainview, and *The Master*'s charismatic cult leader, Lancaster Dodd. Plainview and Dodd are both defined by their far-reaching ambition. Combined with their egotism, this ambition drives the two men to reject any form of control that is not created and sanctioned by their own personhood. Both characters participate in an all-out effort to invent themselves without any reference to or assistance from an outside force. The two characters' battles for self-referential

salvation take place on two fundamentally different battlefields, and by understanding the difference between the two films' main conflicts, the viewer is able to draw larger conclusions about what Anderson is saying over his filmography. In *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel Plainview attempts to overcome his own humanity by destroying all external forces that question his self-declared divinity. In opposition to this physically contingent struggle, Lancaster Dodd of *The Master* seeks to eliminate, or at least control, his own internal vices so that he may be able to ascend to a higher plane of existence and save himself.

Throughout the entirety of *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel Plainview never says or does anything that would lead the viewer to believe that he ever questions his own importance or invulnerability. The spectator witnesses an unusually candid explanation of Plainview's self-imposed divinity through a discussion he has with a man whom he thinks is his brother. In this conversation, Plainview constantly informs "Henry" that he does not like to explain himself. He then goes on to say, "I have a competition in me. I want no one else to succeed. I hate most people ... There are times when I look at people and I see nothing worth liking. I want to earn enough money I can get away from everyone." It is through this shockingly honest moment that Plainview clearly states his belief that he truly is not human, but something greater. Plainview's declaration of divinity is further highlighted by the fact that the only person he is willing to be open with for the entire film is the man he believes to be his brother. Daniel anticipates that since "Henry" is a Plainview, he, too, will feel the inherent superiority and hatred that Daniel possesses. In regards to his unquenchable spirit of competition, Daniel even tells his false brother "Well, if it's in me, it's in you." The eventual revelation that "Henry" is merely an imposter and is not a part of a higher echelon of existence cements Plainview's notion of being alone in his godhood.

Since Plainview is unquestionably convinced of his internal supremacy for the entirety of *There Will Be Blood*, the only obstacles that are able to pose any threat to him are external challenges to the physical symbols of his divinity. *There Will Be Blood* most often uses wealth, usually presented in the visually poignant form of crude oil, as an expression of Daniel Plainview's obsession with his own sovereignty. Plainview sees any challenge to his monetary ambitions as a war on his heavenly kingdom. The most notable physical attacks against Plainview's pursuit of wealth take the form of his broken leg when he first finds oil, the town of Little Boston's reluctance to give up their land, his adopted son's rebelliousness, the greed of his imposter "brother," William Bandy's refusal to sell even a small portion of his land, and the preacher Eli Sunday's overreaching ambition. Through perseverance, coercion, abandonment, gunshot, religious deception, and bludgeoning, Plainview overcomes the external challenges to his divinity in an equally physical manner.

The charismatic, Pentecostal reverend, Eli Sunday, is, by and large, Plainview's primary "antagonist." Even though Sunday's religious devotion is exposed as being driven by greed and ambition, he still stands in Plainview's way as a form of spiritual subjugation that Plainview cannot understand, much less submit to. Plainview recognizes the charlatan as a foreign, spiritual force that has no place in his own worldview. The two characters both attempt to coerce the citizens of Little Boston into pledging their allegiance to their respective factions to give credibility to the two power seekers' causes. Plainview is initially able to tolerate Sunday's influence over the community, but as their individual power grows, so does Plainview's desire to eliminate the preacher. Plainview's masterpiece of self and ascent to "godhood" remains unconsummated until he shouts, "I am The Church of the Third Revelation!" and murders Eli Sunday in the Plainview estate's bowling alley as a sacrifice on the altar of his own wealth.

There Will Be Blood's narrative inability to challenge Plainview on any sort of human level has been a point of contention for some viewers. Daniel Plainview's otherworldly demeanor, further amplified by Daniel Day-Lewis's demented performance, makes it difficult for the audience to believe that there is any real threat to Plainview, a man already entirely convinced of his own supremacy. After fervently criticizing *There Will Be Blood*, Plainview, and Day-Lewis for the above reasons, critic Peter Walker of *The Guardian* suggests, "Anderson later realized the folly of his ways and so half remade his tale of charismatic sociopaths and their damaged, younger sidekicks/nemeses as *The Master*" (Walker). While Walker's complete rejection of *There Will Be Blood*'s merits borders on extreme, he is able to see the parallel structures that run through both *There Will Be Blood* and *The Master*. Accepting the presence of comparable themes between the two films is invaluable to understanding how Anderson's filmography ties together.

The Master combats the cold and one-sided nature of the conflict in Anderson's previous film by not making Lancaster Dodd, the character seeking transcendence, the movie's main protagonist. *The Master* places a psychologically-troubled veteran, Freddie Quell, at the center of its narrative. Quell is an antisocial delinquent who is violent, promiscuous, and willing to drink paint thinner and torpedo fuel to quench his alcoholic thirst. Quell attempts to find comfort and meaning in the arms of Dodd's religion, which is heavily inspired by Scientology. It is through Quell that the audience attempts to understand Dodd's thoughts and actions. Quell's driving forces are more base and relatable, making it easier for the audience to care about the film's central dilemma. These base impulses are emblematic of the moral impurities that Dodd is attempting to purge from himself. Despite the film's emphasis on Freddie, Dodd and Quell are

shown to be equal in terms of their power over one another, and it is in this balance of power that one can find details about Dodd's inability to reach transcendence.

Dodd is presented as a smooth talking, intelligent, and charismatic cult leader who commands his religious followers' full attention. When Dodd is shown interacting with any of his many followers, he is always in the center of the frame, suggesting that he is the center of both his followers' adoration and his own personal universe. Meanwhile, his screen placement changes when he is interacting with Freddie Quell. Dodd sees Quell, who is beastlike in his appetites and behaviors, as a personal challenge that must be overcome to affirm his own power. Dodd and Quell are commonly shown taking up equal parts of the frame in their many scenes together. Their screen placement suggests that the two men are interacting as *ying* and *yang*, with neither man completely controlling the other. Before Dodd can believe in his own godhood, he must tame Quell, who is a symbol of the leader's own vices.

One of the earliest scenes in which the audience is shown the cracks in Dodd's charismatic façade comes at a dinner party in New York City where the spectator begins to see the duality of Quell and Dodd's actions. In this scene, we see Dodd being greeted in an extravagant foyer that belongs to the wealthy Cause followers in New York. While Dodd is distracted by all his adoring fans, we see Quell wander from Dodd's side into the magnificent house. The spectator is then given a brief shot where Dodd looks around nervously in an attempt to locate Freddie. Through this brief shot it is established that Quell, and by extension, Dodd's more animalistic impulses will be beyond Dodd's control for this evening. Quell is then further highlighted as a straightforward representation of Dodd's more base desires through their parallel actions throughout the duration of the religious meeting. Quell essentially acts as a funhouse mirror that exaggerates Dodd's undesirable behavior. During the party, the audience sees Quell

attempt to steal some valuables from a desk and later physically confront a man who openly questions Dodd's teachings. Quell's actions mirror Dodd's own financial dishonesty (he is shown making an extravagant amount of money through The Cause) and his verbal decimation of the man who openly criticizes him.

The coexistent nature of Dodd and Quell's actions continues through the entirety of *The Master*, and as these parallel scenes continue, the audience watches Dodd become increasingly doubtful of his own divinity. In one surreal scene, we see Quell's drunkenness and sexual promiscuity reflected in Dodd as he dances and sings with a room full of nude women. The audience is also shown a glimpse of Dodd's mortality when he and Freddie are arguing in jail. Quell's drunken anger forces Dodd to break his usual smug and superior demeanor in favor of cursing and screaming at Freddie. Dodd's outburst is immediately followed by the usually non-animalistic religious leader urinating on screen, a reminder of Dodd's humanity. Toward the end of the film, Quell begins to question The Cause's teachings' ability to help him, and if Freddie cannot be tamed, then Dodd's own proclivity toward vice cannot be eased. Quell ironically expresses these doubts by angrily beating a fellow-doubting Cause member. In this same scene, Dodd verbally lashes out against a devout member who has earnest questions about contradictions in The Cause's teachings. Dodd knows that if he cannot cure or control the equally strong willed Quell (the embodiment of all his internal weaknesses) then he will never be able to fully believe in the perfection of himself.

The equal distribution of power in Dodd and Quell's relationship is reinforced by the way the camera presents the characters on screen. Quell and Dodd are constantly shown at eye level with one another. An extended example of the visual equality is the psychologically demanding "processing" scene where Quell and Dodd engage in a breathtaking battle of id versus superego.

In this scene, the camera cuts back and forth between the two characters' faces as they talk, but the placement of the camera keeps the back of the non-speaking character in at least a third of the frame. This suggests that no matter how autonomous either man feels, the other is always at least partially in control. There are few shots that show one man standing over the other as "a master," but they are constantly displayed as equal forces trying to cast off the other. This visual representation of equality runs in direct contrast to *There Will Be Blood*, where Daniel Plainview and Eli Sunday seem to be in competition to see who can stand over the other. Plainview undoubtedly commands most of the frames in the film, most notably during the infamous ending. When Plainview starts to verbally abuse and humiliate Sunday in the bowling alley, Plainview literally takes up the entire frame as he shrinks Sunday into the bottom left hand corner of the screen.

Similar to the film's use of framing to articulate the idea of control or sovereignty, multiple scenes in *There Will Be Blood* show Daniel and Eli looming over one another as they attempt to "baptize" the other man. The use of a baptism motif is present from the very beginning of the film where the audience witnesses Plainview's adopted son, H.W., being christened with crude oil. Plainview is later shown beating Sunday as he smears oil on the preacher's face. Sunday returns this act of aggression by violently baptizing Plainview into the Church of the Third Revelation while Plainview feigns repentance. The mere presence of this constant baptismal imagery gives credit to the suggestion that *There Will Be Blood* is a film that is primarily concerned with religious themes such as transcendence and self-initiated salvation, yet beyond the mere religious associations, the use of this motif also offers a deeper insight into Plainview's psyche. He feigns religious devotion for financial gain, highlighting his own inflated

image of himself. Plainview rejects the idea that he truly needs any salvation outside of himself and by committing sacrilege he laughs in the face of any individual who does.

Daniel Plainview and Lancaster Dodd's pathways to becoming the unquestioned masters of themselves and their surroundings seem to be in direct contrast with one another. Plainview already possesses the internal certitude necessary for declaring himself worthy of godhood. Plainview's quest is not one of self-mortification; instead, he seeks external affirmation of his own perfection primarily through money and power. Dodd, on the other hand, already has all the external symbols of his own transcendence: money, religious tenets, and devoted followers of those tenets. What Dodd lacks is the internal assurance that he really is worthy of devotion or godhood. Dodd's lack of assurance takes the form of Freddie Quell, who he is never able to tame or truly purge himself of. Plainview and Dodd differ in one additional and vitally important aspect. Daniel Plainview accomplishes his goal while Lancaster Dodd is unable to attain perfection.

At the end of *The Master*, Lancaster Dodd tells Freddie Quell, "If you figure out a way to live without a master, any master, then let the rest of us know. Will you? For you would be the first person in the history of the world." Though *The Master* offers no clean resolution to this challenge, Anderson has already crafted an example of a man who lives with no master. The image of this transcendent being takes the form of Daniel Plainview, who, after laying waste to all who oppose his reign, sits alone in a tangible symbol of his wealth and power and declares, "I'm finished." Through *The Master*, Paul Thomas Anderson acknowledges the importance of the question of human sovereignty and transcendence, but it is through *There Will Be Blood* that Anderson declares that human manufactured godhood can only be labeled as impossible, as it would require someone as evil and powerful as Plainview to articulate. Anderson makes

Plainview's godhood appear so amoral and lonely that the only response to Dodd's question of lordship can be nothing more than a grim laugh.

Anderson uses *There Will Be Blood* and *The Master* to refute the possibility of a self-induced and self-referential salvation, and by rejecting the importance of one's "ego" in the search for meaning, Anderson leaves the question of the source of human fulfillment open-ended. If it is impossible for Anderson's characters to find meaning through the perfection of themselves, then it is possible that he is arguing the source of their contentment must come from letting go of their own selfish ambitions and selflessly partaking in a transcendent or divine nature that is already present in their world. The argument for selfless transcendent experience is present in other films in Anderson's filmography, most notably: *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002). In these two films, the audience finds positive answers to the negative questions that reside in *There Will Be Blood* and *The Master*. The protagonists in the director's earlier films find fulfillment once they look outside themselves to find transcendent experience in their surroundings. In *Boogie Nights*, all of the characters are only able to find fulfillment once they turn their attention from individual ambitions in favor of forming a surrogate family unit. *Punch-Drunk Love*'s Barry Egan is only able to escape his Prufrockian ennui once he rejects his inwardly focused self-consciousness in favor of a transformative romantic love. By rejecting the bleak worldview of self-imposed godhood present in Lancaster Dodd and Daniel Plainview, Anderson is able to articulate a worldview that can be described as shockingly uplifting and traditional.

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