

Broken Bonds and the Modern Subject: Family Estrangement in “There Will Be Blood”

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Abstract. In recent years, the psychological analysis of film protagonists has attracted growing academic attention, yet few studies focus on how narrative violence and social context shape a character's self-destruction. This research aims to analyze the protagonist Daniel Plainview in the movie *There Will Be Blood* from a psychological perspective, in order to explore why the protagonist in the film eventually became alienated from his family and his self-subject collapsed. In terms of theoretical framework, this paper mainly uses Adler's individual psychology, supplemented by social and cultural psychology, to analyze the protagonist's irreversible tragedy under the internal emotional barriers and external environmental blows. And focuses on the film's text narrative and character creation, the contradictions in Daniel Plainview's personality, and the reasons why the contradictions cannot be resolved, revealing that his unfortunate and terrifying ending is caused by multiple factors. Therefore this study provides a fresh interdisciplinary approach that bridges psychoanalytic theory and film literary criticism. The study finally presents a reflection on this modern tragedy, and also provides a useful discussion for the combination of film literary criticism and psychological theory.

Keywords: Alfred Adler, *There Will Be Blood*, family alienation, modern tragedy, psychological analysis

1. Introduction

There Will Be Blood is a work by American director Paul Thomas Anderson. The film is not a direct adaptation of Upton Sinclair's "Oil!", but focuses on the protagonist's individual narrative [1]. The film is set in the American Westward Movement period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. It tells the story of the success and failure of oil merchant Daniel Plainview in the process of advancing his career, how he brought suffering to others, and how these aggressive personality traits destroyed him.

When conducting research on literary works, people often analyze their content or structure. In this study, the author proposes another point of view, that is, to introduce psychological theory into the analysis of film texts and character personalities. This approach facilitates a more comprehensive perspective on the story while increasing creativity while analyzing the basic content and structure. This article is roughly divided into two parts: internal factors and external factors. It uses a combination of textual close reading and theoretical analysis to focus on the film's narrative, key

lines and violent scenes, and to explain how the complex psychology of the characters and the social background interact. The study aims to reveal the causes of the protagonist Daniel Plainview's character transformation or the exposure of his true character, deepen the understanding of the theme of the film, and provide reference for cross-disciplinary research such as film literary criticism and psychology.

2. Internal psychological roots: Daniel's contradictory character

2.1. The facade of strength and social good

Rather than saying that the protagonist Daniel Plainview changes from "good" to "bad", it is better to say that the whole movie is a process of his external disguise being gradually stripped away. The opening of the film shows a resolute pioneer who is alone in the desert mining. After accidentally falling into a well and breaking his leg, he still insists on bringing the mined silver out of the well. This kind of perseverance and persistence in the face of almost cruelty gives the protagonist a kind of "Heroic Right", that is, the audience will think that he is capable or powerful because of his series of actions that ordinary people can hardly do. Daniel also shows this feature in the scenes of negotiations and promises with others in the early stage of the film, especially when facing the residents of the town, he proposed to make money with the locals and promised to build schools and dig wells for them. All kinds of actions show that this character has a selfless side in his personality.

However, as the plot develops, it is revealed that Daniel's behavior is actually a way for him to disguise his true character in order to achieve his goals. According to Adler's individual psychology, even the most heinous criminals can work hard to solve problems and aspire to become excellent people. The line by which every criminal—and every other human being—is striving to gain a victory, to reach a position of finality [2]. Anyone can pursue dreams and secure status, but people like Daniel always put personal goals above everything else. Besides, this kind of pretense is also a manifestation of vanity. We have already noted that vanity likes to mask itself. Vain people who would like to rule others must first catch them in order to bind them to themselves [3]. A vain person may appear affable, friendly, and kind, thereby convincing others that he is not a belligerent aggressor but a person with rich social feelings, thereby enabling him to assert his personal superiority and carry out his conquests. For Daniel, as long as he expressed his concern for his compatriots during the event, he could advance the realization of his goals.

2.2. Revealing the hidden fear and inferiority

The film's narrative turns dramatically after the oil well explosion and the deafness of his adopted son H.W. Adopting H.W. is undoubtedly Daniel's most obvious and genuine kindness, raising this orphaned child in the course of his business. Before the accident, Daniel had always presented himself as a "loving father", and keeping H.W. with him was both an emotional connection and a social disguise to create an image of a "reliable father-honest businessman". When H.W. became deaf, he chose to abandon the child, a cold decision that was simply terrifying and exposed the deepest contradictions in his character: the instinctive desire for family ties and the extreme resistance to losing control.

In addition to make it clear that he has a bad relationship with his father, there is another detail in the film: he remembers the name of Henry's mother, but is not sure whether he has such a younger brother. Daniel has family trauma, and his violent behavior is a self-defense after the disillusionment of the "surrogate family" [4]. This is particularly evident in Daniel's confession to his "false brother"

Henry. "I see the worst in people. I hate most people..." This confession is not only a verbal vent of cynicism, but also a direct externalization of an inferiority complex. "Misanthropy, that form of hate which betrays a very high degree of hostility to mankind, is one of these veiled forms" [3]. The more he tried to isolate others with wealth, the more it showed that he was afraid of true equal communication and emotional exposure.

This fear reached its peak when he shot Henry: he mistakenly thought he had found blood support, but was deceived. When the illusion was shattered, he could only use extreme violence to sever this fake kinship. After killing him, he cried silently, but this was not moral remorse. Before that, he had already abandoned H.W., and the successive loss of two-family relationships was undoubtedly a huge blow to a person who already lacked trust in others.

2.3. Violence as self-defense for the inferiority complex

In Adler's theory, "aggressive behavior" is an extreme manifestation of an individual's erroneous pursuit of superiority. When a person cannot obtain belonging through healthy social interests, he will turn to aggression to cover up his inferiority. Daniel's life almost revolves around a cycle of violence related to family affection. The four key instances of violence in the film are the direct externalization of his inferiority complex: The first time is beating the missionary Eli, which is a provocation to religious authority and community order, and it is also a venting of anger and emotional transfer (because Daniel felt helpless after H.W. became deaf). The second time is shooting Henry, which is a cruel severance of the complete breakdown of the illusion of "family compensation". The third time is being slapped by Eli in the church and publicly confessing, and then sneered after a moment of vulnerability, indicating that he refused to admit weakness, but instead used sarcasm to close his emotions. The fourth time is killing Eli at the end of the film; it is his extreme rejection of any "symbolic other" after H.W. left, and it is also his final break with the external ethical order, marking that he has nothing from the root.

The common point of these four acts of violence is that they are closely related to the "family affection and belonging" that he desires and fears the most. Once "family" or "moral patriarchy" threatens his psychological defenses, he will use destructive behavior to smash them and cover up his inner powerlessness. Daniel's control over production and transformation enables him to use notions such as evolution and natural selection to construct a self-reflective impression of inevitable triumph and dominance [1].

3. External social factors: historical context and narrative triggers

3.1. Capitalism and the social logic of expansion

The film's narrative time span covers the period from 1898 to 1927, which coincides with the end of the American westward movement and the rise of the oil industry. Reporters described both the exhilaration of nature beyond human control and nature's providence in granting Americans such vast energy and wealth [5]. Daniel's career rise was accompanied by resource plunder and environmental destruction. The audience can intuitively feel the protagonist Daniel's persistent pursuit of money from the film. In addition, he is an ambitious and vain person, so his special liking for wealth is particularly reasonable. This also points to another sharp question: Why did the protagonist, who worked so hard to pursue his dreams and was almost a model citizen, end up being deserted by his friends and relatives, unable to obtain redemption, or peace of mind and happiness?

[6] Under this social logic, if an individual wants to stand out, he or she must possess the corresponding ruthlessness and predatory nature.

Oil is the most symbolic commodity in this stage. It is the source of Daniel's wealth in the film, and it is also the reason for him to persecute and invade others, "his greed drives him to manipulate the community... his reason to build an oil pipeline is to take control of Sunday's and Bandy's land" [7]. Daniel's "cooperation" with the townspeople is nothing more than a buyout in exchange for the legitimacy of his sole control over resources.

3.2. Accidents and tragic coincidence

Two major accidents in the film - the early mine accident and the later oil well explosion - played a turning point in Daniel's fate. The former made H.W. an orphan and provided him with the social packaging of the "father" image; the latter destroyed this packaging and forced him to face his contradictory mentality towards "home". The fire and smoke intensified the impact of the disaster through high contrast, and also symbolized the collapse of Daniel's spiritual world and the loss of control of desire [8].

In the concept of individual psychology, accidental events in an individual's life do not determine his personality. What really matters is how the individual interprets and treats these events. Daniel did not gain real emotional recovery from the accident, and he did not reflect further after taking H.W. home. Because the child was deaf and could not communicate with others, Daniel, as a father, did not choose to learn sign language. Instead, he gradually distanced himself from him and accumulated more and more hostility towards people and the world in his heart, which became a concrete manifestation of the evil of human nature.

Beyond acting as turning points, the two major accidents (the mine accident and the oil well explosion) in the film form a fatalistic narrative cycle through visual language. Anderson repeatedly uses similar low-angle shots combined with the stark contrast of fire and smoke to reinforce the brutal conquest of nature and the uncontrollable consequences of resource extraction. These images not only display external destruction but also mirror the collapse of Daniel's psychological defenses. The director deliberately magnifies the alternation between explosions, flames, and eerie silence, creating an intense psychological pressure that makes the audience feel Daniel's growing obsession with using wealth and power to cover his fear of losing control. The accidents thus serve as "narrative fuses" for his tragic character.

3.3. The role of others: social isolation and breakdown

Daniel's tragedy is not simply a personal dilemma but a microcosm of the failure of social relations. Religion could have been a bond between the community, but Eli's religious authority was actually another form of power grabbing, mirroring Daniel's capital expansion. Together, the two undermined the spiritual bond between the community [9]. Eli and Daniel turned faith into a tool for power games in the confrontation, and eventually lost the ability to reconcile conflicts. H.W.'s departure completely cut off Daniel's most fragile emotional connection with society, leaving only a closed, paranoid and isolated self.

The oil well accident brought a turning point in Daniel's interpersonal relationships. In order to make money without distraction, he sent H.W. away, and the subsequent series of conflicts were almost all because of this. Because of self-blame, he has always been gloomy and resentful, and it is easy to lose patience with people and things around him, but he cannot admit his mistakes. This is a betrayal of his own decision, and secondly, it will affect others' views of him. Under various

contradictions, he took the most extreme way—this also shows from the side that he is a selfish person. In order to make himself feel better, he chooses to hurt others.

As time passed, Daniel's ties with other members of the community, excluding Eli and H.W., slowly eroded. Initially, he wins the townspeople's trust by making sweet promises, but once the resources have been exploited to exhaustion, the community is left with ruined oil fields and an unemployment crisis, while Daniel never truly fulfils his commitments. This betrayal accelerates his isolation from the outside world. Religion, family and business partnerships could have provided him with a sense of belonging, yet he destroys each one through deception and manipulation. Finally, in the ironic ending, Daniel, as mad and cold-blooded as a wild beast, brutally smashes the missionary to death with a bowling ball, tired and lonely, he sits beside Eli's body and says "I am finished", with joyful Brahms violin concerto plays [10], marking his complete severance of all social ties.

4. Conclusion

There Will Be Blood is a brilliant but controversial film, and it forced a good number of critics to double down on their misgivings alongside a wave of grateful converts [11]. By analyzing the character evolution of Daniel Plainview from both a psychological and sociocultural perspective, we can see that the film presents not only a story of personal moral decline, but also a profound modern tragedy. Daniel's character is neither one-dimensional evil nor a simple "good man degenerates", but as Hegel said, character itself is the center of ideal artistic expression, and is a complex whole that is manifested through actions driven by the inner "sentiment". The film has laid the foreshadowing of the entanglement between character and action from the beginning: Daniel's early perseverance, self-denial and altruistic commitment are his self-defense to desire superiority and cover up his inferiority; and when the most vulnerable emotional sustenance in his heart the deafness and departure of his adopted son H.W., and the deception of his fake brother repeatedly tore apart his disguised "goodness", his aggressiveness and repulsion became the last bastion of inferiority.

In short, Daniel Plainview is a modern tragic character shaped by his inner inferiority, distorted desire for family affection and external social logic. His story proves that the real tragedy does not lie in the superficial right or wrong, but in the irreconcilable and intertwined tension between people's inner will, sentiment, social environment and actions. It is this tension that makes *There Will Be Blood* not only a critical visual text, but also a typical literary narrative sample about the disillusionment of human nature and the dilemma of modern subjectivity.

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