Personality, Situation, or Interaction?

A review of the film

*There Will Be Blood*

(2007)

Paul Thomas Anderson (Director)

Reviewed by

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*There Will Be Blood*, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, is loosely based on a novel by Upton Sinclair (1927) called *Oil!*. The setting is historical—the California gold rush—but nobody who sees it today can avoid associating it with the enormous importance of oil in the current global economy and the great wealth it produces. The main theme of the film is greed and rigidity.

The main character, admirably played by Daniel Day-Lewis, who won an Academy Award for his acting in the movie, is a man intending to get rich using any means necessary. To do so, he swindles people into believing he is a “family man.” He adopts a boy, the son of an accident victim, and pretends this is his own son. Promises are given, but he keeps them only when it suits him. His lack of honesty creates conflict with the preacher of a local Pentecostal church, whom he has promised money to but never pays up. However, the church blackmails him to be baptized and to
confess his “sins.” He never forgets this and in the final scenes gets the chance to exact a sadistic and sanguine vengeance on the preacher. The main character, called Plainview, finds himself in California around the year 1900, when oil is being discovered and can make a man rich very quickly if he is lucky and ruthless. Plainview is both. However, his emotional dynamics allow him no flexibility and no ability to see himself as he is or to forgive real or imagined wrongs. He demands from people that they let him dominate; if they do not defer to him, he destroys them if he has a chance to do so. He waits for decades to get his final vengeance on the Pentecostal preacher. The price he has to pay for such a lifestyle is loneliness and a life dominated by the bottle as he becomes an old, lonely, and very rich alcoholic.

The movie is unusual in the sense that there is one character of major interest in the story. Plainview’s son and the preacher are of some importance as well, but they remain marginal characters. Even more remarkable, there are no important female characters in the plot. If Plainview has any interest in women, we are not told about it. He emerges as a very lonely and isolated person. His aggressive and deceitful personality makes it easy to understand why this must be so.

It is never explained how Plainview came to develop his personality. The story assumes that he is rigid and driven only by his “inner demons,” not by the environment or the wider context. Plainview just emerges as an evil person, and there is almost no hope that he will develop into a more humane being. One hint of positive emotionality is in the relationship with his adopted son, but even in this case, his affection is shallow and easily shattered. Another sign of positive emotions is shown toward a man who claims to be his brother, but when Plainview finds he is an impostor he kills him.

Plainview is dominated by negative emotions. In a negotiation about selling some of his property, a remark that he could retire to look after his son, who has become deaf in an accident, creates intense wrath. He starts to threaten and insult the astonished people, who simply wanted to make a business proposition to him. Nothing comes out of the proposed deal. This event haunts him, and he returns to his sense of having been insulted on later occasions.
It is a common view in folk psychology that behavior is largely determined by personality. This belief has been described as the fundamental attribution error. We tend to ascribe the behavior of others to their personality and not to the situation they find themselves in (Jones & Harris, 1967). The discussion of person versus situation as determinants of behavior has a long history in psychology (Endler & Magnusson, 1976). Personality traits generalize to some extent across situations (Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007), but strong variations across situations are common (Mischel, 1968). One can ask, of course, what a situation is. Maybe we should say that Plainview is always in the same situation as soon as he has reached a certain level of economic and social power. His rigid behavior could therefore be ascribed to the constancy of the situation. Mischel has shown that behavior is relatively stable, given the situation tends to stay the same (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). In personnel selection, there is often an emphasis on the principle of “more of the same”; that is, behavior on a similar job is assumed to be repeated in the future (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998).

Could current personality psychology, dominated by the five-factor model (McCrae & Costa, 1987), help us to describe and understand Plainview? It is often claimed that the model is helpful in understanding a stranger or someone we meet for the first time (Paul, 2004). Plainview is clearly an extravert; he is also emotionally unstable, conscientious, and unfriendly. He is probably not very open to experience, although he does display a certain creativity in the pursuit of his goals. Such a person would be unlikely to make a career in an organizational setting, but as an independent entrepreneur and given lucky circumstances he could become wealthy (and lonely). The major characteristics of Plainview fit well in the five-factor model.

Possibly it would also be useful to consider positive emotionality (Simms, 2007), in which he is quite low. There is another important aspect to Plainview's behavior that is not usually considered to be part of personality—his manipulative value system, which is a precondition for the type of deceitful behavior in which he excels.

Plainview is a literary construction, not a real person. Those who created him presumably did so based on an implicit personality theory, and it is therefore to be expected that the five-factor model would fit well with his
psychological dynamics. Real people are likely to be more complex and less predictable.
Political and economic perspectives are interesting to consider as well. Plainview is the epitome of the greedy capitalist who uses any means possible to acquire wealth. His lust for money is associated with low empathy or, as we would say today, low emotional intelligence. Research has indeed shown that emotional intelligence is negatively correlated with giving high priority to money (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2006). He is Machiavellian (Christie & Geis, 1970), another characteristic negatively related to emotional intelligence (Sjöberg, 2001). The landowners he swindles and the workers exposed to dangerous work environments are victimized, but he couldn't care less.

The “robber baron” view of the capitalist was common when Sinclair wrote his book, and it still is. Historical examples such as Henry Ford come to mind. Sinclair's socialist and anticapitalist attitude is well conveyed by the movie. Of course, others view the successful capitalist as an entrepreneur who is the basis of economic progress and welfare for all. However, the type of person represented by Plainview is impossible to see in a positive light; this is probably why the story is so powerful and persuasive. It is a piece of political rhetoric as well as a psychological case study.

References
