

Morton Marcus: A contrary opinion about a much-praised Oscar favorite

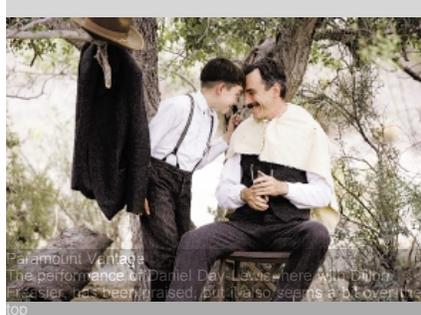
Sentinel Staff Report

Article Launched: 01/25/2008 3:00:00 AM PST

The critics are almost unanimous in their praise of the last highly touted film of 2007, "There Will Be Blood," the epic story of American oil speculation in the early days of the 20th century, nominated for an Academy Award earlier this week.

The film, very loosely based on Upton Sinclair's novel "Oil!," traces the rise of oilman Daniel Plainview -- played by Daniel Day-Lewis -- and the growing antagonism between him and an evangelical preacher named Eli Sunday [Paul Dano], from whose family Plainview bought a downtrodden farm rich in oil deposits.

Some critics have seen the two characters as symbolic representations: Plainview as American capitalism personified and Eli as America's obsession with religion. Others see biblical suggestions of Cain and Abel in the two. Both views agree that the film is a fable about the roots of America's fixations on oil and religion that have led us to the current crises in our national and international policies.



Paramount Vantage
The performance of Daniel Day-Lewis here with Paul Dano as Eli Sunday has been praised, but it also seems a bit over the top.

I agree with most of those estimates, but I think the film is a grandiose failure in the end, mainly because I do not believe in the characters. Granted they are symbolic, even allegorical, and are not supposed to be taken as realistic representations of people. But for the viewer to identify with them, they still must be recognizable as human beings on a realistic level in their cause-and-effect motivations. Unfortunately Plainview and Sunday are not. Why do they do what they do? What are the reasons that explain their actions? There seem to be none.

Plainview has virtually no back story. We see him hard at work in the long opening sequence, but never learn why he has come to hate his fellow humans. Nor why he cheats and deceives. He's a monster all right, but the viewer doesn't know why or how he became one.

Eli does have a back story: his background on the farm. But the basis of his religious fervor is never explained. In fact, it is suspect at first as a form of messianic egotism and finally "seems" to be revealed as a con man's scam. In the proverbial nutshell: the viewer is never sure of what is driving Plainview or Eli's actions.

Because of these problems, Day-Lewis' portrayal of Plainview, which has been as much lauded as the film, is clearly over the top, since it has no foundation on which to build. It is hollow: just loudness and largeness, much like his over-the-top characterization in "The Gangs of New York." Paul Dano's Eli has similar problems and that is why his character sends mixed signals to the audience. Critics have likened "There Will Be Blood's" oil takeover in California to "China Town's" depiction of L.A.'s water grab, and Day-Lewis' Plainview to John Huston's Noah Cross, but a comparison of the two films and actors spotlights "Blood's" failings. So caricatured and comic-bookish do the characters become in "There Will Be Blood" that the final scene is as laughable as Jack Nicholson's death scene in "The Departed."

In the end, "There Will Be Blood" plays like a bad American imitation of a bad Italian Opera, and, folks, that double negative ain't good.

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