Experiential Paper

“There Will Be Blood”

Introduction

“There Will Be Blood” is a dark American drama set in the early twentieth century during the oil boom of southern California. The film covers the life of Daniel Plainview, a ruthless and corrupt oil man on a quest for wealth and power. Daniel will use whatever means necessary to get what he wants, even if that includes abandonment, murder, and deceptive persuasion. The film begins portraying Daniel as a simple, hard bargaining oil prospector in New Mexico who turns into a wealthy, drunk, recluse living in a large empty mansion by the end of the film. I chose this film because Daniel pushes the ethical line negotiating with property owners to acquire land containing oil. Daniel’s appalling behavior and lack of corporate responsibility
makes you want to despise him. The film also highlights the unpleasant battle between capitalism and religion in the early days of the American industrial revolution. Daniel Day-Lewis’ Oscar winning performance playing Daniel Plainview show’s how one man’s greed can turn a father into a monster.

**Portrayal of the Business World**

The business world is shown in a negative light in this film. The industrial revolution brought the railroads to small towns of the Western United States. The people in these towns are use to a simple way of life. They are reluctant to change their way of living, and fear things they are not familiar with. For example, early in the film, Daniel spoke to a gathering of people next to a site he wanted to drill for oil. He made a habit of speaking in plain terms to the local communities in order to get them comfortable with his drilling activities, boasting the economic benefits of his drilling operations in and around the surrounding communities. On this occasion, the crowd erupted into a heated argument, and Daniel left the meeting and later abandoned his drilling efforts in that town. It was obvious that the people feared the change that Daniel’s oil business would bring to the town.

Another example showing business in a negative light was when representatives from Standard Oil, the nation’s largest oil company, offered to buy out Daniel’s local oil interest. Daniel despised the representatives, even going as far as threatening to cut the throat of one of them over the comment he made about Daniel’s son. In that meeting, Daniel was arguing for better transportation costs, to which the representatives told Daniel that transportation is a separate business. Daniel then pointed out that the oil companies owned the railroads and could in fact lower transportation costs. This comment silenced the Standard Oil representatives. At the time, the large oil companies were consolidating by buying out oil interests of small companies such as Daniel’s. This was their attempt to buy out Daniel, but he refused and argued that it wasn’t right to buy up someone else’s hard work.

Another example is shown near the end of the film. Daniel’s estranged son H.W. wanted to dissolve their partnership so he could establish his own oil company in Mexico. This angered Daniel, and he pointed out how his son’s business would be in direction competition with his own oil business. This illustrates the hard line Daniel took in putting his own business interests ahead of his son’s success.

I didn’t see any other examples that directly portrayed business in a negative or positive light. Since the film is meant to portray Daniel as a shrewd businessman, I think the filmmakers intentionally wanted to portray business in a negative light by showing how greed leads to eventual corruption and sin. Daniel embodies these negative qualities and this theme is shown throughout the film.

**Ethical Issue #1**

Early in the film Daniel adopts a young boy, H.W., from a co-worker that was killed in an oil accident. Daniel was working closely with the boy’s father when he was killed by an accidental equipment failure. The boy had no other family, as the mother was out of the picture and the deceased father had been raising him at the work site. For no specific reason given by the filmmakers, Daniel adopts H.W. He would call H.W. his “business partner” to potential investors and property owners that Daniel is seeking to acquire land from. Daniel brings H.W. to all business engagements and portrays himself as a “family man.” Daniel uses H.W. as a negotiating
piece in hopes to gain their trust in the upcoming negotiation of property rights. He also says that his wife, and H.W.’s mother, died during childbirth, which is false.

This misrepresentation can be seen as unethical. Daniel is seeking an unfair advantage by bringing his adopted son into the negotiating mix and lying to clients about his family situation. His son is truly not a “partner” in the business, simply a pretty face to help entice land owners to sell their property to Daniel. He is manipulating these people by making it sound like he is a compassionate family man and concerned about the well-being of his son. He is looking for their sympathy by discussing his family’s plight. He begins most of his negotiations this way. We get an idea throughout the movie that this truly isn’t the case, and that Daniel only uses his son to help negotiate property deals and nothing more. Near the end of the film, Daniel admits this motive to the then older H.W. during an argument when H.W. tries to dissolve their partnership.

If Daniel was truly an honest family man caring for his son, I think this would still be a questionable business practice. If Daniel was an honest person he wouldn’t need to include his son. Instead, he manipulates everyone into thinking that he is a decent, honest person looking to engage in fair negotiations. Many of the land owners buy into his deceptive sales pitch and sell him the land, largely at a discount. Later in the film, it is evident that Daniel is not a family man, as he abandons H.W. when he loses his sense of hearing after an oil eruption. Daniel was more interested in watching the oil spew out of the oil rig than attend for his deaf child. He abandons H.W. shortly after the incident by leaving H.W. on a train headed to San Francisco with one of Daniel’s associates. Daniel is later criticized by the locals for abandoning his son. This did not bother Daniel, as he continued on his path of greed and power, unconcerned about the health of his adopted son.

I would not have involved H.W. in business negotiations, and also wouldn’t have lied about H.W.’s mother. I understand Daniel had to care for his son since he was the only guardian, and it may have been necessary to bring H.W. along, but to make H.W. the center of negotiations and take advantage of property owners is unethical. As a fairly honest person, I wouldn’t have been able to flat out lie to the hard working families of those communities. Instead, Daniel shouldn’t even bring up his son.

**Ethical Issue #2**

Apart from using his adopted son, H.W., to gain an emotional advantage, Daniel uses other unethical negotiating tactics by deceiving others, and taking advantage of those families unfamiliar with the oil business. In one instance, he was told by Paul Sunday, who was not living at his family’s ranch anymore, that the Sunday Ranch had oil seeping from the ground. Shortly thereafter, Daniel and H.W. visit the ranch to hunt quail, which was a cover for them to investigate the property for oil deposits. Once they discovered the oil seeping from the ground on their hunt, Daniel offered to buy the land from the owner, Abel Sunday, for “quail,” not “oil” prices, hoping that the Sunday family was unaware of the existence of oil on their property. Daniel told the Sunday family he intended to use the land only for quail hunting with his son. When Eli Sunday, Abel’s son, realizes that Daniel is offering a low price for his family’s oil abundant property, he quickly asks for $10,000, above the $3,700 that Daniel offers. Daniel then discusses with Abel and Eli the burden and cost of building and operating an oil well. He overestimated this burden and this allowed them to settle on a price of $5,000 instead.

Several questionable things occurred in this timeframe. First, Daniel lied about his appearance at the Sunday Ranch to Abel and Eli. He told them he was there to hunt quail, not look for oil. Second, he lied about his involvement in the oil business. When the value of oil
underneath the Sunday Ranch was brought up by Eli, Daniel seemed surprised about the existence of oil on the property, but claimed he had contacts in the oil industry that he could work with in extracting the oil, if oil was actually found. In reality, oil is Daniel’s profession, so he was well aware of the cost and logistics of extracting the oil. He also knew that oil existed on the Sunday Ranch from his discussions with Paul Sunday prior to his visit, and also his investigation of the ranch that day with his son. In both cases, Daniel misled the Sunday family because he knew that oil existed and how to extract the oil. He also convinced them to agree on a discounted rate for their property because only he knew the costs of drilling and excavating the site, something the Sunday family did not know. His deception got him what he wanted in the end though, even though he paid higher than “quail” prices. The value of oil underneath the Sunday Ranch was much more than the price Daniel paid for the ranch as we see later in the film.

I believe Daniel’s negotiations were unethical, but most of us would do the same if we were put in his shoes. It’s unethical because Daniel misled the Sunday family, and he used his expert knowledge of the oil industry to get a better price on the property by overstating the hassles and costs of extracting the oil. But this is also standard negotiation in my opinion. If given the opportunity, any of us would use this information to bargain for a better price. Daniel got away with it because he has the upper hand in negotiations, and was knowledgeable in the business of oil, whereas the Sunday family was unfamiliar with the value and costs of oil and extracting it from the ground. If it were me, I would have likely used a similar approach, but without directly lying to the extent that Daniel did. He made it sound like he was completely oblivious to the fact that there was oil in the ground, and did not know first-hand how the process worked. This deception is routine for Daniel, but for honest businessman, this may not be the case.

Ethical Issue #3

The next issue deals with Daniel’s accountability to the community, or his “corporate responsibility.” As mentioned earlier, Daniel speaks to the people of the community before he drills for oil. His goal is to portray himself as a decent, honest, and simple man that the people can trust. In his open forum meeting with the town residents, including the Sunday family, he claimed his oil drilling project would bring in water, crops, and employment. He also knew that wheat was not grown in the area to make bread, and he promised that bread will be available for the first time because his drilling requires irrigation and cultivation, necessities to make wheat and eventually bread. He also talks about the prosperity he will bring to the town, and that he will “share the wealth” that the oil brings to the community. As far as I can tell from the film, none of this happens.

Daniel’s goal is to get the community’s approval into allowing him to drill in the area. He will use whatever means possible to get their approval, especially lying. This is unethical because he knows that most of this will not happen, especially his claim of sharing the wealth. The film doesn’t provide enough evidence to show that the town does become prosperous, but I can only imagine that it didn’t. The people couldn’t change their decision after Daniel began drilling, and Daniel knew this. The only thing Daniel brought to the town was “sin,” as Eli Sunday put it. His workers were engaged in heavy drinking and sexual exploits, and this enraged the local people that had before lived a simple, hard-working life. He did not live up to his promises, and instead brought harm to the town from his oil operation.
Another related corporate responsibility issue involved the death of one of Daniel’s workers. A man was working in the well of the oil rig when two of the workers directly above accidentally dropped a heavy piece of equipment into the well, striking the man and killing him instantly. Upon hearing of the death, Daniel knew that he could not admit to the residents that an accident stemming from his well occurred the night before. Instead, he put the blame on the deceased worker, not the obvious safety hazards prevalent around his rigs. He communicated that this worker went into the well without alerting anyone, and was killed because of his clumsiness. Daniel’s lie hid the truth from everyone so that he could resume his drilling without setback or criticism. He showed a poor sense of corporate responsibility in this example.

Daniel really embellished the potential benefits of his drilling operation to the people. It was an obvious lie in order to drill in the area. He should have been upfront with the people by telling them the facts and not exaggerating the potential benefits. This is easier said than done however. If he would have told the truth, the people would have likely argued against his drilling. Although others might have approached it differently, it is hard to know what you can and cannot say to persuade people in this instance. I would not have gone to the extent that Daniel did, but some embellishment may have been needed or else his efforts would have never begun, and any potential benefit to the community would have never been seen. Regarding the accident, Daniel should have been truthful and said that there was a drilling accident that took the life of one of his workers, and he should have then taken the initiative to educate his workers on drilling safety. Because Daniel did not care about his workers, he did not hesitate to begin drilling again.

Other Business Ethics issues
Daniel was verbally and physically abusive to Eli Sunday. Eli was the eldest son of Abel, the man who owned the Sunday Ranch before it was purchased by Daniel. Eli negotiated the $5,000 price with Daniel for the purchase of the ranch. Eli said he would use the $5,000 to build a new church, where he would become the pastor. Shortly after discovering oil, Eli approached Daniel seeking the $5,000 that Daniel promised him. Daniel began arguing with Eli and eventually beat Eli into the mud, refusing to pay the $5,000 because Eli’s spiritual powers did not prevent H.W.’s loss of hearing. This is obviously unethical because Daniel promised to pay Eli and the Sunday family $5,000 for their property, to which Daniel refused. Any good-hearted person or businessman would have paid the $5,000 owed to the Sunday family. Daniel knew he had the power to refuse payment at that point, and did exactly that. However, later on in the film Daniel is forced to pay Eli the $5,000 from a man he needed to buy property from in order to finish his oil pipeline. The man would only sell Daniel the property if he paid Eli and joined Eli’s church, to which Daniel reluctantly did. This was one of the few cases where Daniel had to compromise.

Summary
Throughout the film, Daniel misleads and deceives the innocent families of the communities he drills in. He uses unethical negotiating tactics in his quest for wealth and power. He portrays himself on the surface as a family man growing the family business with his son H.W., but his true colors shows a dark, corrupt, and self-centered trickster that will use any means possible to further his desires. I would say Daniel represents the attributes in Kohlberg’s stage two of moral development. He clearly makes decisions based on his self-interest without
taking into consideration the impact to others, even his own son. He uses whatever means possible to advance his self-interest and has little interest in the needs of others.

*There Will Be Blood* shows what greed can do to a person. Daniel’s unethical approach to gain wealth and power is appalling, but some of it I understand would be warranted to get things accomplished. For example, to start his effort, he needed to paint a pretty picture to the people of the benefits of his drilling. If he didn’t stretch the truth a little bit he wouldn’t get anything accomplished. I know I would have never gone to the lengths that Daniel did, but the early twentieth century is different than today. I’ve learned that I am not a good salesman, since salesmen sometimes go to great lengths to persuade others. I do not have this quality in me, and watching this film confirms that. Daniel is a good salesman, and he goes to great lengths to persuade. I am very uncomfortable in those types of situations, and do not have it in me to deceive others the way Daniel did. It just shows how cold hearted some people can be, and I’m glad I don’t have those qualities in me.

I also learned that this film contained more questionable business practices than I had first imagined. Watching the film for the first time (before I selected this as my project), I didn’t realize how unethical Daniel was from a business perspective. After studying the film, I was amazed at the great lengths Daniel went to grow his business. I think I’ll be watching films more closely now to analyze the effects of unethical behaviors that individuals and business take.