

Sunset Boulevard Film Summary

Sunset Boulevard by Billy Wilder

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Context

Sunset Boulevard tells the story of Joe Gillis and Norma Desmond. Joe is new in Hollywood, where he is desperately trying to make it as a writer. Things are not going well for Joe and his creditors are chasing him all over town. When he runs into an apparently abandoned old house to hide, he meets its owner, Norma Desmond.

Norma was once a famous silent film star, but her days of fame are long gone. However, she is unaware of this fact, as she fully believes she will begin performing again soon. She convinces Joe to move in to her house and work on a script she wrote. He agrees and she begins to try to take over his life. Eventually, Joe begins working with Betty, a woman at a film studio and falls in love with her. Norma becomes extremely angry and murders Joe.

Sunset Boulevard is a classic *film noir* feature that made its way into the popular arena. This acclaimed movie reveals sordid truths about Hollywood, especially the desperation of those in the industry to both become famous and stay famous at all costs.

Wilder grew up in Germany and began writing films until Hitler came to power. As Wilder was Jewish, he quickly escaped the country for his own safety and came to America. In 1938, he partnered with Charles Brackett to begin producing such films as *Ball of Fire* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945). After *Sunset Boulevard*, which is widely considered one of the greatest films of all time, Brackett and Wilder stopped working together. Many of Wilder's later films are harsh and caustic.

In the film, actor William Holden delivers a skilled performance as Joe Gillis. He starred with equal effectiveness in *Born Yesterday* (1950) and won an Oscar for *Stalag 17* (1953). Later, Holden also appeared in notable movies such as *Network* (1976). Although Holden had a long and celebrated career, he would always be remembered for his role in *Sunset Boulevard*.

Gloria Swanson (Norma Desmond) began her acting career with small, uncredited roles. She eventually starred in many successful films, including *A Pullman Bride* (1917), *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), *Sadie Thompson* (1928), *Music in the Air* (1934) and *Father Takes a Wife* (1941). Her performance in *Sunset Boulevard* is probably her most impressive and memorable.

Erich von Stroheim, who plays Max von Mayerling, also generated an extensive list of film credits over his lifetime. He played wonderfully villainous characters in such films as *Hearts of the World* (1918) and *The Heart of Humanity* (1918) before going on to direct films including *Foolish Wives* (1922) and *Greed* (1924). By the time *Sunset Boulevard* was filmed, Stroheim had moved back to Europe permanently, but he returned to play this final role.



Sunset Boulevard only won three Academy Awards: Best Art Direction; Best Music Score of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture; and Best Writing (awarded to Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and D. M. Marshman, Jr.). However, it was nominated for many more: Best Actor (William Holden); Best Supporting Actor (Erich von Stroheim); Best Actress (Gloria Swanson); Best Supporting Actress (Nancy Olson); Best Cinematography; Best Director; Best Film Editing; and Best Picture.



Summary and Analysis

Sunset Boulevard begins by focusing on a signpost that reads, "Sunset Blvd." We watch police cars, sirens blaring, rush to one of the homes. Joe Gillis, the narrator of the story, tells us that it is about five o'clock in the morning on Sunset Boulevard. He says that the homicide squad is coming to the scene of a crime that will be on television and in the newspapers; a former movie star is involved. However, he suggests that we should get the facts, "the whole truth," before the media distorts it. The body of a young man was found floating facedown in a swimming pool; three bullets had been shot through him. The whole story, which actually began six months earlier, follows, in flashback.

Things are tough for Joe in Hollywood and he cannot seem to write a selling story. A company comes to repossess his car and they demand the keys. Joe tells the men that he has loaned the car to a friend. In truth, Joe has hidden the car for the time being and he leaves in it to meet with Sheldrake, a producer and friend. Joe tries to convince Sheldrake that the film he has written would be inexpensive to make and that the actor Alan Ladd would be a perfect star for it. A secretary, Betty Schaefer, enters and tells Sheldrake how terrible Joe's story is; Sheldrake introduces her to Joe. Betty explains that she feels the picture should say something. Gillis begs Sheldrake for a job, but Sheldrake tells him that there is no work and that he does not have any money either.

Joe goes to Schwab's Drugstore and calls some friends to see if they can lend him some money. Joe finally contacts his agent, but the agent refuses to give him any money. He suggests to Joe that having an empty stomach and losing his car will help him write better. The agent also tells Joe that maybe he needs to find another agent. Joe drives home thinking that he should just go back to Ohio. As Joe drives, he realizes that the car finance men have noticed him. They begin chasing him and Joe turns onto Sunset Boulevard, where he steers into a driveway after blowing a tire.

Joe enters the large garage of a rundown mansion; thinking it abandoned, he leaves his car there. He decides to go to his friend Artie's house until he can return to Ohio. Before he leaves, Joe explores the mansion. Suddenly, he hears a voice calling to him through one of the windows; a butler comes out and beckons him in. The woman who owns the mansion, Norma Desmond, invites him inside. She begins to describe the coffin that she wants built for her dead monkey; she has apparently mistaken Joe for an expected visitor. Joe tries to explain the situation and apologizes for his intrusion. As he walks out, he recognizes that Norma is a former star from the bygone days of silent pictures, which have since been replaced by "talkies." He explains to her that he is simply a poor writer with no control over the film industry.

Before Joe departs, Norma stops him to ask about his career. She shows him a script she is writing for her return to the screen. Joe sits down to read the script while drinking and eating caviar. Joe reads for hours even though the script is terrible. He says that the script needs to be organized and edited and she tells him that he should do the work for her. She assures him that she will make it worth his while. The butler brings Joe some things he will need and tells him that he made up Joe's bed earlier that afternoon. Joe



thinks about Norma's palace and how out of touch it is with the rest of the world. Before he goes to bed, Joe observes the burial of Norma's monkey.

The next morning, Joe describes a dream he had of an organ grinder and his chimp. He awakens to the same music that he heard in his dream; Norma is playing the organ. Joe discovers that all his belongings have been brought to Norma's house and are now in the room where he slept. Joe questions Max, the butler, who tells Joe that he brought the things according to Norma's orders. Norma tells Joe that if he wants the job, he must stay at her house.

Joe is certain that he can finish the script in a couple of weeks; however, the job proves more difficult than expected. The script is incoherent and Norma is constantly hovering over him. When Joe cuts out a scene with Norma in it, she explains to him that her fans want to see her. Despite the fact that her career ended long ago, she still believes herself beloved by fans. Joe also cannot imagine how she can stand being surrounded by so many photographs of herself. He remarks that they even watch films in her home instead of going out, because Norma is scared of the outside world. Every film they watch is a Norma Desmond film: she is the star of her own private universe.

Occasionally, Norma invites friends over to play cards. One night as they play, Joe spots the car finance men outside. Max reports that the men have found Joe's car and are planning to tow it away. Joe immediately asks for some money to save his car, but Norma refuses to do anything until her card game is finished. Joe watches as his car is taken away. Norma tells him that he is better off without a new, cheap car and says that she will have Max take out her old, classic car for drives. Norma also tells Joe that she is going to get him some new clothes and that he should stop chewing gum.

Rain begins pouring in December. When Joe's room is moved to the main house, he loses any privacy he once had. Joe becomes upset that the door to his room cannot be locked. In response, Max explains that Norma becomes depressed sometimes and is prone to suicide attempts. Joe says that Norma should not be sad since she still receives letters from her fans. Max reveals that he secretly sends all the fan letters himself and Joe begins to feel sorry for Norma.

At Norma's New Year's Eve party, Joe learns how Norma really feels about him. Norma is wearing fancy clothes and an orchestra is playing. They are alone in the room and Norma begins to dance with Joe. Norma is obviously infatuated with Joe and Joe is uncomfortable with the situation. He asks where the other guests are and Norma tells him that she did not want to share this night with anyone else. She then begins to list all the things she will buy for him next year. Joe feels trapped and tries to refuse Norma's gifts, but she tells him that she is rich enough to spend money however she wants. Joe becomes angry because Norma never considers that he might have a life of his own. Norma also becomes irate, slaps Joe and runs out of the room. Joe grabs his coat and leaves the house.

Joe decides to spend some time with people his own age. After meets his friend Artie at a party, Joe asks to stay with him for a few days. Joe also sees Betty Schaefer again;



she is now Artie's girlfriend. As Joe waits in line to use a telephone, Betty brings him a drink. She tells him that one of his scripts was decent and that she wants to collaborate with him.

When the phone becomes available, Joe calls Max, but Max says that he cannot talk right now. Joe asks Max to pack his belongings for him and Max tells him that Norma used Joe's razor to cut her wrists. Joe rushes out, ignoring Betty, to go check on Norma. He enters her house just as the doctor is leaving. Joe rushes to Norma, who asks him to leave; however, he stays. Norma says that falling in love with him was a dumb thing for her to do. Joe tells her that he does not have a girlfriend and that he did not mean to hurt her by saying the things he said. She tells him that if he does not leave, she will try to kill herself again. "Auld Lang Syne" plays in the background as Norma cries; Joe goes over to her and wishes her a happy New Year and the two kiss.

The next morning, Betty calls Joe, but Max tells her that Joe is not home. Outside, Norma relaxes by the pool while Joe swims. Norma tells Max to deliver her script to Mr. Cecil B. De Mille, a prominent director at Paramount. Joe questions the wisdom of sending De Mille the script, but Norma tells him that she has never looked better in her life since she has never been happier in her life.

A couple of days later, they visit one of Norma's friends to play bridge. Norma is distressed that Max forgot to refill her cigarette case, so Joe asks Max to pull up to Schwab's Drugstore. Norma hands Joe some money for cigarettes, but Joe seems upset by the offer. Inside the store, Joe encounters Artie and Betty. Betty announces that she has great news, but has been unable to reach Joe to tell him about it. She has sold a producer on Joe's script and she wants Joe to collaborate with her on the writing work. Max comes in to hurry Joe along, but before Joe leaves, Betty tells him that he has messed up her career as well as his own. Joe forgets to buy the cigarettes.

Whenever Norma believes Joe is getting bored, she tries to perform for him. However, Joe cannot seem to stop thinking about Betty, who reminds him of the way he used to be when he first came to Hollywood. As Norma is performing one day, Paramount calls. Norma is very excited about the prospect, but she is disappointed to find that De Mille's assistant is the one calling. Three days later, Norma goes to Paramount to visit with the studio people in person. The guard manning the gate has never heard of her, but one of the older guards recognizes her. Norma finds out where De Mille is shooting and goes to see him.

De Mille is shocked to learn that Norma Desmond is on her way to see him, but he refuses to give her the brush. Even though her script was terrible, he is unable to dismiss her the way all her fans have. Upon entering, Norma tells De Mille that he must have been very interested to make Gordon Cole call her so many times. De Mille asks her take a seat, then goes to find out why Cole called her. A lighting technician recognizes Norma and shines the spotlight on her. For a short time, she is again famous and surrounded by fans.



In another room, De Mille finds out that Cole has been calling Norma to see if he can rent her classic car for a couple of weeks. De Mille hangs up, sends everyone away from rehearsal for a minute and prepares to deliver Norma a devastating blow. However, before he can do so, Norma begins to cry. She tells De Mille that she cannot wait to come back and work with him. She states that the cost of the picture is not important to her; she only wants to work again. De Mille does not reveal to Norma the reason for Cole's phone calls. He resumes the rehearsal, but tells her to take a moment to watch.

Max and Joe talk outside and Joe learns that the whole row of offices used to belong to Norma. Joe sees Betty and runs after her. Joe tells Betty that she should take part of his script if she wants it, but she says she cannot do it on her own. She begs him to work with her on the script and then she tells him that she is engaged to Artie now. Max begins honking the horn, so Joe quickly shares some of his ideas for the script, then leaves. Max informs Joe that the phone calls have all been regarding Norma's car. De Mille pleasantly bids Norma farewell without ever telling her the truth. After she leaves, he orders someone to tell Cole to stop calling Norma.

For weeks after the meeting, Norma has dozens of beauty experts over to her house. She undergoes numerous cosmetic treatments in preparation for her starring role in her new movie (which, of course, will never be filmed). One night, Norma tells Joe how well her beauty treatments are going, but then becomes upset when she realizes that Joe went out the night before. Joe reminds Norma that she would not want him to feel trapped in her house, but Norma says she is under terrible stress and wants him around. Afterward, Joe looks at his watch and leaves after Norma's lights go out.

Every night, Joe meets Betty in her office to work on their film script. Betty says that she misses Artie, who is out of town. Joe tells Betty that he has fun writing with her. When Betty gets a cigarette, she sees a note from Norma in Joe's cigarette case. Joe simply tells Betty that it came from a very wealthy, foolish and generous middle-aged woman. Whenever they have writer's block, Joe and Betty walk together through the empty studio lot. Betty tells Joe that her father was an electrician and her mother worked in wardrobe, so she spent a lot of time in the studio growing up. Betty reveals that she herself tried to become an actress. In her first screen test, the studio did not like her nose; after she had her nose fixed, they did not like her acting! Betty says she is now happy to be a reader of scripts. Joe kisses her nose and tells her that she has to keep him at least two feet away from her so that they can finish the script.

One night, Joe comes home to find Max waiting for him. Max, who is worried about Norma, warns Joe that he should be careful because Norma might be watching. Joe informs Max that he is working on a film script. Joe states that he does not believe they are doing Norma any favors by feeding her lies. However, Max tells him that he will prevent her from ever finding out the truth. For a long time, it has been Max's job to deceive her. Max tells Joe that he discovered Norma when she was sixteen, made her a star and cannot allow her to be destroyed. Max confesses that he was the one who directed all her early films and he found it unendurable to be away from her after that. He was her first husband and he asked to return as her servant just to be near her.



Later, Norma wanders around the house in the middle of the night and checks to see if Joe is home. She is surprised to see him asleep in bed and she is devastated by the thought that he is with another woman. On his chair, she finds a copy of the screenplay he and Betty are writing.

The next evening, Betty stops and stares at Joe as they are working. She seems distracted and lost in thought. Then she tells him that something has happened that she does not want to talk about. Joe is disturbed to learn that she has heard rumors about him and Norma; after all, he has never revealed his situation to her. Betty tells Joe that she received a telegram from Artie; he wants her to come to Arizona to get married. Joe tells her that she should go since they could finish the script by Thursday. Betty tells Joe that she is not in love with Artie anymore because she now loves Joe. They embrace passionately.

When Joe returns to Norma's house, he realizes that Betty's entire future now rests with him. He realizes that he should not have lied to her about his relationship with Norma, but he did so thinking that he could get away from Norma easily. However, at that moment, he hears Norma telephoning Betty from her room. Betty is distressed by the strange phone calls and Norma encourages Betty to ask Joe where he lives. Joe takes the phone from Norma and Betty is upset, but Joe gives Betty the address and tells her to come see for herself how he and Norma live.

Norma begs Joe not to leave her, saying that she needs him desperately; Joe simply watches her cry. Norma tells Joe that she bought a revolver but could not kill herself. She begs Joe to say that he does not hate her, but he remains silent. Soon after, Betty arrives at Norma's house with a companion, Connie, who has come along for support. Joe hurries to answer the door; as Norma sits up, we see the revolver hidden underneath her.

Joe beats Max to the door and lets Betty inside. Joe tells Betty that he lives here and he shows Betty all the photos of herself that Norma keeps around the house. He explains that Norma called Betty because she was jealous, but Betty demands the truth about Norma's relationship with Joe. Joe tells her that Norma was lonely and wanted him as a companion. Betty, feeling somewhat disgusted, decides she would rather ignore the truth. She tells Joe to get his things so they can leave. She says that if Joe really loves her, he will be willing to leave the house. In response, Joe tells her and Artie to be admirable and he shows her out the door. He also tells her to finish the script on the way to Arizona, then come back with Artie if they ever want to go for a swim. Joe watches sadly as she drives away. Norma looks on from upstairs.

Joe returns to his room and Norma stands begging at his door. When she enters to find Joe packing his bags, she becomes horribly upset. Terrified to discover that Joe is leaving her, Norma begins calling for Max. She then runs to retrieve her gun so that she can prove she bought one. Joe informs her that her audience left her twenty years ago and he tells her the truth about Paramount's calls. Joe demands that Max also tell her the truth, but Max simply says that Norma is the greatest star of them all. With a crazed look, Norma says, "No one ever leaves a star." She follows Joe outside and shoots him



as walks toward the pool; he falls in. Max runs around the house and sees what has happened.

We then return to the first scene of the film. The homicide team pulls Joe out of the pool and the news teams arrive to record the event. Joe, as the narrator, worries about what will happen to Norma in the headlines. Norma is upstairs, surrounded by police interrogators and a reporter, but she refuses to answer any questions. However, when a man comes in and announces that the cameras have arrived at the house, Norma becomes excited.

Max tells Norma that the cameras are there for her. She responds by telling Max to let Mr. De Mille know that she will be on the second floor. The police decide to play along with Norma to get her down to the first floor. Norma prepares for what she believes is her big scene; Max sets the stage for her by telling her that she is on the staircase of the palace when she comes out. The cameras roll, all focused on Norma. Joe says, "The dream she had clung to so desperately enfolded her." Norma descends to the bottom of the stairs, says she is just too happy to go on and then gives a speech. She closes by saying, "And I promise you I'll never desert you again, because after *Salome* we'll make another picture and another picture. You see, this is my life! It always will be! Nothing else! Just us, the cameras and those wonderful people out there in the dark! All right, Mr. De Mille, I'm ready for my close-up." The cameras close in on her and the film ends.



Characters

Joe Gillis, played by William Holden

Description

Joe Gillis is a struggling young writer in Hollywood. Although he aspires to write wonderful screenplays, he has not yet managed to make a name for himself. Joe is having financial difficulties and creditors are chasing him down in an attempt to repossess his car. Joe successfully evades them by pulling into an empty-looking house on Sunset Boulevard. However, the house is not empty; it is occupied by a former silent film star, Norma Desmond, who hires him to help her revise her screenplay.

At first, Joe loves the life of luxury he enjoys while working for Norma. However, he meets a beautiful young woman named Betty, who also wants him to help her write a screenplay. He covertly works with Betty; in the process, the two fall in love. After Betty learns about Joe's decadent life with Norma and leaves him, Joe decides to move out of Norma's home. As Joe packs and gets ready to depart, Norma, who is extremely possessive, shoots and kills him.

Analysis

Joe narrates the film, which ends up being the story of his own life and death. When the movie first begins, we see police cars racing to Norma's house and we see Joe's body floating face down in the pool; however, it is not until the end of the film that we find out for sure that the body is Joe's. When Joe decides to live with Norma, he has been living the stereotypical life of the starving writer. He is completely broke and taking the job with Norma seems like an easy way out.

For a time, Joe appreciates his carefree existence with Norma, but he eventually realizes that he has sacrificed his freedom and lost his motivation. Although he is still a young man, he is living the life of a hermit. Joe shows his independence by sneaking out to work with Betty every night. Although he does not know how to extricate himself from Norma's clutches, he at least tries to follow his dream of being a successful screenwriter. However, Joe's pursuit of this goal eventually leads to his death.

Norma Desmond, played by Gloria Swanson

Description

Norma Desmond is a former silent movie star. Although she was once famous, her career has been over for years, since the advent of talkies. However, Norma still believes that her fans adore her and are waiting for her to make a grand reappearance



on the silver screen. Norma's delusions of fame have been protected for years by her butler and former husband, Max.

Analysis

Over time, Norma has essentially developed the attitude of a spoiled child; she believes that she should always get her way. When Joe tries to express his independence, Norma becomes unhinged. Rather than risk losing Joe to Betty or to the success of his new script, Norma decides to shoot him. Norma's final appearance before the television cameras is the humiliating performance of a has-been who has lost everything, including her dignity, because she stubbornly refused to face unpleasant truths.

Max von Mayerling, played by Erich von Stroheim

Description

Max is Norma's butler, first manager and husband. Max has cared for Norma ever since her celebrity waned. Max sends fan letters to Norma to prevent her from realizing that nobody even knows who she is anymore.

Analysis

Max is still in love with Norma and he believes that her psychological decline is his fault. He remembers what a beautiful young woman she was and he feels that since he discovered her, he is to blame for her poor mental health.

Betty Schaefer, played by Nancy Olson

Description

Betty Schaefer is a bright, attractive young secretary who works at the movie studio. She is dating Artie Green, Joe's good friend. Betty tries to convince Joe to collaborate with her on a screenplay. He finally agrees and they spend many nights working on the script. They develop a good professional and personal relationship as well as a mutual attraction.

Analysis

Betty is a smart, lovable woman who ends up falling for Joe. However, she is confused and disturbed by his relationship with Norma and eventually leaves him because of it.

Artie Green, played by Jack Webb

Description

Artie Green is Betty's boyfriend and one of Joe's best friends. Artie works for the studio and he and Betty have a serious relationship until Betty falls in love with Joe.

Analysis

Artie introduces Betty and Joe and he also serves as a link to Joe's life before Norma.

Themes

Desire for Fame

Many people have daydreamed about being a famous movie star. It is not uncommon to wonder what it would be like to have the general public know one's name or covet one's identity. While this desire for fame is not unusual, it is not always healthy, as we learn in *Sunset Boulevard*.

Norma's one great desire is to make a comeback and be famous once again. Although she was a hugely successful actress during the silent film era, she never realizes that times have changed and left her behind. Max's deception does not help matters; it just makes Norma's goal of regaining celebrity seem even more tangible. Norma's hunger for fame destroys her.

In the same way, Joe hopes that living with and working for Norma will enable him to become famous quickly and easily. In staying with Norma and enjoying a free and easy existence, he tries to bypass the long, difficult period of hard work and patience it often takes to become famous. After being seduced by his own desire for fame, Joe completely loses control over his life. Ultimately, his mistake costs him his life altogether. As *Sunset Boulevard* makes clear, people often dream about being famous, but a desire for fame at all costs can destroy a person.

Destruction Caused by Deceit

In *Sunset Boulevard*, it is evident that Norma has been deliberately deceived for years. Although she was a celebrated actress during the silent film era, she was let go by the studio after talkies rose to prominence. Norma still watches films of herself each week and reminisces about her legendary beauty and charm. She covets fame and hopes to be a renowned actress again, partially because she has been deceived by those around her into believing that her fans still remember her.

For some time, Max has tried to satiate her desire for fame by writing fake fan letters to her and constantly reassuring her that everyone still loves her. He also plays her films over and over so that she can perpetually view herself as the star she remembers herself to be. Director Cecil B. De Mille also deceives Norma by lacking the heart to tell her that she will never be performing for him again. By failing to admit the truth, he enables her to go on believing what she will.

Once she believes her comeback is imminent, Norma begins to take extravagant measures to prepare for her resurgence in fame. She has makeovers and face-lifts done every week as she waits to be awarded her new movie role. As she strives to prepare for her return to the screen, she has no clue that no one misses her or wants her to perform in their films. In the end, Norma is destroyed by lies and deception.



Following Your Dreams

We all have dreams and there are many different ways to make one's dreams come true. Joe decides to try to take a shortcut when he discovers that his dream of making money by writing is more difficult than he expected. Joe believes that if he moves in and works with Norma, he will enjoy a plush, worry-free existence and will be introduced to the film people whose connections he needs.

Of course, Joe does not suspect that his shortcut will bring about his early demise. Once Joe decides to try writing again and begins working with Betty, he must sneak around Norma so that he can meet with Betty and still live at Norma's house. In choosing to use a path of deception in order to follow his dream, Joe begins to lose all that he ever wanted.

Once Joe and Betty begin to have a relationship, Joe realizes that Betty will eventually discover the truth about his residence with Norma. When Betty does find out and has a predictably shocked reaction, he tells her to go back to Artie. After being awakened by this loss, Joe packs his bags to leave Norma and attain his goals in an independent, legitimate way. However, when he tries to escape Norma's clutches to pursue his own objectives instead of hers, he loses all chances of making his great dreams come true: he loses his life.

Style and Cinematography

Sunset Boulevard is one of the most renowned and classic films of 1950s Hollywood. Most films of the time were made strictly for entertainment. Film studios wanted to keep their fun, lighthearted, wholesome images intact at all costs, but this film suddenly turned all that on its head. The truth of Hollywood's often twisted mindset, including the problems faced by writers, actors and actresses, came to light through *Sunset Boulevard*.

Sunset Boulevard was released during a time when a genre known as *film noir* was in its heyday. The term *film noir* was first coined by French film critics, who had observed increasingly dark themes, scripts and cinematic styles pervading American movies, particularly in films concerning crimes and detectives. In its advanced, intricate *film noir* techniques, *Sunset Boulevard* is widely regarded as among the very best of these films.

The film is somewhat gloomy and macabre not only in its story and style, but also in its cinematography. From the first picture of Joe's body floating in the pool to the final scene, in which Norma descends the stairs toward the cameras with a wild look in her eyes, the film becomes increasingly characterized by darkness. The entire façade of Hollywood happiness and perfection is torn to pieces as viewers watch Norma's unraveling sanity become increasingly obvious. 1950s viewers were finally able to see that the state of affairs in Hollywood was less than utopian. The film industry's somewhat deluded, skewed point of view, along with its participants' constant striving to arrive and stay on top, was revealed in all its gory mess in *Sunset Boulevard*. As we are privy to Norma Desmond's demented outlook on life and subsequent downfall, we witness the often daunting, painful, lonely, dangerous, unhealthy and perhaps even unenviable reality of life in Hollywood.



Motifs

Lost Fame

Norma is no longer a celebrity, although she does not realize it. Although it might be painful for her to discover that her fame has passed, it is far more detrimental that she lives her life in ignorance of the fact that her days of glory have come to an end.

Instead of having to cope with reality, Norma spends each day preparing for her next big role and imagining a newly-launched career based on a script she is having Joe polish. She cannot understand that people no longer enjoy silent films now that talkies have been invented and she is also unaware that she lacks the acting skills to appear in newer films. Norma's delusions of grandeur have been protected for so long by Max that she becomes a danger to herself and others. Cecil De Mille, her former director, also reinforces her deluded ideas when he cannot bear to tell her the truth: that her acting career is long over.

Since Norma both cannot and will not grasp the concept that she is no longer famous, she becomes dangerous upon realizing that her fame has indeed expired. The price for ignoring her lost fame and failing to confront real life becomes greater in the end, when she shoots Joe and is arrested for his death, thereby sacrificing everything good that remains in her life.

Jealous Woman

Playwright William Congreve once wrote, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned." As Congreve and other writers have observed, angry and rejected lovers can be dangerous. Norma evolves into a possessive, jealous woman during the course of the film. At first, she simply seems to dote on Joe in an almost motherly way, but she eventually becomes obsessed with him and refuses to let him out of her sight.

In time, Norma discovers that Joe is sneaking out of her house each night to work with Betty on a script. She is angry to discover that she has been replaced by another woman. When Joe refuses to stay in her home any longer, Norma murders him rather than give him up to Betty or to another woman.

Through the lens of Norma's insane jealousy, we better understand two of the film's main themes: the desire for fame and the destruction of deceit. Since Norma still believes herself to be young, famous and wanted by all, she cannot bear to have Joe walk out on her and spoil her romantic delusions.

Protector

Max serves as Norma's protector. In general, people who cultivate strong delusions about themselves surround themselves with others who help maintain those delusions. Max fulfills such a role for Norma. He writes her fake fan letters, places photographs of her all over the house and convinces everyone else to deceive her as well.

Max's role is basically to both hide and perpetuate the lies and illusions he began. He feels guilty for discovering Norma and turning her into what she has now become: a washed-up, broken, shallow shell of a woman who waits only to return to the spotlight. Max keeps Norma cloistered away from the real world to prevent her from realizing that no one remembers or cares about her stardom.

As a protector, Max helps us to see how deadly deception can be. In the end, the web of deceit he has so painstakingly preserved helps to destroy both Joe and Norma. Joe dies, while Norma loses her tenuous remaining links to reality. At the end of the film, she even believes that the television cameras at the crime scene have arrived to record her last great performance.



Symbols

Chimp and the Organ Grinder

One night, Joe dreams about a chimp who is owned by an organ grinder. The chimp does everything the organ grinder wants so that he can make some money and have some food.

Joe's dream is symbolic of his relationship with Norma. She offers him food and lodging; in return, he does whatever she asks. Before becoming Norma's kept man, Joe entertained big dreams of becoming a brilliant writer. Although times were tough and he was being chased by creditors, at least his independence and idealism remained intact. After Joe comes to live with Norma, he essentially becomes her chimp. He forsakes all his friends when she asks him to stay with her and he assists Max in lying to her about her real situation.

Joe's dream about the chimp and the organ grinder helps him realize that he has gotten himself into a trap. Norma may give him a lot of things, but she refuses to allow him even a shred of freedom. Eventually, Joe decides to reclaim that freedom for himself and he starts meeting Betty to work on the script. However, just as the chimp can never fully free himself from the organ grinder, neither can Joe entirely disentangle himself from Norma. When he finally tries to leave, Norma opts to murder him rather than give him up.

Photographs and Films

Norma's home is filled with hundreds of portraits of herself, providing graphic evidence that Norma has become absolutely obsessed with herself over the years. Once we see inside her home, we learn quickly that Norma is mentally unstable. Norma apparently believes that she is still famous and beloved by fans.

Norma also only watches her own movies. As a silent film star, she refuses to admit that talkies are here to stay and believes that she will make her grand return to the screen any day now. In addition, Norma's photographs and films show her as a much younger woman. We know she realizes that she has aged once she uses face-lifts and makeovers to prepare for what she believes is an upcoming film role.

Norma's solipsism causes profound problems for everyone. She never considers anyone else's feelings as she lives her life. She even seems to think that she deserves everyone's praise and obedience simply because she was once a famous movie star. Norma has become seriously unstable during her years of pathological self-centeredness. When Joe threatens to thwart her plans, she does what it takes to prevent him from leaving, with fatal results.

The Script

The film script on which Joe collaborates with Betty is symbolic of his search for freedom. Before moving in with Norma, Joe loves writing and hopes to become a famous writer. While living in Norma's home, he becomes discouraged and unfocused. He only has time to focus on Norma, whose demanding, needy selfishness and horrible script consume all his attention.

In secret, Joe begins working with Betty on a promising new screenplay. To do so, he waits until Norma goes to bed every evening so that he can sneak out without her hearing. He is afraid to seek his freedom publicly, so he meets Betty in the dead of night. The script and the late, clandestine meetings also help launch a love affair between Joe and Betty.

When Betty finally learns about Joe's questionable relationship with Norma, she decides to leave him unless he moves out. In telling Betty to take the script with her, Joe essentially throws their love back at her. Although Joe immediately goes upstairs to pack, the film suggests that he feels Betty will be better off without him since he may never completely gain his freedom. In the end, even the script cannot save Joe; he loses his freedom permanently when Norma kills him in a jealous rage.



Essay Questions

How does Joe meet Norma?

Why is *Sunset Boulevard* considered one of the great classics of *film noir*?

Why does Joe decide to move in with Norma?

Why does Betty want Joe to work with her on the screenplay? Describe their evolving partnership and relationship.

What does *Sunset Boulevard* reveal about Hollywood?

How did Max come to work for Norma?

What role does Max play in Norma's deluded thinking?

Why does Norma murder Joe?

From whose point of view is the film told and why? How is this an effective device? What purposes does it serve?

Describe and explain the symbolism of Joe's dream about the chimp and the organ grinder.