

Sample essay: *Sunset Boulevard*

This essay responds to the following topic on the film *Sunset Boulevard*:

'*Sunset Boulevard* reveals the destructive nature of Hollywood's obsession with fame and success.' Discuss.

Sunset Boulevard, directed by Billy Wilder, is a 1950s noir melodrama that investigates how the popularity of the Hollywood film industry encouraged a social fixation on the glory of celebrity. Throughout the film, Wilder explores the nuances of success and fame, sometimes pitting the two qualities against each other. *Sunset Boulevard* demonstrates that striving for career success can have both positive and negative outcomes; however, it suggests that those who are swept up in Hollywood's preoccupation with fame will almost always experience negative consequences. Furthermore, the film interrogates the role of the audience in this destruction, insinuating that audiences perpetuate Hollywood's obsession with fame through an intense fascination with gossip and scandal, in a way that conceals its true costs.

Wilder uses the character of Joe Gillis to warn the audience about the harmful effects of self-interest and an obsession with success. At the beginning of the film, Joe, a struggling screenwriter, devises 'a little plot', lying that Norma's 'silly hodgepodge' script is 'fascinating' so she will hire him as an editor. This suggests that Joe's self-interest has destructive implications, as he is willing to indulge Norma's self-delusion in order to gain money and eventual success, even though the relationship he establishes with Norma is founded on dishonesty. Wilder also uses the 'dead monkey upstairs' as a symbol of Joe's impending doom. When Joe refers to the monkey as Norma's 'only child' and ponders the emptiness of Norma's life, he acknowledges that the monkey was a wild animal that had been kept locked in the house as a pet – a plaything for Norma. As Joe watches over 'the last rites for that hairy old chimp', the close-up shot of Joe's face, framed by the blinds and the bars of the window frame, implies a sense of confinement, signalling to the audience that it is now Joe who is trapped in the house. Wilder's implicit comparison between Joe and the monkey can be seen as a warning to the audience that Joe's desire to get ahead could lead to him sharing the monkey's fate. The characterisation of Joe, and his character arc, demonstrate that ambition and selfishness can be disastrous for an individual and their relationships.

However, the film does not always show ambition and a desire for success to be wholly negative. In particular, it juxtaposes Joe's self-interest with the characterisation of Betty Schaefer, an aspiring writer who has 'not once' wished for fame, and who ultimately views success as writing 'true' and 'moving' screenplays. Betty's emphasis on creating work that holds its value contrasts with Joe's choice to work on Norma's 'idiotic script' for short-term gain; Betty's ambition is presented as being more admirable than Joe's. Near the end of the film, Joe recognises the potential in Betty's ambition and

Signposts the essay's approach to the idea of success, establishing partial agreement with the topic statement (i.e. striving for success is not always destructive).

Signposts the approach to the idea of fame.

Signposts an additional element to the analysis, which will be the focus of the final body paragraph.

Begins the first body paragraph with a clear topic sentence.

Incorporates short quotes into the discussion.

Uses relevant textual evidence and shows understanding of how meaning is created by the text's construction.

Ends the paragraph with a clear link to the topic.

Introduces discussion of a second main character to demonstrate the positive as well as negative aspects of ambition. The linking word 'however' signals the compare/contrast approach being used to develop the argument.

ideals, and encourages her to leave him in Norma's mansion so she can 'finish that script', ultimately saving her from being caught up in the destructive conflict between himself and Norma. Consequently, the film suggests that ambition, when held by people with good intentions and values, can be a worthy quality and can lead to positive outcomes.

While *Sunset Boulevard* portrays the idea of success as complex and nuanced, it depicts fame as a fantasy or delusion that is intrinsically linked to self-image. Norma Desmond, the 'famous star of yesteryear', is unable to separate fantasy and reality, as she believes that she is still famous and has 'fan-letters every day'. Wilder consistently frames Norma surrounded by photographs of herself when she was younger. The mid-shots of the many photographs spread through the house, which is 'crowded with Norma Desmonds', remind the audience that Norma has built herself a delusional self-image, based on her fantasy of still being young and famous. However, as soon as Joe reveals that 'the audience left twenty years ago' and that 'there isn't going to be any picture', Norma's fantasy is shattered, and she realises that she no longer has the level of fame that she dreams of. This revelation leads to Norma's ultimate downfall when she shoots Joe. Wilder uses Norma's mental breakdown to demonstrate that the fantasy of fame inevitably results in destruction.

Sunset Boulevard also suggests that audiences are at least partly responsible for perpetuating the Hollywood obsession with fame, through their unstinting interest in scandal and gossip. Joe's post-death narration further emphasises the difference between fame and success in the eyes of the Hollywood community. In these final scenes, Norma receives the attention she has always wanted, as her house is swarming with 'cops, reporters, neighbours, passers-by ... even the newsreel guys'. Instead of being viewed as successful, however, she is pitied by the neighbourhood. Here, Wilder reveals that, in the Hollywood of the 1950s, people could achieve fame without success, as the public was so fascinated by scandalous stories. Indeed, Wilder uses the final scene to critique the role of his audience in encouraging the film industry's fixation on fame. Norma's direct address to 'those wonderful people out there in the dark', combined with the brightly lit close-up shot of her staring into the camera lens, directly positions the audience to feel as though they are included in Wilder's commentary on success and fame, as they, too, are engrossed in Norma's downfall. Wilder's inclusion of the audience makes the final argument that the obsession with fame is an issue for the broader society, as it is fuelled by the public's insatiable desire for gossip and scandal. Joe's death symbolises the destruction caused by this obsession: it is the grim reality hidden from view by the glamorous facade of Hollywood, but real nonetheless.

Transitions to a discussion of the other key term in the topic – fame.

Uses relevant metalanguage – 'frames', 'mid-shots' – to analyse the film's representation of Norma and show an understanding of the film genre.

Engages closely with the destructive effects of an obsession with fame.

Moves on to the final signpost from the introduction.

Continues the argument about the distinction drawn by the film between success and fame.

Links strongly to the topic through the focus on destructive effects, enabling a smooth transition to the concluding paragraph.

Sunset Boulevard presents a nuanced and complex depiction of the social dynamics at play in the Hollywood film industry during the 1950s. Billy Wilder challenges the idea that ambition is always destructive, yet he also reaffirms that those who seek fame at any price are at risk of devastation. In investigating these ideas, *Sunset Boulevard* encourages its audience to critically interrogate their own role in perpetuating the social obsession with success and fame.

Sums up the argument without exactly repeating earlier wording.

Finishes with a strong statement about the film that responds to the topic and flows from the discussion of audience.