

Why *Sunset Boulevard* is a great movie

by Phillip W. Weiss

Sunset Boulevard is a great movie because it contains a tragic story which makes the movie a compelling work of drama. Gloria Swanson and William Holden portray complex characters, one a washed up actress and the other a failed screen writer, with personal needs that conflict. One needs love and the other one money. This simple formula provides the basis for a great movie.

We know from the start that the principal male character, Joe Gillis, is dead and that the story is a flash back. This flash back hooks the audience's attention. We know that Joe has a story to tell, one that is worth listening to because something bad happened to him, and the question now is: why? The movie explains why. Joe, by chance, gets involved with a wealthy but emotionally unstable woman, Norma, who is in a position to cater to Joe's material needs. All Norma wants in return is Joe's love, a love that Joe does not feel for Norma. Now, Joe has a conflict: stay with Norma, whom he does not love, although he loves her money, or leave Norma and go back to where he came from, which is poverty row. Either way, Joe loses. How Joe goes about trying to resolve this conflict is what drives this story. The needier Norma gets, the more frantic Joe becomes. Joe describes himself as a heel. That's because he feels guilty over the way he is treating Norma. Joe's guilt feelings show that fundamentally he is a decent guy who does not know how to extricate himself from an impossible situation. If we did not know what happens to Joe from the start, his situation would seem comical: an eccentric middle-aged woman lavishing gifts on a younger man who is too much of a wimp to say no. Joe Gillis could be played by Adam Sandler or a younger Dustin Hoffman. Indeed, *The Graduate* reprises the older woman-younger man motif. But unlike *The Graduate*, where feathers are ruffled but nobody dies, in *Sunset Boulevard* the story is far from amusing; it is tragic. Joe dies and Norma loses what is left of her sanity. No one wins. Norma makes a grand exit to the police and Joe makes an exit too: to the morgue. That this happens in Hollywood gives the story a sardonic twist. Norma and Joe finally achieve the notoriety that they craved, but at a price.