

The big lebowski assignment



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Mike Preston Lisa Hemminger Art is Film 26 February 2010 “ All the Dude ever wanted was his rug back” To the casual viewer The Big Lebowski, a 1998 film written by film maker brothers Ethan and Joel Coen and directed by Joel, would appear to be a comedy rip off of the 1940’s Los Angeles detective film The Big Sleep by Howard Hawks. It features a hippie dropout from the seventies named “ the Dude” (Jeff Bridges) who gets caught up with his bowler buddies Walter (John Goodman) and Donny (Steve Buscemi) in a case of mistaken identity and a search for a presumed kidnap victim.

Like Thornhill (Cary Grant) in North by Northwest he becomes a reluctant detective. However, The Dude is the polar opposite of the suave and resourceful Thornhill because he is verbally challenged, bumbling, and unemployed. I will present information that despite the film’s initial lukewarm reception by critics and audiences alike, it should be considered a classic like other movies that were initially overlooked including Annie Hall and North by Northwest.

I will make the argument that because of the zany LA based characters, memorable dialogue, innovative narration, creative film elements, and entertaining music and dance; that it is a neo-noir classic that finds more fans as time marches on. Beyond that I will discuss the ideology on greed and social classes that run through the film. In The Big Lebowski the Coen brothers wanted to explore Los Angeles stereotypes. They had successfully mined characters from their mid-western (Minnesota) roots for their previous Oscar winning independent film Fargo.

The Coen's needed a change of pace from the dark humor and graphic violence of *Fargo*. The brothers drew from their real life stoner friend Jeff Dowd, who actually called himself the Dude, for the story's protagonist. Walter, Dude's odd couple friend and a Vietnam veteran with a military haircut and camouflage attire, was based partly on their uncle Peter, also a Vietnam veteran and rug theft victim who had lamented "that the rug really tied the room together". This line would be uttered several times throughout the movie by both the Dude and Walter to give some cover to their idiotic actions in pursuit of Bunny and the money. Other plot elements came from their private lives as well; like the homework assignment stuffed in a stolen car that happened to a friend of Uncle Peter's. (Levine, *The Coen brothers: the story of two American filmmakers*) They also wanted to do homage to the author of *The Big Sleep*, Raymond Chandler. The film's overall structure was influenced by the detective fiction of Raymond Chandler.

Ethan said, "We wanted something that would generate a certain narrative feeling – like a modern Raymond Chandler story, and that's why it had to be set in Los Angeles ... We wanted to have a narrative flow, a story that moves like a Chandler book through different parts of town and different social classes" ("The Big Lebowski"). They borrowed different elements from *The Big Sleep*. As Steve Palopoli points out in his article "Five Things You Didn't Know About 'The Big Lebowski'", The Dude stands in for Humphrey Bogart's Philip Marlowe—both go to the home of a patriarch in a wheelchair (General Sternwood in *Sleep*), after which they are eventually hired to handle the case of a free-spirited young woman (Carmen in *Sleep*, Bunny in *Lebowski*). The uptight butler Brandt in *Lebowski* replaces uptight butler

Norris in Sleep, while Bunny attempts to seduce the Dude just as Carmen tries to seduce Marlowe (to which Bogart famously quips, ‘ She tried to sit in my lap while I was standing up’’. (Five Things You Didn’t Know About ‘ The Big Lebowski).

The dude’s comparative line to Bunny’s offer to give him felatio for a thousand dollars is “ I’m just gonna find a cash machine”. The movie itself did not fare well with critics or the box office. The Guardian criticized the film as “ a bunch of ideas shoveled into a bag and allowed to spill out at random. The film is infuriating, and will win no prizes. But it does have some terrific jokes”(qtd. in The Big Lebowski The Big Lebowski). Peter Howell, in his review for the Toronto Star, wrote, “ It’s hard to believe that this is the work of a team that won an Oscar ast year for the original screenplay of Fargo” (qtd. in “ The Big Lebowski”). While the Coen’s previous academy award winning movie Fargo grossed 25 million, Lebowski only grossed 10 million in the American theaters (qtd. in Levine). Other classic films have suffered the same problems of poor initial acceptance by audiences and critics. For instance North by Northwest is named one of the top ten mystery films by the American Film Institute yet it has never won an Oscar and it took years before it was considered one of Hitchcock’s greatest movies (“ Alfred Hitchcock”)(North By Northwest DVD).

Based on the worship of fans including Lebowski fests, numerous web sites, articles, a religion, and books dedicated to The Big Lebowski, I think it is finally gaining the classic status it deserves. Clark Collis of Entertainment Weekly recently blogged “ The Big Lebowski has had a far richer afterlife than your average box office dud” (Entertainment Weekly and Collis, “ An <https://assignbuster.com/the-big-lebowski-assignment/>

Icon Lives On " The Big Lebowski's" lasting legacy — Why DVD releases, Lebowski fests, and cartoon imitations keep the ' Dude' relevant today").

There is an argument to be made that it is only a cult classic, however as the dude would say, " I got new information, new shit has come to light". For instance, Entertainment Weekly now ranks The Big Lebowski 8th on their funniest Movies of the past 25 years (" The Big Lebowski") and Empire magazine ranked the Dude 7th and Walter 49th in their " The 100 Greatest Movie Characters" poll (" 100 greatest movie characters"). The Dude or Jeffery Lebowski is a reluctant detective swept into the mystery because of a case of mistaken identity.

Throughout the film the dude, who appears in almost every scene, is cast about by forces that represent the social and financial elite while he pursues a replacement for his rug that was " micturated upon". The opening scene of the movie focuses on a tumbleweed blown about from the desert through LA to the Venice Beach while the stranger (Sam Elliot) narrates cowboy style, and the song " tumbling tumbleweeds" plays in the background. The director Joel Coen effectively mixes close-ups, medium shots, long shots with deep focus, and dolly shots to give us a sense of movement along with the tumbleweed.

The tumbleweed works as a symbol for what the Dude is about to endure, being tossed about by forces more powerful than himself. Our protagonist, the Dude, represents the underdog that Americans love in a comical exaggerated way. His clownish ignorance shows throughout the film as evidenced by his actions and language. For instance when he nails a board

to the floor and props a chair against the door to prevent his tormentors from entering only to have the door open outwards by his pursuers. His efforts to convey thoughts are constantly a series of stuttering, slang, and swearing.

Several times he parrots terms he has heard previously to appear intelligent. He first hears the term “in the parlance of our times” from Maude and then uses that term in the next scene. He hears President George H. W. Bush say that “this aggression will not stand” on television and then he parrots that back later to the big Lebowski. He finally rises to the occasion in the end and discovers the truth and confronts the big Lebowski and still comes off looking incompetent. DUDE: You thought Bunny’d been kidnapped and you could use it as a pretext to make some money disappear.

All you needed was a sap to pin it on, and you’d just met me. You thought, hey, a deadbeat, a loser, someone the square community won’t give a shit about. LEBOWSKI: Well? Aren’t you? DUDE: Well. . . yeah. (qtd. in *The Big Lebowski*) Walter Sobchak, the Dude’s friend and bowling partner, played by John Goodman works perfectly to complete the odd couple effect that the Coen’s wanted. Joel Coen explained to actors Jeff Bridges and John Goodman “In a way, the movie is about how these two interact... In a way, it’s a portrait of a dysfunctional marriage”(Belth, *Strikes and Gutters: A Year with the Coen Brothers*).

Walter’s aggressive nature counters the Dude’s passive persona and drives the action in the plot to its ultimate conclusion. The Dude would have overlooked the damaged rug until Walter explodes in anger with his usual

reference to Vietnam and convinces the Dude to pursue reparation for the rug from the big Lebowski for whom he was mistaken by Jackie Treehorn's thugs. Walter then compounds the Dude's problem by bringing an Uzi and a ringer of underwear to attempt to keep the million dollar ransom and beat the whereabouts of Bunny out of the Nilhists who had kidnapped her.

Walter's aggression ultimately leads to Donny's death of a heart attack when he fights the Nilhist's instead of handing over his pocket change. The relationship between the Dude and Walter is a study in contrasting examples of men of their age group (born in the 50's). While the Dude is a burned out hippie slacker who was once involved in campus unrest, Walter is an uptight Vietnam veteran who has converted to Judaism to stay close to his ex wife. It is unlikely they would have been friends in their younger days because of the disparity in their backgrounds.

This disparity now provides plenty of odd couple friction and dry humor. Steve Buscemi, in his fourth Coen movie, plays Donny the friend who can't quite keep up with the conversation. Unlike his chatty role in the previous Coen film Fargo, Buscemi has few lines. He plays the victim to many of Walter's angry verbal explosions including "shut the F*** up Donny" several times. Buscemi dies in The Big Lebowski as he has in all of the Coen films he has appeared in. Donny is the third wheel to the Dude's and Walter's dysfunctional friendship. The character of Donny represents the guy you adopt like a little brother.

The Dude ignores him while Walter verbally abuses him until the end when he finally displays tenderness for him as he lay dying. Jeffrey Lebowski

(David Huddleston) represents an older generation and different social status from Walter and the Dude. His character is a wheelchair bound, rich, and actively involved in charitable causes like the little Lebowski urban achievers. We see some of his generation's ideology about manhood and success when he challenges the Dude's manhood and promotes his own success as in when the Dude asks him to pay for the damaged rug.

Lebowski: just as your rug is your problem, just as every bum's lot in life is his own responsibility regardless of whom he chooses to blame. I didn't blame anyone for the loss of my legs, some chinaman in Korea took them from me but I went out and achieved anyway. I can't solve your problems, sir, only you can. And in this exchange, the big Lebowski tries to educate the Dude on manhood. Lebowski: " What makes a man, Mr. Lebowski ... Is it being prepared to do the right thing? Whatever the price? " Dude: " Hmm ... that and a pair of testacles".

In the end we find out that the big Lebowski is a fraud supported by a deceased wife's money. Lebowski ensnares the Dude in his kidnapped wife's ransom delivery of a million dollars that turns out to be a ruse for him to skim money from the family trust. This represents one of the ideologies in this movie of the rich class manipulating and taking advantage of the less fortunate. Brandt (Philip Seymour Hoffman) plays the part of the big Lebowski's uptight personal assistant. He represents a younger generation than the Dude and Walter.

His character is intensely loyal and apparently has no real identity other than to support his master. Even his physical appearance reflects a younger

version of the big Lebowski. Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara) is a rich pornographer who sends thugs to collect money owed him by his former porno star and now the big Lebowski's wife, Bunny. Unfortunately for our reluctant hero, the Dude, the thugs end up at his house by mistake and this starts the whole comedy of errors rolling. Once Jackie figures out his error he tries to enlist the Dude in his collection scheme.

He invites the dude to his mansion and then ends up drugging him. By this time the Dude is trying to be a detective and in one funny scene he tries to uncover a hidden address using a pencil to shade in the depression from a torn off sheet of a note pad, similar to Thornhill in North by Northwest. Comically he only uncovers a stick figure drawing of a man with an enormous erect penis. Treehorn, like the big Lebowski, is older, rich and a fraud in the sense that he makes his money from pornography as he pretends to be legitimate. DUDE: White Russian, thanks. How's the smut business, Jackie? TREEHORN: I wouldn't know, Dude.

I deal in publishing, entertainment, political advocacy, and... This sequence was introduced with a lavish beach party scene that was dimly lit and in slow motion with young partially clothed beautiful people scampering around to emphasize the Hugh Hefner quality of Jackie Treehorn. This is another ideological swipe at the California lifestyle of the rich and famous. John Turturro as Jesus Quintana makes the most of his limited screen time. Joel Coen uses slow motion mixed with medium shots, close-ups and the King of Gypsies version of Hotel California to create a music video within the movie.

Turturro's Jesus licks his bowling ball, shines it in a perverted way, and moves in an exaggerated fashion to milk the most out of his screen time. His line " You don't F**k with the Jesus" is legendary amongst Lebowski fans. As a former pederast, Quintana represents the perverted side of his generation. While the two main females are portrayed as independent and promiscuous, in comparison the men are portrayed as either inept, or greedy, or manipulative. Maude (Julianne Moore) is the only character in the movie that seems to have a good idea of what is really happening and eventually leads the Dude to the answer.

Maude is the rich daughter of the big Lebowski and a feminist avant-garde artist whose work is considered " strongly vaginal". She also enlists the Dude for a commission to find the million dollars. The Dude agrees if he can keep the rug, displaying his lack of real interest in money. She eventually seduces him in an effort to have a no strings attached baby. Once again we see the rich trying to manipulate the poor (the Dude) for their own purposes. Maude becomes the object of the Dude's music video-like dream sequence called " Gutter Balls" after Treehorn drugs him.

With Kenny Rogers and the First edition's version of Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In) playing in the background, the Dude has a dream involving Maude, bowling, and Busby Berkeley style dancers. The sequence is elegantly filmed with overhead shots of the dancers, then to medium shots of the Dude teaching Maude to bowl and finally to a great dolly point-of-view shot of the Dude floating between the legs of the dancers standing in a bowling lane. Maude was also in the Dude's first dream sequence as he floats over LA after her on his rug, now a magic carpet.

While throughout the film the Dude appears to have little interest in women, these scenes show a sexual interest in Maude mixed with bowling. Bowling seems to be a substitute for a woman in his life until Maude. The stranger (Sam Elliot) provides the detached third person narrative in a slow western twang. In a unique twist in this film, the narrator meets the Dude at the bowling alley in the middle of the movie and at the end to tie things up for the audience with his revelation (to the camera) that there is a little Lebowski on the way. He asks the Dude how it is going and the Dude replies “ Ah, you know. Strikes and gutters, ups and downs”.

This seems to be the analogy to life for the Dude and the ideology that the Coen’s want us to take away from their film. Joel Coen paid close attention to the mise-en-scene to give this film its neo-noir LA style, including sets and wardrobe. He asked Rick Heinrichs, the production designer to give the sets a “ bright, glowing, surreal look” (qtd. in Levine). The Hollywood bowling alley that was used for the bowling scenes was painted in earth tones to reflect the California lifestyle. The bowling alley was also well lit to look warm and inviting while the Dude’s apartment was dimly lit to make it appear seedy.

Jeff Bridges provided much of his wardrobe from home to capture the California Venice beach look (qtd. in “ The Big Lebowski”). Cinematographer Roger Deakins discussed the look of the film with the Coen’s during pre-production. They told him that they wanted some parts of the film to have a real and contemporary feeling and other parts, like the dream sequences, to have a very stylized look. “ Deakins described the look of the fantasy scenes

as being very crisp, monochromatic, and highly lit in order to afford greater depth of focus". (qtd. in "The Big Lebowski").

In some heavy dialog scenes like the first bowling alley scene, Coen moves the camera to follow the actor's movements rather than cutting to keep the audience in the moment. Unlike another bowling centric movie Kingpin, Coen really gives us a new perspective by using a motorized skateboard-like dolly to chase the bowling balls down the lanes. In one scene he appears to have mounted the camera in a bowling ball to give us the point-of-view of the bowling ball hurtling toward the pins. Ian Nathan sums it up nicely "the leisurely pursuit of ten pin bowling is transformed into something lyrical and wondrous ..." (Nathan, "MY REVIEW").

Joel Coen uses camera angles to great effect to prevent audience boredom throughout the movie. His use of dolly shots and then switching to point-of-view shots to give the audience a greater sense of movement and perspective as the Dude is walking into Maude's studio stands out. In the take where the Dude speaks to Bunny sitting beside pool he places the viewer in the scene by employing a low camera angle to capture the Dude standing, making him appear more vertical, then switches to down angle point-of-view shots as bunny looks up to reply rather than a medium shot of the two.

For me personally, I measure a movie by how many times I can watch it and still enjoy it. By this measurement The Big Lebowski is a big winner. It will be considered a classic in the neo-noir genre because of the elements that make it feel like a forties film shot in the nineties and all of the Lebowski

festivals and devotees that have cropped up in the last 10 years. After producing and directing the dark humor and graphic violence in *Fargo* I think the Coen brothers wanted to have some light hearted fun. They drew upon their time in LA to lampoon the stereotypes they found there while paying homage to a favorite writer, Raymond Chandler.

In the process they provide some funny commentary on class and wealth in LA. They use the Dude as a vehicle to reflect the inner slacker that many of us secretly aspire to and to eventually solve the mystery and get the girl, sort of. The exaggerated portrayal of generations, genders, and classes reveal the Coen brother's working class mid western background and values. They must have had fun spoofing the California lifestyle. In the end they made a film that is quirky, funny, and a classic. Works Cited (Alfred Hitchcock 2010)" Alfred Hitchcock. " Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

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