

The performance of  
gloria swanson in  
sunset blvd.



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Gloria Swanson's performance in *Sunset Blvd.* is considered a masterpiece of motion picture acting. Why do you believe it is so considered and why do you agree or disagree? An allusion to *Great Expectations* is made seconds before William Holden's character, Joe Gillis, enters Norma Desmond's enormous home. Contemplating about the house's appearance, Joe narrates, "It was like that old woman in *Great Expectations*."

That Miss Havisham in her rotting wedding dress and her torn veil, taking it out on the world because she'd been given the go-by. This suggestion prophesizes the mysterious character of Norma and her crumbling psyche, expertly portrayed by Gloria Swanson. Though Norma Desmond is more rational in her behavior than Miss Havisham, they mirror each other in destructive single-mindedness and egocentricity. In the same way that Charles Dickens provides a vivid mental picture of Miss Havisham's putrefaction, Gloria Swanson provides clear physical characteristics and behaviors to Norma Desmond in order to visually communicate Norma's mental breakdown. Gloria Swanson's performance as Norma Desmond clearly notes the comparison between Norma and Miss Havisham- or at least is thoroughly constructed through observation of similarly broken people trapped in their past. From the first moment Norma appears onscreen, she dominates the picture. The first image of her is through shuttered blinds, but soon her full figure is shown draped in a long black gown and sunglasses. She is mourning for her dead monkey, but through Swanson's performance it soon becomes clear that she's mourning for her lost, glimmering past much more deeply than her pet.

Norma only appears eccentric at first, but Swanson provides a madness behind her eyes that takes hold when she becomes passionate. Every twitch and intense glare of Norma that Swanson provides is fascinating and foreshadows Norma's final homicidal madness. The most interesting aspect of Swanson's performance of Norma Desmond is that her portrayal extends through every tensed muscle, limb and digit in Swanson's body. The most key example of this are Norma's hands, which are rigid and clawlike, as if racked with rheumatoid arthritis. Her hands are visual cues of Norma decaying internally, and provide evidence that Norma is aged much beyond her years. In addition to her hands, Swanson's face is particularly prominent in her performance.

Her face muscles are limited in mobility, as if Norma is frightened that full expressions might crease her delicate skin. Instead Swanson uses her eyes as her primary means of non-verbal communication, bringing weight to the concept that eyes are windows to the soul. "I can say anything I want with my eyes!" pronounces Norma, a true skill in any old silent film actor. Other forms of Swanson's careful facial expressions are the slight twitching of her eyebrows and lips, which are miniscule but provide excellent punctuation of Norma's intents. In the middle of the film, Joe and Norma celebrate New Year's together at a lavish party in Norma's personal ballroom. She has clearly drunk far too much champagne, and Swanson's brilliant choices show in Norma's behavior.

Norma's reservations about moving her facial muscles are dissolved, along with her rigid movements. Due to this sudden release of energy, Norma's buzz from the alcohol and from her high hopes of her and Joe's  
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™s romantic prospects is felt all the way through the celluloid and into the audience. When Joe refuses her advances, Norma not only emotionally sobers but visually as well, becoming rigid and precise in her movements. After Norma and Joe are romantically involved, Swanson gives Norma more freedom and joy in her facial expressions and movements. As Norma becomes more controlling of Joe, however, and her mind starts to slip, her face grows grotesque with wide, intense expressions.

When she calls Betty about Joe, Norma becomes frantic and distraught. After Joe says he??™s leaving her, Swanson allows a gradual decent into madness shift suddenly into a fall. Killing Joe, Norma snaps. Eyes wide and face paralyzed, Swanson gives an elegant portrayal of insanity. I resoundingly agree with the assessment of Gloria Swanson??™s performance in Sunset Blvd. as a masterpiece of motion picture acting. I personally value visual communication in acting very highly, and I believe that Gloria Swanson brilliantly communicated the character of Norma Desmond in a visual sense.

Every movement of Swanson??™s was a defined choice which furthered the plot and developed her character. I was enveloped in her performance and rarely could tear my eyes away from her. When an audience can become that engrossed in an actor??™s performance, then I believe it can truly be called a ??? masterpiece of motion picture acting.???