

TEACHERS' NOTES

The Searchers is often described as John Ford's Masterpiece. This study guide looks at why **it** is more than a straightforward Western and why **it** has become a classic film.

The guide is aimed at students of GCSE English and Media Studies, A' Level Media Studies, A'Level Film Studies and GNVO Media; Communication and Production (Intermediate and Advanced). It may also be used with students at K53.

The guide looks at the origins of the Western genre and The Searchers' place in its history, incorporating narrative structure, character development, music and filmic techniques.

The Searchers: Certificate U. Running Time 119 minutes.

MAJOR CREDITS FOR THE SEARCHERS

The Searchers 1956 (Whitney/Warner)

Producer: C. V. Whitney

Director: John Ford

Screenplay: Frank S. Nugent

Director of Photography: Winston C. Hoch

Editor: Jack Murray

Music: Max Steiner

Art Directors: Frank Hotaling, James Basevi

Cast: John Wayne

Jeffrey Hunter

Vera Miles

Ward Bond

Natalie Wood

Hank Warden Oscar Nominations 1956: Best Editing

Best Original Musical Score

THE SEARCHERS

John Ford was undoubtedly one of the greatest intuitive story-tellers either America or the world has ever produced - a deeply conservative man hut, though he took pains to deny it, a poet too. The Western was not his only forte but it was, perhaps, his greatest. This particular example allows John Wayne to give his most considerable performance as the obsessive, enigmatic Ethan, riding in from Monument Valley to his brother's homestead and then searching for his brother's daughter, abducted by Indians. The contrast between the old, racist America and the new is simply expressed as much through body language, facial expression and visual sensibility as through dialogue. While essentially a tragedy, there is humour and irony too. The Searchers has all the best values of a good Western, one of the most important genres Hollywood has ever invented and, when it is as good as this, one of the most expressive too.

Derek Malcolm

BEFORE YOU SEE THE FILM

WHAT IS A WESTERN?

THE ORIGIN OF THE WESTERN

It is significant that as we celebrate a hundred years of cinema, one of the films chosen for the 'Ten Films That Shook the World' is a Western. It is one of the most popular types of film running through the whole history of cinema and the fact that there are so many examples of the Western has led it to influence many other types of film.

The reason that there are so many Westerns is purely and simply that so many films have been made in Hollywood. When the earliest Westerns were made remnants of the 'Wild West of America were still in existence. Although much of the landscape of the original Wild West had been altered by settlement and progress, the landscape and weather conditions around Hollywood were ideal for its recreation.

The earliest films were often based on existing stories and plays and one of the most popular types of nineteenth century American fiction was the Western novel. These continued to be read throughout the first part of this century. John Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men* says that the working ranch hands in California at that time liked nothing better than to read tales of the Wild West because they could imagine themselves as those Western heroes. They were working under similar conditions to the cowboys and early farming pioneers and, by association, it gave their humdrum

lives a kind of glamour.

Another popular entertainment was the Wild West Show where some of the people who were the heroes of the novels re-enacted glamourised and stylised scenes of the Wild West and included in them displays of gunfighting, riding skills and spectacular chases.

For Americans, the history of the Wild West was their history. Many Americans had emigrated from Europe. The original settlements were on the east coast especially in Virginia and New England because these were the nearest places to Europe. As more and more came, the new settlers went further and further west into unknown terrain and difficult conditions. The land was already inhabited by the Native Americans and this influx caused strife and, eventually, war.

The earliest Westerns are more stylised because they also portrayed the conflict between good and evil. In most of the earliest Westerns good, after many hardships, normally triumphs over evil and in a neat or clever way. This theme, especially in its setting of unspoilt landscape, is very close to the morality stories common to many religions. As the new societies of America were established they wanted a good moral code and role model. Through all the changing social mores of the 20th century the Western continued to be morally acceptable when other types of film fell out of favour.

The first pioneers were living in newly established communities often spread over many miles, and because law and order were difficult to establish, daring crimes and bands of outlaws were something else with which they had to cope. In an English setting we know from the many stories of Robin Hood that outlaws can sometimes be the heroes of a story ii' they have been unjustly treated. The battles and robberies in the Western are set against the industrial progress of the nineteenth century and have the added visual excitement of horses, trains and stagecoaches set against dramatic scenery. The crimes are modern and include bank robberies and daring train robberies, perhaps using guns and dynamite.

Thus we can see that some of the themes of the earliest Westerns are based on the history of the American people:

- * Man against nature, especially a hostile environment.
- * Man against hostile natives.
- * Good versus evil against the background of unspoilt nature.
- * Crimes and chases in a nineteenth century American setting.

Most of the characters were men. Women were either portrayed as innocent heroines or strong, tough saloon girls with a heart of gold, who could survive in a man's world but normally had to watch the hero go off into the sunset with the innocent girl. Gradually, the pioneering family was introduced with motherly figures and tomboy girls who were doing the same hard farming tasks as their brothers and so looked and acted in a similar way.

Before the First World War some of the American film companies were making nothing but Westerns. These were short films, were sometimes based on real incidents and had titles like *The Great Train Robbery*, which was made in 1903. This was a very popular film and, as is true today, was immediately followed by lots of imitations.

Gradually, Western stars started to appear. The first was William S. Hart who came to public attention in 1916. He always played a hero and was usually a cowboy. What made him so special was that, even in the silent movies of his day, he was able to express great emotion and give his roles great depth and character.

As Hollywood entered the epic days of the 1920's, so the Western took on more epic proportions with subjects like the building of the railways and the pioneering wagon trains to the west.

In the thirties with the rise of the 'talkies' the Western became even more popular. One of its themes in the days of the Depression was the ordinary person overcoming wrong or oppression and triumphing in the end. One of the makers of such films was John Ford.

Task

Make a list of all the things you would expect to find in a Western under the following headings:

Setting

Narrative

Characters

Images

Music

AFTER YOU SEE THE FILM

“HALLO, I AM JOHN FORD, I MAKE WESTERNS”

Task

Look back at your list in the previous task. Can you find examples of what you were expecting to see in *The Searchers*?

Task

How much does the director influence the style and content of the film?

In a famous incident John Ford introduced himself as follows:

"Hallo, I'm John Ford, I make Westerns." Few directors nowadays could define themselves in terms of one genre but in the Hollywood of the thirties, forties and fifties, directors could be known for one kind of film.

* What sort of films would you associate with the following contemporary directors: Oliver Stone, Mel Brooks and Woody Allen?

* Find out what kind of films you could associate with Alfred Hitchcock, Frank Capra and Preston Sturgis.

Similarly, in the Hollywood Studio system, actors became associated with certain kinds of films. In modern films this sort of parallel still works.

* What sort of films would you associate with Whoopi Goldberg, Sylvester Stallone, Sharon Stone and Eddie Murphy?

* Find out what kind films you would associate with Vincent Price, Doris Day, Humphrey Bogart and Joan Crawford.

It is easy to see that because certain directors were working within one genre and certain actors were working in the same genre, it was possible for actors and directors to become paired in both the studio's and the public's mind.

One such association was John Ford and John Wayne. John Ford created John Wayne as a real star in *Stagecoach*. Around this partnership developed a repertory of actors who appeared in many films.

Task

Does John Ford have a distinctive style?

Since the association between Wayne and Ford began with Stagecoach, it is worth comparing this film with The Searchers to see if a distinctive content emerges.

Here are some of the main plot elements of Stagecoach. Complete the table with the appropriate information from The Searchers. Take special note of when elements are exactly the same, as this indicates a stylistic consistency; and note also how the other elements are different in order to see if Ford is breaking his own plot rules.

Stagecoach	The Searchers
The film is shot in Monument Valley, Utah.	
Ringo has escaped from jail.	
He is driven by revenge and spends the majority of the film looking for the man who killed his family.	
The film is about a journey.	
The driver of the stage coach is a comic character. He is an innocent and often says the wrong thing.	
There is an older character, a sheriff who likes Ringo and whom Ringo respects.	
The sheriff says he is going to arrest Ringo, but he does not.	
There is the threat of attack by a renegade Indian, Geronimo.	
There is an army presence. They arrive at the last minute.	
There are quite large towns and settlements in the film.	
There is a Mexican character.	
Stagecoach	The Searchers

The Mexican's wife is a Native American who disappears in the middle of the night. Ringo thinks she may have gone to warn Geronimo.

At the end of the film Ringo kills the man who shot his family.

There is a happy ending. Ringo rides off into the sunset with the girl who loves him.

How similar are the two films? If there are differences, where do they come in?

THE SPECIAL QUALITIES OF THE SEARCHERS

What elements of this film make it so special? It is not that any one element is so extraordinary that it creates a new way of looking at a Western, but rather that all the elements have been so carefully considered that they fit together to create something that is more than the sum of its parts. A good example of how this works is the opening of the film.

Task

The following is an outline of the opening sequence of the film.

- 1 A drawing of a wall. Loud orchestral music in Native American rhythm.
- 2 Over credits the music subsides to a Western-style folksong.
"What makes a man to travel?
What makes a man to roam?
What makes a man leave bed and board?
And turn his back on home?
Ride away. Ride away.
- 3 Texas 1868.
- 4 The first shot of the main film is a door being opened. This opening frames the shot. The contrast between the darkness inside and the light outside throws the character who is Martha, Ethan's sister-in-law, into silhouette. The point of view of the camera is behind her. As she walks out into the open the camera follows her and we see Ethan in the distance.
- 5 Ethan's brother comes out followed by Debbie, Lucy and their brother.

- 6 "Ethan...that's your Uncle Ethan."
- 7 Ethan kisses his sister-in-law.
- 8 They go inside. He does not speak until he says "Lucy"
- 9 We realise that this is a very ordinary family. The conversation is of the neighbours, the Jorgenssens, and of hearing that Mose Harper, a family friend, has been met in California.
- 10 However, Ethan does not say where he has been.
- 11 The arrival of Marty is framed again by the door.
- 12 Ethan immediately says that he could "mistake him for a half-breed". Ethan saved him when he was a baby after his family had been massacred.
- 13 In a silence the clock strikes.
- 14 The children say that the war ended three years ago. Why didn't Ethan come home?

Can you see any themes which run through the film which are set up in this opening sequence?

Make a list and give some examples of how they are explored later:

Can you suggest why the shots are ordered in this way?

FILM AS NARRATIVE

The plot of *The Searchers* is very simple. Ethan's family are killed by Scar. He kidnaps Debbie. Ethan and Marty search for Debbie for five years and eventually find her.

If the plot seems so straightforward, how does John Ford keep his audience interested?

Firstly, he sets up a number of questions, then during the course of the film he gives more information, sometimes leading his audience to make the wrong conclusions until the question is finally resolved or not resolved.

Secondly, these threads of narrative are interconnected so that the development of one thread can change our point of view about another thread.

As an example of this, let us look at the relationship between Ethan and Marty.

Ethan and Marty are The Searchers and as such would normally be the heroes of the film. You can probably think of examples of

Westerns which have two or three people who are the leading characters of the film and go through the narrative helping and supporting each other, but as with many elements in The Searchers, the director takes a cliché and, by going against it, creates a fascinating new theme.

Ethan and Marty are very strongly linked at the beginning of the film: Ethan has saved Marty's life; Marty has been brought up by Ethan's family; Marty calls Ethan "Uncle Ethan."

However, in the opening sequence Ethan accuses Marty of being a "half-breed". He will not let him call him "Uncle". When they realise that the cattle rustling has been a trick to lure them away from the ranch and that it is a murder raid, Ethan does not let Marty ride pillion on his horse but makes him walk.

Ethan will not allow Marty to think of him as kin and tries to make him turn back. After they first come back to the Jorgenssen's ranch he leaves without him.

He uses Marty as a lure to help catch Mr. Fetterman the fur trader. He is quick to tell Marty that he has done wrong or spoken out of turn. When Marty mistakenly marries 'Look' he just laughs.

In contrast, he is also protective of Marty. He will not let him see the bodies of the family or, later, of Lucy in the ravine. He does not tell him until later that the scalp on Scar's lance is that of Marty's mother. He makes him the beneficiary of his will. He trusts him to be the one to try and rescue Debbie before the cavalry attacks the village.

These opposite reactions obviously reflect the conflicts between parts of Ethan's own troubled character and at the end of the film we are still not totally sure of why Ethan feels so strongly about Marty and what happened before the film began.

ETHAN AND MARTY

Task

The relationship between Ethan and Marty is central to the film. The two characters are on screen for the majority of the film.

1 If we assume that every aspect of the film has been carefully considered, what decisions have been made about how they look?

2 A "Time-Out" Exercise:

Divide into two groups. One group researches the character of Ethan and one researches the character of Marty. Each group elects a spokesperson. These people can speak as Ethan and Marty and sit opposite each other at a table with the rest of their group behind them as supporters. At any time in the discussion the person speaking for Ethan, the person speaking for Marty or their supporters can call "Time-out" and either ask for advice or give it, but when the actual discussion is taking place only the speakers can talk. 'Marty' is trying to convince 'Ethan' to take him along on the search and 'Ethan' is giving 'Marty' reasons why he should not go.

There should be either one adjudicator or a team of adjudicators. They facilitate the discussion by questioning the spokespeople when something is unclear or needs further development. The adjudicator(s) should research both characters. If you have a small group then the teacher can be the adjudicator.

LAURIE AND MARTY

Task

Take another narrative thread of the film, the 'romance' between Laurie and Marty. Consider typical romances in films and give examples of how they usually develop. Now look at the way Laurie and Marty's relationship develops and see how the filmmakers lead the audience into thinking it will turn out differently. See how these moments fit into the main story of Ethan and Marty. To help you:

- What is Brad's relationship to Laurie?
- Laurie does not appear in the opening section of the film at all and, apart from a very brief appearance at the funeral, she is not featured until Ethan and Marty come back for the first time.
- Gradually, she becomes one of the three main strands of the plot, the other two being Ethan/Marty and Debbie/Scar: How is this done and why?

CONTRASTING CHARACTERS

It is not only the leading characters in *The Searchers* that are complex. In considering the minor characters, it is easy to see that they too have many layers. Just as Ethan has contradictions in his character, so opposite characteristics are present in the minor characters. This adds to the moments of surprise in the film and adds elements of humour.

MOSE HARPER AND THE REVEREND

Task

Look at the characters of Mose Harper and the Reverend and see how they are built up.

1. They both have unusual quirks in the way they are physically represented. How would you expect a character called 'The Reverend' to look? Why do you think he wears a top hat? What does he do with the hat when he is fighting? Mose wears a soft Derby hat with a feather in it. Who is he? What does he do? Why does he wear this hat?
2. They both have opposite qualities in their characters:
 - The Reverend is also a Texas Ranger.
 - Mose pretends to be mad. He has great insight into the ways of the Indians and how to survive in a very hostile country.

Look at the way they speak and act in certain situations. Sometimes they are serious and sometimes humorous. They both play important parts in the main narrative of *The Searchers*. How do their characters react and interact during the scenes in which they appear?

DRIVING THE NARRATIVE

In such a long story spread over five years, John Ford uses several techniques to drive the narrative. It has already been shown that he sets up ideas and then explores them throughout the film, but he also uses stylistic devices to vary the narration. He uses these narrative devices to give us plot information and character development at the same time. A good example is the use of letters.

THE LETTER

Task

The central section of the film is told in a letter to Laurie from Marty. This allows her to narrate this section of the film and comment on what is happening from her point of view.

- What do we learn about the rest of her family from the way they view the letter?
- Why does she throw the letter on the fire?
- Why does the audience see the events acted out as the letter is read out in her voice?
- What is the significance to the plot of making Charlie McCorry the postman?

Notice, as well, that a letter had been sent from Mr. Futterman to Ethan before this letter. How is the first letter presented in the plot?

The letter is not forgotten in the plot for when Marty returns two years later he says “Didn’t you get my letter?” and Laurie tells him that she read it so often at it fell apart. Thus a simple device such as a letter becomes one of the thematic threads running through the film.

FILM AS ART

As well as the narrative threads running through the film there are visual threads which give a stylistic unity.

FRAMING

The film opens with a framed image. This framing continues throughout the film. Here are the framed images:

- The opening of the film. The opened door.
- Marty arrives on his horse.
- Brad and Lucy kissing.
- Ethan walks towards the bodies of the family. This is seen from the inside of the wrecked building.

- The first return of Marty and Ethan to the Jorgenssen house.
- The cave where Ethan and Marty have the first battle with Scar after they meet Debbie.
- Debbie runs to the cave followed by Ethan on his horse. This is seen from inside the cave.
- Ethan leaving at the end of the film. The door shuts.

Task

Why are these moments chosen to be framed?

Why are there so many more of them at the beginning of the film?

There are several moments when the image is semi-framed but not thrown into silhouette. These include Ethan discovering the dead body of Luke in the village after the cavalry attack and the Mexican cantina before the 'searchers' meet Scar. Why are these chosen and why are they not framed in silhouette?

THE UNEXPECTED IMAGE

Film is a series of images and can be thought of in artistic terms. In the task on page 2, expected images usually found in the Western were identified, but in *The Searchers* there are some very unexpected images which help the stylistic variety of the film and engage the audience.

The Geometric Image

The landscape of Monument Valley itself creates geometric images on the screen, but this is heightened by the angle of the shots and the viewpoint of the camera. A good example is the first attack of Scar's warriors on the Texas Rangers when the landscape creates a concave shape at the top of the screen and the Warriors pathway creates a convex image across the middle of the screen. We know **it** is intended because the warriors' route is neither the quickest or the easiest across the landscape. This contrasts with the straight line the rangers are taking towards the river.

Task

Another example is Brad shouting to the Reverend that he has found something. How is that image built up? Can you find any other geometric images?

Contrasting Images

Because of the length of the journey, the 'searchers' travel through the seasons. However, it is very unusual to see such dramatic use of snow in a Western.

Task

When is it used and why is it so effective?

Moreover, these juxtapositions of opposites are used all through the film. Look at the use of day and night, deserts and rivers, darkness and illumination by lanterns or campfires. These images work because they are put side by side.

Figures in a Landscape

Just as the Warriors take a deliberate visual path, so John Ford creates a series of non-naturalistic images which create the effect of a painting.

Task

One such image is created by putting characters immediately in front of each other so that we see them in profile. This is done at the following points in the film:

- Fight at the river.
- Ethan and Marty in the dark waiting as Brad runs into Scar's camp.
- The Reverend and Ethan about to rescue Debbie at the end.

Is there any connection between these images?

Another device is to have all the characters standing still and looking in one direction as one character moves. Because it is unnatural to all have an identical point of view this creates a strong artistic image reminiscent of the nineteenth century American painters. A good example of this is when the Jorgenssen family look eagerly for Ethan and Marty's return.

THE CAMERA ANGLE

Task

Invent a short sequence involving a character coming through a doorway and meeting another character. Using a digital video camera, video camera or Polaroid® shoot the sequence with the camera:

- At eye level
- From a high viewpoint so that the camera is looking up

What effect do the different camera angles have? John Ford uses unusual camera angles to create an effect. In the opening sequence the camera is tilted so we are very aware of the roof of the room. How does he film the dance at the wedding? What effect does this have?

THE MUSIC

Just as all the visuals are carefully considered so the music is also one of the unifying threads of the film. The music used in *The Searchers* is a theme and variations. This means that all the music in the

film is based on one musical idea and it is developed in various ways. The rhythm can be altered. The tune can keep its basic shape but become more complex. The tune can be kept the same but played on different instruments and given a different harmony so that the mood changes.

The theme is the tune of the song at the beginning. It is a very simple tune all based on one chord so that it can be changed in a variety of ways but still keep its character in the minds of the audience. Moreover, the end of the tune, which is set to the words "Ride Away", is reminiscent of a trumpet call such as "The Last Post". This is very atmospheric and haunting. What is coming to an end? What is being remembered?

Task

Think again about the following sections of the film. How is the music used to enhance the visual text?

1. As Martha gets Ethan's coat we hear the theme played on a harpsichord. There is no dialogue.
2. Look's theme. The rhythm of the tune is changed. It is played on low flutes with a regular rhythm of gentle percussion underneath.

There is also a dramatic use of silence in the film:

- There is no music under the attack on Ethan's family until Scar sounds his horn at the graveside.
- When Laurie reads the letter from Mr. Futterman there is no music until Scar is mentioned.
- When Brad is killed there is no music under the attack. The music tells you which shot killed him.

Task

There are two existing songs used in the score. At the funeral the hymn 'Yes We Will Gather At The River' is sung and Charlie sings 'Skip to My Lu, My Darling'. Why do you think the composer chose these tunes and how does he use them?

REPRESENTATION OF NATIVE AMERICANS

The Searchers is set against a period of change. The families in the film are not cowboys, they are European settlers carving out a new life ranching in the inhospitable wilderness. It is 1868. The American Civil War is over and people are trying to make a new start. The Native Americans are playing a part in this.

The film is looking at the people who have come to terms with this change and those who have not. The Mexicans are trading with the Native Americans. The Army are using them as guides. Only a few tribes are still hostile, only a few of the Texans have not changed. Mrs. Jorgensen gives an impassioned speech about the future; Marty is himself a product of inter-marriage. Look's tribe represents the new Native Americans, whilst the Jorgenssens represent the immigrant farmers. Moreover, the Cavalry are represented in a very negative way. They needlessly kill Look and then in the final attack their officer is portrayed as immature and inexperienced.

However, there is a very strange scene where Ethan and Marty go to see it' Debbie is amongst the "white women" who have been found in the Indian village. These women are portrayed as wild creatures as though living with the Native Americans has uncivilised them. They treat dolls as though they have never seen them before and laugh and smile inanely.

Task

This sequence is very shocking and extreme in the film. Can you think why it is there, especially as there is such a degree of sensitivity in the rest of the representation in the film?

The lack of acceptance and understanding is symbolised and polarised by the characters of Ethan and Scar.

ETHAN AND SCAR

Task

Look at the following characteristics of Ethan and fill in the appropriate characteristics of Scar:

Ethan's Characteristics

Scar's Characteristics

He is a renegade and cannot settle.

He has been away from home, fighting.

His side lost the war and have had to change.

He believes his way is right.

He is prepared to fight his own kind.

He knows much about the customs and way of life of the Native Americans.

He has respect for his enemy and calls him "Scar".

Ethan's Characteristics

Scar's Characteristics

When they finally meet, he says "You speak good American. Someone teach you?"

Are there any conclusions to draw from this comparison?

Does it help to explain the ending of the film?

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SEARCHERS

The Western was such a popular genre in the history of the cinema that it is impossible to say which films directly influenced other films, but when a film is so well conceived and successful in its execution it must be considered in the minds of succeeding directors. The Searchers stood out from other Westerns in many ways:

- It was a new way of portraying the settlers of the West.
- It looked closely at racism. It poses the question of the victimisation and destruction of the Native American.
- It was prepared to ask questions about characters and not answer them.
- It has a happy ending for some of the characters but not for the hero. He walks off into the sunset, his journey continues.
- The U.S. Cavalry are not portrayed in a positive light.

Just as The Searchers contains elements of films made before it, so these statements show that in its turn it influenced elements of later Westerns.

The character of Ethan is very complex. He is not a traditional hero because he is not always on the side of good or doing morally correct things. However, he uses his dubious skills to help other characters and the final outcome is good. There is a happy ending even if it is not for him. We can call such a character an anti-hero.

Clint Eastwood plays anti-heroes in his Westerns.

The portrayal of the Native Americans in The Searchers is a mixture of good and bad. This perspective, together with the way they are treated by the Cavalry, has influenced other films such as Soldier Blue and Little Big Man.

If nothing else, the last shot of Ethan walking away and the door closing has become one of the key images in the history of the cinema.

SUGGESTED READING

The Aurum Film Encyclopaedia 'The Western', Phil Hardy (Aurum Press, 1988).

The B.F.I. Companion to the Western, edited by Edward Buscombe

(Andre Deutsch/BFI Publishing, 1990).

Westerns, Philip French (Seeker & Warburg, 1973).