

“John Ford doesn’t make pictures about good guys or bad guys; he makes stories about people”.

Discuss, with close reference to three John Ford films.

John Ford is probably one of the world’s most famous and successful film producers of all time. He was unhappy with his blood-related family, and he felt much more content when he was with his on-set film family whom he would repeatedly use in many of his movies. It is probably the close relationship he forged with this group of actors and actresses that allowed John Ford to communicate to us stories about ordinary people living completely normal lives. He demonstrates to us that people cannot be categorized into being “good” or “bad”. There is no good or bad, only something in between.

Stagecoach, one of John Ford’s many masterpieces is a very well known western. It is said that most western films were inspired by *Stagecoach*, or even John Ford himself. *Stagecoach* is in fact, a very well made movie, in which none of the characters are good or bad, they’re just humans. The quote “*Don’t judge a book by its cover*” would definitely be appropriate for the message being sent to us by John Ford through *Stagecoach*. Dallas, for example, is a prostitute or a showgirl, either one an occupation which would be considered a disgrace. However, when in the film Mrs. Mallory showed the first signs of pregnancy, Dallas quickly intervenes and does everything she can to help Mrs. Mallory before and after childbirth. With the revelation of Mrs. Mallory’s pregnancy, we find out that Dallas truly has a heart of gold, capable of extreme levels of affection, especially towards the newborn baby. It is Ringo Kid who notices Dallas’ behavior with the baby the most, which gives him the courage to later ask her to marry him, to live together and one day have an infant like Mrs. Mallory’s of their own. Ringo is another character from *Stagecoach* who is initially regarded as bad. He is an outlaw who had escaped from prison, and was being searched for by marshals everywhere. He goes actually voluntarily with the marshal and the rest of the passengers in Buck’s stagecoach, where he is to be taken to Lordsburg as a prisoner. Although it seems that Ringo is a bad person, throughout the film, you get to know him better and better, and you realize that he is really a very polite and decent man. Unlike Mr. Hatfield, another character from *Stagecoach* who is thought of as a better person, Ringo treats everyone the same way, whether they are socially accepted or not. He gives Dallas and Doc Boone the same amount of respect as he gives the rest of the stagecoach passengers. Doc Boone is the final character from *Stagecoach* who is a social outcast, being an alcoholic, and doctor with a ruined reputation from his alcoholism. Even though he is treated pretty badly by Gatewood and Hatfield, when the time comes for his medical skills to come to use (with the pregnancy of Mrs. Mallory) he surpasses everyone’s expectations of him as he successfully delivers the baby. Although this trio of social outcasts is treated unfairly by the rest, they are probably the most respectable people, because they treat everyone equally, even those that treat them poorly.

Another film by John Ford, *My Darling Clementine* has many characters which are worth discussing. However, I believe that the main two are really Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. Wyatt Earp is a man who is both feared and loved all at the same time. We never really know what happened during his previous marshalling job before Tombstone, and it

leaves us wondering what kind of person he really is. When he first gets to Tombstone, before the death of James or the drunken Indian's shooting episode, he just goes to get a shave, because he is rugged and dirty and unshaven from traveling with cattle. By the end of the film however, he has had a haircut, has been sprayed with perfume and is highly respected by everyone for doing such a wonderful job of protecting the city and starting a rebirth of Tombstone, making it a better place. Doc Holliday is a different person entirely although in ways he and Wyatt Earp are similar, and they understand each other. Doc Holliday is in charge of Tombstone's gambling, and likes to show that he is in charge at Tombstone, especially to the marshals. Later during the movie, we realize that Doc has been running away from himself, "Doctor John Holliday", and that with Clementine's arrival, he is driven into a painful series of memories although we never truly know what he is running from. This obviously makes us think of him as somewhat of a suspicious person. But John Ford quickly changes that impression with the surgical operation on Chihuahua. Then again he makes us doubt our instincts when we hear of Chihuahua's unexpected and sudden death. John Ford leaves a question mark on some of these contradictory or ambiguous details. So it is actually impossible to ask - is Doc Holliday good or bad?

The Searchers is a wonderful movie, yet again by John Ford, but this film is in color, unlike *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*, and shot in Monument Valley (also known as Ford's Point) where the western wilderness is truly breathtaking. During this film, there is a constant tension between the Indians and the pioneers, and usually if the Indians aren't planning or carrying out a massacre, then the pioneers are. Each one of these racial groups is continuously fighting with the other, and there is barely ever any peace. The central character is Ethan Edwards. Ethan is a very disturbed man, who is impossible to define as good or bad. He had the unpleasant experience of having his mother dying in an Indian massacre, so he has a built-up hatred towards Indians, especially Comanches. Also, he obviously has a lot of feelings for Martha, his brother's wife, and later witnesses the results of her brutal massacre. At times, Ethan seems like a genuinely good person, like when we hear that he saved Martin Pawley when his Cherokee parents were victims of a slaughter. Also, he volunteers to take his brother's place in a small military group expedition, and then later sets out to hunt down the Comanches. Ethan has another side to him however. Near the beginning, it is unclear whether he has done something criminal or not. Then, when he decides that once they find Debbie, he wants to kill her because she is "contaminated" by Comanches, we wonder once again why he would ever want to do such a thing. Ethan Edwards seems to have a double personality throughout the film, and we never really know what to think of him. Similarly to Doc Holliday in *My Darling Clementine*, we as the viewers don't know whether to classify Ethan as good or bad.

John Ford seems to complicate his films very often, just to make us think about specifics more. Dallas, Ringo Kid, Doc Boone, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and Ethan Edwards. Each of the characters from John Ford films listed are neither good nor bad. They are truly unclassifiable, much too complex to fit into either the good or bad category. They are just regular people, with unexpected events that find their way into their lives, and

rearrange their perspective on things. There really is no good or bad, whether it is in a John Ford film or in real life.

Daniela 8T