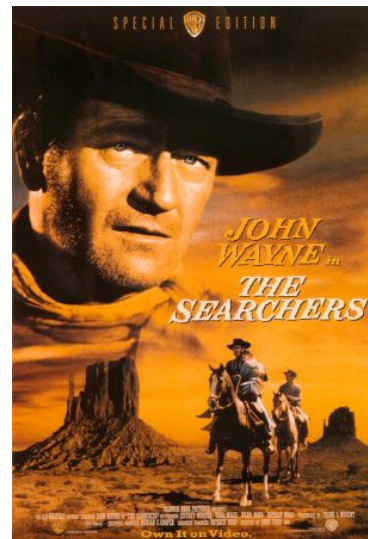


John Ford Essay

“John Ford shows us that there was more to pioneer life than fighting off Indian attacks.”

Discuss, using evidence from three Ford Westerns.



While watching the three John Ford films: Stagecoach, My Darling Clementine and The Searchers I really understood that most of the facts we know about the Wild West are thanks to John Ford. John Ford was born during the last period of the Wild West and therefore was able to make his films a source of information of this period of American History. The Wild West however, as we imagine it is much more than just simple fights and battles between whites and the Native Americans, known then as Indian tribes, but was the history of the pioneers. But what do we exactly know of the lives of pioneers? The lives of the pioneers were difficult lives which these poor transient people lived, facing the harshness of political instability and lawlessness every day of their lives, and most of all the risk of being shot or being caught in a gun fight when walking home from school or from work on a regular day. The pioneers lived in extremely difficult and unstable situations and tried their best to emerge from their many problems and create communities, which were peaceful, harmonious and safe. Our Language Arts theme, Pastures of Plenty, concentrates on the human search for prosperity and the desire to live a better and more enjoyable life. In all three of John Ford's films, the director informs us of the main values of pioneer life and how they changed the course of History.

In Stagecoach, one of the first points which emerges regarding pioneer life is the search for settlement. The film is about a group of people who are traveling west towards Lordsburg, where they can finally settle and end their “nomadic” life. In fact, these people had no place to live and were looking for a situation which would satisfy their requirements for a better life. This already is an important point regarding the lives of pioneers. Pioneers not only had to face the difficulties of a hard and rigid society but also had to deal with the difficulties of the landscape - the Southern

Desert. They were looking for a place where they could live that could minimally meet their life expectations and allow them to create family units which could live in harmony.

Another very important aspect of John Ford's movies and particularly Stagecoach is the love stories which develop between the main characters. John Ford was a very strong believer in family and represented this idea in his films. In Stagecoach, for example, there is the very romantic love story between the Ringo Kid and Dallas, two of the major characters. The nice thing about the love stories in John Ford's films is that they depict what was truly going on during the years of the pioneers. Love was in fact extremely important in those days because it was the essential element which contributed to the creation of a strong, even if small, solid family which was based on ideals such as harmony and peace- two fundamental elements of the American Dream.

Stagecoach also has to do with revenge, like My Darling Clementine. It tells us about how on one side and the other, both Indian and white there was this sentiment of vengeance which existed when harm was done to someone in the family. Stagecoach gives us an excellent example. The Ringo Kid (John Wayne) is determined to seek revenge for the death of his brother, a victim of the Plummer boys, who were desperate to take control of the town through lawlessness and by cheating. At this point it is also true to say that one of the most important things about the lives of pioneers was the desire for power and control. In both Stagecoach and My Darling Clementine, Ford presents the struggle going on between men for power. The goal of these wild, lawless people (like the Plummer boys) was to take control of the political situation and exercise their power over the whole population.

Two very big problems of pioneer life which John Ford emphasizes in his westerns are: alcoholism and lawlessness. Since the pioneers lived such difficult lives they thought that alcohol was one of the few ways to sort of distract themselves and escape their problems. An example in Stagecoach is Doc. Boone. Even though he is a doctor, an educated person with knowledge and therefore knows how harmful alcohol could be, he is shown in almost all of the film's scenes drinking from his whisky bottle.

My Darling Clementine is another very interesting Western directed by John Ford. It gives us a very rich and detailed view of how the Wild West became more civilized. In the film Ford decides not to show Indian attacks at all, and concentrates entirely on the lives of the pioneers in the town of Tombstone. The first and main point that emerges in My Darling Clementine is the attempt to establish communities and live in family groups. In the first part of the film, we get an idea of how people lived during the late 1800's. There were a few ranches and settlements in the countryside, and flourishing communities, which slowly started to develop more lawful ways. This is the first important aspect of this film regarding the lives of pioneers: the establishing of communities. During the West, there were no such things as towns or

cities as we imagine them today. There were simply farms, ranches and small houses set in the wild countryside of the Southern Desert. These conditions allowed for an increase in the level of crime, lawlessness and deaths because there was little order and control. These conditions motivated people to create safer and more stable communities based on the principles of family and peace. In *My Darling Clementine* we see this with Tombstone, a small settlement in Southern Arizona (at the border with Texas) which was slowly developing thanks to the many efforts carried along by its inhabitants. Interesting imagery shows us how the community of Tombstone was slowly starting to develop. Right at the beginning of the film we see a barber shop similar to the ones we have today - with chairs, sofas, books, magazines and all the things a good shop would have. It is understandable that people wanted to improve the conditions of their lives, shaving, going to the barber and enjoying themselves more than they had in the past. Other examples are the building of schools and the town church, which could help sustain the community with education and faith. We also see dancing, singing and the people making an effort to enjoy themselves. We can see in this film that the pioneers started building communities like Tombstone so that they could finally escape the dangers of lawlessness and crime, and start enjoying their lives.

Many of the issues Ford tackles in *My Darling Clementine* are similar to the ones he presents in *Stagecoach*, except they are placed in different contexts. Alcoholism for example, is evident in *My Darling Clementine*. At the beginning of the film we see Indian Charlie getting drunk and shooting his gun dangerously. Europeans sold alcohol and drugs to the Indians, who were not used to the consumption of these substances. The pioneers did so to create an unstable situation in which they could take control. There are also other parts of the film which concentrate on alcoholism. For example, when we see Doc Holiday talking to Wyatt Earp, we understand how addicted he was to this substance.

As in *Stagecoach*, we see how revenge was common in those communities. At the beginning of the film when Wyatt Earp's brother James is killed, Wyatt is shocked by this event. He loved his brother and was very attached to him and felt as if his death had taken away the most important thing of his life. Just after the event, Wyatt accepts the job of Tombstone's new Marshall - we all know that his real intent was to discover the murderer of his brother and force him into jail, or even kill him.

Gambling and cheating is another important point in this film. Doc Holiday is in charge of the gambling, which often leads to cheating, dishonesty and gunfights. Gambling played an important role in pioneer life because as alcohol it was a distraction for these people, who had fun playing together and at same time got quite drunk. Gambling had a very negative influence on the lives of pioneers, because many lost most of their money and became poor or placed their families in difficult situations.

The love stories in *My Darling Clementine* are particularly important. There are a series of very romantic relationships within the story. The element of love and family not only reflects the extreme interest of Ford in this aspect of life, but makes us think about the situation of pioneers, people who sometimes had nothing, except for one thing, love. Love is a natural part of life and it existed in the west just as it has existed in all societies to this very day.

The Searchers was my favorite of the three John Ford movies. I am extremely interested in geography, therefore, I enjoyed learning about the beautiful Arizona desert, and most of all the place where Ford shot his film: Monument Valley. I was impressed that John Ford actually used real Indians in his films. Unlike the other two films, *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*, scenes in *The Searchers* deal with fights between Whites and Indians, but again this only covers one of the many aspects of the film.

At the beginning of the film John Ford immediately presents us with the breathtaking landscape and setting of the movie. We also learn how the pioneers lived in those days. In *My Darling Clementine* we see that people had started building towns and villages, but in *The Searchers*, it is different. Since it is set many years earlier we see that people still lived in lonely ranches and houses in the Desert, and risked their lives every day. In fact, it was very dangerous to live in ranches out in the country side, because there was a high risk of Indian attacks, fights for the possession of the land and most of all gunfights. John Ford tells us how pioneers lived in those days, their conditions of life and how they had to risk being killed or robbed every single day of their lives.

The Searchers tells about racism and social prejudice. Ethan (John Wayne) is very racist toward the Indian community and shows hate and disapproval of their culture and religion. I refer to the scene where he shoots the dead Indian in his eyes and says "Why don't ya just finish the job [and shoots him in the eyes] ... this way he will have to wonder the land of the winds all his life." Ethan hates the Indians and we can see so when he fights them; he is full of hatred and enjoys shooting them one by one. On the other hand, Scar, the Indian chief is racist as well. He is very intolerant towards the whites and disrespectful of their culture. I would say that there is a reciprocal sense of prejudice and intolerance between the whites and Indians in the film. Historically speaking, this point is valid. This is because after the Europeans started settling on the Indians' land, a series of racial and political conflicts grew between the two ethnicities which soon turned out into fierce fights and battles. *The Searchers* also tells us about the typical lives pioneers lived. We can see the family structure and how the different family roles were displayed: women stayed at home and worked, while men went out working either on a farm or in small jobs, which gave them minimal money for survival. The Jorgenson' and Edwards' families are two good examples. I would describe these daily activities of ranch life, which consisted in working the land, collecting milk and food from the cattle and carrying on house duties.

Already, we have found three or four important points about the film and we could continue listing several more and more. However, there is one thing that Mrs. Jorgenson said in the film which I think is the core of this movie, pioneer life and our Language Arts program this year:

“It just so happens we be Texicans. Texican is nothin' but a human man way out on a limb, this year and next. Maybe for a hundred more. But I don't think it'll be forever. Some day, this country's gonna be a fine good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come.”

The American Dream was that pioneers always dreamed of a better life, hoped in a positive future, and most of all always tried their best and worked very hard so that their dreams could finally, one day, come true.

The three films are ordered chronologically in the following way: *The Searchers* (1864), *Stagecoach* (1880) and *My Darling Clementine* (1882). I think John Ford ordered these films in the following way intentionally to show us the progress of pioneer life during the years of the west; in *The Searchers* the people lived in ranches out in the wild, in *Stagecoach* people were trying to find a place where they could settle and finally in *My Darling Clementine* they started developing a new civilized town: Tombstone. In other words, I think that John Ford presents the history of the wild west as a timeline throughout his films, demonstrating how humanity has changed during the years and has struggled to create communities which can live peacefully and safely together and thereby find happiness.

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