

The Searchers (1956) is considered by many to be a true American masterpiece of filmmaking, and the best and perhaps most-admired film of director John Ford. It was his 115th feature film, and he was already a four-time Best Director Oscar winner (*The Informer* (1935), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), and *The Quiet Man* (1952)) - all for his pictures of social comment rather than his quintessential westerns. With dazzling on-location, VistaVision photography (including the stunning red sandstone rock formations of Monument Valley) by Winton C. Hoch in Ford's most beloved locale, the film handsomely captures the beauty and isolating danger of the frontier. However, at its time, the sophisticated, modern, visually-gorgeous film was unappreciated, misunderstood, and unrecognized by critics and did not receive a single Academy Award nomination.

The film's screenplay was adapted by Frank S. Nugent (director Ford's son-in-law) from Alan Le May's 1954 novel of the same name, that was first serialized as a short story in late fall 1954 issues of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and first titled *The Avenging Texans*. Various similarities existed between the film's script and an actual Comanche kidnapping of a young white girl in Texas in 1936.

The Searchers tells the emotionally complex story of a perilous, hate-ridden quest and Homeric-style odyssey of self-discovery after a Comanche massacre, while also exploring the themes of racial prejudice and sexism. Its meandering tale examines the inner psychological turmoil of a fiercely independent, crusading man obsessed with revenge and hatred, who searches for his two nieces (Pippa Scott and Natalie Wood) among the "savages" over a five-year period. The film's major tagline echoed the search: "he had to find her...he had to find her." John Wayne, in his first anti-heroic role as a bigot and racist, is a tragic, lonely, morally-ambiguous figure who is perennially doomed to be an outsider - a role that the actor often described as his favorite. It is commonly regarded as Wayne's finest-acted performance - his ninth starring role in a Ford film.

Characters:

- a slightly eccentric old Indian scout Mose Harper (Hank Worden)
- rancher Nesby (William Steele)
- Lars' son Brad Jorgensen (Harry Carey, Jr., son of Harry Carey, Sr., a famous silent era cowboy star)
- Charlie McCorry (Ken Curtis, director Ford's son-in-law, who later played the role of Festus in the western TV series *Gunsmoke*)

Note: A quick glimpse of the tombstone that Debbie hides next to reveals the source of Ethan's glaring hatred for the Indians: "HERE LIES MARY JANE EDWARDS KILLED BY COMANCHES MAY 12, 1852 A GOOD WIFE AND MOTHER IN HER 41st YEAR." Ethan's own mother was massacred by Comanches 16 years earlier.]

[Ethan is an incensed Indian-hater, although he is very much akin to them and is knowledgeable about their way of life. He can speak the Comanche language fluently, and he is an expert in how they live - he acknowledges or accepts their belief that a dead Comanche warrior without his eyes will wander in the spirit-land forever. But he belongs to neither the Indian world or the white world - doomed forever to remain a lone son of the frontier.]

Ethan replies with his favorite trademark retort [immortalized in Buddy Holly and the Cricket's popular song released shortly afterwards, "That'll Be The Day"]:

Nope. Our turnin' back don't mean nothin', not in the long run. If she's alive, she's safe. For a while, they'll keep her to raise as one of their own until, till she's of an age to...[He pauses and can't finish the sentence] Injun will chase a thing till he thinks he's chased it enough. Then he quits. Same way when he runs. Seems like he never learns there's such a thing as a critter who'll just keep comin' on. So we'll find 'em in the end, I promise you. We'll find 'em, just as sure as the turnin' of the earth.

ETHANS character ARCH accepts MARTY and DEBBIE

[The empty-handed arrival of the two searchers will soon interfere with and disrupt the customary wedding rituals of a family-affirming, grounded, civilized society.]

Parrelles Between ETHAN and SCAR
PARRALELS between Ethan and MARTY-

[Laurie's devoted love and patient waiting for Martin parallel the frustrated romance and wait that Martha must have had years earlier for the nomadic Ethan, causing her to marry Ethan's brother. Laurie's decision to take a less attractive suitor threatens to leave Martin cut off from the civilized community in much the same way. The searchers' return interrupts Laurie's wedding and prevents Martin from suffering the same fate that Ethan did with Martha.]

Still standing with his feet astride within the framing of the doorway, Ethan grasps his right elbow with his left hand. [This has been acknowledged as Wayne's subtle, tribute-remembrance of cowboy actor Harry Carey, Sr.'s familiar stance in silent western films.] He then decides to remain behind, looking after them. Then he turns away, his silhouette continuing to be framed in the open doorway, and walks into the swirling dust. The eternally-excluded loner, he wanders alone (like the fate of the dead Indian whose eyes he shot out) back into the alien, desert wilderness, similar to how he entered the picture so many years before, but now reversed. The Jorgensen's door, the door to civilization and the family hearthside, swings shut on him, making the screen black.

JOHN FORD

[John Ford](#) came to Hollywood following one of his brothers, an actor. Asked what brought him to Hollywood, he replied "The train". He became one of the most respected directors in the business, in spite of being known for his westerns, which were not considered "serious" film. He won six Oscars, counting (he always did) the two that he won for his WWII documentary work. He had one wife; a son and daughter; and a grandson, [Dan Ford](#) who wrote a biography on his famous grandfather.

1. [Cheyenne Autumn \(1964\)](#)
2. [Donovan's Reef \(1963\)](#)
3. [Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The \(1962\)](#)
4. [Horse Soldiers, The \(1959\)](#)
5. [Searchers, The \(1956\)](#)
6. [Mister Roberts \(1955\)](#)
7. [Quiet Man, The \(1952\)](#)
8. [She Wore a Yellow Ribbon \(1949\)](#)

9. [My Darling Clementine \(1946\)](#)
10. [How Green Was My Valley \(1941\)](#)
11. [Young Mr. Lincoln \(1939\)](#)
12. [Stagecoach \(1939\)](#)

2) One of the most important aspects of the Western is the way in which Westerns as a genre reflect (and challenge) the founding story of the American nation. What is so "American" about the Western genre? What values do they reflect? What internal struggles do they bury or alleviate and which do they accentuate in favor of establishing a more cohesive and hegemonic national identity?

3) John Ford's Westerns are often credited as the most "classic" expressions of the genre. What specific characteristics do you find in the film *Stagecoach*? Who are each of the following characters, and what type do they represent: Ethan Edwards (John Wayne); Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter); Laurie Jorgensen (Vera Miles); Reverend Captain Samuel Johnson Clayton (Ward Bond); Debbie Edwards (Natalie Wood); Chief Scar (Henry Brandon); Look (Beulah Archuletta); Brad Jorgensen (Harry Carey Jr.); Emilio Figueroa (Antonio Moreno); Mose Harper (Hank Worden)? How do we learn things which identify each character in the film?

5) What are the Frontier landscapes represented in the film? In what ways does this landscape become like a character in the story? What does the landscape do in the story? Who is *in* the landscape and who is simply *on* it? A device which appears repeatedly in the film is the "framing" of landscapes within doorways and spaces which open out into them, and of individuals inside and outside those portals. Examine these instances as they appear in the film. What does each of these represent, and how do they form part of the storytelling in the film?

7) How are Ethan's racial attitudes about Indians revealed throughout the film? How do they compare to the attitudes of other Europeans around him? How is the audience made aware of this comparison? How do Ethan's attitudes isolate him as the film progresses? In what ways does he actually *become* those whom he hates?

AARON is THE BROTHER OF MOSES!!!
Leads the people to the promised land.