

050.487.01 American Narratives

The Searchers, 1956, directed by John Ford, starring John Wayne (Ethan Edwards) and Jeffrey Hunter (Martin Pawley)

Home and family are always important to Ford. The movie begins with Ethan Edwards coming home after the Civil War, 3 years after it ended, so the year is 1868. The opening shot is classic Ford: a woman in the doorway looking out. Ford images the difference between inside and outside, the domestic hearth within, the untamed landscape, with its dangers and challenges, outside. The ending will mirror the beginning in contrasting inside and outside.

The Searchers is a quest narrative, one of the oldest forms of story. It is an American epic about what it took for white settlers to take this country away from the Indians. The central character, Ethan Edwards, is a stock literary figure of nineteenth-century American fiction, the Indian hater. This is a man who has been touched by an Indian massacre, and, as a result, single-mindedly dedicates his life to revenge. He is a racist and a loner.

The film is set in Monument Valley, a magnificent location Ford discovered and made his own. It is part of the Navajo Nation, and Ford always used the Navajos to portray Indians in his films. Notice the composition of each shot: every one is a masterpiece.

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1. Pay close attention to the first scenes of the movie where Ford introduces the characters. How do we realize that Martha, Ethan's brother's wife, is in love with Ethan?
 2. The time period of the film is 5 years. What devices establish time passing—and why is the passing of time of such crucial importance to the search?
 3. How do we know immediately from a visual cue that the trader Fetterman is a villain?
 4. What is the purpose of the sub-narrative of the Laurie Jorgenson/Martin Pawley romance?
 5. What is the significance of the scene where Ethan and Marty see some white captives?
 6. How does the Ethan/Marty relationship evolve? Contrast the two characters.
 7. The episode with Marty's "Indian wife" strikes a jarring note today. What is Ford's point about it?
 8. Similarly, we find it odd that the major Comanche chief should be played by a white actor. Why did Ford use a white man for this part? How are Scar & Ethan doubles?
 9. Laurie, the romantic lead and a sympathetic character, echoes Ethan's racist thinking about Debbie. Why?