

The Heroic Past in John Ford, USA—A Test Case

“I am interested in *people*. . . . I certainly don’t like type casting. I like casting for individuals, for I photograph people.”—Interview with Michael Kilanin, 1958

“I have been accused of being interested in masculine subjects. War and prison life have fascinated me over the years. But is that so strange? I have lived through the experience of two world wars. I myself have experienced the hell that is war. But I have also learned about friendship, bravery, and deprivation. And back home in Ireland, I learned what a poor life means in a barren climate. And the sea, and the hardship of men at sea have fascinated me since early youth. Would I not then have betrayed my ideals, my thoughts, my ancestors, if I hadn’t given men like that a well-deserved celebration in my films? If I hadn’t chosen to tell about poor, simple people and their hard struggle for existence?”—Interview with Bert Miller, 1955

“The main thing about motion pictures is: photograph the people’s eyes. Photograph their eyes.”—Interview with Mark Haggard, 1970

John Ford, by his own admission, was always drawn to the people, to individuals, to character-driven stories. Yet, as his own ideals showed, he wanted to tell the story of people set within certain expectations as to what mattered, emotionally and ethically. This is especially true when the stories examine heroic values. In each film, ask yourself how Ford uses what we expect of the characters to bring us along with the film, yet also how he uses these expectations to continually surprise us.

General Global Questions

- Are the visions of community and the individual similar in the three films?
- What roles do songs play in each of Ford’s films? Do they play similar roles?
- How important is religious faith to each film? Under what conditions?
- Do the films have similar views about violence, especially violence and men?

Content Questions

Young Mr. Lincoln (1939) [100 min]



1. How does Alfred Newman's musical score shape our sentiments and emotions toward Abe Lincoln's story? What significance does the opening and closing song have to the meaning of the film?
2. Likewise, what does the opening poem have to tell us about the young Lincoln? "Where's my son?/ What happened to Abe?/ What's he done?"
3. How does the opening scene at the general store present Henry Fonda's young Lincoln to us? How throughout does Ford use Lincoln's height and long-limbed lankiness to advantage?
4. What does Lincoln make of Blackstone's definitions of legal rights and wrongs? Why will this become significant to him?
5. How does Ford craft the two next scenes—the one in spring with Anne and then the one in winter with her tombstone to build quickly an emotional picture of Abe's love and loss, but also a revelation of the ambition beneath his languor?
6. How does Ford build our sentiments toward the family with each subplot scene involving them at the county holiday?
7. How does Lincoln diffuse the mob? What does he approach tell us about him?
8. How does the film enshrine motherhood and family?
9. Why does Ford spend such a significant portion of the film on the court case?
10. Why end the film in the way he does? What do we learn about Lincoln in the last three minutes?

How Green Was My Valley (1941) [118 min]



1. How significant is the role of memory in the film? How trustworthy is Huw's memory?
2. What roles do sight, sound, and recalled smell serve in Huw's account of his valley?
3. Why does Philip Dunne's screenplay continually mix happiness with sorrow in the film? How does Ford build off this to powerful effect?
4. How does class and ethnicity shape the film?
5. Why is the politics of unions so volatile for the Welsh town?

6. What is the purpose of the mother, Beth Morgan, and Huw falling into the winter water after her confrontation with the men at the wintery meeting?
7. What are the lessons Mr. Gruffydd teaches Huw about faith and prayer? What about his failures? How does the cinematography in the film help reinforce these key moments?
8. In the scene in which Beth first is able to come downstairs, how does Ford manage the sentimental aspects to encourage our own faith in family and community?
9. How are we to understand the trajectory of the love of Angharad and Gruffydd? How does their story add to the overall impact of the change in the valley and in Huw's family?
10. What do Huw's experiences at the national school teach us about him? How do they compare with his experiences in the mine?
11. How is faith in family and community tested as the film progresses? Is Gruffydd correct in his assessment of the failures of the chapel?
12. What is Ford suggesting by composing Gruffydd in a cruciform position over the dead body of the father, Gwilym, while Huw holds his father like a pieta?

My Darling Clementine (1946) [103 min]



1. How would you characterize Wyatt? Doc Holiday? Clementine? Chihuahua? How does each character grow or change in our estimation as the film progresses?
2. How does Ford use expressionist lighting and shadow to tell us something about Tombstone?
3. Likewise, how does he use silence and space to suggest something about the nature of the West and its inhabitants?
4. What do we learn by having the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? What do we learn about Doc? [see below]
5. What do the touches of humor add to the film? Why are they present?
6. What do we learn about faith and community with the dedication of the first church in Tombstone and the dance?

7. What is significant about Holliday's profession of doctor and surgeon? Why does he fail in the end at this?
8. Does it matter that many of the details of this famous encounter have been changed or outright fictionalized in the film? Why and/or why not?
9. Why end the way Ford does in the pre-release director's cut? Is it a better ending?

Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
 To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

[Clanton interrupts here and tells Thorndyke "That's enough!" Wyatt forces them to let the actor continue.]

Must give us pause: there's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life;
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
 The insolence of office and the spurns
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

[Thorndyke is unable to continue, so Wyatt gives him the next line, then continues once Thorndike cannot.]

But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;