

THE WESTERN

F I L M
EDUCATION

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A TEACHERS'
GUIDE

The Western is, perhaps, the prime means by which America interprets and represents its history to itself. Westerns are set within a certain period of American history, approximately 1860-1900, in which America began to build the nation that it is today and to forge its identity. Many of the characters portrayed on film are men who really lived in that time, e.g. Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, General Custer. The Western is one of the oldest genres – since 1904 hardly a year has gone by without a Western film being made; there have been comic Westerns, musical Westerns and television Westerns. The study of Westerns enables us to examine issues about North America's myths and legends; to look at how America thinks and feels about itself and its history; to explore how men and women fit into the community; and to look at those outside or on the edge of it. It investigates the building of a nation and its identity, patriotism, male friendship, honour and revenge, the triumph of good over evil. The popularity of any myth is rooted in its power to reflect and reproduce a society's beliefs, values and fears in a palatable form. The myth of the Western tells its American audiences, and others, something about themselves and their society.

Westerns often open with the scene of a lone rider sitting in the saddle of his dusty horse, travelling across the wide open plains towards a small frontier town with muddy streets and noisy saloons. He wears a worn wide-brimmed hat, a bandanna round his neck and a gun rests at his side in a well-worn holster. As he approaches the town we see the plains behind him rolling gently away towards deserts or mountain peaks. The scene is familiar to most Americans and to audiences of other nations. It presents a familiar setting within a context of social and moral meanings which are immediately understood. Stories of the Wild West include tales of glory and suffering, sacrifice, love and heroism, and have been a rich source for the growth and development of the myth. During this crucial period of settlement in which most Westerns are situated, major Indian wars were fought, cattle empires flourished and died, and some wagon trains reached their destinations. Part of the appeal of the Western is that it was a setting for romance and adventure and that many ways of life were available for people to start afresh or to reinvent themselves. Farmers, cowboys, cavalrymen, miners, Indian fighters, gamblers, gunfighters and railroad builders – all had their own elements of adventure, were contemporary with one another and had their own interests and values. This variety was a rich source for stories of conflicts between those interests and values.

■ USING THIS TEACHING GUIDE

This Guide will enable teachers and their students both to enjoy the Western as an exciting and popular film genre and to explore areas of Film and Media Studies syllabuses. The Guide provides background information on the Western as well as tasks and activities for students. Also included are synopses of significant Westerns and a bibliography.

The Guide specifically focuses on Sergio Leone and the 'Spaghetti Western', enabling students to look in detail at one

type of Western and examine the influence of both a director (Sergio Leone) and a star (Clint Eastwood).

It also offers ways in which the investigation of this genre could deliver other areas of the syllabuses and concept areas. Exploring a range of Western films, or extracts, can help Film and Media students investigate how meaning is made in film by asking them to analyse the features of a film's form and style and to identify the techniques of storytelling specific to narrative film. Through the Western they can also consider the intended and actual response of audiences; look at representation; examine the codes and conventions within a particular genre, the historical development of a genre and the relationship of genre to media industries and audience.

■ MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES LINKS

At AS Level Media and Film Studies students will need to understand and work with the following:

Narrative

Students are asked to look at the overall structure of the film and the way in which the elements of the story are organised. The study of a specific sequence will include how narrative information is communicated. Westerns usually open with a set of very clear narrative 'clues', for example, look at *The Searchers*, *The Quick and the Dead*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Students can be asked to look at the opening sequences of two or three Westerns and identify the film language, such as the establishing camera shot; the colour and the lighting; the *mise en scène*; and the music, which also gives information about the kind of story it is going to be. What are our expectations of this story? How do we know this man is the main character? What kind of a town or location is it? Is it hostile or friendly? How does the film language tell us this?

The Western is also useful for demonstrating narrative structure as an example of classic Hollywood narrative. When students see a whole film they can be asked to examine how the initial situation or equilibrium is disturbed or disrupted and how the situation is re-established to produce a changed or amended equilibrium at the end.

Genre

Students should become familiar with the means by which a narrative film communicates meaning particularly through the use of signifying features or icons which an audience readily recognises. It is important to discuss genre in terms of how film is marketed to its audience. The Western makes a useful introduction to the iconography of particular genres. Students could be asked to list all the things (or icons) they expect to see in a Western and to discuss an audience's expectation of this particular genre. They could then match what they see in film clips with the iconography on their own list and their own expectations. The opening sequences already referred to should be useful for this exercise.



From *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: the archetypal Western hero (John Wayne) meets the ineffectual Eastern politician (James Stewart).

Mise en Scène and Cinematography

These include setting, costume and make-up, expression and movement, lighting, framing and composition, off-screen space, camera position, colour, depth of focus and special effects. A short sequence, in which particular scenes could be freeze-framed, will allow students to identify close ups; the framing of the camera; the lighting of that particular scene; and to discuss why the film-maker has made these choices. Looking at interiors and exteriors from *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* should encourage questions about the physical positioning of the characters, the groupings within the domestic context and the placing of the characters against the landscape.

Editing

Students need to be aware of how the film-maker organises time, both within a sequence and across sections of the narrative and how the organisation of space creates coherence for the spectator. Most Westerns follow a linear narrative; one of the ways the film-maker can heighten tension and add urgency is through editing shots together. For example, how is the chase by the Indians in *Stagecoach* made to seem so tense and dangerous? Students could be asked to look closely at how one scene cuts to another, so changing the pace.

Sound

Sound is a significant part of film language and includes the variety of ways in which aural elements – speech, music and noise – are used in relation to visuals, and help inform them. For example, the opening sequence of *Once Upon a Time in the West*

conveys a great deal of information through ‘natural’ sounds. Without looking at the visuals, students could be asked to write down all the sounds they can identify and what those noises mean to them, then compare their ideas with the information given when the visuals and sound are combined.

Auteur debates

In A Level Film Studies (A2) these investigations are extended by asking students to carry out a research-based study of a specific *auteur*. The Critical Studies section also asks students to explore the ideas of genre and authorship.

The term *auteur* is used to describe directors who have attained the status of an artist or author, and who are perceived as producing personal films, identified as their own. As film-making is essentially a collaborative process this sometimes makes authorship difficult when you consider how some directors regularly use the same scriptwriter, cameraman or lighting team. The *auteur* debate has continued for over thirty years – *Theories of Authorship* by John Caughie is a useful text in outlining the main areas of debate.

The use of the director's name is often key in the marketing of film nowadays but the original definition of *auteur* does not really apply to this emphasis on ‘star’ directors. This ‘development’ might be an interesting area for students to explore in terms of film marketing and the context of production. Sergio Leone, John Ford, Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood (and others) could be subjects of student research, which could include looking at narrative structure, themes, *mise en scène*, representation and ideology and music.

■ EXAM QUESTIONS

A study of the Western could usefully help answer the following questions from past Film and Media examination papers:

Narrative

Q Analyse any two film or broadcast fiction texts which employ different narrative strategies.

The Western can be used here as a classic Hollywood narrative text and contrasted with another kind of film narrative, e.g. *The Searchers* or *The Outlaw Josey Wales* with *Pulp Fiction* or *Land and Freedom*.

Genre

Q 'Genre is a means by which an audience brings knowledge to a film; genre films provide frameworks in which the audience's capacity to recognise certain story elements of plot, theme and image create the potential for great subtlety of meaning where the conventions may be stretched, played with or subverted'. How far would you agree with this view of genre? Refer to one or more genre films.

Lone Star, *Unforgiven*, *The Quick and the Dead* are all Westerns which explore and subvert the generic conventions of the Western. Students could consider the audiences for these films as well as looking at the film-makers' use of the conventions and iconography.

Q How useful is the concept of genre to media producers and audiences? Discuss with reference to specific examples.

The Western and how it is marketed could be explored here. Students should look at posters, trailers and other advertising material (web sites) in order to examine who the distributors are targeting and how. Stars associated with this genre are also useful marketing tools in reaching an audience.

Q Outline the principal themes, conventions and iconography of any one genre of your choice, illustrating your answer with a range of examples.

Three contrasting aspects of the Western could be considered through *Lone Star*, *Unforgiven* and *The Searchers*.

Stars

Q 'Stars contribute more than potential box office appeal; they significantly determine meaning in the films in which they appear.' Discuss this statement with reference to three films.

Q Stars are often considered in partnerships, for example with a director or with another star. Explore what is revealing in a study of the work of a star in two partnerships.

Clint Eastwood and John Wayne are two stars with which the Western is associated and their work with particular directors is significant. *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Pale Rider*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *The Searchers*, *Stagecoach*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* offer useful texts through which to compare

the relationship of a star persona to a particular director and genre.

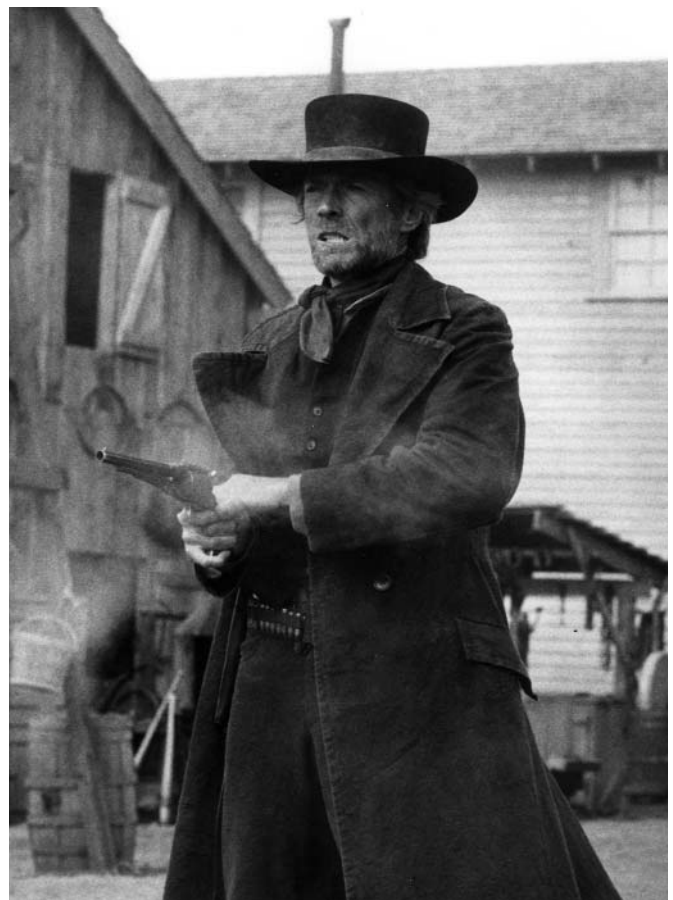
Q Hollywood stars are the direct or indirect reflection of the needs, drives and dreams of American society. Discuss this view of stars, making reference to one or more stars in at least two of their films.

The Western as a myth and reflection of American society could be investigated looking particularly at the different representation of heroes through two or three films from different eras, e.g. *High Noon*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Dances with Wolves*.

Auteur debates

Q Auteur status is claimed today by Hollywood marketing hype for almost any director. What, in your opinion, are the characteristics which make a Hollywood auteur? In answering this question refer in detail to one or more directors and their work.

Leone's work could be a basis for this question as could an investigation of the work of John Ford, Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood. It could also be interesting to discuss with your students whether Clint Eastwood is a star or an *auteur*, or combines qualities of both.



Clint Eastwood in *Pale Rider* – developing his persona as 'the man with no name'.

A stagecoach hurtles across the vast landscape. Indians suddenly launch a savage attack. All seems lost until a bugle call signals the cavalry to the rescue! 'The cavalry to the rescue' has become part of common currency of English language and we recognise this description as an element of a typical Hollywood Western.

TASK 1

- **The stagecoach, the vast landscape, the attacking native Americans all form part of what we call the iconography of the Western. These are the familiar 'signs' that belong to this particular genre or type of film. (We would not expect to see a bus in a Western!) Make a list of as many other elements of iconography that you might expect to see in a Western, e.g. saloons, cattlemen, etc.**

It can be argued that the Western is the only genre that spans the history of narrative film-making from Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903 to Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil* (1999). Geographically Westerns are set to the west of the Missouri/Mississippi Rivers. They are sometimes set in Mexico. Historically, they are mainly set in the second half of the 19th Century (1860-1900). With the distinctive dress, props, situations and characters to add to this clearly recognisable genre it is not surprising that Westerns are often criticised for being far too formulaic. Certainly the Western can be identified by a range of elements which allow us the comfort of easy recognition, but this oversimplifies the complexities of Westerns which are constantly being redefined.

Clint Eastwood, interviewed in *Time Out* in 1992 said:

[The Western] is a genre in which you can analyse new subject matter and moralities; you can take it in different directions, otherwise it gets in a rut. And Hollywood's silly a lot of the time; they follow a fad, and then some expert says a genre's dead. But if they analysed it they'd see that every time they show certain Western movies from their library on TV, they get fabulous ratings.

One reason for the continued hold on audiences' imaginations is the fascination with the 'Lone Hero', the ultimate Western archetype. No one knows where he came from or where he is going. He seeks no quarrel but is usually challenged and that challenge must be faced regardless of the consequences. He is almost always shown as heroic but the moral issues in his confrontations are not always completely clear. He is on the side of justice and order but also is intent on defending his honour or reputation. This rather simplified view of a Western's morality is demonstrated in a classic Western directed by Fred Zinnemann called *High Noon* (1952) where Gary Cooper plays a marshal who has to face confrontation alone, abandoned by the townspeople and despite opposition from his new bride. After the gunfight the hero leaves town and his wife, more understanding now, leaves with him. This film, with the socially conscious allegory of the fearless individual standing up to the threat of oppression, was one of the most influential Westerns of the fifties. The theme of civic responsibility was explored again in a seventies Western – Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter*.

TASK 2

- **A fearless individual standing up to and defeating oppressive forces is an appealing theme. Can you think of any other film genres where this happens?**



Will Kane (Gary Cooper) fighting for his life and honour in *High Noon*.

■ REWORKING THE GENRE

Opinions vary about why the genre fascinates directors and is reworked by them. The way people lived in the West highlights the tensions in America's view of itself and of progress. Individualism and community values are two conflicting ideals which are constantly reviewed in the Western. The Western also looks at the idea of the West symbolised as a desert or garden.

TASK 3

- What do you think the West itself might symbolise?
- Explore the idea of the West being a desert or a garden by comparing the opening sequences of two Westerns, e.g. *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *The Searchers*, *The Quick and the Dead*. Does the environment hold promises for the settlers or is the landscape part of the struggle? You will need to analyse the film text in detail in your exploration – look closely at the *mise en scène*, the relationships between characters, the lighting and the colour, the camera angles.

The narrow boundaries of space and time bring together a cross-section of social types representing a wide range of economic and social interests in a struggle to survive. The Western deals with the moment in American history when options were open and individuals could be nurtured or threatened by the vast landscape around them.

TASK 4

- Describe the range of social types in *Stagecoach* and *The Quick and the Dead*.
- What are their reasons for being in the same place? How are they used to demonstrate conflicts of values and interests?

The Western raises the issue of fictionalised history both in relation to the time it represents and in relation to the contemporary audience for whom it is constructed. It is understood by many as being crucially linked to the American problem of national identity. Changes in its production and reworking the genre for new audiences can be linked to changes in economic and ideological conditions. Is the Western specific to American culture and history? Does it have universal appeal? Are people fascinated with the way history is reconstructed?

TASK 5

- What responsibility has the film-maker to the period that he or she is fictionalising? What do you think they should get 'right'? What is the film-maker's responsibility to the audience?

In *Unforgiven* one of the characters is a journalist documenting the life of a famous gunfighter and trying to establish the 'truth'.

TASK 6

- What is the point of this strand in the story? What themes might it emphasise or highlight?

It could be that the history of the frontier and the discovery of a new way of life is a source for reworking older and more universal themes.

TASK 7

- What universal situations might you identify with Westerns? Are the conflicts or situations that you have seen in Westerns culturally specific?
- What are the myths and stories that you can remember reading or being told as a child? What other meanings might they have held beside being a simple fairy story?

John Ford, the director used to introduce himself by simply saying, 'My name is John Ford. I make Westerns.' *Stagecoach* (1939) remains for many people the prototype Western. With its tight dramatic construction and virtually non-stop action it seems in many ways more typical of Westerns generally than of Ford's Westerns alone. Unusual for Ford is the simplicity of the film's hero: a man on the run from the law, but undeniably good and heroic. More typical of Ford's approach is the spirit of the film which offers the hope that the wrongfully outlawed hero and 'fallen woman' heroine can start a new life in the Eden-like setting of a frontier farm, free from the censure of a hypocritical society. *Stagecoach* was Ford's first film to be set in Monument Valley, the distinctive landscape which was to become Ford's own preserve in the making of his Westerns and which was destined to become an icon of the American West.

TASK 1

- Look at the landscape in *Stagecoach* and list the 'typical' elements. How does the film-maker convey the hostility of the environment?
- Take any sequence where the stagecoach is struggling to reach its destination. How does the film-maker emphasise the struggle and the urgency of the journey? Look closely at the *mise en scène*, camera angles, music and editing.



The archetypal Western moment in *Stagecoach*: fleeing from the Indians.

The characters in *Stagecoach* represent an almost perfect cross-section of Western types. We are introduced to the 'proper' heroine in the person of the cavalry officer's pregnant wife; the 'fallen' woman in the person of the banished saloon girl; the chivalrous Southern gambler; the big-hearted alcoholic doctor; the comic salesman; the bluff, jolly uncomplicated driver; the gruff, sterling, honest sheriff; the good outlaw seeking an honest start; all with the Seventh Cavalry and marauding Indians.

TASK 2

- What are the advantages for the story-teller in having all these types making a journey together? What might be the conflicts of interest? How might these conflicts carry the narrative forward?
- Can you think of any other genres in film, television and literature where groups of people from different backgrounds meet to make a journey, or are thrown together in a life-threatening situation?

In *Wagon Master* (1950) Ford's focus shifted from the individual to the vision of settlement of the west itself. The westward journey of a wagon train of settlers is seen as an epic quest, a trek to a promised land. In his films Ford developed a sense of the West's historical realities, especially the history of injustices to Native Americans, the subject of *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). At the same time, Ford's nostalgia for the desert wilderness produces a hero as loner.

In *The Searchers* (1956) John Wayne is Ethan Edwards, the champion of the family who turns his back on domestic life to become the nomadic loner. This film is considered by many to be Ford's masterpiece. It was one of the most commercially successful Westerns of the fifties with Ford's confident handling of complex material. There is slapstick, mythic landscapes with superbly striking settings, and character exploration. Unlike earlier Ford heroes, Ethan Edwards is not part of the westward march of civilisation. Rather like Scar, the Indian Chief who had 'defiled' his niece, he represents the primitive forces that cannot survive beyond the desert and must be repressed before the foundations of civilisation can be properly laid and the desert be transformed into a garden. The film's seriousness surprised many contemporary reviewers but was the culmination of Ford's deepening sense of the paradoxes that his central characters contain from *Stagecoach* onwards.

TASK 3

- Look closely at the opening sequences of *The Searchers*. What contrasts can you find here, e.g. landscape and domestic setting?
- What are the paradoxes of the central characters, particularly the loner played by John Wayne? Look at his relationship with the adopted son of the family.
- What range of roles do the women play? Are they only symbolic, or are they important in pushing the narrative forward?



The Searchers: Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) returns his niece to civilisation.

In *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), Ford has double heroes. The film praises the rough-hewn yet noble heroes who made the settlement of the west possible, but they remain incapable of belonging to the civilised world whose path they have cleared. This figure is symbolised in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* by the cactus rose, a flower that only blooms in the desert.

Shane (1953) is directed by George Stevens. As the film opens a solitary rider appears on the horizon. He is a professional gunfighter destined to help the family of new settlers (representing hope and the future), in their battle with the cattle rancher (representing the old, lawless, West). Shane has two parallel stories: on the one hand there is the social conflict between the hard-working farmers and the rancher who is determined to keep hold of his open land; and on the other hand there is the mythic confrontation between the hired gun, who is the incarnation of evil, and the hero, Shane.

The relationship built between Shane and the son of the farming family, Joey, is a poignant one. Joey represents the future, a future that Shane will not be able to share. The tragedy for Shane is that he knows that once he has killed he must leave the valley, riding off alone, destined by his calling to isolation once more. When Joey calls out to Shane as he rides away it is a cry that pleads for Shane to return, because with his departure part of the nobility of the West is rejected. His skills are needed yet ironically rejected by those who benefit most by his expertise with the gun.

Shane remains an idealised mythical hero, but heroic because he will not allow himself to be admired by a boy for living by the gun. What is admirable about him is not his skill with a gun but his restraint in using it. What we see in Shane is just how close the hero of the Western has become a tragic figure. His gift – prowess with the gun – has enabled him to survive in a violent wilderness, but has left him doomed to wandering, marked out as an outcast in the civilised world that is overtaking him. He is a figure who embodies and appeals to the best and worst in human nature.

TASK 1

- Examine in detail a sequence from *Shane* where the film language demonstrates the tensions and contradictions represented by the protagonist.

Sergio Leone has said that *Shane* was the major influence on his early Westerns. Both George Stevens and Leone stress the mythical qualities of their respective heroes, although the mythologies are very different. Both have the central theme of the stranger who arrives from nowhere and moves on to 'nowhere'. Both heroes use their skill as a gunfighter to achieve good – but this good is achieved only through violence and death. Both films present stylistic parallels such as the use of amplified natural sound, formal groups and the use of music to emphasise a dramatic point. Both Shane and 'the man with no name' are isolated from the homesteaders/townspeople as outsiders. Each wears distinctive clothes. Shane wears the pale buckskin of a loner from the frontier and 'the man with no name' wears the distinctive poncho. Both wear their belts in the manner of the gunslinger.

TASK 2

- Watch the arrival of Shane in *Shane* and 'the man with no name' in *A Fistful of Dollars*. Write a detailed description of the *mise en scène* of both sequences. What information is the film-maker giving the audience about the character and about the community where he has arrived?

The motivation of the two heroes can be contrasted. Shane represents the traditional view of the honourable lone hero. He is pitted against the villain, Wilson, who wears the badges of villainy – the black hat and the single black glove. Wilson is to be paid for his skills as a gunfighter in cash dollars. Shane earns his place in the community by sweat and toil but is not actually paid for his services as a gunfighter.

TASK 3

- Watch the sequence in *Shane* where Shane and Joe Starrett are digging up the tree stump. What does this sequence tell us about the characters of both men? How is the wife, Marion, represented in this sequence? How is meaning created through image and sound? How does this sequence represent the community?

In *A Fistful of Dollars* the primary motivation is the dollar. The town of San Miguel is a place where undertakers make a substantial living. 'The man with no name' is not warned off from staying in town because of its violence – far from it – he recognises that 'There's money to be made in a town like this'. Leone's hero kills for profit. He is interested in the price on a man's head. Leone's view of the West was that 'Where life has no value, death sometimes had its price.' It is significant that there are several references to Judas in the Dollars Trilogy (the three Leone films – *A Fistful of Dollars*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *For a Few Dollars More*). In Christopher Frayling's *The Spaghetti Western* (1981), he points out that money is seen to be valued for its own sake, something to be possessed – not for what it can be used for. It is not useful but merely a prize.

Shane cannot become an integrated member of the community even though he shows ample evidence of wishing to. 'The man with no name' develops no intimate personal relationships – nor does he have any desire to do so. He cannot invest in the community. He cannot believe in fair play. 'The man with no name' has no desire to settle down – he is the bounty hunter – what good comes of his activities is a by-product not an end in itself.

TASK 4

- Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* is in many ways a direct updating of *Shane*. Identify the parallels between the two films and the different 'spin' that Eastwood puts on the story.

TASK 5



Shane in his pale buckskin.



What differences and similarities do you see between the dress code and appearance of each of the heroes? What do they suggest about the heroes?

The 'man with no name' in his poncho.

■ **SAM PECKINPAH**

Sam Peckinpah, an exciting director working in the sixties and seventies, chose to identify himself almost exclusively with the Western. In a sense, he begins where Ford ends, with the image of the ageing Western hero in *Ride the High Country* (1962) reduced, literally, to being a carnival attraction. The decline in the heroic image of the Western hero from *Ride the High Country* to Peckinpah's most famous film, *The Wild Bunch* (1969) is rapid and extreme. No longer do we have a solitary man with a code of honour, but a killer who runs in a pack. The Western 'hero' who emerges from *The Wild Bunch* has come to resemble that other archetype of American films, the gangster. The violence of the Western, traditionally restrained by the hero's gentlemanly code, is now allowed to run rampant. In this film it is the violence above all else which characterises the West. Moral confusion is everywhere. The U.S. Cavalry (the heroic rescuers in so many Westerns) is revealed as a mob of bungling fools, and children (so often symbols of innocence) are shown to be amoral. The mythology of the West is exploded and the concept of heroism is challenged. In *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), Peckinpah romanticises the character of the famed outlaw hero. He is seen as the personification of freedom and animal vitality in the face of an advancing corrupt civilisation: the last cowboy at the end of the frontier. In *Junior Bonner* (1972), a study of a contemporary rodeo performer, the defeat and death of the hero are a rebuke to society.

TASK 1

- Compare and contrast the representation of the hero in a Peckinpah Western with a more traditional hero. Are there parallels? Is the framework of heroism retained? Do we sympathise with this 'reworked' hero? Are there any similarities to contemporary heroes in other genre?

■ **DANCES WITH WOLVES**

After the commercial failure of *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) it was thought that any Western which lasted more than an hour and a half was doomed at the box office. However, *Dances with Wolves* (1990), directed by Kevin Costner, achieved both critical acclaim and popular appeal. The theatrical release was three hours long and the film made much of the fact that it was the first Western to deal with Native Americans with true nobility and dignity. While it was a novel experience hearing authentic dialogue (the Sioux language, Lakota, was carefully researched and reproduced with subtitles), this claim is very much open to question. The film was criticised in *The Evening Standard* for being 'ideologically conspicuous' and for 'white-washing the red man to the point of removing all dignity'. The reviewer went on to suggest that *The Searchers* was much more questioning in its portrayal of the Native Americans – at the end of the film we don't feel totally sympathetic with John Wayne's deep mistrust of the alien native and come away with some sympathy for the Native Americans.

TASK 2

- What are the images of Native Americans that the film-maker wants the audience to have in *Stagecoach*, *The Searchers*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and *Dances with Wolves*? (Select two or more films)
- Examine how they are presented in the context of the landscape itself, the community and in individual relationships. What is their function in terms of plot and atmosphere?

■ **THE QUICK AND THE DEAD**

It has been argued that the dominance of the male hero in the Western means that the women are instrumental in the action but not central to it and that their principal dramatic role is to be the voice of reason speaking out against violence. In mythical terms, women in Westerns often represent the 'good' and play an important part in civilising the frontier and establishing the community. In traditional Westerns women seem to have fallen into two types: the unsullied pioneer heroine, e.g. the virtuous wife, the rancher's daughter, the schoolteacher; and then the saloon girl. There have been exceptional Westerns where there is a female hero, such as *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and where women are offered opportunities for greater freedom and power.

Women's changing roles in the Western may reflect their changing status in society. In the 1990s women as the central figures in Westerns were in fashion – in 1994 *Bad Girls* starred Madeleine Stowe, Mary Stuart Masterson, Andie McDowell and Drew Barrymore as four prostitutes who, after a killing, flee from town to town and became outlaws. In 1995 Sharon Stone starred in *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi) playing a vengeful woman (Eastwood-like) who takes part in a gun-fighting competition where the winner is the last person to remain alive. The film also starred Gene Hackman and Leonardo DiCaprio and pays homage to the revenge fantasies of Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns. It confused reviewers who could not decide whether it was to be taken seriously or was a parody. One reviewer called it 'a post-modern, post-feminist, post-what have you Western – for what it's worth'.

TASK 3

- How close is Sharon Stone's role to that of the mythical Western hero?
- What are the film-maker's references to other Westerns in this film?
- Compare Sharon Stone's role with that of any other woman in a Western. Look at costume, *mise en scène*, relationships with other characters and to what extent they are instrumental to the plot.

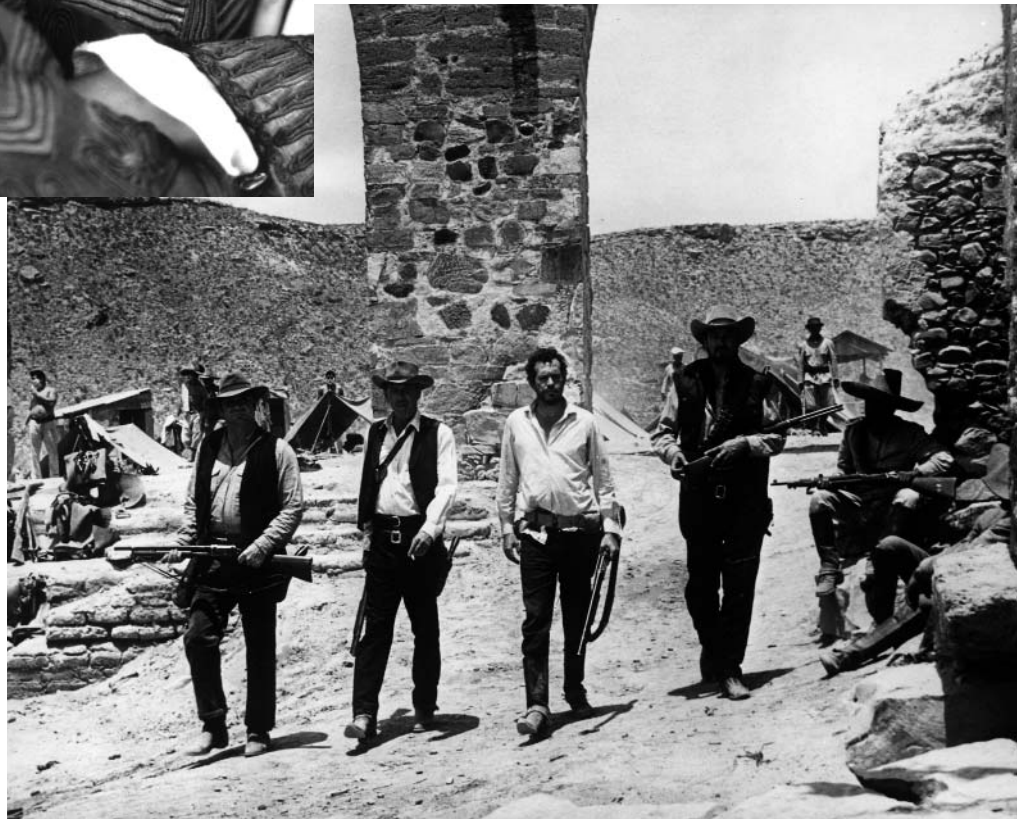
TASK 4



Sharon Stone –
a vengeful woman in
The Quick and the Dead



Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*



The 'gangster' Western – *The Wild Bunch*

In what way do the characters in these films differ from the typical Western hero?

Spaghetti Westerns are generally considered to be a sub-genre of the Western, describing Italian and Spanish made 'Westerns'. The term was first used almost exclusively as a term of abuse. Other terms were used at the time to describe 'alien' interpretations of the Hollywood Western, such as German 'Sauerkraut Westerns', or Spanish 'Paella Westerns'.

Today the influence of the Spaghetti Western on those made subsequently in the US is more clearly recognised and the term is used descriptively to define those European Westerns filmed predominantly in Spain with American lead actors, Italian directors and Italian film crews.

The violence and overt machismo of the Spaghetti Western were matters of concern when they first appeared. The world of the Spaghetti Western was an almost exclusively male one and women were incidental to the narrative. The films were a celebration of masculinity: men were men and women were women, and 'knew their place'. The women were shown as either 'madonnas' (sisters, mothers, wives) or whores (saloon girls). Today the violence in Spaghetti Westerns looks timid when compared with the films of Wes Craven and Quentin Tarantino, although Peckinpah himself claimed that he would not have made his films in the way he did had it not been for the example set by the films of Sergio Leone.

■ SERGIO LEONE

January 23rd 1921–April 30th 1989

Leone was born in Rome, the son of one of Italy's film pioneers. At 18 he turned his back on an academic career and entered the film industry as an assistant to various Italian directors, such as de Sica on *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948). During the 1950s Leone worked for several American production companies making Hollywood epics in Rome. In 1959 he worked as an assistant on Fred Zinnemann's *The Nun's Story*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Peter Finch. His official debut as principal director (and co-screenwriter) was with the historical epic, *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1961), an Italian/Spanish film made in Spain.

Leone found that working with a variety of directors, both Italian and American, was an invaluable experience but was certainly not over-awed by the Hollywood system:

I have worked with directors from the best to the worst, from the mediocre to the talented, from the genius to the idiot.

Leone was determined to find his own voice both in content and in style:

If the critics write that I resurrect old myths and make them even larger, that's true. I was at the side of directors who applied all the rules: for example, a close-up to show that the character is about to say something important. I reacted against all that and so the close-ups in my films are always the expression of emotion. I'm very careful in that area, so they call me a perfectionist, a formalist because I watch my framing. But I'm not doing it to make it look pretty; I'm seeking, first and foremost, the relevant emotion. You have to frame with the emotion and the rhythm of the film in mind.

TASK 1

- Find three examples of this kind of close-up in Leone's films. What effect is the director aiming for? What other aspects of film language emphasise these effects in each sequence?

He was often disappointed by other directors and saw directors of the calibre of Raoul Walsh and William Wyler wasting their talents with populist 'sand, sex and sandal' epics while

I was their assistant, the victim of some curse ... Whilst I organised chariot races, battles between triremes, and explosions on galleys, I was silently dreaming about Nevada and New Mexico.

Sergio Leone's dream came to fruition in 1964 with the making of *Per un Pugno di Dollari – A Fistful of Dollars*, the first of his films with which he was to make his mark on film history as 'the father of the Spaghetti Western.' Although the phenomenon was relatively short-lived, Leone dominated this sub-genre. His influence was substantial and Clint Eastwood publicly acknowledged his personal debt to Leone by dedicating *Unforgiven* (1992) to him.

TASK 2

- Does Clint Eastwood bring any of the qualities of 'the man with no name' to *Unforgiven*? Are there references in the film to the Spaghetti Western and the roles he played in them?

In 1958, 54 feature Westerns were made in Hollywood: in 1962-3 a mere eleven. However, in 1967 annual production reached 37. Between the summer of 1963 and April 1964 the month Leone began filming *A Fistful of Dollars* – 24 Spaghetti Westerns were made and by 1967 annual production of Spaghetti Westerns had risen to 72. It is clear that the revival of the Hollywood Western was largely due to the success of 'international Westerns', especially the Spaghetti Western, and even more importantly the films of Sergio Leone starring Clint Eastwood. The popularity of Leone's Westerns not only boosted commercial demand but also influenced the content and style of future Hollywood Westerns.



A characteristic scene from Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars*.

- *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964)
- *For a Few Dollars More* (1965)
- *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966)

A Fistful of Dollars has been summed up disparagingly as a low-budget Western (the total budget was \$200,000), based upon a Japanese film, pretending to be an American one, produced in Italy. It achieved, however, instant success in Italy and eventual international success.

In this, the first of what was to become known as the Dollars Trilogy, Leone was to present his audiences with an alternative mythology of the West. His hero lives by his wits and is little concerned with 'honour'. Leone viewed the American hero with a more objective, if not cynical eye:

In my childhood America was like a religion. I dreamed of the wide, open spaces. Of demi-gods upon the prairies.

The real-life Americans he saw arriving to liberate Italy at the end of the Second World War *'upset all my dreams'*. Leone saw their weaknesses as well as their strengths:

They were no longer the Americans of the West. I found them energetic, but also deceptive men who were materialistic, possessive, keen on earthly pleasures and goods. I could see nothing or almost nothing of the great prairies or of the demi-gods of my childhood.

In an interview in 1973 Leone rejected Hollywood's interpretation of the West as a place where the 'whiter than white redresser of wrongs' existed. He recognised the 'real' West as a

world of violence, fear and instinct – a world of men. If you were 'honourable' like the heroes of the traditional Westerns – you would find yourself in the cemetery in no time at all. Life in the West was not pleasant or poetic. Up until the arrival of the railroads the law belonged to the most hard, the most cruel, the most cynical.

TASK 1

- Take one Spaghetti Western and two other Westerns, each from a different period, and trace the changes in the characterisation of the 'hero'. What is retained from the traditional hero? What is lost?

The outline narrative of *A Fistful of Dollars* was written in three weeks by Leone and two co-writers. The story was based heavily on Akira Kurosawa's samurai film *Yojimbo* (1961). Both Kurosawa and Leone suggested that their main inspiration came from Hollywood films. Kurosawa said that *Yojimbo* was born out of a passion for the Hollywood Western, and in particular, George Steven's *Shane*, a hugely popular film in Japan.

TASK 2

'Good Westerns are liked by everyone. Since humans are weak they want to see good people and great heroes. Westerns have been done over and over again and in the process a kind of grammar has evolved. I have learned from the grammar of the Westerns.'

KUROSAWA

- What does the 'grammar of the Westerns' mean, do you think?
- What would a Western have to have to attract a contemporary audience? Write a synopsis for a Western which would attract your peer group. Think about effects, casting, narrative.

THEMES AND STYLE

The Dollars Trilogy avoids sentimentality by combining black humour and brutality. In *For a Few Dollars More* Eastwood's characterisation of 'the man with no name' became almost self-parody. In the complex game of the treasure hunt in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* much of the violence has almost a cartoon quality about it. Guns are fired from unexpected places: up sleeves, in a bath and from a boot. All the films include graphic close-ups of people eating voraciously. Less savoury functions are also featured.

Ennio Morricone's music plays a significant role in the films. Many of the characters have musical reference points. In *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* each character has his own distinctive sound – a trill or a whine, sung whistled or played and taken from the opening bars of the main title theme.

TASK 3

- Take two of the Dollars Trilogy and note the musical reference points for the characters.

Leone employs heavily amplified background noises to dramatic effect. Throughout the Dollars Trilogy there are long scenes where there is little or no dialogue but Leone emphasises the mechanics of loading, cocking and firing a rifle or pistol by electronically enhancing or simulating the sounds. This helps to increase the dramatic tension. For the opening sequence of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* amplified natural sounds are used to dramatic effect.

TASK 4

- Identify the sounds in the opening sequences of each of the Dollars Trilogy – the whistle of the wind, a dog howling ... what else?



A closing sequence from
For a Few Dollars More.

Leone's technical devices are frequently deliberately overplayed. He uses fluid camera movements, often incorporating the camera as part of the action. He places objects in eccentric juxtapositions and frequently uses big close-ups to show reaction rather than action.

TASK 5

- Select a sequence from any of the Dollars Trilogy and discuss why it might be criticised for 'excesses of style'.

The Desert

One of the central motifs in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is the contrast between the cactus rose and the references made to real roses. In Ford's mythology of the West the desert can become a garden. In the majestic landscape of Monument Valley families can establish themselves. The future will survive through marriage, children and civilisation. In Leone's West the desert is sterile. The desert provides a suitable setting for a world rooted in violence, greed and cruelty. Leone's characters inhabit a hostile environment but they are not pioneers interested in opening up a new frontier. There is nothing of the traditional West for self-fulfilment or self-awareness in Leone's heroes.

The Family and the Church

The only thing worth preserving in Leone's world is the family. And such is the violence and greed of his world few families survive. Leone links the image of the family with the symbol of the community – the church bell (the *campanile*). Culturally this represents a significant 'Italianism' in his films. The image of the church bell is frequently used, e.g. in *For a Few Dollars More* the mission bell is used for target practice by members of Indio's gang.

TASK 6

- Look for examples of where the family and church are referred to or portrayed in the Dollars Trilogy. What is the effect they have on the action?

Images of Death

Leone frequently gives his characters names associated with death (cf. *mors*, the Latin word for 'death'). There is Colonel Mortimor, the Morton brothers, and another Morton in *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The closing sequences of *For a Few Dollars More* is of the 'man with no name's' farm wagon piled with dead bodies. In *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* a driverless hearse appears from nowhere in the middle of the desert. Possibly most significant of all is the fact that the gold is buried inside a grave. Greed and death are inextricably intertwined.

Students' notes

Once Upon a Time in the West

Once Upon a Time in the West is considered to be Leone's most polished and also most optimistic Western. He wanted to

portray America's first frontier using the most worn out of stereotypes: the pushy whore, the romantic bandit, the avenger, the killer who is about to become a business man and the industrialist who uses the methods of the bandit,...

and

recount, through small characters, usual characters, taken from American traditions of fiction, the birth of a nation. Before they come onto the scene, these characters know themselves to be dying in every sense – physically and morally – victims of a new era which was advancing; the new, unpitiful era of the economic boom.

The main theme of *Once Upon a Time in the West* is the impact of technological developments on the Western frontier. Leone represents capitalism and advances in technology moving hand in hand. Linked with the theme of killing for money is the representation of the ruthless railroad tycoon. Perhaps one of the most telling lines in the film is when the tycoon is told that even when he is dead, 'You'll leave a slime behind you – two shiny rails.' The film's characters generally have no respect for the railroad. Only Jill McBain, travelling as a passenger, visiting the West for the first time seems relaxed and at ease on the train. She represents the advance of civilisation.

In *Once Upon a Time in the West* Leone makes specific references to other Westerns: he includes scenes set in Monument Valley; the opening is a parody of *High Noon*; and there are parallel graveside scenes in *Shane* and visual references to Ford's *The Iron Horse*. Timmy mimes the shooting of a partridge just as Joey mimes the shooting of a deer in *Shane*. There are many other visual echoes running through the film. Leone wanted Henry Fonda, playing the cruel villain, to have maximum impact. The hero of *My Darling Clementine* and *Young Mr Lincoln* becomes the steely-eyed killer and certainly achieved Leone's aim.

TASK 1

■ An audience would have expected Henry Fonda to play the hero with integrity and honour. What effect would it have on them to have him play the cold-hearted villain? How might it have emphasised any themes in the film?

TASK 2

■ What kind of characters do we expect actors such as Harrison Ford, Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep to play? What meanings do they take to their films? What effect would it have on their audience to cast them against expectations?



Themes of death in Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

The character of Jill McBain is central to an understanding of the film. If Leone's world is essentially womanless, *Once Upon a Time in the West* is the exception that proves the rule. It is not that women are handled badly or indifferently in his films it is just that they hardly exist at all. Jill McBain is different. The scene where she strips off her city clothes to draw water from the well combines two essential motifs in the film. The 'mother' figure and the sense of hope for the future. Jill becomes the matriarch to the railroad gangs. Harmonica says, 'It's going to be a beautiful town, Sweetwater', and it is Jill who will make it so. Within the one character lives a succession of Western stereotypes. She has been described as the adoring wife, a whore, a mother, a victim of rape and a matriarch. It is an irony that for all Leone's supposed misogyny it is she who survives to give hope for the future.

TASK 3

■ Choose a range of women, say five or six, from different Westerns and rank them in terms of how 'real' they are. Some are stereotypes and symbols, others more heroic and full-blooded.

There are some actors who are associated with Westerns and with particular roles in them. The physical presence and characteristics of these actors have become part of the genre's iconography, either accepted literally or worked into new patterns or used for fresh meanings. The well-known faces, with familiar plots and situations help to reinforce the sense of ritual, e.g. John Wayne is not associated with parts that require much inner turmoil, Henry Fonda is a key figure in Ford films such as *My Darling Clementine* and Gary Cooper is honest and upright, as in *High Noon*. If any of these are cast as criminals or outlaws there is the definite suggestion that there is something basically wrong with society.

TASK 1

- Which actors do you associate with the Western, and which qualities are associated with them? How do these qualities contribute to audience expectations and to the marketing of the film?

Leone originally wanted Henry Fonda to play 'the man with no name' as an older character; his second choice was James Coburn. Both actors were too expensive and he tried, unsuccessfully, to cast various actors who were living in Europe. Clint Eastwood was, at the time, the co-star of the CBS TV Western series, *Rawhide*. Eastwood had joined the series in the winter of 1958, aged 28, as Rowdy Yates, the 'ramrod' of the cattle drivers. Eastwood was signed to play the 'man with no name' in the spring of 1964: his salary was \$15,000. The film took a mere seven weeks to complete, after which Eastwood returned to *Rawhide*. After the death of Eric Fleming, who played the trail boss in *Rawhide*, Eastwood had solo billing until the series ended in 1966.

Before casting Eastwood, Leone had watched an episode of *Rawhide* and thought that he was 'a little sophisticated, a little light' but 'he was good at getting on a horse and had a way of walking with a tired resigned air'. Leone decided that he had to 'make him look more virile, harden him, 'age' him for the part – with that beard, that poncho which made him look broader, those cigars.' Leone's original vision of 'the man with no name' changed considerably when Eastwood took on the role. Leone saw that

in real life Clint is slow, calm, rather like a cat. He does what he has to do, then sits down in a corner and goes to sleep immediately, until needed again. It was seeing him behave like this on the first day that helped me mould the character.

Clint Eastwood was aware of the differences between his acting style and what he referred to as the 'Helzapoppin school of drama' in Italy. He decided to remain 'impassive'. Also, according to Eastwood, the original script of *A Fistful of Dollars* was overlong and very wordy. As shooting progressed Eastwood and Leone came to a compromise over the dialogue and Eastwood's character was allowed to say less and less.



Clint Eastwood's 'the man with no name' – another kind of hero?

Clint Eastwood carefully refined his 'man with no name' persona, introduced with such dramatic effect in Leone's films, culminating in his homage to *Shane* – the mystical preacher in *Pale Rider* (1985). Two of the most exciting Hollywood Westerns of the seventies were his *High Plains Drifter* (1973), a surreal extension of the genre, and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. *High Plains Drifter* sees the hero consumed by revenge but in *Josey Wales* he is freed from revenge and made 'human' again. The screenplay quotes the classic line from Anthony Mann's film *The Naked Spur* (1952): 'Choosing a way to die, that's easy; it's choosing a way to live that's the difficult thing to do.'

TASK 2

- Compare 'the man with no name' persona with the character that Eastwood plays in either *High Plains Drifter* or *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. What are the changes? What are the similarities? What do you think the audience brings to his performance in terms of expectations?

TASK 3

- What meaning does Eastwood bring to each part he plays? Carry out research on his career as an actor and star. Look at web sites, reviews and articles. Are there areas where the public and private person meet? How much of what we know about him is as constructed for us as the parts he plays?

■ **SYNOPSIS OF SELECTED FILMS**

Annie Get your Gun (US, 1950)

Based on Irving Berlin's 1946 musical, this tells the story of how 'sharp shootin' straight talkin'" Annie Oakley (Betty Hutton) wins her man (Howard Keel), a trick shot artist in Buffalo Bill's travelling show.

Bad Girls (US, 1994)

Four prostitutes; a tough sharp-shooter (Madeline Stowe), a Southern gentlewoman (Andie MacDowell), an impoverished widow (Mary Stewart Masterson) and a young tomboy (Drew Barrymore), go on the run from the injustice and degradation of a life of virtual slavery in the Old West, but find they cannot escape a life that they were forced into. Directed by Jonathan Kaplan.

Ballad of Little Jo, The (US, 1993)

A fact-based feminist Western directed by Maggie Greenwald, this has as its central character a woman, Josephine, who, expelled from the safety of New York society in 1866 for an adulterous affair, travels West where she disguises herself as a man, Little Jo, and thrives in the testosterone-fuelled and brutal society of a frontier town.

Calamity Jane (US, 1953)

Doris Day plays a frontier tomboy who finds she has to choose between her femininity and her six-shooter when she falls in love with Wild Bill Hickok (Howard Keel), in this classic musical directed by David Butler.

Dances with Wolves (US, 1990)

Kevin Costner's Oscar-winning Western sees him starring in and directing the story of a disillusioned Yankee soldier assigned to a remote, deserted outpost where he gradually gains the trust and friendship of the adjacent community of Sioux Indians. Remarkable as much for its epic sweep (it was Costner's directorial debut) as for its historical accuracy: the Indian cast deliver subtitled Lakota dialogue.

Duel in the Sun (US, 1946)

A sustained emotional family melodrama. With a father brooding over his fallen empire as his two sons rival each other for a woman's affections, it's all bound to end in tears. Stars Gregory Peck, Lillian Gish and Jennifer Jones. Directed by King Vidor.

Heaven's Gate (US, 1980)

Hugely ambitious and critically savaged on its release, Michael Cimino (*The Deer Hunter*) tells the story of two men – John Hurt and Kris Kristofferson – who, although ostensibly agents of the law, find themselves powerless in the face of the corruption and compromise that lies at the heart of the American Dream at the end of the 19th Century.

High Noon (US, 1952)

Oscar-winning film starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly, and

directed by Fred Zinnemann. On the day of his retirement, small-town Sheriff Will Kane learns of the imminent arrival of a convicted murderer seeking revenge. As his community gradually abandons him to his fate, he comes face to face with what it means to be a man in the Old West.

High Plains Drifter (US, 1972)

A gothic Western in which Clint Eastwood reinforces and subverts his iconic status as the man (or ghost) who rides into the town of Lago to exact revenge on the entire population. Directed by Clint Eastwood, starring Verna Bloom, Mitchell Ryan and Jack Ging.

Last Train from Gun Hill (US, 1959)

Issues of duty, family and honour as Kirk Douglas' sheriff, determined to bring to justice the man who raped and murdered his wife, comes into conflict with the rapist's father and his own best friend, Anthony Quinn, who is equally determined to stop him.

Lone Star (US, 1995)

The mystery of a 40 year old murder intermixed with racial tensions in a Tex-Mex border town are central in this tale of a living, working, interrelating community. Directed by John Sayles, starring Matthew McConaughey, Frances McDormand and Kris Kristofferson.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (US, 1962)

With passing of the Old West and the paving of the way for the development of a new civilisation, questions of chivalry, etiquette and the law rear their heads. Stars John Wayne, James Stewart, Vera Miles and Lee Marvin. Directed by John Ford.

My Darling Clementine (US, 1946)

Directed by John Ford and starring Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp, provides perhaps the definitive version of the shoot-out at the OK Corral and the events that make it unavoidable, as well as touchingly depicting Earp's civilisation from outlaw and loner to family man and sheriff.

The Outlaw Josey Wales (US, 1976)

Clint Eastwood directs and stars in this revenge western as a farmer who witnesses his family murdered at the hands of renegade confederate soldiers. He picks up a disparate 'family' of settlers and misfits on the way but gradually his thoughts return from killing to farming. Starring Chief Dan George, Sondra Locke and John Vernon.

Pale Rider (US, 1985)

Clint Eastwood again directs and stars as an anonymous, ambiguous stranger; this time a preacher more proficient with a gun than a bible, who rides out of the wilderness to deliver a poor community from the tyranny of an evil cattle baron, in a relatively traditional western.

Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (US, 1973)

An elegy for, as well as a condemnation of, the values of the Old West from Sam Peckinpah: the story of the honourable,

charismatic and inevitably tragic outlaw Billy (Kris Kristofferson) and James Coburn's Garrett, the friend that is reluctantly pressed into the service of 'civilising' forces to arrest and then murder him.

Posse (US, 1993)

An all black Western about black cowboys. A refugee, Jessie Lee leads a band of deserters to a town where he has a score to settle. On his tail are sadistic Colonel Graham and his 'Iron Brigade'. Ultimately a final confrontation ensues where all scores are inevitably settled. Stars Mario Van Peebles, Stephen Baldwin and Billy Zane. Directed by Mario Van Peebles.

Quick and the Dead, The (US, 1995)

Horror film director Sam Raimi's affectionate, violent pastiche of (Spaghetti) Western conventions sees Sharon Stone's woman with no name entering a quick-draw contest in the desert town of Redemption. Inevitably, the skeletons in various closets are exposed before the final showdown.

Ride the High Country (US, 1961)

Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea star as two friends, one transporting a shipment of gold across country, the other planning to steal it, both men trying to hold onto their self-respect and connection with their shared past in the face of old age and the passing of the Old West, in Sam Peckinpah's second film.

Ride with the Devil (US, 1999)

Civil War epic directed by Ang Lee, told from the perspective of a group of young confederate volunteers.

Shane (US, 1953)

Centring on the understanding of the social processes of American History, the film is about a lone stranger rides out of the mountains to lend a hand to a pioneering farm family. Consequently, he becomes involved in their fight against a gang of brutal outlaws played out against an epic landscape. Directed by George Stevens and starring Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur and Van Heflin.

The Searchers (US, 1956)

Based on an Alan LeMay novel played out within another John Ford and John Wayne partnership. Wayne plays a civil war veteran, Ethan Edwards, a man dealing with the murder of his family by Indians. Edwards becomes a brutalised outsider who embarks on a five-year quest to find the sole survivor of the atrocity, his niece Debbie, daughter of his beloved sister-in-law. He becomes torn between his family loyalty and his hatred of what she has become. Stars Jeffrey Hunter, Vera Miles and Natalie Wood.

Stagecoach (US, 1939)

The first and arguably the most influential collaboration between John Ford and John Wayne – the imperilled stagecoach and its eclectic range of passengers becomes a microcosm of Western society. It made the Western landscape an essential part of film vocabulary. Stars Claire Trevor, John Carradine and George Bancroft.

Tombstone (US, 1993)

Entertaining, violent version of the Wyatt Earp myth, with Kurt Russell as Earp and Val Kilmer as the consumptive, murderous Doc Holliday, focusing on the way the crusading Earp is provoked into the final act of violence at the OK Corral.

Unforgiven (US, 1992)

Clint Eastwood won an Oscar directing and starring as William Munny, a killer-turned-farmer who is forced by circumstances to resume his violent ways to bring a vicious cowhand to justice. Also stars Gene Hackman and Morgan Freeman.

Wild Bunch, The (US, 1969)

Peckinpah presents a group of bounty hunters who pursue a band of outlaws into Mexico and become involved in Mexican Revolution. A violent portrayal of a group of brutal but noble outlaws and the passing of the Old West. Stars William Holden, Ernest Borgnine and Robert Ryan. Directed by Sam Peckinpah.

Wyatt Earp (US, 1994)

Lawrence Kasdan directs Kevin Costner in an epic, determinedly serious exploration of an important piece of Western mythology. The film is a biography of Earp, from his harsh childhood to the disintegration of his family in the aftermath of the OK Corral shooting, at every point trying to offer a complete, complex picture of 'a deliberate' man and the psychological traumas that motivated him.

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This Teachers' Guide contains: an introduction to the Western genre; an outline of how teaching the Western can help deliver A Level and AS Level Film and Media Studies syllabuses; a series of students' notes with questions to help explore the genre; and film synopses and a bibliography.

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