

Ford was a storyteller who loved to create and manipulate myths, and as he grew older and more complex, he loved to challenge them as well, reaffirming the audience's deepest conventional wisdom and then gently shattering it. Despite all of his personal setbacks, he rose to the height of his creative powers in *The Searchers*. He is responsible for the film's visual poetry- its skill in moving from the intimacy of domestic interiors and family life to the terrible beauty of the gothic sandstone cathedrals and vast, obliterating plains of Monument Valley- as well as its deep and passionate emotions.

At the heart of *The Searchers* is John Wayne's towering performance as Ethan Edwards. Despite his reputation for knowing how to play only the righteous hero, Wayne had portrayed morally ambiguous men before, most notably the autocratic trail boss in *Red River* (1948) and the brutish Marine sergeant in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949). But in *The Searchers*, he is darker, angrier and more troubled than ever. This dark knight is determined to exterminate the damsel and anyone who stands in his way. He shoots the eyes out of a Comanche Indian corpse, scalps another dead Indian, disrupts a funeral service, fires at warriors collecting their dead and wounded from the battlefield, and slaughters a buffalo herd to deprive Comanche families of food for the winter. Still, because he is played by John Wayne, we identify with Ethan's quest even as we recoil from his purpose. His charisma draws us in, making us complicit in his terrible vendetta.

"Wayne is plainly Ahab," writes the cultural critic Greil Marcus. "He is the good American hero driving himself past all known limits and into madness, his commitment to honor and decency burned down to a core of vengeance."

Largely overlooked in its time- it was not nominated for a single Academy Award-*The Searchers* has become a recognized as one of the greatest Hollywood movies. It was extraordinarily influential on a generation of modern American filmmakers- from Steven Spielberg to George Lucas to Martin Scorsese- imprinting itself on their psyches and their ambitions during their formative years. "It was a sacred feeling," recalled Scorsese, who first saw the film at age thirteen, "seeing that movie on the big screen." The film was also a forerunner of the postmodern wave of introspective Westerns- from Ford's own *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) to Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992)- that dissect the values and assumptions of the genre even while honoring them. Just as Ernest Hemingway noted "all American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn," film critic Stuart Byron once declared, "in the same broad sense it can be said that all recent American cinema derives from John Ford's *The Searchers*."