Westerns achieved high levels of popularity during the midpoint of the twentieth century, the Western, a genre of film, novels, short stories, radio, and television shows that are set in the American West around the time period of 1850s to the end of the 19th century. Westerns have always provided stories of adventures on the frontier, gunfights, natives, lawmen, desperadoes, and much more. However, most Westerns are not historically accurate in the portrayal of the American West. Though historically accurate Westerns do exist, films such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Stagecoach*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, depict an American West which never existed due to their inaccurate depiction of race relations, the tendency to exaggerate positive characteristics of heroes within their narratives, and the tendency of 20th century Hollywood to assign submissive roles to female characters.

In the Unites States, whites have historically been associated with superiority and privilege, while people of color have historically been associated with inferiority and made out to be less than those of the white race. Westerns suggest the difficult relationship people of the white race had with natives, Mexicans, and blacks to be historically accurate, however, some of the depiction of race relations is historically inaccurate.
In the 1962 American Western film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* directed by John Ford\(^1\), John Wayne’s character Tom Doniphon seems to have a complex relationship with his “boy” as Tom Doniphon refers to Pompey in the film. Though Tom Doniphon interacts in a way that would be considered historically correct, there are instances that were not. John Wayne’s character forbid Pompey from attending school, but later opens the way for Pompey to drink at a white-only saloon. In the film, Tom Doniphon is pouring himself a drink when Pompey enters the saloon, the bartender states that Pompey could not drink at the saloon as the saloon was a white-only establishment, but John Wayne’s character monologues the line “who says he can’t? Pour yourself a drink, Pompey (Wayne 1962).” It was theatrically moving but extremely far from the truth of what life was life for blacks in the American West. Historically their would most likely been more of a fight from the bartender in the Saloon to keep the peace among the patrons that would have taken offence to a black person drinking at a whites-only establishment. Many establishments from Saloons to Hotels in the American West had limited their clientele to whites only to keep the undesirables from entering their establishments. Patricia Nelson Limerick book *The Legacy of Conquest*, she discusses that white setters in the West had a difficult time with blacks in the American West even though there was a small black population in the American West. The white settlers viewed the West as a “fresh start” and mixing with the black race was not something they were open to. Limerick states “…Western state legislation also moved to

hold the line against racial mixing (Limerick 1987, 279),” which suggest the situation depicted in the film would not have been as light hearted the real life American West.

Natives were also depicted in both The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance and Stagecoach, but their introductions were brief and at times aggressive as Hollywood chose to depict natives in film as aggressive, uncontrollable, and dangerous. However, these films did not accurately depict why there was conflict or why there were many issues among the whites and natives. In Greg Grandin’s book The End of The Myth he explores the similar relationship depicted on film, but also discusses how the success of the Frontier relied on taking the land occupied by the natives and also explores why native Americans were angry. The Land Grab Act² is notably one reason that the natives were angry with the white people as they found “legal” ways of taking land that belonged to the natives by forcing them off occupied land and claiming it for themselves.

Grandin states “Within seven months upward of four million areas, mostly of the Cherokee and Chickasaw land, was taken by settlers and investors (Grandin 2019, 50).” The natives had many reasons to be aggressive and angry with setters as they have had so much taken from since the first settlers arrived in the American West. It appears Hollywood choose to leave this part out as it did not conform to the story they were telling about the American West, the struggles, and triumphs of the white settlers.

Hero’s in the films were also far from historically accurate, as Hollywood had a tendency of exaggerating the positive characteristics of the heroes in Westerns. In the 1939 film

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Stagecoach directed by John Ford\textsuperscript{3}, John Wayne’s character Ringo Kid is the classic American cowboy, he’s brave, honorable, and optimistic for an outlaw that has recently escaped prison, intending to avenge his father and brother’s deaths. It does not take long for the audience to root for Ringo Kid as he has rebellious spirt and a thriving sense of adventure. Although John Wayne’s character is introduced, arrested, and made to join the other travelers, by the end of the film, Ringo Kid becomes a noble and brave fighter that eventually becomes an asset to the stagecoach and its occupants when they eventually encounter danger as they knowingly crossed through native territory to reach their destination. This description of John Wayne’s character might be enough to agree that Hollywood exaggerated the hero quality of the character in the film, but there is still the gun fight between Ringo Kid and the Apache tribe that was encountered. In the face of danger, Ringo Kid jumps to action shooting the natives that are attacking the stagecoach, with incredible accuracy, Ringo Kid hits every native he is aiming to kill. Ringo Kid was not originally the hero of the film but was made out to be by his shooting skills. Though interesting, it is very inaccurate as fire arms were not what they are in modern times, but to maintain a positive hero characteristic, the film exaggerated what a shootout between a stagecoach and natives would have looked like in a real situation.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance is a 1962 film directed by John Ford that also has an exaggerated hero presence. John Wayne plays the role of Tom Doniphon, a well-respected horse rancher in the frontier town of Shinebone. Tom Doniphon is depicted as a calm, chivalrous, and tough man that firmly believes that justice of the gun is the only justice needed.

John Wayne’s character Tom Doniphon state “out here, a man settles his own problems (Wayne 1962).” John Wayne’s character is made out to be a no nonsense, tough, and levelheaded man. Tom Doniphon is also made to be a silent hero that was only reviled at the end of the film. Tom Doniphon took his place as the hero of the story and theatrically is was an interesting turn. In the film Ransom Stoddard was in a gunfight with Liberty Valance that ended with Liberty Valance being shot and killed by Ransom Stoddard. It was later reviled that Tom Doniphon was the true hero that shot Liberty Valance from a dark ally. As for historically accuracy, the aspect of guns was wrong and gunfights in the West were not two men squarely facing each other in the middle of town, this was a romanticized image of the American West that was born in late 19th century novels. Gunfights were far less civilized and in the real West, Tom Doniphon would have been much closer to land the fatal shot and even if he had managed to shot Liberty Valance from his hiding spot, there would have been witnesses to the shooting. The truth is that Western glamorize what they believe the American West was like, but theatrically they were telling a story that would resonate with those viewing the film. It can also be assumed that historical accuracy when it came to films like The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance was more about telling one side of the story and playing up the role of the hero for theatrical affect.

In the 1940s film The Grapes of Wrath directed by John Ford is the only film out of the three that did not depict an exaggerated hero role in the film. The film follows the journey of the Joad family, tenant farmers from Oklahoma as they journey to California in search of a better life after the dust bowl destroys many farms and leaves many displaced as they could not farm or make money. The film was not overly theatrical with its characters, but it was important to telling the story of how families suffered after the over production of wheat in the West and what

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came after for many families that lived in the West. Patricia Nelson Limerick talks about how the West provided a claimant for growing crops, however, “through overgrazing and carless plowing, humans helped nature fill the air with dust (Limerick 1987, 318).” The Grapes of Wrath tells the audience the story of how not just the Joad’s, but many families found themselves traveling further West due to their part in their carless acts that led to the dust bowl. This film tells more of an anti-hero story rather than an exaggerated hero story.

Women also have a story in the American West, but they have been depicted as submissive women without a clue that need a strong man to take care of them in the films. Hollywood assigned women this gender role as they were damsels that needed to be protected. In the film Stagecoach, the actors are discussion how Geronimo a leader of the Apache tribe was on the war path and is quickly cut off as not to frighten the women present in the stagecoach. This may have some historical accuracy, but Westerns painted women in the American West to all be quiet, reserved, and in need of protection. When it comes to a historical standpoint this is not entirely true as there is a long history of women that did not fit into Hollywood’s gender role for women such as Annie Oakley5 or Calamity Jane6. These are two historical women that were not in need of a tough cowboy to keep them safe, which leaves room to believe that women were not accurately depicted in Western films.


Westerns have always provided stories of adventures on the frontier, gunfights, natives, lawmen, desperadoes, and much more that have an interesting look into the American West, however, Westerns are not historically accurate in the portrayal of the American West. There are many Westerns that are historically correct, however, films such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Stagecoach*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, depict an American West which did not existed and lacked accurate depiction of race relations, the true characteristics of heroes within their narratives, and Westers tended to assign submissive roles to female characters when there were many historical women in the history of the American West that could not be classified as submissive. Westerns achieved high levels of popularity during the midpoint of the twentieth century and are still a favorite for many today, but they should not be looked to for historical facts and accuracy of the American West.
Bibliography


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