

Look in the searchers



Contradicting Ideologies in The Searchers While The Searchers can be viewed from a critical standpoint as a 'revisionist' Western in terms of its portrayal of Native Americans, certain aspects of the film contradict this overall message. One such aspect is the character Look, who serves a role both as comic relief and as commentary on racist depictions of Native Americans. The Searchers does a superb job of highlighting the contorted representation of Indians in the Western genre, but Director John Ford's comic portrayal of Look unwittingly reflects the prejudices and stereotypes entrenched in

American culture in the 1950s. Look, or " Wild Goose Flying Across the Night Sky," appears in a brief flashback sequence delivered from Marty's point of view in a letter to Laurie. The scene portrays Marty's quest with Ethan to find the Comanche Chief Scar who had kidnapped his adoptive sister Debbie years earlier. While attempting to purchase a blanket from a Comanche tribe with connections to Scar, Marty inadvertently bestows a bride token upon Look's father, resulting in an accidental marriage.

The mise-en-scene in the first flashback sets the tone for the remainder of the scenes featuring Look, establishing a racial hierarchy and foreshadowing the power structure in Marty and Look's relationship. The traditional Native American tune playing throughout serves as a sound bridge that connects all of the scenes featuring Look with an upbeat tempo that sets a lighthearted mood continued throughout the comedic climax in the second flashback. Additionally, character blocking offers insight into Look's social position and foreshadows the outcome of her relationship with Marty.

While Marty is negotiating with Look's father, an establishing shot shows Marty standing above Look as she sits cross-legged on the ground. The scene then cuts back and forth between a towering Marty and Look sitting meekly on the ground. This eludes both to white man's dominance and Marty's supremacy in their relationship. Ford uses scenes of this ill-fated marriage as a humorous interlude in a film otherwise dense with revisionist commentary, grim scenes, and desolate landscapes.

While Look is a source of irritation for Marty, it is evident almost immediately that Ford means for Look to be a source of comedic relief from the otherwise intense storyline. In the subsequent scene, as Look dutifully follows Marty away from the Comanche camp and it dawns on Marty that he has accidentally married her, Ethan bursts into delighted guffaws exclaiming, "[c]ome along Mrs. Pauly! " Look is a source of entertainment for both Ethan and the audience as well, who is expected to laugh along with Ethan's quips.

Other characters in the film also find Marty's marriage comical; after hearing about Marty's marriage, Mr. Jorgensen and Charlie laugh heartily, and while Laurie is upset, she is clearly less concerned about her love interest being married than she is with his new wife's ethnicity. The response of the film's characters to Marty and Look's marriage encourages the audience to view the situation in a comical light. In the second flashback, Look obediently takes care of Marty and attempts to do domestic work at the campsite.

Doing everything she can to please Marty, she obligingly agrees to answer to " Look" despite it having no relation to her real name. The scene climaxes when she dutifully lies down next to Marty on his bedroll for the night

Enraged, Marty kicks her off and she tumbles down the hill with a crash. This is followed not with concern for Look by the characters or a change in the tone of the scene, as one would expect when encountering violence against a woman in a movie today, but with yet another quip from Ethan. Laughing, he yells, "You know that's grounds for divorce in Texas!"

"You're really rough." Additionally, Ford focuses on Ethan rather than Look after her fall. Ethan's lighthearted reaction and the overall tone of the scene signal to the audience that Look's mistreatment should be a source of amusement rather than concern. The same upbeat soundtrack and Ethan's steady stream of mockery connect the first and second flashbacks, maintaining the first's humorous feel. The stereotypical native tune amplifies Look's already hyperbolized Native American characteristics, and stylized acting greatly contributes to the comedic vibe of the scene.

Marty's exaggerated anger and seemingly irrational response to Look lying beside him is a directorial play for laughs, as is the fact that Marty's violence is further emphasized by the addition of sound effects. As Look rolls down the small hill, a large crash is heard, increasing the magnitude of the situation while simultaneously increasing comedic effect. Race plays a key role in the audience's reception to this scene as amusing rather than disturbing. This is highlighted best when contrasted with an earlier scene in which Laurie enters a room while Martin is taking a bath, invading his privacy in a similar way.

It is unlikely Ford would elicit laughter from audiences at the time if Marty responded to Laurie's intrusion with violence. It is due to the

cultural racism and prejudice of the time that audiences were far more likely to value the life of, and therefore care about the treatment of, Laurie. Looks diminished value as a person is made evident by clear differences in how Ford handles both characters in the film. The final flashback has a somber tone and soundtrack meant to elicit sympathy and reflection from the audience.

This, however, conflicts directly with how Ford uses Looks character as a comic figure in previous scenes. When Looks body is discovered in the final flashback her death even awakens a moment of sympathy from the profoundly racist Ethan, who covers her body with a blanket. This scene highlights incongruities in the value of white and Indian lives. Historically, the audiences of Westerns were encouraged to grieve for the loss of white characters and applaud the death of Indian characters. This trend is continued in *The Searchers*.

Although Looks death is treated with sorrow and compassion, her death is comprehensible and viewable to the audience because her portrayal rarely rises above that of a comic stereotype. By contrast, Ford's camera does not reveal Martha and Lucy's bodies to the audience out of deference and reverence to their characters. While Ford's contradictory treatment of Look as captured by her death scene may be viewed as revisionist commentary, one can't overlook the fact that there was no precedent at the time for the use of a Native American woman as a comic figure.

It is far more likely that Looks portrayal was not social commentary but rather reflected the director's own prejudices and the reflection of a racially-charged society coming through in his work. Made in 1956, *The Searchers*

came at the beginning of an era of great cultural change toward race and racial stereotypes in America, and therefore may be among the last of its era and genre to offer such an unapologetic portrayal of tradition of racism.

Look is a one-dimensional character compared with the strong female roles of Laurie and Debbie, and the discrepancies in Ford's portrayal of white and Indian women underscore the idea that Ford viewed them as inferior. More than ten minutes pass between Look's initial and final appearance and, denied a voice, she has only one line of dialogue. The audience never knows Look's story and has little foundation to connect with her in any significant way; she is viewed only through the eyes of the white men around her.

The death of her character is noted, but the audience is given few reasons to care about the human being who has died. By overemphasizing the racism and Native Americans stereotypes in *The Searchers*, Ford encourages the audience to reflect on the deeply rooted tradition of portraying Native Americans in an excessively negative light in the Western genre. This noble revisionist effort, however, is impaired by Ford's use of Look as a source of comedy. Essentially nothing more than a comic buffoon, the fact that her abuse is entertaining to the audience is an important reflection on Ford and American society at the time.