

# The searchers' narrative structure assignment

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From Boy to Man: The Searchers Through the Eyes of Martin Pawley The narrative structure of John Ford's *The Searchers* is centered primarily around the actions and knowledge of men. Throughout the movie, men are the figures of action, they are out scouring the land for lost loved ones while the women stay home and wait with hope. In *The Searchers*, just as with any search, the limiting factor involved is knowledge. Ethan, the main character, begins the movie as the leader of the searchers. His assumed role as leader is due to his past excursions as a Texas Ranger.

These past experiences enable Ethan to lead most effectively because they provide him with knowledge. Ethan has the knowledge to survive on the frontier, but most importantly his previous campaigns in the wild have allowed Ethan to learn about the Comanche and their ways; thus, Ethan is best equipped to find a specific tribe in the middle of nowhere. Martin Pawley, Ethan's partner in the search for Debbie fills an apprentice role throughout most of the film, he takes note of Ethan's moves and effectively learns a great deal from Ethan.

Marty's continually growing knowledge base, along with the fact that Ethan's judgment is oftentimes clouded by his racism towards the Comanche, allow Marty to emerge as the voice of reason that the narrative structure eventually revolves around. It is first predicted that Martin will be a noteworthy character in the film when a crew of men is being assembled to go investigate the theft of Lars Jorgenson's cattle. Sam Clayton, Ethan's former superior officer, chooses Marty to ride on with the Rangers.

This comes to the dismay of Ethan because Marty is part Native American. Ethan's racism here also causes him to disregard Marty's concerns about the trail. Marty's perceptiveness in this situation displays that he has some fundamental skills as a searcher in the wild and insinuates that this will not be the last time that Marty voices his opinion. Additionally, by showing that Marty is coming into the ensuing conflict with some base of knowledge, it preempts the eventual building upon of this foundation.

After the first battle with the Native Americans, the crew is broken up due to Clayton taking a wounded man home. Ethan is prepared to drive on by himself, fueled by his racism, but Brad and Marty show their true colors and bravery, stepping up to accompany Ethan. Marty's willingness to risk his life to avenge his family's death signifies his transition to manhood. It also portrays the morals and ideals of 19th century western America. Although Marty is part Cherokee, he portrays the very American value of fighting in the name of what you believe in and what you love: freedom and family.

John Ford uses Marty's Native American heritage along with his strong morals to contrast the foundation of Ethan's racism, thus undermining racism in general. In the film, Ethan first appears as a strong American soldier while Marty is "tainted" with Indian blood. Upon further evaluation, it is clear that Ethan is a lost soul with no true friends or loving family. Ford uses Ethan's status as a social outcast to exemplify that being driven by racism leads to a lonely, unfulfilling life.

Marty's "relationship" with Laurie proves to be important in the development of Marty's character. It gives Ford a medium to present Marty

as the narrator. Ford uses letters from Marty to Laurie as a means of “fast forwarding” through the years of the hunt while still keeping the viewer updated on Marty and Ethan’s progress. After this point, in addition to more letters to Laurie, Marty periodically takes the position of a first person omniscient narrator, telling his story during scene transitions.

This short and sweet narration not only keeps the viewer up to date but also predicts that Marty lives on after the search and must play a very significant role in the plot from here on out as he is in the position to be narrating this action packed thriller of a manhunt. As the searchers get closer to finding Debbie and the search develops so does Marty and the importance of his role in the hunt. Marty explicitly tries to make his voice of reason heard, trying to overcome Ethan’s burning racism when he knocks Ethan’s rifle off target as he tries to deplete the Comanche’s potential food supply.

Tides begin to seriously turn in the dynamics of Ethan and Marty’s relationship upon the discovery of Scar. Marty displays with force that he is no longer inferior to Ethan by forcing his way into Scar’s tent with Ethan. Marty’s controlling hand in the situation is further developed when Marty throws himself in between Debbie and Ethan. This action asserts that Marty’s love for his sister is overcoming Ethan’s racist motives. Ironically, Marty’s position as leader is exemplified best when he has to nurse Ethan’s injury and keep him alive. At this point, Marty completes his emergence as the main character and takes the upper hand as the more capable searcher of Debbie. Marty, as the new leader of the pack, continues his development when he solves the final piece of the puzzle to Debbie’s whereabouts, when he declares what the “seven fingers” are. Marty symbolically completes his

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transition from apprentice to absolute leader when he trumps Clayton's plan and decides to risk his life and save his sister. He displays that he no longer takes orders from anyone. He has already proven himself as worthy as he saved Debbie, essentially triumphing over Ethan (and his racism).

He is officially the man in charge when he overrules the only man who was ever superior to Ethan. Although Ethan is the one who chases Debbie down, spares her life and carries her to her parents' doorstep, contradictory to what the viewer was lead to expect, this compassion that saved Debbie's life was instilled into Ethan by Marty's relentless desire to fearlessly do what is good. John Ford creates the dynamic character of Marty to serve many roles in *The Searchers*. Marty's development as a man parallels the development of the manhunt for Debbie, reinforcing how close they are to finding her, and predicting what is coming next.

Marty takes on each obstacle one by one, beginning with Ethan's dismissive attitude towards him, and ending with saving his sister's life. Each step that Ethan is forced to overcome is symbolic of what people in today's society deal with on a daily basis. Ethan's overcoming adversity is meant by Ford to be inspirational to those who deal with racism in the modern world. As Ford is known to be interested in the appropriate way for a white male to behave, he portrays his idealized vision of how to behave and how to fight an uphill battle through Martin Pawley.