

# Gender roles in the work of john ford

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The Western genre has always been a representation of American identity, in that its films reflect societal moods, popculture, politics, etc. The prototypical Western portrays beautiful open landscapes and heroic, rugged heroes who are set on either conquering or defending them. These iconic actors such as John Wayne, Roy Stewart, Alan Ladd, and Gary Cooper were made famous through being the centerpiece of Western films and series. These heroes and mages of the 'great American frontier' stand as metaphor for America itself. Yet, as we closely examine this exciting and adventurous genre of film we see that the hero's female counterparts are usually underdeveloped and ignored. Western films, especially in the early years of the genre, featured women characters who held little importance to the plot and served as comedic or sexual support to the hero. In this essay I will examine how John Ford, as a Western filmmaker, did not follow the formula of the genre. He played with male characters that were not heroic, but were selfish and cold, and even more interestingly, readjusted gender roles in his western films so that women were no longer simple characters, but in fact drove the story along and made significant plot-related decisions. Often women and men were equals in Ford's work. I will examine how Ford did this, and contemplate why, as well, in three of his western classics. The films we will be taking a close look at are Fort Apache (1948), The Searchers (1956), and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), all of which feature significant female character contributions. Before diving into the work of Ford and how he gave significance to women in the West, it is important to discuss further the attitudes that Western film, and all of Hollywood in the early 20 years, had towards female characters. According to Laura Mulvey, a feminist and film

theorist who wrote extensively on the subject, Hollywood uses women in only two ways: “ as erotic objects for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium... She also connotes something the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. ”

(Mulvey, p. 716-? 718) Therefore, women are either sex objects or characters to be feared. According to Mulvey, Hollywood feels female characters shouldn't be complex, shouldn't grow and change, and certainly aren't able to make decisions that change the outcome of the story. All of that should be left to the male heroes.

Early Western films followed a strict formula. They featured rugged yet likeable heroes from the frontier, and pitted against them was almost always a foreign adversary. He was either a Native American, or more typically a well-dressed man from the East coast. (Garfield) Women in these early films played very small roles, most fitting into Mulvey's definition of sex object. They also acted as a power symbol, and the man who possessed the leading woman had all the power, something we will examine in more depth later in this essay. In 1948, John Ford began to change the dynamics between these dominant male characters and their passive, sexual counterparts when he made *Fort Apache*. The film starred John Wayne playing Captain Kirby York, a prototypical Western hero, who is as rugged as they come as well as a well-knowledgeable man of the West stationed at the frontier's Fort Apache. Henry Fonda played opposite of him as Lt Col. Owen Thursday, a prototypical Western villain, because he came from a foreign land with the intent of instilling change.

Thirdly, the film starred Shirley Temple as Owen's cute, innocent daughter, Philadelphia Thursday. The story revolves around Owen's Thursday's attempts to control the "wild" Apache tribes of the area and send them back to their reservation, usually against the advice of York. All of these story and character dynamics are to be expected when examining a Western film, but it is Ford's portrayal of women, and in fact the number of contributing female characters, that make this classic of the genre stand out. According to film critic Howard Movshovitz, John Ford used a subtle semiotic technique to imply his heroes' opinions of women in his films. "Good women are still; only questionable women travel under their own power," he says. (Movshovitz, p. 71) By this he means that good-intending women in Ford's films are always immobile, and the women whom we are to distrust are those that move around freely. As we begin to examine *Fort Apache* and its female characters, we must keep this in mind. The first female character we meet is Philadelphia Thursday, and we are introduced to her as she is riding inside of a wagon. According to Movshovitz's theory, this means she is good. I would take it a step further and say that we are being presented an innocent character here, who I think falls in line with Mulvey's theory. Shirley Temple was a sex symbol, and that's also how Philadelphia Thursday looks to us when we meet her. Immediately, she is fawned at by a group of soldiers and flirts with the young Michael O'Rourke. We get a very iconic and telling shot from Ford in the introductory tavern scene, in which Miss Thursday and O'Rourke sit down next to each other and smile, while not looking or speaking to one another. Ford is symbolizing a lot for us here. Obviously he is setting up their future romantic relationship, but he is also foreshadowing

for us gender roles of Fort Apache, where both of these characters are headed. As we are to find out, the women in the fort run the show.

They are the ones who take care of the everyday business within the fort, while the men train and go off to battle the surrounding Indian tribes, and as I will explain later, the men actually need their women in order to survive. By not allowing Tom O'Rourke to speak in the aforementioned shot, Ford is suggesting that he needs Miss Thursday to initiate the conversation for him. He is already dependent on women, and therefore will quickly fit in once he arrives at the fort. Ford is also presenting to us something about Miss Thursday with this shot, however it is contrast to the character that she eventually becomes. Here, by being quiet, Miss Thursday is conforming to Eastern societal standards and waiting to be courted. Ford is showing us that she is a foreigner and that she is dependent on men, but as soon as she steps foot within the confines of Fort Apache all of this changes. Upon arrival to the fort, O'Rourke pays a visit to the Thursday residence to drop off his card, and only Miss Thursday is there to receive him. She immediately goes on the offensive and tries to persuade him to admit his romantic intentions towards her. O'Rourke is confused by her forwardness, and needs her to spell it out for him, a job which actually gets turned over to Kirby York who enters the scene about halfway through. Over the course of one night in the fort, Miss Thursday has been transformed into a woman who takes matters into her own hands.

Later that day, Miss Thursday decides to fix up her and her father's house, which proves to be our more solid introduction of another important female character in this film, Mrs. Collingwood. It is Mrs. Collingwood, in fact, who

makes all of the arrangements for the Thursdays to have furniture and food and even a servant. That night, when Owen Thursday comes home from work and finds his house fixed up he is very surprised, and slightly confused at how it happened. He is openly admitting here that Philadelphia is more capable than he, at least in the matters of the home, because of the fact that she was able to take care of a matter he was not. Male characters do not do this in Western films. The entire genre is built around a macho mindset in which the male hero or villain is the all-? mighty, yet here Ford has decided to give power to Miss Thursday and by association Mrs. Collingwood. It is one of the first instances that Ford shows us how important his female characters are. Without them, we are to assume that the entire fort would have nothing and would therefore collapse. This scene is also significant to note because of what it foreshadows for later in the film. Owen Thursday and Mrs. Collingwood end up being our two most powerful characters, which I will explain, and through this scene Ford is showing us who deserves this power. This scene allows us the room to be skeptical of Owen Thursday, and believe his poor decision making at the end of the film, because we are led to ask how he is capable of running a fort when he can't even run a household.

This idea of giving Miss Thursday and Mrs. Collingwood power over men is in contrast to both Mulvey and Movshovitz. These women are in motion, they move about on their own two feet freely and therefore, according to Movshovitz, are questionable. Yet, how can we question them when they are giving such positive contributions to our male heroes? These women are making it possible for the men of the fort to live and defend it. I

believe Movshovitz would make the argument that Ford is foreshadowing here, and that the reasons that these women are not to be trusted arrives later in the film.