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**“WHAT MAKES A MAN TO WANDER?”:  
*THE SEARCHERS* AS A WESTERN *ODYSSEY*<sup>1</sup>**

KIRSTEN DAY

What makes a man to wander?

What makes a man to roam?

Opening theme from *The Searchers*<sup>2</sup>

**INTRODUCTION**

**D**espite its fifth place ranking among the best movies ever made in a 1992 *Sight and Sound* critics' poll,<sup>3</sup> John Ford's 1956 film *The Searchers* is surprisingly unfamiliar to the general public, even among Western film enthusiasts. The film's critical appeal derives not only from its dazzling cinematography, all-star cast, and polished direction, but also from its innovative treatment

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1 This article grew out of a paper presented at the Southwest Texas Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association conference in 2002. I am grateful to Geoff Bakewell, James Clauss, Kyle Day, and David Fredrick for their comments on this essay in various stages of revision. Thanks are also due to Martin Winkler and anonymous *Arethusa* readers for their valuable suggestions.

2 Lyrics by Stan Jones, performed by The Sons of the Pioneers.

3 *The Searchers* ranked tenth in 1982 in the *Sight and Sound* critics' poll, and in 2002, it ranked eleventh on the critics' poll and twenty-fourth on the directors' poll (British Film Institute 1982, 2002a and b). The film also influenced the work of directors of later Westerns, such as Howard Hawks, Clint Eastwood, and Sergio Leone (Cowie 2004.207), and directors working primarily in other genres, such as Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and George Lucas (Eckstein 2004b.33–35, Cowie 2004.207), inter alios (see Scott 2006).

In other media, artist Douglas Gordon has created a video installation piece, entitled “The 5 Year Drive-By,” in which projection speeds have been slowed to the extent that the film takes five years to view; this art event has been held in the California desert (Lehman 2004a.xi) and, as one *Arethusa* reader notes, in both Berlin and Fornebu,

of traditional material: it focuses on a psychologically complex protagonist who demonstrates a moral ambiguity unusual in the Western genre<sup>4</sup> and it uses conventional subject matter as a vehicle for challenging the viewer to re-evaluate ideologies current in 1950s America.

Ford's protagonist, John Wayne's Ethan Edwards, is in many ways a typical hero on a standard heroic journey,<sup>5</sup> a mythic formula whose roots go back to the foundational texts of Western literature: Homer's eighth-century B.C.E. *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. While *The Searchers*' Homeric qualities have not gone unnoticed,<sup>6</sup> Ethan's kinship with Odysseus and the structural parallels between *The Searchers* and the *Odyssey* have yet to be explored in depth. Like the *Odyssey*, Ford's film uses characters and events from the mythic-historical past<sup>7</sup> to weave an epic tale that is both entertaining and didactic. Like Homer's protagonist, Ford's Ethan Edwards is a wanderer on a long and difficult quest to preserve the integrity of a woman and a heroic renegade who relies on his wits and often seeks his ends through

Norway. Even David Thomson, a ruthless critic of Ford's work in general, recognizes *The Searchers* as the one movie that stands out, calling it "a riveting, tragic, and complex experience" (1994.258).

4 Eckstein 2004b.4–5 notes a trend in the mid 1950s towards these "dark" Westerns, many of which include a hero whose moral ambiguity fits an Oedipal pattern.

5 The characteristics typical of the hero figure and his journey are best delineated for non-specialized audiences in Campbell 1973.

6 McBride and Wilmington 1975.147 mention Ethan's Odyssean nature in passing; more recently, a review in *Look* magazine hailed *The Searchers* as "a Homeric Odyssey" (noted in McBride 2001.556–57). Michael Böhnke, too, refers to "The Odyssey of Ethan and Martin" (2001.58), noting: "If Ford was directing his films to be a kind of recreation of ancient myths, *The Searchers* is the closest he comes to realising this intention" (2001.57). Scott Eyman, moreover, calls Ford "America's Homer" (2004.7), and A. J. Place writes: "Ford uses [Monument Valley] as Homer used the sea" (noted in Cowie 2004.166), while Peter Cowie suggests that "Homer would have loved the petrified majesty of Monument Valley" (2004.178).

7 Both the *Odyssey* and *The Searchers* are loosely based on historical events: the *Odyssey* is part of the Trojan War saga, thought by many scholars to represent an ancient memory of a historical dispute, while LeMay based his plot on the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, a white settler kidnapped by the Comanche at age nine when the rest of her family was massacred. After marrying into the Comanche tribe, Parker was "recovered" by the white community (Eckstein 2004b.1), but she was never able to assimilate and eventually committed suicide after unsuccessfully attempting to escape back to the Comanche (Eckstein 2004b.43 n. 89; see also McBride 2001.552). Although the Trojan War cycle was thoroughly mythologized by Homer's day, whereas the frontier period in America was comparatively recent, each work effectively looks back to its culture's heroic era.

questionable means.<sup>8</sup> The thematic and structural parallels between these works, however, run much deeper, extending to interpersonal relationships and narrative structure, pacing, and tone.

This exploration of the Odyssean qualities in *The Searchers* will augment earlier studies that examined affinities between Ford's film and Homeric epic. James Clauss (1999) looked at various Greek and Roman mythological motifs in *The Searchers*, including parallels with the Homeric epics; Martin Winkler demonstrated a connection between *The Searchers* and both Greek tragedy and the *Iliad*, articulating, in particular, similarities between Ethan and Achilles (2001 and 2004);<sup>9</sup> and Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand argued that Western film in general is the epic genre for modern America and that it "stands in a similar relation to the viewer as the Homeric epic did to its original audience" (1997.536).<sup>10</sup> This analysis will support their thesis by showing that Ford draws on archetypal myths found in Homer's *Odyssey* to shape the characters and plot of *The Searchers* and to advance a political message that reflects an ideological commentary also discernible in his Homeric predecessor.<sup>11</sup>

The mythic tropes Homer employs in the *Odyssey* are useful because they touch on universal anxieties and are applicable to more culture-specific concerns. Homer emphasizes the disparity between the civilized Greeks and people or communities who do not bear the marks of civilization and who invariably turn out to be dangerous. This depiction of non-Greek "barbarians"

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8 Stanford 1963 provides an overview of the manifestations of the Ulysses figure from pre-Homeric times through the first half of the twentieth century, noting that this character is particularly suitable to later adaptations of myth because of his own remarkable adaptability (1963.7).

9 Winkler 2004.164 also briefly notes a thematic similarity between *The Searchers* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

10 A discussion of the parallels between these two genres follows (536–39). Blundell and Ormand focus primarily on the *Iliad*, but their arguments are generally applicable to the *Odyssey* as well.

11 Ford's familiarity with and tendency to draw upon Homeric material is illustrated in his 1952 film *The Quiet Man*, where the local matchmaker responds to developments in the tempestuous marriage of his friend Sean Thornton (John Wayne) with: "Impetuous! Homeric!" and later: "It's Homeric! That's what it is, Homeric!," and again in *The Wings of Eagles* (1957), where he inserts a joke about the *Odyssey* into a conversation between a director and screenwriter (played by two of the actors from *The Searchers*, Ward Bond and John Wayne) while a volume of that text lies on the table between them (the latter noted in Clauss 1999.2).

as a dangerous “Other” was common in a world that faced a constant threat of invasion from the Persians to the east, a threat that was, in fact, acted upon in the late Archaic period. Homer complicates this contrast by making his hero Odysseus a participant in the negative behaviors characteristic of “barbaric” peoples. *The Searchers* likewise employs a strategy of exclusion of the “uncivilized” and dangerous Native American, a strategy that fails when this “Other” is revealed to be a manifestation of the self. Ford’s film debuted in 1956, at a time when racial integration was a current and controversial issue; by deliberately complicating the “us versus them” theme familiar in the Western genre, Ford exposes the mechanics of racism as a pattern applied to the Other in general and thereby negates its force. *The Searchers*’ thematic connections with Homer’s *Odyssey* demonstrate that this dynamic has been in play for over 2,700 years; the fact that the Other, then as now, is a reflection of the self reinforces Ford’s message by encouraging viewers to look within themselves for the roots of racism.

### INSIDER/OUTSIDER, HERO/ANTI-HERO

Based on Alan LeMay’s 1954 novel of the same name, *The Searchers* falls firmly within the Western genre popular in 1950s American cinema. Ford’s film, set in 1868 Texas, employs elements that gave his original audience a sense of comfortable familiarity: a “settlers versus savages” plot, traditional Western motifs, and the quintessential Western hero, John Wayne. However, Arthur Eckstein demonstrates that the protagonist is a darker and more complex character in Ford’s film than in either LeMay’s novel or Frank Nugent’s original screenplay.<sup>12</sup> By darkening his protagonist and employing tropes rooted in the ancient mythological tradition, Ford

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12 Eckstein 1998. Eyman 2004.150–51 also recognizes that the movie’s protagonist and tone are far darker than in the LeMay novel. Eckstein, in addition, argues that Ford deserves more or less sole credit for the finished product, as Nugent himself acknowledged when he commented that Ford’s films in their final form were “always Ford’s, never the writer’s” (quoted by Eckstein 1998.18–19). Eckstein also notes that Ford had formed an independent production company, Argosy Pictures (a name, not insignificantly, with classical associations), with Merian Cooper (Executive Producer of *The Searchers*) in 1947 in order to ensure that he had complete artistic control over his product, an unusual situation in the days of the studio system (2004b.22). Therefore, although any film is by nature a collaborative effort, for the purposes of this paper, I will consider Ford the film’s primary artist. Interestingly, Homer’s epic, as part of an oral tradition, can also be considered collaborative, and the attribution of sole authorship is likewise not entirely accurate.

creates an enigmatic hero who demonstrates a close kinship with Homer's Odysseus. Not only does Ethan reflect Odysseus's distinctive brand of heroism, he also exhibits two particularly Odyssean traits that complicate his position as hero: he is a wanderer who longs to be rooted in the community but is effectively estranged, and he demonstrates a moral ambiguity equally appropriate to a trickster or villain. This ambiguous heroism is well suited to the exploration of racial tensions with which Ford concerns himself in *The Searchers*.

Outwardly, Odysseus and Ethan each fit the bill as a standard hero: both are soldiers returning from war, both are natural leaders who demonstrate physical and mental superiority, and both are assisted by "helper figures" such as the goddess Athena and Mose Harper.<sup>13</sup> Ethan also exhibits heroic traits that are more specific to Odysseus. Both men, for instance, demonstrate a self-restraint that helps them successfully navigate situations where others fail. When disguised as a beggar, Odysseus suffers verbal and physical abuse from his wife's suitors, his own household servants, and the "real" beggar Iros, but he restrains his anger and avoids compromising his anonymity. Likewise, upon learning that the Comanche have distracted the men with a cattle theft in order to conduct a murder raid on their unprotected homestead, his adoptive nephew Martin Pauley<sup>14</sup> (Jeffrey Hunter) wants to rush home immediately, but Ethan objects: "That farm's forty miles from here, and these horses need rest and grain." Martin charges off rashly and soon rides his horse to death, so that Ethan, with his horse rested and fed, overtakes him and arrives home first.

Both protagonists also demonstrate an ideal relationship to language. Odysseus is known for his eloquence: in the *Iliad*, the Trojan Antenor says that ὅτε δὴ ὄπα τε μεγάλην ἐκ στήθεος εἶη . . . οὐκ ἄν ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆϊ γ' ἐρίσσειε βροτὸς ἄλλος ("Whenever he would [set free] his great voice from his chest . . . then no other mortal man was a match for Odysseus," 3.221–23).<sup>15</sup> Ethan, on the contrary, is laconic: his words are direct and

13 Identified by Campbell 1973 as a standard feature of the heroic quest. Clauss (1999.5 and 10) sees Mose Harper as a "prophet and friendly guide"; Winkler 2004.156 compares Mose, as a helper figure and "holy fool," to divine helpers like Athena and Thetis in the *Iliad*.

14 Where the names in Ford's film correspond with those in the original novel, I follow LeMay's spelling. For names that do not appear in LeMay's novel, I use those listed under "Credits" in Eckstein and Lehman 2004.343–44.

15 Greek texts for both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* follow the second editions of the Oxford Classical Text, ed. T. W. Allen. All translations from the Greek are mine.

his phrases clipped, and he is irritated by the wordy speeches of others, as when he cuts off the motherly Mrs. Jorgensen (Olive Carey) with an impatient, "I'd be obliged if you'd get to the point, ma'am." While, on the surface, these traits are contradictory, they represent analogous ideals for Greek and Western cultures respectively: Greek society valued a balance between words and action, while a dedication to action and an aversion to long speeches is typical of Western heroes.<sup>16</sup> Both men also show a concern with the concealment of information: Odysseus, as noted above, disguises his very identity on his return to Ithaca, while Ethan works to conceal the purpose of his mission where appropriate and has little tolerance for Martin when he divulges too much information ("When are you going to learn to keep your big mouth shut?").

In both works, however, the protagonists' standard heroic qualities are complicated in like ways. The *Odyssey's* proem and *The Searcher's* introductory theme song<sup>17</sup> bring the wandering nature of the hero and his separation from home into sharp focus from the outset. Both men long for integration into the home, but are hindered by sexual considerations. Odysseus yearns to be reunited with his wife Penelope, but is emotionally distanced from her by his uncertainty as to whether she has remained faithful. Ethan's longing for home and family is apparent in the obvious tenderness he feels for Martha (Dorothy Jordan),<sup>18</sup> but her marriage to his brother Aaron (Walter Coy) leaves Ethan an outsider, a condition Ford stresses visually by framing him in doorways, as in the film's opening and closing shots (figure 1).<sup>19</sup>

This tenuous relationship with the family is illustrated in each man's cautious approach to the home. Just as Odysseus returns disguised as a beggar in order to assess the loyalty of the various members of his household, Ethan is likewise guarded in his approach: the "languorous timidity" with which he rides up to the Edwards' home in the opening scene is contrasted with Martin's carefree and energetic approach shortly thereafter, a disparity punctuated by the musical score (Gallagher 1986.334). Each hero's alien-

16 See Tompkins 1992.47–67 for more on the Western hero's relationship to speech.

17 Eckstein 2004b.3 notes that Ford personally supervised the lyrics of this theme song.

18 After Martha's death, Ethan's longing for home is demonstrated in his initial determination to retrieve his niece Debbie and restore what remains of the family unit.

19 Giannetti and Eyman 2001.167 demonstrate that Ford's later films exhibit a "predominant preoccupation . . . with the outsider who is both estranged from society and dependent on it"; Eyman 2004.17 connects this preoccupation to doorways and fences in particular.



Figure 1. *The Searchers*, copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Pictures, dir. John Ford.

ation is emphasized by his ultimate inability to integrate wholly into the home. At the end of the *Odyssey*, the very act of restoring his home has left Odysseus estranged from the broader community: having killed his wife's suitors—noblemen of Ithaca and the surrounding islands—Odysseus is challenged by their kinsmen, and though Athena as *deus ex machina* forces an awkward peace, we are left with a community hostile to Odysseus.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, we know from the prophet Tiresias that Odysseus must soon set out on another quest that will again take him far from home and family (*Od.* 11.119–25). At the end of *The Searchers*, Ethan restores the family by delivering Debbie to the settler community, but his sinister intentions have not been forgotten, and thus he alone cannot enter the home. In the film's final shot, Ethan stands in the doorway, gazing inside forlornly (figure 1), and then turns to walk off alone while the door swings shut behind him.<sup>21</sup>

20 On the authenticity of *Odyssey* 23.297ff., see Stanford 1958.404–06.

21 This ending is considerably at odds with that in Nugent's original shooting script, where Ethan rather paternally leads everyone home (Eckstein 1998.15 and 2004b.27). Although this revised ending offers a better parallel with Odysseus's situation, Odysseus's adaptability allows for at least a temporary reconciliation with the family, while Ethan's stubbornness and inflexibility preclude even a partial reintegration into the home. Ethan's more complete estrangement is consistent with the fact that, unlike Odysseus, Ethan has been on the losing side in his war, which adds to his problems with reintegration. Blundell and Ormand 1997.550 point out that the "image of the hero as an outsider who must leave town, who



Ethan also demonstrates the questionable morality that distinguishes Odysseus's heroism. Odysseus is one of the wiliest characters in Greek mythology: known for his intellectual cunning and smooth tongue, he tells at least three elaborate, extended lies in the course of the *Odyssey*,<sup>22</sup> and before he narrates his adventures to the Phaeacians, he is forthright in admitting that he is a trickster: εἶμι ᾽Οδυσσεὺς Λαερτιάδης, ὃς πᾶσι δόλοισιν ἀνθρώποισι μέλω ("I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, notorious to all men for my schemes," *Od.* 9.19–20). Because of this craftiness, Odysseus is frequently contrasted with more unambiguous heroes like Achilles and Ajax. In Book 9 of the *Iliad*, Achilles refers to Odysseus's devious nature by addressing him as διογενὲς Λαερτιάδη, πολυμήχαν ᾽Οδυσσεῦ ("Zeus-born son of Laertes, much-scheming Odysseus," 9.308) before calling attention to his own more straightforward disposition: ἐχθρὸς γάρ μοι κείνος ὁμῶς Ἀΐδαο πύλῃσιν ὅς χ' ἕτερον μὲν κεύθῃ ἐνὶ φρεσίν, ἄλλο δὲ εἶπη ("Hateful to me as the gates of Hades is that man who would conceal one thing in his mind, but say another," 9.312–13). In later traditions, Odysseus's moral ambiguity led to his identification as the son of the notorious sinner Sisyphus and to his portrayal in the Classical period as callous and unscrupulous.<sup>23</sup>

Ethan's heroism, too, is questionable.<sup>24</sup> Not only does he threaten the integrity of his brother's home with the illicit love he feels for Martha—which she apparently returns<sup>25</sup>—he is also repeatedly suspected of criminal

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cannot be part of the society he redeems or destroys, is a standard trope of both Western and epic closure," noting as one example Achilles' approaching death at the end of the *Iliad*.

22 13.256–86, 14.199–359, and 19.165–202, the so-called "Cretan lies." While it is notable that Odysseus's lies serve a practical function in the *Odyssey*, and that lying in itself was not generally perceived as a moral flaw in Greek society (Walcott 1977.2–4, 9, and Emlyn-Jones 1986.1–8), Stanford demonstrates that the intelligence for which Odysseus is famous is a "neutral quality" that can manifest itself as "low and selfish cunning or [as] exalted altruistic wisdom" (1963.7).

23 Stanford 1963 notes the increasingly negative portrayal of Odysseus throughout the fifth century B.C.E. and relates this trend to Athens' impending defeat in the Peloponnesian War and the Athenians' ability, as a result, to sympathize with the Trojans (1963.90–101).

24 Böhneke 2001.49 recognizes the "trickster" aspect of the typical Fordian hero, while Winkler discusses the dual nature of the later Western hero (2001.119–24), in particular, connecting Ethan's "moral complexity" to that of Achilles (2004.151ff.).

25 Ford communicates Ethan and Martha's love through a series of visual cues (figure 2) and reinforces his point musically with Reverend H. D. L. Webster's Civil War ballad "Lorena," which tells the story of an unconsummated adulterous love: "We loved each other then,



Figure 2. *The Searchers*, copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Pictures, dir. John Ford.

behavior. When he refuses to let Captain Clayton (Ward Bond) swear him in as a deputy, Clayton asks suspiciously: “You wanted for a crime, Ethan?” Later, Clayton asks Ethan for his gun and initiates an arrest for murder, again characterizing Ethan as an outlaw. Clayton also works as a foil for Ethan in much the same way Achilles does for Odysseus: former comrades-in-arms, Clayton now serves as the religious and military leader of the white settlers, while Ethan stands stubbornly outside the community’s religious and administrative framework. Additionally, Ford situates Ethan as a villain iconographically: not only does Ethan wear dark clothing and a black hat and ride a black horse (Eckstein 2004b.26), in the famous track-in shot of Ethan’s face as he turns to look at a crazed white woman recovered from the Comanche (figure 3), Ford applies to his hero the sort of visual symbolism usually reserved for the Western villain (Winkler 2001.130–31).<sup>26</sup>

Both protagonists also demonstrate hypocrisy and ethically questionable behavior. Odysseus berates his men for their ruinous lack of restraint when they open a bag that holds the winds and later when they

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Lorena, / More than we ever dared to tell” (Eckstein 2004a.200–201 and 2004b.6, Kalinak 2004.121ff., McBride 2001.553). Ford himself believed that this relationship should have been clear to the intelligent viewer (Eckstein 2004b.7).

26 Grimsted 2004.310 sees in Ethan’s expression here “a compassionate sense of the woman’s loss,” a reading sharply at odds with the majority of scholars and viewers.



Figure 3. *The Searchers*, copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Pictures, dir. John Ford.

eat the cattle of the Sun;<sup>27</sup> yet despite the general ability to control his emotions noted above, Odysseus, too, is unable to restrain himself at key points: he cannot resist taunting the Cyclops Polyphemus, putting his own life and those of his men in danger, and he lingers in Circe's bed, delaying his return considerably.

In *The Searchers*, Ethan hates the Comanche and sees whites as degraded by interaction with them, yet he himself is intimately acquainted with their language, customs, and beliefs. He demonstrates both his disdain and his familiarity when he shoots out the eyes of a corpse, explaining: "By what that Comanch' believes, ain't got no eyes, he can't enter the spirit land. Has to wander forever between the winds." Both men also achieve their goals in ways that run contrary to society's ethical codes. Odysseus kills the suitors after catching them off guard, disarming them, and cutting off their escape routes. Ethan fires at retreating Comanche and then stakes Martin out "like a piece of meat" to thwart an ambush before shooting the would-be attackers in the back as they turn to flee.

Moreover, although both heroes see their quests through to a gen-

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27 Clauss 1999.6 notes a similar fatal lack of restraint in Ethan's companion Brad Jorgensen, who charges the Comanche camp in a fury after learning that his girlfriend Lucy has been raped and killed.

erally successful conclusion—the restoration of the family—they demonstrate failings in carrying out this goal. That Odysseus loses all his men in the course of his journey is emphasized even in the *Odyssey*'s proem, which tells us οὐδ' ὥς ἐτάρους ἐρρύσατο, ἰέμενός περ (“He did not save his companions, for all his longing [to do so],” 1.6). Ethan likewise loses one of his companions, Brad Jorgensen (Harry Carey, Jr.), in the course of his search, and although he sees Debbie restored to the home, it is Mose Harper who twice leads Ethan to her (O'Brien 1998.22) and Martin who kills Scar (Henry Brandon). Ultimately, although he demonstrates many traits typical of the Western hero, Ethan's dark side, like Odysseus's, positions him as “a disturbing and subversive antithesis to the code of heroic ethics and behavior” (Eckstein 1998.11).

### WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND FOES

Ford's film demonstrates an even more intimate connection with the mythic archetypes of the *Odyssey* through his hero's relationships with other characters. Odysseus's three primary relationships—with his wife Penelope, with his son Telemachus, and with the enemies he encounters—are paralleled in *The Searchers* by Ethan's relationships with his brother's wife Martha (later represented by her daughter Debbie, played by Lana and Natalie Wood), with his adoptive nephew Martin Pauley, and with the Nawyucky Comanche Chief Scar. Despite differences in details, these relationships function in similar ways and, in each case, play into societal concerns with safeguarding identity by controlling women's sexuality.

Although in their relationships with women, Odysseus and Ethan initially seem quite different—Odysseus has a faithful wife, while Ethan is a bachelor—a closer analysis shows that women serve analogous roles for these men. In both works, women motivate the heroes' quests: Odysseus's goal throughout the *Odyssey* is to reunite with his wife and ensure the integrity of his family unit, while Ethan's initial goal is to rescue his niece Debbie from Scar and restore her to the white community.<sup>28</sup> Both quests are made more urgent by the sexual threat these women pose: Odysseus is anxious to reunite with Penelope before she gives herself to one of her suitors, while Ethan is pressed by the need to save Debbie before she comes of an age

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28 Like Ethan, Odysseus initially left home in order to retrieve a woman, Helen, who had been captured by a foreign people.

to enter into sexual relations with her captor.<sup>29</sup> This urgency, moreover, is based in an overriding concern in both Greek and white-settler cultures with maintaining female purity. In the patriarchal culture of the Greeks, identity was intimately connected to paternity and progeny; therefore, women played a vital role in the transfer of status.<sup>30</sup> As Peter Rose puts it: “The more profoundly human male worth is figured in terms of descent, the more obsessive becomes the desire to control the sexuality of women. The principle so succinctly stated in Roman law, *mater certa, pater incertus est*, becomes the nightmare of the Greek male citizen who is determined at all costs to reduce this incertitude to a minimum” (1993.220).

The danger posed by an unfaithful wife is emphasized in the *Odyssey* by constant references to Clytemnestra, who cuckolds and kills her husband Agamemnon. Likewise in the American West, there was a strong need to maintain the distinction between races due to the precarious position of the white settlers, who were attempting to establish a claim by encroaching on Native American territory. As J. McBride and M. Wilmington observe about this period: “If a white man impregnates a dark woman, he is planting his seed in an alien culture; but if a dark man impregnates a white woman, he is, in the eyes of the primitive white, violating her” and, in effect, threatening the integrity of white culture (1975.162). Therefore, when Debbie becomes Scar’s “wife,” Ethan shifts from a mission to save her to a mission to kill her. As with Clytemnestra, who was ultimately killed by her son Orestes, a woman in the American West who threatens white supremacy and the patriarchal order through her sexuality needs to be eradicated.<sup>31</sup>

Both works, therefore, revolve around the subject of potential adultery and the threat this represents to the honor and very identity of the hero. According to Jean Peristiany, honor and shame have been the fundamental regulators of behavior in the Mediterranean cultural basin since ancient

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29 In LeMay’s novel, the sexual threat Debbie poses to the protagonist, there called Amos, is less pronounced: although there is a concern with miscegenation between Debbie and the Comanche, Scar himself is presented as a father-figure rather than a potential husband. James Brooks notes that this was the more usual practice, and was, in fact, the case with Cynthia Ann Parker (2004.281).

30 For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see Carson 1990.

31 While this argument is not meant to suggest that emotional bonds did not exist between men and women in ancient Greece and the Old West, scholars have demonstrated that socio-economic factors played an important role in gendered relationships in these cultures (see Carson 1990, Rose 1993, McBride and Wilmington 1975, et al.).

times. Julian Pitt-Rivers later refined Peristiany's model, demonstrating that this system of honor and shame concentrates primarily on the role of sex, making women's chastity crucial to the honor of the male and the family. As such, men are justified in controlling the behavior of women, and the chastity of women becomes a kind of currency.<sup>32</sup>

Women are likewise commodified in *The Searchers*: Ethan symbolizes the break in his relationship with Debbie in economic terms by drawing up a will that disowns her,<sup>33</sup> while Martin's relationship with Laurie (Vera Miles) is reduced to a contractual agreement in his comic fight scene with Charlie MacCorry (Ken Curtis) over who has "rights" to the bride (O'Brien 1998.22). Furthermore, Ford develops a system of honor and shame in this film that, like Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers' Mediterranean model, revolves around women's chastity. After Martha's murder, Debbie becomes for Ethan a symbol of her mother: not only does she physically resemble her mother, but like Martha, she comes under Scar's control. Ford reinforces this association musically by transferring what, in the film's opening scenes, was "Martha's theme" to Debbie at the end of the film (Stowell 1986.125, Kalinak 2004.125).<sup>34</sup> The effectiveness of this subtle transference was demonstrated in a 1974 interview, where John Wayne asserted: "[Ethan] did what he had to do. The Indians fucked his wife" (quoted by Eckstein 1998.8 and 2004b.17).<sup>35</sup> As a stand-in for Martha, Debbie becomes a threat to Ethan when she comes of an age to mate with Scar: like her mother, Debbie was "pure," and as with her mother, Debbie's violation becomes representative of Ethan's unacceptable desires. As such, Debbie herself is a symbol not only of Ethan's inappropriate feelings toward his family but also of his impotence and failure to consummate his own desires (Gallagher 1986.335).

While scholars like Brian Henderson, Tag Gallagher, and Arthur Eckstein put forth similar "Oedipal" readings of this film, others reject

32 See Peristiany 1966.9–12 and Pitt-Rivers 1977.71–80. The development and reception of Peristiany's "Honor and Shame" model are discussed in Gilmore 1987.2–7.

33 This principle is even more explicit in LeMay's novel, where Debbie boasts to Martin that she has been purchased for marriage for sixty ponies: "Nobody ever paid so much. I'm worth sixty ponies." Martin's response is equally telling: "We'll overcall that. Sixty ponies! We'll pay a hundred for you—a hundred and a half—" (LeMay 1954.235). For more on Debbie's function as an object in Ford's film, see Henderson 2004.53.

34 Kalinak 2004.123 notes that this association is also suggested early on when "Lorena" accompanies the scene where Ethan gives Debbie his war medal.

35 It is unclear whether, in this Freudian slip, Wayne was thinking of Martha or Debbie as Ethan's "wife" (McBride 2001.557).

this line of analysis, along with much of Freudian psychology, as outdated (Grimsted 2004.319). Recent developments in feminist film theory, however, demonstrate that classic cinema “reinforce[s] the culture of male dominance by its strategy of displacement . . . assuag[ing] male fears of deficiency by representing the female body as the site of impotence and lack, and as the appropriate object for the controlling male gaze” (Robin 1993.102).<sup>36</sup> The relevance of this sort of reading to *The Searchers* is suggested by Nugent’s original screenplay where Ethan, on the verge of killing Debbie, shifts his intention with the explanation: “You sure favor your mother” (quoted by Eckstein 1998.14 and Eyman 2004.151).

As in the *Odyssey*, the sexual anxiety surrounding the protagonist becomes more acute throughout Ford’s film: as a result of constant references to Clytemnestra, Homer’s audience grows increasingly unsure of Penelope’s fidelity, while Ethan, as he grows more and more convinced of Debbie’s miscegenation, becomes progressively more determined to kill her as a blemish on the white race and on both his own and his family’s “honor.”<sup>37</sup> In both cases, the hero’s potential for violence in reaction to this sexual threat becomes indisputable. When his childhood nurse Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus, thus posing a possible threat to his plans to establish his wife’s fidelity and exact vengeance on her suitors, he grabs her by the throat and threatens her life (*Od.* 19.479–90), raising our anxieties about what he will do to Penelope if his fears regarding her chastity are not assuaged. Similarly, right before he confronts Debbie, Ethan scalps Scar, demonstrating his brutal capabilities and playing into our fears about what he will do to his niece. In the end, both heroes refrain from this sort of violence. After slaying the suitors and satisfying himself that she did, in fact, remain faithful, Odysseus embraces Penelope, and the family unit is made whole once again. Ethan, too, ultimately accepts Debbie and restores her to the household. Arthur Eckstein explains Ethan’s abrupt turnaround with the scalping of Scar, which he sees as “a kind of catharsis: with his villainous alter ego finally punished . . . he does not have to kill [Debbie] as

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36 Robin here follows Laura Mulvey, whose landmark 1973 paper, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (reprinted in Mulvey 1989.14–26), more or less initiated feminist film theory by drawing on ideas developed in Freudian psychology and the feminist movement. For more on the applicability of Freudian theory to feminist criticism, film studies, and classical literature, see Skinner 1987.183ff., Rose 1993, and Henderson 2004.51ff.

37 Scott 2006 recognizes this “terrifying, pathological conception of honor, sexual and racial” in this film.



Figure 4. *The Searchers*, copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Pictures, dir. John Ford.

a scapegoat for his own unacceptable feelings” (1998.13).<sup>38</sup> With his own demons thus exorcised, Ethan is able to see Debbie once again as an innocent girl, an interpretation reinforced by the way Ethan lifts Debbie after he catches her—a gesture reminiscent of one he used with her as a child at the beginning of the movie—before he shifts his intentions and, cradling her tenderly, says: “Let’s go home” (figure 4).

Nonetheless, Penelope and Debbie themselves demonstrate that the fears of our protagonists were not unfounded. After her fidelity has been established, Penelope defends Helen, whose adultery led the Greeks to war with Troy: τὴν δ’ ἦ τοι ῥέξαι θεὸς ὄρορεν ἔργον ἀεικές· τὴν δ’ ἄτην οὐ πρόσθεν ἔφ’ ἐγκάθετο θυμῷ λυγρὴν (“Surely, in truth, a god set her about this shameful deed; and not before did she set such baneful folly in her heart,” *Od.* 23.222–24). To Nancy Felson-Rubin, Penelope’s statement suggests a kinship with this most famous of adulteresses and acknowledges the possibility that she, too, could have been in Helen’s position (1994.39–40). In *The Searchers*, not only does the white community eventually see Debbie’s sexual relationship with Scar as a given, Debbie aligns herself with the Comanche when she tells Martin and Ethan: “These are my people” (figure 5). Additionally, Ethan, in the end, delivers Debbie to the Jorgensens still

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38 McBride 2001.561 makes a similar argument.





Figure 5. *The Searchers*, copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Pictures, dir. John Ford.

in her Indian garb, suggesting that she now maintains a dual white/Native American identity.<sup>39</sup>

The anxieties about women's chastity are reinforced in both works by the disconnect that exists between each hero and his son (or surrogate son). In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is separated from his son chronologically and geographically: he has been away at war since shortly after Telemachus's birth nearly twenty years before, and they do not, in fact, meet until Book 16. The distance between them is emphasized by Telemachus's doubts about his own paternity: when asked if he is Odysseus's son, Telemachus replies: μήτηρ μὲν τ' ἐμέ φησι τοῦ ἔμμενοι, αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γε οὐκ οἶδ'· οὐ γὰρ πῶ τις ἐὼν γόνον αὐτὸς ἀνέγνω ("Mother says that I am his son, but I myself don't know. For no one living has yet known clearly his own begetting," *Od.* 1.215–16). Telemachus's concern here reflects the broader societal anxiety about preserving the chastity of women in order to ensure the integrity of the paternal line discussed above, and the initial distance between father and

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39 Of course, this is also a realistic touch, as Debbie's rescuers would have been unlikely to bring a change of clothes. Nonetheless, her costume works well symbolically to indicate that she has absorbed much of the Comanche culture during her years spent among them. One *Arethusa* reader, however, wonders if rather than indicating a dual identity, her position between cultures indicates that, like Cynthia Parker after her own "rescue," Debbie now belongs to neither.

son in this epic reflects the apprehensions both men have about the fidelity of the woman who connects them.

A similar estrangement is found in *The Searchers*, but in this case, the anxiety is intensified by the introduction of a racial element paired with heightened paternal ambiguity. Like Odysseus and Telemachus, Ethan and Martin are reunited after an extended separation. While he is not identified as Ethan's biological son, their shared quest and spiritual kinship suggest that Martin functions as a surrogate son. Despite a surface dissimilarity, both Ethan and Martin are positioned as outsiders at the beginning of the film in parallel shots of each man sitting alone on the porch with the dog while the family communes inside (Henderson 2004.57). Martin also resembles Ethan in his reluctance to become domesticated: he is continually fleeing into the wilderness, away from the advances of Laurie Jorgensen (McBride and Wilmington 1975.154–55).<sup>40</sup> This similarity is driven home when Laurie, weary of waiting, agrees to marry Charlie MacCorry, which concession, as James Clauss notes, corresponds with Martha's "apparent settling for Ethan's brother Aaron" (1999.10).<sup>41</sup>

There is a further argument to be made that Martin is, in fact, Ethan's illegitimate son:<sup>42</sup> Martin's assertion that he is "an eighth Cherokee, the rest Welsh and English," indicates a broad ethnic kinship with the Edwards, while Ethan's apparently intimate relationship with Martin's mother—indicated by his ability to identify her scalp among those on Scar's lance—implies the possibility of a closer connection.<sup>43</sup> Even more suggestive is Ethan's unprovoked hostility towards Martin and vehement denial of significant connections. When Aaron points out that Ethan himself rescued Martin after his parents were killed, Ethan replies curtly: "Just

40 Clauss 1999.8 notes that Martin's wandering nature is emphasized musically when Charlie MacCorry, after delivering Martin's letter informing Laurie that he will not be home again for Christmas, initiates his own courtship by singing: "Gone again, what'll I do? . . . Skip to my Lou, my darling."

41 Eckstein 2004b.19 and Pye 2004.226 also make this point. While this examination focuses on Ethan, Martin likewise can be positioned as an Odysseus figure in that the tensions of his relationship with Laurie parallel closely Odysseus's difficulties in reuniting with his wife Penelope.

42 This suggestion is also put forth by Lehman 2004b.249. The possibility of Ethan's paternity in the film is strengthened by the fact that, in LeMay's novel, Martin's late father was named Ethan.

43 Levine 1995 demonstrates that hair has long had sexual associations in the Mediterranean, an idea that is evident in twentieth-century American culture as well. Ethan's ability to identify a woman by looking at her hair thus metaphorically suggests sexual intimacy.

happened to be me; no need to make more of it.” Thereafter, Ethan repeatedly contradicts Martin’s claims of kinship with the Edwards, demanding that Martin “Stop callin’ me uncle. I ain’t yer uncle!” and later, reminding him that “[Debbie]’s your nothin’! She’s no kin to you at all!” Ethan’s relationship with Martin’s mother implies another parallel: just as his mother’s and Martha’s deaths made Martin twice an orphan, the same losses make Ethan, in effect, twice a widower. Ethan’s hostility towards Martin, therefore, may stem from the fact that Martin is a constant reminder to Ethan of his own contribution to the sexual and racial anxieties that obsess him throughout the film: while Ethan, as a white man, might have initially seen his relationship with a part-native woman as unproblematic, its result has not been the dilution of an alien culture but the infiltration of a native element into the white community.

Both Telemachus and Martin serve a period of apprenticeship with the father-figure during which they mature and grow independent, a “coming-of-age” that helps provide resolution to the sexual, and racial, tensions that have been in play throughout each work.<sup>44</sup> While Odysseus and Ethan are each destined to continue searching after the action of the epic is complete, for Telemachus and Martin, the period of quest and adventure is merely an episode that marks a transition from boyhood to manhood (McBride and Wilmington 1975.158). In both epics, the hero functions as a role model who helps his protégé come of age; and in both epics, unlike

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44 The development of both young men is particularly notable in the way they gradually shed their deference and begin to speak more assertively. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is pushed around and mocked by the suitors (2.301–08 and 323–36); later, his mother is still in the habit of correcting him (18.215–25); and we learn that his authority in the house has been limited (see 22.426–27). As he matures, Telemachus begins to stand up to the suitors (18.406–09, 20.262–67) and eventually wrests the position of head of the household from Penelope, asserting that τοῦ . . . κράτος ἔστ’ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ (“authority in the house is mine,” 21.353).

In *The Searchers*, similarly, Martin is initially young and inexperienced and defers to Ethan, who denigrates him with statements such as: “Wait’ll you grow up.” Like Telemachus, Martin gradually asserts himself as he gains more experience and moves towards manhood. When Scar invites Ethan into his teepee to discuss business, for instance, Ethan orders Martin to wait outside, but to Ethan’s surprise, Martin pushes him aside with an assertive, “Not likely!” and steps into the tent ahead of him. The “coming of age” theme in *The Searchers* was emphasized in a caption from a promotional poster: “Martin: He started the search as a boy, and ended it a man!” (reproduced in Cowie 2004.179). Martin’s initial “apprentice” status and gradual movement towards manhood are less apparent in LeMay’s novel.

the mentor, the protégé is ultimately successful in fully integrating into the home and community. At the end of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus has established himself as a hero in his own right by holding his own in the fight with the suitors; now, reassured about his place in the line of paternal succession, he is firmly entrenched in his home on Ithaca. Martin's domestication is more conspicuously demonstrated in the closing scene of *The Searchers*: having proven himself by initiating Debbie's rescue and killing Scar, he takes Laurie's arm and they enter the house together, symbolizing Martin's assumption of a place within the white community where previously he could not unproblematically fit.

A final parallel relationship is provided by the heroes' adversaries, who, in both works, function as foils to highlight the negative traits of the protagonists and suggest a darker underlying motivation for their animosity. In the *Odyssey*, the lands of the Cyclopes, the Laestrygonians, and Circe are all described in terms of the negative—that is, Odysseus notes that they do not bear the marks of civilized society—and then cast as treacherous when Odysseus loses men in particularly disturbing ways: through the cannibalism of Polyphemus and the Laestrygonians and through the metamorphosis temporarily effected by Circe. These foes, however, are also positioned as alter egos in that Odysseus's fear and/or loathing is related to a subconscious recognition in the adversary of traits present in himself that he is reluctant to acknowledge.<sup>45</sup>

This phenomenon is most pronounced in Book 9, where Odysseus takes considerable pains to differentiate the race of Cyclopes from his own kind, describing them in terms of whatever it is that makes them not Greek: they are without government (ἀθέμιστ[οι], *Od.* 9.106); they neither plant nor plow (οὔτε φυτεύουσιν . . . οὔτ' ἀρόωσιν, *Od.* 9.108); they have neither counseling assemblies nor laws (οὔτ' ἀγοραὶ βουλευφόροι οὔτε θέμιστες, *Od.* 9.112); and they have no ships nor men [who are] builders of ships (οὐ . . . νῆες . . . οὐδ' ἄνδρες νηῶν ἐνὶ τέκτονας, *Od.* 9.125–26).<sup>46</sup> Polyphemus,

45 This line of analysis is most prominent in the work of Carl Jung, who uses the term “shadow figure” to describe an opponent with this sort of function either in literature or in “real life” (see Jacobi 1973 for a short overview of Jung's theories). While the usefulness of Jung's theories in the real world are debatable, “shadow figures” appear frequently as a trope in literature and film, and the concept works well with the tendency of recent scholarship to view the Homeric episodes under consideration here as myths of “self-realization” (see Scott 1995.21).

46 For discussions of this principle, see Austin 1983.22ff. and Dougherty 2001.123–26.

in particular, eats dairy products instead of meat, drinks milk instead of wine, lives in isolation rather than with a family, and scorns the gods and the laws of ξενία, or hospitality. Yet while Odysseus detests Polyphemus's barbarism, he also envies him for having what Odysseus does not: a quasi-utopian pastoral existence free from social concerns with status, reputation, and honor (Austin 1983.29, Vidal-Naquet 1986.21–22).<sup>47</sup>

Despite his contempt, Odysseus exhibits many of the characteristics he despises in Polyphemus. Like Polyphemus, Odysseus exists for most of the epic isolated from wife and family. Like Polyphemus, who imprisons his “guests” and proceeds to eat them one at a time, Odysseus has disrespected the guest-host relationship by entering Polyphemus's cave uninvited and helping himself to his stores. Moreover, later in the epic, Odysseus reacts to those who have invaded his own home and appropriated his goods in much the same way (though with considerably more justification): he traps the suitors and slaughters them one by one. Additionally, Polyphemus, despite his own position as son of Poseidon, boasts that the Cyclopes οὐ . . . Διὸς αἰγιόχου ἀλέγουσιν οὐδὲ θεῶν μακάρων (“take no heed of aegis-bearing Zeus, nor the blessed gods,” *Od.* 9.275–76). Odysseus's relationship with the gods is likewise problematic: though he is the favorite of Athena and assisted by other deities, he is also hated by Poseidon.<sup>48</sup> By the end of the episode, Odysseus and Polyphemus have “traded” identities. Odysseus has become Οὔτις (*Od.* 9.366), or “no man,” just as Polyphemus was initially cast in terms of the negative. Polyphemus, in turn, has become Odyssean in that his most prominent characteristic is a wound, as Odysseus himself is identified throughout the epic by two features, a scar on his leg, and his name, which is related to the verb ὀδύσσομαι, meaning “to be grieved.” The two enemies also trade attributes: Polyphemus develops a taste for wine, a symbol of agriculture and civilization, while Odysseus makes off with emblems of Polyphemus's pastoral existence: sheep and cheese. Polyphemus, therefore, functions as a sort of mirror for Odysseus, a projection of

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47 Odysseus will later temporarily lead a utopian existence on the islands of Circe and Calypso, but these landscapes are cast as inappropriate for mortals, and thus Odysseus, as he himself knows, cannot inhabit them permanently. For more on Odyssean landscapes, see Vidal-Naquet 1986.19ff.

48 When Odysseus arrives on Ithaca and Athena appears to him, he asks why she seemed to have abandoned him in this period. Athena replies that she was unwilling to fight with Poseidon, demonstrating that Odysseus's temporary estrangement went beyond Poseidon's individual persecution (18.311–43).

his own problematic characteristics. Appropriately, Odysseus defeats Polyphemus through an act of masculine aggression, poking out his eye with the sharpened trunk of an olive tree—a visual image of rape or penetration.<sup>49</sup>

This projection of negative characteristics onto the Other reflects anxieties that were current in Homeric society. In the eighth century B.C.E., technological innovations in shipping led to increased travel for purposes of trade or colonization, which movements increasingly brought Greeks into contact and conflict with indigenous peoples. Carol Dougherty, following François Hartog, sees Odysseus's wanderings as an attempt to delineate the boundaries of Greek identity in response to the anxieties produced by this sort of overseas expansion (2001.6–7). While Phaeacia represents the ideal, where the native inhabitants are welcoming and hospitable, and where alliances are sown with offers of marriage, the Cyclopes “embody the colonists' worst fears—either that they will be eaten or that, in the process of subduing the native peoples, they will regress to a primitive state themselves” (Dougherty 2001.15). According to Dougherty, the appearance of cannibalism in colonial narratives both symbolizes the anxieties of the colonizers and works to justify the subjugation of the native population in that it “operate[s] as an index of savagery within an imperial or colonial context to represent those capable of resisting conquest as themselves violent and voracious. The savagery of conquest is thus displaced onto those who are able to fight back. They are the ones who are transgressive since they eat human flesh and are therefore in need of being conquered” (2001.135). Because Odysseus throughout the course of the *Odyssey* exhibits behavior analogous to that for which he punishes Polyphemus, the epic works to question both his exaggerated, negative view of the Other and the justice of the violence he inflicts under the pretext of revenge.<sup>50</sup> The epic's ending emphasizes this point when the suitors' kinsmen seek revenge for Odysseus's slaughter of their sons and brothers. Because their complaint is in many respects valid, and a truce is only secured through supernatural means, Homer shifts the

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49 This motif reappears in the case of Circe, who is “tamed” when Odysseus draws his sword, and again when Odysseus defeats the suitors' ringleader Antinoos with an arrow through the throat (22.15–16). Scholars like H el ene Cixous, following Freud, see the head of the Other as a representation of the phallus and a threat to the male order (see Eilberg-Schwartz 1995.6–7). Odysseus, therefore, repeatedly regains control by asserting masculine dominance, frequently through symbolic castration.

50 Blundell and Ormand 1997.536ff. identify this issue as a central concern of both Greek epic and the Western.

audience's perspective, problematizing their allegiance with Odysseus by asking them to reconsider issues that initially seemed clear-cut.

Like the Cyclopes and other uncivilized peoples in the *Odyssey*, the Comanche in *The Searchers* stand in cultural opposition to the white community. The Comanche are nomadic, whereas the whites are "settlers"; they are viewed as uncivilized, whereas the whites view themselves as a civilizing force in the wilderness; and they transgress Western values—they miscegenate, they steal, they scalp. Native Americans in general, and particularly the Comanche, are viewed as "bloodthirsty savages" by the white characters in the film. Yet as in Homer's Polyphemus episode, the Comanche only become a threat after the white homesteaders have entered their space, and like Odysseus, Ethan demonstrates many of the same characteristics he despises in his enemy. Like the "impious" Indian, Ethan is estranged from the settlers' religion. He interrupts both a wedding and a funeral, the latter by abruptly shouting: "Put an amen to it! There's no more time for prayin'! Amen!" The whites despise the Comanche for stealing, as when they drive off the settlers' cattle, but Ethan, too, takes over others' property, appropriating the cattle Debbie should inherit and later retrieving the money he'd earlier paid Jerem Futterman (Peter Mamakos) from his dead body. Like Scar, who mutilates corpses—those of Aaron, Martha, and their eldest children Ben (Robert Lyden) and Lucy (Pippa Scott)—so does Ethan, who mutilates dead Comanche and later scalps Scar himself. And just as Ethan is a wanderer, so too is Scar, as is suggested by his tribe's descriptor "Nawyecky," which, according to Ethan, means: "Sort of like roundabout. Man says he's goin' one place, [he] means to go a-t'other." Ford emphasizes the connection between these two men linguistically when Ethan and Scar finally meet (figure 6), and Scar responds to Ethan's pointed question: "You speak pretty good American for a Comanch'—someone teach you?," by asking in turn: "You speak good Comanch'—someone teach you?" Ethan and his enemy are also connected through an exchange of attributes: Ethan carries a Native American spirit stick, while Scar wears the "gold locket"—a Confederate military medal of valor—that Ethan had earlier given Debbie.<sup>51</sup>

The parallels between these two men extend to motivation: just as Ethan pursues the Comanche in revenge for the deaths of his family, Scar,

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51 Eckstein 2004b.16 argues that by focusing on Ethan's medal, now worn around Scar's neck, in the scene where Debbie is revealed as one of his "wives," Ford suggests that "Scar has literally *become* Ethan."



Figure 6. *The Searchers*, copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Pictures, dir. John Ford.

too, identifies his motive as vengeance: “Two sons killed by white man. For each son, I take many [scalps].” By underscoring the cyclical nature of this retribution, like the *Odyssey*, *The Searchers* forces the audience to question an issue that once seemed clear-cut: the justice of revenge. Without the possibility of a *deus ex machina* of the sort that put a stop to the violence in the *Odyssey*, the cycle of vengeance here can only end with the annihilation of one of the parties involved—in this case, the Native American people. Ford emphasizes this issue when, as in the *Odyssey*, Ethan and Scar trade identities: Scar takes over Ethan’s role as hero, rescuing Debbie from Ethan (Slotkin 1992.469), while Ethan later slips into Scar’s role as “savage,” scalping his enemy and effectively becoming that which he hates.<sup>52</sup> Like Odysseus, Ethan reasserts dominance over the self through symbolic castration (Henderson 2004.55), which suggests a much darker reason for Ethan’s obsessive hatred: Scar has done what Ethan “wants to do but cannot do and cannot even admit to wanting—he annihilates Ethan’s brother’s family and seizes the women for himself” (Eckstein 1998.3; see also Eckstein

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52 The connection between these two works is further suggested by the name Scar: in a childhood boar-hunting accident, Odysseus obtained a scar that became his most identifying physical characteristic (*Od.* 19.388–96, 21.217–20, and 24.331–33). Scar’s name, then, associates Ethan’s alter ego with Homer’s hero.



2004a.200 and 2004b.15ff.). When Ethan, who has repressed his desires, sees them played out by another, he redirects his sexual frustration and his horror at his own immoral inclinations into a hatred of Scar and a desire for vengeance (Eckstein 1998.3). By complicating the relationship between justice and revenge and drawing a parallel between hero and nemesis, both Homer and Ford ask the audience to alter their perspectives and consider how issues of masculine honor and identity contribute to more complex underlying motivations for hostility towards the Other.

### NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Ford also echoes the mythic patterns of Homer's work through the structure, pacing, and tone of his film. Both epics are interrupted by a long narrative sequence emphasizing the unreliability of an individual perspective and thereby further challenging the biases of the protagonists. In Books 9–12 of the *Odyssey*, the action is put on hold while Odysseus relates the tale of his adventures after the Trojan War to the Phaeacians. This central narrative sequence is the longest in the epic, comprising four books of twenty-four, and has a complex perspective: Homer reports Odysseus's account, which includes dialogue between characters. This section also contains a tonal shift: several scholars note the folktale qualities of the various tales from Books 9–12 (see Page 1972, 1976.1–20, and Austin 1983), while others point out that “buffoonery” permeates this sequence: humor can be found in the Cyclops episode, for instance, in Polyphemus's curious combination of obsessive neatness and revolting savagery, and in the contrast between the gigantic size of the monster and the relative diminution of Odysseus and his men (Austin 1983.7ff. and 11).

In *The Searchers*, Ford includes a similar interruption when Laurie reads a letter from Martin aloud to her parents and her suitor Charlie MacCorry. As in the *Odyssey*, “Shifts in narrative style, length of running time, and tone set this middle sequence apart” (Stowell 1986.130), and here, too, the perspective is complex, consisting of three different narrative voices: Laurie reads Martin's letter that reports dialogue between other characters.<sup>53</sup> Like the tonal shift in Homer, this episode is “surprisingly comic” for a film

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53 In LeMay's novel, these events are not communicated through a letter, nor is there a notable shift in tone, although, like Ford's letter sequence, it constitutes the work's longest chapter by far. See Gallagher 1986 and Stowell 1986 for more on narrative structure in Ford's film.

that is fundamentally tragic in nature (Stowell 1986.130). Martin's letter, for instance, relates with amusement the interest of a friendly Comanche tribe in the hats Martin has to trade, items that are presented as inconsequential and wildly incongruous with their attire.

More importantly, both epics use this narrative interruption towards a similar end. Homer uses Odysseus's narrative in Books 9–12 to emphasize the unreliability of individual perspective by exposing his hero as a liar. For example, Odysseus says that after he and his men rowed out from the Cyclopes' island as far as a man's voice could carry, he shouted back to Polyphemus, gloating over his victory. Soon afterwards, he says: ἄλλ' ὅτε δὴ δις τόσσον ἄλλα πρήσσοντες ἀπῆμεν, καὶ τότε ἐγὼ Κύκλωπα προσηύδων ("But when, indeed, we were twice as far out to sea as before, then again I addressed the Cyclops," *Od.* 9.491–92), and again Polyphemus hears him, an impossibility if he were now twice as far as a man's voice could carry. In a later episode, Odysseus reports a conversation between the gods Zeus and Helios as if he'd been present; realizing he has gotten carried away, he quickly explains that he later learned this from Calypso, who got it from Hermes (*Od.* 12.374–90).

In much the same way, Ford means through his letter sequence to "make us aware of how each person's attitudes color reality" by distancing us from the sympathy we feel towards Ethan and showing us a picture of him as seen through the eyes of other characters (Gallagher 1986.326). Whereas in the rest of the film his character is complex and demonstrates inner conflict, here Ethan simply seems cold and callous. For instance, his attitude towards Look (Belua Archuleta), the Comanche woman whom Martin inadvertently acquires as a wife, is contemptible. He delights in her presence merely because it causes Martin consternation, and he laughs without consideration for her pain and humiliation when Martin kicks her down a hill. Ford uses this subtle shift to move the viewer from an Ethan-centered viewpoint to one that is filtered through society's eyes, and thus, like Homer, he demonstrates the unreliability of individual perspective.<sup>54</sup>

To underscore this point, both narrative sequences are disrupted by incidents that emphasize their narrators' biases. Odysseus interrupts his own story at a strategically climactic point—in the middle of his adventures in

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54 Many reviewers, such as Scott Eyman, view the episode with Look less critically, assuming that Ford intended it simply as "comic relief" and indicting Ford as complicit in Look's "brutal and unfunny" treatment (2004.155).

the Underworld—and oddly suggests that it is time for bed (*Od.* 11.328–32). The effect of this interruption is exactly as he would have it: his hosts encourage him to continue by offering him an abundance of guest-gifts, which he readily accepts (*Od.* 11.355–61). This interruption, then, reminds us that Odysseus has an ulterior motive for recounting his tale: to entertain for his own profit. *The Searchers*' letter sequence is disrupted when Laurie learns that Martin has acquired a wife, knowledge that the catch in her voice and the wounded expression on her face tell us she finds hurtful. Upon discovering that this new wife is a "Comanche squaw," however, she repeats indignantly, "A squaw!," jumps from her seat, and throws the letter into the fire. The contrast between her initially hurt and afterwards outraged reactions emphasizes her racism, and when she resumes reading the salvaged letter, the viewer is reminded that the comic portrayal of Look and her people is filtered through Laurie's prejudiced perspective.<sup>55</sup> Thus this central narrative sequence, like Homer's, is used to demonstrate the unreliability and bias of individual perspectives.<sup>56</sup>

Significantly, both Homer and Ford make the audience complicit in the negative, even sadistic, behavior of the protagonists in these sequences. After Odysseus blinds Polyphemus, he reports with satisfaction that ἐμὸν δ' ἐγέλασσε φίλον κῆρ, ὡς ὄνομ' ἐξαπάτησεν ἐμὸν καὶ μῆτις ἀμύμων ("My dear heart laughed, that my name and my excellent scheme had so thoroughly deceived him"), and the audience joins him in his delight, while Polyphemus is at the same time στενάχων . . . οἰδύνησι ("moaning . . . in pain," *Od.* 9.413–15, noted in Austin 1983.8). Similarly in *The Searchers*, when Martin kicks Look out of bed, Ethan guffaws: "Why that's grounds for dee-voice in Texas!" Ford expects the audience to laugh along with Ethan here, and shamefully, we do.<sup>57</sup> Both Homer and Ford force the audi-

55 In LeMay's novel, the Look character is not presented as comical, nor does the episode in general have the burlesque tone found in the film. While Ford does not make explicit that the perspective is Laurie's (as the reader of the letter) rather than Martin's (as the writer), this point is suggested when we see Martin callously and brutally kick Look out of bed—an action at odds with his otherwise gentle personality (and which, again, does not appear in the novel). This revealing perspective would suit Laurie's designs well.

56 Scott 2006 also sees the flashbacks in Ford's film as exposing the problems with perspective, arguing that they reveal "that the triumph of civilization over barbarism is founded on a necessary lie, and that underneath its polished procedures and high-minded institutions is a buried legacy of bloodshed."

57 Grimsted 2004.308 notes that the audience's guilt is compounded when Look is soon thereafter found dead at the hands of the Seventh Cavalry.

ence to identify with the negative characteristics of their protagonists, in effect asking them to acknowledge their own “shadow” characteristics and rethink the seemingly simple categories of “us” and “them.”

### ***THE SEARCHERS IN 1956 AMERICA***

Ford situates his story in the nineteenth-century Old West, a mythic setting that is as much an integral part of foundational American mythology as was the Trojan War cycle for the Greeks, but which is temporally and geographically more immediate for his audience. Like the Greek epic hero who is compelling because he questions the rules of society and redefines them on his own terms (Blundell and Ormand 1997.535), Ford asks his audience to examine cultural ideologies and their own assumptions rather than accept them unquestioningly.<sup>58</sup> *The Searchers*, as a result, is a timely commentary on issues current in 1950s American society<sup>59</sup> such as racial desegregation and increasing Cold-War tensions.<sup>60</sup>

In *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (1954), the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, bringing race relations to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness.<sup>61</sup> At this critical time, the Western genre, which frequently sets white settlers against the native “red” inhabitants, provided a powerful vehicle for commenting on racial tensions. In *The Searchers*, Ford foregrounds this issue by developing a hero who is an archetypal racist.<sup>62</sup> Ethan Edwards is exclusionist in his claim to the land,

58 While Grimsted 2004.325 notes that Ford’s original audience and critics understood the movie more straightforwardly, Eckstein 2004a.33 reports that Ford was deeply disappointed in this reception.

59 Henderson 2004.51 argues that the message of myth “always has to do with the time in which the myth is told, not with the time that it tells of. Thus *The Searchers* has to do with 1956, not with the 1868–73 time period in which it is set.”

60 Slotkin 1992 provides an examination of the relationship of Westerns, including *The Searchers*, to history, politics, and ideology. Additional sources that discuss the racial implications of *The Searchers* include Eckstein 2004b.8ff. and Henderson 2004.65ff.

61 *The Searchers* premiered just two months after the issuance of “The Southern Manifesto,” in which most of the congressmen and senators of the southern United States pledged their continuing opposition to racial integration (Eckstein 2004b.8–9), a circumstance that would have intensified the audience’s awareness of the film’s racial message.

62 While the Western had long been Ford’s genre of choice, most critics see *The Searchers* as a conscious attempt to capitalize on the “us versus them” nature of the Western in order to foreground the issue of racism.

making conflict with Native Americans inevitable, and he holds all members of that group accountable for the deeds of an individual, a perspective that transforms a personal conflict into a “race war” (Slotkin 1992.462).<sup>63</sup> By complicating his “us versus them” plot with a racist (anti-) hero, Ford “locates the psychological roots of racism in the projection of one’s own unacceptable impulses and desires onto the Other” (Eckstein 1998.3; see also Eckstein 2004b.16). Ford thus utilizes an essentially conservative genre and employs tropes and motifs from classical antiquity to set forth a progressive message, a technique that is all the more profound and effective for its subtlety.

The American myth of the West emphasized Manifest Destiny, an imperialistic doctrine that viewed expansion towards the Pacific Ocean as the divine right of the colonial settlers. This expansion was framed as a benevolent attempt to create civilization out of wilderness; the logic behind this ideology reflects the Greek strategy of projecting the aggression and violence of overseas settlement onto the colonized and viewing colonization as a means of bestowing civilization and culture on lands that were previously savage and dangerous. This sort of reasoning contributes to the tendency of Western mythology to hold Native Americans responsible for instigating a “savage war of extermination,” despite the fact that white settlers first encroached on Native American territory (Slotkin 1992.12). Native Americans, in effect, became scapegoats for the aspects of American expansion and development that were morally disturbing: the annihilation of Native Americans and the kidnapping of Africans for use as slave labor (Slotkin 1992.12–13). Ford taps into this psychological dimension of racism by identifying Ethan with his nemesis Scar, thus indicating a subconscious motivation for the excessiveness of Ethan’s racism. As Martin Winkler puts it: “In all likelihood, Ethan is such a racist because he is aware, without conscious knowledge, that he is in many ways like an Indian himself” (2001.126).

Ford emphasizes the parallel between the white settlers’ fear-based hatred of Native Americans and contemporary racism against African-Americans by contrasting Ethan’s intolerance of a sexual relationship between a white woman and a dark man with his comfortable, amused acceptance of a “marriage” between Look, a dark woman, and Martin, a representative of the

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63 Significantly, in Ford’s film, Ethan is a Confederate soldier, unlike in LeMay’s novel.

white community.<sup>64</sup> This double standard was equally in play in the 1950s (and, indeed, is still evident today) in the view of black women as sexually available to white men, but not vice versa, demonstrating the persistence of “primitive” ideas regarding the relationship between reproduction and imperialism.<sup>65</sup> The psychological dimension of Ethan’s racism is indicated by the elusiveness of the Comanche and their abrupt appearance when they are seen, suggesting that they are projections of Ethan’s own fears as much as they are enemies in a physical sense (Gallagher 1986.334).

The mythic quality of the Native Americans in this film, moreover, suggests that the psychological motivations behind Ethan’s racism are more broadly applicable as well: just as Ethan’s prejudice is rooted in his fears about his own vices and shortcomings, so does the white community’s contempt for the Native American stem from negative traits they deny in themselves. In *The Searchers*, the white community fears Native Americans because they transgress property boundaries, appropriate what does not belong to them, and threaten the safety of the white settlers; so, too, of course, did the white man cross over into Native American country, appropriate their land and resources, and threaten their very existence. The anxieties of the white community regarding their tenuous claims to the land are compounded by the presence of the old Spanish ruling class, who have been violently dispossessed, and Native Americans, who are in the process of being dispossessed (O’Brien 1998.22).<sup>66</sup> The white community hates and fears Native Americans because they serve as reminders of their own precarious position in the world, and they see in them what they hate and fear in themselves. Ford’s analogy between these principles and current anxieties about racial integration parallels Homer’s exposure of the fears that underlie Odysseus’s hostility towards the Other to an audience that tended to view all non-Greeks as “barbarian.”<sup>67</sup>

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64 For more on this double standard, see Pye 2004.227.

65 See above pp. 21–22. Henderson 2004.64ff. discusses the historical differences in attitudes towards miscegenation between European settlers and Native Americans and between Caucasians and African-Americans.

66 Ford brings these anxieties into sharper relief by replacing LeMay’s Jaime Rosas, a shabby-looking, old Mexican who effects a meeting between the searchers and the Comanche (1954.182ff.), with the proud, principled, and sartorially splendid Emilio Gabriel Fernandez y Figueroa.

67 This principle is most evident in Herodotus’s *Histories* (fifth century B.C.E.), which casts foreigners as increasingly alien in direct proportion to their distance from Greece.

Ford further exposes the hypocrisy of racism by implicating his audience in Ethan's attitude, a strategy that, as we have seen, also appears in the *Odyssey*. By encouraging his audience to laugh at Look's abuse in the letter sequence discussed above, Ford indicts "the viewer . . . as a participant in the mechanics of racism" (Gallagher 1986.328). When Ethan and Martin soon thereafter find Look massacred by the Seventh Cavalry, Martin, in horror, remarks on her innocence and the insensibility of her murder, recognizing that his own people are no less savage than the Comanche and, in essence, asking the viewer to do so as well. Additionally, Ford demonstrates through Laurie Jorgensen the hidden racial biases that run through the white community as a whole. Throughout the film, Laurie demonstrates a determined interest in settling down with Martin, who, as we have seen, is part Native American.<sup>68</sup> Her apparent freedom from racial bias is undermined, however, when we find out that Laurie views Debbie as spoiled and dehumanized by her sexual association with the Comanche; she asks: "Fetch *what* home? The leavings of Comanche bucks, sold time and again to the highest bidder?" That this attitude is voiced by a character who had previously seemed to disregard racial differences upsets the viewers' expectations and encourages them to look for racism where they may least expect it: within themselves. That Laurie's views represent those of the white community in general is made clear when she not only endorses Ethan's objective herself, but also aligns this position with that of the girl's own mother: "Do you know what Ethan'll do if he gets a chance? He'll put a bullet in her brain! I tell you, Martha would want him to." As Laurie completes this thought, her voice becomes hushed and she recoils slightly, as if she has acknowledged a truth no one else wanted to vocalize, exposing her racist attitude as the unspoken sentiment of the white community as a whole (Eckstein 2004b.14). Most importantly, just as Homer aligns our perspective with that of Odysseus before exposing his actions and attitudes as morally problematic, Ford implicates his audience in Ethan's racism by first creating sympathy for Ethan and positioning his grudge against Scar as legitimate and then gradually revealing his underlying savagery. As Ethan's quest turns from "search and rescue" to "search and destroy," we may distance ourselves from his objectives, but we retain a sense of kin-

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68 Henderson 2004.71 notes that this relationship is treated carefully: Martin shows no aggressiveness towards Laurie at all and does not accept her advances until he has "proven himself as fully white" by punishing Scar and restoring Debbie.



Figure 7. *The Searchers*, copyright 1956 Warner Bros. Pictures, dir. John Ford.

ship with him and even identify to some extent with his obsessions (Slotkin 1992.463).<sup>69</sup> This process is strengthened by the casting of an “all-American icon” as the film’s hero/anti-hero, which makes it all the more difficult for the audience to view Ethan as a villain and separate themselves from him completely (Eckstein 1998.4, 2004b.3).<sup>70</sup>

Ford also provokes his audience by turning racial categories on their heads—casting a white man as the Comanche chief Scar (figure 7)<sup>71</sup>—and by exposing the white community’s fears about racial “contamination” as baseless. Ethan voices this fear when he and Martin question the mentally disturbed white girl captives that the Seventh Cavalry have recovered from the Comanche. After the Cavalry sergeant remarks: “It’s hard to believe

69 This is a common strategy in ancient tragedy, especially in the plays of Euripides. In *Hecuba* and *Medea*, for example, Euripides first aligns the audience’s sympathy with the title characters so that when they turn to violence and revenge, the viewer becomes silently complicit.

70 See Luhr 2004.75–79 for more on John Wayne’s reception and reputation during this period and 79ff. for Ford’s conscious inversion of Wayne’s heroic image.

71 Henry Brandon was a native of Germany, born Heinrich Kleinbach (McBride 2001.565). Eckstein argues that Brandon’s “striking blue eyes” (see figure 7) are intended to indicate that Scar himself is a product of miscegenation (2004b.13), noting the historical parallel with the blue-eyed Comanche warchief Quannah Parker, son of Cynthia Ann Parker (2004b.40 n. 38). One *Arethusa* reader, however, views Ford’s casting decision more negatively, comparing it to the use of blackface to portray African-Americans.



they're white," Ethan replies: "They ain't white . . . anymore. They're Comanch'." Like Laurie, Ethan regards these women as degraded by their association with the Comanche and their madness as a symptom of their now subhuman status.<sup>72</sup> Debbie herself exposes this fear of contamination as unfounded. When she finally appears onscreen, we find that five years with the Comanche<sup>73</sup> have not destroyed her; instead, she has blossomed into a beautiful, poised, and completely sane young woman (McBride and Wilmington 1975.162, Eckstein 2004b.15).<sup>74</sup>

As the child of Irish Catholic immigrants, Ford generally allied himself with groups that were victimized by racial or religious discrimination.<sup>75</sup> He was a friend to the Navajo, giving them union wages when others were paying Native Americans a mere fifty cents a day, and he arranged a food drop when a blizzard threatened their livelihood, for which he was eventually adopted into their tribe (Gallagher 1986.341).<sup>76</sup> Ironically, the tendency of many viewers and critics has been to identify Ethan's racism as a reflection of Ford's own attitude;<sup>77</sup> others, who accept this film as a commentary on the hypocrisy of racism towards African-Americans, have nonetheless criticized Ford's use of Native Americans as "empty signifiers," a process

72 Winkler 2001.131 suggests that Ethan's racist view is undercut when one of the women breaks into terrified screams at the sight of the sergeant and the doctor who accompanies him, implying that it was not their experiences among Native Americans that has driven these women mad but their treatment at the hands of the Seventh Cavalry. This scene does not appear in LeMay's novel.

73 There is some debate over whether the search in the film lasts five or seven years (see Eckstein 2004b.37 n. 7).

74 Pye (2004.225 and 232) notes that, with his Cherokee ancestry, the "well-balanced Martin," like the "well-integrated" Debbie, suggests at least the possibility of harmonious racial intermixing.

75 Scott Eyman, citing films that include *The Searchers*, argues: "Whether by race or creed, by birth or breeding, Ford believed in fighting for the integration of his characters into the community" (2004.14).

76 According to Harry Goulding, the Navajo dubbed Ford "Natani Nez," meaning "Tall Soldier" (quoted by Cowie 2004.165), an event Cowie dates to the summer of 1955 during filming of *The Searchers* (2004.165). Cowie also points out the "sizeable revenue" that Ford brought to the Navajo community in shooting some seven films on the reservation (2004.162) and says: "From the outset, John Ford used authentic Native Americans in his films and encouraged them to arrive for work wearing their traditional tribal clothes and decorations" (2004.130).

77 See, especially, Pye 2004. Cowie acknowledges that Ford's presentation of Native Americans was sometimes negative (2004.130) and often inauthentic (2004.128, 162), and Thomson goes so far as to call Ford "bigoted" (1994.256). Other sources that dispute this point are noted in Eckstein 2004b.38 n. 12.

that reproduces the racist strategies that denied them their existence in the first place (noted in Eckstein 2004b.9).<sup>78</sup> While there is some argument to be made that Ford's characterization of Native Americans in *The Searchers* implicates him in the very racism he works to condemn,<sup>79</sup> it is notable that some contemporary reviewers took issue with the film's progressive stance, criticizing the "sentimental attitude towards the Indian which is the equivalent of an indictment of the white man" (Courtland Phipps in *Film Review*, quoted by McBride 2001.563). In addition, in this film, Ford juxtaposes patriotic scenes of the Seventh Cavalry—including a bugle-call, eye-catching uniforms, and Custer's spirited marching tune "Garry Owen"—with images of the brutal slaughter of a Comanche village and whipped captives, suggesting that the Seventh Cavalry has here "by-passed its role as a truce-keeper and become a tool of white supremacy" (McBride and Wilmington 1975.158; see also Cowie 2004.124). These scenes, reminiscent of the Washita River massacre of the Cheyenne in 1869 and the massacre of the Dakota Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890 (McBride 2001.564), serve both as a reminder of mistakes that were made with Native Americans in the previous century and as a warning against making the same mistakes again.

Ford's humanization of Native Americans, however minimal it seems today, and his depiction of whites as prone to the same kinds of savagery and violence they saw as characteristic of Native Americans (Eckstein 2004b.12) were groundbreaking in 1956, and actively worked to uproot racist assumptions and encourage the audience to examine their own attitudes. The film's ending, moreover, promotes the racial integration advocated by the Civil Rights movement and ordered by the Supreme Court in *Brown vs.*

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78 In an interview recounted in McBride 2001.566, Henry Brandon reports that Ford drew heavily on Navajo and Nez Perce details in his representation of the Comanche without regard for historical accuracy, in effect denying Native Americans individual identity.

79 For example, Eckstein 2004b.11 points out that Ford generally depicts the Comanche in this film as "ferocious and frightening figures," while Kalinak 2004.130 and Colonnese 2004.337–38 note Ford's use of stereotypical musical clichés in association with Native Americans. Ford himself recognized both the negative aspects of his use of Native Americans in film and the hypocrisy with which Native Americans have been treated in the United States in general when he acknowledged: "I've killed more Indians than Custer, Beecher, and Chivington put together . . . Let's face it, we've treated them very badly—it's a blot on our shield; we've cheated and robbed, killed, murdered, massacred and everything else, but they kill one white man and, God, out come the troops" (quoted by Cowie 2004.151). Colonnese 2004 provides an overview of problems with the depiction of Native Americans in *The Searchers*, and Giannetti and Eyman 2001.371, Colonnese 2004.341–42, and Grimsted 2004.305 note stereotyped depictions of other minority groups as well.

the Board of Education when the Jorgensens embrace Debbie in her Indian attire and Ethan steps aside to make way for the new order (McBride and Wilmington 1975.162).<sup>80</sup> Although Ford's racial commentary is not unproblematic, in significant ways, *The Searchers* promotes racial tolerance and integration, an attitude that had not previously been set forth in the Western genre. Nor does Ford exclude himself from indictment: as Michael Böhnke suggests: "In this film, Ford . . . reveals the racism and assumptions of cultural superiority which were usually suppressed or unquestioned in other Westerns, even in Ford's former work" (2001.60).

Ford's indictment of racist ideologies and his subtle promotion of racial integration in this film are consistent with his defense of other oppressed groups, such as those targeted in the 1940s and 50s by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).<sup>81</sup> In HUAC's investigations into alleged Communist activities, many artists and entertainers were questioned, and those who refused to cooperate were blacklisted. Critics protested that the Committee violated First Amendment rights; Ford himself was disgusted by the blacklisting of the McCarthy era and proclaimed that he would hire anyone labeled a "commie bastard" (Gallagher 1986.340).<sup>82</sup>

80 The film's resolution, admittedly, requires the annihilation of the Nawyucky Comanche. Additionally, Eckstein 2004b.3 notes that this ending also can be seen to promote racial *separation*—Debbie is restored to the white community, and, with Look dead, Martin is free to marry Laurie—in accordance with the Motion Picture Production Code's anti-miscegenation stance in effect during the filming of *The Searchers* in the summer of 1955. Eckstein goes on to argue, however, that Ford subtly reinforced his message of racial tolerance through Ethan's famous stance in this final scene: he holds his right arm as if in pain (see fig. 1), a gesture Wayne spontaneously inserted as an homage to Harry Carey, Sr., the late husband of Olive Carey (Ms. Jorgenson). In a scene that appears earlier in the movie but filmed after the final scene, Ford had Wayne reiterate this pose when his character expresses the hope that the Comanche themselves will kill Debbie in the Rangers' raid. By reusing this gesture, Ford reminds us of Ethan's earlier racist intentions and drives home the reason for his exclusion (Eckstein 1998.17 and 2004b.29).

81 Grimsted 2004.295 identifies the Cold War as LeMay's primary focus of interest in the source novel, while Slotkin 1992.462 sees the film as a "Cold War Western" in which Ford issues a warning about the dangers of U.S. military interference abroad. Ironically, LeMay and Ford's use of the Western genre for this kind of exploration anticipated the later exploitation of myths of the West as propaganda in the Vietnam War. John F. Kennedy's ambassador to Vietnam justified stepping up military activities by explaining that the "Indians" needed to be moved away from the "fort" so that the "settlers" could plant "corn," and, by 1967, American troops were describing Vietnam as "Indian country" and search-and-destroy missions as games of "cowboys and Indians" (Slotkin 1992.3).

82 For more thorough discussions of Ford's political leanings and their relationship to his films, see Gallagher 1986.338ff. and Grimsted 2004.292ff. Giannetti and Eymann offer a

Ford acted on his convictions as well, casting Pippa Scott in *The Searchers*, although her entire family had been blacklisted since 1948 because of her uncle Adrian Scott's Communist connections (Eckstein 2004b.39 n. 28). Additionally, during the Spanish Civil War, Ford was an active member of the Motion Picture Artists Committee to Aid Republican Spain, a group organized by Dorothy Parker and Lillian Hellman to support the Communist-backed Loyalists in Spain against a rising dictatorship supported by the fascist regimes already in place in Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy (Belton 1994.236). In light of his active opposition to prejudice and discrimination and his film's progressive message, Ford's decision to cast John Wayne and Ward Bond in lead roles initially seems odd: in the early 1950s, Wayne had a reputation as an anti-Semite and red-baiter, while Bond was president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, an organization whose objective was to help HUAC root out Communists (Gallagher 1986.339).<sup>83</sup> However, Ford casts Wayne and Bond as two of the characters who demonstrate some of the film's most profound prejudice, and his use of actors who apparently stood in opposition to his progressive ideals may have been intended as irony to make his message all the more powerful.

## CONCLUSION

Ford's complex treatment of the usual "us versus them" theme works as a timely commentary not only on issues of race but on other types of discrimination as well. His film, therefore, serves as a subtle yet effective vehicle for enlightening the audience about the dangers inherent in these kinds of divisive categorizations. By locating the roots of these divisions in the ancient world and emphasizing the interchangeability of the objects of hatred, Ford illustrates that racism and other prejudices stem from a recurring pattern of exclusion of the Other as a scapegoat for weaknesses in the self, revealing more about a need or lack in the subject than about deficiencies in the object towards which hostility is directed.

While Ford likely did not consciously model his film on the

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different perspective, positioning Ford as an "industry conservative" who jumped on the anti-blacklisting bandwagon rather late in the game (2001.264).

83 Henry Brandon, who played Scar, alleged that Bond and Hedda Hopper personally ran the blacklist and put numerous actors and directors out of work (quoted by McBride 2001.568).

*Odyssey*, the pervasive connections between the two works demonstrate that *The Searchers* is heir to the Homeric tradition in not only the literary but in the cultural and ideological senses as well. With *The Searchers*, Ford destabilized the simple heroic vision that the public had come to expect from the Western, complicating the categories of us and them and forcing reconsideration of this dichotomy (McBride and Wilmington 1975.148). As in Homer's *Odyssey*, the complex attitude Ford's narrative voice takes towards the hero forces the audience to question his values and assumptions for themselves. Homer's story of Odysseus persists because of its sophisticated use of a multi-faceted hero and its complex presentation of both individual and group identities. In his film, Ford utilizes similar strategies to communicate the reasons behind and the dangers inherent in prejudice based on racial, political, and national categories. While Ford's message had a particular relevance in the social climate of mid 1950s America, A. O. Scott sees Ford's films in general as "overtly concerned with the kind of moral argument that is, or should be, at the center of American political discourse at a time of war and terrorism. He is concerned not as much with the conflict between good and evil as with contradictory notions of right, with the contradictory tensions that bedevil people who are, in the larger scheme, on the same side" (2006). As with Homer's epics, Ford's use of ancient and enduring mythological motifs in *The Searchers* encourages us to question our own social codes and to examine the assumptions that inform current American political discourse rather than accept them blindly.

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