

Reading Part 4

Read the text and answer the questions. Use a maximum of five words for each question.

The Western

Westerns are the major defining genre of the American film industry, even though the 21st century has been the least prolific period of producing such films. The popularity of westerns has waxed and waned over the years and whether the genre will emerge from today's trough and again reach its former dizzy heights of popularity remains to be seen.

The western is possibly the prime means by which America interprets and represents its history to itself. This American art form focuses on the frontier West that existed in North America. Usually set during the last part of the 19th century following the Civil War, westerns often portray the conquest of the wilderness in the name of civilisation alongside the removal of the territorial rights of the original inhabitants.

For fans of the western, the allure is the lack of a complicated plot. That said, within westerns there are often complex moral issues that need to be resolved – different issues but all based on a small staple of situations and plots: ranchers v. farmers, Native Americans v. settlers, outlaws v. civilised communities.

The western has left an indelible mark on the world. Thanks to Hollywood, we are all aware of the iconic elements of the western – the gun, the Stetson hat, the stagecoach, the myths and legends of the West. The specific settings, such as ranch houses, isolated forts, saloons and the small town in the middle of nowhere are ubiquitous in everyone's images of a western film. Nevertheless, the eye marvels at the vast, empty prairies, the snow-capped peaks and, most memorable of all, the red rock monoliths of Monument Valley.

It's interesting to note that the first commercial, narrative film was a western: *The Great Train Robbery*, which came out in 1903. Yet the setting for Sam Peckinpah's controversial and graphically violent film *The Wild Bunch* is set in 1913, a full decade after audiences watched the first western film. One result of this overlap was that some of the real heroes of the West actually ended up in Hollywood. Wyatt Earp, a major subject of many western films and TV programmes, best known for his participation in the gunfight at the OK Corral, died in 1929, a consultant in the film industry.

The western itself grew in status with the development of the Hollywood studio system. But the early western films, devoid of the sound of gunfire and horses' hoof-beats, were limited in scope, although the best ones established the archetypes that are part of the genre today: good versus bad, a wrongdoing such as a robbery, pursuit and the final showdown.

The genre was hardly prominent in the 1930s. This was not surprising given the technical difficulties at the time with sound recording in the open air – an issue that took time to surmount. Moreover, the studios wanted to exploit the spoken word and the cowboy, like most western heroes, was seldom a loquacious man. What happened was a change to non-violent westerns called 'singing cowboy films', which highlighted the musical and singing talent of their stars. This sub-genre made the studios and stars rich but did little for the integrity of the western itself.

Yet in the following decades, the genre was revived to such a point that the 1940s and 1950s became the heyday of the classic western film, with emphasis on action and character now filmed in glorious colour. From the 1960s, Westerns began to change: the genre became more violent; revisionist films began to show an increasingly positive image of the Native Americans, who had been treated as savages in earlier films; no longer would heroes simply wear a white and villains a black hat.

1. Which period is the backdrop for most Westerns?

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2. What did Native Americans lose during this period?

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3. How do fans find the generally simple plots of Westerns?

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4. Which specific location is named as an iconic backdrop for many Western films?

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5. Which famous event did Wyatt Earp participate in?

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6. How were the early Westerns limited in scope?

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7. What characterised the 'singing cowboy' films?

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8. How did revisionist films portray the Native Americans?

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