Western Genre Themes

* Portrays the conquest of the wilderness and the subordination of nature in the name of civilization or the confiscation of the territorial rights of the original inhabitants of the frontier.
* The Western depicts a society organized around codes of honour and personal, direct or private justice (such as the [feud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feud) in which [social order](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_order) is maintained predominately through relatively impersonal institutions.
* The popular perception of the Western is a story that centres on the life of a semi-[nomadic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nomad) wanderer, usually a [cowboy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cowboy) or a [gunfighter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunfighter).
* In some ways, such protagonists may be considered the literary descendants of the [knight errant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knight_errant) which stood at the center of earlier extensive genres such as the [Arthurian Romances](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Arthur). Like the cowboy or gunfighter of the Western, the knight errant of the earlier European tales and poetry was wandering from place to place on his horse, fighting villains of various kinds and bound to no fixed social structures but only to his own innate code of honor. And like knights errant, the heroes of Westerns frequently rescue [damsels in distress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Damsel_in_distress). Similarly, the wandering protagonists of Westerns share many of the characteristics equated with the image of the [ronin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronin) in modern Japanese culture.
* The Western typically takes these elements and uses them to tell simple [morality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morality) tales, although some notable examples (e.g. the later Westerns of John Ford or Clint Eastwood's [*Unforgiven*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unforgiven)) are more morally ambiguous.
* Westerns often stress the harshness of the wilderness and frequently set the action in an arid, desolate landscape. Specific settings include isolated forts, ranches and homesteads; the [Native American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States) village; or the small frontier town with its saloon, general store, livery stable and jailhouse.
* Apart from the wilderness, it is usually the saloon that emphasizes that this is the "[Wild West](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_West)": it is the place to go for music (raucous piano playing), women (often prostitutes), gambling (draw poker or five card stud), drinking (beer or whiskey), brawling and shooting.
* In some Westerns, where "civilization" has arrived, the town has a church and a school; in others, where frontier rules still hold sway, it is, as [Sergio Leone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergio_Leone) said, "where life has no value".
* The [American Film Institute](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Film_Institute) defines western films as those "set in the American West that embody the spirit, the struggle and the demise of the [new frontier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frontier_Thesis)."
* The term *Western*, used to describe a narrative film genre, appears to have originated with a July 1912 article in *Motion Picture World* Magazine.
* Most of the characteristics of Western films were part of 19th century popular [Western fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_fiction) and were firmly in place before film became a popular art form.
* Western films commonly feature as their [protagonists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protagonist) stock characters such as cowboys, gunslingers, and bounty hunters, often depicted as semi-nomadic wanderers who wear [Stetson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stetson) hats, [bandannas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerchief), [spurs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spur), and [buckskins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buckskins), use [revolvers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolver) or [rifles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rifle) as everyday tools of survival, and ride between dusty towns and cattle ranches on trusty [steeds](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horse).
* Western films were enormously popular in the silent era. However, with the advent of sound in 1927-28 the major Hollywood studios rapidly abandoned Westerns, leaving the genre to smaller studios and producers, who churned out countless low-budget features and serials in the 1930s. By the late 1930s the Western film was widely regarded as a 'pulp' genre in Hollywood, but its popularity was dramatically revived in 1939 by such major studio productions as [*Dodge City*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodge_City_%281939_film%29) (starring [Errol Flynn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Errol_Flynn)), [*Jesse James*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse_James_%28film%29) (with [Tyrone Power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyrone_Power) in the title role), [*Union Pacific*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_Pacific) (with [Joel McCrea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joel_McCrea)), [*Destry Rides Again*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destry_Rides_Again) (featuring [James Stewart](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stewart) in his first western,supported by [Marlene Dietrich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marlene_Dietrich)) and perhaps most notably, the release of John Ford's landmark Western adventure [*Stagecoach*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stagecoach_%281939_film%29), which became one of the biggest hits of the year released though United Artists, and made [John Wayne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wayne) a mainstream screen star in the wake of a decade of headlining [B westerns](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B_westerns). Wayne had been introduced to the screen ten years earlier as the [leading man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leading_man) in director [Raoul Walsh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raoul_Walsh)'s [widescreen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Widescreen) classic [*The Big Trail*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Big_Trail), which failed at the box office due to exhibitors' inability to switch over to widescreen during the [Depression](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression).
* Western films often depict conflicts with [Native Americans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States). While early Eurocentric Westerns frequently portray the "Injuns" as dishonorable villains, the later and more culturally neutral Westerns (notably those directed by [John Ford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ford)) gave native Americans a more sympathetic treatment. Other recurring themes of Westerns include Western treks or perilous journeys (e.g. *Stagecoach*) or groups of [bandits](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal) terrorising small towns such as in [*The Magnificent Seven*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Magnificent_Seven).
* Early Westerns were mostly filmed in the studio, just like other early Hollywood films, but when location shooting became more common from the 1930s, producers of Westerns used desolate corners of [Arizona](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arizona), [California](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California), [Colorado](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colorado), [Kansas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kansas), [Montana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montana), [Nevada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nevada), [New Mexico](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Mexico), [Oklahoma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oklahoma), [Texas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas), [Utah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utah), or [Wyoming](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wyoming). Productions were also filmed on location at [movie ranches](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Movie_ranches).
* Often, the vast landscape becomes more than a vivid backdrop; it becomes a character in the film. After the early 1950s, various wide screen formats such as [cinemascope](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinemascope) (1953) and [VistaVision](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VistaVision) used the expanded width of the screen to display spectacular Western landscapes. [John Ford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ford)'s use of [Monument Valley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monument_Valley) as an expressive landscape in his films from [*Stagecoach*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stagecoach_%281939_film%29) (1939) to [*Cheyenne Autumn*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheyenne_Autumn) (1965) "present us with a mythic vision of the plains and deserts of the American West, embodied most memorably in Monument Valley, with its buttes and mesas that tower above the men on horseback, whether they be settlers, soldiers, or Native American