

John Huston's *The Misfits* (1961): The Failure of the Western Mythos

"Well, it's an Eastern western. The preoccupation of the film is not what it usually is in a western film. It's about people trying to connect and afraid to connect."—Arthur Miller

Huston's *The Misfits*, written by Arthur Miller, was also the last film with either Clark Gable or Marilyn Monroe. The film was not particularly successful with audiences because Huston and Miller evoked the Hollywood mystique of Gable and Monroe in order to dismantle their typical personas, though many critics now consider them the best performances either actor gave in a film. The film also acts to critique and deconstruct many of the values of the Western mythos, including views of the cowboy, freedom, the land, home and town, the Western woman, the sidekick, and the notion of heroic violence.

In our unit on the Cowboy as Hero, we touched on some of the following tropes of the western film:

1. *Covenantal*: The cowboy is shaped by Puritan ideals—inward self-possession; ethical consistency; physical as spiritual survival; calmness before a dangerous world.
2. *Hobbesian Nature*: If the world back East is orderly and enlightened, the West is still too often "Nature red in tooth and claw."
3. *Jeffersonian Democracy*: Property, especially of the yeoman farmer, is sacred and idealized. The commoner is highly valued and the rural community in general has common sense and native goodness.
4. *Family as Bedrock beneath the Individual Hero*: The individual family is assumed to be the basic element of society, far more important than the social polity. The individualistic hero is on the border of the family, bound to it yet often still outside it.
5. *American Populism*: The common people are naturally moral and their livelihood should be protected; however, ethnic "others" are often left out of this equation and excluded.
6. *Manifest Destiny*: American expansion across the "unsettled" territories is assumed quite often as a given aspect of Enlightenment Progress.

How does the film rework and even challenge these values associated with the West and the western?



Exploratory Questions

- Can the western and/or cowboy ideal survive in modern America?
- Is freedom possible in the modern wage economy?
- Is family possible in a culture of divorce and freedom?



Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to be a “misfit”?
2. How are the various characters pursuing freedom, love, or home?
3. How are they struggling with truth and lies? promises and limits?
4. How do the characters define true love and its standards?
5. What kind of person is Gay? Is Roslyn? Is Guido? Is Isabelle? Is Perce?
6. Gay describes his home as the land about Reno. What role does the land play in the film?
7. Is Guido’s home a symbol in the film? What does it represent?
8. What is the gift of life? How do you define cruelty in regard to the animal world? the human world?
9. Are rodeos cruel to animals and people?
10. Why does the West “grind up” women?
11. What is the significance of the paddle-ball scene?
12. How does the extended sequence surrounding the capture of the misfit mustangs bring into focus most of the film’s major themes?
13. How does the film’s cinematography reinforce these values?
14. What do you make of the ending of the film? ("How do we get home?" "We'll follow that star and we'll get there.")