

"LAWRENCE OF ARABIA" BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The war between the Allies and Turkey in the Middle East during the First World War was seen by many combatants as being merely a sideshow to the 'real' war that was taking place in France. Unlike the war in France, which was confined to the trenches, the Middle Eastern war ranged over huge distances.



One particular aspect of the war was the use made by the British of Arab irregulars, often under the command of British officers, against the Turks. It was in this area that T. E. Lawrence, "Lawrence of Arabia", rose to fame. The Arab revolt, of which he was a part, saw as its aim the self-governing of Arabia by the Arab sheiks. However, the British and French had other ideas and were looking to extend their influence over the oil rich territories which, after the fall of the Turkish Empire, they saw themselves as administrating. It is against this background that the events of the film "Lawrence of Arabia" take place.

T. E. LAWRENCE AND "LAWRENCE OF ARABIA"

Thomas Edward Lawrence was born in 1888. During his studies at Oxford, he went to Egypt in order to carry out research into crusader castles, and whilst there became fascinated by Arabia and the Arab way of life. With the outbreak of the First World War he joined the Army and, because of his knowledge of Arabic and Arabia, was immediately sent to the region as part of the Intelligence Services. As an adviser to Prince Feisal he was a key figure in the Arab Revolt against the Turks. At the end of the war he returned to England, trying to escape from the legend that he had become. He joined the R.A.F. and then the Tank Corps as a private soldier under a false name, but his true identity was eventually revealed. In 1935 he was killed in a motorcycle accident.

The fascinating aspect of Lawrence was his character. Over 30 biographies have been written about him, most presenting him in a completely different light, some idolising him, others exposing him. He was certainly a complex character, by turns warrior, intellectual, politician, recluse.

THE FILM

"Lawrence of Arabia" was first released in 1962 and was awarded 7 Oscars. Why should the film be re-released 27 years later? Despite the fact that on its first release it was hailed as a masterpiece, the fact remains that the film itself was cut in several places in order to reduce its running time. This was seen to be necessary in order that the film could be screened a certain number of

times per day in cinemas. Originally lasting 222 minutes, on its first release 20 minutes were removed. In 1970 a further 15 minutes were removed, reducing the length to 187 minutes.

The new print restores the lost material and also a number of scenes which were missing from the original print, so that many aspects of the original film, which at first seemed confusing, now are explained.

TYPES OF FILM

Most feature films made for a mass audience can be fairly easily categorised within a recognised range of subject matter.

eg: Western Comedy Musical
 Science Fiction Historical Romance
 Horror War Biopic
 Epic Thriller

Each of these categories will bring to mind various ideas which, through our past viewing of similar films, we come to associate with each category.

Certain features may be common to more than one kind of film. Certain films may be a combination of more than one genre

We use these categories, or 'labels' to make selection and understanding easier for ourselves when we decide to go and see a film. The film industry also finds it easier to market their product according to readily understood labels.

a) How would you describe "Lawrence of Arabia", using the categories listed above? You may need to think of other categories.

b) From the way that you have described it, what, therefore, would you expect normally be of this type of film?

c) Can you think of any other films which are similar to 'Lawrence of Arabia'?

d) Having seen "Lawrence of Arabia", consider how the film conformed to your expectations, and in which ways (if any) it

differed from them.

THE OPENING OF THE FILM

As a 'reader' of films, you have already started to impose meanings on the film even before you have seen it. Because you have described it in certain ways, then you will be expecting certain things to happen within the story.

From both a filmmaker's and an audience's point of view, the opening of a film is very important. It must grip an audience's attention and also, possibly confirm some of the expectations that the audience has of the film.

Think about the opening of "Lawrence of Arabia". It consisted of a number of sections.

1. Credit sequence displayed over Lawrence cleaning and repairing his motorcycle
2. Lawrence riding the motorcycle and his death
3. The memorial service for Lawrence

The film makers can give clues as to what is happening or what will happen through what is shown and heard.

There may be a credit sequence giving the names of those who made the film. This can provide clues as to what kind of film it will be

- There can be music, sound effects and dialogue
- There can be different kinds of camera shots and movement

These can convey something about the kind of story it will be through showing:

Setting - the place where the story begins

Costumes - the clothes suggesting what kind of people the characters may be

Objects or belongings

Behaviour – what the characters do, how they look or move, what they say.

The filmmakers can also use colours to draw your attention to certain things or create mood. From what happens you may recognise a particular genre or type of film and guess at what the story will be like

TASK

Working in groups, try to remember what you thought was happening in the opening sections of the film and also why these had been included, whether you expected anything to happen that did not, and how you expected the rest of the film to develop.

Make a chart. Fill in the right hand boxes with anything that you have learnt in these first three sequences of the film. It could be about when the action takes place, which type of characters are being presented to us, anything that comes to mind. Put each point in a new box. In the left-hand box, write down how the filmmaker gave you this information. Look at the list of clues above which might give you some ideas

Perhaps the key question to ask, after you have completed this task, is why the film started with what we later discover are events which take place after the main action of the film.

THE ART OF NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

So far we have looked at what type of film “Lawrence of Arabia” is and also what expectations are raised by the opening sequence. These ideas have been given to us through what we have seen on the screen, by the ‘clues’ which the director gives us.

Let us now consider the plot of the film.

PLOTTING

“Lawrence of Arabia” tells the story of T. E. Lawrence’s mission to organise Arab resistance against the Turks during the First World War. Through the help of Prince Feisal, he unites the Arab tribes and captures the Turkish stronghold of Aqaba. He is captured by the Turks in Derra and tortured. This changes his attitude towards the Turks and the war, and just before the Arab capture of Damascus he orders the massacre of a Turkish column. Following the capture of Damascus, he is sent back to England. Many years later he dies in a motorcycle accident

One could say that this is the briefest possible of plot outlines for the film. Certain events are missed out.

– What else is missing from this sort of synopsis of “Lawrence of Arabia”?

What does it not tell us about the film?

It may give us some details about certain events, but does it tell us what the film is **about**?

TASK

Look at the following statements. Which of these give a good description of the film? Try to list them in order of importance. Can you think of any other short descriptions which say what the film is about?
story. When you have done this, write down a list of the events and action in the film that gave you these ideas.

- a) The film is about the politics of the Middle East during the First World War.
- b) The film tells us about the character of Lawrence.
- c) The film is about the effects of war on people.
- d) The film shows the difficulty of a Westerner being accepted by the Arabs.
- e) The film shows the stupidity of the Generals.
- f) The film shows how racist the British Army was.
- g) The film is about man’s struggle with nature.

By now you will have an idea of what the film is about as well as what happens in it. What we see gives us ideas and attitudes towards the characters and events.

As an example, let us look at the character of Auda Abu Tayi (played by Anthony Quinn).

It is the narrative .what is contained within the narrative .which guides us to an understanding of events and characters.

In a couple of sentences, try to describe what type of person he is within the story. When you have done this, write down a list of the events and action in the film that gave you these ideas.

It is the narrative - what is contained within the narrative- that guides us to an understanding of events and characters. Each part of a narrative should fulfil a particular function with regard to the themes and character portrayals in the film.

TASK

You will be given a large sheet with a number of boxes on it. Each box is numbered. In each box write down each section of the film. You will probably need to do this in groups, so as to remember as much of the film as possible. Within each box you may want to give more information about a section. So, for example, in the scene dealing with the memorial service at the cathedral, you may put in two sections:

- a) Discussion about the character of Lawrence inside the cathedral.
- b) The various characters commenting on the character of Lawrence outside the cathedral.

In each box you should also include which characters are present in the scene.

NARRATIVE ACTIVITIES

Using the chart that you have completed, you should now attempt the following tasks:

- a) Choose any three episodes from the film. Try to explain why they are important to the film overall.
- b) Reflections – are there any events in the film which mirror each other? So, for example, are there any events which take place in the same setting – the officers' mess for example? How do events in the same place show any changes either in characters or in situations?
- c) Rhythm – one French critic has pointed out that epic scenes are balanced in the film with scenes of 'intimacy', containing only a few

Think of the scene where Ali first appears out of the desert. There is a long shot of 'something' appearing out of the heat haze. Can you remember how the scene develops? How are subjective and objective shots combined?

What other moments are there in the film where the point of view that we are given helps build up a sense of danger or surprise?

characters. Look at your chart to see if this is true. If it is, try to explain why you think that the director structured the film in this way. Are there any other 'rhythms' within the film? Any other contrasts?

- d) What scenes occur where Lawrence is not present? How are these important to the narrative?

POINT OF VIEW

Most narrative films present the audience with a **story** which is seen from the outside' – **objectively**. We watch the characters behaving in the events which make up the story. The story is usually made up from events arranged **chronologically**, that is, one after another in the order in which they are supposed to have happened in the film's story. The script, the filming and the editing will be used to concentrate upon important events for the story and to leave out anything unnecessary – someone may leave one place and then be seen arriving somewhere else with the unimportant journey left out.

- Can you think of any moments in "Lawrence of Arabia" when this happened?

However, films can also at certain moments suggest the experience of one particular character to the audience – a **subjective view**. This is quite often used in films and mixed with **objective** sequences. For moments of danger or fear, characters' reactions can be shown before what they are looking at is seen. Alternatively, suspense can be created by arranging either the shots, or the order of shots, so that it is clear to the audience that some danger is present but the characters do not see it.

TASK

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remember how the scene develops? How are subjective and objective shots combined?

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THE CHARACTER OF LAWRENCE

When you were completing work on what you thought the film was about, one of the key areas that you may have isolated is the character of Lawrence himself.

_ Would you say that the film explored a character within a war, or does it show war through a number of characters?

In a written text, a character can be described through words. A writer can actually say that a character has changed. In a film this has to be done in a different way.

_In what ways can a film director show that a character is changing?

TASK

Examine the shots which show Lawrence at various moments in the film. First, try to relate each of these stills to a scene in the film on your narrative chart.

When you have done this, try to say how each still shows a change in Lawrence.

When Lawrence joins Feisal and the Arabs, he seems to take part in Arab life eventually adopting Arab dress

Think of all of the different settings that Lawrence appears in. What do his actions in each tell us about him? Also, what does each setting tell us about the people who normally inhabit them?

A key scene shows Lawrence bringing his Arab boy into the officers' mess in Cairo. This scene demonstrates quite sharply the difference in outlook between Lawrence and the other officers. How, also, does it relate to the earlier scene set in the officers' mess when Lawrence interrupts a game of snooker?

How do we react to the officers' response to Lawrence and the boy? Do we sympathise with Lawrence or not? Give reasons for your answer.

Does Lawrence's attitude to his task in the war change at any time? What causes any changes in attitude?
How are we shown these events in the film?

"DO YOU THINK YOU ARE A GOD?"

As the revolt in the desert seems to grind to a halt, this is what Ali asks Lawrence. After Ali has said this, however, life changes drastically and unexpectedly for Lawrence. He is captured and tortured by the Turks and, for a time, wants to become 'an ordinary human being'. He seems as if he has lost any moral sense of his mission and is merely interested in killing Turks as if for revenge.

When he leaves Arabia at the end of the film, might his attitudes have changed in any significant way, or do you think he is the same?

Why does he not respond to the question of whether he is looking forward to going back to Britain?

- a) What do you think are the most crucial ways in which Lawrence's attitudes to life and the war differ from those of the Arabs and the British that we see? Try to think of at least three points on each side, and list them in order of importance.
- b) Do you think his attitude towards the Arabs and their beliefs stays the same during the film, or do you think it changes in any way? Can you think of any scenes in the film to support your answer?

OTHER CHARACTERS

During the real events on which the film is based, Lawrence was in contact with many hundreds of Arabs and British officers. Within the film, however, this number is severely reduced to a few key individuals. In many ways, each of these individual characters must carry the weight and importance which, in real life, might have been split between several people. Why do you think that filmmakers present us with a small number of important characters, instead of a large number of minor characters?

First, describe each one, and then try to say what they represent in the film, what they stand for. As before, try to say which events within the film give you these ideas.

What does each of these characters contribute to our understanding of Lawrence?

During the film, there are many shots of the desert. In what ways could the desert be called a character in the film? Why should there be so many shots of the landscape?

TWO WORLDS

If the desert is important in the film, then we can certainly say that the filmmakers use it as a contrast to life in the city or towns. Look back at your narrative chart. What is the proportion of the action which takes place in the desert compared to the action which takes place in the towns?

In what ways is Lawrence a different person in the desert compared to the towns?

VIOLENCE AND “LAWRENCE OF ARABIA”

We expect a certain level of violence in a ‘war’ film, and many war films (as well as many other kinds of film) achieve popularity because of their violent content.

Would you consider “Lawrence of Arabia” more or less violent than other war films that you have seen?
Is there any difference between the way violence is depicted in “Lawrence of Arabia” and in, say, recent war films set in Vietnam?

Each scene of violence in “Lawrence of Arabia” has significant consequences in terms of the overall plot. This is most obvious in the massacre of the Turkish column. Why is this scene important in the film?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. It has been said that all stories are in the form of a quest, a search for something, the answer to a question. In what ways is the story told in “Lawrence of Arabia” a quest? How is the story constructed, so that at its conclusion, we feel the problem set out at the beginning of the film has been answered?
2. In what ways does “Lawrence of Arabia” construct characters and help us to understand them?
3. Explain the use of objective shots and subjective shots within “Lawrence of Arabia”. How do they affect our understanding of what is happening? From whose point of view is the film told?
4. “Lawrence of Arabia” is nothing more than a war story, with its heroes and villains.’ Do you agree with this statement? In what ways is “Lawrence of Arabia” more complex than this?