

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)



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.

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.

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.

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.

FINAL TASK

"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?