

# Teaching John Sayles' *Lone Star*: A Guide for Teachers of Grades 10-12

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## Introduction

John Sayles' 1996 film *Lone Star* is an examination of the ways in which individuals make sense of concepts such as heritage and history in their own lives. Through his characters, Sayles illustrates that history is a collection of individual stories told from diverse and often contradictory points of view. Using a dual storyline set in the 1950s and the 1990s the film looks at how Tejanos, African-Americans, Native Americans, Mexicans and Anglo-Americans in Frontera, Texas interact with each other and deal with the actions of generations past. *Lone Star* is a film that asks viewers to reconsider simplified notions of history and race. Throughout the course of the film Sayles suggests that those who inhabit the present are very much burdened by history, that children cannot escape the legacies of their parents and that the easy resolutions of the traditional western genre are unworkable in a contemporary multicultural environment.

Because of the numerous issues it addresses *Lone Star* can be used to study a variety of topics including:

- ❖ Multiculturalism in America
- ❖ History of the Southwest
- ❖ Immigration history and related labor issues
- ❖ Historiography
- ❖ The Western Genre.

## Plot Summary/Analysis

In present day Frontera Sheriff Sam Deeds is called to investigate the discovery of a body. Deeds immediately suspects that the remains of Charley Wade, the notorious sheriff, missing for some forty years, have been found. As Deeds conducts his investigation the film alternates between Wade's administration and Deeds' and in doing so examines the state of relations between the white, Tejano, African-American and Native American communities in the past and the present. As the plot moves along Sam examines his father's hero status, reconnects with his high school sweetheart and drudges up memories that most of Frontera's inhabitants would rather forget.

Sam Deeds, as the Frontera's residents continually mention, can't hold a candle to the memory of his father, Buddy Deeds, also longtime sheriff, Korean war hero and legend in Frontera. As the film reveals, Buddy Deeds' hero status was not entirely deserved; Buddy was simply a welcome relief from Charley Wade, his predecessor, whom most people assume Buddy killed. As Sam investigates the found remains, he comes into contact with the residents of Frontera who relate memories of the past and their experiences in the present. These characters create a variety of subplots:

Colonel Delmore Payne, an African-American Army officer, who relocates his family to Frontera's Fort McKenzie, an Army base slated to be closed. Payne's estranged father, Otis, lives in Frontera and is proprietor of the local black bar, Big O's, "the only place where our people feel comfortable." Delmore Payne continues to harbor resentment against his father for abandoning the family for another woman when Delmore was a child. Delmore Payne's relationship with his own son Chet is also strained as Payne imposes a stringent military-style upbringing on Chet. Chet seeks out a relationship with his grandfather and is surprised to learn from Otis, who also runs a small private museum, that he is part Seminole Indian. In an exchange between the two Sayles explores the notion of race—is Chet black or Native American? On the army base, Delmore Payne finds that a private under his command has tested positive for drug use; an exchange between the private and Payne explores the role of the African American in the military.

Pilar, a Tejana school teacher and Sam's love interest, also has a difficult relationship with her mother, Mercedes Cruz, owner of the local café. While Pilar teaches history and wants to make connections with her past her mother refuses to speak Spanish, claims to be Spanish rather than Mexican, and informs the border patrol of illegal aliens. For Mercedes Cruz, national identity is clearly bound up with class, however as the film continues it is revealed that Mercedes entered the country illegally as a young girl. Contemporary immigration issues are also studied via Enrique, a waiter in Mercedes' café, who aids several friends to cross the river as "wetbacks."

In several important scenes issues of power in the community are suggested by discussions of how to structure the school's history curriculum, the development of a lake which destroys a poor but long-established neighborhood, the building of a prison, the upcoming sheriff election and the naming of a local courthouse. In these scenes Frontera's residents debate what it means to live in a multicultural world.

Through several shots of Sam conducting interviews, poring over old police records and examining his father's personal papers, Sayles makes clear that Sam is not only a detective, he is a historian of sorts. The film's historical references and intergenerational conflicts point out that history is not a distant idea contained in schoolbooks but a notion that is confronted on a daily basis by Frontera's inhabitants. The film makes numerous verbal and visual references to the Alamo: (Pilar hangs an image of the Alamo on the blackboard; Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett, heroes of the Alamo are mentioned; at the souvenir stand the vendor, holding a radio in the shape of the Alamo, mentions "nobody buys this stuff anymore;" Pilar says "Forget the Alamo;" a bartender mentions "the last stand;" an African-American tells his Hispanic jailer, "You chumps ain't had a good day since the Alamo") because it is one example of a complex historical event reduced to legend in print and film. In numerous books, articles, comic books, television shows and films the battle has been depicted as a fight between Caucasian Americans and swarthy Mexicans and has notoriously overlooked the participation of Tejanos, Texans of Mexican origin, who fought for Texan independence. The legend ignores the role that slavery played in the battle and the failure of Anglo Texans to make good on promises to learn Spanish and convert to Catholicism in exchange for large land grants. In *Lone Star*

Sayles takes on not only the battle of the Alamo but also the numerous versions of the story deployed in popular culture that reduce it to a tale of good guys and bad guys.

A second theme, one that is derived from the Alamo legend, is the notion of borders and boundaries. Taking a cue from numerous Alamo movies which feature Travis and Bowie allowing men to leave the soon to be doomed mission by crossing a line drawn in the sand (something most historians agree never happened) Sayles explores the arbitrary notion of these lines and what it means when people who share a common culture are divided by them.

### **Film Specifics**

Directed, written and edited by John Sayles. Produced by Maggie Renzi and Paul Miller for Rio Dulce and Castle Rock Entertainment; released by Sony Pictures Classic. Released June 1996. Running time: 134 minutes. Rated R.

### Cast

Sam Deeds	Chris Cooper
Pilar	Elizabeth Pena
Charley Wade	Kris Kristofferson
Buddy Deeds	Matthew McConaughey
Delmore Payne	Joe Morton
Otis Payne	Ron Canada
Mayor Hollis Pogue	Clifton James
Mercedes Cruz	Miriam Colon
Bunny	Frances McDormand

### **Suggestions for Using the Film**

Because of the nonlinear way the dual plotline unfolds and the numerous characters involved in the film's relatively quick scenes it is suggested that students view the film in its entirety. This guide will break *Lone Star* into five 25 minute clips which can be viewed over a week in class. Alternatively, *Lone Star* can be easily found at mass market video rental chains, and students could be required to view the film for homework with the instructor focusing on shorter clips in class. Due to a variety of accents, the use of Spanish, and some important but quickly uttered dialogue, students may find it useful to view the film with the television set adjusted for closed captioning, thus allowing the dialogue to be read as well as listened to.

### **Cautions**

*Lone Star* is appropriate for mature teen audiences. The film features one scene depicting sexual intercourse with no nudity that can be skipped without detriment to the story (Counter 1:27:35-1:29:20). Foul language is used in a few instances. As the film concludes it is revealed that Pilar and Sam have unknowingly engaged in incest (they are

half-brother and sister); however because of the subtle way this is disclosed this may not become clear to all viewers.

## **Questions for Discussion**

### Part I

Counter 0:00-25:25 (beginning from 0 at “Castle Rock Entertainment”)

Who is Coronado and what is his importance to the Southwest?

What is depicted on the poster that Pilar hangs on the blackboard?

What kinds of students are found in Pilar’s school?

What kind of man was Buddy Deeds? How does his son Sam compare?

Why do Hollis and the mayor discuss the naming of the courthouse? How is the name of a public building symbolic of larger issues?

Though Hollis and the men make it clear that they see themselves as different from the Mexicans in Frontera what do the food on the table and music in the café reveal about them?

What is the “other side?” What is Jimmy Herrera doing?

What are the viewpoints expressed by those attending the school curriculum meeting?

Who is correct? What does this scene show about how history is written in textbooks?

Big O’s is a bar that is called “the only place in town where our people feel comfortable.”

Why would African Americans feel uncomfortable elsewhere?

What does “Frontera” mean?

### Part II

Counter 25:26-54:17

How does Pilar describe the history of the Southwest in class?

Why does the mayor ask about Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie?

What does the name of the predominantly African American section of town, Darktown, suggest about Frontera?

Why is Sam so intent on figuring out his father’s past and why is the mayor so strongly against it?

For Mrs. Bledsoe, how were Charley Wade and Buddy Deeds different? Similar? And for Otis Payne?

According to Danny Padilla, the journalist, what was the result of creating Lake Pescadero? Why is he against naming the courthouse after Buddy Deeds?

What is Enrique, the waiter, arranging? What economic conditions have made him choose to live in the United States rather than in Mexico?

Why isn’t Mercedes Cruz interested in returning to Mexico? Why doesn’t she see herself as Mexican? Why did she disapprove of Pilar’s husband?

What exactly is the bartender afraid of? What is the crisis he refers to? Is he correct in being fearful? What does he mean by “the menudo we got down here?”

What is Otis referring to when he says “it’s not like there’s a borderline between the good people and the bad people?”

### Part III

Counter 54:17-1:18:57

Why is the new jail a contentious project?

How is it ironic that the memorial to Buddy Deeds features an image of him with his arm around a small boy (Sam?)?

How does the film comment on local politics in the exchange between the deputy and Shadow? “You chumps ain’t had a good days since the Alamo.” “Oh, yeah, well we’re in charge now.”

Why does Mercedes call the border patrol when she sees Mexicans on her property?

Why do you think they would risk arrest in order to come to the United States?

Why is Sam surprised when Pete tells him of working on Buddy Deeds’ home when he was in jail? What does this say about Buddy?

Why does Sam remove his badge before going over to “the other side?”

What is the significance of the line in the sand Chucho Montoya draws? What is Eladio Cruz doing that’s illegal? Why does Charley Wade object?

### Part IV

Counter 1:18:58-1:44:40

What does Pilar mean when she mentions that her mother “became Spanish by working?”

Why is Chet confused about the race of John Horse/Juan Caballo?

In this scene Chet is confronted with two ideas of family and nationality. According to his father “you start from scratch” and Otis mentions that “Blood only means what you let it.” When then is Otis so interested in “his people’s” history as seen in the museum? Sam pays a visit to a Native American friend who runs a souvenir stand on a dusty road. Holding a radio in the shape of the Alamo he mentions, “these used to sell like hotcakes.” Why is this statement significant? Why does he warn Sam to “be careful where you go pokin’ your nose?”

Whose country is Private Johnson referring to? Who is “they?” Why does Payne take pity on her?

### Part V

Counter 1:44:41-2:11:12

In Otis’ home we see on the walls both historical documents from the Seminole Indians to whom he is related and a small shrine to his son in the form of news clippings. How are these two displays similar?

What is Enrique doing in the river? What are some reasons that would force a person to cross a border illegally?

Why does Mercedes Cruz always insist on speaking English? Why does she refuse to return to Mexico with Pilar and her family?

Did Buddy Deeds really have “the finest sense of justice” as Hollis remembers? If not, how has he acquired such a reputation?

After all of his detective/historical work why does Sam decide not to reveal that Hollis killed Charley Wade?

Where does Pilar learn the truth about her relationship with Sam? What might a blank movie screen suggest?

Why does Sayles choose to feature the incest theme? How does this relate to Otis's line "Blood is what you make it?"

### **Summary Questions**

Why do family problems play such a large role in this film?

What message do you think the director is trying to convey?

Does it matter that Sam and Pilar are related? How does this support the director's message?

What parallels can you find between the Alamo site and Frontera's new courthouse?

What do you think it's like to live in Frontera?

What makes a western film a western? Should *Lone Star* be considered a western? How are race and ethnicity depicted in other western films?

In Frontera, who counts as American?

What role does the music play in this film?

### **Additional Assignments**

Using photocopies from the book *Alamo Images*, ask students to think about the place of the Alamo in popular memory. What is it about this battle that has allowed it to become so well known to Americans?

Ask students to research the history of the Alamo as they watch the film in segments. What similarities do they find between the two stories?

Ask students to compare five different accounts of the Alamo battle. What differences do they find in the various sources? What role does the date of the source play in its recounting of the event?

Using the films *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, John Wayne's *The Alamo*, and *Viva Max* examine scenes where Bowie and Crockett ask their men to cross the line they draw in the sand. Ask students to compare these vastly different representations. What can account for such differences?

Ask students to research the history of a building or landmark named in honor of a local figure in their town. What did this person accomplish? What does it mean to dedicate aspects of the built environment to individuals?

## **Bibliography**

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Diane Carson, ed., *John Sayles Interviews*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.

Gerard Molyneaux, *John Sayles: An Unauthorized Biography of the Pioneering Indie Filmmaker*. Los Angeles: Renaissance, 2000.

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Holly Beachley Brear, *Inherit the Alamo: Myth and Ritual at an American Shrine*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

Examination of the political battle for representation at the Alamo site.

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Don Graham, *Cowboys and Cadillacs: How Hollywood Looks at Texas*. Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1983

Includes a section on the Alamo which discusses the various film incarnations of the legend.

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Includes a chapter on the Alamo mission as museum and details political issues that have arisen as a result of its stewardship by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

Jose Enrique de la Pena, *With Santa Ana in Texas: A Personal Narrative of the Revolution*, translated and edited Carmen Perry. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1975.

Randy Roberts and James Olson, *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory*. New York: Free Press, 2001.

Provides a critical history of the battle and later symbolic uses of the Alamo in Texas and American history.

Frank Thompson, *Alamo Movies*. East Berlin, PA: Old Mill Books, 1991.

Documents the numerous films made about the battle and illustrates how history is altered for entertainment value.

Don Graham, "Remembering the Alamo: The Story of the Texas Revolution in Popular Culture" *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 89 (July 1985) 35-66.

Concise overview of the symbolic role the Alamo battle and mission have played in Texas history.

Susan Prendergast Schoelwer, ed., *Alamo Images: Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience*. Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist University Press, 1985.

Exhibit catalog with readable concise essays on the Alamo battle and its subsequent representation in art and popular culture. Contains numerous illustrations and color plates that can be photocopied for use in class assignments.

### **Internet Resources:**

Tomas Sandoval, "The Burden of History and John Sayles' *Lone Star*" *Bad Subjects*, Issue 28, October 1996

<http://eserver.org/bs/28/sandoval.html>

Thoughtful review of film.

Lone Star Teaching Guide

Ingrid Erickson, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

<http://www.uwm.edu:80/People/ime/lonestarhomepage.htm>

Teaching guide and seminar paper on the film. The bibliography contains a list of useful sites for studying the film, its music and Texas history.

Lone Star Junction

<http://www.lsjunction.com/>

Site devoted to Texas history and culture.

Handbook of Texas Online

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/index.new.html>

Searchable site of Texas history and culture.