MAVERICK: MORE THAN A WESTERN

by Salam Abumaraq

Mel Gibson and John Wayne are (ready for this?) twins! Not literally, but they’re both great actors and they are both cowboys. Need I say more? Okay, let’s try this again...when you think of John Wayne you immediately think: actor, cowboy. When you think of Mel Gibson you immediately think: actor...well not exactly cowboy. But, there’s always Maverick!

Maverick is definitely a western which happens to fit perfectly in John Cawelti’s (289-295) checklist of western characteristics. Not to mention specifically the western plots which Frank Gruber (289) categorizes into seven basic ones. Now why on earth a movie would have seven different plots all rolled into one is beyond me...unless it’s trying to simultaneously help the audience overlook the usual images of the heroes, in this case Mel Gibson and Jodie Foster, and ‘play’ on the typical stereotype of what is expected in a western.

Let’s take Mel Gibson; he was great in Lethal Weapon, Bird on a Wire, Forever Young...and the list goes on. Always the brave, good-looking, modern hero. That’s how he’s portrayed in movies, that’s how we see him in interviews, so that’s how he must be. One of the most important elements of a movie is a convincing cast. In this case Mel Gibson had to fit the image of a cowboy in order to authenticate the overall story in Maverick. He dressed like a cowboy, fought like one (or so we are told), wielded a gun like one, and rode a horse like one.

Jodie Foster also happens to be a beautiful, modern young actress, and we aren’t used to seeing her as a western ‘belle’...named Annabelle. So the wonderful screen writers decide to help us overlook the fact that she wasn’t alive a hundred and some years ago, and she usually doesn’t wear poofy dresses and ridiculous bonnets. By adding a costume, and making sure she perfected a southern accent, ‘typical’ of western young ladies ‘back in the days’, Poof! You have a convincing leading cast!

Now that we have the cast all set to play these parts so unlike them, we need to make sure they are surrounded by western settings to enhance the movie’s authenticity. How do we do that? Simply by taking one, or in this
case ALL, of Gruber's seven plots that all westerns must revolve around in order to look like a western.

Maverick starts out with what Gruber (289) calls a Revenge Story. We have Brett Maverick (Gibson) himself hanging on to a horse for dear life. We also have the Mexican telling him ever so smugly that he should never have 1) fooled him in to thinking that he was tougher than he really is by paying off a few men to pretend he was beating them up, in a successful attempt to discourage other men from challenging him to fight, and 2) considered playing in the poker championships, with a half million dollar prize, which was right around the corner. To top it off, Brett is sitting atop a horse, with hands bound behind his back, and a noose around his neck...so if the horse moves, Brett hangs!

Then again, he can't possibly die. After all, he is the hero and the movie has just begin, but to make the audience more anxious and increase the suspense, Brett begins reminiscing about what exactly got him into this situation in the first place. As Brett begins to spin his tale, we realize the story has now taken on a different plot, combining Gruber's Ranch Story with his Empire Story which traditionally focuses on the conflicts between ranchers and rustlers (289). In this case all you have to do is substitute 'ranchers' with gamblers, and 'rustlers' with gunfighters...or the mean looking guys with a low voice, bandanna around their necks, and a gun at their sides ready to be used if, God forbid, anybody says or does anything to offend them.

He manages to avoid too much real trouble by proving himself to be more than a match for any gunfighter, with his 'quick draw', not to mention his free demonstration of his extraordinary fighting skills when four men called him out, ironically just when he was being challenged by the 'Mexican', and somehow manages to beat them all. Extinguishing any hopes others might have had in the event they called him out to demand satisfaction for his insults and insolence, avoiding any other invitations all together. Things go smoothly for a while until Annabelle repeatedly tries to steal his money. In retribution he forces her to wash his 'lucky' shirt, and she purposely shrinks it, and he runs after her and catches up with her just as she is boarding a ferry...Thus begins their long journey, together, to the poker championships.

Surprise, surprise when on the ferry they encounter Zane Cooper (Garner), who happens to be a Marshall. So now we have switched over to Gruber's Marshall story (289). Cooper accompanies them all the way to the championships and becomes one of the leading characters in the story. Of course, all western movies must have a Marshall. Now, I hate to ruin the ending for you, but the honest and trustworthy Marshall, who is entrusted
with the prize money in the first place, decides that having all of this money within his grasp and not helping himself to it is not a very smart choice. So he gladly sacrifices his impeccable reputation for half a million dollars! Now we have successfully turned the Marshall into an outlaw, which we can already guess happens to be another element in Gruber’s seven plots, the Outlaw Story (289).

After Brett, Annabelle, and Cooper get off the ferry, they begin their long expedition across the desert (the west is mostly desert- isn’t that true?) on a stagecoach! And, of course, this is no ordinary ride, the driver dies and you have Brett over and under the stagecoach trying to find a way to stop the horses before they get really lost. Little do they know that up ahead is a cliff and Brett barely pulls the horses to a stop at the edge of the cliff! Here you have the Union Pacific Story (Gruber 289), which revolves around the adventures of a stagecoach. Now how many times have you seen that in a western?

We must put our hero to the test, so Brett, from the impact of the sudden halt, flies over the horses and over the edge of the cliff. He barely manages to grab ahold of a pile of rocks for dear life! (Does this sound familiar?) Of course he survives this ordeal and they continue on with their journey. All westerns have to mention Indians, otherwise it just wouldn’t really be a western. Once again Brett is put to the test. Along the way they encounter a religious group which is saving money to start a mission. Unfortunately, their money is stolen from them (from Indians for sure) and the Three Musketeers volunteer to get the money back for them (for a price). They find the outlaws (to the disappointment of the audience) who took the money, and Brett single-handedly defeats seven full-grown men. This could be called Custer’s Last Stand (Gruber 289) plot, since the actors give you the impression that Brett probably won’t walk away from this confrontation alive.

The other aspect of the Last Stand Story is the Indian Story...Brett encounters both. After they triumphantly bring the money back to the mission, they hear drums (definitely Indians this time) and before their very eyes appear a whole band of Indians. Brett heroically volunteers to sacrifice himself in exchange for the welfare of the rest of the group. He leaves with a sense of doom and is considered a hero. He may not come back alive! (I won’t ruin the ending for you, watch the movie!)

The movie begins with one plot, and manages to incorporate six other ones, and changes every few scenes. Despite the fact that Mel Gibson is not cowboy material, and Jodie Foster isn’t a bold, manipulative saloon girl, this is definitely a western (by stereotypical standards). And a great one at that!
Works Cited

