

The Greatest Western

“Dyin’ Ain’t Much of a Livin’, Boy”

The Outlaw Josie Wales (1976) is my favorite western. Some consider it the greatest film of the genre. Directed by Clint Eastwood, it stars Clint Eastwood, Sandra Locke, Chief Dan George, and John Vernon.

A great western should have a collection of strong key elements; *The Outlaw Josie Wales* has them all.

The setting is the savage Civil War in Missouri and Kansas where atrocities and outrages were perpetrated by irregulars of both sides. At the time, these criminals and guerrillas were called “bushwackers.” The fighting in this theater of the Civil War is not commonly known except by students and historians of the war, and was particularly ugly and violent; perhaps the Civil War was at its most “uncivil” in the border states. Most actions were [massacre of Union soldiers](#) at Centralia, Missouri, September 27, 1864 was perpetrated by Bloody Bill Anderson and his men, for example. This event is not mentioned in the film for obvious reasons—no one associated with this heinous act could engender sympathy from any audience.



[Spaghetti Western](#) days. Closer to “Blondie” in [Pale Rider](#) (1985), Wales is essentially a good man driven by circumstances to revenge and violence, and a desperate struggle to survive. He is the everyman of the Civil War (and of history in general) dragged against his will into the maelstrom of massive historic events. As he runs from his pursuers he picks up a ragtag crew of fascinating characters who ride with him, eventually heading for southern Texas. Along the way there are gunfights, suspense, and action.

A great western should have certain components including:

- Beautiful scenery
 - Desert, prairie, and/or mountains will do
- A good story line
 - Pursuit and evasion helps
- Excellent minimalist dialogue
- Small ramshackle frontier towns
- A hero or anti-hero with strong and understandable motivations
- Guns, ideally pistols
 - Shootouts

- At least one attractive woman in dire need
 - More people who need help, the better
- Excellent hats
 - There is no better hat in a western film than the one worn by the lead character in this movie
- Indians
 - Motivated, tough, and real is best
- Horses
 - Obviously, the more the better
- Rotten villains

Wales is a hunted avenger as he rides across deserts and through broken-down frontier towns. He has no options but to find a place to hide, or just keep on riding forever. Every shooting that involves him is in self-defense or in the defense of others who cannot defend themselves; the hero is no savage killer. He is a hero, an unsundered soldier of a dead country, haunted by the senseless murder of his family.

The film has beautiful scenery, lots of horses and pistols, rotten villains who deserve to get shot (and generally do), suffering innocents who need protection, and one of the coolest hats in American cinema history.

Josie Wales' hat is stained with sweat, it's a deep Confederate gray with a wide and slightly upturned brim, it's unusual and will always be associated with this character. Eastwood hides his eyes under the brim of this hat, and when he slightly lifts his head to look at someone—they know immediately that he is not a man to be trifled with. He

has a sense of honor and obligation to others, but has no compunction about shooting those who are hunting him or are fixin' to hurt his friends.

There is a touching moment after Eastwood and his friends arrive at their Texas destination. Sondra Locke, dressed in a fine white dress, talks about how beautiful the clouds look. She has gone through terrible abuse and trauma and was rescued by the hero. She represents the stability and happiness that Wales lost when his family was killed, and his pre-war life of peaceful farming. The look of sadness and dissociation that Eastwood delivers in this sad scene between the two of them is a fine one. After all of his war-fighting, losses, and the damage and pain caused by the now ended war, Josie Wales must try very hard to find a place for himself in a post-war world. Killing is easy now for him, it's the living without violence that he knows will be so difficult. One of the more powerful aspects of his character is that he wants to try, and the viewer is confident that he will doubtless succeed.

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