

Coverage of the script by William Kelley & Nick Meagher

The Shining Times of the West –analysis, C. Stevenson
A Western set in 1829

The Shining Times of the West, as with any good screenplay, is many stories in one. Joe Meek, the protagonist, is a young man in search of adventure. As with many youngsters, he has nothing except a head filled with lofty dreams and fantasies, so he signs his life over to a westward bound fur trading company reputed to see much danger and prosperity on its seasonal trips. Of course, Joe encounters his rude awakening early enough in the play as to preserve the readers' interest. Now he finds himself in extremely harsh environments, battling both blizzards and blood-thirsty Indians, but of course, he manages to survive, become a man, and eventually a leader himself. The principal characters beside Joe are Murphy, Joe's tough as nails, codger mentor who channels the boy's reckless free-wheeling spirit into something of use; Bill Sublette, the boss, who hires Joe based purely on his ambition, but who comes to call him friend and equal; and Mountain Lamb, Joe's love interest who fulfills her role beautifully with few lines. (She is definitely secondary, except that she is given to Joe by Sublette when he must leave, thus, showing us the great trust and respect his boss comes to have for him.)

This screenplay is excellent. It is beautifully and, to the best of my knowledge, authentically written employing the dialects of the period. Shining Times contains the conventions of the Western genre (open spaces, horses, gunfights, etc.) which audiences expect, while still managing to be fresh by telling the story of not cowboys but trappers. The trapper aspect is what differentiates this story from other westerns, and as is also key, throughout the play, we come to learn the tricks and methods of tapping beaver, a skill, I can say with confidence, is at this point long forgotten by the majority of the American public. Also, although the Indians are the primary enemy, they are never vilified; this aspect is in line with what seems to be America's pro-Indian/guilt complex currently en vogue.

Lastly, the story seems timely. By the end of the screenplay, the fur business is waning. The characters are finding they must react to the changing, economic climate. Sound familiar? The old characters have departed and new companies exacting heavier tolls upon the land are moving in. Joe, like many Americans today, decides to move on – ironically (like many Americans today) to Oregon. The Shining Times of the West is an excellently written Western, filled with great action sequences, hilarious comic relief, and chased with a bit of romance and just the right amount of sympathy for the Indians. It is familiar yet new, and I think it'll git 'um rit in the gizzard.

Key Elements: Western genre conventions yet new aspect of trapping
Great action sequences (Indian wars)
Does not vilify or dehumanize Indian characters
Teaches the ways of trapping
Addresses issues of small pox affect upon the Indians
Incredible writing as well as sharp comic relief

The many stories are: 1) Joe Meek growing to become a man, shedding his cockiness for competence but never losing his sense of humor. 2) The story in general of the first desperate traders in a foreign land. 3) The story in general of the decimation of the Native American peoples by warfare and disease. 4) A documentary on the beaver trade of the early nineteenth century. 5) Joe's romance with Mountain Lamb.

The one drawback is that it may be a little slow getting started. This, of course, will depend on whether it is a feature or a TV mini-series.