

“Last Stage to Lordsburg” and “Ball of Fat”

John Ford acknowledged that he drew on both Ernest Haycox’s “Last Stage to Lordsburg” and Guy de Maupassant’s “Ball of Fat” in making *Stagecoach*. However, he took different elements from each, merged them, and from the mix created a film masterpiece.

Haycox’s story is a simplistic, commercial, second-rate story at best. Very little is developed in any detail, except of course for the action. The characters are types rather than individuals (most do not have names) and are given little or no motivation for their actions (for instance, we are told only that the Malpais Kid is “rash” or “wild”). Settings are presented in a sentence or two. Ford took the Western setting, many of the character types, and the main action. He added the cavalry.

Set in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), de Maupassant’s story is a complex, densely detailed masterpiece. Settings are described; the military situation, the French military, the general citizenry, and the named characters are individualized and their motivations made clear. With these descriptions, de Maupassant ironically satirizes society and the institutions of the military, patriotism, religion, and marriage; the characters represent a microcosm of the class structure in French society.

Ford adopted from this story the emphasis on setting, a satiric view of society and the respectable classes, and individualized characters whose actions are clearly motivated.

“Last Stage to Lordsburg”

The respectable classes (all stereotypes):

The Englishman

The whiskey drummer or salesman

The cattleman

The army girl (Late in the story we are told her name, Miss Robertson, when a soldier addresses her.)

Ambiguous status:

The gambler (not respectable but treats the army girl like the gentleman he may have been)

The not-respectable class or outsiders (also stereotypes):

Malpais Bill, a gun slinger

Henriette, a prostitute and madam

Indeterminate class:

Happy Stuart, the stagecoach driver

John Stang, the shotgun messenger

“Ball of Fat”

General groups: Fleeing French soldiers, citizen-soldiers, citizens of Rouen, Normans

Individuals from respectable classes (hypocritical, selfish, morally corrupt):

Aristocrats:

Count and Countess Hubert de Breuille

Bourgeoisie or middle class:

Mrs. And Mr. Loiseau, a wine merchant

Mrs. And Mr. Carré, cotton manufacturer (greater wealth, power, and social status than Loiseau)

Two nuns (not only respectable but referred to, ironically, as saints)

German officer

Individuals not respectable:

Cornudet, the radical (a “democrat” or supporter of the Republic/a “revolutionary”)

Ball of Fat, a.k.a., Elizabeth Rousset, a prostitute

Peasants

German common soldiers

Where do you think we should place Mrs. and Mr. Follenvie, the innkeepers?