

2025 Study Guide



Shane

by Karen Zacarias

Shane. A Starting Point

Shane is a Western novel published in 1949 by Jack Schaefer. Set in Wyoming during the late 1800s, the story follows a mysterious gunslinger—the eponymous Shane—who rides into the lives of the Starrett family. Drawn in by Shane’s dark clothing, passive strength, and violent past, the Starretts offer him a glimpse of a quieter, rooted life.

As conflict brews between homesteaders like the Starretts and a powerful cattle rancher trying to drive them off their land, Shane is pulled into the fight. From brutal fistfights to tense shootouts, the novel explores themes of honor, land justice, and the bonds of chosen family.

Meet the playwright: **Karen Zacarias**

- Karen Zacarias is an award-winning playwright and activist. She lives in Washington, D.C.
- She’s written nearly 20 plays, musicals, and librettos for ballet.
- This is her third appearance at OSF. Work previously featured includes *The Copper Children* and *Destiny of Desire*.
- *American Theatre Magazine* recently hailed Zacarias one of the most produced playwrights in the United States.
- She was the first resident playwright at the Arena Stage, where she kickstarted a movement that would become the Latinx Theatre Commons.

Questioning Narratives of Westward Expansion

The lack of Native American inclusivity

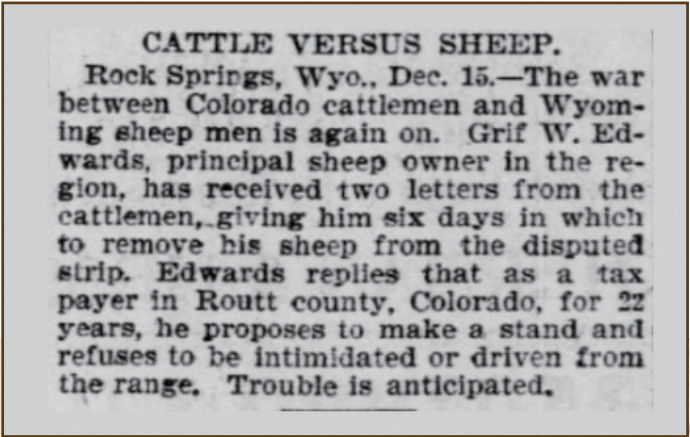
In the novel, Schaefer paints a vivid picture of the tensions between local landowners and the greedy cattle ranchers. However, the novel fails to acknowledge the violent displacement of Native American communities. By framing the conflict between settlers and cattle ranchers, *Shane* overlooks the larger truth: these settlers, whether active participants in moving Native nations to reservations or not, were part of a system that removed Native peoples from their land. The narrative presents land justice as a settler struggle, erasing the injustices that happened first through the forced displacement of Native Americans. As you watch the play, consider the following: whose justice is being protected? Whose story is being told and whose is missing?



Lakota leaders at Ft. Laramie, 1868.

Mexican-American identity

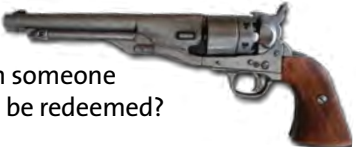
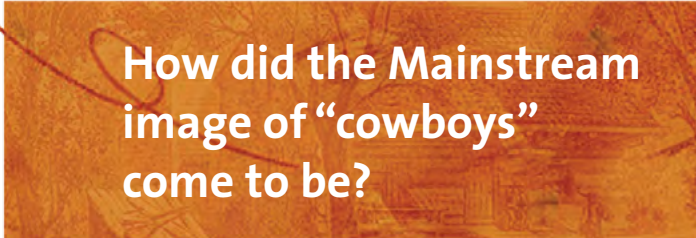
Schaefer does not specify the ethnicity of many of his characters in the original novel, but in Zacarias's adaptation, she reimagines the identity of the settlers to be nearer the historically accurate demographics of cowboys and settlers. By reenvisioning the Starrett family as Mexican-American, she highlights a secondary layer of colonization that followed the Mexican-American War (1846-48). After the war, many Mexicans who remained in newly annexed U.S. territories were promised land ownership and citizenship. In reality, many faced extreme racial prejudice resulting in relocation. This version of *Shane* brings visibility to those stories, complicating the novel's narrative of the homesteaders. By acknowledging who was primarily impacted, we can see the United States's colonial legacy and who primarily paid that cost. While the novel speaks about land corruption, it neglects the conversation of both Native and Mexican-American displacement. Consider whose land was being allocated to settlers and at what cost.



Before seeing/reading the play

1. How do you think Karen Zacarias determined what to keep and what to leave out from the original 1949 novel? [Shane \(Novel\) Wikipedia Page.](#)
[Shane's Lot on crimereads.com](#)
2. How can an ensemble of bodies serve as an emotional vehicle to convey time, tradition, trauma, disruption, and honor? How might physical movement be used to embody themes and reshape story? [Movement and Meaning: Dance in Social Anthropological Perspective](#)
[The Body in Itself Tells a Story](#)
3. Zacarias was introduced to the world of *Shane* as an eleven-year-old, having recently moved to the US from Mexico. The mysterious Shane of her imagination looked like Roberto Clemente. How do personal lived experiences shape our lens of fiction? How does representing the diversity of cowboys in 1889 change the context of the piece? [Race and the Pop Culture Cowboy](#)
[Roberto Clemente Wikipedia page](#)
4. How did the mainstream image of "cowboys" come to be? Were cowboys truly fearless gunslingers? What were their true occupations and responsibilities and how did that change through time? How did whitewashing in Hollywood films erase people from our understanding of how the West was settled? [Cowboys - History.com](#)
5. How did the Mexican-American War shape the political, social, and cultural landscape of the nation? How does the legacy of the Mexican-American War continue to shape U.S. identity and its relationship with Mexico? [Monuments, Manifest Destiny, and Mexico](#)
[Mexican American War Wikipedia entry](#)
6. What was the Homestead Act of 1862? What were its primary goals in promoting westward expansion and settlement? What promises did the government make to settlers, and how did these promises attract thousands of people seeking a new life in the western territories? What were some of the challenges and harsh realities that settlers faced in meeting the Act's requirements? [Homestead Acts Wikipedia entry](#)
[Dreams and Realities The Homestead Act of 1862](#)
7. Who are Native people of Wyoming? Where did they originally settle and why were they forcibly displaced? Who displaced them and why? [Indigenous people in Wyoming and the West on Wyohistory.org](#)
[Native Americans in Wyoming on wyo.org](#)

8. What was Manifest Destiny and who were the key figures promoting the idea? How was the westward expansion of the U.S. accomplished? [Manifest Destiny and US Westward Expansion from Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)
[Manifest Destiny Wikipedia page](#)
9. What is the Bureau of Indian Affairs and how did it play an active role in the colonization of Native American lands? How did the Bureau of Indian Affairs deliberately work with the U.S. government to enforce policies that kept Native Americans on reservations, often undermining their autonomy and traditional ways of life? [History of Bureau of Indian Affairs from US Dept. of the Interior](#)
[Native Nations and the BIA on JSTOR Daily](#)
10. Given that many Mexican Americans have Indigenous ancestry and that Native Americans and Mexicans were both affected by Spanish and then U.S. colonization, what similarities might exist between Mexican-American settlers and Native Americans about land, identity, and displacement? How might their shared histories shape perspectives on what it means to honor the land they live on? [A Century of Informality on the US/Mexico Border](#)
[Indigenous Mexico: A Lost Connection](#)
11. The United States government funded and supported "Americanization" and assimilationist education for both Native Americans and Mexican Americans. How do these efforts echo in modern U.S. society? [How Boarding Schools Tried to "Kill the Indian" Through Assimilation](#)
[The Undertold Story of Texas Mexican Schools](#)
12. How do chosen families provide emotional support and means of self-discovery? In what ways do they challenge traditional definitions of family, and how do they shape a person's understanding of themselves and their place in the world?
13. How do you think gender roles show up in a Mexican-American family in 1889? How could gender roles affect families and how they express themselves to other people?
14. How can chosen families and communities contribute to inner confidence and healing past trauma? How might making positive choices in the present help redeem past actions? Can someone with a history of violence be redeemed?



After seeing/reading the play

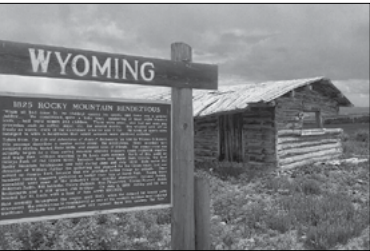
- 1. How does OSF's *Shane* challenge the traditional narrative of what defines an American Western? In what ways do the characters' identities, struggles, and histories reflect the time period in which they live? How do these shifts challenge the world we imagine vs. the historical reality?
- 2. What does Shane represent to Bobby? What specific qualities does Bobby see in Shane that he does not see in his father or other men in his life? What about Shane's mysterious black hat and dark clothes intrigue Bobby?
- 3. What does Shane owe to the Starrett family, and what factors contribute to the rapid connection he feels with them? What unique support or sense of belonging does the Starrett family offer that he was presumably unable to find in other relationships or communities?

How does Shane affirm or contradict your image of a hero?

- 4. How does Shane's identity, clothing, and mysterious presence affect the folks he meets? Why does his fashion and experience with a bigger city seem to intrigue the Starrett family while simultaneously pushing others away?
- 5. While Joe, Shane, and others work to remove the stump, Marian appears in her new hat. What does this moment tell you about Marian? Why does she want to mimic the styles Shane tells her about?
- 6. What makes the stump removal a significant moment for Joe, Shane, and Bobby? What does the physical release of finally cutting and pushing out the stump from its roots give the men? What about that experience inspires Shane? What about it inspires Bobby?



Poster for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, 1899. Library of Congress



1825 - The first Mountain Man Rendezvous was organized by fur trading companies, staged every year from 1825 to 1840 at different locations in Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho.



1845 - Texas was annexed by the United States, becoming the 28th state. The annexation was a significant event, driven by the concept of Manifest Destiny and ultimately contributing to the Mexican-American War.



1862 - Homestead Act of 1862 passed. Granted land, up to 160 acres, to people who farmed the land for at least 5 years for approximately \$18.



1868 - Beginning of Colorado gold rush—driving Native Americans off treaty lands.



1846 - Oregon Treaty established the border between the U.S. and British claims in the region.



1868 - Following the failure of the 1851 Treaty of Laramie, the US brought together part of the Lakota people, the Yanktonai Dakota, and Arapaho Nation to establish reservations.



Shane, 1953 Film. Screen capture from the Ace Black Movie Blog.

The Road from Charrería to Rodeos

Rodeos are an iconic symbol of American culture today, but their origins stretch further back than we may realize. The identity of the *vaquero*, Spanish for cowboy, originated in the 16th century, when Spanish conquistadors brought horses and cattle to the Americas. These early horsemen, primarily of Spanish and Native Mexican descent, were skilled in herding, roping, and riding. Over time, *vaqueros* began to compete, showcasing their talents in contests known as *charrerías*, the Mexican precursor to modern rodeo.

Charrerías are structured according to tradition, with each event unfolding in a carefully sequenced ritual. Accompanied by a mariachi band and processions, the gatherings celebrate skill, heritage, and community. Competitors, known as *charros*, face nine distinct challenges designed to showcase their mastery of horsemanship. Unlike the mainstream competitive rodeo circuit, where contestants often compete for cash prizes, the reward in *charrería* is honor.

The roots of rodeo events in the U.S. can be traced to Anglo-American settlers who moved into Texas in the 1820s and adopted some of the Mexican *vaqueros'* methods, fusing techniques that led to the emergence of the American rodeo, a sport similar to, but different from *charrerías*. Skills continued to evolve as formerly enslaved Black cowboys joined the workforce after the Civil War. It was not until the 1880s that rodeos began making the shift from informal contests to organized competitions with prizes, evolving into the professional sport recognized today. From the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, which celebrates and honors Black cowboys and cowgirls, to *jaripeos* in Latin American, where huapangos, zapateados, cumbia, and norteño dance is featured alongside bull riding, rodeo has become a diverse, continent-wide American sport.

By tracing the road from *charrería* to modern rodeo, we uncover a rich and complex history, one that honors Indigenous, Black, and Mexican roots in cowboy traditions. Learning more about the history of rodeo underscores the breadth of races, ethnicities, and cultures who contributed to this sporting legacy.



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