

# Hombre Short Guide

## Hombre by Elmore Leonard

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# Characters

John Russell (Hombre), the protagonist of the novel, is a mustanger, chasing green horses, harness-breaking them, and then selling them. Three parts Caucasian, one part Mexican, he was kidnapped by the Apaches as a child and raised by them until he was twelve, at which time a man named James Russell took the boy with him, gave him a name, and raised him for five years. Then John left Russell for an Apache reservation, where he served on the police force for three years before going off by himself as a mustanger. When James Russell dies, he leaves his place to John, who is reluctant to claim it but finally agrees to do so. On the way to Contention, Arizona, to take up his inheritance, he becomes entangled in an affair with men who are the very antithesis of him: prejudiced, dishonest, and self-serving.

Chief among these is Dr. Alexander Favor, an Indian agent who cheated the Indians for two years and then secretly fled his post with the spoils of his chicanery. There also is Frank Braden, a crook who bullies his way onto a stagecoach in order to fulfill his part in a planned robbery. Braden becomes the primary antagonist in the novel. In the climactic shootout at the end, Russell and Braden are pitted against each other, and though both men die, Hombre's death is heroic, since he did "what he felt had to be done. Even if it meant dying." Firm and unchanging in his beliefs, he nevertheless "let people do or think what they wanted." According to the narrator, Russell was a significant moral force, although he "never changed the whole time . . .

[whereas] everyone else did in some way."

## Social Concerns

John Russell, who is the hero of this western, is known by several names, including Hombre, which is what he is called throughout the novel. The name encourages the reader to see Russell as independent and brave, as someone who has come to terms with his identity. He is an archetypal figure, and thus properly exhibits a deeply felt interest in his fellows and a responsibility for them. Most importantly, although he is independent, Russell depends upon people for his livelihood and, because of his social conscience and humanity, becomes involved with others. At the end, in his ultimate act of selfless bravery, this quintessential loner is not even the master of his own fate.



## Techniques

Hombre is straightforward in technique, as westerns normally are, much simpler than Leonard's later novels of suspense and detection. It also differs from much of his later work in that there is a clear narrative voice: twenty-one-year-old Carl Everett Allen, who worked for the manager of the stagecoach company office at Sweetwater.

Allen's purpose is to tell the whole story of John Russell and the last stage trip out of Sweetwater, and he is perfect for the role: An honest fellow (the same age as Russell), he has a sense of mission that assures forthrightness and completeness. Importantly, although he is intent upon producing a testament to Russell, he tells at the same time the story of his own initiation into manhood, for the stagecoach trip (he is a passenger) marks his progress from youthful innocence to the tragic awareness of adulthood.

Except for the preliminaries, the action of the novel takes place on the stagecoach trip, with the interest through almost half of the book supplied by the interaction among the passengers. The second half deals with the holdup and its aftermath, in the course of which earlier characterizations and conflicts become relevant and meaningful. A shootout as climax is a predictable event for this genre novel, but that a Mexican shoots Russell is an ironic twist.

# Themes

Like most western fiction, Hombre develops a struggle between good and evil, and its final scene involves a confrontation of the forces that embody each. Society is shown to be a potentially inflammable mix of the two forces and periodically needs to be purged, even though the purgator sometimes dies in the process, a victim not just of society, but also of his own goodness. Commonplace western themes obviously are developed in Hombre, but the hero, atypically, does not ride off triumphantly into the sunset. More realistically, he turns out to be as much a victim as the villains are.

# Adaptations

The 20th Century Fox film of *Hombre*, released in 1967, starred Paul Newman as John Russell, with Frederic March and Barbara Rush. The film was directed by Martin Ritt.



## Key Questions

Leonard wrote a number of western novels and stories in addition to *Hombre*, and comparative discussions of two or more of his works would be useful as a broader introduction to a singularly American literary form.

Since *Hombre* and others have been made into films, comparison of the books with their film versions could lead to interesting discussions of how the genres differ.

1. Describe the narrative point of view. How would the novel differ if the omniscient author, rather than Carl Everett Allen, had been the narrator?
2. What factors in his life have made John Russell into a loner? Does his being a loner diminish him?
3. In what specific ways is the stagecoach trip a landmark experience for Russell? Does it change him at all?
4. Much of the book deals with the interaction among passengers on the stage trip. What is the function of this interaction? Does it advance the plot?
5. The narrator describes Russell as a significant moral force, which suggests that he caused people to change.

How did he affect people?

6. Why is Frank Braden an ideal antagonist for Russell? Russell's death, as a result of their climactic confrontation, is heroic. Is Braden's? Why or why not?
7. From what you know about the American West, does Leonard present the milieu realistically?
8. Leonard has said that he cannot write metaphors, and whenever he sees an adjective or adverb, "I cross it out."

Is *Hombre* written in a noticeably spare style? What is the relationship between the style and content of the novel?

9. The introduction to a 1989 edition of the book says that Russell "becomes a key player in a drama examining man's responsibilities to his fellow man." What are these responsibilities within the world of the novel? Does anyone in the novel meet them?
10. A Leonard biographer says that "Russell is clearly no white-hatted Galahad out to right wrongs and rescue the defenseless." Is this an accurate assessment?



## Literary Precedents

The struggle between good and evil in *Hombre* places it firmly in the western literary tradition, but the conclusion separates it from most of its predecessors. Also distinguishing it is its realism, as opposed to the romanticism that is commonplace in the genre. This realism is characteristic not only of the plot but also of the characters, who are more like ordinary people than the genre's stereotypical heroes and villains. John Russell in particular, but others as well, are developed substantively rather than in simple cartoon fashion, which adds narrative and thematic depth to the work. Because Russell is portrayed as an outsider, standing apart from the social mainstream, he is related to many previous heroes in American fiction, as far back as Natty Bumppo.

## Related Titles

Prior to *Hombre*, the last of his westerns, Leonard wrote four novels in the genre: *The Bounty Hunters* (1953), *The Law at Randado* (1954), *Escape from Five Shadows* (1956), and *Last Stand at Saber River* (1959). In the earlier novels, there is more action and less character development than in *Hombre*, the villains especially are one-dimensional stereotypes, and the outcomes are predictable. These books, in effect, are products of his apprenticeship. Unfortunately, after coming into his own as a western novelist with *Hombre*, he forsook the genre for crime fiction.

# Copyright Information

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