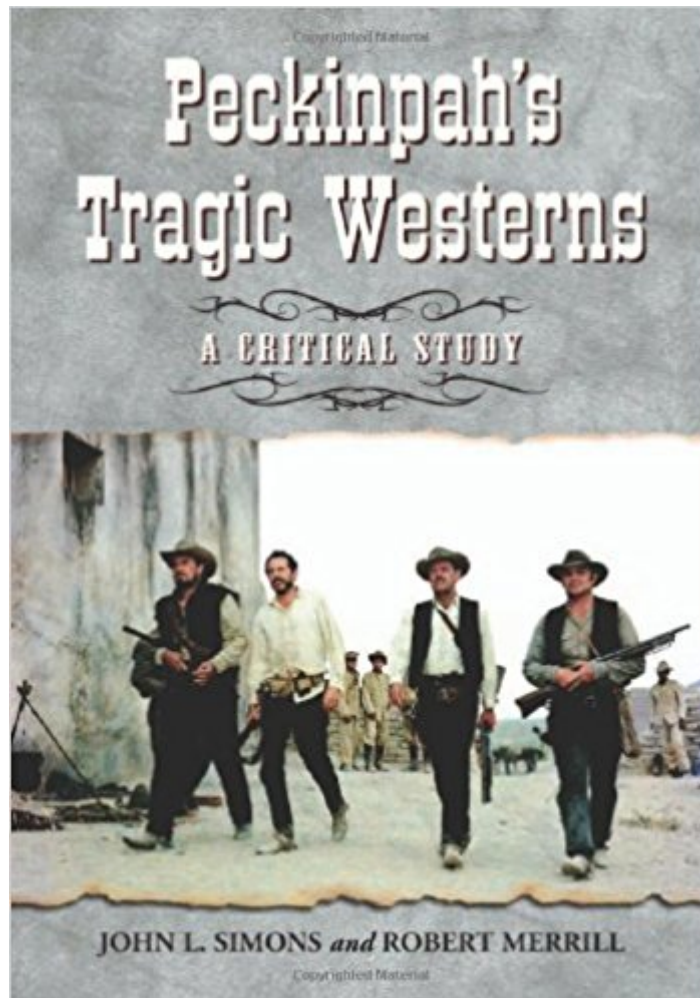




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# Peckinpah's Tragic Westerns: A Critical Study



## Synopsis

The work of Sam Peckinpah represents a high point in American cinema. This text is the first theoretical and critical attempt to place Peckinpah within the 2,000-year-old tradition of western tragedy. The tradition, enfolding the Greeks, Shakespeare and modern tragedians, is represented in Peckinpah's art in numerous ways, and the fact that he worked in the mode throughout his career distinguishes him from most American film directors. Films covered include *Ride the High Country*, *Noon Wine*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In much film criticism today, 'tragedy' as a concept is both overused and frequently misunderstood. Beginning with the classic Aristotelian definition, Simons and Merrill examine its evolution as a useful critical tool, then rigorously apply it to Sam Peckinpah's Westerns. The result provides fresh and, at times, profound insights into how and why Peckinpah's work touches us in such a deep and visceral way." --Garner Simmons, author of *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage*.

John L. Simons is a professor of modern American literature and film at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. He is the author of numerous essays. Robert Merrill is an emeritus professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno, where he taught for thirty years and chaired for eleven. He is the author or editor of several books and has published more than fifty articles and reviews in

such major journals as *American Literature*, *Modern Philology*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *Narrative*, and *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*.

Unjustifiably skimming through the chapter on *RIDE THE HIGH COUNTRY*, I mistakenly thought this book to be too top-heavy on literary criticism. However, once I began to take time to read this book I found I was mistaken. Instead, I discovered not only a meticulous attention to detail worthy of the best critical traditions of an English Department that looks at film seriously rather than regarding it as a crowd filler with dubious courses on *TWILIGHT* designed to show how "awesome" and "cool" professors can be. As the other review points out not only is this a worthy investigation of the issues of Aristotle and Tragedy in terms of Peckinpah's films but also a deep exploration of the parallels Revenge Tragedy has to the most misunderstood of Peckinpah films *BRING ME THE HEAD OF ALFREDO GARCIA*. This chapter would be worth recommending the book on its own but additionally there are important explorations of the different versions of *PAT GARRETT AND BILLY THE KID* as well as an in-depth analysis of Pike Bishop of *THE WILD BUNCH* as tragic hero. The key merit of this book is the meticulous rebuttal of the "misogynist" label tediously applied to Peckinpah's work, a label often resulting from prejudice and superficial analysis. Another key merit of this book is its treatment of the disturbing encounter between Elita and Paco in *ALFREDO GARCIA* and how this operates on a much more nuanced level than is previously believed to be the case. *PECKINPAH'S TRAGIC WESTERNS* is another sterling example of how indebted we are to publishers like McFarland who bring out books often neglected by mainstream publishers due to market dominance. This book will certainly be on library reserve for my next Peckinpah class. It really shows how professors of English can engage in serious film analysis.

Sam Peckinpah is one of the rare directors of Western films in whose work the effect of tragedy is both an authentic formal cause and an often devastatingly realized final effect. In this stimulating, well-researched new critical study, John L. Simons and Robert Merrill use conceptions of tragedy from Aristotle's *Poetics*--a work that greatly influenced Peckinpah in graduate school--through Shakespeare to contemporary critical theorists as a way of analyzing the director's tragic vision in five of his best films (*Ride the High Country*, *Noon Wine*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*). Not least of their achievements is the superbly detailed and illuminating appreciation of that great, problematic masterpiece *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. As someone who prepared one of the several versions of this never-quite-completed film and has written extensively on all of them, I have no hesitation in pronouncing Simons's and Merrill's the

most fair-minded, balanced, and thorough examination of their contents and their relative strengths. Owing to the wealth of scholarship and range of reference these two critics bring to these films, their book is arguably the most erudite and certainly among the very most sophisticated treatments of Peckinpah's work: a valuable and enlightening contribution to the criticism and scholarship of this great American original.--Paul Seydor, author of Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration

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