



LAW-RELATED EDUCATION

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

By Dorothy M. Johnson

A Law-Related Education Lesson Plan on Citizenship, Law, Being a Lawyer, How We Address Violence in our Communities

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance & A Man Called Horse, The Hanging Tree & Lost Sister:
The great western stories of Dorothy M. Johnson*
is available for purchase at www.riverbendpublishing.com

Read the book's Press Release and information on Dorothy M. Johnson
<http://www.riverbendpublishing.com/user/LibertyPress.htm>

Text Copied with Permission from River Bend Publishing

Illinois State Bar Association
Standing Committee on Law-Related Education for the Public
424 South Second Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701

• 217.525.1760 • 800.252.8908 • Fax: 217.525.9063

<http://www.isba.org/teachers>

Discussion Sheet for

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance The Short Story by Dorothy M. Johnson

*Text Copied with Permission from River Bend Publishing
(See end of lesson plan)*



First, have students read the short story by Dorothy M. Johnson.

Open discussions with a short discussion on the story. Did the students enjoy it? Did they understand it? Did they sympathize with any of the characters? Ask some of the following questions to spur discussion.

Goals:

- To provide a better understanding of law and order and how this country has progressed from the Wild West to today
- To show the importance of the rule of law
- To show how one person can affect an entire community, for both good or bad

Why did Senator Foster see Bert Barricune as his enemy and his conscience?

Why did Senator Foster feel that Bert Barricune had made him what he came to be?

Before he met Liberty Valance and Bert Barricune, Ransome Foster felt he had no aim in life at all. How did Liberty Valance and Bert Barricune change Foster?

On page 29-30, Ransome Foster outlines his complaint to the marshal. Was a crime committed against Foster? Did the marshal react in an appropriate manner to Foster's complaint?

When the marshal tells Ransome Foster that there's "a reward for Liberty Valance," is the marshal telling Foster to take the law into his own hands?

On page 32, when Bert Barricune comes for his gear he finds Ransome Foster changed. He says "I should have left you for the buzzards." Why has his opinion changed? What does he see in Foster that makes him wish he hadn't acted to save him?

Why did Foster make himself so unpleasant? Was he truly a changed person or was this an act to call attention to himself?

Ransome Foster says, on page 41, that he expects to die the day he faces Liberty Valance. Has his goal been to prove that he's not a coward? Has his goal been to rid the community of the threat Liberty Valance and his gang pose?

Ransome Foster wanted Liberty Valance to find him. He did everything he could to get Liberty Valance back to town so they could face each other. Could this be considered entrapment? Premeditated murder?

Additional characters are added to the film. There's a newspaper publisher and the marshal has a family. Was this a necessary creation? How does adding these characters advance the story? Why were they added to the film?

Would Ransom Stoddard be acquitted for the murder of Liberty Valance on the grounds of self defense? Consider that Stoddard chose to confront Liberty Valance. Does the fact that Stoddard learned how to shoot a gun and practiced for weeks before the "shoot out" make self defense less likely? Was Stoddard planning on killing Liberty Valance? Would this make his actions pre-meditated?

The charge brought against Ransome Foster was disturbing the peace. He plead guilty and paid a \$10 fine. Was this fair?

Did Ransome Foster do the honorable thing by accepting the "credit" for killing Liberty Valance? Could Bert Barricune have been charged with murder or was Barricune defending Foster? By taking the credit for the death of Liberty Valance did Ransome Foster save Bert Barricune?

Bert Barricune influenced Foster's life from the time of the shooting. How so?

Discussion Sheet for **The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance** **The Film**

*You all seem to know about this fella Liberty Valance.
He's a no-good, gun-packin', murdering thief.
But the only advice you can give to me is to carry a gun.
Well, I'm a lawyer!*

Jimmy Stewart as Ransom Stoddard, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).
Film based on a story by Dorothy M. Johnson



First, have students watch the film “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.”

Open discussions with a short discussion on the plot. Did the students enjoy it? Did they understand it? Did they sympathize with any of the characters? Ask some of the following questions to spur discussion.

Goals:

- To provide a better understanding of law and order and how this country has progressed from the Wild West to today
- To show the importance of the rule of law
- To show how one person can affect an entire community, for both good or bad.

This film shows the conflict between peaceful resolution of disputes through the legal system and individual resolution of disputes through violence. American popular culture tends to glamorize the man who shoots the bad guy rather than the people who rely on the system. What are the problems with relying on the individual rather than the legal system? List them and discuss.

- Greater potential for harm to innocent bystanders
- Fairness for the individual and the community
- Escalation of arguments
- Enforcement of laws

How much of the legal system should be based upon finding “the truth” versus “resolving the dispute”? Is “justice” finding “truth” or “peaceful resolution of disputes” or a combination of both?

- If someone stole something from you, would you want to know who did it and why, or could you be satisfied with just getting your object back?

- If someone hurt someone you loved, would you want to know who did it and why, or could you be satisfied that your loved one got medical attention and got better?

When Ransom Stoddard arrived at Shinbone, he was a country lawyer with ideals and dreams for bringing law to the community. He becomes a teacher and works to establish himself in the community. How do you feel about Ransom Stoddard's reputation after Liberty Valance is shot? Would Stoddard have been a success had he NOT been perceived as the person who shot Liberty Valance?

The laws of the West were considerably different from today's laws. If someone today took the law into their own hands to rid a community of a lawless bully by shooting them, even in presumed self defense/self defense of others, would that person be prosecuted?

When Ransom Stoddard sees Tom Doniphon's body, why do you think he insists that he be buried in his boots and spurs, and with his gun belt? Why do you think Tom stopped carrying a gun?

When Senator Stoddard returns to Shinbone, the editor of the newspaper demands a story and says he has the right a story from Stoddard. Does a newspaper have a "right" to someone's story? Does it make a difference if the person in question is a public figure or a private citizen?

With how many crimes could Liberty Valance be charged during the course of the story? Robbery, aggravated battery, destruction of property, trespass, murder, election interference, discharging a firearm in a public place, intimidation, stalking?

As Stoddard teaches his class the words on the chalkboard say "Education is the basis of law and order." Do you think this is true? Why or why not? Is there significance in Stoddard erasing the words at the end of the scene?

What minorities are represented in the film and how are they represented? Is this an accurate depiction of how minorities were treated in the 1800's?

What happens when the "legend" becomes history? Do we have an accurate record of what really happened?

"When legend becomes fact, print the legend." Today we have information available to us through the Internet, 24 hours news stations, countless newspapers and news magazines, and talk radio. Is the quality of information better or worse than when there were fewer news sources? Is printing "legend" the same as distributing propaganda, misinformation, half truths or the party line? Should there be unbiased news coverage? Who in our history has benefited from becoming a legend? Do we tend to forget the bad and concentrate on the good? Why or why not? Consider Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, FD Roosevelt, Kennedy, Carter, Clinton and others.

Would Ransom Stoddard be acquitted for the murder of Liberty Valance on the grounds of self defense? Consider that Stoddard chose to confront Liberty Valance. Does the fact that Stoddard learned how to shoot a gun and practiced for weeks before the “shoot out” make self defense less likely? Was Stoddard planning on killing Liberty Valance? Would this make his actions pre-meditated?

If Stoddard had disclosed Doniphon’s part in the shooting, could Doniphon have been charged with the murder of Liberty Valance? Could Doniphon plea defense of others?

Ransom Stoddard is a lawyer in the film and is proud of his profession. Does the fact that he’s a lawyer make him more willing to take on Liberty Valance? Does he feel a responsibility to protect the community because of his profession?

Liberty Valance intimidates the entire community through violence or the threat of violence. The marshal is even intimidated and fails to act. How would living in Shinbone make you feel as a citizen? Would you be able to face Liberty Valance and take a stand? How would you have handled Liberty Valance?

At the end of the film, Ransom Stoddard and Liberty Valance are nominated to be elected to represent the territory. The group of citizens gathered as a whole acts to block the nomination of Valance. The power of electing a representative seems to give the community the power to take a nominal stand against Liberty Valance. How would you use the power to vote to change something in your city, community, state or national government?

If you were a presiding judge and Liberty Valance came before you as an accused person, and Liberty Valance had packed the courtroom with his gang of bullies, would you feel safe in rendering a verdict against Valance? Would you feel, as the judge, that you could be fair and impartial? Discuss how intimidation can change the way we think and act.

Try to imagine this plot taking place today, in a small town in the U.S.A. Would you expect the characters to act differently? How so?

- How would Liberty Valance be handled as a character
Would he be arrested by a sheriff/marshal and brought to trial?
- How would Tom Doniphon be handled as a character
Would he be a witness against or for Ransom Stoddard if he was charged with murder?
- How would Ransom Stoddard be handled as a character
Would he take matters into his own hands or use the law to address Liberty Valance and his gang?
- Would the citizens of the town of Shinbone have more options to protect them from someone like Liberty Valance today than they had in the 1800’s?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Additional discussion questions for students who have read the short story AND viewed the film.



Other than the names of the characters, what differences can you identify between the plot in the short story and the film's plot?

Ransome Stoddard/Foster – Good guy? Bad guy? Discuss the difference personality characteristics. Which was the more likeable person? The film Ransome or the short story one?

Tom Doniphon/Bert Barricune - Good guy? Bad guy? Discuss the difference personality characteristics. Which is the more sympathetic character: the film Tom/Bert or the short story one?

Liberty Valance - The story is nowhere without him and his gang. How does the film expand on the character?

The marshal was of negligible assistance in the short story. Is he a vastly different character in the film?

Both the film and the short story use literary references to advance the story. Discuss whether this is an effective tool.

In the short story, the Stoddard/Foster character has “read law” and in the film, he is a lawyer. How do you feel about a lawyer undertaking the kinds of actions that are taken in the short story? In the film?

If Stoddard had disclosed Doniphon's part in the shooting, could Doniphon have been charged with the murder of Liberty Valance? Could Doniphon plea defense of others?



**ILLINOIS STATE
BAR ASSOCIATION**

Illinois State Bar Association
Standing Committee on Law-Related Education for the Public
424 South Second Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701
•217.525.1760 •800.252.8908 •Fax: 217.525.9063