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Middlebury College

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Questions to Ponder: “Lawrence of Arabia”

1. How does T.E. Lawrence, author of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, differ from the “Lawrence of Arabia” of the film and of your expectations?

2. The desert in the “Lawrence of Arabia” has been described as a protagonist in the film. How so?

3. How does Lawrence interact with the desert? What does the desert landscape appear to offer him?

4. How did the director, David Lean, confront the issue of filming so much space that is seemingly empty of details?

5. Read the following quotes by David Lean, director of “Lawrence of Arabia,” and T.E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”). Do these descriptions match the depiction of the desert in any scenes from the movie? If yes, how so? If not, how not?

a) David Lean, during a scouting visit to Jordan:

“From the top we could look downwards towards the Wadi Araba over precipices of jagged rock. You could see it was distant desert but couldn’t really define it. A blurred line of dazzling off-white merging slowly into the deepest blue sky….I thought I would find miles and miles of flat sand and oceans of rolling sand dunes – and they’re just not there.”

(letter to Michael Wilson, dated April 24, 1960, UCLA Arts Library-Special Collections)

b) T.E. Lawrence:

The ascent became gentle, till the valley was a confined tilted plain. The hills on the right grew taller and sharper, a fair counterpart of the other side which straightened itself to one massive rampart of redness. They drew together until only two miles divided them: and then, towering gradually till their parallel parapets must have been a thousand feet above us, ran forward in an avenue for miles.

They were not unbroken walls of rock, but were built sectionally, in crags like gigantic buildings, along two sides of their street. Deep alleys, fifty feet across, divided the crags, whose planes were smoothed by the weather into huge apses and bays, and enriched with surface fretting and fracture, like design. Caverns high up on the precipice were round like windows; others near the foot gaped like doors. Dark stains ran down the shadowed front for hundreds of feet, like accidents of use. The cliffs were striated vertically, in their granular rock; whose main order stood on two hundred feet of broken stone deeper in color and harder in texture. This plinth did not, like the sandstone, hang in folds like cloth; but chipped itself into loos courses of scree, horizontal as the footings of a wall.

The crags were capped in nests of domes, less hotly red than the body of the hill; rather grey and shallow. They gave the finishing semblance of Byzantine architecture to this irresistible place: this processional way greater than imagination…Landscapes, in childhood’s dreams, were so vast and silent.

(T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* [1935], p. 351)