



**OwlTeacher**  
**Teaching with Movies & Literature**

**DANCES WITH WOLVES**

**Good for the following school subjects:**

- ✓ American History
- ✓ Native Americans
- ✓ History of the Great Plains
- ✓ Civil War

Directed by Kevin Costner  
1990; Rated PG - 13; Drama/Western;  
181 minutes; Color;  
Available from [www.OwlTeacher.com](http://www.OwlTeacher.com) bookstore

**Synopsis:** John Dunbar is a wounded Civil War soldier who attempts to end his life. In a twist of fate, Dunbar becomes a hero instead and is rewarded with assignment to his ideal placement. He is stationed at a remote crossroads in the Western frontier and soon becomes friends with the local Sioux Indian tribe.

**Educational Benefits of this movie:** This movie serves as an excellent supplement to a unit on Native Americans in western frontier. Students can learn about Native American customs, traditions, and ways of life by watching *Dances with Wolves*. In addition, this film helps students to see the negative attitudes and misunderstandings that many white Americans had about Native Americans. Finally, this film can add to any classroom study on the Wild West and post-Civil War America.

**Historical Background:** During and after the Civil War, Native American tribes suffered tremendous devastation and destruction. Indian people were violated senselessly in every way and were butchered in the Indian Wars. The Wild West was indeed wild and untamed. Sadly, there was great misunderstanding about the culture of the Native Americans and many saw these tribes as savage and ruthless, which was not usually the case. It seems as though the white man had to justify taking Indian land and creating reservations by portraying Native Americans as uncivilized and unworthy of such things. When we look into the history of the west in relation to Native Americans, sadly we see much racism, ignorance, intolerance, and opportunism on the part of white men. Although the American frontier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is beautiful and breathtaking, much of the history that took place there is not so pretty.

### Study Questions:

1. Why was John Dunbar considered a hero by his superiors when he rode his horse right into enemy territory?
2. Explain why the Native Americans think it is O.K. for them to hunt buffalo, but not the whites. In other words, what is the difference?
3. What is the ultimate message of this film?
4. What do you think this film teaches you about people and societies in general?
5. Did you learn something new about the relationships between the whites and the Native Americans by watching this film? If so, what?

### Written Assignment:

Choose one of the Great Plains Native American tribes from the list below. Complete research in the library and online about that Native American tribe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Based on your research, answer this question in a 500 – 750 word essay: **How was this Native American tribe affected by westward expansion and/or the Civil War?** Your essay needs to answer this question with facts and examples. Give background on the Indian tribe you are researching and write about their culture, traditions, and beliefs. The thesis of your essay, however, is your answer to the above bolded question. Essay must be typed, double-spaced, 1" default margins, and Times New Roman font only.

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|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| ✓ Arapaho Indians        | ✓ Cree Indians    | ✓ Ponca Indians        |
| ✓ Arikara Indians        | ✓ Crow Indians    | ✓ Quapaw Indians       |
| ✓ Assiniboine<br>Indians | ✓ Dakota Indians  | ✓ Sarsi Indians        |
| ✓ Atsina Indians         | ✓ Hidatsa Indians | ✓ Siksika Indians      |
| ✓ Brule Indians          | ✓ Kainah Indians  | ✓ Sioux Indians        |
| ✓ Cheyenne<br>Indians    | ✓ Mandan Indians  | ✓ Teton Indians        |
| ✓ Chipewyan<br>Indians   | ✓ Oglala Indians  | ✓ Wichita Indians      |
|                          | ✓ Osage Indians   | ✓ Yanktonai<br>Indians |
|                          | ✓ Oto Indians     |                        |
|                          | ✓ Piegian Indians |                        |