
Writer's Statement about "Hang 'Em High and Bury 'Em Deep: Thematic Connections between Western and Zombie Fiction"

MICHAEL NGUYEN

“Hang 'Em High and Bury 'Em Deep” was not written or otherwise intended to be authoritative. I did not write the paper to be the be-all, end-all of zombie fiction, nor could I ever do so in an appropriate length of time. As I found out in presenting my work to an audience in the Knights Write Showcase, there is still room for improvement and expansion; with enough documentation and further research, it could probably be cultivated into a graduate thesis. However, the point of “Hang 'Em High” was none of these things originally, and that's the beauty of the whole process: my first idea when writing this paper was that it had to be about zombies, and I ran with it, despite not having any idea how I would integrate it into a research paper.

For four days, I locked myself into my room and played Modest Mouse's “Satin In a Coffin” on repeat while I brainstormed a list of what zombie fiction involved (a post-apocalyptic wasteland rife with danger, raiders, zombies, people trying to stay alive without the means of technology or government) and tried to find something original to write about—that is, something that hadn't already been done, like workforce organization, banking systems, social commentary in relation to 9/11, societal criticism of consumerism, race and colonial influence into the modern era, modernization of the horror genre, conceptualization of death on both personal and social levels, locality of settings used in zombie works, and so on.

I would like to say that I randomly came to the realization that the zombie element of wasteland was very similar to the Western element of, well, 'the West' (a pre-industrial expanse that had highwaymen, Indian incursions, and people trying to make a living in the harsh frontier), but it took more than a few episodes of *The Walking Dead* and a re-view of *Zombieland* to connect the dots (starting with the more obvious visual references to Western tropes like cowboy hats and working back to the thematic elements like the pre-industrial expanse/wasteland). I had to redraft the paper nine times before I had something I was comfortable with, and edited it several more times before submitting it to *Stylus*.

Strangely enough, the element that tied everything together was the prior knowledge of guns used in fiction. It's an odd hobby, to be sure, but it did come in handy while working with a friend on his amateur films, and I found it helpful again while working on this piece. While compiling a list of firearms used in various zombie works (for completeness' sake), I found something interesting: most, if not all, of the guns used in zombie works could be linked back to guns used in classic Westerns like the lever-action .30-30, the double-barreled shotgun, and stainless steel revolvers (so chosen because bluing is more likely to break down and expose parts to rust, something unacceptable in the frequently gunsmith-less West).

Zombie works like *The Walking Dead* slyly allude to Westerns through the guns used, even if more modern designs were available within the context of the story; in *Resident Evil Extinction*, a lever-action rifle designed in the Old West era is used despite the fact that all but two guns used in the film are more modern (out of a total of 19). This central thread was something that I used as the catalyst to understand

and apply the thematic connections involved; even if a character isn't wearing a cowboy hat, the link could be visually established by the choice in firearm, and this link is consistently shown in works (with less classical works using fewer Western-style guns or assigning less screen time to them).

Since I knew that my paper would be limited to a topical piece, I wrote it for peers interested in the subject, both for research and to satisfy curiosity of a current genre. I would have liked to say that I wrote to address a specific problem, but the truth is that I wrote primarily for the benefit of the readers: instead of informative or persuasive, I'd like to call it a 'conceptual' piece, intended to change the way people think about the subject (the closest approximation would be the 'green paper' used in government to bring up a topic to be discussed).

If nothing else, "Hang 'Em High" was a study in intertextuality, an example of treating text and visual mediums as equally important; I had prior experience with analyzing film within a research paper in high school, and I feel that this paper represents a refinement in my methods. If this paper was intended to address a problem, it would be intended to address the problem of first-year students being unable to find things to write about: my paper's answer is that if you're interested in something, anything at all, you can find something to write about. That's more or less the definition of writing: the ability to communicate something to someone through the written word. Initially, it doesn't even have to be a full-fledged idea; it can just be a general concept, like 'zombies.' Then it's a matter of building it up, piece by piece, until you have said what you wanted to say.