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The Hero and Villain Binary in the Western Film Genre

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Abstract

The Western hero has been an established film icon since the early 1900s and the particular brand of masculinity he embodies has represented a set of values and beliefs around what it means to be a man in American society. These resonated into other countries such as New Zealand where this representation also became an accepted view of manhood. Based on a colonialist ideology, the cowboy hero's original role in the frontier of the Hollywood Western was to protect the new settlers and to remove any barriers to their settlement. The first of these was the Native American who was presented as an uncivilised savage to justify conquest. Conflicts such as these created the use of binary oppositions that became an established part of the Western narrative as they provided a contrast between civilisation and wilderness, and good and evil. These oppositions could also take the form of a villain or ideological perspective that didn't fit the ethos of the frontier life the hero was protecting.

Throughout its history, there have been many adaptations and changes made to Western film genre to keep its relevance but the white male figure of the hero has remained a constant presence. In reflecting societal and cultural trends this character has also been adapted as he continues to represent ideal masculinity. The frontier of the American West is presented as a male domain and the figure of the hero is also utilised for the purpose of ensuring threats to male power from minority racial groups or females are minimised. The aforementioned groups, whether good or evil, were never given an equal status to the white hero in this film genre. By having different villains to defeat the hero has been able to prove his superiority in a variety of ways and in becoming more villain-like himself, his power is maintained.

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