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English 182

Genre Analysis: Wanted Posters

The classic “Wanted Poster” as we know it today didn’t start out with a crisp mugshot and embellished Western typeface. In the late 19th century, people sent in postcards with handwritten physical descriptions of the criminal: height, weight, hair color, and identifiable features (Thimble). When photo reproduction became more widely accessible in the 1900s, reward posters developed their recognizable features and became a genre on their own. While wanted posters initially had a purpose of using ordinary citizens in numbers to apprehend criminals, they are now used as a visual motif in popular media because of their distinct look. Additionally, wanted posters may have the opposite effect of increasing the notoriety of the very people they intend to catch.

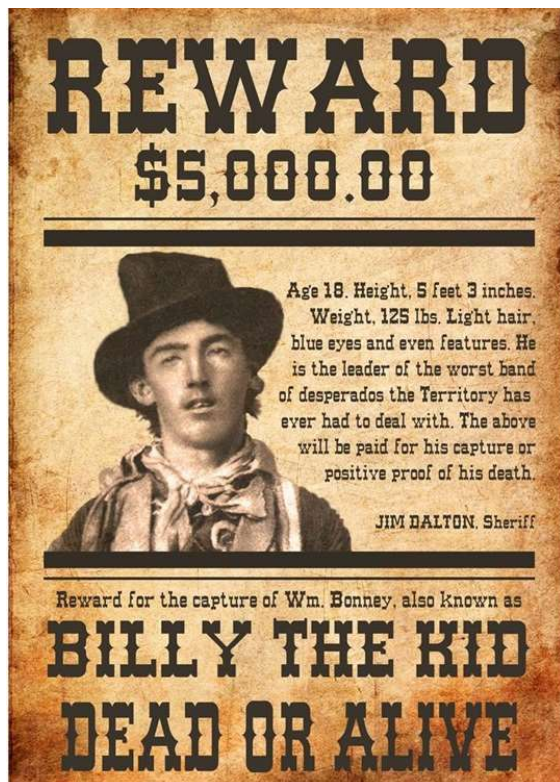


Figure 1. Recreation of Billy the Kid Wanted Poster

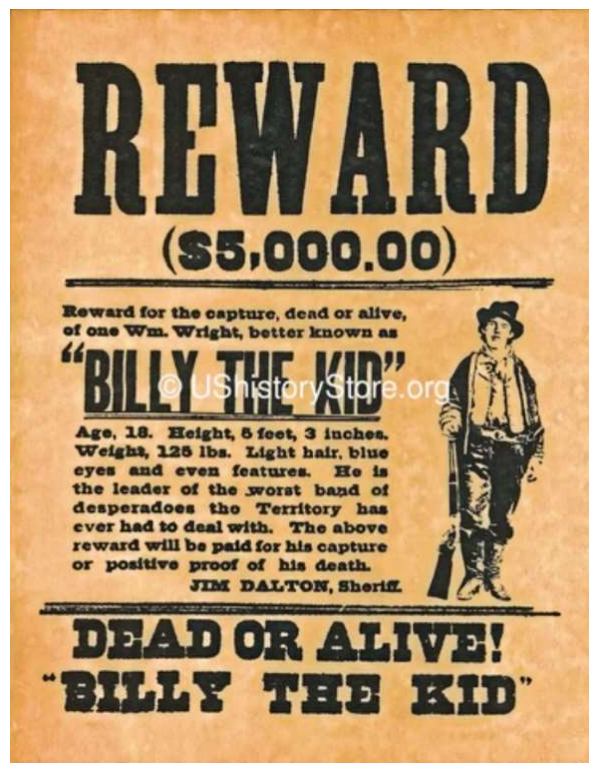


Figure 2.. Original Billy the Kid Wanted Poster

Billy the Kid was an infamous outlaw from New Mexico in the late 1800s. He was known for theft, inciting violence, and working with “the boys”, a crime syndicate in the Southwest (“Billy The Kid”). Billy the Kid, along with other well-known criminals in the American West are partially responsible for the association of wanted posters with the “Wild West”. Recreated posters like Figure 1 use an exaggerated Western font and aged paper to give off a rustic, “authentic” feel to the poster. On the other hand, Figure 2 is the actual wanted poster for Billy the Kid. Noticeable conventions across both the decorative poster and the real one is “REWARD” written at the top in the largest font size, followed by the reward itself of \$5,000. This indicates the purpose of the wanted poster, which is for law officials to entice citizens or bounty hunters to keep an eye out for Billy the Kid. This helps law officials – the minority – to use people in numbers as extra pairs of eyes. Additionally, other non-negotiable conventions include the name and image of the suspect which align with the purpose as well. A decorative wanted poster does not have the same purpose, but they are worth analyzing as well because they represent the changing perception of wanted posters as they become more of an aesthetic representation of history. Consequently, as a genre, I would define a “Wanted Poster” as a vertical page containing the name, image, and reward (enlarged) of a single suspect that law officials wish to find and prosecute. They may also include a written description, “REWARD” or “WANTED” at the top, and a smaller word of caution at the bottom.

These conventions are best observed in media because in movies and TV shows, wanted posters are used to help move along the plot or help with characterization. The interaction between a character and their own wanted poster creates indirect characterization. For example, in *Tangled*, the main character’s love interest Flynn Rider finds a wanted poster of himself. This poster has the same enlarged “WANTED” at the top, and a sketch of himself that takes up the

majority of the page. Because this is only featured for a couple seconds on the screen, it is an oversimplified example that indicates what the young American audience needs to be able to recognize a wanted poster.



In response to the poster, Flynn

Figure 3. Flynn Rider and his wanted poster

Rider said, “this is terrible... they just can’t get my nose right!” Depicting Flynn Rider as sarcastic and nonchalant, this is one example of wanted posters becoming more of a nonserious plot element, even though they would historically be considered serious. Additionally, this highlights the change in purpose of a wanted poster over time due to its existence in visual media.



Figure 4. Sanji [pirate] and his wanted poster from the anime One Piece

The use of wanted posters in the anime *One Piece* is an interesting case study as it takes the point of view of the criminals themselves. The show follows a group of pirates as they gain more infamy for taking down other pirates and fighting the marines. Since the protagonists are the pirates, their wanted posters are a symbol of pride. When the captain, Straw Hat Luffy hears his bounty went up to \$300,000,000, he laughs and exclaims “All right! It went up!” (*One Piece* episode 321, 4:44). The pirates often compare bounties and the higher it is the better. There is a comparable instance to Tangled



Figure 5. Zoro's wanted poster from the anime *One Piece*.

when another member, Sanji, dislikes his poster because of its inaccuracy (figure 4). While the posters were meant to catch these criminals, the non-negotiable convention of a large headshot and name also makes the criminals more widely known by popularizing their identity. To criminals, like the Straw Hat Pirates, a Wanted Poster is a text that communicates that the government acknowledges the pirates' strength enough to ask for help from bounty hunters and marine officials. This makes them prouder to have a high bounty, which contradicts the original intent, and indicates why wanted posters are no longer taken as seriously. Other continued conventions include brown paper, fancy font, “DEAD OR ALIVE”, and the additional swirls bracing the words (figure 5). While the conventions didn't change as much over time, the purpose shifted because the genre is no longer viewed with the same exigency and seriousness.

FBI TEN MOST WANTED FUGITIVE

**Murder of U.S. Nationals Outside the United States; Conspiracy to Murder U.S.
Nationals Outside the United States; Attack on a Federal Facility Resulting in Death**

USAMA BIN LADEN



Date of Photograph
Unknown

Aliases:

Usama Bin Muhammad Bin Ladin, Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin, the Prince, the Emir, Abu Abdallah, Mujahid Shaykh, Hajj, the Director

DESCRIPTION

Date(s) of Birth Used:	1957	Hair:	Brown
Place of Birth:	Saudi Arabia	Eyes:	Brown
Height:	6' 4" to 6' 6"	Complexion:	Olive
Weight:	Approximately 160 pounds	Sex:	Male
Build:	Thin	Nationality:	Saudi Arabian
Occupation:	Unknown		
Scars and Marks:	None known		
Remarks:	Bin Laden is the leader of a terrorist organization known as Al-Qacda, "The Base". He is left-handed and walks with a cane.		

CAUTION

Usama Bin Laden is wanted in connection with the August 7, 1998, bombings of the United States Embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya. These attacks killed over 200 people. In addition, Bin Laden is a suspect in other terrorist attacks throughout the world.

REWARD

The Rewards For Justice Program, United States Department of State, is offering a reward of up to \$25 million for information leading directly to the apprehension or conviction of Usama Bin Laden. An additional \$2 million is being offered through a program developed and funded by the Airline Pilots Association and the Air Transport Association.

CONSIDERED ARMED AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS

If you have any information concerning this person, please contact your local FBI office or the nearest American Embassy or Consulate.

June 1999 Poster Revised November 2001

Figure 6. Wanted poster for Usama Bin Laden created by the FBI

Lastly, at the turn of the 21st century, online wanted posters became a more useful means of reaching the public. The FBI began issuing Identification Orders beginning in 1919 with “Identification Order No. 1” of William N. Bishop (“Fugitive Alert”). Part of the FBI’s own 10 most wanted fugitives is Usama Bin Laden, the leader of the Al-Qaeda. This wanted “poster” doesn’t have the same font and structuring of the others, yet it still includes the name, “WANTED”, an image, reward, description, and word of caution. This poster is clean, white, and simple, with the only accent color being dark blue, to help separate each category. The font is more generic, and it includes the author – the FBI – for credibility, so it appeals to the reader’s ethos. These conventions show that the intent of the poster to find the criminal is to be taken seriously, which is imperative given the severity and relevance of his crimes to the American population. Because it strays from the aged paper and embellished fonts of the previous samples, it acknowledges how wanted posters have lost gravity and inadvertently given credit to the criminals because they have essentially made law enforcement turn to ordinary citizens to find the convict. Wanted posters are still relevant in prosecution, but the creators must be aware of the genre conventions that detract from a poster’s effectiveness.

The wanted poster’s strengths are also its weaknesses. The creator of a real wanted poster intends to make the criminal as identifiable as possible by indicating that they are to be prosecuted (“WANTED”), what they look like (large headshot), and enticing the audience (reward). This issue with this is it also gives credit to the criminal by popularizing them and letting them know they are indeed dangerous, which becomes a source of pride rather than a threat. Now, there exists two different categories of modern day wanted posters; ones used in media as a plot element, and serious ones for law enforcement. While both have the same content, the media posters more closely follow the conventions of historical wanted posters,

whereas real wanted posters do not. Over time, the distinct look of the wanted poster and its use in media as a motif makes them more of a gimmick than an actual tool for law enforcement officials to use. That may be why the online posters have strayed far from the typical conventions of the wanted poster.

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