

The Archetype of the Western Cowboy Outlaw in Red Dead Redemption 2

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Diplomski studij Engleskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer i Hrvatskog
jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer

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Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

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Abstract

The Western genre's presence in books and films is substantial, but in recent years it can be found increasingly in video games as well. The most popular Western video game currently is *Red Dead Redemption 2*, released in 2018. This thesis focuses on *Red Dead Redemption 2* and its protagonist Arthur Morgan. The aim of the thesis is to analyze Arthur Morgan through the Western cowboy outlaw and the Western hero archetype using John G. Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Mody C. Boatright's *The Formula in Cowboy Fiction and Drama*, and Max Westbrook's *The Themes of Western Fiction*. Furthermore, the thesis aims to disprove Cawelti's statement that the tragedy of the Western hero is not comparable to the tragic hero of Greek classics. Through the analysis, the thesis found that Arthur Morgan exhibits the characteristics of both archetypes, but the characteristics of the archetype of the Western hero outweigh those of the Western cowboy outlaw. In addition, the thesis concludes that Arthur Morgan's story as a Western hero is comparable to that of the Greek classics through Arthur's tragic outcome and his heroic efforts.

Keywords: *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Western cowboy outlaw, Western hero, Arthur Morgan, video games, archetypes

Introduction

The United States of America and its people are creators and in a way pathfinders to what the world will like and what will be popularized. One of the things that immediately comes to mind when one thinks about the periods in history that shaped the United States is its American frontier and the Western cowboy. The Western genre has dominated the film scene for decades and its archetypes have been analyzed many times, but mostly those of the Western cowboy as a hero and as an outlaw. In recent years, the Western genre found its way to the medium of video games as well. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) is currently known as the most famous and awarded video game in the Western genre. This thesis aims to explore the archetypes of the Western cowboy outlaw and the Western hero through the analysis of the game's main protagonist Arthur Morgan. This thesis also aims to prove that although Arthur Morgan is an outlaw, at the end of the story, he becomes the Western hero.

In the first section, the thesis gives an overview of the Western genre in video games, from the 1960s and the pinball machines as the console for the Western games, up until the modern day where the most popular console for Western games are *Playstation*, and Windows PC. The second section covers the theory of the Western cowboy archetype using John G. Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Mody C. Boatright's *The Formula in Cowboy Fiction and Drama*, and Max Westbrook's *The Themes of Western Fiction*. The archetypes of the Western cowboy outlaw and Western hero are defined using these works and their theories. The third section explains the story of *Red Dead Redemption 2* in a summary, gives background information about *Red Dead Redemption 2* and its gameplay, and finally lists some of the homages to popular works in the Western genre in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. In conclusion, the final section explores the archetypes of the Western cowboy outlaw and the Western hero through the analysis of Arthur Morgan, the game's protagonist.

1. Overview of Videogames in the Western Genre

Video game developers had numerous inspirations to draw from when creating Western video games and making their mark in gaming history. From James Fenimore Cooper's tales to *The Virginian* by Owen Wister (Saucier) who, although not the one to develop the cowboy-hero character, according to Cawelti, was the one to "give this already popular figure a new thematic significance" (*The Six-Gun Sequel* 68). Moreover, the popularization of the Western frontier increased with the dime novels and, finally, Western films such as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *High Noon* (1952) which "by presenting familiar scenes of ambushes, chases, and grand finale shoot-outs" (Wills 281) served as a great inspiration for the interactive medium. In the earlier days of video games in the Western genre, in the 1970s and 1980s, the narratives of the Western stories were minimally present because of the constraints of the simplistic gameplay mechanics and design; the video games relied on the themes of the Western genre and the action that came with it which, naturally, meant it would be the focus of such games (Heikkinen and Reunanen 5). If a narrative was present, it included the "classic heroes and villains" (Wills 277). The protagonists were usually Caucasian male cowboys "while Mexicans were relegated to the role of corrupt *banditos*, and African Americans were notable only by their absence" (Heikkinen and Reunanen 6). As for the later iterations of Western games, the graphic and design quality rose during the late 1990s and 2000s from pixelated cowboys to more fleshed-out characters, narratives and designs. The 2010s are the decade where Western video games flourished into narratively complex video games, the most prominent examples being *Red Dead Redemption* released in 2010 (Heikkinen and Reunanen 26), and *Red Dead Redemption 2* released in 2018.

The first Western video games emerged as arcade pinball machines in the 1960s with *Mr. Top Gun* and *Mr. Quick Draw* in 1961 (Heikkinen and Reunanen 5) During the 1970s the Western video games gained in popularity with the appearance of many new arcade games that could be "considered as hybrids of video and mechanical elements, which provided a formula for the digital video games" (Heikkinen and Reunanen 6). Among them are *Gunfight* (1975), and *Boot Hill* (1977) which would become even more popular as "*Boot Hill* . . . offered ephemeral escapes to a simpler world of six-shooters, wagon trains, and iron horses" (Wills 277). As for *Gunfight*, the game "positioned two gunfighters against each other, with a wagon and cacti between as cover" (Heikkinen and Reunanen 6), so it could be said that the "*Gunfight* also established a template for one of the oldest genres of videogame entertainment, the Western shooter, and with it, the shooter videogame in general" (Wills 284). The 1980s saw the development of game platforms and the background of the video game became more visually detailed and "home computer games could

also offer more diverse play settings, not constrained by the requirements of arcade cash flows” (Heikkinen and Reunanen 14). Regarding the characters in the games, they became “more complex” (Heikkinen and Reunanen 14). One of the video games, *Gunfricht* (1986), introduced a sheriff looking to find and shoot the villain. There are townspeople as well. One group of the townspeople is pointing out the villain to the sheriff, and the others are gliding ladies (Heikkinen and Reunanen 14). During the 1990s, the “Spaghetti Western” found its way into the gaming world with the “exploitation of spaghetti imagery and sounds” (Heikkinen and Reunanen 22). One of the best examples of such games is *Outlaws* (1997) thought of as a “major milestone” in Western video games (Heikkinen and Reunanen 22).

The 2000s was a period when the *Playstation* console was introduced and saw the transition of Western video games usually being played in the arcade to being played in people’s homes. The most well-known series in the 2000s and the 2010s is the Rockstar Games’ *Red Dead* series. The first game in the series, *Red Dead Revolver*, was released in 2004 showing progress regarding the gameplay and the narrative, but focusing on the main character Red Harlow only moderately (Davis). The second game, *Red Dead Redemption* which was released in 2010 was even more well-received with even better graphics, storylines and gameplay (Calvert). Its sequel *Red Dead Redemption 2* followed in 2018 and is currently the most popular Western video game. It was first released on *Playstation 4* boasting incredible scenery of the American frontier, a vast narrative and plenty of characters with gameplay superior to its predecessors in the series and the Western genre in video games in general (Plagge).

2. The Archetype of the Western Cowboy

As noted in the previous chapter, the archetypes of the Western genre were more simplistic at the beginning, not only in novels and films but in video games as well. As the decades passed, the archetypes of the Western hero and the Western cowboy outlaw changed. The archetype of the Western cowboy outlaw will be described with the help of John G. Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, Mody C. Boatright's *The Formula in Cowboy Fiction and Drama*, and Max Westbrook's *The Themes of Western Fiction*. The aforementioned will be used not only to define the outlaw archetype but also the Western hero archetype as it will be important to the analysis of Arthur Morgan, the main character of *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

2.1. The Western Cowboy Outlaw

According to Cawelti, a savage is “the bloodthirsty Indian or lawless outlaw who is the irreconcilable adversary of the hero and the townspeople” (*The Six-Gun* 79–80). He continues with the description of the savage by noting that the usual works of the Western genre, especially the earlier ones, did not stray from the “bad savage” and “good hero” dichotomy, but that some stories do include a “noble savage” who is differentiated from the “bad savage” by the fact that the savage usually “symbolizes the violence, brutality and ignorance which civilized society seeks to control and eliminate,” while the “positive” traits of the savage, which are “the freedom and spontaneity of wilderness life, the sense of personal honor and individual mastery, and the deep camaraderie of men untrammelled by domestic ties,” make him someone worthy of at least some admiration for his dedication to nature and himself (Cawelti, *The Six-Gun* 80). Both of the characters in the end have to die, but we do not feel sorry for the “bad savage”—his death is celebrated. In contrast, when confronted with the death of the “good savage,” the audience feels “nostalgically sorry” (Cawelti, *The Six-Gun* 80). The reason for feeling nostalgically sorry for the “good savage” is the loss of the traits that he possessed and the “passing of these values as the price which must be paid for civilization” (*The Six-Gun* 80). To specify even more, Cawelti states that the savage can have both bad and “good” qualities, or just one type (*The Six-Gun* 81). The qualities, that is, the characteristics of the bad savage are “negativity, lawlessness, a love of violence, rejection of the town and its way of life” and the most associated villainous quality is a penchant for ruthless violence. The qualities of the “good” savage are “the capacity to live and move freely in the wilderness, mastery of the tools of violence and strong masculinity,” that is, the self-persevering qualities of a man living at the margins of the society, or not at all (Cawelti, *The Six-Gun* 81). To

emphasize the nobility in the “noble” savage, Cawelti mentions “the savage’s code of personal honor and his complete physical courage in defending his honor” (*The Six-Gun* 81). The last quality of a bad savage is madness, which aims to distinguish between the hero’s disciplined and moral use of violence and the uncontrollable aggression which marks the “bad savage” (Cawelti, *The Six Gun* 81–82).

Boatright notes that if the villain is spared, he will either be brought to justice by the court and the reader may or may not know the final verdict of his story (143). The villain could also be spared in the end because of the possibility of his reform or his final unselfish “and humane act” (Boatright 143).

Furthermore, for this thesis, Frye’s qualities of a villain are important when talking about the type of mythos of the story—romance. He says as the world is “cyclical in nature,” the villain then, is associated with “winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age” (187). Meanwhile, the hero is associated with “spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor and youth” (Frye 188).

2.2. The Western Hero

According to Cawelti, the most basic definition of the Western hero’s role is to solve the problems and animosities between the townspeople and the villains. The other, more complex version of the Western hero is the one where he is internally struggling between the “new values of civilization and the personal heroism and honor of the old wilderness [where it] tends to overshadow the clash between savages and townspeople” (*The Six-Gun* 83). The Western hero believes that his true values and feelings lie with the wilderness and Cawelti states that that version of the Western hero archetype is much more tragic (*The Six-Gun* 83). Cawelti notes that if the complex version of the Western hero were to be compared to an ancient Greek hero, it would have to be Achilles, who is “torn between his loyalty to the Achaeans and his transcendent sense of personal honor” (*The Six-Gun* 83). Achilles, after entering the fight that may be his last is embittered and finds no “joy in violence and war” that he used to have (Cawelti, *The Six-Gun* 83). In the end, the Western hero could not be equated with Achilles fully because, as Cawelti observes, “this more complex Western hero is rather more elegiac than tragic and he does not reach the profound depths of grief and knowledge that Achilles does . . .” (*The Six-Gun* 83). Regarding why the Western hero cannot be as tragic as Achilles, Cawelti says that Achilles’s tragedy lies in “the degree to which it forces us to confront the inescapable mystery of life, the terrible limitations of the human desire for immortality and the inextricable relation between glory and death,” therefore the Western hero cannot be compared because his struggle is “linked to a

particular period of history with its limited way of life” (*The Six-Gun* 83–84). The reader may feel sadness over the hero’s death, but it does not make him think about life, mortality, and his “present life.” Cawelti states that the reader laments the hero’s death because it signifies the end of the “old way of life,” that is, the connection to the wilderness and the hero’s code for the new ways and rules of civilization (*The Six-Gun* 84). The Western hero is also associated with a gun and moral violence. His shooting skills are necessary for helping out others and his use of moral violence means he must be highly skilled in combat, but engage in it wisely (Cawelti, *The Six-Gun* 85–86). His group of friends consists of people representing a marginalized or “alienated social class with an ethnic or national background different from that of the hero” (Cawelti, *The Six-Gun* 89). Cawelti ends his analysis and definition of the Western hero archetype stating that “the tired hero often shades over into the sacrificial hero who accepts death or exile because he cannot work out the conflict between the town and his heroic past” (*The Six-Gun* 93).

Cawelti claims that the Western hero is a prime example of a hero of romance in Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* because of the “struggle between hero and villain; the tendency to present both figures as coming not from the town but from the surrounding landscape; the way in which the hero’s action is commonly associated with the establishment of law and order” (*The Six-Gun* 95–96). Frye says that the hero of romance is a human being but is defined by extraordinary feats (33). He spends his time with “romantic animals” such as “horses, dogs, and falcons” (Frye 36). The place where the story is set is usually the forest. When the hero dies, his death “has the effect of a spirit passing out of nature and evokes a mood best described as elegiac” (Frye 36). Frye describes it when mentioning other heroes of romance:

The inevitability in the death of Beowulf, the treachery in the death of Roland, the malignancy that compasses the death of the martyred saint, are of much greater emotional importance than any ironic complications of hybris and hamartia that may be involved. Hence the elegiac is often accompanied by a diffused, resigned, melancholy sense of the passing of time, of the old order changing and yielding to a new one . . . (36–37)

Another thing that makes a hero of romance is a quest that is successfully completed. The quest itself has to have three stages: “the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero” (Frye 187). It is also important to note once again that Frye’s hero is also associated with “spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor and youth” (188).

When it comes to Boatright, the hero is not tempted by the usual vices:

. . . saloon tempting him to drink, but he drinks not at all or only moderately . . . gaming tables, but if he gambles, he never loses his judgement, and he wins . . . bank in a fragile building with no armed guards at the door; he could easily rob it but he does not . . . the saloon girls making seductive advances, but he remains aloof. (144)

Boatright continues, stating that the scenes of temptation are designed for the “bad good man,” and that the “good good man” internally struggles with “conflicts between good impulses, such as love and duty” (144).

Westbrook divides the hero’s characteristics into six points:

1. nature is the better source of truth than man-made
2. man is evaluated more accurately by his performance in a fist fight than by his performance in a drawing room
3. intuitive knowledge and imperial knowledge are superior to book-learning
4. language . . . cannot denote what is truly important
5. the best men are frequently cast out of society because they *are* the best men
6. symbolic action (usually defense of an underdog victimized by institutions) is the most valid expression of value (232–33).

The second, fifth and sixth points will be elaborated upon as they are the most important for the analysis of Arthur Morgan. The second point states that the true nature of the Western hero comes out in a dangerous and unpredictable situation before it does in a controlled situation. The fifth point states that the best men are ignored and pushed away because they do not conform to society’s greed and selfishness. The sixth point emphasizes that the most important action the hero can take is the one of protection and defense of vulnerable people.

3. Red Dead Redemption 2

To better understand the analyses of the archetypes that follow in the fourth chapter of this thesis, it is important to summarize the story of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. The ending where Arthur Morgan with high honor goes to help John Marston is chosen as the version of the game that will be analyzed in later chapters, so that version is the one which is going to be summarized. Additionally, it is equally important to give some background information on *Red Dead Redemption 2* by listing some facts about the game and explaining how the gameplay is important to the archetypes of the cowboy outlaw and the Western hero. Finally, homages to popular works of the Western genre in *Red Dead Redemption 2* will be presented to showcase how the game references and continues the history of the genre in the video game medium.

3.1. The Summary of Red Dead Redemption 2

Red Dead Redemption 2 starts with the Van der Linde gang fleeing from Blackwater, where a ferry robbery had gone wrong, into the Grizzly Mountains seeking shelter while the snowstorm rages on. The year is 1899 and they are running from the law, trying to find a place where they can lie low. The gang consists of more than twenty people, some joining the gang early in the game. Some of the older members who the player never gets to meet, wounded or arrested during the failed ferry robbery, die on and off-screen. The gang's leader is Dutch Van der Linde with his partner-in-crime, Hosea Matthews. Dutch's right-hand man, Arthur Morgan, is the protagonist of the game. The gang consists of members such as John Marston, his "wife" Abigail and their son Jack, newcomers like Charles Smith and Micah Bell, followed by the quiet but useful to the group Leopold Strauss, and many others. While looking for a place to stay, Dutch, Arthur and Micah go to a house where they hear another gang, the O'Driscolls, whose leader is Dutch Van der Linde's sworn enemy, having a ruckus in somebody else's home. After a shootout between the two gangs, Dutch, Arthur and Micah enter the house where they find Mrs. Sadie Adler whose husband was murdered by the O'Driscolls. The house is accidentally set ablaze, and the gang must find another shelter and welcome one more person into the group. Finally, the shelter they find is a place called Colter, where there are multiple abandoned shacks. In the first chapter, the gang decides to rob a train that the O'Driscolls were planning to rob earlier. However, in the process they get into more trouble as they find out that the train and the bonds they robbed belong to Leviticus Cornwall, a man who is a wealthy industrialist. The chapter ends with the gang taking hostage Kieran Duffy,

a member of the O'Driscolls, as they leave the cold weather for the warmer Horseshoe Overlook near a frontier town called Valentine.

In the second chapter, Arthur and the gang go through many side quests. In *A Fisher of Men*, Arthur is confronted by the Pinkerton detectives Agent Milton and Agent Ross while fishing with little Jack. In *Paying a Social Call* Kieran is officially a part of the Van der Linde gang after the gang's attempt at destroying the O'Driscolls goes awry. The two most important storylines are that of money lending and the continuation of Cornwall's pursuit of the gang. In the mission *Money Lending and Other Sins*, Arthur must collect the debt for Leopold Strauss from three unfortunate individuals, one of them being Thomas Downes—a local do-gooder. In the final mission, the gang is on the run again as Leviticus Cornwall is unrelenting in getting them arrested for the robbery of his train.

In the third chapter, the gang finds their home in Clemens Clove, a place near a town called Rhodes. They get involved in a bitter feud between two families—the Grays and the Braithwaites. Thinking there is plenty of gold involved, the gang members work for both families until they figure out that the gang is playing them for fools. The Braithwaites kidnap Jack and give him to Angelo Bronte, a Saint Denis based criminal holding the city in his grip. Before they go to Bronte, the gang kills the rest of the Braithwaites and sets fire to their plantation manor.

The fourth chapter brings the gang to a new hideout called Shady Belle, a derelict manor near Saint Denis. By completing a job for Bronte, they bring Jack back to his mother Abigail. The gang is again confronted by the Pinkerton agents Milton and Ross threatening them with their deaths. Dutch decides to rob a trolley station on Bronte's suggestion and against Hosea's wishes. The robbery goes wrong, and the gang realizes it was a set-up. Dutch decides to enact revenge on Bronte, again against Hosea's wishes. Bronte gets killed and thrown to the alligators, and Arthur starts to see the "beginning" of Dutch's psychological unravelling. Before doing one last robbery at the bank in Saint Denis, the O'Driscolls enact their revenge by killing Kieran Duffy. The bank robbery ends with Hosea and Lenny killed, John arrested and the whole gang on the run. Arthur, Dutch, Micah and Javier end up getting on a ship and getting shipwrecked on an island called Guarma.

The fifth chapter sees Arthur, Dutch, Micah and Javier try to survive and get back home from the island. After fighting Colonel Fustar who is running a sugar plantation in Guarma, the gang is given a boat by Hercule Fontaine, a Haitian smuggler. They return to the U.S. and find the gang in hiding. The Pinkertons arrive one more time with the intent to kill every member of the gang. A shootout ensues and somehow, the gang manages to escape. At the end of the chapter, Arthur finds out he is sick with tuberculosis, starting an internal soul-searching journey.

In the sixth chapter, the gang relocates to Beaver Hollow. Arthur decides that after all the years, the time of outlawry and the family they had is over. Dutch accuses Arthur of treachery, although he is the reason, alongside Micah, why the gang is falling apart. Arthur starts to see things more clearly and believes his own judgement more than he ever has before. Sadie and Arthur rescue John from jail, and Arthur tells him to run and try to live a normal life with his family. Dutch kills Leviticus Cornwall and uses the poor Wapiti people and their plight for his own gain destroying the gang in the process. Arthur tries to make things right by helping the Downes family after destroying their life. His final wish is to help John get away and live a normal life. After the final fight between Arthur and Micah, who is revealed to be the traitor responsible for giving away information about the gang to the Pinkertons, Arthur dies knowing John managed to leave. Dutch leaves both Arthur and Micah and goes his own way.

In the Epilogue, John and his family try to live an honest life years later after the final fight. John enacts revenge on Micah, thus not respecting Arthur's final wish for him not to look back (*Red Dead Redemption 2*).

3.2. *Red Dead Redemption 2*: Background and Gameplay

Red Dead Redemption 2, as mentioned in the first chapter, is a video game released in 2018 by Rockstar Games which is responsible for the *Red Dead* series. *Red Dead Redemption 2* is a prequel to *Red Dead Redemption* released in 2010. The first game in the series, *Red Dead Revolver* is not narratively connected to the other two *Red Dead* video games (O'Sullivan 14). In the first weekend of its release, the video game sold for over \$725 million worldwide (Crecente). Rockstar Games spent over \$170 million to develop the game, making it "one of the most expensive games ever made" (O'Sullivan 14). The game was developed for over eight years and is "the culmination of over 2,200 days of motion-capture work, 1,200 actors (700 of which had dialogue), a 2,000+ page script for the main story, 300,000 animations, 500,000 lines of dialogue and 80 pages of dialogue per non-playable character" (O'Sullivan 14). The story of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, as previously summarized, follows the Van der Linde gang in its efforts to come to terms with the ending of the "Wild West" that they had known and taken advantage of, and the rise of the civilization furthering its values, law and order right at the gang's doorstep (*Red Dead Redemption 2*). Regarding the environment of the game, it is a "fictional recreation of parts of the United States, drawing some inspiration and resemblances from reality" (O'Sullivan 15). The environment consists of five states—Lemoyne, New Austin, West Elizabeth, Ambarino and New Hanover:

Lemoine is similar to Louisiana with its swamps, warmer weather and the bustling Saint Denis, similar to New Orleans. New Austin is “mostly [a] barren, rural desert”. West Elizabeth is filled with “great plains, tall-trees forestry . . . valley similar to California and Yosemite’s valley and . . . [features] snow-capped mountains”. Ambarino is at “the highest altitude, covered by mountains and forests – and is home to the Wapiti Indian Reservation” and New Hanover is bursting with “forests, prairies, and ridges” (O’Sullivan 15–6).

It can be assumed that Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch gang were an inspiration for the Van der Linde gang, seeing as they stopped and robbed Leviticus Cornwall’s train and ended up being hunted by the Pinkerton Agency financially backed by Leviticus Cornwall. Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch robbed a Union Pacific Train in Wyoming in 1899, and E. H. Harriman hired the Pinkerton agency to hunt them down (O’Sullivan 18). The writers of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Dan Houser, Michael Unsworth and Rupert Humphries read and consulted many books and films “mentioning Dickens, Henry James, Keats, Émile Zola, Copperfield’s Uriah Heep, and Arthur Conan Doyle” (O’Sullivan 22).

The player controls Arthur Morgan, as he is the main protagonist of the game, but not the only playable character since the player can play as John Marston in the Epilogue. The player can ride a horse and take care of it by feeding, brushing and bonding with it. The player can also use carriages, trains, trolleys and walk on foot (Hoffman). *Red Dead Redemption 2* is an open-world game which means that the player can go to any of the places in the game whenever he wants to while also following and playing the main storyline. The game also has an honor system which greatly influences what ending the player will get of four possible endings. The honor system has two sides—high honor and low honor. Low honor really means no honor at all. If the player does good deeds, helps other people in need, helps around the gang’s camp with chores and is friendly, the player receives honor points, and the honor rises. If the player continually robs, kills and steals, the honor points fall in the system (Hoffman). Regarding the four endings in the game, the one where Arthur with high honor helps John, and achieves his redemption will be analyzed as the title of the game itself suggests that to be the true ending of the game.

3.3. Homages to Popular Works in the Western Genre

When it comes to inspirations and homages of the works of the Western genre, *Red Dead Redemption 2* has a number of them. In this chapter, some but not all will be mentioned. Two of the homages were taken from the YouTube video titled “7 Epic Movie References in *Red Dead*

Redemption 2,” namely *A Fistfull of Dollars* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the coward Robert Ford*.

The first homage is an already mentioned one. When Butch Cassidy and his gang rob a train, they rob E. H. Harriman’s Union Pacific Train which ends up haunting them for the duration of the film (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*). When Dutch Van der Linde and his gang decide to rob a train, they also find out that it is Leviticus Cornwall’s train they are robbing for bonds (*Red Dead Redemption 2*). In both scenes, a man who works for Harriman and Cornwall explains their job to the leaders of the gangs.



Fig. 1. Still of the Wild Bunch gang robbing the train from the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969.



Fig. 2. Still of the Van der Linde gang robbing the train from the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018.

The second homage comes from the same film. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid are cornered by their pursuers and when they realize that they do not have any other means of escape, they jump from a cliff into a rushing river (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*). The same happens with Arthur and Dutch. After running from the army, they also realize they are cornered. After Dutch distracts the pursuers with talk, Arthur and he jump into a river and evade certain death (*Red Dead Redemption 2*).



Fig. 3. Still of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid jumping off the cliff from the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969.



Fig. 4. Still of Dutch Van der Linde and Arthur Morgan jumping off the cliff from the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018.

Another interesting visual homage is found to be in honor of *Django Unchained* (2012). The scene when Calvin J. Candie's mourners are returning to their home is almost identical to the one when the Dutch Van der Line gang is walking towards the Braithwaite mansion to look for

Jack. The look of the mansion, the path to it, and the characters walking up to the respective houses are visually very similar. What is not the same is the situation and the characters whose moral polarity from the audience's perspective is reversed—in *Django Unchained* the characters walking up to the house are the villains' family, and the members of the Van der Linde gang walking up to the Braithwaite mansion in *Red Dead Redemption 2* are the protagonists of the game, doing what is necessary from the player's perspective.



Fig. 5. Still of Calvin J. Candies' mourners walking towards his mansion from the film *Django Unchained*, 2012.



Fig. 6. Still of the Van der Linde gang approaching the Braithwaite manor from the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018.

Another narrative homage comes from *A Fistful of Dollars*, released in 1964 (“7 Epic Movie References in Red Dead Redemption 2” 3:28). In the film, the Stranger walks into a Mexican town to find two feuding families—the Baxters and the Rojos. He decides to fool both of the families to make money. One of the Baxters is also the town sheriff (Pfeiffer). In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, when the gang relocates to a place near the town of Rhodes, they hear of a feud between two families—the Grays and the Braithwaites. The town’s sheriff comes from the Gray family. Dutch decides for the gang to try and work for both families because they heard they are hiding gold.

There is an homage to *Rip Van Winkle*, a short story by Washington Irving published in 1819–20. Although not necessarily a Western story, it is still an interesting homage to one of the first American short stories (“Rip Van Winkle”). When Agent Milton and Agent Ross arrive at Clemens Point to threaten the gang, Agent Milton asks John Marston what his name is, and he answers with “Rip Van Winkle.”¹

The final homage to mention is the most glaringly obvious. It is in homage to the film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* released in 2007 (7 Epic Movie References in *Red Dead Redemption 2*” 4:11). Jesse James and his gang want to rob a train and they make the train stop by putting up a wooden barricade and by Jesse James standing on it. The scene is replicated almost frame by frame in *Red Dead Redemption 2* when Arthur Morgan, along with his gang members, goes to rob a train. Instead of using the barricade to stop the train, the gang uses a heavy oil wagon with Arthur Morgan standing on it. What is also the same are the shots of the gang members, the gang members hiding in the trees with the light of the train shining on them, and the train coming to a stop in front of Jesse James and Arthur Morgan.

¹ This quote is taken from Chapter 3, mission “The Battle of Shady Belle,” *RDR2*



Fig. 7. Still of Jesse James standing on a barricade from the film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, 2007.

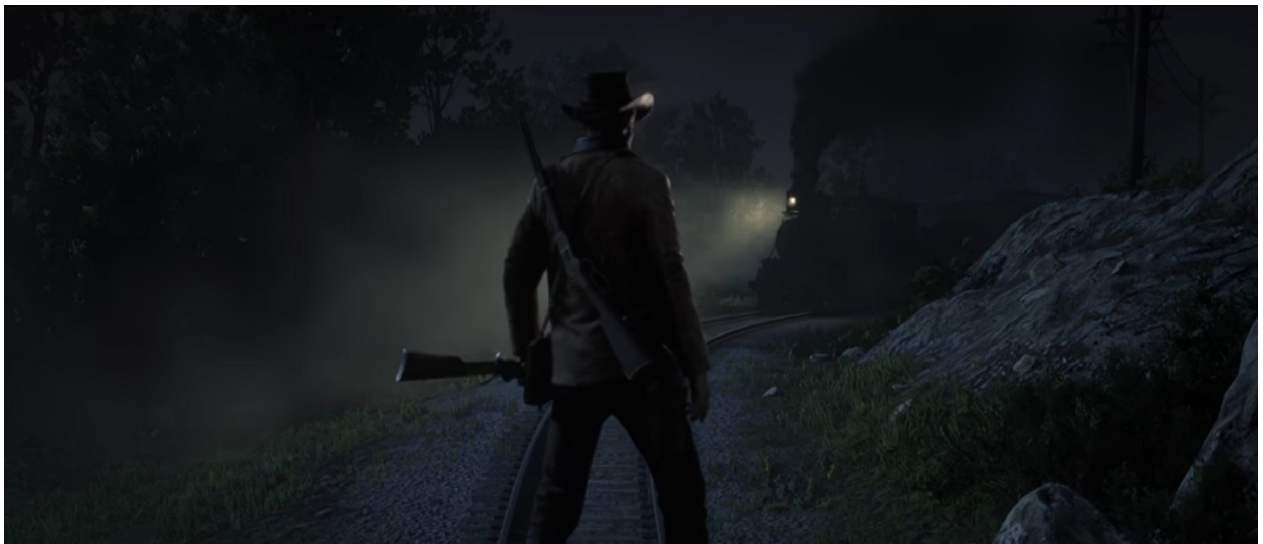


Fig. 8. Still of Arthur Morgan standing on an oil wagon from the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018.

4. The Analysis of Arthur Morgan from *Red Dead Redemption 2* through the Archetypes of the Western Cowboy Outlaw and the Western Hero

4.1. Arthur Morgan as the Western Cowboy Outlaw

Arthur Morgan is a member of an outlaw gang called The Van der Linde Gang, named after their leader Dutch Van der Linde. He is Dutch's right-hand man, and has been for twenty years. Arthur even says that Dutch and Hosea taught him to read and write.² He has been on the run from the law for most of his life. As an outlaw, he has been involved in robberies of banks, trains, and stagecoaches, all of which involved innocent people, some of whom may have ended up killed during the robberies. As Arthur himself describes their life while talking to Uncle who is another older member of the gang who suffers from lumbago which is more of an excuse to avoid work than him being in actual pain: "So, while the rest of us are busy... stealing, killing, lying... fighting to try and survive... you get to think all day."³ To Arthur, all of the things he listed are necessary for their survival, indicating that the kind of life the gang lives is normal to them. Another description of Arthur's life comes from Pinkerton's Agent Milton when he meets Arthur while he is fishing with John's son Jack. Milton explains Arthur's fall into the outlawry: "Van der Linde's most trusted associate. You've read the files, typical case... orphaned street kid seduced by that maniac's silver tongue and matures into a degenerate murderer."⁴ To bring the case home, when Arthur states that Milton enjoys "being a rich man's toy," Agent Milton answers:

AGENT MILTON. I enjoy society, flaws and all. You people venerate savagery, and you will die savagely. All of you.

ARTHUR. Oh, we're all gonna die, Agent.⁵

Agent Milton explicitly states that Arthur and his gang are savages, outlaws and that they will die that way unless they decide to turn in Dutch Van der Linde.

When there is a need to threaten people in order for them not to report him to the law or just because a person has looked at him wrongly or said something he did not like, Arthur does not mind resorting to threats. In the mission "Who is Not Without Sin," Arthur looks for Mr. Swanson, a pastor whose biggest vice is alcohol, and finds him drunk while playing poker with some townsfolk. After one of the men does not want to let Mr. Swanson leave the table, Arthur resorts to violent threats: "Now firstly, we ain't friends. Don't make no mistake on that subject. Now

² This information is taken from Chapter 1, mission "The Aftermath of Genesis," *RDR2*

³ This quote is taken from Chapter 2, mission "Polite Society, Valentine Style," *RDR2*

⁴ This quote is taken from Chapter 2, mission "Fisher of Men," *RDR2*

⁵ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 2, mission "Fisher of Men," *RDR2*

secondly, he can't hardly see, let alone reason. Now reasoning ain't never been one of my strong points neither... but seeing I do just fine. You wanna step outside, or deal with business here?"⁶ Another outlaw characteristic of Arthur's is drinking and brawling in the saloons. In "Americans at Rest" Arthur fights with the other men in the saloon. At one point, a burly man called Tommy walks down the stairs and joins the brawl. Arthur attacks him to save his friend and almost gets killed but manages to get the upper hand. While he is punching Tommy, a man who is a local do-gooder, begs him to stop.⁷

To go back to Cawelti's statement on Western outlaws and the characteristics of the "bad savage"—negativity, lawlessness, a love of violence, rejection of the town and its way of life" (*The Six-Gun* 81), it is important to highlight another situation from the game. In the gang, Leopold Strauss is responsible for making money by lending it to poor, unfortunate people who need help, and then asking them to pay back the "debt." In the "Money Lending and Other Sins III" mission, Strauss tasks Arthur with retrieving the money from four people. One of them, Thomas Downes, is the man who stopped Arthur from killing Tommy. Arthur goes to his house and demands the money back. When Downes says he has not got any, Arthur starts hitting him so hard that the man coughs blood on Arthur's face. Thomas Downes is visibly sick, but it is later revealed that it was with tuberculosis. In the dialogue, it is apparent how much Arthur is not willing to back down:

ARTHUR. You borrowed money from my business partner Herr Strauss. You owe him. You took the money. He wants it back. What's not to understand? Where's our money?

THOMAS. I don't have it.

ARTHUR. Sell your place.

THOMAS. We already owe more than it's worth.

ARTHUR. Then sell your wife, your family, or something. We ain't your idea of charity. Is that clear?⁸

Arthur then starts beating Thomas. Immediately, Downes's wife Edith comes to help her husband and Arthur berates her as well.

Arthur as an outlaw will resort to cruelty to get what he needs. Despite that, there are hints of self-deprecation and even self-hatred in how Arthur views himself. For example, he puts himself down when he looks at his reflection in the mirror and says: "Oh, you ugly bastard. You're getting old. Old, and, kinda sad. No wonder they all leave you. You sour-faced idiot. You ain't foolin' no

⁶ This quote is taken from Chapter 2, mission "Who is Not Without Sin," *RDR2*

⁷ This information is taken from Chapter 2, mission "Americans at Rest," *RDR2*

⁸ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 2, mission "Money Lending and Other Sins III," *RDR2*

one.”⁹ To conclude by going back to Cawelti’s quote, to be an outlaw or “bad savage” means to be full of negativity, which Arthur is, both towards others and himself. He is a lawless man, living on the run from the law for the crimes he has committed. He does not have a particular love of violence but does not refrain from using violence if it will somehow benefit the gang. He rejects civilization and society, abuses it, and lives on the fringes of it, considering it to be unnatural which reflects his father figure’s, Dutch Van der Linde’s, views of civilization.

Arthur also has the qualities of the “noble” savage such as “the freedom and spontaneity of wilderness life, the sense of personal honor and individual mastery, and the deep camaraderie of men untrammelled by domestic ties” (Cawelti, *The Six-Gun*, 80). Arthur lives with the gang mostly in the wilderness, their tents being their shelter. Growing up with hardened outlaws, he has learned to be self-reliant and resourceful. Even though he could survive alone, he chooses to contribute to the gang and help its members who cannot do as much as he can. He also trusts his gang members to survive together and to be able to depend on them if there is ever a need for that. The gang also lives by a code that ensures the trust and loyalty amongst them are preserved, and in a way it is the “sense of personal honor” that Cawelti talks about. If this code is broken and the trust of the gang members betrayed, even then there is a chance for the rogue member to come back and make amends, like in John Marston’s case of him returning to the group after abandoning them for a whole year, fearing the responsibilities of fatherhood.

When talking about “noble” and “bad” savages, there are two characters in the game who are in contrast the most when it comes to the cowboy outlaw archetype—Micah Bell and Dutch Van der Linde. They are the worst of the outlaws compared to Arthur. Cawelti speaks of ruthless violence as the most villainous quality in the cowboy outlaw archetype, and Micah relishes in violence. When Arthur rescues Micah out of jail in a town called Strawberry, Micah decides to “pay a social call” to a man called Skinny. When he arrives at the house, he kills Skinny and it is also implied he kills his wife just to get his guns back. Arthur is shocked at Micah’s actions and says: “You have really lost it this time.”¹⁰ While gunning out of the town, Micah exclaims: “We are thinning the herd today!”¹¹ Showing no remorse, and even showing enjoyment in killing, Micah displays “bad” savage’s love for the violence that Cawelti mentions. During the mission after the escape from Strawberry, Micah propositions Arthur to rob a stagecoach together. Arthur tries to explain his concerns:

⁹ This quote is taken from the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*

¹⁰ This quote is taken from Chapter 2, mission “Blessed are the Meek?,” *RDR2*

¹¹ This quote is taken from Chapter 2, mission “Blessed are the Meek?,” *RDR2*

ARTHUR. It concerns me when you put us in danger, and we don't realize till it's too late. Like that move you pulled in Strawberry making me kill half the town just for your precious guns.

MICAH. Precious they are... you need to roll a little looser, Morgan.

ARTHUR. Looser? I seen you come undone more than once now. And you only been running with us a few months.

MICAH. What's done is done.¹²

Micah proves once again how much he does not care about what anyone thinks of him, even when it puts others in dangerous situations and means ruthlessly killing innocents to save his own skin. He even tells Arthur what Dutch thinks of him, and, of course, agrees with it—"a big shadow cast by a tiny tree."¹³ Both Dutch, who is supposed to be like a father to Arthur, and Micah do not have a high opinion of Arthur as an outlaw.

Cawelti mentions another quality of the villainous savage—madness (*The Six-Gun* 82). Dutch Van der Linde fits that quality the most. In the first chapter of the story, Arthur is notified of the Blackwater ferry robbery gone wrong, where not only have some of the gang members lost their lives and were arrested, but an innocent young woman was murdered in cold blood by Dutch. Ever since then, Arthur has worried about the state of the gang. He tries to be optimistic about Dutch's state of mind and his reasoning capabilities, but as the story moves on, he starts to see more clearly what kind of man Dutch actually is. When trying to escape Guarma, Dutch finds a woman to help them through a secret passage. She only speaks in Spanish. At one moment, Dutch gets annoyed with her, and kills her:

ARTHUR. What was that?

DUTCH. Horrible old crone.

ARTHUR. But you killed her.

DUTCH. She was going to betray us, Arthur... couldn't you tell?

ARTHUR. No.

DUTCH. Well, I got some Spanish... she was.

ARTHUR. You keep killing folk, Dutch.¹⁴

Boatright mentions that the villain of the Western story may not die but may be either spared by the hero or be judged by the court (143). The main villain in *Red Dead Redemption 2*,

¹² This dialogue is taken from Chapter 2, mission "An American Pastoral Scene," *RDR2*

¹³ This quote is taken from Chapter 2, mission "An American Pastoral Scene," *RDR2*

¹⁴ This dialogue is from Chapter 5, mission "A Kind and Benevolent Despot," *RDR2*

Micah Bell, does not die along with Arthur at the end of Chapter 6 but leaves and lives for another few years. The ones who end up being his judge, jury and executioners are none other than John Marston and Dutch himself. Given that Micah had betrayed the gang by cooperating with the authorities, namely The Pinkerton Agency in order to save himself, the trial and execution he faced at the end were conducted by those who once trusted him with their own lives.

What is also interesting to note is Frye's description of the villain and what he is associated with in the mythos of romance—"winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age" (187). Micah Bell is killed by Dutch and John during the winter, surrounded by snow. His reckless way of life in search of riches and easy living surmounted to nothing but a violent death in a wasteland. Dutch meets his end in *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) by throwing himself off the cliff. Arthur's life, on the other hand, ends by both tuberculosis and while trying to ensure John has a good life by fighting Micah, which will be further discussed later.

4.2. Arthur Morgan as the Western Hero

Arthur Morgan is an outlaw, but that does not mean he ended the story as a villain. He is the main protagonist, but he is not the leader of the gang. He listens to Dutch's orders believing him to always be right, truthful and loyal. That all starts to unravel as the gang runs from the Pinkertons, evading them unsuccessfully. Before analyzing Arthur's path to redemption, the relationship between the player and the game needs to be examined.

When playing the video game, the player is immersed in the fictional world through the avatar or agent who is the main character. Given this, there is a higher chance that players will become more emotionally invested if they get to pick choices that affect the end of the story (Omeragić 13). The more time the player spends with the game and its protagonist, the more likely that the player will have a positive experience with the game and be more emotionally invested (Rosenthaler 20). The difference between classic mediums such as books, films and television compared to a video game is that the video game offers more and deeper ways of immersion in the story, mainly through interaction. Although there are some books, films and television series that offer interactive experiences and multiple endings, it is not the same as the possibility of immersion into the fictional world of the game through playing as the protagonist and controlling the protagonist's actions, thus, in a way, becoming him or her. It is important to talk about player immersion and the part it plays in Arthur's redemption. Indeed, the title of the game itself expects redemption to take place during the game, but the biggest role in achieving it belongs to the players.

While playing the game and doing the missions in order to finish the main storyline, the player can do side quests as Arthur Morgan. Side quests come in different forms. Some are like missions, though not part of the main storyline, that can or do not have to be solved—it is up to the player to accept or decline the mission. If the player accepts, it is an opportunity for Arthur to make good or bad choices, depending on whatever it is the player chooses to do. Arthur can either help, remain neutral or make the situation even worse. As noted before, there are different endings to *Red Dead Redemption 2*, but the ending with Arthur’s redemption many consider to be the true one. Even the actor who played Arthur Morgan, Roger Clark, says so himself (qtd. in “The REAL Arthur Morgan” 4:06). That ending will be analyzed which means that the choices made by the player have to go in that direction. Another way to do good deeds in the game are the random encounters that Arthur has with other non-playable characters (NPCs). They are not missions, but random situations that have to be resolved quickly, that is, the player has to react in a fast manner for the situation to have a positive outcome.

One of the first instances where Arthur can show himself in a better light is when in the mission titled “Polite Society, Valentine Style,” while driving the gang towards the town, they encounter a man whose horse had run away. Arthur decides to go after the horse. When he calms the horse down and brings it back to its owner, the gang congratulates him and the man says that Arthur is a gentleman. The previously mentioned honor system goes up and Arthur ends the encounter with higher honor than he had before.

“Help a Brother Out,” a mission where Arthur frees some immigrants in captivity is another point in the path to his redemption. While walking the streets of Saint Denis, Arthur meets a Franciscan monk whose name is Brother Dorkins, begging for his charity. Arthur Morgan is not a religious man, but the monk sees some good in him:

BROTHER DORKINS. You, kind sir. Will you help the poor?

ARTHUR. I ain’t so kind.

BROTHER DORKINS. Yes, you are sir. You have it in you, I can tell.

ARTHUR. I’m a nasty bit of work, father.

BROTHER DORKINS. You’re wrong on two counts, sir. I’m a humble Brother. A penitent Monk, not a priest... and you’re a magnificent bit of work. You may have made some... poor choices, but which of us hasn’t?

ARTHUR. (Laughs) You have no idea.

BROTHER DORKINS. But you do, and God does, and that’s enough for me... and for him.

ARTHUR. We shall see.¹⁵

Brother Dorkins asks for a donation which Arthur gives. Then, he is told that a shopkeeper is keeping people as slaves. Arthur exclaims in disbelief: “I don’t believe you, it’s 1899.”¹⁶ But he does go looking for them. He ends up finding them and saves them, saying: “Please, I’m on your side. It’s going to be okay” thus managing to comfort the distraught captives. He brings them to Brother Dorkins who is grateful for Arthur’s help. To thank him he offers him whatever money he has collected for the charity, but Arthur refuses. In these moments, the goodness that characterizes the Western hero is shown, proving that Arthur may not be a savage outlaw only.

Frye notes that the hero of romance, who Cawelti compares to the Western hero, is often seen with romantic animals like horses, dogs and falcons (36). Throughout the game Arthur owns a horse which he bonds with, feeds and cleans. Right before the final fight, his horse gets shot by the Pinkertons and is dying. Arthur and John need to keep going, but Arthur stops to thank his horse for all it has done for him, for its service and companionship. He praises and pets dogs whenever he sees them. Finally, when the player, as John, goes to Arthur’s grave, an eagle can be seen perched on his wooden cross, the majestic and noble-looking animal symbolizing all of the good Arthur had done for others during his life.

Boatright says how the Western hero is never tempted by drink, crime, gambling, and being seduced by women (144). Arthur gets drunk in the saloon and fights other people; he commits robberies and can gamble. As for the side-quests, though, he may choose not to include himself in these activities. The only time he is exclusively respectful and mindful of others is when he is in contact with the unfortunate, helpless, and vulnerable. Whenever the working girls of the saloon offer themselves to him, he always declines—there is no option for the player to accept their advances. One of the examples of his relationships with women is Mary Linton, his former love, who is brought back into his life when she asks him for help several times. Each time, like the “Western Hero,” the hopelessly in love Arthur accepts to help. The first time he sees her, he writes in his journal:

Saw Mary again. I feel like the luckiest man alive and I feel like a fool. That woman confuses me and plays me for a fiddle like no one else alive. Her little brother Jamie had joined some religious order and needed saving, or so she and the god awful DADDY seemed to have thought. I took him home, after a pathetic little squabble. Poor boy. Wonder what will become of him. Education and an unpleasant father have been a terrible curse for

¹⁵ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 4, mission “Help a Brother Out,” *RDR2*

¹⁶ This quote is taken from Chapter 4, mission “Help a Brother Out,” *RDR2*

him I fear. As for Mary, I hope I will not make a god awful fool of myself once more, but somehow I imagine I shall.¹⁷

He ends his thoughts with a heart between his and Mary's initials. From this example, Arthur is shown to be a romantic at heart. Before finding out he is dying, he promises to run away with her after he gets enough money from the robberies that Dutch plans, but which always fail. She decides in the end to finally give up on him and sends him her goodbye letter. It is interesting to note a similar situation in the novel *The Shootist* written by Glendon Swarthout. The main character, a gunslinger J. B. Books, finds out he is dying from prostate cancer. After being cooped up in a hotel for days while suffering from pain, his former flame Serepta Thomas visits him. At first, he thinks that she visited him because she still loves him and wants to be with him, but she actually came asking for help. Her husband left her, and she needs financial help. A journalist, whom Books has previously kicked out of his room, has propositioned a plan. She marries Books and when Books dies, he can write a book about Books and his life, and the writing credit will go to her. After finding that out, Books is disappointed, angry, and hurt by such a suggestion and tells her to leave (95–97). Although rightly hurt because someone he thought loved him wanted to, in a way, use him, Books still could not find it in himself to swallow his pride and help Serepta. He could have done a good deed for all the things he has done as an outlaw. Arthur, on the other hand, decides to help Mary although she left him years ago. She asks him to give her his help regarding not only her younger brother but also her father who hated Arthur immensely.

Arthur's relationship with John Marston is a complicated one. Both being "raised" by Dutch Van der Linde and Hosea Matthews, they grew up as brothers. In his early twenties, John became a father to a boy with Abigail Roberts, but did not want to acknowledge him so he left the gang for a year. Arthur was not only bitter and angry at him for leaving the gang, but mostly for leaving his young son because he too once had a son of his own—Isaac. When talking with The Wapiti Indian Chief Rains Fall, he confides in him and says that he used to have a son, but he was killed along with his mother by some bandits. Arthur was off with the gang, so he was seeing them every few months. When he went to visit them the last time, the only thing he saw were two crosses in front of their house. Because of that, he envies John and his opportunity to be with his son and have a relationship with him, while still struggling with the guilt of letting his son and his mother get murdered because of his absence.

In the mission titled "Brothers and Sisters, One and All," Arthur sees Brother Dorkins again and meets a nun named Sister Calderón. She praises him, and Arthur does not want to accept the

¹⁷ This quote is taken from Arthur's journal in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*

praise. A boy who is standing next to the sister steals her crucifix, and Arthur tells her he will return it to her. When he finally catches up to the boy, he gets the crucifix. While he is examining it and putting it in his bag, he hears someone talking to him:

FAMILIAR VOICE. Hey... you want some company, mister?

ARTHUR. No.

FAMILIAR VOICE. You sure?

ARTHUR. Hey...

FAMILIAR VOICE. What?

ARTHUR. I know you. Mrs. Downes?

EDITH. Oh, no. Not you. Get away.

ARTHUR. How? I mean...

EDITH. Help!¹⁸

After Arthur ruined Mrs. Downes's and her son's lives, she now has to resort to prostituting herself to feed herself and her son. This is the biggest sign of Arthur's failure to do the right thing at the right time, but it also offers a possibility for redemption which puts him on a path where he will go through self-realization and changes in character while coming to terms with his own mistakes and sins. While looking at the crucifix of Jesus Christ who died for everyone's sins, Arthur is reminded of the sin that he committed and the lives he ruined, compelling him into introspection and representing a spiritual dimension to the story and Arthur's character arc. Later on, when he finds out he is suffering from tuberculosis which, given his lifestyle and obligations, will eventually become lethal, he accepts his situation and fate, trying to do the best he can for the people around him while he still can.

After escaping Guarma, Arthur's health deteriorates. While riding on his horse through the streets of Saint Denis, Arthur starts to have a coughing fit and spews blood. He comes off his horse and falls onto the sidewalk. A man finds him and helps him get to a doctor to have him checked. After a conversation with the doctor and being given his tuberculosis diagnosis, Arthur walks off into the city. While walking through the street, his vision blurs and all of a sudden, it is as if there is no one but him on the street. He walks and hears his own voice and the voices of people he once helped or hurt:

ARTHUR. (In his head) We can't change what's done, we can only move on.

BROTHER DORKINS. You have it in you. I can tell.

EDITH. (About her husband) He didn't have a choice. He was good and he did good.¹⁹

¹⁸ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 4, mission "Brothers and Sisters, One and All," *RDR2*

¹⁹ These quotes are taken from Chapter 6, mission "A Fork in the Road," *RDR2*

While hearing the voices, suddenly, a stag steps in front of him. They look at each other for a moment, and then the stag walks away and everything turns back to normal. This is the first of several moments when Arthur has a vision like this, where he sees a stag, either while awake or asleep. As mentioned before, the player can make Arthur either good or bad. The visions feature a different animal if Arthur's honor is low or even non-existent—a coyote. The stag represents the noble virtues and good deeds Arthur does throughout the game, while the coyote represents the opposite—selfishness and evil. Such transcendental experiences that Arthur has with the stag continue right until the very end when he dies, and the player sees a stag turning away and leaving.

After receiving his diagnosis and recovering somewhat, Arthur writes in his journal:

Turns out, I'm not very well. Got tuberculosis. Doctor did not know how long I would last. All them bullets shot at me, all them horses threw me, all them fights and it was beating up that pathetic little fella Downes that killed me, I reckon. He's the only man I been near was real sick. He begged for mercy and I beat the bastard and he died. And now I'm dying too. The way of the world. My mind is racing, of course. That monk and that nun, Downes's widow, Abigail, Mary, Dutch when I first knew him, Hosea, my dead Pa, the no good bastard, the whole crowd of people. And what kind of man have I been? What kind of man am I? What world is this we live in, a land of fury or a place of love? Am I being prepared for eternal damnation? Am I past any kind of saving? Is that all fairytales? Man ain't got much good in him. I ain't got no good in me, I don't think, and yet I see goodness. I see it, if not in me, in good folk. In Abigail and her love for Jack. In that silly monk. In Downes, I guess. Begging, not for himself but for the poor, even though he was near starving himself. Maybe I don't want salvation. Part of me has always longed for death. Well, here it comes, I suppose.²⁰

It took the prospect of being near death for Arthur to start questioning himself and the world around him more seriously, to realize the truth that he has been ignoring for the most of his life—that goodness exists not only within others but within himself, too. Although he knew that he was mistaken in his way of life and his actions towards others, for the first time he is labeling them as such—as mistakes, but stops short of wanting salvation for himself, not believing himself worthy of it.

Cawelti states that if the Western hero would be compared to any other classical hero, it would have to be Achilles who is “torn between his loyalty to the Achaeans and his transcendent sense of personal honor” (*The Six-Gun* 83). He also states that after Achilles “enters the final

²⁰ This quote is taken from Arthur's journal in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*

fight” out of which he may not come alive, he is “embittered and finds no joy in violence and war” (*The Six-Gun* 83). After realizing that there is no going back for the gang, and all the years he spent on Dutch and his plans have not only gone to waste but did not even mean anything in the first place, Arthur writes in his journal:

. . . but did we ever exist or were we just a group of individuals each just falling for Dutch’s dumb bluster? I feel like I don’t know nothing anymore. That whole life of certainties (is?) over. My whole code I lived and killed by. Was it true? Or was there a bigger truth I was too dumb to ever see?²¹

Before his final fight, several moments occur that must be mentioned. The first one is his final conversation with Sister Calderón at the train station. Right after helping Captain Monroe escape his execution by the United States army because he was trying to help the Wapiti Indians to not have more of their land taken away, he meets with the Sister. He tells her of his sickness and she shares some encouraging words:

ARTHUR. Yeah, I got TB. I got it beating a man to death... for a few bucks. I’ve lived a bad life, Sister.

SISTER CALDERÓN. We’ve all lived bad lives, Mr. Morgan... we all sin... but I know you.

ARTHUR. You don't know me.

SISTER CALDERÓN. Forgive me, but... that’s the problem. You don’t know you.

ARTHUR. What you mean?

SISTER CALDERÓN. I don’t know, but... whenever we happen to meet, you’re always helping people and smiling.

ARTHUR. I had a son... he passed away. I had a girl who loved me... I threw that away. My momma died when I was a kid... and my daddy... well, I watched him die, and it weren’t soon enough.

SISTER CALDERÓN. My husband died a long time ago. Life is full of pain... but there is also love and beauty.²²

Sister Calderón suggests to Arthur that he could help somebody to make him feel better and to be grateful that he sees his life clearly for the first time. Arthur answers that he still does not believe in anything. The Sister says she sometimes does not, either, but then she meets people like him, and everything makes sense again. Arthur finally tells her that he is afraid, but Sister Calderón stresses that he should not be afraid and that he should “take a gamble that love exists, and do a

²¹ This quote is taken from Arthur's journal in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*

²² This dialogue is taken from Chapter 6, mission “The Fine Art of Conversation,” *RDR2*

loving act.”²³ Arthur answers that he will try. Sister Calderón encouraged Arthur with her words and assured him that doing a good thing is never something which he will regret. As Henley puts it: “His willingness to be vulnerable is presented to us as a strength, despite Arthur being physically at his weakest” (“Modern Masculinity”).

Another important situation to mention is his attempt at making things right by absolving several people of the debts that they owed to Leopold Strauss. In “Money Lending and Other Sins VI,” Arthur goes to collect the debts, but in the end changes his mind and helps. The final debt absolution, that of Arthur Londonderry, comes too late as Mr. Londonderry had already passed away working to return the debts. Arthur sees Mr. Londonderry’s wife and child and looks away as it reminds him of his own son and the mother of his child. He decides not only to ignore the debt but to also gift them money. She thanks him but retorts that he should’ve done it before her husband died. Arthur sincerely apologizes to her.

In the mission “Do Not Seek Absolution I & II,” Arthur finds Edith Downes and her son Archie in the town called Annesburg. After helping Archie leave his job in the mines where he was overworked, he gives him money and tells him to give it to Edith and leave someplace safe. Later on, he sees Archie still in Annesburg who says that his mother does not want Arthur’s money as it was earned with blood. Arthur does not disagree but goes looking for Edith. He saves her from a man who was making her feel uncomfortable. Arthur coughs and Edith notes that he sounds like her husband. Arthur agrees and says that he is suffering for his foolishness but that he does not want to see Edith get killed because she does not want to accept his money or his help. He also states, to both of them, that they do not have to forgive him or thank him, they just need to take the money. In the end, Edith relents and accepts the money, and Archie thanks him, but Arthur repeats himself by asking Archie not to thank him. Thereby Arthur shows that he is sincerely trying to compensate the people he has hurt. He is not doing this to redeem himself in their eyes, but out of a purely altruistic need to right his wrongs.

The last situation deserving of mention is when Arthur accompanies Sadie to finish off the O’Driscolls. She wants to avenge her husband and destroy those who destroyed her life. Arthur decides to help so as to not let her go alone. After the shootout, Sadie expresses her gratefulness by saying: “Aside from my Jake, you’re the best man I’ve known”, and Arthur retorts with “I know the company you keep... the competition ain’t too fierce.”²⁴

Before the final fight, in the mission titled “Our Best Selves,” Arthur agrees to one final train robbery under one condition—John, his family and the others should be able to leave the

²³ This quote is taken from Chapter 6, mission “The Fine Art of Conversation,” *RDR2*

²⁴ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 6, mission “Mrs. Sadie Adler, Widow II,” *RDR2*

gang and have a chance at a normal life. This feels like an insult and an attack to Dutch who was always the one making the decisions which Arthur would blindly follow. Now, Arthur finally trusted himself enough to revolt against Dutch and his poor decision making. During the robbery, John seemingly gets killed and for Arthur, that is the last straw. To the rest of the group, Dutch says of John that he could not make it. After that, the final mission of Chapter 6, “Red Dead Redemption,” begins.

Tilly arrives with Jack saying that Agent Milton has kidnapped Abigail. Arthur wants to go and rescue her so Jack is not made an orphan, but Dutch, persuaded by Micah, decides against it. For Arthur, that signals the ending of whatever kind of family they had. Before Sadie and Arthur leave to rescue Abigail, he and Tilly have one final conversation:

ARTHUR. Miss Tilly, take this. (He gives her the bag of money from the final train robbery) You take this money too. (He gives her his own money) Take Jack and you wait at Copperhead Landing for Abigail and Mrs. Adler.

TILLY. Thank you, Arthur.

ARTHUR. You’re a good girl, you live a good life now, you hear?

TILLY. Alright, Arthur. (She gets emotional) I’ll... I’ll miss...

ARTHUR. Me too, sweetheart, me too.²⁵

Arthur also encourages young Jack to be brave. The gang is falling apart, but they were still family, and it is hard to say goodbye. Arthur’s contributions to the group and his support were, it seems, the only thing keeping the company together.

After that, Sadie and Arthur leave to rescue Abigail who kills Agent Milton in the process of getting rescued. When they return to whatever is left of the camp, Arthur says that it is time for people to choose sides because the gang is finished. John arrives, surprising everyone. He yells at Dutch that he left him to die and did not even try to save him. Arthur put down his final words into his journal before learning of John’s “death”:

. . . well, it’s a bit late for regrets. There’s a whole lot I should have done and even more I shouldn’t have done. But I suppose every man has enough regrets as to let him die happy. Just hope I did some good once I learnt to see the world for what it was. Ain’t my fault the process took quite as long as it did! Oh, Mary! Be happy, please be happy. Tilly, Mary-Beth, save Karen if she ain’t too far gone. John, protect Abigail and Jack. Rains Fall – save your son as you could not save your people. Dutch, start listening to them as really loved you.²⁶

²⁵ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 6, mission “Red Dead Redemption,” *RDR2*

²⁶ This quote is taken from Arthur's journal in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*

Even after everything Dutch did to the gang, Arthur was still able to find some love for him to express his disappointment and hope for the future. Here, Cawelti's words about Achilles and his bitterness towards violence and war are worth remembering (*The Six-Gun* 83). Arthur's final fight is the fight for John and his family's possibility of living a normal life. He has to use violence as the means to the end but is not happy about it. As John and Arthur are running, Arthur realizes that both of them are not going to make it. He gives his hat and his bag to John, and tells him to go:

ARTHUR. It would mean a lot to me, please. There ain't no more time for talk. Go.

JOHN. Arthur...

ARTHUR. Go to your family.

JOHN. Arthur!

ARTHUR. Get the hell out of here and be a goddamn man.

JOHN. You're my brother.

ARTHUR. I know... I know.²⁷

After years of bitterness towards John, and John not understanding Arthur, they both acknowledge that they love each other, Arthur even willing to sacrifice himself for John and his family. Here, Cawelti's archetype of the Western hero is represented by Arthur being the tired hero who turns into a sacrificial hero because he could not stop the gang from falling apart, but still tries to save others that can still be saved (*The Six-Gun* 93). Also, it is interesting to note that Arthur tells John to be a man by running away and being with his family, and not getting involved in violence and death. Essentially, he tells him that to be a man means living a life for and with his family, in love and peace, and not in selfishness, greed, and pride. This action also points to Westbrook's second, fifth and sixth points about the Western hero—the second point being that to see the man in his truest and most honest form is to see him in a fistfight. By fighting for John against Micah, Arthur is shown as a selfless man willing to die for his loved ones. The fifth point is that the hero does not “conform to society's greed and selfishness, but [is] the opposite of that,” and the sixth where he says that “the most valid expression” is the symbolic action in defense of the underdog, who in this situation is John (232–33).

As John leaves, Arthur stays to fight against the Pinkertons who are gaining on him, and Micah who wants Arthur dead more than anything. After a bloody fight, Arthur is crawling on the ground, trying to reach the gun:

MICAH. Oh, Black Lung... you ain't gonna reach that gun. You ain't. You lost, my sick friend. You lost.

²⁷ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 6, mission “Red Dead Redemption,” *RDR2*

ARTHUR. (Out of breath) In the end, Micah... despite my best efforts to the contrary... it turns out I've won.²⁸

When Arthur says he won, he talks about saving John and his family. As he reaches for the gun, someone's boot stands on it:

DUTCH. It is over now, Arthur. It's over.

ARTHUR. Oh, Dutch. He's a rat. You know it, and I know it.

MICAH. He's sick... he's dying... he's talking crazy.

ARTHUR. (to Dutch) I gave you all I had... I did.

DUTCH. I...

MICAH. Come on. Dutch... let's go, buddy. We made it. We won. Come on.

ARTHUR. (With his dying breath) John made it. He's the only one. Rest of us... no. But... I tried. In the end... I did.²⁹

As Dutch hears Arthur's words a tinge of sadness and regret can be seen on his face. Perhaps, he finally listened to Arthur and believed him. He leaves, turning his back on both Arthur and Micah. Micah leaves angrily in defeat. Arthur smiles, and crawls to a rock where he dies looking towards the sunrise.

Micah dies later in the snow, in winter, but Arthur dies as a hero of romance who is associated with "spring, dawn, order" Arthur died during spring, looking at dawn in his efforts to bring order, safety and peace into John's life (188). Frye also mentions that what also makes a hero of romance is a quest fulfilled (187). As already mentioned, the quest has three stages: "the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero" (187). For Arthur, the first stage started when he found out he was dying followed by doing all the good he could before the final fight. The second stage is the fight with Micah who, although a villain, did not die, but Arthur did. The third stage is in the Epilogue of the game where other characters remember Arthur and his sacrifice for their own and the greater good.

It is important to remember the relationship between the player and the main protagonist, and the player's immersion that results because of it. As the player fights for John and his family as Arthur, he or she cannot help but experience not only the emotions of sadness as one would, but also of anger, disappointment, and most important of all—tragedy. It is so because the player did the actions and helped other people through Arthur Morgan. As Cawelti compares the Western hero with Achilles's tragedy, he states that they cannot actually compare at all because Achilles's

²⁸ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 6, mission "Red Dead Redemption," *RDR2*

²⁹ This dialogue is taken from Chapter 6, mission "Red Dead Redemption," *RDR2*

tragedy lies in “the degree to which it forces us to confront the inescapable mystery of life, the terrible limitations of the human desire for immortality and the inextricable relation between glory and death,” and the Western hero’s struggle can only be described as elegiac (*The Six-Gun* 83–84). On the contrary, Arthur’s struggle is tragic not only because the player is immersed and therefore feels the emotions more intensely, but also because of Arthur’s immense struggle to give John a new life. It is not that the player laments Arthur’s death because it represents the death of the old way of the wilderness, and the acceptance of civilization (*The Six-Gun* 84), but also because it confronts the player with the concept of redemption, mortality, and the relationship between glory and death, and what glory actually stands for—not dying or acting selflessly for one’s own cause, but for others. Also, by interacting with the world Arthur lives in and by making specific choices in his name, the player projects one’s own personality and values onto Arthur, thus connecting with him and even identifying with him to a great degree. Despite the story being set in a specific time period with a playable character that acts how the player expects him to act given his circumstances and role in the group, the character of Arthur changes as the player changes while playing the game (Vischer, qtd. in Omeragić 13). This connection gives a sense of universality to Arthur’s character and significance that previous Western Heroes did not possess, and which made them seem distant to the recipient of their stories. To further the point even more when comparing the story of Arthur Morgan to a Greek tragedy it is good to mention a character who Arthur sometimes passes by when travelling with his horse. Arthur can talk to a man called Blind Man Cassidy who, when Arthur gives him charity, says a line or two to Arthur that predict what is going to happen to him, what he is supposed to do or what he should do in order to have a somewhat good ending. Blind Man Cassidy can be compared to Tiresias, “a blind Theban seer” in Greek mythology who can be found in Homer’s *Odyssey* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, one of the most famous Greek tragedies (Anderson). With this reference to the ancient Greek tragedy, the transcendental experience Arthur goes through as he is realizing his mistakes and dying for a greater cause, as well as considering the effect the story has on the player by virtue of its interactivity—it can be concluded that Arthur Morgan becomes not only a true Western Hero, but the Achilles of our time—someone to be inspired by, to contemplate him and, as a result, to grow to be better people.

Conclusion

Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018) is a video game in the Western genre, whose main protagonist Arthur Morgan was an interesting subject to analyze regarding the archetypes of the Western cowboy outlaw and the Western hero in the Western genre. This thesis aimed to analyze Arthur through these stereotypes in order to determine whether an outlaw's story could end with him becoming the Western hero. The theoretical works used in the analysis to prove the aim of the thesis include John G. Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Mody C. Boatright's *The Formula in Cowboy Fiction and Drama*, and Max Westbrook's *The Themes of Western Fiction*. Before the analysis, an overview of the video games in the Western genre was provided to see how much has changed between the first games in the genre and *Red Dead Redemption 2*. After giving the definitions and characteristics of the Western cowboy outlaw and the Western hero archetypes, the story of *Red Dead Redemption 2* was summarized as it was important for the analysis of the main character, Arthur Morgan. In addition, background information was provided on *Red Dead Redemption 2* and its gameplay was explained. Furthermore, the homages to the popular works in *Red Dead Redemption 2* were explored, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Django Unchained* (2012), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), and the short story *Rip Van Winkle* written by Washington Irving.

The analysis of Arthur Morgan through the archetype of the Western cowboy outlaw showed that Arthur Morgan exhibits Western cowboy outlaw characteristics, such as negativity towards others and himself, being a criminal on the run from the Pinkertons, intimidating and threatening others, and committing murder. Even though Arthur showcased those characteristics, it was proven that other characters, among them Micah Bell and Dutch Van der Linde, were shown to be even better examples of a Western cowboy outlaw archetype with their love of ruthless violence and a predisposition to madness.

When analyzing Arthur Morgan as the Western hero, the analysis showed that Arthur's road from being an outlaw to seeking redemption intensified after being made aware of his mortality by becoming terminally ill with tuberculosis. His terminal illness prompted internal self-exploration and soul-searching as he looked back at his life as an outlaw and all his actions, both bad and good. Furthermore, Cawelti's statement in *The Six-Gun Mystique* that the Western hero cannot reach the tragedy of the Greek hero Achilles was proven not to be true as it was shown through the dialogue and the description of the events in the game how they affected Arthur, and how Arthur later not only fulfilled the quest of redemption that was even hinted at in the title of

the game itself, but also that he is the Achilles of the Western genre by managing to make the players think about their own mortality, the gravity of the tragedy and their present life. That was made even more possible by the fact that the player of the game acts as the agent through the main character, in this case, Arthur Morgan, and experiences Arthur's story by spending more time with the characters than perhaps in books, films and other media, thus becoming more emotionally invested.

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Fig. 1. Still of the Wild Bunch gang robbing the train from the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Directed by George Roy Hill. 20th Century-Fox, 1969. Accessed 8 Sept. 2024.

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Fig. 6. Still of the Van der Linde gang approaching the Braithwaite manor from the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, 2018. “RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 - Assault on Braithwaite Manor / Best Scene,” uploaded by Generic Gaming, 3 November 2018. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gS6tBhNv-LU&t=246s. Accessed 8 Sept. 2024.

Fig. 7. Still of Jesse James standing on a barricade from the film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, 2007. “Train Robbery Scene - The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford - Full HD,” uploaded by videoprofess, 7 August 2017. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBCdekTEvmo. Accessed 8 Sept. 2024.

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