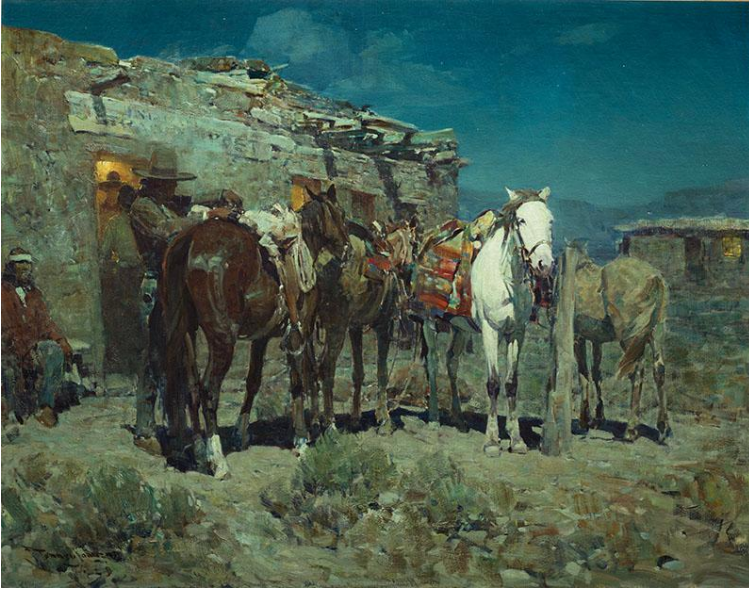


American Museum of Western Art – The Anschutz Collection

Writing the West: Season 8, October 2026

Bounty Hunter

In most traditional bounty hunter stories, the morally ambiguous bounty hunter is a man whose quarry is another man, usually a criminal. The bounty hunter gets paid in cash when he brings in this wanted man – dead or alive. But what if the bounty hunter is a woman? Or a child? What if the hunted person isn't a criminal at all, but someone innocent of the charges? In whatever scenario you choose, the stakes are high. Money and freedom, life and death. Today we'll use the bounty hunter tropes to focus on the two types of stakes most narratives embody – private stakes and public stakes.



Frank Tenney Johnson, *Night at the Trading Post*, 1928

Imagine your bounty hunter has arrived at a trading post at midnight to hear a proposal for a bounty. What's the proposal? Describe it. Next, have the bounty hunter contemplate what will happen should their hunt fail. Will they simply not get paid, or something more devastating? Maybe their reputation is at stake, or their own freedom, or love – “If you make this bounty, I'll marry you.” When a character contemplates failure in this way, private stakes are created.

Establishing private stakes in a story or poem is a great way to hook a reader. But to really get a person turning pages, add public stakes. Why? Because public stakes expand the world and help a protagonist find deeper meaning for their actions. For example, imagine if all the people seen in this painting were somehow connected to the success of your bounty hunter. Suddenly, the pressure the character feels intensifies. They're not only fighting for themselves but for others as well. Look at your bounty scenario from above and connect it to the larger society – let's say to the size of a town or pueblo. If the bounty hunter fails, what will happen to the town, or the people of Taos Pueblo? And because the bounty hunter is typically morally ambiguous, do they even care? Or, perhaps, do they start to care?



Victor Higgins, *Pueblo of Taos*, before 1927