

GENRE MOVES Use Lists

AMY TAN

From "Mother Tongue"

I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind – and in fact she did read my early drafts – I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Try ending your own narrative with a list of things you learned from experiencing your story or a list of things you hope your readers learned from reading it. Experiment with long lists, short lists, and different styles of punctuation. Reread your list and look back to make sure your narrative has effectively communicated all the things you have listed – this is a good test to see if your narrative is as complete as you’d intended. Then you may choose to use this list as part of your conclusion, or you might cut it. Regardless, developing the ability to effectively write lists can help you write in nearly any genre.

Using lists allows Tan to catalog and honor the diversity of language as she knows it.

- -- Divided by semicolons, the first list creates a sense of rhythm and momentum; it acknowledges the many possibilities that exist within Tan’s story, and it mirrors the author’s stream of thoughts.
- -- Tan’s second list is divided by commas. Ending like this enables Tan to offer more than one conclusion or lesson.

NARRATIVE Actor and comedian Patton Oswalt is perhaps best known as the voice of Remy, the lead character in the animated Pixar film *Ratatouille*. This short narrative essay comes from his book of the same name: *Zombie Spaceship Wasteland* (2011), which, as in his stand-up comedy, mixes personal history with pop culture. In addition to creating his stand-up routines, Oswalt has written essays for publications such as *the Believer* and *the Huffington Post*, and stories for comics. His 2015 book, *Silver Screen Fiend*, is a memoir that also chronicles his obsession with classic movies.

PATTON OSWALT

Zombie Spaceship Wasteland

Are you a Zombie, a Spaceship, or a Wasteland?

For my group of friends, after seeing *Star Wars* in 1977, around age eight, and then *Night of the Living Dead* and all the eighties slasher films once VCRs sprouted on top of our TVs, and *The Road Warrior* in 1981, the answer to that question decided our destinies.

I know there have been a thousand parsings of the pop subculture—comic books, video games, horror movies, heavy metal, science fiction, Dungeons and Dragons. There are hundreds more categories. They can be laid out in overlapping Venn diagrams—a tub full of lonely bubbles. Burnouts who are into heavy metal got there through Dungeons and Dragons, maybe some glam rock, probably horror movies. Hard-core comic book readers often became film snobs later in life (they spent their adolescence reading, essentially, storyboards). Even sports freaks¹—with their endless, exotic game stats—overlapped into metal and, yeah, maybe comic books.

But for me, and my circle of high school friends, it came down to *Zombies*, *Spaceships*, or *Wastelands*. These were the three doors out of the Vestibule of

Adolescence, and each opened onto a dark, echoing hallway. The corridors twisted and intertwined, like a DNA helix. Maybe those paths were a rough reflection of the DNA we were born with, which made us more likely to cherish and pursue one corridor over another.

I'm going to try to explain each of these categories (and will probably fail). And then I'll figure out where I came out, on the other end, once the cards were played. I think this essay is more for me than for you.

Each of these categories represents different aspects of a shared teen experience — not fully understanding how the world works, socially or economically. The early outcasts — like me — were late to sex and careers. If we did find a vocation, it usually involved drawing or writing or *something* creative — work that's done in the home, and usually alone. The real-world experience we're going to need, as writers or artists or filmmakers, will come later, when we actually have to get a real job to support whatever creative thing we're hoping to do.

So until then, anything we create has to involve *simplifying, leaving, or destroying* the world we're living in.

Zombies simplify. They don't understand the world any better than Spaceships or Wastelands, but they sure like the houses and highways. Every zombie story is fundamentally about a breakdown of order, with the infrastructure intact. That infrastructure might be on fire, yes. And it's great fun to crash a bus through a department store window as the driver finds himself torn to shreds by the suddenly zombified passengers. But the world, appearance-wise, survives. It might eventually become a wasteland (more advanced *Zombies* begin their stories far in the future, where the world is already a wasteland), but for now, it's a microcosm of archetypes, fighting for survival against the undead hordes. Usually this small group is made up of the archetypes that the teen has met thus far into his short existence — the Hero, the Unattainable Hottie, the Loudmouth Douchebag, and the Brainiac Who Knows What's Going On. Consistent with an awkward teen's roiling sense of vengeance

and self-hatred, it's usually only the Loudmouth Douchebag and the Brainiac who get killed.

Usually, but not often. Since Zombies follow their path into horror, Goth, slasher films, some punk rock, and most metal, Zombies tend to be the most nihilistic of the three. Thus, most zombie movies—including the classic *Night of the Living Dead*—end with every single character dead.

A friend of mine from high school—more of a passing acquaintance, now that I think of it—was a hard-core zombie before he even knew it. He had an unshakable love for the awkward and outcast and a quiet, final disgust with the slick and false. And he divided everyone into one of these two categories, with maybe three subsets for each (Physically Awkward, Mentally Awkward, Sports Slick, Republican Slick—you get the idea).

Years later, when I'd moved to L.A., he sent me a zombie script he'd written. Not a bad effort. Not a great one.

At one point in the script, one of the characters knocks a zombie off of a boat. The zombie struggles for a moment, trying to stay afloat, and then sinks.

I asked him, innocently, "It never occurred to me—would a zombie care if it were underwater or not? They don't breathe. Would they even know?"

This was his terse answer: "For your information, zombies can live underwater, *they just don't like it.*"

He was a Zombie who'd long ago taken a zombie-eyed view of the world. You see them everywhere—rolling their eyes outside a rock club at how lame the band was, shaking their heads over a newspaper in a coffee shop, resentful under office lighting. Zombies can't believe the energy we waste on nonfood pursuits.

Night of the Living Dead (and most zombie films) is about *Zombies* who are in the process of turning the world into a *Wasteland*, and who've been brought back to life by radiation on a crashed *Spaceship*.

Spaceships leave. No surviving infrastructure for them. No Earth, period. *That* would still involve people.

Better to not only leave the world, but to create a new one and decide how the creatures (or human-looking aliens) act. Often, the alien planet they populate is a glorified wasteland. But even in that wasteland, *Spaceships* figure it's easier for them to build a world and know its history or, better yet, choose the limited customs and rituals that fit the story. Every *Spaceship* kid I knew growing up now works in computers. They got there through New Wave, post-punk, video games, and science fiction. Why bother reading subtle facial cues and emotional signals when there's a vast (yet finite) map of a motherboard to tinker with?

But, being *Spaceships*, they describe in the most loving detail the spaceships that zoom between worlds. "Laser cannons" take the place of conversation, "deflector shields" are emotional nuance, and "warp drive" is story exposition. The opening shot of *Star Wars*, with the sleek rebel ship and then the massive Imperial Star Destroyer, barreling across the screen like the pan across a party in an Altman film, permanently doomed a generation of *Spaceships* to their insular, slightly muted lives. *Spaceships* have the hallway with the most gravity, firmly pulling its victims down a cool tunnel of romantic vacuum. In their bodies, skulls, and spirits, a chunk of my peers became *Spaceships*, skimming over the surface of the world, maneuvering through their own lives. Deflector shields up.

Spaceships are the ones most likely to get married and have kids. They treat their houses like spaceships that have landed on earth, and their spouses and kids like crew members. Which makes them pretty good parents — they've always got emergency kits, lists of most-used numbers, backup supplies of ointment, painkillers, and bottled water. The two guys I spent my youth building Lego spaceships with are two of the greatest dads I've ever known — a good captain knows how to treat his crew.

Darth Vader is, essentially, a *Zombie*, born in a *Wasteland*, who works on a *Spaceship*.

Wastelands destroy. They're confused but fascinated by the world. So the idea of zooming off in a self-contained spaceship, no matter how lovingly described or sensually evoked,² smacks of retreat. But the blandness of the world we've built — a lot of *Wastelands* come from the suburbs — frustrates and frightens them as much as the coldness of space. Aliens would bring wonder, and zombies bring the surviving humans together — *Wastelands* aren't comfortable with either of those ideas.

The solution? *Wasteland*. Post-nuke, post-meteor strike, or simply a million years into the future — that's the perfect environment for the *Wasteland's* imagination to gallop through. The wasteland is inhabited by people or, for variety, mutants. At least mutants are outgrowths of humans. Mutants — the main inhabitants of post-apocalyptic environments — are more familiar. Variations of the human species grown amok — isn't that how some teenage outcasts already feel? Mutants bring comfort. You don't have to figure out alien biology or exotic, inhuman cultures or religions. At the most, mutants will have weird mental powers or practice cannibalism. The heroes are unmutated humans, wandering across deserts (always, weirdly, wearing leather or tattered overcoats — suburban teens are accustomed to air-conditioning, so it's not until they're older that they learn the importance of fabrics that breathe) and carrying what they need. *Wastelands* are great at stocking belt pouches, backpacks, and pockets. At any time, *Wastelands* suspect they're going to need to grab whatever's at hand and head for the horizon.

Wastelands are almost always swallowed up by punk rock and science fiction. They're also the most likely to keep journals and usually the first to get menial jobs. The *Wasteland* tarot card should come with a pay stub.

Weirdly, *Wastelands* are the most hopeful and sentimental of the bunch. Because even though they've destroyed the world as we know it, they conceive of stories

in which a core of humanity — either in actual numbers of survivors or in the conscience of a lone hero — survives and endures. Wastelands, in college, love Beckett.

The monster in *Alien* was discovered on a *Spaceship* that had crashed in a *Wasteland*, and reproduced by temporarily turning its victims into alien-incubating *Zombies*.

Leatherface, Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, Pinhead, and Freddy Krueger are, essentially, *Zombies* who want to turn our world into a *Wasteland*. Jason and Pinhead each, at one point, end up on a *Spaceship*.

The *Matrix* films are about a hero, Neo, who doesn't realize he's a *Zombie*, and also doesn't realize he's living in a *Wasteland*, until he's awoken by Morpheus, who dezombifies Neo by bringing him on board a *Spaceship*.

Every teen outcast who pursues a creative career has, at its outset, either a *Zombie*, *Spaceship*, or *Wasteland* work of art in them.

Looking back on it now, I realize I'm a *Wasteland*. A lot of comedians are *Wastelands* — what is stand-up comedy except isolating specific parts of culture or humanity and holding them up against a stark, vast background to approach at an oblique angle and get laughs? Or, in a broader sense, pointing out how so much of what we perceive as culture and society is disposable waste? Plus, comedians have to work the Road. We wander the country, seeking outposts full of cheap booze, nachos, and audiences in order to ply our trade. I'm amazed we all don't wear sawed-off shotguns on our hips.

The *Zombie*, *Spaceship*, or *Wasteland* "work" is conceived of during the nadir of puberty — a grim, low-budget film about the undead; a vast space opera; or a final battle for civilization in a blasted wasteland, where the fate of mankind is decided by a shotgun blast or a crossbow.

Turns out I had two *Wasteland* works in me, and I wrote them both freshman year of high school. The first was called *The Shadow Dogs*, which I figured I'd publish in paperback, like a Stephen King novel.³ It involved — I'm not kidding — a future

nadir: lowest point

where mutant dogs had taken over. They were basically tall people with dog heads. The hero — I can't even remember his name — wandered the wasteland with a cool wrist gun and another sidearm that I basically swiped from *Blade Runner*, which I still think has one of the coolest movie guns.

Hey — why do the heroes always “wander” the wasteland? Wouldn't you at least have a plan to get somewhere with water or food before you started hoofing it? Even desert nomads don't “wander” around pell-mell, assuming they'll hit an oasis just before dropping dead of thirst. Is it the alliteration of it? “Wander the wasteland”? I guess “Take a well-thought-out, purposeful trek through the wasteland” lacks that movie-trailer punch.

Anyway, *The Shadow Dogs*. I spent the first eighty pages of the novel equipping my main character. I'm not kidding — he started with a bolt-action rifle and a knife, and then he killed some people and took enough canned food and other trinkets from them to trade for the wrist gun and *Blade Runner* gun. Once I realized I couldn't think of any cooler guns for him to acquire, I lost interest in the book.

The other one was called *Cholly Victor and the Wasteland Blues*, which I wrote in installments and planned to do as a massive graphic novel. Cholly Victor was a near-plotless library of everything I was obsessed with at the time — *The Road Warrior*, *El Topo*, *Eraserhead*, Richard Corben, nuclear fears, and spaghetti westerns. Holy God, was it a piece of crap. But I got it out of my system. It ends with my hero, Cholly, a shotgun-wielding wasteland scavenger, defeating a mutant, flayed-lamb robot warlord, and then continuing on down a piece of broken highway to the mythical “Westcoast.”⁴

My own life didn't even come close to my defeating a robot warlord and setting out for Westcoast. In reality, I got sick of doing jokes in front of the zombies at the local comedy clubs. I moved to San Francisco. In a used Jetta, not a spaceship. And driving cross-country wasn't “wandering the wasteland,” but Utah came close enough.

pell-mell: in a confused or disorderly manner

Notes

1. Not to be confused with jocks or athletes — a distinction beautifully laid out by Sarah Vowell in *Take the Cannoli*, a book very much worth your time.
2. The spaceship in *Battle beyond the Stars* has huge breasts and a woman's voice!
3. Stephen King, who was the first person I ever read who could meld perfectly felt, mundane life with cosmic horror, later published the *Dark Tower* series, a huge Wasteland epic that tied together most of his novels, which take place in our "real" world. And I'm pretty sure he got the idea in high school. If he didn't, I would like him to lie about it to support my thesis. Thanks, Steve!
4. Cormac McCarthy won the Pulitzer for *The Road*, about a father and son making their way for a mythical coast after an unnamed global cataclysm. But Cormac's hero didn't have a four-armed, bandolier-wearing mutant Kodiak bear sidekick, did he?

Reading the Genre

1. Think about the categories Oswalt sets up. Are you a Zombie, a Spaceship, or a Wasteland? Or are you some parts of each? Explain why you do or don't fit into these categories. Don't be afraid to make up your own category if none of these works for you.
2. This is a narrative essay, but it also lays out its own taxonomy (a way to sort or classify things). How does this classification system help Oswalt tell stories? What does this taxonomy do for his structure, organization, and characterization, and how does it help him to reflect on past experiences?
3. An anthropologist might suggest that what Oswalt is doing in this narrative is also ethnography (a way to describe groups of people through close observation and writing). Some of the goals of ethnography are that the text should help the reader better understand social life, that its authors must be sufficiently conscious of their own role in the society they study, and that the account should feel true and revealing. How does Oswalt's essay measure up to these standards?
4. **WRITING:** Develop your own classification system for you and your friends. As Oswalt does, use stories to illustrate why you and those you know fit in these invented categories. If it helps, you could choose one of your favorite books, films, or television shows and then show how you and your friends align with the characters from that text.
5. **COMPOSING VISUALLY:** Using YouTube, find examples of a zombie, spaceship, or wasteland character from a movie or television show (or from other media). Write about how the character fits this category and embed relevant video or images in your Word document or blog. Then think about how this character also reflects aspects of your own personality or the personality of someone you know. How does this fictional character (and his or her zombie-ness, spaceship-ness, or wasteland-ness) help you to better understand yourself or people you know?