Module CLP8100

Popular Culture

**I Am Legend: A Deconstruction of the Vampire Mythos**

Popular culture is commonly defined as the culture disseminated by the mass media to be reflected in the public consciousness with respect to the realms of fashion, music, design, sport and film.

However, where proponents of so-called ‘high culture ‘are concerned, what is popular and accessible is firmly within the realm of the ‘low ‘i.e. less intellectually valuable and damaging to society as a whole. Dwight MacDonald (1953) writes that popular culture ‘threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze ‘.[[1]](#footnote-6983)

It could be contended that the question of there being ‘high ‘and ‘low ‘culture is largely invalid as popular adaptations of classic works are dime-a-dozen – for instance, the countless modern dramatizations of Shakespearean plays. Hawkins (1990) asserts that: ‘By now there are whole cohorts of modern cinemagoers who spent their childhoods watching Star Trek and heavens only know how many episodes of that series – such as ‘Conscience of the King ‘(Hamlet) ‘A Dagger of the Mind ‘(Macbeth) and ‘Requiem for Methuselah ‘were all derived from Shakespeare’s plays’[[2]](#footnote-2233). Individually, distinctions of ‘high ‘and ‘low ‘, of classics and trash, must then be all relative to the consumer’s sensibilities. In the words of one Prince Hamlet - ‘There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.’[[3]](#footnote-20992)

The Popular Culture module features two staples of vampire fiction – Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Anne Rice’s *Interview With A Vampire*. While these are certainly not without merit, I believe the module could benefit from the inclusion of another classic of the genre – Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*. First published in 1954, the novel was the first to pioneer Gothic horror into the realm of post-apocalyptic science fiction and attempt to attribute a scientific basis to vampiric entities. Subsequent film adaptations have strayed to varying degrees from the source material but in Matheson’s original premise, the year is 1976 and a global pandemic has caused civilization as we know it to collapse. One Dr. Robert Neville, late of the U.S Army’s medical corps, has somehow survived. By day, he scavenges from the ruins of Los Angeles. By night, he barricades himself inside his home as the streets are overrun with feral, bloodsucking humanoids.

The scenario is one that has been reiterated in countless B-movies, comics and video games since – the zombie apocalypse. Indeed, Matheson’s conception of the vampire – a biological aberration – is a cornerstone of the text’s value as a precursor of the archetypal zombie and a stark contrast to the refined characters conjured by the imagination of Stoker et al. Matheson ventures to deconstruct the vampire via scientific rationale, and delivers an objective look at the creature of legend when stripped of its long-established romanticism.

In the popular imagination, the vampire is typically depicted as a suave and alluring figure, the paragon of the genteel aristocrat. He is simultaneously a ruthless predator and, at least in Rice’s imagination, a tortured outcast forever plagued by the moral quandary of his lost humanity. Conversely, Matheson’s vampires are victims of the viral plague, resurrected as rabid fiends that are driven by a base impulse to consume the blood of the living.

The vampire of popular lore is imbued with special powers – typically consisting of mind control, flight, transfiguration into any number of beasts, in addition to accelerated speed, strength and agility. The creatures that assail possess none of these abilities and furthermore have mentally regressed to the point of incompetence – as Neville remarks, it never occurs to his enemies to simply burn him out of his sanctuary. Their one saving grace – a resilience to blunt trauma – is attributed to a form of ‘body glue ‘produced by the *vampiris bacillus* which, even then, is overcome by a stake through the heart or exposure to sunlight.

With Matheson’s vampire reduced to a freak of science more akin to the ‘mindless corpse ‘of the Old World than Lestat de Lioncourt and his peers, our mortal hero is a character infinitely more relatable to the 21st-century reader than Stoker’s Victorian gentlemen who encounter considerable death and gore but remain unblemished as ‘ministers of God’s own wish’[[4]](#footnote-28730). Neville is an alcoholic, given to bouts of violent rage. By nightfall, he yearns for the ‘lustful, bloodthirsty, naked women flaunting their bodies at him’[[5]](#footnote-1943).

This is behaviour undoubtedly alien to the sensibilities of Stoker’s high-society heroes – not that Neville’s foibles could be dismissed as evidence of a degenerate character, however. Matheson portrays a psyche assaulted by frustration, self-loathing and an undercurrent of intense grief:

“If I could be with her. If I could believe I would be with her.

Virginia, take me where you are.

A tear, crystal fell across his motionless hand.

He had no idea how long he’d been there. After a while even the deepest sorrow faltered, even the most penetrating despair lost its edge. The flagellant’s curse, to grow inured to the whip.’[[6]](#footnote-6873)

Such emotionally charged passages serve to endear us to Neville and provide the level of characterization notably absent from Dracula.

With our sympathies invested in Neville, the vampire of Rice’s vision is simply not there. Indeed, the tale could be said to be a vampire novel about human isolation. We must consider Neville as ‘a weird Robinson Crusoe, imprisoned on an island of night, surrounded by oceans of death.’[[7]](#footnote-11304) One man, alone, in a world of vampires. Or so he contends. Is he really the last living man on Earth?

Matheson wisely elects to leave this question unanswered, better to maintain the atmosphere of hardened pessimism that pervades Neville’s battle against the hordes of the undead.

Much interpretation has been made of the novel as a commentary on the social climate under HUAC in the same vein as Jack Finney’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.* Indeed, there is a comparable atmosphere of paranoia throughout – consider, for example, Neville’s reluctance to accept a stray dog as anything but evolved undead – that echoes the scaremongering of Joseph McCarthy and his peers, but perhaps more importantly, augments the central theme of outcasts made by changing social mores.

Just what is normal? Furthermore, what is it to be an individual especially when a minority of one?

Such questions are routinely addressed by Neville, so when the “New Breed “comes, the inverse irony is not lost on him.

“Robert Neville looked out over the new people of the earth. He knew that he did not belong to them: he knew that he was anathema and black terror that was to be destroyed. Abruptly, the concept came, amusing him even in his pain. He turned and leaned against the wall while he swallowed the pills. Full circle, he thought while the final lethargy crept into his limbs. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend. ‘[[8]](#footnote-27568)

Thus, we can infer that society’s monsters are relative – the vampire has become the norm, and man has passed into darkest lore.

Clearly then, Matheson’s rejection of the vampire as a romantic figure and creation of a relatable protagonist through which important cultural issues are explored ensures that I Am Legend is a milestone of vampire fiction that would make a worthy addition to the module.

1. Dwight Macdonald, *A Theory of Mass Culture* ( 1953 ) [↑](#footnote-ref-6983)
2. Harriet Hawkings – *Classics and Trash, Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres, 302* [↑](#footnote-ref-2233)
3. William Shakespeare – *Hamlet, Norton Critical Edition*, Act 2 – Scene 2, 239 [↑](#footnote-ref-20992)
4. Bram Stoker – *Dracula*, Oxford Press 1897 p.332 [↑](#footnote-ref-28730)
5. Richard Matheson – *I Am Legend*, Gollancz-Orion, 1954 p.27 [↑](#footnote-ref-1943)
6. Ibid, p.32 [↑](#footnote-ref-6873)
7. Ibid, p.77 [↑](#footnote-ref-11304)
8. Ibid, p.150 [↑](#footnote-ref-27568)