

How i am legend was adapted for the big screen essay

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How I Am Legend was Adapted for the Big Screen

Originally, Richard Matheson's novel, *I Am Legend*, was written to be an apocalyptic, dystopian narrative concerned with a virus which sweeps across the planet and brings people back from the dead. These vampires are both completely inhumane and horrifically driven and violent all at once. The novel works hard to build up the reader's belief that the vampires are the absolute pinnacle of evil and Matheson casts his central protagonist, Robert Neville, in the role of the hero - persecuted by the enemies, courageous in the face of adversity and tenacious in his will to survive. The film adaptation also reflects this with endless scenes of Neville bravely tackling the vampires and desperately seeking a solution to the virus. However, it is either ending which truly sets the written and film versions apart: The novel, *I Am Legend*, was adapted for the big screen through altering its ending to make it more appealing to mainstream audiences - in the novel, Neville's character is introverted to encourage the view of him as the monster whereas in the film, he saves the day and creates a cure for the problem, making him a more appealing character for movie audiences.

As part of the adaptation, the monsters were altered in order to further enhance the film version of Neville as being the good but tragic hero. Instead of the novel's vampires, the monsters are far more zombie-like: incapable of discussion and physically unable to actively behave in such a way that indicated any co-ordination or skill. In the film, in one scene, the viewer sees a zombie ramming repeatedly into a glass screen in order to gain access to

the room beyond it. He uses his head and body to gradually crack away at the screen rather than having the sense to find a blunt object to use instead. Ironically, it is also this scene in the film which is the only one which indicates that the monsters may be more sentient than originally realised since he is doing this because what is implied as his ' girlfriend' has been captured and experimented upon by Neville. However, in the novel, Matheson has deliberately carved the vampires out of the former bodies of people that Neville knew and loved - his neighbour, Ben Cortman, who continues to hound him every day: " Above the noises, he heard Ben Cortman shout as he always shouted. ' Come out, Neville!'" (Matheson, 2006, p8).

This continued taunting initially serves to further demonstrate Neville's vulnerability and the constant danger which the vampires impose. Equally, it enhances the idea of the tragedy which has befallen over the planet as Neville has lost everyone he knew but they are still there in this new, rabid form. The biggest tragedy is that he knows his wife, Kathy, is amongst them: " Why do they all look like Kathy to me? he thought, drawing out the second stake with shaking hands" (Matheson, 2006, p15). The juxtaposition between reminiscing about his dead wife whilst killing the woman anyway highlights both the desperation of the situation and also begins to show how Neville is losing his humanity. In the novel, the monsters help to represent this whilst in the film, they help to strengthen his humanity and eventually lead to Neville being martyred.

As previously mentioned, it is really the endings of both the novel and the film which properly demonstrate the alterations that are made to bring the novel to the big screen. It is a well-known fact that movie goes like to have a happy ending – or at least an ending which sees the hero being portrayed as brave, strong and wonderful. In the film version of I Am Legend, the viewer is presented with Neville as the man who saves the world: having perfected the cure for the virus (despite not having any real prior scientific knowledge), hidden the woman and her child whom he encounters in a safe place and under attack from the zombies, he blows himself and the zombies up – allowing the woman to escape with her child and the cure in order to take it to the last remaining human camp in America. It is tragic, it is patriotic and it is entirely different from the ending in the novel but it is a good movie ending – it doesn't cause audiences to question their own humanity, it doesn't draw attention to the fact that mankind are increasingly dangerous and it doesn't make the viewer feel awkward in having supported Neville and his actions throughout the movie but rather, the ending endorses Neville's violent actions in their entirety. However, in the novel, the ending is very different as Neville is captured by the vampires who then execute him as he poses a threat to their species: the vampires have evolved into a race of their own – keen to carve a civilisation.

In the final pages of the novel, Neville has been captured by the vampires and is talking to Ruth, a woman he encountered earlier who left him after he realised that she was a vampire: “'New societies are always primitive' she answered. ' You should know that. In a way we're like a revolutionary group – repossessing society by violence. It's inevitable. Violence is no stranger to

you. You've killed. Many times.'" (Matheson, 2006, p157). By comparison with the tragic heroism of the film, the novel twists at the final hurdle and holds Neville up as an example of the worst of humanity - he has killed to survive and that is all the vampires are doing too, in order to create their own society. In doing this, Matheson is raising an uncomfortable question of which is really the monster here. Ruth explains this to Neville: " They mean to execute you. Even though you're wounded. They have to. The people have been out there all night, waiting. They're terrified of you, Robert, they hate you" (Matheson, 2006, p159). It is clear at this point that in the eyes of the new race, Neville is a maniac - hell bent on genocide. Whilst they now out-number the ' old race' as Neville is told that he is the last human being, it is clear that for them to prosper, Neville (who must seem like the bogeyman to them) must die.

The ending of the novel is uncomfortable, awkward and uneasy as it fails to present the last human being in a romantic and heroic light. Instead, he is presented as being bloodthirsty and terrifying - a shadow which when cast alongside those of the vampires is both unexpected and confusing. The film's ending is a stark opposite to that and in some ways; this makes the film version an entirely different narrative from that of the book. Movie goers do not wish to be confronted with the lack of humanity which mankind possesses and in truth, the novel is an allegorical discussion of mankind's unwavering lust to control and own the entire planet. Instead of killing vampires like Neville, we have killed off animals and plants in order to gain greater command of the planet - we acted to survive, which is all that the vampires are doing too, making a hypocrite of anyone who decrees their

actions as monstrous. Matheson has not provided his audience with a patriotic novel; instead he is demonstrating the ideas of evolution and survival as being struggles rather than the planet being the God-given right of human beings.

The novel, I Am Legend has been altered and adapted for the big screen by implementing the idea of Neville as being a tragic 'last man standing' style hero - a symbol of hope and strength which in recent years, has been waning in reality. The world today is a terrible place full of violence and aggression and movie goers do not want to see a lack of humanity in their entertainment too and so, the novel was adapted to have a happier ending which induced pride in our species rather the novel's ending which encourages the reader to view him or herself as being 'part of the problem' instead. In essence, the novel's idea is lost in its transition to the big screen and the alterations made prevent the narrative from being properly presented but it does make the film more entertaining and enjoyable to the vast majority of the general public.

References

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