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‘ Instructor’s Name’

Vampires

Since the advent of horror literature, horror novels were not taken seriously by critics and scholarly reviews were usually not associated with horror literature. Nevertheless avid readers always were drawn like magnets to books categorized under the ‘ thriller’ or ‘ horror’ sections in bookstores. But the history of literature has time and again reiterated the fact that, there are novels in every genre, that deserves a high place in terms of literary merit and Richard Matheson’s “ I Am legend”, is an example to this fact.

First published in 1954, this novel is single handedly responsible for the popularity of the ‘ zombie genre’ particularly in the movies. It was not just famous among the fans of the horror genre but also was critically well received. It is widely perceived to be a trend setter in the Gothic literature of America, and it continues to inspire many generations of writer and is widely anthologized. It was a landmark in the history of vampire literature and even after half a century the novel retains its fame to this day. This essay aims at exploring the reasons behind the lasting appeal of ‘ I Am Legend’ by analyzing the various elements of the novel.

The novel tells the story of Robert Neville who is the last man standing, in a planet filled with vampires. An epidemic of sorts has infested all human beings with a blood thirsty vampirism, and Neville is the only person immune to it. He spends his time by scavenging and killing vampires in the broad daylight, and hiding in his house at nights and wading off the humans turned vampires by using the likes of garlic, crucifixes and mirrors. He meets a girl called Ruth, who seems unaffected, during one of his morning routines and

takes her home. Later he finds out that she too is infected and there is a colony of such vampires who can spend short time in daylight. Neville is finally captured by this society and he takes the pills given by Ruth which would supposedly make his death easier. The story ends with the following thoughts of Robert Neville: “ a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend”.

Yes, vampires were present in horror literature even before the release of this novel. But the unique factor of this novel is the association of war effects and science with vampirism. In this novel the humans are turned into vampires because of mutagenic effect of radioactive substances. Written during the cold war era, the combination of side effects of war and horror of vampires was new and irresistible. Matheson’s novel is a first of its kind to provide a logical scientific explanation to horror and violence. (Boluk and Lenz, Pg. 80)

This unique factor of the novel does not lose its appeal in present day society too, because the ill effects of war is still a contemporary topic. The media is full of stories about how nuclear weapons are a shortcut to the end of the world, and thus a plot, talking about an epidemic caused by use of weaponry will not be considered an obsolete topic by the readers. The scientific approach to vampirism was a refreshing idea in the 1950s and this originality of the plot makes it a novel that could remain popular throughout many generations. Though subsequently many novels have been released drawing inspiration from this story, ‘ I Am Legend’ is the pioneer of scientific vampirism, and thus retains its special place in horror literature.

The second theme which makes the popularity of this novel time proof is its

handling of the human emotion of loneliness. Be it in the 1950s or 2013, a human being stuck alone in a place where he has no company and has no hope or dreams of a better life, is a theme which will be empathized. In fact the novel is as much about human loneliness, as it is about horror and vampirism. Neville's frustrations are better expressed by his action of bringing the stray dog home and his pain when he finds out the dog too is infected. Matheson has beautifully used the dog to convey to the readers the depth of Neville's longing for companionship. (Clasen, 320) The reader can almost feel the tears and bottled up frustration of Neville, when he makes no hasty moves and feeds the dog in his front porch, and gradually becomes attached to it. The description of the relationship by the author is poignant and non-dramatic. When the dog dies the sadness of Neville is palpable. Days and days of vampire hunting has put Neville in a state of 'monotonous horror'. Vampire slaying through the course of the novel becomes a routine than a ritual to Robert Neville. Vampire killing is in this novel not good's triumph over evil nor does it have any religious justifications like the previous vampire novels, it is just a plain genocide. Through this significance reversal of the perspective on vampire hunting, Matheson has thrown light on how earlier novels simply took it for granted that the living had the right to kill the undead. (Waller, pg. 258) The thought of indulging in such violent pursuit of extermination of a breed, that too in a world where he is perhaps the sole survivor, is enough to send down a shudder through readers of all period. The total isolation suffered by its lead character, being thoroughly removed from human interaction, is the driving theme of this novel and is a main ingredient of its eternal appeal.

The characterization of Neville is another highlight of the novel. This character is handled expertly by Matheson to portray the darker sides of the human emotion, such as solitude and confusion. The novel has only a single living character with very few dialogues, and this character forms the heart and soul of the story. The characterization of Neville coincides with post modernism trends whereby stories concentrate on the psychological complexities of their characters, rather than the events that surround them. The story is as much about Neville's inner struggle as it is about his fight against the vampires. In the end when Neville chooses to end his life, the reader is almost relieved instead of feeling horrified at the thought, because death is the only escape route that could take Neville away from the life of dreadfulness and isolation he leads. This character of Neville is iconic and capable of captivating any book lover.

Matheson's novel is as famous today as it was in 1950s and would remain so for years to come. The exploration of human emotions and the struggle put on by a person to survive against all odds is a timeless theme. Neville is not a hero, but a man trapped into an extraordinary situation, which brings into fore his repressed survival instincts, which is inherent in all human beings. For this reason the novel will never age and Neville's journey probably will never be dated.

References

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