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I Am Legend

Abstract

This is a review of *I Am Legend* (2007).

The film, *I Am Legend*, is the third based on Richard Matheson's 1954 classic of the same title, preceded by *The Last Man on Earth* in 1964, starring Vincent Price and *The Omega Man* in 1971, starring Charlton Heston. This latest revisioning changes the story of the original novel in significant ways and at the same time nods to each of its predecessors. The theme of a Christ-like savior dominates this latest incarnation, whereas the original novel plays much more with notions of right and wrong, good and evil, and self and other.

Matheson's original premise centers on the lone survivor, Robert Neville of a virus that has transformed the rest of humankind into hordes of blood-thirsty vampires. The novel flips back and forth between Neville's present predicament and flash-backs that provide details of the chaos caused by the virus and the infection of his own wife and daughter. Neville spends his days building up defenses around his home (which include all of the typical anti-vampire paraphernalia: garlic, crosses, mirrors, etc.), restocking his supplies, training himself in the medical sciences in a search for a "cure," and hunting vampires while they sleep. Neville is able to find the nocturnal creatures during the day and perform gruesome "experiments" upon them before coldly executing them. In the end, Neville surprisingly encounters a woman out in the daylight. Starved for human company, he brings her to his fortified home and questions her, only to discover that she is one of the vampires; unbeknownst to him, some of the vampires have

intelligence (unlike the monsters that threaten him nightly) and have developed the means to control the virus. For his part, Neville is seen by these intelligent vampires as not only an evolutionary throw-back but a serious threat as he indiscriminately destroys vampires both monstrous and intelligent during his daylight rampages. As the monster who comes during one's sleep, Neville is captured and condemned to public execution. Upon seeing the throngs who have come to see him die, he realizes the title, "I am legend."

None of the three films based upon this story has been entirely faithful to the novel, especially where the ending is concerned. *The Last Man on Earth* is most true to the text, though introducing changes in detail that have been retained by later adaptations. Neville (who also here undergoes a name-change to Robert Morgan) is depicted as a research scientist rather than a simple factory worker who is self-taught. The ending strays from the original in having Neville (Morgan) flee from his attackers and die, violently cursing the vampires as freaks all the while. The novel certainly includes Neville's sense of revulsion at this new society of vampires, but he is taken alive in order to suffer a public execution – a fate he avoids when given suicide capsules by the sympathetic female vampire who first contacted him. As Neville dies in the novel the reader is made to pensively reflect upon the meaning of us versus them and the here/anti-hero dichotomy, whereas Vincent Price's trade-mark melodrama does not allow for such careful consideration, instead

making clear through Morgan's defeated cries that his pursuers are, without a doubt, evil.

The Omega Man introduced further changes to the script by transforming the vampires into cultists (here called The Family) infected with a biological agent (the result of world war) that simply makes humans go mad and despise the light of day. Neville remains a scientist, and the theme of the film is one that pits the rationality of the scientifically-minded Neville against the madness of a Luddite cult. In this version, Neville escapes his captors, who seek to kill him not for his violence against their people but for his high-minded use of technology. His escape is facilitated by a group of human survivors, proving that Neville is in fact not the last man on earth. With the co-operation of these survivors, Neville is able to discover a cure for the madness-inducing virus. Though Neville attempts to provide the cure to The Family, they refuse and instead violently kill him. The surviving humans flee once again, this time with a sample of the cure, derived directly from Neville's blood. Herein lies the kernel of what allows Will Smith in the most recent adaptation of *I Am Legend* to become a Christ figure of a more traditional sort.

I Am Legend deviates considerably from the original novel, especially in the ending which has now become filled with a conservative hope for the survival of humanity without the evolution indicated by Matheson. Will Smith's Robert Neville becomes a Christ-like savior-legend rather than the monstrosity feared by

Matheson's intelligent vampires. The creatures in this film are completely bestial, the obvious CGI effects further removing any possibility that they may be construed as human. The virus is caused by the hubris of a cure for cancer gone awry. Neville, again a military research scientist, attempts to discover a cure to restore humanity from this monstrous state with no desire to harm the creatures whatsoever. Unlike any other version of this story, Neville is not even under direct threat from the creatures, his home secure since unknown to the monsters. In this film, when he encounters other survivors they are completely human with no sign of the infection within them. They encourage Neville to flee with them to some haven where other survivors are holed up, but before a decision can be made the monsters discover his home and attack relentlessly. Having only recently discovered the cure for the disease (successfully tested on a captured female monster), Neville gives a vial of it, derived once again from his own special blood, to the surviving humans before sacrificing himself in an explosion. Thus, the hidden survivors hold with them the cure to restore humanity in the blood of the legendary Robert Neville.

Reaching this blatant Christ-figuration, *I Am Legend* sways radically from the theme of Matheson's novel. Matheson plays with issues of good and evil, and Otherness in general, as his anti-hero becomes vilified by what he took to be monsters. *I Am Legend* rejects any such ambiguity, raising the hero to the status of nearly divine savior. Will Smith (displaying the cruciform position in behind-the-

neck pull-ups) saves humanity through his blood and sacrifice, allowing not only those who are already free from disease to survive, but providing the hope that those who are ill might themselves be saved and restored to humanity from their horrific, bestial state. The film creates a stark contrast between the good and the bad where the bad are completely removed from humanity.

The contrast between the good and the evil can be exemplified in one scene from the movie. In Matheson's book, Neville's daughter and wife both become infected. He is forced to burn his daughter's body in a mass grave, but refuses to do so with his wife, electing instead to bury her illegally. This burial of his wife leads to her return as a vampire intent on killing him, forcing him to drive a stake through her heart. What could have been an intense emotional and thought-provoking series of events for the film is replaced. In *I Am Legend* Neville attempts to get his wife and child safely off Manhattan Island. First, they are stopped when his wife is detected as being infected by scanners. As a ranking military officer, he orders a second scan which proves her uninfected. His wife and child then board a helicopter, which moments later is involved in a collision. The helicopter explodes, killing them both instantly. No ambiguity is allowed here; Neville's wife and child are completely good and uninfected, and their deaths are caused by a mere accident, not the machinations of man-playing-God.

In short, *I Am Legend* does not put forth a faithful representation of its literary namesake, either in plot detail or underlying themes. Rather, the film follows on from other film versions in providing an increasingly hopeful ending. In this latest case, the religious (Christian) symbolism is blatantly transparent. The nuances of Matheson's novel have yet again failed to appear on screen, with Hollywood seemingly unable to challenge the viewer and instead feeding the audience a straight dose of unambiguous good versus evil. *I Am Legend* is interesting in the context of its predecessors and what the differences have to say about modern popular culture, and further illustrates both the undying interest in Matheson's novel and also Hollywood's inability to, and perhaps fear of, giving the viewer those very themes that have made the novel a classic of horror.