

Barricade the Doors First: A Reflection on Zombie Fiction and its Critique of Post Modern Society

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Abstract

The trope of the zombie is a staple of the contemporary horror genre. This paper will reflect on how the symbol of the zombie is a post modern refraction of the traditional resurrection story. In addition to addressing the concept of a resurrection, the zombie mythos also allows addresses the state of the family unit in the post modern world. Ultimately, the horror of zombie fiction is not the walking dead but what they say about us, the living.

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George A. Romero forever changed how we view the zombie in 1968 with the release of *Night of the Living Dead*, adding a new symbolic depth to the undead. With his film, Romero ties the metaphor of the zombie directly to the disconnection we feel in postmodern society. The zombie is the embodiment of society sans soul, sans intellect, only driven by the urge to consume. But these disparaging characteristics fly in the face of the metaphor that is at the core of the zombie mythos: the resurrection. When we think about the concept of resurrection, two key concepts are at play. First, the idea of a resurrection directly usurps the permanence of death, contradicting most empirical data. But not only does the resurrection defeat death, it merges spirit to transfigured flesh, creating the perfect condition for an afterlife. And it is this afterlife

that we find the second main factor; eternal reunion with family. Not only does the resurrection offer beautified life after death, but it offers us the company of those we love. And so this concept had endured for thousands of years, from the Elysian Mysteries to Christian Dogma, until the advent of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*.

Romero's work defines our concept of the zombie; they are mindless automatons who crave one thing: living flesh. And while they look human and have some semblance of intelligence, as seen throughout the film when the spectator sees them pick rudimentary tools like rocks and sticks, zombies do not have the basic requirements that would allow us to label them as human. The classical definition of resurrection creates an image of perfect flesh merged with spirit, but the postmodern condition transforms this idea in the zombie. The zombie is not perfected flesh but rotten, dilapidated form that mimics the body. This is why in the opening of the film Barbra and Johnny cannot immediately identify the zombie approaching, a critique on our society and its zombie-esque movement. This is also why the scenes where the zombies are aimlessly walking around the countryside are so disturbing. The horror isn't just the gore factor but also the social psychological danger of all of us becoming soulless machines. This lack of any sense of spirit, of animus, is what really defines the zombie as a metaphor is direct opposition to the resurrection. If the classical view allowed us to return in spirit and perfect flesh, the postmodern view, which is based on lack of any connections, be they literal or symbolic, creates a revised metaphor, a dark resurrection, where the flesh does return, but it is not perfect since the spirit is completely missing. But this new symbol goes beyond this, as the individual is affected by the zombie apocalypse, so is society as a whole.

In the very opening of *Night of the Living Dead*, we see how society has begun to already fragment. One of the most fundamental units of society is the family, which will be test in

extreme ways throughout the film. Early in the film when the siblings, Barbra and Johnny, park in the cemetery, they are bickering over the distance required for this ritual of family observance, one which their mother insists upon. Their exchange touches on the theme of family discord. Johnny does not see the purpose of leaving the flower of the relative's grave, even joking about the caretaker making a profit by reselling the ornament. Barbra defends her mother's request, later on praying to show respect. While the relative is never really mentioned, it is important to note that it is a male relative. As Johnny begins to tease his sister, he is attacked by a male zombie, and the sibling urges his sister to run for safety while he unsuccessfully tries to fend off the ghoul. Barbra and Johnny make up the first familiar subunit of the film. The other units are met in the house where the majority of the film takes place.

At the secluded farmhouse, we discover the other two family subunits. The first is the Coopers, composed of the husband, wife, and infirm daughter, and the other is the young couple from the town, Tom and Judy. Both groups were hiding from the zombies in the basement of the house when Ben, the protagonist and lone figure of the film, and Barbra, who is catatonic after her brother's death, were barricading the home. Both groups show the family at different points in time. The young couple represents the initial phase of the union. Tom and Judy are effectively inseparable, which is a condition that will ironically lead to their inevitable demise. The Coopers signify the family in the latter phase where they have a child. While Tom and Judy express love for each other, Mr. and Mrs. Cooper do not, as seen when Mr. Cooper tells his wife that even though she is not happy with him, they must stay together and survive for their daughter's sake. Despite all affection and intentions, none of these groups survive.

The idea of the resurrection promises a reunion with lost loved one, but in *The Night of the Living Dead*, this reunion is a frustrated one. The family is shattered and left in pieces.

Barbra has already lost her brother, and at the end of the film, when he reappears as a zombie, it is Johnny who drags his sister away into the zombie horde. The Coopers meet their end in the basement. When their daughter turns, being previously bitten, she murders her mother, who discovers her eating the flesh of her father, who dies from the gun wound inflicted by Ben in their final scuffle. Tom and Judy meet their end during the botched attempt to fuel the truck, where out of loyalty the boyfriend stays in the combusting truck trying to save his girlfriend as it explodes. All the family units fall apart or are destroyed by the zombie threat, which is completely fitting, for as the resurrection promises reunion, zombification promises separation. In addition to this dichotomy, as the zombie nightmare destroys the family, the individual is the only one able to survive, and this is true in the case of Ben.

Ben is able to endure the night because he is able to think clearly. Upon discovering the house, he secures it, searches it for possible threats, and devises an escape plan and attempts to execute it, which should be noted fails not because of him but because of Tom. Also, Ben is the only one to survive the night, but in an ironic twist he is shot by the search party securing the area. The one human to survive the zombies is senselessly killed by other humans, leaving us with a question: Who are the real monsters?

The symbol of the zombie is a troubling one. It is a metaphor that not only denies us the spirit and intellect that make us human, but it also destroys the family unit that is essential to humanity. Besides these practical applications, the myth of the zombie completely subverts the concept of a resurrection. As the resurrection story is one that offers hope against the inevitable, the zombie narrative is one that destroys hope, leaving us alone, uncertain, and lost.

Works Cited

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