Pedagogy of the Living Dead: Using Students’ Prior Knowledge to Explore Perspective

In the summer movie season of 2007, much to my chagrin, Will Smith delivered his box-office mega-flick *I Am Legend* to theaters. I like Will Smith as much as the next guy and enjoy a mindless action flick in the heat of the summer months, but my dread arose because the source material for this film, Richard Matheson’s novel by the same name, was the central text in a highly successful and engaging unit on the undead that I taught at the beginning of each year. If suddenly *I Am Legend* garnered box-office gold, I could count on impressions of the story created in Hollywood competing with those in the minds of students. However, I was soon pleasantly surprised. Standing in line with my students at the book room as they were given their copies of *I Am Legend*, a student from a previous year came up to me and asked if I had seen the new movie. I told him that I had not but was curious to see how it had been adapted. “Don’t bother,” said my former student. “It isn’t the same story at all. They changed the ending so much, the title doesn’t even make sense.” I couldn’t help but smile. The critique that followed illustrated that the student had not only remembered the work we had done a year ago, but he was not swayed by Hollywood’s slick retelling of this powerful, thought-provoking story.

A Very Zombie Curriculum

Zombie movies have always held a special place in my heart. I will put up with any amount of bad acting and cheesy special effects a B-movie zombie flick can throw at me if it means a chance to thrill at the horrors of the dead rising from the grave. Like many young boys growing up, my cinematic and literary tastes tended toward the macabre. I read everything that Poe wrote, was a huge fan of Stephen King, and devoured classics such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to stoke my thirst for the bizarre and frightening.

Years later, I was teaching English language arts to high school students full-time on a community college campus. One of the greatest aspects of this job was the freedom it provided me to experiment with different approaches to the study of literature. In this particular case, this freedom manifested as a question: How do I incorporate zombies into my classroom? More importantly, how do I do this without being gratuitous? I knew the undead would hold the interest of my students, but just because something is interesting does not make it appropriate for the classroom.

Well before my undead aspirations, a colleague and I developed a unit exploring advertising as literature, using James Twitchell’s *Adcult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture* as a central text. One of Twitchell’s major premises in *Adcult* is that advertising is becoming a language we use to experience the world. In other words, we read the world around us (in part) by considering the advertisements that are ubiquitous to our culture (13). I began the ad unit by illustrating just how much students already knew about advertising (which was a lot) and moved on to a more in-depth study of the communicative power of ads—with students acting as experts. I took this same approach when developing my unit on the undead. Everyone knows something about zombies, and if
they don’t, surely they know something about monsters, or horror movies, or things of a similar nature. I thought of the movie *Scream*, a brilliant postmodern experiment in moviemaking premised around the archetypes of horror films, where the characters in the movie are themselves aware of the clichéd scenarios that abound in horror films even as those situations unfold around them. My students, like the young people in *Scream*, were experts in a way. The undead could be used as a device for exploring what students already know, how they know it, and how that knowledge affects their understanding of the world.

Rather than jumping straight into the undead in classes on that first day, the students and I started out with a brainstorming session on mythology. I wanted students to see just how much they already knew about Greek and Roman mythology. This exercise served as an example of how much knowledge students retain, often unaware. I likened it to a pop-cultural twist on Jung’s notion of the collective unconsciousness—information we share as a culture, even if we are unaware of how we know it. They were indeed surprised at how much information they were able to give me about didactic myths, the gods and their powers, and even the present-day uses of mythological references in American culture. They knew, for instance, that Nike was the goddess of victory and thus an appropriate brand name for athletic apparel.

Students had been told we would be starting a thematic unit on the undead, and when they began to press me on what Greek and Roman myths had to do with it, I used the transition to show that, while some of their mythology smarts might have come from classroom instruction, a good portion of it likely came from places unknown because Greek and Roman myths represented a substantial contribution to our culture’s shared knowledge. So, too, does knowledge of zombies and other monsters. We started brainstorming anew, listing on the blackboard all the different monsters we could think of and all the attributes that we understood defined those monsters. Some monsters were generic in nature, such as ghosts, werewolves, and witches. Some of them were specific, with students volunteering Frankenstein’s monster, Dracula, and modern monsters such as Freddie Krueger and Jason Voorhees. “Zombie” was of course mentioned, and along with the other examples in our brainstorming, our class began to discuss the common attributes of each creature, discussing the “rules” that we knew in on what separates a zombie from a vampire. Pretending that their existence was not in doubt (much of the unit was approached tongue-in-cheek, by myself and my students, and this kept what could have been some rather dark discussions more light-hearted), we discussed what we knew about zombies in particular. We filled a board with information such as “eats brains,” “really dumb,” and “turns a lot.” The students were amazed at how much they knew about zombies as I asked the question, “Where did you get this information from?”

How did they know so much? Obviously, some of the information came from firsthand “research” watching the myriad zombie movies available today. However, there were plenty of students who had never seen an actual zombie movie, yet had no problem explaining that zombies needed to eat living flesh to survive, that if you were bitten by a zombie you would in turn become one, and that the only sure way to kill a zombie was to destroy its brain. By the end of the day, it was evident to the students that however unlikely it seemed, knowledge of the undead was a part of the culture we shared without (necessarily) learning it directly. More importantly, they recognized themselves as
experts and were ready to put this wealth of knowledge to use.

These days, it is easier to find literature pertaining to zombies than it was even five years ago. Max Brooks wrote a wonderfully engaging “oral history” of a fictional zombie epidemic entitled World War Z, and there are a half-dozen or so “zombie survival guides” that are prominently displayed at checkout counters in local bookstores during Halloween. But for a literature class, there probably isn’t a better example of the undead canon than Matheson’s I Am Legend.

In I Am Legend, Matheson presents the story of Robert Neville, the sole survivor of an apparent biological warfare attack, who awakens to a need for answers regarding a sudden outbreak of vampirism that has all but wiped out humanity in 1950s Los Angeles. In addition to providing an interesting take on and challenge to the myth of the vampire, the novel inspired the modern notion of zombies as portrayed in movies today. Well-written and accessible to a range of reading levels, I Am Legend would serve as the central text of the unit.

Zombies, Perspective, and How We “Know” the World

The reaction of most of my students likely mirrored that of their parents when first told they would spend the next few weeks studying zombies. Faces reflected equal parts confusion and disbelief. How could an English teacher justify spending time on this seemingly disposable aspect of popular culture? And how did we get so lucky to not have to do “real” work this semester? In reality, however, there was much “real” work to be done, and we began immediately.

Fortunately, I Am Legend is a thought-provoking novel that addresses familiar literary themes in a unique fashion, and as such it is as legitimate a selection for a literature classroom as any other. The protagonist of the novel, Robert Neville, is the embodiment of isolation, a theme not only central to every subsequent zombie film and book but also common to literature in general. Neville is determined to understand why he is the last man on earth and how the world could have turned into the nightmare it has, and through his perspective we begin to understand how he sees the world. Neville becomes symbolic of how perspective determines our understanding of how the world works. Early in the zombie unit, I hinted that this thematic unit would look at how we understand the world through zombies. In I Am Legend, Neville literally does just this. He seeks to understand how the world became a land of the walking dead: what events transpired to create his situation, how science could explain the seemingly unexplainable, and how he would be able to continue his survival, regardless of his isolation. Moreover, like my students and I were trying to do, Neville struggles on cultural truths as well as scientific ones on his journey to understand his world. At the end of the novel, Neville is captured by a new society formed among those vampires who have managed to adapt to their new reality. Neville learns that he will be publicly executed, and the social function his death will serve drips with irony. Neville realizes that although he had for years been thinking of himself as the sole survivor of “normal” human culture and of the vampires/zombies as aberrations, his planned execution was designed to benefit the fearful crowds of vampires by letting them witness the death of this man, this creature that for so long had hunted and killed their own. For Neville, this is the ultimate irony, as his obsession with the legend of the vampire blinded him to the truth of that legend. It is a legend centered on fear of the unknown. To Neville’s horror, rather than fighting against the legend of the vampires, he has himself become that legend.

My students were quick to pick up on connections between Neville and their experiences with modern culture. One student commented on how similar the vampires’ situation was, in some respects, to women, who are considered (or at least treated as) a minority when in fact women outnumber men in terms of population. Other students pointed out how this was also the case with other minority groups, that while Caucasians still retained most of the political and financial power in our country, minority groups such as African Americans and Latinos/Latinas were quickly becoming majorities in parts of the country. The twist of the novel illustrated in a
powerful way the nature of hegemony and how power does not always stem from numbers but from the longstanding privilege of some groups over others. For the most part, students read the final paragraphs of *I Am Legend*, and especially Neville’s attitude regarding his impending doom, understanding that it was Neville’s egocentric worldview that was at least in part to blame for his demise.

**Using Zombie Films as Supplemental Texts**

As most English teachers can attest, “Are we going to watch the movie?” is the one question we can count on students asking when studying a book that has been adapted for the screen. This question can give me chills like no horror flick can. By the time Will Smith starred in his version of *I Am Legend*, the book had been filmed at least three times. There are good reasons to show films in an English class, and students’ need for media literacy becomes more important as multimedia communication technologies become more ubiquitous. And using film in a unit on the undead makes sense, as most students’ prior knowledge of the undead likely comes from movies and television in the first place. I did not want to show any of the cinematic versions of *I Am Legend*, primarily because the students’ engagement with the novel was so complete. They had a sense of connection with Neville, an understanding of him as a complex, dynamic character that arose from personal engagement with the text. I did not want to subvert this hard-fought interpretation with one that, through special effects and polish, might seem more “legitimate.” Not did I want their still-forming impressions of the story to be suffused with a filmmaker’s version of events. These comparative exercises have value, but I wanted to give the students a different kind of experience when using film in the classroom. So, as *I Am Legend* represents a beginning of sorts with regard to zombies in literature, I went to the origins of the modern cinematic zombie, the flick that started it all: *Night of the Living Dead* (NLD).

When George Romero wrote *NLD*, he was inspired in part by Matheson’s vampire-like creatures in *I Am Legend* (c.f. in Russo 6); however, he likely wasn’t referring to the functional, society-rebuilding creatures that appear at the end of the book. Rather, in the seminal zombie film *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero gives viewers a re-presentation of what Neville experiences at the beginning of *I Am Legend*, where hordes of mindless zombies ramp survivors in their homes. *NLD* is a remarkably simple conceit in this respect, allowing my classes to focus less on the intricacies of plot and instead examine how a film can present a scenario similar to a novel, but using a different set of tools.

Our approach to *NLD* mirrored the approach we took to *I Am Legend* in some respects. Just as *Legend* used prior knowledge of vampires and the undead to challenge assumptions, *NLD* used expectations of the common Hollywood fright flick and turned them on their head. Where *Legend* played on conventions of form, however, *NLD* was largely responsible for establishing the conventions of the modern zombie movie. Using their knowledge of modern horror films, students were able to examine *Night of the Living Dead* for its cultural impact as well as for its inherent value as a text for study.

During our study of *I Am Legend*, we had explored the notion of conventions, or the common way things are done both in literature and in this case specifically with regard to monsters and their subsequent legends. That Matheson chose to toy with our understanding of vampire/zombie conventions was one of the reasons my classes were as fascinated as they were. *Night of the Living Dead* provided another opportunity to look at the conventions of horror films. In some respects, *NLD* was responsible for creating the conventions we now expect when watching a scary movie. Throughout our viewing of *Night of the Living Dead*, students were quick to point out what they noticed was common to many present-day horror films. Their comments reflected issues of gender (“Why do women always go helpless in these films?”), to politics (“I knew the government had something to do with this” when news reports reveal a top-secret meeting being held in Washington), to media and the changing role of broadcast news (“You know the news today would not be this calm and helpful,” referring to the periodic news updates that appear throughout the film).

Students were surprised to find other horror movie conventions flouted. In one encounter midway through the film, an African American student mentioned to a classmate that she was surprised:
“Usually the black guy dies first.” This is a truism so common in horror films that it has been parodied in horror satires such as Scream and Scary Movie. But not only did Ben, an African American character in Night of the Living Dead, not die first, he broke another convention of movies of the 1960s: he was the hero of the movie decades before having African American leading men would become common Hollywood practice.

Metaphors of the Undead

One reason zombie films are so frightening, and perhaps so popular, is because zombies represent a unique type of monster. Rather than frightening us because they are so alien to the world as we understand it, zombies are horrifying in how closely they resemble us. Zombies are people and represent the potential of zombie characteristics in everyone, which is simultaneously scary and revealing. I posed a question to my classes, wondering aloud why zombies, having existed as cinematic monsters for nearly a century, are as frightening as they are. Almost immediately students mentioned the situation of Barbra, one of the first characters we see in Night of the Living Dead, who goes mad and reverts to a childlike state after experiencing a zombie attack on herself and her brother, Johnny. Johnny succumbs to the zombie while trying to protect his sister, leaving Barbra to seek shelter in a nearby farmhouse. For my students, this raised two issues in particular. The first dealt with the behavior of Barbra, who had trouble even driving a car to get away from the zombie that had killed her brother. During the film, students reacted vocally to Barbra’s ineptitude at taking care of herself and her exhibition of the clichéd horror trope of running and screaming. At one point, after entering the farmhouse that serves as the setting for the rest of the movie, Barbra runs to the second story of the home, only to be jeered by one student with “Not upstairs! Why do they always run upstairs?” At the end of the movie, when Barbra falls victim to the zombiefied version of Johnny, another student remarked on the irony of the situation, how Barbra’s brother died trying to save her from a zombie only to become one and kill her himself.

The issue of Barbra’s behavior obligated students to examine a deeper level of meaning in zombie entertainment. While initially confident that they would never react as Barbra did, my students gradually came to the conclusion that, if faced with the reality of a zombie sibling as Barbra was at the end of the film, they likely would have stopped thinking rationally as well. One student insightfully noted that a character having to “kill” an undead family member is a common occurrence in zombie narratives (including I Am Legend). This comment led to a discussion of the relative nature of dealing with real-life horrors. It was easy for my students to defy typical behavior when the monster they envisioned was anonymous, no matter how human they seemed to have been at one point. However, when a character has been given some backstory or is otherwise presented in a sympathetic light, it changes the perspective of those students who were initially steeped in their commitment to zombie annihilation.

The second issue that was raised by examining Barbra’s behavior was tied closely to I Am Legend. Robert Neville realizes, at the end of his life, that he will be a legend to the newly rising society in much the way vampires had been to him before the apocalyptic events in the book. This was a powerful lesson on the impact of perspective in how we see the world. Regarding the movie, my students were initially derivative toward near-catatonic Barbra when comparing her to the more level-headed Ben. This derision quickly dissipated, however, when a more sympathetic student brought to our attention the plight of Barbra, arguing that she couldn’t be expected to be as detached as Ben was. In this student’s view, Ben could be cool-headed as he did not have any personal attachments to any of the zombies. Ben saw the zombies as the audience would, as strangers who were out to kill him. Whatever conflict Ben experiences, knowing that these zombies were once living humans, is outweighed by the fact that they now are not living and want to eat him. Barbra, my student argued, was stunned by the trauma of her brother’s death and further driven to madness when he shows up at the front door of the farmhouse, devoid of recognition for his sibling and
intent only on feeding. Barbra had developed, argued the student, a different perspective.

**Advocacy for the Rights of the Undead?**

Frequently in my teaching I have enjoyed playing devil’s advocate to encourage students to consider viewpoints opposite of their own, to better understand different worldviews. For the undead unit, common thematic elements shied by the core texts lent themselves easily to this type of advocacy. To further explore and make explicit the idea of perspective, I concluded the unit with a short philosophical essay exploring the hypothetical “rights” of the undead.

One treasure I had come across during my preparation for this unit was a surprisingly accessible book entitled *The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless* (Greene and Mohammad), a collection of essays on philosophical issues raised through consideration of our cultural myths of the living dead. The essay “Should Vampires Be Held Accountable for Their Bloodthirsty Behavior?” (Druegger) explores the question of whether the undead had the right to exist, as their behavior was not rooted in evil so much as it was rooted in a basic need to survive. This essay extended a discussion, begun while reading *I Am Legend* and continued through *Night of the Living Dead*, about how adopting a different perspective can change how one views situations that might otherwise seem cut and dry. Here at the end of the undead unit, students were required to empathize with zombies and vampires, at least long enough to determine if these undead creatures warranted the right to exist.

What followed was a spirited debate concerning the rights of the undead. Students quickly moved past the fantasy elements of the argument and delved into a serious debate about the rights of minority viewpoints. It should be noted that never did anyone, myself included, suggest that those needing to feed off the blood or brains of others had a right to do so. Nor was there ever the suggestion of equivalency between this hypothetical discussion of rights and the real struggle for rights among those suffering from legitimate injustice. Rather, my students showed a ready ability to see through the conceit of the argument and recognize a larger truth: no matter how foreign the beliefs of others, foreignness does not by itself warrant bigotry and dismissal.

That zombies are simply misunderstood and have a right to exist is a patently ridiculous notion, not the least because zombies as we understand them do not literally exist. However, the symbolic nature of zombies is a potent example of how the absurd can be instructive when approached as if it were a legitimate societal concern. There is a history, moreover, of seeing ourselves reflected in and revealed by our amusements (Wood 29). *Dawn of the Dead* is considered the foundational zombie-movie-social-commentary film, with its implied critique of consumer culture. Even the zombie comedy *Shaun of the Dead* illustrates how oblivious we can be to the mundanity of our everyday lives and how we deaden our awareness of the world around us, even as that world (for Shaun and company) falls apart.

**Summoning Units from Beyond the Grave**

Because I taught high school students on the campus of a community college, I had more freedom in my selection of texts for my zombie unit. I taught *Shaun of the Dead* with great success, although I imagine its inclusion in a typical high school curriculum would be a nonstarter due to language and gore. *Night of the Living Dead*, while tame by modern standards, might also be a tough sell depending on community standards. This does not mean that the zombie unit isn’t possible for those teaching in a school where R-rated zombie flicks are not allowed. In my preparation for this unit over the two years that I taught it, I have come across countless examples of texts from a variety of media that would provide many if not all of the same opportunities for deep, serious discussion of issues that should be part of any literature classroom. *White Zombie*, one of the earliest examples of zombie movies, features Bela Lugosi, famous for his other archetypal undead role, Dracula. Best of all, this movie exists in the public domain and can be downloaded for free.1 While *White Zombie* does not feature the same zombies we are familiar with today (the zombies in this film are more in line with the traditional Haitian
zombie lore), it is just as suited for discussing social issues such as exploitation of workers and gender discrimination. Moreover, like my class did in comparing *I Am Legend, Night of the Living Dead,* and *Shaun of the Dead,* White Zombie allows students to examine how a familiar trope in horror movie history has evolved and to examine how that evolution reflects shifting social norms and perspectives.

I imagine that no amount of arguing on the merits of the undead as a thematic unit will convince everyone of its value in the English classroom. However, there is a long history of using horror to illustrate and illuminate human experience. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame,* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are perhaps the easiest to name. However, *Bewitched* is not only one of the earliest examples of English literature, it is a monster story. Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* is a ghost story, and nearly the entire body of Edgar Allan Poe’s work deals with the supernatural, madness, or murder.

Zombies and other undead denizens can provide for meaningful scaffolding onto knowledge that students already possess, and the undead are pretty popular right now. Recently, HBO began a series called *True Blood,* a drama about vampires living out in the open in modern-day America. Earlier, the void in “event publishing” created by the end of the Harry Potter series of books (themselves examples of high-interest reading) was at least partly filled with Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series of adolescent novels, featuring vampires as a central element. No English teacher should turn over the entire curriculum to the passing trends of adolescent interest. But if our goal for students is the “development of literacy . . . to achieve full participation in society” (NCTE), teaching texts with pop culture appeal can be an effective tactic. For my classes, engaging with the undead not only provided opportunities to examine thematic material common to many traditional literatures, it provided a selection of texts that generated high interest and participation. And, it was a lot of fun.

**Note**


**Works Cited**


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**READWRIETHINK CONNECTION**

Joyce Bruett, RWT

Nail highlights how students bring much to the table when discussing topics they are familiar with, such as horror films. Using this genre in the classroom provides students an instant hook into studying “thematic material common to many traditional literatures.” In “Ghost and Fear in Language Arts: Exploring the Ways Writers Scare Readers,” students write a scary text after exploring a chilling scene they have found from a favorite horror author. They analyze it in terms of structure and language to get an inside look at the craft of writing scary stories—and they use what they have learned as they write and publish their own stories. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_views.asp?id=237](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_views.asp?id=237)