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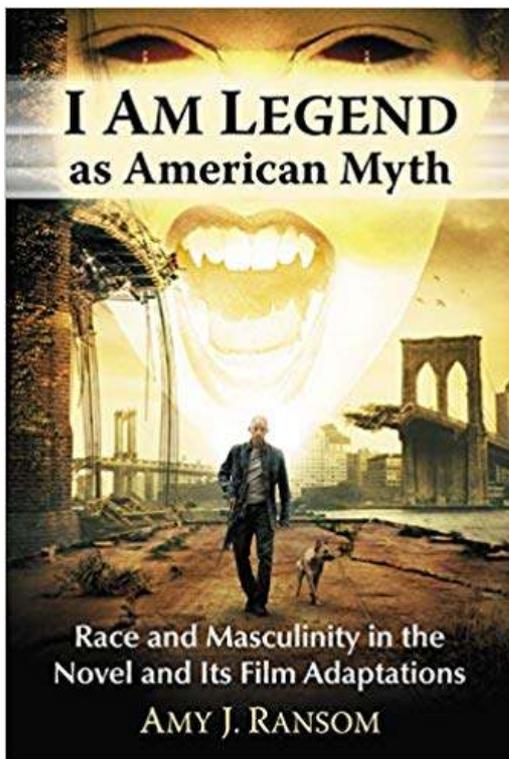
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Ransom, Amy J. *I Am Legend* as *American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*

Fallen Matthews



- 1 The cover of Amy J. Ransom's *I Am Legend as American Myth* shows a lone man who trudges forth against a barren sky and a city whose former life is only evidenced by skeletons of concrete, whose death is manifest by the vampiric apparition that looms overhead to bare its fangs. Although taken from the *I Am Legend* film, the apocalypse is less thematic than peripheral in how Ransom incorporates race, masculinity, and

positionality in her analyses of how the eponymous novel manages to be simultaneously timeless and emblematic of its historical moment through adaptation theory (5), star theory (6), queer theory (8), and critical race theory (10). In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the book has four chapters.

- 2 The first, “Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend: The Trauma of World War II and the Decline of the Western ‘Right’*,” covers Matheson as a unique literary figure whose penchant for prose was influenced by science-fiction and Westerns, whereas fantastic creatures imbued his works with Gothic elements (20, 21); and how monumental *I Am Legend* was in cultivating the trope and subgenre of an apocalypse’s sole survivor pathologizing the inhumanity that afflicted victims of a nuclear fallout, unlike the narratives of seclusion, apocalypse, and disaster which preceded it (21). Another critical consideration includes how the politics of militarism, nationalism, and fear culminated in the revelation of a masculinity no longer idealized, but compromised by a virulent horror at the hands of unknown albeit Othered adversaries (30, 33, 35). Notably, Ransom notes how Matheson’s protagonist—Neville—invokes the unnerved soldier whose recurrent nightmares of battle estrange him from the happier memories and disjoint prospects of happiness beyond (40). The literary visuality of ravaged places and peoples also resonated with audiences whose fears were stoked by graphic orientalist and Cold War propaganda, in addition to the exponential casualties of wars abroad (42, 43). Likewise, Ransom discusses how tasks of upkeep and interpersonality attributed in the absence of women are understood to effeminate soldiers such as Neville; how desperation and isolation endanger the composure and strength ascribed to masculinity and make it liable to hysteria, exclusively considered symptomatic of femininity (46). Empiricism is also instrumentalized as the means through which Neville “rediscovers his humanity” (47), which speaks to engendered divisions of labour: with rationalism, discipline, and commercial vocations being attributed to men; while primacy, maternity, and homemaking are ascribed to women. Ransom furthers that racialized masculinity is conceived in the advent of the Civil Rights movement, Jim Crow, and calls to cease segregation in favour of integration (52, 53); along with the consciousness of other masculinities embodied by the non-white subjects (56).
- 3 The second chapter, “Visualizing Apocalypse Through Compromised Masculinity: Vincent Price as *The Last Man on Earth*,” covers the first film adaptation of *I Am Legend*. Ransom reflects on what cultural staples coincided with *The Last Man on Earth*: the shift in cinematic portrayal of masculinity from the bourgeois gent in a tailored suit to the brusque, rugged everyman (59); and how the former representation was later condemned as homoerotic, inciting fear as much as aversion, as if homosexuality were contagious (60). Vincent Price, the film’s lead, is renowned as a horror movie icon and also cited to be a sexually ambiguous figure who is speculatively considered queer (61). Ransom explores how Price’s persona and sexuality were “non-normative” (61); and how his version of Neville—renamed as Robert Morgan—differs in class, modality, and respectability from that of *I Am Legend* (67). In *The Last Man on Earth*, apocalypse is envisaged as Robert Morgan, a well-to-do scientist, muses upon a possible plague which consequently manifests as generalized blindness, then a vampiric pathology that overtakes his family and the masses (69). The film plays upon the mainstream anxieties which surrounded the prospect of a nuclear conflagration during the Cold War’s infamous arms race. Ransom posits that survivors such as Robert are not driven by hope or heroism, but by sheer desire for survival (74). She also discusses other works by Matheson—*The Shrinking Man* and *The Beardless Warriors*—which involve the

transmutation of masculinity (79-81), and how the slightest change can be coded to undermine a subject's masculinity in respect to potency, heterosexuality, and patriarchy (83). Additionally, *The Last Man on Earth* integrates engendered divisions of labour into its plot, as Robert engrosses himself in work instead of assuming any reproductive or domestic labour when his family is infected by the contagion (89); and how Price's sexual ambiguity served to queer Robert as a prospectively closeted character who vies for a male colleague (89, 95).

- 4 In chapter three, "The Last White Man on Earth: Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man*," Ransom explores the premises of *I Am Legend* as apocalyptic prospects are likened to the 1960's countercultures which dominate the social imaginary. Race and class—in particular, the consciousness of racial and economic marginality—become emblematic given the rise of the Black Power movement, race riots, poverty rates, and calls for integration (97, 120, 123). Ideals of masculinity are repurposed as Matheson's Neville is portrayed by Charlton Heston: an iconized thespian whose grave bemusement, chiseled physique, and chivalrous baritone would distinguish him onscreen; and later, as the face for Christian fundamentalism and the National Rifle Association (98, 112, 114, 116, 135). The amalgamation of these traits would see Heston's Neville significantly depart from Matheson's as an urban figure, a potent and stylized bachelor, whose enemies were more cult-like than rabid (101). The uniformity and sentience of the infected—especially the determinism in their attribution and hierarchal separation between ranks of alpha and omega—would be inspired by the look of the infamous Manson family (101) and the ascension of conservatism through the election of Richard M. Nixon (109). Additionally, Ransom explains how orientalism was evoked within the historical moment through the Vietnam War, as hierarchy within *The Omega Man* reflects the virulent dehumanization ascribed to non-white foreigners in the wake of the My Lai massacre and Tet Offensive (104, 105, 107, 131).
- 5 Ransom covers the latest incarnation of Matheson's tale in "The Color of the New Hero: Will Smith in *I Am Legend*." Race was crucial in Smith's casting: his positionality as a Black man—the determined and sole survivor who pushes forward against dismal odds in the wake of apocalypse—embodies what Ransom rightly terms as "endemic" (147) to American history, citing his "ancestral burden: the history of slavery, segregation, injustice, and oppression" (157); and how Hollywood cinema plays upon the paranoia surrounding Black masculinity, "particularly in connection to white women, prompt indirect narrative strategies which prevent or lessen sexual behavior" (161) which dates back to anti-abolitionist propaganda. As a scientist much like Price's character, whose past life additionally sees him as a burly combatant, strong and fearless much like Heston's version, Smith's Neville contains elements of his onscreen predecessors; but unlike them, he is juxtaposed with the extreme whiteness of the infected (167), with the darkening of skin pigmentation presented as a breakthrough in his empirical pursuit for a cure (169). Ransom further notes how the infected are reminiscent of malnourished marginalized peoples, victims of war. They are pale, sullen, and emaciated not unlike prisoners of concentration camps—an appearance which subverts both Neville and their own inhumanity (172). Hence the sterile, harshly lit tableau of Neville's experiments serves as a metaphor for the violence of experiments upon subjected bodies; where the impersonal researchers allege that the prospect of knowledge or order justify whatever afflicts their test subjects (172). This is also evinced through the incremental sentience of the infected, who inevitably acquire a sense of self through the pain caused by hunger and captivity (173). Ransom muses

upon the cure being synthesized from Neville's blood: "...through the injection of his blood, the black [sic.] hero saves the world from the hyperwhites by injecting color into the humanity of the future" (173).

- 6 In conclusion, Ransom briefly revisits how Matheson's [*I Am Legend*] novel "allegorizes the repressed trauma and survivor's guilt of the World War II veteran" (187) whose existential crisis hinges upon the ambiguous ethos of conquest, complicating once simple dichotomies of hero and villain, human and inhuman, American and Other. *The Last Man on Earth*, she notes, "remains the most faithful to the original" (187) given its chronological adjacency to the original publication. Whereas *The Omega Man* strayed to invoke shifting values related to racial and class countercultures (188), *I Am Legend* repositions Neville as inextricably racialized (189). Overall, Ransom effectively covers the literary and cultural transcendence of *I Am Legend* through the breakdown of Neville in text and onscreen, in addition to the changing yet governing praxes of him which range from respectability politics to contemporary revolt.

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