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Dante, Damnation, and The Undead:
How The Conception of Hell Has Changed in Western Literature From Dante's *Inferno* to The
Zombie Apocalypse

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English
American Literature

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction.....	1
A Brief History of Hell	3
Dante's <i>Inferno</i>	5
<i>Huis clos</i> : Hell Is Other People.....	8
<i>The Great Divorce</i> : Hell Is Separation From God.....	12
<i>The Living Dead</i> and the Zombie Apocalypse: Hell Is Here And Now	14
<i>The Road</i> : Hell Is A Journey Without End	23
<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i> : High School Is Hell	25
Conclusions.....	34
Works Consulted.....	36
Vita.....	39

Abstract

Dante's *Inferno* defined hell in Western literature for centuries; it was a physical place for sinners, they were subjected to physical torments, and it was in the afterlife. Dante's depiction was firmly rooted in Christian theology. However, as fears and morals change, ideas of hell evolve as well. With the popularity of the zombie and other apocalypse narratives, these ideas return to the notion of physical torment and earthly places. In poetry, novels, theater, television, and film, writers examine different interpretations of hell, punishment, and redemption as metaphors for modern sins. In *Huis clos*, the *Living Dead* film series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Road*, and other works, the concept of hell is reinvented and replaced by new ideas, but the influence of the past iterations shapes the new landscapes.

Keywords: Dante's *Inferno*; hell; zombies; Cormac McCarthy; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; *Huis clos*

INTRODUCTION

Hell fascinates both writers and readers. In literature and art it provides ample opportunity for description, imagination, and social commentary, and can even serve as an ideal location for a revenge fantasy. Over time, the portrayal of hell in literature has evolved with changing mores. As notions of sin, redemption, and the afterlife are reevaluated, literature reflects the changing fears and anxieties attached to such ideas.

Hell is a strange concept. It is sometimes a threat, a means of trying to control a population through fear of retribution, a way to keep people in line with particular, even arbitrary, morals. Some version of hell can be found in the mythology or religions of most cultures. Generally, hell is a place where the soul is sent after death; it is often, but not always, the opposite of heaven, where a soul goes if it has been good. Heaven is reward; hell is punishment.

It is perhaps a strange undertaking to write what Alice Turner calls "a real history of an imaginary place," but if we are to look at how the concept of hell has changed, we must first establish its origins (4). Although many cultures and religions have a version of hell, I am focusing here on the concepts of hell in Western literature, as opposed to religion(s), and while the idea of a hell and an afterlife originates in religious thought, this is not a study of theological texts but rather an examination of how the two worlds, the sacred and the secular, influence one another and the concept of hell in Western literature. Furthermore, I want to examine the concept of hell as a place, whether literal or metaphorical. For many writers, the notion of place grounds the idea of hell. In the *Inferno*, hell is underground, and the deeper down one goes, the more terrible the punishments, for the more egregious sins. Finally, the deepest pit imprisons Judas and Lucifer, the biggest villains in Christianity. But for Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist, there

is neither god nor hell; therefore, if hell is a construct of the mind, his version in *Huis clos* is just a small room, and the tortures are all psychological, or in the characters' minds. C.S. Lewis, a devout Christian, conceived of hell as the ultimate alienation from his Christian God. Since there can be nothing worse than being separated from God, his idea of hell from the novel *The Great Divorce* is simply a town, much like one on earth, but devoid of God, and therefore devoid of love, hope, or joy. This town is not a monstrous place and it offers no tortures, but the lack of the divine presence is hellish enough.

For other secular writers, such as George Romero, hell is already here in this life, in a society he sees as diseased and doomed, so his *Living Dead* series is set not in an afterlife but here on earth and in the present, our very own world overrun by zombies of our own creation: monsters who look and act like us, but who are stripped of their humanity and want only to destroy. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is also set on earth and after a presumably human-made disaster, but his monsters are human, not zombies. His hell is not only the remains of a world wrecked by man, but the journey without destination through that world, the sights of what could have been and now never will be again; his is a road without end and without exit, leading nowhere.

Finally, Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* deals with hell as both a real physical place and as a metaphor, positing high school and teenage life as hell, but inventing hell dimensions throughout the series. The show's setting itself is an American town built on something called a "hellmouth," literally an opening into other worlds and hells, allowing the writers to examine both literal and figurative versions of hell throughout the series.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HELL

The first written accounts of hell we have are Sumerian, but the better known ancient version is most likely Hades, the Greek underworld. It is an underground place, and although most mortals do not go until they die, it can be visited before death, such as in the myth of Euridyce and Orpheus. The best known narrative of Hades is probably that of Persephone's abduction by Hades, the lord of the underworld. This hell has several geographical features also found on earth, such as mountains, rocks, lakes, and rivers, among them the river Styx. These are usually cold and lifeless: stones, cold dark water, and very little vegetation. This makes sense both psychologically/symbolically and biologically, because hell is underground, after all.

While most religions include an afterlife and even a hell, "no other religion ever raised Hell to such importance as Christianity, under which it became a fantastic kingdom of cruelty, surrounded by dense strata of legend, myth, religious creed, and what, from a distance, we might call dubious psychology" (Turner 3). Western culture appears to spend far more time thinking about and building up hell than it does building heaven. The latter is somewhat vague, "intrinsically understood as a metaphor, an inadequate attempt to convey the bliss or ecstasy of the soul dwelling in God's grace, rather than a real address with pearly gates, harps, and halos. Hell, the place of punishment for sinners, has always been taken much more literally" (Turner 3).

Perhaps hell is simply easier to understand. As corporal beings, we are familiar with physical pain. What's more, we are fascinated by it. Horror as a genre is not new, but is becoming more commonly accepted, even revered. In the United States, one of our best loved and most commercially successful writers is Stephen King, master of horror and gory narrative, and *The Walking Dead*, a zombie survival drama, is one of our most popular television shows.

Hell, a kind of horror movie we may one day take part in ourselves, is bound to fascinate us. Turner writes that hell's landscape is "the largest shared construction project in imaginative history, and its chief architects have been creative giants—Homer, Virgil, Plato, Augustine, Dante, Bosch, Michelangelo, Milton, Goethe, Blake, and more" (3). I propose we add Jean-Paul Sartre, George Romero, Joss Whedon, Cormac McCarthy, Suzanne Collins, and Stephen King to the list.

The "essentially incontrovertible demonstration for early Christians that Hell existed as a *place* of after-death punishment of evil doers" comes from the Gospel of Luke (Turner 55). Matthew had "vaguer references to the place of 'weeping and gnashing of teeth," but Luke is the first to describe it (56). It appears to be Christian tradition that put the flames in hell, though it is noteworthy that for Dante, the deepest pit is a frozen lake, and not one of fire.¹

Is hell an actual place? To Dante, the answer is clearly yes. His *Inferno* sizzled with realism, and from other writings, church doctrines, and art, it appears the majority of Christians felt the same way: hell was a very real place, and they lived in fear of being sent there. That palpable fear of hell seems to have abated in the years since, however, and other places have grown in importance--and dread--in the Western psyche.

Because hell is, as Turner says, "an imaginary place," it offers writers enormous freedom in the ways they may interpret it. Hell appears as a physical place constructed in concentric circles; a high school; another dimension; an earthly road through desolation and leading nowhere; a shopping mall full of human and humanoid monsters; a desolate town; a demonic sweatshop; even simply a windowless room. The one aspect of hell that seems to be agreed upon across genres, writers, and both secular and sacred texts, is that hell is also a separation from

¹ It should be noted that the Jewish concept of Sheol as it is depicted in the Hebrew Bible is also a physical place where souls go after death, but it is not so much a place of punishment. Indeed, it is a place where all the dead go, regardless of sin, and so is not a hell for the purposes of this paper, as the focus here is on place and punishment.

God. Whether this is because the alienation itself is punishment or because God does not exist, one thing is certain: in hell, not even god can help you.

DANTE'S *INFERNO*

Dante is the godfather of the hell narrative, and almost every version of hell in Western literature owes something to his *Divine Comedy*. Dante's vision is based on Christian dogma, and his hell itself is meticulously detailed, organized, and sin-specific, meaning that the punishments fit the particular sins. The Bible does not offer a very specific description of hell, so Dante was free to imagine and create his *Inferno*.

Although Dante's hell is in the afterlife, the tortures are predominantly corporal and corporeal. Dante uses imagery and characters from the Bible as well as his own imagination, and his hell is paradoxically located not only in the hereafter but also physically in the earth as well. The poet Virgil takes Dante on a guided tour through the underworld, which is literally under the existing world, in this case Italy, and when they reemerge later, it is to climb a mountain leading to purgatory, also located simultaneously on earth and in an afterlife. Dante uses place to give the epic a sense of tangibility, that hell is closer and more attainable than one might like to imagine. By describing it in as much detail as he does, he makes it easier to visualize, which of course makes it easier to visualize oneself in, as well.

Dante adds another touch of realism when he incorporates actual people from thirteenth-century Florence. He surely derived a fair amount of satisfaction for himself when, exiled and devastated, he managed to send his enemies to hell for all eternity, if not literally, then at least literarily, and judging by the *Comedy's* considerable popularity, for almost as long. His epic work serves as both warning and revenge.

One of the most striking aspects of Dante's hell is its hierarchical structure, both in physical structure and classification of its dwellers. At the top are the sinners who are deemed the least sinful, and the concentric circles descend in a cone shape, each level more horrifying than the one above, until he reaches the final circle and its frozen lake Cocytus, at the center of which is Satan himself.

Modern readers of Dante are often struck by the order of severity of the sins and their consequent punishments, which seems reversed; the more animalistic sins, such as lust and gluttony, are punished less severely than the more human sins, such as avarice and treachery. At the time of Dante's writing, it was generally accepted that God was more forgiving of those who were simply too weak to resist their impulses than of those whose trespasses were calculated. He shows much less mercy to those who used their capacity for reason to commit acts of sin. Therefore, the sinners who gave in to lust, even when it resulted in betrayal, such as Paolo and Francesca, are not punished for treachery but for licentiousness. Judas, however, is punished for treachery, as his betrayal of Jesus was not an uncontrollable animal impulse but the result of a careful evaluation and subsequent choice. Divine justice in the *Divine Comedy* punishes acts of betrayal or violence against others more severely than it punishes mere lack of self-control.

Because they were unable to stop themselves from committing their sins when they were alive, the sinners of the *Inferno* are damned to repeating grotesque exaggerations of their earthly evil deeds for all of eternity. They remain incapable of stopping themselves, as though addicted to their sin. Whatever vices they indulged in happily in life, they are forced to repeat endlessly in death: the gluttonous continue to indulge in gluttony, gobbling up filth and excrement the way they devoured food on earth; the violent continue to fight and tear one another limb from limb, unable to control their wrath; even the lustful, some paired for eternity with the object of that

lust, are unable to separate from one another, blown around and around together in perpetuity. This repetition itself is of course psychological torture, as the damned know all too well that they have no hope of ever escaping or even being momentarily relieved of their suffering; they know, too, that they are the cause of their own suffering and so have damned themselves to their own hell. The idea that hell is a place of one's own making is a theme that repeats throughout Western literature.

Dante's *Inferno* is a place of grotesque tortures as well. He describes them so vividly that in the commentary about them "the part of those volumes that has to do with that *Inferno*'s engineering and geography would form a substantial subdivision, . . . limned in three dimensions, right down to the cracks, fissures, and ruins created in the infrastructure at the time of the great earthquake that followed the Harrowing of the First Circle" (Turner 133). He describes sights, sounds, and even smells, making his epic poem an attraction for gifted illustrators. Gustave Doré's woodcuts are among the most well known, with their realistic details of gore and mutilated human form. His works focused on the violence done to the human body in hell instead of its architecture or landscape, which made the *Inferno* more personal, more intimate, and more imaginable, and therefore more frightening, more horrifying.

It is impossible not to see similarities between Gustave Doré's gruesomely detailed illustrations and modern horror and zombie movies or comic books. The men and women in the *Inferno* whose bodies have been mutilated and dismembered are still "alive" in the sense that they still move, weep, and reach towards Dante and Virgil, or even the viewer. These damned may be dead, but that does not mean they are free from bodily torment. In fact, most of their pain and torture is physical and visceral.

HUIS CLOS: HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE

Jean-Paul Sartre, a French existentialist, was less compelled by a medieval underworld of torture and demons. Sartre's hell requires no physical torture. He wrote his one-act play, *Huis clos*, in 1944, at the close of World War II, after being captured and held prisoner by the Germans; he knew firsthand the horrors humans can inflict upon one another. His hell is simply an inescapable windowless room, populated not by pitchfork-wielding demons but by cold, indifferent people as contemptuous of themselves as they are of one another. Sartre, an atheist, does not believe in hell, but clearly believes that we create hell on earth for ourselves.

As a prisoner of war and an existentialist, the demonic and otherworldly tortures usually conjured up in descriptions of hell must have seemed almost absurd or cartoonish in comparison to the real human suffering he witnessed on earth. Furthermore, Sartre seems to find the former preferable. His version of hell, from *Huis clos*, is often condensed to its most famous quote: “*l'enfer, c'est les Autres*” (Sartre 93). Here, as in the *Inferno*, the damned have damned themselves, and part of their punishment is the knowledge that they are themselves responsible for their fate. In this claustrophobic imagining, however, there are no pitchfork-wielding demons, bodies in flames, rivers of excrement, or frozen lakes of despair. Instead, Sartre's characters torment one another only psychologically, in a hotel-like room. This room has very little description in the play, only that it is a living room or parlor (*salon*) in the Second Empire style and that there is a bronze sculpture on the mantel. He chose Second Empire as the decor because it was a very common style at the time, and because it was an empty one: a combination of older styles, it combined neoclassical, Renaissance, and Baroque, but offered nothing new or original. It is a symbol of the bourgeois society that Sartre condemns.

Each character in the play must admit his or her sin to the others, and as the play unfolds each realizes that the others are there specifically because they have the ability to afflict one another in a way appropriate to their earthly sins. As they gradually discover, each of them is the torturer-executioner, the "*bourreau*." The play has only four characters, the three newly dead -- Garcin, Inès, and Estelle -- and the bellhop who brings them to the room. The three have never met before, and it soon becomes apparent that the reason they are placed together is that each has what another of them wants, and that each is unwilling or unable to yield what is needed. Garcin, damned for both his cowardice in war and his cruelty to his wife, desperately needs Inès to believe that he was not a coward but a conscientious objector, but she will not. Inès, here for her role in a sadistic adulterous lesbian affair with her cousin's wife, is obsessed with Estelle, who has no sexual interest in women. Estelle is an infanticidal narcissist who drove her last lover to suicide when she drowned their child, and she requires constant male validation, which Garcin is unable or unwilling to provide. It is a love triangle with no hope of resolution or relief.

Sartre never expressly states in the play that the characters are in hell; it is only their assumption that they are, and it has been conjectured that they are perhaps in purgatory instead. Whatever the case, they all believe themselves to be in hell, and do not really question their place in it. In the first scene, Garcin asks the bellhop if all of the rooms are like this one, to which the bellhop replies that of course they are not, as they get all sorts of people here and asks what a Chinese or a Hindu would do with a Second Empire chair. Garcin wonders what he's supposed to do with it, either, but then dismisses it, saying it does not matter, as he has always lived in places he did not like and in false situations (14). This brief exchange illustrates that Garcin's hell is very similar to his life, and that like in Dante, different sins will be punished in different

ways--or at least in different interior decor. One wonders how Sartre's Hindu hell rooms are decorated.

Garcin, Inès, and Estelle know they have sinned, and accept that hell is where they belong. It is possible that they may have the power to absolve, or even to free, one another, but again, this is not expressly stated and the audience may draw its own conclusions. Regardless of whether they have this power or not, the point is moot, as none of them finds within the capacity to perform such a merciful act. Like Dante's sinners, they cannot stop themselves from inflicting mental cruelty upon one another, repeating *ad infinitum* their earthly acts.

When Garcin finally comprehends fully the power Inès has over him and realizes that she is the only one who can absolve him but never will, he begs for the tortures, the sulfur, the flames, and the physical agonies of a Dantean inferno:

Ouvrez ! Ouvrez donc ! J'accepte tout : les brodequins, les tenailles, le plomb fondu, les pincettes, le garrot, tout ce qui brûle, tout ce qui déchire, je veux souffrir pour de bon. Plûtôt cent morsûres, plutôt le fouet, le vitriol, que cette souffrance de tête, ce fantôme de souffrance, qui frôle, qui caresse et qui ne fait jamais assez mal (86) ²

The irony, of course, is that when the door opens, Garcin finds himself unable to leave the room. Inès still believes he is a coward, and it is this very belief which tortures him. Although he knows she is correct, and has seen him as he is, he begs her to tell him she does not think he is cowardly. She is either unwilling or unable to see him as anything but a coward, and she even derives a sadistic pleasure from depriving him, despite knowing he will avenge himself eternally upon her. Inès, like the two damned with her, has also created her own hell, and like the

² Open! Open up, dammit! I'll take anything: the rack, the tongs, molten lead, red-hot pinchers, the garrote, everything that burns, that flays, I would suffer it all. Better a hundred bites, better the whip, acid, anything but this agony of the mind, this phantom pain that brushes, that caresses, but that never hurts enough. (*translation mine*)

sinner from the *Inferno*, is still compelled to perform the same sins and other behaviors she found herself unable to avoid in life.

The title *Huis clos*, most often translated in English as *No Exit*, is a reference not only to the room, or to hell, but to the inescapability of one's self. Although much is made about the lack of mirrors in the room, the characters never escape from their most feared and reviled reflections: the reflections they find in one another's eyes. They have each discovered the others' true selves, and now exposed, will never allow each other to hide again. Furthermore, the lack of mirrors symbolizes the loss of self-image; for eternity, they can see themselves only through the eyes of the others. They will never again be able to look at themselves directly. Instead of seeing their reflections in a mirror, which each could interpret as he or she wanted, they are now left only with the impressions of themselves reflected in the others' views. Garcin, for instance, can no longer romanticize who he is and what he did, but is forever doomed to see himself as Inès does: cowardly and weak.

In the very first scene, before the women have arrived, Garcin begins to understand the significance and relentlessness of this new perspective when he notices that the bellhop never blinks and never closes his eyes, and that here are no windows and the lights never go off. Garcin sees the bellhop's eyes and realizes they are windows to his own fate, saying, "*Les yeux ouverts. Pour toujours. Il ferait grand jour dans mes yeux. Et dans ma tête*" (20).³ Garcin will always be seen for who he truly is, and will be unable to close others' eyes to him, nor his own to himself, as these eyes are now open, and in his head, forever.

What sort of creature is this bellhop, that he does not need to close his eyes or blink? Surely, Sartre meant him as a symbol to further expand on the theme that there is no escape, no respite, not even for the briefest of moments. But if this description of the bellhop is taken

³ Eyes open. Forever. It will always be broad daylight in my eyes. And in my head. (*translation mine*)

literally, it must be noted that he does not seem human; he has no reaction, no human emotion. He is never even named. Unlike Dante's guide, Virgil, the bellhop is neither friendly nor helpful. He merely exists, zombie-like, somewhere between the living and the dead. He is their unhelpful guide, but also a reflection of themselves.

THE GREAT DIVORCE: HELL IS SEPARATION FROM GOD

Sartre is not the only modern writer to take the fire and brimstones out of hell. In fact, literary hell in the mid-twentieth century becomes less and less physical and more and more psychological, even symbolic. Perhaps this movement is a direct reaction to war, especially the keen horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. When one witnesses such atrocities on earth, perhaps a frozen lake no longer inspires as much dread. Or perhaps these writers, especially in Europe, were exhausted of horror and cruelty, and needed a more abstract, intellectual hell narrative. C.S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, conceives of hell as a separation from God, not a place of eternal physical torture, so his version of hell is a bleak, grey town. Like most towns on earth, it has buildings, sidewalks, houses, and streets. As in *Huis clos*, there are no lakes of fire or cackling demons, only lifeless, morose denizens called Ghosts. They wait for buses, shuffle about the streets aimlessly, vaguely malcontent, and exist in a passive, joyless haze. Although the damned in this hell are suffering, their pain is more *ennui* than real torture. They are not burned in flames, nor are they placed in a windowless room filled with French existentialists. The souls who find themselves in this place are lost. No matter what sins they committed in life, however, their greatest sin was not knowing God, and so their punishment is the greatest punishment Lewis can conceive: to remain ignorant of and separate from Him eternally.

Lewis draws from *The Divine Comedy*: the narrative is a dream of a tour through hell and heaven, guided by a writer. The writer is George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis's mentor, and the

narrator hails him as mentor the way that Dante hails Virgil. They begin the tour, as did Virgil and Dante, in hell, depicted here as a grey town in perpetual twilight. Its residents, the Ghosts, are cranky, cantankerous, and querulous fools who know not the joys they miss. They have no physical needs, and can move about freely through the town, mostly farther and farther out and away from one another. They become isolated not only from God but also from one another and any companionship they could find among themselves. The narrator is invited to go with several Ghosts on a tour bus to Heaven, an Eden-like paradise full of light, radiant beings known as Spirits, where the Ghosts are given the option to stay. Only one does so, and only after being forced. When he is “saved,” however, he transforms from a Ghost into a Spirit and gallops off to the sound of an angel chorus, never looking back at his fellow hell-dwelling Ghosts but apparently so filled with joy he has no more thoughts for his former companions. Later, a saved Spirit woman meets her unsaved Ghost husband in the woods. He has become a small, withered, dwarf of a man, with a shriveled, puppet-like creature on his arm called the Tragedian. He longs for her to be aghast, to weep for him, but she has no pity for his misery, since he has brought it upon himself. She tells him she is “*in love*” now and that she was not truly in love with him before, as one “cannot love a fellow-creature fully” until one loves God (Lewis 84). One must agree that she did not love him, for if she had really loved him, she surely could not bear to see him suffer so. As it is, she remains utterly unmoved as he shrinks hideously and miserably into nothing. He disappears altogether, literally reduced to nothing by his wretchedness and her indifference, and she wanders off singing. The narrator is shocked by this, and asks his guide if it is not true that “the final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved” (110). The guide answers that if the Spirits felt sorrow for the suffering of the Ghosts, the Spirits’ own happiness would be compromised, which would be akin to allowing the damned to

“blackmail the universe” by refusing to be saved or to know God and yet still demanding happiness or contentment (111).

Lewis’s version of hell seems particularly strange to the modern reader: it’s almost dull in comparison to Dante’s *Inferno* or even Sartre’s existential angst. Furthermore, for nonbelievers, the punishment does not strike much fear. If one has never searched for God, not finding him is not much of a shock. A bloodless hell is a boring hell. Lewis, a Christian apologist, was fighting the slow but steady deterioration of Christian ideals. In the twentieth century, the Dantean concept of hell as a literal place of physical torment was losing popularity. While Lewis kept the idea of the literal place, in his version a bleak town, he did away with the physical torments. If his version of hell is simply a removal from God’s grace, what would hell be if God did not exist?

THE LIVING DEAD AND THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE: HELL IS HERE AND NOW

All of these hells, whether directly Christian or vaguely agnostic, have at their center a structure, the workings of an unseen hand, a hierarchy or system. But what if one were to remove that presence? Film director George Romero does just that. His *Living Dead* films bring the inferno up from the underground and places it in our most mundane locations: farmhouses, shopping malls, the suburbs. Romero maintains the dread and psychological torment from *Huis clos* and *The Great Divorce*, brings back the violence and gore of the *Inferno*, and keeps god and theology firmly out of the picture. The zombie apocalypses of his films are depictions of hell on earth. By setting these horror movies in places usually considered the most safe, Romero pushes the existentialist idea that we are never really safe from one another, and the Dantean idea that our sins will catch up with us in horrific ways. He is also saying that these places, particularly the mall, are hells we have built and condemned ourselves to. As in the *Inferno*, the punishments

fit the sins. Unlike in the *Inferno*, *Huis clos*, or *The Great Divorce*, however, these sins are not personal, but instead the collective sins of the culture as a whole: greed, war mongering, racism, mindless consumerism, scientific hubris. Furthermore, because punishments and hell come to earth instead of existing as an afterlife, the punishments are not limited to those whose sins brought them about. Indeed, many innocents are killed by zombies, and some of the guilty escape. The zombie apocalypse is chaos, disorder, a complete breakdown of social structure. Instead of neat concentric circles of hell or roommates tailored to heighten one another's unique anxieties, Romero's vision of hell is entropic, chaotic, and indifferent. The zombie apocalypse is hell on earth.

While he did not invent zombies, Romero did invent the modern zombie movie genre and the popular image of slow-moving, mindless, rotting hordes of the undead shuffling across the landscape intent on eating any survivors. These monsters are not the zombies of Haitian myth or voodoo folklore, but an almost entirely separate entity. They are not just individual monsters, but a mass, and they not only kill but force their victims into mindless assimilation.

Although the popularity of the zombie as a present day bogeyman is fairly recent, Marina Warner, in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, suggests that the concept of a zombie existed as early as the Middle Ages. One of the earliest mentions of zombie-like beings in Western literature comes from none other than the godfather of literary hell himself, Dante. In *Inferno* 33, Fra Alberigo, the murderous monk, claims Branca d'Oria is in Cocytus and has been for years, but Dante argues that this is not possible, as he has just seen him alive on earth, eating, drinking, and sleeping. Alberigo explains that some sinners are so evil the devil may claim their souls even before they even die, leaving their emptied bodies to roam the earth (Dante 411). The great poet had "imagined the possibility, but did not have a word for the

soul-less, hollow man left in the world above” (Warner 125). Since then, we have not only the name, but an entire genre.

Arguably the first zombie movie is George Romero’s groundbreaking 1968 classic *Night of Living Dead*. Shot in black and white, the film opens on a graveyard. Our introduction to zombies begins with death, loss, and mourning, and goes downhill from there: death, then an inescapable descent into hell. The viewer, like Barbara, the first character we meet, is about to be given a tour of a new and terrifying version of hell: the zombie apocalypse. More than any other horror movie monsters, zombies are “fully and literally apocalyptic . . . : they signal the end of the world as we have known it” (Paffenroth 13).

Combining the gore and carnage of Dante’s lower circles with the “hell is other people” concept of Sartre, the zombie apocalypse is the contemporary literary incarnation of hell. Not only is hell other people, but it is created by other people as well: zombies are not naturally occurring, nor are they sent from God as a punishment for sins. They result from military experiments gone awry, nuclear disasters, or biochemical warfare. Whatever the details of the cause, it is always humans who create the zombies and the resulting apocalypse:

Zombie movies deal not just with a deadly attack of monsters, but with a situation in which all humans are quickly reduced to a hellish existence, either as zombies, who are the walking damned, robbed of intellect and emotion, or as surviving humans, barricaded and trapped in some place from which there is no escape. Either way, people are doomed to a shadowy, trapped, borderline existence that resembles hell. It is probably no surprise, then that much of the imagery of zombie movies is borrowed, consciously or unconsciously, from Dante’s *Inferno*. (Paffenroth 22)

There is no God in the zombie apocalypse. Romero has removed the guise of religion, and has also abolished the demons or bellhops. There are no guides, no neat circles, no enclosed rooms.

And then, there are the zombies themselves, “who eerily resemble the description of the damned that Dante gives as he begins his descent into hell: they are ‘the suffering race of should who the good of intellect’” (Paffenroth 22). They are no longer human, but instead reduced to their physical appetite and need for carnage. As for the remaining humans, they do not die sinners and go to hell; they live, they survive even, and hell comes to earth. The tag line for the *Dawn of the Dead* puts it succinctly: “When there’s no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth.”

Zombies reflect modern fears of science and technology, of our fellow man, and of nuclear or chemical terrorism. At the same time, they harken back to the medieval hell of the *Inferno* and the Christian theology which shaped it:

They are also, in many ways, the embodiment of the seven deadly sins. These are for the most part sins of uncontrolled appetite, which Dante presents in the first five circles of hell. Zombies are the nadir of gluttony, eating whenever they can and as much as they can, even though it does not nourish them. . . . They are overcome with uncontrollable rage, frequently shown snarling and attacking one another when there are no humans around to kill and eat. . . . When they are not fighting or killing, zombies are just as likely to lapse into complete sloth, sitting around doing nothing if there are no humans in sight. More than any other movie monster or mythological creature, zombies vividly show the state of damnation, of human life without the divine gift of reason, and without any hope of change or improvement. (Paffenroth 23)

If the zombies embody the sins of rage, sloth, and gluttony, it is the humans who represent lust, greed, pride, and envy. They are “frequently conniving and cruel, like the sinners deeper down in Dante’s hell, guilty not of lacking reason, but of perverting it to satisfy their sinful desires” (Paffenroth 24).

In the zombie apocalypse genre, hell is no longer either an afterlife or a realm of supernatural demons, but is instead right here on earth, and the torments, while often grisly, are mostly psychological. There remains of course the horror of being eaten alive by a monstrous humanoid enemy, but more harrowing are the moments when a character must witness a loved one “turning” and inevitably becoming inhuman, an ordeal made more horrifying by the knowledge that one must kill or be killed by those who were once family members or friends.

Compounding this horror are the other survivors. Unlike in *Huis clos*, the ones who are still around are not there for any discernible reason: some are lucky and have banded together; some are smart or prepared for catastrophe; some are just vicious enough to live through almost anything and use the anarchic situations as a means of indulging cruel or sadistic urges. The following scenario is so common in zombie film and literature as to be cliché: a survivor or group of survivors stumbles across others who appear friendly but turn out to be as much of, if not more than, a threat as the zombies themselves. In *Night of the Living Dead*, it is the wandering group of strangers who kill the would-be hero. In *The Walking Dead* series it is the Governor who leads the makeshift town and attacks the survivors hiding in the prison. In *Day of the Dead* it is the Army men threatening rape and murder of the scientists. In *28 Days Later* it is the military men in the safe house mansion. In *World War Z* it is the rich in North America, the tribal warlords in Western Africa, and the government in North Korea. The theme remains the

same: *we* are the enemy, the monster; *we* are corrupt and cannibalistic; *we* are rotten, whether the putrefaction is literal or metaphorical.

The Max Brooks novel *World War Z* is written as a compilation of interviews done by the United Nations a decade after the start of the zombie apocalypse. Phalanx, a bogus drug marketed as a vaccine against “African rabies,” as the zombie virus is called, is a cynical indictment of capitalism and the pharmaceutical industry. The character Breckinridge Scott, an opportunist and a marketing genius, sees in the zombie outbreak a chance to make literally millions of dollars by selling false hope. He explains that advertising is not the selling of products, but the commodification of fear: “People selling their products? No. People selling the fear of you having to live without their products. . . . Fear of aging, fear of loneliness, fear of poverty, fear of failure. . . . Fear sells” (Brooks 55). The sham vaccine helps the virus to spread, as people think they are safely inoculated and so take no further precautions. Once again, man’s greed is his downfall.

In previous hell narratives each character is punished for his or her individual sins, whereas in zombie films and literature society as a whole is punished for its collective sins. These societal sins usually include racism, sexism, classism, greed, consumerism, and warfare and other violence. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the hero is a black man. He fights bravely, keeps his head in terrifying situations, thinks quickly and tries to save everyone he can, even strangers, and is shot in the head by a careless crowd of white men. They do not know who he is, have no reason to think him a zombie, and remain ignorant and callous to the end, using meat hooks to put his body on a pyre of corpses, human and zombie. He would probably have been their salvation from the violent end we assume they will meet, but their own ignorance and hatred damns them before they have a chance.

Meathooks are not common weapons, and why would a gang of men in the woods have had access to meathooks? The scene could be read as a retelling of Canto XXI, the white men with hooks standing for the Malebranche and their hooks. Here, however, Ben does not have a Virgil to protect him from the demons, and as there is no God, there is no protection by the Divine Will, either.

Casting a black man as the heroic lead in a story of violence, chaos, and human self-destruction was a defiant statement in the years immediately following the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. The whites who kill Ben are a lynch mob wandering through woods and fields with shotguns and dogs. When they destroy him, they destroy their own hope of survival, yet they are no less ignorant of this fact than were the lynch mobs of the American South.

In the second of Romero's pentalogy, *Dawn of the Dead*, the most sympathetic and resilient character is a woman, Francine. Women in horror films are often depicted as skittish, useless, and dumb. More importantly, they are almost always the victims, are almost never the heroes. Not so in Romero's and subsequent zombie works. Francine is smart and resourceful, and she has a stronger sense of self-preservation than her male counterparts. While the men are thrilled to discover a shopping mall (still a popular place in 1978) that they can use for both shelter and an unlimited material consumption, she is disgusted by their materialism. Only Fran sees the uselessness of jewelry, clothes, and other luxury possessions. This is Romero's way of thumbing his nose at the dismissive stereotypes of vapid female characters found all too often in popular culture. Here it is the men who shop till they literally drop, and the woman who is exasperated by their blind greed. Furthermore, the men are so distracted by their sudden quest for useless material goods that they allow the zombies an opportunity to get inside the mall,

transforming the shelter into a scene of dismembered body parts and carnage. The men have essentially guided their little trio from the shopping mall, the perfect symbol for the Fourth Circle, Greed, down into the Fifth and the Seventh Circles, Anger and Violence. Once again, they've orchestrated their damnations.

Another cliché Romero dismantles in *Dawn of the Dead* is the “buddy movie” trope: two men, one black and one white, are friends, but invariably the white man is the lead and the black man is the humorous and often expendable sidekick. Again, Romero surprises. There is a strong male friendship between Roger, a black man, and Peter, a white man, but Roger leads, and Peter is the expendable sidekick: in this case, Peter is bitten by a zombie, which means he will slowly die and come back as one of the monsters. In an emotional scene, Roger alone stays with his friend, the two men knowing what will happen and what must be done: Roger has to have the strength to shoot and kill Peter when he dies and reanimates as a zombie. Then, Roger must battle through the hordes of undead to rejoin Francine, who has commandeered a helicopter for their escape.

It is significant that Francine pilots the helicopter for the final escape. Earlier in the film, when Francine reveals she is pregnant, the men immediately discuss ways of aborting the pregnancy without even acknowledging her. The men assume control of her and her body. She vehemently protests this objectification, and Roger, who only now realizes she is an equal, decides she should be taught to pilot the helicopter and that she should carry a gun at all times. In the end, her insistence at being treated as an equal saves not only Francine but Roger himself, and probably humanity, as the two of them escape in the helicopter she can now pilot, presumably to make a life for themselves and the unborn baby.⁴

⁴ The ambiguous ending is the most optimistic one in all of Romero's works, but it is not the one he intended. In the original ending, no one survives: Roger shoots himself rather than be eaten, and Francine accidentally decapitates

But even if they escape this scene, what future do they have? And for how long? Will this zombie outbreak ever end, or will the undead walk the earth forever?

Apart from the individual horrors of hell, one of the defining characteristics of any hell, whether biblical, allegorical, or literal, is the idea of eternity, which is why Robert Kirkman chose comic books as the medium to write his zombie apocalypse story *The Walking Dead*, now an enormously popular television show as well. Kirkman says in his 2003 afterword that the most frustrating part of zombie movies is that they have to end. One is always left wondering, as Kirkman says, instead of being allowed to “follow the end of the world to its natural conclusion.” And so his series is subtitled *A Continuing Story of Survival Horror*. It has proven to be wildly successful, continuing to be published monthly since 2003 in comic form, and in its fifth season in live action television format. But why are zombie stories so popular? Why do today’s audiences identify so well with the zombie apocalypse?

Zombies saturate pop culture right now: video games, movies, comic books, young adult novels, television, podcasts, advertisements, and even pornography. They appear on t-shirts, coffee mugs, bumper stickers, 5K races, and playing cards. What was once a niche in a genre—zombie movies were a sub-genre of slasher films which were a sub-genre of horror—has now become so common that children play “Plants vs. Zombies” on their iPads. This popularity has unfortunately diluted what was interesting in the zombie genres, and what made them different from other horror genres: namely, the social commentary.

My first experience with zombie movies remains a vivid memory: staying up past my bedtime on a Friday night to watch USA’s “Up All Night” showing of *Return of the Living Dead*, a cheesy knock-off of the Romero classics, complete with the infamous scene of the punk

herself with the helicopter’s blades while trying to escape. The original final shot was the blades slowly running down, indicating the helicopter would not have had enough fuel to escape anyway (Paffenroth 63).

rock girl dancing a strip tease on a grave stone. It has everything I was fascinated with: punk rock style (mohawks, colored hair, leather and tattoos), death, sex, and monsters. And what was most fascinating was that the monsters were human. They were a grotesque form of a human, and clearly monstrous, so they were not “hidden” baddies like Hannibal Lecter or Patrick Bateman. They didn’t look like neighbors, but they did. They were the horror that the young feel towards the old. Maurice Sendak, talking about his children’s story “Where The Wild Things Are,” says that the beasts of the tale are based on the way children view adults: the moles, the hairs, the weirdness that is the human body, aging—all of these were somewhat scary to him as a kid, and he based his depictions on the way he had viewed his aunts and uncles. However, Max, the little boy of the Wild Things, and the heroes of zombie movies and literature have more in common than one might think. They are both horrified by the beasts at first, but both stories are metaphors; both narratives involve a sort of survival of terrible times and a heroic controlling of monstrous beasts, whether by commanding them to dance (“Let the wild rumpus begin!”) or by shotgun blasts. In either case, the protagonist is a winner.

But what are zombies if not an exaggeration of the body horror of humanity and the soullessness of modern society? Humans are mindless, we rot, we smell bad, we have no concern for others, and we consume without need or caution. We turn on each other and we bring about our own demise by our own greed and violence. We are monsters, and we are everywhere.

THE ROAD: HELL IS A JOURNEY WITHOUT END

Zombies are not the only popular apocalypse. Almost any apocalypse and post-apocalyptic dystopia is devoured by the public. Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize winning 2006 novel *The Road* was a huge success with both critics and lay readers, and was made into a critically acclaimed and financially successful film only three years later. The story is post-

apocalyptic; unlike in Romero's zombie apocalypse films, the disaster has already happened years before the start of the book. Also unlike in zombie movies, there is only one scene of gore, and although it is one of the most disturbing scenes in recent literature, the story otherwise contains little violence. Instead, it is the constant threat of violence that hangs over the narrative in a pall, giving it a sense of dread and oppression not unlike that of *Huis clos*.

As in *The Great Divorce*, this world is grey and bleak. It is a colorless wasteland, and the people here are as separated from god as are the Ghosts in Lewis's town. It is unclear whether this is because god does not exist, however, because the novel is mostly from the point of view of a man who seems to waver in his faith, saying early in the story, about his son, "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 5) This line can be read several ways, though; either the son is the word of God, which proves God's existence, or the son is not the word of God, and so God never spoke. But did God not speak because he does not exist, or is he just silent? Perhaps, as later the old man they meet along the road says, "There is no God and we are his prophets" (170).

The Road can be read as a modern retelling of *The Inferno*. The story follows a nameless man and his son—in the roles of Virgil and Dante—as they trek through a dead, grey world. We are told that there has been an unspecified apocalyptic catastrophe, and that it has killed almost all life on the planet. Ash falls constantly from a grey sky. Civilization and structure have fallen. The man and his son do not have a home, but instead are in constant motion, hiding from the others. When the man and boy do meet others, they do not band together in a rag-tag group of misfit survivors, as in most zombie apocalypse tales, but at best try to steal everything the others have, or at worst, attempt to kill and eat them. As McCarthy told the Wall Street Journal, part of the inspiration for the novel came from discussion with his brother about what people would do

in an apocalypse, and he concludes: “They'd probably divide up into little tribes and when everything's gone, the only thing left to eat is each other. We know that's true historically.” This novel is even bleaker than Romero’s vision of humanity (WSJ).

The choice of the title is interesting for a book about an apocalypse: *The Road*. It implies a journey, perhaps even an eventual destination. It means there is forward movement. A road, ostensibly, leads to something. The father/guide is leading his son/the reader towards something, though it is not clear what it is or if he even knows. Redemption? Salvation? Safety? Heaven? We are never certain. As in Sartre’s play, this road has no exit. The family who takes the boy after the father’s death is also on the move. We do not know if they are “good guys,” as the boy has called himself and his father, or villains. Perhaps that phrase, as in zombie films, is not as clearly drawn as society, or the boy, would like it to be. Upon seeing the house full of dying and half-eaten people, the boy seeks reassurance from his father that they would never do such a thing as to eat other humans. But the father knows these others were pushed to a point of desperation and that perhaps he would in fact kill and eat another person to save his son’s life. With no other options, with no exit, perhaps he would. He knows of “the common humanity that [they] share with both the sinners and cannibals” (Lane 19). As in *The Walking Dead*, this is a world without end, a nightmare with no chance of an awakening. And as in *Huis clos* and the *Living Dead* films, hell is other people.

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER: HIGH SCHOOL IS HELL

In Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, hell is both literal and figurative. Hell is more than a metaphor in the Buffyverse, the nickname for the fictional universe of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spinoff *Angel*. There are actually many hells in this world. Sunnydale, California, the fictional town in which Buffy and company reside, is built on a hellmouth, which

is a place where the wall between dimensions is weaker and demons and other supernatural beings can pass more easily, allowing them to star in the weekly show (Whedon “Welcome To The Hellmouth”). Hell exists as a physical place in *Buffy*, and like the *Inferno*, the entrance, at least, lies underground. As Thomas Hibbs says, “On *BtVS*, suburban paradise is but a storm drain resting over the cauldron of hell” (52).

When one is a teenager, other people, usually adults, will often say that whatever problem is currently happening “isn’t the end of the world.” How quickly they forget! As a teenager, peers and the high school environment encompass one’s entire world, and when something happens to threaten that, whether it be a romantic breakup, a fight with a friend, or just being uncool, awkward, or unpopular, it does actually feel like the end of the world. So it makes sense that post-apocalyptic fiction is a popular genre of adolescent literature, and Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* captures this feeling perfectly:

In *Buffy*, the apocalypse functions as a hyperbolic representation of the heightened emotional realities of adolescence and the seemingly ‘life-or-death’ problems that many face – disastrous relationships, misguided educational systems, identity politics. Angel develops this perspective by politicising the apocalypse. In the final season, the title character realises that the end of the world that he has devoted himself to stopping is well underway. Humanity is its cause and effect – it is how we think and live unquestioningly under the influence of global capitalism and other hegemonic institutions. (Vinci 225)

In the late 1990s, there was much talk and anxiety about the new millennium. People were worried about Y2K and its supposed catastrophic consequences. Enter Joss Whedon and his heroine, Buffy Summers. Created to subvert the cliché of “the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed in every horror film,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was an

immediate hit with critics, and soon gained an ardent and loyal fan base which is still alive today, almost two decades after the show debuted (Billson 29). The combination of great writing, well-developed characters and story arcs, and of course the ever-present possibility of the end of the world blended to make a show so adored that it still continues today in comic book form. In fact, the end of the world scenario was so relatable to teenagers and the rest of *Buffy*'s audience that the second part of the two-part Season Three finale was postponed for several months because of fears it was too soon after the Columbine school shooting of April 20, 1999. This episode, called "Graduation Day, Part 2" involved the character Mayor Wilkins' ascension, wherein he transforms into a giant fire-breathing snake demon and tries to destroy the high school and the rest of Sunnydale, only to be defeated by Buffy and her classmates wielding crossbows and other weaponry. It is at once ridiculous and astonishing that an event which is so unrealistic and fantastical was still considered too close to reality to be aired a month after the Columbine tragedy. Demons and vampires work as a metaphor for high school. Even the characters themselves admit that high school itself is at times more hellish than battling giant snake monsters, such as when Oz, one of the students, says at the end of the episode, "Take a moment to deal with this. We survived." Buffy agrees with him that it was "a hell of a battle," but he corrects her, saying, "Not the battle. High school" ("Graduation Day, Part 2"). The other teenagers look around at the decimated school building and nod their heads, having literally conquered the biggest hell of their lives so far: high school.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, like *The X-Files* before it, uses both the "monster of the week" and the full season narrative arc. Unlike *The X-Files*, which was interested predominantly in government conspiracy and the possibility of extra-terrestrial life, *Buffy* is very much about metaphor and the contemplation of good and evil. The series lasted seven seasons, and continues

today in comic book form. Each season has one “Big Bad,” a villain who will ultimately be faced and becomes more prominent as the season progresses. These monsters (and sometimes men) all want to plunge our world into a hell of some sort. The apocalypse is a constant threat to the Buffyverse. In the first season, the Big Bad is an ancient vampire. In the second, it is Angelus, Buffy’s boyfriend turned evil vampire by a gypsy curse, and so on. Each villain wants to bring about hell on earth, and each time, Buffy must find a way to send him or her back to the hell dimension whence they came.

In the final season, however, the Big Bad was The First, the original evil, the force from which all other evil originates. This season ties in all of the others, as The First is actually behind all of the previous villains, and often torments Buffy and the gang by appearing in the forms of previously vanquished killers or as the people they love, both living and dead.

In the episode “Bring On The Night,” midway through the final season of the series, once the Big Bad has been identified as The First and everyone is aware just how difficult this monster will be to stop and this apocalypse to prevent, Buffy gives a rousing speech to close the episode. She tells all assembled that while they are facing the worst they’ve ever faced, that the situation is not really impossible, as they have always faced this. “Evil isn’t coming. It’s already here. Evil is always here. Don’t you know? It’s everywhere. ... Evil is a part of us. All of us.”

Some of the hells in *Buffy* are very much infernal. Angel/Angelus is sent to hell by Buffy at the end of the second season, and there he is tortured and punished for his sins. Crucially, Angel’s soul is restored only moments before he is sucked into hell; he enters the hell dimension not as the soulless demon Angelus, but as the vampire-with-a-soul Angel. Time works differently there, and although he is gone only a few months of Earth time, it appears to be years to him and his fellow hellmates.

This Dantean hell of torments and punishments is not the only hell in the Buffyverse. In season three's first episode, "Anne," Buffy discovers a hell dimension where humans are stolen from earth, regardless of whether they have sinned or not, worked as slaves in a factory until they are physically worn out and horribly aged, and then sent back to earth to die, their spirits and minds broken. They shuffle zombielike through Los Angeles, muttering "I am no one." Other Los Angelenos see these people as just more homeless nuisances, ignoring them as they do the rest of society's undesirables. These characters have been robbed of their humanity, but unlike the Romero version of zombies, they are not aggressive or violent, merely lost and in everyone's way. Furthermore, the citizens of a big city like Los Angeles are so callous to the suffering of others that no one takes any notice of the shambling hordes of soulless humans filling the streets. These poor people are so damaged by supernatural events that they have lost all of their humanity, yet their fellow citizens do not even notice, instead passing right by them as go about their own lives. We see man's indifference again in *Shaun of the Dead*, the 2004 homage to zombie films by Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg. The protagonist, Shaun, goes about his morning routine, shopping, picking up a paper, absentmindedly greeting his neighbors, all without noticing the living dead who shuffle about his own neighborhood. It is only when he is attacked that he notices, and even then, only after the zombie shows superhuman strength does Shaun realize it isn't just a drunk. What does it say about hell if we can live in it and not notice it? If we can walk past people who've been spit back out of it and not even glance at them?

Buffy Season Five's big villain is Glory, short for Glorificus, a god/demon who ruled a hell dimension but became too proud and was cast out of hell and onto a lower plane: earth. It is hard not to read this storyline as a play on the story of Lucifer being cast out of heaven and sent

to hell, so we may conclude that in the Buffyverse, earth is hell. We usually think of the order as Heaven is better than Earth which is better than Hell, but for Glory that order is inverted.

Glory herself is never fully explained: her followers refer to her as Glorificus the Supreme Being, and worship her as a god. The Knights who are trying to defeat her, however, refer to her as The Beast, a demon, a devil. Evil is in the eye of the beholder, it would seem. These knights, in chain mail with red and white crosses, are clearly meant to invoke the Crusaders, and at one point Xander refers to them as the Crusade (“Spiral”). The Knights themselves refer to Buffy and her gang as “infidels,” and they refer to themselves as doing God’s work. Which god is never specified, but the language and behavior are clearly religious. In the final episode of the season, titled “The Gift,” when the hell portal is opened, it is Buffy who sacrifices herself, giving her life for Dawn and for the rest of humanity. She leaps into the void, arms outstretched in the pose of Christ’s crucifixion. The Buffyverse may not acknowledge Christianity, but the writers clearly do, as this iconic image becomes part of the opening credits for the rest of the series.

As in Romero’s zombie apocalypses, even in the worst of times, it is often true that other humans are more monstrous than the monsters. Dawn says to Ben, a human who is at times possessed by Glory and who is willing to kill Dawn in order to save his own skin and escape, that she would rather speak to his Glory incarnation than to him because Glory is at least honest about her intentions. Dawn tells Ben he is more of a monster than Glory is (“The Gift”).

Buffy tells Dawn at the end of Season Five that “The hardest thing in this world is to live in it.” This quote is referred to several times in Season Six, when Buffy has been brought back to life by her friends through magic. They assume she is trapped in the hell dimension opened by Glory and are desperate to free her. When she comes back, it is inside of her own coffin; she is

forced to claw her way back out, and later reveals to Spike that she was not in fact in hell but in heaven, and that being brought back means that now, for her, earth is hell. Ironically, this is how Glory felt about it in the last season. Adding to the torment, she does not want her friends to know, so she is even more alienated and can no longer speak honestly with them. It is not until episode seven, “Once More, With Feeling,” when a god from yet another hell dimension comes to Sunnydale, that she finally reveals the truth to everyone. In this episode, a very loose interpretation of the Persephone myth, Sweet, the ruling devil from a musical theater hell, comes to take Dawn to the Underworld as his queen. He charms/curses the city so that people find themselves singing and dancing in musical numbers, but their songs actually force them to reveal their most intimate thoughts. In the final scene, Buffy sings that when she was dead she was calm, happy, and finally at peace: “There was no pain/ no fear, no doubt/ ’til they pulled me out/ of heaven/ So that’s my refrain, I live in hell/ ‘cause I was expelled/ from heaven.”

This episode marks a turning point for most of the characters. In fact, many have been living in a Sartrean hell of one another’s making, and some are attempting to free themselves: Giles finally accepts that his role as Watcher/father figure must come to an end, and that he in fact cripples Buffy by staying and being her crutch, and so must leave her; Anya and Xander have deep doubts about their upcoming marriage, yet are too fearful to talk to one another about it (and in fact, these fears destroy them only a few episodes later) and so stay trapped in an unhealthy relationship; Willow uses magic to make her girlfriend forget any transgressions, using an herb called Lethe’s Bramble—Lethe being the name of a river in Hades that had the power to make the drinker forget. Though hell is a real place right under Sunnydale, these characters are all living in daily and almost mundane hells themselves, because earth is hell, even to those who have not yet ascended to heaven. In the group song, “Walk Through the Fire,” each

member sings of his or her own torment, and they walk through flames to fight Sweet, who is holding Dawn captive. When Sweet is finally thwarted, he leaves feeling triumphant because “no one can say it ended well” and parts in a dance number while laughing that he will “see you all in hell,” knowing that by forcing them to confess their true feelings, particularly Buffy’s shocking admission, he actually creates hell for them here. In that season’s finale, Willow tells Buffy, “You hate it here as much as I do. . . You know you were happier in the ground.”

In fact, Buffy’s only solace this season is a destructive sexual relationship with Spike, her former nemesis, a vampire with a chip in his head which prevents him from acting violently against humans (but not against other demons). He falls in love with Buffy, but she never loves him: “For Spike, Buffy has become a kind of Beatrice to his Dante—a feminine ideal to be worshipped but, of whose affections he is not completely worthy. Like Dante, it is this love that moves him along the path to redemption” (Sakal 248). The vampire Angel is cursed with having his soul back as a punishment for the sins he commits as a soulless monster. Spike earns his soul back by falling in love and working to change himself completely, from monster to hero. In the final episode of the series, he sacrifices himself for the world, and in so doing, is given back his human soul and a second chance at life (in L.A., where he is a recurring character in the later episodes of *Angel*, the *Buffy* spinoff show.)

While *Buffy* is a fantasy series that takes great liberties with reality, Joss Whedon did not invent the vampire, a myth steeped in superstition and Judeo-Christian myth: classic vampires are burned by holy water and crosses, and this is true in the *Buffyverse* as well. Whedon’s vision of hell and the apocalypse is not as atheist as Sartre’s or Romero’s. Buffy often wears a cross, and holy water is in her arsenal next to wooden stakes, swords, and crossbows, though she does not show any other sign of religious belief. The subject is skirted throughout, but directly

addressed in the final season. In a conversation with a vampire she knew when he was a human, the following exchange occurs:

Vampire: Oh my god!

Buffy: Oh your god what?

Vampire: Oh! Well, you know, not MY god, because I defy him and all of his works, and—does he exist? Is there word on that, by the way?

Buffy: Nothing solid.

And then there is Caleb. Dressed in a priest's vestments and constantly quoting scripture, Caleb at first plays the savior, rescuing a girl running in the woods from men with knives. He turns on her almost immediately, however, calling her a whore, blaming her for her own predicament, saying she deserves it, and eventually stabbing her. He is the terrifying authority figure, one who uses his position of power and authority to exploit and hurt those he is alleged to protect.

Where Romero loathes consumerism and uses his zombies to mock it, Whedon hates misogyny and uses Buffy and Caleb to attack it. Caleb's hatred of women is vicious and unrelenting, and he uses Bible verses to give it credence. He kills girls with glee, shouting "Cleansing fire, hallelujah!" and says to Buffy: "I work in mysterious ways" ("Dirty Girls"). Clearly, he sees himself as one of God's men, if not God himself. He has worked as a preacher and has once had faith, but the power he has wielded over impressionable young girls has seduced him, and although he has lost his Christian faith, he still wears the vestments because "Man can't turn his back on what he come from."

Caleb works for The First, so his comment is especially interesting. Does he come from the evil, or from the church? And are they really that different? Since *Buffy* is all about

dismantling social constructs and tropes, either interpretation works. This season aired in 2003, at the peak of the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal in the United States. Priests were suddenly being seen as predators, men who used children's trust against them, men who betrayed in the worst possible way. If The First is Satan, the source of all evil, Caleb is Judas, the great betrayer, at his feet. In this version, however, neither one weeps in remorse. They can never be redeemed, only vanquished. Buffy does vanquish them, and she does so by traveling into another dimension and literally taking back the power vested in the Slayer from the "scared little men" who bestowed it upon her ("End of Days"). Then, with the help of all of her friends, she channels that power and gives it to all of the Potential Slayers (young girls who may one day be Vampire Slayers), empowering them to fight with superpowers and beat Caleb, the First, and an army of Übevamps. They destroy Sunnydale in the process, and several characters are killed, but Buffy and the gang manage to climb out of the pit and drive away from hell like Dante and Virgil climbing back up to the earth.

In the end, good triumphs over evil, but just barely. The apocalypse is once again averted, but it will happen again on *Angel* and in the still running *Buffy* comic books. One can never truly escape hell or the apocalypse.

CONCLUSION

Most people no longer believe in an underground hell, and that means that for many, the idea of hell has become more abstract. Instead, the focus, for both religious and secular people, is more on this world, and the actions, behaviors, and consequences of this life. Fears have not abated, however, but merely changed shape. We still fear the unknown, and we still fear one another--with good reason. War, torture, terrorism, greed, and inhumanity are still very much

alive, and bring hell to earth. And we are all too aware that man is the most frightening monster we face.

So hell has moved from the idea of an afterlife to a reality of this world. Many see that the very real places of our lives embody the idea of hell: torment, cruelty, punishment, guilt. Whether it be high school, shopping malls, waiting rooms, or our own minds, our angst and horror can make the mundane monstrous.

The fear of soullessness seems a natural side-effect of a soulless culture. As we become more materialistic, we become less compassionate. We distance ourselves from one another by interacting through machines instead of face-to-face. We become jaded and desensitized as we are fed a constant stream of violence in news and other media sources.

Furthermore, the apocalypse often seems to be right around the corner. Nuclear war, terrorist attacks, Ebola, new drugs that give users superhuman strength and capacity for violence—all of these have been seen in our 24-hour news cycle recently. None of these seems far removed from zombies, cannibals, demons, or the end of the world. If anything, we may long for the predictable structure of the *Inferno* amidst the chaos of our world.

As each generation scoffs at the fears and inhibitions of the last, those fears change and shift focus. Maybe examining them through literature and film or television helps us to overcome them. Apocalyptic fictions force us to confront those fears in a visceral and relatable setting. When we spend several hours getting to know characters, we identify with them, and it is shocking to see them killed. We can imagine ourselves in their place. We see our worst fears played out in Technicolor, and yet we survive them, perhaps conquering them in the process. Whatever the case, our fascination with death, punishments, damnation, and the placement of hell seems to be in no danger of diminishing.

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