

**Final Paper: World War Z, The Fledgling, and a Monster for the 21st Century**

Americans' fears and anxieties are as varied as our cultures in this melting pot nation. These feelings are reflected in the readings of novels *World War Z* by Max Brooks and *The Fledgling* by Octavia Butler. Both novels resonated with audiences for different reasons, but both are good examples of how real societal issues can be reflected in monstrous literature of the present day. In addition to this analysis, I will create a monster for the 21st century, one whose origin, appearance, and methods will strike fear in the hearts of all who read about it. It will be made all the more terrifying when seen through the lens of current American culture.

*World War Z* is a book that resonates not only due to the seemingly unquenchable American appetite for zombie entertainment such as *The Walking Dead*, *28 Days Later*, and *Zombieland*, but because of the societal themes it addresses. A nation weary of war finds *World War Z* exhausting, which was very likely Max Brooks' intent. The post-9/11 world has seen America fighting a seemingly unending series of wars against an inexhaustible supply of terrorists, much as the soldiers and civilians in the novel find themselves in constant struggle with a tireless enemy, the living dead. In retelling his tale of the battle of Yonkers, a soldier describes this new enemy as incapable of fear, and thus immune to earlier "shock and awe" tactics. "No matter what we do, no matter how many we kill, they will never, ever be afraid (Brooks, 130)!"

Another way the novel is able to convey the sense of chaos of war is through the way its very narrative is structured. The story is told in the form of an oral history, which gives the reader several different perspectives and feels more like a historical documentary. This technique ensures a human focus for the story, where the emotions and experiences of the people involved become the heart of the story, instead of the monster. The reader will have several characters to relate to and connect with. This kind of disjointed storytelling can also be disorienting, with the reader getting fragments of several narratives, then having to not only weave them together to construct the larger story, but determining which of the storytellers are credible and trustworthy in sharing their views. Such distrust is exemplified in the Shkreli-esque pharma exec behind the ineffective zombie drug, Phalanx. When the drug is proven to be a failure, he claims “It protected them from their fears. That’s all I was selling (Brooks, 73).”

The book also addresses themes of how your occupation can either make you an invaluable contributor to the post-zombie society, or a burden on your neighbors. This is particularly resonant in the information age, as internet analysts and web developers have seen their job prospects on the rise, while the job market for blue collar workers in agriculture and some energy industries like coal are in rapid decline. In the book, the Department of Strategic Resources must find jobs for the people living through the zombie war, and are shocked to discover that “the first labor survey stated clearly that over 65 percent of the present civilian workforce were classified F-6, possessing no valued vocation (Brooks, 173).” In a zombie apocalypse, executives, analysts, and consultants have no value whatsoever, and people who work with their hands like

mechanics, carpenters, and gunsmiths are the hottest commodity. The war has turned the job market on its head.

Brooks also reveals a lot of interest in geopolitics in the book, with the zombie war representing an international crisis. In some ways, the war acts as a “reset button”, with the pecking order of the world’s nations being rearranged, and some looking vastly different at the end of the conflict. Cuba finds itself a world power, the wealthiest in the post-war world, due to its adaptation of sustenance farming and its relative isolation from the world’s most dangerous zombie hotspots. Russia reclaims its breakaway republics and becomes a full blown theocracy: The Holy Russian Empire. But not all countries are transformed in such a way. North Korea, in reality one of the most mysterious and isolationist nations, simply disappears. According to a South Korean official, “the North suddenly, and inexplicably, severed all diplomatic relations (Brooks, 247)” shortly before the first outbreaks were reported. The fate of millions of North Korea’s citizens is unclear by the end of the novel. Geopolitical intrigue will always resonate with audiences, due to the ever changing nature of our planet.

Another relevant theme of the novel is that of civilization vs. the wilderness. In modern society, urban sprawl and the encroachment into nature by mankind’s continued growth and development will make sure that any popular fiction will continue to get mileage out of this concept. Humanity has expanded non-stop for centuries, and it is not unreasonable to think about what will happen when we run out of space. *World War Z* uses wilderness and civilization as a backdrop for the survivors of the war. Many of the book’s epic battles take place in urban landscapes, like the battle of Yonkers, while many American city dwellers strike out into the wilderness, driving north to Canada. The

harsh winter freezes the walking dead in their tracks, and provides a false sense of security for city folk who are underprepared for the dire conditions they find in the great outdoors. A survivor recounts the worthless things like video games and laptops that people brought with them on the trek, and believes that her own family was not prepared, despite packing sensibly, "It looked like enough food for a couple of years. We finished half of it on the way up (Brooks, 155)." The longer people are away from civilization, the more clear it becomes that prospects for survival are very grim.

*The Fledgling*, by Octavia Butler, is a more personal story than *World War Z*, on a much smaller scale. The story of an amnesiac young vampire named Shori, *The Fledgling* introduces a family of vampires far removed from Bela Lugosi's Count Dracula. This novel sets new ground rules for the vampire, and introduces several new concepts which allow the story to comment on themes such as racism, sex, family, and polyamory.

Butler addresses race and racism in several ways throughout the book. As we do not live in a post-racial society, and racism continues to mar the American experience in some way or another, these themes prove very relevant to our times. Shori appears, although she is over 50 in human years, to be a ten year old black girl. This is the result of an experimental mating between Iosif, Shori's father, and a black human female. Iosif is an Ina, which is an ancient race of vampires. This experiment is intended to give future generations of Ina darker skin, allowing them to spend more time out in the daylight without ill effect. This hybridity does not sit well with some Ina, as they believe it will make their bloodline "impure". This is reflective of racist attitudes

toward miscegenation, which in this takes on a double meaning, as Shori is both half white/half black, as well as half human/half Ina.

*The Fledgling* was released in September 2005, at a time when stories about vampires were incredibly popular with the public. Stephenie Meyer's best-selling novel *Twilight* would be published less than 30 days later. Both of these books found relevance, in part due to the culture wars over morality in the midst of the presidency of George W. Bush. The ascension of the religious right as a political power put concerns about morality and the public good into the forefront of American culture. "Traditional Christian values" were pitted against progressive beliefs, and moralists tried to replace sex education with "abstinence education". It was in this climate that *Twilight* and *The Fledgling* were seen as two sides of the same monstrous coin.

*The Fledgling* represents an alternative lifestyle in American culture. While *Twilight* supported teen abstinence and monogamous relationships, Butler's book takes a different path, demonstrating a polyamorous relationship among the Ina. Shori's relationship with her symbionts is more akin to a hippie commune from the 1960's than the wealthy Cullens of *Twilight*, with their more traditional trappings of success. Shori's sexual appetites stand in stark contrast to Edward and Bella's chaste relationship. She does not limit herself to male symbionts either, as Shori reveals to Wright: "Sex with men and with women? With my symbionts if both they and I want it (Butler, 90)." This kind of open sexuality, including representation of gay and bisexual relationships advocate the progressive viewpoint during the Bush presidency in the mid-2000's.

Addiction and codependence are also social issues that found traction in Butler's writing. While addiction was a societal problem long before the 21st century, popular

reality shows like A&E's Intervention (2005), and later Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew (2008) would offer a better understanding of the causes of addiction, and keep the problem in the American Zeitgeist. In the Fledgling, we see a relation of codependence between the Ina and their symbionts, a relationship that is mutually beneficent, but that clearly exemplifies addictive behaviors. As Brook explains the symbiont-Ina relationship to Wright: "Iosif told me what would happen if I accepted him, that I would become addicted and need him. That I would have to obey. That if he died, I might die (Butler, 167)." The book well establishes the need for symbionts to continue to be bitten by their Ina, a clear analog for addiction; whether that addiction is for drugs, sex, or alcohol, there is a strong dependence created.

Speaking of creations, I reveal to you now, my own contribution to the panoply of American Monsters: The Ghul. While borrowing from elements of Arabic mythology, middle eastern folk tales such as One Thousand and One Nights, as well as modern boogeymen, I have created a patchwork creature uniquely suited to terrify audiences of the 21st century.

The Ghul is a little over six feet tall, with dark skin, and legs that end in cloven hooves, similar to a satyr. All of the monster's teeth are ground to sharp points and he has thick dark horns protruding from either side of his head. In his chest is carved his name in Persian: غول. The monster lives in a cemetery, where he frequently digs up the graves of the recently deceased to feast on their remains.

The Ghul is a primeval Persian monster appearing in modern America, summoned from an inter dimensional portal by an unwitting student reading an ancient text. Once being conjured in our times, the monster will seek out young children,

inviting them to dine with him at local burial sites. Once a child consumes flesh in his need to please the Ghul, he is under the monster's influence for the rest of his days, powerless to deny the evil requests of the beast.

The Ghul resonates with our modern culture for a couple of reasons. The first of which is rooted in xenophobia and Islamaphobia, a deep-seated fear felt by many Americans after al-Qaida attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11 and elsewhere around the world since. So strong is the fear of this outsider culture and religion, that no less than the current president of the United States has been fooled into retweeting false anti-Muslim propaganda (Spencer, 2017). Trump's "travel ban", which many Americans approve of, exposes a very real fear, not only of terrorism, but of countries that are majority Muslim (Nguyen, 2017). The Ghul's dark-skinned appearance and obvious middle east ties with the text imprinted into his chest exploits these fears.

The control the Ghul exerts over his young victims is also reflective of another monster: the internet boogeyman Slender Man. One of the cornerstones of the Slender Man myth is his influence on children (Gonzales, 2017). Like the viral 21st century monster, the Ghul serves as a kind of pied piper to the younger generation, enticing them into demonic acts, simultaneously terrifying parents who now realize that their children are beyond their control.

Lastly, the monstrosity of the Ghul can be related to some of Cohen's seven monster theses. He does represent a category crisis, with his cloven hooves and horns typical of an animal, but with the upper body of a large man (Cohen, 6). The fifth thesis, that the monster appears at borders, to enforce boundaries, can be seen in the Ghul's residence in cemeteries, usually located at the outer edges of town, and,

metaphorically, the boundary between the living and the dead (Cohen, 12). Additionally, the Ghul personifies Browning's theory of the monster as a mode of inquiry into the construction of normal and a way to cognize the notion of "otherness" (Browning, 51). Besides his obvious monstrous appearance, the Ghul represents the "other" with its aberrant non-human behavior. Its appetite for decaying flesh certainly indicate a monster well outside the borders of the human experience. Further, the practice of cannibalism, whereby the Ghul and his young followers devour human bodies recalls Poole's description of European beliefs of monstrous races associated with cannibalism in the New World. Here, the Ghul represents the "other" savage non-white culture, while during the age of discovery, art and woodcut engravings depicted cannibalistic natives roasting human remains over a fire. Europeans arrived in the New World with these images in their heads, with a "tendency to define the cultural and religious other in terms of monstrosity (Poole, 32)."



## Works Cited

Brooks, Max. *World War Z: an Oral History of the Zombie War*. Broadway Paperbacks, 2013.

Browning, John Edgar. *Towards a Monster Pedagogy: Reclaiming the Classroom for the Other*.

Butler, Octavia E. *Fledgling*. Grand Central Pub., 2007.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Gonzales, Dave. "The Real Origin of Slender Man, the Internet's Worst Nightmare." *Thrillist*, Thrillist, 11 Jan. 2017, [www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/slender-man-slenderman-real-story-sightings-videos-pictures-murders](http://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/slender-man-slenderman-real-story-sightings-videos-pictures-murders).

Nguyen, Tina. "Trump's New Travel Ban Attempts to Prove It's Not Anti-Muslim." *The Hive*, Vanity Fair, 25 Sept. 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/09/trump-new-travel-ban-north-korea-venezuela](http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/09/trump-new-travel-ban-north-korea-venezuela).

Poole, W. Scott. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Baylor University Press, 2011.

Spencer, Saranac Hale. "Trump Spreads False Anti-Muslim Tweet." *FactCheck.org*, 30 Nov. 2017, [www.factcheck.org/2017/11/trump-spreads-false-anti-muslim-tweet/](http://www.factcheck.org/2017/11/trump-spreads-false-anti-muslim-tweet/).

The Next 100 Years is a 2009 book by George Friedman. In the book, Friedman attempts to predict the major geopolitical events and trends of the 21st century. Friedman also speculates in the book on changes in technology and culture that may take place during this period. Friedman predicts that the United States will remain the dominant global superpower throughout the 21st century, and that the history of the 21st century will consist mainly of attempts by other world powers to challenge US dominance. Two world wars had been planned and orchestrated with industrial assiduousness; twice had the world experienced the darkest sides of industrial production and annihilation. But the world after Hiroshima was different: The greatest threat to global survival was no longer (exclusively) rooted in mass production of war technologies but in the weaponization of advanced physical knowledge. Man creates a reality he can no longer control. In the original *Godzilla* movie, coastal fishers are the first to warn against the seaborne creature. If someone were to make another movie about the present and future dangers of the 21st century, what monsters would they invent? What are the risks that would rob us of our sleep and politicians of their sanity? Read more [By Martin Eiermann](#). Suddenly, the world is plagued by a mysterious infection turning whole human populations into rampaging mindless zombies. After barely escaping the chaos, Lane is persuaded to go on a mission to investigate this disease. What follows is a perilous trek around the world where Lane must brave horrific dangers and long odds to find answers before human civilization falls. Written by Kenneth Chisholm ([kchishol@rogers.com](mailto:kchishol@rogers.com)). [Plot Summary](#) | [Plot Synopsis](#).