

The Last *Real* Man: Foreshadowing Men's Social Issues and Movements in Matheson's *I Am Legend*

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Abstract

We interpret *I Am Legend* as a metaphor for the sociopolitical collapse of patriarchal hegemony, and as foreshadowing several contemporary issues and movements affecting and involving men. In our interpretation, Matheson's last real man is immune to the ideologically infectious "wokeness" that transforms almost everyone else into "un-men," leaving him the equivalent of a modern socially and sexually isolated "MGTOW monk" or "Incel." He is so feared for his "toxic" views and behaviors by the emerging ideologically moderate "quasi-men," that he must be "cancelled" along with the equally extreme un-men as destabilizing threats to the new society. He experiences the same loss of control, powerlessness, alienation, and estrangement experienced by many so-called "traditional" White men today. This includes his sexual frustration and reactive violence which reflects the misogyny exhibited by the Incel movement and his ultimate manipulation and betrayal by a woman which reflects the fears of the MGTOW movement.

Keywords

Matheson, *I Am Legend*, Masculinity, Woke, Cancel Culture, MGTOW, Incel

1. Introduction

Richard Matheson's 1954 book, *I Am Legend*, reflects the zeitgeist of post-war traditional White men and their anxieties over what is, in effect, the beginning of a sociopolitical collapse of patriarchal hegemony. As such, it foreshadows several current social issues and movements affecting and involving men. In our interpretation, Matheson's "last man" is not literally the last man but rather the last

real man, who is so socially and sexually isolated and feared for his “toxic” views and behaviors that he is seen as an intolerable “monster” in a rapidly evolving modernity. In particular, Matheson’s protagonist is immune to the pervasive ideologically infectious “wokeness” that transforms almost everyone else into “un-men,” which leaves him the equivalent of a modern socially and sexually isolated “men going their own way” (MGTOW) monk or “involuntary celibate” (Incel). Ultimately, he is so reviled and feared by the moderate “quasi-men,” who reject the polar extremes of men and un-men, that he must be eliminated as a destabilizing threat to their new society. Reflecting the fears of the MGTOW movement, the quasi-men eventually use a woman to entrap and “cancel” the last real man.

2. Literal Summary of Matheson’s Original Story

Matheson’s protagonist, Robert Neville, is a traditional, White, lower middle class, factory worker living in the rapidly growing and evolving post-war suburbs of Los Angeles. He is the last fully human survivor of a pandemic. The microbe, which may have mutated due to radiation and spread by dust storms resulting from vaguely referenced nuclear detonations, has the effect of changing people into vampire-like creatures. After infection, victims remain alive for a period of time in a liminal state but eventually succumb and become fully undead. Neville is immune to the disease and spends his days indiscriminately destroying the infected, both the still living and the fully dead, and his nights barricaded in his fortified suburban home as the vampires, including his former friend, Ben Portman, taunt him to come out. For several years he struggles with the isolation and loneliness of a bleak and solitary existence, and then miraculously discovers another survivor, Ruth. Unbeknownst to Neville, Ruth belongs to a group of living infected who have learned to stave off the final stage of the disease and stay alive with medication. Ruth and her people are establishing a new society, and because Neville is the last member of the old race and has killed many of the living infected, she is sent to spy on him. He is ultimately captured and condemned to death but takes his own life before he can be executed.

3. Historical Context

I Am Legend published in 1954 and is set only one generation later in 1976, which suggests the rapidity with which societal change was occurring. Matheson was twenty-eight, establishing his own family, and struggling to make ends meet. He recalled, “There were bad years...My theme in those years was of a man, isolated and alone, and assaulted on all sides by everything you could imagine” (Winter, 1990: p. 42, quoting Matheson). Thus, “[the book] is the product of a troubled man in troubled times, at once intensely personal and highly dependent on local, sociohistorical anxieties” (Clasen, 2010: p. 313).

It is essential to have a sense of the broader historical context, particularly the political and cultural upheavals, in which such a work is created, finds an initial

audience, and remains relevant seven decades later. From the end of World War II in 1945 to the early 1950s, conflict between Western and Eastern political blocs dominated lived experiences in the northern hemisphere. This includes the beginning of the Cold War (1947), the Second Red Scare (late 1940s-50s), the Korean War (1950-53), the Cuban Revolution (beginning in 1952), the first U.S. thermonuclear bomb test (1952), and a communist insurgency in the French colony of Vietnam (1950-53). Other important sociopolitical events include the rapid devolution of European empires around the globe, an assassination attempt on President Truman (1950), the maturity (or the “Golden Age”) of television as an entertainment and news medium (by the end of the 1950’s most American households owned a television set), and the emergence of “rock-n-roll” music, including the provocative, pansexually-appealing, race-crossing icon, Elvis Presley (mid-1950s).

The post-war American suburbs are commonly thought of as a space of White middle-class stability and social conservatism (Yeates, 2016). However, within these communities tensions were developing as White men in particular reacted to rapidly evolving racial, gender, and sexual boundaries (Yeates, 2016). *I Am Legend* reflects these tensions in its racially-charged descriptions of Neville’s antagonists and its objectifying and misogynistic depictions of women (Yeates, 2006). Thus, also relevant to understanding the context of the story are the Civil Rights movement (early 1950s) to end institutional racial segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement, and the increasing influence of feminism including, for example, publication of *The Second Sex* (1949) which analyzed and critiqued female oppression by the patriarchy, and arguably established the field of gender discourse and opened the door for second-wave feminism (early 1960s).

“[T]he threats which distinguish 1950s horror...are associated with the processes of social development and modernization” within American society, and often played upon crises of identity in a changing world (Jancovich, 1996: pp. 2-3). In particular, Matheson’s work is “preoccupied with the male anxieties of the 1950s,” it explores and critiques the prevailing notions of normality upon which those anxieties were founded, including “the intimate effects of modernity” (Jancovich, 1996: p. 130, 148). His stories play upon the “fears and anxieties of...the insecure suburban male” (Murphy, 2009: p. 40), and often involve a loss of control, powerlessness, alienation, and estrangement, in which men’s notions of normality and masculinity are challenged as the world becomes strange and unfamiliar to them (Jancovich, 1996). For example, in Matheson’s short story, *No Such Thing as a Vampire* (1959), set in “Rumania” in the “year 18,” a man eliminates his wife’s lover by framing the man to appear to be a vampire so that the townsmen kill him (Lavalley, 2017). This would make a fitting prequel to *I Am Legend* in that it so clearly establishes the irony of Neville’s fate in being killed by the “townsvampires” for being a man. In *Blood Son* (1951), a strange boy with disturbing behaviors is abnormally infatuated with the idea of becoming a vampire. He proclaims in front of his classmates, “I want to live forever

and get even with everybody...I want to drink girls' blood!...That is my ambition!" (Lavalley, 2017: pp. 47-48). In this, we see the first sign of a narrative shift from the abnormal as an undesirable affliction to a desirable condition.

In *Disappearing Act* (1953), a man finds himself unable to perform his traditional manly role as breadwinner and, more generally, to live up to his own notions of masculinity, and, in a Kafkaesque transformation, his connections to the world gradually disappear until, finally, he does as well (Greenberg et al., 1985). A very similar element of existential horror makes Neville's experience so compelling, and, in so doing, connects these stories to the very real existential crisis of the hegemonic patriarchy of traditional White men. *I Am Legend* is "a tale of 1950s suburban masculinity in crisis," and "reflects conservative responses to racial integration and sexual equality and the inability of a certain type of man to adapt to the rapidly changing new world" (Murphy, 2009: p. 27). Many of these concerns of traditional White men of the 1950s are reflected in the social issues and movements affecting and involving traditional White men today.

4. Evolving Interpretations of the Original Story and Multiple Adaptations

Given the historical context, several scholars have interpreted Matheson's original story as involving metaphors for various sociopolitical conflicts of the time between traditional White men and rapidly evolving society. In our interpretation, all of these and more are true-Matheson's protagonist is not simply fighting one aspect of modernity but *all* of modernity, as he is literally the last holdout of a dying era in every sense. The story is a study of human nature, examining how one might deal with the loss of all they know, understand, and value in an apocalyptic scenario (Roberts, 2016). In particular, the story's power and appeal for repeated adaptation is that it is a character study of the fall of traditional White men from the pinnacle of power and privilege to literal extinction. In the book this decline transpires very rapidly, while in reality it is still ongoing. In each of the subsequent three film adaptations the protagonist finds himself fighting in a somewhat different context against a somewhat different enemy, but it is always a struggle that he personally cannot survive.

It is worth noting that such interpretations, including our own, need not find express support in the work itself or from the author to be valid. Authors' conscious intentions are often unrelated and, arguably, irrelevant to the meanings found within their works (Moreman, 2012). Authors and other artists live and work in a sociopolitical context, and "[i]f political and social events are significant, they will, consciously or unconsciously, make an impression on artists and evoke a response[, and w]e can reasonably expect therefore that, consciously or not, political realities, events, and themes will register in an artist's work" (Greene, 1996: p. 13). In particular, science fiction is very often grounded in the reality of the human condition and its hardships (Baker, 2006).

With regard to the original book, Neville is remarkable only in his unremarkability as a representative middle-class, suburban, traditional White husband

and father (Roberts, 2016). Roberts (2016) saw in the book a fear of nuclear war and the potential effects on those who survive the initial destruction. Heyes (2017: pp. 3-4) focused on racial tensions in which Neville was “the ‘last of the old race,’ executed by a new society of vampires who [Neville] thought of as having ‘no means of support, no measures for proper education, ...[nor] the voting franchise,’” and who otherwise “bears all of the same plights that African-Americans did at the time of Matheson’s writing.” Similarly, Patterson (2005: p. 19) saw an uneasy attempt to negotiate racial anxieties and interpreted the vampires as thinly disguised African-Americans, noting that the story “contains a very clear, racially charged subtext that reflects the cultural anxieties of a White America newly confronted with the fact that it can no longer segregate itself from those whom it has labeled Other.” Relatedly, Murphy (2009: p. 532) noted that “Neville’s ‘Aryan’ credentials are established early on,” and Ransom (2018) suggested that Neville is not the last man but the last *White* man. Diehl (2013) explored the use of biological contagion as a metaphor for racial infection and ideological contamination. Even before the 1950s, “[T]he concept of a microbial parasite was extended to a race parasite, the language of bacteriology...converged with the language of [anti-immigration]” (Diehl, 2013: p. 85). In the right-wing political discourse of the 1950s, “[c]ommunists...were opportunistic infections, crafty agents...that spread their malignancy” (Diehl, 2013: p. 100). Applying this to the conclusion, Diehl (2013) characterized Neville’s status as changed from being the organism to being the disease that had to be eradicated from the new organism.

Khader (2013: p. 532) presented a strained argument that the story is about “the protagonist’s...traumatic recognition of his queer sexuality in its monstrosity (the unspeakability of male penetrability).” Khader (2013: p. 532) (emphasis added) bases this largely on his claim of Neville’s identification with and sexual desire for his undead friend, Ben Cortman, and such evidence as “Cortman’s obsessive exhortations for him to *come out* [i.e., of the closet].” Reasoned interpretations without express support from the text or the author are one thing, but manufactured interpretations such as this without any real support whatsoever are another. Given Matheson’s belaboring of Neville’s sexual frustration and temptation by the undead *women*, Khader (2013) could have more convincingly argued that the story is about heterosexual necrophilia. In fact, Ransom (2018) noted that a broad definition of queer encompasses necrophilia, but Khader (2013: p. 548) was clearly committed to finding only metaphors for homosexuality, asserting, for example, that “[Neville] wants Cortman dead so he will not have to confront his repressed queer sexual desire,” even though Cortman is, at that point, already dead and presumably incapable of sexual activity or desire himself.

Schlosser (2015: p. 312) noted that “[t]he image of the lone, sentient survivor defending his last scrap of autonomous territory...has frequently been seen in terms of the subject-anti-subject duality in various forms.” Less abstractly, Yeates (2016: p. 422) argued that “[t]hese invading forces, the...vampires, are

suggestive of a new colonialism, in which roles have been reversed and the White colonizers have become the colonized.” Bowring (2015: p. 130) similarly characterized the story as “a narrative of colonization, viewed from the perspective of the usurped,” in which the once dominant White man fails to adapt to his new environment and is, ironically, alienated, othered, and, ultimately, eradicated. Relevant to our own interpretation, Clasen (2010) emphasized the significance of the contagious aspect of vampirism and noted that the vampire in Stoker’s *Dracula* threatened not to kill his victims but rather to infect them with his disease and travelled to London to convert and transform millions into “semi-demons.”

Yeates (2016: p. 417) also noted that Neville represents the insecurity of post-war masculinity: “Neville’s need to assert a primitive masculinity is due in part to his loss of identity...as husband and father, and in part to the breakdown of society, in which he was defined by his maleness.” In addition to the questioning of normative masculine roles, there is also in Matheson’s work a postcolonial concern with the growing power of the marginalized Other (Mathews, 2014). Moreman (2012: p. 130) interpreted the story as “foreshadowing the societal transformations of the 1960s counterculture in its criticism of traditional authority structures, including institutionalized religion and scientific rationalization.” Moreman (2012: pp. 133-138) (emphasis added) also argued against others’ interpretations, noting that ultimately neither the microbe nor the vampires are the real villain:

Rather, it is the protagonist, Robert Neville himself, acting as a conservative drag on the social evolution of the [quasi-men], and a stalwart supporter of scientific investigation, who is the true monster...Neville’s worldview is shown not only to be ineffective at stemming the tide of social revolution but also to be *ultimately evil in itself*...Ultimately, Neville’s refusal to accept the possibility of a new society...that might be composed of people, however “other” to his past experience, aligns him with the [also monstrous un-men] who surround his house instead.

Thus, it is Neville, the last traditional White man, who becomes the bogeyman of the new world order.

Others have examined Matheson’s story using more esoteric, though no less interesting, approaches. For example, Faizi and Taghizadeh (2015) applied a dialogic perspective and found that each party attempts to suppress the others by destroying dialogue and thereby establishing a monologue and imposing its own voice on them to its own advantage. In general, such efforts leave the marginalized parties in a state of alienation in which they spend their time in violence and frustration (Faizi & Taghizadeh, 2015). We believe this supports our invocation, below, of the cancel culture phenomenon in that it warns against the absolute suppression of voices, even seemingly unreasonable or intolerable voices, because it does not actually eliminate the voiceless but rather leaves them frustrated and with only physical violence as a means of expression. Nuttall (2015)

used cognitive theory to explore the fictional minds of the vampires and the significance of those minds for the readers' experiences, including the readers' attributions of individual and group mental states based on the vampires' described behaviors. Cohen (2014) explored the monster-nature of the vampires, noting, as many have, that they seem more zombie-like than vampire-like in their presentation, and going into great detail to support a conclusion that they represent an important transitional development in horror fiction between vampire and zombie. Mathews (2014) similarly noted that through the hybridization of vampire, ghost, and walking dead, Matheson created a prototype for the contemporary zombie. Relatedly, Hoge (2014) credited Matheson with essentially inventing the idea of the undead apocalypse.

The Salkow and Ragona (1964) film adaptation, *The Last Man on Earth*, was relatively faithful to the original story, with Vincent Price playing Neville (re-named Morgan). Roberts (2016) interpreted this adaptation as involving Neville fighting against communists, and Heyes (2017) similarly saw him as fighting against communist sympathizers. In the Sagal (1971) film adaptation, *The Omega Man*, Charlton Heston played Neville as a military scientist seeking and ultimately finding a cure for the destruction of society, even though Neville himself still died. Whereas in prior versions of the story Neville ultimately lost and the living infected formed a new society, the 1971 film suggested that Neville's cure was effective and that the other human survivors would eventually prevail, which is, obviously, a radical departure from the original story. Baker (2006: p. 200) found in this adaptation "a manifestation of White America's dread of losing societal supremacy," with "Neville, an affluent White man, as the majority besieged by an alien majority." Heston himself has noted, "I've been a conservative all my life, ... 'A conservative tries to conserve civilization, and that's what Neville was trying to do'" (Bond, 2003: p. 66). According to Bond (2003: p. 64), "Heston's [subsequent] role as president of the National Rifle Association makes for ripe commentary, as Neville levels his arsenal of high-powered weaponry at the film's future-flung counterculture—a mob of attacking 'hippies' determined to take down 'The Man'." Roberts (2016: pp. 45-46) saw a post-1960's shift in focus from the collective to the individual, with the re-imagined vampires, "the Family," representing a quasi-communist collective "set on destroying many cultural trappings." Subramanian (2010: p. 49) also observed that "Neville's masculinity...is shored up by fast cars, guns, elaborate survival techniques, and shirtlessness."

The Lawrence (2007) film adaptation, *I Am Legend*, in which Will Smith, an African-American, plays Neville, has almost no connection to the original story and actually destroys much of its sociocultural significance. The reimagined Neville becomes "legend" by sacrificing himself to save humanity with a cure for the pandemic. Heyes (2017: p. 22) found in the 2007 film 9/11 imagery and Christian symbolism that recoded the vampires, now called "dark-seekers," as Islamic terrorists and serve the "us/Christians vs. them/Muslim dichotomy present in post-9/11 America, a dichotomy that the film presents as curable

through the spread of Christianity and the fall of Islam.” Subramanian (2010: p. 45, 49) noted that the film never explicitly acknowledges race, and though “[Smith’s] portrayal of a vulnerable yet cool Neville tends to diffuse the racial implications of White hordes (and even white zombie-dogs) chasing a lone Black man,” there are significant issues of African-American identity and masculinity. In yet another strained interpretation, Hwang (2015: pp. 2-3) argued that the infected represent “‘the stateless within the state,’ national minorities who are contained within the territory of a nation-state but excluded from legal protection.”

Importantly, in every adaptation, the un-men-whether they be called vampires/zombies, the Family, or the dark-seekers-all represent a mob infected in various ways and seeking the destruction of the last real man or, in the more optimistic 1971 and 2007 films, the only man left who can change things back to how they were, or, one might even say, to “Make America Great Again.”

5. Foreshadowing Contemporary Men’s Issues and Movements

In our interpretation, Neville’s experience foreshadows several current social issues affecting men, including the so-called “woke” and “cancel” phenomenon, and several current social movements involving men, including the MGTOW and Incel movements. Like many such social phenomenon, their meanings and significances depend on one’s perspective. For example, from a disapproving etic (or outsider’s) perspective, the MGTOW and Incel movements may be characterized as antifeminist and misogynistic, while from an approving emic (or insider’s) perspective they may be characterized as promoting men’s interests and rights. Both perspectives are important to understanding these issues and movements and therefore to our interpretation.

“Woke” is dictionary-defined as “[being] aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). From an approving perspective, “woke” refers to “an impetus for change that touches on every aspect of our lives” and “being woke is about continuously searching for more understanding and truth, and challenging oppression and problematic norms [regarding, e.g., sex, race, sexuality] in society” (Cerny-Suelzer & Friedman, 2022: p. 8, 11). Importantly, achieving and effectively and appropriately acting on such awareness can be difficult, can require sometimes painful introspection, and can involve “awkward errors of intention versus impact” (Cerny-Suelzer & Friedman, 2022: p. 8). From the disapproving perspective of many traditional White men, especially those who are on the far right of the ideological continuum, “woke” refers to a leftist politically progressive ideology (Romano, 2020), especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). From this perspective, the central dogma of wokeness is that oppression is omnipresent, and this dogma is unquestionable and absolute (Dahlen, 2021). According to advocates of “woke-ism,”

systemic inequalities implicate the whole of society, and eliminating them presumably requires re-engineering nearly every aspect of society such that it must be demolished and reconstructed from a very basic level (Reno, 2020). Thus, “[b]eing ‘woke’ means being hypersensitive to any alleged injustices concerning group identities...Being woke does not mean merely opposing racism, sexism, and the like; it means embracing a particular [social justice] ideology. If you oppose [inequality and oppression], yet don’t embrace this ideology, you’re not woke; you’re part of the problem” (Dahlen, 2021: p. 12, emphasis in original). Of further relevance to our interpretation, Dahlen (2021: pp. 13-14) alleged that there exists a “woke purge” infecting most cultural institutions to cancel those who voice any disagreement with the central dogma, and that “fearing the woke thought police, countless others silence themselves.”

To “cancel” is broadly defined as “to withdraw one’s support for” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). Relatedly, “cancel culture” is “the practice or tendency of engaging in mass cancelling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.c). “[C]ancelling” is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, action or inactions, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money” (Clark, 2020: p. 88). It is the withdrawal of any kind of support for those who are perceived to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic generally from a woke perspective and especially with regard to sexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and other bigotry (Ng, 2020). Thus, cancelling at least involves boycotting and can involve blacklisting, and, importantly, “to cancel” can also mean “to bring to nothingness” or to destroy (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). While the ostensible goal of cancellation is to express disapproval and neutralize influence, particularly relevant to our interpretation of Matheson’s story is that it can be and often is destructive of relationships (e.g., academic, service, employment, romantic), leaving the cancelled individual socially isolated.

Under the umbrella of “men’s rights movements,” MGTOW is defined as an online social movement and reaction to feminism in which men renounce interactions with women and seek to define and live their masculinity on their own terms (Dictionary.com, n.d.). From a disapproving perspective, which in our interpretation would be held by the woke “un-men,” MGTOW is an antifeminist movement largely made up of heterosexual, White, middle-class men and espousing the abandonment of women and a Western society that they believe has been corrupted by feminism (Lin, 2017). However, from an approving perspective, “MGTOW believe that they are victims of ‘gynocentrism,’ that the male gender role traps men..., [and that] feminism will ultimately bring about societal demise” (Lin, 2017: p. 78). In response, MGTOW “nurse their besieged masculinities” and seek to live on their own terms at all costs (Lin, 2017: p. 78).

Lastly, an “Incel” is defined as a man who regards himself as being involuntarily celibate and expresses extreme resentment and hostility toward women and

other men who are sexually active (Merriam-Webster, n.d.d). From a disapproving perspective, “Incels are a self-proclaimed group of beta males who claim a position at the bottom of the social hierarchy due to their continued romantic and sexual rejection by women” (Glance et al., 2021: p. 288). Incels often bemoan their lack of relationships while simultaneously dehumanizing women and calling for and praising misogynistic violence (Glance et al., 2021). In fact, serious incidents of violence have been committed by young men who self-identify as Incels, and although these attacks often specifically target women, men and children have been among the casualties (Hoffman et al., 2020). “[I]ts core ethos entails the subjugation and repression of [women] and its violence is designed to have far-reaching societal effects” (Hoffman et al., 2020: p. 565). Because it is an involuntary condition, there is no approving perspective of the Incel movement, though there is strong commiseration among members and at least some support for members who commit violent acts.

Although Incels are generally characterized as believing that their lack of sexual success is based on their “inferior physical appearance” which has destined them “for mediocrity, social isolation, and abject loneliness” (Hoffman et al., 2020: p. 565), it seems likely that many Incels would likely have more sexual success but for their off-putting perspectives and behaviors. Thus, the attitude that many see as the manifested effect of being Incel may very well be or at least exacerbate the cause. Regardless, Incels see themselves as destined to be ignored or dismissed by women with no hope of change, i.e., it is a permanent condition (Hoffman et al., 2020: p. 568). It is worth noting that the militant Incel community has been integrated into the larger alt-right movement, “with common grievances and intermingling membership bringing the two extremisms closer together” (Hoffman et al., 2020: p. 572).

6. Our Interpretation: The Last Real Man against a Rapidly Evolving Society

With that in mind, we can transplant Neville to the current year and recognize him as MGTOW and Incel, socially and sexually rejected by and violently fighting against the wokeness that characterizes him, a traditional, middle-class, White man, as the primary cause of inequality and oppression and that therefore seeks to cancel him. The relevant dialectic is between this “real” man fighting to maintain traditional society, with its hegemonic patriarchy, and the radically ideologically infected “woke” un-men fighting to destroy it, and the synthesis is found in the quasi-men who stand against bigotry, not by simply introducing a new form of it as the un-men have but by introducing a new moderate order that rejects both extremes.

Matheson (1954) presents Neville as an exemplar or, at least, a suitably generic representative of traditional manliness: He is tall, thirty-six, of English-German stock, with bright blue eyes and a broad, hairy chest. He is highly rational and sophisticated: He reads science textbooks (e.g., physiology, psychology) in his

spare time, and listens to classical music. He finds pleasure in practicing orderliness, which, according to traditionalist media personality, Jordan Peterson, is the very hallmark of masculinity (Peterson, 2018). He is tough and stoic: He is a combat veteran, and believes that “[a] man could get used to anything if he had to” (Matheson, 1954: p. 11), but, in the same spirit as the modern preparedness, or “prepper,” movement, he is also prepared for any contingency with a giant freezer full of food and stacks of canned food piled to the ceiling. He is highly functional: He has a workshop full of tools, can repair or replace a generator, and can perform maintenance on his vehicle. Of course, he also enjoys manly vices: He smokes cigarettes from the moment he wakes, drinks alcohol from a flask, and has a tattoo on his chest of an ornate cross.

Matheson’s portrayal of Neville’s experiences is “a speculative account of what happens when basic human needs are suppressed” (Clasen, 2010: p. 314). As the representative of traditional manliness, Neville is immune to the rapidly spreading woke ideology, and as a result he is forced to live as a socially and sexually isolated “MGTOW monk” or “Incel.” More specifically, Neville is immune to the change that has occurred around him, and so is cut-off from the rest of humanity: “I don the robe of hermit without a cry” (Matheson, 1954: p. 116). Both his wife and his daughter succumbed and left him, as did his friend, Ben Cortman, who became “a Ben completely alien to him now” (Matheson, 1954: p. 63). He discovers a dog, which gives him hope, but even the dog soon abandons him (by dying). As a result, hygiene and appearances are no longer of any importance to him: “For he was a man and he was alone” (Matheson, 1954: p. 10). Thus, Neville is alone in a hostile world “caught simultaneously in the desert of isolation and the jungle of predation” (Clasen, 2010: p. 313). He yearns for human contact and yet the possibility of human contact, let alone true companionship, is increasingly unlikely if not already forever lost (Clasen, 2010: p. 313), which reflects the same “permanent condition” of isolation and loneliness experienced by Incels. For a social species such as ours, such complete and utter isolation becomes a horror in itself (Clasen, 2010). As Aristotle observed, “[H]e who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god” (Jowett, 2001: p. 1130), and Neville is certainly not a god. This extreme degree of social and sexual isolation and loneliness is reflective of the lived experiences reported by the men of the MGTOW and Incel movements.

The paradox of Neville’s isolation is that he is not, in fact, alone but surrounded by other beings sufficiently similar to him to tempt connection and yet sufficiently different to threaten death (Clasen, 2010). It has been said that the only way to hurt a man who has lost everything is to return to him something broken (Donaldson, 1980). Neville lost his friends and family, his place in the world, and his connection to any other living thing, and it was all returned to him broken. At several points, Neville entertains the notion of joining the un-men (although given his immunity, it is unclear how this would work), espe-

cially when he thinks of women, but he determinedly denies his sexual urges because the only remaining women are infected and want to destroy him. "In the beginning he'd...watched them. But then the women had seen him and had started striking vile postures in order to entice him out of the house...It was the women who made it so difficult...the women posing like lewd puppets in the night on the possibility that he'd see them and decided to come out" (Matheson, 1954: p. 14). "The women were out there, their dresses open or taken off...The women, the lustful, bloodthirsty, naked women flaunting their hot bodies at him. No, not hot" (Matheson, 1954: p. 29), because "[t]here was certainly nothing attractive about them in the daylight" (Matheson, 1954: p. 20). Neville frequently chastises himself for feeling sexually attracted to them (Schlosser, 2015). In this, Neville exhibited a Victorian form of manliness and the principle of self-mastery by rejecting the temptations of the loose or absent morality of modernity. "[I]t was a natural drive, but there was no outlet for it anymore. They'd forced celibacy on him; he'd have to live with it" (Matheson, 1954: p. 15), which is the very definition of an Incel. Murphy asserted that, as a result, Neville most loathed the females and "[took] particular pleasure in murdering [them] as they lie sleeping in their beds" (Matheson, 1954: p. 33), which disturbingly reflects the violent misogynistic fantasies attributed to some Incels.

Neville is under attack by the un-men who seek to destroy every vestige of traditional society. They are the result of an infective agent blown on the wind, which we interpret as the constant bombardment of ideological content pervasively present through social media and other Internet communications. Neville hypothesizes that periodic destructions of civilizations throughout history were due to the same sickness leaving dormancy and becoming virulent until it fully runs its course, destroying the old way and making space for the new. The un-men are inferior: They often attack their own because "[t]here was no union among them" (Matheson, 1954: p. 19). They are against technology and order, smashing everything they can get their hands on. However, "they are no invincible race. Far from it; they are a highly perishable race requiring the strictest of physical conditions for the furtherance of their God-forsaken existence" (Matheson, 1954: p. 115). Unfortunately for Neville and his peers, "[t]he strength of the [monster] is that no one will believe in him" (Matheson, 1954: p. 25, quoting from *Dracula*). "[Neville's] father had died denying [the un-men's existence] violently to the last" (Matheson, 1954: p. 23). "[N]o one had believed in them, and how could [we] fight something [we] didn't even believe in?" (Matheson, 1954: p. 25). As a result, the abnormal became the normal. In our interpretation, this foreshadows the far-right perspective that those who are woke are the opposite of real men—they are un-men-parasites living off the efforts of the few remaining real men, fragile "snowflakes" infected with the liberal ideology of wokeness, who can only exist in the safety and security provided by modernity, and who must ultimately cancel the last real man because as long as he has any influence, their new world order is threatened.

Neville checks and repairs his defenses daily. He destroys the adjacent houses to prevent the infected from using them to gain access to his. Further, he wants to soundproof his home, but settles for using earplugs to silence them. These eliminations of unwanted connections foreshadow the ideologically-limited consumption of news and other discourse we see today-the so-called “echo chamber” phenomena in which many seek for and consume only discourse that reflects their existing worldview. “It wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t that he had to listen to them...it got on his nerves” (Matheson, 1954: p. 14), which a traditional White man today might characterize as the pervasiveness of left-wing media, including social media, which continuously smuggles ideological content into our perception. Fighting them off day-to-day keeps him busy, and he can “never get to the real problem” (Matheson, 1954: p. 17), which, in our interpretation, reflects the time wasted in vitriolic, dead-end, online “debates” rather than effectuating real change.

The quasi-men are an intermediate group infected with woke ideas but not to the extreme degree of the un-men. The quasi-men are piecing together a new society, and neither the last man nor the hordes of un-men have a place in it so the moderates seek to destroy them. “New societies are always primitive...In a way, [they’re] like a revolutionary group-repossessing society by violence. It’s inevitable” (Matheson, 1954: p. 170). In our interpretation, the quasi-men are the ideological moderates who recognize that neither the extreme right-wing real men nor the extreme left-wing un-men-can be allowed to win the culture war. They include the independent voters in today’s elections who increasingly are the key to determining which party will hold power. Unlike Matheson’s quasi-men, independent voters cannot simply eradicate both extremes, but they do seem to accomplish a similar result in shaping society and culture by alternately granting slim majorities to each extreme to limit their ability to affect radical change or, at least, change that cannot be undone by the other side after the next election.

Neville, a throwback, is seen as a monster and feared by the moderates and is eventually trapped by a woman and “cancelled.” Neville discovers a woman moving about in daylight, which suggests to him that she is not one of the undead. He finds that “[h]is sex drive had diminished, had virtually disappeared. Salvation of the monk, he thought. The drive had to go sooner or later, or no normal man could dedicated himself to any life that excluded sex” (Matheson, 1954: p. 136). “In a way, he almost regretted having found her at all. Through the years he had achieved a certain degree of peace. He had accepted solitude, found it not half bad” (Matheson, 1954: p. 141). “He suddenly realized that he had become an ill-tempered and inveterate bachelor again...And he was afraid of the possible demand that he make sacrifices and accept responsibility again” (Matheson, 1954: p. 139). This again reflects the MGTOW philosophy in which some men see the cost of relationships to far outweigh the benefits and so voluntarily reject women. In particular, many MGTOW monks voluntarily abstain

from relationships in order to better focus on other projects.

Neville is entrenched in his notion of normality and completely unable to accept change, and “[a]s a result, he is unprepared for the emergence of the new social order” (Jancovich, 1996: p. 150). For example, the new society “is not hierarchically organized along gender lines,” and Ruth is a ranking officer with power and authority “which Neville had not associated with women or even believed to be either appropriate or possible” (Jancovich, 1996: p. 157). By definition, traditional men espouse traditional gender roles, and the current MGTOW and Incel movements have both been characterized as antifeminist. Clearly, right-wing ideologues are uncomfortable with changing social roles, especially changes that undermine the traditional social hierarchy and hegemonic patriarchy.

Prior to the pandemic, Neville was a conscientious, law-abiding citizen, but we see his steady degeneration to the point that he coldly recounts destroying twelve infected children in a single afternoon and experimenting on infected women. This reflects Aristotle’s observation that a man who is bound by law and justice is the best of animals, but when separated from them he is the worst of all (Jowett, 2001). Nevertheless, Ruth gets him to question whether he should be killing the still-living infected: “In the years that had passed he had never once considered the possibility that he was wrong. It took her presence to bring about such thoughts. And they were strange, alien thoughts” (Matheson, 1954: p. 146). Neville knew that the quasi-men existed as a stage of infection immediately prior to death, but he did not know that they could stop their progression to the final stage and avoid becoming fully un-men and so he destroyed them with equal fervor when he found them. In fact, Ruth was spying on him for the moderates. She returns to them but leaves Neville a letter explaining that they have found a way to stay alive and live in a liminal state with regard to the infection. They intend to rid the world of both extremes—both the last real man and the hordes of un-men.

In the end, when societal order is being reestablished by the infected living, Neville remains the outsider, unable and unwilling to participate in the new society (Clasen, 2010). The quasi-men capture Neville and intend to execute him. They are terrified of Neville, they hate him, and they want his life. “They came by night...The dark-suited men knew exactly what they were doing...[Neville] didn’t like the looks of them...They were more like gangsters than men forced into a situation. There were vicious looks of triumph on their faces, white and stark in the spotlights. Their faces were cruel and emotionless...A clumping of boots” (Matheson, 1954: p. 162, 164). “They weren’t going to take him to their courts, to their justice. They were going to exterminate him...And the dark men dragged his lifeless body from the house. Into the night. Into the world that was theirs and no longer his” (Matheson, 1954: pp. 165-166). “Robert Neville...the last of the old race’...‘when you’re gone, there won’t be anyone else like you within our particular society” (Matheson, 1954: p. 171). We see in Ruth’s role the MGTOW assertion that women cannot be trusted and advance themselves

only by manipulating men. In our interpretation, the dark-suited men are government agents, working on behalf of women, sent to silence the last real man and eliminate him as a destabilizing force within the new feminist society.

Neville has an epiphany, “I’m the abnormal one now. Normalcy was a majority concept, the standard of the many and not the standard of just one man” (Matheson, 1954: p. 173). He saw on the faces of the mob of moderates “awe, fear, shrinking horror-and he knew they were afraid of him. To them he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with” (Matheson, 1954: p. 173). “Robert Neville looked out over the new people of the Earth. He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like [the un-men], he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed” (Matheson, 1954: p. 174). He noted that the abnormal historically were a minority element and were loathed because they were feared. “Isolated and now alien, the all-too human Neville becomes the monster in a classic reversal of roles” (Bond, 2003: p. 55). Rather than be executed, Neville takes his own life with suicide pills given to him by Ruth. In this, we are reminded of Socrates who, having been tried and found guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth, similarly took his own life with poison prior to execution.

Once men like Neville had been the majority and determined normalcy, and in doing so, also determined deviancy and labeled deviants “monsters.” Today, the new majority sees the traditional White man as deviant and so he becomes the monster. The roles of minority and majority, abnormal and normal, monster and victim are reversed for the last real men. Social evolution has come full circle as the privileged become the subjugated, and in their subjugation they became the single greatest threat to the new society (Christie, 2011). Neville’s experience foreshadows the ongoing and accelerating losses of power and privilege traditional White men had in setting the terms of normality. “For many on the far right, multiculturalism is nothing short of a dystopia, one in which White public spaces and political offices are ‘taken over’ by people of color” (Brayton, 2011: p. 66). To the educated, it is difficult to believe that these men, with their racist, sexist, and generally bigoted and small-minded worldview, actually still exist somewhere out in so-called “flyover country.” Men like Neville have been recast as bogeymen useful only to scare others into action-cancelling when possible, voting when necessary-to avoid their retaking power and privilege and their re-making of dystopian society.

7. Conclusion

I Am Legend was not the first post-apocalyptic last man story, but it was published at a time when the threat of existential apocalypse in the form of nuclear war became real for everyone and an actual sociopolitical collapse in the form of rapidly changing social norms was beginning for traditional White men. “Though living surrounded by many other beings...the last men are characters nonetheless profoundly alone and desperate to assert the superiority of their

gender. Their only refuge is in the futile defense of their suburban homes against an emergent new society with which they are not compatible, in the obstinate conservatism of a doomed order. With their last White men standing in as generic everymen, it is mainly in their incompatibility with the developing society that these texts interrogate such a conservatism” (Yeates, 2016: p. 428).

Matheson’s work shows that notions of the monstrous are always relative and social—“a monster is a definition given by a particular society to that which it finds threatening” (Jancovich, 1996: p. 152). Ultimately, the real men failed to control their own narrative. They see themselves being recast as bogeyman on which to blame many of the world’s ills and the eradication of which will somehow make the world a better place. In that light, Matheson’s work provides valuable insights into traditional White men’s initial and current reactions to a rapidly changing order in which they have no place, reactions that are clearly reflected in and therefore help us to better understand various contemporary issues and movements affecting and involving men today.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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