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# From Romero to Romeo— Shakespeare’s Star-Crossed Lovers Meeting Zombedy in Jonathan Levine’s *Warm Bodies*

## ABSTRACT

Since their first screen appearances in the 1930s, zombies have enjoyed immense cinematic popularity. Defined by Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* as mindless, violent, decaying and infectious, they successfully function as ultimate fiends in horror films. Yet, even those morbid undead started evolving into more appealing, individualized and even sympathetic characters, especially when the comic potential of zombies is explored. To allow a zombie to become a romantic protagonist, however, one that can love and be loved by a human, another evolutionary step had to be taken, one fostered by a literary association.

This paper analyzes Jonathan Levine’s *Warm Bodies*, a 2013 film adaptation of Isaac Marion’s zombie novel inspired by William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It examines how Shakespeare’s Romeo helps transform the already evolved cinematic zombie into a romantic protagonist, and how Shakespearean love tragedy, with its rich visual cinematic legacy, can successfully locate a zombie narrative in the romantic comedy convention. Presenting the case of Shakespeare intersecting the zombie horror tradition, this paper illustrates the synergic exchanges of literary icons and the cinematic monstrous.

**Keywords:** Jonathan Levine’s *Warm Bodies*, *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare, Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*, zombedy.

## ROMERO, THE ZOMBIE GODFATHER

Monsters have been present in cinema since its beginning, replicating the roles they play in folk culture and literature. Ontologically liminal, they inhabit the margins (Cohen 6) and from thence erupt to run havoc in the order of things. The natural cinematic environment for monsters, an extension of the literary Gothic they comfortably inhabit, is horror, which, as a genre, narratively and visually exploits the interest in the monstrous body, and in its threatening proximity to humans. However, as Cohen argues, the monstrous evokes a mixture of fear and desire, incorporating repressed fantasies alongside expressly manifested anxieties (4). Much as it is dreaded, the monster can also be titillating, and the scope of excitement varies depending on the nature of its monstrosity. Vampires are particularly alluring; their penetrating fangs and orgasmic blood-draining practices, well exploited in the horror genre, also allow the narratives to move in the direction of drama or romance. As early as 1931, Bela Lugosi's *Count Dracula* had the aristocratic elegance and hypnotizing allure that marked a radical departure from Murnau's *Orlok in Nosferatu*. The gradual change of the vampire figure peaked with Coppola's 1992 film, which successfully and irreversibly relegated *Dracula* to the realm of true love and sacrifice, as well as sexual appeal.

Amongst the various monsters that continue to fuel cinematic narratives, zombies can boast a rich and varied screen history. The earliest well-known screen versions of a zombie, such as featuring in Victor Halperin's 1932 *White Zombie* or Jacques Tourneur's 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie*, use the notion of voodoo magic and directly connect the undead with the Haitian culture. It is, however, George A. Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* that is typically credited for introducing key characteristic features that have since defined the cinematic presentation of a zombie. Romero's iconic undead are decomposing creatures that mindlessly crave human flesh and threaten humanity with their infectiousness. A crucial aspect of Romero's groundbreaking image is the exceptional morbidity of the undead decaying bodies. As Hubner et al. note, zombies violate bodily taboos confronting the audience with "processes of decomposition and the eruption of blood, bodily fluids, entrails, not to mention messy saliva" (6). Unlike vampires, thus, zombies fundamentally lack erotic appeal. As Cocarla argues, "zombies' rotting flesh and general lack of composure has left them neutered and asexual" (54). Moreover, not being nocturnal, they are not mysterious and haunting creatures of the dark, but hungry corpses whose decay is made all the more visible by daylight.

Typically appearing as a mindless horde, zombies also lack the possible appeal as singular, however monstrous, characters. Unsurprisingly, then, while their vampire cousins have moved relatively quickly into the cinematic

narratives of seduction and appeal, zombies remained unattractive in their threatening quantity. Moreover, vampirism, with its promise of immortality, eventually came to be seen as a curse desired by many, but infrequently granted by those who can give it. Zombies' condition, by contrast, is highly contagious and uncontrollable, as any reckless zombie bite or scratch transforms a human into another of the undead. This viral spreadability has been effectively used in cinema to highlight the apocalyptic angle of zombie narratives, which, as McFarland claims, are now considered a generic aspect defining zombie horror (59). The Romero-inspired vision of "a violent, contagious monster" whose fate cannot be undone (Bishop, "The Contemporary Zombie" 27), who is a raw and unstoppable force of destruction, driven solely by the primitive desire to devour human flesh, remains popular in recent zombie films. Forster's 2013 *World War Z*, for example, shows dramatic scenes of zombies swarming, or desperately climbing over each other to get to humans, or moments showing dormant zombies who wander aimlessly until they smell human flesh, or scenes capturing a mass of running zombies ignoring weak and ill individuals on which they do not prey.

R, the protagonist of Jonathan Levine's 2013 *Warm Bodies*, is a zombie that defies most of those typical characteristics. Individualized, empathetic and brooding, he is a vulnerable romantic whose sacrificial love turns out to be redemptive and eventually heals zombies of their condition. *Warm Bodies* is the first full-blown zombie film that puts the romantic plotline at the centre of the narrative, manages to make a zombie protagonist appealing from the beginning, and convincingly promises the development of a brain-eating undead into a love interest. Such presentation of a zombie has been made possible due to several factors. First of all, the film draws from the cinematic legacy of complicating the presentation of zombies, and of gradually making them more sympathetic, and potentially redeemable. The film also capitalizes on the comic potential of the undead, choosing the comedy genre as a way to explore the empathetic take on zombies. The romantic element, however, is secured through a different strategy—an alliance with Shakespeare's iconic lover, Romeo. Examining Levine's film, this paper traces the paths that allow for the presentation of a zombie as a love interest. One is the gradual and inevitable evolution of a cinematic zombie, while the other is contextualizing a horror monster in an iconic literary love story. As an adaptation of Isaac Marion's 2010 novel, which very subtly alludes to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Levine's film further highlights the Shakespearean hypotext and reinforces the importance of the literary references by acknowledging the play's screen history. Falling on the inviting cinematic ground that has been softened by the presentation of zombies that evoke empathy and fertilized by the

comedy genre, Shakespeare's iconic literary text assists the transformation. As a result, Levine's film presents a zombie that is highly individualized and sympathetic, one that in the course of the action proves to be heroic and sacrificial, and that, through association with Romeo, becomes eligible as a romantic figure and a desirable life partner.

## A SYMPATHETIC ZOMBIE

Although zombies owed their first cinematic success to how menacing, horrifying and violent they were, they soon began to be portrayed as more ambivalent, inviting audiences, as Bishop notes, "to see the walking dead in more empathetic terms, as the tragic and misunderstood victims of an uncontrollable force, infection or evolution" ("The Contemporary Zombie" 26). One of the ways cinema seeks to partly redeem the zombie character is by focusing on the notion of a zombie plague, which is often, in an apocalyptic vein, connected with a viral infection or medical experimentation gone wrong. Thus, many narratives centre around finding a way to undo the process and present zombies as suffering victims, despite their undead monstrosity. Such an approach is pivotal to most films inspired by Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, including Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, as well, the novel is pivotal in complicating the nature of the monsters, showing them to be victims of the infection and stressing the issue of trying to find a cure to it. The most recent adaptation of the novel, Lawrence's 2007 film, foregrounds the fact that humanity is responsible for the plague, explores the ambiguous monstrosity of Darkseekers, and offers an ending promising a cure for the condition. The already mentioned *World War Z*, although going in a different direction, also ends with the discovery of a medical solution, even if it eventually only helps people survive, leaving zombies to be exterminated.

The idea of a cure is also crucial for the narrative of *Warm Bodies*. The plague is presented as a disaster that causes the suffering of humans, as well as zombies. While humans try to survive, Corpses, as the undead are called in the film, have their existential struggles, as well. If they give up on the remains of life that define their undead existence, they face an even more terrible condition and transform into Boneys, completely inhuman skeletons for whom there is no hope of redemption. The film's happy ending involves not only the healing of Corpses and the annihilation

<sup>1</sup> On the influence of Matheson's novel on Romero, see Abbott 9–38. Although his undead are called vampires, Matheson's narrative is a crucial hypotext of typical zombie narratives, introduces the notion of a quickly spreading infection, the dead coming back to life, mass attacks of the undead and the inevitable end of the humans.

of Boneys, but also a successful integration of the former zombies and the traumatized humans. This narrative line, however, aims at undoing the aspect that makes zombies so terrifying—that the transformation is irreparable and that it annihilates the human in the monster. Once the zombie is cured, it is no longer a monster.

Another, perhaps more successful, way of taming the zombie figure is trying to individualize it, and endow it with a touch of personality. According to Bishop, this approach originated in the 1980s, with films featuring zombies that can think and act on more than just the killer's instinct, such as Romero's *Day of the Dead* and Dan O'Bannon's *The Return of the Living Dead*, both made in 1985 ("The Contemporary Zombie" 32). Romero, the creator of the iconic cinematic zombie, can thus be credited with prompting the change in the presentation of the undead. Following the depiction of a creature "possessing virtually no subjective, human qualities and encouraging almost no psychological suture with the audience" in his *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*, in *Day of the Dead* he moves on to present "a moderately sympathetic zombie, giving one central ghoul a name and asking audiences to see it—him—as a fully formed character and an active participant in the story" (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 159). By presenting imprisoned zombies and developing the motive of Dr. Logan's experimentations, he further complicates the divide between good humans and bad monsters, and encourages more sympathy for the latter. In his 2005 *Land of the Dead*, Romero takes another step in eliciting sympathy for a zombie. First, as Bishop notes, "zombies appear to have their own identities, personalities, and motivations; in fact, their adventures constitute a separate plotline from the central action and conflict of the film" (*American Zombie Gothic* 159). Moreover, when one of the tough zombie killers, Cholo, is bitten by a zombie, he refuses a mercy shot from his companion. Instead, he accepts the transformation, seeing it as a better way to kill his human nemesis, Kaufman. In this way, as Bishop points out, "the audience finds itself rooting for the zombie and cheering the explosive death of the film's evil human antagonist" ("The Contemporary Zombie" 28). Ultimately, Romero's last zombie installment presents "pitiable and almost heroic zombies" who "have largely become victims instead of maniacal monsters" (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 169).

## ZOMBEDIES

What best secures a sense of sympathy for an evolved zombie is a comic element and it is "zomcoms," or "zombodies," Bishop argues, that most successfully explore the zombie potential for subjectivity: "Because

these films deflect the horror of the zombies through both humor and satire, they humanize the creatures and make it easier to relate to them” (*American Zombie Gothic* 181). The comedy appeal of zombies primarily stems from the fact that their rotting and clumsy bodies and their mindless drive for human flesh are grotesque enough in themselves. As zombies violate bodily norms, they “induce disgust and fear but there can also be, in the inversion of social conventions, the pleasures of the carnival. In other words, zombies can be simultaneously disgusting and funny” (Hubner et al. 6). In either exaggerated or slightly tamed versions, zombies easily embrace parody and become very successful comic characters.

Bishop notes the importance of the 1980s and 1990s zombedies, like *The Return of the Living Dead* or Peter Jackson’s 1992 *Braindead*, which successfully integrated clowning and parody into the zombie horror narrative. It is the new millennium films, however, that he credits for bringing a new depth to a comic zombie (“The Contemporary Zombie”). A film that is undoubtedly important for the development of the comic presentation of the zombie phenomenon is Edgar Wright’s 2004 *Shaun of the Dead*. Not only does it close with a swift and successful end of the apocalyptic zombie outbreak, but also, as Bishop notes, offers a comic coda: “Just six months after ‘Z-Day,’ popular musicians are fundraising for a zombie-friendly charity campaign called ‘Zombaid,’ the service industry is employing domesticated zombies as a virtually free labour force, and some devoted spouses have elected to stay married to their reanimated partners” (“The Contemporary Zombie” 27). *Shaun of the Dead* also clearly distinguishes between various types of zombies. Next to the nameless and faceless ones, which can be killed without remorse, there are also important characters that turn into mindless monsters, like Shaun’s stepfather and then his mother. Finally, there are also individualized and tamed zombies in the film’s ending, notably Shaun’s best friend, Ed. Ed’s earlier zombie-like existence—not working, neglecting basic hygiene and wasting his life on playing video games—is a key element of the film’s comic narrative, and creates an interesting twist when he eventually proves his worth by sacrificing himself to save Shaun and his girlfriend, Liz. Attacked by zombies, he inevitably becomes one, but at the end is revealed to be kept by Shaun in his garden shed. As a zombie, Ed merely continues his parasitical existence; yet, he remains Shaun’s best company, being there for Shaun to play together and obligingly not biting when told off.

Perhaps the best example of how the comic convention solidifies the sympathetic and individualized presentation of a zombie is Andrew Currie’s 2006 *Fido*, in which tamed zombies are the discriminated workforce. Here all victimized zombies evoke sympathy, but the title zombie, Fido, as Bishop observes, becomes not only “a pet, a best friend and even a surrogate

father” to Timmy, but eventually even a preferred husband figure to Helen, Timmy’s mother (“The Contemporary Zombie” 29, 30). Thus, even the decaying undead, seemingly unlikely candidates for central protagonists outside of the horror genre, have eventually evolved into more appealing and even sympathetic characters. Through experimentation with comedy, zombies became more flexible and individualized, and have gradually evolved into cinematic creatures that could aspire to become interesting, or even romantic, protagonists. This is the cinematic zombie legacy that allows Levine’s *Warm Bodies* to start with a premise that R, the zombie protagonist whose individualized perspective opens the film’s narrative, is the character the viewers are to identify and empathize with. It then only takes another step—identifying R as a variation of Shakespeare’s Romeo—that the film’s narrative can take a turn towards romantic comedy.

### “O ROMEO, ROMEO! WHEREFORE ART THOU ROMEO?”

The impact of literature is a vital element in creating the monster appeal in cinema, and literary inspirations remain an influential source for cinematic narratives and characters. Even zombies, whose origin is not strictly literary, are now seen to have solid literary antecedents. Various undead creatures are well explored in literature: ghouls and golems people various folk tales, Mary Shelley’s resurrected monster has many affinities with a zombie, and Luckhurst (58–74) solidly documents the contribution of pulp fiction to the pop-cultural zombie image. While Romero’s undead are seen as very original, his 1968 film is also inspired by a literary source—Matheson’s *I Am Legend*. The plague-infected people in the novel are referred to as vampires,<sup>2</sup> but their “rampaging in infectious hordes and hungering for human flesh” (Peirce 60) is a strong indication of how much Romero owes to the novel.<sup>3</sup>

In the intersections between literature and the horror genre, Shakespearean inspirations are no exception.<sup>4</sup> As Földvály notes, “since the earliest days of horror cinema, there have been instances of cross-fertilisation

<sup>2</sup> Adaptations acknowledging Matheson’s novel also retain that association. In Salkow’s and Ragona’s 1964 *The Last Man on Earth* the monsters are presented as vampires, in Sagal’s 1971 *The Omega Man* they are albino mutants, and in Lawrence’s 2007 *I Am Legend* they are nocturnal mutants called Darkseekers.

<sup>3</sup> Even if, as Luckhurst notes, the “key source” for Romero’s undead was not Matheson’s novel directly, but *The Last Man on Earth* (137).

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Kinga Földvály for helping me develop the background for this research. She kindly let me read the draft of her recently released book, *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos*, and generously shared her bibliography. Without her help, and the inspiration of her book, my work on this paper would have lasted forever.

between Shakespeare, the most canonical of authors, and horror, the allegedly most debased of all genres” (156).<sup>5</sup> Hutchings makes a reservation that the meeting points of Shakespeare and horror cinema are “small in number and often isolated or marginal” (155), and admits that they may be reduced to “one cryptic line,” as in the case of Renfield quoting the recognizable “Words, words, words” from *Hamlet* in the 1931 *Dracula* (165). Still, they remain a regular element of the contemporary cinematic landscape and attest to the “confidence with which they negotiate their way across what some would consider an uncrossable cultural divide” (Hutchings 166). Hutchings concludes, therefore, that the interactions between Shakespeare and horror cinema, increasing in recent times, suggest promising possibilities, especially that they can “further develop a cultural relationship based not on simplistic high/low distinctions but instead on productive differences and some rather surprising similarities” (166). Zombie narratives also reach out to Shakespeare or Austen, often in a playful or parodic way, and productively use the appeal of canonical plotlines and characters. In the case of Levine’s *Warm Bodies*, the association with Romeo undoubtedly facilitates the transition of a mindless brain-eating undead into an individual with romantic appeal, and helps manoeuvre the film’s narrative towards romantic comedy, creating a new zombie subgenre—a romzomcom.

Marion’s novel, the immediate text behind Levine’s film, has a complicated relationship with its Shakespearean hypotext. On the one hand, its basic narrative is close enough to Shakespeare’s iconic love story—a young couple from two conflicted backgrounds form an unlikely bond and their love eventually brings peace to their feuding “families.” R can be quickly understood as Romeo, and Julie is an obvious reference to Juliet, while the surviving humans and tragic zombies are identified as the Capulets and Montagues. Once the word “zombie” is replaced with “tragedy,” Cocarla’s description of *Warm Bodies* can be read as a blurb for *Romeo and Juliet*: “a zombie-romance story, where two unlikely lovers find themselves having to battle against forces that deem their love and choices unacceptable and incompatible” (66–67).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the novel does not highlight the affinity with Shakespeare and many readers would not recognize the subtext at all, or until way through the novel.<sup>7</sup> Marion himself admits that the novel is a little more than “a winking allusion” to *Romeo and Juliet*, the play

<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of the development in the relationships between Shakespeare and horror genre see Földváry.

<sup>6</sup> Although Cocarla in fact argues that, despite “many amusing similarities” between Shakespeare’s play and Marion’s novel, the two stories are fundamentally about something else (67).

<sup>7</sup> See Desmet 282–83.



itself being “a remake of a remake of a remake” of such universal themes as “love thriving against safety and reason, the suffocating narrowness of our labeled identities, the power of youthful imprudence to disrupt the social order” (qtd. in Desmet 284). In Levine’s adaptation, however, Marion’s multiple layering of recognizable literary narratives is given sharper focus as the film visually references iconic film versions of the play, mainly Baz Luhrmann’s stylistically powerful 1996 film and Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 classic.

Levine’s film is an exemplary romzomcom in which the zombie and comedy components resonate within the established cinematic genres, while the romantic element relies specifically on the popular appeal of Shakespeare’s ultimate love story, even if for many (re)viewers that recognition comes through the *Twilight* saga.<sup>8</sup> The fact that both films were produced by the same company, Summit Entertainment, allows audiences to recognize *Warm Bodies* as “a gentle parody of *Twilight*’s Romeo and Juliet storyline” (Abbott 168), except that replacing vampires with zombies asks for a different point of reference. The “heteronormative desire and romance” at the heart of the post-apocalyptic reality of *Warm Bodies* (Cocarla 52–53) is a very untypical zombie plotline. Abbott rightly observes that the very notion of a girl falling in love with a zombie, a narrative borrowed from vampire stories, is ridiculous, and the fact that R grows infatuated with Julie partly because of the memories of her boyfriend, whose brain he ate, adds a disturbing element to an already weird situation (168). One way by which the idea becomes plausible is the standard procedure used in other zombie narratives—introducing elements of comedy and parody, and individualizing the zombie protagonist, which often comes hand in hand with the comic twist. The other significant strategy is making the basic romantic plot allude to the love story of all times—William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*—which the film strengthens with visual references to the play’s film adaptations. Although the *Romeo and Juliet* frame is used against the dramatic tragedy genre, being reconstructed into a romantic comedy with a happy ending, numerous elements of Shakespeare’s masterpiece are woven into the fabric of the film’s strategy of making the zombie characters sympathetic. Ultimately, the film succeeds in making a zombie-human romantic narrative work by creating a comedy that sits comfortably with audiences because it relates its key narrative issues through a Shakespearean hypotext, strongly relying on visual affinities with the screen history of *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion on how the Shakespearean subtext was decoded upon the film’s release, see Desmet 283.

## I ZOMBIE

The key aspect that allows zombies in *Warm Bodies* to become interesting, and eventually attractive, is their growing individualization. A classical zombie, as Murphy stresses, “is generally portrayed as humanity reduced to its most mindless level, no longer capable of emotional engagement, an animated husk that may look like the deceased but (generally) lacks all remnants of personality” (119). Many zombie narratives stress that while the undead may look like a living person we know, they are no longer them, and cannot be restored to their conscious selves. In *Shaun of the Dead*, Shaun has to persuade his mother to leave her transformed husband locked in the car, and he implores: “That’s not even your husband in there. Okay? I know it looks like him but there’s nothing of the man that you loved in that car now. Nothing!” Later on, in a dramatic exchange, Shaun himself cannot come to terms with the fact that his mother is also turning into a zombie and David has to spell out to him the same thing: “She’s not your Mum anymore! Any minute she’ll be just another zombie.” In *World War Z*, Javier explains to Gerry how he lost his son and wife saying: “Rather, I lost my son to [pause] *something* that had once been my wife.” *Warm Bodies* echoes the same motive at the film’s beginning. Colonel Grigio, Julie’s father, sending young volunteers to get supplies from outside their walled settlement, gives them a warning: “Corpses look human. They are not. They do not think. They do not bleed. Whether they were your mother or your best friend, they are beyond your help. They are uncaring, unfeeling, incapable of remorse.”<sup>9</sup> This introduction to what Corpses are, however, follows a lengthy opening sequence in which the viewers meet the film’s protagonist, R, a zombie who does not match Colonel Grigio’s description. Similarly set in a post-apocalyptic world, *Warm Bodies* shows the zombie environment in the airport in the vein of Romero’s *Land of the Dead*—introducing the undead before the human protagonists and focusing specifically on the subjectivity of R, the film’s narrative voice. Like Romero’s evolved zombies in Uniontown, who “are rather peacefully attempting to recreate the behaviors of their mortal lives . . . trying to play musical instruments, attempting to pump gas, and even appearing to communicate with each other by grunting” (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 191), Corpses in the airport also seem relatively benign, mainly communicating a sense of loss and confusion as they helplessly shuffle around in their apocalyptic realm. As in *Land of the Dead*, Levine’s Corpses are also able to form groups, notice their potential for evolving, and eventually fight, although in *Warm Bodies* the enemies are ultimately not humans.

<sup>9</sup> To which Julie comments: “Sound like anyone you know, dad?,” implying her father has also changed beyond recognition.

R, however, is a considerable step forward from Romero's evolved zombies. For Comentale and Jaffe, the "sensitive zombie portrayal in romance novels," such as Marion's *Warm Bodies*, rests on the use of "allegorical narratives" that make zombies less of a zombie by granting them "richly subjectivized inner lives" (21). In the novel, the subjectivization is achieved mainly by first-person narration—R can technically only produce zombie grunts, but it is his eloquent internal narration that takes readers through the events. The I-perspective, fundamental in the portrayal of monsters as sympathetic, as Abbott illustrates with numerous examples, is crucial in *Warm Bodies* not only because it positions R as the central protagonist, but also because it presents his "conscious point of view to shape the trajectory of the story" (167). Apart from the personalized narration, R's internal life is enriched as a result of consuming the brains of his victims (Comentale and Jaffe 21), specifically Perry. Flashbacks of the victim's lives, blending in with R's thoughts, make him even more human and are of key importance in the developing relationship with Julie.

The film works around these aspects of R differently. Unlike in the novel, the narrative perspective is not entirely R's. However, from the very beginning, the film foregrounds R's individuality and his exceptional tendency for isolation and reflection, likening that to Romeo's behaviour. The film's opening sequence, starting with R's existential question "What am I doing with my life?", allows viewers to understand the pain of being undead. In a fairly straightforward way, for anybody with knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet*, "R's quest to feel 'less dead' and closer to life" (Cocarla 56) strongly resembles Romeo's desire to find real life in true love. While Marion's novel discusses zombie routines in more detail, stressing their communal activities within the airport area, the film gives only a cursory look into those imitations of human life. Instead, it highlights R's exceptionality and his unique desire to break free from a lifeless existence, making instantaneous visual associations with Leonardo DiCaprio's rendition of Romeo in Luhrmann's film. The opening sequence takes time to revel in R's solitude, showing him wandering around the airport, contemplating his existence, reminiscing about the past and dreaming of the future. In that, he is like Romeo in Luhrmann's film, who is shown on his own on the beach, pictured against the sunset, pensively smoking a cigarette, and contemplating love and life. Even when he is around other people, DiCaprio's Romeo seems frequently immersed in his thoughts and needs a distraction to reconnect to his friends. Similarly, in *Warm Bodies*, R roams the airport trying to figure out what it is that he is missing, moving around other zombies but clearly standing out, and often seeking solitude in his shelter, a Boeing 747, where he keeps the remains of real life.

Abbott argues that establishing R's personalized perspective in the film's opening, by combining an extreme close-up of his face with his internal monologue in which he questions his existence, "establishes R as functioning within the teen film, a genre plagued with questions of identity and acceptance" (167). This, however, is also an element that defines DiCaprio's youthful and rebellious Romeo in Luhrmann's MTV-styled adaptation specifically targeting teenage viewers. While those multi-layered associations help to build the internal landscape of R as a sympathetic zombie, what makes it possible for R to be seen as the promise of a romantic, and possibly tragic, lover is the infusing of the character with Shakespearean potential through the parallels with DiCaprio's self-isolating and depressive Romeo.

Another moment that blends the teenage narrative with the charisma of Shakespeare's love story is when R sees Julie for the first time. In Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* this scene is a visual masterpiece. A long music sequence—Des'ree's "Kissing You"—shows Romeo watching colourful fish in a big aquarium when he suddenly sees Juliet's face across the tank. The exchange of their glances, with the focus on their mutual gaze, visually illustrates what Romeo soon after acknowledges—"Did my heart love till now?" *Warm Bodies* takes liberties with the novel in order to romanticize the moment in which R sees Julie for the first time. In the book, he first attacks Perry and, as he is eating his brain, he sees Julie in the flashes of Perry's memories. When he then sees her in the room, fighting off other zombies, he recognizes her and impulsively decides to protect her. In Levine's film, zombies barge into the room where Perry, Julie, Nora and others are collecting medical supplies, and the fight starts. Amid the shooting, R falls, and when he lifts his head he sees Julie with a machine gun. The sounds of shooting fade to John Waite's "Missing You," and a slow motion sequence shows a close-up on R, his eyes fixed on the shooting Julie. For a split second, she registers his hypnotized gaze and, instead of shooting his head off, she hides behind a counter. The fight sequence then resumes, and Perry is taken down by R, who *then* sees flashbacks of Julie while consuming Perry's brain. Building R's character on such cinematic clichés—exceptionality, reflexivity and the power of love at first sight—may seem general enough to be dismissed as Shakespearean, but the film further develops more significant references to *Romeo and Juliet* and its iconic cinematic renderings.

## STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

What determines the drama and tension at the heart of Shakespeare's tragedy is the fact that Romeo and Juliet cannot be together due to some "ancient grudge" (Prologue) that antagonizes their households. The

play makes it clear that the feud is rooted in a past that nobody seems to remember and that it senselessly perpetuates into a “new mutiny” (Prologue) that destroys Verona. Cinematic adaptations have offered various ways of modernizing the idea of the conflict, like the 1961 musical *West Side Story*, which shows the two families as fighting gangs, Jets and Sharks, with a strong ethnic touch to the conflict. A similar approach is assumed by Luhrmann, whose Capulets and Montagues are also shown as gangs, ethnicity playing an important role in the feud, as well as by a more distant spin-off, 2000 action film *Romeo Must Die*, featuring Asian- and African-American mob war. The human versus zombie conflict in *Warm Bodies* seems to be a natural way to translate the Shakespearean feud into the post-9/11 cinematic code. In a post-apocalyptic narrative, it is humans against various kinds of self-created enemies that best represent the senselessness and the devastating impact of what antagonizes the Capulets and Montagues.

Another strong inspiration for lining up the relationship between zombies and humans in *Warm Bodies* is Romero’s presentation of the two groups, based on the realization that “both the living and the dead communities are similarly struggling to survive in the new post-apocalyptic world” (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 193). Similarly to Riley, the key human protagonist of *Land of the Dead*, who notes “little difference between the two groups, claiming both are simply ‘pretending to be alive’” (Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic* 193), the protagonists of *Warm Bodies* on both sides of the conflict, R and Julie, realize how little differs them. R not only keeps looking for some meaning in his zombie existence that would make him more human but also understands that Corpses remain somewhat close to humans, as opposed to Boneyes, creatures in the final stage of physical and mental decay. At the same time, Julie keeps commenting on the absurdity of the military walled existence of her community, focused on survival rather than living. She sees her father, as well as Perry, as people who have lost some of their humanity, and are getting more dead than alive.

As in *Romeo and Juliet*, then, the conflict between people and Corpses in *Warm Bodies*, initially presented as irresolvable and fatal, gradually begins to be seen as pointless because the feuding parties appear to be less and less of enemies. As Földvary points out, “by introducing a romance plotline, a sense of equality is created between humans and the non-human. The bond between the lovers, forged in opposition to the rest of society, effectively emphasises the hostile, even monstrous, elements within the so-called human environment” (211). The film stresses this in several specific moments, making the Shakespearean references resonate more strongly through cinematic allusions. The most obvious case is the balcony scene. In *Warm Bodies*, R’s desire to be with Julie to protect her

makes him go on a suicidal quest. He gets into the walled military camp of the humans and goes to Julie's house, where he speaks to her while she appears on the balcony above. Desmet argues that "the scene is indeed redolent of *Romeo and Juliet*—that is, of Franco Zeffirelli's iconic film version of *Romeo and Juliet*," and analyzes the details of the moment to highlight those similarities (286). Since Luhrmann's balcony scene references Zeffirelli's, younger viewers may take this moment to finally realize that *Warm Bodies* is more than just a romzomcom.

Another visually resonant moment is connected to the gradual transformation of zombies. Under the influence of the growing bond between Julie and R, and following R's waking up to feeling more alive, a group of sympathetic zombies, led by R's friend, M, also begin to change. Unlike in the novel, where the change is connected to their waking senses, in the film, at the moment when zombies begin to feel something changing in them, their hearts give a beat and glow for a while. The recurring image of a glowing heart is visually powerful, and clearly references Luhrmann's use of religious imagery. In *Romeo + Juliet*, among numerous crosses of all sizes, tattooed and neon, Juliet's angelic wings, statues of Holy Mary, or the giant statue of Jesus Christ overlooking the city, there is the image of Jesus with a beaming heart on Tybalt's shirt, and the burning heart in a rose wreath on Romeo's. Those hearts not only define the film's key visual tone but also adorn its promotional materials, thus remaining emblematic of the film. Choosing the beating and glowing hearts to symbolize the change in zombies, *Warm Bodies* makes another allusion to *Romeo and Juliet*, building up the context for the developing love between R and Julie.

## THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS HAVE . . . A HAPPY ENDING

Although since Romero's *Land of the Dead* zombies have been frequently shown as victims of human violence, the undead are still irredeemable. *Land of the Dead* ends with a promise of a truce, but zombies remain cannibalistic and potentially infectious. Other films that explore the hope for a peaceful coexistence of zombies and humans also tend to problematize the possibility, highlighting the tentative and fragile status of the truce. David Freyne's 2017 horror drama *The Cured* in a realistic mode explores the difficulties of integrating the cured zombies back into social life and traces the disintegration of the fragile coexistence into another round of chaos and killing. In the comedy convention, in turn, as excellently shown in the *iZombie* series (2015–19), the domesticated, benign, helpful and heroic zombies exist side by side with the predatory and evil ones, and the ups and

downs of the instability of their coexistence fuels the series' overarching narrative.<sup>10</sup> *Warm Bodies* takes a step further here, as well, completing the process of domestication of zombies by presenting the condition as curable. By evoking the magic of the Shakespearean power of love and sacrifice, the film offers more of a truce than any other zombie narrative, and more than the "glooming peace" in *Romeo and Juliet*. Using the play's narrative, the film indicates the possibility of a reconciliation between the feuding "families" if the love between their young representatives reaches the level of the ultimate sacrifice. Peaking on that sacrificial moment, however, the film dissolves the conflict into a truly happy ending, befitting the comedy genre: in a paraphrase of the redeeming power of sacrifice made in the name of love by Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, R's sacrifice to save Julie redeems him, his fellow zombies and the humans. In another interesting diversion from Marion's novel, in which the happy ending does not include Julie's father,<sup>11</sup> the film offers Colonel Grigio a chance that Lord Capulet did not have—to accept the man of his daughter's choice against his prejudice and to see her happy in love.

That redeeming moment is strengthened by another visual reference to Luhrmann's film. Julie and R, cornered by Boneys, get trapped on a ledge, high above the ground. They realize they are lost, but they refuse to give up and decide to sacrifice themselves by jumping. The attempt is desperate, but R holds Julie tight to become her buffer for the fall, hoping she might survive. In the novel, they fall to the ground, and R suffers multiple breaks and injuries. In the film, however, they fall into a fountain pond beneath the ledge. R is initially unconscious, which terrifies Julie, but then he comes round and they share a long-awaited kiss. In Luhrmann's film, the swimming pool kiss following the balcony scene is one of its strongest romantic moments. Playing on the visual power of the water motif, used also in the fish tank scene, and symbolically complementing the religious imagery, it is another emblematic scene of *Romeo + Juliet*. The fountain kiss between R and Julie is positioned in a different narrative moment, but it perfectly emulates the beauty and power of Luhrmann's sequence, relishing in the passion of the newfound love of R and Julie. Framed in the symbolic power of water, it also signals the baptismal significance of the

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<sup>10</sup> The series, in the end, finishes on a decidedly happy note: with the cure being available, some zombies remain highly functioning in the society, with the approval of the humans, and all the major characters, humans and zombies alike, are happily married, with kids. The series, with its sugar sweet coda, however, dates post *Warm Bodies*.

<sup>11</sup> In the novel he is so far immersed in his hatred for Corpses that he cannot accept the possibility of their transformation, and therefore has to die. Significantly, he is taken down in a fight by a Boney, which suggests that his stage of moral deterioration matches the Boneys' complete loss of any traces of humanity.

moment when a new life is born: this is when R transforms into a human, thus reversing the play's final kiss of death<sup>12</sup> into a romantic comedy's kiss of love and life.

In Shakespeare's play, appropriately for a tragedy, the love between Romeo and Juliet dooms them to death, but finally ends the feud and brings peace to Verona. The joint loss of their children allows the Capulets and Montagues to see the futility of their conflict and its fatal consequences, so the power of love reaches beyond the young lovers' grave, healing the hearts of their families. *Warm Bodies* takes that Shakespearean cue quite literally. The true love of the unlikely couple saves both humans and zombies and brings peace to the world threatened by apocalypse and annihilation. As impossible love proves to be true love, the kiss that wakes life in R is idyllically presented as a cure for the zombie condition, and its healing power grants everyone a happy ending. In this way, the traditional trajectory of a romantic comedy playfully reverses Shakespeare's iconic tragic ending and allows the cinematic convention to appropriate the Bard's celebrated drama.

From the point of view of a zombie narrative, the film's conclusion may, of course, be seen as unsatisfactory, in that zombies deserve a happy ending only when they stop being zombies. Ruthven, discussing the status of a zombie as "the walking abject, . . . the constant reminder of what must be rejected from the self in order to survive," explains why a zombie cannot be an object of love: "The zombie cannot be rehabilitated, cannot develop a conscience and renounce its murderous ways or its very monstrosity, thereby enabling the heroine to fall in love with it" (345). *Warm Bodies* only seemingly transgresses that border. Julie begins to develop feelings for R when he is still very much undead and manifests those feelings in a kiss before he transforms into a human. However, R does change, which happens thanks to the kiss, as in a traditional fairy tale. In undoing the tragic ending of its Shakespearean hypotext, the film may be seen to finish with a simplified solution, but the conservative and heteronormative happy ending results from a reliance upon romantic comedy cinematic convention, proving *Warm Bodies* to be a typical rom(zom)com.

## ZOMBIE SHAKESPEARE

Zombies are a massive cinematic phenomenon, and whenever the world is in an apocalyptic mode, as it is now in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, zombies adjust to new contexts, representing the problems

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<sup>12</sup> Juliet, upon waking up from a drug-induced sleep, sees Romeo dead and, wishing to die, as well, kisses his lips hoping for a "friendly drop" of the poison that he took.



and fears of the given moment. Surprisingly flexible, they have not only adapted to various cinematic genres but even proved eligible for marriages with literary classics, as numerous mash-up novels show.<sup>13</sup> That the paths of zombies and Shakespeare should cross is not that surprising. Shakespeare has already benefited enormously from the synergic marriage with cinema, his plays being adapted to various genre conventions,<sup>14</sup> and his plots and characters feeding countless screenplays. As in any synergy, both sides not only gain, but also inspire each other, further replicating the network of intertexts, references, quotations, parodies or recyclings. These crossing paths become inevitable as a result of hybridizing literary genres and narratives, such as tragedies, Gothic stories or folk tales, with cinematic conventions, like romantic comedy or zombie horror. Genre hybrids, in turn, help to create more flexible monster characters that can function outside of their original structures, as exemplified by zombodies. As Bishop argues, such genres “offer viewers all the shock, gore, and horror of the zombie tragedies, but their resolutions are markedly different: zombodies, true to their classical roots, end on a note of hope, promise, and stability in the form of a newly constituted family and/or marriage” (“Vacationing in *Zombieland*” 29). *Warm Bodies*, now a “classic” romzomcom, illustrates the change, as romantic comedy conventions determine its plotline, and zombie elements are used to create obstacles to the course of true love.

In his 2010 analysis of the development of the cinematic zombie, Bishop offers a prediction that “the next step in the evolution of this highly specially [sic] subgenre will likely literalize the metaphor, presenting narratives in which the zombies tell their own stories, acting as true protagonists and even heroes” (*American Zombie Gothic* 196). This is exactly what happens in Levine’s *Warm Bodies* with the help of Shakespeare’s love tragedy. With that experiment already well tested, new paths will follow, further allowing the hybridization of literary and cinematic classics. Mash-up novels open up to film adaptations that can further enhance their already rich intertextuality. Burr Steers’s 2016 film adaptation of Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, for example, is a radical reinterpretation of the mash-up, taking the novel’s mix of Austenian comedy of manners and Gothic horror into the realm of cinematic action comedy and highlighting the political touches of Austen’s

<sup>13</sup> These including, for example, Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and Sherri Browning *Grave Expectations* (2011), but involving other monstrous creatures, as well, as in Grahame-Smith’s *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*, Ben H. Winters’s *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009), or Browning Erwin’s *Jane Slayre* (2010).

<sup>14</sup> *Hamlet*, for example, drawing from film noir in Olivier’s version, becoming an action movie in Zeffirelli’s adaptation, or incorporating elements of horror and costume drama in Branagh’s 1996 film.

narrative.<sup>15</sup> Another area for the development of appealing zombie characters is TV series, combining comedy and horror with such TV genres as crime/detective, as in *iZombie*, or family/drama, as in *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017–19).<sup>16</sup> Placing zombie characters in the contexts of *CSA* or *Desperate Housewives*, such experiments further explore the questions inherent to classical zombie genres—the nature of the infection, the ethics of killing zombies, the moral dilemma around their feeding routines or the quest for a cure—as well as allowing for the inclusion of thematic areas hardly associated with the undead, such as family life, romance or sex, friendship and career.

The role of literary classics may be less evident in those zombie instalments, but the spectral presence of names like Shakespeare remains palpable, as *iZombie* illustrates. The series makes ample references to various cultural texts, including other zombie films, like *Dawn of the Dead*, *Zombieland* or *Warm Bodies*,<sup>17</sup> and even gets ironically self-referential.<sup>18</sup> Its regular cameo appearances, however, are Shakespearean, as play quotations and other allusions run regularly throughout the series, starting with the pilot episode. When Liv, the protagonist, manages to find a reason to live her undead life by helping people through solving criminal cases, she can finally fall asleep after months of useless zombie existence and says: “to sleep, perchance to not dream.” *Hamlet* is evoked many times, either through quotations, like “Something’s rotten in Denmark. Denmark in this case meaning the Seattle police department” (episode 1.9), or more direct references, as in episode 1.10, when Ravi explains to Liv how he managed to teach his zombie rat a trick. When she doubts him, he ironically says: “Yes. I also taught him to declaim *Hamlet* soliloquies. He holds a tiny skull, it’s quite something.” *Henry V*, *Romeo and Juliet* and even *Julius Caesar* are quoted, and the final episode, in which the human/zombie conflict is resolved and all of the characters are given their happy endings is titled “All’s Well That Ends Well.”

The Shakespearean references in *iZombie* are purely decorative but they are comfortably present throughout the series. Considering that *iZombie* rests on the notion significantly explored in *Warm Bodies*—that zombies experience flashbacks, memories and visions of the people whose brains they consume, which is how Liv helps to solve murder cases—the series may be illustrating an idea that Shakespeare, the amazing “literary dead,” can thus be granted another form of life. Devoured by screen

<sup>15</sup> For an extended discussion on gender and social politics in Steers’s 2016 *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, see Cieślak.

<sup>16</sup> I wish to thank Tim Bridgman for mentioning *Santa Clarita Diet* to me.

<sup>17</sup> *Warm Bodies* is not just alluded to, but explicitly mentioned in episode 1.5.

<sup>18</sup> In episode 2.10 there is an ironic moment when Liv and Clive are investigating the murder at the set of a zombie series, and one of the zombie actors, complaining about how bypassed they are, says: “You know what’d be fun? A zombie show where a zombie is a star.”

zombies for his juicy poetic brains, he returns to life in the form of bits and pieces processed by the undead. As much as he benefits from such revivals, he also gives a spicy touch of classical life to the cinematic undead. This is the type of synergic exchange that *Warm Bodies* illustrates, too. Romeo becomes a way to turn a zombie into a romantic lover and Shakespeare can be credited with the transformation of a zombie narrative into a story of star-crossed lovers, but literature, in turn, may benefit from the evolving forms of the cinematic monstrous, as the timeless story of star-crossed lovers is given another life in an apocalyptic zombie narrative.

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