

SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS:

GOTHIC FEMINISM,  
DECONSTRUCTION AND  
COLONIALISM IN

*I Walked With A Zombie*

MEAGHAN WALSH  
ISSUES IN CINEMA THEORY  
SPRING 2008  
DR. ROGER RAWLINGS

When Val Lewton and Jacques Tourneur teamed up to make their second picture, the world had been at war for four years. Both men were from Europe originally, and now called America home; they felt the sting of war with a double intensity. Both men were interested in exploring the underrepresented -- the female mind, the indefinable realm between the natural and supernatural, and the oppressed. They investigated a reality that was made up of the intangible, a tenuous truth. Of Tourneur, Scorsese says, "It's appropriate that so many of Jacques Tourneur's movies deal with the supernatural and the paranormal, because his own touch as a filmmaker is elusive yet tangible, like the presence of a ghost -- in a way, you could say that Tourneur's touch is so refined and subtle that he haunts his films."<sup>1</sup> Lewton and Tourneur's sophomore project, *I Walked With A Zombie* was informed by both men's ability to delve into the depths of human psychology, fear, the unknown and discrimination. This film features elements of Gothic feminism, a deconstructionist world view and sympathy for colonized cultures.

### Gothic Feminism

The Gothic tradition features many hallmarks that make it a truly unique style. Old castles, family manors, surreptitious housekeepers, secretive husbands, innocent young women, family inheritances and howling from distant corners of the moonlit night figure prominently in these tales. Although these elements sound like they would leave an impression of ridiculousness, the well-crafted stories written in this manner fold these features in with realistic narratives and ride the wire between the natural and the supernatural.

Female figures also figure prominently in the Gothic story tradition. Chris Baldick writes of the "noticeable prominence of women in the Gothic tradition, as popular

---

<sup>1</sup> Scorsese, Martin. Forward to *The Cinema of Nightfall: Jacques Tourneur*, by Chris Fujiwara. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998. Pg. xi.

and influential authors, as central fictional characters, and as devoted readers.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the evolution of the Gothic, women characters have become increasingly daring and adventurous. They may be a victim of outside circumstances but they have learned to take matters into their own hands. It doesn’t turn out as they planned, and there is often sacrifice involved, but they have settled their conscience. Indeed, they have their own conscience to settle. Later Gothic stories (termed “Gothic romances”) pitted this new, emerging female figure against the standards of the past – male hierarchy, familial responsibilities, and other archaic traditions – by putting her in a strange world where the rules are unknown and she is often unwittingly in danger. Val Lewton’s *I Walked With a Zombie* fulfills this Gothic tradition, and adds a new layer of feminism to previous readings of the tale. Lewton had worked on *Gone With the Wind*, *Rebecca*, and *Jane Eyre* with David O. Selznick before getting his own unit at RKO. Ironically, RKO hired Lewton to make some quick cash to offset the overdrawn accounts of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Across town, Universal had a booming horror film machine that was raking in the bucks. They pumped out such titles as *Frankenstein Meets The Wolfman*, which coincided with an article by Richard G. Hulber in the *Saturday Evening Post* in which he revealed “[Universal Producer] George Waggner’s seven ingredient recipe for horror films. ... Although this tried-and-true formula made a lot of sense to RKO executives, Lewton was determined to ignore most of Waggner’s recipe and develop a formula he could call his own.”<sup>3</sup> Before *Cat People*, his first solo assignment, was even finished, Lewton was given the task of coming up with a story for a film entitled *I Walked With A Zombie* and was given the services of Curt Siodmak, writer of all the horror films at Universal. Lewton flinched at such an association and took his own route, once again,

---

<sup>2</sup> Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. Pg. xxi.

<sup>3</sup>Bansak, Edmund. *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003. Pg 143

and decided to do a reworking of "Jane Eyre" in the West Indies. In this framework he would create a new style Gothic feminism.

As for Jacques Tourneur, his attraction to the Gothic goes back to his childhood. He recalled:

I was about four years old and we lived by Luxemburg Gardens. My father, who before becoming a filmmaker, painted a lot and had worked with Puvis de Chavannes, lived in the latter's house. His studio was a big mysterious room that filled me with fear. It was there that on Christmas Eve, my parents would put my gifts, and they would say to me, "Go find them yourself." There was a very long corridor, completely black, and I could make out in the distance the white spots that were my presents. I walked forward all alone, torn between desire for the toys and a fear that almost made me faint, especially as the toys in their packages started to take on a phantom-like appearance.<sup>4</sup>

This coupling of fear and desire, beauty and terror is prevalent in Tourneur's direction style. His shots often consist of dual impressions. Everyday objects take on sinister appearances, and everyday people turn out to be monsters in disguise.

From the outset of *I Walked With A Zombie*, Lewton presents a strange and unnerving setting. The heroine, Betsy Connell, (like Jane Eyre) arrives to find her new home has a deep, uncertain past. Fort Holland, she is told, "was a fort, now no longer." Although it tells of past wealth, it is now less inviting, surrounded by a tall, wrought iron gate.<sup>5</sup> The original script describes, "At one corner stands a big, stone tower, obviously a relic of some previous building."<sup>6</sup> This place has begun to decay, and represents an ideology of the past. There is history here, what the Gothic terms, "a house of degeneration, even decomposition, its living space darkening and contracting into the dying space of the mortuary and tomb."<sup>7</sup> Betsy hails from Ottawa, Canada and the audience sees her homeland briefly as she interviews for this

<sup>4</sup> Fujiwara, Chris. *The Cinema of Nightfall: Jacques Tourneur*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998. Pg 20.

<sup>5</sup>"I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. by Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>6</sup> The Val Lewton Screenplay Collection. "I Walked With A Zombie." <http://www.whiskeyloosetongue.com/zombie.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Baldick, xx.

new post. The city is represented with classical, brownstone buildings and it is snowing. Canada is clean, white and properly British. The West Indies are hot, humid, overgrown and dense and suggests a sense of closeness and decay.

This house as depicted in the film is labyrinthine. We see rooms but are not sure how they connect. There is a courtyard garden and some rooms seem to face that. And to one corner is that forboding tower. The audience cannot create a map in their heads and they have no way to orientate themselves. The décor is simple but lovely, except for the strange fountain in the courtyard: A ship's figurehead of Saint Sebastian with arrows sticking through him. This brutal, gargoyle-like image harkens back to a superstition that the Gothic refers to, only to disavow. Saint Sebastian was martyred by being shot by archers. A ship's figurehead was meant to frighten the enemy as well as placate a deity for safe passage while at sea. A figurehead with a religious symbol would have been prevalent on ships of the late 1500s and early 1600s<sup>8</sup>, the height of the Catholic and Protestant warfare. Captains and crews believed these carved ornaments would bring them luck on their voyage. This one, the audience is told by Mr. Holland, was from a ship that brought slaves to the island. The strangeness of this icon is overt and disturbing. By giving such attention to the figurehead, Lewton points out the absurdity of this belief. Baldick writes, "Gothic writers have borrowed the fables and nightmares of a past age in order to repudiate their authority: just as the consciously Protestant pioneers of the Gothic novel raise the old ghosts of Catholic Europe only to exorcise them."<sup>9</sup> Lewton does the same. While the audience enjoys the creepy feeling they get by watching this story unfold, they are able to enjoy it because they know it is not real.

Besty, the woman who finds herself in this strange, foreign place, is the protagonist of *I Walked With A Zombie*. She narrates most of the film and the events are seen from her

<sup>8</sup> "History of the Ship's Figurehead." [http://www.geocities/cptblood\\_1999/figurehead.html](http://www.geocities/cptblood_1999/figurehead.html)

<sup>9</sup> Baldick, pp.xiii-xiv.

perspective. Here Lewton advances the Gothic female, like du Maurier, by involving the female, rather than having her as the object of the narrative. She may be in danger but she is not helpless. Betsy is a nurse, hired to take care of Paul Holland's wife, Jessica. She is logical and efficient, as a nurse should be. She is well-mannered, polite and compassionate, as a woman is expected to be. It is this strong desire to heal that manifests in a supernatural desperation. Even though Betsy knows better than to believe in superstition, she is completely determined to find a cure for Jessica. First, she and Dr. Maxwell perform an experimental treatment by inducing an insulin coma and administering electroshock therapy. This scene is like watching mad scientists at work. They hover in white coats over an unseen patient while Paul Holland lurks in long shadows. When this treatment is unsuccessful, the level-headed nurse resorts to superstition of local voodoo. While this seems like a foolish choice for such an intelligent person to make, in the context of the influences around her, it is not. She is open-minded and is willing to do anything she can to help a patient. It also demonstrates her headstrong independence – she does what she wants, whether others approve or not, even if it's dangerous. Especially if it's dangerous. This Gothic female asserts herself with politeness and naïveté. She takes on this dangerous task with an adventurous spirit and becomes entwined in something much more mysterious and overwhelming. When Betsy accepted the job she agreed to take care of, and perhaps cure, Mr. Holland's wife Jessica, but she did not know the difficulties she would encounter. No one mentioned that Jessica was a zombie, that Holland and his half-brother were at odds over their love for Jessica, that voodoo and superstition would be so prevalent, or that she would be forced to navigate a winding passage of reality with no reference to an outside world.

This new Gothic female character is also selfless. She sacrifices her own happiness for that of another, and for the greater good. Jane Eyre leaves Thornfield for India so the

Rochester may stay with his wife (that has been hidden from Jane) but she does so out of anger and shame. In "Rebecca" the second Mrs. DeWinter (she is never named) agrees to her husband's whims and Mrs. Danvers suggestions, even when they make her uncomfortable, to preserve happiness in the home. Betsy Connell in *I Walked With A Zombie* sacrifices her potential happiness with Mr. Holland, whom she has fallen in love with, by insisting on a cure for Jessica so she can be returned to Mr. Holland. She represses her emotions for propriety's sake but she does so on her own terms. This type of relationship between Mr. Holland and Betsy is one approaching respect despite the odd circumstances. This sense of female empowerment is a reference to the changing roles of men and women's interactions during World War II, when *I Walked With A Zombie* was released. Laurie Shrage writes about the film *Christopher Strong*, in which there is a scene played out calmly between the wife and mistress. She says, "In a society that generally sees adult women as sexual rivals - especially wives and mistress - and in one that is inclined to see the mistress's function as disruptive rather than constructive, this scene appears odd."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it does seem odd that a nurse would fall in love with the husband of a woman now in some kind of coma. But the new Gothic female often falls in love with her mysterious male counterpart. Some part of her is attracted to the wounded aspect of him, and wishes to heal.

This new Gothic female is also placed in contrast to an "old" female character, the Perfect Victorian woman, as someone who has not sloughed off the male hierarchy. In *I Walked With A Zombie*, this character is over-intensified as Jessica, the zombified Mrs. Holland. Jessica's state is never fully understood. There are implications that she was driven mad by Mr. Holland, that she was a gold-digger and Mr. Holland grew to hate her (not unlike Maxim and Rebecca De Winter), and that her mother-in-law unwittingly placed a voodoo curse upon her. We get glimpses into her character only

---

<sup>10</sup> Shrage, Laurie. "Feminist Film Aesthetics: A Contextual Approach." *Hypatia*. Vol. 5. No. 2. Summer 1990. Pg. 138.

occasionally. For instance, Alma brings Betsy some breakfast and Alma comments, "Miss Jessica used to say this is the only way for a lady to break her fast – in bed, with a lacy cushion to bank her head up." This indicates someone who was a bit spoiled, and perhaps not cut out to live in the West Indies. Perhaps this is why she married a rich plantation owner, to keep the wild outdoors away from her.

The only thing that all the characters can agree upon is that she was very beautiful, as if this were her sole worth even before she was a zombie. Now she is some kind of other. The medical arguments throughout the film try to determine if she is dead or alive, but no one argues if she is human or not. They treat her as sub-human, perhaps like an old, Victorian Gothic female character. Alma says, "Every day I dress her just as beautifully as if she was well. It's just like dressing a big doll," and Dr. Maxwell describes her condition as if "certain lobes of the mind were burned out by the fever. The result is what you see – a woman bereft of will power, unable to speak or even to act by herself. She will obey simple commands."<sup>11</sup> This description is particularly pointed as it is being made to the female protagonist who is the very opposite of that depiction. Such a sketch of a woman, in 1943, would have stood out to audiences on purpose. It points out that any woman who would allow herself to be so driven by a man's influence – to marry him for his money – is no better than a mindless shell of a human. She is a self-made zombie. Jessica's lack of self is in direct contrast to the "resourceful,...professional woman who, playing by her own rules, shows intelligence and courage in a crisis"<sup>12</sup> – in this case Betsy Connell. Bansak writes, "The female roles in Lewton's films are admirable on their own terms and closer to the kind of 'liberated' feminine film roles we expect today."<sup>13</sup> By making this statement in *I Walked With A Zombie*, Lewton melds the Gothic genre with feminist themes of the

---

<sup>11</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. by Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Bansak, 158.

<sup>13</sup> Bansak, 157.

day and thus solidified a new Gothic female.

### Deconstructionism

Deconstruction deals with the absurdity of a fixed reality, that something is truly knowable and permanent. The Gothic also challenges this notion of empirical truth. *I Walked With A Zombie* explores this idea through the Gothic narrative type, but also in a deconstructive manner. Deconstructionism posits that there is no certainty, no fixed identity. Truth is contextual and Western philosophy is too narrow in its focus. *I Walked With A Zombie* invites comparison between the standard Western ideas and the primitive superstition of the West Indies; and in so doing brings into question our ability to be certain of anything. Indeed, Fujiwara notes, *I Walked With A Zombie* is a sustained exercise in uncompromised ambiguity. Perfecting the formula that Lewton and Tourneur had developed in *Cat People*, the film carries its predecessor's elliptical, oblique narrative procedures to astonishing extremes ... obsessively revising itself, finally giving up the struggle to explain and surrendering to a mute acceptance of the inexplicable."<sup>14</sup> In addition, Bansak writes, "Nothing is as it appears to be. This is a world where horror always lurks beneath the calm."<sup>15</sup> The film presents many different possibilities, suggestions, ideas and questions, while it reevaluates itself. It attempts to find a reality that lies somewhere in the intersection of Venn diagram of all the facets and aspects presented. Aside from the overarching plot points which constantly call reality into question, there are several specific details residing in the depths of the tale itself.

After the scene in which Betsy accepts her new job, she is seen on a ship, sailing for the West Indies. Her narration tells the audience her thoughts on the view. She says, "I looked at those great glowing stars - and I felt the warm wind on my cheeks and I breathed deep and every bit of me inside myself said, 'How beautiful-'" Her

<sup>14</sup> Fujiwara, 86-87.

<sup>15</sup> Bansak, 149.

thoughts are interrupted by Paul Holland, who interjects: "It's not beautiful."<sup>16</sup> In the first moments of the film, the audience is already faced with opposing points of view.

Holland goes on:

Everything seems beautiful because you don't understand. Those flying fish – they are not leaping for joy. They're jumping in terror. Bigger fish want to eat them. That luminous water – it takes its gleam from millions of tiny dead bodies. It's the glitter of putrescence. There's no beauty here – it's death and decay. ... Everything good dies here – even the stars.<sup>17</sup>

Holland's depressing world view crashes into Betsy naïve one. They are looking at the same thing and seeing something entirely different. Lewton's ability to bring this out through the voices of realistic characters presents a conundrum for the audience. By questioning the basics (in this case beauty), it sets the stage for what is to come.

When Betsy meets Holland's half-brother, Wes Rand, she is greeted by a much cheerier disposition but he presents just as many backwards moments. When Betsy arrives for dinner, she finds Wes is the only one waiting. He then begins to jovially introduce her to the absent family members by gesturing to their empty chairs – including the chair kept for Jessica. This seemingly innocuous action points the absurdity of this family's practices. Furthermore, Holland and Rand are half-brothers, a distance that becomes increasingly obvious throughout the film (one is free-spirited, one is traditional; one is schooled in England, the other in Buffalo; both love the same woman, for different reasons).

As Betsy and Rand attempt to enjoy an after-dinner coffee, drums begin to beat in the distance. Betsy is startled at first, and Rand teases her saying, "Jungle drums – mysterious – eerie." After she smiles at his joke, he explains that they are nothing more than "a work drum at the sugar mill. Saint Sebastian's version of a factory whistle."<sup>18</sup> Not only are they not voodoo related, according to Rand, they are

<sup>16</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. by Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>17</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>18</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

completely innocuous, despite their frightening connotation. This assumption will be challenged throughout the film as the potency of the natives' traditions are constantly questioned.

Betsy's role within the structure of the Holland family is always in flux. Holland's mother treats Betsy as an equal, insisting that she has influence over her sons. Holland asks her if the servants are making her comfortable and on her first evening she offers to take a dinner tray up to Jessica but Holland stops her, insisting that "Tomorrow's soon enough for you to begin work."<sup>19</sup> Her station is above that of the servants, for they bring her breakfast in bed, but she is not of the aristocratic upbringing. She has to work, for one thing. Much is made of her "day-off", a common term in the upstairs-downstairs genre. When Holland and Rand get into an argument, instead of behaving like gentlemen they send Betsy to her room to finish her dinner, like a little girl. This confusion regarding her station in life brings out the absurdity of a caste system.

Jessica herself presents the main synthetic binary - life and death. In her zombified state, she is both alive and dead, yet she is fully neither. She still has breath and motion but she is completely devoid emotion, personality or recognition. This frightening possibility is first presented when the compassionate Betsy hears a woman crying in the middle of the night (as when Jane first hears Mrs. Rochester). Betsy rises and goes to the tower where Jessica is kept. The script describes:

a white-robed female figure comes out from under the stairs, walking slowly, her movements drift-like as if walking in a deep sleep. She begins to slowly climb the stairs. ... Without expression, Jessica moves toward her. CLOSEUP of Jessica. This is the face of the dead, bloodless, cold-lidded, eyes open and unseeing, washed white with the pallor of the moonlight, framed by lank, lifeless tresses of blonde hair.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>20</sup> The Val Lewton Screenplay Collections. "I Walked With A Zombie." [www.whiskeyloosetounge.com/scripts/zombie.htm](http://www.whiskeyloosetounge.com/scripts/zombie.htm). Pg 15.

The idea of someone wandering around unconsciously and aimlessly is frightening. The audience equates life with feeling and reason as well as self-knowledge. To see a person with motor skills but no consciousness is unnerving and it makes the zombie a sympathetic character. The audience imagines how awful it must be to be trapped in a body yet have no control over it. This is where the fear comes from. She is the manifestation of a completely realized deconstructed binary. Dr. Maxwell describes her as, "a sleepwalker who can never be awakened - feeling nothing, knowing nothing."<sup>21</sup> The other characters are also confused and try to determine what her condition really is. Nearing the end of the film, when neither Western nor West Indian medicine has healed her, Betsy and Rand argue over what it must be like for her. Rand asks Betsy commit euthanasia. He says:

"She's dead. The dead ought to be buried."

Betsy: "But she's not dead, Wes."

Rand: "You know what she is! That's death - no mind, no sense - no love, no hate, no feeling - nothing! ... She should have rest. She shouldn't have to walk and walk, in that black emptiness. You could set her free. You could give her rest."<sup>22</sup>

Betsy, both a nurse and a female, refuses to do it, but only after some thought. She understands Rand's view of things. Yet, she is able to have a certain empathy that a man cannot. In addition, her nursing instinct does not allow her to give up hope on finding some help for Jessica. Addressing the topic of euthanasia in a society in the midst of a world war highlighted the issue of force versus mercy and when each should be exacted.

The audience finds out that Jessica's midnight wanderings were not the source of the wailing. The explanation from Mr. Holland only deepens the feeling of reversed binaries in the West Indies. When Betsy asks Holland why the maid was crying, he tells her, "They still weep when a child is born - and make merry at a burial," the

---

<sup>21</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>22</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

direct opposite of what the audience assumes is the common practice.<sup>23</sup>

Deceptive reality continues throughout the film. Betsy is brought a brioche for breakfast in bed. It is large and puffy looking pastry and she comments that it looks like far too much for her to eat, but when she starts to cut it, it “falls into in to tiny bits.”<sup>24</sup> Its appearance was deceiving. On Betsy’s day off, she goes into the main town to explore. There she finds little to amuse herself but meets up with Wes Rand. While sitting at a café with him, she hears a Calypso singer playing a lively little tune. Rand tries to talk over it but she quiets him, insisting upon hearing him. Only then does she find out the lyrics are disparaging to the Holland family. This entertaining little ditty actually exposes all the family secrets, despite its innocent sound. Rand, now drunk, joins in the reproachful remarks, especially about his half-brother. He says, in Betsy’s presence, but to the world in general, “That’s Paul’s great weapon – words. He uses them the way other men use their fists.”<sup>25</sup> The field of deconstructionism would say that Paul’s use of words as something other than basic communication, and Rand’s perception of this, is what the theory tries to achieve. Words, like reality, do not have fixed meaning. Their power is not fixed and should be challenged. This back and forth between Holland and Rand signifies their inability to agree on the mutable meaning of their words and actions.

The scene becomes even more frightening when the Calypso singer moves toward the table, staring unblinkingly at Betsy. Rand has passed out inebriated and Betsy looks for help but there is none. Incessantly, the Calypso singer moves forward, zombie-like, forcing her to listen to the repetitive drone of his guitar and the strange lyrics which now include her own arrival to Saint Sebastian. Rand is not being gentlemanly (he has essentially left her unprotected) and the Calypso singer is not a lovely outdoor

<sup>23</sup> “I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>24</sup> The Val Lewton Screenplay Collection. “I Walked With A Zombie” [www.whiskeyloosetongue.com/scripts/zombie.htm](http://www.whiskeyloosetongue.com/scripts/zombie.htm). Pg 19.

<sup>25</sup> “I Walked With A Zombie. Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

entertainer. He is threatening and menacing and he has focused on Betsy specifically. This situation would make the audience squirm because it reverses typical social constructs, and in this case, creates a foreboding scene.

With *I Walked With a Zombie*, Lewton advanced the horror genre to a questioning state. He enmeshed typical fears and societal fears in 'backwards' situations to highlight the issue. By arguing the quality of Jessica's life in a zombified state, he draws attention to the importance of living our lives to the fullest. By presenting a Calypso singer as menacing he points out the danger of not listening to the content of various media (a commentary perhaps on Germany's belief in Aryan propaganda). Indeed, in each instance of point-counterpoint, the assumption is turned upside down and the audience is forced to reexamine that belief. *I Walked With A Zombie* deconstructed some of the most assumed binaries - life and death, slave and free, beauty and ugliness - and presented a world that existed somewhere in between.

### Post-Colonialism

Lewton presents a view of colonialism, slavery and hybridity that challenged assumptions at the time. There was a slight movement in Hollywood when Walter White, president of the NAACP, "met with sympathetic studio executives to discuss 'how to put a new African-American on the screen'."<sup>26</sup> The war also forced the public to re-examine its stance on racism and colonialism. America had joined in the battle to prevent a wholly discriminatory power from conquering Europe, committing genocide along the way. Holding sway over an entire nation of people and strong-arming them into creating wealth for yourself was an idea that was quickly losing popularity.

In *I Walked With A Zombie*, the island of Saint Sebastian is in the West Indies, and a British colony. The Holland family owns the sugar cane plantation and refinery that

---

<sup>26</sup> Nemerov, Alexander. *Icons of Grief: Val Lewton's Homefront Pictures*. Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 2005. Pg 100.

is the main industry for these people. Although there must have been original natives to the island, several references are made to the slaves that were brought to Saint Sebastian when it was colonized. When Betsy arrives, a coachman picks her up and they chat on the ride to Fort Holland. He tells her, "The enormous boat brought the long-ago Fathers and the long-ago Mothers of us all - chained down to the deep side floor," to which she replies, "But they came to a beautiful place, didn't they?"<sup>27</sup> Her comment strikes a modern audience as unfeeling, but it is meant to. Her character is still ignorant about her surroundings but the audience is supposed to know better and recognize it as an inappropriate remark. Betsy will show no more insensitivity, as she learns more about the history of Saint Sebastian.

Holland, when explaining the significance of the figurehead of Saint Sebastian in the garden shows a small amount of comprehension regarding the native peoples, but it is as a plantation owner, not as one of them. Holland represents the old model of proper colonialist. He says, "It was once the figurehead of a slave ship. That's where our people come from - from the misery and pain of slavery. For generations they found life a burden."<sup>28</sup> He says this as though their lives are no longer a burden, that paying them at the sugar factory is enough to undo the discrimination of hundreds of years. He also uses the pronoun 'our', which could indicate a sense of community with them, but more likely refers to an idea of ownership and possession.

Holland argues with his head planter, a native, about the sugar cane. He says, "No. It isn't a drought, Bayard. The rains are just a little late, that's all," to which Bayard replies, "I've seen the drought before, Mr. Holland. The cane's too dry - it's dangerous that way - it's the drought."<sup>29</sup> Holland dismisses him with a wave of the hand and is on to the next thing. He does not validate the native's opinion, even

---

<sup>27</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>28</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>29</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

though this man would not have been able to survive in agrarian society if he was not an excellent farmer. Holland is in denial about his crops and he is in complete denial that a native would know more than he about anything. Moments later his authority is again questioned when Betsy asks him to keep the whiskey decanter off the table at dinner to help curb Rand's drinking habits. His answer is more than just a "no." He insists on the grounds that, "It's always stood there, Miss Connell. I can remember it in my grandfather's time and my father's. I'm afraid it will have to remain. ... I have no sympathy for people who can't resist temptation."<sup>30</sup> This is the mindset of a Victorian-era colonialist. Things are done a certain way, just because that is how they have always been done. The cane is not too dry and the decanter stays – because he said so.

The most complete example of colonialist hybridity is Mrs. Rand. She is the widow of a missionary, with a grown son and a step-son. The audience is first introduced to her by reference, as Wes Rand is explaining the configuration of the dinner table. He notes that she is rarely at the house and prefers to spend her time at the village dispensary. It is Mrs. Rand who comes to the rescue when Betsy is being threatened by the Calypso singer. Mrs. Rand has learned how to handle these sorts of situations with the natives by her many years on the island. She has had to learn how to adapt, as well as create new connections between her world and theirs. Her main frustration is trying to overcome the superstition of the native peoples, yet she does so with great compassion. The audience sees her with a young boy who has come in for a minor scrape. As she dresses his wound she notices his voodoo talisman around his neck and very kindly says to him, "Ti-Peter, how do you expect to get to Heaven with one foot in the voodoo Houmfort and the other in the Baptist church?" When Betsy questions her about voodoo, she says, "I suppose I take it for granted. It's just part of everyday

---

<sup>30</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

life here."<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Rand, for all her kindness and truly good intentions, still assumes an authoritative voice over the native beliefs.

When Betsy takes Jessica to the Houmfort, they arrive to find a strange, unrecognizable ceremony. Betsy follows suit when she sees people walking up to the door and asking their questions to the 'god' behind the door. When she approaches, the door opens and Betsy enters a dark room, where it is revealed to be Mrs. Rand. It is Mrs. Rand that is the one behind the curtain, pulling the strings. She explains her motives to a very confused Betsy: "Then, almost accidentally, I discovered the secret of how to deal with them. There was a girl with a baby – again and again I begged her to boil the drinking water. She never would. Then I told her the god, Shango, would be pleased and kill the even spirits in the water if she boiled it. She boiled the water from then on."<sup>32</sup> It is clear to the audience that she did the right thing by improving the quality of life with boiled water, and that she truly wished to help these people. But a post-colonialist reading sees the condescending thinking associated with such a comment. Firstly, Mrs. Rand says, "I discovered the secret", indicating her ability to find and lay to claim to something heretofore unknown. Then she says, "how to deal with," noting an exchange that was not easily arrived at or on equal footing. Lastly, she refers to the natives as "them." This solidifies her obvious position as one who sees the natives as an "other." Even though Mrs. Rand is outwardly respectful, kind, and helpful to the natives, this kind of superiority is still apparent. Mrs. Rand represents a sort of incomplete evolution toward an equality.

Standing at that crossroads is Carre-four, the miserable zombie. Tall, imposing, frightening and looming, Carre-four, whose name literally means 'cross-roads', becomes a junction between these two worlds. He stands stoically, unflinchingly in the sugar cane field when Betsy is taking Jessica to the Houmfort, and allows them to

---

<sup>31</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

<sup>32</sup> "I Walked With A Zombie." Dir. By Jacques Tourneur. 1943.

pass. He is sent by the head voodoo priest to retrieve Jessica from her bed. He is a voodoo messenger between Saint Sebastian's native population and the colonialists, just as Alma is a 'civilised' messenger between the colonialist and the natives. In the character of Carre-four, Lewton did "what he did best: dwell in the past, dredge up pain and loss, and turn them toward events of the present day. ... Solitary, clad in rags in the plantation field, he embodies the links between slavery and zombies... ." <sup>33</sup>

The sympathy for (and fear of becoming) a zombie that the audience feels for Jessica, they also have for Carre-four. He is a complex character who is menacing only because he is inhuman. His actions are illogical and therefore unpredictable. Yet he is controlled by an outside force - in this case voodoo - although it could just as easily be the plantation owner. He is portrayed as gentle but staunch, often unmoving. In fact the only time he moves not on command by another is at the end, when he watches as Rand takes Jessica's now dead body out to sea. He follows them, unable to catch up, but with a kind of sadness, as if he had only wanted to take Jessica back with him, because she was one of them - the zombies - more than she was a plantation owner's wife. Lewton, too, placed emphasis on this shot. Nemerov writes, "The effect centers on the luminous wave breaking around Carre-four's feet. Lewton and Tourneur loved this image. We can tell, because they chose to show the same wave break not once but twice, to keep the screen covered in the dramatic white foam for as long as possible." <sup>34</sup> This shot is not only photographically beautiful, it starkly places the color black and the color white squarely against each other. In fact, Carre-four's figure is barely visible against the backdrop of the sand. When the foamy wave washes on shore, contrast flows behind him, making him not only visible but silhouetted. It reminds the audience that the "other" is only an "other" when it is compared to something unlike it. It also suggests that one should look more carefully

---

<sup>33</sup> Nemerov, 103.

<sup>34</sup> Nemerov, 226.

about their surroundings if they are to perceive all that is there – and it may take a changed point of view to do so.

Lewton's efforts to present a film with sensitivities to native cultures, while maintaining his dictum to create a frightening "other world" for the studio are prevalent in *I Walked With a Zombie*. Although there are some characters who display colonialist views, they are also the least-liked characters. It is especially impressive to have done so at a time when the US had only just given up Haiti as a colony (but retained control of its finances until 1947). But World War II was a wake-up call to many, that subordination of another race or religion was dangerous territory and had no place in the modern world. As such, a post-colonial reading of *I Walked With A Zombie* is particularly relevant.

This film managed to reside between the sensibilities of the classical Hollywood style and the concerns of the time. It presented the survivors and victims of a decaying society in its use of the Gothic genre. A middleworld in the deconstructed reality had its victims and survivors. So, too, did colonialist ideals, and the collapse of such an outmoded construct. Lewton and Tourneur transplanted the fears of the unknown future, the changing face of African-American characterisations, and the growing acceptance of female capability and equality into their film *I Walked With A Zombie*.

### *Bibliography*

Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.

Bansak, Edmund. *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003.

Fujiwara, Chris. *The Cinema of Nightfall: Jacques Tourneur*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998.

"History of the Ship's Figurehead." [http://www.geocities.com/cptblood\\_1999/figurehead.html](http://www.geocities.com/cptblood_1999/figurehead.html)

Nemerov, Alexander. *Icons of Grief: Val Lewton's Homefront Pictures*. Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 2005.

Shrage, Laurie. "Feminist Film Aesthetics: A Contextual Approach." *Hypatia*. Vol. 5. No. 2. Summer 1990.

"Val Lewton Screenplay Collection, The." *I Walked With A Zombie*.  
<http://www.whiskeyloosetongue.com/zombie.html>.

### *Filmography*

Tourneur, Jacques. *I Walked With A Zombie*. 69 minutes. RKO Studios, 1943. DVD.  
Distributed by Warner Brothers, 2005.