

Caroline Damesek

Dr. Daelena Tinnin-Gadson

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### **Who Has the Privilege of Being Hunted and Who Deserves To Survive in *Us***

*Us* (2019), a horror film written and directed by Jordan Peele, tells the story of Adelaide Wilson and her family as they are stalked and attacked by evil doppelgangers of themselves. The film begins with a description of the “miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States”, a creepy depiction of an advertisement for the charity fundraiser “Hands Across America”, a flashback to a traumatic event from Adelaide's childhood, and a disturbing view of caged rabbits before showing the present day Wilson family. Though Adelaide exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder such as being frightened easily, the Wilsons are presented as a happy, “ordinary” family. As it was released two years after Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, a horror film presenting an “unsettling metaphor for the sweep of black and white relations in the United States” (Dargis), Roth argues that audiences of *Us* “are likely to approach the film expecting it to be about race”, but that the film’s primary commentary is on class. It also critiques privilege, as the monstrous doubles are revealed to have lived disturbingly tragic lives trapped in tunnels, opposite to the Wilsons, who had the ability to lead normal lives. While the film’s central commentary is not about race, *Us* engages with various ideas explored in the Black horror genre such as “Blacks in horror”, the privilege of being hunted, and the Final Girl trope, to underscore its cultural critique. Through the Wilson family and their doubles, *Us* asks the questions of “Who has the privilege of being hunted?” and “Who deserves to survive?” in order to comment on class and privilege in the United States.

## “Blacks in Horror”

Coleman defines “Blacks in horror” as films depicting “Blacks and Blackness in the context of horror, even if the horror film is not wholly or substantially focused on either one” (6). Coleman’s definition of “Blacks in horror” seems to explain the tension between the film’s lack of direct racial commentary (as argued by Roth) and its cultural critique of the representation of Blackness in America. As Coleman explains, “these films possess a particular discursive power in their treatment of Blackness” (6). Roth points out how Peele stated that *Us* “proves a very valid and different point than *Get Out*, which is, not everything is about race.” However, the film *not* being about race provides commentary on the depiction of race in film, exposing the tendency of audiences to assume the film will be about race if it features Black characters, thus illustrating the discursive power of Peele’s treatment of Blackness in *Us*. Roth also mentions other instances where race comes into play, such as Gabe (Adelaide’s husband) making “a joke about the whiteness of hide-a-keys” and wearing a Howard sweatshirt throughout the film, a character making a joke about O.J. Simpson, and the Wilsons meeting up with the Tylers, their family friends who are white and appear to be wealthier than them. Roth suggests that these elements draw attention to race in a way that criticizes the audience’s tendency to project “what they take any film centered on a black family, or made by a black filmmaker, to be about.” Roth’s analysis aligns with Coleman’s idea of “Blacks in horror” by showing how, in not being centered around Blackness, the film presents a type of discourse around Blackness.

Though the film hints that the Tyler family is wealthier than the Wilson family, it still features a gradual presentation of the Wilson family’s privileges. Before the family is even shown (at this point in the film viewers have seen the younger version of Adelaide, but not present day Adelaide and her family), the audience sees a sticker depicting a happy family on the

back of their car, which denotes a type of privilege. The Wilsons are introduced as they are driving to their vacation home (Adelaide's childhood home) for a family trip, which indicates another form of privilege. Additionally, Peele makes it clear that the family is comfortable financially and emotionally (other than Adelaide's paranoia). *Us* subverts the audience's stereotypical expectations surrounding privilege, class, and race, which is just the beginning of the film's subversions.

### **Who Has the Privilege of Being Hunted**

The Wilson family's privilege is literally the reason why they are hunted by their doubles. When the doubles emerge, Adelaide's double explains:

Once upon a time, there was a girl. And the girl had a shadow. The two were connected ... When the girl ate, her food was given to her warm and tasty. But when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbit, raw and bloody. On Christmas, the girl received wonderful toys, soft and cushy. But the shadow's toys were so sharp and cold, they'd slice through her fingers when she tried to play with them. The girl met a handsome prince and fell in love, but the shadow, at that same time, met Abraham. It didn't matter if she loved him or not. ... Then the girl had her first child, a beautiful baby girl. But the shadow, she gave birth to a little monster. ... The girl had a second child ... They had to cut her open and take him from her belly. The shadow had to do it all herself. ... So, you see, the shadow hated the girl so much for so long, until one day the shadow realized she was being tested by God.

This description not only explains the doubles' motive for hunting the Wilsons, but it also provides commentary on class and privilege. Though it is extreme, it calls into question why some are granted privilege over others. The doubles become evil as a result of being born into

dreadful lives, which does not justify their violent actions, but does criticize the roles of privilege and class in society.

This scene illustrates why the Wilsons have the privilege of being hunted: they are the ones who were born into privilege. Briefel and Ngai explain that horror films' representation of fear suggests that being frightened is "paradoxically a sign of empowerment", which describes the Wilsons precisely. They are the ones being frightened because they have the privilege and therefore have something to lose. Briefel and Ngai add that being hunted signals that being in a state of fear is not normal. The Wilsons are shocked when they are hunted because this is not how life normally operates for them. For their doubles, however, this is normal. The doubles are accustomed to living in a state of fear and despair. Briefel and Ngai also touch on the ability to move in and out of a space. In the example of *Us*, the Wilson family has the privilege of going where they want, while their doubles have been confined to the tunnels for their entire existence (until they escape to hunt the Wilson family).

Even though the Wilsons do not deserve to be hunted, the doubles did nothing to deserve being born into their horrifying conditions. Through the drastically appalling example of the doubles, *Us* criticizes the role of class and privilege in the United States by revealing how the class (or, more generally, the situation) people are born into can determine their level of privilege. After Gabe offers money, his car, and his boat, then asks: "What are you people?", Adelaide's double responds: "We're Americans." This striking scene posits that even though the Wilsons and their doubles are all Americans, they have experienced vastly different lives due to the situations they were born into.

### **Who Deserves to Survive**

When Adelaide kills her double at the end of the film, she becomes the “Final Girl”, which Carol Cover defined as the woman who is the sole survivor and ultimately the person left to tell the story (Dent). Dent emphasizes that the Final Girl trope is typically manifested through an implied moral superiority of the survivor. Adelaide is deemed morally superior until her morality is called to question as her true identity is revealed at the end of the film. Adelaide’s identity as the original double undercuts the audience’s judgements and expectations, critiquing viewers’ initial assumption that one of the Adelaides deserves to survive more than the other. This subversion critiques society on a larger scale, asking why some are deemed “worthy” to survive over others.

Dent also discusses how in claiming the new privilege of being the hunter, the Final Girl connects and subsumes both roles within her consciousness. Adelaide, though she is initially “the hunted”, grows increasingly able to fight back until she ultimately kills her double. In the final battle, Adelaide and her double are equalized to the point that it is unclear who will kill the other first. The combination between the two becoming increasingly similar and the revelation that Adelaide is the original double suggests that Adelaide and her double are two versions of the (inherently) same soul which have changed and developed in opposite directions depending on the situation they were born into (or swapped into). In other words, the film implies that were it not for being raised in the tunnels, Adelaide’s double would have turned out to be “normal”, and if it were not for Adelaide switching places with her double when they were young (this is where it gets complicated, so to clarify, “Adelaide” refers to the character born in the tunnels who swapped places with her doppelganger to be able to live the normal life above ground), she would have been the one leading a life of misery. This implication is the root of the film’s commentary on class and privilege.

**Conclusion**

*Us* serves as a clever commentary on class and privilege, leading audiences to consider who has the privilege of being hunted and who deserves to survive. It also reveals insights into the Black Horror genre as a whole, demonstrating how even when a film is not about race, it may indirectly comment on race. The horror in this film exposes the consequences of privilege and class distinctions in the United States, calling the audience to examine society with a new understanding.

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