

Title:

Bone Flowers: Global Folklore of The Living Dead

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757

Summary:

Death is a universal concept, although how it is treated and looked upon varies from culture to culture, from religion to religion. While beings that come back from the dead are common themes in the mythologies and folklore of various peoples, there are often cultural differences that bely even the most prevalent "themes" among them. Some have theorized that these tales are common because of the equally common separation anxiety people feel towards the dying and dead.

Keywords:

mental health, separation anxiety, anxiety, fear and anxiety

Article Body:

Death is as common a theme in the world of the arts as it is an event in everyday life. The point where a single, living being is separated from other living souls has become as common a subject of literature and art as any other aspect of human life. It has also inspired in countless cultures various concepts on what happens beyond the mortal coil. This is understandable, as the dying tend to feel anxiety at the idea of death. The bereaved, for their part, go through a period of grief and separation anxiety. Arguably, this aspect of human psychology regarding death can be used as an explanation for the widespread - nearly universal, by some accounts - tales of the "undead."

Achieving or stumbling upon tales of life after death appears in almost every major continent. Ghosts are prominent players in these tales, naturally. These incorporeal beings generally are attributed to have a form of separation anxiety, fundamentally attached to something they valued or held dear in life. The unwillingness to leave also grants them the ability to manifest in the mortal world on a variety of levels. While Western concepts of ghosts are incapable of influencing the mortal world on a physical level, they are more than able to damage the mental health of the living. In contrast, Chinese ghosts come in a variety of forms, but all invariably are capable of visiting physical harm upon the living.

It is not only the spirit that is subject to being turned into one of the "undead," as the living tend to attach emotions to the body as well. Zombies are

corpses brought back from the dead through arcane and occult rituals, are a prime example of this. The drauger of Norse mythology also fits into this category, as they are corpses that resist being brought to the burial mound or refuse to stay buried. Some analysts of the literature and mythology surrounding these beings have noticed that most people regard these creatures with fear and anxiety. There are some that theorize that this stems more from cultural and religious norms about death than society at large. Most people have come to believe that the bodies of the departed should be incapable of motion, so an animated corpse is something to be feared.

However, this apparent idea does not extend to forms of "un-death" that are both spirit and flesh, such as the Romanian strigoi - more commonly referred to as vampires. These creatures are often seen as having both the body and the soul of the deceased, but require something else to continue corporeal existence. This is apparently a prevalent phenomenon among various cultures, though the substance varies from culture to culture. Europeans consider the blood as the sustaining factor in the existence of vampires, while most African equivalents of the creatures subsist on human feces or bones. Regardless, these creatures are traditionally regarded with fear and anxiety by mortals, particularly the ones that are being used as "food." While the vampire image popularized by Hollywood's version of Dracula has become a creature of wonder and sensuality, most other variants are still objects of horror.

One interesting tangent to the "vampire" category above would be the variations to be found in Chinese and Japanese culture. The jiang shi (hopping corpses) of China, for example, are comparable to their Western counterparts, except that it is not the blood in and of itself that feeds them. Rather, the jiang shi are said to lack something called chi - the essence of life - and require taking it from the living to stay extant. Most often, the strength of human chi is concentrated in the blood. The end result is that the victim is drained of all blood, as consequence of the feeding. The gaki of Japan are similar creatures, but are often described as being more human in countenance than the jiang shi. Also, they take the chi directly, leaving a body that appears to have died while asleep.

Regardless of what form or variation is taken, the state of "undeath" is a prevalent one in the various cultures of the world. The fear and anxiety associated with death often attaches itself to these mythical creatures, even if pop culture has made some forms more appealing than others. In some ways, the undead are considered a means of coping with the separation anxiety people experience around dying people. At the same time, they also act as allegories for what could happen if certain cultural and religious norms are ignored in life.

