**Invasion(s) of the Body Snatchers**

Fans of old horror movies may recall two versions of a sci-fi classic—*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. On the surface, both Don Siegel's original 1956 movie and Philip Kaufman's 1978 remake tell the same story. While humans sleep, duplicates of people emerge from alien seed pods and take the place of the nearest humans, killing the people they replace. The pod people are like their human models in nearly every way, and have the same memories, but the pod people have no emotions. Also, they are intolerant of differences in others. It is an unnerving story, yet even though the two films tell the same story and have many similar characters, their themes are as different as the eras in which they were produced.

One significant change in the 1978 version is the setting. While the 1956 film takes place in a stereotypical small town, Kaufman’s remake shifts the action to San Francisco. The original setting suggests that something sinister is happening in every small town in the United States; evil pod people are infiltrating the very foundation of American life. But San Francisco is the opposite: it is a city known for being liberal and open to new ideas. To the average viewer, San Francisco suggests New Age trends, the drugged-out sixties, and politically radical students at the university in Berkeley.

The characters in both films are similar, but *whereas* the main character, Bennell, is a doctor in the original (a person who is supposed to be able to cure sickness), in the 1978 version he is merely a health inspector (a person who can fine people who might cause sickness). Bennell’s circle of friends is different, too. In the original, he has a successful writer friend and a psychologist friend, but in the remake the writer is an unsuccessful poet while the psychologist is a hugely successful writer of pop psychology books. The poet views the psychologist as a “sellout,” someone who has given up his integrity in return for money and things. Significantly, in both movies the psychologist is deceptive: Bennell trusts him, but the viewer learns that he is actually a pod person who has been misleading Bennell.

The changes in setting and character reveal the most significant difference between the films, that of theme.
Comparison-Contrast Essay

Strong Student Model  continued

The Siegel film is recognized as an allegory about the communist scare of the fifties. In the 1956 film, the sudden change of friends and family into hollow replicas of themselves—emotionally dead plant people who long for conformity above all else—is a disguised way of questioning the madness of the communist witch-hunts that marked the fifties. At one point the psychologist character hypocritically dismisses signs of the invasion as “an epidemic of mass hysteria” because of “worry about what’s going on in the world.” This statement could also describe the fears of communism in the fifties.

By 1978 the fear of communism was no longer dominant. Thus Kaufman’s version offers a different allegory, one about the spoiled idealism of the 1960s. The choice of San Francisco for the invasion is ironic: San Francisco is the last city the viewer would expect to be overtaken by an invasion of conformity. When Bennell is first approached by a woman whose boyfriend has changed, he jokes about discovering “whether he’s become a Republican.” Yet nearly everyone in the movie eventually conforms. The poet’s disdain for the psychologist who sells out makes his own later change into a pod person especially telling. “You can still have the same life, the same clothes, the same car,” the poet says, as if that’s all that matters. Pod people care about the prizes of materialism, about having the right clothes and the right car. Though the 1956 version ended on a hopeful note (the hero rallies the government to stop the pod people), the remake ends with the hero himself transformed into a pod person. Everyone is a sellout, the film seems to say.

Comparing these two versions of Invasion of the Body Snatchers reveals that some movies are not “timeless,” but instead are very much about their time. That two films so similar on the surface can be about such different things is surprising. The viewer can imagine yet another remake of this movie revealing, through the device of the pod people, that our current fears about ourselves are coming true.

Writing Workshop

7. Interprets theme of first film based on history of the 1950s.

8. Supports interpretation of theme with quotations from the film.

9. Uses historical changes as transition to discussion of second film’s theme.


11. Concludes with observation derived from comparison of the two films.
Remaking Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Horror movie fans may have seen this classic oldie—*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Don Siegel’s 1956 original and Philip Kaufman’s 1978 remake of this movie tell the same story. An alien invasion takes place in the form of an evil plant life that grows giant seed pods. While humans sleep, duplicates of people emerge from the seed pods and kill the humans. But because the aliens take the faces and forms of the people they kill, no one can tell that an alien has replaced their father or one of their neighbors. The pod people are like the humans they kill in every way. They have the same memories, but there is one difference: The pod people have no emotions. It is a scary story, a story about our paranoid fears that someone we know has changed even though they look the same. The two films are very similar in plot and characters, but the themes of the two films are very different.

The 1956 movie takes place in a small town, just like the ones you see on 1950s TV shows. This setting makes it seem that there is evil in small-town America, which as everyone knows is the typical American lifestyle. The 1978 movie is set in San Francisco. San Francisco is a city known at present for New Age trends, but in the sixties it was known for druggies and politically radical students. It is a very modern city, a city on the cutting edge of American culture. That the 1978 movie changes the setting to San Francisco seems to mean that whereas the invasion took place in America’s heartland in 1956, it has now moved to the bastions of liberal America.

The characters in both films are pretty much the same. There is still a leading man named Bennell, and he still has a girlfriend (though her name is changed from Becky to a more formal Elizabeth). He still has a friend who is a psychologist and another friend who is a writer. In the remake, the writer is a poor poet, and the psychologist is a very successful writer of psychology books. The poet calls the psychologist a “sellout,” meaning he thinks the psychologist has given up his integrity in return for money and things. In both movies the psychologist turns out to be a pod person: Bennell trusts him, but the viewer learns that he is a pod person and has been misleading Bennell.
Comparison-Contrast Essay

Average Student Model  continued

Despite these differences, the movie is pretty much the same story. The biggest difference is in the theme. The 1956 movie is supposedly about the communist scare of the fifties. In that earlier movie, when friends and family change overnight into replicas of those people but are really emotionally dead plant people, this is a disguised way of saying that the communist-hunting investigations of the time are madness. At one point the psychologist character calls the signs of the invasion “an epidemic of mass hysteria” because of “worry about what’s going on in the world.” This statement could also describe the fears of communism in the fifties.

The 1978 movie is a different sort of allegory, one about how the sixties left people empty and emotionally dead plant people. This is why the story is set in San Francisco. When Bennell is first approached by Elizabeth because she is concerned about her boyfriend, Bennell jokes about discovering “whether he’s become a Republican.” This is a clear sign of how liberal these characters are, yet they eventually become pod people too. And the poet’s disgust about the psychologist who sells out vanishes after the poet changes into a pod person. “You can still have the same life, the same clothes, the same car,” the poet says, as if that’s all that matters. Pod people care about the prizes of materialism, about having the right clothes and the right car. Though the 1956 version ends on a hopeful note (Bennell convinces the government to stop the pod people), the remake ends with Bennell turning into a pod person. All the sixties liberals have sold out, the film seems to say.

These two versions of Invasion of the Body Snatchers are alien invasion movies on one level, but on another level they are about political movements. One attacks conservatives of the fifties, and the other attacks liberals of the seventies. Clearly movies can be used by filmmakers to send different messages to audiences, and we should all be careful about what messages we take away from movies.
Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Old horror movies are my thing, and I watch a lot of them on video and late-night TV. I am going to compare and contrast two versions of an old movie with the same title. The 1956 movie of Invasion of the Body Snatchers and the 1978 movie have the same story. Aliens invade Earth. The aliens have the form of an evil plant life that grows giant seed pods. While humans sleep, exact duplicates of the humans come out of the seed pods and kill the humans. The aliens take the faces of the people they kill, so no one can tell the difference. The pod people are like the humans they kill in almost every way. They have the same memories, but they don’t have emotions. It is scary to think that maybe someone we know has changed into a weirdo even though they look the same. But even though the movies are very similar, they are very different.

The 1956 movie takes place in a small town. It is just your normal small town with white picket fences and trains and milkmen. It looks like any small town you’ve ever seen in a movie. This setting makes it seem like there is an evil in small-town America, which as everyone knows is the typical American lifestyle. The 1978 movie is set in San Francisco. San Francisco is a city known for having lots of liberals and drug-users and already seems to me like it has been invaded by another kind of alien. It is a very modern city in the worst sense. Moving the setting to San Francisco means that even though the invasion took place in small towns in 1956, the aliens have now infiltrated and moved into the big city. Maybe this explains why San Francisco can sometimes seem strange to outsiders.

The characters in both films are pretty much the same. The main man is still named Bennell, but now he is played by Donald Sutherland instead of Kevin McCarthy. He still has a girlfriend, and a friend who is a psychologist, and another friend who is a writer. In the remake, the writer is a poor poet, and the psychologist is a very rich writer of psychology books. The psychologist is played by Leonard Nimoy in the 1978 version, and because he is famous for playing Mr. Spock, who is an alien, he is especially creepy playing a real person. In both movies the psychologist turns out to be a pod person: Bennell trusts him, but the viewer learns that he is a pod person.
Comparison-Contrast Essay

Weak Student Model  continued

Even with these differences, the movie is pretty much the same story. The biggest difference is the ending. The 1956 movie ends with Bennell getting away from the pod people after an exciting chase. He gets interviewed by the police, and at first they don’t believe him, but by the end of the movie they discover the pods, and the entire nation is placed on the alert about the invasion of the pod people. It is a hopeful ending and means that people can triumph over creepy characters. It is a testament to American fighting spirit and our ability to beat even the worst enemies. This is pretty typical of movies produced shortly after World War II.

The 1978 movie ends with Bennell becoming a pod person. It is very tricky, and at first the viewer thinks he is faking being a pod person. He looks around like he knows that he’s surrounded by pod people, but at the very end he is approached by a woman who is still a human, and he screams like the pod people, so we know he has been turned into one of them. This seems to mean that the big-city lifestyle changes people and makes them behave in ways that they regret. It is a very downbeat ending and shows how we are our own worst enemies in life.

These two versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are alien invasion movies on one level, but on another level they are about how Americans respond to outside threats. In the first one, the threat is met with the promise of a strong government. The people seem to just let the aliens win in the second movie. Clearly the filmmaker of the 1978 version is suggesting that Americans are not as strong as they once were. That thought makes this horror movie even scarier than it might be if it was just another alien invasion movie.

Writing Workshop

8. Compares the endings of the two films and what they might mean. Does not identify this third point of comparison as a discussion of theme.

9. Interpretation of the two endings seems far-fetched and is unsupported by details or quotations.

10. Summarizes the major difference between the two films. Parallel structure would make these two sentences clearer and stronger.

11. Conclusion does not flow logically from differences examined in the essay.
Comparison-Contrast Essay

Rubric for Evaluation

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Writing Progress to Date (Writing Portfolio)

The strongest aspect of this writing is ______________________________________________________
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The final version shows improvement over the rough draft in this way: __________________________
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A specific improvement over past assignments in your portfolio is _____________________________
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A skill to work on in future assignments is ________________________________________________
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Additional comments: ________________________________________________________________
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