

# Us (2019)



Four eerie strangers show up in the driveway of the Wilson's cabin. (c) Universal Pictures

Writer-director-producer Jordan Peele's second film may be less humorous than his [Get Out](#), but it certainly is as hard hitting. I heard Mr. Peele say during a public radio interview that the race of the family isn't as important in this film. Though true within the film, outside of it race is important in that this is the rare film in the horror genre centering on a black family—and that the public responded to the film by making it the number one film at the box office during its opening weekend. We will see if we as a people have reached a racial milestone if succeeding films featuring a black family also are successful.

Be prepared to be confused at times when you go. I am still trying to figure out some of the bizarre things I saw. Indeed, virtually everyone I have heard speaking about the film on public radio say that they want to see the film again—even a person who did not like the film. Peele provides little by way of explanation, so I recommend that you see the film with others so you can share insights.

Instead of race, it is class or the division between those living in comfort and those in poverty, that Peele wants us to

consider this time. In the opening sequence of the film young Adelaide (Madison Curry) is watching a TV promo about 1986's "Hands Across America" charity event. An announcer says, "Six million people will tether themselves together to fight hunger in America." This event, involving millions of people supposedly holding hands clear across the continent, was intended to raise \$100 million, but reached just \$34 million, and only \$15 million reached the supporting charities after the sponsors deducted their promotional expenses. Critics claim that much ballyhooed project did nothing to alleviate the systemic causes of poverty.

The present day story begins with the Wilson family traveling to the family cabin near Santa Cruz where they will hook up with their white friends the Tylers. Grown-up Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o) and husband, Gabe ([Winston Duke](#)) have two children, Zora ([Shahadi Wright Joseph](#)) and Jason ([Evan Alex](#)). Adelaide had been reluctant to return to the area because she still has bad memories of an event there in 1986, something that she apparently has not shared with her husband. Back in 1986 she had wandered from her preoccupied parents on the Santa Cruz boardwalk to see the beach. Spying an empty but lit up hall of mirrors, she had entered it. After winding through the darkened maze, she had encountered her doppelgänger, who definitely was not friendly. She receives no help processing her horrific experience because her parents insisted she must have seen her reflection in the mirrors and not someone else.

Husband Gabe assures her that everything will be fine, but we can tell she is not convinced. There is a touch of humor when he pilots an old motorboat by the cabin, obviously wanting to impress their friends later, but no one is impressed by it. There is an ominous feeling when we see an overhead shot of the four walking across the beach with their extremely long shadows (anticipating their doppelgängers?) that look like 11-11, repeating the numbers of the Jeremiah 11:11 sign held by a homeless man. As you can see at the beginning of this

review, the passage is a somber prophecy of judgment and doom, portending the horrific events about to befall the two families. There is a scare on the beach involving Jason, while the Wilson adults are conversing with the Tylers, and then the friends part to return to their cabins.

That night four figures clad in red coveralls and holding large golden scissors are spotted standing in the driveway of the Wilsons' cabin. Gabe goes out, baseball bat in hand, orders them to leave, but they just stare at him. After a standoff, he is attacked, but despite a wounded leg manages to get back into the house. The four intruders, plainly doppelgängers of the Wilson's, attack the house. Gabe's doppelgänger is bearded; Jason wears a mask atop his head, and so his evil double has a mask with which he covers his disfigured face. Pluto, as he is named, is especially creepy because he scurries around on all four limbs like a spider or crab. Except for Adelaide's, whose double is referred to as "Red," the other three intruders communicate in grunts and groans. Adelaide/Red speaks in a raspy distorted voice. In her speech to the terrified Adelaide she provides sort of a history of what is transpiring:

Once upon a time, there was a girl and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected, tethered together. And the girl ate, her food was given to her warm and tasty. But when the shadow was hungry, he 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 sliced 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 had Abraham, it didn't matter if she loved him or not. He was tethered to the girl's prince after all. Then the girl had her first child, a beautiful second child, a boy this time. They had to cut her open and take him from her belly. The shadow had to do it all herself. She named him Pluto, he was born to love

fire. 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.

(Quote from IMDB's website)

The Wilsons are not the only ones besieged by doppelgängers. There is a horrific scene at the Tylers wherein they and their twin daughters are attacked by their four doppelgängers, and soon we see the world outside is also under siege. Bodies lie strewn everywhere. Trying to flee in the Tylers fancy car that Gabe had admired, the Wilsons see at the beach a long line of doppelgängers, all in red coveralls, holding hands in a seemingly endless line, just like in the 1986 Hands Across America event. There are bloody fights, chases, and rabbits, lots of rabbits. (We first saw hundreds of them in cages at the beginning of the film.) Later they are loose in the corridor of what seems to be a large laboratory facility. The film's conclusion includes a surprise concerning Adelaide and what happened to her back in that hall of mirrors in 1986. Wow!

This film is like a Rorschach test, leaving viewers to "see" different societal meanings in it. Several of the posters for the film even incorporate ink blots, and one includes the statement "We are our worst enemies." This in turn calls to mind the famous saying from Walt Kelly's Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us," hence perhaps the title. This portrayal of the dark side is reinforced when Red's response to the question of who are they is "We're Americans." Other horror films might portray the evil menace coming from another planet or from "others"—all outside ourselves, but Peele bids us look inward. Slavery and lynching; the demonization and rejection of immigrants; the denigration and occasional murder of gays; the presence of so many hungry and homeless in a society in which almost \$70 billion is spent on pets; the smothering patriarchy—the latter, by the way, is overturned in the movie when Adelaide tells her hapless husband to shut up,

that she is now in charge of the family and will tell them what to do.

Peele injects lots of doubles into the film. Beginning with a doppelgänger for everyone, there are the twin “11s” of the Jeremiah reference, the overhead shot of the four Wilsons walking on the beach, their long shadows also looking like twin “11s,” the 11:11 that Jason points to on their clock, the two nuclear families—a pair of parents and a pair of children, and in the case of the Tylers, actual twin daughters.

As in so many disaster films the government is blamed for creating what are called “The Tethered” in some kind of a super secret project, keeping the clones below Santa Cruz in a lab replete with tunnels—before the film started we were told that there are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the U.S. This massive conspiracy defies logic, but logic might be the last thing to expect in such a nightmarish tale.

There is so much in this film that, I repeat, it ought to be seen with a group that meets afterward for discussion. People of faith will be intrigued by the Jeremiah quotation and by the end of Red’s speech in which she says she is being tested by God. Given the apocalyptic-like climax, what might she mean by this? How is this view compatible with the New Testament teachings about a loving God? Also, in regard to my earlier mention of doubles, a portion of Jesus’ teachings in Luke came to mind that includes doubles. Matthew records eight Beatitudes, of which Luke gives but three—and he pairs each of them with a “Woe.” Might Peele translate Luke’s Greek “ouai” (woe) as “Horror!”? Here is the complete section with the three pairings:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

#### Luke 6:20-25

This goes well with a parable, also in Luke (the gospel writer who seems especially interested in the poor), The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Paired together is a rich man who had neglected a beggar outside his house, and when both die, their stations are reversed, the rich man now begging for relief from the sufferings of hell and the poor man resting comfortably in the bosom of Abraham. For a horror film to lead to such musings it indicates that Mr. Peele has raised a genre that so often intends just to thrill and shock to a much higher level. (I haven't even mentioned the many references to other movies and such, but will leave it for you to discover them!)

If you can stand the shocks and the blood, this will be a film that will occupy your mind long after you leave the theater. Given everything I've just written, the director must be one of the most clever artists working in Hollywood. Who would have thought that a horror movie could add to the ongoing discussion and debate about America's growing problem of economic and class inequality?

*This review will be in the April issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.*