

# The Walking (Gendered) Dead: A Feminist Rhetorical Critique of Zombie Apocalypse Television Narrative

John Greene  
Michaela D.E. Meyer

*This essay presents a feminist rhetorical criticism of AMC's *The Walking Dead*, exposing how hegemonic gender roles reinforce patriarchy within the series. We connect previous research on horror film and television, particularly in the zombie apocalypse genre, to representations of gender roles in popular culture. Our analysis reveals five categories of gendered representation: sexist rhetoric, division of labor, the role of protector, White male leadership, and the role of the dutiful wife. The *Walking Dead* narrative features women as incapable of surviving the apocalypse without men, renders them slaves to products of consumption (such as clothing), and ultimately strips them of autonomous decision making. We connect these images to the never-ending process of consumption and creation perpetuated by zombie narratives as representative of our social unease with capitalism, consumerism and its link to gendered identity.*

Over fifty years after George A. Romero forever changed the horror genre with *Night of the Living Dead*, 5.3 million viewers watched once again as the dead rose to devour the living in the series premiere of AMC's *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010). *The Walking Dead* is one of the most-watched pieces of zombie fiction ever created, and is the first that has been successfully launched on cable television. Robert Kirkman, the creator of the graphic novel series on which the show is based, stated that "it's something that succeeds in movies all the time, but I don't think anybody has seen survival horror on TV before" (Stelter, 2010). The show has won numerous awards, and was the highest ranking premiere among 18-49 year-olds in AMC's history for an original series (AMC, 2010). The series chronicles the story of Rick Grimes, a Georgia sheriff's deputy, who wakes up in the hospital after being shot in the line of duty to find a hospital littered with dead bodies and a door marked "Don't Open, Dead Inside." As he examines the door, there is groaning from the other side, and dead, decomposing fingers appear. Confused and terrified, Rick flees the hospital and is rescued by a man and his son who explain that the dead have returned to life to devour the living.

AMC's *The Walking Dead* is a rather unique text for analysis because of its production style. While *The Walking Dead* is a television drama, it is produced to have the look and feel of a full-length feature film (Stelter, 2010). The series was developed and the pilot was directed by Frank Darabont, a director well known for *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile* (Stelter, 2010). Fox International handled the international broadcast of the pilot, treating it much like a theatrical film-release (AMC, 2010). In fact, the series premiered in dozens of countries at the same time and was backed by a marketing budget unprecedented for television productions, including "organized zombie-walking stunts in about two dozen cities" (Stelter, 2010, p. 1). This combination of attributes offers a unique opportunity to explore how media genre traditions and conventions impact televisual representation.

This essay examines the representation of gender in AMC's *The Walking Dead* through feminist rhetorical criticism. We are specifically interested in how depictions of women in *The Walking Dead* potentially reinforce hegemonic gender roles. Moreover, given previous research on horror film and television, we situate *The Walking Dead* within the more specific zombie apocalypse genre, a format that influences society's conception of gender roles. The representation of hegemonic gender roles reinforces patriarchy in this particular series, which is particularly troubling for a 21<sup>st</sup> century television series. Following our critique, we offer broader cultural implications of these representations with respect to television and genre.

John Greene (B.A., Christopher Newport University, 2013) recently completed his undergraduate work in Communication at Christopher Newport University and is currently employed as a Corporate Communications Associate at Reed Integration, Inc. Michaela D.E. Meyer (Ph.D., Ohio University, 2004) is an Associate Professor of Communication at Christopher Newport University who specializes in identity, media and cultural studies. A previous version of this essay won the Top Undergraduate Student Paper for the Student Clubs Section at NCA.

### **Tracing Gender Monstrosity: Horror, Zombies and the Feminine in Media Representation**

Films and television shows often help construct and reinforce hegemonic gender roles. Feminist rhetorical critics often examine media discourses to “critique sex roles, the patriarchal family, and the false consciousness created by the mythology of romance and heterosexuality” (Dow, 1996, p. 28). Feminist readings of television narrative reveal “both continuities and discontinuities over time as scholars have struggled to make sense of why media matter and what women want media to do” (Brunsdon & Spigel, 2008, p. 4). In general, feminist approaches to media studies seek to expose the ways in which women’s representation is linked to larger cultural issues of gender oppression. For example, in Dow’s (1992) analysis of *Murphy Brown*, she argues television narratives that “allow women the opportunity to act like men” (p. 146) offer the illusion that “once women receive equal opportunity, feminism has won” (p. 153). She connects historical and contemporary feminist discourses to this representation in order to expose how women’s choices about careers and/or personal lives are constrained. Similarly, Sibielski (2010) analyzes the television series *Veronica Mars* for its complicated discourse of feminism at the turn of the century. She explains that media seek to entice female viewers to programs as potential consumers, a practice that “both exploits and commodifies feminist politics” (p. 323). Meyer, Fallah and Wood (2011) take a different approach by examining the way women’s representation in media narratives demonstrates “madness.” By tracing the cultural process by which “madness” is articulated, they illustrate how the meaning of madness is contingent on its connection with gender: male representations of madness are linked to rational thought and/or intellectual superiority while female representations of madness are linked to uncontrollable desires and/or emotions. In each of these cases, feminist rhetorical critics seek to expose how gender matters through media representation.

Obviously, multiple types and genres of media narrative exist, and feminist critique has traversed these entertainment conventions. The horror genre is no exception. Women’s bodies are culturally positioned as a border between life and death, thus, gender is often implied in monstrous representation. Feminist theorist Kristeva (1982) explains this link observing that human consciousness is both repelled by and attracted to horror, which produces a kind of emotional attachment; “One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones” (p. 9). In other words, we are simultaneously attracted to and repelled by horror, thus, representations of horror in mediated content offer a unique cultural artifact produced to elicit this human response. In particular, horror genres are often explicitly linked to gender because “the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender positions from those who do not” (Creed, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, gender representation in horror film and television speaks directly to cultural expectations of gender performance.

Zombies are a particularly fascinating subset of the monstrous. In contemporary representations, zombies represent “the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system. [The zombie] is a machine that performs but two functions: it consumes, and it makes more consumers” (Lauro & Embry, 2008, p. 99). This positionality explains why zombies are a recurring theme in horror, as the zombie representation serves a social function by representing economic and political anxieties (see Becker, 2007). As Bishop (2009) notes, “the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios of zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded by more traditional horror films” (p. 18). Griffin (2012) further observes that although film is the most common medium through which the zombie is represented:

[The zombie genre] has also played an increasingly significant role in written narratives, including novels and comic books. Throughout its relatively short existence, no matter the medium, the zombie has functioned as a mutable, polyvalent metaphor for many of society’s anxieties, with zombie film production spiking during society’s most troublesome times, including times of war, the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and, more recently, 9/11 (p. 2).

Given these parameters, it is unsurprising that apocalypse dramas including *The Walking Dead* have gained popularity, especially among American audiences questioning the logic of late capitalism while entrenched in a massive economic recession.

Prior research on zombie narratives identifies a number of problematic issues with respect to gender and media representation. Harper (2003, 2005) has published multiple articles about gender in zombie films, focusing on *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero's *Dead* franchise as a whole, and *Resident Evil*. When Harper (2005) analyzed *Night of the Living Dead*, he noted that only the men in the film seem to be capable of fighting the zombies effectively and explains that, "the women in the film generally constitute a kind of backdrop, their feelings and actions largely dependent on the more capable males" (p. 9). In a separate article, Harper (2003) argues that two of the primary characters in *Night of the Living Dead* establish gender relations: Barbara's "silent submissiveness is an inevitable reaction to Harry Cooper's aggression. After all, the patriarchal domination of the house is unremitting" (p. 3). Harper establishes that hegemonic masculinity is depicted through controlling behaviors that elicit submissive behavior, or hegemonic femininity, from female characters. Positioning these observations in relation to slasher films, Clover (1987) locates "the helpless child" as feminine, which renders the autonomous adult or subject as masculine. The proliferation of female children represented in horror films can thus equate adult women with children, marking them as being in need of constant male protection. Clover also locates differences in the levels of emotional expression between men and women in horror films, explaining that anger and/or displays of force belong to the male, while crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, and begging for mercy belong to the female. This is a significant distinction, because in horror films, anger and force often facilitate survival, while cowering and fear generally lead to death. Once again, this representation works to construct women as requiring male protection. While this would seem to imply that women die more often in these films, Cowan and O'Brien (1990) found that women were not more likely to be victims in horror films, but when they were killed it was far more emotionally important than the death of male characters.

Just as the zombie genre has its own conventions and forms, so too does television as a medium. Television representation differs in some respects from film representation, yet gender is still an important factor for analyzing these visual forms. Barbatsis, Wong, and Herek (1983) explain that within television narratives, "male characters are usually identified by a profession...on the other hand, female characters are most likely defined not by a profession but by a relationship, i.e., as a wife, girlfriend, or mother" (p. 148). Moreover, Gunter (1995) explains that there are fewer female leads on television, and they tend to occupy lesser quality positions and roles within television narratives. This is particularly true among horror narratives, which are often tailored for male audiences. Bury (2003) explains, "in the absence of popular television texts informed by overtly feminist discourses, liberal or radical, female viewers who identify as feminists to some degree have little option but to try to gain pleasure from 'stories for boys'" (p. 240). Combining these observations about television with film representation, and the zombie metaphor more generally, helps frame the context from which *The Walking Dead* emerged. As a hybrid of horror film and television apocalypse drama representing the zombie figure in a cultural moment of economic crisis, *The Walking Dead* is an important subject for scholarly research.

### Method

We employ a feminist rhetorical criticism to analyze season one of AMC's *The Walking Dead*. According to Foss (1996), "Feminist criticism involves two basic steps: (1) analysis of the construction of gender in the artifact studied; and (2) exploration of what the artifact suggests about how the patriarchy is constructed and maintained or how it can be challenged and transformed" (p. 169-170). As a rhetorical method, feminist criticism seeks to expose the ways language and visual forms represent gendered realities. Episodes were screened multiple times, and detailed notes were taken during scenes involving gender. Notes were analyzed through thematic analysis using Owen's (1984) categories of repetition and recurrence. Repetition involves the "explicit repeated use of the same wording" while recurrence involves "an implicit recurrence of meaning using different discourse" (p. 275). In order for recurrence to occur, multiple instances of a discourse and/or image

must contain the “same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning” (p. 275). By identifying both repetition and recurrence, we identified five categories related to feminist issues depicted in the series: *sexist rhetoric*, *division of labor*, *the role of protector*, *White male leadership*, and *the role of the dutiful wife*.

### Show Synopsis

In order to aid readers who may not be familiar with the series, we offer a short description of the characters we analyze in the analysis. *The Walking Dead* is a cable television show that airs on AMC between the months of October and February. The show chronicles an apocalyptic event where recently deceased human beings become reanimated for unknown reasons and begin attacking and feeding on the living. *The Walking Dead*'s main protagonist is a rural Georgia police officer named Rick Grimes. He is portrayed as good, compassionate, and resistant to violence. The show follows Rick's journey from waking up in an empty hospital to becoming reunited with his wife (Lori), son (Carl), and a small group of survivors of which he becomes the leader.

Shortly after fleeing the hospital, Rick is rescued by a man named Morgan Jones and his son Duane. After hiding out in a house together for a few days, Morgan and Duane decide not to join Rick on his journey to find his wife (Lori) and son (Carl). Eventually, Rick finds his wife and son with a group of survivors. Upon joining the group, Rick discovers Lori is having an affair with his best friend and former partner, Shane Walsh. Shane is Rick's opposite, and is portrayed as cruel, strong, and dominant. Carl is depicted as looking up to Shane as a father figure, which is a source of tension in the show. Other characters in the group include Merle Dixon, a racist, violent drug addict, and his more levelheaded and intelligent brother Daryl. T-Dog is strong and mostly silent type who is brave, loyal and a valuable asset when battling the undead. Andrea is a single woman portrayed as being stronger and more masculine than the other women in the group, and becomes suicidal after her younger sister, Amy, dies during an attack by the undead. Dale is the oldest man in the group, and often serves as the voice of reason and moral compass for the group. Jackie is a middle-aged African-American woman with very few lines, who is portrayed as being quiet and reserved. Glenn, a young man who saves Rick's life early in the show, is portrayed as being intelligent and capable, yet slightly naive. Carol, a quiet middle-aged woman, and her adolescent daughter, Sophia, struggle to deal with the abusive patriarch of their family, Ed, who is eventually eaten by the undead.

### Analysis

#### Sexist Rhetoric

The first episode of *The Walking Dead* opens with a conversation between Rick and Shane on a normal day before the apocalypse. They are sitting in the police cruiser, eating, and the first words spoken are Rick asking Shane, “What's the difference between men and women” (5:10), casting a strict division has been cast between men and women, which remains a consistent theme throughout the series. Shane jokingly responds that he “never met a woman who knew how turn off a light” (5:21). Shane then, for Rick's entertainment, begins to rant about a woman who would leave lights on and then complain about global warming. He refers to the woman as a “pair of boobs” and, when told he sounds like her father, responds, “Bitch you mean to tell me you've been hearing this your entire life and you are *still* too damn stupid to learn how to turn off a switch” (6:32)? Rick ends the scene, after explaining that he and Lori had a fight in which she questioned whether or not he even cared about her and their son, Carl, by stating, “difference between men and women? I would never say something that cruel to her” (8:30). In addition to the creation of a divide between men and women and their roles, this scene portrays sexism as humorous and light-hearted, marking it as harmless and socially acceptable. This tactic is common in popular culture narratives that often offer essentialist notions of gender relations as comedic (Shifman & Lemish, 2010). Because Lori was “cruel,” Rick asserts that it is a universal trait that women share. Within the first minutes of the show, we see that women are characterized as sex objects (“pair of boobs”), stupid, incapable, and cruel. This opening foreshadows the rest of the season.

Later in the first episode, Rick realizes that Lori must have been alive when they left the house because the photo albums are gone. He tells Morgan, who laughs and says “photo albums...my

wife, same thing. There I am packing survival gear, she's grabbing photo albums" (38:27). Morgan, portrayed as the intelligent, rational man who packs items necessary for survival, implies his wife is ill-suited for survival since her instinct is to protect emotional memories at the expense of "survival gear." Van Dijck (2008) explains that photography's role in the preservation of memory is a particularly strong "family tool for remembrance and reminiscence" (p. 60). In the wake of an apocalypse, men are represented as preparing for the future while women are holding on to the past.

Later in the second episode, after a man named Merle has been handcuffed to the roof for attacking another man in the group, he calls Andrea "sugar tits" and "honey-bun" and suggests that they go somewhere to "bump some uglies." When she declines, he responds "rug muncher, I figured as much" (16:24). Again, the show portrays the verbal assault and objectification of women as harmless (he is handcuffed to the roof and Andrea seems unthreatened) and/or humorous. The exchange also implies that because Andrea has no interest in having sex with him, she is a lesbian. However, when Merle uses a racial slur later in the episode, it is portrayed as offensive, even evil. The use of "rug muncher" elicits no response. No one fights, no one cries. Andrea shrugs it off and walks away, allowing a homophobic, sexist remark to seem inconsequential or worse: funny. Yep (2003) explains that heteronormativity is the "presumed bedrock of society" and the "quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others" (p. 18). The fact that this exchange occurs exposes that even in a post-apocalyptic state, heteronormative logic prevails in organizing social relations.

In one of the final scenes of the season, when the Center for Disease Control is about to explode with the survivors trapped inside, Carol realizes she still has Rick's grenade from earlier in the season. She says, "Rick, I have something that might help" (39:45). Shane responds to her with "Carol, I don't think a nail file is gonna do it" (39:51). For absolutely no reason, with moments to live, Shane takes the time to belittle Carol's attempt at saving all of their lives. This scene happens so quickly that Carol receives absolutely no credit for literally saving everyone in the group. In contrast, Shane's entire character is built around saving people, and every time he does so, it is the center of attention. This constant dismissal of women's contributions continues in other aspects of the series.

### **Division of Labor**

When a dangerous task becomes necessary in *The Walking Dead*, women are marginalized to easiest, least-important roles. Decades of research on work and family indicates that "the domestic has historically been a key site of feminine activity, while masculinities have historically been heavily associated with paid labour and public life" at cultural, interpersonal and individual levels (Halford, 2006, p. 385). In the second episode, when Glenn is going into the sewer to look for an exit, Andrea says, "we'll be right behind you" (17:21). Glenn responds, "No you won't. Not you," to which Andrea retorts, "Why not me? Think I can't" (17:29)? Instead, Glenn assigns everyone a job – the men serve as "wingmen" while the women are told to stay and yell if they need the men to come back in a hurry. Much like other mediated representations of zombie narratives, men begin the "work" of assuring the survival of the group, while "Jackie stays here" (17:42). In the midst of a zombie apocalypse, women are relegated to the sidelines while men forage for survival. Later in the episode, while some men work to escape Atlanta and other men fix cars, the women are first depicted doing the one activity *The Walking Dead* allows them to do: laundry (32:14).

By the third episode, it is rare to see a woman *not* washing clothing. In fact, even though the characters generally look dirty and they are almost always shown to be wearing the same clothing, there seems to be a lot of laundry getting done. Carol tells Rick that she washed his clothes as "best we could. Scrubbing on a washboard ain't half as good as my old Maytag back home" (20:59). Lori is also shown doing laundry, as are Andrea and Amy. The men, however, are stripping down cars, repairing equipment, fueling the generators, and securing water and food for the group. This division of labor is very distinct, and eventually becomes a source of conflict in the show, where it is given brief but ineffective attention before it drifts back into normality. While the men play and relax, the women continue their quest to wash a seemingly infinite amount of laundry. Finally, Jackie states that she is "beginning to question the division of labor here" and asks "can someone explain to me how the women end up doing all the Hattie McDaniel work" (37:36). Carol responds, "it's just the way it is"

(37:56). Laundry service has always been considered low-wage employment, and in the wake of an apocalypse where economic, social and cultural structures have been upended, this seems to be the sole place for women. This depiction reflects how labor markets respond to recessions. As Mayer-Ahuja (2006) explains, in times of economic crisis there are often cultural campaigns against “double earners,” resulting in pressure for women to “quit their jobs so that men can find employment. Ideologically, women’s labor, like their earnings, is seen as optional” (p. 22).

The link of women to domestic labor is particularly important given the genre of horror, and more specifically, zombie narratives. If zombies represent uncontrollable consumption in a late-capitalist economic system (Harper, 2002), then the products we consume represent our perpetual slave labor to consumption. Linking women to clothing not only establishes that the consumption of fashion is predominantly feminine, it also firmly roots women as responsible for these items of consumption. Goldman, Heath and Smith (1991) explain this conundrum as “commodity feminism,” or the way by which capitalist systems position marketable consumer goods as “choices” whereby women are “empowered” by selecting and purchasing appropriate goods to establish identity capital. In other words, women’s connection to the consumption of commodity goods ultimately results in their enslavement to caring for and tending to those objects. As a result of this link, the women are owned by “capitalist form: the exchange between the commodity and ‘woman’ ... establishes her as a commodity too” (Winship, 1980, p. 218).

### **The Role of Protector**

Jackie’s questioning of the division of labor begins one of the more disturbing portrayals of gender inequality in the series. After being questioned about why Ed refuses help with the laundry, Ed answers “ain’t my job, missy” and that his job “sure as hell isn’t listening to some uppity smart-mouthed bitch” (41:55). Ed then physically assaults his wife, Carol, reinforcing his hegemonic masculinity. During the assault, the women make unsuccessful attempts to fight Ed off, however, Carol tells them not to and that “it doesn’t matter.” Shane then intervenes and beats Ed mercilessly, telling him that if he ever abuses his wife again, he will literally beat him to death. Carol rushes to Ed’s side, hysterically crying, and repeatedly apologizes to him. This reaction is congruent with battered women’s identities. In qualitative interviews with battered women, Smith and Randall (2007) found that “a woman often sees herself as needy, inadequate, or even a complete failure when the man she loves is abusing her” (p. 1058). Carol’s repeated apologizing and anguish reinforce the idea that women should remain loyal and compassionate toward their abusers.

Perhaps this scene was created to emphasize the problematic nature of domestic violence and patriarchy, however, this depiction fails to serve an educative function. Carol’s response to Ed’s violence mirrors scholarship on domestic abuse that argues a primary reason women stay in (and protect) abusive relationships is that “society has constructed a situation in which women are dependent on men for economic stability, social standing, and social support” (Goss & DeJoseph, 1997, p. 163). Moreover, although Ed is displaced as the patriarch who violently domineers over his family, it is Shane who is called to replace him, and Shane who immediately assumes the role of patriarch. Ed had previously dominated his family and kept them separate from the group, and now Carol and Sophia are, without their consent, members of the group under the control of Shane. Thus, while the scene depicts domestic violence negatively, it also positions rescue by another man as the solution.

As a result of women’s need for protection, it is very uncommon for women to fight zombies in the show. Andrea, the only woman with a gun, is depicted as not knowing how to use it properly. In episode two, she points it at Rick and he tells her that the safety is still on. While Andrea’s possession of a weapon could have provided her a position of power, Rick’s commentary strips her of this power and repositions her as hyper-emotional and irrational. The men in *The Walking Dead* mount resistance and engage in hand to hand combat with the undead while the women cower in fear, hold each other, and cry. For example, in episode three, when a zombie stumbles into camp, the women panic and hold each other while the men kill it. At the end of the fourth episode, when a large group of zombies attack the camp, the men are shown fighting, some to the bitter end, while the women run around screaming and cowering in fear. Ultimately, men protect women from zombies.

The cultural value of this role is made all the more salient when examining the depiction of female zombies in the series. The most memorable zombies in the first season are the little girl at the beginning, the half-eaten woman Rick finds in the first episode and apologizes to, and Amy. The opening scene of *The Walking Dead* shows Rick finding a little girl who, like in most zombie films, turns out to be a member of the living dead. In this opening scene, the little girl is shown to be helpless, and not much of a threat to Rick. His face implies that he feels bad for her, a moment where he feels helpless as a provider and protector, yet after this contemplation, he shoots her in the head. Amy's death is possibly the most emotional moment of the season, and while many men died during that episode, Amy is the one that Andrea (and the audience) weeps for. The scene spans two episodes, with Amy's death ending one episode and opening the next. Other deaths in the show are far less memorable, partly because of Amy's age and her status as a young woman. Ultimately, the narrative positions her death as the most emotional because it represents the inability of the men to protect her – which to this point has been their sole purpose for being. This is congruent with Cowan and O'Brien's (1990) finding that while more men are killed in zombie narratives, the deaths of women are both more memorable and emotionally salient to characters within the narrative.

### **White Male Leadership**

The struggle for leadership that occurs between Rick and Shane reinforces the cultural belief that a man should be in charge of the group. Canavan (2010) argues that race is a distinctive feature of *The Walking Dead* graphic novel series emphasizing that zombie apocalypses “repackage the violence of colonial race war in a form that is ideologically safer” (p. 439). This depiction appears to have translated from print to screen. In a sense, the survivors are grouped into a hierarchical system of a decidedly male “government.” Even though society itself has fallen to the undead, cultural beliefs about gender roles are one of the few shreds of humanity the survivors cling to. A central component of the narrative is two White men struggling for control. It is never called into question whether they have a right to govern the other survivors. It is simply taken for granted that a White man must be in control to protect those who are “Others.” During the struggle for power, no women are considered for the role of leader, and none of the minority male characters are considered either. The non-White men and all of the women are absent from the struggle. Instead, the people in the group are (though not formally) called to pick between two White men, who hold unreasonably opposite beliefs and plans for securing their existence. In a sense, this mirrors the contemporary understanding of the American democratic process, which until recently was universally controlled by White men.

The protagonist group featured in *The Walking Dead* is not the only group of survivors of the apocalypse. Rick, Daryl, Glenn, and T-Dog encounter another group of survivors at a hospital in Atlanta led by a single male leader, Guillermo. Guillermo is Hispanic, and the group he governs is devoid of White people. When Rick asks if the men are the doctors (which he probably assumes because they are men), he is told that Philippe is a nurse, and Guillermo was the custodian of the hospital that they are defending, who has now become their leader (1.4, 32:05). Thus, other groups of people have managed to survive but the narrative chooses to follow a group that is predominantly White with a White leader. This repositions Whiteness as a central feature of survival, ultimately suggesting that White leadership will emerge victorious under apocalyptic conditions. Much like other mediated horror narratives, *The Walking Dead* “remains rooted within a frame of non-reflexive whiteness” (Picart, 2004, p. 339).

### **The Role of the Dutiful Wife**

As is common in television dramas (see Barbatsis, 1983), men are defined by occupations and women are defined by relationships in *The Walking Dead* narrative. In fact, *The Walking Dead*'s “uncritical relationship to a particular pre-feminist narrative about the need to ‘protect’ women and children” firmly establishes that women are both the property and responsibility of men (Caravan, 2010, p. 444). Rick is defined as a leader and a police officer, while Lori is defined as Rick's wife and Carl's mother. In fact, the only woman with a profession in the first season is Jackie, whose knowledge from her work at a city zoning office is used in a short-lived attempt to rescue the group. Of course, her idea fails, and it is left to the men to design a plan that works while Jackie drifts into

the background. As a result, themes of marriage being unbreakable, even at the expense of one's happiness or physical well-being, are commonplace. This establishes a dangerous cultural message that women should not, or cannot, leave their husbands – even (or especially) in the wake of a zombie apocalypse.

The love triangle between Rick, Lori, and Shane is one of the more obvious instances of gender inequality the show creates in this regard. After Rick finds the group, and Lori realizes he is alive (Shane had told her Rick died in the hospital), Lori ends her affair with Shane and resumes her marriage with Rick. The fact that Lori immediately ends a relationship she appears happy with to resume a marriage that the viewer knows was unhappy (from the beginning of the first episode) prior to the apocalypse could be read as reinforcing norms of traditional marriage. However, Lori's relationship with Shane also robs her of any sense of autonomy. With Rick in the hospital and the world ending, she is depicted as desperately needing a man in order to survive. Lori is represented as unable to care for herself and her son, and must therefore rely on a sexual partner for protection. Even if Lori's return to Rick is viewed as merely the result of her love for her husband, Shane's reaction to Rick's return certainly reinforces hegemonic gender norms. Shane is happy to see Rick is alive, however he also views Rick as an intruder, who steals *his* woman away. Rick views Lori as *his* wife, and Carl as *his* son, while Shane views them as under *his* care. By defining Lori and Carl as either Rick's family or Shane's dependents, these characters are robbed of their individual autonomy.

As a result of this secondary positionality, Lori is constantly used in the plot as a symbol of appropriate (married) female behavior. For example, during the struggle for control of the group between Rick and Shane, a disagreement over whether or not to try to make it to the Center for Disease Control in the city becomes a central source of conflict. Shane attempts to use Lori to persuade Rick to come around to Shane's point of view (1.5, 22:47). Not only does this create a false impression of Lori's power and control, but it leads to another example of damaging gender roles in traditional marriage. First, Shane's attempted use of Lori's influence over Rick subtly implies that a woman's sphere of influence is in the private realm of her marriage, and therefore her husband's sphere of influence is external. This is troubling because it reifies that a woman's place in marriage is secondary, a supporting (and sometimes decorative) role that supports the stronger male protagonist. Lori is not asked for, or even expected to give, her public opinion on the matter, nor is she allowed to persuade the group as a whole. She is only asked to influence her husband. Lori's response to Shane's request does not improve the situation. Instead of trying to use her relational influence to change Rick's mind, she publicly supports her husband's decision to try to make it to the Center for Disease Control, even though she admits privately that she disagrees with it. Shane sarcastically refers to this as "playing the role of the dutiful wife" (22:47), but Lori's image in the group improves as a result of standing by Rick's plan. The tone of the scene implies that she did the right thing, even though she disagreed personally with the course of action. Culturally, this tells viewers that a woman's sphere of influence only extends to her marriage, and that even if she disagrees with her husband, it is not only her duty to support his decisions publicly but it also will present her more advantageously to others.

Beyond the primary love triangle in the series, *The Walking Dead* implies that marriage is a private context, not to be meddled with by outsiders. After Shane intervenes in Carol and Ed's abusive relationship in the fourth episode, a man in the group named Jim criticizes Shane for attacking Ed, saying, "that is their [Ed's and Carol's] marriage, that is not his" (13:11). While Jim is questioning Shane's right to control the group, he is also implying that domestic violence is between the couple, and that it is no one's right to intervene. Meyer and Stern (2007) found a similar pattern of representation on the series *Lost*, a narrative that shares a sense of apocalyptic doom. In that series, domestic violence between Sun and Jin is tolerated by the White characters, while a physical assault on Claire from an "outsider" produces a rallying of the survivors to her rescue (p. 320). Essentially, the depiction implies that marriage is more important than the physical or emotional wellbeing of an individual, and that in-group violence, particularly within marital dyads, is not problematic. Moreover, being partnered in a romantic relationship and serving as the dutiful wife is correlated to survival. The only surviving single woman in the show is Andrea, while nearly all of the surviving men are single. This implies that women who were not partnered prior to the apocalypse did not possess the necessary skills to survive – the only ones left standing are those who stood behind their men.



### **Gendered Monstrosity on Television: Future Directions for Research**

In our analysis, we illustrate how the *The Walking Dead* reinforces stereotypical gender roles, especially with regard to division of labor, power, control, leadership, and the relational context of marriage. Like most zombie fiction, *The Walking Dead* features exclusively male leadership where men fight amongst themselves for control. The women of *The Walking Dead* are presented as unstable and dependent. They are barely characterized as members of the group of survivors, and are very rarely allowed to function in any useful capacity. In addition, the narrative features stereotypical gender roles with regard to the division of labor. Even after the fall of civilization, men “work” outside of the home fighting zombies and gathering survival supplies, while the women provide the “home” domestic labor of taking care of the children and doing laundry. The women in the show are depicted as so emotionally unstable that they will literally kill themselves, either purposefully or accidentally, without male intervention, and marriage is portrayed as something one stays with, quite literally, “til death do us part.”

Examining *The Walking Dead*'s television narrative through a feminist rhetorical lens offers key insights into the zombie as a gendered monstrosity, as well as apocalypse narratives more generally. These stories often create “worlds in which people rather than fantastic creatures are the monsters,” shifting narrative focus to the problematic nature of human interaction in the wake of potential annihilation (Becker, 2006). Zombies located within these narratives expose “a dilemma for power relations” and risk “destroying social dynamics that have remained – although widely questioned, critiqued, and debated – largely unchallenged in the current economic superstructure” (Lauro & Embry, 2008, p. 90). The never-ending process of consumption and creation perpetuated by zombie narratives illustrates our social unease with capitalism, consumerism and its link to identity. Schlipphacke (2001) argues that late capitalism produces a double bind for women – the “critical subject” free of capitalist influence is inherently masculine in its construction, marking the “symbolic function” of the products of late capitalist systems as feminine (p. 306). Through this explicitly gendered process, traditional gender roles are frequently offered up as the “solution” in post-apocalyptic narratives for characters “to attain illusory control” as a result of economic demise (Jones, 2012, p. 533). In the case of *The Walking Dead*, this harbors particular consequences for women – positioning them as incapable of surviving the apocalypse without men, rendering them slaves to products of consumption (such as clothing), and ultimately stripping them of autonomous decision making. Given the representation, it is questionable who has the better lot: the zombies, or the women? Or are the women already zombies – bodies without autonomy, without the ability to intellectually reason and act?

Through our analysis, we have established that the portrayal of women in *The Walking Dead* has not progressed far from depictions found in 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*. Utilizing a feminist rhetorical critique, we illustrated how the subtle sexism present in mediated horror narratives is still apparent in *The Walking Dead*, and how it has been coupled with graphically sexist rhetoric, violently stereotypical gender roles, and a disturbing demand for women to honor even the most terrible marriages. However, given that our reading only includes the first season of *The Walking Dead*, future analyses should examine additional seasons of the narrative. Moreover, other types of contemporary horror narratives across media forms should be analyzed for their depictions of gender. For example, one might conduct a comparative study of *The Walking Dead* graphic novel with the television series in order to shed light on how gendered representation differs between these two mediums. Future studies could also interrogate the link between the zombie and its cultural place in a late-capitalist society. Particularly when media representations are at stake, the zombie – a cultural trope that can often be employed to describe the process of television viewing – offers critical insight into the fears and anxieties of our culture through the production of popular culture.

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