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Fixed gazes on grotesque gorging : deconstructing humanist tropes in cannibalistic comics

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Fixed Gazes on Grotesque Gorging:

Deconstructing Humanist Tropes in Cannibalistic Comics

Whitney Porter

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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Abstract

The theme of cannibalism is taboo but pervasive, abhorrent yet enticing. The Western appetite for consumptive narratives seems even more insatiable in today's zombie-infested popular culture. In some sense they are out-and-out cannibal narratives, and they are emerging with growing frequency in the world of comics. *The Walking Dead*, by Robert Kirkman¹, challenges the tropes established in canonical narratives by authors like Ovid and Shakespeare, and disrupts the humanist modes of thought within them. Many cannibal narratives of the postmodern period deconstruct the categories "Man" and "Animal" that traditional literature relies upon to glorify humans. In my reading of the popular comic series *The Walking Dead*, which is supplemented by the theoretical framework of philosophers Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and Jonathan Dollimore, I investigate the border between the figures Man and Animal to demonstrate how postmodern thought influences and complicates representations of humanity. This turn in representation within the zombie narrative, unveils a rupture, something more complicated than a singular and definitive border between the two groups, through which it is revealed that there is no "us" and no "them," but rather a multiplicity of identities between and among the epistemic figures inherent in the humanist creed.

¹ I am considering the writer, Robert Kirkman, the putative author of *The Walking Dead*, although I acknowledge that comic series are very much a collaborative effort between writer(s) and artist(s).

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Introduction

The theme of cannibalism is taboo but pervasive, abhorrent yet enticing. The Western appetite for consumptive narratives seems even more insatiable in today's zombie-infested popular culture. In some sense they are out-and-out cannibal narratives, and they are emerging with growing frequency in the world of comics. These works draw upon tropes established by traditional authors like Ovid and Shakespeare and disrupt the humanist modes of thought within them. Many contemporary cannibal stories deconstruct the categories "Man" and "Animal"² that conventional literature relies upon to glorify humans over animals. In this reading of the popular comic series *The Walking Dead* by Robert Kirkman,³ I investigate the border between these figures to demonstrate complexities and problems within representations of humanity as they are influenced by postmodern thought. This turn in representation within the zombie narrative unveils a rupture, something more complicated than a singular and definitive border between two groups, through which it is revealed that there is no "us" and no "them" but rather a multiplicity of identities between and among epistemic figures.

In this research I consider the zombie within the term cannibal. This is a commonly-made connection, though some would argue that the zombie is outside of that sphere, as the cannibal is still within the realm of the living and zombies are otherworldly, the living dead. In my view, zombies are hyperbolic cannibals. They are usually portrayed as so monstrous that their humanity is forgotten, but in some taxonomic sense zombies are humans who have returned from the dead to devour human flesh. Cannibals, conventionally speaking, consume human flesh

² The term "animal" will be used here in such a way that notions of the Other. That is, when coming across the term "animal" the reader should consider this figure an "animal-other" as a way of understanding that this is a category considered not only separate from the group "human," but also threatening to and less-than humans.

³ I am considering the writer, Robert Kirkman, the author of *The Walking Dead*, although I acknowledge that comics are very much a collaborative effort between the writer(s) and artist(s).

and, though they are not of the supernatural world, they are dealt with in literature as though they are just as monstrous as the walking dead, if not more so. Because of the importance of the traits shared among cannibals and zombies, in particular the otherization of both figures in literature that stems from anxiety about their likenesses to humans despite their animal behaviors, I find considering the two figures as part of the same “group” useful.

It turns out the cannibal narrative has a rich history in the Western world, particularly in writing and film. Contemporary zombie narratives, unlike those focused primarily on consumerism and capitalism as topics of criticism (e.g. the works of George Romero), comment on a wide range of social concerns from investigating the threat of contagion to questioning the realities of human nature. No matter what the focus, however, these stories share rich foundations within an extensive body of literary, historical, and anthropological works. Of particular interest to this paper is the vast expanse of literature within the canon that helped to establish long-lasting tropes about the cannibal figure, which contemporary texts continue to both draw upon and challenge.

In the first section of this essay, I analyze “Tereus, Procne and Philomela” from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Titus Andronicus* by Shakespeare. In these readings I will identify tropes set forth regarding the cannibal figure. Following this discussion, I will present a deconstructive reading of *The Walking Dead*⁴. This series grapples with established tropes, but, overall, remains a confused and problematic text.

My argument implements the theoretical framework of Jacques Derrida. I argue that his notion of the abyss, the concept that any given signifier evokes a complex and infinite network of signification, appears in the modern cannibal narrative. I will utilize references from his *The*

⁴ Because the series is extensive and ongoing, I have limited my discussion to a representative selection of panels from Compendium 1 (issues 1-48)

Animal That Therefore I Am. In this work, Derrida questions, among other things, who or what the subject is. He challenges humanist thought, like that which appears in classical texts, ascribing subjectivity to the figure that was formerly robbed of all agency and identity, namely the animal. He problematizes the assertion that only humans have subjectivity. By ascribing it to animals, his theory allows for a departure from the view of humans as concretely separated from and directly opposed to animals. I will pair the use of his theories with supporting texts by Judith Butler and Jonathan Dollimore, who both comment extensively on the problematic nature of binaristic structures. These theoretical perspectives will aid in a thorough deconstructive reading of *The Walking Dead*, challenging the complicated stances the text moves in and out of.

While the movement from an analysis of traditional works of fiction to a popular comic series may seem like an intellectual leap, I argue that *The Walking Dead*, among other contemporary cannibal narratives, draws upon classical literature, linking the two putatively separate bodies of work. Additionally, the huge readership of the series offers an opportunity to consider how traditional tropes serve a purpose within this popular field. Though not always considered “literary,” comics are generating increasing attention in the academic sphere and making their way into classrooms, journals, and larger works of research. I hope to support this movement towards accepting comics in the academic sphere by demonstrating how they wrestle with the pervasive and enduring cannibal figure.

Canonical Cannibals: Foundational Tropes in Fiction

Many canonical works highlight cannibalism as unimaginable, repugnant and horrifying. These works rely on identifying tropes, especially the tradition of representing the cannibal as the animal-other to fully separate “glorified,” “civilized” man from “lowly,” “vulgar” animal. Though the following draws upon a small sample, important distinctions between categories are established, which highlights the humanist thread that runs through many classical texts. Understanding the literary foundations of the cannibal’s isolation in the animal sphere allows for a better understanding of the ways current fiction both relies upon and challenges them. Here I will discuss two qualifiers – innate motivation and exclusion from normative social structure and practice – that these, and many other canonical representations of cannibals rely upon to safely and completely separate humans and animals.

Innate Motivation and Insatiable Hunger

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* provides an early example of cannibalistic fiction in the story “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela.” In this tale of revenge, Procne begs her beloved husband, Tereus, to fetch her sister Philomela and bring her to Thrace. Tereus travels to Athens to find Philomela and, upon seeing her, he is overcome with lust. Determined to have her, he takes Philomela captive and rapes her:

And scarcely able to defer his lust,
the barbarian exults, and keeps his eyes
fixed firmly on his now defenseless prize,
exactly as when Jove’s great bird of prey,
the eagle, drops into his lofty nest
the hare gripped in his talons, and the prey
and captor both know there is no escape (739-745).

Tereus is deemed an animal here with “innate” animal desires. “Scarcely able to defer his lust,” the predator seems to have little or no control over his motivation to sate his hunger. This expresses the idea that the animal-other, the cannibal, is inherently compelled to act on his monstrous desires. Because of his lack of control, he is made markedly separate from man. It is suggested that the rational human exhibits self-control. Once discipline and self-restraint are lost, one risks becoming animal, driven and motivated solely to sate appetites of hunger and lust. That is, in the story, barbarism is isolated in the animal sphere. Tereus’ position as animal is underscored in the language of the epic. He is described as “an old gray wolf” that has “broken” the “young lamb” (757). He feeds his lust by raping Philomela, further satisfying his innate hunger for power and craving for violence by cutting out her tongue to stop her from divulging the details of his acts to Procne. His appetite is too compelling for him to control and we are told that “even after this, the man continued/to violate her mutilated body” (810-811). His desire to consume Philomela overtakes him and becomes an insatiable drive. Though there has not yet been a literal cannibalistic act, it is clear that Tereus has assumed the cannibal identity metaphorically. He is rejected from the category human for his deplorable acts and his insatiable sexual hunger.

Upon returning to his wife, Tereus tells Procne that Philomela is dead. Meanwhile, in captivity, Philomela cleverly constructs a tapestry depicting her rape, which she sends a slave to deliver to Procne. Enraged after learning of her husband’s violation of her sister, Procne frees Philomela and the two finally reunite, overcome by a developing appetite of their own, the hunger for revenge. Once the desire overtakes the women, once logic is overshadowed by innate motivation, Procne and Philomela themselves slip quickly into the category of animal.

Tereus and Procne's son Itys approaches his mother and she recoils, as we learn "how very like his father the boy is!" (901). She stabs and kills her son and is described as a "tiger" dragging a "nursing fawn" to the woods. She sees nothing in Itys but a by-product of Tereus, the deplorable animal who has defiled Philomela. As the women eagerly kill and dismember the boy, their humanity is forced into the background and they become bestial and therefore mere instruments of an innate hunger. Itys' fate is graphically detailed:

He was still alive as they dismembered him.

Gobbets of flesh in the cauldron wildly

danced as she made a fine broth of the boy,

while other parts were hissing on the grill (933-936).

Itys' cooked flesh is served to his unsuspecting father and we are told, "Tereus dines alone" (942). He consumes the mirror of his own identity and in that incorporates the threat of an extension of the cannibal identity back into himself.

Moreover, Tereus becomes a literal cannibal and is isolated in the animal sphere, which is apparent in the characterization of him as "alone." Procne and Philomela, though somewhat sympathetic in their quest for revenge, move into the category of animal as well. In her critical essay, "Blood, Barbarism, and Belly Laughs," Jessica Lugo argues, "When all characters have crossed the line and lost touch with civilization, they must be transformed and contained away from spreading their savagery to others" (404). She asserts that the women are equally as barbarous as Tereus for their murder of Itys, which explains their transformation. Lugo's discussion points to the pervasive idea in literature that civilized behavior defines humanity. Philomela and Procne's violence against the innocent Itys justifies their ultimate animal transformation and manages to address the anxiety generated by the possibility of continuing the

monstrous animal family line. By destroying an image of Tereus, notably the son, by feeding his offspring to him, Procne and Philomela prevent the proliferation of his monstrosity in a new generation. In their eyes, Itys is no more than a phantom of the animal-other, Tereus. Ultimately, their pursuit of revenge absolutely consumes them, putting them at odds with civilized behavior.

In this way, the cannibal is stopped in “Tereus, Procne, and Philomela.” Though the husband seems the clear cannibal, the less-than-human being that should be eliminated in order to maintain the power of a higher humanity, the entire family transforms into a figurative pack of animals. To concretize this, the three remaining characters are literally transformed into birds at the end of the narrative. Their metamorphosis demonstrates that once a being’s sole drive becomes an insatiable hunger, the civil human disappears and the animal takes over from within. This means that the animal does not have the same agency as the human, an important distinction that removes subjectivity from the cannibal figure. In the complete metamorphosis of the family into animals, it is suggested that the cannibal identity is contagious, threatening and not at all suited for the human sphere, which not only suggests an utter distinction from humans, but also adds specificity to the cannibal’s characterization throughout literature.

Exclusion from Normative Social Structure and Practice

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* draws directly from Ovid’s narrative, extending it into something more grotesque. The play implements the same characterization of the cannibal as innately compelled to his behaviors, and therefore contains the figure within the category animal. However, the drama expands upon an additional condition that separates the civilized humans from the animals that was only briefly examined in Ovid’s narrative—the stable family unit.

There are two key families within the work: the traditional Andronici family and the “unnatural” family of Tamora and Aaron. Titus is the patriarch of the Andronici, beloved and respected by his many children, especially his daughter, Lavinia. The relationship between father and daughter offers the clearest representation of what rules uphold the “natural” family, as their relationship is more directly illustrated than that with his other children. Titus believes honoring the family (and the patriarch of the family) is a priority, a value system that establishes the rigidity of the traditional and therefore, it is suggested, natural, family structure. This unit is juxtaposed with the unnatural, monstrous family unit that develops from a relationship between Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and wife to the Emperor of Rome, Saturninus, and Aaron the Moor. Their adulterous relationship drives much of the plot and their increasingly strong emotional and sexual connection threatens to proliferate the cannibalistic family.

The first audiences of *Titus Andronicus* would have understood, more quickly perhaps than contemporary readers, that Aaron and Tamora are the outsiders (he’s a Moor and she’s a Goth), a signal that these are the most obvious “bad guys.” Tamora is not threatening solely because of her ethnic background but also because she is an outsider with a venomous disposition. The “intended” villain is most obviously Aaron. He is constantly referred to as “the Moor,” dark in complexion, an ethnic “other” and therefore dangerous by nature.

The ultimate source of villainy in *Titus Andronicus* emerges, then, from the joining of Tamora and Aaron. Their relationship violates the queen’s legally and religiously binding union with the Emperor, effectually threatening the stability of the realm, the embodiment of high civilization. Their sexual union enables a literal incorporation of one evil into another. Bassianus warns Tamora that Aaron, “Doth make your honor of his body’s hue, /Spotted, detested, and abominable” (II.III.73-74). Aaron’s “ultimate Other” status mars the Empress’

potential to become honorable and moral, like her Roman husband. The reception of Aaron's body into her own through sex alters her very composition, making her "of his body's hue" from within. This transference of abomination is literalized in Tamora's pregnancy, but the transmission of evil into her bloodline also extends to her already born children Chiron and Demetrius. Aaron the "cur," the "beast," has transmitted his animal blood into Tamora, transforming her into the "tiger," as Lavinia calls her (II.III.142).

The beastly parents to Chiron and Demetrius (natural sons of Tamora) arise from this union. The relationship is evidenced first in that Aaron is more closely connected to the boys than their own father, and further in the pride that Aaron takes in their murderous and violent accomplishments. The brothers are first introduced in the play in Act II, when Aaron offers some "fatherly advice." The two are fighting over Lavinia, each insisting that he is her true love. The monstrous father influences them to hunt their prey, creating animal sons. Aaron comments, "Single you thither then this dainty doe, /And strike her home by force if not by words" (II.I.117-118). This representation of Lavinia as a "dainty doe," something not only frail, but also somehow appetizing is telling. In the wilderness, Aaron's territory, the rules of the civilized Romans hold less weight. Aaron explains;

The Emperor's court is like the House of Fame,
The palace full of tongues, of eyes, and ears;
The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull;
There speak, and strike, brave boys, and take your
turns (II.I.126-130).

He thus firmly roots himself as an advocate of the "ruthless" wilderness. Explaining that the civilized world has too many rules, too many people watching what one does, he coaxes Chiron

and Demetrius fully into the realm of animals, one, it turns out, without rules or responsibility, without control, like the animality represented in Ovid's work.

Tamora reinforces Aaron's teachings, ignoring Lavinia's plea for death instead of enduring Chiron and Demetrius' "worse than killing lust," but the Empress encourages her sons to sate their desires as reward for their obedience to their mother (II.III.175). Lavinia's rape occurs offstage and, when she reappears, her body is most grotesquely changed. The abuses she suffers are like that of Philomela, except she faces two attackers. Her tongue is cut out and her hands cut off; Chiron and Demetrius "consume" Lavinia by robbing her of her chastity and destroying her image, leaving only her "masticated" body behind, alive but damaged beyond repair and, in some cases, recognition. When Marcus discovers Lavinia, he laments that "some Tereus hath deflowered thee...O, that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast, /That I might rail at him to ease my mind!" (II.IV.26,34-35). The brothers are re-imagined "Tereuses." This is a direct reflection of the animal's pollution of the family bloodline and is the last moment in the play in which the family reflects any shred of humanity. Marcus' severe distress at seeing Lavinia leads him, and everyone else, to transform her into only monstrous body, absent of subjectivity. He even presents her to Titus exclaiming, "This *was* thy daughter" (III.I.63; emphasis added). As far as the Roman family is concerned, this "lively body," as Titus calls her, is no longer Lavinia the honorable daughter of Titus Andronicus, but rather a consuming reminder of the cannibal threat, all of which was foreshadowed in the idiom "dainty doe," one which operates more as a culinary metaphor than a corporeal one.

The cannibal family thus begins to consume the traditional family through the destruction of the human body. Corporeal abuses threaten the image of the civilized Roman and empower the unnatural family. Just as Lavinia is made less than human with the loss of her hands, her

tongue, and her honor, Titus too becomes increasingly fragmented in mind and body. Falling for a trick controlled by Aaron, he cuts off his own hand to send to the emperor. The “consumption” of Lavinia and Titus marks the sole success of the monstrous family. Quite soon after, it is suggested that animals cannot have a family unit like the civil humans do and, when Tamora gives birth to Aaron’s son, their unit begins to crumble.

Titus, like Procne, is overcome with an insatiable desire for revenge. As he and Lavinia take on roles similar to those of Procne and Philomela they slip outside the realm of humanity. Lavinia, with her inhuman body, and Titus, with his ruined mind, set out to stop the cannibal family, but become cannibals themselves. Titus decides to make the men into pasties, and describes the process of killing and assembling the pies vividly:

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
And with your blood and it I’ll make a paste,
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
And make two pasties of your shameful heads...
...Lavinia, come, receive the blood, and when that they are dead,
Let me go grind their bones to powder small,
And with this hateful liquor temper it,
And in that paste let their vile heads be baked. (5.2.186-189, 196-200)

Titus expresses that he intends to reduce the men to unrecognizable traces of their former selves. Lavinia stands and holds the basin to “receive” the brothers’ blood. This act reflects how she was forced to receive their bodily fluid during her rape. Presumably she would hold the basin at her stomach, which enables her to catch the brother’s blood in an external womb. In “The Cook and the Cannibal,” David Goldstein notes that “In collecting the blood of the brothers Lavinia

positions herself simultaneously as mother and consumer, incorporating the blood of her tormentors back into her body” (121).

Tamora and Aaron’s animal family and their infectious cannibal condition have been transferred to the civil family. Both ultimately represent the threat of cannibalism as something contagious, an inescapable cycle of consuming and being consumed. Once Titus’ plot is carried through and he serves the pasties to Tamora, he creates a literal cannibal out of the animal matriarch. Goldstein asserts, “To create a cannibal, to feed a son to his mother, one needs already to have labeled the other ‘inhuman’” (125). Tamora is made animal because of her “inhumanity.” In this narrative, and many other classical works, categories of identity are limited. Someone outside of humanity who is not a deity of some kind is transformed to animal to justify his barbarism and incivility. Titus stops Tamora from further infecting the empire while feeding his own hunger for vengeance. Since he too has become cannibal, consumed by his drive for revenge, his appetite, like Procne’s, cannot be sated. Obsessed with upholding his family unit, he kills Lavinia, hoping to purify his family line and remain separate from the animals he has defeated. Though Titus believes that his actions are moral, like the animal actions of Procne and Philomela, he is ultimately killed in order to end the proliferation of the cannibal identity.

Though Tamora’s cannibal feast on her sons is unintentional, the act literalizes her identity as animal. She is not allowed to achieve this identity without also being cast out into the wilderness, the animal sphere. She is denied the rites of burial, as those would only be fit for a human; instead her body is tossed out to be eaten by vultures. This mirrors the bird transformation at the end of Ovid’s narrative. Aaron is to be buried up to his head to starve, also denied any acknowledgement of humanity.

Tamora and Aaron come to represent the animal pack, the group that is most threatening to humanity when it tries to mimic its structures. The text forbids a cannibal family to the extent that even the initially strong civilized family is destroyed once it is tarnished by animal motivations and actions. *Titus Andronicus* strongly asserts that man and animal are to be kept in separate spheres, warning that allowing members of one group into another threatens the total consumption of civilized structure.

These two texts demonstrate the ways that literary works draw from one another, both perpetuating and challenging sentiments of a given cultural moment. Tereus and Tamora are made accidental cannibals. Both are transformed within the impassioned pursuit of revenge. To trick a person into committing one of the ultimate taboos, as Goldstein argues, is to completely dehumanize him. These stories create cannibals as both literal consumers of human flesh and as figurative consumers of another's subjectivity or identity. These figures are incorporated in the cannibal atmospheres of "Tereus, Procne, and Philomela" and *Titus Andronicus* and all are transformed into animals. Ultimately, the classical notion of that category as totally separate from the human is concretized in the image of the cannibal figure or the group of cannibals. These works, and many others within the canon, suggest that the threat of cannibals is not only that they are animal and therefore cannot exist within the human sphere, but also that they risk consuming, infecting and altering civil order, which problematizes the very structures that classical thought often relied upon to uphold a variety of societal norms.

Contemporary Consumers: Breaking Down Tropes in *The Walking Dead*

While the movement from a close reading of classical and Renaissance “high” literature to that of contemporary comics is admittedly a leap, excluding this literary style solely because it is not yet entirely accepted in academia would be a missed opportunity. The comic that I will analyze here presents important challenges to notions of human identity that have been upheld for millenia, as we have seen. Even more profound is that the breakdown of the traditional binary is encountered and avidly consumed by a huge audience. Over 100 issues of *The Walking Dead* have been published since the series’ introduction in 2003. An average of between 20,000 and 30,000 issues are sold monthly, with sales peaking in the summer of 2012 at nearly 200,000 units in the U.S. (Mayo). Additionally, in 2010 the series received an Eisner Award for Best Continuing Series. The collection challenges the tropes established in “Tereus, Procne and Philomela” and *Titus Andronicus* by employing conventional cannibal representations to propel characters’ actions ultimately exposing how the binary structures within them break down.

Humanism is the primary school of thought underlying the canonical works. In general, the term has a negative connotation nowadays and is associated with the kind of overglorification of humans that is common in traditional literature. Tony Davies provides a concise and helpful overview of the tradition in *Humanism*, where he concedes, “It might be argued, indeed, that the book should be title ‘Humanisms,’ to avoid any implication that its subject is a singular, stable entity (6). That is, humanism is a broad term, and its particular meaning depends heavily upon the context in which it is being discussed. Within this argument it is key to consider humanism in relation to the periods of the canonical works that I assert set the “standard” for humanist -- and cannibalistic-- texts.

Titus Andronicus was written during a period that elevated works of the classical period, such as Ovid's epic, viewing the values of the time as the "gold standard." Davies refers to Marx's discussion of the ways in which Greek modes of thinking are engrained in Western culture: "The ancient Greeks, [Marx] suggests, represent 'the historic childhood of humanity;' and although 'a man cannot become a child again,' he can still 'find joy in the child's naïveté, and even 'strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage'" (13). This desire to return to the "childhood of humanity" was emphasized within Shakespeare's culture, and, as Davies says, "Most of the early humanists...saw their task not as the *discovery* of the future but as the *recovery* of the past" (68; italics in original). To what exactly did the early humanists hope to return? In general, there was a desire to reclaim a collective human identity. Knowledge of the "classics" (including Ovid and Homer) was expected, and a standard component of most curricula, and it was insisted that the lessons taught in these works were morals to live by. Davies explains the unifying thread among early humanists as discussed by Arnold, a scholar from the Victorian era:

For Arnold, the 'central...truly human point of view', though evidently modern and European, stands for something essential, above and beyond the accidents of historical or national difference, a quality sometimes eclipsed by ignorance or self-interest, but visible in Homer and Sophocles no less than in Shakespeare or Goethe twenty or more centuries later...What they share – what makes them all 'humanists' – is their conviction of the unwavering centrality of the 'human' itself. (20)

These writers collectively helped to establish "secular individuality," allowing the human subject to become of central importance and value (21).

This particular “type” of humanism is key in this argument. It is problematic, as Davies argues, because it misrepresents humanity, suggesting that there is a “universal humanity” (24). This viewpoint fails to consider the nuances of human identity, asserting that “human-ness” is a definitive quality. This assumption of universality allowed canonical authors to privilege man, but with the modernization of society, and the traumatic and vast changes that Western society has witnessed, the “essential man” has become a far more complicated subject.

With the rise of postmodern thought in the West in the 1960s, “paradigmatic man” has been challenged by changed understandings of subjectivity. The humanist thought at work in the canon is deeply indoctrinated within much of Western thought, and has certainly not disappeared entirely, but the opportunities to consider humanity beyond universality have expanded. I will delve into these changed understandings of the subject utilizing Jacques Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, in which he investigates the humanist perspective and contests the strict binary between the categories man and animal.

The humanist thought at work in the classical texts I have analyzed establishes a singular border between the two groups in question. Derrida examines this border, though not to contest its existence. He explains, “I have thus never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he calls* the animal” (30). Instead, he challenges the humanist notion of the limit between man and animal by considering the “abyssal” qualities of this particular border. He continues a theoretical perspective that is threaded through much of his work – the notion of the abyss:

The discussion becomes interesting once, instead of asking whether or not there is a limit that produces a discontinuity, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyssal, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one

internally divided line; once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible. What are the edges of a limit that grows and multiplies by feeding on an abyss? (31)

Derrida considers the heterogeneity of the limit, or abyss of signification, that lies between given signifiers. Rather than pinning one classification against the other, he considers “a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living” within the abyss, the rupture between “proper man” and “proper animal.”

Challenging the humanist sense of a strict and singular border between the two epistemes, I will analyze the rupture that is unveiled through the characters’ experiences in *The Walking Dead*. The comic series seems bound to the idealized, universal man that is revered in the canon, but is unable to uphold the singularity of this figure in light of the “heterogenous multiplicity” of being that is revealed in the text.

The comic follows a group of survivors after the rapid epidemic of an unknown virus that has created “walkers,” or zombies. Rick Grimes, former sheriff of his small town, awakens from a coma in an entirely changed world. Clinging to his identity and leadership role in his community, he upholds the values and behaviors expected of a “man of the law.” His wife, Lori, and son, Carl, team up with Rick’s best friend and former work partner, Shane. Lori, Carl and Shane have been living in a small camp with a rather dysfunctional group of survivors. Once reunited with Rick, they move from one location to the next, believing that traveling towards a major city promises information, sustenance and security. Their journey is consistently disrupted by detours and disappointments, and slowly the survivors’ hope of arriving at a “promised land” morphs into an illusion. They learn to cope with the walkers, which once seemed the primary

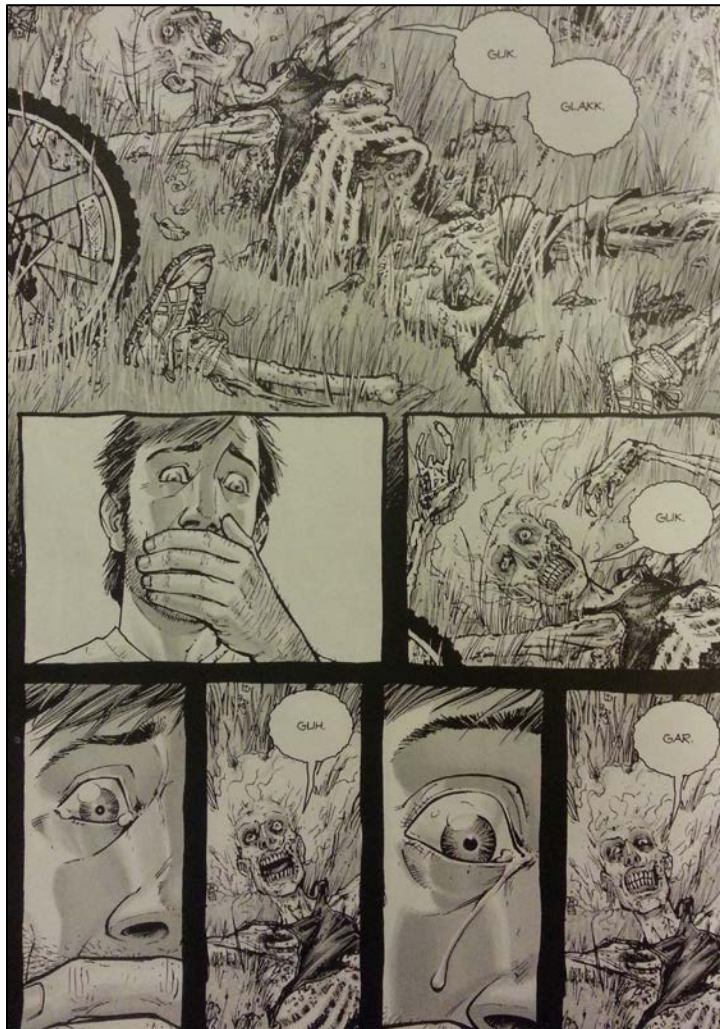
threat of their post-apocalyptic world, but it is quickly unveiled that the walking dead are nowhere near as sinister as the living.

With over 100 issues published at the time of this research, *The Walking Dead* is a huge collection, and difficult to condense. For the purposes of this argument, I have chosen Rick and his direct relationships and experiences as the primary focus. He is central to the narrative, and his desperate struggle to uphold normativity, primarily through the maintenance of the nuclear family unit, poignantly illustrates the ways the narrative grapples with breaking away from established ideologies and tropes, like those in the canonical works I examined, while failing to do so fully.

Rick's struggle to process the world around him begins when he wakes from a coma, alone, in an abandoned hospital. He makes a stealthy getaway, past a mob of walkers, and finds his way to a nearby field. Here he encounters a different kind of walker, unlike the violent, monstrous beings from which he flees (see Fig. 1)⁵.

The walker, who is really more of a "crawler," is sprawled out in the grass. Rick looks closely at what appears to be a lifeless, rotted corpse, to discover that the boney figure is very much alive. A panel featuring Rick's astonished expression is juxtaposed with the gaping expression of the animated corpse beneath him who utters a "guk." When viewing these images in succession it appears that the two are making eye contact, a moment of strangely human connection with a being from a group that was initially presented as entirely other. Rick's horrified wide-eyed expression quickly shifts to a teary and terrifying realization: The world, and everyone in it, has been completely changed.

⁵ Because *The Walking Dead* Compendiums One and Two do not have page numbers I will cite quotations and images by the chapter in which they appear.



Rick's Aporia (Ch. 1) (Fig. 1)

By humanist standards, the walker would be considered animal because it is not representative of proper, universal humanity. Initially, it appears as though this moment upholds the humanist binary, emphasizing the singular border between man and animal. However, this moment actually places the zombie somewhere between humanity and animality. The text is bound to the binaristic code of man/animal, but presents a figure that is biologically human and behaviorally animal. This zombie's "inbetween-ness" is the first of many moments evidencing the text's attachment to language that fails to represent the subject adequately. Derrida

comments on the gaze as a vehicle for breaking down the singular limit between man and animal. In Kirkman's text, the gaze functions first as a mirror; Rick has the potential to reflect on himself through his awareness of being looked at. Second, the exchange creates an aporia, or a rare instance of stepping back and examining what is before the viewer. Finally, the gaze makes Rick aware that he is being looked back at, that the walker is responding to him, and therefore is given subjectivity, calling attention to the unsettling suspension of the zombie somewhere both within and without of the constructed categories.

Interestingly, in Derrida's own, personal recollection of an exchanged gaze between him and his cat, he explains that the gaze is "bottomless." He says, "the gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself" (12). In other words, by gazing at, or gazing with the animal, man is made aware that his identity is not in fact definitive. Rick looks into the eyes of the walker, and quite literally sees himself reflected in the human eyes staring back at him. He becomes aware that the border that contained him within the sphere of proper man and separated monstrous others within the sphere of proper animal, does not offer a singular limit, but rather unveils an abyss, a multiplicity of identities that lie between the proper, but phantasmic categories that humanists relied upon.

Rick's aporia is disconcerting. He gazes into a mirror, into the eyes of what he thought was other or outside, and in this way he confronts an abyss. The terrified expression on his face points to the shock and horror he feels about becoming cognizant of this abyssal limit. His realization disrupts every concrete notion of humanity he depended upon for security in the world before the zombie outbreak. Readers also face this changed awareness, and though

unsettling or unfamiliar, when pursued further, this new perspective has considerable implications.

After this aporetic moment, Rick fights to return to a past that simply cannot be recreated. His attempts at resistance fail repeatedly, making the complexity of his own identity increasingly apparent. Despite his refusal to reconsider the limit as a “heterogeneous multiplicity of the living,” as Derrida deems it, his repeated failure to reconstruct normalcy demonstrate that humanity is not the singular, universal state of being that the humanists once considered it (31).

Rick’s aporetic moment is fleeting, and, as the style of illustration throughout the whole of chapter one suggests, he is bound to his drive to return to some semblance of normal life. Like the rest of the series, this section is inked in black and white, but interestingly, all of the panels in this chapter are boldly outlined in black. None of the remaining chapters are illustrated this way. This is due in part to the shift in illustrators after Chapter 1, but the visual impact of this stylistic shift from one chapter to the next is profound. The aesthetics of chapter one suggest stability, clarity, and most importantly, control. These qualities reflect the state of the shocked, but always poised and collected, main character. Even in the face of chaos, Rick keeps moving, destined to solve the problem at hand. His “mission” is laid out like a storyboard; the thick black lines that appear in chapter one downplay, quite literally, the gray area. As the structure in chapter one falls apart in following chapters, Rick grows increasingly desperate, yearning to reconcile past and present, and return to the comfortable, “rational” black and white world he remembers.

The ultimate illusion of normalcy, for Rick, lies in the secure structure of the heteronormative nuclear family. He and others in the series rely upon the performance of certain socially constituted roles to aid in a reconstruction of the phantom past. In considering these

roles, I will turn to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. In this text, she problematizes the notion of the "natural" by examining constructed identities, namely man and woman. Much like the binary that emerges between man and animal in humanist discourse, the phantasmic "slash" between gender roles calls attention to the problem of binaries in general.

Within the first ten pages of *The Walking Dead*, it is apparent that, like Ovid and Shakespeare's works, the family is of central importance. However, the series is not interested in the royal family that the canon regards with fascination. Instead, the comic emphasizes the structure and function of the nuclear family from a typical American suburb. This focus is due, in part, to contemporary social structures in the West. Additionally, though, the American nuclear family is perhaps just as popular a topic within the horror genre to the degree that members often are represented as zombies. Robin Wood discusses the evolution of the horror film from the 1970s onward in her book, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan and Beyond*. She notes that the seventies marked a period of heightened interest in the "American nightmare." Normative expectations imposed on American society in earlier decades (by the media, government and religion, among other things) were finally called into question, and horror films took some of the first "stabs" at these critiques (63-65). Wood notes that horror films of the seventies brought together five key trends – "The Monster as human psychotic or schizophrenic," "the revenge of Nature," "Satanism," "The Terrible Child," and "Cannibalism" – all of which are still themes in currency with the contemporary horror genre (75). She notes that, "these apparently heterogeneous motifs are drawn together more closely by a single unifying master figure: the Family" (75). With the advancement of the genre, the American family morphed from something morally and psychologically black and white (like the sitcoms of the 50s and 60s) into a more derisive and horrifying entity.

During this period of cultural change and fascination with the family, the zombie films of George Romero rose to popularity. These works are certainly a point of inspiration for Kirkman's comic series. Romero's films are fixated on normative social structures and hell-bent on breaking them down. Postmodernist storytellers implemented the horror genre as a vehicle to deconstruct tradition in a terrifying and tantalizing way. By targeting the typical, suburban family unit, the embodiment of security and normalcy, they demonstrate that what is most familiar and closest to home can perhaps be the greatest challenge to not only what it means to be "normal," but also what it means to be human.

Reminiscent of the zombie flicks of the seventies and eighties, the zombies in *The Walking Dead* are slow moving and unthinking. In fact, they become decreasingly threatening as survivors learn how to control them. Through this gripping horror story, conventional structures such as the family are challenged. Unlike the cannibals of the canon, and despite survivors' attempts to separate the walkers from themselves, the zombies are not entirely isolated on the periphery of humanity. Instead the walkers instigate a continuation of what one might call an aporetic dysphoria. These moments of revelation are troubling, especially to Rick, who so obediently abides by normative "rules."

When the figures are successfully kept outside, if only temporarily, the narrative becomes less about *those* monsters, and more focused on the impossible but desperate struggle among the survivors to uphold the strict binary code one finds in humanist texts. How can the survivors maintain that their humanity is superior or even definitive in a world absent of the influences and structures that upheld one of the most basic social units—the heteronormative, nuclear family?

The Walking Dead is bound, particularly within the assignment of roles within the group of survivors, not only to a hyper-masculinist ideology but also to a singular border between man

and woman. Butler questions the Western understanding of the subject that is attached, perhaps irremovably, to gender and sexuality as constructed within culture. She asks:

To what extent is ‘identity’ a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as ‘identity’ is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (23)

For the characters in Kirkman’s series, the answer to Butler’s first question is that identity is bound to the performance of expected roles, particularly in relation to gender. Rick in particular is unable to see subjects outside of expected gender roles established by the “norms of intelligibility” that Butler refutes. His own actions are tied to a performance of masculinity that makes little sense in a world that has been completely upended, one in which traditional roles appear as quaint and even passé.

Not only does Rick rely on the performance of a masculine identity rooted in problematic understandings of gender, but also he expects his wife, his son and the others in the group to adhere to these roles (man as provider, woman as caretaker) that uphold strict limits of identity. Rick is the self-styled patriarch of the group and of his family. The Grimes family is a reminder of the past, but also creates a series of aporetic moments for characters and readers both. As

Rick imposes the identities of the past on his family, it becomes increasingly evident that those roles are not only impractical, but also fictitious ideals.

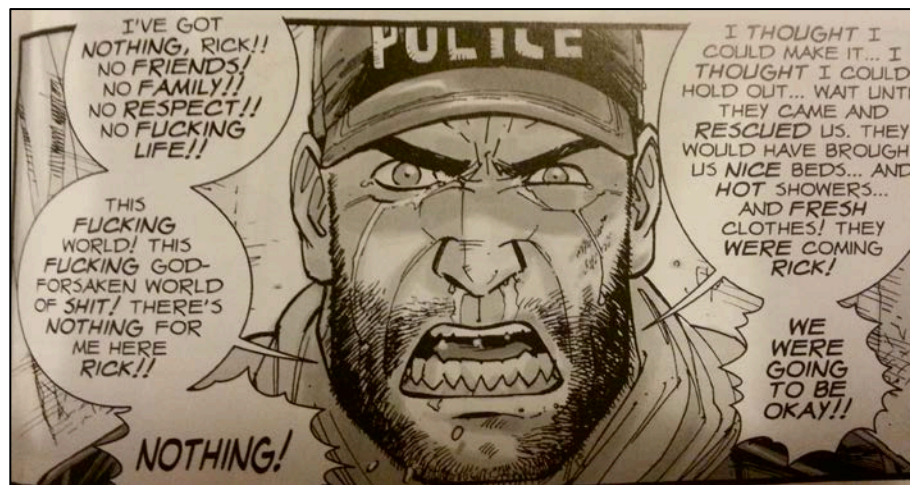
Butler discusses the role of marriage, in particular the role of the wife and women as “binding agents” between certain tribal communities. She notes that women, who are crucial to tribal relations, lose their subjectivity and become only symbolic units of exchange that reinforce patriarchal structures. She writes, “The woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity, but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds the various clans to a common but internally differentiated patrilineal identity” (53). Lori functions similarly in *The Walking Dead*. Her key purpose is to serve her husband and the other men in the group of survivors. She has limited agency, and while her role as mother is critical to the heteronormative structure, her submission to Rick’s fantasy of the past weakens her ability to survive in the changed world.

In short, Lori’s role as mother and wife overshadows her personhood. She appears as a caricature rather than a multidimensional subject. This lack of subjectivity allows Rick to use her to attempt to recreate the past. However, the binaristic allocation of roles in the nuclear family, like the stringent separation Rick insists exists between rational humanity and base animality, falls apart as the phantom of normativity is revealed as such.

All of this is to say that a second major aporia occurs in the midst of Rick’s desperate efforts to define concretely his own family as properly and purely human. Very early in the narrative, the family unit is unsettled by Shane. Not only does he assume Rick’s role when it is presumed that the sheriff is dead, but also, Shane forms a romantic relationship with Lori and acts as a father for Carl. In a sense, he functions as a competing tribal leader, and Lori, the central unit of exchange, dictates where the loyalty of “tribesmen” should lie through her

respective “marriage” or partnership. Before Rick returns, the “clan” of survivors sees Shane as the leader because he is the head of the family.

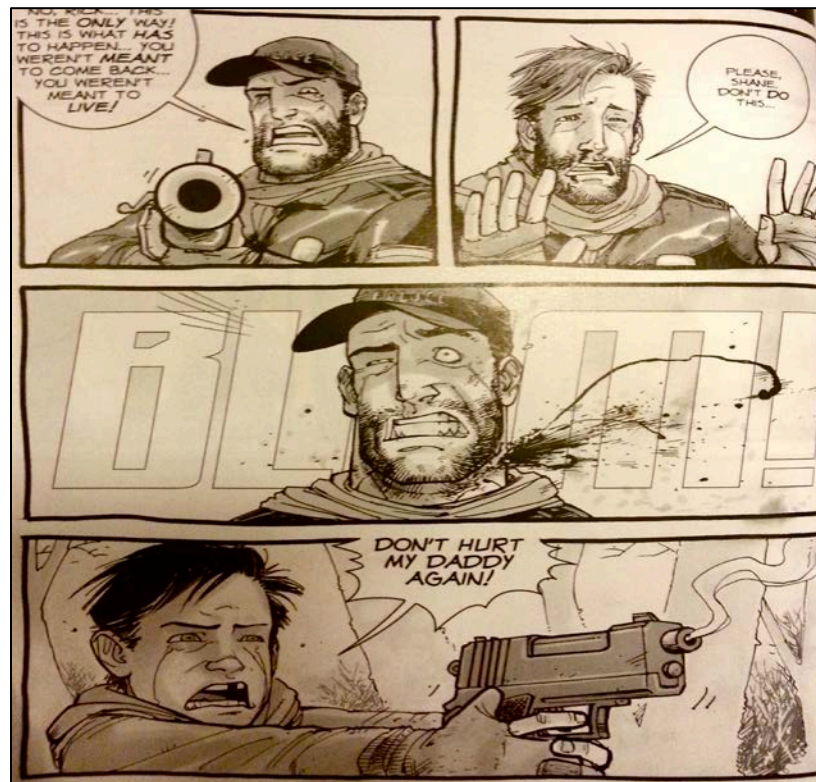
Once Rick returns, Shane’s presence is too problematic for Rick’s “formula” for a return to normalcy. As in *Titus Andronicus*, the outsider puts the family at risk. Two patriarchs cannot exist under the humanist assertions made about the family in the texts I examine. Moreover, Shane is not representative of the epistemic man that embodies the ideals to which Rick is bound. Shane announces his outsider status in a confrontation with Rick, crying out that he has none of the things that he “should” have, namely a family of his own (Fig. 2).



Shane Confronts Rick (Ch. 1) (Fig. 2)

In the middle of the wilderness, Shane is not changed to an animal like Chiron and Demetrius, though he has infiltrated the family unit through sex. In Figure 2 he is depicted as “wild” and threatening (he has crazed eyes, bared teeth, and a chaotic swarm of venomous words around him), yet he is still presented as not only human, but also sympathetic. Despite his “humanness,” Shane is still eliminated to quell Rick’s uncomfortable aporia. He sees yet another identity that doesn’t fit the mold of proper man in a human figure, but the text prevents any consideration of an identity outside of the humanist sense of humanity can really “sink in.”

Just as Shane raises his gun to shoot the upstanding patriarch, the lawman, Rick, a bullet passes through Shane's neck. The next panel reveals Carl holding a smoking gun. He is in tears, mouth open showing his missing front tooth, highlighting his youth, and he cries, "Don't hurt my daddy again!" This violent resistance to the breakdown of the family exposes the urgency these characters feel to avoid falling into an identity that is not clearly set on the "right" side of the border (Fig. 3).



Carl shoots Shane (Ch.1) (Fig. 3)

Even though the obvious threat is eliminated, it can be inferred that the decay of the family has already begun. Just before Shane is killed, Lori falls to the ground lamenting, “It’s never going to be the same again. We’re never going to be normal.” The mother, a clear remnant of the civilized world, begins to give up. The characters are anxious, slowly realizing, and adamantly resisting the fact that the structures they relied upon to identify their humanity, their civility, are rotting away like the walkers around them.

Shane and his ultimate demise culminate in an aporetic moment that points to the flaws in Rick’s “plan” to return to the past. Continuing her discussion of the problem of binary divisions within understandings of gender, Butler comments that to assert the category “feminine” or “masculine” are definitive, tangible concepts insists that there was a time before these ideas, a notion that she challenges. Her discussion is helpful for understanding Rick’s struggle with “natural law.”

Without society to help create the concept of family, survivors are cast into an unknown space without the normative ideals that were mistaken for truth. That world engenders the same anxiety that canonical works try to eliminate. Any figure or group that challenges the singular border between man and animal in traditional cannibal narratives is cast into the category of animal, thus preserving the supposed purity and superiority of the human identity.

Survivors in *The Walking Dead* are not granted this protection. In their post-apocalyptic world, the process of assigning meaning and defining identity is further complicated. Assuming that their world, pre-zombie breakout, was a mirror of the “real” world, we can also infer that these characters do not stringently uphold a traditional humanist ideology. For example, the primarily white group of survivors does not cast out or demonize the black and Asian characters as animal or place them within the group of outsiders because of their race. In *Titus Andronicus*,

Aaron's race is more than enough to cast him, and anyone associated with him, out of "humanness." Interestingly, though, the survivors seem to regress in terms of gender roles to a clearly outdated way of considering identity once the world is all but lost in the traumatic sequence of events that continues to unfold.

Initially, Rick adamantly fights to uphold the notion that humanity is superior to the uncivilized, animalistic state of the zombies, but then it is discovered that everyone, as far as anyone can tell, is infected with the zombie virus--the walkers just look different than the living. This revelation perpetuates the existing fear of a loss of humanity, rationality, order, productivity--all attributes upon which civilization prides itself. Furthermore, any information at all about the nature of the virus is purely speculative. The strain is incomprehensible because there is no rational explanation or understanding of it. The walkers lack rational thought, and the survivors are slowly forgetting what human civility means. The chaos and lack of information generates incredible anxiety for Rick, again the lawman whose sense of justice, and arguably of the ethical world is relatively black and white.

Rick is unable to come to terms with the world around him because his perception of reality is singular. Butler notes the Western tendency towards binary division in thought from a broader perspective in order to consider the relationship between culture and nature:

The binary relationship between culture and nature promotes a relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely "imposes" meaning on nature, and, hence, renders it into an "Other" to be appropriated to its own limitless uses, safeguarding the ideality of the signifier and the structure of signification on the model of domination. (50)

Just as Derrida asserts in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Butler points out the problem of the constructed Other. Humanist thought promotes man as the "ideal signifier," dominant over the

“rendered Other,” animal. Reliance on this kind of division is indeed a safeguard for Rick, who insists that he has power over the natural world. Dependent upon a conventional form of masculinity, which Butler explains is most readily associated with “agency” as well as “reason and mind,” Rick falls into the position of group leader (50). However, as it becomes clear that the normative world as *he* understands it has shifted a great deal, the sheriff becomes unfit for the position.

As mentioned previously, Rick’s perspective is illustrated in the clearly organized, high contrast images of the first chapter, but as he starts to see the world for the gray area that it is, the comic panels become less defined. The first battle against the “gray” as it were, the plan to remove Shane, the challenge to modernism’s assigned roles and binarisms, fails to change the inner workings of the new world, which remains incomprehensible to Rick. In fact, the gray area of *The Walking Dead* is so difficult for the survivors to grasp that it overwhelms many into suicide, betrayal and violence.

Despite the unreliability of his worldview, Rick continues to believe that the old world’s ways can be reclaimed; the phantom of the past can be trapped and brought back to its rightful place in the present moment. As I’ve argued, Shane’s infiltration of the family unit is yet another sign of a changed world. Carl’s role in attempting to stop the realization of this change is key, and he becomes even more significant as the story progresses. Rick’s body and the bodies of his family are literally altered, and much like the bodily abuses suffered in the canonical texts I discussed earlier, as the Grimes family begins to crumble, physical trauma coincides with and mirrors their psychological turmoil.

First Fractures: Corporeal Trauma and Fragmented Identity



Fig. 4 Carl is Shot (Ch. 2) (Fig 4)

On a hunting trip with Tyrese and Carl, Rick warily observes, “I think there’s something out there up ahead of us” (Ch.2). As soon as the reader turns from his concern at the bottom of the page to the first panel of the next, they are met with the image of a tiny sheriff falling forward, dropping his rifle. A bullet whizzes through Carl’s back violently, as indicated by the word “PKOW!” stretched horizontally behind Carl’s hat at the top of the panel (Fig. 4).

A scared, disheveled man runs out of the woods, profusely apologizing and exclaiming that the shot was an accident. Blinded by rage, Rick charges towards the man and throws him to the ground. Despite a few angry outbursts in the past, this is the first time the reader is shown a violent side to Rick. Any killing he did in the beginning of the narrative was out of mercy or necessity, but now, murder has become, at least in Rick’s mind, an acceptable form of settling any kind of conflict.

Carl survives the shot and is rushed to the gunman’s community, a farm inhabited by a family of other survivors. Even though Carl’s wounds are dressed and he wakes up asking, “where’s my hat?” – a sure sign that things are back to “normal” and that he can go back to emulating his father’s former role as sheriff – everyone in the group is acutely aware of the sensitivity of Rick’s situation.

Outside of the farmhouse Dale, an older man who is a part of Rick's group, approaches Lori. He has discovered that she has been hiding her pregnancy. She is anxious not because the child will be born into a fallen world, but rather because she knows that the baby's father is most likely Shane. Dale warns:

'Rick is the backbone of this group. He's the one stable thing we've all got. He knows this. That's why when he's scared you can't tell...you know he's scared, but he ain't showing it. We need that. We need him...I don't know what you did with Shane...but if that baby's his and not Rick's, I'm begging you—take it to your grave. It'll kill him. It'll be the one last thing it takes to make him crack...' (Ch. 2; bold in original)

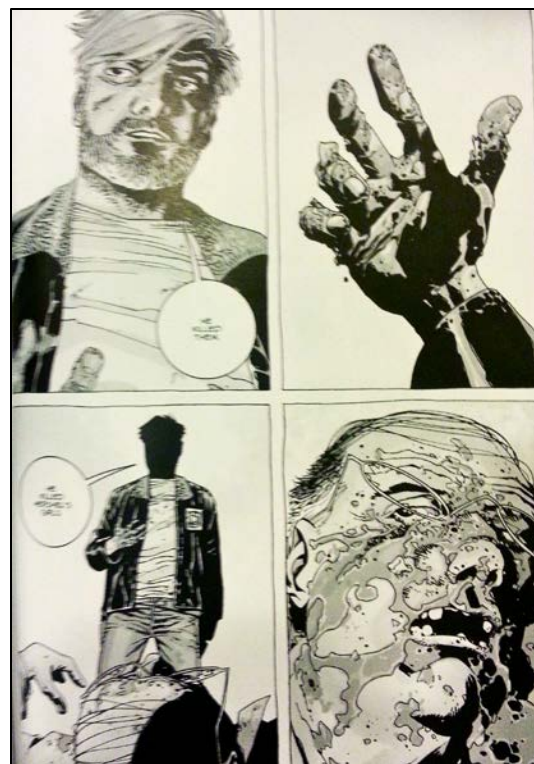
Dale respects Rick, but he also recognizes that the sheriff is highly unstable. This moment highlights Rick's vulnerability to his surroundings, something that prevents him from maintaining his established persona.

Despite Dale's warning and loyalty, by the time the survivors settle into their new community inside a prison, tensions boil over causing others to turn away from the once trusted lawman. Andrea, Dale's lover and one of the group's best with a gun, is in the laundry room of the prison when Thomas, a former inmate, attacks her. She runs outside screaming for help, and Rick is there to save the day, but his heroic act goes too far. His eyes narrow at the sight of the prisoner chasing Andrea, and he bolts off towards them, like a predator tracking and taking down his prey (Ch. 3).

Rick beats Thomas violently, screaming and accusing him of the murders of two other members of his group that remain unsolved. Lori tries to hold him back, afraid that Rick will kill the man, but Rick persists, and in a horrifying sequence of images he reveals what lies beneath his collected exterior.



Rick Beats Thomas (Ch. 3) (Fig. 5)



Rick's Mangled Hand (Ch. 3) (Fig. 6)

The irony in this panel speaks volumes about Rick's mental state (Fig. 5). He calls Thomas a "psycho son of a bitch," but Thomas is passive, absorbing each blow to his face without fighting back. Here it is unclear who the "psycho" really is. Thomas has the social stigma of being a prisoner attached to his name, so Rick's beating is supposedly "OK," yet after Thomas is left in an unconscious heap the double standards that must be implemented to maintain the lawman's moral sensibility are revealed, demonstrating the murkiness of morality in this world.

After this confrontation, Rick is depicted as a different man, he is illustrated in darker shades than before, and most importantly, his body is marked as changed. The hand he used to beat Thomas with is badly mangled. In a foursquare page layout Rick justifies his aggression stating, "He killed them...he killed Hershel's girls" (Fig. 6, Ch. 3). The page displays Rick's figure standing over Thomas' body, but his face is blacked out. The sheriff's initially clear identity is scribbled out, metamorphosed. Rick's mangled hand indicates his removal from the category epistemic man. As the narrative moves forward, Rick's body is of particular interest. It is greatly changed and, like Titus, as his body is further disfigured, his mental state is fractured beyond repair.

After the lawman's desire for control leads him into a serious altercation with Tyrese, which leave's Rick unconscious for over a day, Dale explains that the group has decided to form a committee to make decisions for the group. In other words, Rick is no longer the leader by title. Rick confronts the group insisting, "I am a cop—I know that technically what I did was wrong. I know the laws—I know how things used to be....things have changed!" Tyrese responds, "We can't just ignore the rules, Rick. We've got to retain our humanity!" (Ch. 4; bold in original). Here Rick's failure to remain true to the "old world" values that he so vehemently

pushed previously is challenged directly. Tyrese's fear of a loss of humanity suggests that in order to remain within the category human, the group can only kill those on the outside. This moment calls to mind Butler's discussion of law as a construct that depends on unified and linear temporality to create a false sense of its necessity and inevitability. She comments:

The self-justification of a repressive or subordinating law almost always grounds itself in a story about what it was like *before* the advent of the law, and how it came about that the law emerged in its present and necessary form. The fabrication of those origins tends to describe a state of affairs before the law that follows a necessary and unilinear narrative that culminates in, and thereby justifies, the constitution of the law. The story of origins is thus a strategic tactic within a narrative that, by telling a single, authoritative account about an irrevocable past, makes the constitution of a law appear as a historical inevitability. (48)

What the law *was* is represented allegorically in Rick's character. However, his inability to adhere to the moral code that Tyrese insists is *necessary* to retain their humanity demonstrates the problem of assuming law as linked to an originary truth. Rick relies on the fluidity of the law, without realizing it, when he insists that new laws must be created. This moment is uncharacteristically progressive, but fails to sway Rick into a changed awareness.

In a moment that greatly contradicts his former quest for the preservation of the world that was, Rick admits to killing one of the inmates from the prison. He says, "I thought you people might prefer not to know just how savage we're going to have to be for just a little while longer" (Ch. 4; bold in original). This is his first open acknowledgement that the current world is notably different from the past. However, he still says that the "savage" identity is separate from humanity, something that must be adopted "for just a little while longer." This identity that

is enfolded in the category animal has to be moved phantasmatically into the human sphere. Allowing for this fluctuation between supposedly concretely separate spheres speaks to the fluidity of identity and the fragility of the notion of singularly divided ways of being.

This kind of contradiction is discussed in Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence* in the chapter entitled "The Politics of Containment." He explains that the theoretical model of containment argues that "to invert a binary opposition (e.g. masculine/feminine) is to remain within rather than to overthrow its oppressive structure" (82-83). In other words, Rick employs the binary structure under the guise of subversion from the man/animal divide. He cannot move outside of this structure, though, because the Western reliance on perceiving the world in binaristic terms has been too deeply engrained in his (and arguably Kirkman's) mind. So what is presented as transgressive actually serves to uphold the binaristic "law." Dollimore discusses the complexity of transgression through an examination of Richard Sennett's theory of "disobedient dependence." He writes, "Transgression, says Sennett, is perhaps the most forceful element in disobedient dependence, since it involves a defiance based on dependence, a rebellion not against authority, but within it" (82). Rick partakes in this kind of disobedient dependence, clearly entrenched in and reliant upon the laws of the society he believes ideal. This qualifies his momentary "rebellion" against the laws of humanity in chapter four.

Dollimore quotes Sennett, remarking, "rebellion 'has very little to do with genuine independence or autonomy'; moreover, 'the world into which a person has entered through the desire to transgress is seldom...a real world of its own, a true alternative which blots out the past' (82). Rick, the rebel, the fearless leader who is so beloved by fans of the comic series, it seems, is clearly no rebel at all, at least not in the sense that his rebellion is moving away from the structures that shaped his identity. In fact, is dependent upon the laws he enforced as Sheriff

and the “law” in a broader context – the normative structure and function of society in relation to gender, sex and other roles harking from an idyllic, phantom past.

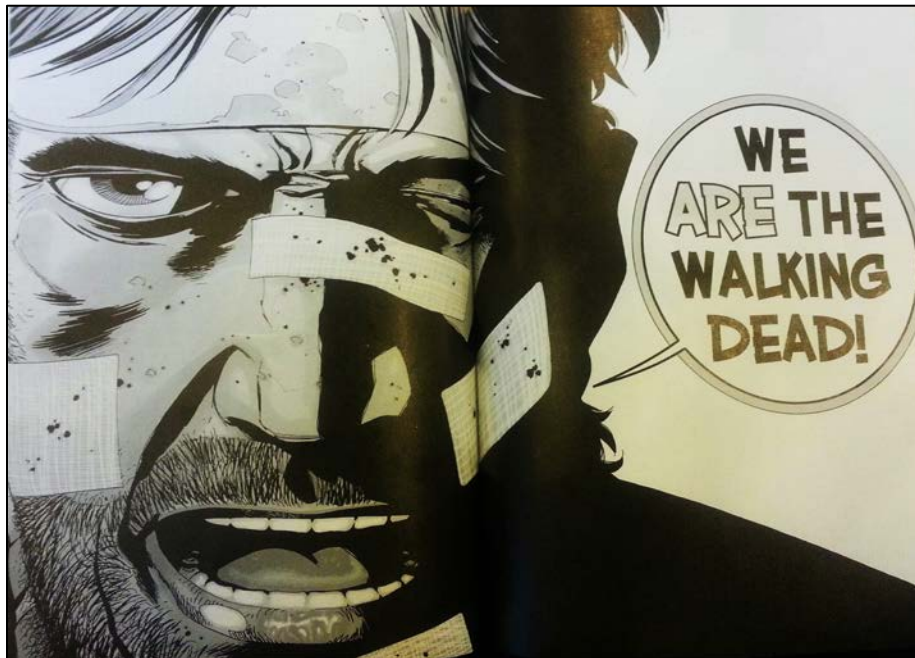
Even after asserting that a lean towards animality is only a temporary necessity, one that will hopefully be reversed once things return to “normal,” Rick comes to a striking realization. As his speech to the group builds in intensity and emotion he seems to realize for himself that what once was a journey for other humans, namely a quest lined, if only faintly, with hope for reclaiming the world, has changed, establishing a new world that is only a phantom of what was. He stands in front of the group, disheveled and covered in bandages from his fight with Tyrese and rants:

Do you think you’re ever going to watch television again? Go to the bank? Buy groceries? Drop your kids off at school?! EVER?! It will never happen! You can come to grips with that sad fact—or you can sit around wishing for it to happen! You can sit around trying to follow every retarded little rule we ever invented to make us feel like we weren’t animals—**AND YOU CAN DIE!** (Ch. 4; bold in original)

Rick appears more concerned with convincing himself that he is not in fact bound to a singular humanity. It could be argued that he is accepting the multiplicity of being in an abyssal rupture of identity, but he can only comprehend abiding by the supposed rules of one sphere of being or the other – that is he ultimately reinforces the binary structure that Dollimore insists occurs in the attempt to transgress. Rick’s flirtation with the abyss overwhelms him. The past that he clings to as reality, as the origin of his identity, is repeatedly unveiled as fiction, yet despite his desperate struggle, he sees that he cannot uphold the notion of humanity that he stands for but rather insists on reconstructing a singular limit between the categories man and animal. In order

to justify the border, Rick thrusts himself and his fellow survivors into the latter category, relinquishing humanity in order to salvage the normative “reality” he hopes to restore.

Tyrese tries desperately to reason with Rick, saying, “We are trying to reestablish life as it was. That’s our goal. We don’t want to become savages, that’s what you don’t get.” Rick sharply replies, “It’s obvious now that I’m the only sane one here! We already are savages, Tyrese” (Ch. 4; bold in original). The panoramic panels that follow depict a horde of walkers, gray and out of focus, outside of the fence around the prison and gradually coming into focus, until, at the bottom of the page, the reader is confronted with the dark eye sockets of a zombie hidden slightly by the grating of the fence and a continuation of Rick’s desperate and angry address. In the corner of the horizontal view of the could-be-living face of the walker a bubble of speech from Rick questions, “Don’t you get it?...” and on the consecutive two page spread an abrasive and poignant picture of Rick’s haggard face is paired with a striking sentiment; “**WE ARE THE WALKING DEAD!**” (Ch. 4; bold in original; Fig. 7).



We Are the Walking Dead (Ch. 4) (Fig. 7)

This climactic revelation offers evidence to break down the singular limit between categories of identity, but ultimately, the text fails to turn away from the humanist perspective.

Addressing this tendency, Dollimore notes:

Contradictions are manifested in and through representation, infecting its most elementary categories...the binarism that most static of structures, produces internal instabilities in and through the very categories it deploys *in order* to clarify, divide, and stabilize the world. Thus the opposition us/them produces the anomaly of the internal dissident (87; italics in original).

Rick is afforded the opportunity to utilize the contradictions within binary structures to break them down, but is unable to perceive a world outside them. Dollimore's suggestion that binaries are transgressive allows an opportunity to employ stringent humanist tropes as vehicles for changed perception of identity, as catalysts for reimagining humanity and animality, masculinity and femininity as not two opposing categories, but rather as idyllic "bookends" to a far more complex and nuanced multiplicity of identities. Unfortunately, *The Walking Dead* does not follow through with the potential to transgress, and instead depends upon conventional binaries to maintain the fiction of the past as something to which one might return.

Ruptured Reality: Attempting to Recover Singularity on the Precipice of an Abyss

In subsequent chapters, Rick's outburst is all but forgotten even though his announcement lingers in the atmosphere of the narrative. Just as animal figures in the canon are made cannibal in a metaphorical sense, as soon as Rick proclaims his "temporary" identity as proper animal ("savage") he is slowly consumed by the world around him. Recall that in the classical texts I've discussed rationality and control as what establish human subjectivity and separate superior man from the lowly animal by way of a singular divide. In those texts, the loss of subjectivity threatened the downfall of humanity. This same anxiety is laced throughout *The Walking Dead*. Though Rick claims that he and his fellow survivors occupy the identity of savage animals, Rick ultimately resumes his role as leader, sheriff. This reappropriation offers a question – how can savage animal (on the opposing end of a singular divide) assume the role of rational man? How can it be said that both the singular limit and the past are not fictions, phantoms of an idealized notion of truth that is eternally reaching for, but never arriving at the origin? Once the slash between epistemic ideals that feigned security between outside and inside is exposed as a fiction, the literal enclosure (the electric fence) around the prison proves insufficient protection, compromising the notion of a singular, universal humanity in a permanent way.

Rick and his group come into contact with a community of survivors in a town called Woodbury that is led by "The Governor," whose real name is Philip. Woodbury appears an example of a post-outbreak society that has been successfully rebuilt to mirror the world that was, but the internal affairs at Woodbury are dark and terrifying, ultimately serving to blot out rather than return to the past. When Rick resists giving Philip information, the latter pins him to a table, pulls out a long knife and cuts off the other's already mangled hand (recall Fig. 6).

Rick's body has been altered yet again, making him more similar to the walkers on the outside. He is literally a zombie on the inside, as the virus is within all survivors, but this corporeal alteration also exteriorizes Rick's extensive psychological transformation. His "wholeness" is compromised from the inside out. Like Lavinia, Rick's damaged body draws him closer to the "other," and, like Titus, Rick's slowly deteriorating mind is reflected on his markedly changed body. With the continual reversal of interiority and exteriority, yet another binary code is challenged. This reversal within the text, however, still relies upon a dualistic structure.

As I've been arguing, *The Walking Dead* relies upon established tropes but is not firmly rooted in humanist ideology, as postmodernity's acknowledgment of certain "gray areas" within representation is also at work in the text. These conflicting stances illuminate the confused nature of the text, which, as the compendium moves towards a riveting close, is never effectively resolved.

In the final chapter of the compendium, readers are reminded of the nuclear family that has been central to Rick's journey. In a chaotic and violent attack on the prison by Philip and his followers, Lori, who has been separated from Rick, clutches her newborn daughter, a glint of hope for the next generation, as she dodges ensuing bullets. Rick turns back only to witness a bullet pass through his infant daughter and wife, killing them both instantly. What Rick perceived as his last concrete connection to the phantom past is shattered.

Rick's hope for a return to normalcy through the preservation of the nuclear, heteronormative family has been ripped apart. In the final pages of the narrative, Carl understands the reality of their situation, and experiences an aporetic moment of his own mirroring Rick's exchanged gaze with the immobilized walker in Chapter 1. Carl stares, wide-eyed, at his father, and soon tears stream down his face. The darkness around Carl's eyes and his

tattered sheriff's hat are indicators of the changes he has experienced. Once a happy-go-lucky young boy, eager to play the role of his father, Carl is on his way, as evidenced in later issues of the series, into a downward spiral similar to that of the fragmented patriarch of the Grimes family (Fig. 8).



Carl's Realization (Ch. 8) (Fig. 8)

Conclusion

The *Walking Dead*'s ongoing reliance on normative binary structures persists, though, as I've claimed, only superficially. A close reading of the text reveals the multiplicity of being that lies in the abyssal rupture between proper man and proper animal, as well as the delineation of gender roles within the category human. Derrida comments on the plurality of identity once more:

We have to envisage the existence of "living creatures," whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity. This does not, of course, mean ignoring or effacing everything that separates humankind from the other animals, creating a single large set, a single grand, fundamentally homogeneous and continuous family tree . . . (47).

My research is a gesture towards considering the fictitious nature of binary structures. It is not, as Derrida expresses, an attempt to lump all living creatures into one equal group, but rather to expand considerations of identity to encompass a greater number of possibilities not only for the subject animal, but also for human subjectivity.

One might argue that Kirkman is entrenched in a masculinist fantasy and offers a complicated, but confused, text. His point of view prohibits an actualization of the failures of binary structures because he, like Rick, seems to see the abyssal rupture but fears an honest confrontation with it. This failure reinforces how much of Western thought is deeply entrenched in binaristic language. However, there is an awareness of the problematic nature of this mode of thinking, which is evidenced in the muddled movement between and among categories of identity within the series.

Like Ovid and Shakespeare, Kirkman is restricted to his cultural moment. Though he has the opportunity to engage in a discourse with readers, he is too reliant upon the tropes, particularly within the cannibal narrative, that have pervaded from the canon and continue to dominate literature. The comic genre in general is an interesting venue for examining binary structure because it is so bound to normative ideology. Cannibal comics are, as I mentioned before, appearing with growing popularity. Works like *Crossed*, *Transfusion*, *Ferals*, just to name a few, deal with posthumanist questions in ways similar to *The Walking Dead*, on the verge of breaking away from established tropes, but ultimately unable to break fully with convention.

While zombie and cannibal narratives have long been platforms for resistance and social unrest, emerging consumptive narratives are generating questions, opening the door to perceiving issues of identity in a revolutionary way. That is to say, this commentary is unconscious, enfolded as it is in a genre aiming to entertain shock and thrill rather than pose philosophical questions. The reliance upon singular borders between epistemic categories in *The Walking Dead* and other similar works proves problematic and impossible to uphold in any concrete way. The encouraging thing is that instead of seeing what many once would brush aside as “just” comics, it is apparent that these works allow readers to begin to imagine how these texts unveil the superficiality of modes of thought that have been relied upon for centuries.

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