

8-2019

“We Are The Walking Dead”: Morality in Robert Kirkman’s Comics Series

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“We Are The Walking Dead”: Morality in Robert Kirkman’s Comics Series

Amy Lynne Jacobs

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

English

August 2019

Dedication

In dedication to Dave Jacobs and Karol Jacobs. I love you both so very much, and my identity, humanity, and morality define themselves by the examples you set.

Acknowledgments

Completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of three people in the English department at Grand Valley State University. Professor Robert Rozema's endless patience, constant attention to what felt like endless drafts, and continued efforts to push me to completion served as the most important sources of academic encouragement. Professor Kathleen Blumreich's unwavering belief in my writing abilities, interest in my off-the-wall ideas, and her fearless approach in the classroom reignited my fire to finish my degree—so that I may one day do with horror literature what she does with *all* literature she assigns. Finally, Professor Rob Franciosi's interest in my outside-the-box approach to scholarly writing topics and his choice to share opportunities for publication revived my belief in my abilities to do something special. To all three of you, I give endless thanks and appreciation. You all will forever influence the type of professor I am in the classroom, and I know I will only be a better educator because of your positive influences.

Abstract

Despite widespread cultural success, Robert Kirkman's comics series, *The Walking Dead*, has received little critical attention in the literary canon. The limited critical attention it has received fails to provide an in-depth examination of the work's morality. This could be a result of the ever-present influence of Frederic Wertham's claims in his 1954 work, *Seduction of the Innocent*. However, when viewed through the frameworks provided by John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* and Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep*, Kirkman's zombie narrative exhibits morality in multi-layered and complex ways with every turn of the page. Through the gothic settings, zombies, and characters found in the series, Kirkman meets the criteria for moral fiction and so provides lasting and significant lessons about how to best live to 21st century audiences. Because of this, a horror comic like *The Walking Dead* not only deserves but also requires further examination in the literary canon.

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Author's Notes

Because of the visual nature of comics and graphic novels, one likely expects any scholarly examination of the medium to include key panels or sequences within the writing itself. However, this thesis does not include any visual representations of panels. The use of comics panels requires licensing fees; licensing even a single panel for use from a smash success like *The Walking Dead* could run in the thousands of dollars. Alas, I am a poor graduate student who can barely afford a cup of coffee some days—thus the absence of visual examples. I do, however, try to describe any key panels mentioned in concrete and specific detail to aid in the visualization process.

A reader would also likely expect at least some attention to be paid to the illustrator's choices alongside the choices of the author. Again, in this examination, that is not the case. Both creative and economic reasons fueled this decision. First, *The Walking Dead* has had three illustrators over the course of its run. Tony Moore illustrated the first six issues, but from issue seven and on Charlie Adlard and Cliff Rathburn served as illustrators on the series. It is almost impossible to determine which illustrator—Adlard or Rathburn—made which creative decisions. Further, and perhaps more importantly, determining who makes which creative choices when it comes to illustrations is made even more challenging by the influence of Robert Kirkman. In circumstances quite unusual to the comics industry, Robert Kirkman is the owner, creative mastermind, and, for all intents and purposes, “master” of *The Walking Dead* universe. Because Kirkman is the center of the creation of *The Walking Dead* world, he receives the sole critical attention in this moral examination.

One final unusual dilemma is the lack of pagination in *The Walking Dead*. Neither *The Walking Dead* single issues nor the trade paperbacks include page numbers. Because the series lacks pagination, it is not only impractical but also unresolved as to how to cite under the rules of

MLA. This examination uses the trade paperbacks as reference; each trade paperback includes six issues in one collected work. Therefore, the title of the trade paperback in which the specific material can be found is noted in the in-text cite. Whenever possible, signposts and specific descriptions are included as well to aid in locating the material if necessary. This examination only covers the first four trade paperbacks, but a total of thirty-two volumes exist. For visual reference and further reading, please reference the following titles released by Image Comics:

- Kirkman, Robert, Adlard, Charlie, and Rathburn, Cliff. *The Walking Dead Volume 5: The Best Defense*. Image Comics, 2006.
- . *The Walking Dead Volume 6: This Sorrowful Life*. Image Comics, 2007.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 7: The Calm Before*. Image Comics, 2007.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 8: Made to Suffer*. Image Comics, 2008.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 9: Here We Remain*. Image Comics, 2009.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 10: What We Become*. Image Comics, 2009.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 11: Fear the Hunters*. Image Comics, 2010.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 12: Life Among Them*. Image Comics, 2010.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 13: Too Far Gone*. Image Comics, 2010.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 14: No Way Out*. Image Comics, 2011.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 15: We Find Ourselves*. Image Comics, 2011.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 16: A Larger World*. Image Comics, 2012.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 17: Something to Fear*. Image Comics, 2012.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 18: What Comes After*. Image Comics 2013.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 19: March to War*. Image Comics, 2013.
- Kirkman, Robert, et al. *The Walking Dead Volume 20: All Out War Part One*. Image Comics, 2014.
- . *The Walking Dead Volume 21: All Out War Part Two*. Image Comics, 2014.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 22: A New Beginning*. Image Comics, 2014.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 23: Whispers Into Screams*. Image Comics, 2015.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 24: Life and Death*. Image Comics, 2015.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 25: No Turning Back*. Image Comics, 2016.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 26: Call to Arms*. Image Comics, 2016.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 27: The Whisperer War*. Image Comics, 2017.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 28: A Certain Doom*. Image Comics, 2017.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 29: Lines We Cross*. Image Comics, 2018.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 30: New World Order*. Image Comics, 2018.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 31: The Rotten Core*. Image Comics, 2019.
 - . *The Walking Dead Volume 32: Rest in Peace*. Image Comics, 13 August 2019.

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

“In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living”: these words, inscribed on the cover of the first trade paperback volume of *The Walking Dead*, expose the main argument at the heart and “brains” of the zombie-centered apocalyptic transmedia phenomenon. Robert Kirkman works with Charlie Adlard, the primary illustrator, to produce the black-and-white series, which finished its run at issue 193 in July 2019; the television series based on the comics premiered on AMC in October 2010. Kirkman’s narrative serial focuses on protagonist Rick Grimes, who leads a group of survivors as they navigate through the now-desolate American landscape. Throughout the series, Rick and his fellow group members face threats not only from the zombies grazing the countryside, but also from the other survivor communities they encounter. Attacks from all sides force Rick and his group to make life-and-death decisions on a day-to-day basis, many of which have no clear moral answer.

The two-time Eisner Award winning comic is one of the most popular series in publication, and the show’s season finales break viewing records. Fan groups exist all over the world, and *The Walking Dead* panel creates pandemonium at the San Diego Comic Con each year. But while other popular cultural phenomena like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have received significant critical attention in the academy, *The Walking Dead* remains relatively unexplored. A few collections examine parts of the series for philosophical and social issues—including *Triumph of the Walking Dead* (2011), *The Walking Dead and Philosophy* (2012), *We Are All Infected: Essays on AMC’s The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human* (2014), *The Walking Dead and Psychology* (2015), and *The Ultimate Walking Dead and Philosophy: Hungry For More* (2016)—but no one has evaluated the series collectively as a complete work. This lack of critical analysis may indicate that academia still does not take comics—especially horror comics—seriously as a discipline, despite growing fields of studies in both areas.

The long struggle for academic recognition may result from the lingering influence of Frederic Wertham, a psychologist whose anti-comics crusade in the 1950s nearly destroyed the comics industry. His contemptuous distaste and contempt for comics has traditionally limited academic study of the medium's form and content. Scott McCloud argues "Perception affects who will enter comics, as reader or creator. It affects the decisions of those in position to help comics as an art form and industry. And it affects those in position to do it harm" (*Reinventing Comics* 82). Many valuable pieces of art and literature are not given the examination and value they deserve, because of the stigma associated with the medium. Therefore, understanding the negative attitudes is the first step in accepting a violence-ridden and seemingly life-debasing comic like *The Walking Dead* as moral and instructional.

In large part, misconceptions about comics come from studies conducted by psychologist Frederic Wertham, who worked closely with juvenile delinquents in the 1940s and 1950s. In his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham argues that comic books are a driving force behind illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, and other unsavory behaviors in young people. In the early pages, he notes "The trouble is that the 'good' comic books are snowed under by those which glorify violence, crime, and sadism" (10). Wertham believes the problem to be three-fold. First, comics are anti-educational. Next, comics are morally disarming, creating an atmosphere of cruelty and deceit as well as an openness to temptation and criminal or sexually abnormal ideas. Finally, comics "are a factor in a host of negative behavior manifestations" (Wertham 105), including rationalizing ideas otherwise abnormal, providing details of technique in relation to crime, and pushing readers over the edge of maladjustment or delinquency. Wertham asserts that "Even on an adult, the impression of sex plus violence is definite" (32).

In 2019, these attitudes still shape academic discussions of comics. As McCloud rightfully believes, "Words and pictures are as popular as ever, but this widespread feeling that

the combination is somehow base or simplistic has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The roots of this attitude run pretty deep” (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 141). Will Eisner, in his 2008 work *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, similarly observes, “Since comics are easily read, their reputation for usefulness has been associated with people of low literacy and limited intellectual accomplishment...The predominance of art in the traditional comics format brought more attention to that form than to its literary content” (xv). Because of this attitude, “It is hardly surprising, therefore, that comics as a reading form was always assumed to be a threat to literacy, as literacy was traditionally defined in the era before film, television and the internet” (Eisner xv).

While Wertham’s arguments that comic books promote illiteracy and are anti-educational still holds some validity in the minds of scholars, the truth is that comics are more likely to increase literacy. Wertham argues due to their form, comics promote illiteracy. “Comic books are death on reading” (Wertham 121), because they provide an inadequate reading experience which harms fluent left-to-right eye movements, community interest and appreciation of literature, vocabulary development, and creativity. Essentially, “Comic books harm the development of the reading process from the lowest level of the most elementary hygiene of vision to the highest level of learning to appreciate how to read a good literary book” (Wertham 139).

Yet the comics reading process is a multi-layered experience. Eisner notes in *Comics and Sequential Art*

The format of comics presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, line) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax)

become superimposed upon each other. The reading of a graphic novel is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit (2).

If the creator develops the comic to a high standard both verbally and visually, then vocabulary, literacy, an appreciation for literature and art, creativity, and critical thinking will increase.

Comics have inherent value, enhancing not only verbal and visual competency but also the underlying instructional value found in all storytelling. In comics, storytelling is used “to teach behavior within the community, to discuss morals and values, or to satisfy curiosity. They dramatize social relations and the problems of the living, convey ideas or act out fantasies” (Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* 1). Just as fiction authors do, comics artists use storytelling in their panels to provide directions on how to act and react within the world in a more impactful and inclusive way. Further, because readers gain experience in multiple types of literacy, identification with the story and understanding of its messages deepen and make a more lasting impact.

Because of their form of sequential visual storytelling, “Comics communicate in a ‘language’ that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience. Modern readers can be expected to have an easy understanding of the image-word mix and the traditional deciphering of text. Comics can be ‘read’ in a wider sense than that term is commonly applied” (Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* 1). Contrary to Wertham’s assertions that “The sort of community of interest established between children, and between them and adults, by reading and knowing the same stories and classics is...one that is lost to comic-book readers” (Wertham 128), the commonly-experienced visual vocabulary links consumers of popular culture and creates a community in which to explore ideas and lessons. *The Walking Dead’s* fanbase is itself a “community of interest” since they discuss the latest episode or issue.

Promoting illiteracy and devaluing community are not the only issues Wertham finds with comics. In fact,

[T]he most subtle and pervading effect of crime comics on children can be summarized in a single phrase: moral disarmament...It is an influence on character, on attitude, on the higher functions of social responsibility, on superego formation and on the intuitive feeling for right and wrong. To put it more concretely, it consists chiefly in a blunting of the finer feelings of conscience, of mercy, of sympathy for other people's suffering and of respect for women as women...Crime comics are such highly flavored fare that they affect children's taste for the finer influences of education, for art, for literature and for the decent and constructive relationships between human beings and especially between the sexes (Wertham 90-91)

Wertham believed that traits like trust, loyalty, confidence, solidarity, sympathy, charity, and compassion are ridiculed in crime and horror comics, while hostility and hate are praised (94). However, if comics facilitate "moral disarmament," then it is vital to consider what "morality" really means in terms of scholarly criticism.

John Gardner, in his work *On Moral Fiction*, provides frameworks to use in examining a work for morality. What Wertham fails to note is that violence, crime, sexuality—these are all aspects of the world we live in, whether we want to accept them or not. Gardner observes "Though we struggle to deny it, and though only a madman would stare at it constantly... life's potential for turning tragic is a fact of our existence" (Gardner 45). If our literature and art—comics included—deny the reality of violence, then the works become immoral in their refusal to examine what is *true* about the world in which we live. As Gardner believes "to fail to imitate people as they are...would reveal a lack of the true artist's most noticeable characteristic: fascination with the feelings, gestures, obsessions, and phobias of the people of his own time and

place” (77). People are violent, no matter the circumstances; however, in the event of apocalyptic catastrophe, violence almost a certainty. Kirkman truthfully portrays the many sides of humanity—not only the violence and cruelty, but the good and true and beautiful in people as well. The honest, compassionate, and thoughtful responses of the central characters to the violence in the series inform *The Walking Dead’s* potential for moral teaching: despite the vicious, cruel potential in every person, people can reanimate and hold themselves to higher standards of behavior in the face of a culturally-cataclysmic event. In this optimism, Kirkman projects something audiences need *and* want to see.

Not only that, but Wertham fails to understand the potential for social intelligence to be gained from horror comics and their iconography. According to Kyle Bishop, “zombies and the narratives that surround them provide critics an important lens through which they may discern the prevailing attitudes, tendencies, concerns, and anxieties of the society or generation that produced those narratives” (31). They function to reflect attitudes about “violence, inequality, and the shifting social dynamics of gender, race, patriarchal society, and the traditional family unit” (Bishop 103). This coincides with Gardner’s belief that “art reflects something which is real in life...and reveal[s] to others what life is in his own time” (169). The horror-centric content of *The Walking Dead* teaches empathy, the importance of family and community, democracy, sense of self, death, survival, and many others. Through the settings, zombies, violence, death, and destruction, there exists an overall message of the importance of love and human dignity and respect for human life throughout the pages of *The Walking Dead*. The zombie tropes and other horror iconography effectively examine and work through the complex web of cultural, social, and political anxieties of the time. Kirkman uses these tropes to advance Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in his optimistic beliefs that we can, in fact, be better than we were before 9/11.

The release of *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 negatively affected the ways that comics are viewed, both in terms of academic/instructional potential and in terms of societal favor and acceptance. Wertham was correct when he wrote “Comic books and life are connected” (25), but the value of the connections lay in the artist’s ability to categorize morality. The true artist is one who can “distinguish between conventional morality and that morality which tends to work for all people throughout the ages” (Gardner 50). If art must be examined for the “morality which tends to work throughout the ages,” dismissing a story just because it falls in the horror genre is illogical. Perception and acceptance matter to a story like *The Walking Dead*, because, “as misinformation about comics in the short-term needs correcting, the truth about comics in the long run needs preserving” (McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* 91).

Traditionally, horror has been a niche market; it takes a special kind of viewpoint to untangle the terrifying imagery and reveal the true guts of the horror work. But *The Walking Dead* has risen above traditional misconceptions, because the series honestly projects the cultural anxieties which frame post-9/11 American experiences: Who are we? What does it mean to be moral? What does it mean to be human? How do we maintain our ideas of right and wrong and a concern for the well-being of others in the face of the world like the one we live in today? Characters answer these questions constantly in Kirkman’s narrative, as they face the life-and-death circumstances of a post-apocalypse. Characters’ choices in these conflicts embody the moral ideals, and so offer life-affirming lessons about how we should live. In fact, it is its the horrific content that allows *The Walking Dead* to teach moral answers to these difficult questions, through characters’ choices in response to these conflicts which embody the moral ideals

While Elizabeth Grosz argues the turn of the 21st century was marked by a moment of hope represented in “the meeting of history (the twentieth century and before) with a future full

of promise and yet without form or flesh” (qtd. in Peaty 187), on 9/11 America’s future arrived when the moment of hope took the form of identity-shattering anxieties. For many Americans, “From the beginning of the War on Terror that followed 9/11, the popular culture produced in the United States has been colored by fear of possible terrorist attacks and the grim realization that people are not as safe and secure as they might have once thought” (Bishop 9). Americans have witnessed endless violence—both domestically and internationally—as well as the economic recession, natural and manmade disasters, and tragedies of all sorts that bleed all over our news sources and television screens. Everything we have known has been stripped down to bare bones and is rotting, and “the laws and moral conventions that once maintained some level of social harmony are long gone” (Routledge 247). Everything we know about ourselves as individuals and as members of American culture is no more. Where does that leave us?

While fiction in general reflects cultural identity, *The Walking Dead* frames cultural anxieties in an especially powerful way—as a work of gothic fiction. Throughout his choices in the visual and verbal languages of the series, Kirkman frequently incorporates ambiguity, uncertainty, blurring of boundaries, doubles/doubling, mirroring, and the interplay between light and dark. *The Walking Dead* reflects the loss of innocence, the ambiguity in choosing right from wrong, and an uncertainty about how to treat our fellow human beings with dignity—challenges many endured after the massacres on that September day. Kirkman works through these challenges using the traditions and tropes of gothic and horror narratives, but it is his use of the zombie narrative tradition which has the strongest influence on the morality of his offered lessons. In his mirrored and violative uses of the zombie narrative tradition, Kirkman offers healthier choices of self-hood and community in a post-9/11 world. In choosing hopefulness over cynicism, Kirkman advocates the potential of humanity to improve themselves and their culture in this new world in which we now find ourselves.

Settings and zombies are two of the central gothic elements of the zombie narrative tradition created by George Romero in *Night of the Living Dead*, and Kirkman uses both tropes to captivate the reader's sympathetic engagement with the work. The early settings which Rick traverses alone, as well as Wiltshire Estates, Hershel's farm, and the prison, are all central to diagnosing the wounds driving Kirkman's opus. These settings—infested by zombies in almost every corner—demonstrate that the pre-9/11 cultural constructions that guided the American way of life are outdated and ineffective now. Kirkman uses the zombies to infect the settings and express two ideas: pre-9/11 cultural constructions are not only ineffective, but dangerous in their continued influence. By showing these pillars of American culture are infected, Kirkman demonstrates individual and cultural constructs informing identity, humanity, and morality must be redefined if one wants to survive. In the character arcs and choices of Rick Grimes, Kirkman offers which principles to preserve, which to adapt, and which to outright destroy as Americans move forward in a post-9/11 world. Kirkman answers which principles to keep and how to redefine outdated moral standards through Rick.

Together, the gothic and horror content created *The Walking Dead's* educational curriculum, in the form of a comic. As "real art", the series "creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths" (Gardner 126). In its brutal narrative, *The Walking Dead* affirms life and communicates values of community, harmony, peace, friendship, love, family, truth, beauty, and goodness, despite the violence and death that frame its stories. In doing so, *The Walking Dead* offers viewers a rich, cohesive, moral vision.

Chapter 2: *The Walking Dead* as Gothic Fiction

According to Gardner, “Art begins in a wound, an imperfection—a wound inherent in the nature of life itself—and is an attempt to either learn to live with the wound or to heal it.” He relates the artist’s wound to pains of personality, self-confidence, dignity, and self-respect. To diagnose the cause and prescribe the cure, Gardner believes the “tradition behind the work and the moment (time and place) of its appearance” must be considered in determining if the work is “medicine or distraction” (163). Kirkman’s uses moment of creation and tradition in *The Walking Dead* to exemplify his desire to offer lessons which act as medicine to a 21st century American audience.

The Walking Dead’s moments of appearance serve as important points of consideration in exploring its moral impact. The comics series premiered in 2003, coming just two years after the traumas of the September 11th attacks—traumas which created the wounds driving *The Walking Dead*’s creation. By releasing the TV series in 2010, Kirkman demonstrated that the fears produced on September 11th continue to plague American culture; still today, no cure properly reconstructs our destroyed worldviews. Kirkman chooses a perfect narrative vehicle in the modern zombie narrative tradition envisioned by George Romero in 1968’s *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero’s stark black and white film completely reimagined the zombie from the Haitian folkloric voodoo slave to the flesh-eating reanimated corpse we all know and love to fear today; his “*Living Dead* trilogy constitutes a full-scale criticism of American values” (qtd. in Phillips, *Projected Fears* 83). Bishop adds to this idea, arguing “[I]n a very real sense, then, *Night of the Living Dead* is the story of humanity’s struggle to retain its sense of humanity” (119). *Night of the Living Dead* is not just an examination of Romero’s subjective woes, but a “full-scale criticism” of the underlying problems challenging the values of 1968 America. The blind

patriotism found in the beginning of the Vietnam War, segregation versus integration, women as secondary citizens—all these values came under attack in Romero's film.

The Walking Dead's moments of creation and corresponding cultural landscape in 2003 and 2010 mirror those informing *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. Then and now, America is riddled with fear-mongering demagogues, intense violence—both domestic and international—uncertainty about our fates and our futures, and a real sense of a failing American dream. The divisive turmoil over race and gender relations in 1968 are comparable to the fights for gender and marriage equality which have marked the last eighteen years of American culture and politics. The racial and social riots and police brutality which plagued 1960s America are seen again in 21st century America through police brutality and claims of racial profiling which have filled headlines more and more often since 2001. Parallels in public perception are easily found between the Vietnam War and the Middle Eastern conflicts of the 2000s-era America. In 1968 we saw the Tet Offensive, while 2003 saw the first major battle and American deaths in Operation Iraqi Freedom and 2010 marked Iraqi Freedom's end. Kirkman advances his own full-scale analysis of 21st century American values, by using a storytelling tradition born of a time like his own—traumatized and fearful.

Kirkman's choice to use a narrative framework born from similar cultural circumstances exemplifies his understanding of the usefulness of the zombie tropes in times of cultural turmoil. Audience loyalty to *The Walking Dead* strengthens the usefulness of these narrative standards. It takes more than just an understanding of the usefulness of the gothic and horror, though, to elevate a narrative to mainstream success. In *Projected Fears and Horrors*, Kendall Phillips argues the horror narratives accepted into the popular mainstream do so because they “so capture[s] our cultural anxieties and concerns that our collective fears seem projected on the screen before us” (Phillips 3). Just like *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Walking Dead* remains

popular worldwide after eighteen years of continuous publication; something in the series must see “our collective fears...projected.” Because the shattered culture of the 21st century so closely resembles 1968 America, audiences recognize the potential of Kirkman’s narrative to diagnose and heal the anxieties resulting from 9/11. This recognition establishes resonance, in which narratives “connect in some sympathetic manner—to trends within the broader culture” (Phillips 6). Kirkman’s choices to use gothic, horror, and zombie narrative traditions to inform *The Walking Dead* establish the audience’s familiarity and sympathetic connection, reactions solidify the work’s morality.

In *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner discusses three moral ends of fiction and how to find them in a piece. Kirkman produces all three through his narrative choices in *The Walking Dead*. Through resonance, Truth and Beauty in the series are found—two of the three moral ends. Gardner defines Truth in art as “that which is factually accurate or logically valid...[and] that which does not feel like lying” (142). Gardner also mentions the use of tradition as “one last check on fiction’s honesty” (123). Related to Truth is another of the three moral ends: Beauty. Gardner believes “Beauty, then, is the truth of feeling” (Gardner 144). It involves not only unity in technique, but also emotional honesty. In recognizing the unity between the moments of creation, audiences experience a sympathetic connection to Kirkman’s series because the culture informing the content of both narratives “feels true” in their respective cultural temporality. Just like Kirkman’s survivors, Americans in a post-9/11 society have seen endless and senseless violence, the rise to power of manipulative and dangerous leaders, and fears about whether the American way of life—and Americans themselves—will survive or ever be the same again.

But through his narrative and formal choices, Kirkman advances Americans become better people and a better culture. Gardner argues “Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness” (6). In *The Walking Dead*, Kirkman weaves together the gothic,

horror, zombie narrative, and comics traditions to construct a mirror to clearly reflect 21st century cultural anxieties in a True way. Bishop discusses Jerold Hogle's theories, quoting "how 'the longevity and power of gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety throughout the history of Western culture'" (qtd. in Bishop 121). This longevity allows gothic fiction to assist in discovering the necessary elements of humanness, by assessing the social wants, needs, and fears of the environment and society that creates them—essentially, it provides a resolution to "the story of humanity's struggle to retain its sense of humanity".

To understand the moral function of gothic fiction, it is first necessary to understand the elements of gothic fiction. Bishop details Jerrold Hogle's four-point matrix, which names the defining characteristics of gothic works as "(1) an antiquated space, (2) a hidden secret from the past, (3) a physical or psychological haunting, and (4) an oscillation between earthly reality and the possibility of the supernatural" (Bishop 120-121). These elements figure heavily into *Night of the Living Dead* and so find their way into *The Walking Dead* through the zombie-infested settings.

In any creative work, "Texture is king in all the arts" (Gardner 57). Texture abounds in a graphic novel; the verbal storytelling appears alongside visualizations of that narrative through character appearance, color, lighting, and shadow. Part of this texture includes settings; Gardner notes, "a good writer chooses the setting which makes character and situation clear" (119). A textural element like setting works on multiple levels to create morality in a piece. In graphic novels, "[B]ackgrounds [are] another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas, particularly the world of emotions. Even when there is little or no distortion of the characters in a given scene, a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our 'reading' of characters' inner states" (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 132). Bishop argues that gothic settings "prove

essential to understanding the cultural resonance of their respective films; in fact, the locations are perhaps more important to interpreting the complex messages of the movies than the zombie monsters themselves” (120).

Kirkman’s skillful use of locations advances the Truth found in the pages of *The Walking Dead*. Moreover, in using black and white as in *Night of the Living Dead*, Kirkman ensures that “the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language” (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 192). Without the distraction of color or other visual interferences, Kirkman uses the simplicity of the stark black-and-white imagery to allow meaning to transcend form and so depict the emotional voids still felt by so many after 9/11. Similarly, by pulling settings from gothic and zombie narrative traditions—such as a farmhouse, a prison, a gated community, and major cities—Kirkman uses the symbolic and emotional associations created to examine the anxieties affecting individuals and the culture at large. His use of traditional Gothic locations and formal style establish the unity of Gardner’s moral end of Beauty, and so the settings more directly communicate the anxieties which propel Kirkman’s narrative.

The zombies roaming the settings reveal that pre-9/11 ideological constructions are dangerous and therefore must be abandoned or adapted in a post-9/11 world. Culturally, the zombie “represents a logical ‘form’ for anxieties related to such moments of ‘cultural historical progress’” (Bishop 32) such as America witnessed after the 9/11 attacks. That fateful day disrupted the entire structure of American beliefs, and from its ruined rubble change was inevitable. With this need for progress comes the fear of the unknown—what if we become something worse? Bishop argues “the ‘new’ zombies of the late 1960s and beyond work as uncanny manifestations of other repressed societal fears and insecurities” (95), and in *The Walking Dead*, the zombies work as signifiers of the anxieties and fears produced by the

unavoidable “cultural historical progress” initiated by September 11. The zombies’ “seemingly innocuous resemblance [to survivors] manifests visually what Freud calls the *Unheimlich*—an uncanny similarity between the familiar and the unfamiliar that makes such monsters even more disturbing and frightening” (Bishop 95). This *Unheimlich* similarity allows readers to see themselves and their fellow humans in the zombies’ representations.

Perhaps more importantly, the zombies reveal the inevitable emptiness left behind in the wake of blind adherence to stagnant belief systems. Belief systems once familiar and safe are now unfamiliar and, at times, monstrous. In the U.S., our definition of “freedom” is supposed to be all-inclusive, yet “moral” choices often result in exclusion; the LGBT+ and other minority groups feel the effects of this exclusion every day. Every day, images of detention centers for illegal immigrants and stories of separation of families fill our headlines. Debates on climate change, the sentencing and treatment of imprisoned terrorists, and gun control fill our screens. Essentially, every belief system and infrastructure informing American ideological constructions has become a struggle between the familiar and unfamiliar in the wake of 9/11.

The addition of zombies to the settings doubles the *unheimlich* felt in encounters with the locations. As in Romero’s zombie narrative, “the *Unheimlich* appearance of the walking dead forces characters and viewers alike to confront their own fallibility and mortality, and the similarly *Unheimlich* location...reveals deep-seated tensions about social structures and human relationships” (Bishop 95). The *Unheimlich* doubled in the antiquated settings and monstrous zombies work in tandem, symbolizing 9/11 left an empty void where familiar ideological values used to be held. In order to fill the void, moral analysis is required to determine which values to preserve, which to adapt, and which to dispose. By examining the settings in chronological order, the post-9/11 anxieties and potential cures present themselves: pre-9/11 individual and cultural

constructions of identity, morality, and humanity are no longer effective and must be adapted or abandoned in this new, post-9/11 world.

Rick's Moral Degradation and Individual "Safe" Spaces

Kirkman's early settings and the conflicts characters face in their boundaries symbolize the subjective, individual-centric "truths" which must be abandoned or adapted to comprehend and put into practice the moral lessons of *The Walking Dead*. The initial settings are all related to Rick, specifically. As we fall in step alongside Rick and visit the places central to *his* life, we also visit places we recognize. These are localized "safe" spaces for him but also the sort that we all encounter regularly within our own lives—our own safe spaces. The hospital, Rick's family home, the police station, and the road to Atlanta represent, respectively, how we form identities based on our birth(rights); our family; our norms, laws, values, and attitudes; and the roads we travel to somewhere bigger and communal (like Atlanta). Because we form our identities in these places and have extensive experience in each one, these places are assumed to be familiar, comfortable, true, and safe. However, the safety of these early settings is short-lived.

Everything Rick learned in these places about himself and the world around him no longer applies, and the destruction of these ideals leaves Rick an empty vessel, ripe for deconstruction.

The Walking Dead comic begins with a one-page reference to the "present" world. Rick Grimes and Shane Walsh, both police officers, are in a shootout with an escaped inmate from a nearby prison. He shouts "I AIN'T GOIN' BACK! I'LL DIE FIRST!" and establishes the underlying current of the entire series: we can't go back to the pre-apocalypse world and trying will only get us killed or worse—infected. At the end of the first page, Rick is shot. Rick's bullet wound immediately draws the reader in: clear even the central character is not safe. The desire to find out if Rick lives or dies drives the excitement in turning the page. In putting this event so early in the series, Kirkman implies to continue to follow standards which are no longer

healthy and effective can only end in emptiness and a lack of fulfillment. Instead of seeing Shane running to Rick or Rick's journey through surgery and recovery, Kirkman takes a different direction and blurs the boundaries of time with the scene on page two, which shows a full-page panel of Rick waking up in a hospital bed with a "GASP!" above him in the only speech bubble. The image is drawn from a bird's eye perspective. Rick is half-covered by a sheet, left hand reaching towards the side of the bed while his right-hand rests on his stomach, one foot visible as it pokes out of the blanket at the bottom of the bed. A quick reading of the next few pages clarifies this to be the actual present of the series. The switch from the shootout—the seeming present of the work—to the awakening in the hospital—the actual present—establishes that Kirkman is "[D]isturbing the boundaries between past and present...an inevitable feature of Gothic fiction" (Botting 52). Because "[T]he past with which gothic writing engages and which it constructs is shaped by the changing times in which it is composed" (Botting 3), Kirkman's disturbance of time suggests our previous understanding of familiar ideological values underpinning American life now appear unfamiliar and monstrous and require reexamination in a post-9/11 world.

Not only does Kirkman blur the boundaries between past and present with the rapid shift in time, he further muddles time by leaving the actual time lapse ambiguous. Clearly some time has passed, but how much? Has it been hours, days, weeks? We can assume it's been at least a few days, based on the stubble on Rick's face, but other than that no obvious detail exists to alert us to the actual time of his awakening. This ambiguity is a common narrative element in gothic fiction. In gothic fiction, "The devices and techniques employed heighten ambivalence and ambiguity, suggesting opposed ways of understanding events" (Botting 5). In blurring time, Kirkman represents the ever-shifting faultline Americans stand on which bridges between pre-

9/11 ideologies and whether those concepts should survive in our world now. Just like Jonathan Harker in Dracula's castle, Rick has no idea how much time has passed since his shooting.

By disturbing the boundaries of past and present, Kirkman posits the need to evaluate what was, what is, and what needs to be. *TWD*'s ambiguous time suggests we are meant to consider "opposed ways of understanding events," and so we must disturb the boundaries between our past and present views of morality and identity to build a new future—something imperative in this zombie world Rick is about to encounter. Kirkman seems to understand that "Gothic works and their disturbing ambivalence can thus be seen as effects of fear and anxiety, as attempts to account for or deal with the uncertainty of these shifts" (Botting 22). By establishing this disturbance of boundaries through a distorted and quick disturbance of time—only one page—the fears and uncertainties Kirkman addresses came on quickly and unexpectedly. The battle between the boundaries of tradition and progress, old and new, has already begun in *The Walking Dead* by page two, and this immediacy expresses not only how quickly these fears were born but how vital it is to begin to face them.

The settings Rick soon traverses represent the types of battles fought over opposed positions and viewpoints which must be reconciled, to fill the empty void left after the traumas of the terrorist attacks. Rick begins his journey in this new world in a hospital. In this instance, as Rick lies in a coma from the shooting on the first page, the hospital appears to represent a place of healing and care. He may have been shot, but he is alive and on the mend. However, the disturbance of boundaries quickly shows the hospital is not a safe, structured place as assumed. Danger lurks, and Rick is exceptionally vulnerable. The hospital symbolizes Rick's rebirth into this new world. In a splash page, Rick is depicted as looking confused and scared, unsure of where he is or what is happening. In the following panels, he struggles to pull himself up, legs wobbly and uncertain underneath him. These reactions mimic a newborn baby being

born or a newborn baby deer trying to walk, experiencing the first moments of new life. As he pulls himself from his hospital bed, he is so weak he falls and yells out for the nurse. When no nurse comes, the familiar becomes unfamiliar and one expects a secret in the halls beyond. As Rick drags himself through the hallways—almost resembling a shambling zombie himself—there is not a person to be seen. The floor is deserted, paper litters the floor, and an unattended wheelchair sits at the end of a hallway as Rick searches for other people. These random items feel alien and unnatural in a typically-spotless hospital, and these unexpected items and the lack of people make the hospital feel as if it has been deserted for an extended period. Within these first few pages, Kirkman’s hospital meets the first element of Hogle’s four-point matrix: an antiquated space. While the hospital is modern in its overall appearance, the room is dark when Rick wakes up. From the state of his blankets and IV bag, no one has been into this room for a while. Rick’s alarm increases as he takes in the deserted hallways. He’s right to be alarmed, as the second element of Hogle’s matrix presents itself: a hidden secret. Rick quickly realizes something is very wrong, but finally hears the ding of an elevator. The door opens—and a zombie falls out. Instead of finding help, Rick screams “HELP!!” as he falls to one knee next to the corpse. Rick stands up and travels a bit further to find the cafeteria—barricaded with a wooden plank through the door handles. Behind those doors, Rick learns the hidden secret of not only the hospital, but the world he’s been reborn into: zombies. Further, the zombies meet the third and fourth elements of Hogle’s four-point matrix: “a physical or psychological haunting, and an oscillation between earthly reality and the possibility of the supernatural” (Bishop 120-121). The zombies are a haunting, a transgression of boundaries between life and death. In their *Unheimlich* appearance, the zombies blur the boundaries of reality and the supernatural to express that even hard and fast rules like life and death no longer apply. Through the visual aspects of the hospital—dilapidated, empty, with no humans and only zombies living within its

walls—the familiar has become not only unfamiliar but fear-inspiring and deeply ambiguous. The world Rick is entering is not the world he—and we—know to be our present. It is something else entirely. With his rebirth, Rick is an empty vessel, a void. Filling that void with guiding standards presents challenge after challenge; as Rick makes his way out of the hospital and encounters zombies, everything he knows is challenged.

As Rick exits the hospital, there is a three panel-sized image of the exterior of the hospital. In the stark depiction, the landscape is dismal with its scattered garbage and barren trees. Botting notes that in Romantic gothic fiction, “the gloom and darkness of sublime landscapes [became] external markers of inner mental and emotional states” (83-84). Here, the setting’s visual components reflect the desolation of Rick’s internal mental and emotional state as he travels home. The exterior of the hospital shows crumpled papers and a lack of human life; as he travels along the road, Rick sees a corpse hanging out of a mangled car, and we encounter the famous “Bicycle Zombie”: an emaciated skeleton still moving and making noises in the grass.

Panels bounce back and forth between Rick’s horrified reaction and Bicycle Zombie herself. The panels alternate between closer views of the tears in Rick’s eye and the zombie. He breaks down in the street and takes the bicycle, creating an uncomfortable juxtaposition between necessity and theft: he mourns the woman and exhibits empathy for fellow suffering, but he steals the bicycle lying next to her. While “thou shalt not steal” is expected to always feel true, Rick’s choice to steal the bike feels not only necessary but appropriate. This action—like so many others that I will later examine—illustrates part of what Rick must relearn about morality in this uncharted universe: morally ambiguous and situational decisions which blur the lines of right and wrong must be made in order to survive.

The setting shifts to Rick's neighborhood. Again, a previously familiar setting is now overgrown and unfamiliar. The family home is a location common in gothic and horror fiction. It is one of the most utilized locations in both genres, because it functions on such strong symbolic levels. As Botting notes, "home and family were seen as the last refuge from the sense of loss and the forces threatening social relations" (122). Here, with Rick's inner emotional and mental state in chaos with his rebirth into this new world, he seeks the safety of home and family first. What he finds is desolation. His wife and son are nowhere to be found, and the visual depictions of the home imply it has been empty for a while. The center of his identity, safety, and security is now stripped bare. Kirkman's turning the home desolate and placing it immediately after Rick's rebirth represents existing familial constructs are the first we must reevaluate.

Not only are Rick's internal principles at odds in this new world, so too is the idea of his role in his own family. Rick's neighborhood—littered and destroyed—looms at the top of the page in a three-panel illustration. A similar depiction of the front of Rick's home occupies the next three panels of space. As he enters his home, he says "Son of a bitch" (*Days Gone Bye*) and enters. The use of the heavy black gutters in these panels visually reveals the significance of Rick's return. McCloud notes that in the gutter "Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there" (*Understanding Comics* 67). The heavy black of the gutters of these panels demonstrate the importance of constructions of family to one's internal principles and identity. The emotional association of the family home implies that Rick can find safety and what he once knew here if nowhere else. But as Rick enters the home, it is torn apart. The only thing untouched and intact is a picture of Rick's family—his wife and son. It is only slightly tilted on the wall, but his family is still askew and the life it creates disrupted. Rick spends four panels inside his home, and then he walks outside and says "Nothing" (*Days*

Gone Bye). He leaves his porch, and a panel follows in which he looks off into the distance, seemingly confused. The use of the family picture on the wall—slightly tilted but otherwise seemingly unharmed—suggests some of the old ideas of family and individual community must be carried on, but taken collectively, the ideals represented by the home are now tilted and no longer safe.

After this major revelation, Rick meets Morgan and Duane, a father and son squatting in the old neighborhood. Rick and Morgan decide to raid the armory of the police station where Rick worked. Just like the hospital and Rick's home, the police station represents something which contributes to who Rick is. If the hospital represents the rebirth and subsequent blank slate following the trauma, and his family home represents the destruction and needed reconstruction of familial roles and rules establishing early identity, then the police station represents the standards of social order and justice which influence selfhood. The police station is also a very gothic setting. When Rick, Morgan, and Duane arrive, it is still and devoid of people. This alone turns the station to an antiquated spot: when is a police station ever empty? This trope is used frequently in horror films to create a sense of unease. The three take guns and ammunition without notice. Once again, the lines between right and wrong are blurred. The choice to steal guns and ammo is an illegal choice made moral the totality of their present circumstance. Not only that, but the setting has a secret. Although it appears relatively unscathed in terms of the other locations—depicted as orderly in the panels—once outside the station the three men encounter a zombie on the other side of the fence. Rick quickly realizes even a police station—an immovable beacon of security—no longer provides safety through law and order.

The police station functions as a part of Rick's individual identity because it signifies his profession and therefore how he treats the community to which he belongs. Before awakening in the hospital, Rick treated the people he encountered with fundamental concepts of law, order,

justice, fairness, and empathy. This connection is forged by bridging the police station immediately after his family home and neighborhood. Not only that, but it harkens back to his choices on the first page of the series. Rick demonstrates he allows the law to guide him even under severe threat to his safety, when he chooses to wait for backup during the shootout with the escaped felon. Rigid lines of law and order, represented by the police station, must be blurred if he wants to survive in this time of overwhelming change.

Rick embarks on the last part of his journey alone. He takes his police cruiser and leaves. A five-panel page shows the extent of the desolation: abandoned cars as Rick enters Georgia, a gas station with no gas and corpses laying in the parking lot, a zombie laying in a car, and deserted cars along a long stretch of road. From place to place, Rick finds no survivors: he is truly alone in an empty world. The emptiness of Rick's mental state is clear in these images. His individual, familial, professional, communal, and cultural identities have been stripped away, and he is a shadowed void inside.

Eventually, his cruiser runs out of gas, and he continues on foot through the countryside. He finds a home set far off the road—the safe family home is the distance—and enters. Inside, he finds a family of corpses with bullet wounds to the head and Bibles in hand. What is interesting here is the cross on the wall. It quietly demonstrates that religious views informing American constructions of morality must die—as a “family” of ideologies—and so a new worldview must be adapted. Rather than protect the family against the zombies, the cross “watches” from the wall and does nothing to stop them from killing themselves. The Bibles in their hands couldn't provide the answers to save them. Even our religious ideals are not safe from the need for examination to determine if they are still effective or are now outdated. Rick leaves the home and finds a horse left behind in the stables; once again, in an act deemed

acceptable under his present circumstances, Rick steals the horse and sets off towards his next destination.

At this point, three similar location panels reestablish the connection between the desolation of the inner mental and emotional state Rick experiences and his journeys through the gothic settings. The large size of each panel—a third of the page—identifies the emotional associations here depicted include significant information. In the first panel, it's just Rick, the horse, and an abandoned car, traveling a long stretch of road lined by barren fields; as they go along, Rick asks the horse its name. This panel, with no people, no cars, no life on this road, represents the desolation of Rick's destroyed sense of self. He's so lonely, he resorts to talking to a horse. A panel of Rick from behind with the world "Police" on his back follows the isolated landscape of the first panel, demonstrating he understands he must leave who he used to be behind and adapt to the new world into which he was born.

Six panels later, another setting panel of Rick riding the horse on a desolate road reinforces the idea that we must leave past ideologies behind on the road to survival. This panel is even more empty than the one a few panels earlier: even the single car is missing, amplifying the void which reflects who Rick is after his rebirth. He is a completely blank slate. Immediately following this panel, the first view of a major city is shown—it directly mirrors the road shots of the previous two setting panels. Rick rides in on the horse, and from a distance sees that destruction exists on a major-city scale: Atlanta is in ruins. Abandoned cars litter the highway, and Rick states "Here we are..." (*Days Gone Bye*). Here, Rick shifts to the next leg in his journey after rebirth: the major city of Atlanta, where Kirkman expands the anxieties he examines to include not just the individual American, but also American "humanity" at large.

Humanity's Moral Degradation and Communal "Safe" Spaces

Rick rides along the highway to Atlanta on horseback, and it is clear the metropolis is *Unheimlich* before he enters the city limits. Atlanta meets the four-point gothic matrix almost immediately. Abandoned cars and papers litter the highway, the grass along the road is overgrown, and Rick is the only person in sight. Even the city's skyline is drawn in light pencil marks with no detail; it's as if someone began to erase the buildings along the horizon, effectively breaking Atlanta—and by proxy, humanity—into shambles. The panels immediately after show a city overrun with walkers. Even more quickly than in the hospital, Rick realizes that a major city like Atlanta is not safe at all: societal and communal lines have broken down. After Rick's first glimpses of Atlanta, the next pages include a full-page panel of the back of Rick as he sits atop the horse's back, the word "Police" clear on his gun bag and zombies coming at him from every direction. Atlanta's secret—and its haunting—comes right away: zombies have infiltrated the major cities.

This full-page scene implies that in navigating the voids of destroyed individual-centric models of behavior, one must also navigate and assess models of behavior created by culture—a culture that Kirkman doubly represents in the city and the zombie hordes which fill Atlanta's streets. As Botting notes, "[T]he apparent reality of the city's horrors evokes emotions that ask questions of the social order, emotions relating to fears in the immediate present rather than displaced on to a distant past" (118). While Rick represents each individual reader, Atlanta symbolizes all readers as a collective culture. It's not just one city, but all cities—not just NYC, but every major city and every small community who has been affected by 9/11. The uncertainties at the center of American anxieties are not just based on "I" questions, but rather "we." How do we treat others in this post-9/11 world? How do we maintain our humanity and strive to improve humanity at large? Rick's individual self as he knows it, in every respect—

individual needs and desires, familial, professional, moral, communal—is destroyed in this new world and must be retooled to survive. *The Walking Dead* uses the three locations after Atlanta—Wiltshire Estates, Hershel’s farm, and the prison—to symbolize the long-standing models of behavior which may no longer be true and effective in a post-9/11 world, the dangers of clinging to these outdated ideologies, and the rationale dictating what to abandon and what to adapt to establish more effective post-9/11 constructions of American identity, humanity, and morality.

Wiltshire Estates

Three more seemingly-safe settings follow Rick’s early settings: Wiltshire Estates, Hershel’s farm, and the prison. Kirkman uses these locations to demonstrate that the seeming security found in previous “moral” patterns of behavior is an illusion. Through their gothic associations, the settings break these guidelines apart, reveal the dangers of clinging to antiquated ideologies, and show the need for adapted constructs.

These lessons begin in the gated community of Wiltshire Estates. The neighborhood is depicted in a splash page providing a high-angle depiction. No zombies walk the streets, the gate and fences appear to be in good working order, and there is no sign of threat from other survivors. Outside the gates, Rick declares “I think we’ve hit the jackpot.” While antiquated in that the neighborhood appears to be abandoned, Rick believes the group “should be relatively safe here” (*Miles Behind Us*); Rick’s wife, Lori, agrees and says “This place is perfect. We could start a new life here” (*Miles Behind Us*). Kirkman shifts the focus to include not only the individual’s anxieties born as a result of 9/11, but to also represent the communal American anxieties after September 11th. Phillips notes that “suburban culture focused its energy on the family home as the center of life” (66). This “center of life” also figures into how one defines self. Further, “While the home had always been an important concept in American culture, the

suburban home was unique” because “Unlike either the urban neighborhood or the rural farm, the suburban home was founded on its separation from both the world of work and from the world of others” (Phillips 66). The gated suburban community mirrors Rick’s family home in *Days Gone Bye*. As Rick’s home represents the individual models of behavior, so the gated suburban neighborhood grouping the homes of many individual families in Wiltshire Estates demonstrates the ways of life which influence cultural models of behavior. Because Rick and Lori are the first to discuss the potential for safety and a “normal” life in this neighborhood, the individual family that was the work’s focus early on now expands to include not only the individual family of Rick, Lori, and their son, Carl, but also encompass the group as community.

However, the neighborhood’s lack of inhabitants makes Wiltshire Estates an antiquated gothic setting, and therefore experience dictates that a dangerous secret haunts its streets despite the group’s hopes. The gates signify the misguided belief that this community would be separate “from the world of others” comprised of the zombies and survivor threats, allowing this to be a location where Rick’s group can rebuild the life they once knew. However, once inside the first house, the group realizes threats still exist as Rick searches the home with Tyrese, another member of the group of survivors. Rick notices the basement and comments “These houses are bigger than they look” (*Miles Behind Us*). In a nod to *Night of the Living Dead*, two zombies hide behind the door and attack Rick when he opens it. In a splash page, the zombies loom over Rick and are huge in comparison. The houses are bigger than they look, but so are the zombies hiding within its walls. Tyrese notes, “Everything but the basement was clean” (*Miles Behind Us*). Symbolically, the zombies represent the threats of our past modes of thinking lurk right below the surface—living by these constructs can overpower us if we are not diligent about what is behind the door. However, despite the zombies in the basement, the group still believes the neighborhood to be a beacon of hope and safety.

The zombies in the basement are not the only secret in Wiltshire Estates. The more dangerous secret roaming the streets of the neighborhood reveals itself a few panels later. A set of three panels depict snow melting while the group sleeps inside the house the first night. As the snow melts, the (literal and figurative) writing on the wall of the community is revealed: “All Dead. Do Not Enter.” Immediately after, a wide but cramped panel depicts the house the group sleeps in; unlike the splash page depicting well-kept homes earlier in the volume, this house looks dilapidated with its broken windows and debris in the front yard. Inside the house, panels depict Donna and Allen, a married couple also traveling with Rick’s group. Donna expresses her hope for a chance to start over to Allen. She notes “This place—it’s **perfect**. I think we can be **happy** here” (*Miles Behind Us*). She believes they are lucky, and that they “couldn’t ask for better neighbors” (*Miles Behind Us*). She seeks a return to the ineffective models defining community represented by Wiltshire Estates. This desire to return to the outdated is dangerous, and these dangers almost immediately reveal themselves.

A few pages later, the group spreads out to clear zombies and search the houses for canned goods and supplies. Donna appears relaxed, even expressing “This is going to be so fun...like one of those home shows but better” (*Miles Behind Us*). She seems to forget the potential zombies which might hide within the walls of the homes they search, moving to look inside one without backup. As she tells Allen he worries too much, what Donna does not see is the zombie coming up behind her. Just as the zombie threat reappears, Rick sees the writing on the walls separating Wiltshire from the outside and realizes security here was a lie. A large panel follows in which a zombie attacks Donna. By showing her eye as the center of the zombie bite, Kirkman signifies Donna’s sight obscured by the myth of safety in the community. Her desire to return to the normalcy of models of behavior dictated by conventional morality blind her to the real threats hiding in the homes, and this desire leads to her violent demise.

Donna's refusal to clearly see and recognize the ineffectiveness of pre-apocalypse constructions of community forces the group to open their own eyes. Despite Rick's pleas to not shoot, Allen fires his gun to try to save Donna. In doing so, the zombies turn their attention to the group and descend upon them. The secret of Wiltshire Estates finally fully reveals itself: the zombies have overtaken the entire community. The gates and fences have not kept the neighborhood separate from the "Others." Instead, the illusion of safety created by the fences has instead exacerbated the problem by locking it inside. The separation from the outside and primary focus on one's own family as center may have once been a safe haven, but now the means to keep the threats out have created new and more dangerous threats within the fences. Here, the seeming safety of the American "family" as community is destroyed; the four walls of the American home cannot guarantee safety, just as American soil could not guarantee safety from terrorist attacks. The group crashes the RV they have been traveling in through the gates to escape, destroying the illusion that separation between one's own family and the rest of the community guarantees safety from the outside world of the "Others."

Hershel's Farm

Kirkman's next major setting is Hershel's farm, paying homage to the American farm at the center of meaning in *Night of the Living Dead*. Through Hershel's farm, Kirkman further clarifies the anxieties produced by the uncertainties of American cultural identity in a post-9/11 world. After leaving Wiltshire Estates, Rick and the group continue to look for a safe place and supplies. While hunting with Rick and Tyrese, Carl is shot by a man in the woods. Otis, the man who shoots Carl, offers to take them to a nearby farm whose owner may be able to attend to Carl's wound. This leads the group to Hershel's farm, a place which seems likely to provide salvation and safety.

Hershel's farm resonates with any fan of zombie narratives, as it mirrors the use of the farmhouse as the primary setting for Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Bishop argues that in using the farm, "Romero is addressing cultural anxieties connected to the American family of the 1960s" (121). Specifically, the isolated country farm is "a symbol for both a traditional social organization and a rather antiquated agrarian lifestyle" (Bishop 122) and "symbolizes the comforting idea that one's home is a place of security" (Bishop 116). This use of setting in *Night* puts it within the gothic literary tradition, "particularly in the way it adopts and adapts its 'antiquated space' to reflect the key cultural concerns and anxieties at play in the contemporary environment that produced it" (Bishop 120). With Hershel's farm, Kirkman represents the peril in adhering to rigid and outdated models for defining familial roles, blind belief in the safety of one's home, pre-9/11 social organization, and "hiding out" from the community culture. In his use of the American farm, Kirkman shows the anxieties resulting from 9/11 reach beyond Ground Zero and New York City and infiltrate American culture from coast to coast.

Hints of these shared anxieties begin in the introductory image of Hershel's farm. The first glimpse comes in a large panel drawn from a high angle perspective. The similarity in perspective to the introduction of Wiltshire Estates is the first indication that all is not as it seems. Here, the farm seems idyllic and utopian: the house is in tip-top shape, the lawn is manicured, and the fence surrounding the property has no gaps or holes. Two gardens cover a large portion of the fenced-in land and a chicken coop stands in the corner, implying fresh produce and eggs for the taking. Off to the right, however, the barn looms large and casts a shadow over the property.

Rick and his group do not immediately see the threat, as the sense of security the farm seems to present is reinforced in the following scenes. In an almost-half page panel on the next page, Hershel offers sanctuary to the group while Carl heals. Hershel tells the group "[W]e got

plenty of food harvested...and really plenty of room” (*Miles Behind Us*), and immediately follows these descriptions of bounty and safety by introducing his children. The tall half-page panel of Hershel offering the group refuge covers the left half of the page, while five small panels showing his children are stacked opposite on the right side of the page. In laying these panels side-by-side, Kirkman aligns the theme of safety in the farm’s symbolic associations with the concept of family. The four oldest—Lacey, Arnold, Maggie, and Billy—wear expressions of aloof irritation or nervousness, as opposed to relaxed contentment. Further, the small, cramped size of the panels and the lack of headspace at the top of the panels gives visual expression to the feeling of entrapment likely felt by Hershel’s children. The anxieties produced by the trappings of outdated roles and rules passed on through familial ideologies can be felt in the content of the panels. These depictions imply the all-American family on the farm and its symbolic associations are not what they seem, and only trap and cramp people in a post-9/11 world. Kirkman’s implication becomes explicit when the hidden secret of Hershel’s farm reveals itself a few pages later.

When Hershel discusses his family background with Rick a few pages later, he articulates the long-standing belief in the promised safety of following family legacies when constructing models of behavior. According to Hershel, “[I]t was my father’s dying wish that I would come back and work on the farm” (*Miles Behind Us*). Hershel “never liked” the farm but came back because “[I]t just seemed like the right thing to do” (*Miles Behind Us*). After being there five years, he tells Rick “[I]t’s honest work. I can see why my dad loved it so much. There’s nothing like...providing for yourself” (*Miles Behind Us*). Hershel’s story is a succinct statement of the American dream and blind adherence to tradition. In coming back to the farm, Hershel not only did the “right thing” by his father but also set himself up to keep his own family alive during the zombie apocalypse. The farm Hershel used to dislike “comes to regain its physical sense of

security (the *Heimlich*)” (Bishop 116) and provides for his family’s survival. By extension, Hershel’s farm also represents safety and security for Rick and his communal family, and by proxy, Americans.

It does not take Rick long to realize the error of his assessment, though. The farm’s hidden secrets are exposed right after Rick hears Hershel’s history, simultaneously revealing the anxieties produced by the void left where American cultural identity constructions used to be. Hershel again offers to share the safety of the farm, and Rick asks if the group can spread into the barn instead of cramming into the RV. In a 2/3-page panel, Hershel tells Rick “[Y]ou don’t want to go in there, trust me. That’s where we keep all our dead ones” (*Miles Behind Us*). The large panel size signifies the seriousness of this secret. Hershel’s face, cast in shadow, implies the danger which will result from this revelation; symbolically, the shadows represent uncertainties which shadow Americans’ abilities to clearly and honestly analyze previously-held standards for behavior in the wake of the terrorist attacks. These uncertainties result from the blurred and shadowed line between morality and immorality in a post-9/11 world, a line previously believed to be immovable and stable. The debate which follows gives clearer expression to the difficulties in resolving the distinctions between what now qualifies as timeless versus conventional morality.

Rick and Hershel immediately begin a heated debate about what to do with the zombies in the barn. Rick tells Hershel that his group has been killing the zombies, because “[T]hose things aren’t human. They’re undead monsters” (*Miles Behind Us*). Hershel believes the lack of knowledge about the cause or symptoms requires that the zombies not be killed. Hershel reveals his son, Shawn, is amongst the walking dead kept in the barn. Shawn should have been safe and secure on the family farm, but instead he is among the infected; by putting a member of Hershel’s family in the barn, Kirkman connects the hidden secret up for critique to

responsibilities dictated by the family roles we play. The American dream and his role as Hershel's son didn't save Shawn, and these ideals cannot save Americans either. Rick's argument signifies the necessity of killing off ineffective models of behavior dictated by outdated familial roles. Rick knows "[T]hey're dead" (*Miles Behind Us*), and so the lessons he has learned since his rebirth are into practice with this argument. Hershel, on the other hand, clings to the antiquated ideologies informing his family dynamic and refuses to adapt, because "these things could wake up tomorrow, heal up, and be completely normal again!" (*Miles Behind Us*). Hershel reassures Rick, telling him "They can't get out of the barn. We've got them locked up tight. We're completely safe here" (*Miles Behind Us*), in two speech bubbles superimposed on an overscale depiction of the barn. Despite Hershel's assurances, the dark, looming visual depiction of the barn foreshadows an inevitable confrontation with the zombies inside.

The decay of outdated familial roles and their resulting models of behavior spills over onto the survivors before the end of *Miles Behind Us*. Towards the end of the volume, Hershel enlists Rick's help in corralling a zombie into the barn. Hershel drags the zombie towards the barn and asks Lacey and Arnold to help distract the other zombies. The two go into the hayloft, and Hershel opens the door. A zombie on the other side knocks him over, and so Arnold jumps from the hayloft as he yells "I'm coming Dad!!" (*Miles Behind Us*). Arnold screams "Not my father!" twice as he beats the zombie attacking his dad. In the next image, a large corner panel shows a zombie biting into Arnold's neck. Readers learn the zombie is Shawn, when Hershel screams "Please son! He's your brother! Don't do this! You've got to remember" (*Miles Behind Us*). Lacey comes running to assist, yelling "Daddy!" But, zombies attack her too as she again yells "Daddy?!" Alongside a tall panel of the zombies eating Lacey, a panel shows Maggie on her knees next to Hershel with both drawn completely in black. Maggie mutters "Daddy?" before Hershel takes her gun and shoots both Shawn and Arnold in the heads. After repeating "I'm

sorry” a half-dozen times, Hershel turns the gun on himself. The other survivors stop him, but the real damage has been done.

The attack by the zombies in the barn exemplifies the danger in clinging to antiquated pre-9/11 familial roles and ideologies. The repetition of family names, like “brother,” “son,” “father,” and “daddy” directs focus to the patriarchal roles which influence the ideologies guiding American culture. Here, readers see “The gothic theme that the sins of the father are visited on the offspring” (Botting 123) through “representations of...brutality of paternal authority, the repetition of events, and the doublings of figures...in successive generations” (Botting 123). Hershel’s paternal authority leads him to lose two more children as a result of his choice to keep his undead son with the other zombies in the barn. The similar physical appearances of Shawn and Arnold draw parallels between the blurred lines between dead and outdated ideologies and living and updated modes of thinking. In his refusal to relinquish paternal authority in favor of an examination of the total effects of his actions, Hershel’s choices reflect how dead ideologies can overtake and infect the potential for survival in a post-9/11 world.

Without change, the now-ineffective pre-existing ideologies which guide the “American dream” will lead to a perpetuation of the cultural apocalypse Americans continue to experience in a post-9/11 world. Hershel symbolizes the fear of change and rejection of the necessary adaptive approach to morality when he kicks the group off the farm. Between the zombie attack and Hershel’s violent threats, the security represented by the farm disappears and the real dangers inherent in its representations become clear. In *Night of the Living Dead*, “Ben must tear the house apart to build it up as something new, different, and un-homey (Unheimlich)” (Bishop 124), while in *The Walking Dead* the farm must be torn apart and left behind in order to

demonstrate that Hershel's—and by symbolic representation, 21st century Americans'—outdated models of behavior dictated by familial roles must be reevaluated.

The Prison

While Wiltshire Estates and Hershel's farm express the threats in maintaining outdated cultural models of behavior as related to community membership and familial roles, the prison symbolizes the cultural models of behavior constructed by American definitions of morality. The prison reminds one of America's off-the-charts incarceration rates, police judgment and resulting claims of brutality, and other controversies related to morality and law and order. Kirkman's prison—with its three fences, various buildings, dark hallways, and mazes created by connected areas—mimics the labyrinths used in Romantic gothic fiction, “places of radical politics and confusion...dangerous, subversive sites destroying established boundaries and conventions” (Botting 76). Further, “the labyrinth is also the site in which the absence or loss of reason, sobriety, decency and morality is displayed in full horror” (Botting 76). In using the labyrinth as a model for the prison, “[D]istinctions that hold rational, sexual and moral identities in place are threatened by the labyrinth's confusions” (Botting 78). Because the prison mimics a labyrinth in its construction and secrets, Kirkman works to destroy the “established boundaries and conventions” of outdated pre-9/11 concepts of justice, right and wrong, morality, and how to ensure we treat our fellow humans with dignity and respect so that the boundaries may be reestablished in a way which improves future quality of life.

The first appearance of the prison comes at the end of *Miles Behind Us*. After leaving Hershel's farm, the group tries to find food, supplies, and shelter anywhere they can. The group inadvertently stumbles upon the seeming answer to their problems at the top of a steep hill: the prison. When Rick looks over the top of the hill, he appears to look straight at the reader in a small panel as he exclaims “Oh, man” (*Miles Behind Us*). Two splash pages follow. From afar,

the prison seems to be structurally intact. Three fences surround the prison yard and the buildings housing the cellblocks; while some zombies mill about, the threat seems to be out in the open and an easy problem for the group to solve. *Miles Behind Us* ends with a splash page of a close-up of Rick from the shoulders up, smiling and telling the group “It’s perfect. We’re home.” The prison offers protective boundaries, stable shelter, and the strong possibility of food and supplies. The “hidden secret” of the zombies is out in the open, and the threat is much smaller than ones previously encountered by the group. While the lack of prisoners and armed guards makes the location feel abandoned, Rick’s affirmation about the prison being perfect is *almost* believable.

The next morning, Rick and Tyrese enter the prison and begin taking stock. A large 2/3-page panel shows the interior of a cell block as Rick and Tyrese search. Rick and Tyrese discuss the surprising amount of light inside, and Tyrese comments “This is nice. With all these windows...it’s not dark at all...I wasn’t looking forward to living in the dark most of the time” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Here, Kirkman employs the common gothic binary of light and dark to reflect the symbolic associations of black and white, boundaries of right and wrong represented by the prison. As a symbol, the prison evokes concepts of law and order, sentencing and punishment, and the respect for human dignity among “criminals.” Filling the prison with contrasts of light and dark, Kirkman provides a clear sense of the challenges that occur in adhering to rigid black and white constructions when the real hidden secret of the prison reveals itself a few pages later.

In their search, Rick and Tyrese come across the cafeteria. Rick comments that “It’s getting pretty dark back here” as the two continue through the hallways, again playing on the gothic interplay between light and dark. The further they travel into the prison’s labyrinths, the darker it gets—so reflecting the deeper our reliance on outdated models of morality, the more

shadowed our worldview becomes. Rick assumes zombies will be waiting for them behind the cafeteria doors, noting “If past experience is any indication...we’re looking at a room full of zombies on the other side of this door” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Rick thinks he knows the secret hidden within the prison walls, but when he opens the door he learns the real secret: four living inmates remain in the prison.

While the four living inmates come as a surprise to the survivors, they also add clarity to their symbolic meaning in relation to Kirkman’s instructions. Readers are hesitant to trust the inmates right from the beginning, assuming the worst based on the inmates’ incarceration: how can we trust criminals? What are they in for? Rick and Tyrese, however, seem very happy to see them; the panels depicting the two talking to the four men show Rick and Tyrese both smile and appear welcoming. Across the bottom third of the two pages, Rick’s recounting of what has happened evokes infrastructures and the associated guiding principles which govern the American way of morality. He talks about the fall of the government and military, and he notes there is no communication or organization anymore. He tells the men “It appears civilization is pretty well **screwed**” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Rick’s major features—his eyes, cheeks, ear, and mouth—are all drawn in black shadow with no detail. Here, the fall of pre-apocalypse civilization, government, and military—cultural pillars upholding moral definitions—coupled with the shadows on Rick’s face show the shadowed uncertainty about how to rebuild those pillars from the rubble at Ground Zero. The next panel shows the shock on the men’s faces, and is followed by a cramped panel of Rick’s face asking, “Wait a minute—you guys are guards—aren’t you?” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Rick takes the realization that the four were inmates in stride, embodying the necessary willingness to accept change and expand the scope of human value. The reactions of shock and fear from the rest of Rick’s group mirror the fear caused by the

anxieties of the moral adjustment required post-9/11—adjustment which is guided by morally ambiguous choices and guidelines.

Once settled in, Rick and Tyrese argue about Rick’s desire to bring Hershel and the other people still on his farm into the prison. Rick argues, “I don’t think it’s right to just leave him miles away knowing we’ve got plenty of room in here” (*Safety Behind Bars*). In wanting to do what’s “right” in the present in his desire to bring the farm group to the prison, Rick represents a desire to understand what “right” now means in this new world. Rick verbalizes this consideration time and time again, and so faces the fear of change inherent in the ambiguity of reconstructing morality after 9/11. Rather than dismissing the value of Hershel’s life based on Hershel’s past transgressions against him, Rick chooses to find value in Hershel’s life simply because he is human. This suggests so-called morality laws—such as ones related to abortion, gay marriage, euthanasia, or censorship—and advances the idea that these must be decided based on a consideration of human dignity and *communal* needs—not on the morality of the few. Selfish and subjective prejudices only decrease the value of how we live our lives, so what is objectively “right” for the community must be of primary concern in redefining morality and humanity in a post-apocalyptic landscape. This return to a focus on doing what is right proves pivotal in the next story arc, as these layers of narrative challenge everything the survivors think they know about morality and humanity, for a new secret presents itself and haunts the prison’s inhabitants.

Hershel’s two youngest daughters are beheaded and another of the prison’s secrets comes out. This story arc challenges the very core of pre-apocalypse notions of morality and humanity and demonstrates the problems in continuing to live by these definitions. Hershel searches for his two youngest daughters in the shadowed hallways of the prison. He yells out “We’re still safe—you don’t have to hide!” As he finds the room the girls are supposed to be hiding in, a turn of the

page reveals a cramped, tight page-wide panel of Hershel's face with tears under his eyes and a speech bubble with only "...". A close-up shot of Hershel's two daughters decapitated, laying bloody on the floor fills the remainder of the page. The next four panels switch to a view of Rick traveling back to the prison, saying only "Oh, man..." as he tries to outride the zombies he encounters on his motorcycle. By inserting this quick shift to Rick trailed by zombies, Kirkman hints that the deaths of Hershel's girls could infect the group if they choose to react to the death in immoral ways.

The next page shows Maggie as she comes upon Hershel on his knees and crying. Maggie turns to look at what has upset Hershel, and readers see five equal-sized panels focused on the two girls' heads. Over the course of the five panels, the girls' heads reanimate and become zombies as Hershel and Maggie watch. Small differences in the eyes of each girl give visual expression to the reanimation. By having the girls turn after their deaths, Kirkman shows the future generations can be infected—through the mistakes of their elders—if outdated and ineffective constructions of American values continue to guide our moral choices. In showing the girls looking in different directions as they reanimate, Kirkman represents the different alternative in front of Americans as they journey for moral survival in a post-9/11 world. The first path leads to the anxieties which result in facing the changes necessary to fill the void of cultural identity. These uncertainties find expression in the alternative approaches to justice dispensed and debated by the group, exemplifying the challenges in deciding which approach is the most moral.

Lori and the rest of the group descend on Dexter and Andrew, two of the remaining inmates. Lori immediately accuses Dexter of killing the girls, because he was the inmate who was incarcerated for murder. When Rick returns, he confronts Dexter in the cell where he is being kept. Rick asks him "Did you do it?" Unlike Lori, who puts blind faith in his guilt because

of his past choices, Rick attempts to do the “right” thing and find the real Truth. Rick doesn’t assume Dexter is guilty just because he was imprisoned for murder, but instead recognizes nothing is what it seems in this post-apocalyptic world. While panels show Rick outside the bars of Dexter’s cell, the angle of the POV makes it look like Rick is the one locked in a cage. By depicting Rick as if he is really the one in a cell, Kirkman demonstrates that while he attempts to reexamine and redefine what it means to do the right thing, the lasting vestiges of his pre-apocalypse beliefs still imprison Rick. He confronts this, though, by opening the door to Dexter’s cell and accepting Dexter’s invitation to fight. Again, Rick opens the doors of his pre-existing ideals and try to free himself.

Before the real killer is revealed, a conversation between Rick and Tyrese clarifies the conflicting approaches to the anxieties produced when previously-held models of moral behavior are destroyed. The two discuss Tyrese’s survival in the gym after the group believes the zombies got him, and Rick asks Tyrese, “You okay? I asked before and you said you were fine—but you’re going through some shit, man. I know it” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Tyrese aligns the survivors with the zombies, noting, “My daughter is dead...but you know what? We **all** are. We’re **all** dead. You, me, Carol, Lori, Dale—**everyone**. The only difference between us and Julie is that she doesn’t have to put up with all the bullshit we do” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Kirkman forces readers to think about whether the survivors and the zombies are alike in all respects—even whether the zombies have it easier. The “bullshit” Tyrese refers to is the “bullshit” of uncertainties and facing those challenges in redefining what the moral way of life looks like, something he would rather not deal with at this point. To Tyrese, humanity and morality are dead and infected, without any chance of cure or survival. Rick, however, attempts to distinguish the differences between the living and the dead, and tries to remember that living through changing

definitions, while painful and confusing, is preferable to the alternative—a mindless, decaying existence as another growling corpse in a horde of the undead.

The next two pages reveal the real killer as Thomas, not Dexter. This secret further complicates the challenges in redefining models of moral behavior free from the influence of conventional morality. Rick implies the dangers of blind belief in the preexisting constructions of morality as he questions the safety of the prison when talking to Lori. He blames himself for the death of Hershel's daughters, because "I thought this place was safe. I told Hershel it would be safe here. I assured him. I talked him into coming here" (*Safety Behind Bars*). His assumptions that the prison—the symbol of pre-9/11 morality and law and order—was safe in this post-9/11 world proved to be wrong—and deadly. He realizes the old definitions—like the prison itself—are maladaptive and could ruin their chances for survival in this post-apocalyptic world.

A few pages after his conversation with Lori, Rick still sits in the prison yard as Andrea bursts out of the prison and runs from Thomas. Rick tackles Thomas to the ground and begins to beat him mercilessly, continuing the beating over two pages. Lori tries to stop Rick, but Andrea pulls her off as Rick screams "He deserves EVERY bit of this, Lori." Finally, Tyrese pulls Rick off and asks him "Rick—Jesus, man?! What are you doing?" (*Safety Behind Bars*). After he's pulled off, Rick says "He killed them" repeatedly. Two splash pages follow, depicting the entire group standing behind Rick as he holds his mangled hand to his torso and stands over Thomas; the prison, with its barred windows, looms in the background behind the group. The conversation that follows between the group proves to be critical in understanding the anxieties represented by the prison. The pages provide a moment to wonder whether the group will free themselves of the prison of ineffective moral constructions or if the looming prison and its symbolic representations of brutal violence and indignity will consume their responses to Thomas's horrific crimes.

Rick takes charge and expresses the need to set new rules to live by in this unexplored world. Lori asks Rick what he plans to do, and Rick emphasizes “We have to do what’s **right**—to make sure he never kills again!” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Lori asks Rick, “You’re the king now?” and argues “We’ve got a chance to change things... We’ve got a chance to break the cycle. No killing means no killing. If we kill him—we’re no better than he is” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Instead, Lori wants to let him loose outside the fences or locking him up. Andrea vehemently opposes, saying he deserves to die for what he did to Hershel’s daughters. Tyrese references the void left after the destruction of previously-clear moral judgment, noting “We haven’t made any kinds of rules for this sort of thing. If we’re going to start a new life here—try to reestablish society—we need to have rules for this. We need to decide what to do. What do we do?” (*Safety Behind Bars*). The conflicting viewpoints offered by Rick, Lori, Tyrese, and other group members mimic the morally-ambiguous dilemmas one must face in redefining morality and humanity in a post-9/11 world. Just like the survivors in the prison, Americans have no frame of reference to determine which cultural constructions of right and wrong to destroy, adapt, or redefine. The debates over what to do with the terrorists held in Guantanamo, how to handle profiling of certain minorities, and how to treat Americans who just so happen to look like the terrorists accused of the September 11th attacks still exist. The logic to be found in each potential alternative creates ambiguity as to which choice is ultimately the “correct” one. No one really knows what to do or how to define these central concepts of our existence, because the circumstances are completely new. Just like Tyrese, we still ask “What do we do?”

Rick’s final say to silence the debate implies that an unwavering acceptance of outdated models clouds his vision and obscures a path to greater morality. After Tyrese asks, “What do we do?,” Rick responds “You kill? You die. It’s as simple as that” (*Safety Behind Bars*). When Lori challenges this rule, Rick tells her “I’m just making sure we do what’s right... I’m a cop—

I've been trained to make decisions like this" (*Safety Behind Bars*). He takes it a step further, arguing "I'm making the choice that's best for all of us" (*Safety Behind Bars*). He believes Thomas must be made an example of and believes "We have to make the statement once and for all—we do not kill" (*Safety Behind Bars*). At the bottom of the page, in a panel looking down on Rick's back as he speaks to the group, he tells them "We do not tolerate it. We will not allow it. That is our rule—our pledge. You kill. You die. No exceptions" (*Safety Behind Bars*). Rick makes the new rules in the spirit of pre-apocalypse ideas of capital punishment. However, his argument for "no exceptions" exhibits black and white thinking that is never true or effective in defining moral and human patterns of behavior—whether they are constructed before or after 9/11. In drawing the final panel from above, we "look down" on Rick's black and white boundaries and know they are bound to be challenged and to ultimately fail. The readers look down on Rick and know these rules will not allow for survival in this new world. There are always exceptions to the rule, and the reader knows that in the zombie narrative tradition, survivors are usually almost always forced to make the choice to kill or to die. Rick's continued perpetuation of outdated standards creates a "new" set of rules which bar the group from achieving moral safety.

Almost immediately after drawing this rigid line of morality, the group must hastily erase and redraw it when faced with the decision to kill or be killed. After Thomas's death and subsequent feeding to the zombies, the group's relief is quickly shattered. Rick tells Lori it is safe to bring the kids out, and the two discuss what to do with Patricia after she tried to free Thomas from his cell to save his life. As the two talk, Patricia trails after Dexter and Andrew as they come up with guns pointed at Rick and the group. The final page of *Safety Behind Bars* shows a splash page of Dexter aiming a shotgun at Rick's head and telling him to "Get the fuck out of my house." (*Safety Behind Bars*). As Rick and other members of the group try to talk

Dexter into lowering his gun, zombies begin pouring out of the prison from A-Block. Both sides turn their attention to the zombies.

A full page shows sixteen small panels, alternating back and forth between living human and undead zombie. Each person is visually paired with a zombie drawn in similar position or appearance. In paralleling the appearance or position between survivor and zombie, Kirkman aligns what is and what could be if the group fails to relax rigid black and white distinctions of morality. Each zombie is shown as one of the survivors shoots it through the head; here, the panels symbolize the logical progression of the refusal to reject ineffective behavior guidelines as leading to the need for a metaphorical bullet to the brain. As they continue to fight the zombies, six more tiny panels appear alternating between human and zombie; this time, however, two of the three survivor panels show weapons instead of their faces. Here, the survivors challenge and attempt to kill the old ideals represented by the zombies. The next panel shows Rick yelling “Don’t let them surround us!” (*The Heart’s Desire*) as the bottom half-page panel shows the zombies closing in on the survivors as they fight to kill them. Rick’s call to not “let them surround us!” represents a desire to fight back against the dangerous threats posed by the antiquated models for moral behavior that the zombies symbolize. Even with zombies closing in and threatening to eat the survivors alive, Rick still has hope of overcoming the horde and that the group will come out on the other side of the fight as improved human beings.

One reason the uncertainties in defining right and wrong are so difficult to resolve is because the influence of the antiquated definitions always presses at the fences of our minds. In the page immediately following the discussion between Tyrese and Rick, a 2/3-page panel shows zombies converging on the fences. Three pages follow depicting these zombies as they lurk outside the safety of the chain-link, giving visual expression to the constant and consistent pressing influence of ineffective past conventions of morality. At any moment, these now-

threatening influences can break through the fence and consume the potential for honest reevaluation and implementation of new and improved models of behavior which govern a more effective morality in the future.

While it is easy to connect the prison to moral anxieties of *TWD*'s time and culture, the prison's symbolic associations with values related to antiquated definitions of humanity are not made clear until a conversation between Hershel and Axel in *The Heart's Desire*. As they work in the garden on the prison grounds, Axel asks Hershel "You ever think about them? Watching you like they do—all day?" Hershel responds, saying "I try not to think about them at all" (*The Heart's Desire*). A page-wide panel at the bottom of the page follows, depicting the hordes of zombies outside the prison fence. Axel tells Hershel "I think about them all the time" and that he wonders about who they were, their jobs, their families, and whether any of the zombies knew each other before they died. He tells Hershel "Those things all used to be **people**. Every single one of them had **lives**. You follow me?" Hershel reiterates that he doesn't like thinking about it, and Axel continues his musings, noting "You don't wonder about that? What kind of people they were...I bet most of them were **good** people, like you or me—or well, you. I was no boy scout" (*The Heart's Desire*).

This brings up questions and uncertainties about where the zombies land in definitions of humanity. Even Axel, a hardened criminal incarcerated for armed robbery, thinks about the lost individual members of humanity now comprising the faceless zombie horde while Hershel, the God-fearing farmer, avoids thinking about the zombies' connection to humanity. This exchange calls into question considerations in determining how humanity is defined, viewed, and valued. These are not just infected corpses—they are *people* who have been infected. By bringing the previous humanity of the zombies into question, the distance closes between the walking corpses and living survivors lessens and the boundaries separating the two. The competing alternatives

which could potentially define humanity—apathetic dismissal or empathetic inclusion—collide and become a fully completed vision in the final confrontation of *The Heart's Desire*.

After Carol's suicide attempt, Rick confronts Tyrese and a serious fight ensues between the two. As the two argue and fight for sixteen pages, bars appear frequently in the panels as they debate the justifications for the murders of Chris and Dexter. Here, again, the bars symbolize the cages imprisoning Rick and the group, created by refusal to accept and face challenges of change so to resolve the ambiguities in redefining humanity and morality. At one point, Rick blacks out and falls over the rail on the second floor of cells to the floor below. Tyrese descends, and the two lay on the floor. Rick tries to stand but can't and tells Tyrese "Everything I did—everything—I did for the good of this group. You can't say that. That's what makes me right" (*The Heart's Desire*). Booth notes "Not to be a *social* self is to lose one's humanity" (Booth 238). This is because "To be *joined*, in other words, is my primary, natural condition" (Booth 240). Because Rick attempts to do what he believes is best for the group, he again Rick's demonstrates his desire to be a "social self" and thus uphold beneficial standards of humanity and morality. This teaches that however we decide to redefine these models of behavior, a concern for the "social" self and the needs of the group as a whole must be key motivating influences.

Despite his concern for his social self and the group's collective safety, Rick still sits in the cage built by other outdated models of behavior. When Andrea reveals Allen has died, Rick steps up and offers to shoot him to prevent reanimation. He doesn't "want anyone else to have to do it" (*The Heart's Desire*). After he shoots Allen, four panels depict Rick with his face drawn completely in black shadows. On the following page, a splash page shows Rick collapsing and is followed by four black panels on the opposite page. Everything has gone black and shadowed after the fight between Rick and Tyrese. This blackness represents the void left after refusal and

subsequent expulsion of long-standing ideologies which create our guiding moral principles. Rick was forced to bend his black and white “you kill, you die” mentality from *Safety Behind Bars*, but he couldn’t expel the underlying outdated points of view until the fight with Tyrese. Rick expresses the realization of the rejection in his speech to the group at the end of *The Heart’s Desire*.

When Rick awakens, Dale comes to talk to him. Dale informs Rick that he is no longer the sole leader of the group, and instead, a committee has formed to oversee the community comprised of Rick, Dale, Hershel, and Tyrese. Rick agrees it is the right decision, and he asks to talk to the group. He tells them “I’m not fit to be making all the decisions around here. None of us are” (*The Heart’s Desire*). This acts as a rejection of individual and subjective conclusions about what it means to be moral or humane and an acceptance of the multi-faceted and communal approach in reconstructing models of behavior. Rick explicitly references the need for change in how we understand morality and humanity, after Tyrese tries to interrupt and undermine Rick. He starts by saying “I am a cop—I know that technically what I did was wrong. I know the laws—I know how things used to be” but immediately follows it up with “Things have changed!” Tyrese responds with “We can’t just ignore the rules, Rick. We’ve got to retain our humanity!” and Rick retorts with “That’s what I’m saying!” (*The Heart’s Desire*). Despite the alternatives they each pose, they can agree on the need to maintain the Good of morality and humanity, especially in this life-or-death reality. In the next panel, Rick is physically damaged. Bandages wrap around his head and smaller ones are on his nose and cheeks. The fight with Tyrese left him mangled and broken, but Rick has finally come to accept change and face the challenging mental work necessary to reconcile and restructure the standards which govern moral behavior and the treatment of those outside ourselves.

Rick's speech at the end of *The Heart's Desire* teaches that the only choice left is to accept the fear of change and face it through the guiding principle of communal concern. After explaining his logic in killing Dexter, Rick seeks the group's understanding. He tells them "Things have changed. The world has changed—and we're going to have to change with it" (*The Heart's Desire*). The repetition of the word "change" creates a rhythm which roots the word as the heart of the lesson and so exemplifies the urgency of accepting this inevitability. In this moment of his own "historical progress," Rick tells the group "If you still think things are going to go back to the way they were—stop! They're not! Nothing will ever be the way it used to be! Ever!" (*The Heart's Desire*). Rick aligns refusal to accept and face that change with the certainty of death, telling them "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!" (*The Heart's Desire*). He argues "We will change! We will evolve. We'll make new rules—we'll still be humane and kind and we'll still care for each other" (*The Heart's Desire*), and so teaches a framework which preserves the qualities which last through the ages—humane, kind, care and concern for others outside ourselves—as ones which should still govern new defining features of morality.

But Rick rightly argues "We have to adapt to this world if we are going to survive" (*The Heart's Desire*). In each of the panels depicting Rick, there is open space around him; the bars which always appeared in previous panels when he engaged in these debates over alternatives to right and wrong have now disappeared, and so they no longer imprison and prevent him from ascending to a higher moral character. Rick is no longer caged and imprisoned by the antiquated definitions of morality and humanity. His sight is unobstructed, clearing the path for more life-affirming and lasting definitions. Just like in zombie apocalypse, Americans navigating the cultural apocalypse after 9/11 must adapt, change, evolve, and create new rules in order to

identify the true standards for the way life should be lived. Instead of ripping an innocent woman's hijab off as she walks down the street, for example, Americans can learn its symbolic purpose, and so respect the different culture represented in that garb instead of wrongly associating it with a terrorist.

Trying to return to a destroyed and futile worldview will inevitably debase life. Tyrese tells Rick "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" (*The Heart's Desire*). Tyrese still does not see the dangers of trying to reestablish a life that no longer works in the new world they live in. Rick does though, and responds "We already are savages, Tyrese... We're surrounded by the dead. We're among them—and when we finally give up, we become them!!" (*The Heart's Desire*). In perpetuating unwavering and inhumane standards as the framework to define new rules, Rick and the group have become savages just like the zombies outside the fences. The infection bites at their heels every day. A two-page splash depiction of Rick ends *The Heart's Desire*, with Rick exclaiming "WE ARE THE WALKING DEAD!" in a huge speech bubble taking up approximately 1/3 of the page. In this proclamation, Rick takes accountability for the error of his use of conventional models of morality; in holding himself accountable, Rick rejects and redirects his potential alternatives for thinking from here on out. In recognizing his potential "mindless" adherence to ineffective views, Rick is paroled from the prison of those models and he can look forward to the possibility of something better. What that something better may be—and the challenges which must be faced in order to obtain it—find expression in the actions and reactions of the various characters inhabiting *TWD* universe.

Rick Grimes and Morality Through Total Effects

Despite Wertham's claims to the contrary, a horror comic like *The Walking Dead* can and does provide moral instruction. This occurs through Wayne Booth's belief that a literary work

functions as an author's offering of friendship to the reader, arguing "The authors who become our lasting friends are those who offer to teach us..." (Booth 222) lessons which focus on "the way life should be lived" (Booth 173). Viewed in this way, a narrative's offered instructions have the potential for lasting and significant influence, because "the quality of our lives was said to be in large part identical with the quality of the company we keep. Our happiness is found in a pursuit of friendship, of something more than our limited 'selves'" (Booth 172). Whether a work's instructions uplift or debase the way life should be lived depends on seven measures: quantity, reciprocity, intimacy, intensity, coherence, Otherness, and breadth of range. All seven of these measures are found in *The Walking Dead*, when Kirkman's uses of various comics languages are examined through two lenses: resonant violation and John Gardner's moral fiction.

The value of Kirkman's offered friendship begins with what Kendall Phillips calls "resonant violation." According to Phillips, "for a horror film to achieve an impact on the broader cultural landscape, it must balance resonance and violation," (8). He found "the central crucial element to be that combination of familiarity and shock" that leads to resonant violation (Phillips 8). *TWD* combines familiarity and shock through how Kirkman chooses to use traditions, and this allows the series to have an "impact on the broader cultural landscape." Resonance is found in *The Walking Dead's* use of the traditions provided by gothic conventions and the zombie tropes of George Romero's *Living Dead* films. Pulling from these traditions, Kirkman's zombie-infested gothic settings give intellectual and emotional moral expression to the anxieties created from the destruction of individual and American beliefs on 9/11.

Kirkman continues by pairing resonance with violation to provide instructions on how to face the fears of those anxieties in moral ways. The continued focus on survivors in serial forms give expression to how best to reconstruct those belief systems to create a better future. While "Most contemporary writers are hesitant to speak of Truth and Beauty, not to mention God—

hesitant to speak of the goodness of man, or the future of the world” (Gardner 38), Kirkman uses the traditions informing the series to present these ideals repeatedly. Characters’ navigating *The Walking Dead*’s horrific content educate on emotional, psychological, and cultural fronts, and Kirkman ensures these lessons are moral by advancing Gardner’s ideals of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty found through examination of the total effects of the characters’ choices in their journeys.

Booth argues critics should focus on “the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self’” (Booth 8). For Booth, “‘Moral’ judgements are only a small part of it” (Booth 8). A moral or ethical examination of a work should focus on “all qualities in the character, or ethos, of authors and readers, whether these are judged good or bad” (Booth 8). Booth aligns “character” with “my habits of choice in every domain of my life, and a society expresses its ethos by what it chooses to be” (Booth 8). Viewing the qualities and total effect of the actions of Kirkman’s characters, *The Walking Dead*’s lessons add significant weight to all seven measures of friendship and so provides moral instructions.

Quantity is clearly represented in *TWD*. In violating the traditional use of one-shot or film, the serial narrative approach of *The Walking Dead* adds significant weight to the measure of quantity, or the number of invitations the author provides the audience. Over the course of almost two-hundred issues and nine seasons of television, Kirkman offers hundreds of invitations to the audience for consideration. Further, Kirkman’s world consists of dozens of well-developed characters for whom he provides multiple narrative arcs. Because Kirkman includes so many characters with attentive development, he seeks to express as many “individual opinions” to count as possible and so provides even more alternatives to evaluate. In these two ways, Kirkman adds weight to quantity before an examination of specific choices even begins and grounds his literary offering as one of value.

Kirkman's characters also add weight to the second measure of friendship through the moral conflicts commonly present in gothic and horror works. The second scale focuses on the reciprocity/hierarchy combination; here, Booth argues that a friendship with a high value of reciprocity involves "that most important of all 'reading' challenges, the interpretation of moral character" (Booth 187). *The Walking Dead's* endless invitations almost always center on the moral conflicts which arise from the gothic and horror circumstances the characters encounter. As characters make choices of morality, readers work through these same conflicts themselves and assess what their own choices would be in the same circumstances. Whether or not to put down the zombies, the choice to leave Shane unburied, and Rick's conflicts over the appropriate punishment for Thomas are only a few of the hundreds of examples of opportunities for moral interpretation. Because so many invitations for "interpretation of moral character" exist, Kirkman advances numerous alternatives with intellectual and emotional honesty in mind. Every character, facing every conflict, has the potential to add to this measure of friendship, and so again Kirkman adds weight to the value of his offering.

The third measure, intimacy, finds an "inferred total reciprocity and intimacy" (Booth 189) when the author's "mind works...much as mine does-only better" (Booth 189). Kirkman creates intimacy by using "ordinary" people as characters. Bishop notes "zombie cinema pursues the struggles of bland, ordinary (i.e., *Heimlich*) citizens" (115), and Phillips argues *Night of the Living Dead* "is disturbing because of how ordinary its characters are" (98). Like *Night*, *The Walking Dead* focuses on ordinary people as survivors, making the series not only more intensely disturbing but also more relatable to a wider scope of the American audience. A police officer, lawyer, gym teacher, pizza delivery man—these are just some of the roles survivors played before the zombie apocalypse. These are everyday roles which readers, their family members, their neighbors, and their community also embody their "ordinariness." Kirkman's

series doesn't focus on the one-perfect, but rather on how the everyman and everywoman of American society would act and react in a zombie apocalypse. Because they are just like everyone else, Kirkman parallels the minds of readers with his own processes as he works through character development. This identification expresses the parallels required for intimacy, and so Kirkman adds weight with each ordinary character he introduces.

Through the emotional connection created by the identification with these ordinary people, intensity (the fourth measure of friendship) also receives weight. Intensity examines the engagement with a given story: can the story take the audience away? Outcomes of these moral conflicts and the fates of favorite characters matter, because they are the same moral conflicts the audience experiences—the resulting answers hold weight in their own lives, and so they lose themselves in analyzing and awaiting the outcomes. When one also examines the actions of the ordinary survivors for their total effect—as opposed to focusing only on the violence like Wertham did—Goodness appears time and time again within *TWD*. Many actions taken by these ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances feel reasonable, relatable, and appropriate, decided in the intended spirit of doing what is right and Good. When Carl shoots Shane, it feels necessary and appropriate to protect not only Rick and Lori, but the rest of the group. When Michonne tortures the Governor, readers understand—and some cheer—because of the brutality he previously visited upon her. Because the characters' choices feel intellectually and emotionally honest, the ordinary people encountering the narrative are swept away by their strong emotional connection to these characters. In this, Kirkman adds significant weight to intensity.

Both the characters' expected and unexpected behaviors add weight to coherence, the fifth measure of friendship, which requires examinations of both consistencies and inconsistencies within the work. In narratives, “[S]ome works exhibit deep contradictions from

moment to moment and ask us to accept them as an essential part of sincere or authentic narrative; others seem harmonious and ask us to reassemble and embrace unities” (Booth 193). This measure receives weight either when “What we all admire...are works that are either consistent with themselves, and thus in some sense unified, or works that acknowledge their own inconsistencies and thus reflect a genuine encounter with recalcitrant materials” (Booth 193-194). The survivors act in ways which feel consistent with their characterizations; while at times they may make decisions which feel out-of-character and inconsistent, the motivating morality behind the choices remains consistent with their overall characterization. Even those behaviors which feels inconsistent within an established characterization work.

How the work of art deals with the “other” is the sixth scale of measure. For Booth, value on this scale is found not “in how strange or ‘defamiliarized’ the surface or ‘content’ is but rather in what the reader is likely to learn about *ways of dealing with* the unfamiliar or the threatening” (Booth 195). Fiction of the highest ethical kind creates “a depth of education...in *dealing with* the ‘other’” (Booth 195). Through the characters’ moral conflicts, Kirkman educates on how to deal *with* the other in multiple ways. First, by presenting moral alternatives and ambiguities, he shows multiple sides of the concept of morality—some sides which feel familiar and others which feel foreign or uncomfortable. In presenting so many different characters with so many individual voices, Kirkman allows varied and conflicting alternatives to be “heard” and considered. Further, Kirkman characterizes the people encountered in *TWD* in balanced ways, showing both their “good” and “bad” sides and the ambiguities this creates when trying to determine the morality of their decisions. Rick and the Governor as doubles is one strong example; by the time the climax of this arc is on the horizon, the very fine line defining good and evil between the two is almost indistinguishable. Through every character, Kirkman depicts both strengths and flaws to provide a more expansive knowledge base in which to decide how to deal

with the Unheimlich and unfamiliar culture created by the terrorist attacks. In doing so, the scale of the “other” receives significant weight.

Lastly, the seventh measure, breadth of range, focuses on instances of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty within a work. Booth places high value on art that provides a variety of offerings, focusing on the “limits of the traditional triad: aesthetic, cognitive, and moral—beauty, truth, and goodness—with each of the three offering innumerable possibilities to the story-tellers” (Booth 195). With every turn of the page in reading *The Walking Dead*, Kirkman offers innumerable instances of all three of Gardner’s moral ends, through the intimate and intense connection with the many characters inhabiting the zombie world. Through the characters’ actions and reactions, the audience feels Truth in the logic of their choices. Anticipating the results of the characters’ choices, readers hope for happiness and satisfaction—we feel these characters deserve it that much more in a world like the one in which they live. We empathize and feel the suffering they endure through identification with ordinary, inherently Good people on the pages of *The Walking Dead*. With every character, in one way or another, Kirkman provides instances of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and so adds significant weight to the measure of breadth of range.

While Wertham would argue *The Walking Dead* creates a sense of “moral disarmament,” based solely on its presentation of horrific content through the comics medium, in reality the series does the exact opposite. Represented by the heavily weighted offering of friendship which Kirkman offers, *The Walking Dead*’s provide moral protection against the disarmament occurring in the 21st century’s cultural apocalypse. The series advances attitudes and lessons related to the world we live in currently—an uncertain, fear-driven, post 9/11 world that is technology-obsessed, violent, chaotic, and culturally apocalyptic.

Rick Grimes as Moral Individual and American Culture at Large

To reveal uncertainties of this new, post-9/11 world, Kirkman uses the gothic convention of doubles. In gothic fiction, “notions of human nature are neither stable nor dual, but bound up with an ambivalence and uncertainty that leaves boundaries between nature, culture, law and identity both in doubt and strangely interconnected” (Botting 135). Due to similarities between the notion of human nature in gothic fiction and the anxieties facing 21st century Americans, gothic doubles provide the symbolic means to examine and better understand this ambivalence. In times of cultural turmoil, “Without an adequate social framework to sustain a sense of identity, the wanderer encounters the new form of the gothic ghost, the double or shadow of himself” (Botting 85). As someone recently “reborn” into a world where all social frameworks have collapsed, Rick encounters doubles in order to draw new boundaries of identity and social behavior.

Noel Carroll also discusses doubling in *The Paradox of Horror*. Carroll calls this doubling *spatial fission*, “a process of *multiplication*, i.e., a character or set of characters is multiplied into one or more new facets, each standing for another aspect of the self, generally one that is either hidden, ignored, repressed, or denied by the character who has been cloned” (Carroll 46). Through spatial fission, “These new facets generally contradict cultural ideals (usually morally charged ones) of normality” and “The alter ego represents a normatively alien aspect of the self” (Carroll 46). These contradictions and alien aspects of self come through the doubling of Rick and Shane. Using gothic doubles and the effects of spatial fission, Kirkman uses Rick as an instructional tool to teach the urgent necessity of fighting off moral stagnancy and maintaining constant awareness of the fine line between moral and immoral. If we instead choose to deny change and shirk the hard work in rebuilding the pillars of who we are, we put

everything—even our survival—at risk. Kirkman begins to teach these lessons in his first doubling, between Rick and his partner, Shane.

As Rick’s partner on the police force, Shane appears alongside Rick on the first page of the series. Immediately, the two function as doubles. It is unclear which of the two—if either—acts as the protagonist of the series. Because both are police officers and the first two “good” guys to appear, either offers the potential for moral instruction. When Rick becomes the clear protagonist on page two, experience dictates Shane is likely dead as Rick stumbles upon his first zombie and the state of the world reveals itself. However, in a shocking twist, Rick finds not Lori and Carl but Shane too at the camp outside Atlanta. A borderless panel depicts Rick’s reunion with his family, followed by another open panel showing Shane approach the Grimes family. Despite splitting the scene between the bottom panel of one page and the top of another, the two open panels mirror Rick and Shane in their connections to the Grimes family. Also, Shane, like Rick, still wears his officer’s coat. The two are only clearly differentiated by their hats—while both police hats, Rick’s is a cowboy hat while Shane wears a ballcap. Here, the hats act as symbolic association of the aspects of self defined by each other. Rick functions as the Western wandering hero, a rebellious outcast trying to work through the deserted landscapes alone. Shane, on the other hand, represents the All-American mentality—what’s more traditionally American than baseball? These two aspects of self—the rebellious wandering outcast and the All-American conformist—are represented by Rick and Shane as doubles.

In pairing Shane’s reemergence with Rick’s family reunion, Kirkman uses Shane as Rick’s double to challenge some aspect of identity and its formation at its most central level—the family. Over the next few panels, Kirkman paints Shane as an amoral inversion. Three pages depict Rick alone with Lori and Carl, but these pages are followed by Shane rejoining the trio. As Rick peers out of his tent in the next panel, Shane yells “Morning, Partner.” The use of

“partner” further aligns Rick and Shane as doubles. However, the connection between the two as equals weakens when Dale pulls Rick aside. Before he and Shane leave to hunt, Rick meets Dale in the RV. Dale tells Rick “But that Shane...he’s a good man...He helps out a lot around here...He took care of your wife...But he’s not glad you’re back...I wouldn’t trust him around my wife” (*Days Gone Bye*). Rick tells Dale he doesn’t have anything to worry about, but resonant experience implies no survivor is worth automatic trust—even old friends. By ignoring Dale’s concerns, Rick remains steadfast in the “truths” of his destroyed reality, despite warnings to the contrary. In doing so, he exhibits a stagnancy of thinking which puts him at serious risk in this new world. Rick’s refusal to adjust his own definitions of truth reflect the fear and refusal to examine our most enduring pillars of behavior in a post-9/11 world. With so much change and uncertainty, many turn a blind eye and continue life as it was before the attacks. However, just as it is to Rick, this mindset endangers the chance of survival and a better future for American citizens.

This side of Rick’s self—blind moral stagnancy—reveals itself when Rick and Shane go hunting. Kirkman once again presents Rick and Shane as doubles in their first hunting scene. Over two pages, Rick and Shane move quietly through the woods and discuss their respective journeys to the camp. Both Rick and Shane look alike, with dark and thick eyebrows, stubble on their cheeks and chin, and similar eye shapes. If not for the different hats they still wear, the two could easily be twins. As the two talk, their dialogue reveals the conflicting sides of self each represents. In the first panel, the two discuss the police station and unlike Rick, Shane didn’t take any guns. Rick tells Shane, “If you had seen the place the way I did...you wouldn’t be so worried about the rules. I don’t think it’ll **ever** be the same again” (*Days Gone Bye*). Shane responds, “Don’t say that, man...This won’t last” (*Days Gone Bye*). Here, the conflicting views of the potential for a return to normalcy and an acceptance that things will never be the same

represent the clashing senses of self which create ambiguities in constructing new models of behavior.

Kirkman also implies the moral stagnancy which can result from a refusal to face the fears of change and exhibit self-awareness and reflection necessary to survival. While Rick's decision to steal the guns provides alternative patterns of thinking and so ultimately results in moral behavior because of the total effects of that action, Shane's refusal to consider alternatives as he follows the old rules out of fear exhibits illogical and dishonest adherence to tradition. His choice to leave the guns functions amorally at best and immorally at worst under the total effects of the action in the *Unheimlich* circumstances. Kirkman symbolizes the dangers of blindly adhering to pre-9/11 law and order ideals by immediately following this conversation between Rick and Shane with a 1/3-page panel of a detailed zombie eating a deer. Had Rick not stepped outside the boundaries of conventional morality and stolen the guns, the zombie could have easily eaten them both. In his choice of moral stagnancy, Shane could have been infected or killed.

Another conversation between Rick and Shane nuances the conflicting sides of self represented by the doubles as ones related to moral stagnancy and moral adaptability. On a splash page, Shane acts as look-out atop the RV, and Rick joins him to discuss the group's next step. Rick argues they need to move camp, while Shane believes staying put will increase their chances of survival. He tells Rick, "It's too risky to go somewhere else... This is the best place to be for the rescue" (*Days Gone Bye*). Shane's insistence that the group stay where they are reflects the moral stagnancy of maintaining the status quo. Rick, however, believes the group must move to increase their chances of survival. As the wandering outcast, Rick understands staying stagnant—remaining where they are and maintaining the outdated constructs—only puts them in more danger, evidenced by the zombie attack earlier in the day. Shane refuses, telling

Rick “No, dammit! We’re staying right here!” Rick acquiesces, briefly joining the two doubles with moral stagnancy as the unifying behavior. As time passes and the situation grows more dangerous, Shane becomes more aggressive in his belief in the necessity of staying put.

The tensions between the doubles comes to a head in the final confrontation between Rick and Shane. Towards the end of *Days Gone Bye*, Shane tells Rick to let him know when he’s ready to hunt. Carl asks if he can go too; Rick says no, but Shane encourages Rick to bring Carl along. This clash of opinion ignites an argument between the two and things escalate when Shane punches Rick prompting Lori to attack Shane. Shane storms off, and Rick goes to follow. A few panels later, Lori laments “It’s never going to be the same again. We’re never going to be normal...just look at us” (*Days Gone Bye*). Lori’s attack on Shane and comments about the inability to regain a sense of normalcy reflect Rick’s positions as wandering outcast, and so make the rejection of what Shane represents even more honest and urgent.

The remaining pages of *Days Gone Bye* see the final confrontation between the clashing ideals of moral stagnancy and moral adaptability at the heart of the conflicting sides of self which Rick and Shane as doubles represent. As Rick tries to stop Shane, Shane turns his gun on Rick and yells “What do you want?! You come to rip my heart right out of my chest?!!” (*Days Gone Bye*). Shane screams “I’m nothing now, Rick! NOTHING!,” verbalizing the nothingness of the void left by the destruction of self in the aftermath of the apocalypse. Shane’s morally stagnant approach to the void leaves his worldview completely dark, and his visual depictions of him in the facial nuances. The close, detailed panels of Shane’s face create distance from the reader, working in opposition to what Scott McCloud calls amplification through simplification. According to McCloud, “The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe” (*Understanding Comics* 31). Conversely, by including more details in drawing a face, the less people the face could be said to describe and so identification

becomes less likely. In the detailed depiction, Shane could be said to represent a much smaller pool of readers—if any at all. His crazed eyes and loss of control distance him even further, as he rejects the Good through his jealous, selfish, and pessimistic exclamations. Shane—and the moral stagnancy he represents—feels so Othered that we immediately seek to reject them and the dangers they pose. Here, the disgust Shane elicits teaches that maintaining outdated models of behavior must be avoided in constructing new ways to life; if we want to prosper, we must face the fears of uncertainties in restructuring our ways of living and adjust our worldviews to focus more on the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

The fears which drive the response of moral stagnancy reveal themselves, as Shane prepares to kill Rick in the panels that follow. As he levels the gun at Rick, he screams at him “You weren’t meant to live!” While textually this represents Shane’s pain over losing Lori when Rick returns, this contextually represents the fears a many people felt in and the threats they perceived in being forced to reexamine the long-standing ideals informing their identities. For many, the shifts in the tides of concepts of “freedom” and what it means to be American were changes they vehemently opposed and refused to accept. Some examples include the purpose and value of patriotism, the shifts in privacy laws and the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act, and redefining the concepts of marriage and personhood at the Supreme Court level. Like Shane, many people maintained the moral status quo and denied the new models of behavior they believed “weren’t meant to live!” However, because nothing will ever be the same again, these new models of behavior will not only allow for survival but will also create more moral ways of living for future generations—represented when Carl pulls the trigger on the gun that kills Shane. Here, Carl represents that the future will have the ability to protect themselves from culturally-cataclysmic events if they learn to fight off moral stagnancy and instead adapt identities based on the guidelines represented in Rick’s character. In a splash page ending *Days*

Gone Bye, Rick and Carl embrace and weep as Shane lays bleeding on the ground. While destroying and denying traditional constructions which define who we are will be painful and leave emotional scars, it is an “evil” necessary in the unknown confines of the post-apocalyptic world.

When Rick returns to the site of Shane’s grave, Kirkman further strengthens the need for continuously-evolving and forward-moving morality guidelines and the importance of self-awareness in exposing the problems of stagnant moral principles. After witnessing the reanimation of Hershel’s daughters, Rick realizes a bite isn’t necessary for a corpse to reanimate. He decides to run an errand, and before leaving the prison he tells Lori “If they revived without a bite—that means we’re all infected...or could be. That means we’re just waiting to die before we come back as one of those things” (*Safety Behind Bars*). After revealing this, he tells Lori “The more I thought about it—I realized...there’s something I have to do” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Page-wide panels show Rick leaving the fences and bars of the prison behind as he leaves on the motorcycle, moving towards the “something” he has to do.

A few pages later, Rick speeds along the open road, but zombies begin to follow the sounds of the bike. The panels visually express the threat of infection chasing Rick as he rides to wherever he is heading. The next set of panels show him driving past Wiltshire Estates, and the zombies are more plentiful than they were a few pages previous. The next panels put Rick right outside Atlanta. On this errand, he follows the path back to where it all began: the camp outside Atlanta. In traversing his past locations, Rick uses everything he has experienced and learn along the way to make the choice at the end of his path backwards. Whatever action he is moving toward must be examined through the total action of Rick’s experiences thus far to determine the morality in his choice. Two panels show Rick has pulled a shovel from the ground and suddenly his intent is clear: he came back the way he came to confront zombie Shane. Here, his choices

provide an honest and emotional model of behavior which balances relevant pre-existing moral qualities with new models of behavior. This blurred approach provides the inoculation against the infection of moral stagnancy.

Rick's choice to confront zombie Shane teaches both traditional and updated alternatives should be used to reconstruct moral behaviors. First, Rick embodies mercy, even to those who may not deserve it, as a traditional virtue to preserve in reconstructing a new sense of self. In two tall and equal-sized 1/3-page panels Rick waits for Shane to crawl his way out of the dirt of his grave. The second panel shows Shane standing in dirt from the waist down, still wearing his police jacket. A tight, cramped page-wide panel shows Rick's face up-close as he talks to Shane. Rick wonders whether Shane would have left him in the dirt had he been in Rick's shoes. Rick says out loud to the zombie "You were a good man, Shane. I don't know why you did what you did...but you were a good man" (*Safety Behind Bars*). As zombie Shane growls in a panel depicting his clouded eyes and bared teeth, a speech bubble overlays the gutter between the panel depicting Shane and another of Rick looking down on him. Rick notes "Had things turned out differently, if you had killed me...I wonder if you would have just assumed being buried 'alive' wouldn't effect me. Could you have lived with yourself?" (*Safety Behind Bars*). Readers have a beat to ponder this question, and the idea that Shane could have lived with himself and left Rick reanimated in the dirt below is not a far stretch of the imagination. Rick, however, tells Shane "I had to set things right" (*Safety Behind Bars*). Like so many other times, Rick's choices are born from a desire to do "what's right." It quickly becomes evident what setting things right entails for Rick.

The next page shows four equal sized page-wide panels. Rick shoots zombie Shane in the head, and the three remaining panels show him turning his back on the zombie corpse and walking away; a cross stands over Shane's burial site, with his police hat hanging off one part of

the cross. In his last words to Shane, he looks back at the corpse and tells him “I ain’t gonna bury you again, you son of a bitch” (*Safety Behind Bars*). Rick’s return to kill zombie Shane advances the preservation of the traditional virtues of mercy and compassion, even in the face of personal or cultural attack. However, Rick’s choice to not rebury Shane—previously a deeply immoral indignity—symbolically leaves the threats of moral stagnancy out in the open so they are not “buried” and forgotten. In traveling the roads back through the places Rick has already been, Kirkman symbolizes the dangers of moral stagnancy we think are behind us never truly live in the past. By placing the police hat on the cross, Kirkman expresses that the symbols and ideologies informing morality—like law and order and religion—may be dead and *Unheimlich* in the circumstances of today. In recognizing and mourning the death of outdated models of behavior, Rick can move forward in filling the void of who he is and who he needs to be to survive in this zombie-ridden landscape.

Kirkman adds weight to Booth’s measures of friendship by requiring harder, more complicated work in determining the moral character of not only Rick and the Governor, but themselves. In aligning Rick and the Shane as doubles, *The Walking Dead*’s “plots are built out of the characters’ efforts to face moral choices. In tracing those efforts, we readers stretch our own capacities for thinking about how life should be lived, as we join those more elevated judges, the implied authors” (Booth 187). As Kirkman works through the anxieties and disturbing of the boundaries of the definitions of identity, morality, and humanity, readers engage in the same moral work and thus the series adds weight to the reciprocity one looks for in a moral friendship. In creating the conflicts and uncertainties between Rick and the Governor, Kirkman “offers us the pleasure of imaging characters and events in some world not exactly our own, of wondering how those events will turn out, and of concluding that somehow they have hung together” (Booth 192). In doing so, “We are so determined to have this pleasure that we

will try to find it even where it is not offered” (Booth 192) and thus our feelings of intensity are enhanced.

The blurred distinctions and complex moral dilemmas faced by the characters in *The Walking Dead* provide valuable and lasting moral instruction. Readers walk away feeling they have engaged in important moral work, allowing themselves to consider how they should define their own constructions of identity, humanity, and morality in a post-9/11 world. In making these moral assessments, we “take responsibility for what we are to become, in a world that does not offer simple moral choices of the kinds that our traditional codes are at least said to have provided” (Booth 271-272). Because the definitions are destroyed and shadowed throughout the work, “its choices are between goods or desires not all of which really *are* good or desirable. And it is this kind of reflection, the effort to discover what I *ought* to desire, what I really should desire to desire, that defines what it is to be a person” (Booth 271). The doublings of Rick and Shane provide opportunities to understand the challenges in redefining what we should desire, how we should live, and what it means to be human.

Conclusion

Gardner believes moral works to be great works with lasting impact, and “A lovely, easily achieved piece of art can never be called great” (178). Critics may debate the merit of violence and morality of *The Walking Dead*, but no one can argue the series is “easily achieved.” Kirkman proves this in the continued usage of doubles, throughout multiple character arcs. Kirkman layers other uses of doubles in Thomas, Dexter, the Governor, Negan, and Alpha. Because of their significant development, Andrea, Michonne, Carl, Carol, Daryl, and other primary characters could be found to have doubles throughout their arcs. Any one of these combinations could be put to the moral test and pass. In just his use of doubles, Kirkman

characters who morality in *The Walking Dead* to show the “great” significance of his horror comic.

Further, in his additional uses of the layers of texture found in settings, other gothic traditions, horror fiction traditions, and comics’ visual and verbal languages Kirkman offers another almost-endless array of moral questions to examine. Clearly, the early localized settings, Atlanta, Wiltshire Estates, Hershel’s farm, and the prison examine post-9/11 America in a moral and significant way. But Kirkman goes even further. In the zombie-riddled gothic settings, Kirkman could be said to examine many anxieties or questions about 21st century America. Individual zombies, such as the notorious Bicycle Zombie or the show’s Well Walker, each provide some form of moral interpretation. The visual choices in settings all seem to tell us something about ourselves in this new world in which we live. From every corner of the page, Kirkman adds layer upon layer to provide a complex and significant moral work.

The fact that a horror comic like *The Walking Dead* can do complex and significant moral work is what matters here. Despite being separated by sixty-five years and a host of academic advancements in the field of literary criticism, Wertham’s claims about comics still enjoy some hold in the field today. So, a work like *The Walking Dead* often finds itself ignored and we are denied the valuable and moral lessons which are found in those pages. This is problematic. McCloud believes “until widespread public ignorance of comics’ potential worth is successfully countered, comics censorship will always find fertile ground in the public mind” (*Reinventing Comics* 91).

Horror fiction and comics narratives like *The Walking Dead* should be given critical and cultural attention for this very reason. Not only do they teach us valuable moral lessons, but the examination can dispel the ignorance of comics’ potential worth and so combat negative censorship in our public and academic reading circles. Kirkman’s layered and complex universe

is just one example of the valuable horror comics and fictions which exist and await our critical examination and praise. In his comics series, “High art and popular culture collide in an aesthetic context in which personal taste and consumption come to the fore. Transformation is experienced...and boundaries become porous” (Botting 172). Through his vulnerable and open-ended offer of friendship, 21st century audiences can find the lessons they need to survive their own apocalypse and thrive despite the zombie always thumping at the door.

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