

## “What’s the Difference Between Men and Women?”: Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Walking Dead*

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*The Walking Dead* is an undisputed cultural phenomenon. The horror series, which airs on cable channel AMC, follows a group of survivors during the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse. *The Walking Dead* is the most-watched cable series in television history, and is notably the only drama series to be listed among the 50 highest viewed cable telecasts of all time, with the rest consisting entirely of sports broadcasts (Rice 26). The program premiered in 2010, during a period many television critics and scholars refer to as the current Golden Age of Television, characterized by a wealth of acclaimed and innovative American drama series (Albrecht 6; Damico and Quay viii; Sepinwall 41; Wood 11). Many eminent series of this Golden Age, such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, are concerned with themes of masculine identity and power. Such themes resonate with male audiences due to ongoing “cultural shifts regarding the dominant idea[s] surrounding masculinity,” such as the increased visibility of feminism in the new millennium (Wayne 206).

While feminism has experienced an increased acceptance in mainstream American society during recent decades, feminist movements seeking to advance women’s rights continue to be dismissed and rejected within conservative communities that ascribe to traditional gender hierarchy and neoliberal philosophy. Neoliberalism describes a political and economic system “in which state policies synchronize with cultural practices to apply market-based individualism as a governmental rationale across the institutions and practices of everyday life” (McCarthy 21). Neoliberalism thus emphasizes strong individualism, a traditional marker of classic conservative masculinity. The

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relationship between neoliberalism and masculinity is well established, and “in recent years there has been a qualified return of interest in the concept of patriarchy and thus neopatriarchy, neoliberal patriarchy, and ‘neoliberal neopatriarchy’” (Hearn 17).

In her seminal text *Sexual Politics*, feminist scholar Kate Millett defines patriarchy as culturally reinforced male domination, demonstrated through the power relationships men have with women (25). Patriarchy exists as the societal manifestation of hegemonic masculinity, which encompasses the cultural practices that serve to ideologically validate the dominant societal positions of men and subordinate societal positions of women (Connell and Messerschmidt 832; Trujillo 291). Although *The Walking Dead* has enjoyed a generally positive critical reception over the course of its broadcast, it has also attracted criticism for its regressive portrayal of gender (Steiger 100).

Horror fiction traditionally espouses patriarchal dominance. Literary critic Tzvetan Todorov explains that the basic narrative structure opens in a state of equilibrium, which is then disrupted by the events of the plot. All narrative, then, “is a movement between two equilibriums which are similar but not identical” (163). At the conclusion of the narrative, a new equilibrium is established, transgressors are punished, and normalcy is reestablished (164). Although horror narratives may subvert and question institutions, “the return to normalcy at the end of many horror [texts] is often a reinscribing of white, male, patriarchal authority” (Wetmore, Jr. 3). The ultimate aim of this essay is to demonstrate how *The Walking Dead*, which is recognized as the most commercially successful horror series in television history, reinscribes “white, male, patriarchal authority” and reinforces conservative patriarchal ideology (Rice 26).

## Rationale for Study

Generally, horror narratives are driven by “the presence of a foreign or unfamiliar Other,” a phenomenological concept describing an individual whose deviant appearance or characteristics violate dominant social norms, and thus belongs to a separate and subordinate social category (Bishop 96; Miller 587). The zombie is a quintessential example of the Other and possesses near-unlimited narrative potential as a metaphor. Zombie narratives have historically explored the tension between conservative and progressive ideologies, with the zombies themselves “manifest[ing] the predominant cultural anxieties” of the time-period (Bishop 26;

Browning 45). Divergent from other forms of classic horror, however, zombie fiction does not necessarily reinforce the status quo. Instead, because it frequently explores the failure and destruction of traditional patriarchal power structures, such as the military and government, zombie fiction is instead regarded as “one of the most politically invigorating narrative paradigms in genre fiction, [critiquing] conservative ideology and the political status quo, while also creating a space within its narrative where (sometimes radical) social alternatives can be explored,” yielding either positive or negative outcomes (Hassler-Forest 345).

Following the September 11 attacks, zombies in popular media were frequently interpreted as a collective metaphor for terrorism (Bishop 29). However, the zombie has also varyingly been interpreted as a metaphor for the potential danger of liberal causes such as feminism and gay rights, both of which are recognized as contemporary factors “that challenge the validity of male privilege” (Wayne 206; Bishop 26). Many contemporary Golden Age dramas that engage the cultural zeitgeist of “white masculinity in crisis” have already enjoyed critical analysis amongst scholars regarding their themes and presentation of gender, particularly how they reinforce or subvert notions of idealized masculinity in society (Albrecht 9; Wayne 206). *Breaking Bad* in particular has been heavily dissected regarding its portrayal of masculinity, arguably “the primary theme of the series” (Cowlshaw 6). The protagonist of *Breaking Bad* is Walter “Walt” White, a former high school chemistry teacher who begins selling methamphetamine to support his family. Although Walt commits numerous crimes in *Breaking Bad*, the character that notably inspired the most outrage from fans of the series was Skyler, Walt’s wife (Cowlshaw et al. 132). Upon learning of Walt’s occupation as a drug dealer, Skyler directly confronts her husband and threatens him with divorce, arguing that Walt’s actions will endanger their children. Subsequently, Skyler became the target of intense, misogynistic vitriol on social media. Anna Gunn, the actress who portrays Skyler in the series, suggests that despite Walt’s various crimes, Skyler still attracted a greater degree of hostility from fans because she was portrayed as an equal to Walt instead of his subordinate, and did not “conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female” (“I Have a Character Issue”). Gunn further suggests that Skyler and female characters in other popular dramas could serve as “a measure of [societal] attitudes toward gender.”

Despite the widespread popularity of *The Walking Dead*, the complexities of how hegemonic masculinity is portrayed in the series have not enjoyed the same

level of exposure as *Breaking Bad* or other similarly themed dramas. However, due to its high ratings success, *The Walking Dead* could serve as a worthy barometer for how audiences interpret gender in the current television landscape, as proposed by Gunn. This is particularly important due to the influence that popular television dramas exercise in formulating societal perceptions regarding idealized masculinity (Moss 29). Such dramas “provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations. ... To the extent they do this, they contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole” (Connell and Messerschmidt 838).

In *The Walking Dead*, the collapse of government and society “seem[s] to require a parallel return to social norms of gender and racial difference that are foundational to the dominance of white men in collective life” (Sugg 795). Like many of its peers in the current Golden Age, *The Walking Dead* is heavily concerned with contemporary notions of masculinity. However, whereas *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and many of its peers critique regressive models of hegemonic masculinity within contemporary sociocultural contexts (Albrecht 9), *The Walking Dead* instead embraces them. Rather than utilizing the subversive elements of the zombie subgenre to critique and examine the limitations of its subject, *The Walking Dead* instead endorses patriarchal masculinity and power structures. Such endorsement is evident through the program’s portrayal of conservative gender roles, gender stereotypes, and political leadership.

## Framework and Methodology

For its theoretical framework, this critical essay utilizes feminist film theory, which “came into being in the early 1970s with the aim of understanding cinema as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity” (Smelik 1). Informed by structuralism and women’s studies, feminist film theory is utilized by scholars to demonstrate how popular texts reinforce and promote dominant stereotypes of femininity, such as the myriad stereotypes that *The Walking Dead* has been accused of perpetrating throughout its run (Steiger 100). Narrative rhetorical criticism is also utilized for this essay’s methodological approach.

Rhetorical criticism functions as a method of social criticism by identifying the persuasive messages embedded in media texts, and the resulting influence these texts have in regards to how their audiences perceive reality (Botan et al.

235). This essay's specific form of rhetorical criticism is recognized as narrative criticism, which media scholars employ to determine how popular texts reflect "the [current] state of culture" (Gronbeck and Sillars 212). This is accomplished by identifying the specific persuasive message of a text, as well as "the features of the [text]" that substantiate this message (Foss 326-27). Such features are expressed in scenes, which can be interpreted as rhetorical mechanisms that allow researchers to study drama; cultural critic Steven W. Schoen explains:

[The scene is] a dynamic mechanism of connection, structuring possibilities for innovation at the intersection of cultural meaning and identity. That is, scene structures meanings: it locates us, with that location doing work to help define who people are, what they do, how they do it, and why they do it. (145)

Narrative rhetorical criticism is applied to specific scenes from the first six seasons of *The Walking Dead* that feature prominent gendered interactions, content that is subsequently thematized for this research. Specific character dialogue, action, and other textual elements of these scenes are identified and analyzed to convey how *The Walking Dead* promotes values characteristic of conservative hegemonic masculinity.

### Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Walking Dead*

*Conservative gender roles.* Gender is distinct from sex in that it is not a biological construction, but rather a wholly social one. Specifically, gender roles "focus on behavioral aspects of being a woman or a man (as opposed [...] to biological differences between the two)" (West and Zimmerman 126-27). Stereotypical gender roles in American society include women "working full-time within the home" and men "making important family decisions" (Blackstone 337). Because female gender roles largely "derive from the domestic and lower status occupational roles that women more often hold," gender thus serves "a primary way of signifying relationships of power [between the sexes]" (Carli 346; Scott 1096). *The Walking Dead's* own endorsement of masculine authority and dominance is primarily embodied, and continually validated, through the leadership of Rick Grimes, the primary protagonist of the series.

Rick is first introduced as a deputy sheriff from rural Georgia, working alongside his best friend and partner, Shane Walsh. Their occupation as law enforcement officials is notable, as “white heterosexual middle- and upper-class men who occupy order-giving positions ... produce a hegemonic masculinity that is glorified” in American culture (Pyke 531). In particular, law enforcement officials must be able to project a commanding presence and exert physical control. The historical idealization of this particular masculinity is culturally rooted in America’s frontier history. Notably, the American cowboy is an archetypal representation of hegemonic masculinity, specifically as “a white male [possessing] working class values” and capable of violence if required (Trujillo 291). Andrew Lincoln, the actor who portrays Rick in *The Walking Dead*, has specifically likened the series to a contemporary western, with Rick as a metaphorical cowboy or similar western protagonist (Jeffrey “Andrew Lincoln”). Frank Darabont, who originally developed *The Walking Dead* for AMC and served as showrunner for its debut season, similarly acknowledged drawing inspiration from various western films during his tenure on the series (Marshall “Frank Darabont”).

The earliest zombie narratives were influenced by colonialism, with the zombies themselves alluding to savage and unintelligent “colonial objects” that cannot be reasoned or negotiated with and thus must be destroyed (Canavan 437). Similarly, the western genre also “has its roots firmly in a context of colonialism [...] From this perspective, making the connection between the western and its threatening world of savage colonial subjects and the world of the zombie makes perfect sense” (Hassler-Forest 342). However, unlike zombie fiction, western fiction is regarded as an explicitly conservative genre, due to its emphasis on individualism, “extreme versions of masculinity” and traditional gender hierarchy (McGee xiv, 48). Rick’s appearance in *The Walking Dead*, specifically his trademark sheriff’s hat and cowboy boots, evokes classic western iconography, while both his and Shane’s personalities are rooted in frontiersman aspects of hegemonic masculinity, particularly regarding their roles as family protectors. Similar to the westerns from which the series draws inspiration, white heterosexual masculinity is presented in *The Walking Dead* as the natural protector of femininity. Instead of utilizing the subversive elements of the zombie narrative, *The Walking Dead* rather “uses its zombie motif to re-articulate the fundamental narrative paradigm of the western: that of the lone hero struggling to

establish a safe and tranquil community in a pastoral frontier surrounded by perpetual savagery and danger” (Hassler-Forest 342).

At the start of the apocalypse and series, Rick is separated from his wife Lori and their son Carl. In “Tell It to the Frogs,” which aired Nov. 14, 2010, Rick finally tracks down and is reunited with Lori and Carl, who are now part of a group of survivors camped outside Atlanta and led by Shane. The plot of this episode largely focuses on introducing Rick to other survivors in the camp, including: Andrea, a former lawyer; Daryl Dixon, a redneck-like hunter; Dale Horvath, a former car salesman; Glenn Rhee, a former pizza delivery boy; Carol Peletier, a meek housewife; and Ed, Carol’s abusive husband. However, this episode continues to reinforce conservative gender roles: while Rick, Shane and other male survivors are trained to use weapons and hunt for food, Andrea, Carol, Lori and other female survivors in the group are shown taking care of children, washing laundry and preparing food, all stereotypically feminine responsibilities similarly rooted in America’s frontier history (Bianchi et al. 195). When Ed slaps Carol, accusing her of neglecting her chores, Shane exerts his masculine role as protector by brutally beating Ed into submission, threatening to kill him if he harms Carol again.

The designated responsibilities of the women in the camp, as well as Shane’s punishment of Ed, both demonstrate the program’s endorsement of hegemonic masculinity, particularly the notion that women require masculine protection. The only character who challenges this notion is Andrea, who begins studying and practicing with firearms. Guns and masculinity are closely intertwined in American culture, with the former popularly viewed “as a form of cliché for the male penis” that signifies both “masculinity and male potency” (Tolley-Stokes 363; Faucette 76; McGillis 76). Therefore, Andrea’s use of firearms violates acceptable gender roles, and she is punished accordingly. While defending the camp perimeter in the season two episode “Chupacabra,” which aired Nov. 13, 2011, Andrea mistakenly shoots Daryl in the head, having mistaken him for a zombie. Andrea only succeeds in grazing Daryl’s head, indicating that despite her extensive training and practice, her skill with firearms is entirely lackluster anyway. This incident turns Rick and the rest of the group against Andrea, animosity that Andrea agrees she deserves. Cultural critic Charing Ball criticized how Andrea, being the sole female character in *The Walking Dead*’s ensemble to challenge the program’s limited gender roles, was portrayed as a transgressive gender deviant who violated acceptable feminine norms:

Traditional gender roles have been standard issue throughout the whole series where women are there exclusively to cook, do laundry, and screw while the men comb the earth, scrounging for supplies and killing zombies, like good caveman hunters. [Andrea] took exception to the traditional roles [by] choosing to step down from the pedestal and kill zombies like the boys [...] Despite her noble efforts of try to claim some independence for herself, Andrea just wasn’t smart enough to hack it out in the real world all alone. (Ball “Forget the Zombies”)

Andrea is thus ultimately portrayed as a gender deviant, an individual who violates popular presumptions regarding gender roles and gender identity (Dirks and Worthen 281).

The “traditional gender roles” described by Ball, which encompass the perceived “‘normal’ and ‘natural’ attributes and responsibilities of men [and women]”, have been used to legitimize patriarchy in the United States (Gross 62). Power dynamics are encoded in popular entertainment, which have historically promoted misogynistic and sexist representations of women (Bacue and Signorielli 543). Such representations of women in American entertainment “make inequalities and subordination appear natural and just and thus induce consent to relations of domination” (Kellner 7). Unfortunately, *The Walking Dead* continues to promote such regressive gender roles, rather than challenging them. Although the women are finally trained in the use of firearms in subsequent seasons, it is entirely at the behest of Rick, thus preserving traditional gender dynamics. Notably, conservative delineation of “proper” gender roles and attributes are rooted in regressive and enduring gender stereotypes, ones that Rick and other protagonists of *The Walking Dead* continued to endorse.

*Gender stereotypes.* Gender stereotypes describe “stereotypic beliefs about the attributes of women and men, and prescribe how men and women out to be” (Northouse 358). Such “stereotypical beliefs” include men being inherently more assertive, confident, and rational, while women are more emotional, sensitive, and hysterical (Carranza and Prentice 269-70). Gender stereotypes such as these are pervasive in American society due to their continued presence in popular television programs, *The Walking Dead* being a prominent example (Bacue and Signorielli 543).



In the series pilot “Days Gone Bye,” which aired Oct. 31, 2010, Rick and Shane are introduced while on patrol and discussing their relationships. Rick initiates the conversation by asking Shane, “What’s the difference between men and women?” Shane, quoting from the “guy gospel,” relates a story about a past girlfriend, demonstrating misogynistic tendencies by labeling her a “bitch” and a “pair of boobs,” reducing her to an object. Shane also mocks her intelligence, which Rick finds humorous. Rick then proceeds to relate his frustrations regarding his relationship with Lori, specifically that she is emotionally manipulative by questioning Rick’s commitment to her and Carl, and affirms that he “would never say something that cruel to her.” Unfortunately, this scene serves as an encapsulation of the representation of gender within *The Walking Dead*. Both protagonists share the philosophy representative of hegemonic masculinity that women are inferior due to their innate emotionality. Displaying emotions is a stereotypically feminine trait, while the classic masculine myth of strong men, derived from American frontier mythology, requires them to control their emotions and appear unconcerned (Monaghan and Robertson 142). This is made explicit when Shane mockingly asks if Rick “shared his feelings” with Lori, questioning his partner’s masculinity.

Later in the episode, after the apocalypse begins, Rick returns home to search for Lori and Carl but instead encounters Morgan Jones, another survivor. Rick deduces that his wife is alive, as his family’s photo albums are all missing, which looters would have ignored. Morgan, whose own wife was killed by a zombie, laughs ironically, explaining that his wife did the same thing: “I’m out there packing stuff for survival and she’s gathering photo albums.” This exchange similarly demonstrates *The Walking Dead*’s “regressive conception of gender,” as the series repeatedly emphasizes the “nurturing and protective nature” of women while men like Rick and Morgan are “shown to be level-headed, quick-acting, and good at perceiving and planning for dangers” (Sugg 795). Although zombie narratives can often demonstrate “alternative visions of femininity [...] that do not rely significantly on gender stereotypes,” *The Walking Dead*’s presentation of gender unfortunately does not progress far from such historical stereotypes: men are portrayed as rational and practical, while femininity is characterized by inefficient and unproductive sentimentality (Patterson 111; Frueh and McGhee 182-83).

As white hegemonic masculinity is constructed as normative in American society, all alternative forms of masculinity are measured and contrasted against it

(Atkinson and Calafell 3). In contrast to Rick, Shane, and Daryl, Glenn – notably the only Asian-American character in the entire series – is initially portrayed as a feminine figure, mocked by Shane and Daryl for his lack of bravery and discomfort towards violence. During *The Walking Dead*’s second season, the group settles on an isolated farm in the countryside, owned by Hershel Greene. Due to it being primarily set in the American countryside, this narrative arc of *The Walking Dead* heavily draws from western tropes:

The archetypal American western [...] traditionally stages the establishment of thriving settlements on the frontier between civilization and savagery. The fantasy that informs this type of narrative [...] is one of the most obvious cultural myths articulating the successful reinforcement of patriarchal power. (Hassler-Forest 345)

During the group’s tenure on the farm, Glenn begins a romantic relationship with Maggie, Hershel’s daughter, whom he charms with his humor. However, in the episode “18 Miles Out,” which aired Feb. 26, 2012, Maggie admits to Lori that she suspects their relationship is affecting Glenn’s capability as a fighter and causing him to lose focus. In response, Lori orders Maggie to help Glenn “man up.” This exchange continues to reinforce regressive notions of gender by portraying emotions as inefficient by negatively impacting the ability of men to properly function as hunter-gatherers. Glenn is only treated as an equal by Rick and the other men in the group after he sheds what they perceive to be his feminine characteristics. In subsequent seasons of the series, Glenn becomes more stoic and comfortable with “risk-taking practices,” thus conforming to what has been historically recognized as a more acceptable model of masculinity, especially within conservative communities that celebrate the cowboy archetype (Connell and Messerschmidt 851).

Despite the mythic status the cowboy enjoys in American popular culture, the archetype does demonstrate traits of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity is an exaggerated form of masculinity composed of “socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination [and] the devaluation of women” (Kupers 714). Many scholars have improperly employed hegemonic masculinity as shorthand in accounting for toxic male characteristics such as aggression and violence, although this line of thought is understandable (Collier, 1998). While toxic

masculinity and hegemonic masculinity are distinct, unique concepts, it is not uncommon for them to overlap:

Because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men's collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's engaging in toxic practices [to] stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting. (Connell and Messerschmidt 840)

Throughout *The Walking Dead*, Rick demonstrates toxic masculinity by devaluing the women in the group, determining for himself what is in their best interest and thus depriving them of any agency.

Notably, Rick engages in mansplaining to Lori in the episode "Secrets," which aired Nov. 20, 2011, upon learning that Lori is pregnant and considering an abortion. Mansplaining describes any condescending exchange between a man and woman, where the man "explain[s] the good reasons why women should be satisfied with, if not downright grateful for, their present status in life" (Cockburn 48). Rick argues for Lori to keep their baby, stating that "You want this baby, I know you do," despite Lori's fears that the baby will live "a short, cruel life" before inevitably being eaten by zombies.

Writer Katherine Don criticized how Lori was portrayed "as a sniveling, downtrodden person whose perfectly reasonable protests are framed as nagging whines" ("Bringing up baby"). Lori's protests are presented as hysteric and irrational, derived from the inherent fragility of femininity, a dominant gender stereotype (Northouse 358). In contrast, Rick's attempts to exert his will over Lori's reproductive rights are wholly normalized. This instance represents larger patriarchal social norms, which limit women's rights "to use any or all methods of fertility regulation such as artificial contraception or abortion" (Dixon-Mueller 14). Historically, conservative societies have prioritized male influence over women's bodies and marginalized female reproductive freedom. Lori's own feelings and wishes regarding her pregnancy are marginalized in favor of Rick's, due to the influence and privilege he enjoys as a product of hegemonic masculinity. This plotline further reinforces *The Walking Dead's* "gendered division of narrative grammar in which identification and agency are investments [only] in male characters" (Sugg 803).

Ultimately, popular television is a profound pedagogical source, “provid[ing] materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female” (Kellner 5). Therefore, the portrayal of gender in popular entertainment is a crucial influence on gender relations in society. Although modern feminism continues “to deconstruct gender stereotypes [and] emphasize equality between women and men” (Blackstone 337), popular entertainment texts such as *The Walking Dead* continue to propagate problematic gender stereotypes among a wide, impressionable audience. The program’s conservative gender dynamics are similarly reflected in the sparsity of female leadership represented in *The Walking Dead*, with the few who do manage communities and settlements subscribing to liberal politics that are portrayed as woefully ineffective.

*Political leadership.* In the third season of the series the group settles into an abandoned prison, which gradually evolves into a thriving community consisting of refugees and survivors from across the state. Rick absolves himself of leadership, wanting to instead focus on raising Carl and his newborn daughter Judith. In Rick’s stead, a governing council is established in an attempt to restore a democratic government. However, the vast majority of these refugees are unfamiliar with firearms and incapable of self-defense, and thus incompatible with the cowboy archetype or other idealized models of hegemonic masculinity. Many of these refugees are also old and frail, and ergo unable to work. Therefore, the prison functions like a liberal welfare state, with its governmental system exerting significant effort to provide and care for its expanded population, even those who are unable to contribute to the community. The prison is subsequently devastated when a heavily armed rival community launches an attack in the episode “Too Far Gone,” which aired December 1, 2013. Lacking the capability to defend themselves, Rick and the other survivors are forced to abandon the prison, confirming the inherent ineffectualness of the liberal welfare state, a core belief within conservative ideology (Feldman and Zaller 272). *The Walking Dead* instead affirms the conservative philosophy that “individuals are sovereign beings best ruled under circumstances in which they are encouraged to self-manage, taking on responsibilities for their welfare, growth, and security that might otherwise be assumed by the state,” a philosophy rooted in romanticized notions of frontiersman masculinity (McCartney 25).

In the fifth season episode “Remember,” which aired Mar. 1, 2015, Rick leads the regrouped survivors to Alexandria, a protected settlement in Virginia. The

leader of Alexandria is Deanna Monroe, a former congresswoman from Ohio who shuns violence. Because Alexandria is a walled community, its inhabitants have not experienced any external threats, and are thus ignorant to the dangers posed not only by zombie hordes, but also human marauders. Deanna welcomes the group and, as a show of goodwill, appoints Rick to serve as a constable for Alexandria. However, Rick is dismissive of both Deanna and her model of leadership. To Rick, the Alexandrians, unfamiliar with firearms and violence, represent the feminized liberal society that was originally annihilated during the zombie apocalypse, and later failed again at the prison. The Alexandrians are thus perceived by Rick to be weak and impotent.

After settling in Alexandria, Rick soon grows fond of Jessie, the abused wife of Pete Anderson, the town's local surgeon. Rick and Pete gradually become rivals competing over a sexual relationship with Jessie, reducing her to a mere object and trophy to be won to signify dominance as the community's alpha male. Such conflict reflects a core tenet of hegemonic masculinity, where "women provide heterosexual men with sexual validation, and men compete with each other for this [validation]" (Donaldson 651). In the episode "Try," which aired Mar. 22, 2015, Rick finally establishes his dominance over Pete in a public fight. Deanna is horrified at Rick's violent actions and puts him on trial in the season finale "Conquer," which aired Mar. 29, 2015. However, before the trial can commence, Rick encounters a herd of zombies that have penetrated Alexandria's defenses. Rick kills the zombies and presents their bodies to Deanna, thus justifying his advocacy of violence. After an intoxicated Pete inadvertently murders Deanna's husband Reg at the trial, Deanna also permits Rick to execute Pete. This is the first instance of Deanna endorsing Rick's use of violence as a means to maintain societal order. Later, in the sixth season episode "Now," which aired Nov. 8, 2015, Rick personally rescues Deanna from a zombie. Deanna then decides that Rick is more capable of leading Alexandria due to his capability as a warrior, something she entirely lacks, and concedes her position to him.

Within the context of the episode, Deanna's concession acknowledges the impotence of the liberal welfare state within *The Walking Dead*. As a whole, the entire series can be interpreted "as a fantasy template for social and individual action after [the] destruction of the welfare state" (Sugg 796), with individual action being a tenet of classic cowboy masculinity. *The Walking Dead* continually validates Rick's actions and position of authority within the group, thus continually endorsing conservative patriarchy and traditional gender dynamics.

At this point in the series, Carol, Maggie, and the other women in Rick’s own group are now all capable of self-defense. To be considered viable contributors to the group, the women must demonstrate their own violent capability and thus metaphorically shed their feminine weakness. Despite the women having adopted characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity, specifically toughness and aggression, their authority almost never supersedes that of the male survivors, and especially never Rick’s, and thus they remain subordinate to masculinity (Donaldson 645). This hierarchy is indicative of conservative patriarchal power structures, where men monopolize leadership and even women in positions of authority are mostly relegated to agentic roles (Carly and Eagly 101).

## Conclusion

David Fincher, the director of the 1999 film *Fight Club*, which has been acclaimed for its exploration of masculine identity, has described the film’s resonant appeal by explaining that men are “designed to be hunters and we’re in a society of shopping. There’s nothing to kill anymore, there’s nothing to fight, nothing to overcome, nothing to explore” (Kimmel 220). However, male audiences experiencing such a masculine crisis can achieve catharsis through *Fight Club*’s portrayal of mythologized violent combat:

[*Fight Club*’s] portrayal of violence and hyper-masculinity resonates with the reactionary mythology of warrior culture that reached its heyday during Ronald Reagan’s presidency and found its cultural embodiment in figures such as John Wayne and Oliver North as well as in a host of Hollywood movies celebrating rogue warriors such as *Lethal Weapon*, *Missing in Action*, *Robocop*, and *Rambo*. (Giroux 22)

Fincher’s quote can also neatly apply to Rick Grimes and other male protagonists of *The Walking Dead*, which portrays similar violent, hypermasculine themes. In *The Walking Dead*, society failed during the zombie apocalypse because it had been emasculated by feminine consumerism and liberal ideology, and thus was incapable of defending itself. In contrast, the apocalyptic wasteland of *The Walking Dead* is untainted by feminine influence, and only hunters with keen masculinist survival skills are capable of surviving its constant dangers, akin to the American frontier.

Like *Fight Club*, *The Walking Dead* portrays a male fantasy, with “the emasculation and crisis of white masculinity [...] at the center of the drama” (Sugg 799). However, while *Fight Club* critiques traditional machismo displays of hegemonic masculinity, *The Walking Dead* instead endorses them through its survivalist scenario. The series affirms the neoliberal philosophy “that individuals are sovereign beings best ruled under circumstances in which they are encouraged to self-manage, taking on responsibilities for their welfare, growth, and security that might otherwise be assumed by the state” (McCarthy 25). *The Walking Dead* represents a conscious resistance to feminist and liberal ideologies, with its main protagonist Rick instead exemplifying masculine leadership within a neoliberal framework. The program’s endorsement of patriarchal hierarchy is primarily demonstrated through its portrayal of conservative gender roles, gender stereotypes, and male political leadership. Women in *The Walking Dead* are, at best, portrayed as subordinate to the men, or relegated to providing domestic support; at worst, as represented by Lori, they are emotional and wholly inefficient.

Due to the enormous cultural influence that the series exhibits within the current media landscape, *The Walking Dead* is a ripe text for analysis regarding its perception of gender. Although feminism has witnessed an increased influence in mainstream American society, many conservative communities continue to reject feminist ideology and advocate for traditional gender roles (Clatterbaugh 10). *The Walking Dead* notably embodies various conservative values, including “Christian sacrifice and the restoration of traditional marriage,” limited government and the naturalization of hegemonic masculinity (Nuckolls 102; Sugg 796). Thus, *The Walking Dead* is especially interesting for the questions it raises regarding how contemporary audiences interpret gender roles and masculinity’s relationship to femininity. Future research that could expand on these questions could include an audience analysis of *The Walking Dead*, analyzing socio-demographic characteristics of the show’s audience. Such analysis would yield specific numbers on how many of *The Walking Dead*’s audience identify as conservative. Focus groups could then be utilized to complete the analysis, asking viewers if they derive enjoyment from the series based on perceived alignment with their own personal politics. Popular media texts and the audiences that consume them are a rich source through which to gauge both current and future sociocultural trends and ideals, especially media texts as culturally significant and influential as *The Walking Dead*.

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