Gender, Guns, and Survival: The Women of The Walking Dead

Amanda Keeler

Marquette University, amanda.keeler@marquette.edu

The first several episodes of AMC’s *The Walking Dead* (2010–) use both visual storytelling and dialogue to situate the lives of the show’s post-apocalyptic survivors. The show’s second episode “Guts” (1.2) opens with an elaborate crane shot that introduces the core characters and their setting: the camp in the foreground and the Atlanta skyline in the background. The shot first frames Dale (Jeffrey DeMunn) standing on top of his RV, guarding the camp with a rifle slung across his back. As the crane descends to ground level Amy (Emma Bell) steps into the shot, carrying a bucket of mushrooms she gathered. The camera weaves around the camp following Amy as she walks past Jim (Andrew Rothenberg) repairing a chain, until she finally stops to talk to Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies), cooking over an open fire. This scene exemplifies the new normal for these characters, each falling into tasks based on gendered divisions of labor rooted in the world they once inhabited, such as Dale’s paternalistic guarding of the camp. These roles are reinforced in the next episode, “Tell It to the Frogs” (1.3). In the camp, Shane (Jon Bernthal) teaches Carl (Chandler Riggs) to catch frogs while several women wash clothes in the background. After the women observe that Carl and Shane are playing while they are working, Jacqui (Jeryl Prescott) says “I’m beginning to question the division of labor here. . . . Can someone explain to me how the women wound
up doing all the Hattie McDaniel work?”! Amy answers that “the world ended, didn’t you get the memo?” Carol (Melissa McBride), resigned, tells them “it’s just the way it is.” Ignoring Carol’s assessment of the situation, Andrea (Laurie Holden) tells Carol’s husband Ed (Adam Minarovich), who has been watching them work, that he should do his own laundry. He replies that “it ain’t my job, missy.” This trend continues into the second season, when Lori criticizes Andrea for not contributing to the women’s work:

Andrea: Are you serious? Everything falls apart, you’re in my face over skipping laundry?

Lori: It puts a burden on the rest of us. On me, Carol, Patricia, and Maggie. Cooking, cleaning and caring for Beth. You don’t care about anyone but yourself. You sit up on the RV, working on your tan with a shotgun in your lap.

Andrea: No, I am on watch against walkers. That is what matters, not fresh mint leaves in the lemonade.

Lori: We are providing stability. We are trying to create a life worth living.

These short exchanges function to crystallize a continuing conflict over the utility of traditional gender roles, even in the face of total societal collapse that suggests new norms and behaviors are necessary for survival. Carol’s comment from “Tell It to the Frogs” (1.3) establishes the norm that women’s traditional roles continue on as part of an unquestionable status quo; in contrast, Andrea repeatedly questions the division of labor, marking it as unfair and unreasonable given the need to focus on survival. Lori asserts a value to feminized work beyond the bare bones of making it to another day without being eaten by walkers. These scenes from The Walking Dead effectively elicit a question: why have the roles of men and women remained defined by and tied to a pre-apocalyptic world that no longer exists, one of bourgeois norms of gendered labor, civility, and comfort now long in the past?

This chapter examines the intersection of gender and guns on The Walking Dead. Using two characters, Andrea and Carol, the chapter illustrates how the narrative positions traditional gender roles to shape and define the characters’ parallel yet diverging lives. I argue that Andrea and Carol occupy different epochs across the show’s five seasons, and that each character differently interprets her place in their post-apocalyptic world. Seasons one, two, and three establish the main characters as they attempt to rebuild the world they previously inhabited; a world that now only exists in their infrequent flashbacks. Here, Andrea’s desire to take up arms (rather than do laundry) represents the tension between the core characters as they struggle to learn
how to govern their group and keep it safe in this dangerous world. Only at
the end of the third season do these characters recognize that their former
lives are now, as the title of the first episode of the show, “Days Gone Bye.”
In the fourth and fifth seasons the characters transition into a new world with
more inclusive and fluid post-apocalyptic gender roles, represented by Andrea
and Carol’s transition from being women in need of male protection to being
recognized by men as capable, worthy wielders of guns. While initially Carol
embodies her comment, “it’s just the way it is”, her actions in seasons four and
five upend the pre-apocalyptic gender roles that Andrea had vehemently pro-
tested. By examining both Andrea’s and Carol’s individual transformations
across multiple seasons, this chapter comments on the ongoing anxieties over
the construction and maintenance of traditional gender roles in a changing,
dangerous (but possibly less biased) world.

This chapter enters the scholarship around *The Walking Dead* at the in-
tersection of multiple approaches. To date, little scholarly work has specifical-
ly addressed how *The Walking Dead* constructs and comments on gender and
the specific connection of gender to guns on this program. Additionally, while
scholars have produced a large amount of scholarship on zombie films, much
less work has been done on these tales as they unfold on television. *The Walking
Dead* comic book author Robert Kirkman sees his narrative as a “zombie mov-
ief that never ends.” In that regard, the ongoing, multi-year serialized nature
of the television program gives viewers a long-form view into the fascinating
interpersonal dynamics of survival. I connect the show as well with the schol-
arship on female characters in action and horror films. Again, less work has
considered women in action television, especially non-supernatural characters
like Andrea and Carol, who are everyday people thrust into uncharted territory.
The intersection of all of these elements creates the space for a multitude of
scholarly inquiries within *The Walking Dead*. This chapter represents just one
approach that explores the complicated way that gender and guns intertwine
through these two female characters. Specifically, I focus on the character arcs
of Andrea, who overtly demands access to guns from the start, and Carol, who
slowly becomes recognized by herself and others as capable of handling a gun,
to explore how this post-apocalyptic narrative builds on and further troubles
gendered representations of women, safety, and necessary violence.
"Guns are worth more than gold": Firepower and Survival on The Walking Dead

The Walking Dead is loosely based on a comic book authored by Robert Kirkman, with art by Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard. The television show crafts a unique, dystopian narrative that explores the long-term possibilities of humans confronted with a life-altering, cataclysmic event. Now in its fifth season, the television adaptation serves as a pastiche of horror and science fiction genres, evoking George Romero's Living Dead films, the iconography and ideology of westerns, and 1970s slasher films. The program follows a group of survivors who must battle "walkers", their name for the zombie-like reanimated human corpses that seek to feed on living, human flesh. The Walking Dead depicts the crumbling aftermath of a fallen society, where the daily challenge to stay alive has eroded civility among survivors resulting in a lawless and dangerous world. While the show features a shifting cast of characters, former sheriff's deputy Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) remains at the center, rallying the other characters as they look to him to lead their ever-changing group to shelter, food, water, and safety. Rick anchors the core group of characters, who form the central "family" struggling to survive in this dystopian setting. In their re-constructing world, no one is safe and no one can be trusted. This cynical view is reinforced through first-hand experiences with dangerous "others", individuals and groups that seek to steal, maim, rape, and murder anyone that stands in their way. Members of Rick Grimes's community are often contrasted with these other humans, whose willingness to reject norms of civility and compassion to attack fellow humans is coded as "bad violence", while violence done in the name of protecting the group against walkers and "others" is coded as necessary and, perhaps, "good violence."

Above all else, the day-to-day lives of these characters represent a constant struggle for safety, both for the individuals and as a group. Since living another day remains the top priority of its characters, The Walking Dead positions guns as the most prominent objects of preparedness, safety, and ultimately, survival. In this narrative universe, only a severe blow to the head or a shot to the brain will kill a walker. While characters use a variety of weapons—including sticks, scrap metal, and screwdrivers—guns enable them to neutralize walkers most efficiently, and at a safer distance. Thus, guns are often at the center of conflict, both inside and outside the "family" formed around Rick. Guns are the new currency in this post-law, post-civilization world. Without the protection of civil society, characters look to guns to quell
the growing disorder and desperation among the survivors. And yet, from the beginning of the show, guns are also carefully coded as paternalistic objects that belong primarily in the hands of male characters. The show constructs guns with a dual status, at once dangerous and protective objects that must be respected, communicated from the beginning of the program. In *The Walking Dead*’s first episode, “Days Gone Bye”, Rick takes Morgan (Lennie James) and Morgan’s son Duane (Adrian Kali Turner) to his old office, the sheriff’s department, where they help themselves to the contents of the gun locker. This prompts a telling conversation between these three characters:

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Duane: Daddy, can I learn to shoot? I’m old enough.
Morgan: Hell yes you’re going to learn, but we’ve got to do it carefully, teach you to respect the weapon.
Rick: That’s right. It’s not a toy. You pull the trigger, you have to mean it. Always remember that, Duane.
Duane: Yes sir.
Morgan: Here, load up.
Rick: You take that one. Nothing fancy. The scope’s accurate... Conserve your ammo. It goes faster than you think, especially at target practice.
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Notably, this lesson about guns and gun safety occurs in a male, homosocial moment, marking men as the bearers of both the guns and the knowledge of how to use them properly, an idea that shapes the female characters’ access to firearms, and attitudes of the group about their use of firearms.

**“Put a gun in my hand and I’ll cover your ass too”: Andrea’s Struggle for (Gun) Power**

The character Andrea is most resistant to the gendered rules reinforced in the camp, rules that she feels shouldn’t apply in their post-apocalyptic lives. Andrea’s complex relationship with the gendered division of labor and guns begins in the second episode of season one, “Guts.” Andrea gets the impression that her group does not view her as someone who could help them in critical moments. This impression is confirmed after she, Glenn (Steven Yeun), and Morales (Juan Pareja) attempt to rescue Rick in downtown Atlanta. The characters find themselves trapped in a precarious situation, holed up in a department store, trying to figure out a way to evade the herd of walkers outside. As they contemplate escaping through the sewer, Andrea volunteers to help navigate the tunnels. Glenn tells her that she can’t come. She replies, “You
This moment introduces the "battle of the sexes" struggle that will follow Andrea through the rest of her character's life on the show.

Andrea sees her gun—not housekeeping—as the one contribution she can make to the group. Though she has had her gun since the beginning of the show she does not know how to use it properly. The show communicates this through her first conversation with Rick, in "Guts" (1.2) when he has to instruct her about how to turn off the gun's safety switch. While Andrea seems annoyed by this exchange, she listens as Rick shares his knowledge about guns with her. In the episode "What Lies Ahead" (2.1), Shane (Jon Bernthal) offers to teach Andrea how to disassemble and clean her gun. Andrea tells him that the gun "was a gift, from my father. He gave it to me just before Amy and I took off on our road trip. He said two girls on their own should be able to defend themselves." This exchange constructs Andrea's complex relationship with her gun. First, the gun itself is a gift given to compensate for the absence of a father-protector, and in some ways it retains the ghostly traces of her dead family and serves as a physical link to her previous life. Second, through experience Andrea knows that her gun will help to protect her, if not always those she loves. Indeed, her weapon did not protect her sister, Amy, who was bitten by a walker in "Vatos" (1.4). Later, Andrea was forced to shoot Amy at the moment she reanimated as a walker in the episode "Wildfire" (1.5). The object itself takes on this duality, as a special object imbued with fatherly love meant to keep her safe and also the weapon she has to use to end her beloved sister's life.

This complex connection to her gun sets the stage for Andrea’s anger when Shane and Dale prevent her from using it. Not long after a short conversation with Shane in the episode "What Lies Ahead" (2.1), the main characters come upon a huge traffic jam and a herd of walkers. Andrea fumbles as she attempts to reassemble her gun without attracting attention from walkers. She barricades herself in the RV bathroom as a walker enters the camper, but her gun remains unassembled on a table just outside of her reach. Dale drops her a screwdriver through the skylight and Andrea stabs the walker in the head before it can bite her. Soon after this incident Dale takes her gun and hides it. This prompts an angry exchange:

Andrea: Where's my gun? You have no right to take it.
Dale: You don't need that just now, do you?
Andrea: My father gave it to me. It's mine.
Dale: I can hold onto it for you.
Andrea: Or you can give it back to me.
Shane: Everything cool?
Andrea: No, I want my gun back.
Dale: I don’t think it’s a good idea right now.
Shane: Why not?
Dale: I’m not comfortable with it.
Shane: Truth is, the less guns we have floating around camp the better.
Andrea: You turning over your weapon?
Shane: No, but I’m trained in its use. That’s what the rest of y’all need, proper training, but until that time I think it’s best if Dale keeps them all accounted for.

Despite the fact that only minutes ago Andrea’s life had been in peril, Dale feels justified in taking her gun away from her. Though Shane was just beginning to teach her how to reassemble the gun, and Andrea had abandoned her weapon only when forced to find safety in the bathroom, she had not misused the gun. Yet, Shane and Dale use this encounter to inexplicably declare Andrea incapable of using her gun or even having it in her possession. This conversation, and the resulting hold on the gun, blindsides Andrea and reshapes her relationship with Dale over the show’s second season.

Part of the complexity here comes from Dale, the camp’s unofficial armed guard, who has taken on a paternalistic, fatherly role towards Andrea (and Amy, prior to her death), continually attempting to protect her from harm. The decision to disarm Andrea seems counterintuitive—in a dangerous post-apocalyptic world, doesn’t it make sense for all of them to be armed? Yet, Dale employs a traditional patriarchal logic: if he can be a father figure to her, then Andrea won’t need to use her gun, since he is there to protect her. Dale attempts to explain this to Andrea in the episode “Wildfire” (1.5), when he tells her that since his wife died several years ago, and because they had never had children of their own, “you girls were the first people that I cared anything for.” He wants desperately to step in for Andrea’s missing father, which requires him to have primary duties of protection of the younger woman. In this way, and others, Dale serves as the group’s benevolent father figure. Moreover, the show’s second season portrays him as a man of reason, fairness, and civility in times of great stress. In Dale’s mind, if the characters try to approximate their pre-apocalyptic norms and roles, then women like Andrea need not be armed; the men will look out for them.

Dale and other male characters continue to try to restrict Andrea’s use of her own gun and challenge her attempts to define herself as a protector rather than a domestic nurturer. For example, in “Chupacabra” (2.5), Dale asks her,
“What’s with the Annie Oakley routine?” Andrea responds, “I don’t want to wash clothes anymore, Dale, I want to keep the camp safe. Is that alright with you?” Two interesting points come out of this short conversation. For one, just as in the episode “Guts” (1.2), Andrea continues to act out against the notion that she must perform women’s work. Dale’s joke about Annie Oakley reinforces his idea that women should not possess guns. The comparison to Oakley is apt—the infamous “Wild West” star sharpshooter was initially forbidden to “use her father’s rifle” after his death, but later became a “superb markswoman and hunter.” In another context, this example would serve to prove Dale wrong: when given the chance, Andrea will also become a skilled shooter. While she does eventually learn to shoot with great accuracy, the show continues to frame her as untrustworthy with guns. Right after Dale makes the “Annie Oakley” remark, Andrea spots a walker in the distance. Andrea says, “I bet I can nail it from here.” Rick replies, “No, no, Andrea, put the gun down.” Shane yells to her, “you’d best let us handle this”, as Rick, Shane, and T-Dogg (IronE Singleton) run off with baseball bats and guns to kill it. She ignores their warning and shoots at the figure, not realizing that it is actually a member of their camp, Daryl (Norman Reedus), wounded from a fall in the woods. Here, her alleged inferiority is ironically welcome: her shot merely grazes the side of Daryl’s head. Though Andrea is quite upset and apologetic, her mistake reinforces Shane’s earlier fears about inexperienced shooters, and solidifies the framing of women shooters like Andrea as inept.

Even when men willingly provide Andrea access to guns, the narrative suggests that firearms belong in the hands of male characters. In the episode “Secrets” (2.6) Shane agrees to take Andrea for target practice. While Andrea has previously shown skill in hitting a stationary target, moving targets prove more difficult for her. Shane attempts to rile up Andrea by putting her under pressure, yelling at her, among other insults, that she is “too damn emotional” to shoot a moving target. His tactics resonate with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, or as Marc O’Day writes, the “more or less overt set of patriarchally defined traits and qualities equating men and masculinity with hardness, strength, muscles, activity, rationality, decisiveness and power, and women and femininity, in opposition, with softness, weakness, curves, passivity, intuition, indecisiveness and powerlessness.”10 As Nancy Floyd notes, “armed women are now embedded in the fictional landscape”, yet “ambivalence toward armed females persists.”11 Floyd claims that female characters “must abide by most of the rules of traditional action dramas: they must straddle the line between femininity and
masculinity as they perform what is still considered a man’s job with a man’s tool.” Shane and many of the men in their group buy into the traditional gender roles and these gendered assumptions implicitly stand in as evidence in moments when Andrea questions the unwritten rules that steer her away from protecting the camp. Shane and Rick benefit from these traditional gender notions as the basis for their perceived superiority and firepower over Andrea and other female characters.

As a counterpoint to Andrea’s struggles to retain her own gun, male characters of all ages are given weapons without much discussion about their training or emotional control. For example, Rick and Lori’s twelve-year-old son Carl (Chandler Riggs) steals a gun from the RV when Dale is not looking. Lori feels strongly that her son is too young for a firearm, yet Rick says that they need to start treating him more like an adult. Carl says, “I’m not going to play with it, Mom. It’s not a toy. I’m sorry I disappointed you...I want to defend our camp. I can’t do that without a gun.” His parents quickly relent—creating a much different scenario than Andrea had encountered. Without training, without permission, this young boy is afforded the privilege of carrying a firearm. The ease with which Carl obtains the “right” to carry his weapon further communicates how the show crafts this split between men and women and how it uses Andrea as the pawn in this ongoing struggle.

Despite living in this new, dangerous world, many of these characters continue to cling to the gendered rules of their old lives. The tension around the gendered norms of work and roles within the camp erupts during a conversation between Andrea and Lori in the episode “18 Miles Out” (2.10). Both male and female characters persist in treating Andrea as if being a woman automatically makes her incapable of using a gun, and that her only utility remains in her capacity to wash clothes and cook. In this episode Hershel’s youngest daughter, Beth (Emily Kinney), is having trouble coping with the ongoing aftermath of losing her mother, and the general state of the world. She attempts to commit suicide using a knife that Andrea gives her, which Lori takes away after Beth cuts her wrists. Andrea tells Lori that she shouldn’t have taken the knife away:

Andrea: You were wrong, like Dale taking my gun, that wasn’t your decision.
Lori: She needs a loaded gun, right? You’ll understand if I don’t send you in there.
Andrea: I came through it.
Lori: And became such a productive member of the group. Let Maggie handle this her way.

Andrea: I contribute. I help keep this place safe.

Lori: The men can handle this on their own. They don’t need your help.

The exchange between these two women hints at the complicated dynamics that continue to define and challenge the post-apocalypse ideologies of the female characters. Lori and Andrea symbolize the conflict over women’s roles in this new world. Andrea stands ready to move into a role as a gunslinger, to protect the farm and its inhabitants, whereas Lori works to maintain a semblance of domestic caring, as when she notes, “We are providing stability. We are trying to create a life worth living.” Both of these women make valid, worthwhile points. Their lives before the walkers took over couldn’t have been more different—Andrea was a civil rights lawyer and Lori was a stay-at-home mom. While Lori seeks to recreate that life, Andrea knows that it is not possible. The knowledge that their old lives are over defines Andrea’s desire to be armed and prepared; a desire for the world to balance itself keeps Lori rooted in a past that no longer exists.

Not long after this exchange, Andrea’s fate changes drastically. In the episode “Beside the Dying Fire” (2.13) a massive herd of walkers descends on the survivors’ farm. In the ensuing chaos, Andrea is left behind. Though at first it seems the walkers have killed Andrea, she survives the attack. As she escapes through the woods, she meets Michonne (Danai Gurira) and they form a new survivors’ group. This also serves as the show’s introduction of Michonne, an important African American character among a largely white cast of characters. All of Andrea’s anger across the first two seasons—her longing to belong, and her desire to protect people with her gun—shifts when she separates from her original group. Now on her own with Michonne she must use her gun and her skills to ensure their continued safety. Now that Andrea is free from the patriarch-led group that was holding her back, Michonne and Andrea use their partnership to work together. These two women—rather than exploit each other or try to subordinate one another—now work with one another as a team.

Andrea’s separation from Rick’s group and her new partnership with a woman who also rejects traditional gender roles grants her a new autonomy across season three. The central conflict in season three revolves around relationships between the two groups of survivors—Rick’s group who repurpose a prison, and those who have created the nearby, heavily guarded town, Woodbury, run by an autocrat who has named himself the Governor (David
Morrissey). These two sides use their massive gun power to fight for control of the geographical area. Andrea's final attempt to have a purpose in this world and show her worth—to craft a peace accord between the prison and Woodbury—ends up precipitating her death.

The circumstances of her post-apocalyptic existence thrust Andrea into what she perceived to be her new role—an armed woman who wants to help protect others from danger. It is somewhat problematic that it is only after Andrea's death that the gendered divisions that she fought so hard against begin to fall away. Her death has two contradictory meanings on The Walking Dead. On one hand, it reads as a punishment for her transgression of standing up to the male power structures of the post-apocalypse. Yet, at the same time her death earns her redemption—she ultimately helps her friends at the prison continue to survive, and going forward the other female characters on the show appear to step into a more equitable future.

Andrea's death at the end of season three marks a narrative shift for another important character, Carol, who struggles through the post-apocalyptic world in different ways. The next section of this chapter focuses on Carol, who embodies the dissolution of gendered boundaries that begin to emerge in seasons four and five. Over the course of five seasons, Carol transforms from a meek, abused wife into an intelligent and resourceful fighter who single-handedly rescues her friends when they are imprisoned. Carol's developing ability to survive in this world without clinging to patriarchal norms offers her the freedoms that Andrea had previously fought to achieve.

"You have to trust your gut and you have to act fast every time": Carol's (Gun) Power Transformation

At the beginning of the series, Carol serves as a striking counter example to Andrea. She embodies a different understanding about her place both before and after the walker takeover. Though she speaks very little about her pre-apocalyptic life, Carol, we come to learn, was a wife and a mom. The first five episodes of the show slowly and carefully build Carol's character through personal loss—first her husband and then her daughter. In the same episode that Carol announces that the gendered division of labor is "just the way it is", (1.3) viewers learn that Carol's husband Ed physically abuses her, a situation that has presumably shaped her into a meek, robotic, dutiful woman.
Her transformation begins only after Ed is bitten by a walker and dies in “Vatos” (1.4). In the episode “Wildfire” (1.5), Carol prepares to bury him. In a striking visual sequence, the camera slowly tracks into Carol’s muddy and sweaty face, focusing in on her current emotional state, torn between the loss of her spouse and the end to his physical abuse. The shot cuts to a 90-degree canted frame, in which Ed’s body appears to be standing up and Carol’s body appears sideways. In this moment Carol, while crying and groaning, begins to strike Ed’s body repeatedly. Though weeping and reeling from this loss, she enacts her own violent revenge on him in his death—the dissolution of their abusive relationship. Now safe from his physical abuse, Carol will slowly discover who she is with a new freedom, but not before a second personal sacrifice. At the beginning of season two, Carol’s daughter Sophia (Madison Lintz) runs into the woods to escape a walker attack and goes missing (2.1). Despite a massive search for Sophia that spans several episodes, Carol fails to locate her until the episode “Pretty Much Dead Already” (2.7). Here, the group realizes that Sophia is one of the walkers held captive in Hershel’s barn and they are forced to kill her. While the loss of both her husband and her daughter undoubtedly shapes Carol’s life going forward, she finds solace in her grief. Her pre-apocalyptic life had been focused around her status as a dutiful wife and mother; now, she is no longer tethered to these responsibilities. Carol no longer has to submit to her abusive husband or spend energy protecting her daughter from the dangers of this new world. Now as a single person she can concentrate on her own personal safety. As I will discuss later in the chapter, this transformation through pain and loss makes Carol kin to the “Final Girl” heroines common to late 20th century horror films, the one female character who survives only after experiencing the transformative crucible of violent loss.\footnote{14}

While these events open up the opportunity for Carol to shed traditional gender expectations, she experiences a different and much slower transition than Andrea. As she shifts away from being an abused woman, she presents an uneven but effective construction of a woman who uses her past experiences to survive in a broken world. Steadily across subsequent episodes, she finds ways to help the group survive danger, not just support their daily needs for sustenance. For example, in the season one finale “TS-19” (1.6), the characters have traveled to the Centers for Disease Control, where they meet up with the CDC’s lone surviving scientist Dr. Jenner (Noah Emmerich). Jenner has locked everyone inside so that they can collectively perish in a “facility-wide decontamination.” Near the end of the episode the group
convinces him to let them go; most of them still want to live and thus must find a way out of the building with only minutes to spare. When they are unable to break a window in the lobby to facilitate their escape, Carol reaches into her purse and tells Rick that she “has something that might help.” Shane tells her that “I don’t think a nail file’s gonna do it”, dismissing her in much the same way that he will later dismiss Andrea’s attempts to contribute to group safety. Carol ignores him and hands a grenade to Rick, which he uses to shatter the window. The scene affirms Carol’s quick thinking and unexpected resolve that will continue to protect the group in times of dire need.

Unlike Andrea, Carol does not get involved in long conversations with other characters to discuss her frustrations with their post-apocalyptic lives. She also does not (at first) see guns as a part of her new life. For example, in the episode “Save the Last One” (2.3), Dale wants Carol to take a gun for protection, but she says she does not know how to use it. Later, she does join Shane and Andrea at target practice in “Cherokee Rose” (2.4), but within the larger narrative Carol still sees her utility in “women’s work.” For example, in “Chupacabra” (2.5), Carol asks Lori to help her cook a big dinner for Hershel and his family to thank them for letting the group stay at the farm. Throughout season two Carol cooks, babysits, and takes care of Hershel’s daughter Beth, who remains in a state of shock over her mother’s death. In sharp contrast to Andrea’s determined and vocal struggle to secure a gun, Carol’s relationship to guns changes outside of the scope of what viewers are shown. Except for the scene where she goes to target practice, the audience does not see her becoming more comfortable with guns and engaging in violence. The show portrays this development through the positive comments of mostly male characters. In the first episode of season three, “Seed” (3.1), the remaining members of the group stumble upon the prison that will become their new home. As the characters make their way into the inner yard of the prison, Rick gives everyone an assignment to help clear the yard of walkers. Rick tells her, “Carol, you’ve become a pretty good shot. Take your time. We don’t have a lot of ammo to waste”, indicating that she is now well versed with firearms and can be trusted to protect her group. The parallel between his ammo warning to Carol and his earlier conversation with Morgan and Duane in “Days Gone Bye” (1.1) represents her new status as a member of the inner circle of characters that can be trusted with guns. By the episode “Home” (3.10), Carol knows enough about guns to teach a new male character, Axel (Lew Temple), how to shoot.
Carol’s utility to the group continues to flourish across season three. In the episode “I Ain’t a Judas” (3.11) Andrea reunites with her old group for the first time since the end of season two. In a moment alone with Andrea, Carol tells her that she needs to kill the Governor to prevent him from attacking the prison. Carol says, “the Governor, you need to do something...you need to sleep with him. Give him the greatest night of his life. You get him to drop his guard. Then when he’s sleeping, you can end this.” This short but remarkable scene between Andrea and Carol represents an interesting power shift. For one, Andrea now has the agency and the opportunity to change things for her friends at the prison. Carol, who was previously her antagonist in challenging gender norms, entreats her to be a “femme fatale” to bring down a dangerous man. This moment illustrates Carol’s increasing boldness in terms of understanding that women must use violence with all of the weapons available in order to stem further violence from outside groups.

Yet, Andrea fails to follow through with Carol’s “femme fatale” mission. Sensing that Andrea sympathies remain with her former group at the prison, the Governor decides to eliminate her as a threat. Andrea’s death occurs in “Welcome to the Tombs” (3.16), when she is unable to free herself from a trap set up by the Governor to kill both her and his former town assistant Milton (Dallas Roberts). Her death precipitates the dissolution of many of the pre-apocalyptic gender roles and represents an unspoken shift away from conflict over the traditional gender rules for men and women, to a space where groups of like-minded people must work together to keep everyone safe. Peter Dendle notes this tendency in other zombie narratives, notably the 1968 film Night of the Living Dead. He writes that in that film, “People are viewed as objects, to be evaluated on the basis of immediate utility rather than on sentimental traditions of family attachment or the value of social interconnections.” While Dendle’s analysis suggests that he reads this shift as a negative for the characters in Night of the Living Dead, the recognition of the women’s utility in The Walking Dead can be read as a shift away from patriarchal norms, opening up a much more egalitarian worldview that does not rely on gendered stereotypes to maintain safety.

In season four Carol’s group has created a stable life in the prison, complete with seemingly happy, productive citizens. The prison now has a ruling council, comprised of Hershel, Daryl, Glenn, Carol, and Sasha (Sonequa Martin-Green), modeled on a pre-apocalyptic democracy—but with better proportional gender representation than contemporary U.S. legislatures. The occupants work together to emulate the closest semblance of a normal life
that these characters have experienced since the walker takeover. Thus, Carol’s willingness to use violence emerges simultaneously as her leadership qualities, which continue to bring stability and care to the group. In some ways, then, Carol’s emergence as a leader willing to use violence to support human survival suggests a more organic pathway than Andrea’s to post-patriarchal gender roles.

Despite the idyllic life that the prison group appears to have settled into, and even though Rick appears to have attempted to stem the violence of the outside world, Carol recognizes that they can never be truly safe. Like Andrea, Carol remains vigilant and ready. In “30 Days Without an Accident” (4.1), under the guise of story time for the children living in the prison, Carol sequesters them in the library to teach them about preparedness. She tells them: “Today, we are talking about knives, how to use them, how to be safe with them, and how they could save your life.” First with guns, and now knives, Carol has transformed into a woman prepared, someone ready for an inevitable threat. In this more inclusive space, Carol can be both a fighter and a surrogate mom, reading to the children but also making sure they know how to protect one another using deadly weapons. This new Carol, both fearless and quick-witted, has learned to put the needs of the group ahead of any one person’s individual needs, even if it makes her seem monstrous. This is best illustrated when an unknown pathogen begins killing people at the prison in the episode “Infected” (4.2). She kills Karen (Melissa Ponzio) and David (Brandon Carroll), and burns their bodies, in an attempt to stem the spread of this illness. Situations such as this show Carol in a role she now comfortably inhabits—taking drastic but unpopular measures to ensure the group’s continued survival. These moments mirror similar dilemmas that Rick faced in earlier seasons, effectively situating Carol as a peer to their proto-male leader. However, Rick views the killing of these characters as an inhumane transgression that threatens the peace they created at the prison, for which he excommunicates Carol.

After Rick tells Carol to leave, two other critical events occur that showcase Carol’s ability to adapt deftly to difficult situations. The first occurs in the episode “Too Far Gone” (4.8), when the Governor returns to the prison with a new group. The ensuing attack scatters the surviving characters. And, much like Andrea’s escape at the end of season two, Carol will form a new group in the wake of this chaos. In “Inmates” (4.10) Tyreese (Chad L. Coleman), Lizzie (Brighton Sharbino), and Mika (Kyla Kennedy) stumble upon Carol in the woods. Lizzie and Mika were part of Carol’s knife
training at the prison, and since the attack they have been forced to use these skills for their survival. But Lizzie is perplexed by the walkers—she still considers them people, and thus confuses the living and the undead. In the episode “The Grove” (4.14), Carol has to make the excruciating decision to shoot Lizzie after she has a psychotic break and murders her little sister, Mika. Here the narrative presents a painful melding of all of the elements of Carol’s post-apocalyptic world—she must use a gun, a weapon she previously had little knowledge of, to kill a young girl who was left in her care. Again, guns represent safety and protection in this post-apocalyptic world, but they still remain instruments of pain and suffering as well. Having to shoot Lizzie rattles Carol, and though she views it as a necessary measure to ensure the safety of other characters, it again serves to demonstrate her ability to make difficult decisions for the betterment of the group. Carol is now fully enmeshed in this horrific landscape where traditional gender roles matter little and action means everything.

The second critical event that functions as the apex of Carol’s renaissance occurs in the fifth season premiere. In the episode “No Sanctuary” (5.1) Carol single-handedly rescues the members of her old group—including Rick, who had recently excommunicated her. After the attack on the prison, small clusters of surviving characters all began following signs to Terminus, a mysterious place that promises “Sanctuary for All. Community for All. Those who arrive survive.” Many of the main characters arrive there only to discover that it is a compound inhabited by people who have been cannibalizing other humans to survive. Nearby in the woods, Carol and Tyreese hear gunfire in Terminus, and Carol insists on going alone to “get answers.” Again, Carol emulates Rick’s actions across much of the show’s first three seasons—that is, act quickly and without much thought for consequences, particularly to help others in trouble. Carol shrouds herself in dirty clothes and rubs walker blood on her face and body as a visual and olfactory camouflage that will allow her to move freely among the walkers while avoiding detection. After carefully approaching Terminus, Carol spots Rick. Using her gun, a powerful automatic weapon with a scope, she shoots a propane tank and then employs a firework to create an enormous explosion. In the ensuing chaos, Carol rescues her friends in a blaze of gunfire and destruction, both for the undead roaming around and the living Terminus residents. These heroic moments evoke tropes of action films, and are remarkably Rambo-esque, down to the dirty, sweaty hair, face, and assault weapon. After Carol is reunited with her friends in the woods Rick says, “did you do that?” and she communicates “yes” to him with a silent nod. This
is Carol's redemptive act, only possible because of her new skills with weapons and her willingness to use them in moments such as this. Without her knowledge of firearms and the newly opened space in which she was allowed and even encouraged to use them, she would not have been able to both rescue and rejoin her group.

**Carol: The Final Girl (Woman)**

The comparison to the character Rambo suggests another interesting parallel—that of what film scholar Carol J. Clover terms the “Final Girl”, the last girl or woman who survives the attacker in 1970s horror films such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). Clover describes “Final Girls” as female characters “who not only fight back but do so with ferocity and even kill the killer on their own, without help from the outside”, seemingly able to overcome an “unsurvivable” situation. Throughout much of the show, Rick wavers between wanting to be the leader of the group and feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility. Even in times of great strife he always seems cautious and capable, which makes his imprisonment at Terminus so striking. In this episode, Carol and Rick swap positions—she is the one making decisions, and as Clover notes, the “Final Girl” “is intelligent and resourceful in a pinch.” As another allusion to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Carol rescues her group from what later proves to be a group of cannibals. At other times on the show Carol has also fulfilled traits associated with the “Final Girl”, such as recognizing the “small signs of danger that her friends ignore.” This is evident in season four when Carol continues to insist on training the young children to defend themselves because she understands that it was a matter of when, not if, people outside the prison would disrupt their peaceful existence.

The comparison to the “Final Girl” merits a few additional notes. For one, though this character in horror films is credited with saving the day, she is also subjected to untold horrors before she is fully able to escape. In a way, Carol’s abusive marriage resonates here—perhaps her years as a battered wife and mother gave her the strength to walk into danger with little self-doubt. This suggests in certain ways that characters like Carol, with abusive, broken pasts are better prepared to survive in the post-apocalyptic world. Further, Carol’s transformation into the “Final Girl” is also a shift away from traditional notions of femininity, particularly away from the “indecisiveness and pow-
erlessness” that Marc O’Day describes, and into the “hardness . . . decisiveness and power” associated with traditional notions of masculinity.21 We must ask then, has the group’s recognition of Carol’s leadership been built on her ability to embody masculine traits? Is the price for female strength the dissolution of the roles of wife and a mother? On the other hand, perhaps the text can be read to suggest that Carol represents a third way, in which these old rules and stereotypes dissolve so that men and women achieve the freedom to explore their own personal strengths rather than accept proscribed roles as “just the way it is.”

The narrative of The Walking Dead is open in terms of its assessment of Carol (and the redemption of Andrea) in that her character can easily be read in at least two ways—that she does accept her feminine strengths (nurturing and teaching orphaned children), but she also leaves behind the subservient aspects of gendered feminine roles that defined her at the very beginning of the show (kowtowing to her abusive husband). Through her steady evolution toward the role of protector/gun wielder, Carol is given the narrative space to be the leader and fighter that Andrea had so dearly sought to become.

Terminus: “Never Again, Never Trust”

Throughout this chapter I have demonstrated how the construction of gender roles shifts, dissolves, and blends over the course of the first five seasons of The Walking Dead.22 Through an analysis of Andrea and Carol, I explored how two different characters worked through these gendered rules, particularly as these rules were connected to guns and gun use. In many ways the first three seasons of The Walking Dead depict a paternalistic world in which the men stand up as leaders because that is what they feel they are supposed to do. The men hold the guns and the women do the cooking because that is how things were before the walker takeover. To maintain some semblance of civilization, this strategy suggests holding onto the past. Characters like Lori and, initially, Carol, accept this because “it’s just the way it is”, and they have to make “life worth living” to maintain hope. But characters like Andrea step up to challenge these outdated rules. What is problematic about Andrea, however, is that her challenges are framed as disruptive and dangerous, as when she almost kills Daryl when she mistakes him for a walker. Through Carol’s more patient and seemingly organic development into a
gunslinger, *The Walking Dead* begins to present a world more willing to put the gendered division of labor aside for the benefit of the group safety. While it is promising that Carol is portrayed as a successful leader and savior of the group, it is telling that Andrea’s overt rebellions against patriarchal power were portrayed as deadly and unwise.

Arguably, *The Walking Dead* can be read as a commentary that speaks to concerns that exist outside of the fictional television program. A number of writers have attempted to locate larger cultural concerns that prompt the popularity of zombie narratives. Peter Dendle’s work suggests that contemporary zombie tales are “marked by concerns over environmental deterioration, political conflict, the growth of consumer-capitalism, and the commoditization of the body implicit in contemporary biomedical science.”

Likewise, *Entertainment Weekly* writer Mark Harris claims that “great horror stories tap into fears”, and that *The Walking Dead* specifically brings to life “the fear of a total systemic collapse.” These theories root the popularity of the program in the unspoken fears that viewers might have over the state of the world. In the complicated and dangerous world of *The Walking Dead*, the closest approximation to safety that these characters achieve comes through the possession of guns. If, as J. P. Telotte suggests, science fiction asks audiences to identify the elements of our world that shape the fictional, narrative world, then guns must be a part of this examination. While the female characters on *The Walking Dead* are initially discouraged from using guns, their real life counterparts in the United States are increasingly being marketed to by gun manufacturers and the National Rifle Association, both of which have a vested, financial interest in continuing gun sales and the loosening of gun laws that normalize the idea that people, both men and women, should be armed at every moment of the day, all built around ideas of personal safety and “self-protection.”

If Telotte’s suggestion is correct, and science fiction demands audiences “think about the implications of [its] resemblances” to the contemporary world, then *The Walking Dead* is a particularly interesting subject for this type of analysis. It presents a narrative universe that is at once recognizable in its familiar settings and everyday characters who use guns for protection, and yet completely foreign in its murderous, undead walkers. Viewers must contemplate the pre-apocalyptic gendered world that shapes these characters and the challenges they face in an unfathomably complicated landscape populated by women and men resourceful enough to continue to survive.
The idea of the safety of home, and the impossibility of securing it again, even with guns at the ready, is harrowing. The Walking Dead's narrative world has become what Dale feared the most, a post-law, post-civilization existence where the characters have let go of their pre-apocalyptic humanity. Now, both men and women can and are expected to use guns to protect safety and prevent murderous acts. But as Andrea learns, having a gun does not guarantee safety for the ones you love, no matter how good a shot you become. Moreover, the experiences with the Governor and Terminus blur the lines of what might be called good violence (against the walkers), and bad violence (against human survivors). Safety remains the primary objective for these characters and guns remain the mechanism with which they maintain their post-apocalypse lives.

Notes

1. Jacqui's reference to Hattie McDaniel is particularly telling as an African American character. McDaniel was the first African American actor to win an Academy Award, having been nominated for her role in Gone With the Wind (1939). In a pre-civil rights Hollywood, McDaniel was relegated to domestic servant and slave roles. Race figures intersectionally in the Southern location of The Walking Dead and in reference to Hattie McDaniel. Likewise, while this chapter does not focus on the construction of masculinity and the men that populate this narrative universe, that analysis would be just as important to uncovering the root of the power struggles between the male characters on the show who take up leadership roles, particularly Shane, Rick, and the Governor. Equally illuminating would be an investigation of the post-apocalyptic dissolution of civility, particularly as it is portrayed in the new rules and regulations that groups create for themselves, such as the ruling council at the prison and the so-called “Claimers” that Daryl travels with, both in season four. Built into this new set of rules and regulations are the shadows of the ones that no longer apply. The scope of this chapter doesn't allow for an analysis of one of the most difficult parts of the show—its depictions, allusions to, and threats of rape, and the preponderance of men willing and able to commit this heinous act against women and children. I raise each of these other avenues of inquiry because they help illuminate other ways that The Walking Dead constructs and problematizes the relationship between women, men, race, gender, and guns. These other areas of research deserve additional attention in future work on The Walking Dead. See Tom W. Rice and Diane L. Coates, "Gender Role Attitudes in the Southern United States", Gender & Society 9, no. 6 (1995): 744–56.

2. Another important addition to the analysis of the women on this show would undoubtedly include Michonne (Danai Gurira), Sasha (Sonequa Martin-Green), Maggie (Lauren Cohen), Beth (Emily Kinney), Tara (Alanna Masterson), and Rosita (Christian Serratos). For a feminist analysis of the characters on The Walking Dead, see John Greene and Mi-
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5. “Guns are worth more than gold” is a comment Daryl (Norman Reedus) makes to the other characters in “Vatos”, The Walking Dead, American Movie Classics (New York City, NY: AMC, November 21, 2010).


7. Though many scholars quoted in this paper refer to these types of narratives as “zombie” tales, the characters in The Walking Dead never call them zombies. Instead they refer to them as “those things” (Morgan, Ep. 1.1), “walkers” (Glenn, Ep. 1.2), “biters” (the Governor, Ep. 3.3), “lamebrains” (Dave, Ep. 2.8), “roamers” (unknown character off-screen, Ep. 2.9), and “cold bodies” (Martin, Ep. 5.1).

8. “Put a gun in my hand and I’ll cover your ass too”, is a comment Andrea (Laurie Holden) makes to Shane (Jon Bernthal) in “What Lies Ahead”, The Walking Dead, American Movie Classics (New York City, NY: AMC, October 6, 2011).


11. Floyd, She’s Got a Gun, 132-33.

12. Floyd, She’s Got a Gun, 133.

13. “You have to trust your gut and you have to act fast every time” is a comment that Carol tells the children during story time/survival training in “Infected”, The Walking Dead, American Movie Classics (New York City, NY: AMC, October 20, 2013).

14. Clover, Men, Women, and Chainsaws, 35-64. An earlier essay on gender and The Walking Dead labels the character Andrea as a “Final Girl”, because of her role throughout season two. This essay only looks at the first two seasons of the show and does not account for how guns figure into the complicated gendered dynamics of the characters on The Walking


17. Clover, Men, Women, and Chainsaws, 37, 39.


20. There is also another important avenue of future research—who are the people who were most likely to survive the apocalypse, at least according to the narrative in The Walking Dead?


23. Dendle, “The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety”, 45. Dendle roots the “resurgence” of these supernatural narratives in American culture as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but does not explore this assertion in depth in his chapter.


27. Telotte, Science Fiction TV, 82.

28. On a smaller scale, three important concepts remain central to most of the conflict on The Walking Dead: home, family, and survival. More than any other metaphor, the program evokes the idea of the sanctity of the home. The home represents safety and refuge from the outside world, a place that shelters and protects the family. Home is what is missing most from the post-apocalyptic world these characters inhabit. Much of the characters’ plights throughout The Walking Dead focus on the re-creation of home, the reformation of family, and thus the reconstitution of safety. While the narrative allows for the group to evolve into a family, the show reinforces the continued impossibility of safety. If these characters cannot rebuild home, in whatever form it takes in their post-apocalyptic world, then they will never be truly safe. As Henry Jenkins notes, near the end of season one the main characters realize that finding a new home will be the “recurring quest in the comics.” See Henry Jenkins, “The Walking Dead: Adapting Comics”, in How to Watch Television, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 376.