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# Narrativizing Trauma in the Apocalypse: Christianity and Burial in AMC's The Walking Dead

## Abstract

This paper examines the role of narrativization as a form of improvised trauma treatment in the first six seasons of AMC's *The Walking Dead*. *The Walking Dead* explores a modern America that has been decimated by a traumatic event. This event, a zombie apocalypse, results in the permanent loss of infrastructure and social services. What remains in this unpredictable landscape for survivors is a reliance on Christian narratives, expressed through pious characters and burial rituals that strive to provide meaning and purpose in the new world. Survivors perform burial rituals to preserve a connection to the pre-apocalyptic world and to narrativize trauma, both personal and collective. This paper contends that *The Walking Dead* uses the context of cultural trauma not to reflect on or critique nationalist agendas and ideologies but to identify the past as a robust repository for the future.

Keywords: *The Walking Dead*, trauma, narrative, emplotment, Christianity, burial

*The Walking Dead* (2010-present) is set in a world where modern infrastructure is absent and the threat of violence, or death, is a relative constant. Society has collapsed and full recovery, it seems, is not possible. Survivors struggle to orient themselves in the dramatically changed environment, deprived of access to services, such as healthcare, and institutions, such as law enforcement that had regulated and organized daily life. These conditions correspond to those described in cultural trauma theory; a theory often associated with the horror genre. This paper argues that the context presented in *The Walking Dead* provides an example of cultural trauma in

post-apocalyptic horror, but it is one that avoids broader critical reflection as to the cause of the trauma. Additionally, by focusing, albeit at times loosely, on Christian notions of fate and an omnipresent God, the first six seasons of *The Walking Dead* promote pious characters and burial rituals as necessary in limiting the impact of cultural, and by connection, personal, trauma; thus, framing the past as a receptacle which can continually replenish the future. The importance of Christianity and burial rituals is enhanced in the first six seasons because survivors at this time do not have other resources to process traumatic experiences. It is Christianity and burial that function as forms of improvised narrative psychology to promote meaning and purpose during this period.

Cultural trauma theory is most often associated with the impact of colonization on First Nation's people. Stamm et al. see that cultural trauma theory provides a "framework for understanding disruptions that an 'original' culture might suffer at the imposition of an 'arriving' culture" (89). This definition can be readily applied to horror texts that focus on some type of invasion. The 'arriving culture' in *The Walking Dead* is the undead, the walkers. However, framing walkers as an arriving culture is also somewhat problematic as they lack a social structure or a recognizable ideology. Conversely, they do exist as a version of the Other, as something transformed and destructive and terrifying. Murray and Heumann state that the horror genre is characterized by "the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they encounter" (16). In *The Walking Dead*, the dead rise regardless of how they die and consequently transform into a monstrous version of self. As such the walkers constitute not only a violation of the natural order but also a hostile force, or at the very least a hostile virus. The impact of this hostile force aligns with Smelser's definition of a culturally traumatic event, as "an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole" (38). The walkers and the devastation they bring is a mass culture event, one that erodes traditional ways of being and continually places survivors on the cusp of existential turmoil.

Cultural trauma and the horror genre are a focus of Linnie Blake's *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity*. Blake contends that horror can focus "on the sites where ideologically dominant models of individual and group identity are sequentially formed, dismantled by trauma and finally re-formed in a post-traumatic context" (2). That is, horror texts can provide, in part, a space for critique and examination of challenging cultural events, anxieties,

and politically and socially divisive events that have been culturally and personally traumatizing. Further, Blake sees that “such narratives ... demand not only a willingness on behalf of audiences to work through the anxiety engendered by trauma, but a willingness also to undertake a fundamental questioning” (2), a questioning necessary for processing trauma at its root. Theorists such as Kyle Bishop see the rise in American zombie and post-apocalyptic horror as a response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks that revealed the susceptibility of the American homeland to infiltration or infection. The ready national compromises made to prevent further terrorist attacks, such as The USA Patriot Act (2001) and the torture of detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, revealed disquieting and divisive aspects to sacred American notions of freedom, democracy, and equality. Certainly, the Christian and ideological beliefs expressed through burials in *The Walking Dead* intersect, and come into friction, with broader concerns around race, gender, morality, and national myths. However, burials in *The Walking Dead* attest to the importance of maintaining recognizable narratives to negate trauma and promote stability, both communal and personal. These narratives, however, regularly prescribe a way of being that is often simultaneously revealed as fraudulent or hypocritical. Yet, such revelations do not disempower the narratives but demonstrate the innate desire of survivors to chronicle their experiences and narrativize them in ways that bridge the present with the past.

In doing this, survivors are engaging in an ad hoc form of narrative psychology. Narrative psychology, for Neimeyer and Levitt, is premised on “the belief that people give meaning to their experiences by using a storytelling structure” (48). Neimeyer and Levitt state that “narrative serves a healing as well as a heuristic function” (64), as it structures life events into a comprehensible and causal story. This is guided by contextual and collective values and understandings and is a process that Neimeyer and Levitt see as “the therapeutic attempt to ‘emplot’ a traumatic incident by relating it in a meaningful sequence” (57). In *The Walking Dead* emplotment is structured and thematized by Christian representatives and ritualized through burial. The connection between religion and burial comes because, as Urbatsch states, “explaining the fate of the dead is a prime function of religion” (28). Sociologist Emile Durkheim, in his influential work *The Elementary Form of Religious Life*, sees ritual as necessary to maintaining religion and vice versa. Religion’s function is, for Durkheim, to build group cohesion and create ethical ideologies that suitably address

existential wants. Thus, “all are true in their fashion: all respond, if in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence” (4). Durkheim, however, also maintains that there must be a separation of the ritual, the sacred, or revered, from the everyday or the profane for it to have potency. Ritual and religion, beyond their mutually beneficial relationship, strive to address the contextual wants and needs of their audience. Catherine Bell asserts that Durkheim’s work stresses the importance of ritual as “the means by which individual perception and behaviour are socially appropriated or conditioned” (25). In *The Walking Dead* burial rituals are the only potent ritual available to preserve Christianity, although the preservation of Christian ideologies seems secondary to the need for survivors to narrativize the deceased in a way that maintains emplotment for the living. Wood and Rowatt identify that “the central focus of a Christian funeral is the belief in the resurrection of the body and the hope that life does not end with the physical mortality” (19). This resurrection, it is believed, comes in the presence of a loving and compassionate God and as a reward for a life lived by Christian principles. Resurrection in *The Walking Dead* can also mean becoming monstrous and a danger to the living. When the dead are eulogized and buried the monstrous is negated and notions of a supreme God and an eternal reward are reinstated. Death, despite its tragedy, is still a pathway to security.

Burial of the dead, even the monstrous dead, is crucial because, as Dastur states, “the purpose of all funerary rites is to establish a spiritual relationship with the deceased” (15). So, funerary rites establish a connection between the past and the present. Characters in *The Walking Dead* attempt to replicate funerary rites they have seen and experienced previously. Of course, the ritual, the intent rather than the form, reveals a great deal more about the participants, their wants, needs, and hopes than about the deceased. Even tacit participation in burial endorses the underlying narrative.

Perhaps the most horrifying cultural and personal trauma facing survivors in *The Walking Dead* is the revelation of the contextual nature of self. When the show’s survivor group encounters other survivors, they have sometimes found like-minded people, but they have also regularly found sadism, cannibalism, rape, torture, and murder. Burial rituals provide a way for the show’s survivor group to compare and differentiate themselves, ideologically and morally, against others, to rationalize their own actions, even those that conflict with their conception of self, and shape these

events into a narrative that is potent and uplifting. More broadly, this becomes a way to differentiate nationalist actions outside of the show that might seem contrary to a nationalist identity.

Christian burials make distinct the ideology of the living in a world where, for many survivors, the unfolding calamity is a form of divine punishment. By framing events as ordained by God, many survivors then have an understanding that allows them to distinguish themselves from others and to apportion or absolve blame. Urbatsch argues that many religions “constantly reinforce the notion that moral turpitude leads to otherwise incomprehensible misfortunes” (29). In “TS-19” (1.6), Jacqui (Jeryl Prescott) sees the walkers as “the wrath of God.” Equally, in “Bloodletting” (2.2), Hershel (Scott Wilson) describes the apocalyptic events as “nature correcting herself, restoring some balance.” Hershel, who becomes a spiritual leader in the survivor group, has his faith challenged by events, but not broken. The correlation between theological doctrine and lived experiences, even in disasters, provides a simple cause-and-effect explanation that avoids critical reflection of systematic or regulatory failings. Likewise, it locates events in an established narrative and can provide a clear path to resolution. In *The Walking Dead*, new narratives are needed, but they are also grounded in the past. Gurr, in arguing that American post-apocalyptic texts, such as *The Walking Dead*, are a reimagining of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century frontier, believes such texts provide characters with “the freedom to determine their own destinies and carve out a new (better?) world” (33). In the Christian characters and rituals in *The Walking Dead*, the absence of overt nationalist rhetoric does not suggest an anti-nationalist position or even a neutrality. Indeed, the survivors become post-apocalyptic pilgrims, and the underlying foundations of the old America remain intact so that the emerging new America will inevitably maintain more than a passing resemblance to its predecessor. Ultimately these foundations are presented as resilient and unbreakable. The cultural trauma impacts organizational and aesthetic aspects of America, but not foundational. There then remains the ongoing assemblage of narrative or emplotment.

This emplotment, for Niemeyer and Stewart, is a form of trauma treatment. Although Niemeyer and Stewart are focused on individual or group experiences, their work has broader application for *The Walking Dead* and cultural trauma. Niemeyer and Stewart believe that “narratives provide structures of meaning that allow the person to understand both the role and the wider social and

cultural plot of which it is part” (361). Emplotment seeks to avoid the emergence of destructive traumatic disorders, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which in the post-apocalyptic landscape of *The Walking Dead* will not receive the same treatment as it might in the pre-apocalypse world. Niemeyer and Stewart state that “the traumatic experience not only disrupts or damages the victim’s narrative stream of consciousness, but may also fundamentally challenge the unity of the victim’s selfhood” (361). Alongside burials, the devout characters in *The Walking Dead* are representatives of past narratives that work to sustain the notion that the world is still a place of meaning and purpose that transcends the physical realm.

The ongoing exposure to uncertainty, regarding a place to live and personal safety, and to gruesome killings, often of friends and family, is confronting for most survivors. Often, survivors must “kill” walkers to live, and sometimes they must kill other humans. The need to be almost constantly ready to use violence or be vigilant that others might attack, creates a tense environment. Malešević makes the point that “both self-sacrifice and killing go so much against the normative universe of ordinary upbringing in nearly all social orders” (29). However, the notion that God has a purpose for each person, and for the events that are occurring, persists in *The Walking Dead*. This notion absorbs traumatizing actions and events by normalizing them and defining them as consistent with past Christianized narratives.

This narrativizing continues even with the unabated spread of the virus, and even when characters are bitten and infected. When T-Dog (Ironie Singleton) is bitten by a walker in “Killer Within” (3.4) he comforts a frightened Carol (Melissa McBride) by telling her, “This is God’s plan. He’ll take care of me. Always has. He’s gonna help me lead you outta these tunnels.” T-Dog understands that the bite he received is terminal, but his belief in the Christian God and the notion that God as the author has ordained this death is readily accepted. Soon after, T-Dog is eaten alive by walkers as he sacrifices himself so Carol can escape, sustained and encouraged by his faith.

The lack of modern medical care means that conditions that were previously treatable can now be fatal, but this vulnerability also does not challenge the faith of those characters that become spiritual guides for other survivors. Doka states that “religious and spiritual perspectives may reassure persons with life-threatening illness that their illness is part of a larger plan” (234). In “Internment” (4.5), the prison where survivors have established a temporary home is plagued by a

flu-like illness that is killing those who have taken refuge there. Hershel tells Rick (Andrew Lincoln), “I still think there’s a plan. I still believe there’s a reason.” Hershel’s placing of events within a broader Christian chronicle links the past to the present and redefines uncertainty as certainty, in the same way T-Dog did. Disaster and tragedy are not disruptions or failings, but predetermined events.

Several episodes after Hershel’s death, in “Strangers” (5.2), the survivors save Father Gabriel (Seth Gilliam) from being bitten by walkers. Gabriel, still dressed in his clerical collar, turned his back on his parishioners and boarded his church doors shut, saving himself while they were eaten alive by walkers. Gabriel adds little to the survivor group. He cannot fight, seems incapable of defending himself and states, in “Four Walls and a Roof” (5.3), “The Lord sent you here to finally punish me. I’m damned.” Gabriel is clearly troubled by his own actions, actions he cannot reconcile. In “Them” (5.10) he throws his clerical collar into a fire and in “Conquer” (5.16) he tries to coerce a distressed Sasha (Sonequa Martin-Green) into shooting him. Sasha comes to him for counsel after the recent loss of her brother, Tyrese (Chad Coleman), and her boyfriend, Bob (Lawrence Gilliard). Gabriel tells her, “You don’t deserve to be here,” and he blames her for Bob’s death. “Bob was mutilated. Consumed. Destroyed because of your sins.” Sasha knocks Gabriel to the ground and points a gun at him, but Maggie (Lauren Cohan) intervenes, offering Gabriel her hand and hearing his confession. This marks a return to God for both Maggie and Gabriel and provides a pathway out of the trauma experience. Maggie, Hershel’s daughter, had temporarily abandoned her faith, but faith, it seems, is innate and can always be rediscovered. Wood and Rowatt maintain that when “people who identify themselves as Christians do return to the church, they seek the comfort of familiar words of scripture and rituals that bring comfort and offer hope” (19). From this point on, Gabriel becomes a loyal member of the show’s survivor group while promoting God as still present in the world.

The presence of a loving God, one that rewards the devout, is something Gabriel demonstrates in “No Way Out” (6.9). Alexandria, the stronghold the survivors arrive at in “Remember” (5.12), and where they remain for several years, is overrun by walkers and Rick is trying to halt their advance while Gabriel, sheltering in the church with other Alexandrians, states: “We’ve been praying together. Praying that God will save our town. Our prayers have been answered. God will save

Alexandria. Because God has given us the courage to save it ourselves.” Lord sees that “Faith leaders bring calmness and stability to a traumatic situation because they are representatives of the Divine” (69). Gabriel then joins Rick in beating back the walkers and is followed by others, that, still looking for objective purpose in the post-apocalypse, trust in Gabriel’s narrativizing.

Indeed, Gabriel comes to rationalize taking part in the killing of competing groups while still maintaining his position as a priest. In “Not Tomorrow Yet” (6.12) he confirms to Tara (Alanna Masterson), “I’m still a priest.” Moments later he stands over a wounded adversary, telling him, before killing him, “In my father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would’ve told you. I go prepare a place for you.” This Bible verse from John 14.2 has Gabriel position himself as Christ but he inverts the meaning of the passage, for Gabriel does not precede his adversary nor is the adversary Gabriel’s follower. Conversely, Gabriel does not provide the scripture to console, but to suggest that he has fallen and been redeemed, has suffered death and resurrection, is Christ-like, and has reconciled the taking of life for a righteous cause. The ongoing presence of characters that promote Christianity as relevant and necessary to the apocalypse, even when altered or overtly hypocritical, promote a stability that strives to incorporate traumatic experiences into recognizable narratives. These narratives are at their most potent when they are expressed during burial rituals. The burial acts and the accompanying eulogies, particularly the burials taking place in the first few seasons of *The Walking Dead* when the group does not have a stable base, are explicitly linked to and regularly serve to promote Christian-specific narratives. Hoy states that “humans have an undeniable need to make sense of death; funeral rituals are created by social groups as potential scripts to achieve this end” (13). The Christian foundations of modern America are reflected in the burials that take place in *The Walking Dead* and, initially, in the concern expressed by several characters for the sanctity of human life and the need to honor the dead.

Burials provide affirmations and an opportunity to reconnect with self and with others. Burial also works to narrativize the deceased and provide closure to that narrative thread. In terms of alleviating the trauma of those confronted by death or mourning the deceased, Anderson believes that “good rituals will help us find our grief—even if that grief is left over from some other death” (132). The specifics of actual burials in *The Walking Dead* vary significantly depending on context and the relationship the deceased had with those that remain. Certainly, the willingness to engage

in some form of ceremony akin to what was experienced in the pre-apocalypse world is persistent. For Hunter, the “value of funerary rites is found in both social and psychological functions that they fulfill” (159), such as promoting solidarity, marking death as meaningful, fated, and creating space for mourning and the sharing of grief and for nullifying trauma.

Raphael et al., commenting on the function of burial for the living, believe “recognition of the death, of the dead person’s value, and of the trauma, loss, and suffering of those bereaved may be critical issues that enhance ... capacity to adapt” (13). In *The Walking Dead*, burial rituals provide temporary access to the pre-apocalyptic world and signify a reverence for, and belief in, that which had previously been established. The experience of grief or trauma has the potential to be worsened in *The Walking Dead* because there is limited or unavailable space to engage in processing such experiences. Kremmel observes that violence and mourning become intertwined in *The Walking Dead*, that the “pervasiveness of death in this dangerous new world and the threat that the undead body poses to the living both necessitate and problematize mourning practices” (80). Certainly, the capacity of burials to continually provide a guide to emplotment is challenged and troubled for some, but, predominately, burials throughout each season reflect a yearning for the past. Many characters bury friends and family when it is a time-consuming and exhausting activity. This speaks to the power of burials and the comfort they provide that supports survivors in narrativizing their own lives so that the problematized aspect Kremmel speaks to is relatively limited.

In attempting to control or mitigate trauma, survivors strive to maintain a reverence for the known dead in season one. In “Wildfire” (1.5), after several group members are lost to a herd of walkers, there is uncertainty as to what should be done with the dead and with the dying. The task is made difficult by the number of bodies, yet Glenn (Steven Yuen) distinguishes between the dead that are known and those that are anonymous. When Daryl (Norman Reedus) and Morales (Juan Gabriel Pareja) drag a deceased group member towards a collection of burning bodies, they are confronted by Glenn, “Our people go in that row over there. We don’t burn them! We bury them! Understand?” Glenn’s capacity to process this mass death event is predicated on the known dead maintaining an individual identity and not being homogenized. Glenn is also trying to maintain a reverence for life so emplotment remains a possibility. Later, when Daryl questions the value of the

burials given that he, along with Rick and Shane (Jon Bernthal), are digging graves in oppressive heat, Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) states, “We haven’t had a minute to hold onto anything of our old selves. We need time to mourn, and we need to bury our dead. That’s what people do.” This statement shows that despite the dramatically changed living circumstances, Lori, like Glenn, sees importance in an adherence to established procedures to process and place the deaths in a narrative that is understandable.

The ritual component, for Hunter, is significant because “ritual plays a role in providing a sense of familiarity and expected structure within those chaotic natural processes that lie outside of human control” (156). The burial that is shown in “Wildfire,” like all that follow, is far more personal than would typically have been experienced in the pre-apocalypse world. Groups in *The Walking Dead* must dig a grave by hand, prepare the body and place that body in the ground. It is a physically demanding and unfamiliar task. When Andrea buries her sister Amy (Emma Bell) in “Wildfire,” she struggles to maneuver the body into the crude grave. Gore notes that in modern times the bereaved mostly do not take an active part in burial, but rather there are “local authorities, florist, coroner, clergy, registrar and the general workings of a complicated and bureaucratic urban system” (217). While contemporary burial practices generally work to maintain a structure and process that distances those experiencing loss from the act of burial, in *The Walking Dead*, burial is confronting and deeply personal.

Burial also works to provide an emotional and psychological safeguard for survivors, one that continues to be promoted in each season. For Dastur, the “purpose of all funerary rites is to establish a spiritual relationship with the deceased” (7). In “Nebraska” (2.8), Andrea reiterates Glenn’s position, “We bury the ones we love and burn the rest.” Burial rituals in *The Walking Dead*, to a significant extent, take the place of grief and trauma counselling present in the pre-apocalypse world. Christianity also, like many other religions, does not see physical death as the end of existence. Dastur makes the point that “even in archaic societies humans refuse to consider death as a complete disappearance” (6). Burial also provides an escape for the deceased from the violence and uncertainty of what the world has become. Steele asserts that “social solidarity or strong community focus is common during times of emergency, catastrophe, or disaster” (199).

Burial, therefore, also affirms for survivors their connections to each other and the purpose of the life that was lost.

The death of Otis (Pruitt Taylor Vince) in “Save the Last One” (2.3) and his funeral in “Cherokee Rose” (2.4) demonstrate the importance of narrativizing death so that it can be placed within the broader ecumenical narrative. Lori’s earlier comment on the need to maintain something of “our old selves” has relevance not only to burials, but to what death means for the living and how death rituals can support emplotment. In “Save the Last One,” Otis and Shane, on a night trip to gather medical supplies to help a seriously injured Carl (Chandler Riggs), whom Otis accidentally shot while hunting deer, are low on ammunition, seemingly surrounded by walkers, both hobbling, and a long way from their vehicle. Shane, aware of the hopelessness of the situation, advises Otis, “You’re gonna take these bags and you’re gonna go.” Otis refuses. Shane, sensing they will both be killed, shoots Otis in the leg and escapes with the medical supplies, leaving Otis to a ghastly death as he is eaten alive by walkers. Shane, however, does not tell this story but rather frames Otis as someone who sacrificed himself in a heroic act for the greater good. When he arrives back at Hershel’s farm, he tells Rick, “He said he’d cover me and that I should keep going.” Shane’s action in shooting Otis is an affront to the morality of the pre-apocalyptic world. Clearly, Shane is aware of this, yet his actions certainly saved Carl’s life and his own and provided much-needed medical supplies for the group.

At the funeral that is conducted for Otis in “Cherokee Rose,” Hershel focusses on Otis’s sacrifice, but also on his reward. “We thank you, God, for the peace he enjoys in your embrace.” Wood and Rowatt make the point that “fundamental to a Christian funeral is the belief in a caring God who offers hope for life beyond death” (20). Patricia (Jane McNeill), Otis’s wife, asks Shane to speak, saying, “I need to know his death had meaning.” Shane, clearly understanding the need for narrative closure, for Patricia and the group, obliges: “We gotta save the boy, that’s what he said... If not for Otis, I’d have never made it out. And that goes for Carl. It was Otis. He saved us both. If any death ever had meaning it was his.” Clearly, Shane is motivated by self-preservation, but the promotion of a familiar script soothes the bereaved and Patricia nods in tacit approval. As such the funeral functions as group conformation that Otis, and his actions, represent desired values and that his physical death is a transition to a more peaceful state that survivors should take comfort in,

knowing that such space is available to them too if they replicate his perceived moral goodness. Context is irrelevant.

A similar approach is taken when Dale (Jeffrey DeMunn) is mortally wounded by a walker in “Judge, Jury, Executioner” (2.11). He is euthanized by Daryl and buried in “Better Angels” (2.12) in the same area as Otis. Rick provides the eulogy, promoting Dale’s positive qualities and establishing his contribution to the survivor group: “He saw people for who they were. He knew things about us, the truth, who we really are ... he said this group was broken. The best way to honor him is to unbreak it ... From now on we’re going to do it his way.” As with Otis, this eulogizing is also done via storytelling, a process that Hunter identifies as a way to “construct, reconstruct, and/or launder the memory of deceased individuals” (162). The Christian influence on burials and the narrativization of the dead in *The Walking Dead* is persistent and ultimately becomes a critical component in the memorialization of beloved group members when they die.

Burials often involve an improvised and unscripted ceremony during which the value of the deceased is stated by survivors to place the death within the new survival narrative. Long and Buehring contend that “narratives may be about the deceased, but they are simultaneously about the speaker who, by publicly voicing the memory makes a claim to his or her own morality” (95). These events also serve to galvanize the group and provide a resilience and a reason for the living to continue living. In “Heads Up” (6.7), Glenn makes this point for Enid (Katelyn Nacon) when they are trying to return to a damaged Alexandria, uncertain if anyone else is still alive. Glenn states, “You honor the dead by going on even when you’re scared. You live because they don’t get to.” Honor clearly implies morality and belief. The dead are honored with burial and remembrance that affirms, for the living, a purpose in continuing their own lives.

Many of the deaths that occur in season two, while survivors are on Hershel’s farm, involve burials that mirror pre-apocalypse burials. Along with Otis, Dale, Hershel’s wife, Annette (Amber Chaney) and Carol’s daughter, Sophia (Madison Lintz), are also buried on the farm. Sophia’s death strikes the group particularly hard and in the immediate aftermath of her loss in “Nebraska” Andrea states, “We need a service. Carol would want that.” Andrea’s use of the word “service” suggests ritual, to which T-Dog responds, “Yeah, we all want that.” Interestingly there is an absence of traditional crosses to match the Christianized eulogies. All graves are marked by stones. Otis’s grave is a

mound, and the other graves are ringed by stones. This invokes a far more ancient tradition of building a stone cairn or a ring cairn to mark graves. However, conflating ancient methods of marking graves with modern methods is not uncommon. The merging and acceptance of such practices serves to reinforce the significance of death across a range of cultures and contexts and to invoke the long-established reverence for marking the passing of a community member.

The fledgling communities that survivors either establish or take up residence in, all create cemeteries. The importance of this is that cemeteries occupy a specific space both physically and in terms of promoting an understanding of the world and of beliefs and practices. In Alexandria, a formal cemetery already exists before the show's survivors arrive. Alexandria, a place its leader Deanna (Tovah Feldshuh), a former congresswoman, tells Rick, "is the start of sustainability," is also promoted as a community and a place of safety. The graves in its cemetery are uniform, neat, set out in rows and each grave is marked with a board and the name of the deceased engraved on it. The area is sectioned off from the habitations by a row of conifers, a tree commonly associated with longevity, solitude, and peace. "Cemeteries are spaces which record sociocultural and religious change" (47), Francis et al. argue, and "their physical landscapes register varying religious traditions, and their ownership reveals a history of inclusion, assimilation and exclusion" (47). Most importantly, these "spaces encode identity, status, ideology and memorialization both at the collective and individual level" (47). More so than with the individual burials, the graves at Alexandria consolidate narratives because of their formal aesthetic and the physical context in which they exist. This cohesion comes, for Francis et al., because "cemeteries demonstrate that society is a partnership between the past, the living and those not yet born." It is a site where the living pay "tribute to the memory of the dead" (49). The cemetery at Alexandria is, however, an exclusive space and one that marks the power of narrative to reconstruct and redefine.

In "First Time Again" (6.1), Gabriel and Tobin (Jason Douglas) dig graves for Reg (Steve Coulter), Deanna's husband, and Pete (Corey Brill), the man who killed Reg and who was then summarily executed by Rick. However, Rick intervenes to stop Pete's burial, stating "We're not gonna bury killers inside these walls." Given that Rick has killed many times, both to defend himself and other group members, and he has killed based on the perception of threat, the statement suggests subjectivism. This is something that Morgan (Lennie James) understands, later telling Rick, "I'm a

killer Rick. I am, and you are, too.” This aside, Rick’s decision is an attempt to articulate for the living community a moral contract, one with variable and exclusive clauses, but a contract nonetheless. Deanna supports Rick’s decision, telling Tobin to “take it away;” a statement that denies Pete identity and group membership. These actions demonstrate the ways in which groups can demonize the actions of those they define as Other, while similarly reconciling their own same actions. Thompson sees that “community and interpersonal relationships are a clear part of the show and the quest for friendship and familial units appears even more important during the apocalypse” (160). The cemetery at Alexandria is a space for private commune with the deceased and it allows for the deceased to remain present in the community so that their deaths have meaning and their relationships with the living, although transformed, are not lost.

Interestingly, the horrific deaths of long-time characters Glenn and Abraham (Michael Cudlitz) do not result in them being buried in this space despite them belonging to that community. Both Glenn and Abraham have their heads eviscerated by Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) in “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” (7.1), but they are taken to the Hilltop, another location in which survivors exist for several years, and their graves, first revealed in “Go Getters” (7.5) are seemingly hidden by long grass and water barrels. Each grave is marked by an upright, bare stick, a small pile of stones and flowers, placed by the aptly named Jesus (Tom Payne), who states, “I read somewhere that blue flowers inspire strength and calming.” The flowers are boarded by green that Jesus tells Maggie, Glenn’s widow, signify “release.” The overt symbolism of graves tended by Jesus highlights how imbedded Christianity remains in the lives of survivors.

Alexandria, aside from its cemetery also has a memorial painted on the inside wall near the entry/exit gate. The memorial is important because many of the dead are not recovered. The memorial gives them permanent status in the community. In “Now” (6.5), Aaron (Ross Marquand) watches as new names are added to the list, under the heading, “In Our Memory.” A memorial certainly functions as Raphael et al. understand as “a powerful personal and societal focus” (24). It gives recognition in a public and commonly used area to those that were part of the community and thus narrativizes their deaths as both tragic, but also in the service of the community. The public acknowledgment works to promote a set of shared values, as does the cemetery and Rick’s ambiguous notion that killers should be buried outside of Alexandria. These delicate steps towards

consolidating a cohesive group narrative, one changed but not damaged by cultural or personal trauma, begins in earnest with these burial rituals.

Burial rituals, in the context of *The Walking Dead*, and the narratives they endorse, particularly in relation to higher meaning and purpose beyond the physical realm, function as trauma treatment, personal and cultural, because of their familiarity, and their capacity to articulate a narrative that is recognizable and comforting. They also provide, for survivors, an opportunity to make meaning of a world that, in comparison to what existed before, is frightening and bleak. Yet, the Christian ethos in *The Walking Dead*, despite its contextuality, is also one that seeks to endorse the Christian founding of the American state. Horror, as Blake notes, can shift “the ways in which ideas of nationhood are re-narrativized, re-visioned and re-remembered in the service of nationally-specific military-industrial ends” (190). The persistence of war in *The Walking Dead*, the relentless violence of the living versus the dead, and human versus human, is reflected in the ongoing war on terror first articulated by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Fear or anxiety of disaster and trauma, personal and communal, is somewhat placated in *The Walking Dead* by demonstrating that the foundational tenets of the American state remain intact, so that the new world that will emerge in the aftermath of such destructive and uncertain times will be very much like the old.

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