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**The Zen of Daryl: A New Masculinity Within AMC's *The Walking Dead***

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## Chapter 1: Post-Apocalyptic Entertainment As New American Past-Time

AMC's *The Walking Dead* (TWD) is a pop culture phenomenon that reaches millions of viewers each week, ranging in age from 18 to 50 years old. Chronicling the trials and tribulations of a fictional group of survivors within a horror-fueled post-apocalyptic America, *The Walking Dead* follows in a long line of zombie-centered texts that reveal some of society's deepest anxieties: the threat of overwhelming disease, the fall of societal infrastructure, and the breakdown of ideologies that we live our daily lives by. This project examines changing representations of masculinity within popular culture, and the ways in which the men of *The Walking Dead* seem to both reinforce and challenge those conventions in their post-apocalyptic environment. My critical analysis will focus mainly on the character of Daryl Dixon as a changing, fluid example of the enactment of stereotypical gender norms. The character was developed by the show's producer Robert Kirkman, who is also the creator of the comic book series on which the show is based. Since the character doesn't appear in the original comic books, Daryl has the unique quality of being made-for-TV. Daryl Dixon was developed, along with his brother Merle, as antagonists to the main character Rick Grimes, who serves as the show's hero and leader of the group of survivors. Daryl is at once a macho action hero, moral compass, and soft-hearted 'good guy' within the group of survivors. While other characters within the series have only been portrayed within one of those three categories, Daryl constantly shifts between them, creating a dynamic and complex character that an increasing number of fans identify with. The longevity and increased fervor for Daryl Dixon demands closer examination as his character development actively works to separate the made-for-television text from the printed text it originates from.

This project will use Dixon as a reference to examine the changing representations of masculinity within a pop culture text, while maintaining his identity and connection with the series' audience. The analysis seeks to answer the following research questions: In what ways is Daryl a standard example of hegemonic ideals of masculinity? At the same time, in what ways does the text work to portray him as a

more fluid example of masculinity within the group of survivors, and how does this separate him from other male characters? Finally, I will examine the ways that fans of varying ages and genders connect to and identify with Daryl.

Currently, premium cable channels such as HBO, AMC and FX hold sway over trends and tropes that have become indispensable to dramatic narratives, setting the standard for 'quality television'. Scholar Grace Torcasio (2014) cites another of AMC's original programs, *Mad Men* and its lead protagonist Don Draper as an example of the "complex masculinity" that new male-centered dramatic series have brought to the forefront (p.1). While Daryl doesn't move into the highest position of power, leaving the leadership role to Rick Grimes, he holds a powerful position within the group of survivors. This project argues that Daryl's portrayal of a complex masculinity "offers images of masculinity and patriarchal structures of power, and vulnerable, conflicted personas" (Torcasio, 2014, p. 1). As the American social landscape has changed, the emergence of male-centered dramatic television has been seen as a response to the changing social, economic and interpersonal position of men and the role of hegemonic masculinity and the ideologies of patriarchy in modern American society. Patriarchy has long been defined as "culturally accepted male domination and the power relationships by which men dominate women" (Beechey, p. 67). While Beechey's examination of the structures of patriarchy was first published in 1979, the concept of patriarchy is rooted in the concept of males dominating over subordinate groups. The definition of 'subordinate' groups has come to include women, various racial and ethnic groups, homosexuals, transgendered individuals, the disabled and handicapped – basically any group that does not fit the description of the dominant white, heterosexual, able-bodied middle class male. However, power structures within the dominant group create a secondary subordinate group, even within the dominant group, a phenomena labeled "internal hegemony" (Buchbinder, p. 93). Class identification, cultural identity and the performance of masculinity contribute to differences in the power of males within a patriarchal society. This project examines Daryl Dixon as a new standard of masculinity

– and a marked difference from his fellow masculine white males - through his fluid portrayal of traits that are often strictly coded as either masculine or feminine. Dixon easily combines physical prowess, violent action against threats, and those characteristics that don't necessarily fit into the ideal definition of masculinity – emotional affection for others, a heightened sense of right and wrong, and uninhibited displays of emotion in moments of duress or grief. His portrayal is not only a departure from the standard male anti-hero of TV and film standards, but it also separates him from the other male characters within *TWD*.

*The Walking Dead* premiered on AMC Network on October 31st, 2010, and the first season consisted of six episodes. It quickly skyrocketed to international acclaim, and with each new season it seems to target a growing demographic, pulling in viewers ages 18-49, which is fairly evenly split between male and female viewers. The series' fourth season broke ratings records including viewings for a season premiere, weekly ratings of live viewers, and shattered the record for series finales (Freeman, 2014). While the ratings records continue to grow, the series has developed into an almost interactive experience through the use of social media and web technologies. Currently, AMC dedicates another hour of programming to *Talking Dead*, a panel-style talk show that airs immediately after the premiere of a weekly episode of *The Walking Dead*. The show features interviews with guests including show stars, producers, and celebrity fans. The host takes questions that are sent in via Twitter or Facebook, and often takes live on-air calls. With real-time interaction with the show's hierarchy of producers and creators, fans connect on a deeper level with the program. This increases their sense of ownership, allowing Walking Dead fans to delve into the series with a unique passion and dedication.

With highly recognized titles such as *Mad Men* (2007-2015) and *Breaking Bad* (2008 -2013), AMC has set itself up as a curator of quality programming, and had set the foundation for *The Walking Dead's* success within its first few seasons. As the show has increased in popularity with viewing audiences, media outlets have taken notice, as well as many in the field of academics. Research for this project has

uncovered books and essays from a variety of disciplines such as philosophy, theology, business and marketing, as well as a wealth of viewpoints from the field of Communications. Scholars, as well as other media influencers, have begun to highlight the ways in which *The Walking Dead* affects not only the pop culture niche of comic book and horror film fans, but the production of television and the engagement of audiences across genres. This project will examine the current available material – Seasons 1 through the first half of Season 5 of AMC's *The Walking Dead*- and critically analyzes the development of Daryl Dixon throughout the story arc. Research will also include an examination of fan-generated content such as forum posts and memes that highlight the ways in which fans view the character's development, and the ways they relate to him. With the power of the internet behind him, Daryl Dixon's future as a main character in *TWD* universe seems certain, as fans continue to promise that if Daryl dies, they will riot.

Given the size and age range of the audience, *TWD* is a significant influence on other pop culture texts. It is not only changing the face of dramatic television, but it is also reaching into the horror film genre, where gender issues have long been discussed with very little change seen in recent years. This project focuses on Daryl Dixon as the site of an increased awareness of the fluidity of gender enactment and the breakdown of rigid gender norms for a television character, and also sets *The Walking Dead* series generally, and Dixon specifically as a blue-print model for audience engagement and identity within new pop culture texts.

This project seeks to develop the idea that fluid portrayals like those of Daryl Dixon will contribute to a less rigid and more representative depiction of characters within pop culture franchises and their fandoms, and influence those audiences in beneficial ways. As I'll expand upon later in this chapter, this project will examine these instances through the lens of cultivation theory as an influencer on it's massive audience and fan base. Before I can begin my own analysis, it is necessary to discuss the pop culture climate that has contributed to *The Walking Dead's* immense success, focusing on two areas

of literature that figure prominently into audience reception of zombie narratives: media as a barometer of social anxieties and the history of the zombie genre.

*TV & Film: Barometers of Social Anxiety*

The works of film and television have long been considered barometers of our social and cultural identity. In the world of television, characters involved in weekly installments of a series come into our homes week after week, compelling us to watch and identify with them as they experience life in front of our eyes (Neel, p. 10). Television series have the unique ability to adapt to current events and changing ideals, encapsulating them within the larger tapestry of the show. These shows also have the power to affect our perceptions of the world around us with their repetitious portrayals of cultural ideas of racism, sexuality and in particular, gender roles. In our modern society, these points are constantly changing and adding new dimensions to our human experience.

The development of male-centered dramatic programming is the product of television adjusting to the changing social structure of American culture. In the years immediately following the terror attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the War on Terror, the American job market plummeted and financial stability became an uncertainty, the concept of patriarchal breadwinners lost much of its potency as an ideological norm. Doug MacLeans' (2011) lengthy examination of the biggest premium cable hits is a case study in "the masculinization of television drama, attributed to a desire to realign the medium to appeal to a wider audience" (p.7). MacLean sites two other AMC original programs – *Mad Men* (2007 - 2015) and *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013) as examples of a growing trend that has shaped the television landscape in recent years. Both programs feature a male protagonist as the head of a household, Don Draper of *Mad Men* set in New York City of the 1960's, and Walter White in New Mexico, post- 9/11. Both men are breadwinners for their families. They each suffer under the structure of (distinctly white) patriarchal masculinity and the pressures it puts on them to provide for their families while maintaining their position as self-made, professional men. Both programs focus on the character's internal struggle with his own

sense of self, and the expectations of those around him. These programs, while set in different eras of American history, speak directly to modern concerns over the changing landscape of our society. As the work force becomes more integrated to include women and minorities, as jobs pay less and expect more, or become harder to find in general, the ideological norms of a male breadwinner and provider lose much of their social currency, and become more damaging and restrictive. Dramatic programs examining the internal struggle of men within a patriarchal system highlights the need for a “reexamining of the stability and relevance of the performance of rigid masculine/feminine gender roles” (MacLeand, 2011, p. 8). As I explained above, patriarchy has long been defined as “culturally accepted male domination and the power relationships by which men dominate women” (Beechey, p. 67). While Beechey’s examination of the structures of patriarchy was first published in 1979, the structure of patriarchy has only morphed to include a wider definition of subordinate groups. MacLean notes the separation of quality TV male characters through the ways that male-centered dramas deal with the breakdown of the lead male’s social sphere and value within a turbulent patriarchal structure:

“With the public sphere destroyed, focus on interpersonal connection is the only option...a shift away from an emphasis on monetary prowess while stressing less tangible, less celebrated offerings. (p. 43)”

Class identification, cultural identity and the performance of masculinity contribute to differences in the power of males within the dominant group. Daryl is constantly identified as an ‘other’, compared to the group’s leading males – mostly Rick and Shane. The characters who do comment on Daryl’s difference attempt to reconcile his otherness by confirming that he is just as good, strong, or as decent as Rick and Shane, even with his backwater redneck habits and mysterious past. As I’ll elaborate on in the next chapter, when compared to the two clean-cut cops, Daryl is seen as lower class, less socially accepted, and somehow, less capable to not only care for the group, but also to properly care for himself, even though he displays early on some of the more valuable survival skills necessary to provide for the group.



Daryl is a manifestation of a new trend in the concept of masculinity, and the desirable traits that encompasses. While the American cultural ideology would suggest that wealth, intelligence, sophistication and physical power are the most beneficial and useful traits, American pop culture has seen a dramatic shift in what is considered relatable when discussing concepts of masculinity. The rapid increase in “hillbilly” entertainment could be considered a cultural shift away from the more conservative and straight-laced entertainment of the 80’s through the early 2000’s. The reality TV sector has given us dozens of shows based around affluent families like Ozzy Osborne’s brood of rock royalty, the Kardashians’ dizzying fortune and confusing paths to fame, and other reality shows where money and materialism are part of the pleasure that audiences gain from watching. The shift away from high-status characters to the everyday, low-brow, self-identifying redneck families as seen on programs like TLC’s *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and A&E’s *Duck Dynasty* allows middle-class viewers a break from the overwhelming wealth of the Kardashian family to the somehow more relatable reality of Honey Boo-Boo eating dinner out of a repurposed Country Butter crock. Dean’s (2012) examination of America’s cycling trend of hillbilly entertainment includes a critical analysis of Alana “Honey Boo Boo” Thompson and her family. Their identification with the term “redneck” gives us permission to view them as a spectacle, since we understand them to be acting the part. As Dean states in her examination, the family’s identification as “hillbillies” showcases their “backwardness, and highlights the progress more upstanding Americans in the cities or suburbs have made. These fools haven’t crawled out of the muck, the story goes, because they don’t want to” (2012). Daryl and his brother Merle embody the sort of contrast that a hillbilly symbolizes when compared to upstanding police officer Rick Grimes. They fit perfectly into the rugged, basic masculinity Laura Bennett has summarized in her analysis of A&E’s *Duck Dynasty*: “Masculinity seems as straightforward as a punch to the face. You kill things. You eat them. You take care of your family. And you grow a beard” (2014). While Daryl never grows more facial hair than a goatee and wispy

moustache, the concept rings true for Daryl as portrayed at the beginning of the series, and continues to mark his separation from the other members of his group throughout the series.

Along with the rural, hillbilly identity, Daryl is well-practiced in some of the most important skills to his group's continued survival. Survivalist fantasies are part of the appeal of a zombie apocalypse narrative for many viewers. The apocalyptic world, with a complete loss of societal structure, is the perfect landscape to experience them without physically acting them out. Bishop notes that the infatuation with survivalist and Dooms Day Preparedness is a symptom of the post-9/11 cultural fear of terrorist attack or other major disaster. As millions witnessed during the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina, government power structures collapse quickly and easily, leaving very little law or order in place (Bishop, p. 21). The entire world becomes wilderness, and survival is the only option – meaning that those individuals who once held white-collar jobs, with little to no physical output, become some of the most ill-prepared and ill-suited authorities within the post-apocalyptic world. Their lack of inherent physical skills mean that they'll have to learn as they go, and the learning curve for handling a weapon is rather sharp in the midst of a zombie apocalypse. This means that men like Daryl – and the men of *Duck Dynasty* - with a more rural, "hillbilly" upbringing, might just be better suited to the new world order. While his low-class upbringing was a detriment in his pre-apocalypse life, it's part of the reason he's still alive, and as this paper will seek to examine, thriving within the post-apocalyptic world.

Blending the zombie film narrative with the male-centered drama, the social commentary of the horror film is infused with the socializing power of television. *The Walking Dead* not only addresses ideological concepts of power structures within families and society as whole, but they address the inevitable breakdown and uselessness of those structures in the face of disaster. The incorporation of the zombie is just a way to address those issues without directly calling them out by name. The zombie is a visual monster. Its gruesome depiction and physically violent nature make it necessary to watch a zombie film, rather than read about it. The zombie is a unique horror trope due the fact that its modern

incarnation has no root in literature. Other undead monsters such as vampires, golems (like Frankenstein's monster), and demons all possess some resemblance to humans, or at least maintain some sort of mental capacity for thought and purpose. The zombie is simply a body, animated by supernatural forces with one purpose. The zombie's origins are entirely different from other supernatural monsters as well. The term "zombie" is rooted in Haitian voodoo folklore, a combination of African mysticism and Western Christianity- introduced to the native culture by decades of imperialist colonization. The "process of zombification is a ritual, which brings back recently deceased corpses as mindless slaves" (Bishop, p. 47). However, the zombies of Haiti don't come back in order to consume the living. They're victims of a curse, brought back from their eternal rest to work in sugar cane fields. These empty shells were first brought to the silver screen in the 1930's as literature about Haiti reached the height of its popularity with *White Zombie* (1932). It wasn't until George Romero combined the pitiful Undead of Haitian folklore with a more sinister science fiction monster that the modern zombie standard was created. The modern zombie was brought about by Western imperialism, manipulated into horror by the collective imperialist society's imagination and hegemonic ideals concerning religion, creating the first fully Western horror monster.

The horror genre has been both praised and criticized for its ability to delve into the collective human psyche. The point of a horror film is to both thrill and horrify, but very often it encapsulates a critique of the social climate it was created in. The zombie narrative in particular is an incredibly powerful source of satirical commentary, as exemplified by the work of George A. Romero and his *Dead* trilogy (*Night of the Living Dead* 1968, *Dawn of the Dead* 1978, *Day of the Dead* 1985). His films have become the standard by which all other zombie narratives are judged, and set the criteria for zombies as a faceless threat to American society. Decades later, his original films still speak to the cultural anxieties of their historical time periods, while allowing for modern audiences to project their own fears onto the zombie hordes. The third installment of Romero's *Dead* series, *Day of the Dead* first debuted in 1985. Film

scholar Robin Wood sees this film as a blatantly negative critique of American society of the 80's, and the hyper-masculinity depicted by the most popular Hollywood blockbusters of the era (p. 288). The men in *Day of the Dead* who make up the last of the organized American military are a clear example of this violent version of masculinity, and the threat they pose to the female protagonist, Sarah, is evident from the start of the film.

“What Romero captures, magnificently, is the *hysteria* of contemporary masculinity, the very excesses of which testify to an anxiety, a terror. (Wood, 2003, p. 290).

Wood also perfectly sums up the character of Sarah, who is physically female, yet has an extremely androgynous attitude and personality combining characteristics that are rigidly coded masculine or feminine within American culture: “(she is) strong, decisive, and resourceful, she is also tender and caring and shows no desire to dominant” (p.292). I would make the argument that Daryl Dixon is, to an extent, an androgynous character. The description provided for Sarah is apt, and one only needs to change the pronoun to make it fit for Daryl.

In another perfect example of a fluid character within the post-apocalypse, and a timely reexamining of concepts of masculinity and femininity, Barry Keith Grant examines the 1990's remake of *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by Tom Savini and written by George Romero. The recreation revamps the main female character, Barbara from the inept burden of the 60's into a shot-gun wielding heroine who winds up being the only surviving member of her group. Barbara embodies resourcefulness and a calm missing from her original incarnation. Grant uses the term professionalism: “a detachment from personal needs and comforts, and an existential determination to survive, as well as to cope with the zombie threat” (p. 205). She isn't weighed down by sentimentality for loved ones that she's lost to the zombies, nor is she restricted by the territorial or patriarchal needs of her male counterparts, Ben and Harry Cooper. Neither of the men make it through this version of the film alive, and they are limited and suffer from their inability to move past masculine notions of territory and dominant power, lines that we

can draw to later examine the toxic masculinities of TWD's Shane and Merle. We see this same sense of professionalism in Daryl now and again as he takes some of the more emotionally charged decisions or actions out of Rick's hands, and makes judgements based on his responsibility to the group as a whole, without paternal instinct clouding his decisions.

As Daryl develops, he showcases his value as a tie back to horror film roots and allows *The Walking Dead* to wield the popularity of a weekly television program and the social power of a feature-length film. As the zombie narrative takes on new forms throughout pop culture, the series provides an opportunity to address social issues and standards, using the narrative to explore new social dynamics. The show's position as a post-apocalypse story separates it completely from our modern society, allowing for a suspension of belief that allows audiences to connect and empathize more fluidly. American popular culture had to adjust to the major culture shock that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, finding ways to skirt around the direct issues, and allow audiences to explore their newfound fears through newly imagined characters, both living and undead.

America came face to face with a terrifying new reality on the morning of September 11, 2001. Since then, American cultural attitudes have been significantly altered and these alterations have been seen in contemporary horror movies. Examining these changes, Muntean and Payne (2011) conducted an extensive content analysis on some of the most successful horror films released after 9/11. Addressing the increase of zombie-themed films, the authors make the case that Americans have now become familiar with scenes of devastation –empty streets, dead bodies and have faced the threat of a collapse of society as we know it (p.243).

Bishop has added to this research by analyzing the drastic changes within the zombies themselves. Bishop focuses mainly on George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* as an example of the 'classic' zombie. Using the shambling, reanimated corpses as a standard, the changes made to the zombie within films like *28 Days Later* and *Resident Evil* are drastic. New zombies are fast, angry and driven by an

animalistic instinct to spread their infection – being eaten alive is no longer the major threat, but rather the loss of control and personal autonomy become the basis of the zombie’s power to horrify (p.197).

A common pattern throughout these studies is the analysis of zombies as a reflection of ourselves. They are devoid of human emotion or conscious thought, and they reflect some of our deepest fears – the inability to know what comes after death, and our own potential for violence (Bishop p. 200; Muntean & Payne p. 246). Bishop attributes this to Sigmund Freud’s theory of “The Uncanny” (p. 196-197). The zombie serves as an antagonist to our human nature. They are flesh and blood, not some supernatural being. They are us, but grotesquely altered. The theory of The Uncanny allows for the utilization of the zombie narrative to address any societal ill that the film maker wants to address. They are a blank slate that can stand in to represent the threat of terrorism, infectious disease, or the dismantling of ideological structures. Even if the specific problem isn’t addressed within the text, the “Uncanny other” becomes whatever the audience views it to be – “allowing for a television audience to create their own horror while identifying with the living characters within the program” (Bishop, 2006 p.197). Attributing the post-9/11 mentality of American culture to *TWD*’s success aligns it with the development of zombie cinema and the introduction of the male-centered drama, both of which saw a rapid increase during the fall out from the terrorist attacks and the start of America’s War on Terror. The fear of the unknown and unnamable threat makes the zombie narrative a malleable source of fear for television audiences.

As noted in Muntean and Payne’s analysis of post-9/11 zombie cinema, even the landscape in which the events unfold has drastically changed. Modern zombie cinema has upped the ante, increasingly showing city-wide chaos and devastation, explosions and riots. These scenes have become familiar to American citizens. Kyle Bishop notes:

“Scenes depicting deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses, and gangs of lawless vigilantes have become more common than ever, appearing on the nightly news as often as on the movie screen” (p. 18).

Veiled social commentary has become more and more pronounced in modern zombie cinema. In post-9/11 films, everything is up for grabs. From capitalist greed, terrorism, to the nuclear family and immigration –all of these ‘threats’ to American society fit the narrative of zombie cinema. As the *TWD* franchise grows in popularity, and the message of the show delves deeper into the problems inherent to human nature, we see the veil slowly slipping away. The zombie film has been adapted, compacted down to fit on the small screen, with the same power to horrify and captivate as its big-screen predecessors.

The fascination with zombies has been limited to their horror movie fan-base for decades. While the zombie enjoyed some success with an early move into the world of video games, there is a marked increase in popularity of zombie-themed pop culture franchises since the breakout success of *The Walking Dead*. As many popular print magazines note, the zombie is an ‘open-ended narrative’, and can be turned and twisted to fit pretty much any scenario, or fit into any media channel necessary (Lauro 2013, Marche 2013, & Pappas 2013). The power of the zombie is recognized as a way for audiences to feel a sense of control over their emotions concerning the fear of death, provide a way of acting out survivalist fantasies, and to some extent, urging them to prepare for the inevitable disaster that causes society’s breakdown. There are also a lot of fun, quirky, and down-right weird ways in which zombies are working their way into America’s everyday visuals and entertainment. Alongside full-scale video games, web-based games like *Plants vs. Zombies* have begun popping up, or the disturbingly motivational fitness application, *Zombies, Run!*, which provides the users with a soundtrack of zombie moans and groans to motivate their running workout, and builds into an interactive game with frequent use. Popular fads like family portrait car decals have gotten an undead makeover, complete with undead pets to advertise the size, and creepiness, of your family on the back of the minivan. The frequency and diverse levels of camp

to creepy have made the zombie a much more accessible icon than their B-movie horror film days. The availability of the zombie genre through other media channels not only contributes to the TV series popularity, but also allows the franchise to branch out into other areas of its audience's entertainment landscape. The zombie is no longer limited to the four walls of a TV or movie screen – they're roaming all over pop culture, and the audience's social sphere.

As I will explore in the following chapters, Daryl's portrayal within a massively popular text contributes to the increased acceptance and frequency of less rigid portrayals of masculinity and femininity. This project will combine analysis of the television series along with audience reception through media created and shared by fans. As detailed in the following section, audience interpretation of the text is a crucial part of Daryl's appeal and his benefit as a model of fluid masculinity.

#### *Archive & Method*

This project examines qualities of AMC's *The Walking Dead*, which has been adapted for television from a series of wildly successful comic books of the same title. The first issue was published in 2003 by Image Comics, and has been reprinted three times in small paperback form, graphic novels and compendium collections. The comic series released its 139th monthly issue on March 25th, 2015 (Huntington, 2015). The serialized format of the comic books allows for an ideal translation to the world of television. *TWD* is at the forefront of the quality TV genre, as defined in the previous chapter (Torcasio 2014, MacLean 2011). As Hassler- Forest noted in his examination of the serialization of the quality TV genre, *The Walking Dead* navigates a fine line between the "endlessly deferred narrative of comic books...and novelistic and thematic coherence, often associated with the cinema and quality television" (p. 91). Comic book creator and show producer Robert Kirkman has stated that his main goal when creating the comic series was to establish "the zombie movie that would never end" (Ross, p. 35). Television has the power to create a limitless storyline, the same way soap operas are able to continuously recycle themselves and suspend closure for decades, in most cases. The death toll within



the world of *TWD* doesn't allow for characters to last that long, but with the comics still rolling out month after month, there is no shortage of material to utilize.

One of the most interesting aspects of the series' move to television is the inclusion of characters that have never appeared in the printed comic book stories. As stated earlier, Daryl and Merle Dixon were created by Kirkman and former co-creator Frank Darabont specifically for the television series after actor Norman Reedus auditioned for the role of Merle, and Darabont created Daryl in order to utilize Reedus' talent.(TheWalkingDeadFans, 2013). Since he has no prior storyline, Daryl serves as a constant force of change within the series. The writers have to consider Daryl's personality and behavior, and how his presence affects the trajectory of a particular storyline. Producer Robert Kirkman has stated that the writing team addresses each new story line with Daryl in mind.

“The first thing we deal with is: how does Daryl Dixon change this story? ...his personality is this, and he would behave this way, (that) means that he would react to this person differently than this and differently than that” (Rowles, 2015).

In a series that already addresses a variety of masculine topics and tropes, Daryl's character provides a new point of exploring themes that weren't covered in the printed comics. He represents a fluid, evolving version of masculinity within the series that departs from our society's hegemonic ideal that often includes aggressiveness, gratuitous violence and stoicism from its leading men. Daryl is a man who moves amongst a diverse group of survivors as a leader, a caretaker, protector, and a provider without ever moving into the position of ultimate authority, while also developing an emotional response system that often differs from the ways that other men within *The Walking Dead* universe react to their surroundings.

*The Walking Dead* is an undeniable post-apocalyptic narrative. Modern American society has been abolished. The landscape resembles America only in the physical layout of landmarks and roadways. America's definition of hegemonic masculinity has lost its grounding with the destruction of patriarchal

structures, and therefore the social, economic, cultural and symbolic structures that allowed for male individuals to hold power over other social groups has lost its systematic grip. To this effect, David Buchbinder's definition of post-apocalyptic masculinity is an apt description of the emerging ways in which the males of *The Walking Dead* interact with each other, and various characters. Buchbinder defines the "apocalypse" as the demise of masculinity within a society still intact, a change of meanings and values produced after a shift in ideological thought in regards to masculinity and its performance. While this is a tame definition for our purposes, it does still fit *TWD's* more violent definition of an apocalypse, which abolishes the society and its values completely.

Daryl was operating at a very different level in American society than his counterparts in the pre-apocalyptic world due to their disparaging economic statuses, cultural identities, and social roles. Rick follows more closely to the standard of hegemonic masculinity, the societal construct of what "makes a man", formed by the frequent repetition of tropes within pop culture and social interactions. These concepts are also influenced by the ideological belief that gender is a binary structure, "coding certain behaviors for biologically male or female individuals as masculine or feminine" (Buchbinder, p. 66). Masculinity often includes features such as physical size, muscularity, attractiveness and stamina along with personal traits such as bravery, resourcefulness, competitiveness, stoicism, (hetero) sexuality and stamina. It also usually includes aspects of aggressiveness, violence and dominance (Buchbinder, p. 89). Rick fully embodies what Buchbinder defines as "residual" masculinity, a representation of masculine qualities that was formed in the past, but is an active influence on present representations (p.158). I will explore the difference between Rick and Daryl's macho representations in a later chapter, discussing Daryl's redneck or hillbilly identity.

Buchbinder's analysis sets the ideological shift in the value of masculinity within the timeframe of a post-9/11 society. As outlined in the previous section by various scholars, we can safely consider the events of 9/11 a catastrophic event that greatly altered the course of American society and popular

culture (Bishop 2006, Munten & Payne 2009, MacLean 2011). As Buchbinder states, the attacks were considered emasculating, threatening the vitality and strength of America (p. 171). When we consider the visible changes within pop culture's treatment of hegemonic masculinity in the years following, we understand that the answer to emasculation was to up the ante on representations of powerful, iconically American, and in turn residual, representations of masculinity.

This project will critically analyze the texts available to the public, focusing on Daryl Dixon's development from Seasons 1 through 5. By examining key moments, the analysis will highlight the qualities that define Daryl as a new, less rigid example of masculinity. Coupled with audience reactions, this project will examine the power of Daryl as a blueprint for the development of fluid characters. *The Walking Dead* has a powerful voice in contemporary media, and this project hopes to highlight the ways in which this pop culture powerhouse can influence the future of television, film, and entertainment technology. In the following sections, I'll explore three themes focusing on the character of Daryl Dixon: examples of his hegemonic, traditional masculinity, his subversive masculinity and significant sub-cultural identities, and finally, his developing emotional connection to the other survivors, and the ways they continue to shape his development into a more fully realized person.

The entire project is informed by the lens of cultivation theory, developed at the dawn of television's engrainment as a cultural norm in the late 1950's. The general concept of the theory links an audience's TV viewing habits with their real-world beliefs and social practices. The theory states that "those who spend more time watching TV are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the TV world" (Morgan, Shanahan, Signorielli p. 34). Of course, television viewing habits differ between individuals, based on a multitude of factors. This project would narrow the scope of the cultivation theory to focus on audiences that ritualistically watch *The Walking Dead*, and participate in fan-driven channels such as blogs and forums to contribute their own thoughts and content. This limited focus allows for a much more concise picture of the effects of *TWD* on

its audiences as a singular influencer. Considering the huge demographic that the show reaches, and the multiple other influences on the way the audience watches the program, the opportunity to find a varied sample within the demographic will still provide enough room for a comprehensive analysis of the show's homogenizing effect within the viewing audience.

## Chapter 2: Made For How It Is Now – Leadership & Expectations of Masculinity

Daryl Dixon is a young man from the mountains of North Georgia, brought up by a dysfunctional family including his abusive father, an alcoholic mother, and his violent and troublesome older brother, Merle. He wears leather and flannel shirts with the sleeves ripped off, and rides a motorcycle. Visually, he fits the description of your usual bad boy, with Merle taking on the more unsavory personal qualities of racism, irrationality and violent aggression. The pair pose a challenge to the show's representation of residual masculinity in the form of Rick Grimes, a clean-cut sheriff's deputy from King County, Georgia. As audience members, we are to automatically assume that Rick has the upper hand over the Dixon brothers, simply by virtue of his character. However, Daryl is a much less toxic version of his brother's hyper-machoism. Where Merle is violent and crude, Daryl is reserved, reasonable and socially aware. In this chapter, I will highlight key moments within the series that showcase Daryl's unique interpretations of masculine qualities such as leadership and machoism, and how his display of masculinity works to separate him from the men around him, including his ability to control his emotions and violent urges, his selective performance of a more macho façade, and his ability to make decisions for the good of his group based on personal instinct, instead of a moral or paternal identity.

The first example of Daryl's unique masculinity is showcased by his reactions to his brother being left in Atlanta after a group scavenging trip went wrong. The group repeatedly tells Rick that this news will not go over well with Daryl when they return to camp. He returns from hunting soon after they arrive, and Rick and his partner Shane break the news to him as calmly as they can. Daryl's reaction is violent, but clumsily so, as if he's not used to lashing out at others. He comes at Rick with a knife, swings and misses, stumbling over himself in an uncoordinated, haphazard way. Rick and Shane overpower him easily with a headlock, and he accepts Rick's requests for a 'calm discussion'. When the party returns to rescue Mere, instead of finding him still chained in place, they find his severed hand lying in a pool of blood and the handcuffs still locked around a rusty pipe. Daryl turns his crossbow on T-Dog, whom he blames for

leaving Merle after losing the key that would have unlocked the handcuffs (*Tell It To The Frogs*, 2010). These two brief moments of violence are marked by Daryl's restraint and his hesitation to injure or kill another human. We've already seen that he has absolutely no problem shooting Walkers, or delivering a blow to the head as quickly and confidently as any of the others. He is physically capable of inflicting damage, but he only uses this power against zombies. In both instances, he lashes out when he is overcome with emotion over the fate of his brother. However, we see a moment of hesitation that holds him back from striking, or releasing the trigger on his bow. Unlike his brother, Daryl draws a line at violent action against other living humans, and is able to control himself. I would also argue that his ability to restrain himself is an example of stoicism, the restraining of emotion in order to maintain a calm, aloof and emotionally detached demeanor, often considered a desirable masculine quality that denotes strength and rationality.

Shane is the ultimate marker of Daryl's 'difference' from the other males, especially in the ways the men interact and deal with threats to the group. Shane is an example of overt and violent hegemonic masculinity in the absence of Merle Dixon. He is hungry for the same type of "masculine capital" that Rick has, including the power he sees Rick gaining over him, along with the familial connections he has that Shane wants (Buchbinder, p.156). As the second season develops, the group slowly realizes that Shane's violence and volatile personality make him more of a threat than a leading force. Rick comes to depend more and more on Daryl's more level head, and his advice. Shane resents this not only because he is losing more of his power over the group, but also because he doesn't see Daryl as an equal to himself or Rick. Shane still bases his assessment of leadership material on the pre-apocalypse standards, which are constantly being proven wrong and ineffective in this new world. He also tries to usurp the role of patriarchal protector for Rick's family, a territorial power struggle that eventually severs his relationship with Rick completely. Shane constantly subverts Rick's decisions, and questions his ability to protect not only the other survivors, but his own family. When the group takes a young man prisoner after a run-in

with another, much more violent group of survivors, Shane wants to kill him and get it over with to remove the threat. Rick has reservations, and wants to come to the most ethical and conscientious decision he can. Daryl doesn't lend his voice to either side of the argument, but takes on the responsibility of getting information out of the prisoner in order to assess whether or not he's a danger to the group. While this involves beating him up in order to get answers, Daryl does it quietly, away from the others inside the barn without making a spectacle of it. "He's not that guy, he wants to quietly get it done and be done with it.", actor Norman Reedus adds to the reading of Daryl as Rick's best support in many of the group's more weighty decisions (TheWalkingDeadFans, 2013). Daryl doesn't struggle for leadership, but rather supports Rick and tries to contribute to the protection of the group, instead of trying to dominate and control.

In addition to Daryl's ability to maintain himself and his emotions, we see evidence of his masculine fluidity in the ways in which he calibrates his performance of overt machismo as needs and threats arise. Within the first episodes, there is a pattern of instances of Daryl's performance of hyper-masculinity, a showboating of violence that doesn't fit into his day-to-day mode of operations. The entire fourth episode of the series, *Vatos*, is a comment on masculinity and its performativity. As defined by Buchbinder, the performance of gender is "an undertaking by an individual to enact the gender discursively (and culturally) assigned as appropriate to that individual's anatomical configuration" (p. 55). In Daryl's case, he frequently puts on a show of strength and overt violence in order to maintain his macho demeanor in front of strangers who pose a threat to his group. In one instance, Daryl is attempting to intimidate a teenager that the group has taken hostage. He throws Merle's severed hand into the boy's lap as evidence of what happens to people who mess with him. This is obviously an act to the audience, but is a moment where the teenager stops degrading Daryl and calling him a "hick", and starts to see him as a powerful threat. Daryl turns up the machismo, using his physical appearance and power to his advantage. The episode culminates in Rick and the group discovering that the gang's leader,

Guillermo, is a janitor who turned into the leader of his group out of a need to protect the abandoned residents of the nursing home he worked for. “Appearances are the only thing we can judge people on now”, he claims after revealing that his second-in-command, Phillippe, was a nurse – both committed to helping the residents after everyone else had abandoned them. The actual gang members had arrived later, also looking for their loved ones, and stayed to protect the rest (*Vatos*, 2010). The performance of an overtly violent masculinity maintains some semblance of power, especially for the men of *The Walking Dead*. Daryl frequently plays along, filling the role of a heroic and aggressive protector when threatened by outside forces.

The portrayal of Daryl’s masculinity also serves as an example of modern American cultural values and concepts of ideal masculinity hinges on context and environment. Daryl’s skills as a survivalist and knowledge as a Georgia native make him an invaluable resource as the group searches for a new home and move into a rural landscape. In one of the most alarming moments of the show, Sophia, a twelve-year-old member of the group is chased away from the rest of the group by two Walkers and is lost in the woods. Daryl immediately goes out after her, momentarily assuming leadership from Rick and Shane. In this moment, Daryl proves that his survival and tracking skills are the most desirable qualities out of the group leadership at that moment, as they shift from the urban cities where the other two men held more knowledge and power. This distinction between the three men highlights a resurgence in the value placed on tactile, natural skills over more refined, social skills. Rick and Shane can’t do much more than follow Daryl around while he tracks Sophia’s movements, but continually question his abilities. “Do you want a lesson in tracking or do you want to find that girl?”, Daryl quips. It solidifies the second-in-command positions of Rick and Shane, and shows that Daryl has full confidence in himself and his abilities (*What Lies Ahead*, 2011). This exchange, and the drastic shift in power, is a perfect example of Buchbinder’s concept of internal hegemony – the suppression of one version of masculinity over another, creating an oppressed version of masculinity within the hegemonic group itself. While Daryl maintains a form of



power over female characters, he is often seen as subordinate to Rick and Shane, due to his divergence from the hegemonic norms of masculinity that the other two men epitomize. However, in this moment he has taken over as the more powerful version of masculinity within this new landscape, due to his personal skills, his physicality, and resourcefulness.

As the group continues to relocate later in the series, the group's concept of valuable masculinity shifts depending on where they settle, making Daryl's leadership role volatile. In Season 5, the group discovers the Alexandria Safe Zone, a community that was walled off at the beginning of the outbreak and has been untouched by the destruction. Once inside, we see Daryl struggling again with his place within the group. The Safe Zone is an almost grotesque example of Suburbia, alive and well inside the post-apocalyptic world that the survivors have been struggling through. When the group arrives, many of the members immediately take advantage of the creature comforts that they've been missing - showering, shaving- brushing their teeth. Daryl remains in the same dirty clothes, unwashed, for days. He guts and starts eating an opossum on the front porch of an otherwise picturesque mini-mansion. He leaves the walls of Alexandria for hours at a time to go hunting, trying to avoid interaction with others inside the safe zone. Daryl can't adjust to the suburban concepts of survival, because he had never experienced them prior to the apocalypse. With food sources, a stockpile of guns, and the comfort of lovely, furnished homes and nice neighbors, the rest of the group begins to devalue Daryl's rural leadership, and Rick's social capital as an example of hegemonic masculinity comes back into play. When Rick accepts a leadership role within the Alexandria community, as a constable alongside Michonne, Daryl audibly scoffs before stalking away from the group. "You a cop again?", he asks after Rick appears in his new constable's uniform (*Remember*, 2015). He sees again the power dynamics of a patriarchal society between himself and Rick, an aspect of their relationship that had fallen away during their months in the prison, but were now coming back to the surface in an extremely exaggerated fashion. The group is moving back into an urban landscape, with all the trappings of an upper-middle-class lifestyle, alienating the lower-class,

redneck woodsman that Daryl grew up as. While the other survivors find some relief within the walls of Alexandria, Daryl sees himself as having even less breathing room, and feeling less than secure, inside the picture-perfect world the Alexandrian survivors have built.

As previously mentioned, Daryl is a more rugged and organic version of traditional masculinity. He doesn't have the social graces or wholesome appearance of Rick and Shane, and he relies more on his physical power and resourcefulness to survive. One of the most interesting symbols of this separation is Daryl's crossbow. He has a near super-human ability to shoot and hit his target, undead or otherwise, with a single arrow. It not only serves to increase his value as an action hero, but as a resource for the group's continued success and protection. He uses a somewhat antiquated weapon, but one that technically can't run out of ammunition. Unlike Rick and Shane, who rely on more abrasive and stereotypically masculine revolvers and shotguns, Daryl's stealthy and deadly crossbow are often the weapon of choice when the group desperately needs to be quiet, since Walkers are attracted to sound. His weapon is understated, quiet, but highly effective – much like the man himself – without being abrasive or overly destructive.

One of Daryl's most effective leadership qualities is his professionalism, as outlined in the previous chapter. His detachment from situations that confound or compromise Rick emotionally don't upset Daryl nearly as much. He calmly takes control of a situation that his counterparts can't follow through with. He's able to gut zombies similarly to the way he'd gut hunted game and beat up another person in order to get information out of them. In one extremely difficult moment for the group, Daryl puts down another survivor, Dale, after he is bitten and gruesomely injured by a Walker when Rick breaks down. "No reason for you to do all the heavy liftin'", he responds casually when Rick thanks him later (*Beside the Dying Fire*, 2012). Less progressive examples include his avoidance of physical and emotional closeness to the group, especially after they learn of the death of Sophia. Daryl moves his tent far from the other group members' camp, stringing up his hunted squirrels, building his own fire and pushing away

group members who try to connect to him. His sense of restraint fights the urge to create emotional attachments to the rest of the group. Even while grieving for her daughter, Carol seems to be the only one who notices or shows concern for Daryl. She appeals to him through what she sees as their personal connection. "I've already lost my girl – I won't lose you too" (*Trigger Finger*, 2011). Daryl lashes out at her, out of anger at the situation and a sense of loss. He sees Carol's despondence to losing Sophia as not caring, and he blames her just as he blames his own family for their lack of caring for him. "You gonna make this about my Daddy or some crap? Sophia wasn't mine ...all you had to do was keep an eye on her!" Daryl makes the connection back to his own troubled past himself – Carol never mentions it. He's connecting to his past trauma through Sophia, and taking the anger he holds for his own family out on Carol and what he sees as her inability to care for her daughter. His reaction is violent, somewhat sexist, and irrational. Sophia's death forces Daryl to relive his past in a more gruesome way, and emotions that he didn't cope with earlier are coming to the surface.

The final way that Daryl embodies a more complex masculinity within the hierarchy of *The Walking Dead's* male leads is in the way that he identifies family, and his sense of loyalty and duty to those around him who provide support and comfort. Daryl's connection to the two most dominant male characters, Rick and Merle, provides us with the starkest examples of his ability to develop past other character's rigid examples of masculinity. Prior to the outbreak, the only beneficial male relationship that Daryl could claim to have was with his brother Merle, and even that was marred by a history of abuse and abandonment. The differences between Rick Grimes and Daryl Dixon are numerous. Rick is a symbol of male patriarchal authority, a father and a cop who finds himself cast as the leader of a jumbled group of survivors. Daryl is a hillbilly hunter who sees very little value in Rick's version of authority, putting more stock in nature and his own personal will to survive, tagging along behind his older brother for some semblance of familial connection. Daryl is stuck in a sort of teenaged rebellion phase at the onset of the apocalypse, where Rick seems to be a fully realized adult, with a wife and child and middle-class lifestyle.

The fact that the two of them come to identify as family later in the series can be seen as the product of Daryl's personal development and ability to connect, as well as the breakdown of Rick's pre-apocalypse concepts of authority, strength and what it takes to be a leader. Rick provides Daryl with the space he needed to become more fully realized, and a confidant he needed to feel secure. As Rick's most trusted ally and friend, Daryl becomes an integral part of the family dynamic, providing food, protection, and support for Rick and other members of the group. Rick comes to rely on Daryl's instinctual knowledge of the nature of people, and his ability to make decisions based on much more than Rick's animal instinct to protect his children. Being a parent in the apocalypse is unfortunately even more stressful than it was pre-apocalypse, and Rick's duties to his children often weigh heavily on the decisions he makes for the rest of the group. Daryl isn't as burdened by that need, and is able to provide Rick with another sound viewpoint, using his instincts and personal connections to the other survivors to guide his decisions. Rick also unknowingly provides Daryl with a validation that he didn't receive from any of the other men in his life. Both his father and brother treated Daryl as if he were less than them, weaker due to his more gentle nature. "Always the sweet one, my Baby Brother," as Merle so aptly describes him while snickering (*Walk With Me*, 2012). Rick needs Daryl, not only for moral support but for the continued protection of his family. While I won't assume that Daryl is replacing Merle with Rick, it's safe to say that Rick has quickly become the brother that Merle couldn't (and somewhat refused to) be.

While they share moments of leadership, Daryl never fully takes the reigns of leadership away from Rick, reflecting a noteworthy absence of ego and power-seeking. Rick steps down as the solo leader of the group in Season 3, and a "council" is developed, with Daryl stepping in as one of the more proactive leaders. He organizes scavenging parties, hunts for game to support the food sources growing inside the prison grounds, and regularly brings back other survivors that he finds out on the road. As the situation inside the prison deteriorates with a violent flu infecting killing off many survivors, Daryl is put in charge of a mission to reach a nearby veterinary hospital to bring back necessary antibiotics. During that

mission, Bob, one of the survivors brought in by Daryl to help gather supplies, has decided to try and smuggle a huge bottle of whiskey out of the hospital, and hasn't picked up a single useful supply. "Got no meds in your bag? Just this?" he quietly asks as he turns the bottle in his hand. As he pulls his arm back preparing to throw the bottle from the roof, Bob shouts "No!" and reaches for the gun at his hip. Daryl is instantly enraged, and pushes right up into Bob's face, physically challenging him to make a move. Bob lowers his eyes as Daryl comes nose-to-nose with him. Daryl roughly shoves the bottle into his chest with a strained, guttural warning. "You take one sip – once those meds get into our people, I will beat your ass into the ground" (*Indifference*, 2013). Daryl's rage is not only an answer to Bob's reckless behavior, but stems from his past experiences with alcoholics and the destruction that substance abuse brings about. Daryl shows absolutely no patience or empathy for Bob's addiction, another example of his professionalism. His main concern is returning to the group with the medicine, even before settling the situation with Bob through violent retribution, which again highlights his ability to control himself as needed. Daryl's deep commitment to his family – both in the biological sense and the interpersonal sense, which hurt him in the past, now provides transformative benefits for him in the midst of the zombie apocalypse.

Strong familial ties and loyalty are marks of the ideal patriarchal masculine figure. While Daryl doesn't have any progeny to worry about in the zombie apocalypse, he does display intense loyalty and dedication to Merle, who embodies both his male role model, and his most abusive and dysfunctional relationship. The brothers are reunited after the survivors break into Woodbury, the community controlled by The Governor, to save two of their own, Maggie and Glenn, whom have been taken hostage by Merle. When they reach the relative safety of the woods, the rest of the group adamantly refuses to let Merle return to the prison with them. "No him, No me. That's all I can say...Don't ask me to leave him. I already did that once," Daryl sacrifices every connection he's made at the prison for his brother (*The Suicide King*, 2013). This scenario has clear parallels to the stories of those individuals who find

themselves trapped in abusive relationships, both familial and romantic. Merle is the embodiment of a dysfunctional, manipulative entity. He exerts his power over Daryl as his older brother, and in ways that clearly indicate that he is a more aggressive, brutal type of man than Daryl. Even though he is Daryl's last surviving family member, there is no benefit to the relationship, and very little love or emotional support to speak of.

Daryl displays just how far he's developed past his brother after they have been wandering through the woods together for a few days. Daryl rushes to help a group of survivors trapped on a Walker-swarmed bridge. Daryl leaves Merle behind to gripe about helping strangers, and starts taking down Walkers left and right. Daryl's quick move to action in a dangerous situation led to absolutely no reward for himself, but saved four lives that otherwise would have been lost to the shuffling horde of zombies. The fact that Merle is physically present in this scene, but refuses to help, highlights the differences between the two men as Daryl moves further away from the concept of violent, hegemonic masculinity that Merle inhabits. Afterwards, Daryl unleashes his pent-up anger at Merle. Merle attacks him, ripping Daryl's shirt in half and revealing huge, ugly scars down Daryl's back. Merle is visibly emotional for the first time.

Merle: I..I didn't know.

Daryl: Yeah you did. He did the same to you. That's why you left first.

Merle: I had to, man. I would have killed him otherwise.

The two are referring to their father, who clearly gave Daryl those scars after years of physical (and most likely mental) abuse. Merle also suffered the same torture, but being the older sibling, he was able to get away much earlier, leaving his younger brother to fend for himself against an abusive drunkard. There is a pattern of violent masculinity being portrayed as harmful, both to the men who enact it and those around him. Merle comes to realize that Daryl has developed well past him, and no longer relies on him for protection or even a semblance of emotional connection. Merle constantly refers to "Sherriff Rick" and

how close he and Daryl seem, using it more as an insult than anything (*The Suicide King, Home, This Sorrowful Life* 2013). He sees Rick as the remnant of the hegemonic patriarchy that saw Merle as a subversive and invaluable version of masculinity, regardless of his aggression and penchant for violence because of his low-class, redneck identity. While Daryl has ways of subverting the label, and frequently proves the stereotype wrong, Merle can't. His version of masculinity, much like Shane's, is too rigid and too set in the old world's ways to adapt or change. His death at the end of Season 3 is clearly a response to his own inability to cope with the post-apocalyptic order. Merle goes out in a violent blaze, taking out many of The Governor's soldiers, but ultimately being shot and killed by The Governor. It's unclear how much time has passed before Daryl finds his brother, but Daryl discovers Zombie Merle hunched over, gnawing on another body. Daryl begins to sob as the undead version of his brother gets up and starts shambling towards him. For the first time, we see Daryl's professional demeanor break down. He can't even lift his crossbow to shoot it, but pushes the zombie away with his arms a few times before finally snapping, violently stabbing Zombie Merle in the head in order to kill him. He openly weeps throughout the ordeal (*This Sorrowful Life*, 2013). Daryl's reaction to Merle's death is in stark contrast to the calm and cool way he put Dale down after a zombie bite, or the way he was able to hold Carol back when they found Sophia in Hershel's barn. With the last of his blood-related family taken away from him, Daryl finally comes unhinged for a brief moment of pure, unrestrained grief. Daryl's emotions seem simple in their expression, but that's what makes them so vitally important to his identity when compared to the other men in his life. He doesn't resort to violence in order to anchor his emotions in machismo, but instead fully expresses those emotions in other physical ways. In many ways, Daryl's masculinity is grounded in his personal development, and his ability to grow as a person, and as an effective leader through non-confrontational means.

### Chapter 3: Am I The Only One Zen Around Here? – Masculinity Within Spiritual Practices

From his earliest introduction, Daryl has been marked as a separate identity within the Walking Dead universe. He was separated from the rest of his group based on the demolished class system's stereotypes and his "redneck" status, but the others also distinguish him from his brother Merle based on their widely differing personalities. Daryl's presence within the group allows for a unique character perspective, and an opportunity to take chances on fan's ability to identify with the character. Since Daryl is not the series' foremost male lead, he doesn't have to follow the same pattern of behavior as Rick or other male hero leads. Since he doesn't exist in the original comics, Daryl doesn't even have to follow a fan base's pre-existing concept of his characteristics. This allows him to embody characteristics not normally found in the lead macho hero, and to be an intriguing contrast to the series' established leading man. He is playing with the stereotypes of a macho male lead in small but significant ways. Audiences are used to seeing the contrasted examples of Rick and Merle compared to characters like Glenn, who are less heroic but more compassionate, allowing for a wider range of audience identification. In this chapter I'll explore the ways in which Daryl's beliefs and spiritual identity allow him to navigate the post-apocalyptic world as both a heroic protector and a compassionate leader within his group.

One of the earliest indications of Daryl's personal separation from the other survivors is revealed through his identification (or lack thereof) with religion. During the search for Sophia, the group finds an abandoned church. They investigate, hoping to find Sophia safe inside. Instead, they find a group of Walkers. After dispatching the threat, Daryl saunters up to the altar and addresses the crucifix, "Hey J.C., you takin' requests?" before turning his back and exiting the church (*What Lies Ahead*, 2011). In contrast, Rick and Carol both approach the crucifix respectfully and pray. Daryl's skepticism is brought up again when he admonishes Andrea and Carol for repeatedly saying they are "hoping and praying" to find Sophia. "It's a waste of time, all this hopin' and prayin'," he says to a stunned Carol, "because we're gonna locate that little girl. And she's gonna be just fine (*Bloodletting*, 2011). He says this directly to Carol,



looking her in the eyes, completely sure of himself and his words. “Am I the only one who’s Zen around here? Good lord,” he gruffly asks as he turns away from the two women, continuing their trek through the woods. This moment seems to indicate that Daryl has clued us in on a religious ritual he does believe in – Zen Buddhism. Zen is considered an intellectual discipline within the Buddhist religion, focusing one’s nature and training of the mind to “focus on personal growth and achievement of Buddhahood”(O’Brien, 2013). Zen also rejects the study of “scripture, religious rites, and other devotionals” in favor of personal practice of meditation and self-attained enlightenment (ReligionFacts.com, 2013).

Daryl exhibits habits that create parallels to the tenants of Buddhism. His self-assurance and independence follows the concept of Zen, which promotes internal development and sustenance in order to achieve enlightenment. Daryl relates his own survival story to Andrea. When he was about Sophia’s age, he got lost in the woods behind his father’s house and was missing for days. Unfortunately, no one noticed he was missing, and therefore no one came looking for him. Little Daryl survived out in the woods on the skills he’d picked up from hunting, scavenging for berries and catching small game, and eventually made his way home (*Save the Last One*, 2011). He has confidence in Sophia’s own courage to continue to believe that they will find her alive and well. He relies on the power of natural instinct, and the power of nature to provide safety and comfort, even in a landscape where nature has turned the tables on its human inhabitants.

The attitude of Zen also seems to fit Daryl very well. The rejection of standard religious practices, and the elevated importance of personal responsibility reflect Daryl’s own habits and beliefs. While he is clearly very far from the enlightenment that Zen Buddhism strives towards, he works to understand himself better as the series develops, through his own personal development and strengthening his connections to others. It’s never revealed if his solitary treks through the woods or long rides on his motorcycle are methods of meditation, but considering the limited amount of space the survivors have, it

can be assumed that those hunting expeditions are the only moments of solitude Daryl gets on a regular basis.

We also see many instances of Daryl practicing the Buddhist ideals of non-violence and passivity, even though they do not mesh with the extremely violent and non-passive environment Daryl has found himself in. In retrospect, Daryl's commitment to nonviolence against humans is made clear fairly early on, but I feel it's defined by one particular interaction with another survivor, Tyreese, in the middle of Season 4. Tyreese has found out that his girlfriend has been murdered by another member of the group. Daryl seems to reach out to lay a comforting hand on Tyreese's shoulder, and Tyreese instantly forces him back against a fence, easily overpowering him. Despite being threatened, Daryl quickly throws his hands out to signal the others to stay back. "We're on the same side, man," he says calmly, while Tyreese fumes and continues to hold him down. It's one of the first instances where Daryl is faced with violence within his own group, and it seems that he is still practicing some semblance of Buddhist teachings, even within the kill-or-be-killed world he's living in. The examples of restraint mentioned in the previous chapter take on a deeper level of meaning when examined alongside the concept of Daryl's Buddhist nature.

In a masculine aspect, I linked Daryl's emotional distance from the other survivors as professionalism, but I would also argue that it's following the Buddhist ideal of detachment. Detachment has many concepts, including emotional, physical and in some ways, a spiritual detachment from our basic survival instincts (Harris, 2005). Daryl constantly displays a casual attitude towards his own mortality, hunting alone and choosing to ride a motorcycle instead of adopting the relative safety of an enclosed car. His severe emotional distance at the beginning of the series shows how deeply he's adopted the concept in his previous life, but personal development required him to accept some sort of emotional connections in order to find balance within his life after his connection to nature has been tainted, and connection to others becomes a basic part of his survival. Buddhist teaching reiterates that extremes of detachment weaken the body and mind, and therefore make enlightenment impossible.

Finding a balance between the two allows for the continued personal development of the individual, and his journey towards enlightenment. When we compare his development to the dead-end arches of characters like Shane and Merle, we see that Daryl's fluidity and spirituality lend themselves to his continued survival and benefit, whereas the rigidity of hegemonic masculinity brings about other character's violent deaths. "You can't do anything without people anymore, man," as Daryl reminds his brother. He doesn't participate in hyper-macho territorial battles, nor does he try to exert his physical strength over individuals that pose no threat to him. He shows no need for physical comforts, and seems to focus only on providing for himself, and increasingly for the benefit of the group.

The tenants of detachment make reference to physical pleasures, from basic creature comforts (which Daryl refuses in Alexandria), to more sensual pleasures of the body. To date, Daryl is the only male character who has not had romantic interaction with another character. Even the newest additions, Aaron and Eric, shared a kiss within their debut episode! Daryl Dixon's sexual identity has been a buzzworthy topic since the show began, mainly begging the question if Daryl is homosexual. While Kirkman went on record during an episode of *Talking Dead* to state that Daryl is in fact straight, it hasn't quieted the fandom, nor stopped questions pouring in, requiring an explanation as to why one of the show's biggest characters doesn't have a love connection. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, with its rigid notions of sexuality and virility, demands that a true example of masculinity act upon his sexual desires. At this point, Daryl hasn't offered a single example of what his sexual desires are, regardless of whether or not he acts upon it. There's no comical ribbing or innuendos to speak of within *TWD* universe. The decision to make Aaron and Eric, a gay couple, Daryl's newest friends in the Alexandria Safe Zone is a cheeky way of skirting around the issue of sexuality, while highlighting Daryl's deviation from his otherwise heteronormative style. Daryl is an embodiment of physical stamina and prowess, with rugged good looks, and even if he wasn't – he's one of five or six men left in the known world throughout most of the series, with only five or six females, two of whom are Hershel's daughters. There's no opportunity to

be too choosy when trying to fulfill a primal urge. Carol is frequently flirtatious with Daryl, but it's played off as friendly teasing, and not a serious solicitation. The fact that Daryl has no obvious sexuality, or even sexual desires, is a distinct separation from the other males within his group. "I don't want to play him as someone passionate, as someone who would throw a girl up against a tree in the moonlight. I want to play him like he doesn't know what that means..." actor Norman Reedus provides one of the most concrete answers fans have gotten when asking the "Is Daryl gay?" question during fan-driven Q&A in 2014 – he mentioned "a girl" (ahepburn, 2014). In an interview given to Conan O'Brien in early 2015, after the introduction of Aaron to the show, where O'Brien asked whether or not his character might be gay, Reedus quickly answered, "If that's the story they gave me, I would rock that story...I'm not afraid of that" (TeamCoCo, 2015). Whether we can attribute Daryl's disinterest to a separate sexual identity, a simple lack of attraction, or evidence of his Buddhist detachment, the available material doesn't supply any answers. In the context of Buddhism, basic relationships are enough to satisfy his needs and create balance, and fulfill a need for basic survival within the post-apocalyptic world.

Daryl's connection to Eastern religion, and rejection of the group's version of Christianity shows a further connection to outsiders, and a curiosity about the world around him. He showcases his affinity for history and culture through his knowledge of folklore and legends. This separates him from other examples of masculinity within the group because it denotes a masked intelligence and awareness of other cultures, and heightens Daryl's connection to and identification with outsiders. In a touching moment with Carol, Daryl brings back a Cherokee Rose for her, a small, delicate white wildflower. He explains the legend of the rose as a symbol of hope for grieving Native American mothers who were losing their children along the Trail of Tears. The roses would bloom wherever the mother's tears fell. "I aint' fool enough to believe there's flowers bloomin' for my brother, but I believe this one bloomed for your little girl" (Cherokee Rose, 2012).

As previously mentioned, Daryl preferred to search for Sophia alone, and when Daryl first suggests going into the woods alone, Dale asks if he isn't concerned about his Chupacabra. The group explains that Daryl shared a story around the campfire of the time he saw the mythical monster, a common folk story in Mexico and South America, in the woods of Northern Georgia during a hunting trip. "I know what I saw.", he reiterates (*Chupacabra*, 2011). In an otherwise straight-forward, stern man like Daryl, a strong belief in a superstitious creature seems very out of place. In fact, the other men laugh at him and roll their eyes. Considering the tale isn't native to the U.S, and originated in stories out of Mexican folklore, Daryl has obviously studied the stories to some length to understand the myth surrounding the mysterious creature he saw in the woods. With his self-taught knowledge of subcultural history and customs, we are able to see Daryl's ability to connect to and identify with the marginalized, mostly because he himself identifies as an outsider from his own group.

The second season of the series is marked by Daryl's internal struggle with his pre-apocalypse identity as an independent, somewhat reluctant loner and the vital group member he's becoming. During the search for Sophia, Daryl suffers a serious accident which causes him to grievously injure himself. He is forced to climb the steep walls of a river ravine in order to make it back to Hershel's farm. While struggling to maintain his footing on the cliff wall, and to maintain consciousness, Daryl starts to see visions of his brother Merle. Instead of being comforting and encouraging, Merle starts berating him and questioning his masculinity. It serves to highlight Daryl's hidden emotions, as we understand that this version of Merle isn't real, but simply a fever dream that Daryl is having while working through bodily trauma. Dream Merle continuously comments on his distinction from the group, and Daryl's continued dependence on his brother for some sort of connection and meaning. While Daryl's outward demeanor has pushed away from his past emotional connections, we see that his internal dialogue and thoughts still focus on Merle. "No one's ever gonna care about you except me, Little Brother", Dream Merle reiterates as Daryl slips in and out of consciousness.

Concepts of spirituality and superstition have long been coded as feminine within American society and pop culture. His intelligence and ability to connect to outside cultures is also in stark contrast to pop culture's concepts of the hillbilly stereotype. His connection to outside cultures deepens his disconnect from his racist brother, and denotes an ability to empathize and connect to others that other male characters within *The Walking Dead* lack to their detriment. This ability to establish connections with others contributes to Daryl's increased ability to connect personally with the rest of his group. As I'll explore in the following chapter, the interpersonal relationships that Daryl is able to cultivate contribute greatly to his continued success and improvement, even within the horrific world of the zombie apocalypse.

#### Chapter 4: You're Family, Too – Daryl's Adopted Familial Bonds & Interpersonal Development

Daryl's increasingly engrained role within the group is framed by his relationships to others. At first, Daryl is separated from the group by his physical aloofness and emotional distance. By the time the survivors reach the prison, Daryl has become Rick's right-hand man, and a valued member of the group's support systems. His masculine qualities allow him to maintain the role of protector, and exemplify him as a powerful physical threat, who works well alongside Rick's more structured and standard example of a leader. Rick has the strongest relationship to his own flesh and blood family, his son Carl, his daughter Judith, and his late wife, Lori. Since most of Daryl's family has been lost prior to the apocalypse, he forges his connections with other members of the group. In this section, I will outline Daryl's deepest emotional connections, and highlight his development from aloof outsider to an integral part of the group's family dynamic.

Daryl has a distinct connection to the younger generation of survivors. He identifies with the struggles that are unique to them as children, developing their sense of self within a post-apocalyptic world. As stated earlier, Daryl seemed to be a teenager in rebellion against authority at the start of his journey with the group. Previously dependent on his father and brother for some sort of moral support and security, Daryl is technically orphaned in this new world after he is separated from Merle, losing his last tie to family. When the young survivors face their own losses, it's usually Daryl reaching out to connect with them. After the death of Rick's wife, and Carl's mother, Lori, Rick has a nervous breakdown and takes off for nearly two days on a zombie-killing rampage. The baby girl survives the emergency birth that killed her mother, but the rest of the group is entirely unprepared to care for her. With Rick gone, Daryl assumes control and goes out to find food for the baby. He returns and prepares the bottle for her himself, taking the little baby up in his arms and feeding her while cooing at her. It's a sweet moment for Daryl and the rest of the group in the midst of some of the darkest moments of the show, and Daryl seems to thoroughly enjoy fawning over the baby for a few moments. He eventually breaks the mood by

calling her “Little Asskicker,” but since she is as yet unnamed, no one seems to mind (*Say The Word*, 2012). At this point, after the baby (finally named Judith) is out of harm’s way, Daryl’s attention turns to Carl. He’s been left to deal with his mother’s death, and his heartbreakingly major role in it, surrounded by people he barely knows. Daryl shares the story of how his Mom died in a house fire when he was a little boy. This interaction is distinct in its directness. Daryl doesn’t sugarcoat the situation – he tells Carl that his mother was a drunk who liked to smoke in bed, and that is what killed her. He speaks to Carl in almost the same way he would another adult – minus some of his more standard rough language, and connects to the young boy on a personal level (*Hounded*, 2012).

Daryl also establishes a deep connection with Beth Greene, Hershel’s seventeen-year-old daughter, after their home in the prison is destroyed and the group is scattered. When Beth is first introduced in Season 2, she is unable to cope with the reality she faces and tries to take her own life. By Season 4, she has become a strong member of the group, and one of Judith’s primary caretakers. She claims that she’s been able to turn off her emotions, and doesn’t cry over death anymore. After the prison is attacked and destroyed by The Governor, Daryl and Beth escape into the woods together. Daryl clearly resents the fact that Beth is the only member of the group that he knows for sure is still alive, and it makes him hostile towards the young girl. “It’s not that he’s stuck with her – but they’re right back to square one. He’s put some much effort into these relationships and survival, and to have that all ripped away – it wasn’t that personal,” Norman Reedus tries to give voice to Daryl’s internal struggle after the prison (ahepburn, 2014). As Beth reveals her own weakness and lack of survival skills, Daryl becomes her only source of protection.

Season 4 includes the episode *Still*, which focuses only on Daryl and Beth. While other episodes in the season have been bouncing between character’s storylines, the single arch delves much deeper into the changing relationship between the two characters. After a momentary lapse into grief, Beth tries to put on a brave, headstrong face. She starts lashing out at Daryl, fed up with his silence, apathy and



resentment towards her. The episode centers on Beth's desire to find alcohol, to have her first 'real drink', an experience that has been denied due to her father's strict prohibition of alcohol in their home. As previously noted, alcohol is an extremely sore subject for Daryl, and that's evident in his resistance to her request. After a few failed attempts, Daryl leads Beth to a cabin he discovered in the woods during his hunting trips. He opens up the small shed on the side of the house to find it stocked full of homemade moonshine. He explains that he knows his way around the house because it's exactly like the cabin he grew up in with his father. It is a stark contrast to the picturesque Georgia farm that Beth grew up on, with a father who gave up alcohol on the day her older sister was born and then banished it from their home. It's just a small example of the deep well of differences between Beth Greene and Daryl Dixon, yet they are forced together by extreme circumstances and have to try to make sense of each other. Daryl tries to connect with Beth on an almost brotherly level by providing her with some sort of coming-of-age experience through alcohol, but the tensions come to a head as the two begin sharing more. Beth suggests playing the Never Have I Ever drinking game. Daryl's never been on vacation, or out of the state of Georgia; Beth has never shot a crossbow, and never been in jail. Daryl pauses after she makes the statement.

Daryl: Is that what you think of me?

Beth: I didn't mean anything serious...I meant like...the drunk tank. Even my Dad spent a few nights there."

Daryl gets up from the game, clearly intoxicated, and no longer concerned with keeping his voice down to avoid Walkers. In his rage, he starts rattling off all of the other things he's never done, they quickly escalate into personal attacks on Beth, including a reference to her suicide attempt.

"I've never eaten frozen yogurt...never got nothin' from Santa Clause. Never relied on anyone for protection before. Hell, I don't think I've ever relied on anyone for anythin'!

Never sang out in front of a big group of people...like everything was fun. Like everything was a big game. I sure as hell never cut my wrists lookin' for attention!"

Daryl continues to berate Beth for her own selfishness, her foolish motivation to find alcohol when her entire family is dead and gone. Finally, he reveals what has been eating away at him.

"The Governor rolled right up to our gates. Maybe if I wouldn't have stopped lookin...Maybe because I gave up. That's on me. And your Dad...maybe I could have done something."

As Daryl breaks down, Beth embraces him. The two share a moment of profound sadness, finally letting go of their attempts at steeling themselves against the overwhelming sense of loss, and each other. Their grief and their shared experience of losing the security and familial environment in the prison unites them, and establishes them as a support for one another. I'll explore fan reaction in more detail in the following chapter, but it's obvious that this entire episode sparked a new round of speculation as to whether or not Daryl had or would develop romantic feelings for Beth. In my analysis, their relationship was motivated by much more of a brotherly, familial love – a desire to protect and nurture Beth, while at the same time depending on her for some sort of connection to the family he had come to love.

Daryl's most intense, and for this analysis, important interpersonal relationship exists between himself and Carol Pelletier, previously mentioned as an abused housewife and mother of twelve-year-old Sophia. She has lost every connection she had to family after the outbreak, but has continued to develop and in many ways, blossom into a more fully realized person. While the two clearly have a deep connection, it has yet to turn into anything more than a loving friendship, the major point of contention that often brings up the question of Daryl's sexuality. Given each character's past –Daryl suffering abuse at the hands of his parents and sibling, Carol living with an abusive husband until a deadly zombie attack - a simple, supportive relationship is something that neither have experienced prior to finding each other. Throughout the search for Sophia, Daryl offers comfort and personally assures Carol that he will find her

daughter alive. In return, she offers him the first real confirmation of his worth and his place in the group. “You did more for my little girl today than her own daddy ever did in his whole life.”, Carol thanks Daryl after he returns injured from his search for Sophia. When he tries to play it off, stating that it’s nothing that “Rick or Shane wouldn’t have done.” Carol responds sweetly “I know...and you’re every bit as good as them. Every bit.” (*Chupacabra*, 2011). She doesn’t see a difference between Daryl, Rick and Shane. She marks him as separate from the previous men she’s known, mainly her husband, Ed. While an abusive husband is a terrible barometer to judge other men by, the sentiment is clear – Carol sees the worth in Daryl as a friend, and as a member of her group that provides protection.

The pair identify as outsiders due to their shared trauma, both slightly broken by years of abuse and insecurity, but finding healing in each other. They’ve found security in their new family, and begin to work on healing their old wounds. Each seems to be hitting their developmental strides during the post-apocalypse because their old life didn’t allow for personal exploration or deeper emotional connection. Their relationship is defined by their concern and care for one another. There are dozens of instances where a glance, or a brief interaction speaks volumes to the way the two characters care about each other. Carol frequently teases Daryl with flirtations and out-right passes at him, which he shrugs off or puts an end to with a grumbling “Stop” (*Seed*, 2013; *30 Days Without An Accident*, 2014). Again, his resistance to physicality or sexual attention, even with Carol making it easy for him, colors their entire relationship for many fans. It isn’t until Season 5 that we see another moment of unbridled emotion from Daryl, and for the first time ever, physical affection. The group is finally reunited after the destruction of the prison, and Carol has just finished saving them from an encampment full of cannibals called Terminus. As the group gathers in the woods outside of Terminus, Carol appears from the trees. Daryl looks up when he hears footfall, and upon realizing that it’s Carol, he *runs* to her and pulls her into an embrace that lifts her off of her feet. He grips her for nearly a full minute, and is sobbing as he finally pulls away

from her. Their hug seems to break a barrier between them, as we see even more random (and small) acts of physical affection between the two of them later in the season (*No Sanctuary*, 2014).

Daryl and Carol become their own small team, travelling into Atlanta to rescue Beth, who has been abducted. Their trip highlights the way Daryl interacts with someone on an intimate, personal level. He and Carol work well together, both being physically capable of protecting themselves, each other, and being resourceful in the face of threats. Carol leads Daryl to a safe spot she remembered from before the outbreak, a women's shelter where she and Sophia once stayed to avoid Ed's wrath back at home. While scanning the building, they find a zombie locked inside one of the other rooms with a little zombie clawing at the windows beside her. The viewer doesn't need it to be explained that it's another woman and her child who were taking shelter there before the outbreak. She immediately moves towards the door to kill the two Walkers behind it. "You don't have to - you don't." Daryl reaches for her hand, blocking her from gripping the door handle. She turns away and goes to bed without another word. She wakes with a start the next morning when she spots smoke outside the window. She watches Daryl carefully laying the bodies of the mother and child on a pyre, having taken care of them earlier in the morning while Carol slept. In this scary, gruesome post-apocalyptic world, sparing Carol the trauma of seeing another zombie child was one of the most caring and respectful things Daryl could have done for her. She understands that Daryl was also hurt by the loss of Sophia, especially after his desperate attempts to search for her. In this moment, it seems that Daryl is also dealing with his own suppressed past, and the disconnect he felt between his own mother who died when he was very young. Daryl sees his own dysfunctional relationship with a mother who was unable to protect him from an unstable and frightening life, due in part to her own demons, and the abuse she suffered at the hands of Daryl's father. The two are each facing the issues of past abuse from different viewpoints, but they are both on a similar path to recovery, even within the violent post-apocalypse.

Daryl: You said I ain't like how I was before. How was I?

Carol: It's like you were a kid. Now you're a man.

Daryl: What about you?

Carol: ...At home, I got beat up, life went on... But I didn't do anything. Not a damn thing.

Who I was with him, she got burned away...and I was happy. At the prison, I got to be

who I always thought I should be – should have been. Then she got burned away too.

Everything now just...consumes you.

Daryl: We ain't ashes.

This powerful exchange between these two characters seems to summarize their relationships, not only to each other but to the rest of the group. They've both changed so drastically from the start of their journey, and nearly all of the changes were for the better. Now, with the prison lost and the future looking bleak, they cling to the progress they've made and their personal abilities to survive regardless of the gravity of their situations. Daryl's simple retort feels more symbolic than just a compliment to Carol's metaphor of being burned away. Neither have been completely consumed by the destruction around them, but have found ways to conquer their fears and anxieties to develop a connection to someone else. Before the apocalypse, and before the formation of their group, there was nothing loving or good in their lives. While it's heartbreaking that it took a catastrophic event to alter their lives for the better, their experiences have made them well-suited to the new world, and allowed them to become more fully themselves (*Consumed*, 2014).

Daryl's personal relationships have become one of the most important ways that fans identify with the character. In the following chapter, I explore the ways in which fans utilize characters, storylines, and images provided by the series and manipulate them to create their own experiences within the *Walking Dead* universe. For fans of Daryl Dixon, his role within that universe becomes one of the major sources of pleasure in creating their own content and interpretations of the character.

#### Chapter 4: If Daryl Dies, We Riot – Fan Activism & The Future of Quality TV

At this point in this project, it should be abundantly clear that there is something compellingly different about the way fans take to Daryl Dixon. What makes his popularity so unique is the fact that it is entirely driven by fans of the television version of *The Walking Dead*. Since he doesn't appear in the comics, his story arc is completely open, which gives the show's creative team, a malleable character, and an endless source of new material to utilize. As previously mentioned, since Daryl doesn't have to follow a pre-conceived storyline or characterization, audiences are able to interpret him as they wish, and this is often reflected in fan content and discussions.

Raven: The character is addictive. I think its because he started off as a redneck TOOL, then showed how much of a good guy he was when he went out of his way (and nearly got killed -twice!) looking for a little girl that wasn't his. And he's smarter than he looks.

Donnnn: The character development with him is nuts I hate it when characters just stay exactly the same throughout a whole show.

In this chapter, I hope to expand upon my textual analysis of earlier chapters in order to highlight the ways that fans have interpreted, and identified with various points in Daryl's storyline. I have consulted web-based fan groups and forums, the largest being [WalkingDeadForums.com](http://WalkingDeadForums.com), as well as Facebook-based group The Walking Dead Support Group, and following various fans under Twitter hashtags "#TheWalkingDead" and "#DarylDixon", combing through for the best examples of fan content. By analyzing the material that fans have created, and pass amongst each other, I hope to establish a connection between Daryl Dixon's fluid representation of gender and heightened fan involvement in his development. I will examine audience's interpretation of Daryl's masculinity through fan-generated media, the fan base's connection to the actor Norman Reedus, and the various ways Daryl's sexuality is brought into conversations amongst fans, as well as between the stars and creative team of *TWD* and

their fans.

*Fangirls and Fan Fiction – Creating the Experience of Daryl*

The clamor for Daryl as a fan favorite came on very early in the series, and the effects of the response began to show as early as Season 2. His likeability was established early within the second season after his struggles to find Sophia, and since then fans have considered him an integral part of the group, and an important part of the show's dramatic, and human, appeal. It's been frequently discussed that the Daryl's character has been allowed to continue on largely because of his popularity with a large female audience, and little more than that. Fans of the comic series have a different relationship to Daryl, and consider him a way to appeal to an audience that still hasn't connected with the comic series. In her analysis of this phenomena within the fan communities built up around soap operas, Scardaville investigates the ways in which fan's reactions, and their overwhelming outcries, have helped to shape the story arches of major storylines (2005). As discussed earlier, *TWD* fits the mode of endless serialization that is often associated with soap operas, so the parallels are easily drawn between fans of *As The World Turns* demanding the return of a favorite character killed off too soon and the clamor for more screen time for Daryl Dixon. Scardaville also links the increase in organized fan communities to the increased popularity of the internet. For the first time, soap opera fan clubs had the ability to organize themselves, but also had the resources by which to communicate with large numbers of fans, not just those in their immediate vicinity (p. 592). I would argue that *TWD* wouldn't be enjoying nearly as much success without the added influence of online fan communities, as well as web-based streaming services. Fans of niche horror genres, science fiction, and survivalist fantasies have all converged on *The Walking Dead*, and are able to communicate regardless of geographic boundaries. Without the unlimited sharing of information through the Internet, the series wouldn't garner as much attention – and in turn, neither would Daryl. The character has greatly influenced the differences between the comic books and television series, and his popularity amongst fans makes it difficult to imagine that the showrunners will consider killing him off

any time soon. Fans of the comic books generally feel that Daryl has had an adverse effect on the storyline, as his mere presence has led to the exclusion (or death) of a few key characters within the series.

Fan-generated content is the backbone of the Daryl Dixon movement. The veritable battle cry of “If Daryl Dies, We Riot” got its origins on Tumblr, the popular blogging platform that allows users to post various types of media, as well as reblog and share other user’s content. Since then, the slogan has been adopted by AMC, and printed on every bit of merchandise the network can crank out – from t-shirts to pencil sets. Daryl was a background character through the first episodes of the series, with very few lines and only a few key scenes occurring within the first season. However, as fans began to take notice of the strong but silent archer, with his penchant for motorcycles and soft-hearted interactions with fellow survivors, Daryl began to pull his weight as a main character. As previously mentioned, the show actively works to create tension concerning Daryl’s safety and survival by subjecting him to dangerous situations as well as subtle methods of shooting. Dozens of scenes allow the camera’s view to linger on him as a pack of Walkers creeps closer, or forces the viewer to watch as he slinks through a dark corridor, or struggles through an incredibly small crawlspace. The entire group’s storyline is volatile, and Kirkman frequently reminds fans that “no character is safe”, but it is safe to say that the network wouldn’t welcome the idea of angering the massive online community that the series and its supplemental programming have cultivated.

The show’s following has grown exponentially since the first season thanks in large part to AMC and *TWD*’s showrunners embracing the power of the internet. The series’ Season 5 finale broke the series record for most viewers at 15.8 million viewers tuning in live. Statistics have also found that *Talking Dead*, the after-show panel talk show introduced by AMC in 2011, also maintained a huge following with 4.9 million viewers (Bibel, 2015). The show consistently pulls in viewers across the 18-49 age brackets. The series broke another massive record – all sixteen episodes of Season 5 rank in the top 50 telecasts of the



year among adults aged 18-49, the first time a series has achieved this feat in cable TV history (Bibel, 2015).

*Talking Dead* has given a voice and structure to the fan-driven conversations that used to be restricted to online blogs and forums. The show features a host, Chris Harwick, who guides conversation as well as fielding questions, allowing fans to interact directly with showrunners, cast members, and other fans through both on-air discussion and social media. The phenomena of Twitter contributes some of the best real-time reactions to the show, as audience members tweet along under “#TWD”, “#TheWalkingDead” or “#DeadBuzz” to be included on *Talking Dead*. Fans comment on events, or relay a particular quote, and often include graphics and memes that they’ve created themselves. It’s easy to see the appeal of Daryl through these fan-centric channels. The utilization of the franchise’s built-in fan base has contributed to the success of the show in more ways than are broadcast on television. The fan forums are often marked by interactions between fans of the comics and newer fans that were brought in by the TV show, and *Talking Dead* does a fantastic job of blending opinions from both groups within the show. Harwick is well versed in both comic and show knowledge, and frequently makes connections for fans as well as panel guests to discuss between the two texts. In my analysis, I see these same conversations happening amongst fans in the forums, blending the two texts and promoting the sharing information with other users who may only identify as fans of the television series.

With fans working behind the scenes to interpret and define their own experiences with a pop culture text, moving their soapboxes from the web to the television screen shows a desire to utilize the power of fandom to improve and tailor the text to its audience’s tastes and desires (to an extent). As Jenkins (2002) states, online communities are moving towards more fully realized communities of knowledge-sharing, becoming “expansive self-organized groups focused on the collective production, debate and circulation of meaning, interpretation and fantasies in response to various artifacts of pop culture” (p.158). Comparing that notion to Scardeville’s concept of fandom organization, this project

establishes parallels to the ways in which *TWD*'s format and supplemental programming contributes to fan culture while utilizing its creative energy and passion for the series.

Fan-generated content is heavily focused on Daryl, and serves as an outlet for fans to express their personal views and feelings about the character through various media. Still photos of Daryl from the show, as well as some candid shots of Reedus are used to create funny or sexually suggestive "memes" – a photo manipulated with text or Photoshop to create humorous or satirical commentary. They're highly viral and easily shared through every social media outlet. The meme is how "If Daryl Dies..." got its start, and continues to refresh itself with each new season. Some of the most frequently used scenes include Daryl holding newborn baby Judith with captions that reference "exploding ovaries" and "screaming fangirls", or any of the glamour shots of Daryl with his crossbow, parodying Chuck Norris jokes and making exaggerated claims about his deadly skills.

Daryl's fan base seems to trend towards the female audience, anywhere within *TWD*'s demographic of 18-49 year olds. The term "Fan Girl" is frequently used within the world of pop culture fandom. Obviously, it's often used to describe a female fan who exhibits a lot of enthusiasm for one particular character within a series, usually in a sexualized sense. Fan Girls contribute to Daryl's appeal as both a lucrative merchandising strategy, with AMC cobbling together "Mrs. Daryl Dixon" t-shirts, and as a creative source. Scenes from the show are often edited together by fans creating "ships", pairing Daryl with various other members of the group in romantic relationships – Daryl is possibly linked to Carol, Michonne, Rick or Aaron, judging by the wealth of fan fiction short stories and fan videos (Tumblr.com). Daryl's sexuality, and his enactment of masculinity is constantly fluctuating and changing, based on the whims of his fans within the world of 'slash' fan fiction. The authors of fan fiction vary greatly on their gender and sexual identities, and no clear pattern emerged as to whether or not female writers are more apt to use Daryl in their romantic short stories. Canonically straight characters are often used in same-sex couplings, but it seems that Daryl's fluidity contributes to his frequent use in those couplings. The

frequency of stories focusing on Daryl/other male characters far outweighs the stories that involve any combination of other male characters. The diversity of fan fiction and other media, in both subject matter and character choice, creates an entirely new universe for fans to participate in, and allows them to develop a deeper connection with the source material at the same time. With AMC utilizing the fandom's favorite sayings, paying attention to their desires, and in turn, reflecting that in their programming, they've solidified the power of Internet-based fandoms to control what they see and how they interact with a program. This also speaks to the concept of cultivation theory, in that the younger, savvier audience members are interpreting and sharing their own perceptions of the character, and perpetuating his fluidity and subversive qualities through their own media.

*Norman Reedus – Not Daryl, But Close Enough.*

While *The Walking Dead* is set in a fictional universe, the likeability of the cast within the real world should be considered when discussing the commitment of fans. Cast mates are continuously involved in press tours, and make the rounds on fan convention circuits, meeting with *TWD* fans for photos, autograph signings, and jam-packed panel discussions. Daryl Dixon's forum thread on [WalkingDeadForums.com](http://WalkingDeadForums.com) show that not only do fans respond to Daryl Dixon within the series, but they respond to the actor, Norman Reedus with the same fervor. The thread focuses on Daryl Dixon as a character for the first few pages, and then explodes with fan's personal photos of Reedus attending comic conventions, various magazine spreads, and candid photos behind the scenes or at press events. It seems that whatever warm, personable qualities Daryl conveys on screen are shared by Reedus, and in a genuine way. Reedus is much more talkative than his apocalypse counterpart, and frequently attends fan events and panels where Daryl is usually the topic of choice. "It feels like this character is ours," Reedus has stated that his connection to fans greatly influences the way he plays his character

(WalkingDeadFans,2013). Given the power that Reedus holds as an ambassador to fans, we see the influence that his performance has on them, and what their reception has on him as an actor.

Reedus frequently visits *Talking Dead* to discuss his character, as well as the storyline of that night's episode. Through his personal anecdotes from the set of the show, to his own interpretations of the source material, Reedus gives fans a glimpse of himself in each new interview. During my analysis of his given interviews on *Talking Dead*, I noticed that Reedus frequently relates that it's his teenaged son who got him in to the *Walking Dead* comic series. The fact that he has a child old enough to be considered a teenager seems strange to most of his fan base. In reality, Reedus is 46 years old, something that not many fans seem to realize until he mentions his 16-year-old progeny. In past research of fan's perceptions of *Walking Dead* characters, I found that many fans within the older demographic identified with Rick and Carol as parents, qualities that the character's respective actors share, and therefore the identification extends to the actors. However, Daryl's separation from the role of family leader makes him less likely to have parent-fans, and more likely to have teenaged fans who find his brooding demeanor matches their own. While Reedus does come off as very hip in real life, his disconnect from older fans reveals a lot about the nature of Daryl Dixon as a character that reaches young people. I'll discuss later the ways in which audience age comes into play when we discuss Daryl's sexuality as perceived by fans, but it is worth noting here that Reedus himself has found that he has more impassioned fans of a younger age.

#### *The Daryl Dixon Problem – Paranoia Regarding Masculinity and Sexuality*

As discussed in earlier chapters, Daryl Dixon's sexuality is constantly in question. His relationships with Carol and Beth were the most frequent causes of speculation, and have generated their own fans of a particular "ship". As mentioned in a previous chapter, showrunners decided that Daryl's first connection in the Alexandria Safe Zone would be the gay couple, Arron and Eric. During the course of Season 5, Daryl spends most of his time out hunting with Aaron, and eats a spaghetti dinner with the two men instead of

going to a party with the rest of his group. For fans on the Internet, every small interaction is more fodder for the discussion. The previously mentioned reunion scene between Carol and Daryl was heartwarming, and the Twitter reaction was instant with the new hashtag, “#TeamCaryl” cropping up with still photos of the two embracing, fan art depicting other sorts of embraces – and much more.

@TheWalkingChay - “Crying....Caryl is life #TeamCaryl”

@ Reni\_89 - “The moment when #Daryl saw #Carol & the world became beautiful again

♥ #TeamCaryl #TrueLove #TWD #Pookie #Caryl”

Whether his character’s interactions are being over-analyzed or not, Norman Reedus has quite a few things to say about the paranoia over Daryl’s sexual proclivities, particularly speculation that he might be gay. “I have kids come up to me at comic conventions and they’re like ‘Man, I don’t care what’s goin’ on, you’re awesome. Then I have dudes who are my age and older that are like ‘Uhhmm..’. And then you’ve got the women who are just like ‘You better not be!’” (TeamCoco, 2015). In this quote, Reedus highlights how often the topic comes up when he interacts with fans, and the patterns that he’s seen emerge. For this project, my views of fan culture and interaction have been informed by the lens of cultivation theory, and Reedus’ quote is a perfect encapsulation of this project’s findings. As Reedus noted, younger fans (except a few female fans who would be heartbroken) *don’t seem to care* what is going on with Daryl in between the sheets because he is a character that they identify with on a humanistic level, more impressed with his heroics and loyalty. Older viewers are skeptical and seem to hinge their opinion of the character, and by extension the series, on whether or not Daryl’s storyline moves in that direction. Older generations were frequently shown flamboyant and over-the-top homosexual characters in prime-time TV, so Daryl does not register with them as even possibly being homosexual. As Clarkson notes in his examination of gay visibility in media, the effeminate gay stereotype is a dominant trope, and is “constructing a normative gay identity” that includes a “transgressive gender performance...as the root of antigay attitudes” (p. 336). Again, the hegemonic ideal of masculinity plays a

huge role in the way an audience perceives a character as either gay or straight, because American audiences codify certain behaviors as feminine or masculine, and links the enactment of those behaviors to sexuality. To an extent, younger audience members have seen a somewhat more diverse representation of homosexual characters from both serialized quality television and reality TV programs – consider for example David Fisher and his husband Keith from HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) or Pedro Zamora from MTV's *Real World: San Francisco* (1994). Their perception of sexuality doesn't necessarily hinge on a character's enactment of masculinity over femininity, rather they would need to see it to believe it – Daryl hasn't so much as looked at anybody in a sexy way for the past five years, so there are no physical signifiers for the audience to read. Discourses concerning gender fluidity and sexuality have reached, and to a certain degree been accepted by, younger generations of TV viewers. This is the audience that is most susceptible to the continued portrayal of less rigid, non-binary characters like Daryl Dixon. Given the wild popularity of the series among younger viewers, and the dedication to Daryl himself, this project argues that Daryl Dixon is well on his way to becoming the benchmark for success in the future of quality television. With more frequent use of fluid characters, enacting qualities that range across the spectrum of traditional gender roles, the possibilities for more inclusivity and representation is possible within the realms of both cable and broadcast television programs. Daryl Dixon's commercial and demographic success is a clear indication that audiences are willing to embrace characters that do not abide by rigid standards of hegemonic binary gender identity, and are capable of identifying with characters on multiple levels.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

My project has sought to establish Daryl Dixon as a fluid example of masculinity within a wildly popular pop culture franchise, and set him as an example to be followed to improve the inclusivity of depictions of non-binary gender and sexuality within American television. By examining *The Walking Dead's* incredibly successful five seasons to date, I have examined the most readily available public material that focuses on the character. In this chapter, I will address the definitive moments that solidify my theories, why his portrayal of masculinity is important to the development of American TV, as well as the limitations of my own study and steps to be taken to further research this phenomena.

The first goal of my analysis was to separate Daryl's version of masculinity from the other male characters he interacts with. By examining the toxic examples of Shane and Merle, the text provides a compelling contrast to Daryl's less violent, more reasonable, and inevitably more successful version of masculinity. He doesn't fight for control of the group like Shane, and he is able to adapt and connect to the group on a personal level, unlike his brother Merle. Daryl's ability to put on or take off the trappings of machoism also contributes greatly to the concept of gender and masculinity as a performance – enacted by an individual as they see fit, instead of a strict binary system of traits and behaviors. However, the fact that he scales his masculinity and machoism in response to threats showcases the power that idealized masculinity still holds over society, and our cultural concepts of strength and power.

Daryl doesn't crave the role of leadership like some of his counterparts within *The Walking Dead*. While he sometimes moves into positions of leadership, they are highly contextualized and hinge on the environment that the group finds themselves in. The drastic shifts in power that are strewn throughout the show couldn't be fully addressed in this paper, but the two instances that were referenced – Daryl's control during the search for Sophia, and the reestablishment of Rick as an authority figure – place the concept of leadership squarely within the separate structures of society and wilderness. Daryl's redneck identity only becomes valuable when the group needs him to guide them through an increasingly

threatening natural landscape. When they find the safety of structured society, Daryl's masculinity moves back into a subordinate position under Rick, who regains position as an officer of the law, and a symbol of the society that Daryl avoided out in the woods of Georgia. I would argue that this is an increasingly important concept in our own society. Referencing the articles in earlier chapters that address the desirably qualities of families like those featured in *Duck Dynasty*, this phenomena is apparent in the way in which the men of that family enact a certain type of masculinity that is seen as an entertainment oddity to the wider American society that watches through the lens of reality television.

Given the overwhelming fan reaction to Daryl Dixon, it is obvious that he is a lucrative piece of AMC's investment in *The Walking Dead*, and a huge factor in its continued success. As fan fervor increases, and Daryl's storyline deepens, showrunners have a unique chance to play with concepts of identity and portrayal with a highly popular character. As detailed in earlier sections of this paper, paranoia over Daryl's sexuality is reaching a fever pitch, especially after the introduction of a gay couple in Season 5 of the series. Should the writers decide to take that route, what would it mean for the continued success of Daryl and the entire series? Daryl is already a phenomena within *The Walking Dead* universe, and it may be that the success of his subversive performance of masculinity may contribute to the easy acceptance of a prominent gay character, at least within the younger demographic of viewers.

This project was limited by the constraints of time, as most fan conventions had passed by the time of its composition, and their annual returns were set far after its completion. However, the most important aspect of the audience analysis – the online fan community- was highly accessible, and only limited in investigation by time and necessity. Continued investigation into audience-specific details would benefit from participatory ethnography, either through the communal watching of the program, or interaction with fan groups through conventions and fan events. The project would also benefit from deeper investigations of supplemental materials within *The Walking Dead* franchise, including a series of books based on the television series, and a video game titled *Survival Instinct* that centers on Daryl's



journey through the apocalypse before joining his group. Given that these materials don't factor as easily into the definition of cultivation theory as it pertains to TV viewing, they were left out of the analysis. However, expanding the conversation to include the high cross-over rate of media channels that *The Walking Dead* has been able to successfully adapt to would contribute to the validity of *The Walking Dead* as a pop culture powerhouse. Through multiple incarnations, the character of Daryl Dixon has been able to reach a huge variety of audiences, who all readily identify with him on a basic, humanistic level. Deeper investigation into fan's emotional responses to Daryl would also greatly enhance the research, and allow for a deeper reading of the effect of *The Walking Dead* as a text. In summation, Daryl Dixon serves as a blueprint for not only the development of a dynamic and exciting television character, but as an inclusive and highly interpretive depiction of gender fluidity.

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