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# A Postapocalyptic Return to The Frontier: *The Walking Dead* As Post-Western

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## Abstract

This article argues that *The Walking Dead* is a post-Western, a genre that extracts classical Hollywood Western themes and iconography, and resituates them in a dystopian, postapocalyptic setting. The program features characters forced to reconquer the frontier amid the disintegration of modern society, who must battle undead walkers and other human survivors. As a post-Western, the program inverts the ideological optimism of the classical Hollywood Western. In doing so, it highlights the linkages between the seemingly unconnected narrative universes of the Western and the postapocalyptic tale.

## Keywords

[Genre](#), [seriality](#), [television](#), [Western](#), [post-Western](#), [postapocalyptic drama](#)

Near the end of the first episode of *The Walking Dead* (1.1), sheriff's deputy Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) travels to Atlanta in the hope of finding his family. Having woken up from a coma several weeks into what might

be termed a “zombie apocalypse,” Rick finds little more than death and destruction in his small Georgia hometown. While he initially departs in his police cruiser, he comes upon a horse grazing in a pasture and decides to ride it the remaining distance. Rick’s introduction to Atlanta is built around two important shots, the first of which frames him in a medium shot as he arrives on horseback, in uniform, with a number of guns slung across his back. This image showcases Rick’s expression for the viewer, a reaction shot that foreshadows his deflated hope of finding his family. The shot then cuts to a deep focus establishing shot framing the utter destruction of Atlanta in the background and the similarly dire situation on the highway leading away from the city. This image of the lone man on horseback with guns slung across his body invokes the iconography of the classical Hollywood Western, with one exception. Monument Valley does not rise out of the distance, but rather the smoldering remains of the once thriving modern city. These shots situate *The Walking Dead* as a post-Western, a genre that works to “contest and reconstruct the values implicit in the classic Hollywood Westerns” while simultaneously maintaining the aspects of the “conventions that have shaped the genre as a means of storytelling” ([Borden and Essman, 2000](#): 36).

Based on Robert Kirkman’s comic book, *The Walking Dead* explores the long-term prospects of people attempting to survive the aftermath of a life-altering, cataclysmic event that transform the dead into undead “walkers.” Although set in a horrific, postapocalyptic landscape, *The Walking Dead* borrows a number of thematic elements common to many classical Hollywood Westerns: man coming to terms with the lawlessness of survival in an untamed frontier, the unrelenting power and cruelty of nature, and slippery notions of good and evil. As a post-Western, *The Walking Dead* reimagines the frontier in the rural south by incorporating elements from science fiction, through its depiction of events that exceed the bounds of known science, as well as horror and melodrama. Other scholars have also noted *The Walking Dead*’s connections to Western iconography and themes. In his essay on *The Walking Dead* comic book, Dan Hassler-Forest suggests that the comic “uses its zombie motif to re-articulate the fundamental narrative paradigm of the Western: that of the lone hero struggling to establish a safe and tranquil community in a pastoral frontier surrounded by perpetual savagery and danger” ([Hassler-Forest, 2011](#): 342). The relationship between Westerns and science fiction existed long before *The Walking Dead*. Both [Star Trek \(1966–1969\)](#) and [Firefly \(2002–2003\)](#) have been described as Westerns set in the “final frontier” of outer space ([Castleberry, 2014](#); [Crossley, 2014](#); [Slotkin, 1992](#)). Similar generic blending of Westerns with science fiction and horror can be found in more recent programs, such as [Jericho \(2006–2008\)](#), [Falling Skies \(2011–2015\)](#), [Revolution \(2012–2014\)](#), and [Z Nation \(2014–\)](#). Each of these programs focuses on characters who strive to continue living in postapocalyptic, dystopian settings—each forced to reconquer newly dangerous “frontier” territory amid the disintegration of modern society.

Writing in 1986, J. Fred MacDonald questioned the near disappearance of Westerns on American television. He pondered, “If the genre is so vital to American culture, so adaptable to changing times, and so chronically popular, why is it no longer accepted by the mass audience as a video entertainment form?” ([MacDonald, 1986](#): 6). Westerns have not disappeared—their defining elements have merely mixed with other genres to reinvent, reinvigorate, and interrogate generic boundaries. This commingling results in what [Slotkin \(1992\)](#): 633–634 terms “post-frontier” narratives, in which the “underlying structures of myth and ideology” have been “abstracted from the elaborately historicized context of the Western and parcelled out among genres” such as horror, science fiction, and “urban vigilante” films. These post-frontier narratives “invert the Myth of the Frontier” such that they create story worlds where “the borders their heroes confront are impermeable to the forces of progress and civilized enlightenment” ([Slotkin, 1992](#): 635). [Cawelti \(1999\)](#): 103–104 labels these narratives “post-Westerns,” referring to texts that make “use of Western symbolism and themes but in connection with contemporary urban or futuristic settings” that work as “self-reflexive commentaries on the Western myth.” As a post-Western, *The Walking Dead* resituates Western themes in a dystopian, science-fiction setting that works to, as Slotkin writes, “invert the Myth of the Frontier” by invoking many of the classical Western’s attributes but simultaneously rejecting the optimistic ideology ([Slotkin, 1992](#): 635). In doing so, the

program makes transparent the linkages between the seemingly unconnected narrative universes of Westerns and postapocalyptic tales. *The Walking Dead* taps into a subconscious desire to return to the frontier stemming from contemporary environmental, technological, social, and political issues. Much like the Western, this search for new frontiers merely reinforces a different set of unpredictable and unforeseen hardships—rooted largely in the fight against other humans.

The following section examines the classical Hollywood Western's narrative elements, and how the post-Western utilizes and inverts these aspects. Next, the article traces specific examples to demonstrate how *The Walking Dead* creates its post-Western identity. The unique attributes of serialized television enable *The Walking Dead* to demonstrate the storytelling potential in reimagining the Western within the postapocalyptic tale. This long-form television program provides a wealth of opportunities for media producers to experiment with genre mixing, for audiences to explore hybrid story worlds, and for television scholars to interrogate the cycles of storytelling modes.

## The classical Hollywood Western

[Schatz \(1981: 45\)](#) notes that the Western is Hollywood's "richest and most enduring genre." As [Tudor \(2003: 6\)](#) writes, "we feel that we know a Western when we see one." Part of the reason viewers find Westerns so recognizable is that they have proliferated over the past century across literature, film, radio, and television—signaling the genre's long-standing place in the larger cultural consciousness. While over time the bounds of the Western genre have shifted in response to social, cultural, industrial, and economic paradigms, the overall understanding of the classical Hollywood Western remains tied to a particular visual aesthetic, an iconography connected to an ideological undercurrent that typically constructs an optimistic worldview and situates the west as a site of hope, redemption, renewal, and rebirth. This ideology, at the center of the mythology of America and the West, has historically privileged one plight, the westward expansion and the taming of the wilderness by European settlers, over another, the displacement and annihilation of Native Americans in the name of "progress."

Unlike other prolific genres, the Western's loose connections to historical events sets it apart in engaging ways. Across his insightful study of the origins and dispersal of the "Myth of the Frontier," [Slotkin \(1992: 10\)](#) writes that

according to this myth-historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and "progressive" civilization.

This myth arose as a way "to account for our rapid economic growth, [and] our emergence as a powerful nation-state" amid the conflict and progress of modernity, built around the "regeneration through violence" ([Slotkin, 1992: 10–12](#)). With deep ties to American national identity formation, the Frontier Myth serves as the basis for Western tales, constructed around historical events and blended with those embellished through fictional treatment.

In his study of the Western across literature and film, [Cawelti \(1999: 19–56\)](#) locates textual commonalities between different Westerns in their setting, characters, and situations. [Cawelti \(1999: 29\)](#) claims that Western narratives feature three broad character types: "the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes." This narrative triad centers on the law-abiding frontiersman or rancher who attempts to survive and thrive on the frontier. Two distinct threats oppose this mission, the first of which comes from outlaw men drawn to the West for its lax rule of law. In these narratives, a secondary threat exists as well, from the "other," represented in many Westerns as the dehumanized,

“savage” Native Americans. This “complex of characters” collectively battles against nature, weather, wildlife, and outsiders.

The setting varies across different types of Westerns, from open stretches of the desert, small towns, and outposts, to family ranches. At the center of these Western spaces and situations exists the hero, who [Schatz \(1981: 51\)](#) describes as having an ambiguous characterization in his “physical allegiance to the environment” and “moral commitment to civilization.” This hero “is a man of action and of few words, with an unspoken code of honour that commits him to the vulnerable Western community” ([Schatz, 1981: 51](#)). These characteristics define every aspect of his actions and his reasons for continuing to live in a dangerous world. More than anything else, though, this hero can be described as “complex” because he exists within a range of different situations that frequently force him into the role of “middleman” between opposing forces ([Cawelti, 1999: 29, 41](#)). The hero’s complexity, as [Kitses \(1969: 19\)](#) argues, situates him as “both complete and incomplete, serene and growing, vulnerable and invulnerable, a man and a god.” He must work with the land and fight against anyone who stands in his way.

The ongoing struggle to tame the West remains chief among the predictable set of actions for the characters, featuring moments in which “society stands balanced against the savage wilderness” ([Cawelti, 1999: 45](#)). Similarly, [Kitses \(1969: 11\)](#) locates a binary that he feels defines the Western genre, which pits “The Wilderness” against “Civilization,” nature against culture, savagery over humanity, and tradition versus change. As [Creeber \(2008: 23\)](#) notes, “the enduring struggle between civilization and savagery” remains central to the Western narrative. Likewise, [Newcomb \(2008: 98–99\)](#) locates the “movement from savagery to civilization’ as the defining ‘structure of the conventional Western.” Most often, this places the European settlers on the side of moving “civilization” westward, while it concurrently aligns those characters standing in their way with “savagery.”

While these characteristics can never fully account for every Western, they do locate some commonalities across setting, characters, and situations. Likewise, while certain elements define the post-Western genre, this label can be applied across a broad set of texts. Post-Westerns largely incorporate elements of the classical Hollywood Western while also working to question, unpack, or complicate these characteristics. [Cawelti \(1999: 119\)](#) notes that despite the decrease in the production of Westerns over the last several decades, “Americans still seem to need some sense of heroic adventure on the boundaries of civilization.” Thus, this unconscious desire inspires a body of films, literature, and television programs that blend Western elements in postclassical ways. The post-Western genre “draws on Western themes and imagery but treats the Western tradition in a subversive, ironic, or otherwise critical fashion” ([Cawelti, 1999: 119](#)). In this classification, [Cawelti \(1999: 103\)](#) cites stories ranging from “the old gang’s last ride” to ones that present “a new more favourable complex view of Indian culture and a more critical view of the white treatment of Native Americans.” The post-Western also refers to television programs and films that diverge from the storytelling bounds of classical Hollywood by featuring a lead female character—such as [Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman \(1993–1998\)](#). Other post-Westerns (or revisionist Westerns) include the “spaghetti” Westerns of the Italian director Sergio Leone, such as [A Fistful of Dollars \(1964\)](#), as well many films directed by Clint Eastwood, such as [High Plains Drifter \(1973\)](#) and [Unforgiven \(1992\)](#). Leone’s and Eastwood’s post-Westerns attempted to reinvigorate the Western genre by, among many changes, blurring the boundaries between good and evil and including more explicit on-screen violence. Most pertinent to [The Walking Dead, Cawelti \(1999: 103\)](#) defines a group of post-Westerns that feature “new visions of the west,” such as the forced return to the frontier in science-fiction narratives that employ “Western symbolism and themes but in connection with contemporary urban or futuristic settings,” such as the dystopian science-fiction narratives in [Mad Max \(1979\)](#) and [The Terminator \(1984\)](#).

It is important to note that much of the scholarship in this section comes from analyses of film genre. Several television genre scholars have declared the difficulty of simply importing genre theory from literature or film because doing so fails to account for structural and industrial differences between these different media. As [Holmes \(2006: 292\)](#) notes about television, “when compared to film studies, the complexities of the medium’s relations with genre have rarely been subjected to sustained analysis.” [Mittell \(2004: 1\)](#) suggests that discussions of film genre cannot account for the differences between film and television, such as “scheduling decisions, commonplace serialization, habitual viewing, and channel segmentation.” Additionally, genres are not static, as [Feuer \(1992: 141\)](#) notes, but instead are “in a constant state of flux and redefinition.” Genre mixing demonstrates “an ongoing process of generic combination and interplay” that works constantly to redefine, combine, and stretch generic boundaries ([Mittell, 2004: 154](#)). As [Castleberry \(2014: 270\)](#) claims in his reading of the program [Sons of Anarchy \(2008–2014\)](#) as a Western, the ongoing narrative form of many television programs leaves room for genre pliability across different episodes, seasons, and series. [Newcomb \(2004: 425\)](#) writes that genre blurring occurs in programs as a result of television’s constant dependence on “‘new’ material in increasing amounts.” These genre alterations are a necessary function of sustaining programs over multiple seasons, which demands that situations, events, scenes, and characters continually evolve.

While the industrial differences between film and television complicate the study of genre, there is much to be gained from studying how and why certain genres come back into popular consciousness. As Bonnie Dow notes, studying a television series as a whole allows scholars “to do the kind of close reading that reveals patterns of plot and character, recurring rhetorical strategies, and ultimately, repetitive rhetorical function” ([Dow, 1996: 22](#)). To Dow’s definition, I would add genre; looking across multiple seasons reveals how serial narratives blend and mix genres to create new narrative universes capable of attracting, growing, and sustaining an audience. The presence of Western genre elements in contemporary television programs such as *The Walking Dead* indicates that the “Myth of the Frontier” has not dissipated and thus demands continued investigation.

## *The Walking Dead* as post-Western

*The Walking Dead* utilizes aspects of the classical Hollywood Western in its post-Western, postapocalyptic narrative landscape. It blends science fiction, horror, melodrama, and Western elements to create a seemingly unbelievable world set in a horrific future in which an unknown pathogen has caused the dead to reanimate. In the resulting chaos of this “health” crisis, the government and civil society have ceased functioning. Survival for these characters means avoiding the walkers who feed on human and animal flesh, and whose bites mean certain death for the living. In the wake of this upheaval, the main struggles come from the central characters coping with the lawlessness of survival, where they must battle not only walkers but also other human survivors in order to stay alive. Its characters seek ways to ensure their safety now that they live outside the bounds of law and government. Through the show’s eight seasons (and counting), the shifting cast of characters experiences many trials in their attempt to civilize the untamed “frontiers” of Georgia, Virginia, Washington D.C., and beyond.

From the beginning, *The Walking Dead* focuses mainly around former sheriff’s deputy Rick Grimes, who embodies the Western hero in his status as reluctant lawman unsure about the leadership role foisted on him in this postapocalyptic world. In the show’s first episode, Rick wakes from a coma in the midst of the horrific world that will continually challenge and test him. Despite the impossible odds, Rick locates his wife Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) and son Carl (Chandler Riggs), who are now part of a group of survivors living in a camp. Rick steps into a precarious leadership as the Western hero, as he continually attempts to protect the group and lead them to safety. As in the classical Hollywood Western, in *The Walking Dead*, deadly threats come from unpredictable situations: struggles for power within the group; the good-versus-bad human survivors; and the continuing search for adequate shelter, safety, and sustenance.

The show's visual storytelling effectively juxtaposes the characters' old lives with their new existence on the frontier. For example, "Guts" (1.2) begins with an establishing shot of Dale (Jeffrey DeMunn) with a rifle slung across his back standing on an old RV, guarding a makeshift camp of fellow survivors. The Atlanta skyline appears in the far background of the shot. The only sounds accompanying this image are the birds and the cicadas, providing a post-Western visual and aural contrast between the modern spaces in which these characters once thrived and the wilderness/frontier they now inhabit.

The classical Hollywood Western narrative triad places the law-abiding frontiersman in opposition to two distinct threats: the outlaw men drawn to the west and the "other," often represented as the "savage" Native Americans. *The Walking Dead* mirrors this structure. The apocalypse, like the Western frontier, has separated the survivors into different camps—those who want to survive by the rules of their pre-apocalypse civilization (Rick's "good" settlers) and those who want to survive *and* exploit the possibilities of their new, lawless world (the "bad" outlaws), and the "other" defined in this narrative universe as the undead walkers. Although much of season 1 focuses on a small group of main characters as they try to avoid being bitten by walkers, as the show progresses the growing danger subtly shifts from the walkers to other survivors. This begins largely in season 2, most of which occurs on a farm owned by Hershel (Scott Wilson). While the characters are largely stationary in this season, the show uses the farm's fragile stability to emphasize the "bad" survivors' narrative thread, which becomes all-encompassing for the characters in their new frontier. For example, in "Nebraska" (2.8), Hershel seeks a moment of solitude in an abandoned tavern in his small town, where Rick and Glenn (Steven Yeun) later find him. Soon after, two seemingly innocuous men, Dave (Michael Raymond-James) and Tony (Aaron Munoz), show up and settle in for a drink. The five men talk about the difficulties of postapocalyptic survival. These new characters appear benign and do not actively threaten the men, but they repeatedly ask Rick and Hershel where they are living. This scene proceeds into the next episode "Triggerfinger" (2.9) as Rick continues to evade their questions. In this moment, it dawns on Rick that the farm cannot hold any more people and that inviting strangers into their relatively safe space would be a mistake. Tony walks away from the group to urinate on the side of the room and asks them, "You got cooze? Ain't had a piece of ass in weeks." This comment triggers a slow reaction in Rick, Glenn, and Hershel—an indication to them that Tony might be seeking something more nefarious than mere shelter. In a classic Western quick-draw shoot-out, Rick makes the split-second decision to kill these two men rather than invite them back to the farm. This scene marks the moment where the characters realize they must now be on guard against other living survivors, who can and will be hostile and lawless. This presents the first time that Rick has to kill a person, rather than a walker, crafting a complex ambiguity whereby these characters are now forced to judge the people they meet by acts they might commit in the future, acting as a metaphorical end to the civil society that they once inhabited. As [Cawelti \(1999: 120\)](#) notes, "in the traditional Western a very strong distinction was made between good violence (perpetrated by the hero) and bad violence (that used by the villains in pursuit of their evil aims)."

This introduction of "bad" survivors completes the Western's narrative triad, providing the characters with yet another uncertainty in their already dangerous world. The show continually introduces other groups of survivors who are featured mostly through their savage acts. The other survivors, like Dave and Tony from season 2, are characters who move through the new frontier, raping, murdering, and taking everything in their paths. According to [Bishop \(2009: 20\)](#), these characters are common in the "zombie story," which often feature an "indulgence of survivalist fantasies, and the fear of other surviving humans." In "Alone" (4.13), Daryl (Norman Reedus) meets a new group, the "claimers," a loose formation of survivalists, men who are still alive because they were crafty enough to prepare themselves for any number of environmental, governmental, or societal breakdowns resulting from a catastrophic global pandemic or war. These types of characters are thriving in *The Walking Dead's* new lawlessness. The "bad" survivors thread only grows in magnitude in the later seasons as the characters encounter increasingly hostile groups such as the "wolves" and Negan's "saviors." Again, these characters are constructed as "bad" survivors, the ones who have forsaken all pre-apocalyptic laws in order to

survive in this new frontier. Yet, they also represent different modes of survival in an increasingly hostile world with few remaining pre-apocalyptic resources. These clean “distinctions” between “good” and “bad” survivors become deeply muddled in *The Walking Dead’s* post-Western landscape.

The search for adequate safety and shelter remains the steady, repetitive objective as the characters struggle through the daily tribulations of finding food and attempting to thrive in a world full of dangerous, undead walkers. From season 2 forward, the characters shift back and forth between the search for a safe place in which to settle and their attempts to craft and preserve safety in their temporary settlements. This alternating narrative, what [Cawelti \(1999: 46\)](#) describes as “flight and pursuit,” evokes Western films such as [Stagecoach \(1939\)](#), which focuses on the characters’ journey through dangerous territory and the brief moments in which they rest within the fragile safety of desert outposts and Western towns. The characters of *The Walking Dead* first realize their vulnerability near the end of season 1, when their small campsite is attacked in “Vatos” (1.4). In “Beside the Dying Fire” (2.13), a herd of walkers destroys the relative safety at Hershel’s farm. Following this attack, the remaining characters find solace in a large nearby prison. Unbeknownst to the characters living in the prison, another group of survivors have constructed a walled town nearby, Woodbury, which is led by the show’s first true recurring “villain,” the Governor (David Morrissey). After the Governor attacks the prison in “Too Far Gone” (4.8), the surviving characters attempt to find safety in another settlement, Terminus, only to find yet another group of hostile characters. In “What Happened, and What’s Going On” (5.9), after the characters have escaped Terminus, Noah (Tyler James Williams) leads Rick and his group to his hometown in Virginia, only to find more death and destruction. In “The Distance” (5.11), Aaron (Ross Marquand) approaches Sasha (Sonequa Martin-Green) and Maggie (Lauren Cohen) to invite their group to Alexandria, a community with housing, electricity, weapons, food, medicine, and most importantly, strong, high walls. All of these settlements represent the characters’ temporary attempts to recreate home, family, and safety in their unpredictable frontier. They serve the same function as the walled-off, desert outposts of the Western. As [Schatz \(1981: 49\)](#) writes,

In Hollywood’s version the West is a vast wilderness dotted with occasional oases—frontier towns, cavalry posts, isolated campsites, and so forth...each oasis is a virtual society in microcosm, plagued by conflicts both with the external, threatening wilderness and also the anarchic or socially corrupt members of its own community.

These guarded spaces offer slightly safer options than the endless battle with nature and the other threats of the outside world. In *The Walking Dead*, these spaces are no longer linked by a shared set of laws, nor do they represent colonies of survivors interested in helping outsiders. In the short term, most of these settlements prove to be moderately successful at keeping their group members safe. However, these frontier outposts become static targets, vulnerable to attack as outside groups learn of their existence.

In each of the examples above, tensions between opposing group leaders threaten, and ultimately endanger, the health and safety of their settlements. The need to exert physical power to gain or maintain territory is not only a hallmark of the classical Western but also of “zombie” films, demonstrating another way these types of stories intersect. In [Grant’s \(1992: 72\)](#) estimation, [George Romero’s 1978](#) zombie film *Dawn of the Dead’s* overarching story focuses on the “struggle for masculine dominance and territorial control.” In *The Walking Dead*, this struggle first arises in season 1 when Rick wakes up from his coma only to find that his wife Lori, after being told Rick was dead, is now engaged in a sexual relationship with Rick’s friend Shane (Jon Bernthal). Shane’s jealousy over losing Lori, combined with his loss of power once Rick arrives at the camp, creates a visceral tension between the characters that culminates in Shane’s death in “Better Angels” (2.12). In seasons 3 and 4, Rick battles the Governor, ultimately leading to the demise of the prison. In seasons 5 and 6, Rick struggles with a female group leader for the first time, Alexandria’s Deanna (Tovah Feldshuh), but they eventually find common ground and are able to work together. Near the end of season 6, Rick meets the Hilltop community’s



leader Gregory (Xander Berkeley) and attempts to work with this group in order to preserve the well-being of both Alexandria and the Hilltop and to battle an emerging common enemy, Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan). Rick embodies [Kitses' \(1969: 19\)](#) notion of the complex Western hero, who is at once “complete and incomplete, serene and growing, vulnerable and invulnerable, a man and a god.” While at times he struggles with the pressure to lead the group and keep everyone safe, they grow to trust him.

Rick's character, however, best embodies the attributes of the classical Hollywood Western hero, rather than the post-Western hero/heroine. One hallmark of the post-Western is that “women usually play a much more active role as members of the heroic group” than in the classical Hollywood Westerns ([Cawelti, 1999: 119](#)). Across the first two seasons, *The Walking Dead* relies heavily on traditional gender roles, focusing on the male characters as they struggle to protect the group, while the female characters are tasked mainly with cooking, cleaning, and child care. A more nuanced narrative emerges in season 3 as the characters come to terms with the dissolution of their pre-apocalyptic lives. From this point forward, many of the female characters develop into post-Western heroines, working alongside other men and women to ensure everyone's safety. The post-Western heroines in *The Walking Dead* fall into two distinct categories; those who enter the program's narrative universe as fully capable postapocalyptic warriors and those who gradually develop into their leadership roles. The first category consists of characters such as Michonne (Danai Gurira), Sasha, and Rosita (Christian Serratos). From her introduction at the end of season 2, sword-wielding Michonne establishes her reliability whenever any character is in peril. Likewise, through an emotional haze of losing her boyfriend Bob (Lawrence Gilliard Jr.) and brother Tyreese (Chad L. Coleman) in quick succession in season 5, Sasha finds solace in her ability to help protect the group. Alongside Daryl and Abraham (Michael Cudlitz), Sasha helps to divert a herd of walkers away from Alexandria in season 6. Upon arrival back at Alexandria in “No Way Out” (6.9), Sasha annihilates a group of walkers who have swarmed into the settlement through a wall breach. Similarly, Rosita continually proves her worth to the group over the course of seasons 4 and 5. She repeatedly risks her own life to keep Eugene (Josh McDermitt) safe. Later, in “Heads Up” (6.7), Rosita teaches the inhabitants of Alexandria how to fight with machetes to prepare them for future attacks—a skill they successfully put to use in subsequent episodes.

In contrast, both Carol (Melissa McBride) and Maggie slowly develop into their leadership roles after their introduction into the program's narrative. Perhaps, the most striking example of this is seen in Carol's metamorphosis from a meek, abused wife into a powerful post-Western heroine. The first hints of Carol's transformation appear in “I Ain't a Judas” (3.11) when she urges Andrea (Laurie Holden) to kill the Governor before he can cause any more trouble at the prison. Her full transformation becomes apparent in “No Sanctuary” (5.1), when Carol proves herself a capable leader by carrying out a complex plan to save her group, who are being held captive at Terminus ([Keeler, 2016](#)). Her deft thinking saves everyone from death at the hands of this settlement's group of cannibals. Likewise, Maggie, who once lived a sheltered life on her father's farm, transforms in season 3 into a powerful fighter capable of helping to rescue anyone in peril. More significantly, in “Knots Untie” (6.11), Maggie assumes a leadership role in Alexandria and successfully negotiates a trade agreement with Gregory, the Hilltop settlement's leader. In the wake of this success, Rick tells Maggie that “Deanna was right about you,” presumably meaning that Deanna saw Maggie's potential for a new leadership role. With this success, Maggie stands poised to be the only remaining female leader featured on the program. Overall, the move toward including a varied set of post-Western heroines demonstrates another way that *The Walking Dead* stretches the storytelling boundaries of the classical Hollywood Western to encompass a more diverse narrative that allows both men and women to achieve moments of personal heroism and sacrifice. There are limits to this diversity, however. The three women, who enter the program's narrative as fully capable post-Western heroines, Michonne, Sasha, and Rosita, are all women of color. However, the two women who must learn to fight to survive, both Carol and Maggie, are White women, marking another aspect of the show's complex treatment of race and gender.

Both Carol's and Maggie's transformations into post-Western heroines speak broadly to the abstract notion of internal or emotional borders—ones that separate the wilderness from civilization and demarcate savagery from humanity—mirroring the often-contested physical borders of the Western. The battle over “internal” borders emerges in seasons 3 and 4 as the characters begin to grapple with the fear that they have been irreparably transformed and hardened by living in a world where danger abounds. Between the warring factions at each new settlement and the introduction of dangerous “outlaw” survivors, the characters must make conscious decisions either to retain their pre-apocalyptic humanity or internalize “the conflict between savagery and civilization” (Cawelti, 1999: 36). These internal borders are even more fluid than the external ones. In order to survive in this world, these characters have been forced to betray their internal borders temporarily by killing other survivors, and then to step back from their actions to prevent a permanent “hardening.” Some characters, such as Rick, struggle with an uneasy ability to kill both walkers and those survivors deemed problematic, suggesting that this murderous acumen might drift into other acts of violence. If both groups kill to stay alive, it blurs the line between “good” groups and other “bad” survivors. Several moments demonstrate the characters' complicated relationship with these internal borders. For example, in “The Suicide King” (3.9), Rick finds out that the Governor has staged fights between men and walkers for the town's entertainment. Rick asks Hershel, “what kind of sick man does that?” Hershel replies, “the kind that this world creates.” The implication here is that their world, which shaped the Governor into a “bad” survivor, might also negatively shape the “good” guys as well. This narrative thread continues in “Alone” (4.13), when Daryl and Beth (Emily Kinney) are separated from the group after an attack on the prison. They come upon a large house, and Beth optimistically says, “maybe there are people there...there are still good people Daryl.” He replies, “I don't think the good ones survive.” And yet, both Daryl and Beth are alive still and coded as “good guys.” Despite these questions, some characters actively work to prevent this “hardening” that might transform them into “bad” characters. For example, in season 4, the characters at the prison realize that the provisions of the past will not remain forever, so they begin to create a farm, tilling the grounds to grow crops and raise livestock. In “A” (4.16), Hershel tells Rick that they need to domesticate the feral pigs and horses and grow crops. Hershel urges Rick to pull back from going out on supply runs and to stop killing the walkers at the prison fence. Hershel reiterates to Rick a version of what Lori had told Andrea in the episode “18 Miles Out” (2.10), that the characters need to “create a life worth living” within the realm of their unpredictable, postapocalyptic lives. Hershel sees the prison farm as an ideal way to rehumanize everyone, stepping them back from the violent life by crafting their own version of the Western town. Hershel's suggestion to create a farm is not just to domesticate the animals but also to redomesticate the group living at the prison.

While Hershel works to keep the survivors at the prison rooted in their pre-apocalyptic humanity, one of the post-Western heroines, Carol, temporarily demonstrates the ability to move fluidly between “savagery and civilization” (Cawelti, 1999: 36). In “30 Days Without an Accident” (4.1), Carol uses storytelling time with the children as a ruse to teach them knife survival skills. She recognizes that the relative peace and civilization at the prison in season 4 is temporary and wants to remain prepared. Later, in “The Grove” (4.14), Carol has a long conversation with Mika (Kyla Kenedy) about how their current world has changed them. She tells her

sooner or later you're going to have to do it [kill people]. You'll have to do it or you'll die. So, you're going to change the way you think about it. You have to change. Everyone does now. Things just don't work out.

Carol knows that the world has changed her. She has been able to carve out these internal borders, to be able to kill people when necessary, and to step away from that and remain a loving, caring person to those that prove themselves to be “good” and necessary. Yet, despite her comfort and ease with this new way of life, Carol's internal border fluidity becomes problematic in season 6. When the characters first arrive in Alexandria in season 5, Carol begins donning khaki pants and cardigans, masquerading as a new version of her old persona. However, when the “Wolves” attack Alexandria in “JSS” (6.2), Carol immediately reverts to the heroine who

saved the others at Terminus. This incident causes her to question how many people she has murdered as she attempts to suppress the ease with which she kills other living humans in the name of her group's survival. As season 6 progresses, Carol struggles with her two personas, showing outward signs of her inner struggle. This personal turmoil parallels that of the character Morgan (Lennie James), who reappears in "Conquer" (5.16) as a new man, incapable of killing other living humans. Their tenuous friendship slowly builds as Morgan recognizes that Carol is suffering as he once had, finding herself on the same precipice of madness and despair where he had previously been. As season 6 ends, both Carol's and Morgan's struggles suggest that this split persona will continue to plague them, and perhaps other characters, in the future. Some of the characters in *The Walking Dead* find that they cannot reshape themselves to this new frontier or that they cannot maintain these temporary internal borders between their old selves and their new lives.

## The post-Western's ideological inversion

As a post-Western, *The Walking Dead* diverges most significantly from the Western at the ideological level. Classical Hollywood Westerns frame the American West from the perspective of the European settlers, communicating a clear optimism around redemption, renewal, and rebirth. At the root of the classical Western, there remains a sense that despite the daily hardships, the future promises great returns and abundant opportunities for the people willing to risk their lives in this pursuit. Even at climactic, dangerous moments, viewers know that within the bounds of the classical Hollywood Western genre that most of the characters will live through the experience. This thematic thread works in Westerns—after all, the westward expansion in the United States was built on the idea of seeking out new worlds in search of a better life. In the definition of the post-Western narrative, [Slotkin \(1992: 635\)](#) writes that these stories "*invert* the Myth of the Frontier" such that "the borders their heroes confront are impermeable to the forces of progress and civilized enlightenment." Rather than mythologizing the past through characters that look to the future with great hope, the characters in *The Walking Dead* know that their best times are in the past, not the future.

This post-Western inversion appears most acutely in *The Walking Dead* in its rejection of ideological optimism. Despite small moments of hope, nearly every episode of the program brings more turmoil, unrest, and uncertainty to their lives. While the struggle against the wilderness or savagery might occur once or twice in a typical classical Hollywood film Western, on television, this confrontation proves relentless. [Newcomb \(1997: 301\)](#) argues that

unlike the Western novel, or even the movie, in which endings open gateways to new worlds, new lives, the television Western offers no such sense of conclusive renewal. It must—for purely industrial reasons—return with the same character the following week, a character who must once again confront the issues of the day—our day.

In this way, the successful television narrative curses its characters to endless struggles. The characters in *The Walking Dead* are not full of hope as they move toward the promise of tomorrow; rather, they know that modern luxuries such as specialized medicine are now precious and scarce.

In one final way, the post-Western's inversion prompts questions about the linkages between the seemingly unconnected narrative universes of Westerns and postapocalyptic television programs. The post-Western treats the Western critically, producing subversive narratives that question it ([Cawelti, 1999](#)). In many ways, the Western and the postapocalyptic genres seem to exist in the same narrative universe but diverge at the level of narrative perspective. The narrative triad in classical Hollywood Westerns focuses primarily on the perspective of the White settlers as they battle lawless individuals and "threatening" Native Americans. *The Walking Dead* situates Rick's group as its narrative center, again, as they battle lawless survivors and undead walkers. Flipping the perspective of the Western genre shifts this frame of reference. A Western told from the perspective of Native Americans could be classified as a postapocalyptic tale, in that these main characters

watch as their civilization is violently destroyed by the unknown European settlers. Likewise, the postapocalyptic world in *The Walking Dead* has reopened the bounty of the frontier for those crafty enough to successfully navigate it, even if they have shaken off the moral code of their former society. Furthermore, if we account for the perspective of the undead walkers, this new world offers a veritable garden of opportunity in their search of food. For the walker “others,” the world of *The Walking Dead* could even suggest a return to Edenic spaces like those depicted in the classical film Western. When viewed through an analytical lens that questions narrative perspective, the Western and the postapocalyptic tale are not wholly distinct genres but instead variations on the same stories.

## Conclusion

*The Walking Dead* explores postapocalyptic survival and lawlessness rooted in characters and situations reminiscent of classical Hollywood Westerns, while also inverting the classical Western’s geographic space and ideological framings. It presents a stark depiction of humanity as its characters battle to survive in an increasingly inhospitable world. Instead of the optimistic closure of the classical Hollywood Western film, *The Walking Dead* depicts a world of death and chaos. As a post-Western, *The Walking Dead* also brings attention to complex linkages between Westerns and postapocalyptic tales as defined through the narrative perspective of its characters.

*The Walking Dead*’s voyeuristic, fictional destruction of contemporary society remains open to multiple interpretations. At the conclusion of this essay, two questions remain. First, why do the Western’s themes continue to define post-Westerns like *The Walking Dead*? As [Slotkin \(1992: 640\)](#) writes, in some ways, post-Westerns “represent a powerful recrudescence of the old myths of regeneration through violence.” Like the Western, *The Walking Dead* depends on the use of violence to ensure the survival and the possibility of a future for the main group of characters. The post-Western also invokes a complicated, inverted notion of nostalgia. The Western mythologizes the open frontiers of the past and provides the space to act out televisual fantasies of the destruction and reconstitution of civilization. In contrast, post-Westerns like *The Walking Dead* subtly ask viewers to envision our current world as the “Days Gone Bye” (1.1) and acknowledge that in some ways the viewer already inhabits a fragile utopia. As [Waller \(2010: 354\)](#) notes about tales of survival, “this genre displays our points of vulnerability and memorializes the world that we are in danger of losing.”

The second remaining question is what larger, allegorical readings exist within this program? Contextualizing it within the notion of the “zombie” as a signifier provides some final thoughts about its purposes and meanings. Much of the scholarship on Westerns and post-Westerns theorizes how these types of narrative respond to shifting issues and anxieties across the 19th and 20th centuries. Post-Westerns, such as *The Walking Dead*, animate a subconscious desire for adventure played out through their escapist landscapes. As [Dendle \(2007: 54\)](#) writes, these stories “are fantasies of liberation: the intrepid pioneers of a new world trek through the shattered remnants of the old, trudging through the shells of building[s] and the husks of people.” Other writers have focused on how “zombie” tales engage with a host of contemporary global anxieties through their reimagined, lawless frontiers. [Harris \(2012: 29\)](#) suggests that these narratives have grown increasingly popular as a result of our “fear of a total systemic collapse” and an acknowledgment that our current existence is on the brink of.

Although many of the Western scholars cited throughout this article note the dearth of film and television Westerns since 1970, the genre has not entirely disappeared. As this article has demonstrated, post-Westerns continue to thrive across television, manifested in many different kinds of programs. The storytelling possibilities of television must be credited here. The ubiquity of serial narratives on contemporary television has created spaces for the exploration of long-form visions of utopian and dystopian worlds. *The Walking Dead* reimagines the traditional “zombie” narrative across many years—providing the time and space for the program to explore

beyond previous narrative bounds and to create new story worlds that are both similar to and distinct from those depicted in classical Westerns.

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