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<div align="center">Prospectus</div>

The idea of the living dead has been a classic figure of horror in human culture for centuries, blurring the line between life and death and invoking fear through sheer numbers and infallibility. The idea of a zombie began in the voodoo culture of Haiti, where being a "zonbi" meant being enslaved by black magic after death, forced to work in fields as a mindless drone for eternity. However, in 1968, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* introduced the elements of cannibalism and infectious disease to the zombie, forging it into a formidable and terrifying monster in the horror genre. Over time, zombie culture has evolved and grown to reflect the way humans view their own society.

I have decided to focus my research on AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2004-), an ongoing television series based on a comic book series written by Robert Kirkman. *The Walking Dead* follows a former police officer, Rick Grimes and a close-knit group of survivors as they try to live in a post-apocalyptic world overrun with "walkers", or zombies. This show not only portrays the zombie-ravaged landscape and horrors of the living dead, but reveals complex inter-human relationships that arise from humanity dealing with an environment without any form of law or true safety. My goal to analyze how the zombies in *The Walking Dead* create an environment that brings to light the extremes of human nature. I intend to prove that this television series critiques the actions taken when humanity is pushed to a breaking point and explores deeply how society views death.

I will support my hypothesis by first differentiating *The Walking Dead* from other zombie narratives in its serial nature, which allows the audience to closely follow a few characters and watch their development over time. This is arguably one of the biggest factors in the popularity of the show, since this allows emotional attachment to characters who grow through hardship and trials through an extended period of time. Then I will describe how exactly the zombies create the perfect environment that brings humans back to their basic survival instincts, stripping

humanity of the protection of technology and law, by relating it to Thomas Hobbe's theory of the social contract. The details of the apocalypse do not matter in the bigger picture; attempts of explaining the origins of the situation is limited and ignored for the most part in favor of focusing on its consequences on humans. In zombie apocalypse narratives, the only things that matters are the present and the fact that it exists.

By using select examples, I will show how characters are pushed to their limits in this environment, revealing different facets of human nature through their attitude and choices. *The Walking Dead* explores the realm of morality and how it is challenged by the zombie apocalypse. Specifically, I will analyze a scene where Shane sacrifices Otis to a hoard of zombies so he could survive and save another. I will relate this to the classic "Trolley Problem", an ethical problem that involves the choice of killing one man versus five men, and it variants. Shane's decision is utilitarian and practical, but it does not come without the consequences of guilt and immorality, beginning his descent into becoming "the walking dead". Another example I will analyze is the former sanctuary, Terminus, which has turned into a home for cannibals who lure survivors to their home and cannibalize them. The cannibalism that people resort to in extreme situations critiques human nature by showing how humans can degenerate to zombies themselves in order to survive. This creates doubt that humans can even survive with their morals and humanity intact in a world full of the living dead, proving that in order to survive among zombies, one must turn into a zombie themselves. Finally, I will show how this contributes to the development of humans becoming more dangerous than zombies, in the change in zombies themselves throughout the show. This is reflective of the way *The Walking Dead* hopes to challenge its audience to reevaluate their own morals and decisions. The way we, as an audience, bond with the show, can be connected to the messages that it is trying to send through the development of its characters in a zombie wasteland.

The zombie narrative, although ages old, can always be developed to challenge modern society's thinking. AMC's *The Walking Dead* is an example of how zombie culture has mutated and adapted to fit the way people see themselves now. This television show utilizes the zombie narrative to its full potential by creating a diverse display of characters whose actions critique and explore the limits of humanity, thus questioning its audience about their own morals and values.

Becoming the *The Walking Dead*

"To me, the best zombie movies aren't the splatter fests of gore and violence with goofy characters and tongue in cheek antics. Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society…and our society's station in the world." – Robert Kirkman, creator of *The Walking Dead*

Every week, thousands of viewers tune into AMC to follow the endless journey of former police officer, Rick Grimes and his hardy band of survivors as they continually search for an elusive safe haven in a world overrun by "walkers" or zombies. Zombies have walked through the post-apocalyptic narrative of Western culture for decades, a classic figure of horror, death and never-ending hunger. Their sheer numbers and disregard to pain or mutilation make a hoard of zombies a near infallible enemy of humanity. However centuries ago, the notion of a zombie held a very different meaning than how we perceive it now. The concept of the living dead actually began in Haiti, where voodoo culture described zombies as those enslaved by black magic after death and forced to work in fields as mindless slaves for the rest of eternity. Instead of the humans fearing zombies, Haitians feared becoming zombies who can never rest in peace until their master releases them (Hart).

However, George Romero completely reinvented the zombie for the modern world by introducing elements of undead cannibalism and the spreading of zombies through infection in his film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). He forged the Haitian zombie into the formidable and terrifying monster of today's horror genre, resulting in many adaptations of the zombies throughout Western films, novels and story media (Bishop 17). In fact, "160 zombie movies [have] appeared since 1968 (almost four per year)" (Morton 6), showing just how fascinated Western society is in the zombie.

AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2004-) is an ongoing television series based on a comic book series written by Robert Kirkman, and is one of the many stories that branched off from Romero's original idea of a world of the undead. As Rick and his group of survivors travel across Georgia and seek a place to call home, they come into contact with other groups, both friendly and dangerous. This series not only portrays the zombie-ravaged landscape and horrors of the living dead, but reveals complex inter-human relationships that arise from humanity dealing with an environment without any form of law or true safety, and how this environment twists the morals of the humans living within it. We can define morality as a human's ability to discern between what is right and wrong in the context of their specific situation, revolving around the principle of the "sacredness of life" (Barkman 208). I will analyze the zombie narrative of *The Walking Dead* and how characters make decisions regarding life and death of themselves and others in their extreme environment. This will show that the world of zombies in *The Walking Dead* forces people into an immoral, zombie-like state in order to survive, making viewers question their own values while providing addictive entertainment.

The serial nature of television shows makes AMC's *The Walking Dead* a unique zombie narrative in that it allows time for a deeper exploration and development of characters while removing focus on zombies themselves. The audience is able to closely follow a specific group of characters, watch their growth over time and thus become emotionally invested. Having enough time to develop the relationships between the diverse groups in the show is an aspect that will create the deepest and most fruitful exploration of a zombie world (Bishop 314). The combination of the zombie narrative and the ongoing nature of a television series are integral in allowing *The Walking Dead* to deeply impact an audience and become a successful franchise. In a way, the zombie narrative is never ending in that there is no destination or "home" that truly

guarantees safety; this fact forces the survivors to continue on their search for safety until they die, and the elongated format of a television series is the perfect genre to portray this type of storyline. Its extended structure also prevents the zombie from becoming a specific metaphor; the lifespan of a television series is never certain, so it is impractical to create a complete story with a metaphor attached to the zombie. This is unlike films, where the story is written with an ending in mind, allowing more control over how the story forms with the zombie. *The Walking Dead*'s ongoing plot contributes to the show not being about zombies and what they represent, but the way the humans react to them.

Zombies create an extreme environment that forces humans to revert to their more primal selves, relying on their basic survival instincts. When zombies invade, human civilization is destroyed from the inside out, taking down any semblance of stability or structure, stripping our world of the protection of technology and law. By forcing people to scavenge for food like animals, the undead world already forces a human to a state focused solely on survival. The remaining survivors are deprived of the luxury of choice in *The Walking Dead*, taking away the advancement technology has allowed us. The character Rick himself comments that, "…our government has crumbled. There's no communication, no organization, no resistance… It appears civilization is pretty well screwed" (Kirkman, *Safety Behind Bars* 24). Because of the collapse of a government or authority, what Hobbes described as the "state of nature" returns, which, driven by humans' desire to preserve their own lives, becomes "'continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short'" (Tuckness). Western society is on the brink of returning to a "eat or be eaten" world; remaining survivors must struggle to trust or distrust others when their lives are on the line. The only way to regain stability, according to Hobbes, is to "[submit] to some mutually recognized public

authority" (Tuckness), which in *The Walking Dead*, is a responsibility that Rick eventually assumes. This provides an interesting turn to his former occupation, a police officer; he finds that in face of absolute lawlessness and the collapse of all political structure, he must shed his role as a law enforcer and embrace that of a law maker (Round 158). His infamous quote "This isn't a democracy anymore," told to his band of survivors, created what fans call the "Ricktatorship", proving that some semblance of law and order is needed to survive in the zombie wasteland.

However, *The Walking Dead* had still become a post-apocalyptic world without the order of modern civilization, and the resulting situations force characters to make challenging decisions of the highest risk, revealing the extent of their morals and how they value a life. But, in a world where death and reanimation is imminent, morals must be surrendered in order to survive. Throughout the show, the audience is shown examples of humans losing their morals and thus regressing into a figure similar to and arguably lower than a zombie (Barkman 216). A zombie is the embodiment of uncontrolled hunger, but cannot be categorized as evil because they have lost their agency to make choices. It is fair to say that a zombie is "bad" in that their actions are not natural and cause harm to other sentient beings, but to be evil they must have the capacity to choose between "good" and "evil" and willingly choose the latter without remorse (Barkman 216). To stay human and alive in this world of "walkers" you must preserve your own life as well as those of innocents, a balance that is impossible to find, since *The Walking Dead* creates situations where it seems that characters must choose one or the other. The environment of *The Walking Dead* simply disallows virtuous survival, showing how the zombie narrative forces humans to their very extremes in order to preserve their lives, if not their humanity.

I will discuss a pivotal scene in "Save the Last One" of Season Two that exemplifies the moral ambiguity of situations that involve life and death, specifically in the context of the classic

"Trolley Problem" to place it in a frame of reference of an extensively studied situation. Shane, an integral member of Rick's group and known to be ruthlessly practical, shoots the portly farmhand, Otis in the leg to use him to slow down a huge hoard of zombies about to overtake the them in order to bring back medical supplies for Rick's son. Here, his choice depicts a moral issue brought up by the "Trolley Problem", which is a hypothetical situation Phillipa Foot, a British philosopher, drew attention to in 1967. In this situation, you see a trolley that is out of control and about to run over and kill five men working on the tracks, but you are given the choice to turn a switch so that the trolley will follow another track where there is only one man and kill him instead. When presented with this problem, most people choose to flip the switch and kill only one man instead of five; in fact, it is morally acceptable and expected to choose this path.

However, Shane's situation more closely resembles a variation of the original "Trolley Problem", where, instead having the option of diverting the trolley, you are given the choice to push a fat man onto the track to stop the trolley from hitting the five men. This is closer to Shane's situation because he is an active participant in another person's death, instead of a passive decision maker flipping a switch. Disregarding the physical impossibility of the "fat man" version of the problem, people are more hesitant and choose not to save the five men in lieu of killing the one, showing that having such an active role in this situation deters most people. Judith Thomson, who wrote an extensive analysis and argumentative paper on the "Trolley Problem", attributes this to the fact that physically pushing the fat man to his death is "infringing a person's right even if doing them does not cause his death" (Thomson 1409) and is thus unacceptable. Shane's shooting of Otis is an infringement and fatal, as it cripples him and causes him to be devoured by zombies in order to save Shane's own life, as opposed to both of

them dying. Otis' death is drawn out and graphic, displaying the bloody consequences of Shane's choice.

Another factor added into this equation is the fact that Otis is carrying important medical supplies that Rick's injured son, Carl, is in dire need of, so the sacrifice of Otis actually saves the lives of two. The show continuously reminds the audience of this by cutting from the intense action of Shane and Otis' chase scene to the heart-wrenching scene of Rick and his wife, Lori, at the bedside of his unconscious and dying son, juxtaposing Shane's eventual choice to the reason he makes it. This close visual representation of the two sides to Shane's decision does not lean towards one choice or the other, and thus does not deliberately or obviously impose judgment on his actions. This challenges the audience to judge the situation themselves and reevaluate their own morals.

Shane chose to "push the fat man onto the track" in order to save himself and Carl, not because he is inherently evil or immoral, but is thrust into it by his situation. Shane's actions are an example of how morality in *The Walking Dead* is forced to be selective between acquaintances like Otis and those you love and cherish. Otis, who refused to go on without Shane when offered the chance, did not violate his morals, potentially killing them all. While it can be viewed that Otis took the more moral path of refusing to go on without Shane, if the outcomes assumed are absolute, it is ultimately true that Shane's actions saved more people in exchange for his morality. Despite this perspective, Shane is deeply affected by Otis's death; he becomes visibly distressed, and even goes so far as to lie about the nature of Otis's death to his friends in order to cover up the shameful inhumanity of his actions. The final scene of the episode depicts Shane staring into a mirror fogged with steam as he contemplates the murder he committed; the close up of the foggy mirror shows that as he reflects on himself, he finds it more and more

difficult to see himself as human. In their tragic situation, it is impossible to stay virtuous and alive in *The Walking Dead*, showing that in order to survive, humans must give up their morals and humanity to resemble the "walking dead" (Barkman 216).

While Shane's decision illustrates his eventual decline in morals and into the realm of the undead, the episode called "Terminus" in Season Five mercilessly villainizes a group of people at a former sanctuary called Terminus who have turned to cannibalism in order to survive. Terminus used to be a sanctuary but after those who ran it had their trust violated by a group of bandits, they decided that the only way to survive was to take advantage of others, taking on the motto of "You're the butcher or you're the cattle," an ultimatum that leaves no room for mercy or preservation of morals. This statement is reminiscent of the classic "eat or be eaten" mindset associated with a wild animal kingdom, showing just how far those at Terminus have lost themselves.

They way Terminus runs like a well oiled machine in their method of butchering is unforgivable and inhuman; in "No Sanctuary", they follow strict procedures of first bludgeoning their victims on the head before bleeding them out by the throat over a metal trough, a cruel procedure that lowers their victims to animals. The combination of diegetic sounds, like blades rasping against each other and chain saws whirring in the background, and non-diegetic sounds, ominous and suspenseful background music, easily brings to mind a setting of a horror movie and builds the suspense as part of Rick's group is about to be killed and eaten. One particularly grisly scene displays human torsos strung up and hung like pigs, a vivid object of horror that further distances those at Terminus from the audience. They can barely be seen as human in their cold demeanor towards those they view as "cattle" and methodically kill, butcher and eat without remorse, removing themselves from the audience and thus becoming villains of the show.

Their partaking in the taboo of cannibalism is a way *The Walking Dead* creates a spectacle for the viewers to gawk and feel disgust at, but at the same time allows the audience to feel discomfort at its fantastical reality within the show. In a paper published in a food and culture journal called *Gastronomica*, Mark Morton claims that "our culture is fascinated by depictions of cannibalism, even though (or because) it is an almost universal taboo" (Morton 6) and backs it up with a history of morbid interest in the cannibalistic stories of exotic foreign islands, most notably Africa. The cannibalism in *The Walking Dead* takes place in America ravaged by the unnatural disaster of the living dead, and despite the fictional nature of the zombie apocalypse, its presence still instills discomfort; the knowledge that humans, from the same country and once as normal as the viewers themselves, have succumbed to such a taboo ritual will always create unease. Those who live in Terminus shock the audience of the show by depicting normal Americans reaching the limits of their humanity and becoming cannibals in order to survive.

Terminus has completely forgone their morals for their own survival, degrading themselves into little more than zombies, completely dependent on their hunger and barely having any trace of humanity at all. They are a perfect example of how humanity can regress in the face of hardships, and how easy it is for group mentality to override individual morality because it takes away an individual's responsibility to be moral. Subsequently, a group can easily find themselves losing inhibitions and move together in one thoughtless mob, much like a hoard of zombies. The coagulation of minds removes agency from each individual, similar to the development of a soldier in boot camp in that it prepares the person to commit wartime acts in order to survive. In their lack of guilt of eating human flesh, just like zombies, they have become

the embodiment of the "walking dead". *The Walking Dead* argues in order to survive in a world of zombies, one must become a zombie as well.

As the show progresses, zombies become less capable to show how humans become the primary danger. Zombies do not regress in relation to the capabilities of humans, but were changed to be less dangerous as a deliberate choice of the producers. In the first season of *The Walking Dead*, the episode "Guts" featured a zombie picking up a rock and shattering the window of a shop Rick and his group were taking shelter in. However, by the end of the fifth season, the utterly slow shambling and lack of dexterity in zombies makes it impossible for them to pick anything up, let alone attempt to break glass of windows. While some write this off as serial inconsistency television shows are notorious for, it actually is a deliberate choice made by the writers to develop zombies alongside the humans. The zombies' loss of dangerousness supplements the fact that humans gain it instead, showing that those who survive that far into the apocalypse are barely human anymore.

Zombies have always had a special place in the heart of Western culture by embodying our fears of violent death, but *The Walking Dead* revolves around the horror of becoming a monster while still human. The image created by zombies is one of deserted cities, lawlessness and hoards of the discontent, which closely resembles the real aftermaths of war and disaster, creating mass destruction. This connection with reality makes the zombie invasion story timely and even more affecting than the usual horror genre. By focusing on the human aspect in a show imbued with war, *The Walking Dead* boldly confronts the audience about their own morals and values by delivering a dark storyline fraught with death and unpredictability. The appeal of zombie narratives, other than their adrenaline-pumping jump scares and the nod to the human's morbid fascination with death, is the way it can critique or reflect a fear of the population. The

zombies of *The Walking Dead* create a ruthless and treacherous environment that displays the limits of human behavior, similar to a battlefield. Even though the television show is set in America, its message is universal and is a window for all people to question the way they value a life.

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