The Ties That Bind: Familial Burdens in a Zombie Apocalypse

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Introduction

The basic zombie concept that has become commonplace in today's film and television is this: a dead person suddenly comes back to life cursed with a ravenous, cannibalistic urge. With no consciousness of his or her former self, the zombie consumes any human being available. Previous relationships hold no meaning, since the zombie is a new creation, whose origin begins with its bizarre resurrection. Any previous sense of self is erased, and the new creature sets out to destroy any elements of humanity that remain. On the modern zombie, Michael Newbury contends '[t]he zombie is a reshaping of the individual subject by forces larger than the self into something purely, brutally, and rabidly consuming' (2012: 97). Further, this amorality is contagious. Though zombies lose their human identity first, eventually, their human antagonists run the risk of losing a human identity as well. Humans, in fact, often find themselves burdened by their humanity and, more specifically, their familial relationships. This claim is evidenced by the fact that although zombies are slow moving creatures, they routinely snare people who should be able to easily outrun them. The reason for this is simple: with no sense of their previous selves, zombies do not care about previous relationships. They attack any living person they encounter. In contrast, the humans' adherence to previous relationships undoes them. Accordingly, in a zombie apocalypse, familial bonds create burdens for the surviving humans which, if not overcome, lead to their destruction.

As a result, in many modern zombie narratives, human beings often are required to behave in a less civilized manner, and thereby forfeit 'the one trait that distinguishes them from the undead', their own mortality (Compora, 2013: 34). George A. Romero's classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the immensely popular television series *The Walking Dead* (2011-present) both present shattered worlds in which familial bonds become almost as dangerous as the zombie outbreak itself. These two zombie narratives, along with the 2013 BBC miniseries *In the Flesh* (2013–2014), clearly illustrate the burdens of traditional family ties in a post-apocalyptic world. Family often proves to be a more difficult enemy to overcome than the zombies themselves. In this article, I will examine the impact of familial burdens in these three prominent zombie narratives, focusing primarily on the transformative nature of the familial bonds in the face of an undead threat. The failure of parents to protect children (and the family as a whole), sibling loyalty, and responsibility to humanity versus blood-ties are among important issues survivors face, and how the survivors deal with them is often key to their survival.

Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* is widely recognized as the first modern zombie film, as indicated by Kyle Bishop, who states that, 'By the late 1960s, zombie movies had virtually no remaining ties to voodoo or folklore, and, almost single-handedly, Romero reinvented the subgenre' (2010: 94). The film defined the genre upon its release in 1968 and serves as the basis for elements that have become archetypes in modern zombie narratives, including cannibalism and the eventual dehumanization of the survivors. But the film is more than simply a visceral display of violence and gore. As Elizabeth McAlister states, 'Romero's films are anti-establishment parables about the corruption and decay of the American way of life. *Night of the Living Dead* attacks the nuclear American family, patriarchy, and racism' (2012: 473). Romero begins this film focusing on the squabbling siblings Barbara and Johnny, who have taken their annual trip to visit their mother's grave in rural Pennsylvania. As Johnny mocks the tradition of placing flowers on a grave, he taunts his sister,

who is unnerved by their visit to the cemetery, with a creepy warning, 'They're coming to get you, Barbara' (*Night of the Living Dead,* Romero: 1968). For James McFarland, 'The very banality of the siblings' squabbles illustrates a failure of mourning, a crisis in the procedures that reintegrate the absent dead into meaningful human life' (2015: 50). In fact, Johnny's words turn prophetic when a graveyard wanderer does indeed attack Barbara, forcing Johnny to come to her rescue. Johnny is killed in the struggle, and Barbara, after witnessing Johnny's sudden death, escapes to a nearby farmhouse.

Barbara, shortly after reaching the farmhouse, lapses into a semi-catatonic, incoherent state. Even though Barbara spends most of the film in a state of shock and proves to be only minimally useful to the small survival group which eventually forms, she survives longer than several characters. The shock of Johnny's death nearly destroys Barbara, but it is Johnny who returns from the dead and finishes off the sister he died trying to protect. Barbara sees her brother, now a zombie, and succumbs to him easily because she is unable to see him for what he has become. It is fitting that Johnny is the one who ultimately is responsible for Barbara's death. Functionally, as a character, she died at the time of Johnny's death anyway. Though she lived for much of the film, she was nothing more than a shadow of her former self and was a burden to the group.

The Barbara-Johnny dynamic is not the only familial situation that creates a burden. The film's second half focuses on the plight of the Coopers, a nuclear family consisting of the father, mother, and zombie-infected adolescent daughter, who also succumb to the bonds of family. In fact, according to Kevin Heffernan, the presence of this family jeopardizes the survival of others: 'the patriarch Harry Cooper, his wife, Helen, and their wounded daughter, Karen, set in motion the events that insure the destruction of all the human protagonists' (2002: 70). The parents attempt to hide their sick daughter from the zombie threat in the basement of the farmhouse. This family does indeed stick together, but in a

very non-productive fashion. Harry protests any idea presented by the group throughout much of the film, stubbornly and ignorantly arguing the merits of trapping themselves in the basement with their infected daughter.

Luckily, the group does not follow Harry's advice, but Helen does stay with her daughter, who eventually dies from the infectious zombie bite. Shortly after, Helen Cooper dies at the hands of her newly resurrected daughter, who commits two social taboos in one act: matricide and cannibalism. Helen's inability to see her daughter as a monster is as much her downfall as is the zombie outbreak itself. Granted, the family seems doomed from the start. As Matt Becker points out, 'there is familial strife between characters, particularly Harry and his wife, Helen. Finally, Harry and Helen's zombified daughter, Karen, attacks her parents, which suggests intergenerational conflict' (2006: 51). Familial burdens cripple these characters, leading to their own demise and the death of the others. Elliott Stein, in a review of the film, stated that 'the American family is really in trouble' (1970: 105). While it can be surmised that the zombies would eventually have gotten through the inadequate barricades, Becker points out that 'the inability of the people within the farmhouse to work together helps facilitate the success of the zombie siege' (2006: 51). The Cooper's dysfunction creates unnecessary burdens for the rest of the characters. When Ben, the leader of the survivors, shoots Harry Cooper near the end, it is too late. The damage their family has caused is too much to overcome.

Night of the Living Dead illustrates the difficulties family ties create in a post-apocalyptic setting. The rural farmhouse, in which much of the familial conflict takes place, is symbolically significant; 'By setting the action in a typical house, Romero is addressing cultural anxieties connected to the American family of the 1960s, emphasizing in particular the breakdown of the nuclear family' (Bishop, 2010: 121). The idea of home being a nurturing, supportive environment for a family is destroyed. According to Robert Newman, '[t]he traditional values it [the farmhouse] symbolizes--

family, cooperation, the efficacy of hard work—are [. . .] decimated as the film progresses' (2000: 57). Humans and zombies both dismantle the house; the survivors tear up boards and doors and windows to nail to the windows as the zombies pummel the structure to gain entrance; 'The farmhouse, once a sanctuary for the family unit, becomes a battleground in which humans struggle to maintain their humanity' (Compora, 2013: 32). Johnny's sudden death while protecting his sister sets the tone for the rest of the film and Karen's murder of Helen reinforce the notion that family ties are detrimental to survival. The house, like the idea of family, is inevitably destroyed.

The Walking Dead takes a considerably different view of family. Even though 'family and justice are the social values that serve as the core values of Rick's [Rick Grimes'] Group' (Engstrom and Valenzano, 2016: 133), familial relationships are not just burdens, but outright threats that ultimately lead to violence. As Ambrosious and Valenzano have stated, 'It is very rare that characters have any family left, and those that do go to whatever lengths necessary to protect them' (2015: 85). In the pilot episode, Rick Grimes awakens in a hospital and begins his quest to reunite with his family (*The Walking Dead*, 2011, 'Days Gone By', 1.1). His wife Lori, however, has begun a sexual relationship with his friend and partner, Shane Walsh. As the series develops, the affair becomes a major obstacle, and Shane becomes as much of a threat to the safety of the group as the zombies. Likewise, Rick's attachment to the past, specifically his loved ones, 'is a weakness that blinds him in which he places the group' (Simpson: 30). The familial tension eventually places Rick in the position of being forced to kill Shane, who has grown increasingly hostile, partially because of his inability to be with Lori ('Better Angels', 2:12). His unstable mental state and lust for power make him just as dangerous, if not more so, than the undead walkers. Rick's adolescent son, Carl, eventually shoots 'the newly resurrected Shane, who served as a surrogate father for the twelve-year-old boy when it was believed that Rick was dead' (Compora 2013: 34). Like Karen Cooper in *Night of the Living Dead* more than forty years earlier, Carl

also commits matricide in the third season (‘Killer Within’, 3:4). The circumstances here are different. While trapped in a prison cell block, Lori dies from childbirth and Carl shoots her before she turns into a zombie. His act is one of mercy and survival. Unlike the Coopers, Carl knows the difference between humans and zombies, even if they wear the face of a loved one.

As Carl grows up during the zombie apocalypse, and his group faces hostile threats, he becomes a voice for peace. Seasons six through eight featured the evil, yet charismatic antagonist Negan, leader of a group of survivalists who call themselves The Saviors. Clearly serving as a dramatic foil to Rick Grimes, Negan develops a fondness for Carl, but Carl sees that the two of them are on a path toward mutual destruction. Negan’s terrible acts, which includes the horrific bludgeoning of two prominent group members, Abraham Ford and Glenn Rhee, at the beginning of season seven serve as an odd contrast to his fondness for the young boy (‘The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be’, 7:1). Much like Shane, Negan serves as a surrogate father for Carl, who eventually sees the destructiveness of his own father’s actions as detrimental to his long-term survival. In season eight, it is revealed that Carl has suffered a bite from a walker and is going to die (‘How It’s Gotta Be’, 8:8). Carl’s death is realized in the next episode, ‘Honor’, forcing Rick to re-examine his purpose for survival. Most of Rick’s actions previously could be explained as trying to protect his son, or create a better, safer world for him. But this often creates conflicting priorities for Rick who ‘endeavors first and foremost, to protect, teach, and love Carl’ (Anderson: 211). Yet Rick also serves as a ‘father to the group’ (Anderson: 211). This situation influences Rick’s actions going forward, eventually damaging his relationship with Maggie Greene, one of the prominent members of Rick’s survival group. This dual paternal role illustrates how Rick struggles to balance family ties within a zombie reality.

Carl’s final wishes, revealed posthumously over time by way of letters to several characters, reveal that he wants the fighting to end. Though the letter is not read at this time, Rick eventually tells

Negan, 'He asked you to stop. He asked me to stop. He asked us for peace' ('Worth', 8:15). Though all-out war ensues by the end of season seven, Rick spares Negan's life, opting for imprisonment over execution ('Wrath' 8:16). By honoring Carl's dying wish, Rick infuriates Maggie, who watched Negan brutally kill her husband Glenn, leaving her a pregnant widow. While viewers may quarrel with the notion of Glenn and Maggie being married, since no wedding was ever shown on screen, Glenn did propose to Maggie at the end of season three and refers to her as his wife in season four. As Ambrosius and Valenzano point out, 'Glenn considers the group as a whole to be his family, but actually becomes part of Hershel's family when he 'marries' Maggie by giving her a ring removed from a zombie woman's finger' (2015: 87). Whether or not a proper ceremony ever took place, her connection to Glenn is real, and the fact she is carrying his child strengthens this bond. While such a bond provided a stronger purpose for Maggie and Glenn to continue fighting and do whatever is necessary to survive, Glenn's death created a tremendous emotional burden for Maggie, who also faces raising a child alone in such a dismal environment. Therefore, this serves as another instance of family ties being a problem in a post-apocalyptic, zombie-dominated setting.

The series also depicts sibling relationships that creates burdens for characters to overcome. Andrea Harrison, one of the original survivors introduced in the first season, changes considerably after the death of her sister, Amy. But unlike Barbara from *Night of the Living Dead*, she becomes more vigilant and useful to the group. She learns to shoot a gun and becomes one of the series' central characters, at least throughout the second season. In fact, Andrea brings herself to shoot Amy shortly after she resurrects, after cradling her dead body all night ('Wildfire', 1:5). In this scene, Andrea represents a balance between mourning the loss of a beloved family member and recognizing the imminent zombie threat; 'Andrea, herself, however, transforms in this moment of grief, adapting what she needs for closure to the new understanding of death and the loss with which she is faced' (Kremmel:

2014: 86). She is unable to prevent Amy from turning, but she acts quickly once her sister does. Arguably, Amy's death functions a catalyst that allows Andrea to grow into the stronger character she eventually becomes. By properly contextualizing Amy's death, and acting upon it, Andrea successfully overcomes the burden of family, for at least a little while. Yet, she later strikes up a relationship with the Governor, the megalomaniacal leader of a survivalist community called Woodbury, to rebuild a sense of family. This decision ultimately results in her death.

In a similar way, Daryl Dixon is burdened by the actions of his brother Merle Dixon, who caused so much trouble for the group early on that he was abandoned on a rooftop. After being separated during the first season, the brothers are reunited midway through the third season, which pits them against each other in a public display of brutality ('Made to Suffer', 3:8). During their separation, Merle had allied himself with the Governor, who just so happens to be involved in a major conflict with Rick's survivors, who have taken refuge in a prison. The relationship between the brothers can be described as both complicated and dysfunctional, putting the others at risk. Although Daryl refuses to cause harm to his brother, Merle continuously poses a threat to the survivors. Yet they are unable to eliminate him because of the presence and wishes of Daryl, an important member of the survivors (not to mention, one of the most popular characters in the series). Even the Governor finds their brotherly love difficult to deal with. After promising Merle that Daryl would not be harmed, the Governor tosses them both in a ring to fight to the death, an act that foreshadows the inevitable fratricide; 'In this series of events Daryl first chooses 'blood' over the group, but ultimately returns to the group in time to help fend off an incursion by the Governor's forces. Daryl does not want to make a choice as he wants both his brother and his new 'family' (Ambrosius and Valenzano, 2015, 87). But that simply is not possible. Later that same season, Merle is turned into an undead creature, and Daryl is forced to kill him, reinforcing the idea that a zombie apocalypse often requires family members to kill one another ('This Sorrowful Life, 3:15).

Daryl's ability to overcome his familial bond and dealing with his brother's loss of a human identity is crucial to the group's survival.

Daryl's struggle with Merle is only one example of a character overcoming the burden of familial bonds. The character who is arguably the most successful at overcoming familial burdens is Carol Peletier, who, as the series has evolved, has emerged as one of the show's strongest figures. Carol's abusive husband Ed dies in the first season, having been beaten by Shane, then later attacked by zombies ('Vatos', 1:4). His death is liberating for Carol, who breaks free from her meekness and becomes a protector and heroine in her own right. Ed's death is a transformational moment for Carol. Laura Kremmel states that 'Carol projects her memories of suffering onto it [Ed's corpse], enabling the long-awaited moment of liberation. . . the destruction of the zombie gives her one last chance to perform the resistance to Ed of which she was incapable while he was alive' (88). The burden of an abusive relationship does hold Carol back early in the series, but her ability to cast off the shackles of Ed's abuse allows her to survive in an environment that is hostile in a different way.

If Ed's death opened the door to Carol's liberation, the death of her daughter Sophia radically transforms her. In season two, Sophia disappears into the woods while escaping a zombie herd ('What Lies Ahead', 2:1). The search for Sophia eventually leads Rick's band of survivors to find shelter on a nearby farm where they meet a kind yet firm veterinarian, Herschel Greene and his family. Here, the survivors have enough food, shelter, and water to make life comfortable. However, as Gerry Canavan points out:

> A brief stint at a rural farmhouse turns bad when it is discovered that the owner of the farmhouse has been locking local zombies in his barn in anticipation of a "cure" that, we can be certain, will never be forthcoming. (2010: 436)

The zombie hording began when Herschel kept his deceased family members in the barn. This process eventually became a crusade, with Herschel trying to shelter as many walkers as possible in the hopes of one day saving them. Herschel's vision, though seemingly noble, is caused by an inability to see the walkers for the threat that they are—he erroneously still sees them as loved ones, dooming himself and other survivors to a brutal showdown. In perhaps the most powerful moment in the series' early seasons, Shane opens the door, and the zombies pour out and are executed by Carol's group. Sophia emerges as the final zombie, Carol breaks down emotionally, and Rick, in an act of mercy for both Sophia and Carol, steps forward to end the child's undead existence ('Pretty Much Dead Already', 2:7). In a moment that could have destroyed Carol, she survives and evolves, becoming an essential member of the group. But Carol's existence after this point is contextualized by the loss of Sophia, the daughter she could not protect.

During season eight, Carol acknowledges her loss in a conversation with Ezekiel, leader of The Kingdom, another group of survivors:

> I had a daughter. After I lost her, I was nothing. But the people I was with, being with them, I found myself. Some version of myself, a better self. Still, it always feels like it could just be swept away again. But that doesn't mean that it will, and it doesn't mean that I couldn't find myself again if it does. ('Still Gotta Mean Something', 8:14)

Despite this assertion, her progression as a character has setbacks along the way. During season four, after secretly killing two ailing characters to keep them from turning into zombies, Carol is banished from the group when they discover what she has done. Later that season, during the episode, 'Grove', Carol is seen with two children, Lizzie and Mika, sisters whom Carol had been helping keep alive. Lizzie does not see walkers as dangerous and tempts fate several times by getting close to them. Lizzie's

difficulty seeing walkers as zombies leads her to kill her sister, believing she would come back to life. Seeing the girl's dangerous tendencies, Carol leads Lizzie into a grove, tells her to look at the flowers, and shoots her in the back of the head. Though it takes strength to put down such a threat, the killing of a child is difficult, and the parallels between Sophia and Lizzie are apparent. Lizzie was not actually Carol's daughter, but Carol undoubtedly served as a mother figure to her (Bennett, 2019: 92). Carol evolves 'from a cowering victim of domestic abuse to decisive woman capable of killing both zombies and people' (Roth and Shoults, 2015: 233). After losing Sophia in such horrific fashion, Carol can see Lizzie as the threat that she really is and acts accordingly and appropriately.

That is not to say that every character in *The Walking Dead* overcomes the burden of family, 'the transformation of lost loved ones into walkers causes some other survivors—notably, those more isolated—to stagnated. They either refuse to mourn altogether or refuse to adapt mourning to the new necessity of violence' (Kremmel, 2014: 88). Morgan Jones, for example, does not deal with his loss in a productive manner. Introduced in the pilot episode, 'Days Gone By', Morgan lost his wife Jenny to the zombie uprising. He attempts to survive with his young son, Duane (aptly named in recognition of Duane Jones, the actor who played Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*). But they are visited at night by the resurrected Jenny, and Morgan cannot bring himself to kill the monster his wife has become. Viewers later learn, during the third season episode 'Clear' that Jenny eventually bit Duane, who was unable to put her down. This truth comes out when Rick finds Morgan hiding out alone in a compromised mental state. Between Morgan's psychotic babbling and the bizarre stories written on the walls, Rick pieces together that Morgan had to shoot his wife, but had he been able to kill Jenny earlier, he may not have lost his son. Thus, 'For melancholics like Morgan, the memory of the walker as a person becomes a curse rather than a blessing' (Kremmel, 2014: 89). Morgan's inability to differentiate between his wife and the creature she had become leads to his son's death and the eventual decline of his mental state.

Duane's familial attachment directly leads to his death and subsequent resurrection, putting Morgan in the unenviable position of having to kill his wife and, presumably, his son (it is unclear whether Morgan killed Duane or let him become a walker). In contrast, Rick and Carl demonstrate how the ability to cast off familial burdens when necessary, enables them to not only to survive, but also maintain their human identity. Serving as dramatic foils, Morgan and Duane portray the tragic results of being bound by socially defined familial roles. It's the death of his family that sets Morgan on this chaotic, nihilistic path. Though he does kill Jenny, his delay in doing so costs Morgan his son, resulting in grief and despair that it puts him on a path toward losing his own human identity. This is not to say that Morgan never recovers from these tragic events, he does, at least to some extent. But it takes the tutelage of a pacifist cheesemaker named Eastman, in the episode 'He's Not Here', to get Morgan off his path of indiscriminate killing. Morgan eventually becomes a pacifist himself, before he resumes killing zombies again.

The Governor is another character who must deal with his own family problems. Having lost his wife and daughter during the zombie uprising, the Governor manages to hide his undead daughter, Penny, from the townspeople, keeping her chained up in his apartment. One could surmise that the Governor's delusional mental state has been brought on by his inability to cope with his daughter's death and perverse resurrection. Like Morgan, the Governor's failure to recognize the changed nature of a beloved child leads a character to destructive tendencies and madness. The Governor returns in season four, acting as a father figure to a young girl named Meghan. In *The Walking Dead,* 'characters often attempt to regain an element of family with unrelated characters, whether through romantic or adoptive connections', and that certainly is true of the Governor, both in his relationship to Meghan and his romance with Andrea (Ambrosius and Valenzano, 2015: 87). In what initially seems to be a scenario designed to redeem the Governor, he eventually shows his true colors, convincing his newly formed

community to attack Rick's group of survivors at the prison. During the mid-season finale of the fourth season, 'Too Far Gone', this ill-conceived attack leaves Meghan unprotected back at the camp, and she is bitten. When her corpse is presented to him, the Governor calmly pulls out a pistol and shoots her in the head, proving that he has learned to recognize the difference between a family member and a zombie. In this way, as unappealing as his character might be, the Governor is another example of a successful survivor because he learns to make this distinction.

Unlike the typical zombie narrative that begins with a zombie outbreak, the BBC series *In the Flesh* focuses on a world in which the zombie curse is not defeated but managed. The first season focuses on the reintegration of a reformed zombie named Kieren (Ren) Walker, who four years earlier committed suicide following the death of his friend, and presumed lover, Rick Macy. After he is resurrected as a Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer (their word for zombie) during a horrific event later labeled The Rising, he commits cannibalistic atrocities that make it difficult for him to reintegrate into his small, fictional community of Roarton. He faces hostility not only the townspeople, but from his militant zombie-hating sister Jem as well. Ren struggles to forgive himself for the atrocities he committed when he was a zombie while his family tries to come to terms with the fact that he had killed himself. His return creates an emotional burden that becomes the central conflict of the first season. His parents have failed to come to grips with his suicide, and despite their attempts to reintegrate Ren into their lives, they find themselves in the awkward position of having to live with a son who had chosen death. This proves to be a greater emotional burden for his parents to overcome than the atrocities he committed as a zombie.

As with *The Walking Dead*, the viewers learn more about Ren's pre-zombie apocalypse life via flashbacks. Since this series focuses equally on zombies and humans as characters, it is necessary to flesh out Ren's human identity in contrast with his zombie identity. In his previous, human life, Ren had

fallen in love with his best friend Rick Macy, who abruptly left for military service in Afghanistan rather than stay with Ren. Ren's love for Rick, and Rick's abandonment of him, leads Ren into a deep depression and eventual suicide. Though he wished to be cremated, Ren's body was not, and he becomes a zombie during The Rising. Most creatures were hunted down and killed by militant groups, but the "survivors" were treated for their affliction and after years of medical treatments and rehabilitation, they were sent back to their families. Though the medical community describes these reformed zombies as suffering from Partially Deceased Syndrome (PDS), locals prefer the derogatory term 'rotter's'. With heavy use of makeup and daily injections, these formerly undead creatures are forced to reintegrate into a hostile society that wishes they had just stayed dead. In this new world order, what would normally be a joyful situation for a family—the return of their dead son--is instead laden with sorrow. The Walkers (appropriately named here likely in recognition of the term used to describe zombies in *The Walking Dead*) find themselves hiding him away to protect him from the hostility of the community. Isolated, alone, and estranged from his family, Ren ironically finds himself in the same situation that led to his suicide in the first place. His isolation is tempered somewhat by his friendship with another PDS survivor, Amy Dyer, but Ren very much feels isolated throughout the series.

His sister Jem, with whom he was once very close, took his death the hardest, and tries to avoid dealing with him in his returned form. In fact, Jem has become a member of the local militia group called the Human Volunteer Force (HVF) whose sole mission is to destroy rotters. Jem spends much of the series struggling to accept Ren in his current condition (Guiliani, 2015: 381), yet she does hide him when the HVF comes for him. Jem acts as if Ren is the brother she grew up with—not this other creature he has become. Unlike what occurred in *The Walking Dead*, however, this appears to be the right choice in this case. Like her parents, she is unable to forgive Ren for committing suicide, and his return creates anxiety and puts her in conflict with her commitment to the HVF. Ren's return forces his

family members to face his suicide every day. His presence creates significant emotional distress for his surviving family members, who struggle with his return to life more than they did with his death. In this way, the series explores the same dilemma as *The Walking Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead*—how to deal with a loved one who is now another creature.

Equally troublesome is the parallel situation that plays out in the community. The militant anti-zombie leader of the HVF, Bill Macy, is forced to deal with the return of his son, Rick, Ren's former lover and soldier who died in Afghanistan. Rick's unexpected return disrupts his father's anti-PDS survivor agenda. Bill, who murdered a PDS afflicted neighbor in the middle of the road during the first episode, struggles with his son's return and tries to accept him as a legitimate survivor of war. Near the end of Episode 3, Rick stands up to his father, ignoring orders to kill Ren. During an embrace in which Rick believes he has gained his father's acceptance, Bill stabs him, killing him a second time. The Macy family is destroyed not by Rick's death, but by his return, and his own father's fanaticism. According to Gaia Guiliani, 'In killing his son, Bill is convinced that he is giving him the chance to resurrect again' (2015: 381). This situation serves as a stark contrast to what eventually occurs in the Walker home; they eventually find a way to accept Ren's return, and he assures them he will not kill himself again. Unlike the characters in *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Walking Dead*, the struggle is not for survival, but acceptance, representing somewhat of an evolution in the zombie genre. In her discussion of the series, Allison Moore states that 'the zombie reflects current cultural anxieties regarding sexuality, sexual rights and sexual progress' (2016: 303). In the case of Ren, it is the people closest to the Partially Deceased Syndrome sufferers—Keiren's sister Jem and Rick's father Bill—who struggle the most with their loved ones' otherness. '[T]he zombie is a convenient catch-all for representing the "other", regardless of what group is identified within the category of "self"' (Williams: 2016: 51). For Bill Macy, his struggle is

coming to terms with his son's homosexuality and death, while Jem struggles with her brother's suicide and eventual PDS status.

The second season takes place in a more tolerant Roarton, but Keiren's family still have struggles. Jem, despite trying to return to a normal life following the disbanding of the HVF, gets pulled back into the life of a soldier. This keeps her fundamentally at odds with the zombie community in general, and Ren specifically. In the final episode of season two, however, Jem refuses to shoot Kieren. But other characters during this season best illustrate the burdens family place on existence in a world populated by both the dead and the living. A sad situation is depicted in a secondary storyline of Episode 3. Freddie Preston returns from the grave, only to find his wife Haley cohabiting with another man, Amir, in their home. To ease his return, Haley allows Freddie to stay in the home, but that causes more problems than it solves. Maxine Martin, a member of the radical pro-living party Victus, is a major character introduced in the second season, and most of her actions are driven by her misguided desire to bring her brother back from the dead. Maxine begins a tyrannical rule in Roarton to bring about a Second Rising. She believes that finding the First Risen from the first event (whom she believes is Amy Dyer), is key to bringing about this second event. Maxine's actions include the imposition of a PDS Give Back Scheme; a travel ban on PDS sufferers, keeping Kieren from leaving Roarton; and the killing of Amy, shortly after she returns to a fully human state. Her misguided attempts to bring about a Second Rising fail, and Maxine is left broken at the end. Though she is corrupt and her actions personally and socially destructive, she is motivated by a desire to restore her family member to life. In this way, she is like the characters in *The Walking Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead* who are unable to loosen the family bonds, and like them, she has failed.

Surviving a zombie apocalypse is difficult enough without the added burden of familial relationships weighing down characters. As Chase Pielak and Alexander Cohen state, 'When viewed in

the context of humanity struggling to survive a zombie apocalypse, the inhumanity of the zombie hordes heightens the contrast between responsibility and its absence' (2015: 46). Those who seem best equipped to survive are the ones who accept that their family members have indeed changed, even if such acceptance is difficult. *Night of the Living Dead's* Barbara, *The Walking Dead's* Morgan Jones, and *In the Flesh's,* Bill Macy illustrates that a failure to accept the new reality ultimately leads to destruction. Characters who recognize and try to protect the integrity of family, like Carol Peletier and Rick and Carl Grimes in *The Walking Dead,* seemingly have achieved the proper balance between respecting the traditions of their formal world while simultaneously adjusting to the harsh realities of the new, post-apocalyptic one in which they find themselves. However, the bonds of family, though burdensome at times, do serve one key purpose: they keep the characters grounded in their humanity. Nancy D. Wadsworth points out the following, in discussing Rick's digression into madness during season four:

> Rick spirals into psychological breakdown under the pressures of extended survival in the apocalyptic environment, on the one hand, and the strains of this version of leadership, on the other. He is haunted over the loss of friends and loved ones, and the extreme violence he has become accustomed to, and worries that in becoming such an effective killer he is losing his humanity (2016: 576).

Even though family bonds can tighten like a noose, and even lead to the destruction of loved ones, they can also provide meaning to characters and serve as a source of motivation to survive. In the real world, familial bonds can be a source of strength, providing members with love, support, and motivation making them stronger. During a zombie apocalypse, however, the characters who are most likely to survive are the ones who can overcome them. Though it may be difficult to recognize a loved one's loss of humanity, doing so may be necessary to ensure that not everyone becomes a zombie.

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