‘Netflix and Kill’: Feminist Flesh-Eaters in *Santa Clarita Diet*

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Women in zombie cinema have, until recently, been presented only as victims or glorified sex objects, remaining slaves to patriarchal heteronormativity so as not to threaten the articulation of male identity within monster culture. However, contemporary film and television producers seek to challenge these norms, scripting a hybridized monster, the feminist, female zombie. Though ensconced in patriarchal structures, these progressively enhanced women protagonists advocate abrupt shifts in traditional zombie media's portrayal of the female monster, consequently promoting a stark rise in feminine sexual expression and desire unaccompanied by punishment from men for the transgression. As with George Romero's cult-classic *Dead* series’ unconventional transgressive living female protagonists that challenge zombie media's antagonistic roles for female characters, Victor Fresco’s Netflix series, *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017–2019), advances stereotypical portrayals of the oft-overlooked female zombie. This article contends that Fresco’s series departs from conventional female zombie representations, replacing the mindless, entirely desire-centered, and uncontrollable, female-gendered zombie with an undead, wholly sentient, humanized, female protagonist whose unabashed sexual expression and social autonomy successfully transgress male-defined gender roles without irrevocably imploding her heteronormative family structure.

While zombies have been slowly enhanced from mindless, id-driven creatures to relatable representations of the human experience, ‘the treatment of sex and gender in traditional zombie cinema has largely remained the same’ (Schweitzer 2019: 348). Moreover, when it comes to women as monsters, we are content to accept predisposed assumptions about gender codes

within patriarchal structures, juxtaposing women as ancillary and antagonistic characters to white, male protagonists to uphold archaic social and behavioral norms. Karen Stein suggests that 'women who have been most acceptable to patriarchal culture are those who have been powerless; passive rather than active, self-sacrificing rather than self-assertive, meek rather than bold' (1983: 124). For women to succeed, they must fit into prescribed, male, heteronormative spaces or run the threat of being rejected as monstrous or other.

More specifically, conventional zombie cinema's monstrous assignation of transgressive women both scrutinizes and strengthens correlations between women and otherness. As Jeffrey Cohen points out, 'women…have found themselves repeatedly transformed into monsters, whether to validate specific alignments of masculinity and whiteness, or simply to be pushed from its realm of thought' (1996:15). When focus remains on actualizing male desire, white, heterosexual men create and control parameters for cultural normality, deigning inferior—or monstrous—those whose behaviors become undesirable or misaligned with the male gaze.

Female monstrosity serves as the second of two mutually exclusive gender roles for women within popular monster media. Barbara Creed contends, 'all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (1993: 1). When considering the monstrous woman, theorists focus on one of the following approaches: they have either 'simply discussed female monstrosity as part of male monstrosity; argued that woman only terrifies when represented as man's castrated other; referred to her only in passing; or argued that there are no "great" female monsters' (Creed 1993: 3). Scholars, such as Stephen Neale (2000), deny feminine monstrosity's existence separate from the traditional male monster, concluding it exists only in relation to male

monstrosity or the male other. As a result, female characters are defined in accordance with male-dominated ideals, often leaving them as unwitting victims of the male gaze.

By depicting women as victims of monstrosity, controlled by and at times transformed through the male gaze, men can establish and maintain notions of naturalized feminine inferiority. In typical monster cinema, 'Emphasis has been on woman as [the] victim of the (mainly male) monster' (Creed 1993: 1). Designated as the object of desire, the male or male monster seeks out that which it does not have—the female—for satiation. Expanding on these conclusions, Julie Miess suggests 'the roles of the male monster/culprit and female victim have flourished' in the horror genre (2007: 233–34). Normalizing these ideas and assumptions maintains limited, prescriptive gender coding, constricting women to antagonistic roles and cementing ideas of feminine passivity and inferiority in opposition to male superiority and dominance.

The earliest zombie films reflect women's necessary adherence to patriarchal values through the male monster altering the desired woman into a slack jawed, enslaved, zombie-like individual, lacking agency or autonomy. Primitive zombie films, such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *Svengali* (1931), suggest women's perpetual propensity for victimization as the object of male desire, always in jeopardy of becoming voodoo zombie slaves, a characterization originating in Haitian folklore. In this depiction, 'the heroine becomes, or is threatened with becoming, a zombie in conjunction with her enslavement by a villain' (Draper 1988: 54). Ultimately, man assumes control over the desired woman's behavior, altering it as he sees fit and creating a pliable, obedient victim suitable to fulfill his every desire. Damsels in distress, like Trilby from *Svengali* (1931), upon looking into Svengali's eyes and accepting his gaze, unwittingly lose agency, becoming 'obedient to his will […] rising from her bed and walking

back and forth in a trance' (Draper 1988: 57). Seen through the male gaze, Trilby has been 'recreated' to embody women's acceptable, passive behavior ancillary to the dominate male. *Svengali* (1931), and films like it, present a central 'idea that a woman created by a man […] is never fully a living creature when she is not other to him' (Draper 1988: 60). That women are unwillingly, psychically enslaved by men to satisfy male desires directly perpetuates assumptions that women are monstrosity's perfect victims—naturally passive and purposed solely to satiate the male gaze.

Zombie cinema remained content with this depiction of female monstrosity until George Romero resurrected the zombie in the 1960s, rendering the monster not only abject, but also as a true figure of terror. The most frightening aspect of Romero's films are that they are 'somewhat ambivalent in their treatment of the issue of gender, as everyone is capable of becoming a zombie' (Patterson 2008: 08). Replacing the sexually aggressive, dominant male monster with the universally threatening zombie puts everyone, both female and male, in danger of transformation. The zombie invasion presents an opportunity for female characters to reject scripted passivity and instead adapt attitudes and behaviors similar to that of their male counterparts to survive.

Romero's succession of female characters in his *Dead* series consecutively defy prescriptive, inferior female behaviors, suggesting the dichotomies are not as naturalized as portrayed. Female characters like Fran in *Dawn of the Dead* (1968) indicate much more than inferior femininity; in fact, Fran 'is the only member of the surviving group to demonstrate a drive for knowledge and practical skill acquisition necessary for longevity in the peril of apocalypse' (Aiossa 2018b: 60). Fran's capability to display autonomy and assume a leadership position in the group sets her apart from zombie films' previous female characters. The

universal threat zombies represent in Romero's films their existence 'enable his female characters to be so demonstrably aggressive and unapologetic', defying passivity and asserting dominance to survive the horde (Aiossa 2008: 111). Throughout the films, Romero's women sequentially make the shift from victimized damsels in distress to unabashed, bad-ass protagonists who are far from helpless and more than willing to subvert antagonistic roles and take agency of their survival.

Despite the complexity the female character gains from rejecting passivity, doing so creates fissures in long-standing social constructions, prompting audiences to view women as monstrous, subject to punishment or repercussion for their transgressions. When viewers punish women for breaking gender boundaries, 'the possibilities for the woman thus become constricted. She may be the passive victim or, if she chooses not to inhabit that role, she is figured as the inhuman mythological female monster' (Miess 2007: 234). Passive victimization fails to keep transgressive behavior contained; only by rendering the woman monstrous do viewers clearly see women penalized for not abiding by constrictive, misaligned gender roles. In zombie cinema, rendering a transgressive woman undead remains the standard and most effective method of behavior aversion.

As early zombie characterizations mimic acceptable feminine norms in patriarchal structures, it can be argued that zombies are coded female by their very definition, because they are 'soft-bodied, and largely passive […] wrought in binary opposition to the present humans, who are active…who tend to carry weapons and tools […] thus evincing their evolutionary "superiority"', all of which are norms set forth by long-standing, patriarchal ideologies (Jones 2011: 42). The undead's previous sex becomes irrelevant, as zombies reiterate the inferiorities patriarchal culture prescribes specifically to women, assumptively paralleling the undead to the

inferior female. With this, identifying the zombie as the antithesis of male superiority becomes the presumed conclusion.

The female undead illustrates alterity in ways passive, voodoo, zombie slaves simply cannot; she calls into question 'traditional horror conventions of the monster as an inhuman outsider or external threat, of the female as the distressed damsel-victim, and of the white male as compulsory hero-savior' (Aiossa 2018a: 18). While passive victimization suggests a set gender role for women in zombie film, feminine monstrosity does not limit woman's differences to only one aspect; the female turned zombie figuratively becomes other for all heteronormative behavior.

Zombies present deeply ingrained ideals about the monstrous feminine through their transformation. Transgressive women are 'unwittingly thrust into a transformation from reserved, conscientious, and self-conscious women to lustful, cannibalistic monstrous-feminine embodiments', recognizing this victimization as 'the price they pay in order to break the bounds of convention' (Aiossa 2018c: 150; Kee 2017: 180). Both unwilling victimization and repercussions for unabashed assimilation to masculine ideologies discourage deviant behavior through a woman's literal transformation to undead female.

While the zombie acts as a deterrent for aberrant behavior, it also becomes a transgressor of social norms, creating a 'threat to ideological hegemony that supposedly arises from women becoming "uncontrolled"' (Jones 2011: 44). Undead female zombie representations are not innovative in monster media, yet monster cinema thus far has ignored or failed to investigate the true merits of 'uncontrolled' zombie female characters, choosing instead to fall back on familiar tropes of sexual otherness.

Most frequently, this juxtaposition is shown in displays of sexual agency and unrestricted desire, or act in opposition to ideals that are dominated by patriarchal norms. Breaking femininity's boundaries directly threatens the power men have in society. The threat stems from male fear of:

> unrestrained sexual expression […] the wanton sexuality of monsters is not primarily feared because of the damage it may do to the hapless woman involved, but because it is an affront to male sexuality. Sexuality is power, and those who possess power are loathe to share it. (Hogan 2010: 93)

Thus, keeping feminine desire contained then becomes paramount, using both metaphorical and literal zombie transformations to contain women and return them to male control, sexual or otherwise.

Though the female zombie appears to indicate a welcome shift in gender binaries, in fact, the opposite occurs, reinforcing women's prescriptive roles through the zombie's sexual alterity. The typical zombie film tends to portray female monsters as highly sexualized beings, unable to control themselves, and more indicative of male desire than of true monstrosity. David J. Hogan argues that female monster depictions 'express a tantalizing sort of evil, and a sexual ambivalence that is at once enticing and ghastly' (2010: 4). Ambivalence toward the monster as an evil creature increases when men sexualize women's demeanors—even as monstrous and evil, she still serves the male desire-oriented gaze as sexually other.

The most referenced contemporary example of the female zombie's sexual otherness being used to not only eradicate female sexual desire, but also to encourage conventional views about women created to facilitate male sexual desire is Trent Haaga's film, *Deadgirl* (2008), due

to the film's explicit depictions of zombie-rape. The film's premise centers on three teenage boys who discover and decide to hold hostage and treat as their personal sex slave a naked, undead woman (Jones 2013: 525). The stereotypical undead woman in this instance does not transgress gender norms in ways that challenge male superiority—Deadgirl (a grown woman, despite her name) is bound, naked, and unable to consent to sexual encounters. Yet, her helplessness only heightens the young men's desire to keep her. Jones contends that 'patriarchal perspectives have associated femaleness with bodiliness in a manner that conceives the female body as fulfilling a function: being "for sex"' (2013: 530). To render a woman as the most traditional depiction of a zombie removes any agency or desire she may display, leaving her wholly available to facilitate and actualize male sexual gratification.

Though individualized, Deadgirl has absolutely no autonomy; though separate from the horde, she nonetheless remains controlled. Whitney Cox and Ashley Ruth Lierman conclude that 'in the end, *Deadgirl* says not something new, but something very old: that women are objects to be possessed, transferred, and ultimately, replaced to better the men around them' (2017: 43). Advancing age-old gender dichotomies, zombie film has, thus far, come up short exploring transgressive capabilities for the monstrously feminine, undead, female, protagonist. Kyle Williams Bishop claims that while 'variations on this ghoulish creation have existed long enough to be included in the narrative cannon—fast-moving zombies, living zombies, talking zombies, and zombies that only consume brains—the basic characteristics of these foes remain relatively unchanged' (Bishop 2015: 181). The female zombie's depiction as a complex, sophisticated character has been virtually nonexistent or invariably antagonistic; almost all mid-20th century female zombie portrayals are constructed as repercussion for unacceptable female behavior and sexuality, leaving ample opportunity for investigating alternate dynamics for the undead woman.

Modern zombie narratives expand upon the zombie female's characterization specifically, crafting backstories and personalities for the undead and at times rendering the female zombie as protagonist. Natasha Patterson encourages these representations, saying 'the zombie narrative in particular makes possible alternative versions of femininity' (2008: 111). Until *Santa Clarita Diet*, the most recent resurrections of female undead protagonists have only achieved moderate success illuminating upon and challenging zombiedom tropes as castigation for transgressive female behaviors.

Despite zombie women becoming more humanized, their existence still does not fully eradicate the problematic female inferiority and male superiority dichotomy. In fact, the resurgence of humanistic female zombies may not suggest an overturning of patriarchal values at all, but instead reflects an attempt to shift back to them, suggesting 'a reemergence of patriarchal fears regarding female sexuality, liberation, and power' (Aiossa 2018c: 141). Though zombie women have more humanistic qualities and sentience, by far and large the transformation itself still occurs due to deviating from social norms in some way. Quoting Kat George, Dahlia Schweitzer suggests audiences 'haven't yet been truly asked to accept women as fully active, autonomous, erratic beings within the cinematic sphere' (George, cited in Schweitzer 2019: 351). Contemporary zombie film and television has yet to successfully articulate the complex, normalized, *socially accepted* zombie female, leaving efforts to eradicate monstrous femininity's cloak of otherness largely untouched.

Due to the transformation's origin, the female zombie's traditional and even more modern depictions are only partially unsuccessful in effectively demonstrating women's limited and prescriptive behaviors in contemporary zombie film. Though 'today's female zombie leads are

fully-fledged embodiments of the monstrous-feminine', producers must continue to advance the female zombie character to truly create alternative depictions of the undead (Aiossa 2018c: 142). As a result, to progress the zombie's narrative, a hybridized female zombie must be created as the 'next step in the evolution of this highly special[ized] subgenre […] presenting narratives in which the zombies tell their own stories, acting as true protagonists and even heroes' (Bishop 2010: 196). These leading ladies not only represent the monstrousness of femininity in heteronormative social structures, but they thrive in it. They are not cautionary tales for women to abide by male-dominated ideals, but tales of 'deeply relatable and humanized character who invite audiences to identify with a "monster" who is wholly familiar and nearly human' (Aiossa 2018c: 142). These women may behave monstrously in accordance with patriarchal standards and some might even be legitimately and supernaturally transformed by their embracing femininity; however, they are no longer rendered inferior—they become dominant, shattering male superiority/female inferiority gender dichotomies.

Undoubtedly, previous iterations of the sentient female zombie protagonist investigate and advance women's positions within zombie films' heteronormative structures. Though still rendered monsters, 'these radical female protagonists are liberated from their former social constraints without vilifying their gendered bodies and appetites' (Aiossa 2018c: 150). Despite this liberation, these leading ladies often fall short of truly and irrevocably breaking cultural parameters for zombie women. In films such as *Life After Beth* (2015) and *Burying the Ex* (2014) attempts are made to give the female zombie a more dynamic depiction; however, the films' premises denigrate the female zombie character back to a solely sexualized being. The premise for both movies, a young, male protagonist seeking ways to eliminate his recently zombified (ex)girlfriend, still allows control over the female zombies' characteristics, entirely

dependent upon the male gaze. Both films show female zombies retaining all aspects of their physicality as when they were alive; however, Beth, the female lead in *Life After Beth* (2015), sees signs 'of her new zombified nature (external rotting, increased strength, extreme feelings of coldness) manifest after [her boyfriend] Zach's first attempts to break up with her' (Berns, et.al. 2017: 167). Though zombie women in these films possess more stamina undead than alive, they have no agency and must continue to be entrenched in vastly patriarchal ideals and subject—or in this case, lack thereof—of the male gaze.

Despite the influx of zombie movies succeeding in developing and portraying more humanistic, sympathetic zombies, television zombie depictions have failed to produce the same results. Stacey Abbott claims the zombie's prior absence from television stemmed from strict regulations on 'what is considered acceptable to be screened on terrestrial television' (Abbott 2016: 93). Traditional zombie depictions, visually unappealing and rife with bodily gore, were visually unacceptable until television began to expand into a multiple-channel and, more recently, multiple-stream service. Yet despite the changing nature of television itself, the zombie remained restricted to what Abbott calls a '" monster-of-the-week'" type role, lacking identity or character development (2016: 95). Due to the zombie's mode of existence, a mindless, soulless monster raised from the grave, the depth of character needed for a zombie to maintain a dynamic role was still sorely missing from the television sphere until recently, with the emergence of series with female zombie protagonists who use their undead state to their advantage, as does Liv in *iZombie* (2015–2019) and Sheila in *Santa Clarita Diet*.

Victor Fresco's choice to transmute suburban mother and wife, Sheila, to zombie-woman is no accident; Sheila's transformation highlights the repressive feminine bounds of heteronormative patriarchal society, like that of her predecessors; however, Sheila's portrayal

specifically aims to transgress even modern-day female zombie renderings. The shift from heteronormative, submissive woman to zombie, though unintentional, does not turn her into a brainless, hypersexual creature subject to male whim, but:

> exposes and interrogates the norms that are the effect of cultural processes, revealing that monstrosity defines the norm. Thus, that the monster that is positively female interrogates and destabilizes the norm that dictates the female be passive and virtuous and also disrupts the concept that the female 'Other' is essentially different and therefore unknowable and to be abjected. (Miess 2007: 244)

Though Sheila still becomes undead, everything about her new state challenges traditional depictions of female zombies, undermining conventionally illustrated views of feminine monstrosity. These hybrid creations are in a 'transitional phase' as 'females who subvert the binary of male-monster/female-victim, without entirely erasing it' (Miess 2007: 244). Sheila's hybridity exists in part because, aside from her diet, there are no clearly recognizable or definable difference can be seen in her person or day-to-day operation.

Sheila's ability to evolve past the stereotypical zombie characterization challenges both conventional zombie women tropes and patriarchal heteronormative structures. Sheila quickly and permanently transgresses the normative bounds for both women and zombie women protagonists, becoming a more enhanced version of her previous self rather than an undeniably altered, uncontrollable savage lacking autonomy or agency. As Joel and Sheila receive confirmation of Sheila's undead state she says, 'I don't feel dead or undead. I feel the opposite. Totally alive' (*Santa Clarita Diet*, 'So Then a Bat or a Monkey' 2017,1: 1). Not only does she remain fully sentient after her resurrection, but her self-awareness indicates both to her family

and to viewers that while there indeed is something different about her, she remains very much still the same. Similar to Liv in the television series *iZombie*, who harnesses her undeadness into motivation to do better deeds in the world than she had when she was alive, Sheila utilizes zombiedom as a vehicle for self-exploration. While female undead depictions are not novel in contemporary zombie television, the subtle enhancements Sheila experiences after she becomes undead, how she behaves, and how others view and respond to her transmutation evolve her past previous zombie women protagonists, illustrating alternative parameters for gender codes in patriarchal structures.

In general, contemporary zombie women portrayals have evolved past the classic undead depictions; while we associate classic zombie depictions with rotting flesh, exposed organs, and putrid smells, contemporary zombies retain much of their original appearance, at least initially. Such is the case with *Santa Clarita Diet*'s leading zombie lady, Sheila. At the pilot episode's end, Joel finds a recently transmuted but visually unaltered Sheila in the yard eating her colleague, Gary. Aside from her bloodstained body and clothing and Gary's entrails caught in her teeth, Sheila looks no different from the suburban wife with whom Joel began his morning (1: 1). Traditional zombie depictions would show Sheila noticeably different from her former self, with washed out eyes, rotting wounds, and other grotesque features; however, much like other modern zombie women, Sheila retains her original appearance throughout much of the series' first season.

Though she initially retains her appearance, like her predecessors, she also begins to decompose as she struggles to reconcile her new state of being with her old life. For Sheila to transgress the typical female zombie characterization she must 'project the image of a body that is whole, contained, and most certainly not leaky or excessive' (Ruthven 2014: 355). Sheila's

body must remain as intact as possible for her to maintain relatability with the viewer. As she finds one of her toes floating with her in the bath, viewers see the evolutions of her decomposition: the toe cleanly severs from her foot, without the prototypical zombie's decay or putrid odor ('Strange or Just Inconsiderate?' 1: 7). Sheila's decomposition simultaneously parallels and surpasses previous zombie decomposition, but also shifts focus back to her alterity, leading to the desperate hunt for and ultimately successful procurement of an antidote ('No Family is Perfect' 2018, 2: 1). With the antidote, Sheila will never fully decompose—a feat unaccomplished by prior zombie women protagonists.

Sheila's stalled decomposition allows her to explore exactly what being undead means for her, offering 'viewers an alternate perspective on zombies, one where the zombie is not only highly functional, but also female and with plenty of agency' causing them to rethink zombification entirely; the '"zombie virus", rather than being a death sentence…actually provides liberation and opportunity for personal exploration' (Schweitzer 2019: 349). While previous zombie portrayals posit the undead female as the ultimate form of destruction, the fact that Sheila will never decompose allows her to use her new state as a vehicle to explore alternatives from previous patriarchal constraints.

In fact, after Sheila receives the antidote, we begin to see her liberation in gradual changes to her hair, clothing, and makeup throughout the rest of the series. Sheila begins the series with long, center-parted, straight hair, wearing little to no makeup and modest, professional clothing (1: 1). Initially, Sheila fully reflects the stereotypical mother and wife role prescribed for her in heteronormative suburbia through her meek, lackluster appearance. With each subsequent episode following her decay stasis, Sheila more freely expresses a style all her own. She begins styling her hair in voluminous, loose curls and braids, applying darker, more dramatic makeup,

and wearing flashier, more noticeable clothing—most notably, exchanging low-heel black pumps for red, leather, stiletto boots and platform sandals (‘Easels and War Paint’ 2018, 2: 8). Though Sheila is still a wife and mother in heteronormative suburbia, her transformation allows her the opportunity to explore and expand upon the parameters of those roles in ways zombie women before her could not.

Sheila’s gradual and subtle shift in appearance renders her difference more difficult to articulate, which also allows her to defy patriarchal norms. Jones argues ‘these gradual slippages mean…it is difficult to measure the difference between human and zombie by referring solely to physical modifications…or behavioral changes’ (Jones 2014: 4). Sheila’s physical appearance alters in such small, gradual ways, presenting no abrupt distinction between her live self and undead self, which allows her to exist outside traditional depictions of women within patriarchal society while also not being deigned monstrously other.

While the newfound sense of empowerment associated with defying patriarchal structures suggests the zombie woman’s difference from her former self, it also allows her to behave in ways acceptable to the traditional male monster. The empowerment permits her to become openly, sexually expressive; yet for *iZombie*’s Liv Moore, that fails to be the case. Though Liv’s agency over her life transgresses typical zombie stereotypes she cannot be fully sexually autonomous for fear of spreading the zombie virus. Moore’s zombiidom functions like that of ‘a communicable disease—particularly through fluid exchange. Because of this, the disease in *iZombie* can function like a sexually transmitted disease’ (Szanter & Richards 2017: 111). Though she can express agency within her sexual life, her focus on not spreading the virus ultimately puts the living men she sleeps with in power positions; his needs then come before hers, rendering her in perpetual deference to him.

Sheila, on the other hand, has no such limitations. Her zombiidom does not mimic that of the Haitian voodoo zombie or of Romero's undead horde, but instead is akin to the viral zombie, whose transformation presents as an infectious disease that kills the body but reactivates the brain stem and thus a subject's basic vital functions (Reyes 2018: 177). Sheila does not transform due to transgressive or aberrant, sexual behavior, but instead becomes a zombie due to an all too human error in judgment—she ingested tainted clams, inadvertently contracting a Serbian zombie virus. Sheila's characterization specifically illuminates zombie women stereotypes and limitations and then subsequently transgresses them to demonstrate the alternative reality of the fully realized, sexually autonomous, widely accepted female zombie.

Sheila uses the sexual prowess zombiihood gives her not as a seductive temptress to all men, but to express desires that both focus on her needs and draw attention to long-standing coded roles for women in zombie cinema, beginning as early as the show's pilot episode. As Sheila's colleague, Gary, confronts her with unrelenting intent to have sex with her, Sheila recognizes his expectations of her, telling him 'your unwillingness to take no for an answer has made me feel sexy and desirable' and subsequently licking his fingers, indicating to Gary she understands the role she plays in their encounter (1: 1). Though licking Gary's fingers initially appears to serve the male gaze, Sheila abruptly shifts the power dynamic by biting off Gary's fingers. Licking his fingers for Sheila is not a demonstration her accepting her prescribed role, but instead is simply her taste-testing him.

As the show continues, Sheila makes more explicit references to the damages inflicted by the male gaze to men she ultimately ingests. When attempting to restock the freezer by killing Larry, a member of a local Nazi group, Sheila plays into the stereotypical sexual temptress role, sarcastically asking him if she could 'lick his gun so that I can demonstrate an unhealthy male

fantasy of a sexually dangerous woman' before running her tongue along his gun to get to his arm to bite him ('Wuffenloaf' 2019, 3: 1). Though self-evident to viewers by her explanation of the fantasy, Larry becomes distracted by Sheila's tongue on the gun—a realization of the very fantasy she's ridiculing—giving Sheila opportunity to attack him to satisfy her own consumptive needs.

Though Sheila ultimately must eat flesh, she consistently maintains control of her urges to do so, unlike the brainless zombies in Romero's *Dead* series. Once Sheila realizes she must eat humans—packaged meat, live animals, nor dead flesh satisfies her—she does not go on a killing spree, but instead does not eat for days as she tries to plan a semi-ethical protocol to attain flesh ('We Can't Kill People!' 1: 2). Ultimately, Sheila chooses who she kills, specifically demonstrated by her refraining to kill Tommy, the undead hunter, to prove to him that she is much more than just a monster ('Belle and Sebastian Protect the Head' 2019, 6: 5). By only killing those she deems menacing to society, Sheila shows how far zombie characterization has evolved. Not only can she maintain control and not attack those she cares about, like her immediate family, but also, she cannot become overcome with desire for flesh, even after long stretches of time without eating.

In fact, Sheila only comes close to losing any control over her actions when she senses immediate or direct threat to her family. When Sheila comes home to find an unknown man cornering her daughter, Abby, in their kitchen, she immediately pounces on and attacks the man without question or pause, ripping him apart right in front of her ('No Family is Perfect' 2: 1). Though at first it appears as if Sheila has impulsively attacked someone, she has not acted on a zombie instinct. When Joel questions Sheila about the killing, she tells him that she had no choice because the man was threatening their daughter (2: 1). That she readily articulates a

relatable, rational reason for her attack shows viewers that she has not lost control of her urges. Her characterization as a zombie does not dictate or eliminate her maternal instincts, leaving her capable of consciously choosing to protect her family and eradicate those who threaten its stability.

Changes to the zombie narrative provide space to shift the dynamic of the heteronormative family structure, gender roles, and, most importantly, how society views zombiidom, presenting 'opportunities to imagine a fundamentally different relationship between men and women in contextually reappraised gender constellations' (Lanzendörfer 2018: 131). Viewers see this when Joel's initial reservations regarding Sheila's more aggressive behavior are met with challenge rather than submission. As he tells her this new, desirous person is not who she is, she responds in kind, telling him 'Maybe it is—maybe it's who I've always wanted to be. Maybe it's not who you are' (1: 1). This scene demonstrates Sheila's changed character—she's directly challenging not only patriarchal family structures, but she's also inferring that Joel might not fit into her new structure.

Instead of chiding or chastising her, Joel shows his love and devotion to his wife by attempting to accept the reality of the situation, telling her 'We're gonna kill people, sweetheart. We're gonna kill people so you can eat them […] I'm not gonna bail on you now' (1: 2). The dedication Joel shows toward Sheila depicts the importance of the nuclear family unit to their lifestyle. Cady and Oats claim this is a 21st century tradition in zombie film and television, writing that these films 'do not question the validity of the American patriarchal nuclear family, but justify the violence necessary to uphold it' (Cady & Oates 2016: 312). Despite his misgivings about how Sheila's new lifestyle will affect the family, his main concern is maintaining the

integrity of the nuclear family structure, stemming from his love for and commitment to Sheila, as long as he can.

To maintain the family unit, gender codes must be eradicated—rather than attempt to constrict Sheila to fit into previously prescribed norms, her husband and daughter do everything they can to help her not out of fear, but out of love for her. Her family's choice allows Sheila an opportunity to 'learn to identify with [her] hidden self and to reaffirm the values which had been previously denied' (Stein 1983: 124). Joel's shift in viewpoints and quickness to collaborate with Sheila on killing methods demonstrates not only a break in binary gender norms within the heteronormative family structure, but also an acceptance of feminine monstrosity. Though Sheila kills people for food, she can also maintain her status as wife and mother to Joel and Abby, successfully existing as the new, hybrid she-monster.

The return to heteronormativity through the familial narrative has a significant impact on monster media. The heteronormative family in zombie media exists 'as the essential feature of a functioning society' (Cady & Oates 2016: 310). Without the family unit, heteronormativity for Joel, Sheila, and Abby does not exist, leaving Sheila truly abject and monstrous; however, because she is enhanced rather than altered, Joel, Sheila, and Abby conclude that Sheila's transformation only comprises a small, negligible part of her identity, both individually as a traditional suburban wife and mother and collectively as a member of a heteronormative family unit. As the three discuss how to get back to normality, Sheila reassures Abby, telling her 'We're gonna get our lives back to normal. We'll just have this little family secret' (1: 2). The idea that Sheila can exist successfully as a wife and mother in a heteronormative family and as a desire-oriented monster encourages Sheila's hybridity and transgression past the typical zombie narrative.

Not only does Sheila's hybridity demonstrate a reappraisal of gendered relationships in her household, but also it encourages other women, most specifically her daughter, Abby, to explore opportunities to challenge and transgress patriarchal dichotomies. After Sheila's transformation, she tells the neighborhood women they 'should be having more fun. Live your best lives' ('The Farting Sex Tourist' 2017, 1: 4). Through comments like these and changes to Sheila's behavior, her neighbors notice a distinct change in her, as she used to be 'kind of bland…and kind of uptight' (1: 4). The recognition Sheila's neighbors have of her transformation, along with direct encouragement from her, gives them courage to seek out their own desires.

Though many of the neighborhood women are influenced by Sheila's altered behavior, her daughter Abby is the most directly impacted. Watching her mother fulfill her desires propels Abby to push against the constraint society begins to put on her. In response to hearing gossip about a classmate being slandered by her ex-boyfriend, Abby does not sit idly, feeding into the gossip, but instead, smashes a cafeteria lunch tray into the boy's face as punishment for his treatment of her classmate ('The Queen of England' 2018, 2: 4). Though Sheila defies social norms by literally consuming men, Abby uses her defiance as a kind of vigilante justice. Abby seeing Sheila focus on her own desires and maintain connections with her family demonstrates that pushing past prescriptive boundaries leaves women with the ability to be open, 'having the capacity to be interpreted, read, and to an extent repopulated' (Meiss 2007: 243). Abby needs to see Sheila as assertive and independent, yet still capable of expressing her femininity and filling the roles of wife and mother which encourages Abby to embark on the same types of behavior.

As Abby watches her mother, she realizes Sheila is not a monster; she is a model of empowering behavior. Sheila as 'the typical monster has been reworked as the female monster-

hero who, re-presented from within, no longer appears as dangerously monstrous' (Miess 2007: 237). For Abby to desire to continue in her mother's footsteps shows progress toward the female monster's acceptance, inverting 'the model of the female monster by showing that the conventional female monster is not an object to be feared, but a subject to be celebrated' (Miess 2007: 239).

The neighborhood women do not see Abby as monstrous or menacing, but instead view her as an extension of her mother. Lisa, the family's neighbor, articulates to Abby she feels Sheila has had a positive impact on her. She tells Abby: 'you have a fire in you that you didn't have before' and that she is 'awesome […] so many people play it safe but not you[…] you're just like your mom' (2: 8). Abby's noticeable shift is significant because she does not have to become undead to behave in a way that transgresses gender norms, nor does she have to mimic standard forms of masculinity to do it. She is not monstrous—she's a teenage girl who is testing boundaries—and viewers revel in watching her grow into an autonomous, feminine, bad-ass, young woman.

What *Santa Clarita Diet* and the texts discussed here evince, is that zombie film narratives have come a long way in the past couple decades, emerging from the grave of stereotypes and into the realm of dynamic characterization, no longer pigeonholed as the subject of abject horror and disgust. Eliminated are the mindless, brain eating, walking corpse and a newer, more sympathetic undead has come forth. Furthermore, due to laxing televisual restrictions and the mutable characteristics the undead possess, zombie have been surreptitiously creeping into the homes of millions, successfully making the shift from the big screen to serialized television narratives like *The Walking Dead* and *iZombie*.

Zombie women are no exception to the change in society's views on the undead. These narratives, in particular *Santa Clarita Diet*, have proven the ability to utilize the undead in ways previously unthinkable, namely with the introduction of transgressive, autonomous, female undead. No longer do zombie women only serve as representation of female submissiveness and sexual servitude. Since George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* series, female zombie characters have slowly gained sovereignty over their social and sexual expression, evolving, and continuously attempting to break free from the chains of the male gaze without damaging or degrading characterizations of feminine monstrosity.

Santa Clarita Diet is one of the first contemporary television series to use the inversion of the female zombie successfully, allowing for an undead protagonist able and willing to explore autonomy and sexuality outside of patriarchal bounds; however, the series was only in its infant stages of exploring these alternative versions of the undead when, in 2019, it was abruptly revealed Netflix would not be putting out a fourth season, despite significant demand. Despite its short-lived run, the likelihood that this series will inspire other series to consider the female monster's subjectivity, exploring and valuing her as a real person, accepted exactly as she is, remains high. At a minimum, women watching *Santa Clarita Diet's* three seasons walk away with hope that alternative depictions of femininity can and will be normalized—that their inner monstrous selves can not only be accepted, but also celebrated as part of a 'new normal.'

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