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## Same As It Ever Was: Rem(a)inders of Racism in *The Walking Dead*

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“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,” writes Robert Kirkman in his introduction to the *The Walking Dead* comics series. Like many zombie properties since Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), both Kirkman’s comics and Frank Darabont’s television adaptation of them probe the outlines of post-apocalyptic social reformation through their representations of families. Rick Grimes, who emerges as a leader in the show’s first season, is a former deputy sheriff and avowed family man. His search for genuine cores of humanity and community often means confronting ethical inconsistencies in his past legal and social roles. Characters of color in the show, however, have to reckon differently with personal and social identity as they discover that harmful racial prejudices and narratives prevail even in this post-apocalyptic world. Interactions in the first season between Rick and two other family heads (Morgan and Guillermo) highlight particular social issues related to white privilege and perceptions of people of color. These perceptions have embedded themselves so deeply into our society and its popular narratives that even an apocalypse-level event cannot mitigate the racially charged constraints on identity perpetuated by received narratives.

The first survivors Rick encounters in the changed world are Morgan Jones and his son, Duane, who are isolated in a dangerous area because they won’t abandon Duane’s mother, despite the fact that she is now a “walker.” Their situation introduces a social critique by showing how racism affects their behavior even in the midst of crisis. This is apparent after Rick first wakes up in the house they have claimed and, as yet unclear about what’s happening outside, knows only that he has been bound to a bed by a black man. Both fear each other, but for critically different reasons: Morgan worries that Rick’s bandage and hospital robe suggest infection; Rick hints at ingrained, racist suspicions by questioning Morgan and Duane’s presence in his former neighbors’ house. Soon, they talk over a candlelit dinner in the home’s formal dining room, underscoring the distance between old social graces and new survival demands. In this scene, Duane is eager to explain the knowledge he has acquired of the walkers, yet his father interrupts to correct his speech, likely because he is in the presence of a white man.



Morgan forces Duane to speak formally and avoid the vernacular that he is comfortable using with his father, as evidenced when Duane first finds Rick outside and calls Morgan over. In that prior moment, Morgan and Duane are focusing on surviving, not on social expectations, since they do not yet know that Rick is not a walker. The high-angle shots of Duane and Morgan looking down on Rick cut with low-angle reverse shots of Rick looking up at them show that Duane and Morgan are the ones in power in this situation. Not only do they have knowledge and weapons that Rick lacks, but Rick is physically in a position of weakness, as he has not yet fully recovered from his gunshot wound and from being unconscious for so long. They also have yet to figure out that he is human and not a walker. For all of these reasons, they are not concerned about proper speech, only survival.

However, in the dinner scene after they have helped Rick to safety, these positions are reversed: the camera assumes Rick's perspective, standing in front of them while they sit at the table. His physically dominant position symbolizes that he has regained both his strength and his social position of power. Although their shared (and assailed) humanity should make them all equals, Morgan and Duane fall back into learned social behavior, removing racial markers from their speech that are typically reserved for others of the same race.

The importance placed on these behaviors is made ridiculous in the context of a zombie apocalypse. Perhaps more than in some of the overtly racist exchanges featured elsewhere in the show, this episode emphasizes how people are marginalized by racist social systems. Morgan's felt need to suppress Duane's self-expression to adjust to the normativity of whiteness, even after many other rules and norms have drastically changed, exposes just how deeply ingrained this has become.

Morgan and Duane are not the only people of color who feel compelled to suppress their identities and change their behaviors in Rick's presence.



Guillermo's Hispanic "family" is a group of people who are brought together in a nursing home by the tragedy that has occurred. Although there are some literal family units within the large group, the group as a whole has bonded together by choice in order to survive. Guillermo, the former custodian in the nursing home, explains that when the entire staff had taken off when everything happened, he and one nurse had taken over the responsibility of taking care of and protecting the elderly residents. They have also taken in anyone who comes seeking their family members. Although Guillermo isn't related to the residents, he feels a responsibility to stay and lead rather than leaving them there to die like so many others had. In doing so, he and the others form a strong relationship built on shared morals and a desire to help others, creating bonds similar to those found in a biological family structure. But none of this is revealed until after the episode plays out as a gang confrontation between Rick's group and Guillermo's over a bag full of guns Rick had abandoned in an Atlanta street.

The family unit made up of Guillermo, his gang, and the people in the nursing home demonstrates that racism teaches people to have inaccurate expectations and assumptions. Societal stereotypes lead the white characters to assume they are confronting a violent gang leader; Guillermo performs the role defensively, playing on their stereotypes to create an illusion of greater strength than the group actually has. This escalates the situation far past what is necessary, because in fact, motives are pure on both sides: both groups desperately need the guns in order to protect their respective families. But as Guillermo later explains, many of the people they come across treat them badly and try to take advantage of them, which explains why they assume the worst of the people they meet, and Rick does the same. Despite the fact that every group of people Rick has come across so far has actually helped him, Rick and Darryl's group assumes that Guillermo is a threat based on racial profiling, inducing their perceived need to defend themselves. In reality, Guillermo and his friends do nothing to antagonize or threaten them until they are driven to defend themselves, which causes them to act according to the way Rick initially assumed they would.



The mise-en-scène during the initial confrontation implicates viewers in these same assumptions, once again aligning them with Rick's (white) perspective even while ostensibly looking through Guillermo's gang's eyes. The use of chiaroscuro when viewing Guillermo from behind in the dark and Rick and his group in the light creates a sense of drama and suspense

about what is going to happen that corresponds with what Rick's group automatically assumes to be true. The actual truth is revealed when a grandmother bursts into the room and begs Rick to see that they are kind people just trying to help each other survive. Immediately, the violence and threats stop, and the groups start communicating as equals. This speaks to the way in which assumptions are made quickly and based on limited information: Rick and Darryl see a group of



Hispanic men wearing chain necklaces and bandanas and assume that they are gang members simply because they fit a stereotype, and the grandmother sees a white man in uniform and feels the need to reveal everything about her family as a form of self-preservation. And the plot twist makes viewers experience their complicity in the same narrative patterns. The grandmother's immediate assumption that Rick is there to take her grandson Felipe is also triggered by stereotypes and past experiences of race relations in U.S. society. Racialized violence through familial separation is such a prevalent and common fear among immigrant groups that she does not stop to think that this should be the least of their concerns within the clearly changed, post-apocalyptic world they are adjusting to. Whether based on personal experiences or community lore, the grandma instinctively fears that this government official is there to take her son away from her and possibly deport him. When a sheriff shows up in full uniform and she sees people arguing, she assumes that the world is, in Guillermo's words, "the same as it ever was; the weak get taken," and she knows to start begging and defending Felipe's character without asking for specifics. The shallow-focus close-up on her concerned face highlights the fact that the weapons and hostages in the scene are not her concern; in her internalized and automated script, the police are there to take away her son for potentially gang-related charges or illegal immigration.



This confrontation reveals from both angles the negative and destructive implications of narratives based on stereotypes. These ideas are so normalized in society that—despite the otherwise brutal and complete loss of normalcy in their world—none of the characters in this scene really stop to effectively question why they assume what they assume. They simply react, very nearly to deadly effect. This is how *The Walking Dead* makes viewers question how “messed up” society is. By staging interactions between different racial families, the show examines how racism affects behavior and ways of thinking, and suggests that this is so deep seated, it might even survive an apocalypse. ☹

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Darabont, Frank, et al. *The Walking Dead: The Complete First Season*. Special edition. Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011. DVD.