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## Understanding the Apocalyptic Society: The Walking Dead from Comics to Television

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### Introduction

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*“That’s all we want, a choice, a chance, let’s keep trying as long as we can.” – Rick Grimes, Protagonist, The Walking Dead*

Every Sunday night for almost as long as I can remember, my husband would remain downstairs while I went up to bed so that he could watch AMC’s, *The Walking Dead*. Each week he would say something like, “I think you really would like it” and I would adamantly reply, “No, I don’t like zombies!” At school, one of my colleagues also spent quite a bit of time trying to convince me, saying that the show was really about psychology and sociology, the subjects that I teach. I remained unconvinced, not willing to even watch one episode until...spring break two years ago. For some reason that I cannot recollect, I found myself watching the first episode. I was overwhelmed in the best way possible. The opening scene has the show’s protagonist, Rick Grimes at an abandoned gas station in disarray trying to help a little girl that just doesn’t seem right. The music, the close up of his face...and when she turns around, you see that she isn’t right – her mouth is ripped open, decayed, with blood dripping from it, her eyes sunken in and bloodshot – she’s no longer a little girl but a zombie, or a walker as they are referred to in the television series. In the first few minutes of the episode, I was already asking a hundred questions and it has only gotten better from there. I realized I was not so much involved with the zombies but more so with Rick. What was his story? Why was he alone? What was happening? This led me to the longest binge watching I have ever participated in. During that spring break, I watched 84 episodes of *The Walking Dead*. We do have a DVR but not On Demand, so to be able to view the new season which would begin in a week, I had to watch the past six seasons keeping up with our five-episode-only DVR. I was hooked! Just as Kirkman, the creator of *The Walking Dead* universe, proclaims, it isn’t really about zombies. It’s about the characters – their stories.

## Rationale

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Last year our school initiated an advisory period for all students; high school students meet on Mondays and Tuesdays while middle school students meet on Thursdays and Fridays. This is a 30-minute “skinny block” for which the content and curriculum is left up to individual teachers. The Building Leadership Team (BLT) and administration placed no expectations or guidelines on this “skinny block” meaning – for once – teachers had complete freedom in regard to the course and its curriculum! Selections include *Meditation*, *Robotics*, *Creative Writing*, and *History Through Film*, amongst others. So far, I have used the time to work with groups of students who are interested in additional preparation for the AP Psychology exam administered in May. However, over the past two years, I have noticed that it seemed as if the students in my advisory did not benefit as much from the meetings during the first half of the year. I think it might be because at that point-- so early in the year – the AP Psychology exam is too far in the future. It is hard for them to concentrate on something that still seems abstract to them in September. They do not know enough content yet to understand what and how to approach the exam. Because of this, I have thought I could offer a different advisory the first half of the year – one which has a subject that I am really now interested in....zombies!

I would like to marry one of my students’ interests (and mine!) – *The Walking Dead*/apocalyptic society – with Common Core Content Standards that would benefit them beyond Advisory. The television series, *The Walking Dead* based on Robert Kirkman’s comics, has become cult-like in our society. Many of my students as well as myself view the show on a weekly basis. Many examples of the characters – their experiences and relationships and the scenes depicting societal issues already find their way in to my Sociology and Psychology classes. Through this series we will be able to look at the culture of zombies, these characters’ stories, and the depiction of an apocalyptic society in an in-depth manner as well as to look at two medias – the written text (comics) and the television series both telling the “same” story. In that way we will be able to better understand the concept of adaptation and its nuances.

### School Setting

Conrad Schools of Science (CSS) is a science/biotechnology magnet school serving almost 1300 students in grades 6 – 12. It is considered an urban school, situated on the outskirts of the most populated city in the state of Delaware, Wilmington, which is well known for its violence rates. CSS students come from all over our state’s county, New Castle, which houses six school districts. Since our state runs on a Choice Option, families can decide to apply to schools in districts outside of their home district. As our school has become more popular, most students come from our own district, Red Clay Consolidated. One of the most unique things about our school is that approximately two-thirds of our students stay with us for seven years throughout the middle and high school levels. Community is a word that I believe highlights our school.

At the high school level, students can choose to focus on a variety of learning “strands” such as biotechnology, physical therapy/athletic healthcare, biomedical science, animal science, and computer science. Our high school is the only one in the state that is not a vocational-technology school to offer a Delaware Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program. Additionally, a variety of Advanced Placement (AP) courses are offered as well as multiple courses taught in conjunction with our local community college and university.

## Learning Objectives

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As stated, I have complete freedom in what I will teach in this Advisory. However, I do want to keep in mind that no matter what content we are reviewing that I still have the greater purpose of better preparing students for their academic studies. That is why I will be using two Common Core Standards – one for reading and one for speaking and listening. These include: **English Language Arts Standards/College Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading - Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:** *Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g. recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry, evaluation how each version interprets the source text)* and **Speaking and Listening - Comprehension and Collaboration:** *Prepare for and participate electively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.*

Students will be viewing the television show and reading the comics, focusing on the first season of six episodes and reading the corresponding comic pages. Students will learn the skills of closely reading comics and a film (in this case – a television series). In doing so, they will be able to analyze the information in both medias interpreting the source texts. Students will then participate in whole group and small group conversations meeting this second standard regarding a variety of things including background information on zombies as well as the similarities and differences between the two medias in order to determine what is compelling about each version.

**Enduring Understandings** are the big ideas of this curriculum unit. Students will understand that pop culture (*The Walking Dead*) can be a useful tool for learning about difficult and controversial material, what an adaptation is (literature to screen) and what it looks like, that adapting literature to the screen is a complicated process of give and take with regard to telling a story, and that *The Walking Dead* is so much more than zombies! It is a storytelling masterpiece that focuses on the concepts and principles of Psychology and Sociology. These understandings lead to **Essential Questions** that guide students through this unit within each of our sessions. These questions are those that students will investigate through their reading and viewing of the comics and television series. These include: How can storytelling be the same and different in regard to the two medias – comics and television series? Is one more compelling than the other? How so? How is the presentation of the central character, Rick Grimes, different in the comics and the television series? What are some of the reasons for these differences? What is my understanding of the similarities and differences between comics and television series? Do the changes detract from the quality of the story? and What do the two medias tell us about our society? Additionally, there will be **Specific Questions About Episodes/Comic Book Entries** that include: What is the difference between this part of the episode and the corresponding graphic novel pages? What is common to this part of the episode and the corresponding graphic novel pages? and Why would the filmmakers change the scene (s)?

This curriculum unit is divided into three sections: (1) the concept of adaptation from literature to film and, specifically – the idea of comics to television series adaptation, including how to read a film and comics (2) *The Walking Dead* Apocalypse including information about the dystopian genre, why it is popular, and how it reflects a society and (3) the adaptation within *The Walking Dead* – comparing and contrasting specific sections and scenes between the two medias' interpretations including characters and their development.

## Content Objectives

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### What is Adaptation and How Does it Apply to Film?

I would also bet that my students have not thought deeply about or engaged in many thoughtful conversations regarding adaptations of text to film. With this in mind, one of the things that I would like to convey to my students is an overview of film adaptation. Dudley Andrew writes about three modes of adaptation from text to film: “borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation.”<sup>1</sup> Borrowing refers to the mode which is most often used in which the artist uses “more or less extensively, the material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful, text”<sup>2</sup> to further their own work or viewpoint. Intersection is the second mode of adaptation and is the one that most viewers hope for in that it is just like the book, demonstrating the “uniqueness of the original text is preserved to such an extent that it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation”<sup>3</sup> Lastly, the final mode of adaptation is fidelity and transformation. This one allows for the greatest freedom of interpretation with the caveat that the spirit of the original text remains.<sup>4</sup> I would venture to say that *The Walking Dead* series would be categorized as borrowing. Although there are many similarities between the texts (comics and television series) such as Rick being the protagonist and a small-town cop besides others, there are liberties that they take advantage of to include a character named Daryl who is very much beloved by the television show following; the manner in which Rick’s wife, Lori, dies; an inversion of the characters Andrea and Michonne regarding their personal relationship with Rick, amongst others. More of these changes will be discussed in the adaptation piece specific to the *Walking Dead* comics and television series.

Linda Costanzo Cahir writes about three types as well, mirroring what Andrew writes but using different terms - literal, traditional, and radical. However, her thought that one must first look at the difference between adaptation and translation is more intriguing to me. According to her, “To adapt is to move that same entity into a new environment.”<sup>5</sup> Modification is necessary whether that is minor or major: the adaptation must “...accommodate itself to its new environment.”<sup>6</sup> “To translate takes a different approach “to move a text from one language to another. It is a *process of language*, not a process of survival and generation. Through the process of translation a fully new text - a *materially different entity* - is made, one that simultaneously has a strong relationship with its original source, yet is fully independent from it.”<sup>7</sup> I found this explanation to be quite understandable as well as realistic. As someone who would consider herself pretty capable in two languages, I still find myself struggling at times in my second one. My husband, whom I consider to be much more gifted in the same two languages, always reminds me that you cannot translate word for word. Although the essence of one’s thoughts and explanations may come across the words are not exactly the same. This is what I first thought of when I read Cahir’s words and it will be something that I will be able to explain to my students with an example from my Peace Corps service. While there, I tried to convey the idea that I felt sick (not illness but uneasiness/badly) to a native Ecuadorian. There is no direct translation for this - to write *Estoy enfermo* does not convey the same meaning. Cahir explains that “One, every act of translation is simultaneously an act of interpretation. Two, through the process of translating, a new text emerges - a unique entity - not a mutation of the original matter, but a fully new work, which in form and in function, is independent from its literary source. Three, film translators of literature face the same challenges, dilemmas, interpretative choices, latitudes, and responsibilities that any translator must face.”<sup>8</sup> I also felt comforted by this viewpoint, since it was shedding a new light on a somewhat sore subject for me. I am one of many who like to have the film reflect exactly what happened in the book. A former English Language Learner (ELL) of

mine enjoyed reading Nicholas Sparks books. As a celebration of each book she read, I would take her to see the film. The two of us were extremely angry when we saw *Dear John*, since the film's ending was completely different from the book. Cahir's words were ones that we could have benefited from! Seminar Leader, Brigitte Peucker followed up in seminar stating that it is an interpretation, a translation from one media to another from the language of literature to the language of film. She believes that it is not a matter of the fidelity to the text, but instead that a person should have artistic license with the adaptation.

Much of the literature as well as Peucker proclaim that a film gives information about the time period in which it is produced. As she states, "It picks up on the important issues of the day." So, the original story is written but as adaptations are produced over the years, their perspectives speak to what may be happening politically or socially at the time. "Since the end of the nineteenth century, the tension between visuality and literacy has dominated much of Western culture. It has served as a barometer for questions about class, human intelligence, political action, the different statuses of races and genders, and the use and abuse of leisure time."<sup>9</sup> I would like my students to think more broadly about what we read and view - more than just about the apocalypse or zombies but also at how society is portrayed - what messages are being given? For example, the extremely diverse cast including multiple races and sexualities is something one would not have seen fifty years ago.

### **Literature and Film Vocabulary - What Do They Have in Common?**

There is a certain vocabulary that should be taught to students regarding film and literature. Some of this they may be familiar with. One such word is *theme* or *motif*. This indicates the main idea or message.<sup>10</sup> *Characters* are something about which students will also be knowledgeable. They are the source that drives the story line of a piece of literature or a film. Terms such as major and minor come into play as well as protagonist (hero) and antagonist (villain). "How characters are depicted and what they contribute to the themes and meanings of different works can vary a great deal, depending on the perspective of the work and the media being used."<sup>11</sup> Questions to be considered when looking at an adaptation include: "How are movie characters a product of certain film techniques?" and "Which characters are added, omitted, or changed in an adaptation?"<sup>12</sup> *Stories* are commonly what literature and movies might share, as they provide basic materials, from fact or fiction, about events, lives, characters, and their motivations.<sup>13</sup> A *plot* presents events in an order, a *narration* provides the perspective or point of view, a dramatic conflict happens "between characters or a character and society", and a "*narrative causality* through which characters' needs and desires motivate events and actions." Lastly, a *setting* or *location* is the place, time, and space in which the action and characters are placed.<sup>14</sup> Students will be able to use this terminology when speaking about both the comics and television show episodes.

### **Comics - How to Read Them and Why?**

Scott McCloud defines comics as 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.'<sup>15</sup> Or, more simply as "sequential art." Many people think comics are not really a form of reading. Over the years, most educators I know have categorized the comics/graphic novels into a category that they would not use for classroom instruction. My own thoughts changed about comics when I did use them in a scaffolding technique to teach ELLs how to read Shakespearean plays. I would agree with McCloud when he argues that most fail to understand what comics are and define them too narrowly.<sup>16</sup> "Comic strips deserve to be taken seriously, as they can be rich in meaning, style, and structure."<sup>17</sup>

Whatever people believe or however comics are defined, there are many reasons why using comics in the classroom can be beneficial for students. The first, which I believe, to be most important is that they are *motivating*! Students, much like adults, do not like to do things they do not want to do. Most of my students complain about reading. In fact, in my Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology course I know that all of my students do not complete all of the assigned reading. Using comics with students is putting reverse psychology into practice in that it allows them (in their minds) to believe that they are reading less. While they may be reading fewer words, proponents of comics argue that it is really a much more sophisticated type of reading. I know that I will need to teach my students how to truly read comics, including the vocabulary specific to the genre. Additionally, “Motivating students with texts that resonate with their personal interests and identities will increase their investment, leading to greater exposure to words, greater vocabulary acquisition, and more frequent use of reading strategies — three cornerstones of comprehension.”<sup>18</sup> Many comics and graphic novels today replicate great works as well as topics of interests for young people such as gender, family, and friendships. Second, as advanced picture stories, comics are *visual*, allowing for the text and pictures to work together to tell the story. Even in high school, many students reminisce about the picture books they remember from elementary school – they miss them. Fewer words and more pictures are appealing for most. Even as a graduate student, I would find myself counting the pages in an assigned article and being thankful for the multiple pages containing data tables, thinking, “Oh, five less pages to read!” Providing both images and text for the students allows them not to have to consider all points, making the reading process less tedious and more enjoyable. Thirdly, the idea of an *intermediary* is another reason why comics are so beneficial and one with which I can completely relate. In my first YNI seminar as a novice Shakespeare reader, I found overwhelmed with dissecting the language of his plays. So, I found myself looking first at the children’s stories by Lamb and Lamb, and then moving to the comics/graphic novels of the plays I was to read before I delved into his intense work. This was just the middle ground that I needed to go from something very simplistic to something much more complex. Fourth, comics are also very *popular*. Since students find the combination of text and pictures engaging, comics provide students with a variety of reading options from real-life accounts of tough issues such as Allison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* to Marvel’s Superheroes like the Black Panther, Spider-Man, and The Hulk, amongst others. The use of these is a means to integrate popular culture with which students relate with the school environment. In this way, students can also bridge the gap between home and school.”<sup>19</sup> Fifth, and in my opinion, just as important as motivation, the idea that comics are *permanent* is an important aspect when determining to use them with students. When I think about my students and even myself, I am reminded of how many times a person needs to repeat something in order to remember it. We know that when viewing a television show or film, one may miss something along the way. Peucker states that it is important to view a film multiple times to ensure that one sees all that it can offer and even then things are missed. Despite seeing something, even multiple times, you may miss out on some of the details. This is even more obvious to me now during seminar when people are discussing the films we have seen. Many times I have overlooked the details that they point out. With comics, it is different as the reader controls how fast or slow he goes with his reading, so one does not have time constraints.

I have not used comics or graphic novels with my current students. Although they may have experience with reading these outside of class, I do not know what their expertise may be in regard to the terminology or the act of *how* to read them. “By providing direct instruction on the art and craft of the graphic novel, students develop an appreciation for how visual elements such as color, perspective, and point of view manipulate the viewer’s emotions and influence their comprehension of various subjects.”<sup>20</sup> With that in mind, I will need to ensure that they have an understanding of comic reading vocabulary. This will allow them to be able to closely read and better comprehend *The Walking Dead* comics. Terminology needed includes terms such as:



*panel*, a square or box that is separated from the others, indicating “a sense of time and space.”<sup>21</sup> At times these panels have no lines around the edges as well. Although some may think that the *blank space* in between the panels is not important, however, close attention should be paid to these as they enable a reader to better follow along with what is happening as well as indicating what was omitted – which can be very telling. The *camera angle* indicates the location to which the reader should focus their attention. For example, much like in films, if it is a close up of an illustration of a character’s face, emotions are easily recognizable, making it easier for the reader being able to interpret the inner thoughts or feelings of the character. Known as the *gutter*, the spaces in between panels allow for the reader to infer what has happened between them (each panel) – what information can one deduce from panel to panel. A *symbol* is a visual representation of something else. For example, a heart above two people with their heads together could indicate love or a loving relationship. *Emanta* are also visual representations. Items such as lines or arrows, for example, could indicate movement. Not only are they the visual representation of an action but, it is also important to think about what it means and why was it included. How does it help to convey meaning? One last vocabulary term is the *speech or thought bubbles* indicating what a character is saying or thinking. Usually, the difference between these is the thought bubbles are indicated by cloudlike circles or boxes. All of these vocabulary terms are items the students may be familiar with, but they may not know the terminology or have had practice it with yet. That will follow later.

### **How Does One Read a Film?**

A few years ago, I was in another one of Peucker’s seminars – *Using Film in the Classroom/How to Read A Film*. Due to this experience, I have led some of my students through film vocabulary exercises and practice in my College Preparatory (CP) Psychology courses when we complete the Psychological Disorders unit in conjunction with the curriculum I wrote about Mental Illnesses. However, I expect that none of those students will be in *The Walking Dead Advisory*. Knowing this, I will work with students to understand the following vocabulary by reviewing it while showing short clips of the first *The Walking Dead* episode. While watching it, students will be able to understand the concepts while seeing them in action.

Framing includes three types of *shots* – *close-up, media, and long shots*. Each of these expresses something different. The close-up, focuses solely on the face of an actor allowing for the viewer to see his facial expressions, his emotions, into his very soul. The Long shot shows the actor’s entire body is in the shot with the objects and surroundings. From these one is able to make out the setting but not so much the emotions of a character. A media shot focuses on the character – from the waist up. It’s a middle ground indicating emotions as well as surroundings. Angles are another consideration that the director needs to make. These include low, high, and eye-level shots. The low-angle shot indicates the character is larger, has more power. The high-angle shot reflects the opposite – the character is smaller, weaker. The eye-level shot is one in which demonstrates the normal type of interactions people have with each other. It is also used in conjunction with high- or low-angle shots to demonstrate a character’s change in power or status. There are a few vocabulary terms in relation to camera movement within a shot that students should know: *pan, tilt, zoom, and dolly*. The pan movement goes from left to right to emulate our own eyes. It shows the viewer the setting. The tilt moves up and down, and the zoom movement comes in from a far distance to indicate a specific reaction or clue. The last one, the dolly or tracking shot, indicates that the camera is moving, unlike the other three. This helps to “move the audience with the action and keep us from feeling like spectators.”<sup>22</sup>

Sound is used as a “layered effect”. There are three types: diegetic, nondiegetic, and internal diegetic. Diegetic refers to sounds that are found within the movie – e.g. characters talking or a bird chirping. Nondiegetic indicates sounds that are not part of the situation in the film such as the music adding to effect – e.g. think about the *Jaws* theme! Internal diegetic is a combination of the two such as what we saw in the

MacBeth adaptations – the famous speeches are said but internally while the director uses a close up shot. Lighting also plays a major role in a film to indicate the mood. Low-key lighting with shadows and contrasts between light and dark indicate uncertainty about what will happen next. High-key lighting “is characterized by brightness, openness, and light” indicating that there is nothing to hide.<sup>23</sup> Sets, costumes, and props are also points to consider when evaluating a film. These can all indicate the place, time, and space of the film.

### **How Do We Put It All Together? Adaptation - Comics to Television Series**

In the past, when I taught solely ELLs, I used many film adaptations of the literature that we were to teach. Since my students were beginning English readers, many of the mandated texts were far out of their reach – *War of the Worlds*, *The Cay*, *The Outsiders*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, amongst others. Indeed, or my first few times here with the Yale National Initiative (YNI), I created units focused on Shakespeare and used the film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *MacBeth*. These adaptations provided visuals for students where there were none. However, I did not give much thought to the complicated issue of how and why I was using them. Narrative adaptations can be more expansive, including comics to television, and can be used for a variety of purposes and classes. For practical purposes, using film adaptations provides educators with things to consider while focusing on how and what to teach include the choices made for the adaptation, fidelity, and the “degrees of translation”.<sup>24</sup> For this unit I am going to focus more on guiding questions such as: “How can I maximize educational impact when teaching adaptations? Where does one start? Are all adaptations the same? For that matter, what is an adaptation, and what does it look like?”<sup>25</sup> These questions reflect the Common Core Standards that I have chosen regarding reading and speaking.

I love watching television! So many programs, so many genres, so many stories are being told. I appreciate and look forward to seeing what will happen to my characters each week. I laugh, I cry, and I know that I am not alone. In fact, watching television is an important part of our current culture with the A.C. Neilson Company reporting that the average person watches four hours of television a day.<sup>26</sup> It tells the stories of our times – past and current – provides a “window to broader social issues, whether by establishing norms of identity categories like gender or race or by framing political agendas and perspectives.”<sup>27</sup> Over the past few years, the number of comic book-based television shows has steadily increased with about thirty currently, one being *The Walking Dead*. This moneymaking business of comics lends itself very nicely to television and/or movie production.

### **Why Should One Focus on *The Walking Dead* Apocalypse?**

*The decision was made a long time ago, before any of us knew each other. But we were all strangers who would pass each other on the street before the world ended. And now we mean everything to each other. You were in trouble. You were trapped. Glenn didn't know you but he helped you. He put himself in danger for you. And that started it all. From Atlanta, to my Daddy's farm, to the prison, to here, to this moment now – not as strangers as family.” Because Glenn chose to be there for you that day a long time ago, that was the decision that changed everything. It started with the both of you and it just grew. All of this to sacrifice for each other – to suffer, to stand, to grieve, to give, to love, to live, to fight for each other. Glenn made the decision, Rick. I was just following his lead.<sup>28</sup>*

**“Apocalyptic literature is a literary genre that foretells supernaturally inspired cataclysmic events that will**



transpire at the end of the world. A product of the Judeo-Christian tradition, apocalyptic *literature* is characteristically pseudonymous; it takes narrative form, employs *esoteric* language, expresses a pessimistic view of the present, and treats the final events as *imminent*.”<sup>29</sup> It could be considered an end. Usually in the films and literature regarding apocalypse there are always people who survive – who have hope, develop communities, and love each other. It seems to be part of human nature and is at the core of Maggie’s quote above. As a people, we are fascinated by the apocalypse! It represents the unknown, which is terrifying for people. We revel in reading about and watching how “the end” could play out. Films such as *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, *Divergent* Series, *2012*, and *The Day After Tomorrow*, amongst others have young people thinking and talking about whether it could really happen, what exactly would happen, and how could I survive? As an adolescent, I read many of these types of books such as *Alas Babylon*, *Childhood’s End*, and *1984*. I remember thinking profoundly about this subject – the end of the world, as we know it - trying to process the uneasiness of the unknown. Perhaps soothing myself with the idea that it could never happen – it was, in fact, too alien to my current life, the world today. I believe this is one of the reasons why a zombie apocalypse, the world of *The Walking Dead*, is so fascinating for people – because it is almost plausible but not probable, making it safe to engage in thoughts about the subject. The one thing that really seems to interest people is that the zombies eat living human beings – representing cannibalism, a taboo in our society. But more importantly,

A compelling zombie story must have the same elements as any other successful story, and *The Walking Dead* has them. It has intriguing, believable characters whom people care about. It has well-developed plots and subplots. And it has important things to say about the human condition, which is one of frailty and nobility, weakness and courage, fear and hope, good and evil. These are the enduring puzzles and enigmas of our existence, and we can delve into them and learn from them vicariously when we sit down to watch *The Walking Dead*.<sup>30</sup>

However, it was a long road to getting these comics published. Kirkman’s original pitch, entitled *Dead Planet*, is a hard-core zombie series. He said the later reveal included aliens as the cause for the zombie epidemic, which aided their invasion of Earth, but he states he never intended to follow through with this idea. The later proposal had changed the title to *The Walking Dead* under the influence from Image Comics and featured protagonist, Rick Grimes, working and living in Pennsylvania with his wife, Carol, and their son. When he gets word of the undead walking around eating humans, he does whatever he can to protect his family. They travel around the state in search of a safe setting, settling in a high school, and Rick gathers and leads an army in hopes of expanding a safe territory. Although much of this changed for the released comics, the format remained faithful to the pitch in that the comics would be illustrated in black and white. Kirkman strongly believed that the best horror films were in black and white and he wanted to replicate that quality, paying homage to George Romero’s, *Night of the Living Dead*.

*The Walking Dead’s* first issue was published in October of 2003 and the initial 7,000 copies immediately sold out. This seemed to be timed perfectly as the film, *28 Days Later* was a blockbuster success and had a number of similarities to Kirkman’s comics. Additionally, the book titled *The Zombie Survival Guide* was very popular. The world was ripe for a zombie take over! Obviously the allure of zombies is intense! They have held our attention since director George A. Romero introduced us to them in *The Night of the Living Dead*. One of the reasons that people were so interested had to do with the fact that it wasn’t just about zombies, but stories about the people. The final plot finds the protagonist, Rick Grimes, a small-town sheriff’s deputy in a rural Kentucky area, waking up from a coma in a hospital where he was recovering from a shooting wound,

with no one else around – well, no one else except for zombies, and he doesn't really understand what "they" are. He staggers out of the building and manages to get back to his home where he finds the neighborhood deserted and his family missing.

The television series is successful because it is not a film – not a story that is told in a two-hour time frame but one that is continuous. For that reason, it will “allow for more-nuanced storytelling than the original books”.<sup>31</sup> Kirkman stated, “I'm really just doing a soap opera about survival.”<sup>32</sup> Its executive producer, Frank Darabont, understood Kirkman's basic principle that *The Walking Dead* is much more than just zombies – it is character-driven. It's really about the humans in the picture – their lives, their stories. Kirkman stated that his main objective was to

...explore how people deal with extreme situations and how these events CHANGE them....You guys are going to get to see Rick change and mature to the point that when you look back on this book you won't even recognize him...I hope to show you reflections of your friends, your neighbors, your families, and yourselves, and what their reactions are to the extreme situations in the book...This is more about watching Rick survive than it is about watching Zombies pop around the corner and scare you...The idea behind *The Walkin Dead* is to stay with the character, in this case Rick Grimes for as long as humanly possible.<sup>33</sup>

In the first chapter in compendium one, the part that we will focus on and is more or less equal to the first season of the television series, Rick finds his family and work partner/best friend, meets new people, loses some of them to death, and begins to act as the group's leader. The comics depict “blood splattering as humans and zombies battle, but it is also focused on melodramatic moments, as human characters struggle to maintain normality in the face of the monstrous.”<sup>34</sup>

AMC committed to six episodes-- not just one pilot episode. This allowed the show to find an audience. Joel Stillerman, senior vice president of original programming, production & digital content, justified the reasoning by stating that this was original, there was a great team in place, and people were interested in the genre of zombies/horror. These unique factors seemed like a winning combination. The premiere occurred at the end of the annual classic horror movie marathon. AMC was the perfect place to “let characters and stories breath. They let the stories take their time.”<sup>35</sup>

### **What Does Adaptation Look Like Within *The Walking Dead*?**

When we are looking at the two medias – comics and television series episodes, I figure we will do this on three levels. On the first level, students will determine the big picture when it comes to the two medias – what is the overarching theme (the main idea), who are the characters one is introduced to, what stories are they telling, who is narrating the episode (the point of view), what is the plot (the events in order) and the setting. I think this will be pretty easy for students as it mirrors what they have been doing in school for many years regarding their literature stories. On the second level, we will analyze both the comics and the television episodes using the vocabulary that we have learned including shots, angles, panels, and symbols, amongst others. On the third level, we will compare the two looking at what is enhanced, what is compelling about each of the medias. I have re-watched the first episode “Days Gone Bye” as well as re-read the comics. Although I have done this multiple times, I found it interesting that this time when I applied this methodology I “saw” so many additional details. Looking at it more critically, I was able to see I was able to

not only see information about the principle story line, but also the details of each of the media.

In the film, we are first introduced to Rick (much like in the comics) and learn about this “new” world with him. He wakes up to silence from an extended coma in which the flowers he thinks that his friend just dropped off are dead and dry. He screams for a nurse’s help but no one responds. Leaving the hospital room, he encounters complete mayhem in the hospital halls with no working phones, the lighting system compromised, a dead, half-eaten, decaying body in the hall and a sign painted on the cafeteria doors, Don’t Open Dead Inside. The door rattles and fingers come slowly out. He escapes from the hospital where outside he discovers hundreds of dead wrapped bodies as well as what appears to be a failed military outpost. He finds a bicycle and rides home to find it abandoned – his family nowhere to be found. Upon going outside, he is smacked in the head by a young child named Duane who thought he was a Walker (zombie). When he comes to, Duane’s father, Morgan, has brought him into the home that they are held up in. They proceed to tell him what happened while he was in the hospital – about the Walkers. After he is feeling better, Rick takes Morgan and Duane to the sheriff’s quarters where they stock up on weapons and transportation. Rick goes off in search of his family who, he believes, has gone to Atlanta while Morgan and his son remain. In his travels to Atlanta, his car runs out of gas and he comes across a farmhouse looking for some. Instead he finds a family who has written in blood “*God, forgive us,*” as they committed what appears to be a group suicide. He ends up taking a horse and rides away. Students will be able to get this overview and determine the theme, characters, stories, plot, narration, and setting without a problem. They will also already be drawn into the story, much like I was, having hundreds of questions and wanting to know what happens next.

For the second part of this process, I am going to have them read the comics first – 37 pages. This will take us up to the end of the first television episode that we can watch afterwards to be able to also analyze and then compare the adaptation. Students will use the vocabulary terms we have learned about panels and the spaces in between them, gutters, speech and thought bubbles, amongst others. I believe that this will prove fascinating, and I am eager to see what students pick up on. For example, the speech bubbles are different for the noises zombies make versus what humans are saying. Additionally, when Rick is screaming the bubbles are more pronounced with sharp angles. If students don’t comment on it, I will ask them to observe the illustrator’s version of Rick. What does he look like? What is he wearing? What does he say? What does he do? How and what do these things tell us about him as a character? What type of man is he and what is the “textual evidence” to support their thoughts? What do they see and read in the comics to give credence to these thoughts. Then, in the second half of this part of the process, students will be introduced to the first episode of the television series, *Days Gone Bye*. Students will view it paying attention to the reading film terminology we have gone over and practiced. Students will notice the director’s popular use of close-ups, especially of Rick. By means of the close-up, we are drawn into his feelings of bewilderment, shock, anguish, and horror. The director also uses a number of high angle shots where we sense Rick’s vulnerability-- for example as he lies in a fetal position in his home sobbing when he discovers his family is not there.

For the last portion of this process, we will begin to compare and contrast the two medias. I find this part most interesting as it reminds me of something I read which Kirkman mentioned. He wrote that he works simultaneously carrying along the story through his comics as well in the series’ writer’s room – a process that is not always smooth. In fact many times it is an awkward process with as many as up to eight others critiquing his work, stating this won’t work or it would be better another way. It is challenging to have people do that regarding characters and events written years in the past since the comics are ahead of the television show’s timeline. That is in fact what my students will be doing – critiquing his work! We can begin with the idea of music being used sparingly throughout the episode. The instrumental theme music is harried and hurried and it is accompanied by still shots of desolated areas and symbols pertinent to the story in black and

white with just a tint of red. The episode takes the liberty of adding many details that we will not find in the comics. These additions are to allow the viewer insight into the characters lives. I think of it as a hook: I am drawn in to better understand Rick – that he is a character, whom I really like, one with whom I can empathize. He’s a regular sort of guy eating hamburgers with Shane, his partner/best friend, discussing the complications of understanding women. It demonstrates the intimacy of their relationship. This continues throughout the episode when Rick gets shot and we see the panic Shane feels about losing him and the care and reassurance he gives him, and even later when we see that Shane is visiting Rick in the hospital, bringing him flowers and complaining that no response is all that he gets each time he comes by. The comics do not have any of these scenes. We will discuss the reasons why...why would a director choose to include these scenes? There are also many differences between Rick waking up and discovering what is happening in the comics versus the television episode. All of these scenes, I believe, add to the human component of our protagonist. There is also a discrepancy with what happens in the hospital. In the comics, he wakes up, falls out of bed, finds his clothes and changes into them. He is scruffy and not very clean. Afterwards, he walks into the hallway where not much is out of order until a dead body comes out of the elevator. He doesn’t understand what is happening and removes a board and opens the doors to the cafeteria, wondering what is going on. It is there that he sees the walking dead, rotting zombies who try to attack him. In a narrow escape, he gets out of the hospital building. In contrast to the television episode, in which we see him coming awake and calling for help to which – again – no one replies. After that, he walks into the hallway, still in his hospital gown and moving slowly due to his gunshot wound. The hallway looks like a scene from hell with blood smeared everywhere, lights flashing on and off, objects strewn around, and electrical wires hanging from the ceiling. He comes across a half-eaten rotting body. When he approaches the cafeteria, one cannot miss the big letters stating *Don’t Open – Dead Inside*, which is paired with the chains on the doors rattling. As if that’s not enough, he hears moaning behind the doors and sees fingers trying to come through. The close ups of his face again indicate his extreme horror, disbelief, and lack of understanding regarding what is happening. This version also makes him look extremely vulnerable. We feel it as we are also discovering the world with him. Just this one portion of the episode is packed with a lot of information – so many meanings. I took eight pages of notes regarding the commonalities and differences between the two medias. I imagine we might want to consider students completing a general overview of this process but then going back and, in a jigsaw manner, having pairs reflect on certain sections of the comics/episode and reviewing it multiple times to glean as many details as possible.

## Strategies

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### How to Read a Comic

One may first think that this step is unnecessary, that I am not expecting enough of my students. However, there are many details regarding reading a comic. The first step is to look at the general structure of the comic – how it is laid out. The vocabulary such as panel, frame, speech bubble, and gutter, among others, will be pointed out as we go through a page from *The Walking Dead* comics. “Pages are meant to be read from left to right and in a “z-like” pattern — you read the rows as they’re tiered and make your way down a page.”<sup>36</sup> The website *Read, Write, Think* has many invaluable resources that I have used or modified during my teaching career. For this unit, I was able to find vocabulary terms for the comics, with visual examples for angles, layout and design, and text containers. These are the vocabulary terms that were previously explained. These will be of great help to my students as we preview these first before delving into actual

comic pages from *The Walking Dead's* first issues. In doing so, we will practice what we have learned together as a whole group. I believe we will do this in pairs so that there is the comfort of a colleague – students discovering the information together.

## **How to Read A Film**

The National Archives has a variety of document analysis guides for students to use when they read and analyze a document. Specifically, I have modified the Motion Picture Analysis Worksheet for my students to use so that it incorporates the details of what I learned in the seminar to help them better understand the films and also to reflect the Common Core standards that I want them to achieve. The second section, Viewing, has two components (B) in which students check off the physical components of the film such as music, narration, special effects, color, live action, background noise, animation, and dramatization and (C), in which it has students look at cinematic features such as camera lighting, music, narration, and/or editing that contribute to the atmosphere of the film. Additionally, there will be a section that reflects/has them write down what they want to share with others in the class discussions as I am also trying to have them develop their speaking skills. For this unit, I have also found another graphic organizer that might be good to use with my students. It is specific for the cinematic and theatrical elements and their effects. This one focuses more on the actual filming of the piece, and it is divided into five parts: One – Framing, Angles, and Camera Movement; Two – Editing Choices and Length of Takes; Three – Soundtrack and Music; Four – Color and Lighting; and Five – Theatrical Elements. I imagine this particular graphic organizer to be very helpful as students first carefully read the film or its specific elements, going back to them, and being able to apply what we have learned in class. Then they will look at the bigger picture, asking what this all means with regard to the characters and their actions.

## **Collaborative Learning/Groupwork**

Students need to learn how to work together to accomplish goals – those set by the teacher and themselves. This is a basic requirement for many positions or jobs that they will hold in the future. Working together, relying on each other helps to build team-working skills. This strategy is somewhat challenging for us in that there are two groups of students at three different high schools. For the intense conversations that follow, and the readings of important concepts such as gender, race, or religion, a facilitator must be certain that there is a strong sense of camaraderie, trust, and willingness to work with and listen to others in the group. In collaborative learning, each group member is accountable to each other member. They are dependent upon one another and each one contributes the established goals. Everyone has some strength to share.<sup>37</sup> Together, more is accomplished. Opportunities to learn about each other before and while working help to promote the collegiality and cohesiveness necessary to work well together. Individual and group evaluations are necessary to monitor the group's work (product) and their progress as a team. Additionally, this strategy will serve us well as we will be working within the time constraints of the 30-minute "skinny block".

## **Activities**

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### **Zombie Jigsaw and Life-Size Drawings**

In this activity, students will be divided into pairs and will read individually and then work together using the



information learned to create life-size drawings of zombies using captions from the textual evidence they have gathered. The readings will come from a variety of texts to include the biology, psychology, and philosophy behind zombies. I will provide a few life-size zombie outlines enough for multiple pairs to work together to add what they have learned to the same outline to create an artistic representation of a zombie and label the major features pulled from the texts. There will be ample opportunity to discuss what fascinating facts they have learned.

### **Comic Illustrations**

Since a lot of my students watch *The Walking Dead* on television but have yet to read the comics, I want to use this to my advantage. The first thing that I will do is play for them the introductory scene from the television show premiere in which Rick is wandering around a deserted gas station. Afterwards, I will have them choose between working individually or in pairs to create their own comic strip of what they have seen. We will come back to these later, after we learn comic terminology and how to read comics. After we do this, we will later return to this exercise and complete it again with another section from one of the episodes. Then, we will look at the original comics and compare ours to Kirkman's - seeing the differences including what might have been omitted.

### **Comics and Film (Television Episodes) Adaptations/Comparisons of *The Walking Dead* Comics to Television Series**

Until now we have not really analyzed either text - comics or television. We will take specific scenes from both medias, reviewing them in-depth. First, students will determine the big picture when it comes to the two medias - what is the overarching theme (the main idea), who are the characters one is introduced to, what stories are they telling, who is narrating the episode (the point of view), and what is the plot (the events in order) and the setting. Second, we will analyze both the comics and the television episodes using the vocabulary that we have learned including shots, angles, panels, and symbols, amongst others. Third, we will compare the two looking what is compelling about each of the medias. The *Teach With Movies* website has excellent discussion questions and assignments that I will be incorporating into this unit to assist my students in examining the adaptation. For this analysis, I will have them focus on scenes altered between the two medias - depictions of both - and the reasoning behind this, as well as the tone, evaluating the "changes in terms of how well the intention of the scene is made manifest in either media."<sup>38</sup>

## **Resources**

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Comics in Education: Strengths. <http://www.humblecomics.com/comicsedu/strengths.html>.

Excellent reasons for why a teacher could/should use comics in the classroom.

Abad-Santos, Alex. "How to Read a Comic Book: Appreciating the Story behind the Art." Vox. February 25, 2015. <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/25/8101837/ody-c-comic-book-panels>.

Step-by-step instructions on how to read a comic.

Brooks, Max. *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*. Baltimore: Cemetery Dance Publications, 2014.

This book provides 10 lessons for surviving a zombie attack!

Burke, Liam. *Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Univ Pr Of Mississippi, 2017.

This book speaks to the popularity of the genre.

Cahir, Linda Costanzo. *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2006.

Information about the concept of adaptation of literature to film.

EBSCO Information Services, Inc. "Film Adaptations: Strategies for Teaching a Complex Narrative Practice." EBSCO. Accessed June 08, 2018. <http://www.ebsco.com/blog/article/film-adaptations-strategies-for-teaching-a-complex-narrative-practice>.

An instructional piece about using adaptations to teach students.

"English A: Language & Literature Support Site." 2.1 Analysing Visual Texts: 2.1.4 Understanding Comics. <https://www.philpoteducation.com/mod/book/view.php?id=222&chapterid=1350#/>.

This website provides information about the various terms regarding comics - it takes one through a visual process of understanding terms such as panel, blank space, camera angle, amongst others.

Frieden, James A., and Deborah Elliott Frieden. "Lesson Plans Based on Movies & Film!" Teach With Movies - Lesson Plans from Movies for All Subjects. Accessed June 08, 2018. <http://www.teachwithmovies.org/>.

This is an excellent website with a variety of resources to help teachers effectively use films to teach students in the classroom.

Kirkman, Robert, Tim Daniel, Charles Adlard, and Cliff Rathburn. *The Walking Dead Survivors Guide*. Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2012.

In this book, each character is analyzed including when he/she first appeared in the series as well as died. Character details are included.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.

This book - in comic style format - explains the nuances of comics.

Naremore, James. *Film Adaptation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Theories regarding the concept of film adaptation.

"Pictures Tell the Story: Improving Comprehension With Persepolis - ReadWriteThink." Readwritethink.org. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/pictures-tell-story-improving-1102.html>.

Good model as to how to use comics/graphic novels in a classroom.

Ruditis, Paul. *The Walking Dead Chronicles: The Official Companion Book*. New York, N.Y: Abrams, 2011.

This book speaks to adaptation of The Walking Dead from comics to screen.

Schwartz, Gretchen. "Schwarz, G.E. (2002). Graphic Novels for Multiple Literacies." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 46:262-65.

Good background information regarding the use of comics in the classroom.

"Television." Deaf Films 2005 - Home. <https://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html>.

This website provides data regarding television usage in our society.

"The Sociology Behind The Walking Dead." Disenthrall. September 22, 2015. Accessed June 08, 2018.  
<http://disenthrall.co/the-sociology-behind-the-walking-dead/>.

Thompson, Ethan, and Jason Mittell. *How to Watch Television*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013.

This compilation of essays focusing on the ways that viewing television is represented today. There is one essay in particular - The Walking Dead/Adapting Comics by Henry Jenkins explains the importance of storytelling in the series. This includes the importance of character development.

Venable, Nick. "Why Adapting *The Walking Dead* From Comic Book To TV Show Is So Hard." CINEMABLEND. October 09, 2015. Accessed June 08, 2018.

<https://www.cinemablend.com/television/Why-Adapting-Walking-Dead-From-Comic-Book-TV-Show-So-Hard-91227.html>.

Yuen, Wayne. *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*. Chicago: Open Court, 2013.

This book is a series of essays depicting various themes concerning a zombie apocalypse - e.g. What are the ethical ramifications of how to "treat" the dead?

## Appendix

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In this unit on *The Walking Dead* - Comics to Television series, two Common Core Standards - one for reading and one for speaking and listening --will be addressed. These include: **English Language Arts Standards/College Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading - Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:** *Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g. recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry, evaluation how each version interprets the source text)* and **Speaking and Listening - Comprehension and Collaboration:** *Prepare for and participate electively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.* Students will be viewing the television show and reading the comics, focusing on the first season of six episodes and reading the corresponding comic pages. In doing so students will learn how to closely read comics as well as film (in this case a television show/series). Students will analyze and compare these two types of visual texts to answer guiding questions while engaging in conversations that will also assist them in practicing their active listening skills.

## Endnotes

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1. James Naremore, *Film Adaptation*, 29.
2. Ibid, 30.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 32.
5. Linda Costanzo Cahir, *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*, Loc 211 of 5299.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Timothy Corrigan, *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, 5.
10. Ibid, 80.
11. Ibid, 81.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid, 83.
14. Ibid.
15. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 9.
16. Ibid, 3.
17. <https://www.philpoteducation.com/mod/book/view.php?id=222&chapterid=1350#/> (accessed July 10, 2018).
18. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/12/comics-classroom> (accessed July 9, 2018).
19. <http://www.humblecomics.com/comicsedu/strengths.html> (accessed July 10, 2018).
20. Schwarz, G.E. (2002). Graphic novels for multiple literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46, 262-265.
21. <https://www.philpoteducation.com/mod/book/view.php?id=222&chapterid=1350#/> (Accessed on July 10, 2018).
22. [www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/cinematic-techniques-intro.doc](http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/cinematic-techniques-intro.doc) (accessed on July 10).
23. [www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/cinematic-techniques-intro.doc](http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/cinematic-techniques-intro.doc) (accessed on July 10).
24. <http://www.ebsco.com/blog/article/film-adaptations-strategies-for-teaching-a-complex-narrative-practice> (accessed May 14, 2018).
25. <http://www.ebsco.com/blog/article/film-adaptations-strategies-for-teaching-a-complex-narrative-practice> (accessed May 14, 2018).
26. <https://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html> (accessed July 14, 2018).
27. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (Eds.) *How to Watch Television*, 4.
28. The Walking Dead, Season 7 - Episode 16, "The First Day of the Rest of Your Life".
29. <https://www.britannica.com/art/apocalyptic-literature> (accessed July 14, 2018).
30. The Walking Dead Psychology: Psych of the Living Dead, Travis Langley (Ed.), xvii.
31. <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/69124/> (accessed May 14, 2018).
32. The Walking Dead Chronicles: The Official Companion Book, Paul Ruditis, 23.
33. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (Eds.) *How to watch Television*, 375.
34. Ibid.
35. The Walking Dead Chronicles: The Official Companion Book, Paul Ruditis, 51.
36. <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/25/8101837/ody-c-comic-book-panels> (accessed July 10, 2018).
37. <http://www.studygs.net> (accessed July 13, 2009).
38. <http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/adaptations-essay.html> (accessed July 16, 2018).

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