

Why is *The Walking Dead* season finale eating at me? (Oct. 22, 2016)

An analysis of AMC's *The Walking Dead*, Season 6, Episode 16: "Last Day on Earth"

In the empty hours following the crush of Neegan's baseball bat, I slowly realized why the finale of this season's *Walking Dead* was so hard to watch. I was more than interested in what each new episode would reveal. I'd started daydreaming about living in the world of *The Walking Dead*. That walled security balanced with the astringent edge of survivalism against a mindless threat had begun to seem sustainable...and appealing. The daily, unifying work of keeping a community alive was beginning to feel more achievable than my petty but overwhelming chores in real life. As I ran down a trail behind apartment buildings, I tested myself to see if I could outrun hordes of undead like Rick. When I looked at leftovers in the fridge, I summoned my inner Carol, pretending the damp broccoli and stale rice were the only ingredients available for a MacGyvered meal. Hearing Sasha describe the seduction of a life on the run where only the single choice in front of you matters, I sighed in solidarity. From my world boiling over with app notifications, to-do lists, Amazon deals, and Google calendar appointments, exterminating one walker at a time seemed like a meditative luxury.

So when all the signs in the season finale began pointing to an upheaval of Alexandria's serenity, I was mightily tempted to quit while they were all alive. To see my group on their knees in front of a living demon—not an undead hoard—bombed my daydreams with the truth of human treachery. But since I can't unwatch it, I'll rely on analysis to help me process the details that captivated me this season before slamming me back into reality.

Mercy as the Ultimate Commodity

Though Eugene argued that supply and demand made ammunition the new gold standard, the arc of this season established what's truly valuable in the new world: mercy. Morgan's aikido beat us over the head with the mantra, "Where there's life, there's potential" ("He's Not Here"). Mercy does not require trust; in fact, it is wisely tempered by caution, as Morgan's jail cell reminds the community.

But strength in numbers relies upon increasing your group, which requires leaving people alive long enough to become part of your group. Neegan's Savivors take the dark side of this approach, capturing and leaving people alive, forcing survivors to work for him. We can predict his method will fail because it's built upon fear rather than devotion. Rick's group has seen the good side of this tactic: inviting people to join their team on the road, then joining Alexandria and

ultimately embracing the townspeople as “us.” But they lost their advantage when they traded violent caution for cautious mercy. By murdering sleeping Savors and demanding the gang’s payment from Hilltop, they missed an opportunity to join forces with those who might be willing to change and to increase their own strength in numbers (“Not Tomorrow Yet”).

Change as a Constant

Leading up to the foil groups of Savors and Alexandrians, role reversal itself became a motif in Season 6. Accentuated with Biblical symbolism in the season finale, this pattern emphasizes both the power and pain of change. In flashback, we see most clearly how Morgan transforms from a broken sociopath to a dedicated and proselytizing aikido master. His nonlethal wrench in the gears of the group’s hardened “no chances” philosophy of protection forces Carol to face and turn away from her cold killer core. After tallying and adding her death count, she ends the season pleading to be killed just as Morgan pleaded in Eastman’s cell before his conversion. Ironically, Morgan reverses his role and uses the reluctantly accepted gun to kill Carol’s attacker...just before being saved by another man whose life he spared hours before. Eugene caps his advancement to “Stage 2” by grinning as he gets behind the wheel of a vehicle, taking the hero role from his own hero Abraham. He has gone from pants-pissing fear of death to demanding the most dangerous role in his own plan, and the transformation brings him joy in the face of pain. Abraham faces a different fear and joy when he tells Sasha he’s ready to bring a child into the world’s dangers. Sasha’s smiles in this episode indicate her willingness to permit vulnerability back into her steely life, acknowledging the paired possibilities of hope and loss. Even Rick and Carl—in some ways the most static characters—have pivoted their perspectives. Rick embraces gentleness and hope, Carl nearly embraces walkers themselves. But as father and son recite their new code to one another —“Together we can do anything” —they feel the rug of hope torn out from underfoot (“Last Day on Earth”). Hopefully America doesn’t face the same fate in November.

Purposeful Details

Visual symbolism abounds in the final episode, foreshadowing doom and underlining character shifts. Michonne and Rick, naked as Eve and Adam, eat an apple as they wake up together in Edenic Alexandria. Their time in the kingdom of plenty is officially cut short. Maggie has her hair cut short then immediately is overcome by contractions, her power of leadership and motherhood cut off like Samson’s symbolic locks. Carol’s rosary, a reminder of her sins, follows her even when she drops it on the road and returns to her as she faces death. Gabriel finds redemption in violent acts and now wears a rifle more prominently than his clerical collar. Even Neegan is awarded some

symbolic touches, his black leather jacket and red ascot making him seem like a satanic Greaser while “Lucille” recasts public murder as the new American pastime.

The final moment is just good filmmaking. The low camera angle and fade to black personalizes the mystery of who Neegan kills. We are killed ourselves by Lucille’s blows. No need to close our eyes against the ultraviolence, but as we listen to the repeated thuds and the faint cries of comrades, we can only wonder: it is more painful to watch a beloved character die or to bear the burden of not knowing who took those blows with us until the next premiere?

Works Cited

"He's Not Here." *The Walking Dead* 6.4, written by Scott Gimple, directed by Stephen Williams, AMC, 2015.

"Last Day on Earth." *The Walking Dead* 6.16, written by Scott Gimple and Matthew Negrete, directed by Greg Nicotero, AMC, 2016.

"Not Tomorrow Yet." *The Walking Dead* 6.12, written by Seth Hoffman, directed by Greg Nicotero, AMC, 2016.