

It's the End of the World as We Know It: What Dystopian Lit—& Zombies—Can Teach Us about Living Our Best Life Now

by Hilary Brooke Hall | December 2020

Images of people “living their best life now” may be hashtagged all over social media, but the question of what it means to live a good life has philosophical roots that long predate Instagram.

In fact, “the good life” was a hot topic among Greek philosophers of the B.C. era. Socrates and Plato believed the good life to be based on principles of morality and virtue, whereas Epicurus asserted that a good life is one full of pleasure experiences.

Aristotle, though, approached the matter more holistically, diplomatically combining elements of both views and adding some of his own.

He said that a good life includes virtue *and* pleasure as they fit into the pursuit of happiness—and everyone wants to be happy.

According to Aristotle, a happy person is one who lives “in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1101a10) ¹.

What this means is that, to Aristotle, happiness is a lifelong pursuit—one of action and choice leading to the achievement of all the things he identified as good:

- Moral character.
- Health.
- Friendship.
- Knowledge.
- Engagement.
- Respect.
- Enough means to be comfortable.¹

Millennia later that still sounds pretty good, right?

Between the ancient Greeks and our current time, the question of the good life continued to be discussed and, of course, written about. Not only did people write philosophically about their concepts about the good life, they also wrote stories that envisioned how those concepts would play out in an ideal society.

Which brings us to English class and our science-fiction story.

Science-fiction is the genre that houses most stories about what life looks like in idealized societies. So much so that sub-genres have been created for the two primary types:

- Utopian** ▶ Stories of a perfect society living the good life.
- Dystopian** ▶ Stories of an imperfect society living the not-so-good life.

Utopian and dystopian stories both depict life as we do NOT currently know it. Rather, they depict life as it *could* be if certain ideologies were applied to a whole society: Utopian stories show how this society could be perfect; dystopian stories show how it could fall apart.

Utopia vs. Dystopia

Utopia refers to an imaginary place where everything—including government and social relations—is perfect. English Renaissance statesman Thomas More coined the word when he published a book titled—you guessed it—*Utopia* that told of a perfect fictional island society and its religious, political, and social customs.

From the Greek *ou* meaning *not* and *topos* meaning *place*, the word can literally be translated as *no place*.

So...*utopia* is both no place and a perfect place? Yes.

Coincidence? I think not.

Because, really, can any place actually be perfect?

Most writers don't think so. To them, the idea of utopia seems too good to be true. They agree with Shakespeare that while everything might look okay on the surface, "something is rotten in the state of Denmark."²

And not just Denmark. In pretty much every society set up to be oh-so-perfect, something—often many somethings—goes horribly awry.

Enter dystopia.

From a combination of the prefix *dys* for *bad* or *abnormal* and the word *utopia* itself, we get *dystopia*—that is, an imaginary place where (like Denmark) something is rotten.

For further clarity on this rotten state, take a look at these definitions of dystopia:

- A very bad or unfair society in which there is a lot of suffering, especially an imaginary society in the future, after something terrible has happened.³
- A society characterized by human misery, as squalor, oppression, disease, and overcrowding.⁴

- An imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives.⁵
- An imaginary place or state in which everything is extremely bad or unpleasant.⁶

The good life? Not so much.

If utopia is paradise, then dystopia is that paradise lost⁷. As a matter of fact, ironically—albeit predictably—“dystopias follow utopias the way thunder follows lightning.”⁷

Moreover, utopias tend to breed dystopias.

Consider, for example, many of the recently popular dystopian novels-turned-films like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergence*, *The Maze Runner*, and *The Giver*. In each of these stories a society created to be perfect proves not to be in very disturbing ways that lead to inequality, injustice, oppression, and dehumanization.

Because dystopian lit is primarily about the breakdown of social structures, it has far-reaching implications for how societies (and the individuals within them) live—and die—the not-so-good life.

The not-so-good life in dystopian societies typically exhibit five characteristics⁸:

- **Government control:** Although sometimes no government exists at all, more often government is oppressive and relies on propaganda and force to maintain its control. Rebellion and revolution are frequently part of everyday life.
- **Environmental destruction.** Due to natural disaster, manmade catastrophe, too-powerful or misused technology, overpopulation, or disease (pandemic, anyone?), the environment is not the one we know in real life and is usually destroyed, inhabitable, hostile, or void.
- **Technological control:** “Depicted as a controlling, omnipresent force and...often used as a fear-mongering tactic,”⁸ technology—be it robots or surveillance—is a menacing force and is typically some form of A.I.
- **Survival.** Whether left to their own devices to navigate a desolate world alone or to figure out how to get through life under an oppressive regime or to fight the powers that be, one of the main goals of the characters is to live to see another day.
- **Loss of individualism.** Often the result of environmental catastrophe, technology gone haywire, or oppressive rule, characters experience a lack of freedom or identity that drives the conflict and quest of the story.

In short, “dystopian literature shows us a nightmarish image about what might happen to the world in the near future”⁹—a future that is already the end of the world as we know it and could be the end of humanity altogether.

Fear is pervasive, autonomy is lost, and human connection all but dead.

Cue the zombie.

Becoming Undead

Initially associated with the horror genre, this undead monster now frequently surfaces in science-fiction dystopian stories, especially in movies and tv shows.

With origins in Caribbean folklore as a person “who had died and been buried, only to be malignantly revived and enslaved by a sorcerer,”¹⁰ the zombie in its strictest form is defined as “a will-less and speechless human...held to have died and been supernaturally reanimated.”⁵

Having evolved from its Haitian horror roots, today the term *zombie* also takes on other connotations of lost humanity, referring to people who have not died but who may as well have for all the humanity they exhibit.

Informal definitions of zombies of this incarnation include...

- A person held to resemble the so-called walking dead.⁵
- A person who has no energy, seems to act without thinking, and does not notice what is happening.³
- A person who seems only partly alive, without any feelings or interest in what is happening.⁶

In both its strict and informal iterations, the zombie is a barely recognizable remnant of what was formerly fully human. As such, it represents the things that we fear will make us less than human—and not just in a horror-movie kind of a way.

The zombie represents our dystopian fear of becoming “desensitized, industrialized, hollowed out, [and] metaphysically evacuated.”¹⁰

As symbols of dehumanization, “all manner of meanings have been and continue to be plastered onto the zombie”¹⁰:

He is the consumer, the mob, the Other, the proletariat, the weight of life, the dead soul. He is too many emails in your inbox, a kind of cosmic spam. He is everything rejected and expugnable. He comes back, he comes back, feebly but unstoppably, and as he drags you down, a fatal lethargy overtakes you.¹⁰

He is so many things to fear and the horrific notion of what could happen to us—to not die, exactly, but to lose our personhood and, thus, become—to ourselves anyway—as good as dead.

Or, rather, undead.

Which is, perhaps, a fate worse than death: The loss of one's self.

And the zombie of popular media has shown us that there are many ways we can lose ourselves, as individuals and especially as a society.

The Zombie Seven: Types & Fears

Generally speaking, the following seven types of zombies embody an underlying fear associated with the loss of personhood and of life as we know it, making the zombie a powerful vehicle of sociopolitical commentary.

1. Savage Zombie ► Fear of Primitive Culture¹¹

The Savage Zombie is the OG of zombies and can be traced to the French slave-holding society of rural Haiti from the 1600s to 1800s when a *zombi* referred to the belief that person who died unnaturally would be kept in a suspended state between life and death until it could be revived by a witch doctor (or *bokor*) who would then keep the *zombi* as a slave.

This fate was particularly repugnant to slaves who, having been forced to spend their human lives in slavery, could then be forced to remain slaves even in the afterlife, thereby never having any experience of personal freedom.

The Savage Zombie is the classic zombie of the horror genre, the one seen in early horror films—the shuffling monster terrorizing the untamed countryside, looking to prey on unsuspecting strangers—who tended to be white.

Because coming out of a slave society, the Savage Zombie has a lot to do with race and social power. To be overtaken by the Savage Zombie is to break with the traditional norms of Western civilization and turn instead to the dark and lawless ways of primitive cultures.

The Savage Zombie represents the fear of losing agency through forced bondage or the abandonments of the established order.

2. Atomic Zombie ► Fear of Nuclear Annihilation

The Atomic Zombie bridges the genres of horror and dystopian sci-fi: Where the Savage Zombie preys on fears about an individual's survival, the Atomic Zombie preys on fears about the survival not just of an individual but of a whole society or culture—of the world as we know it.

The Atomic Zombie manifests anxieties about widespread destruction caused by mass genocide, escalating technological advancement, atomic war, and

nuclear annihilation—all of which are usually thought to be the result of communist indoctrination and takeover.

The Atomic Zombie represents the fear of death and upheaval at the hands of evil dictators wielding dangerous ideologies backed by weapons of mass destruction.

3. Pandemic Zombie ▶ Fear of Mass Contagion

Like the Savage and Atomic Zombies, the Pandemic Zombie harnesses real and present fears of death. But instead of zombification due to voodoo mysticism or radiation exposure, the Pandemic Zombie is a biological eventuality.

Here a zombie is a chemically induced creation that, having acquired a virus—often man-made and sometimes weaponized—firmly crosses into the realm of dystopia:

The rapid spread of zombie infection results in societal collapse, and the few survivors are left to inhabit a previously unknown environment of death, disease, and destruction.

Which is to say, dystopia.

The Pandemic Zombie represents the fear of losing one's life and one's way of life via biological means.

4. Sociopolitical Zombie ▶ Fear of Changes in Government/Social Structures

Arguably, all zombie types could be considered sociopolitical zombies, but the Sociopolitical Zombie targets specific anxieties about government structures, social order, and economic philosophies.

Zombies of this type could be a symbol of the sudden and arbitrary loss of agency to a dictatorial regime as well as a symbol of the mindless consumption of a capitalistic society.

The Sociopolitical Zombie is less about actual death than it is about metaphorical death: Losing our lives would be bad, but losing our way of life and the agency we have in that life would be worse.

This metaphorical transition solidifies the modern zombie¹¹ as a dystopian figure that embodies not just the definition of the zombie in its strictest form but also in its connotation of humans in a zombie-like state, not having actually died but having forcibly lost or willingly given up the things that make them human: individual identity, personal freedom, and independent thought.

The Sociopolitical Zombie, then, represents the fear of losing one's agency by means of an ideological framework, imposed or self-selected.

5. Tech Zombie ► Fear of Technology

The tech zombie is at home in dystopia. It inhabits a futuristic world of prevalent technology and arbitrary social orders where its primary purview is the fear of the loss of agency, which is generally portrayed in one of two ways:

- **Technology as Distraction:** Here the use of technology—think television and smartphones as not-so-speculative examples or robots and implanted bodily devices as more advanced ones—keeps humans in a state of mindlessness, which makes them easy to control and keeps them from rebelling or thinking for themselves—or wanting to do either.
- **Artificial Intelligence (A.I.):** Here humans are still mindless, but the technology is not. Rather, the tech has a mind of its own—one that is usually bent on subjugating humans.

In Tech Zombie stories, instead of undergoing a physical death to then come back as a zombie, humans are usually kept alive but reduced to a zombie-like state of mindless impotence because the controlling power (be it corrupt human government or an evil A.I.) needs the mass of humans alive-but-drone-like in order to do its bidding, to keep the establishment going, or, in the cases of some sentient tech, to simply stay alive.

So where the human protagonists of Tech Zombie stories may sometimes have to fight to against death, more often they fight to maintain their humanity—their freedom and identity as well as their separateness from the technology that ever threatens to subsume them.

The A.I. Zombie represents the fear of losing one's self via technological means.

6. Existential Zombie ► Fear of Ourselves

Often a slow process, Existential Zombification is a devolution from human to sub-human through the small, steady sloughing off of the things that make the human life worth living, including but not limited to...

- Meaningful relationships.
- Active engagement in the mental, physical, and artistic pursuits.
- Communing with nature.
- Emotional connections with the people and places in one's environment.

Unlike the other types of zombies where zombiehood occurs after being overtaken by some outside force, the Existential Zombie rises up from within.

By not exercising agency in their own lives, either through inaction or indecision, through lethargy or indifference, humans in these stories ultimately lose the capability to do so, even when they try.

The Existential Zombie represents the fear of losing one's self by means of one's self—that is, by one's own actions...or inaction.

7. Selfie Zombie ▶ Fear of Each Other

The Selfie Zombie comes into play in narratives in which zombies are not the only things humans must combat. In fact, in these stories the zombie is almost a nuisance getting in the way of battling the greater enemy: other humans.

In this kind of dystopia, zombies are a fact of life, and the surviving humans live in pockets and factions across the globe, struggling to stay alive and competing with one another over remaining resources.

What is interesting about these stories is that while the characters do fear the zombies, they fear other people more.

Sure, losing a fight with zombie means the loss of physical life and, thus, personhood, but losing a fight with another faction of humans means the loss of power, of the chance to be the hero of a new society of our own making.

Which would mean that we lose not just our life but the identity we worked so hard to create—the self we intentionally cultivated in order to survive—nay, dominate—in this brave new world.

The zombie might threaten our existence, but other humans threaten our importance. And we can't have that.

Blinded by self-involvement, we choose not to team up cooperatively and collaboratively to defeat the monstrous common enemy but to fight each other in defense of ourselves, our social circle, and our way of doing things.

Armed with rugged individualism¹¹, self-reliance, and the belief that our way of life is best simply because it's ours, we charge forward with the reckless optimism that, in the end, the most awesome survive. And clearly that's going to be us.

The Selfie Zombie represents the fear of losing one's self-importance by means of all-consuming self-involvement or because someone else cancels us out.

Our Best Life Now

Shambling up from the grave and into popular media across the globe, the zombie has come a long way since its humble beginnings as a rural Haitian horror to embody so many dystopian fears.

And these days it seems that, little by little, the zombie may be shuffling its way right on to utopia, crossing genre lines into the realm of fantasy.

In his article "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies," writer Mike Mariani supports this claim, putting forth the idea that "the zombie apocalypse isn't an outlet for fears but for fantasies, functioning as an escape hatch into a world with higher dramatic stakes, fewer people, and the chance to reinvent oneself, for better or worse."¹²

He goes on to say that modern-day "zombie scenarios are as much utopian as they are dystopian," with the creature that once "represented the real-life horrors of dehumanization" now used "as a way to fantasize" about an existence of "an outsize importance."¹²

Because, really, "who wouldn't want to escape into characters leading lives of infallible significance" and "whose every decision is exalted"?¹²

Sounds like living the best now.

Except that zombies still lurk in the shadows.

Because whether we champion the traditional view of the zombie as a symbol of dehumanization or embrace its new fantastical identity as "the primary symbol of escapism itself," in order for us to live our best lives—that is, to retain a sense of our full humanity in the face of sociopolitical tensions, advancing technology, and a global pandemic—we must come to grips with our own fears.

And how do we do that? We embrace them—and each other. While we still can.

References

- ¹ "Aristotle—What Is Happiness?" *Pursuit of Happiness*, Pursuit of Happiness Project, 2012, <https://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/aristotle/>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.
- ² Shakespear, William. *Hamlet*. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Tech at MIT U, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2020.
- ³ *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge UP, 2020. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- ⁴ "Dystopia." *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, 2020. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/dystopian?s=t>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- ⁵ *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- ⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, 2020. <https://www.oed.com/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- ⁷ Lepore, Jill. "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction." *The New Yorker*, Conde Nast, 29 May 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/a-golden-age-for-dystopian-fiction>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.
- ⁸ MasterClass. "What is Dystopian Fiction? Learn About the 5 Characteristics of Dystopian Fiction With Examples." *MasterClass*, 8 Nov. 2020, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-dystopian-fiction-learn-about-the-5-characteristics-of-dystopian-fiction-with-examples#what-is-the-significance-of-dystopian-fiction>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2020. This work outlines the five characteristics of dystopian literature; I have added the descriptions.

- ⁹ "Dystopia." *Literary Devices*, <https://literarydevices.net/dystopia/>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.
- ¹⁰ Parker, James. "Our Zombies, Ourselves." *The Atlantic*, April 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/04/our-zombies-ourselves/308401/>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2020.
- ¹¹ Crockett, Zachary, and Javier Zarracina. "How the Zombie Represents America's Deepest Fears: A Sociopolitical History of Zombies, from Haiti to *The Walking Dead*." *Vox*, 31 Oct. 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/31/13440402/zombie-political-history>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2020. This work outlines five zombie categories and fears. I have renamed all but two of the original categories (Atomic and Pandemic), added two more categories (A.I. and Existential), and adjusted the wording of most of the fears.
- ¹² Mariani, Mike. "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies." *The Atlantic*, 28 Oct. 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2020.