

Jackie Lutz

Professor Sen

English 200

4 May 2021

The Ecological Implications of Zombies

Zombies can be utilized as literary devices in reference to environmental doom. They are often portrayed as ruthless and mindless creatures, such as in the popular TV series “The Walking Dead,” where the zombies wander aimlessly until they see a potential meal. They have no need to eat anything, for they are just empty shells of dead humans. This makes their cannibalistic acts much more unnerving to the audience. They may attack in hordes, surrounding their victims, giving the viewers a feeling of helplessness. There is a specific aura of confusion about the creatures, and it's sometimes hard for audiences to understand what exactly makes these zombies so unnerving. Zombies don't even have to be deadly to be unsettling, such as in the novel “Severance” by Ling Ma. Obviously zombies are terrifying creatures, but in most media, they are not the true antagonist of the story. The real villains are hidden in subtle subtexts scattered throughout the story.

In “Severance” by Ling Ma, the zombies and the apocalypse are used as a representation of the overworked working class. The creatures, known as ‘the fevered’ in this universe, spent all of their time doing the same tasks over and over again. These were everyday tasks for them while they were in a normal state of mind. Ma states that “the lizard brain is a powerful thing” (Ma 28). It is interesting how she used the word lizard in this statement to describe the fevered. The definition of a ‘lizard brain’ is the part of the brain that is “in charge of fight, flight, feeding, fear, freezing up, and fornication” (Troncale). A lizard brain is simply the basic functions of the

brain. Despite the many different actions shown in the quote above, the fevered in “Severance” use their brains to only complete nonsensical tasks. They aren’t looking for food, they don’t react to stimuli, and obviously aren’t looking for any sexual encounters. The definition of a ‘lizard brain’ in this sense is that the fevered are doing some sort of unexplained behavior that they are programmed to complete. They could be walking back and forth from home to work, or completing a meaningless task over and over again. This in a sense is satire against the corporate and repetitive life that we live in now. We wake up, go to work, and come home. We are essentially already zombies, since in society we technically don’t have as much free will as we think that we do.

The theme of corporate lifestyles is also addressed earlier in the novel, when Candace is talking with her boyfriend Jonathan. They get into a disagreement where Jonathan says that he wants to leave his boring and repetitive lifestyle in New York. They talk for a while, and then Jonathan explains his predictions of the future to her. He describes how everything is going to focus more on consumerism than it already is, and then he says “Manhattan is sinking” (Ma 13). Consumerism is going to take over the city, and eventually cause it to fall. Jonathan wants more out of life, to create art and write books. However it is difficult to live that sort of life in this society, for it is the norm to work at a repetitive office job for essentially one’s whole life. In a sense, Jonathan has predicted the future. He knows that everyone is already in the midst of an apocalypse, where they are stuck doing mindless jobs for minimum pay. This transitions into the fevered and the zombies that will soon be introduced into the story as the true representatives of those who spend their lives completing the same tasks over and over again.

In “The Postapocalypse Outbreak,” author Dahlia Schweitzer provides a few explanations for the concept of zombies representing the impending doom of the world. Writers

make this apocalypse seem closer than ever with their modern settings. Schweitzer explains how authors “depict a world that, while fantastical, still seems plausible, if not inevitable” (Schweitzer 144). People who read these works get a feeling of dread, for this world that they’re learning about is actually not far from reality. Right now we are in the middle of our own apocalypse. Sea levels are rising, the world is growing warmer, the economy is crashing, and our governments are controlled by corrupt politicians. These all are themes that are portrayed in zombie apocalypse novels and media.

Schweitzer goes on to explain the zombie narrative in relation to this concept. Zombie movies always show what happens after the apocalypse, in a postapocalyptic setting. There usually isn’t much mention of how the world has gotten to this point, and the characters often only focus on how to adapt to their changed environment. This could be due to the fact that the actual postapocalyptic timeline is more interesting than the slow change to how the world became the way it is. However, it is important to think about how this narrative relates to what we see in life today. Schweitzer says that “Zombie narratives play out the dystopia that already seems to be occurring” (Schweitzer 149). The visuals in zombie stories mirror life in the 21st century. People feel threatened by the violence and impending collapse of both the economy and the environment, which just makes these zombie narratives more relatable.

People become entranced with these concepts, and may feel safe reading or watching apocalyptic stories, since they are safe behind the screen. They think that zombies don’t exist, and the apocalypse is too far ahead to truly conceptualize. They may admire the heroes in these stories, but they are also relieved that they aren’t living in the characters’ realities. They think that it is just a story, and after indulging in said fantasy, they will just carry on with their lives. It needs to be said, however, that this is not the right way to read these stories. Instead of thinking

about how far away the apocalypse is, it's important to remember that we are living through an apocalypse right now.

It is a devastating concept to think about but the world is dying through slow violence. Rob Nixon explains this phenomenon in his essay "Slow Violence." He describes it as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, and attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). The environment is gradually being polluted, and in the span of a hundred years, the world will pass the point of no return. This devastation of the environment is noticed, but not enough is being done to stop it. It is happening so slowly that people push it to the back of their minds. They think of it as someone else's problem, since they only have time to focus on their everyday lives. With the influx of apocalyptic stories in the media, people may not focus on the real problems that could cause the end of the world. These stories are a reflection on the fascination humans have with the end. If people focused on zombies being specific literary devices to represent the gradual violent attack on the earth, then maybe their true potential as storytelling tools would be realized.

The theme of focusing only on oneself is explored in *Severance*, when Ma writes about Candace's struggles in corporate office. She tries to help some workers in Hong Kong, who were developing severe lung diseases as a result of their hard labor to create faux gemstones for a colorful bible. Unfortunately, the publishing company doesn't see the health of the workers as priority. The production editor says "I don't want to sound like we don't care, because obviously we do, but this is disappointing news" (Ma 24). She says this stiffly, as if she is forcing out the words. The editor's main focus is to get these books published in order to meet her job's requirements. This issue of workers in Hong Kong dying is not her priority. While she probably

thinks it's sad, she has never met these workers, and has no emotional connection to them whatsoever. The editor has her own life to worry about. This is the same problem seen with people ignoring the dying environment. They can't actually see the change in the rainforests and oceans, for they are often stuck in their own bubbles at home, where they only have time to worry about themselves.

Zombies aren't the enemies in these stories. The true antagonists are the corrupt people who take advantage of the situation to gain power and status. Schweitzer uses examples from the show "The Walking Dead" to explain this. As the series goes on, the zombies become more of a nuisance in everyday life. The characters often have to evade evil leaders of groups that want to have absolute control over the new societies they create. This is a common theme in other zombie media. It can also be compared to corrupt politicians in reality. In Rob Nixon's "Slow Violence," he describes how Lawrence Summers tricked environmentalists by pushing toxic waste to "a place remote from green activists' terrain of concern" (Nixon 2). This politician was using his status in order to attempt to further his agenda of power. This is a small example of a vast problem, since corruption is a staple of most governments. There is a major focus on individual growth in helping the environment, mostly driven by huge corporations. People are told to use reusable straws and water bottles, and while those are helpful to the environment, the corporations are the ones that actually can make sustainable change. Companies would rather blame the individual than take responsibility for their own actions, which shows that they are the real enemies in this fight to save the environment.

Ling Ma subtly inserts themes of wastefulness and environment in her post-apocalyptic world of *Severance*. When Bob brings a bottle of Pepto-Bismol to Candace, and then throws away the plastic shell, Candace is caught off guard. "I looked at the plastic piece of litter on the

ground. ‘Littering is only a problem if everyone does it,’ Bob said wryly” (Ma 30). This was particularly striking, for his comment implies that he thinks that he is the exception from everyone else. This is an example where someone must take responsibility for their own actions, since they can’t just assume that everyone else will fix the problem for them. While huge corporations are the ones creating the most waste, it is also important to have good sustainable habits in order to lead by good example for the next generation and for other people. This is particularly important in Bob’s case, since he considers himself the leader of this group.

The zombie trope has gained themes of disease and viruses, which parallels current issues in 2019 and 2020. In the beginning of zombie history, they were condemned and sad souls, doomed to be mindless yet harmless shells of their former selves. The fascination with zombies has grown, and with that, society has essentially created a basic narrative that they follow in the stories. This narrative is one of a global pandemic, or a virus striking the population, which rapidly spirals out of control. This relates to the current situation of our planet, the spread of the virus known as COVID-19. Zombie narratives almost parallel the situation that we are going through in 2019 and 2020, but not as dramatic. Streets are empty, businesses are closed, and the economy has nearly collapsed. The word ‘pandemic’ in itself brings images of zombies and the apocalypse to mind. This current time period is the closest humans have gotten to a real apocalypse. It must be said, however, that an apocalypse has been going on for years. The Earth being slowly drained of resources, the oceans being polluted, and animal populations being killed through slow violence.

In our COVID-19 reality, there is proof that the decrease in consumerism has allowed the Earth time to heal. Since airplanes are not running as often, emission levels have gone down. Animals have also been taking over certain areas, reclaiming lost territory. An example of this is

when the dolphins of Istanbul, Turkey came much closer to the city than they ever have before. Other animal species have also returned to their territories, places where humans had the majority of the occupation before the lock downs. In an article by BBC, it was stated that the animals “sense less noise and are also looking for new places to find food and some get lost and appear in cities.” People are alarmed that wild creatures have started wandering the streets, but they are just trying to survive. This is what happened at the beginning of the pandemic, but it won’t last. Airports are gradually moving back to regular business, and the emission levels will start going up again. The animals will return to the small secure places that they had before the pandemic, and species will continue to die off.

Another parallel that is particularly striking is how the earth heals itself after an apocalyptic event. In zombie movies, there are many scenes of how nature takes over its territory again once humans are gone. Stores are covered in vines and plant life, and animal populations thrive. There are broken buildings with plant life and animals living amongst the living dead. In a vast majority of zombie stories, the dead will ignore the animals, and only eat humans. This allows for creatures to reclaim past territories that they have lost to human capitalism and greed.

COVID-19 has sparked existential fear in the general public. People have been thinking of the worst possible scenarios, comparing it to events such as the Black Death. According to an article in Global Challenges, while COVID-19 is not as deadly as other diseases, it still “grips our minds and generates fear, helplessness and anger” (Eggel). People are afraid of their realities being changed, and scared that it will last forever. It is likely that life will never be the same after this pandemic, but there will be a feeling of normalcy returning. However, this also means that the environment will resume its steady pace of decline.

It is intriguing to think about what would happen if the COVID-19 pandemic continued without a vaccine, or if it were more deadly. Our world could mirror one seen in a post-apocalyptic movie. There would not be any actual zombies, but the world would move into a state of nature and healing. The visuals of apocalypses in the media is a wake up call for people to start caring for the environment more, or thought of as just a far away problem for a future generation to worry about.

Works Cited

“Coronavirus: Wild Animals Enjoy Freedom of a Quieter World.” *BBC News*, BBC, 28 Apr. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-52459487.

Dahlia Schweitzer, “The Postapocalypse Outbreak,” in Schweitzer, *Going Viral: Zombies, Viruses, and the End of the World* (Rutgers University Press, 2018.)

Eggel, Dominic. “Covid-19: A Modern Apocalypse or a Temporary Shock to the System.” *Global Challenges*, June 2020, https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/special_1/covid-19-a-modern-apocalypse-or-a-temporary-shock-to-the-system/

Nixon, Desiree. “COVID-19 Appears to Be Giving the Earth Time to Heal.” *The Standard*, 13 May 2020, www.the-standard.org/news/covid-19-appears-to-be-giving-the-earth-time-to-heal/article_4bf749b6-954a-11ea-8e08-83b1df056aea.html.

Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence: Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Troncale, Joseph. “Your Lizard Brain.” *Psychology Today*, 22 April 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/where-addiction-meets-your-brain/201404/your-lizard-brain#:~:text=Many%20people%20call%20it%20the,humans%20credit%20it%20to%20be>.

