

Uncovering the (Dys-)Utopian Reality of *The Good Place*

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Abstract: The American television series, *The Good Place* is a fresh take on life after death. The utopian neighborhood depicted in the series is built according to the needs and desires of its inhabitants. In addition, each inhabitant is introduced to a soulmate to pass eternity in a more comfortable way. They are further assisted by Janet, an artificial intelligence in human-form. Trouble begins to brew in this paradise when the protagonist, Eleanor reveals to Chidi (her soulmate) that she is not the real Eleanor Shellstrop but her namesake. In order to become more deserving of her place in the neighborhood, Eleanor begins to take lessons in ethics from Chidi—as he was an Ethics and Moral Philosophy Professor on earth. Yet she feels guilty every time something disastrous happens around her or to anyone. Eventually she realizes the dystopian nature of the so called “The Good Place” which is in fact not an after-life utopia but a novel attempt at torture devised by one of the demons of Hell; and with this begins her attempt to escape the dystopian reality. This paper will attempt to show how many-a-times, utopian existence turns out to be a dystopian reality.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, *The Good Place*

The burning question that needs to be answered at the very outset is what is meant by Utopia. For a student of literature, it would mean a direct reference to the fictional village in Thomas More’s eponymous work of the same name. In general terms, utopia represents an ideal futuristic situation which is very subjective in nature. It is subjective because everyone has a different idea of a perfectly crafted ideal world which would not be burdened with the frailty of their present. For a child, utopia would mean a place with unlimited candy without the fear of cavities. For a gamer, it would be unlimited access to top-notch video games free of cost (obviously!) without parents nagging them. For a woman, it would be a place where she is treated at par with the other sex without being referred to as the weaker sex, among other things. However, it should be noted that what is one woman’s paradise might be another man’s hell. What is utopia for one can certainly be a dystopia for another one. This means that dystopia always follows utopia as it is impossible to have an ideal objective utopia. At least this is what can be gathered from J.S. Mill’s usage of the term ‘dystopia’ in his 1868 speech on the state of Ireland where he uses it in contrast with the idea of utopia conferring to the term ‘utopia’ a highly positive connotation while the term ‘dystopia’ inherits a negative air (Pospíšil 9). This is the basic reason why this paper has the word, ‘(Dys-)Utopian,’ in its title. This hyphenated word highlights the importance of an individual in devising the subjective concept of utopia as well as dystopia. In order to achieve this, an American sitcom, *The Good Place*, will be utilized where ‘sitcom’ is an abbreviation for ‘situation comedy’, that is, it involves comedy which arises as a result of seeing a character act and react in different situations. Another thing to note is that the show has completed three seasons, but this paper will limit itself only to the first season.

The Good Place is a fresh take on life after death and represents a utopic existence awaiting those who have accrued positive points by doing good deeds during their stay on earth. The series opens with the character of Eleanor opening her eyes and finding herself looking at a wall and smiling on reading the message in front of her: ‘Welcome! Everything is fine.’ (“Everything is Fine” 00:01-00:06). The sound of a door opening diverts her attention to a man who calls her by her name and invites her into his office. He introduces himself as Michael and answers Eleanor’s question about her current location by telling her that she is indeed dead and is “in the next phase of her existence in the universe” (“Everything is Fine” 00:40-00:45). Michael informs her that she is neither in heaven nor hell but in what is regarded as “The Good Place”—as opposed to “The Bad Place”. He then takes her on a tour of the neighborhood and explains that it is one of the many neighborhoods which are a part of “The Good Place”. According to Michael, all the neighborhoods are designed so as to cater to three hundred and twenty-two residents only, “perfectly selected to blend into a blissful harmonic balance” (“Everything is Fine” 03:30-03:35). The important thing here is that each of the neighborhoods is unique and is built to suit its residents. But the one thing common to all of them is the presence of frozen yoghurt places. Their conversation is followed by the orientation day clip in which Eleanor and the other residents of the neighborhood are informed about the basis of their selection for “The Good Place.” According to the clip, each of the actions committed by all the humans in their lifetime on earth accrue for them a positive or negative point depending on the amount of good or bad it attributes to the universe. At the end of their stay on earth, these points are added and the best of the best, “the cream of the crop” (“Everything is Fine” 05:17-05:23) is selected to become a resident of one of the neighborhoods in “The Good Place.” This means that only those people who have lived the best lives which can be lived get a chance to be selected for “The Good Place”. In addition, each of the residents is paired with their actual and true soulmate with whom they will get to spend eternity together. In essence, “The Good Place” is equated with eternal happiness, a true objective utopic existence.

Michael explains that since Eleanor Shellstrop was a humanitarian lawyer “who got innocent people off death row” (“Everything is Fine” 06:33-06:38), she was given the opportunity to spend the rest of eternity in “The Good Place”. After the orientation clip, Eleanor is led to her perfect home which, according to Michael, has been built to perfectly match the true essence of its owner. In case of Eleanor, it is a tiny little cottage in the vicinity of a giant mansion and includes Icelandic primitive style interiors with a wall full of frames dedicated to clowns. It is here that Eleanor meets her soulmate, Chidi Anagonye, who is delighted to find someone to accompany him in the “pursuit of the fundamental truths of the universe” (“Everything is Fine” 08:40-08:50). However, Eleanor bursts Chidi’s happy bubble, by getting him to promise that he will never betray her secret. She then tells him that she is just the namesake of the real humanitarian lawyer, Eleanor Shellstrop. She tells him that there has been a mistake as she is the Eleanor who worked in sales and basically “defrauded the sick and the elderly” (“Everything is Fine” 10:40-10:44). Chidi tries to convince Eleanor to confess to Michael but to no avail. He tells her that she does not belong in “The Good Place” and she should go to “The Bad Place” as it might not be that bad. Chidi then takes the help of Janet, the information assistant of the neighborhood, to get an idea about life after death in “The Bad Place.” Janet

expresses her inability to help him and only plays a short audio clip of “The Bad Place.” The deafening shrieks and screams further solidify Eleanor’s resolve of never coming clean about her identity to anyone. Eleanor decides to never leave this perfect utopia if she can stay clear of trouble. But this is something which is impossible for Eleanor.

During a party hosted by her neighbor Tahani and her soulmate, Jianyu, Eleanor gets drunk after finding out that she is the only bad person in the neighborhood. She ends up hogging all the shrimp, calls Tahani a giraffe and tries to steal from the mansion. The next day Eleanor wakes up to utter chaos and confusion. She awakens to scenes of flying shrimps and giraffes and other animals running around the neighborhood. Chidi attributes this chaos to Eleanor’s attire. While everyone else is in yellow and blue striped clothes, Eleanor is the only one in pyjamas—the odd man out. Guilty of ruining Chidi’s utopia, Eleanor requests his assistance in becoming a good person because besides being her soulmate Chidi was also an Ethics and Moral philosophy professor during his time on earth. Thus, begins Eleanor’s journey from being an unethical, immoral person to someone who deserves to be in “The Good Place.”

It is pertinent now to list the reasons why the “The Good Place” is considered to be an ideal utopia. The very first reason is that it is a place of safety in contrast to its antithesis “The Bad Place,” which is quite scary. Second, it is equated with eternal happiness. Third it is built to perfectly match one’s true essence. Fourth, no one can curse in “The Good Place.” Finally, one can access anything at any time with the help of Janet, the information assistant. For Eleanor, it is only the first factor that motivates her to further lie about her real identity and stay clear of “The Bad Place.” Eleanor believes that she is neither a very good person nor a very bad one and so deserves a place which is neither too good nor too bad. Even though Chidi wants to help her he is not convinced that she deserves to be saved. He dares her to prove to him that she is not selfish by giving up on a flying lesson and volunteering to clean the neighborhood of the garbage. Eleanor, however, ends up causing a garbage storm. Over the next few episodes, it is revealed that just like Eleanor, Jianyu, too, does not belong in the neighborhood. He is in fact not a Buddhist monk, but a DJ named Jason Mendoza. Slowly and steadily, Tahani is also able to uncover the fact that both Eleanor and Jason do not belong in “The Good Place” but she still does not reveal their secret. Over time, the difficulties in the neighborhood begin to increase, almost forcing Michael, the architect of the neighborhood, towards retirement. Every resident is sympathetic to Michael’s condition, who sees his vision of utopia crumbling before his eyes. Eleanor is also affected by Michael’s agony at witnessing his perfect utopia transform into a dystopia without any logical explanation. He ends up thinking that all of it is his fault and decides that retirement is his only option. However, the conditions of his retirement are so unbelievably horrendous that Eleanor begins to question her motives and finally decides to speak the truth about the mistaken identity. This leads to the arrival of the real Eleanor from “The Bad Place” and to Eleanor making distinctive efforts to accrue positive points by doing good deeds. But even after a lot of effort Eleanor is unable to make much progress with her points tally in order to qualify and stay in the neighborhood. Eleanor ultimately realizes that the point system is directly connected to the motivation behind her actions. As she is performing all the good actions based on selfish motives, they do not hold the same value as the selfless actions (“What’s My Motivation”). She then decides to leave the neighborhood

willingly and board the train to “The Bad Place” without informing anyone about her decision. This simple action of hers, done for the betterment of all the residents of the neighborhood help her accrue the points needed to stay in “The Good Place.” But the catch is that the last call on who stays and who leaves the neighborhood is to be taken by Shawn, the Judge who is supposed to come to the neighborhood at any time. Eleanor panics and runs away with Janet and Jason to Mindy St. Claire’s in what is described as the medium place (“Mindy St. Claire”). While still at Mindy’s, Eleanor realizes that what she has done is selfish and decides to return for her hearing, once again accompanied by Jason and Janet. Shawn, the judge leaves it to the four friends—Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani and Jason—to decide which two of them should take their rightful place in “The Bad Place” as Chidi and Tahani knew the truth and yet helped the other two. A verbal fight ensues between the four friends which is interrupted by the real Eleanor who willingly sacrifices herself and offers to take one of the positions. In the meantime, Eleanor has an epiphany and decides that she and Chidi will go to “The Bad Place” and asks Michael to call the train. When Michael does not follow through, Eleanor explains to everyone present that he cannot call a train to “The Bad Place” as they already are in “The Bad Place” (“Michael’s Gambit”). On hearing this, Michael begins to laugh and confirms that Eleanor is indeed correct; that they are in fact in “The Bad Place.” In the end, the utopian existence all the four friends—who are coincidentally the only humans in the neighborhood—turn into a dystopian experience. It had all the ingredients of being the perfect utopia that they could have imagined going to after their death, but it was not “The Good Place” utopia. Eleanor had her doubts from the beginning about the true nature of the neighborhood. She was never convinced about the importance of frozen yoghurt in the utopic after-life from the beginning. The above-mentioned incidents help Eleanor to uncover the dystopic nature of their after-life utopia as it always had a feeling of subtle torture to it.

The flashbacks confirm that Michael was indeed an apprentice for a long time and received his first solo assignment to design a perfect neighborhood but not for the residents of “The Good Place.” He is an architect of “The Bad Place” who builds his utopic version of a neighborhood, to torture humans without them realizing it, as a new type of experiment. While it ended to be a dys-utopia for Eleanor and the others, it was always a utopia for Michael even after Eleanor uncovers its dystopian nature. Going back to all his panicked reactions and constant worries about having made a mistake in the design, it is shown that they were all an act to further torture the humans with guilt. Michael was rather always enjoying the anguish of the four humans as a result of his phenomenal acting. He deliberately puts each of the characters in such a spot that they end up torturing not only themselves but each other as well. In order to continue his dream, Michael convinces Shawn, the judge—who is actually his senior and a demon as well—to allow him to reboot the neighborhood one more time and mend the clinks that were visible in his otherwise utopic experiment. He promises that this time he will not let the humans find out the truth about the neighborhood and will keep the dys-utopian reality of his utopic design a closely guarded secret while continuing to torture the humans. What he does not know is that Eleanor has already planned and is determined to uncover the true nature of his after-life utopia with the help of Janet, the information assistant.

As can be gathered from the above discussion, the neighborhood of “The Good Place,” acts as a utopia as well as a dystopia for two sets of characters at the same time. Hence, the usage of the term (dys-)utopia. On one hand, are the four humans—Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani and Jason—who think that their actions directly or indirectly are hampering their utopia. They can see the after-life utopia turning into a dystopia and so work to maintain the status quo. However, in the end, it turns out that the place they had believed to be a utopia was in fact a dystopia from the very beginning, something like like a ‘wolf in sheep’s-skin’ kind of thing. On the other hand, there is Michael and the rest of the residents, who enjoy watching the pain and fear of the four humans as they desperately long to stay on in “The Good Place.” In the end, what is a utopia for Michael turns out to be a dystopia for the four humans.

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