Pop culture has two new icons. The first are zombies who appear in books, graphic novels and films about the (supposedly) coming zombie apocalypse (the Centers for Disease Control even released a helpful bulletin) and in recast classic novels, such as "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies." The second are vampires, which appear in the wildly popular "Twilight" series of books and films, to say nothing of rewritten novels like "Little Vampire Women."

Vampires and zombies are not new to English fiction. Vampires have starred in stories since the early 1800s, while zombies began appearing in the early 1900s. Popular interest in them should be seen alongside two other fictional creatures, such as Dr. Frankenstein's monster, created by Mary Shelley in 1818; and golems, animated human-shaped beings made from clay.

On one level, these four imaginary beings are just scary creatures to build a story around. At another, they reveal our society's fascination with life and death, particularly death.

All four of these creatures present ways the dead remain alive. By writing stories and creating films about these beings, we use them to explore the difference between life and death. Each one is an interstitial figure that embodies elements of being alive and being dead. By putting these states together in different ways, we can think about their meaning.

In the 1500s, golem stories had a heyday with Jewish rabbis in Eastern Europe. Golems were created by pious rabbis, whose righteousness gave them the power to create -- in imitation of God -- life.

In the most famous story, the Jews of Prague are threatened with mass murder by an emperor. To prevent the slaughter, Rabbi Judah Loew creates a golem out of clay (just as God created Adam out of dust), bringing it to life with prayer and a holy word. When the golem goes beyond his orders and becomes uncontrollably violent, Judah gives him the word for death, and the golem stops.

In Shelley's story, Dr. Frankenstein created his nameless creature not from clay, but from parts taken from different bodies. Frankenstein represents not piety, but the forefront of science, animating the body with electricity rather than prayer. When the monster comes to life, Frankenstein runs away in fear, leaving the monster to fend for itself. The creature seeks out human contact but, when he tries to join in, his horrible looks cause everyone to reject him. In emotional agony from this, the creature turns on his maker.

The point is that human life needs society to thrive. Without it, the excited emotions lead to violence, especially violence against one's creator.

Frankenstein films add to Shelley's story by focusing on the brain used in the creature; it is abnormal, often coming from a condemned psychopath. This explains the creature's violence rather than his social rejection.

Vampires begin with a whole human body, rather than parts. They are technically dead, as is the most famous vampire, Count Dracula, of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel. But rather than featuring human control of the revivified being, vampire stories usually focus on the vampires' control of living humans and their attempts to change them into undead vampires. Rather than the living animating the dead, vampires are the dead bringing the living to their state.

Vampires control their victims by drinking their blood. Since the vampire "maker" possesses the victim's blood, they can guide their actions. This differs from the control exercised by the rabbi over the golem through the holy word or of the independence of Frankenstein's creature given by his brain.

Zombies also play with life and death, but in another direction. Early 20th-century zombies were animated corpses. As corpses, they were decaying. They had no intelligence, brains or emotions, and existed by eating human flesh.

Later films began to create zombies from living people, whether through disease (usually escaped from a government laboratory), radiation, demonic possession or aliens. Mindlessly driven by hunger, they ate as their bodies continued to putrefy. They were infectious, walking slowly, but spreading zombie contagion quickly. If the contagion reached far enough, the Zombie Apocalypse would arrive and, along with it, the end of humanity.

The details of these four "alive-dead creatures" cannot be pinned down because the stories continually change them. While general descriptions are clear, the details change as writers, actors and producers try out different ideas to see how they affect the interplay between life and death. This is what gives the stories their power -- they enable us to explore what it means to be alive and to be dead, by watching creatures who are both.

Note: The CDC's tongue-and-cheek notice appears at: http://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2011/05/preparedness-101-zombie-apocalypse/