ZOMBIES will come to my door on Wednesday night — in rags, eye-sockets blackened, pumping devices that make fake blood run down their faces — asking for candies. There seem to be more and more zombies every Halloween, more zombies than princesses, fairies, ninjas or knights. In all probability, none of them knows what a zombie really is.

Most people think of them as the walking dead, a being without a soul or someone with no free will. This is true. But the zombie is not an alien enemy who’s been CGI-ed by Hollywood. He is a New World phenomenon that arose from the mixture of old African religious beliefs and the pain of slavery, especially the notoriously merciless and coldblooded slavery of French-run, pre-independence Haiti. In Africa, a dying person’s soul might be stolen and stoppered up in a ritual bottle for later use. But the full-blown zombie was a very logical offspring of New World slavery.

For the slave under French rule in Haiti — then Saint-Domingue — in the 17th and 18th centuries, life was brutal: hunger,
extreme overwork and cruel discipline were the rule. Slaves often could not consume enough calories to allow for normal rates of reproduction; what children they did have might easily starve. That was not of great concern to the plantation masters, who felt that children were a waste of resources, since they weren’t able to work properly until they reached 10 or so. More manpower could always be imported from the Middle Passage.

The only escape from the sugar plantations was death, which was seen as a return to Africa, or lan guinée (literally Guinea, or West Africa). This is the phrase in Haitian Creole that even now means heaven. The plantation meant a life in servitude; lan guinée meant freedom. Death was feared but also wished for. Not surprisingly, suicide was a frequent recourse of the slaves, who were handy with poisons and powders. The plantation masters thought of suicide as the worst kind of thievery, since it deprived the master not only of a slave’s service, but also of his or her person, which was, after all, the master’s property. Suicide was the slave’s only way to take control over his or her own body.

And yet, the fear of becoming a zombie might stop them from doing so. The zombie is a dead person who cannot get across to lan guinée. This final rest — in green, leafy, heavenly Africa, with no sugarcane to cut and no master to appease or serve — is unavailable to the zombie. To become a zombie was the slave’s worst nightmare: to be dead and still a slave, an eternal field hand. It is thought that slave drivers on the plantations, who were usually slaves themselves and sometimes Voodoo priests, used this fear of zombification to keep recalcitrant slaves in
order and to warn those who were despondent not to go too far.

In traditional Voodoo belief, in order to get back to lan guinée, one must be transported there by Baron Samedi, the lord of the cemetery and one of the darkest and most complicated of the religion’s many complicated gods. Baron is customarily dressed in a business jacket, a top hat and dark glasses; he’s foul-mouthed and comic in a low, vicious way. One of Baron’s spiritual functions, his most important, is to dig a person’s grave and welcome him to the other side. If for some reason a person has thwarted or offended Baron, the god will not allow that person, upon his death, to reach guinée. Then you’re a zombie. Some other lucky mortal can control you, it is believed. You’ll do the bidding of your master without question.

Haiti’s notorious dictator François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc, who controlled Haiti with a viselike grip from 1957 until his death in 1971, well understood the Baron’s role. He dressed like Baron, in a black fedora, business suit and heavy glasses or sunglasses. Like Baron at a ceremony, when Duvalier spoke publicly, it was often in a near whisper. His secret police, the Tontons Macoutes, behaved with the complete immorality and obedience of the undead, and were sometimes assumed to be zombies under the dictator’s control. I once heard a Haitian radio announcer describe Klaus Barbie, a Nazi known as the Butcher of Lyon, as “youn ansyen Tonton Makout Hitler,” or one of Hitler’s Tontons Macoutes: a zombie of the Reich.

The only way for a zombie to have his will and soul return is for him to eat salt — a smart boss of a zombie keeps the creature’s food tasteless. In the 1980s, with Duvalier’s son ousted from
power and the moment ripe for reform, the literacy primer put out by the liberation theologians’ wing of the Roman Catholic Church in Haiti was called “A Taste of Salt.”

There are many reasons the zombie, sprung from the colonial slave economy, is returning now to haunt us. Of course, the zombie is scary in a primordial way, but in a modern way, too. He’s the living dead, but he’s also the inanimate animated, the robot of industrial dystopias. He’s great for fascism: one recent zombie movie (and there have been many) was called “The Fourth Reich.” The zombie is devoid of consciousness and therefore unable to critique the system that has entrapped him. He’s labor without grievance. He works free and never goes on strike. You don’t have to feed him much. He’s a Foxconn worker in China; a maquiladora seamstress in Guatemala; a citizen of North Korea; he’s the man, surely in the throes of psychosis and under the thrall of extreme poverty, who, years ago, during an interview, told me he believed he had once been a zombie himself.

So when kids come to your door this Halloween wearing costumes called Child Zombie Doctor or Shopko’s Fun World Zombie, offer them a sprinkling of salt along with their candy corn.
Quiz - A Zombie Is a Slave Forever
By Amy Wilentz, The New York Times
Level 5

Q1. At the end of paragraph 5 ("And yet..."), the term "too far" means

A. eating salt.
B. becoming a zombie.
C. fighting back.
D. committing suicide.

Q2. Which of the following paragraphs contains the author's main thesis?

A. Paragraph 2 ("Most people...")
B. Paragraph 1 ("Zombies will...")
C. Paragraph 5 ("And yet...")
D. Paragraph 3 ("For the slave...")

Q3. Based on information in the article, which of the following statements about Voodoo is most accurate?

A. It is a polytheistic religion in which different gods fulfill different important roles.
B. It is a pagan religion that often involves elements of magic and spells.
C. It is a religion popular with dictators because it encourages blind acceptance of authority.
D. It is not its own religion, but a series of practices and beliefs associated with Haitian Christianity.
What does the zombie say about who we are and what we fear?

Davia Sills

11-14 minutes

A boy called R becomes zombified during the zombie apocalypse and for eight years he is alone, shambling around an abandoned airport, groaning at fellow zombies and searching for human flesh. Then he meets his dream girl. There’s just one problem: she is human. For R, it is love at first sight – perhaps because, just before he met Julie, he ate her boyfriend’s brain, which infuses him with memories of lust and love. When zombies attack Julie and her friends, R rescues her, slowly winning her trust and affection. No one wants R and Julie to be together – not the zombies, not Julie’s friends, and certainly not Julie’s father, the colonel leading the human resistance. Their romance seems doomed. But then something strange begins to happen inside R – his feelings for Julie start making him more human. Jonathan Levine’s film Warm Bodies (2013) asks: can love bring a zombie back to life?

This human-zombie love story showcases the latest stage of zombie evolution: humanised zombies, sweet zombies, romantic zombies. On-screen zombies have always reflected
their era, creating a cultural arc and a ‘mirror image of what’s happening in society at that moment’, according to Sara Sutler-Cohen, a sociologist at San Francisco State University who studies the motif. In their earliest film incarnations, zombies were unspeaking, single-minded creatures craving human flesh; a mob of staggering corpses, unnatural and unstoppable. Perhaps it is a desire to understand our culture’s monsters – or just those who are different – that has brought us to the threshold of a new zombie revolution, with zombies that have personalities, feelings and loved ones. Zombies who want to grow and be good. They’ve become so much like us that they could almost be us – until they get violent or need to eat.

The original concept of the zombie was drawn from 19th century stories about West Africa and 20th century accounts of Vodou culture in Haiti, where terrifying, drug-fuelled rites could make it seem like the living were dead, only to come back to life. In line with those tales, the earliest filmmakers showed us drugged, obedient automatons, without conscious thought or free will. In White Zombie (1932), the first feature-length zombie movie, the drugged zombie slaves do the bidding of the voodoo master ‘Murder’ Legendre (Bela Lugosi) – reflecting, perhaps, the powerlessness most Americans felt during the Great Depression, which laid people low for years.

It would take more than 30 years for the genre’s master, George A Romero, to serve up a zombie for modern times. In his seminal film Night of the Living Dead (1968), the classic screen zombie is a walking corpse that, like the 1960s itself, breaks every taboo and is hungry for human flesh. This film also
exposes underlying racial tensions in the midst of the US civil rights movement. The main character, Ben, an African American, survives a growing mob of pale, pasty zombies only to get killed by the white police force that should have protected him. That the cops fail to distinguish between Ben and a zombie illustrates the injustice of white authority, the dehumanising treatment of African Americans, and the fact that the zombie would always represent ‘the Other’ – the stranger, the outcast, the dark force in modern film.

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In *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Romero’s zombies take over the mall, where they spent much of their human lives. That film warns about the dangers of consumerism, says Elizabeth McAlister, a scholar of American culture at Wesleyan University, who has studied zombies in the media for years. Zombies serve as ‘placeholders for the excesses of capitalism and the way we over-consume’, she explains.

Romero gave zombies their first hint of humanity in *Day of the Dead* (1985), when zombie Bub listened to music, aimed a pistol and sought revenge for the death of his beloved friend. But for most of the next decade, zombies were ravenous, mindless monsters, made scarier than ever through the act of eating brains. In fact, the first brain-eating zombie appeared that same year in *Return of the Living Dead*, directed by Dan O’Bannon. The trend intensified with *Army of Darkness* (1992), where Ash Williams, the iconic chainsaw-wielding hero of the *Evil Dead* franchise, travels back in time to 1300 AD and battles an army of brain-devouring zombies (called
Deadites) led by his dark half, Evil Ash. (The film led Marvel
Comics to create a special crossover comic series where Ash
tries to warn superheroes of an impending Deadite invasion
before they all get turned into brain-eating zombies themselves.)

Aaron Sagers, founder of the website Paranormal Pop Culture,
thinks that the act of eating the brain symbolises the ultimate
loss of self. So much of what we are – our memories,
experiences, likes, dislikes and feelings – is housed in that
bundle of nerves and grey matter. ‘If the whole idea of the
zombie is to be part of a mindless swarm of creatures that lack
individual personalities, well, how do you create another
creature that lacks personality? You destroy their brain, their
personality centre.’ Therein is the crux of why zombies are so
horrifying: they consume and destroy the essence of who we
are.

Over time, and especially after the terrorist attacks of
September 11, 2001, zombies assumed an even more terrifying
form. With the Western world in panic over suitcase nukes,
anthrax envelopes and that word *jihad*, our film monsters
became less cartoonish. Faster, smarter, more strategic, they
were perversely more like us, and more like real-world threats.
In Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002), these speedy new
zombies embodied our fear of infection from outside, a spectre
that has haunted the US for decades from AIDS to swine flu to
Ebola today.

The recently dead look the same, but they don’t remember
dying
With Al-Qaeda still out there (and ISIS on the move), it feels like we’ll never find common ground for our demons and ourselves. But zombies do for us what we cannot not do ourselves – they invest the monster with personality, creating a path for reconciliation between the outsiders and us. One example is Edgar Wright’s horror-comedy *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), which follows two slacker buddies who hole up in a pub during a zombie invasion. By the end of the film, one is human and the other is a zombie, but they find they can still connect over their favorite pastime – lounging on the couch playing video games.

Romero’s *Land of the Dead* (2005) next gave us cunning, willful zombies who organised under their zombie leader, Big Daddy. And in Andrew Currie’s *Fido* (2006), the titular zombie hero starts out as a family pet, becoming a father-and-husband replacement later in the film. While Currie’s film is a comedy, it deals with social anxieties: the prejudiced human characters accept zombies only when they can treat them as sub-humans, reflecting what McAlister calls humanity’s ‘impulse to “other” another group’ – to ostracise outsiders, and relegate them to a lower social class. Fido’s love and the persecution he endures asks the audience to empathise with a zombie, to cross the line and embrace the outsider over ourselves.

Today, the new zombie thinks, feels and has the capacity for angst. In the French TV drama series *Les revenants*, or *The Returned* (2012), a mountain village is thrown into turmoil when a number of its deceased residents, starting with the teenage Camille, return to their homes years after their deaths. The recently dead look the same, but they don’t remember dying.
and soon exhibit odd, even violent, behaviours. They’re not who they used to be. In fact, they’re not even sure they are still human. Despite this difference, the returned are emotionally complex, fully fleshed-out people with their own sets of memories, goals and fears.

The self-aware zombie has proliferated in recent years: R, the zombie narrator in *Warm Bodies* (2013); Kieren, the teenage sufferer of Partially Deceased Syndrome in the TV miniseries *In the Flesh* (2013); and Liv, the crime-solving zombie in *iZombie*, a forthcoming US TV series. These are all relatable zombies who convey what it means to feel like you don’t quite fit in.

Using a zombie as protagonist is a radical storytelling move. Not only are we embracing the softer, more human side of these monsters, we’re choosing the zombie first, rooting for it to succeed over the human beings who seem more like us at first glance. ‘Intimacy with zombies helps us bridge the gap between us and them,’ says Sutler-Cohen.

Neuroscience has weighed in. ‘If corpses can be reanimated as zombies, then they must have some brain function to move at all, even at the most shambling of paces,’ says Bradley Voytek, a neuroscientist at University of California, San Diego, who has written on the zombie brain. ‘Every time you learn something new, something changes in the brain, and your neurons change their structure – a phenomenon known as brain plasticity. The zombie brain has to have some neurological activity to translate a craving for human flesh into movements like staggering and biting. Thus, the zombie brain may have enough plasticity to adapt, explaining increasingly human traits over time.’
The humanised zombie is an antidote to the ever-present threat of terrorists, school shooters, exotic pathogens and predators of all sorts.

Voytek explains that zombie aggression could result from a breakdown in the orbitofrontal cortex, which helps us with self-control. Zombies might forget feelings for loved ones because of damage to the amygdala, the centre of emotion in the brain. Yet plasticity should help these damaged zombie brains to heal. ‘If a zombie can exist in our fictional world, then it has the potential to become a zombie with personality,’ he says.

And that is where the zombie stands today – a tragic figure, trapped between a craving for human flesh and a desire to regain human form. Unlovable, sexless and alone, the zombie’s only means of reproduction is eating humans, especially their brains. Zombies conscious enough to witness their own disgusting acts evoke our greatest fears, but also real compassion. A zombie in such a predicament makes us more conscious as well.

At the heart of the zombie metaphor lies our need to understand our own personhood: can we extract good from all that darkness? Can we come back from the depths of despair and retake the world of light? We still have our share of monsters, like the skulking, mindless killers on the long-running US TV series, *The Walking Dead*. But more and more, viewers want to see zombies such as R from *Warm Bodies* and Camille from *Les revenants* who are just as confused, angry and unsure about their place in the world as we are. The humanised zombie is an antidote to the ever-present threat of terrorists, school
shooters, exotic pathogens and predators of all sorts because it offers the potential for us to understand those who are different from us. Sure, zombies with personalities crave human flesh, but the most evolved of them struggle to control themselves, either in memoriam of the person they were or for the sake of the human beings they now love.

Today’s zombies might be rotting on the outside, but they want to be good. They want to connect with us and love us. Humanised zombies raise a lot of questions about the lines we draw between ourselves and those who are different from us, but they also suggest we can find a common ground. Zombies with personality offer a shared path forward. They show we are more open and more generous than in decades past – more willing to reach out. Zombies with heart give us hope.

Syndicate this Essay
Quiz - The Good Zombie
By Davia Sills, Aeon
Level 5

Q1. Today's zombies are described as
A. sweet and romantic.
B. obedient and lacking free will.
C. easy to relate to and complicated.
D. faster and more strategic.

Q2. George A. Romero's first zombie film responded to
A. widespread racism in society.
B. the human impulse to look down on others.
C. the discomfort of breaking taboos.
D. the dangers of capitalism.

Q3. The author would most likely agree with which statement about the current trend in zombies? [For your prediction, write down several of the author's key arguments. This will help you identify an answer choice that fits within the author's viewpoint.]
A. Zombies are tragically conscious of their circumstances but unable to help themselves.
B. Zombies represent our desire to become better versions of ourselves.
C. Zombies that behave like humans toe the line between impressive and pitiful.
D. Zombies no longer behave like monsters.

Q4. According to the author, people are primarily afraid of zombies because
A. zombies kill what makes us human.
B. zombies always represent "the Other."
C. zombies have become more like real-world threats.
D. zombies are monsters with human personalities.
Choose one zombie, or one type of zombie, described in this article that you find most interesting. Discuss what aspect of humanity the zombie reveals, and explain why the zombie you chose appeals to you. Look back at the text as you answer to find details and supporting evidence.
Quiz - The Living Dead
By,
Level 5

Q1. What is the difference between the types of analysis used in each article?
   A. "A Zombie Is a Slave Forever" employs psychological analysis, while "The Good Zombie" relies on philosophy.
   B. "A Zombie Is a Slave Forever" is fictional, while "The Good Zombie" is nonfiction.
   C. "A Zombie Is a Slave Forever" analyzes the Haitian origins of zombies, while "The Good Zombie" argues that zombies actually originated in America.
   D. "A Zombie Is a Slave Forever" uses a historical approach, while "The Good Zombie" examines popular culture.

Q2. Which point in "The Good Zombie" would the author of "A Zombie Is a Slave Forever" most likely disagree with?
   A. Zombies fascinate us because we recognize something familiar in them.
   B. Modern versions of the zombie offer us hope for our own humanity.
   C. A zombie's desire to eat brains symbolizes the loss of the self.
   D. Zombies reflect the era in which they are created.

Q3. The authors of both articles would most likely agree that which quality makes zombies so terrifying?
   A. Zombies cannot fit in with the living world.
   B. Zombies no longer have a soul.
   C. Zombies have to follow the orders of a master.
   D. Zombies are unable to express their own wills.