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A Hand in the Darkness: How Neil Gaiman's Portrayal of Death Affects the Human Condition

What is the most common answer to the question, "what's your biggest fear?" Some people might mention the ocean, or insects and bugs (for me, it's snakes). For other people, however, fear isn't something so materialistic—it's the concepts and values that surround our lives. Failure, love, illness, unpredictability—not achieving society's standards of what a "good life" consists of. Most often than not, however, people answer "what's your biggest fear?" with some form of death. Death of a loved one, death of yourself, fear of dying alone and forgotten—it's a topic we think about harshly, and one we think about often. Despite the common fear that follows death, it's a concept people ultimately have to accept. There is no avoiding death, regardless of religion and belief—everyone dies, no matter who you are. It's a part of life that we all share as a human collective. The question remains, though, that if death is something we all accept, then why does it continue to be something we fear?

Death is unknown to no man—meaning that, at some point, every person will learn about death, and that this is just the way things are. We can barely try to forget about death altogether when there are too many reminders in daily life. People see death everywhere—in their families, on the news, in the lives of others, all over popular media and culture. Just turning on the TV or opening a book can be a prompt to recall the concept. As one of the most popular writers in all things weird and mystical, author Neil Gaiman showcases, and knows, this all too well.

Throughout his many and various works, Neil Gaiman proves himself to be a lover of the mythical and magical. His concepts and stories are full of references of folklore, mythology, and ancient ideas that he incorporates into modern storytelling. One of his most popular pieces, *The Sandman*, follows life constructs called *the Endless*. These include ideas turned into seven characters, named Destruction, Desire, Delirium Despair, Destiny, Dream, and Death. Dream, also known as Morpheus, is the main character of the graphic novel. His popularity and likeness of the character, however, is not as high as his sister's—Death. Gaiman portrays and personifies Death as a sweet, gothic sixteen year-old girl. Unlike her brother Dream, Death shows a compassion for her victims—a spot of humanity that shines through for the readers of the series. It's this characteristic of hers that is illuminating, and even shocking, for us to digest.

People have always perceived death as a horrible and tragic thing. The concept itself brings images of grim reapers and dark creatures that will take us away from this life to whatever is next. It's terrifying, and scary, and something most people want to avoid for these exact reasons. And yet, here is a young girl, offering us a hand in the darkness. She is the embodiment of all things evil and bad, but Death is kind and nice, and is willing to listen to the concerns of her victims. For a culture of people that is used to believing that death will come in the shape of darkness and shadows, Neil Gaiman hands us something of the opposite. Within *The Sandman*, Gaiman purposefully subverts expectations of Death, and in doing so further illuminates, and reveals, society's outlook on life's inevitabilities.

There's a lot one can argue about death. After all, it's a concept no one can be an expert on until they reach that point. Death is something everyone knows the main definition of, but the barriers of that definition will vary from person to person. Some people might define death strictly as failure of all bodily functions—meaning that death occurs when the heart stops

beating. For others, it might be the diagnosis of being brain dead, despite the body still working. This then leads into conversations about death of one's self, personality, and mind, as compared to the body. There is also a popular collection of people and various religions that believe in the idea of life after death, which might influence how they interpret the actual act of dying. For them, death might not even be an actual occurrence, but more of a pass by into the next life.

The definition of death, however, is not why it scares people. It's all of the unknown areas that surround the subject. In his article, "Death," author Thomas Nagel writes, "It is *being* alive, *doing* certain things, having certain experiences, that we consider good. But if death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or non-existent, or unconscious, that is objectionable. This asymmetry is important" (Nagel 74-75). Nagel showcases the distinction between the fear of the act of dying, versus the fear of losing life. While people can fear the different ways in which their death might occur, this is not the only contributing factor behind a person's fear of dying. As Nagel elaborates, the "loss of life", and as implied, the loss of life *experiences*, is what generates society's unbecoming fear of death. People fear what death will remove from their lives, creating a separation between the act of dying—all the wondering possibilities of how one might die—versus facing death, as a concept, itself. Nagel concludes his findings, stating, "...death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of indefinite extensive possible goods" (80). It's the missed possibilities and opportunities of life that instigates a fear of death. Nagel's use of the word "indefinite" here is necessary, as people don't know when they will be facing their own death. Life, until death, is essentially infinite. As humans, we know and understand that an ending will come—there's an acceptance of inevitability with this. Like Nagel writes, it's the "possible goods" that life provides us, just by being alive, that people fear losing.

While this explains where the human fear of death stems from, it does not explain why Neil Gaiman's personification of death was a monumental subversion of expectations. In comparison to other variations of death portrayed within the media, Gaiman's version of death is benign. When people imagine and picture an interpretation of death, that image usually consists of dark robes, a scythe, and haunting shadows. These obscure and gruesome personifications can actually be dated all the way back to the Bible. The passage from "The Revelation of St. John" (6:8) states:

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. (*The Holy Bible, Revelations 6:8*)

Demonstrated by the description present, the account of Death replicates that of a Grim Reaper. Here, Death is represented as a dark figure on top of a pale horse. This is the typical image of death that people imagine when giving the concept a figure. The hooded figure that death is portrayed as is one that has continued to remain in, and influence, western culture. The notion of the Grim Reaper has also blended into other cultures over time, becoming a significant representation, and notion, of death.

In her essay, "Blend Elaboration as a Mechanism of Concept Change in Examples of Death the Grim Reaper," Professor Agnieszka Gicala expands on the Grim Reaper as a concept, and how it has become a symbol of death within society today. She discusses how the figure of Death riding a horse further developed within the 14th and 15th centuries, when the Plague, also called Black Death, began its first wave in Europe:

When it reached England in 1665, it killed each fifth inhabitant of London. . . Due to the high mortality caused by the Plague, the concept of personified death underwent some alteration in its visual representation: while it was not necessarily depicted on a horse, it gained detail in that it took the form of a human skeleton and become clothed in a black cloak with a hood which often hid its face. It carried a scythe as a weapon. It is probably then, along with that attribute, that death received the name Grim Reaper and has thus become perhaps the most common image of death. (Gicala 94)

Death is a concept that will always last the test of time. Death was here when the world was created, and it will be here when it ends. As a personification, it too has lasted throughout all of society's changes—its origin being that of the Grim Reaper. The visualization of the Grim Reaper is one that is insanely popular within media and culture, and has continued to be in this modern day. Movies, books, TV shows, games—all of these different mediums have conveyed death as a scary, dark hooded figure. Popular shows like *Supernatural*, a series like *Harry Potter*, and even movies like *Bill and Ted's Bogus Adventure* feature death in this style. Death is typically a pale man, wearing black, and carrying some sort of scythe or weapon. In the *Harry Potter* world, death is featured within the story “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” being a cloaked dark creature that takes the life of each brother (Rowling). All of these examples demonstrate the expectations society has when it comes to a personification of death. As humans, we *expect* death to look this way, and probably even predict that some form of this personification will be there for our own deaths.

Neil Gaiman is not an exception to this, either. Gaiman has characterized death in many different ways throughout his various novels and stories. Within *Good Omens*, a novel written by

both Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, for example, death is personified as one of the four horsemen. Compared to the nuance of the novel, death is showcased, once again, in a traditional aspect. In his chapter titled, “Four Bikers of the Apocalypse,” within the book *Neil Gaiman and Philosophy: Gods Gone Wild!*, author Tuomas Manninen elaborates on this idea:

Death, as he appears in *Good Omens* bears a striking resemblance to Death in Pratchett’s *Discworld*: both are tall, gaunt, scythe-wielding skeletons that TALK LIKE THIS. But neither of these two Deaths comes close to Death as she appears in Gaiman’s *Sandman*: a charming, affable, young goth woman who prefers casual clothes over the more traditional black robes, but who still acts as a psychopomp for the departed souls. (162)

Death, in all of these different aspects, does not appear to be a friendly one. Most of the time, death is a scary and terrifying figure. There’s another reason why the human race often fears death, and it’s not just because of life’s opportunities that would be missed. It’s because of this particular personification of him that has been hugely popular within today’s world. This is society’s expectation when it comes to facing actual death—a macabre figure that will form to take us away from the living world. It’s a dreadful kind of premonition, one that would appall any creature from dying. It becomes surprising, then, that Gaiman chose to personify Death within *The Sandman* as a young, teen girl—just as Manninen implies. While Gaiman’s Death is one that still guides souls to the beyond, as the term “psychopomp” suggests, she does so while still acknowledging humanity’s fears of herself. Compared to these other personifications of death that seem to blindly reach out and take a soul, without care to who or what they are taking life from, Death from *Sandman* does the opposite.

Death's first introduction occurs in issue #8 of *The Sandman*, "The Sound of Her Wings". This issue begins with Dream, who has accomplished his goal of retrieving his helm, sand pouch, and ruby. Sitting on a bench and feeding pigeons, Dream is joined by Death, his older sister. She appears next to Dream casually, favoring all black clothing, a chunky cross necklace, and that cool-girl attitude most people are jealous of. Before we even get to the brunt of Dream's problem, Death begins talking about and referencing the iconic film *Mary Poppins*. She talks about her love for the film, quoting the famous "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," and stating how Mary Poppins is a leader, showing the banker in the movie what's *important* (Gaiman, "The Sound of Her Wings"). So far, the reader's first impression of this new character does not match that of the typical grim reaper. The reader doesn't actually find out that this is Death until Dream expresses his disappointment about the results of his conquest—that being, how he feels drained and lost of purpose. This leads into Death yelling at Dream as any annoyed, older sister would at their mopey and moody younger brother. Death invites Dream to accompany her on her regular 'work day,' which begins the implication of who this mysterious yet friendly person is for the reader. Clues start to fall into place as Death and Dream make their way through the lives of specific individuals, collecting their souls and sending them off.

Within issue #8, readers see the accounts of several different people and their interactions with Death. First there is Harry, an older Jewish man who Death refers to as "sweet" (Gaiman, "The Sound of Her Wings"). The next victim is a young woman looking to discover a career in comedy, who passes away due to an electrical failure with a microphone. Death too shows her an understanding mind, comforting her with the honest but kind phrase, "I'm sorry, Esme. Your time was up. Come here, honey" (Gaiman, "The Sound of Her Wings"). As the chapter continues and Death collects the souls of many, Dream wonders about the aspects of his sister's profession.

He recognizes the fear humanity has about his sister, and how “they do not love her” (Gaiman, “The Sound of Her Wings”). Yet, he also acknowledges that like all of the Endless, his sister has responsibilities—a function that has to be fulfilled. The issue wraps up with Dream expressing that today, his sister has taught him something—something that he will continue to think about. In the end, it’s not so odd that Death has a fascination and love for something like *Marry Poppins* when she acts like Mary Poppins herself. This particular issue of *The Sandman* is actually close in structure and theme of the actual series, *Mary Poppins*. Death here has essentially taken on the role of Mary, showing up just when Dream needed her. She guides Dream on a journey, showing him the things that are *important*, just like Mary Poppins does (Travers). In this case, the things that are important are *people* and understanding *humanity*. For Dream to begin comprehending his function and purpose as head of the dream realm, he first needs to sympathize with humanity—like how Death does. Illustrating Death as a parallel figure to Mary Poppins is an unusual one, but in Gaiman’s example, it works. In the first introduction to her character, Gaiman has already broken the expectations that society has for a figure of death and mortality.

He continues to do so, as well, with Death’s appearance within issue #20 of *The Sandman*, titled “Facade”. While her presence within this issue is short and only occurs at the end, it is a significant demonstration of Death’s personable and understanding characteristics. “Facade” introduces Urania “Rainie” Blackwell, who is also identified as Element Girl. Overcome and overwhelmed from her insecurities about the way she appears physically, Urania lives a pretty lonesome and isolating life. Through the issue, readers learn that there is no way for Urania to kill herself, which is unfortunate, as the release of death is the only thing that Urania wants. Suffering in depression and drowning in the wishes of her own death at the end of

the issue, Urania is surprised when Death makes an actual appearance. Death, who was passing through and happened to hear Urania's sobs, offers a friendly ear to Urania's troubles. Unlike the version of death that humans often picture in their minds, Gaiman's personification continues to be a guide for those feeling lost—first to her brother, Dream, and now to a complete stranger, Urania. Death explains to Urania that while she *is* the form of death, she isn't *Urania's* form of death. She states, impactfully:

I'm not blessed, or merciful. I'm just me. I've got a job to do, and I do it. Listen: even as we're talking, I'm there for old and young, innocent and guilty, those who die together and those who die alone ... For some folks death is a release, and for others death is an abomination, a terrible thing. But in the end, I'm there for all of them. (Gaiman, "Facade")

Death expresses the ways in which she functions as one of the Endless, and what her role is within the world. The specific line, "For some folks death is a release, and for others death is an abomination, a terrible thing," stresses the different ways in which Death understands humanity. While her other siblings of the Endless have expressed confusion over the concept of death, and why humanity fears it, Death accepts this fear. She recognizes that for humans, death is the end of something, and treats it as such with a kind face—compared to someone like Dream who previously acted indifferent when it came to the death of a person. Death also understands that some people wish for death—for a release—just as Urania does.

This is why, even though she doesn't have to, Death chooses to help Urania. She directs Urania to reach out to Ra, the sun god. With Death's help, Urania is able to achieve her desired wish—death and perishment. She dies, turning into a husk of ash, but does so with a smile of relief and honest happiness on her face—the first time within issue #20 that Urania actually

smiles. Before the issue ends, Death answers Rainie's phone, talking to someone on the end and introducing herself with, "Who am I? Just a friend. Sometimes. Maybe" (Gaiman, "Facade"). She apologizes to Mulligan, who is looking to talk to Urania, concluding the issue by saying, "Sorry I couldn't help any," with one of the biggest smirks on her face in a show of irony (Gaiman, "Facade"). The readers, like Death, realize that she has been above and beyond helpful—in her own way. Unlike the rest of her siblings, Death here does something out of the ordinary, choosing to help someone else even when it's not her purpose to do so. In these appearances of Death within *The Sandman: Book One*, Death has acted like a leading light to those she cares about. From these examples, readers can interpret that 'those she cares about' can be her family, represented by Dream, and the rest of humanity, represented by simple characters like Harry, Esme, and Urania. Death chooses to be a friend for those who face her presence, reaching out a hand in the darkness as a guide. It's rare for a personification of Death to showcase care and kindness so openly, which is just what Neil Gaiman was going for when subverting audience expectations in this way.

The impact of Death's personification in *The Sandman* openly affected its readers to the shock of, surprisingly, Neil Gaiman. Despite choosing to personify death as this young girl, Gaiman did not quite realize the impact Death would have on his readers, and the connection they feel to her as a character. In his journal article, "Reflections on Myth," Gaiman writes:

I think, overall, the character that people responded to most was Death, who I represented as a cheerful, sensible sixteen-year-old girl—someone attractive, and fundamentally nice; I remember my puzzlement the first time I encountered people who professed to believe in the characters I had created, and the feeling, half of guilt and half of relief, when I started to get letters from readers who had

used my character Death to get through the death of a loved one, a wife, a boyfriend, a mother, a child. (77-78)

Gaiman here acknowledges that despite the series focusing on Dream and his narrative, his readers responded most to Death—not because of her plot lines, or narrative, but because of her *character*. *The Sandman* is a graphic novel that focuses on themes like humanity, violence, self-reflection and identity, and the instability of the mind. In other words, it's not quite a happy story. The main narrative is full of horror and cruelty, and there are often images of humans being punished or humans dying in a brutal way—like within issue #6, “24 Hours”. It's hard to escape these feelings of savagery within the pages, and yet, readers found a way to do so through their love of Death. Part of Gaiman's shock from Death's impact and influence could also stem from a sense of uncomfortability that happens when people have a connection to a *character*. Meaning, that fans of *The Sandman* feel bonded with a fictional universe—using it to cope with real-life events that occur in reality. This sensation of fandom is one that people are used to in modern day, but Neil Gaiman wrote the series back in 1988. At this time, it was odd for people to hold such opinions over fictional characters and series. While the overall notion remains significant that fans felt this emotional connection to Death, it's hard to deny this bit of awkwardness over the idea.

However, it remains ironic, really, that for a figure society typically fears and hates, readers actually gravitated towards Death. As Neil writes, his readers used Death as a way to cope for the loss of their own loved ones. In an odd twist of juxtaposition, by subverting reader expectations, Gaiman actually brought humanity and Death closer together through her personification. While death, as a concept, has taken its victims as it usually does, Gaiman's

readers turn to a *different* version of death for comfort. Just like Mary Poppins, Death has opened readers eyes to the things in life that are *important*.

Death will be something humans always fear. Whether it's just one person, or an entire society, there is no getting around the fear that stems from death. It's characters like Death from *The Sandman*, however, that can make dying seem less frightening. The connection that draws between humanity and death within *The Sandman* reveals the reasons *why* humans possess this fear, and the different ways a character like Death opposes those fears. By understanding the psychological reasons why humanity fears death, and where the personification of death originates from, we slowly begin to piece together a puzzle that reveals why a friendly hand at the time of death means so much. It means even more knowing that the friendly hand came from Death herself, as her warm presence can eliminate the human worries of inevitability.

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