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The portrayal of the personification of death as a character in myth and fictional literature in the western world.

From Antiquity to the 21th century.

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Denne masteroppgaven analyserer utviklingen av personifiseringen av døden som karakter i myter, folklore og moderne skjønnlitteratur i den vestlige verden, med noe hjelp fra kunsthistorie. Den dekker en kort periode en kort periode i den greske perioden (for det meste den arkaiske), den sene middelalderen og renessansen, før vi tar et skritt i vår egen tid. I første kapittel undersøker jeg deler av tekstene til Homer, Hesiod og Euripides, i tillegg til andre historier eller fragmenter som nevner Thanatos, den første personifiseringen av døden og noen av hans søstre, Keres og Moirai. I det andre kapittelet vil jeg se på utviklingen av Døden fra personifisert ånd til antropomorfisk skjelettfigur og de ulike roller den påtar seg i middelalderen og renessansen. Jeg vil også undersøke den videre utviklingen av den mannlige og kvinnelige personifiseringen av døden. I det tredje og siste kapittelet vil jeg analysere skildringene av fire personifikasjoner fra moderne litteratur, se på deres likheter og ulikheter. Jeg avslutter med en komparativ analyse av de fire nye personifiseringene med de gamle som ble funnet i de to foregående kapitlene.

This thesis analyses the development of the personification of death as a character in myth, folklore and modern fiction in the western world, with some help from art history. It covers a short span of the Grecian period (mostly the archaic), the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, before taking a leap into our own time. In the first chapter, I examine some of the texts by Homer, Hesiod and Euripides and other stories or fragments mentioning Thanatos, the first personification of Death and some of his sisters, the Keres and the Moirai. In the second chapter, I will look at the development of Death from personified spirit to skeletal anthropomorphic figure and what different roles it takes on in the Middle Ages and Renaissance period. I will also examine the further development of the male and female personification of death. In the third chapter, I will analyse the portrayals of four personifications from modern literature, two anthropomorphic skeletons and two human personifications, look at their similarities and dissimilarities and end with a comparative analysis of the four new personifications with the old ones found in the first two chapters.

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Introduction

The human relationship with death is a lovely little paradox. On the one side there exists repulsion, fear and a great social taboo. On the other side there is an attraction, interest and above all a fascination surrounding anything and everything related to death. Describing and depicting death as an abstract concept and a physical reality has been a preoccupation of artists in all genres for thousands of years.[1] Creating an image of that which is unknown has always been a practice and an urge which defines us humans.[2] It is not surprising then, when we think of death as a figure (to be written with a capital D) that so many images spring to mind without much necessary contemplation.

Influenced by the social and religious environment, Death has taken on different forms, humanoid and others, sometimes taken more than one shape in the same culture but always recognizable as Death. Most often Death has been personified as a man or a woman, giving our eternal companion a face and form, which can be recognized instantly and is relatable. Death has inhabited many different roles: It has been Master of the underworld, the servant to chthonic kings, friend, foe, lover; welcomed and shunned. Most representations of Death have been feared and worshipped as gods and goddesses, being prayed and sacrificed to, often living in some kind of separate world beneath the earth's crust.

Later stories tell us that Death was brought into the world by the first humans, Eve and Adam, where it now dances with us, lest we forget that we shall die. Death is the child of Sin, the Devil's companion and a seducer in its own right. Death is both righteous and cruel. The closer we come to our own time, being Death is simply a work title and a job that has to be done by someone. But like any other profession, being Death might get boring and tiresome as well sometimes, so one seeks other employment, tries out new hobbies, falls in love or go on a strike. But in the end, Death is the only one who can do Death's work. And through the act of making Death recognizable and very like us, we may change our minds about how strange and unwelcome Death is.

"No single image can capture death in all its allure and horror".[3] When one thinks about death there are many images which come to mind. On the European continent, Death's

[1] Ciregna, 2009, p. 356
[2] Guthke, 1999, p. 8
[3] Guthke, 1999, p. 10

appearance has usually been imagined in a humanized form, making it instantly recognizable. By turning death into a character, a person or personification, with a voice and a face (although often it is a skull) and a story, writers and creators of different kinds made death into something reachable through their imagination and art. They created entities to explain the unexplainable, which could reason and sometimes be reasoned with. These creations were often still feared and respected, yet they are not something completely mysterious and unknown to us. We call these creations personifications. But what exactly is a personification?

A personification is an animal, object or abstract, (such as destiny or death,) which is given qualities or abilities only human beings can have. As a personification, death is portrayed as a person with human characteristics. The anthropomorphic features of death are represented in the physical appearance of death, for example a human skeleton, performing human activities. Death can be given a gender, clothing, personality and voice. In stories featuring death as a character, humans often try to trick death, wanting to avoid or control their fate. Personifications of death have been depicted in mythology, art literature and popular culture since 800 BCE.[4] Most often the personification has been in the form of an intimidating and supernatural appearance, like a god or a goddess. The deities of Egypt very often had human bodies with animalistic heads, like the god of embalming and guardian of the dead, Anubis, with the head of a black dog. The Grecian gods were all humans with the powers to transform themselves into other beings. They dwell mostly in sunless lands under the earth.

Many gods and goddesses of death were also combined with war, such as the Morrigan of Celtic lore or Odin from Norse mythology, who gets half of those who die in battle. But many female deities were also often connected to rebirth. Persephone for instance, who was queen of the Underworld in Grecian myths but also a goddess of fertility, who spent some of her time down in the Underworld and the rest of it up on earth, was used to explain the cycle of the seasons. Just like Persephone, Marzanna, an ancient Slavic goddess of death, rebirth and dreams, is associated with seasonal rites based on the idea of death and rebirth of nature.

What all the gods and goddesses have in common is that they were responsible for the dead: they were judges and caretakers of the souls and rituals surrounding death. But none of them were Death itself. Death was just another task which can be compared to any other human

[4] Wojtkowiak, 2009, pp. 804-805

aspect they were connected to such as life, wisdom and love.

In other religions based on a monotheistic system, like Judaism and Catholicism, Death was personified through an Angel of Death. There are several such angels, good and bad, which are associated with death. In folkloric myths and tales, we often find minor deities, spirits and nymphs which are in some way either linked to death or blamed for causing it, such as the Irish Banshee or the Nordic Nøkken.

Many of these personifications and deities of death are still very well known today. The death gods of Egypt and Greece are some of the best known in history, even at present. They are characters who show up in books and movies and other media still, even though the belief in and religious acts around them has disappeared.

Throughout history and culture, in mythologies, folklore, religions, art and literature, there has been and still are a great variation of the appearance of Death. The one we might know best in the western world today is the anthropomorphic skeleton swaddled in a black cloak, most commonly named the Grim Reaper. The Reaper is often depicted wielding a scythe or carrying an hourglass, both being metaphorical objects for the end of life. The hourglass represents the time of life which is left. Turning the hourglass is not an option. The sand, and so time, only flows one way. The scythe is a tool to reap crops. In the hand of the grim reaper it becomes a weapon which cuts down life with a single stroke.

But is the image of Death today only grim? In this thesis I will try to unveil the different personifications of Death that have been depicted through time by analysing the portrayal of the personification of death as a character in myth and fictional literature in the western world. Further research criterias set for this thesis statement will be presented in the method chapter below. In the chapters to come I will work my way through different time periods: Grecian Antiquity, the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the end of the 20th to the 21th century.

The first chapter will state the beginning of the personifications and shows us a small variety of possible Death presentations in male and female form, both kind and cruel. The second chapter covers further developments in physical possibilities and thematical occurrences such as memento mori, Danse Macabre, the Triumph of Death, Death as seducer and Death and the maiden. The third and last chapter contains an overview of the four most common Death personifications in existence today and their similarities and dissimilarities. I will compare

them to each other and put them in context with the forms of personifications covered in the previous two chapters.

When writing I will be distinguishing between death written with a lowercase and uppercase D. When the D is lowercase, it will mark the context of death as in dying or being dead. When in capital, I will be referring to Death as character or personification.

Method

Choosing the theme

I chose to write about death because the theme has interested me for a long time. After having read Caitlyn Doughty's book *Smoke gets in your eyes and other stories from the crematorium* from 2014, I figured out quickly that I wanted to write my master thesis about death and our society's dualistic attitude towards death: the fascination and the taboo. My thesis and research questions have changed several times. Finding the exact wording for my thesis statement took some time as well. After having rummaged through different dissertations and articles, I quickly found that death in society is a theme that has already been covered quite well by several academics, such as by Zygmunt Bauman and Philippe Ariès. Having also played around with the thought of incorporating fictional literature as part of the fascination aspect, I decided to focus mainly on fiction and death as a character in fiction. This in turn turned into a thesis about the personification of Death and its development as a fictional character in literature.

Finding literature

The books and novels I have chosen from modern fiction are:

> *Death with Interruptions* (2009) by Jose Saramago
>
> Excerpts from the graphic novel series *The Sandman* (1989-1997) and series collection *Death* (2014) by Neil Gaiman
>
> *Mort* (2013) by Terry Pratchett
>
> *A Dirty Job* (2006) by Christopher Moore

Some of the literature I wanted to use was clear to me from the start, namely Neil Gaiman's graphic novel series *The Sandman* and Terry Pratchett's fantasy book series *Disc World*. The works of Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett were essential, because of their characters of Death which are both well-known in the world of fantasy literature and very distinct characters. Although the format of *The Sandman* is graphic instead of just text based, the reader gets a good look into the world where Death lives. We as readers, see how the author imagined his character through illustrations, not just descriptions (or, in some cases, having to imagine the character ourselves because of lack of descriptions). Although there are many volumes to *The Sandman* novels, Death does only feature frequently in them and her appearances are usually short. She has her own two storylines collected in *Death*, but even here, Death is not truly the main character of her own stories but rather the antagonist. Several of Terry Pratchett's books are dedicated to the story of Death, and I chose the first of these books, *Mort*, simply because it is the first story about Death. The last two books are by Nobel prize winner Jose Saramago and the American author Christopher Moore. I found their books through research on the internet, looking for books where Death featured as a protagonist or prominent antagonist.

I chose fiction as a general genre, and the literature I chose delves into different genres again within fiction: fantasy, magical realism, urban fantasy, fantasy comedy, speculative fiction, graphic novel, horror fiction. Terry Pratchett's book is the only one which is pure fantasy. The other three feature more or less in our modern world, at times somewhat back in history, but always based on our reality.

As I began researching Death as a character further back in history, it became clear to me that I would want to create a bridge between Death's portrayal known today and the portrayal then. Finding older literature where Death was an actual prominent character was not an easy task. For the first chapter, I decided to focus on Thanatos, the Grecian personification of Death. I had to look through a lot of texts and fragments to find places in ancient mythology where Thanatos would be adequately described. In the beginning it looked like slim pickings, but the more I searched, the more I found also of secondary literature by different writers, professors and researchers. I also included his sisters, the Keres and the Moirai, better known as the Fates in my analysis. Not only are they deemed representatives of life and death as well, but one of the Moirai known as Atropos, has a resurgence in the Middle Ages and features there more than Thanatos does. But in the first chapter I did not focus primarily on

them because Thanatos is the main personification of Death and, also, I found very little information about them.

In the second chapter, I decided to focus on the Middle Ages and Renaissance, because it was here that the second prominent Death personification first appeared: the skeleton. Yet for this chapter it was especially difficult finding fitting literature where Death was portrayed as an actual character in more than just snippets. Like Thanatos, Death in the Middle Ages was not a common literary figure. Also, after Antiquity, Death turns into several different characters and develops different personae which over time becomes a bit difficult to keep track of. More often Death was depicted in art: I found copper etchings, woodcuts, paintings and murals. What became clear quickly, was that in the Middle Ages, Death was mainly portrayed as a skeleton. The transition from Death as a man to a skeleton is probably the cause of images and not literature. In hindsight, literature followed art. Therefore, I will consider some of Death's pictorial representations and the emergence of the other representations of Death in this chapter in addition to analysing literature.

Another theme which became more prominent in the literature I was reading, was the portrayal of Death as male and female, both as skeleton and in human form. I decided to take into account Death's personifications in these two forms: the human (male and female) and the skeleton (feminine and masculine).

One book which was very helpful while writing the second chapter was *The Gender of Death* (1999) by Karl S. Guthke. Guthke has handled the theme I myself was interested in and, although in the beginning I was afraid that Guthke had already written the thesis which I wanted to write, his book became my main reference when I needed suggestions for literature or other descriptions, especially for the second chapter. I believe I have managed the balance of using Guthke's book as a research tool and private guide and not let it completely take over the whole research endeavour. It was also difficult at times to keep track of all the directions Death's development went into, and Guthke was some help in this task as well.

For my third chapter, it was already clear that I would be analysing the four Deaths from the four fictional literary sources I had found (listed above). I have chosen my characters on the basis that firstly, they are all mainly protagonists or play an important role in their respective stories and fictional worlds. Secondly, they are individual characters with different personalities and qualities, yet still have many of the same traits, such as an interest and

fascination for life, though their approach to life is often quite different. Some of them seem to understand it, while others struggle to comprehend it.

Reading-method and analysis

I decided on a thematical reading where the main focus lies on the chosen characters and their personae and development and not on the stories and their surroundings. Neither do I focus on the author's intentions. This concerns mainly the modern Death characters in the last chapter. In the first two, the focal point had to accommodate for some of the historical surroundings, so I adjusted my viewpoint.

It became clear from an early point that it would be difficult to analyse the Deaths in their different time periods by the same standards, so I have made different adaptions for each chapter, following the literature and information I have collected, not forcing any Death to fit into my own schematics. Since the personifications are from a very different historical contexts, I accommodated my analysis to their time frame, putting together thematic overviews, following a more or less chronological path where it was possible, since many of the Death-portrayals, especially the ones I will be presenting in the second chapter were often present at the same time, making it difficult to follow the timeframe too strictly.

For the modern Deaths I chose some focal points from which I would be analysing the modern Deaths: appearance and personality, powers and abilities, symbols and items, family, friends and acquaintances, and home and pets. They will be listed not necessarily in that order in the analysis. My interests lie in their deathly yet also humane characteristics. How are the personifications put together? What is it that constitutes them as Deaths? I analyse one Death at a time, and I will make small comparisons to the other ones when I see them, comparing them at the end before the conclusion.

Analysing the older Death characters through the same focal points would have been difficult since I had too few consistent details on one end and very much on the other. There is a vast difference between having, on the one hand, four actual books with a thought-through plot written by contemporary, popular authors and on the other hand partly only fragments and secondary literature from perhaps not properly qualified internet sources. I have done the best I could, only trusting and using a source if I have found the same information on several other websites or in encyclopaedias.

Therefore, in the first two chapters, which are more historically bound, I have chosen to not follow the above-mentioned focal points but rather tried to put the personifications together with the material that I could find and create whole, understandable characters for the reader and for myself in its historical context. In the first chapter I look at Thanatos and the way he was described as a character and his personification, finding a dualistic, paradoxical perspective and concentrating on these two sides. In the second chapter I look more at the development of Death over several hundred years, and how Death turned into several different characters, which in turn turned into the four characters we see in modern literature: the male and female Death in both human and skeleton form. I have categorized the themes of the analysis more thematically than chronologically, although I do go through the Middle Ages before the Renaissance.

Analytical aid

I have read and reread the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (at least parts of them) by Homer and the *Theogony* by Hesiod, and also other myths and stories to form a basis of knowledge for the first chapter. Searching for things to do with Thanatos and reading up on Grecian characters in that mythology. Thanatos was not a majorly popular deity in Antiquity, at least not in written form. Finding much about him was therefore not easy.

The same goes for Death in the early Middle Ages. It is depicted several times over the span of several hundred years, but the stories that might have come with the pictures are seldom to be found or not translated into a language I can read, much of it being in French or Italian. There are sentences, but seldom anything proper to refer to. I therefore chose to rely somewhat more on the history of art for descriptions of Death in this time period. As we move into the Renaissance, Death began to show up in the writings of famous poets like Petrarch and Milton. The tradition of anonymisation of artists in the Middle Ages was over and we therefore know who wrote and painted what. Also, it became more and more common to be able to read and write for the common people, producing more written work. The black plague was used as inspiration by the writers who survived it to present Death as a living, talking character in their works.

The reason why I make a huge leap between the Renaissance to our own time is because firstly the four Deaths that I will analyse have been established by then and secondly, Death does not develop much after this time period. Older versions, especially Thanatos, have their

own renaissance in the romantic era, but there is nothing interestingly new or important to add.

Art history

For the first chapter I had problems finding literature and began researching some art history books, because they popped up quickly when I began my research on Thanatos. These books were a large help in my research of Thanatos and discovering other Death personifications. The other Death characters have several more descriptions.

The actual pictures, photos and depictions I found of Thanatos and the other Deaths have been a great help for my research, although art was not supposed to be the main focus of the thesis. But literature and art have always gone hand in hand. For instance, depictions of Thanatos from ancient Greece inspired later authors and poets to write about him. Also, much of my research has not made it into the thesis but have been important building blocks for me to work on. To make my points easier to understand, I have added a list of illustrations with numbered pictures which I will refer to in the text.

Limitations

I have covered a large timeframe, keeping to the borders of Europe. I have not included literature from other countries or continents outside Europe, excepting Christopher Moore who is from America. Limiting myself to certain literature, genres and themes was difficult. If I could have added all the aspects that I wanted to include, my thesis would quickly have grown into at least the size of a doctorate. Some themes I wanted to include but had to drop were of a more sociological aspect (see secondary literature list under omitted literature below). I excluded books that covered death-induced genres like crime and horror fiction since I would not be finding the kind of death characters I was interested in there. I also avoided themes like vampires and zombies because, although vampires and zombies are in their undead state a kind of presentation of death and can be the cause of someone's death in fiction, they are not personifications of Death. I have also avoided writing specifically about any death-related gods or goddesses as there are firstly too many of them and secondly, they are not actual Death personifications. I have further tried to stay as objective as possible regarding religions and belief systems and also themes like sexism and feminism, which would have been easy to include, but would have been too much to write about.

Omitted literature

I ended up having to drop several fictional books which at first, I wanted to include in my analysis. Among them were:

The book thief (2005) by Markus Zusak

Soul Music (1994), *Hogfather* (1996) and *Thief of Time* (2001) by Terry Pratchett

Duck, Death and the Tulip (2016) by Wolf Erlbruch

Life and I – a story about Death (2016) by Elisabeth Helland Larsen and Marine Schneider

I also had to exclude most of the research material I wanted to use, because as my thesis changed, they were no longer useful to me. These books and articles included:

Death in literature (2014) by Outi Hakola og Sari Kivistö (red.)

The Hour of our Death – the Classic History of Western Attitudes toward Death over the last one thousand years (2008 2nd ed.) by Philippe Ariès

Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies (1992) by Zygmunt Bauman

"Dødens socialpsykologi – perspektiver på døden i samspillet mellem individ og samfund" (2014) by Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Jan Brødslev Olsen

"The Undiscovered Country", "A Kind Behind the Door", "Neverland", or "A Small Unfocused Blur": Uncanny literary definitions of death (2012) by Katarzyna Malecka

I include this list of books and articles so that the reader may get a better picture of how much this thesis has changed in the course of the period it was developed and written.

1. The personification of Death in Ancient Greece

Introduction: the mythology and genealogy of the Grecian gods

In this first chapter, I will look at the beginning of the personification of Death in fiction, or more accurately, the personification of Death in ancient Greece, namely Thanatos. In addition, I will also delve into the feminine aspect of Death in the form of some of Thanatos' sisters: the Keres and the Moirai[5], giving a little extra attention to Atropos, one of the sisters. They were all representations of death and played important roles in later times as well, as will become clear in the timeline towards modernity. It is also important to note that gender plays a part in this analysis. Thanatos and Atropos each represent a male and female version of Death, which will be one of the themes that follows us throughout this thesis.

Before Thanatos and his sisters, there were, of course, many other and far older death-related deities. These, however, are not the subject of this thesis. I want to explore the actual personifications of Death in fiction. By fiction, I hereby mean not only fictional literature as we know it now, but also the myths and folktales of the past. These myths had a strong influence on later storytellers and they still live on today, giving us inspiration and ideas for further literary narrations, which will be seen in the last chapter of this thesis.

Mythical origins of the Grecian gods

There are at least two creation myths in the Greek fictional world. The one I will use as the basis for this chapter is the genealogy written down by the poet Hesiod in his work *Theogony*, around the last third of the eighth century before the common era (BCE).[6] This was probably inspired by the same heroic stories as the poetic epics *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* accredited to the poet Homer approximately around the same time, if not about a century earlier.[7] If these particular epics were known to Hesiod or not is difficult to say for certain but the stories they are based on certainly would have been.[8]

Homer and Hesiod lived around the end of the Grecian dark ages and the beginning of the Archaic period (c. 700-480 BCE). The archaic period formed the basis for the classical period

[5] or the Fates, as we now know them.
[6] Hesiod, 2008, p. vii
[7] I tread carefully here since it seems that no one can ever agree completely on when exactly Homer and Hesiod were alive.
[8] Hesiod, 2008, pp. viii-ix

and thus also the basis for the Grecian mythological world as we know it today. Of the several Grecian creation myths Hesiod's is still the best known.

One of the reasons I have for choosing Hesiod and Homer's texts as basis is that Thanatos and the gods, spirits, and personifications connected to him are directly named in their work. The *Iliad* and *Theogony* are also the literary texts still to exist where Thanatos first appears. The third reason is that although Thanatos does not feature that often in either of Homer's or Hesiod's writing, most scholars and other sources still do refer prominently to Homer and Hesiod when they write about the Grecian Death spirit.

Hesiod's genealogy of the gods

In the *Theogony* the lineage of the gods begins with the Chasm, known as Chaos, from which sprang several personifications: Gaia (Earth), Eros (Desire) and Tartarus – the deepest, darkest part of earth. From Chaos again came Erebos (Darkness) and Nyx (Night).[9] Nyx was a beautiful woman escorted by the stars. She was clad in dark robes, covering her face with a long veil and her chariot was drawn by two black horses.[10] Nyx and Gaia were very fertile and each begot, through traditional and untraditional methods, a gigantic horde of children. Erebos (Darkness)[11] is sometimes recognized as the father of many of Night's children. Nyx on her part has been crowned the mother of the darkest and most mysterious of the personified abstractions. Some of her children include Doom, Misery, Cavil, Blame, Resentment, Pain, Retribution, Deceit, and other personifications of such dark feelings and actions. Among her children are also Geras (Old Age), the Hesperides and the Oneiroi, known as the tribe of Dreams.[12] The children which are important to this analysis are the Moirai (the Fates), the Keres (violent death), Hypnos (Sleep) and of course Thanatos.

After a great war with the Titans, Zeus and his brothers Pluton and Poseidon divided the world between themselves. Zeus ruled the heavens, Poseidon the oceans and Pluton got the Underworld Hades, after which he was later named. Hades is where the souls of the dead go and it is a place made up of many locations, such as cities or counties within a country ruled by a king and his queen. For the Greeks, death was a sad affair, as they generally loved life

[9] Hesiod, 2008, p. 6-7
[10] Berens, 2007, pp. 142
[11] Hesiod, 2008, p. 6
[12] Berens, 2007, p. 142 / Hesiod, 2008, p. 9

and the life-giving sun.[13] The abode of Hades is a dark, depressing, shadowy place,[14] according to with only a few beautiful, bright places where not many were able to go to unless their place there was earned. Yet in its own way, the realm of Hades is just as alive as the world of the living above it, with rivers, gates, guardians and of course inhabitants. Most of them are the spirits of the dead, but there are also Titans, gods, demi-gods and demon-like creatures living there. It is also inhabited by many beasts, monsters, and personifications who have made this dark place their home.[15] They are what we call chthonic beings, chthonic meaning relating to or inhabiting the world below. Among those who live here are Nyx and many of her children.

Female Death in Ancient Greece

Nyx bore Thanatos many siblings. Several are linked to death in some way or other, and many of them are female. These Death spirits lay the grounds for female Death in the Middle Ages and the ages to follow, as we will see in the upcoming chapters. I will therefore give the death-related sisters[16] of Thanatos, at least an introduction, if perhaps brief.

The ones who are best known to be death-bringers whom I will be focusing on are the Keres and the Moirai, which are most commonly known as the Fates. All belong to a branch of the Death family tree: The Keres embody any kind of violent or unsolicited death, be it on the battlefield or in sickness while the Fates are inescapable, spinning and cutting the threads of life.

Keres

The Keres, singular Ker, are vicious female death-spirits and the personified necessity of death (*Kêres Thanatoio*). The Greeks looked upon them as responsible for any form of violent and horrible death. The meaning of the name Ker has been translated to the goddess of death and doom and they represent ill fates. [17] Its meaning is also synonymous with destruction and

[13] Heinemann, 2015, p. 17
[14] Homer, 2002, p. 221, l. 114-117
[15] Wikipedia, 2019, *Greek Underworld*
[16] The different translations of Hesiod's *Theogony*, where the births of these personifications are listed, differs ever so slightly due to the use of different adjectives and sometimes nouns, making keeping track of which is which not always so easy when the translators do not agree among themselves, but I've done my best to keep track of them.
[17] Atsma, 2017, Theoi, *Keres* / Hjortsø, 1998, p. 97

painful or violent death. Extended further, its meaning may include plague, terminal sickness, disease, and similar maladies. Together with their brother Thanatos, they represent the physical aspects of death.[18] One might say that while Thanatos is Death itself, the Keres are the cause of death. According to Heinemann the Keres are one of the most prominent death deities in the *Iliad*. Portrayed as vile women, they rage through the battlefields in blood-speckled clothes, dragging the dead corpses by their heels through the fighting throng and delighting in the slaughter.[19] They are equipped with sharp claws and fangs like wild animals.[20] Although there seems to be many of them, I have not been able to find a specific number nor are any of the Keres ever mentioned by personal names.[21]

Moirai

The Fates are known as a trio of sisters, yet at the beginning (which here means in the time of the Homeric epics), the Fates were not three, but one. That one was Moira, her name meaning destiny or portion.[22] She was the only one of the gods allowed to act independently. Later, one became three, and these three were recognized by Hesiod as "(…) the Fates, to whom Zeus the resourceful gave the most privilege, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, who give mortal men both good and ill"[23]. Like Moira, acting on her own, the three Moirai (or Moiræ) are also independent. The only one they answer or listen to is Zeus, although the true extent of this has been under debate several times. Sometimes it is said that Zeus can dictate them, other times that Zeus is the one who has to abide by their will.[24]

Homer and Hesiod accord the Moirai's motherhood to Nyx, though Hesiod changes his mind later in the *Theogony* and declares Zeus and Themis to be their parents.[25] Through their first parental association, they represent an essential part of the development of the world.[26] With the second, they are symbolically marked as a part of the divine order. Either way, they are important figures in this mythology and are high ranking among the Grecian deities. As

[18] Atsma, 2017, Theoi, *Thanatos* /Wikipedia, 2019, *Keres*
[19] Heinemann, 2015, p. 24 / Berens, 2007, p. 149 / Guthke, 1999, p. 80 / Redfield, 1994, p. 184 / Wikipedia, 2019, *Death (personification)*
[20] Hjortsø, 1998, p. 97
[21] Sadly, information about them has been scarce
[22] Oxford Dictionaries, 2019, *Moirai* / Graves, 2017, p. 49 / Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 172
[23] Hesiod, 2008, p. 29
[24] Wikipedia, 2019, *Moirai* / Graves, 2017, p. 48
[25] Hesiod, 2008, pp. 9, 29 / Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 48, OH 59: *To the Fates*, l. 1 & p. 173
[26] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 173

children of Nyx, they are automatically chthonic beings. Yet, through Zeus, they have connections to the gods upon Olympus. Perhaps they are the strings which tie the worlds above and below together.

The Moirai are the makers of the life threads and are therefore all-seeing and all-knowing.[27] Each thread symbolizes the fate and outcome of human life from birth to grave. They spin and keep the thread, cutting it when a lifetime is over. Like their names indicate, each of the Moirai has a task with regard to this occupation: Clotho, meaning "Spinner", spins the thread of life on her spindle. The thread is then measured or portioned out by the rod of Lachesis, which signifies "Portion" or "Allotter", before being cut by the scissors of Atropos, whose name means "Inflexible", "Irreversible" or "inevitable" – in other words, death.[28] They give out what is allotted in life, "(…) the portion of life one receives"[29], just like Lachesis' name and task signifies. Even though the Greeks firmly believed that their life and destiny was to a certain extent predetermined through the Fates and the will of the gods, one did have the power to a certain degree to choose one road or another, to either shorten or prolong one's own life, like the choice Achilles had in the *Iliad*.[30]

The only one to be properly correlated to death of the three is Atropos. Graves refers to her as the most terrible of the three.[31] Through the meaning of her name and the act of cutting the life thread and so deciding when someone is to die, Atropos is a bringer of death and therefore also a personification of death. When the Grecian myths were being rediscovered in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, Atropos was again seen as a death-goddess and became one of the earliest personifications of Death after the ancient Grecian era.[32]

Thanatos

Thanatos has a contradictive appearance in literature and art: for some, he was a beautiful, gentle youth, the impartial attendant to the Underworld. For others, he was a dark and ugly

[27] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 49, OH 59: *To the Fates*, l. 11, 13-14
[28] Graves, 2017, p.48 / Berens, 2007, pp. 140-141 / Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 175
[29] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 173
[30] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 173
[31] Graves, 2017, p. 48
[32] More on that in chapter 2: Death of the Middle Ages and Renaissance

entity,[33] hateful and bitter. In this guise, he sees the human souls as something owed to him when a human life ends.[34] But to all Thanatos is the personification and literal embodiment of death in Greek mythology.

On many occasions, Thanatos has been likened to or mistaken for other gods, most often with Hades, perhaps because their descriptions and tasks resemble one another. Thanatos may be seen as his representative or subject on earth, [35] yet, although Hades is the God and ruler of the Underworld, he is just that: the ruler of a land. Hades is not Death himself, nor does he bring death to humans or take their spirits down to his domains. Rather, he is the caretaking monarch of the spirits inhabiting his chthonic country. Thanatos (his name is one of the Grecian words for death) on the other hand is not a god and is to be distinguished from the god Hades.[36] In Antiquity, Thanatos was categorized as a daemon (sometimes daimon), psychopomp or genius. Daemon is the Greek word for a lesser deity or a guiding spirit of nature.[37] As a psychopomp, Thanatos is a conductor of souls and his job is to bring the souls of the dead to the Underworld. Another, better-known psychopomp is the messenger of the gods, Hermes, who also had this task. In Roman times a genius was considered a protective spirit which attended a specific person or place.[38]

Thanatos and Hypnos

Hypnos is Death's best-known and closest relative, often recognized as his twin brother.[39] They have seldom been depicted without each other and in Greek mythology, the twins share a very close relationship, as most twins do, which has been emphasized often throughout art and literature. They share a home at the entrance of Hades, "in the realm of shades"[40]. Hesiod wrote: "There the sons of gloomy Night have their dwelling, Sleep, and Death, fearsome gods. Never does the shining Sun look upon them with his rays when he goes up into heaven, nor when he climbs down from heaven"[41]. The ancient Greeks used many euphemisms and allegories in their daily life for death and "(…) felt a close affinity between sleep and death,

[33] Heinemann, 2015, pp. 21-22
[34] See *Alcestis* further down.
[35] Heinemann, 2015, pp. 46-47 / Euripides, 2018, p. 8
[36] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 218
[37]Wikipedia, 2019, *Daemon*
[38] Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012, *Genius*
[39] Virgil, 2008, p. 191 / Homer, 2011, p. 412
[40] Berens, 2007, p. 142
[41] Hesiod, 2008, p. 25

probably inferring it from the close resemblance between a body asleep and a body dead."[42]. It is interesting that Death and Sleep are so closely entwined. Would not the pairing of for example Death and Illness or Death and Ares (the god of War) have made more sense to the Greeks? Yet in his role as the personification of death Thanatos was often referred to as eternal sleep,[43] a very peaceful-sounding concept which makes death in itself seem less scary and more amicable.

A good example of this is to be found in the Orphic Hymns where both brothers have one hymn each. In Hypnos's hymn, he is said to "(…) save souls by easing them into the thought of Death, / since to Death and Oblivion you are a true brother"[44]. The hymn of Thanatos mirrors this statement with: "Your sleep tears the soul free from the body's hold, / whenever you undo nature's powerful bonds, / bringing the long slumber, the endless one, to the living."[45]. Thanatos is the bringer of the long sleep, the endless slumber. Together, the brothers have a very liberating function. Sleep can be regarded as a kind of practice death, just like death may be seen as a permanent sleep[46] and thus bring eternal peace, a euphemism we still use today.

When the two brothers are depicted together it is most commonly as infants or while carrying a dead body between them. The latter is known to be on different kinds of funerary vases and kraters.[47] One depiction of them as children is to be found on the Chest of the Corinthian ruler Kypselos where Nyx, their mother, is shown holding the twins in her arms. One is painted black, which is probably Thanatos, while the other, Hypnos, is painted white. Both children are seemingly asleep.[48]

The only mythological story I have found where the brothers are present together is in their short appearance in the *Iliad*. The brothers are sent by the gods to collect the dead body of Sarpedon, a hero in the Trojan war and one of Zeus' mortal sons, to bring it back to his homeland so that the body may be buried properly, and the soul may reach the Underworld.[49] This short scene has been painted several times through the Grecian decades. On a krater

[42] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 216
[43] Ciregna, 2009, p. 356
[44] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 65, OH 85: *To Sleep*, l. 7-8
[45] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 67, OH 87: *To Death*, l. 3-5
[46] Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 216
[47] See picture 1 in the list of illustrations
[48] Burton, 1997, p. 62 / Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 216 / Atsma, 2017, Theoi, *Thanatos*
[49] Homer, 2011, pp. 403-404, 412 / Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 216 / Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011, *Sarpedon*

painted by Euphronius[50] Hypnos and Thanatos are pictured in the act of carrying Sarpedon's corpse away from the battlefield. Both have wings and are clad in armour. Hermes, here in his role as psychopomp and recognizable by his winged hat, winged feet, and staff, is overseeing the pick-up. It would be quite impossible to know which brother is supposed to be which if their names weren't written next to the figures. Hermes' and Sarpedon's names are also written next to them. This feature is something which is left out in later depictions, making it nigh impossible for the untrained eye to keep the twin brothers apart.

The two sides of Thanatos

There is a large difference in the way that Thanatos has been described by poets and dramatists from the Archaic to the Hellenistic time periods. I have picked out the few stories and passages I have found where he is an active participant of the story and will distinguish between the one I will call the aristocratic version and the folkloric version of Thanatos.

To the upper-middle and aristocratic classes of Antiquity Thanatos was a death spirit with a poetic and soft, even somewhat passive nature. His tamed personality was invented so as to match that of his brother Hypnos and to contrast his violent sisters, the Keres. This is how he behaves in the story of the Trojan war,[51] and how he is portrayed on kraters and columns: either as a psychopomp in the act of carrying away a dead soul or as a winged youth leisurely leaning on a downturned torch, symbolizing a life having been extinguished.[52] Neither of these portrayals shows a murderous Death hunting for souls.

In the eyes of the lower classes however, Death was a cruel and unfair spirit. He would be snatching people away too early in the wake of illnesses, diseases, crop failings and other horrendous causes of death by the Keres. This idea of the darker Thanatos is something which Hesiod must have believed in as well, as we will see later in this chapter when we look at what Hesiod had to say regarding Thanatos. The idea of Thanatos that lived in the consciousness of the population was that of a coarse and destructive death-bringer[53], which

[50] Again, see picture 1
[51] Heinemann, 2015, p. 25
[52] A picture often repeated in the romantic era of the 19th century / Berens, 2007, p. 143
[53] Heinemann, 2015, p. 21

brings him closer to the picture we have of the Keres and makes him the opposite of Hypnos instead of his equal.

Thanatos as the gentle Death

The first interpretation I will examine is the aristocratic one; the soft, gentle, sleep-like version which is a continuation of the Thanatos we have encountered briefly already with his twin brother Hypnos. The painting on the krater[54] is, as already mentioned, taken from the famous epic about the Trojan war. Even though not only the word "death" but also the action of causing death is probably one of the most frequently occurring in the *Iliad*, Thanatos himself is not mentioned much and only appears once with Hypnos to take the fallen hero Sarpedon's body back to his home country of Lycia.[55] It is Hera who implores Zeus, who is Sarpedon's father, not to favour his mortal son in the battle of Troy. Instead of saving his life, she asks him to let Sarpedon's fate go its course, and in the end "(…) when the ascending soul has wing'd her flight, / Let Sleep and Death convey, by thy command, / The breathless body to his native land"[56]. And so it goes. Zeus commands Apollo to bathe and dress his son's dead body before leaving it to "(…) the soft arms of silent Sleep and Death."

> "Then Sleep and Death, two twins of winged race, / Of matchless swiftness, but of silent pace, / Received Sarpedon, at the god's command, / And in a moment reach'd the Lycian land; / The corpse amidst his weeping friends they laid, / Where endless honours wait the sacred shade."[57]

This is the only active part Thanatos plays in the *Iliad*. He does not join the Keres in their bloodthirsty rampage, as one might have expected of the darker, folkloric version of Thanatos.

Ignoring the fact that their appearance and tempers are not prominently discussed, it is easy to conclude through these few quoted lines above that neither Thanatos nor Hypnos are cruel or hateful beings – on the contrary, they sound like rather genteel creatures. There is nothing violent about either of them in the *Iliad*, where violence is all around them. Thanatos is never depicted as an active killer.[58] His part in the Trojan war is simply a poetic invention by Homer, who does not regard Death as a crude, malevolent figure.[59] Thanatos and his brother

[54] See picture 1
[55] Homer, 2011, p. 412 / Heinemann, 2015, p. 25. / Athanassakis & Wolkow, 2013, p. 216
[56] Homer, 2011, pp. 403-404
[57] Homer, 2011, p. 412
[58] Burton, 1997, pp. 61-62
[59] Heinemann, 2015, pp. 25-26

are only performing their jobs as undertakers of the souls, bringing them home or to the Underworld.

When referring to the Sarpedon episode in the *Iliad*, Guthke writes: "Thanatos is not threatening; he certainly does not kill"[60]. In several texts I have come across, Thanatos is introduced as the god of peaceful and non-violent death. He was not seen as a fearful or tragic figure, but rather as a peaceful and serene presence.[61] Like his brother, Thanatos has a gentle, peaceful mien. The twins are efficient yet take care of their charge and convey their work with caution. According to Burton, "Thanatos is the personification of the result of a killing, not of the agent"[62]. It is the Keres who are the life-takers. Thanatos has a "non-proactive nature"[63], which deems him quite the passive, non-threatening type of character. This is also reflected in the *Iliad*, where, although the slaughter is immense, and the number of the dead is enormous, he is only mentioned when he is commanded to transport a dead body peacefully back to its home country. His role on the battlefield is, all in all, quite a passive one.

The few vases in existence depicting Thanatos either alone or with Hypnos also show him as inactive in any killing. Sometimes he is shown as a very small figure, physically unable to inflict death and only there to represent it.[64] Neither of the pictures I have added to this thesis (two of many similar ones I have found during my research) is in any way showing a villainous spirit. On the second picture, Thanatos is featured as a winged young man on a column referencing the story of Alcestis. Even though he is armed with a sword, there is nothing demonic or cruel about his features. His face, what is left of it, shows a calm presence and his stance is in a simple contrapposto.[65]

The trickery of Sisyphus

Most know Sisyphus[66] as the man who is tasked with rolling a stone up a mountain in the deepest depths of Tartarus, only for the stone to roll down again so that Sisyphus must start anew. The stone-rolling is his punishment for having escaped death twice,[67] to be executed

[60] Guthke, 1999, p. 33
[61] Atsma, 2017, Theoi, *Thanatos* / Wikipedia, 2019, *Keres* / Ciregna, 2009, p. 356
[62] Burton, 1997, p. 59
[63] Burton, 1997, p. 60
[64] Burton, 1997, pp. 61-62
[65] See picture 2 in the list of illustrations
[66] The name is also written: Sisyphos
[67] Burton, 1997, p. 58

forever in the underworld of Hades. It is mentioned in the *Odyssey*,[68] which makes it a myth of early origin.[69] In some versions of the myth, it is Hades who is tricked and in others it is Thanatos, but both are used as an allegory for death and are, in this instance, the same person. In the story, Sisyphus manages to anger Zeus who in turn orders Death to go and fetch him. "Yet Sisyphus would not be daunted: he cunningly put Hades himself in handcuffs by persuading him to demonstrate their use, and then quickly locking them. Thus Hades was kept a prisoner in Sisyphus' house for some days".[70] Because of this, no one on earth was able to die. In one version, the god of war Ares, "whose interests were threatened"[71], is the rescuer of Death[72]. His interests, in this case, were mostly an annoyance over people not dying anymore and therefore spoiling the fun of war for him.[73] In another version, the gods threaten to make Sisyphus' life miserable if he does not release Death, so Sisyphus complies.

When Death is released, Sisyphus is ordered down into the Underworld, but Sisyphus has a second trick up his sleeve. He instructs his wife not to give him the customary funerary rites and is able to persuade Hades and Persephone to be sent back home so he can reprove her.[74] According to Graves, this myth ends with Hermes being sent after Sisyphus "(…) to hale him back by force".[75] Here we do not know how much time passes from Sisyphus' return to the upper world until he is being reclaimed by Hermes. In other versions, Sisyphus stays home in Corinth until he dies of old age. Back in the Underworld, he is punished with the task of rolling his stone for eternity.[76] "The core of the Sisyphos myth is, of course, that although Thanatos can be tricked and tied (and death thereby postponed) he can never be held indefinitely: death is inevitable. Sisyphos gets the better of death not once but twice".[77] Even so, he is not able to hold off Death forever and is taken down to Hades in the end.

Thanatos as the vile Death

So far Thanatos has been regarded as a quiet, servile spirit. The other variety of Thanatos was that of a grotesque-looking demon. This vile picture of him was probably created out of

[68] Homer, 2002, pp. 227-28, l. 807-814
[69] *Britannica Academic*,2018, *Sisyphus*
[70] Graves, 2017, p. 217
[71] Graves, 2017, p. 217
[72] Burton, 1997, p. 58
[73] Wikipedia, 2019, *Sisyphus; cheating death*
[74] Burton, 1997, p. 64
[75] Graves, 2017, p. 218
[76] Burton, 1997, p. 58
[77] Burton, 1997, p. 64

folkloric belief and brought forth by the poet Hesiod,[78] who tells Thanatos and his brother Hypnos apart thusly: "The one of them ranges the earth and the broad back of the sea gentle and mild towards men, but the other has a heart of iron and a pitiless spirit of bronze on his breast. That man is his whom he once catches, and he is hateful even to the immortal gods."[79]

The first one being described is certainly Hypnos, the other is Thanatos. Apart from a few more sentences, Thanatos is not mentioned much in the *Theogony*. Still, this is enough for us to get a clear picture of Hesiod's opinion of this personification and it is clear that he does not care much for the spirit of Death. Through his quick description, he turns Thanatos into a villain with a cold heart and unfeeling soul, who shows neither mercy nor love towards humans or gods. This is quite the opposite of the Thanatos we have met so far. Our mild, slightly passive bystander is transformed into an evil spirit actively hunting men for their lives ("That man is his whom he once catches"[80]). This other side of Death is further enhanced in Euripides' play *Alcestis*, (which will be discussed below) where he is listed only as Thanatos or Death. Apollo, who also features in the story, is listed as the god Apollo,[81] making it clear that Thanatos is still something outside or beyond the Olympian range of gods and can be tied in with the sub-literary, folktale view.[82]

The myth and play of Alcestis

The play *Alcestis* is based on the myth of King Admetus and his wife Alcestis. It is one of the oldest surviving works by the Grecian playwright Euripides and was first performed in 438 BCE.[83] In the play as well as in the myth, Admetus, who is favoured by the god Apollo, has been granted a longer life than originally bequeathed to him by the Fates. This prolonging of life was obtained through Apollo who got the Fates drunk on magic wine[84] and thus persuaded them to promise that, when Admetus' time to die would come, he would be spared should a member of his family die voluntarily in his place. But when this day comes, no one wants to take Admetus' place except his wife Alcestis, who therefore is on the brink of death

[78] As far as my knowledge goes.
[79] Hesiod, 2008, p. 25
[80] Hesiod, 2008, p. 25
[81] Euripides, 2018, p. 10
[82] Burton, 1997, p. 63
[83] Euripides, 2018, p. 10
[84] Euripides, 2018, p. 11

when the play begins. Admetus, being very much in love with his wife, does not know how to intervene. Then the hero Heracles enters.

Thanatos and Apollo

The first dialog occurring in the play is between Apollo and Thanatos. Apollo is the first to enter the scene and gives a preamble as to what has happened prior to the play's start.[85] Thanatos enters soon after, having come to claim the allotted soul. He is described as being "a crouching black-haired and winged figure, carrying a drawn sword" who "starts in revulsion" as he detects Apollo.[86]

> **Thanatos:** Aha! Why here? What mak'st thou at the gate, Thou Thing of Light? Wilt overtread The eternal judgment, and abate And spoil the portions of the dead? 'Tis not enough for thee to have blocked In other days Admetus' doom With craft of magic wine, which mocked The three grey Sisters of the Tomb; But now once more I see thee stand at watch, and shake That arrow-armèd hand to make This woman thine, who swore, who swore, To die now for her husband's sake.
> **Apollo:** Fear not. I bring fair words and seek but what is just.
> **Thanatos,** *sneering* And if words help thee not, an arrow must?
> **Apollo:** 'Tis ever my delight to bear this bow.
> **Thanatos:** And aid this house unjustly? Aye, 'tis so.
> **Apollo:** I love this man, and grieve for his dismay.
> **Thanatos:** And now wilt rob me of my second prey!
> **Apollo:** I never robbed thee, neither then nor now.
> **Thanatos:** Why is Admetus here then, not below?
> **Apollo:** He gave for ransom his own wife, for whom ...
> **Thanatos,** *interrupting*. I am come; and straight will bear her to the tomb.
> **Apollo:** Go, take her. I can never move thine heart.
> **Thanatos,** *mocking*. To slay the doomed? Nay; I will do my part.[87]

[85] Euripides, 2018, p. 11
[86] Euripides, 2018, p. 11
[87] Excerpt from the play, Euripides, 2018, pp. 11-12

Already we have a clear picture in our mind's eye of how the villainous version of Thanatos is portrayed. It is also certain that he has no love for the gods, as Hesiod wrote, at least not for Apollo. As their dialogue continues, we notice the anger in Thanatos' speech. He sneers his words in a sarcastic tone, mocking Apollo and wording himself quite violently and dramatically: "rob me of my second prey", "to slay the doomed"[88]. His villainous role in the play is definite and he is certainly not gaining any sympathy from the audience. Yet Thanatos' words unveil that he does have a reason for being angry with Apollo. The fact that Apollo tricked the Fates into giving Admetus more life means that in a way he also tricked Death. From Thanatos' view, his anger is righteous because Apollo not only kept a soul from him but is hindering him in doing his job properly. As he says, "I will do my part". There is certainly no love lost between these two antagonists.

> **Apollo:** No. To keep death for them that linger late.
> **Thanatos,** *still mocking*. 'Twould please thee, so?... I owe thee homage great.
> **Apollo:** Ah, then she may yet ... she may yet grow old?
> **Thanatos,** *with a laugh*. No!... I too have my rights, and them I hold.
> **Apollo:** 'Tis but one life thou gainest either-wise.
> **Thanatos:** When young souls die, the richer is my prize.
> **Apollo:** Old, with great riches they will bury her.
> **Thanatos:** Fie on thee, fie! Thou rich-man's lawgiver!
> **Apollo:** How? Is there wit in Death, who seemed so blind?
> **Thanatos:** The rich would buy long life for all their kind.
> **Apollo:** Thou will not grant me, then, this boon? 'Tis so?
> **Thanatos:** Thou knowest me, what I am: I tell thee, no!
> **Apollo:** I know gods sicken at thee and men pine.
> **Thanatos:** Begone! Too many things not meant for thine Thy greed hath conquered; but not all, not all!
> **Apollo:** I swear, for all thy bitter pride, a fall Awaits thee. One even now comes conquering Towards this house, sent by a southland king To fetch him four wild coursers, of the race Which rend men's bodies in the winds of Thrace. This house shall give him welcome good, and he Shall wrest this woman from thy worms and thee. So thou shalt give me all, and thereby win

[88] Euripides, 2018, p. 12

> But hatred, not the grace that might have been.
> *Exit Apollo.*
> **Thanatos:** Talk on, talk on! Thy threats shall win no bride From me.--This woman, whatsoe'er betide, Shall lie in Hades' house. Even at the word I go to lay upon her hair my sword. For all whose head this grey sword visiteth To death are hallowed and the Lords of death.[89]

Apollo tries to change Thanatos' mind and hopes to save Alcestis' life, but Death himself will not be swayed so easily. Even though Thanatos sees the souls of Admetus and Alcestis as his "prey", he is simply upset with Apollo for intervening in and disturbing his work, making it difficult for Thanatos to perform his task. At the same time, he might also feel somewhat threatened by Apollo's presence, perhaps being afraid that Apollo might try to interfere again. Apollo, who at first tries to reason with Thanatos, finally gives up and leaves him with the words "... gods sicken at thee and men pine"[90], before telling him that for all the bitter pride Thanatos has, he will fall one day. This little prophecy is a forewarning of his coming fight with Heracles. After this unfriendly exchange of words with Apollo, Thanatos enters the house and is not seen again in the play, only mentioned: once by Alcestis who sees him coming for her and a second time by Heracles after he has defeated him in combat.

The defeat of Thanatos

"When Heracles heard what had happened, he went out and wrestled with Death, conquered him, and brought Alcestis home."[91]

The myth of Sisyphus has already shown us that Death can be defeated by trickery, or at least be postponed for a little while. In the story of Alcestis, another defeater of Thanatos shows up, the son of Zeus and half-god, Heracles. His twelve labours make him indirectly on numerous occasions fight and overcome Death, but here he does it more than just metaphorically. Heracles enters the play during Alcestis' funeral. When He finds out the truth of what has happened to the queen, Heracles quickly asks where Alcestis is buried. Without hesitation, he decides to save her from the shore of death,[92] saying how he will ambush Thanatos "(…) this

[89] Excerpt from the play: Euripides, 2018, pp. 11-13
[90] Euripides, 2018, p. 13
[91] Euripides, 2018, p. 4
[92] Euripides, 2018, p. 33

black and wingèd Lord of corpses (…)" as he is "(…) lapping the hot blood they gave in sacrifice" [93]. The way Thanatos is described to be drinking the sacrificial blood custom at a Grecian funeral makes him seem almost like a prowling beast. Heracles' words are somewhat harsh, but again, the role of Thanatos in this play is to be the villain. But is Thanatos truly such a dark lord? Murray writes in the introduction of the play that Thanatos is neither a god, nor a king of terrors, but rather a servant of Hades, the true King of the dead. Thanatos is only a priest or "sacrificer" whose task it is to fetch the appointed victims.[94] The word which perhaps eludes Murray is psychopomp. Thanatos is just a grumpy psychopomp come from the Underworld to bring Hades the souls he is warranted.

Even though Heracles pictures Thanatos as frightening, he is not afraid of Death himself. According to the myth, Heracles shows up "with a new wild-olive club".[95] The mentioning of the new club indicates quite clearly in which manner Heracles means to rescue Alcestis from Death. With his matchless strength, he plans to wrestle Thanatos into submission and return Alcestis to the living: "These arms shall be a brazen ring, With no escape, no rest, howe'er he whine And curse his mauled ribs, till the Queen is mine!" [96]. The club does not only indicate an act of violence: wild-olive was used to expel evil influences in Greece[97], which brands Thanatos as evil on a superstitious level in the myth.

When Heracles returns, his clothes are somewhat dishevelled, showing signs of struggle.[98] The match between Thanatos and Heracles is never set forth in the play, only recounted by Heracles himself. He tells Admetus how he ambushed Death and "(…) gripped him as he fled"[99]. He has succeeded in his mission to rescue Alcestis and defeat Death by using his own physical strength. According to the ancient myths known today, it is only Heracles who manages to stop Thanatos through an act of physical violence. This is due to his superhuman strength, and according to Burton, also a representation of the immortality he gains later.[100] Where Sisyphus applies cunning, Heracles uses force to defeat Thanatos. But we do know

[93] Euripides, 2018, p. 33
[94] Euripides, 2018, p. 8
[95] Graves, 2017, p. 224
[96] Euripides, 2018, p. 33
[97] Graves, 2017, p. 225
[98] Euripides, 2018, p. 36
[99] Euripides, 2018, p. 41
[100] Burton, 1997, p. 65

that even though death can be avoided and even defeated, it is not forever. Even Heracles, though immortal, winds up in Hades in the end.[101]

The ambivalent Thanatos

"But though the ancients regarded Thanatos as a gloomy and mournful divinity, they did not represent him with any exterior repulsiveness. On the contrary, he appears as a beautiful youth, (who holds in his hand an inverted torch, emblematical of the light of life being extinguished,) whilst his disengaged arm is thrown lovingly around the shoulder of his brother Hypnos."[102].

The dark version of Thanatos from folkloric myth and Euripides' play did not manage to take root in Greek literature and succeed in establishing itself as the image of Death.[103] The more sophisticated picture of Thanatos, however, did manage to settle itself as a traditional concept; he is depicted in the relief of the Alcestis myth that adorned one of the columns of the temple of Artemis of Ephesus with a youthful complexion and mild countenance.[104] Gone is the demonized, unsympathetic Thanatos we met in the play.[105] The column is dated to a couple of hundred years after Euripides' version of the myth was written and performed, yet the only thing similar in the portrayal of Thanatos in the play and on the column are the wings on his back and the sword he carries. To the aristocrats, he was not the cause or bringer of death, only the personification of it, enveloped in the guise of a beautiful and gentle youth: certainly, the more desirable option to a grim and unheroic Death.

Summary

These two notions create a very ambivalent picture of Thanatos. I believe we can say that both portrayals are valid: one peaceful and calm, the other cold and unfeeling. After all, personalities are usually more than just one-sided.

Even though Thanatos was not a much-featured, high-standing deity in ancient Greece, he was still given a certain appearance and a background story. He is part of a large family, has a

[101] Homer, 2002, p. 228, l. 818-819
[102] Berens, 2007, pp. 142-143
[103] Heinemann, 2015, p. 24
[104] See picture 2
[105] Brandon, 1961, p. 329

twin brother and a home. As far as his personality traits go, sometimes more is said between the lines than what is actually written down. We may say that Thanatos was a morose, sombre character, who took his work seriously. Although not very passionate or dramatic in his execution, like many of the Greek deities were, he shows a darker side when he is angered or annoyed. Except for the close partnership with his brother, Death seems to be a lonely character, not much liked and even feared not only by humans but also by the gods. In the folktales of the lower classes, Thanatos probably was, in his true form and function, a creation meant to provoke fear and sometimes possible to ridicule and overcome.

It is safe to say that since these writers were mythmakers and storytellers, everyone had their own version of Death – some saw him as gentle, putting the blame of harsh death on his sisters, while others discerned Thanatos to be the cruel Death, perhaps because they themselves were scared of dying.

2. Death personified in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

Introduction: Death after Antiquity

During the European Middle Ages[106] the frame of imagination in the western world had gradually changed from including the belief in many gods to believing in only one. Goodness and justice were held by God whilst evil and trickery was the devil's work, who was God's counterpart but not his equal. This change of belief led to a change in how people imagined Death as well, how Death worked and whom It worked for. Death slowly transformed itself from the beautiful male Spirit of Thanatos into the skeleton we still know today. Unlike Antiquity's Death personifications, the medieval figure of Death was, in the beginning, anonymous in its gender and place in society. How did the personification of Death in Europe transform from Thanatos to the skeleton?

The Romans adopted, along with the rest of the mythology and etymology of the Grecian gods, the personification of Death. Renamed Mors, he was the equivalent of Thanatos,[107] while the Moirai were known as the Parcae.[108] In Byzantine times and early Christianity,

[106] The time frame I am discussing is somewhere between 1100-1500 CE (common era)
[107] Although the Latin noun for death is feminine and Latin poets were bound by the grammatical gender, the roman artist never depicted Mors as a woman. Wikipedia, 2018, *Mors (mythology*)
[108] Virgil, 2008, p. 448

Death was still a male figure, but powerless in the face of Christ and God, who ultimately have the power to stop Death. During this time, Death was pictured as a small man, sometimes bearded with green skin or a slit stomach and was always ugly. He often crouched in front of or behind Christ, who is victorious over Death and made him look pitiful.[109] During this time period, Death was certainly present but did not play a large part in either literature or art. After the pitiful man, Death's appearance was transformed into a decomposing corpse, the *transi*,[110] before being figuratively stripped of all remaining flesh, settling the new visual representation of Death on the figure of a skeleton, often found dancing the Danse Macabre,[111] just in time for the black plague.

Personifications of Death before and in the time of the Black Plague

The bubonic plague, also known as the black plague or Black Death was an exceptionally disastrous pandemic which encompassed the whole of Europe. It spread during the year 1347, killing approximately one-third of the population of Europe over the course of five years. Sickness and death were for a long time a huge part of everyday life. Before the plague, death was also caused by other calamities such as famines, war, malnourishment and bad sanitation, which led to more sickness spreading quicker and further than necessary (washing of the hands before handling sick or deceased people first became a norm in the 19th century). Life, as Humphries writes, was hard and short.[112]

Dying agonizingly was nothing new and rather normal at this time, yet of course, people searched for answers: the common people turned to the then highest institute of authority which was the Catholic church. During the Dark Ages, the church became immensely powerful and it had the authority to deploy explanations which in turn were taken as truth by believers, especially by the poor and uneducated.[113] The Clergy gave vivid descriptions of Heaven and Hell. These two opposite outcomes highly believed to await everyone after death were not only proclaimed but were also a part of people's daily reality.[114] The fear of Hell and

[109] Guthke, 1999, pp. 44-46
[110] Jaworski, 2009, p. 354
[111] "The Dance of Death", see below
[112] Humphries, 1970, p. 9
[113] Humphries, 1970, p. 1
[114] Humphries, 1970, pp. 7-10

eternal punishment ensured faithfulness to the church. But there had to be a bad guy of course, which we know as the devil, and he needed helpers: enter Death and Sin.

Death and Sin became the devil's associates. Sin was shaped as a seductive woman, first in the simplest form of Eve, who persuaded Adam to take a bite of the apple, leading them to be cast out of paradise and bringing mortality, or in other words death, upon humanity. These two personifications of Sin and Death were used by John Milton in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* written in the 17th century. Here Sin is related to Death through mother- and sisterhood, making their relationship incestuous and sinful.

The earliest most commonly known Christian literary mention of Death is from the book of Revelation by St. John in the Bible. It tells of the Apocalypse and the four horsemen who will destroy the earth. One of them is Death who rides on a pale horse. The others are Famine, War and Pestilence, each one riding a designated horse. What Death is supposed to look like is not written in the book of Revelation, but many artists have imagined the riders in different forms. The four riders of the Apocalypse became a popular theme in wood engravings, and well-known among art historians is Albrecht Dürer's from 1498. He portrayed Death as an old, withered man, while many others depicted Death as a skeleton.

Then there is the Angel of Death, featured in Judaism and Catholicism, which is reminiscent of Thanatos: a winged supernatural spirit in human form. The archangel Michael was the good Angel of Death in Catholicism as opposed to Samael, the controversial Archangel of Death from Jewish lore who is also associated with the devil.[115]

The skeletal version of Death was around this time to be found dancing in an act of "memento mori"[116] known as the Danse Macabre. "The Danse" was to show the living that everyone was equal in death. It was originally a pagan funerary rite which continued to be performed through the centuries in wavering intervals.[117] The female version of Death re-entered the stage in the shape of Atropos of the Moirai during the plague years and became popular as the symbol for the triumphing Death in the following years. The violent Keres also turned up now and then in art as winged female demons, but they faded more into the background or morphed with their sister of the Fates, lending their ruefulness to her triumphant massacre.

[115] Wikipedia, 2019, *Samael* / Wikipedia, 2019, *Death (personification): Scholars and the Angel of Death*
[116] Loosely translates into "remember that you must die"
[117] Welford, 2009, pp. 253-254

Some years later her destructiveness was somewhat calmed down and she took on the more romantic role as the dangerous seductress. Skeleton Death tried seducing too, often showing up in pictures named "Death and the Maiden", being both a seducer and a threat; harassing the living, he did not care about either status or wealth. These three versions of Death – the skeleton, the triumphant and the seducing one – were present simultaneously, all in their own respective roles. We still see them thematised in art today.

One of the reasons why Death was found in so many guises during this time was probably because it was a time riddled with disastrous torments resulting in high death rates. The imagination sought a personified agent to handle the event of dying,[118] which caused fantasies concerning death to multiply and consequently spur a growing obsession with Death throughout Europe. "The imminent approach of death"[119] was always around the corner, threatening. War, disease, and famine was nothing new in the world, but this time in history has been remembered for being an especially dark and virulent time in history. The medieval catchphrase "memento mori", adopted from the Romans and used by the Catholic church for moralizing purposes,[120] walked hand in hand with the Danse Macabre and the Triumph of Death.

Memento Mori

The Latin words "memento mori" were popularized in the early Middle Ages. While the Romans had used this motto to try to live a full life in the form of "carpe diem" (seize the day), Christians gave it a more cautionary and serious aspect, using it as a reminder of one's mortality. Believers were encouraged by the church to reflect upon the way they lived their lives often so as to not be taken by surprise once death actually came.[121] Since death could quite possibly strike at any time, it was best to live one's life as intended by God, so that the punishment in death would be minimal or completely avoided, thus invoking salvation. The act of repenting was always an option, but not all lying on their death bed might be able to do this and therefore risking salvation. Rotting corpses were often depicted in this context, reminding men and women of the fragility of their lives.[122]

[118] Welford, 2009, pp. 253-254 / Humphries, 1970, p. 8 /Burton, 1996, p. 326
[119] Humphries, 1970, p. 7
[120] Ciregna, 2009, p. 357
[121] Sabatos, 2009, pp. 927-928
[122] Sabatos, 2009, p. 928

Danse Macabre

The Dance of the Dead was meant as not just another reminder but also as a lesson of the equality and inevitability of death, an extension of the Memento Mori-theme. No matter which status one holds in life, how much or little money one has or what age or gender one has – Death comes for everyone. In the Middle Ages, the belief was that judgment would come from God after death, based upon each individual's faith and good work in life. According to Welford, this dance of the macabre developed and held fast as a funeral ritual over several hundred years, reaching its peak during the 14th and 15th century.[123] In the age of paganism, people would often dance naked, celebrating life and the material world. Later, one person would be dressed up as a skeleton, sometimes wearing a black cloak and carrying a scythe as if for harvest, representing Death.[124] The skeleton as the new main figure of Death found, according to Guthke, its peak around the thirteenth century, firmly establishing itself as the new icon of Death around the fourteenth century.[125]

Death would begin the dance before the rest of the congregation would join in. In the Danse, Death would often be dressed in male or female clothes or carry specific accessories and thereby be able to impersonate both sexes and anyone on the ladder of social hierarchy.[126] Death's gender was unimportant. In the guise of a naked skeleton, Death could represent or mimic anybody. The garments and accessories were more like an actor's outfit. Death could change from one part to another as if acting out various roles in a play. One dancer from the congregation, the one Death would be mimicking, would be dragged along resistantly by Death into their symbolical grave.[127] The Catholic church long sought to oppress the practice of using the cemeteries as dance floors, to little avail. The dance would instead become more formalized and organized; the movements of the dance were slower and lacking nudity.

The Danse Macabre would become a fixed topic in art and literature all the way through the Renaissance.[128] Several artistic portrayals of the Danse Macabre came about specifically

[123] Welford, 2009, p. 254
[124] Welford, 2009, p. 253
[125] Guthke, 1999, pp. 43-44
[126] Guthke, 1999, pp. 43-44 / Robbins Library, Library Rochester, date unknown, *Death, Dying, and the Culture of the Macabre in the Late Middle Ages*
[127] Robbins Library, Library Rochester, date unknown, *Death, Dying, and the Culture of the Macabre in the Late Middle Ages*
[128] Welford, 2009, p. 253 / Robbins Library, Library Rochester, date unknown, *Death, Dying, and the Culture of the Macabre in the Late Middle Ages*

around the 15th century, amongst them, fresco paintings and woodcuts,[129] and later also musical compositions incorporating the Danse Macabre theme. There were plays and poetry being written, the plays often featuring dialogues between the dying and Death itself.[130] In the woodcut *The Abbot* by Hans Holbein[131] Death is dragging the abbot by his robe. He has put on the abbot's mitre and is carrying the abbott's staff known as a crosier nonchalantly on his shoulder. The mitre and crosier tell us that the abbot must have been a high-ranking prelate, probably with some wealth and power in society. The abbot tries to push the skeleton away with one hand and waving a book, probably of prayers, with the other whilst protesting loudly, all to no avail. Neither his rank nor presumed power is a match against Death, who is completely ignoring the abbot's objections.

Female Death in the Middle Ages

After centuries of natural catastrophes, famines and to top it off, the plague, it is not difficult to see why superstitious human beings would try to figure out why they were being, as they believed, so severely punished and by whom. It must be someone quite vengeful. And when the reason was not something human, it had to be inhuman, devilish, evil, finding pleasure in the misery of others. Women of this time were often marked as the scapegoat for all things most foul and sinful, as the witch hunts and -trials would also illustrate a few hundred years down the road (around the years 1450-1750). So when the time came to find a fitting image for the unrelenting death that was plaguing a whole continent, it seemed apparent that only a *female* anthropomorphic figure was suitable for an artistic imagination trying to come to grips with that massive presence of gruesome death that had severely decimated the population over the course of two centuries.[132]

The Middle Ages produced many Death-related female figures. The Christian church preached from an early time on that the original sin was Eve's fault. Having been the reason why Adam and Eve herself were cast out of Paradise she was not only blamed for bringing female sexuality but also death into this world. Death, sin and carnal desire were fused

[129] See picture 3 in the list of illustrations
[130] Welford, 2009, p. 254
[131] See picture 3
[132] Guthke, 1999, p. 80

together into one unit: the woman. Allegorically one of the three could stand for the others.[133] This allegory of female sexuality was named Luxuria and was represented by a woman with long waving hair. She is the source of all evil. "It thus comes as no surprise that Death appears in the shape of a woman in the Middle Ages (…)"[134]. Without doing more than just hint at the similarities, one such depiction of an allegorical Luxuria may be the famous painting *the birth of Venus* (ca. 1482-1485) by the Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli, where Venus is holding onto her long, curly hair waving in the wind. I will come back to this theme later.

Other female Deaths around this time where to be found for instance in Scandinavia where an old crone named Pesta[135] would sweep the plague into people's houses at night. In Irish folklore, we know of the Banshee, a supernatural death-messenger who would wail or cry out as a warning when someone in the family was about to die.[136] These kinds of female figures existed all over Europe and were a kind of bringers of sickness and death, much like the violent Keres had been.

The Triumph of Death

The years of plague harassment gave rise to the genre of the Triumphant Death, especially popular in Italy's art and literature. The outcome of the plague was like that of war: destructive on a large scale with masses of people dead. Death, being the enemy of this time, needed to match that. Female Death was presented as a powerful menace and terrifying enemy, and, according to Guthke, her portrayals and descriptions identified her as a woman achingly similar to Atropos of Antiquity.[137] She would be portrayed as a very old woman in a dress with long white hair, skin closely draped over her skeleton. The scythe accompanies her as the symbol of the deathly Reaper, reaping the harvest that was human lives.[138] She is often depicted as driving a cattle-drawn chariot over a plague-ridden field of human corpses.[139] She is a far cry from the vaguely amusing dancing skeletal Death. Much like the Keres of ancient Greece, this female version of Death is an unyielding and fighting force of nature, with close associations to violent deaths, sickness, and destruction. In a "Balade de la Mort" from around

[133] Guthke, 1999, p. 59
[134] Guthke, 1999, p. 60
[135] The "a" at the end makes the word pest (Norwegian for plague) sound like a woman's name
[136] Lysaght, 2009, p. 95
[137] Guthke, 1999, pp. 57-59, 61
[138] Spanish skulduggery, Tumblr, 2014, *Mythological Etymology - La Parca*
[139] See pictures 4 and 5 in the list of illustrations

the twelfth or thirteenth's century, Death declares: "I, Death to all humans that I am, / Make it known as their goddess, / That I hold their lives in my hands."[140] The picture these few sentences paint of the Death goddess with human lives in her hands create immediate associations to the life strings the mythical Atropos would be holding and cutting with her scissors.

The plague became a literal and allegorical theme and was often painted and written about towards the end of the 14th century. One such plague-inspired fictional work was the *Decameron* begun by Boccaccio soon after the city of Florence became infected in 1348. According to Guthke, in an early *Decameron* manuscript Death is portrayed as a woman riding a horse, waving her scythe over three corpses.[141]

None of the sources I have come across has managed to pinpoint exactly why the personification of Triumphant Death was turned female, but perhaps the Keres and Atropos in combination with the sinful Eve in her new guise as Luxuria were all-together violent, vengeful and morally depraved enough to serve as the Death icon of such horror. Boccaccio's Death was not the only one to be featured as a woman. The image of the female Death was helped further to establish a foothold through other plague-inspired poems such as the "Trionfo della Morte" by Petrarch. In the wake of the plague, Petrarch spent the years between 1351 and 1374 writing the *Trionfi* (Triumphs), a series of poems where allegorical figures defeat each other one after the other.[142] There are six poems, all named "Triumph of…" featuring in written order: Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time and Eternity. In "Trionfo della Morte" Petrarch describes "Donna la Morte" (the Lady of Death) as a black-dressed, mean-spirited, blade-wielding woman who kills Laura, Petrarch's love, who in the poems is also representing Chastity. The way Petrarch portrayed Death in the *Trionfi* was instrumental to how female Death would be featured in later art.[143]

In "Trionfo della Morte" Death describes herself as being fierce and importunate, bragging about bygone times when she fell the Greek and Roman nations with her sword.[144] The

[140] Italo Siciliano quotes from a "Balade de la Mort" in his book *Francois Villon et les themes poetiques du Moyen Age*, which I have quoted directly from Guthke (1999, p. 62) because I was unable to find any other English translation
[141] Guthke, 1999, p. 68
[142] Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018, *Petrarch* / Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019, Italian literature
[143] Guthke, 1999, p. 69
[144] Alexander, The Faculty of English, 1999, *The Triumph of Death*, l. 37, 40-42

narrator of the poem says she is cruel and "deeply over-ghast"[145] bringing "[f]ury with her, such as I scarcely know / If like at Phlegra with the giants were"[146]. Here fury is probably meant as rage. After calming down a little, Donna la Morte advises Chastity to die young rather than of old age, so she may escape from its loathsomeness.[147] If she agrees to go early, the Donna promises to make her death a swift and painless one.[148] Chastity, in the form of Laura, agrees and apparently dies on the spot. After having reaped her soul, Death cuts a lock of Laura's golden hair as a token of her victory; "Now reaping once what virtue's life did sow, / With joy she sat retired silently"[149]. Death sits down and enjoys a well-earned break, having done what she presumably believes to be a good deed. Her advice might be seen as kindness in her own eyes, but it could also have been a trick to gain Laura´s soul. What is clear is that this female Death certainly does not earn any sympathy from neither the other characters in the poem nor from the readers. The lock of hair being cut from Laura´s head is reminiscent of Atropos cutting someone´s life-thread. Even though the Roman empire had fallen a long time ago, the ancient Greek and Roman myths were somewhere between not quite forgotten and being slowly rediscovered (Latin for instance was still being used as the written language of the Bible and the Clergy). Either way, the until now unnamed feminine version of Death Triumphant became known to be Atropos, which was firmly established around the sixteenth century.[150]

Death in the Renaissance

As we move from the Dark Ages into the Renaissance period, we see not only repetitions but also new transformations of Death's manifestations. Especially during the Renaissance and Baroque era, there was again a development, inspired and motivated through the rediscovery of classical Antiquity. Death was depicted as both male and female. This is of course nothing new. Even before classical Antiquity, there were gods and goddesses of death. But the female Death character became rediscovered or reinvented through Eve's sinfulness; associations like love, eroticism and sensuality were added to her attributes, in addition to the already existing

[145] Alexander, The Faculty of English, 1999, *The Triumph of Death*, l. 58
[146] Alexander, The Faculty of English, 1999, *The Triumph of Death*, l. 32-33
[147] Alexander, The Faculty of English, 1999, *The Triumph of Death*, l. 66
[148] Alexander, 1999, *The Triumph of Death*, l. 68-69
[149] Alexander, 1999, *The Triumph of Death*, l. 122-123
[150] Guthke, 1999, pp. 76-77

attributes fearsomeness and violence. But the feminine representation of Death was not the only one sexually inclined; over time, both the feminine and masculine representations of Death were turned into seducers.[151]

Clément Marot and Pierre de Ronsard, two French renaissance poets, both imagined Death as a woman. In Marot's poem "Deploration de Messire Florimond Robertet" written in 1527, he imagined her as the terrible and triumphant Death of medieval times:

> "I see hideous and formidable Death / On a chariot of triumph, / Under her feet a human body / Crushed to death, a spear in her hand … / Proud Death on the chariot, / turning her pale face to me".[152]

In his "Hynne de la Mort" from 1555, Ronsard wrote of a cold and unfeeling Goddess of Death created by Jupiter (Zeus) to relieve the humans from their ennui.[153]

"He made her two arms as large as the earth, /Wielding a great scythe, and he covered / The soles of her feet with wool, so that not a living soul / Could hear the sound of her footsteps right behind; / He did not give her eyes, ears, or heart, / In order to stop her feeling pity at the sight of men's pining, / And so that she should always be deaf, haughty, / Inexorable, and cruel to their sad prayers. / As a result, she is all alone amongst the immortals / In not wanting to have a temple or altars, / And in being intransigent to prayer and offerings."[154]

This description of Death evokes the vileness of Hesiod's Thanatos but is shown in the figure of his sister Atropos, carrying her medieval scythe instead of the classical scissors. She is without her chariot but still triumphant and merciless. A somewhat lighter version of a hymn of Death was written by Geffrey Whitney in 1586. In the poem, Eros (or Cupid) and Mors (here also a feminine Death), exchange quivers by mistake which leads to tragicomic results – old people fall in love while young people die. In the first line of the poem, Death is described as "furious Mors" who shoots bony, frozen, fatal darts.[155] When Cupid is made aware of the exchange by a scared youth who does not want to die,[156] he tells Mors, who unhappily swaps arrows with Cupid again.[157] Yet somehow, not all arrows are switched accordingly, leaving some of Cupid's golden arrows with Mors and some of hers with Cupid.

[151] Guthke, 1999, pp. 63-64
[152] Guthke, 1999, p. 110. These lines are quoted directly from Guthke because I was unable to find their original source
[153] Guthke, 1999, p. 112
[154] Ford, 1997, p. 97, l. 269-279
[155] Green, 1866, p. lxiii, l. 2, 9, 24
[156] Green, 1866, p. lxiii, l. 20-24
[157] Green, 1866, p. lxiii, l. 30

The morale of the poem is that there exists the possibility that some people may be struck by love in old age and some by death while they are still young. Perhaps Mors knowingly left some of her own arrows in Cupid's quiver and took some of his with her. Cupid had to be made aware of the death he brought with the bone-arrows, but Mors could have noticed that the old people she was supposed to "bringe to grounde : / Beganne againe to love".[158] What we may read between the lines is that Mors had fun being the bringer of something other than death for a change and thus only reluctantly agreed to swap the arrows back.

Whitney's poem of Love and Death's meeting is still on the side of innocence. During the 14th and 15th century the relationship between death and love mostly in the form of sin became further intertwined. A theme in art which began to occur more and more often was that of a skeleton trying to seduce women through sexual gestures.

Death and the maiden

Among the several artists to have painted Death and a naked woman together, one of Albert Dürer's more famous apprentices, Hans Baldung Grien, is one of them. He made several woodcuts and paintings depicting Death sneaking up on a young and usually naked woman from behind. This action has often been likened to a gesture expected to be performed by a lover, only for the woman to suddenly realise it is not her lover who has come on a surprise visit. These pictures combine the morale of memento mori with the seduction by Death. Sometimes the girls seem willing whilst Death fumbles their bodies, other times they look quite distressed.[159]

We can put the woman in the joint role of Superbia (Vanity), Luxuria and Sin, three parts which were all joined together during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Vanity is one of the seven deadly sins, and in some depictions, the woman is admiring herself in a mirror; one of the simplest and most expressive gestures of vanity. The women in Grien's pictures always have long, curled hair waving behind their back, just like Luxuria's hair is described to be. By acting out a deadly sin, the woman gives herself over to her paramour, Death, on her own accord.[160] In the painting by Grien,[161] we can see the maiden's unhappy realisation of who her visitor is. Whilst trying to pull up her shroud, the woman is barely able to wring her neck

[158] Green, 1866, p. lxiii, l. 15-16
[159] See picture 5 in the list of illustrations
[160] Städel Museum, 2007, p. 168
[161] See picture 5

away from the unwanted kiss from Death. A tear runs down her cheek. But it is her sinful ways which have brought this lover to her side. With the legs still in contrapposto, her arms are trying to cover up the until-then naked body with a shroud. Death has disturbed her mid-pose. The viewer can guess at her Venus-like posture which she would have been in the moment before Death arrived.[162] Death, on the other hand, is barely touching the woman; with one hand, he gently supports the crying woman's head, while the other touches her just below the armpit. His feet are in a striding motion, making his pose unsteady. He is not ready to grab her should she decide to run away.

In another painting by the same artist (*Der Tod und das Mädchen*, 1517), Death is gripping the maiden's hair with one hand while pointing downwards into a grave located in the left corner of the painting with the other. Above the two figures is written, "hie mvst dv hyn" (hier musst du hin = here you must go).[163] This picture is not a love scene gone wrong, but rather a forewarning of what will happen next when the woman tries to wrestle herself out of Death's embrace. These scenes have as many erotic- as they do death-related notions. The morale these pictures are meant to exude is that surrender to sexuality leads to mortality, in other words, death. "These young women meet their death on account of their sexual desire (…)"[164]. Even though the paintings and woodcuts of Grien were all in all quite harmless in their depictions, the viewer needs to know about the symbolism to understand all the finer points of the morale. There are other artistic works from this period in which Death is interwoven even closer with sexuality and sin.

Further presentations of Death in the Renaissance

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, written in 1617, Sin and Death are personified as mother and son. The devil, or rather, Satan, refers to Sin as his "fair, enchanting daughter",[165] confessing to the incestuous relationship between them when he later refers to Death as "son and grandchild both".[166] Sin and Death are the "two arms" of Satan, which metaphorically speaking makes Death, Sin and the devil three parts of a whole. This is in keeping with the

[162] Städel Museum, 2007, p. 173
[163] Städel Museum, 2007, p. 167
[164] Städel Museum, 2007, p. 174
[165] Milton, 1829, p. 303
[166] Milton, 1829, p. 304

theological idea that Eve's blame combined sin, death and evil, bringing them collectively into the world.

In *Paradise Lost*, after having built Satan a bridge leading to and from Hell, Death and Sin are tasked with enthralling Man, better known as Adam, before they are to murder him [167] – this gives each adversary a task according to their function. For Sin the task is to seduce Adam while Death's task is to kill him. Although in Milton's story Death is not female, he is constantly on close connection with his sister-mother Sin. They are seldom, if ever, referred to as working apart. Milton fused them tightly together both through the family bond and also as working partners, so there is no question that they are actually representing two sides of the same coin. This interwoven symbiosis of Sin and Death is in accord with how they were represented in the 15th and 16th hundreds. Milton was simply following the same recipe as Grien and the other boys were.

In the poem of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, titled *To his Mistress for her true Picture*, also written in the sixteen hundreds, lord Cherbury has written a celestial love poem to Death: "my heart doth love you best"[168]. Sin and Death are fused together into one. Even though Milton made their relationship very close, he still kept Sin and Death separate. Cherbury on the other hand puts them together, making the sinful attributes a part of Death. Here, Sin is a part of Death, making her the seducing mistress who lures mortal men to their end. In the poem, Lord Cherbury longs for this mistress, unlike everyone before him who sought to avoid her. Although he confesses that she is no beauty, at least not in the picture he has been presented with, he claims that Death must have been painted by someone who "(…) did mean / no honour to you" and thinks this ugliness untrue to her real appearance.[169] He asks her if she can come and show herself to him, believing that he will then, surely, see some "beauty Angelick" which in turn will free his soul to eternal liberty.[170] With the lines "(…) the sovereign Queen / Of all that ever breath'd" and "(..) your bright hair, / Which are the threds of life,"[171] Cherbury entwines Death with Life. Again, we discover a subtle nod to Atropos, here in the strands of Death's hair which to Cherbury are threads of life. She wears the crown of Immortality and carries the keys to Heaven in one hand and the keys to Hell in the other.[172]

[167] Milton, 1829, p. 304
[168] Smith, 1923, p. 48, l. 3
[169] Smith, 1923, pp. 48-49, l. 4-8
[170] Smith, 1923, p. 49, l. 19-22
[171] Smith, 1923, pp. 48, 50, l. 1-2, 37-38
[172] Smith, 1923, p. 50, l. 39-41

Not only does Cherbury place his mistress on an unbelievable high pedestal, but he also ascribes to her immense powers. He adores and worships not just a woman but a force greater than anything else in a, what some would say, quite a macabre way: he thinks of her as a worm-infested nut,[173] which is quite a bizarre comparison in itself, and even more so considering this is a love poem. He encourages her to "seize with age" those who "(…) think their beauties best,"[174] and to attack the more wicked sort, who make fun of her praise, with all kinds of worms, to make them scabbed like lepers, their teeth rot and their insides destroyed while caterpillars and wasps attack them and destroy their lands, unless they do not agree that she is the most beautiful.[175]

Did he long for death in the literal sense? We do not know. Cherbury died at the age of 65. What we can take away with us from this (142 lines long) poem is the adoration of Death as a beloved mistress and not just as a force of evil. Although he may not hope for reciprocation, Cherbury's love, though somewhat twisted, is clearly being declared. We may understand that he is expressing a desire or longing to surrender to death. He truly is romanticizing Death, both figuratively and literally.

Summary

Death enjoyed another round of popularity in the romantic era between 1700-1800, where Thanatos was rediscovered and once more put forth as the desired Death personification. The writers and poets of this time, especially Gotthold E. Lessing and Friedrich Schiller, were very much pro-Thanatos,[176] turning him into a romantic figure: a beautiful youth with wings and downturned torch, reminiscent of the aristocratic spirit from ancient myths. The solemn, docile brother of Hypnos who is still to be found decorating stone plates, gravestones and mausoleums. The Germanic poets saw this death as a sweet relief and preferred Death in this romanticized classical form rather than a macabre skeleton.[177]

So far, I have found four Death personifications from the past: Thanatos, Atropos, the omnigendered skeleton and the threatening yet seductive female (firstly in the guise of the

[173] Smith, 1923, p. 51, l. 73, 74
[174] Smith, 1923, p. 51, l. 79, 77
[175] Smith, 1923, pp. 51-52, l. 83-105
[176] By interest, see Lessing's work *How the ancients depicted Death.*
[177] Guthke, 1999, pp. 142-144

Keres and the triumphant Death, later as Eve and her sinful descendants). Having gained her sinful attachment, Female Death never quite loses it. Female Death is also the first Death after Thanatos to be shown in human form. The masculine version was mostly depicted as the skeleton. Instead of one Death representing one kind of death, there were, and are, several Deaths encompassing all the ways of death and dying and what might lead to death and dying – sickness, ill fate or simply the wish to die. The skeleton might have been in charge of the earliest Dances of Death and the remembrance of memento mori whilst Atropos was the all-destroying Death of the plague, but the skeleton also made its appearance in the paintings and engravings of the triumphs of Death.

As we have seen in this chapter, the personification of Death during this time period shows us a depiction of Death as both male and female, in the suit of a skeleton and as a human – this will be further analysed in the next chapter on modern literature.

3. The four representations of Death in modern literature

Introduction: Death in modern and popular literature

As we move forward into our own time, the 21th century, we see that the character, or rather, characters of Death are still very much alive and kicking.[178] Death has over the years gotten many protagonist parts in art, film, music and of course various types of literature, and continues to do so. In the past, these Death personifications used to be connected to a purpose; to serve as an allegorical tool to guide us humans in whichever way we choose regarding our cultural belief, to give us answers as not only to what lies behind the veil of death but also to what death really is. Nowadays, the personification of death is used mostly for entertainment. It seldom has the same aspect of memento mori as it used to, although we still know about and refer to this rhetorical effect.

Making death and loss understandable to us is something which there has been written many books about. There are several children's books dealing with these themes in understandable and enjoyable ways. Two such books which I have come across are *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch and *Life and I – a story about Death* by Elisabeth Helland Larsen and

[178] Oxymoronic pun intended

Marine Schneider, both from 2016, which explain these things in different ways, trying to ease the fear many have of death and "normalize" the idea that we will all die one day. These books turn death into something or rather someone who is harmless, kind and sometimes even funny.

Death has also become a popular character in comics: graphic novels like *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman (which is part of the coming analysis) and Japanese comics known as manga, which has truly blossomed in popularity in the West over the last few decades, often have Death playing the part of antagonist and sometimes protagonist in their stories. In Japanese culture, there is not one Death, but many death gods known collectively as Shinigami. They feature heavily in many manga series. Some of the most popular ones to have gained a Western fanbase over the years are *Bleach* by Tite Kubo (last published 2016), *Death Note* by Tsugumi Ohba (last published 2006) and *Yami no Matsuei* by Yoko Matsushita (begun in 1996 and still ongoing), just to mention a few. These mangas have also been made into animation series and real-life actor movies.

In other media Death plays chess with a knight in the well-known movie *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman (1957) or falls in love with a young woman and becomes entangled in human affairs in *Meet Joe Black* (1998). In *the Book Thief* from 2005 by Markus Zusak Death is the narrator of the story of a young girl and her life during the second world war.

Having had a quick walk through the past in the previous chapters, we have now come to the present where Death continues to inhabit a male and female persona, both in human and skeletal form. In this chapter I will concentrate on these four types of personifications of Death through the characters found in contemporary literature.

I have picked out four Death characters imagined by four different authors. What will interest me is their humanity and Death-ness. I will look at how they are portrayed according to their described appearance and personality, what sort of abilities and powers they have, do they use any kind of symbols or items and do they have any relations to family, friends and acquaintances or home, pets and work.[179]

[179] What I will try not to do, is give an in depth recaption of the books' plot lines, since this is not meant as a book review. Though, to understand the characters behaviours and reactions, some of the plot lines must be added. If the reader should be curious about the books, a simple search online will quickly give you the outline of the stories. Spoilers will occur heavily in the coming pages.

Then I shall look at the similarities and differences between the new Deaths, what they have in common with each other and what differs between them. Lastly, I shall see what connects them to the Death personifications of Ancient Greece, Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and how the characters of Death have developed through the ages. The books which I have chosen have already been listed in the method chapter.

When comparing the Deaths with each other, in order not to cause misunderstandings to which one I am referring, I shall add the capital letter of the author's surname before "Death". Neil Gaiman's Death will be G-Death, Terry Pratchett's is P-Death, Jose Saramago's character is S-Death and Christopher Moore's is M-Death or Charlie, since he has a normal name.

Feminine Death in modern literature

As we have already seen in the first chapter, feminine Death was first embodied back in ancient Greece as the sisters of Thanatos. There were the Keres, violent and death-hungry spirits, haunting and hunting on the battlefields, and the all-knowing Moirai in charge of the lives and destinies of humanity. As Christianity took its hold over the western world, Eve was blamed for bringing sin and death. Atropos, considered to be most connected to death of the three Fates, enjoyed a resurrection in the late Middle Ages, which lasted well into the Renaissance. Another female version of Death, inspired by Eve, became the seductress in league with Sin and the devil. In more recent years, as we shall see below, feminine Death has been portrayed as a young woman or sometimes even a girl.[180] Female Death currently enjoys a gentler and friendlier reputation and is no longer depicted as someone vindictive and gruesome as the Deaths of the past. The two feminine Deaths I have chosen for this analysis are from Jose Saramago's *Death with interruptions* from 2009 and Neil Gaiman's graphic novel series *The Sandman*, which was printed between 1989 and 1997 and *Death*, a collection of short stories mainly featuring Gaiman's Death.

[180] as in *Life and I* by – *a story about Death* (2016) by Elisabeth Helland Larsen and Marine Schneider

Jose Saramago *Death with Interruptions* (2009) [181]

The first part of Saramago's story is about the disappearance of Death in Portugal, where the story is set, and how the people deal with the repercussions of it. At first it is seen as a godsend: the people of Portugal have turned immortal. But it quickly turns into a problem; the humans who are on the cusp of death are caught in a perpetual state of continuous dying, unable to find release. Families begin to transport their dying over the borders, where death is still working. The second part of the book is about Death herself, the reason for her strike and what happens when she decides to do her job differently. After having ended her strike and resumed her responsibilities, Death begins sending out violet-coloured letters a week in advance to the persons who are soon going to die.[182] The reader first meets Death as she puzzles over a letter which has returned to her. This letter sends her on the search of the person, in the story only known as the cellist, for whom it was meant. She decides to deliver the letter to him personally, after having "done some research".[183] But that endeavour does not go quite as planned.

Jose Saramago's Death

Work

The main plot of this book is that Death actually stops working. She goes on a strike to show the humans who hate her what life would be if it were eternal: "I should explain that the reason that led me to interrupt my activities (…) was to give those human beings who so loathe me just a taste of what it would mean to live forever." [184]

This sentence is from a letter of explanation which Death sends to the director of a large Television company, so that the letter will be broadcasted and shown to the largest number of people possible. Before resuming her work, she lets the Portuguese people know that they will receive a notice a week in advance before they will die. This results in the receiving of a violet letter personally written by Death. She sees this new regime as a kindness, making it

[181] For book cover see picture 6 in the list of illustrations
[182] This new method of course causes much debacle and displeasure in the people, but that is beside the point of this thesis
[183] More on the cellist further down
[184] Saramago, 2009, p. 109

possible for people to get their life in order before they die. But this is of course not the reaction of the Portuguese population. Then one day, one of the letters return and Death tries to find out why. How Death used to do her work prior to her strike and the letter-sending, is something the reader does not get to know. It is possible to imagine it from things written or insinuated, but unlike the other Deaths were it is plainly described, here we meet nothing of this.

What is made a note of a few times, is that Death's job is actually to kill the humans, as instituted by the first rule in the book of death; "Thou shalt kill"[185]. Where the other Deaths are collectors of souls and help the souls of the dead into the beyond, S-Death is instructed to bring them their end. Though she is in possession of a scythe, neither how she does her killing, nor what happens after, is ever told or even speculated on by the author. Death actually never performs her work personally and in the "classical" way in the timeframe of the book.

Other personifications of Deaths

S-Death is not the main Death of the world or in the universe. Rather, she refers to herself as a sectorial Death,[186] meaning that there exists a higher, Main Death in charge of all the smaller Deaths. This is also the case in Terry Pratchett and Christopher Moore's books. S-Death does not know who this higher authority of Death is. She happens to be so old that she simply does not remember who instructed her at the beginning.[187]

S-Death is exclusively in charge of the human race,[188] in this case specifically to everyone inside the country of Portugal. Outside the country's boundaries, people keep dying as they have before. She is also not responsible for the fauna and flora of Portugal; some other Death is responsible for that.[189] There is as sort of Death hierarchy at work which is referred to as the hierarchy of Thanatos[190] – by using that name at the top, the reader can quickly believe that there is a male Death at the top, like a king over all his subservient Parcaes, even though S-Death in her second letter to the press refer to the big Death as a she.[191] She never refers to

[185] Saramago, 2009, p. 176
[186] Saramago, 2009, p. 179
[187] Saramago, 2009, p. 180
[188] Saramago, 2009, p. 165
[189] Saramago, 2009, p. 167
[190] Saramago, 2009, pp. 77, 199
[191] Saramago, 2009, p. 123

Thanatos, only the narrator and two philosophers in the book do.[192] When there one day will be no one left to kill, S-Death believes that she will come to an end. this thought brings her a feeling of rest and peace, of relief.[193]

Appearance and personality

Saramago sums up his own Death character thusly:

> "We are reliable witnesses to the fact that death is a skeleton wrapped in a sheet, that she lives in a chilly room accompanied by a rusty old scythe that never replies to questions, and is surrounded only by cobwebs and a few dozen filing cabinets with large drawers stuffed with index cards."[194]

Death herself shows up quite late in the book, more like into the third part of it, on page 150. When the reader finally gets to meet her, she is "(…) sitting on a chair while wrapped in her sheet, and with a look of blank amazement on the orography of her bony face."[195]. I imagine her sheet being a simple, white cotton bed sheet, but it is probably meant to be her black Death-cloak. Calling it a sheet makes it sound cosy and not very threating. If it wasn't for the word "bony", the reader would imagine a simple depiction of a girl or woman. The word "orography", which is the study of topographic relief of mountains and other elevated terrains, is not something usually used for describing a face, but I think it elegant of the author to use it to describe her skull. These two words then, orography and bony, are the first indications the reader is given to imagine Saramago's Death to be a female skeleton. The summary referenced above appears eleven pages later.

In the same sentence we have both a human emotion and a facial expression. The "look of blank amazement" which she expresses is a facial expression which I believe every human knows and can imagine. On the same page further down, she "eyes suspiciously", which also indicates the existence of emotions and facial expressions. In the same paragraph she is described as to mutter the words "how stupid of me" to herself and after that talking in a "dreamy tone of voice"[196]. As the reader we get a sense of a young woman sitting at home, having been surprised by the discovery of having made a mistake. Her surprise and annoyance are caused by the return of a letter (explained above).[197] In one passage, the author writes that

[192] Saramago, 2009, pp. 77, 199
[193] Saramago, 2009, p. 90
[194] Saramago, 2009, p. 161
[195] Saramago, 2009, p. 150
[196] Saramago, 2009, p. 150
[197] Saramago, 2009, p. 151

her fixed grin is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is a grimace of pain which is a constant reminder that she once used to have a mouth and a tongue.[198] This little fact means that Death did in fact once have a human face and body, not just the skeleton of it. But like so many things in this book, this titbit is all the information we get about S-Death's past. Yet later in the book, Death is able to transform herself into a human.

The specifics of the facts about her vary; On some points the author is very precise, on others he is not. Although he wavers between a height difference of 2 cm, the author is quite specific what his Death's height is concerned. S-Death is described to be probably 166 or 168 centimetres in height and seems without her sheet to be almost the size of a tiny adolescent skeleton.[199] She does not feel thirst and is unable to even imagine what it feels like to be thirsty.[200] Neither does she sleep, although she does rest.[201]

S-Death is quite easily annoyed; the letter she sends to the TV-Company gets printed in newspapers around the country. When they print her letter with the capital letter D in "death" and not a small d like she signed it, she gets quite offended.[202] Since she does not see herself as the main, big Death, she insists that her "name" be written with a small d, not with a capital letter. She refers to herself as the small, everyday death with a lowercase d, whilst the big Death with a capital letter is something humans could never conceive of. [203] Throughout the rest of the book, she gets irritable but also surprised, curious, and develops feelings without really noticing it (perhaps because this aspect is new to her). The reader understands it in her actions more than what is described. In the book she is described to be "(…) by nature, strong, energetic and active." She has professional pride, strong opinions and is a strong-willed character right from the beginning.[204] Lastly, she is simply tired of not being appreciated.

Symbols and items

S-Death has three items she uses or has used for her work. The first one is the book of death, also known as the book of nothingness. It is only consulted once by Death, to try and find out what happens or what to do when someone who ought to be dead is still alive, but to no avail.

[198] Saramago, 2009, p. 154
[199] Saramago, 2009, pp. 162-163
[200] Saramago, 2009, p. 172
[201] Saramago, 2009, p. 155
[202] Saramago, 2009, pp. 122-123
[203] A notion which I have chosen to ignore as well. Sorry Death.
[204] Saramago, 2009, pp. 186-187

The book contains rules, addenda and appendices in which all the possible manners and variants of dying are listed.[205] The second is the filing cabinet which archives all the human lives automatically. Death herself does not have to do anything in ways of organising the index cards representing all the humans who are alive. The index cards in the cabinet appear, update and disappear automatically with the development of the lives of the humans.[206]

Lastly, there is the scythe. Death likes to talk to her scythe, the classic reaper weapon, although her scythe seldom if ever responds to any of her inquiries.[207] Yet it is able to tremble as to show that it is alive and thinking.[208] It does give her warning, once, when she changes the cellist's age on his index card. When the scythe finally speaks, it surprises Death. "You spoke, exclaimed death, There seemed to me to be a good reason", it replies.[209] Otherwise, the scythe is mostly indifferent.[210] It hasn't been used for a long time and now serves more as a silent companion and room décor, when it previously used to be her companion in so many adventures and massacres.[211]

The violet letters are S-Death's newest way of doing her dealings and are explained as much as is needed further up.

Home and pets

About S-Death's home there is not much to say. She lives in what is being described as a cold, subterranean room with white walls and pale, constantly lit lightbulbs.[212] Apart from the few items listed above, the filing cabinet, desk, chair and scythe, the room where S-Death lives is very bare and extremely minimalistic. There is a narrow door which leads to a warehouse-sized wardrobe which, according to the scythe's memory is never in use,[213] until Death one day decides to transform herself into a woman.

[205] Saramago, 2009, p. 176
[206] Saramago, 2009, pp. 168, 177
[207] Saramago, 2009, pp. 151, 202-203
[208] Saramago, 2009, p. 204
[209] Saramago, 2009, p. 206
[210] Saramago, 2009, p. 163, 184
[211] Saramago, 2009, p. 158
[212] Saramago, 2009, p. 169, 158, 204
[213] Saramago, 2009, p. 162, 204

Powers and abilities

Death's normal state is to be omnipresent. This includes being everywhere and seeing everything concurrently, which also gives her the ability to walk through any and every material.[214] She shares this trait with two others of the Deaths (P and G) but being omnipresent is particularly remarked upon by Saramago. When she first visits the cellist's apartment, she flows into the rooms and fills them with herself in an unknown elemental form which is described as been gaseous and spreading like a tenuous mist.[215]

She does this with a "herculean effort" because not being omnipresent is something she actually finds quite tiring.[216] It is actually more tiresome for her to be out of everywhere than it is to be in it. She is able to make herself visible, which is something she sometimes does in private, but in public she stays invisible,[217] for good reasons - a skeleton in a cape walking around in broad daylight is not an everyday sight. Also, I believe being omnipresent incurs the invisibility-part. The one special thing about S-Death is that she is able to transform or materialize herself into a human. Changing their form is something the other Deaths do not do. They stay in their one form, either as skeletons or as humans. S-Death sees it as necessary to transform herself to reach the cellist – a skeleton walking around would probably scare passers-by and not be such a good idea.

Her first transformation in the book is not complete. Since it takes her a great deal of effort to turn into a human shape, she first leaves out the legs and feet, not really needing them to move about.[218] The reader does not learn if this is the first time she materializes herself in this way or not, although the second time she does it, her scythe remarks that it cannot remember her ever having done so before, even though she has always been able to.[219] By her second transformation or materialization, she does it completely and properly. She transforms herself into a beautiful woman of around the age 36 or 37 (the author cannot seem to decide), so that she can get close to the cellist without scaring anyone.[220] The reader is not given any further clues to what exactly she looks like other than that she is neither fat nor dressed in black.[221]

[214] Saramago, 2009, p. 164, 166
[215] Saramago, 2009, p. 163, 170
[216] Saramago, 2009, p. 164, 165
[217] Saramago, 2009, p. 162
[218] Saramago, 2009, p. 166
[219] Saramago, 2009, p. 205
[220] Saramago, 2009, p. 206
[221] Saramago, 2009, p. 206

What she initially does, is transform herself into a seducing Death. Her scythe is one to first compliment her on her looks, calling her pretty and then comment on this exact point: When Death says, "Go on, admit it, I'm irresistible," the scythe answers with "That depends on the kind of man you hope to seduce"[222].

Family, friends and acquaintances

S-Death is probably the loneliest of our four modern Deaths. While the others which I will be discussing below have family, either real or adopted, friends, acquaintances, servants or pets, S-Death has no connections of any sort, at least not as indicated in the book. The closest she comes to having a pet or companion is her scythe. Although she is part of a bigger hierarchy of Deaths, she does not know how to contact or much else about them. She realises that there must be others while she is watching the dog of the cellist asleep on the floor, reminding her of the fact that she is not responsible for the death of fauna and flora.[223]

The dog

Although Saramago's Death is the only one of the four Deaths without a pet, she still has an interaction with an animal, namely the medium-sized black-haired dog of the cellist.[224] While Death is in the cellist's bedroom watching him sleep, the dog jumps up on the sofa where death is sitting and, "[f]or the first time in her life, death knew what it felt like to have a dog on her lap".[225] Here the chapter ends with that sentence, leaving it open to the reader to interpret what Death might be thinking and feeling having the dog lie down on her lap. Personally, my first thought was of the warmth and softness of the dog's body and fur, something pleasant, if perhaps a bit heavy. Someone who might not like dogs, will probably have a different interpretation. The dog might be strange to her, but she does not feel disgusted or repulsed in any way. I would suggest that it is also an important incentive to the humanising of Death. Out of the four she is the one who has the least connection to humanity. G-Death and P-Death watch and talk to all the human souls they pick up personally. G-Death also turns human once a century and spends her day as a mortal, while P-Death has a daughter, an apprentice and a servant. M-Death is a human with his own family, so there is nothing more to be said on that point, for now.

[222] Saramago, 2009, pp. 207, 209
[223] Saramago, 2009, p. 167
[224] Saramago, 2009, p. 167
[225] Saramago, 2009, p. 172

The Cellist

The main focus of Saramago's Death personification is on her interaction with the cellist, a man whose violet death letter keeps returning to Death. She managed to send it off too late, and now the cellist who should have died, keeps on living. For some reason, Death does not know how to kill him. [226] His presence and their interaction is something special and new for S-Death, because of her otherwise rather lonely and confined state of life. First, Death becomes annoyed, then interested in the situation. She visits him in her invisible state to understand the situation better. This is when she transforms herself into a human for the first time. After a fourth failed try in sending off the letter, she decides to give him the letter personally. She turns herself into a beautiful woman so that she is able to talk to him and, as planned, finally give him his violet letter. They finally meet, face to face, in the last chapter of this story.

The cellist is fifty years old but looks older, has grey, thinning hair and is described to be neither handsome nor ugly.[227] It is perhaps when she begins to watch the cellist, that she for the first time begins to truly notice and feel emotions towards someone else. She has had her strong opinions and feelings before, but this is the first time she interacts so closely with a human over a longer period of time. The first thought she has when she sees him on the night when she visits the sleeping cellist, is that he should be dead.[228] She tries to keep her annoyance for him still being alive[229] awake but fails at it. Something inside her is shifting. She tells herself that there is nothing special about him, that in his sleep he also looks like a dead person, but she is beginning to feel for this human, without being conscious of it. Her emotions are, in this instance, something the reader interprets through Death's actions and thoughts, not through something being directly told by the narrator. This happens several times during the last few chapters and is difficult to reference. After having watched him practice with the orchestra he plays with, Death feels proud of his performance, as if she was in close relations to him.[230] After this, she truly begins to stalk him over the course of three days, following him around in her ever-present, invisible way.[231] Death watches the cellist practice his music at home and in the park reading, perhaps beginning to feel a kind of

[226] Saramago, 2009, p. 172
[227] Saramago, 2009, pp. 168-169
[228] Saramago, 2009, p. 169
[229] Saramago, 2009, p. 169
[230] Saramago, 2009, p. 191
[231] Saramago, 2009, p. 191

connection or closeness to the cellist. After these three days, she decides to meet him and give him the letter in the guise of a beautiful woman. when she drives by the cellist's home in a taxi, she feels a tightening in her solar plexus,[232] a feeling of nervousness.

She goes to see the cellist play with his orchestra at a proper concert. While she is there, sitting alone in her private box, her lone figure is described to be surrounded by emptiness and absence on every side. It is as if she is inhabiting a void and is the expression of the most absolute solitude.[233] Perhaps it is her loneliness which pushes her to connect so quickly with the cellist. At the same time, she is likened to an eagle surveying its pray, obliged to kill it, yet she feels pity for him. She feels sympathy for the cellist, and the thought of having to kill him, turns into tears.[234]

After the concert, Death, now in human form, waits for the cellist outside the stage door. She talks quite cryptic to him, insinuating his death, saying that she needs to talk to him and at the same time she is being quite flirtatious.[235] The cellist finds her attractive yet troubling from the start,[236] which is understandable. Death is sending the man very mixed signals and speaks more confidential than the cellist might feel is proper and pleasant. He thinks she must be crazy or at least quite odd, but feels himself being attracted to this woman, nonetheless. [237] He quickly finds her intriguing, so her strange seduction seems to be working. Her smile is pleasant yet dangerous.[238] Their interactions keep being strange and, for the cellist's part, rather confusing. "Talking to you is like finding oneself in a labyrinth with no doors," says the cellist. "Now that's an excellent definition of life", replies Death. "But you're not life, No, I'm much more complicated than that".[239] Part of the confusion must come from the fact that Death is unexperienced in the interaction with human beings. In a phone call they have the same night as the concert, Death keeps talking about the letter and the inevitability of things, claiming that what he sees as mysteries in their conversations is her way of protecting him.[240] Coming out directly and telling him that he will die does not seem to be an option. Also, she notes, she has had two chances already to give him the letter but did not take them, hoping to

[232] Saramago, 2009, p. 214
[233] Saramago, 2009, p. 217
[234] Saramago, 2009, p. 218
[235] Saramago, 2009, pp. 220-222
[236] Saramago, 2009, p. 220
[237] Saramago, 2009, p. 221, 224
[238] Saramago, 2009, pp. 211, 217
[239] Saramago, 2009, p. 227
[240] Saramago, 2009, p. 227

find out why she did not do it.[241] She seems to have some insight as to why she has failed to deliver the letter twice, but it is not being shared with the reader.

Her fascination with the cellist continues to grow. So does the cellist's fascination with her. The last few pages of the last chapter are from his perspective, where he waits expectantly to hear or see her again, which he doesn't for several days. The cellist goes to bed bitter and disappointed, trying to forget about the strange woman.[242] Alone in the hotel room, Death has a moment of crisis. She is looking at herself in the mirror, naked, and does not know who she is.[243] Is her human body changing her so rapidly? This moment of crisis is not dwelt on further or mentioned again, leaving the reader to wonder what it was about.

The next day, the cellist meets Death in the park and his heart is fluttering.[244] She apologises for her absence and wants to say goodbye, but having forgotten to bring the letter with her, she wishes to bring it to him late that same evening. The cellist admits to having fallen in love with her, to which Death reacts with the words "(…) you can hardly expect me to respond, there are certain words my mouth is forbidden to speak".[245] This might mean that she has done the same but does not believe herself able or allowed to say it out loud. She visits him again in the evening, bringing the letter. He plays her a private concert, after which they take each other's hands effortlessly and kiss.[246] She decides that she will spend the night with him, and after he has fallen asleep, she looks for a place where she can leave the violet letter for him to find. But instead of putting it down somewhere, she takes a match and burns the cellist's letter, before getting back into bed.

The courting between Death and the cellist is quite confusing for the reader to follow. Especially Death's intentions are unclear and often change on a whim. The book ends where it starts: "The following day, no one died."[247]

[241] Saramago, 2009, p. 227
[242] Saramago, 2009, p. 232
[243] Saramago, 2009, p. 229
[244] Saramago, 2009, p. 233
[245] Saramago, 2009, p. 235
[246] Saramago, 2009, pp. 237-238
[247] Saramago, 2009, p. 238

The grammaticality of female Death

At first glance, Saramago's Death is depicted as the classical allegory of death: a skeleton with a cloak and scythe. Yet one choice which he has made in his portrayal of Death, is in modern, English-written literature not so frequent, namely the choice of picturing his grim reaper as feminine. Even before Death shows up personally as a character in the book, which happens rather late, it is referred to as "she".[248] This could be due to the fact that in Latin-based languages such as Portuguese, death is grammatically seen as female. In Portuguese,[249] death has a female pronoun: a morte. The word therefore has a feminine connotation. This does not make all portrayals of Death female in these countries, but we see that Saramago has chosen to do so. He even explains it in a passage of his book thusly: "Death, in her features, attributes and characteristics, was unmistakeably female. (…) with the exception of a very few languages, which, for some unknown reason, opt for the masculine or the neuter, death has always been a person of the female gender"[250].

On the first page in Saramago's novel we find a mention of Atropos "(…) as if old atropos[251] with her great bared teeth had decided to put aside her shears for a day", referring to S-Deaths choice to quit killing.[252] Saramago also refers to the collective Deaths as Parcae in a passage about insects and the death's head moth with the Latin name *Acherontia Atropos*.[253] Again, Saramago has found a link between language, myth and female Death. The first part of the name, Acherontia, refers to the river of pain Acheron which runs through Hades. When Saramago collectively names his Deaths Parcae, he traces its roots back to the roman name for the Moirai, which we also know from the first chapter as the Fates. In roman mythology Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos are known as Nona, Decima and Morta.[254] Morta is derived from the Latin mortem, which again is where the common word for death in the Latin-based Languages comes from; mort (French), muerte (Spanish), morte (Portuguese/Italian), moarte (Romanian). In this way we see that death's female backgrounds are all linked in one big bundle of the ball of yarn that is language. When we speak of a female Death, Morta or la Parca, which is how the grim reaper is known in Spanish, we automatically yet unknowingly

[248] Saramago, 2009, p. 13
[249] Likewise, in Spanish, French and other languages
[250] Saramago, 2009, p. 141
[251] Saramago writes all names in the book with a lowercase letter
[252] Saramago, 2009, p. 1
[253] Saramago, 2009, pp. 196-198
[254] Spanish skulduggery, 2014, *Mythological Etymology – La Parca*

refer to the one sister with the fateful Scissors, Atropos, whom we know from Greek mythology, responsible for the time of death. Atropos again is linked to atrophy, which means to "waste away", which we can understand as dying slowly. Saramago sums up this grammatical ball of yarn perfectly with the sentence: "(…) death, whose other name is fate"[255]. For the non-Latin-based languages in Europe, reading a story about a female skeleton might seem strange as first, but knowing this will make it easier to understand.

Neil Gaiman *The Sandman* (1989-1997)[256]

The Sandman stories focuses mostly on the king of dreams known as Morpheus or just Dream. He is one of seven personifications known as the Endless. In this series Neil Gaiman mixed classical legends of mythology and popular history with different elements from 20th and century comics. Dream's elder sister Death does not feature much in the series, but she shows up often enough to give Dream sisterly advice or sometimes just to get angry or annoyed with him, like only a sister can. When the reader first meets Death, Dream accompanies his sister on a few pick-ups, that is, meeting people in their final moment before death and the moment after.[257]

Due to *The Sandman* being a graphic novel, I will be adding some pictures from the comics in the text, to better explain points made in the analysis. All pictures are scanned by myself from my personal collection of the graphic novels.

Neil Gaiman's Death

Appearance and personality

Death appears as what we would call a goth[258]: She has hair which is black and messy and skin which is usually extremely pale or completely snow white. Her eyes are heavily rimmed with eyeliner in an Egyptian-inspired style, sometimes with markings echoing the Eye of Horus. She prefers to dress in casual black clothes, like tank tops and jeans, and sometimes

[255] Saramago, 2009, p. 139
[256] For book cover see picture 7 in the list of illustrations
[257] Gaiman, 1991, pp. 221-233
[258] The gothic dress style belongs to a subculture which emerged and became popular in the 1980's and 90's

dons a top hat.[259] Sometimes she will dress up when others require it of her[260] or according to the century the story is set in. Around her neck she wears a silver Ankh which serves as her sigil.

In the graphic novels, her speech is presented in regular letters in a regular speak-bubble. Unlike all her other siblings, Death speaks in a normal font like other normal humans do. All her other siblings have different kinds of font as part of their characterization. For example, Dream's speak-bubbles are white ink on black background with squiggly edges, quite the opposite of Death's speak-bubble.[261] Perhaps this is a way of normalizing her, making her more human or equal to humans.

The interesting thing with Death in *The Sandman* is that the reader gets to know her through time and space. In the late 20th century she appears as a level-headed young goth woman who is also fun-loving and easy-going. In the stories before this time, she often acts more sober, grave and grown up. Gaiman wrote in an introduction that "[i]t would be several hundred million years before Death would cheer up (…)"[262], and she finally did. But what it was that made Death finally cheer up, the reader is never told, and we can only guess. Perhaps this is due to the change of how humans interact with each other, and Death, always dressing more

[259] Gaiman, 1993, p. 44 / Gaiman, 2014, p. 95
[260] Gaiman, 1992, p. 17
[261] See example in the picture, Gaiman, 1996, chapter 13, p. 2. Scanned by me from personal collection
[262] Gaiman, 2003, p. i

or less in period-appropriate clothes and fitting herself into the customs of the current time and place she is in – makes it possible for her to get quirkier with time or at least around humans due to how the times change. Her personality is mostly happy, open and caring. She turns into a stern older sister when it is called for, and she can be seen as someone to look up to or be supported by because of her steady emotions and moral code. The reader understands that she is someone who cares.

Death's first appearance in the series is at the end of the first volume, Preludes & Nocturnes. One of the first things she does, is quoting *Mary Poppins*, telling Dream how wonderful she finds that movie.[263] Then she puts on a pair of sunglasses and uses the expression "peachy keen" to explain to her brother what supercalifragilisticexpialidocious means.[264] This quick introduction is also a good indicator of how Death usually is: bubbly, fun and full of life, the opposite of Dream, who is often brooding and moody.

Death is, after Destiny, the oldest of the Endless, making her the big sister of five siblings. Although she likes to be optimistic and have fun in an up-beat, sometimes childlike way, she also acts as the tough, grown-up sister (contrasting her otherwise sunny mood). She is Death, someone with a lot of responsibility and in charge of a not very fun job. She also has to take care of her sisters and brothers sometimes; this might be the reasons why she tries to be light-hearted on the outside, because she cannot afford to really be that way on the inside. Being positive, curious and fun is perhaps a way of contrasting the harsh reality of her being and a way of getting a break from the toughness of her work – a sort of escapism. G-Death lights up at the thought of people enjoying themselves. She gets called little miss sunshine by Hob, a friend of Dream, after saying she thinks the renaissance festival they meet at is wonderful.[265] She enjoys reading books with a happy ending and reveals that she sometimes sings to herself, but not in public.[266]

Even though she is at least a head shorter than her brother Dream,[267] she certainly is not afraid of him. He is generally a quite respected figure, being Lord of Dreams, but Death treats him like a little brother who is often making mistakes. She is one of few who dares to stand up to

[263] Gaiman, 1991, pp. 214-215 215
[264] Gaiman, 1991, p. 215
[265] Gaiman, 1997, p. 110
[266] Gaiman, 1994, chapter 6, p. 19 / Gaiman, 1997, p. 109
[267] Gaiman, 1994, p. 19

him directly, and is, like Dream, very stubborn.[268] Perhaps more so than her brother, which makes her points go through to him.

Once, when she is mad at him, she throws a piece of bread at him. Another time, she declares that she is not talking to him.[269] Even though her first reactions can be somewhat childish, Death is still always the big sister and the more "grown up" or reasonable one of the two. For where Dream does not want to realise the bad things he has done or blames his actions on other people's causes, Death always points out to him what his mistake was and pushes him to do something about it, to right the wrong he has done. And Dream often seeks out her advice and listens to it.[270]

 [271]

In *The Doll's House* a man, Hob, is having a conversation with Dream in a pub. Hob has previously decided not to die, ever, thinking death is rubbish.[272] He ends a short monologue by saying "Death's a capricious thing, isn't it?" to which Dream replies, "Yes. Yes, she is."[273] The man is not aware of Death being a woman but Dream still thinks what he says about his sister is true, capricious meaning unpredictable, erratic, fanciful or witty, which I also agree to is a good notion of Death. the author's choice of portraying Death is a good way to "sell" the

[268] Gaiman, 1991, pp. 219-220
[269] Gaiman, 1994, p. 19 / Gaiman, 1991, p. 19
[270] Gaiman, 1991, p. 231
[271] Death with her brother, Dream. The picture is from Gaiman, 1992, p. 18
[272] Gaiman, 1995, p. 117
[273] Gaiman, 1995, p. 136

idea that death is not scary and therefor nothing to fear. This Death character is both loving and quite harmless in her personality and appearance.

Home and pets

Death is seldom alone. The reader meets her either when she is picking up a recently dead soul or when she is with her family. She has, like all the Endless do, her own home, but how much time does she get to spend there? In *Fables & Reflections,* we meet her firstly at her nephew Orpheus's wedding day, where she knows that Orpheus's wife Eurydice will die on the same day.[274] Orpheus[275] meets his aunt again later, when he wants to get his wife back – here he meets her in her home, which is a simple-looking, small, cosy and a little messy apartment; Her stockings are lying around, there is a family picture on the wall, a teddy bear on an old green comfy chair.[276] She also has a bowl of goldfish, which are named Slim and Wandsworth.[277] When Orpheus finds her place to be too strange, she "glitzes" the place up for him in an instant, making it look more sinister and herself dressed in a Victorian-styled black dress.[278] Time and place is not an issue for Death.

Family, friends and acquaintances

Death is part of a large family. Her six siblings are Destiny, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium (formerly known as Delight). Death is the second eldest after Destiny. Together they are known as the Endless and they act and quarrel like any other siblings do.

The parents of the Endless are finally introduced in *the Sandman: Overture* (by Neil Gaiman, 2015). They are Time and Night, or Chaos and Nyx, as they are known in Greek mythology. *The Overture* brings in for the first time the origins of the Endless and also shows a direct link to the mythical etymology of Ancient Greece, which Gaiman uses frequently in his Sandman-stories. The parts I have mentioned in this analysis covers only a little of it. When it comes to friends and acquaintances, Death states that: "I know everybody really well."[279]

[274] Gaiman, 1993, p. 158
[275] Gaiman has used the mythological story of Orpheus and Eurydice
[276] Gaiman, 1993, p. 171
[277] Gaiman, 1993, p. 171 / Gaiman, 2014, p. 86
[278] Gaiman, 1993, p. 172
[279] Gaiman, 2014, p. 105

Work

Death never talks much about her job, but she is never not doing it. Living creatures are never not dying, so we mostly meet Death on the job or when she takes a quick break to in between to tend to her family. G-Death sees her work as something which cannot be skipped or ignored. Dream tells the reader at the end of *Fables & Reflections*: "My sister has a function to perform, even as I do. The Endless have their responsibilities."[280] She is Death and Death is her job ergo she is her job. It is something she takes seriously, but also tries to add some fun to. She takes her "clients" seriously and is friendly, sympathetic and humane to everyone, giving them a feeling that they know her in as a dear and close friend.[281]

Powers and abilities

G-Death is omnipresent, just like S-Death is. She shows up personally, probably to everyone who dies, and it is the kindness she shows to the ones she meets which is her true power and ability, although she does not define herself in that way: "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."[282] Still, she is considered as kind. She often tells people to take her hand when she comes to collect their souls,[283] and is said to give you peace and meaning.[284]

She never answers questions put to her directly from the souls she picks up, though she is always honest. When Hob asks her if his theory about death is true, she only smiles knowingly at him.[285] When he asks what comes after death, she answers with another question, "what do you believe?" and later says: "you'll find out".[286] When others contemplate what lies beyond life, she answers: "yeah, everybody wonders. And sooner or later everybody gets to find out".[287]

[280] Gaiman, 1991, p. 230
[281] Gaiman, 1991, pp. 223-230 / Gaiman,
[282] Gaiman, 2014, p. 54
[283] Gaiman, 1992, p. 137 / Gaiman, 1997, p. 113
[284] Gaiman, 1997, p. 82
[285] Gaiman, 1997, p. 111
[286] Gaiman, 1997, p. 112
[287] Gaiman, 1993, p. 44

In *The Wake* we see that Death is also able to give life; she says, "I haven't done this in ages", before breathing life into an envoy her other siblings have created.[288] Death is granted one day of life once every century. The story *The high cost of living* follows her as she takes the form of Didi and spends the day with a boy named Sexton, who she meets while he contemplates suicide.[289]

Symbols and items

Death does not use a scythe or any other weapon. Her symbol is the Ankh, the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for eternal life. She usually wears it in silver, around her neck. In *The High Cost of Living*, a man hunts Death down and steals Death's Ankh necklace, thinking it will give him her powers. She asks for it back, but when the man refuses, she simply buys a new one from a market seller.[290]

Greek mythology in *The Sandman*

Although I will not go in too deeply into this theme, I would still like to pull a small thread from the first chapter of this thesis through to this last one by including this, because Gaiman has plucked almost endlessly from the Grecian mythological world for his *The Sandman* series. There are traces of myth everywhere in the series. He has not only taken from mythological Greece but also from Japanese, Egyptian, Hindu and Norse mythology and folklore, as well as others. There are also references to well-known English literature, like Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton. Yet it is the Hellenistic world of myths that shines brightest through his story telling in *The Sandman*.

In the Series, Death is depicted as Dream's sister, while originally in the Grecian myths, Dream would be Death's nephew. Morpheus, which is also the original Greek name for Dream, does, in the graphic novels, not only represent dream but in a way also sleep. Since Sleep or Hypnos, is Death's brother, Gaiman has in his own way kept to the family origins we know from the Grecian myths, presented in chapter 1 of this thesis. In *Fables & Reflections*, Orpheus calls Death his aunt Teleute.[291] Teleute means death stroke or to finish life, to expire,

[288] Gaiman, 1997, p. 22
[289] Gaiman, 2014
[290] Gaiman, 2014, p. 133
[291] Classic studylight, Date unknown, *Teleute* / Gospel Hall online bible, date unknown, *Teleute*

to be dead in Greek. It may be said that this is the female name version of Thanatos, since it is the female noun for death or dying.

With all the mythological characters to be found everywhere in this series (such as Orpheus, the muse Calliope, the Fates and the gorgon sisters Stheno and Eurydale [292]), it is almost strange that Gaiman chose to portray Death as a woman instead of a man, in other words, as Thanatos. He is almost the only thing missing from the character board. At the same time, Death is in her own way a wonderful character which it is difficult not to like and adore. She is a good antagonist for Dream. Perhaps Gaiman chose to make Death a woman to create an even larger contrast to Dream.

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Although Gaiman reimagined Thanatos completely in his own version of Death (Death's sigil is an Egyptian Ankh, she has no wings and is also of the opposite sex), he still managed to

[292] To be read about in *The Doll's House* (1990), *Fables & Reflections* (1993), *Brief Lives* (1994) and *The Kindly Ones* (1996), among others

[293] Gaiman, 1994, p. 19

keep the mythological world of the personification alive. Death features a lot with her brother Dream like Thanatos did with his brother Sleep. And although Dream and Death are not twins in the series, they certainly look quite alike, except for a distinct height difference (see picture above). Dream in the series seems quite bound to the mythological world throughout these stories, while Death is not. She is more her own entity, perhaps also because she never is the main focal point of any of these stories.

Masculine Death in modern literature

Probably the best-known representation of Death known today is the figure of the Grim Reaper, a skeleton dressed in a black riding cloak. The figure first made its appearance in the late Middle Ages, often carrying a scythe or an hourglass. The cloaked and weaponized Death has become a very popular personification of Death. It is to be seen everywhere: on cover-illustrations for books, CDs and LPs, on figurines, clothes, and similar objects. Yet it was not the only form of Death personification around, as we already know. Death is still being represented as a human male, although not so iconic, as it was in the beginning through the figure of Thanatos. Thanatos made his comeback around the eighteenth and nineteenth hundred in the romantic era in his gentle mien as the young man with an upturned torch and gave way, I believe, for Death to again be connected to something more peaceful. Both of these Death personifications are represented below, the foreboding skeleton in the dark hood and the gentler collector of souls. The first one is from Terry Pratchett's Disc World-series, particularly the book *Mort*, while the other belongs to Christopher Moore's novel *A Dirty Job*.

Terry Pratchett *Mort* (2013)[294]

Disc World is a fantasy world shaped like a flat disc and is also a huge book series by the author Terry Pratchett. In this world Death is an anthropomorphic skeleton in a hooded cloak wielding sometimes a scythe and other times a sword. There are wizards, witches, vampires, monks, kings, clergy and other kinds of people who inhabit this magical, slightly ironic and exaggerated place which is loosely reminiscent of the Middle Ages.

[294] For book cover see picture 8 in the list of illustrations

Although there are four books concentrating on the doings of Death in Pratchett's fictional book series, and he appears swiftly in several more, I will mainly concentrate on traits picked out from *Mort*, perhaps mentioning some of the other books he is a part of, like *Reaper Man*. In *Mort*, the first book of the Death-trilogy, Death is on the lookout for an apprentice. The choice falls on Mortimer, Mort for short (with the joke of this shortening of his name being that Mort means "death" in French). While Death leaves Mort to do more and more of his work, Death tries to understand the joys of being human; why do we dance and go to parties, how do hobbies work and would he perhaps prefer a different job, say as a cook?

These books often concentrate on Death and his job or rather, how he ends up doing something other than his job and what consequences this ends up having, a similarity we can connect with S-Death, only that S-Death had different reasons to stop working.

Terry Pratchett's Death

Family, friends and acquaintances

What is quite special about this Death, is that he has an adopted daughter named Ysabell. Since she lives in the in between world of Death where time stand is frozen, she is forever fixed at the age of 16,[295] until she leaves. She later marries Death's apprentice. Death's apprentice and later son-in-law Mortimer, or Mort for short, is described as being a nuisance to his family. He has "about the same talent for horticulture that you would find in a dead starfish"[296], but is interested in many things: "He was determined to discover the underlying logic behind the universe"[297], and therefore gets sent off to become an apprentice. The last one of Death's human household is his servant Albert, who is a former wizard who chose to serve Death instead of dying. He has lived in Death's house for over 2000 years.[298]

Home and pets

Death has a white horse named Binky, which is a real horse. P-Death gave up on skeletal horses, though they are supposed to be the traditional ones, because they are somewhat

[295] Pratchett, 2013, p. 116
[296] Pratchett, 2013, p. 3
[297] Pratchett, 2013, p. 5
[298] Pratchett, 2013, p. 196

unpractical, losing part which have to be wired back on all the time.[299] Death treats Binky kindly, patting and feeding him when they travel around.[300] Even though Binky is a normal horse, being the horse of Death, he can ride through the air and even stand on it.[301]

The home of P-Death is created by him in a place which exists on no map and owes nothing to time and space.[302] The house is probably not what anyone would call cosy. It is more like an estate, decorated in a dark Victorian style. It is ornamented with a lot of skull-and-bones motifs, huge candles, funeral drapes, and everything is in shades of black and purple, because Death does not have the imagination to create colours. The grass in the garden is black, likewise are the flowers and trees. "Even the air looked inky."[303] Next to a grandfather clock with a tick "like the heartbeat of a mountain", in the umbrella stand sits the scythe.[304] The air in the house is described, it is dry as old tombs under ancient deserts.[305] In the house of Death, time stands still.[306] He has a study where he spends most of his time when he is not out and about working.[307] There is also a library filled with mostly biographies writing themselves. The ones for people who have died are full of course, and the ones living get a few added paragraphs every day.[308]

This is the most descriptive of all the homes of the Deaths. Pratchett does not leave much to the reader's imagination. It is also one of the most ornate and opulent. Where S-Death lives in a small, extremely minimalistic room, P-Death has not only a huge house, but also a garden and stable. G-Death can change her home on a whim, but prefers a cosy apartment, while M-Death lives in a normal, non-descriptive apartment above his second-hand shop in a big city.[309]

[299] Pratchett, 2013, p. 31
[300] Pratchett, 2013, p. 10
[301] Pratchett, 2013, p. 17
[302] Pratchett, 2013, p. 34-35
[303] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 24-25, 32, 35
[304] Pratchett, 2013, p. 25
[305] Pratchett, 2013, p. 24
[306] Pratchett, 2013, p. 34
[307] Pratchett, 2013, p. 29
[308] Pratchett, 2013, p. 49
[309] See below

Work

P-Death is the death of every living creature on Disc World. When the reader first meets him in *Hogfather*, he is under the sea, picking up the soul of a tube worm.[310] When asked where he is based, Death replies "FROM THE UTTERMOST DEPTH OF THE SEA TO THE HEIGHTS WHERE EVEN THE EAGLE MAY NOT GO."[311] His business lies "NO FURTHER THAN THE THICKNESS OF A SHADOW"[312] away.

He refers to his work as "the duty".[313] When Mort says that he goes around killing people, Death becomes offended; "I? KILL? Said Death, obviously offended. CERTAINLY NOT. PEOPLE GET KILLED, BUT THAT'S THEIR BUSINESS. I JUST TAKE OVER FROM THEN ON".[314] What he does, is usher the souls into the next world. [315] He tends to do personal visits, but what decides them is unknown, because he tends to visit quite ordinary people and not just kings for instance.[316] Although, all practitioners of magic have the right to be collected by Death personally.[317] The duty is only part of the work Death has to do. It is the easy part. What he also has to is calculate something called the nodes, so that death comes at the exact right time, which is at the end of life and not before in the middle. After having done this, the correct lives belonging to the calculations, have to be collected.[318]

Powers and abilities

Like all the other Deaths, the human one included (to be discussed below), P-Death is invisible or not being seen normally by the normal human eye. Yet this is not one of his own abilities. At dinner in a public restaurant, when Mort is wondering why every other guest is ignoring them, Death explains it to him:

> "The other diners didn't take much notice, even when Death leaned back and lit a rather fine pipe. Someone with smoke curling out of their eye sockets takes some ignoring, but everyone managed it.
>
> 'Is it magic?' said Mort.

[310] Pratchett, 1996, p. 55
[311] Pratchett, 2013, p. 13
[312] Pratchett, 2013, p. 14
[313] Pratchett, 2013, p. 49
[314] Pratchett, 2013, p. 13
[315] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 12-13
[316] Pratchett, 2013, p. 48
[317] Pratchett, 2013, p. 57
[318] Pratchett, 2013, p. 176

> WHAT DO YOU THINK? Said Death. AM I REALLY HERE, BOY?
>
> 'Yes,' said Mort slowly. 'I... I've watched people. They look at you but they don't see you, I think. You do something to their minds.'
>
> Death shook his head.
>
> THEY DO IT ALL THEMSELVES, he said. THERE'S NO MAGIC. PEOPLE CAN'T SEE ME, THEY SIMPLY WON'T ALLOW THEMSELVES TO DO IT. UNTIL IT'S TIME, OF COURSE."[319]

Death brings out a visual denial in people, which makes them able to ignore the visual presence of Death without ignoring his form. Because of this, when he decides to quit his job as Death, he does not have to turn human, like S-Death does. But this visibility is not taken on always by Death. Mostly he is invisible and also non-materialized. This makes it possible for him to walk through all kinds of substances like walls and water. He is also able to freeze time or to put himself outside time.[320] He can move all over the Disc, with or without his horse Binky. He has mastered the art of going anywhere without ostentation and can slide easily between dimensions.[321] The only humans able to perceive him are witches and wizards.[322] He can "see" all over the Disc without having to move. Just like S-Death is omnipresent, P-Death is being everywhere at the same time.[323]

Symbols and items

He usually uses a scythe, but he also carries a white-handled sword which hangs from Death's waist in a heavy belt, which he uses for kings as a royal prerogative. Both the blade of the scythe and the sword is so thin that it is only a blue shimmer in the air and so sharp that it can slice flame and chop sound and starlight like salami.[324] P-Death has, like almost all the Deaths, apart from G-Death, a book of Death. His is a vast leather book described to be almost bigger than the desk it lies on.[325] Then there are the lifetimers, which are stored in a candlelit room: "shelf upon shelf of them, squat hourglasses, one for every living person, pouring their fine sand from the future into the past. The accumulated hiss of the falling grains

[319] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 21-22
[320] Pratchett, 2013, p. 12
[321] Pratchett, 2013, p. 37
[322] Pratchett, 2013, p. 23
[323] Pratchett, 2013, p. 2
[324] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 11, 37, 42, 68
[325] Pratchett, 2013, p. 29

makes the room roar like the sea."[326] The lifetimers are hourglasses filled with the seconds of each human's life. When does goes out on his rounds, he brings the lifetimers of the people he is going to see with him.[327] To him, they function as clocks so he knows at exactly what time he shall swing his blade or scythe.

Appearance and personality

P-Death is depicted as the all-round, classical Grim Reaper, a skeleton in a black cape with hood and a scythe. Our first depiction of Death in *Mort* is quite clear: "Death clicks across the black and white tiled floor on toes of bone, muttering inside his cowl as his skeletal fingers count along the rows of busy hourglasses"[328]. The toes of bone and skeletal fingers indicate quite clearly that he is an anthropomorphic skeleton, although skeletal fingers could have indicated a very skinny figure, not necessarily a skeleton. Yet that is unnecessary speculation, especially with this description of his hand: "(…) that was nothing more than polished bone, smooth and rather yellowed like an old billiard ball."[329]. Death's eyes, as far as a skeleton can have them, are described as being two tiny blue stars in empty eye sockets.[330] His bony face is described as having an eternal grin. Although Death is a skeleton with the stone-set face of a skull, he is able to make some facial expressions, like allowing his "fixed grin" to broaden slightly,[331] making him able to smile just a little more. He is also able to have different looks in his eyes. When Death looks at Mort it is described as coming in the successive order of first blank surprise, then a flicker of annoyance, over to quick recognition and ending with vague forbearance.[332] He even tries to wink at one point by letting a small blue supernova flare up for a second in one eye socket.[333] When Death gets angry, the pinpoints turn red.[334] All of these emotions shown through orifical movements give Death a "lively" face, able to express itself quite well. His height is never mentioned in any more detail other than that he is tall.[335]

[326] Pratchett, 2013, p. 1, 56
[327] Pratchett, 2013, p. 40
[328] Pratchett, 2013, p. 1
[329] Pratchett, 2013, p. 11
[330] Pratchett, 2013, p. 11
[331] Pratchett, 2013, p. 45
[332] Pratchett, 2013, p. 33
[333] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 34, 110
[334] Pratchett, 2013, p. 241
[335] Pratchett, 2013, p. 10

When he speaks, it is always in capital letters. Death's words are being described as arriving in a person's head "without bothering to pass through his ears"[336]. His voice is "like lead slabs being dropped on granite"[337]. Even when he coughs tactfully, it sounds like "the pistol-crack of an ancient beam full of death-watch beetles."[338] The descriptions of P-Death surpass the ones of the other Deaths, the others having normal, unremarkable voices.

This Death is a quirky character. Even though he is in not in need of sustenance, P-Death enjoys a good meal, like hot curry, and smokes a pipe. Also, he hums occasionally.[339] He seems to not understand or believe that he really cares about humans and their emotions, yet he still has an immense curiosity for all things human-related. He is also very fond of and kind to animals, especially cats When he finds a sack of drowned kittens, he becomes very angry and upset.[340] Although he believes himself to be above emotions, he tends to form attachments to the people around him. In *Mort* he cares for his horse Binky and his adopted daughter Ysabell. In *Reaper Man*, he connects with his landlady and a young village girl he ends up rescuing from a fire. But he seldom realises that he forms these attachments. According to Ysabell, Death's adopted daughter, he is kind in an absent-minded sort of way. He apparently cannot truly feel, because he has nothing to feel with. He can think things, like sorry.[341] One thing which is important to P-Death is to keep the neutrality up. There is no fair or unfair; "LISTEN, said Death, FAIR DOESN'T COME INTO IT. YOU CAN'T TAKE SIDES. GOOD GRIEF. WHEN IT'S TIME, IT'S TIME. THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT, BOY."[342]

Ysabell explains it to Mort that Death likes to act like a human being. With all his little things, the food, smoking, winking, they are small things humans do. She says that he even tried to learn the banjo once, but his problem is that he cannot create (being death and all), only imitate or copy.[343] Death is beginning to enjoy a sort of newfound freedom now that he has an apprentice to do his Death-work for him and feels inclined to "see a bit of life".[344] While Mort is being sent out to Death's rounds, Death tries out what it is like to be human. He starts by

[336] Pratchett, 2013, p. 11
[337] Pratchett, 2013, p. 2
[338] Pratchett, 2013, p. 16
[339] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 21, 23, 40, 154
[340] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 20, 154, 183
[341] Pratchett, 2013, p. 113
[342] Pratchett, 2013, p. 42
[343] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 112-113
[344] Pratchett, 2013, p. 109

going fishing.[345] He works his way through what he believes to be four of life's greatest pleasures (fishing, dancing, gambling and drinking), and is not overly enthusiastic about any of them.[346]

He tries to have fun at a party, first questioning one of the guests as to what fun actually is, not understanding the concept. "I felt I ought to learn something of human pleasures."[347] He plays dice in an alleyway with some criminals, still just wanting to learn about human pleasure.[348] He goes on to a bar where he drinks all the strangest drinks the barman has to offer. First at drink number 47 he seems to be getting drunk, or rather, letting himself get drunk. As he says himself, "I can be shober any time I like. This ish an experiment."[349] He even confesses to the barman, in a classic or cliché barman/therapist-manner, telling him how no one has ever wanted to talk to him before, never inviting him to parties (how?), saying how he is friendless and that he is being hated by everyone, having a small existential crisis.[350] He also experiences sadness for the first time.[351]

What is noticeable is that Death begins to take on some human traits like feeling sympathy for someone destined to die young. Albert calls it taking a funny turn.[352] At the same time, Mort keeps getting more and more of Death's traits. It is as if they are swapping. Especially once Death begins to go out into the world and leaves Mort to do his work, Mort turns more into Death.[353] At some point, Mort says, "Death is whoever does Death's job," in the leaden tones of Death.[354]

The last thing Death tries is a new job. Finally, when he starts working as a cook in a grubby fast food restaurant that he feels a warm feeling of happy contentment. He is a good and quick cook, time not being of importance since Death can work around time. He even puts out bowls of milk and meat for the neighbourhood cats and scratches them occasionally behind

[345] Pratchett, 2013, p. 118
[346] Pratchett, 2013, p. 166
[347] Pratchett, 2013, p. 147
[348] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 152-154
[349] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 158-159
[350] Pratchett, 2013, pp. 159-160
[351] Pratchett, 2013, p. 58
[352] Pratchett, 2013, p. 57
[353] Pratchett, 2013, p. 196
[354] Pratchett, 2013, p. 217

the ears while he is working. [355] Here he feels happiness, but is called away by Alfred and finally, Death realises what he has been doing, comes to his senses,[356] and puts a stop to it.

He realises that he will not to be interested in human affairs other than officially anymore. It was clouding his judgement.[357] He concludes that he will not understand people for as long as he lives.[358] Mort, on the other hand, has felt what it feels like to be Death and he understands why Death would want to quit his job: it is an endless future, living outside time in loneliness.[359]

Although Pratchett has invented an entire world, he has kept his Death the way he would be imagined in the Middle Ages, at least on the surface. This is not a Death of the Danse Macabre nor one that rides triumphant over the dead masses. This Death has his own personality, is serious, funny – even when he doesn't mean to – and caring, though he tries to be indifferent and objective towards most creatures. Ysabell states at one point that Death "…is not something you become, he is something you are."[360] When Mort points out that there is no justice, Death sighs and says, "THERE IS JUST ME." He goes on to point out that there dying does not have anything to do with fairness, when it's time, it's time. That is all, nothing more or less.[361]

Christopher Moore *A Dirty Job* (2006)[362]

The book follows Charlie Asher, a recent widower and single parent to new-born daughter Sophie and how he, after his wife's death, has to deal with being a newly chosen Merchant of Death. Written by Christopher Moore in 2006, *A Dirty Job* this is the only of the four books I have chosen to feature a mortal human Death character. Charlie is also the only Death with an actual name. In this story being Death is a real job, which is supposed to be kept secret. He is tasked, alongside with other Death Merchants around the city of San Francisco, to collect soul

[355] Pratchett, 2013, p. 183
[356] Pratchett, 2013, p. 24
[357] Pratchett, 2013, p. 254
[358] Pratchett, 2013, p. 167
[359] Pratchett, 2013, p. 243
[360] Pratchett, 2013, p. 31
[361] Pratchett, 2013, p. 42
[362] For book cover see picture 9 in the list of illustrations

vessels so as to prevent the Forces of Darkness to rise and end the world. The timespan of the book is approximately 6 years.

Since Charlie is a human, he falls outside the schematics we have seen in the Death characters until now. The book builds up a large gallery of people which Charlie interacts with. Some of them are family, others a mixture of friends, colleagues and all-around helpers or enemies. I will not be including all of them, since many do not have anything to do with Charlie's Death work, but some of them are worth mentioning.

Christopher Moore's Death

Family, friends, pets, home and acquaintances

In the first chapter of *A Dirty Job* the reader meets Charlie in the hospital, where his wife Rachel dies shortly after their daughter, Sophie, is born. Charlie, suddenly a single parent, has to figure out how to take care of his new-born child (this makes Charlie also a family man, like three of the four Deaths). Strange deaths begin to surround Charlie. Two men die as a cause of action on Charlie's part. Also, the pets he keeps buying for his baby daughter die after a few days or even hours after procuration, without any explanation. After when Sophie learns to talk, she kills not only a kitten, but also a man by pointing at them and uttering the word "kitty". Sophie is the newly awakened Luminatus, aka the Supreme Death. Before Sophie is old enough (that is, 6 years old) to exalt her gifts and powers as the Ultimate Death, she is being watched by two Hellhounds, Mohammed and Alvin, their names are written on their silver collars.[363] The hounds suddenly show up one night when Sophie is being threatened by the forces of Darkness, also known as the Morrigan. The hounds are monstrous-sized black dogs who are able to swallow down literally anything that is being thrown at them. They protect Sophie[364] and also help Charlie in retrieving soul vessels by reminding him to check his calendar each morning. The hounds are described, like everything else in the book, with a slightly disturbing and sometimes dark or just plain childish humour. The hounds poop a lot and they can eat anything without getting hurt or sick. They all live in San

[363] Moore, 2006, pp. 156-157
[364] Moore, 2006, pp. 150-151, 155

Francisco, above the thrift shop that Charlie owns and manages. It is a normal, little described apartment.

Lily is employed by Charlie and also the only one who knows he is a Death Merchant. The Book of Death first falls in her hands by mistake. Lily, who loves anything which is dark and mysterious, hopes that the job of being Death is meant for her, but soon realises that she is not the one chosen,[365] and gives it to Charlie somewhat later on.[366] Minty Fresh is the first Death Merchant Charlie meets.[367] Minty is the one who collects the soul vessel of Charlie's wife. He wears a mint-green suit and is owner of a used-records shop.[368] Including Minty Fresh, there are several other Death Merchants in the book. They are mentioned sometimes but do not feature much in the story. Like Minty Fresh, the other merchants are more like distant neighbours to Charlie. The Death Merchants are not allowed to have close contact with each other. That brings forth the evils of the Underworld.[369] They know of each other, but do not engage in any way, except on very special occasions, such as when the world is threatened to go under.

Appearance and personality

Charlie is a Caucasian male, "a lean and nimble thirty"[370] in age, who has a somewhat nervous and awkward personality. When the reader first meets him, also described in the books as a "skinny nerd"[371]. Charlie gets characterized as being a "beta male" more than once throughout the book.[372] Beta males are supposedly steady and responsible, loyal, trustworthy, adoring, considerate, and "(…) often quick with an apology"[373]. Unlike G-Death and P-Death, Charlie's looks are never intricately defined by the author, thus the reader is able to make up their own picture of what exactly Charlie looks like. His clothing style, which is remarked upon more than his looks, goes from professor-like tweed,[374] to a more dandyish style in the

[365] Moore, 2006, pp. 59-61
[366] Moore, 2006, pp. 77, 107
[367] Moore, 2006, p. 8
[368] Moore, 2006, p. 77
[369] Moore, 2006, p. 84
[370] Moore, 2006, p. 4
[371] Moore, 2006, p. 69
[372] Moore, 2006, p. 35
[373] Moore, 2006, p. 36
[374] Moore, 2006, p. 4

form of expensive suits he gets through the thrift shop he owns and an antique sword cane which is mostly for show, although it does sometimes come in handy.[375]

Being a Death Merchant changes Charlie's attitude towards his life and gives him more confidence to act in ways and do things he probably would not have dared to do before he became a Death Merchant. This is something which may not be noticed by Charlie himself, but the narrator keeps highlighting it in the book. It also makes him quite sarcastic and snarky.[376]

Work

After his wife dies, Charlie starts seeing things in his thrift shop which glow or pulsate red.[377] These things inhabit a person's soul and they begin to pulsate when someone is about to die.[378] No one else, except the Death Merchants and Audrey can see this red glow. Charlie learns that he is one of several Deaths around, who collect soul vessels.[379] After Charlie becomes a Death Merchant, he begins receiving names and numbers on a message pad lying next to his bed. The names belong to the people whose souls he has to collect, and the numbers refer to how many days he has to retrieve them in.[380]

Already in the title of this book there is talk of work. Death is considered a job by Moore. The employment title is coined as being a "Death Merchant", made up by Minty Fresh [381] with a work manual and soul vessels which need to be collected. All the Merchants in the book keep shops which deal with old artefacts of some sort or other. Mr Fresh has a second-hand record shop, Charlie himself has a thrift shop, two others run a bookstore and a pawnshop.[382]

The thrift shop is important for a Death Merchant, because the soul vessels he takes in are then sold in his shop. He owns a thrift store and the building above it,[383] selling knick-knacks and clothes in the store, renting out the apartments to various interesting people, two of which babysit his daughter on several occasions. Also, being a Death Merchant means that you get a lot of money from what you do, automatically. As soon as Charlie begins to understand and

[375] Moore, 2006, pp. 47, 72, 117
[376] Moore, 2006, pp. 157, 164
[377] Moore, 2006, p. 13
[378] Moore, 2006, p. 21
[379] Moore, 2006, pp. 66, 79-84
[380] Moore, 2006, p. 67
[381] Moore, 2006, p. 81
[382] Moore, 2006, pp. 191-194
[383] Moore, 2006, p. 7

do his work as a Death Merchant, the thrift shop begins to go very well also. What is important to note is that the Merchants are not responsible for people's deaths. They are only working to collect and redistribute the soul vessels.

Symbols and items

Charlie's job as a Death Merchant revolves solely around collecting Soul vessels. These are things which harbour a person's soul. A soul vessel can be anything, as long as it is or was important to the person who owns or owned it. The soul vessels are collected right before or right after someone's death, kept, and then redistributed or reassigned when a person feels drawn to that particular vessel, in other words, soul. Owning a thrift shop helps Charlie with his work in collecting and re-distributing these soul vessels. The vessels are everyday objects which get "traded" around by the help of the Death Merchants.

The Great Big Book of Death [384] is an instruction book, a how-to-be-Death handbook. The book is received in Charlie's shop by Lily, one of his two employees, who covets the book and keeps it for herself until she realises that Charlie is Death and she is not, and hands it back.

Powers and abilities

Unlike the other Deaths in this analysis, Charlie does not have many powers or abilities. When he is getting close to finding a new soul vessel, he becomes sort of invisible.[385] Charlie calls it his unnoticeability, because he is never really invisible, only unnoticeable, thus able to sneak in and out of people's homes or other places to collect the soul vessels. The only two occasions where his unnoticeability is not working is once while Charlie is trying to collect a soul vessel, he meets a dying woman in her home. This woman is able to notice him while everyone else in the house are not. She welcomes him and they have chat, sharing a nice moment.[386]

Villains

Unlike the other Deaths, who are sometimes viewed as the "villains" in their respective stories, Charlie has to battle the forces of evil several times and make sure that they do not

[384] Moore, 2006, pp. 27-28
[385] Moore, 2006, p. 46
[386] Moore, 2006, pp. 136-138

conquer the world before the Luminatus, a.k.a. his daughter Sophie, is old enough to destroy them completely.

The villains of this book are named Orcus and the Morrigan.[387] In mythology, Orcus is associated with the roman equivalent of Hades. In the book he is sometimes called the ancient one.[388] The Morrigan re three sisters: Babd, Nemain and Macha. They are able to transform between the guise of women and something more birdlike,[389] with wings and sharp claws dripping poison. Their shape is likened to that of a man-sized raven.[390] They are very reminiscent of the bloodthirsty Keres from Grecian myth. When they are weak, they move about like thick shadows or "like smoke with a purpose", being invisible to most humans.[391] They get their strength from eating souls, so they try to steal as many soul vessels as possible. Orcus is a bull-headed Death god of old,[392] and he knows that Sophie is the next Luminatus.[393] Therefore, they plan to kill the child before she is old enough to reinforce her powers. One of the Morrigan go to attack Sophie, which results in the Hellhounds showing up.

Sophie the Luminatus

Since Charlie is not immortal and also not a real Death, is he truly a personification of Death? This is a question which I have chosen to ignore. It is rather Charlie's daughter, Sophie, who is the personification of Death. Only, Sophie has a rather small part in the book. Other than being described as the adorable, cute little daughter whom Charlie is not being described as seeing a lot, her role does not feature much until quite late in the book. Even then, she only sweeps in to save her father and destroy the forces of darkness with a wave of her hand.[394] Therefore, I have chosen Charlie to represent Death in my analysis. His part is also different from the other Deaths, since he is only a mortal man, and only a Death, not the Death.[395]

[387] Moore, 2006, p. 96
[388] Moore, 2006, p. 96
[389] Moore, 2006, pp. 96-97
[390] Moore, 2006, pp. 51-52
[391] Moore, 2006, pp. 56, 118
[392] Moore, 2006, p. 97
[393] Moore, 2006, pp. 145-146
[394] Moore, 2006, p. 378
[395] Moore, 2006, p. 76

Comparison of the four modern Deaths

The modern Death is used in a different literary setting than it was before. It used to be a concept to scare or reprimand or warn, just for practical use because it was necessary to have an idea of a Death. But now this conception or idea is free to be played with.

Even though the four Death personifications have been imagined by four different authors, they share several common traits but also dissimilarities, of course. Their similarities are, however, seldom shared between more than two or three of the four personifications. Beyond the fact that they all are Death and do the work of Death accordingly, there are never any traits which they all have in common.

Universal Death

In three of the four books there is the talk of a greater Death. Several of the portrayed Deaths are only Deaths to a specific place and not the main, all around Death of the entire universe. Pratchett's Death is the Death of all of Disc World,[396] but not to the rest of the Universe. In *Reaper Man* the reader finds out that the Great Death of the Universe is named Azrael, the Great Attractor, the Death of Universes, the beginning and end of time.[397] He is so great that perceiving him is not really possible. The name Azrael is borrowed from the Hebraic Angel of Death.

In *Death with Interruptions* Death herself only hints at the fact that she is not the almighty Death. The philosophers believe there is a "(…) hierarchy of responsibilities delegated by Thanatos", "(…) the last, supreme death, (..) the one that will destroy the universe".[398] Saramago's Death is Death to only the humans in one country. Even the fauna and flora have their own Death.[399]

In *A dirty Job* it is Asher's daughter, Sophie, who is the Big Death, preferably named Luminatus.[400] Asher believes himself to be the Luminatus for a long time, until his daughter actually saves him from being killed by the Morrigan in the last part of the book. Asher is not even the Death Merchant for a country or a city. He is only Merchant for a part of the city

[396] Pratchett, Mort, 2013, p. 1
[397] Pratchett, 2013, p. 272
[398] Saramago, 2009, p. 77
[399] Saramago, 2009, p. 167
[400] Moore, 2006, 378

which he lives in. This may make sense also because, out of the four Deaths, he is the only one who is truly human and who can't be everywhere at once, like the other three Deaths can be.

The only one who is an almighty Death in the story is Gaiman's Death, who summarises her existence thus: "When the first living thing existed, I was there, waiting. When the last living thing dies, my job will be finished. I'll put the chairs on the tables, turn out the lights and lock the universe behind me when I leave." [401] She does her job on her own, without any helpers or aspects of herself co-existing with her. P-Death says something similar: "WHERE THE FIRST PRIMAL CALL WAS, THERE WAS I ALSO. WHERE MAN IS, THERE AM I. WHEN THE LAST LIFE CRAWLS UNDER FREEZING STARS, THERE WILL I BE." [402] This equals that which G-Death says, only she uses a metaphor with barstools.

Death as a job

The most notable similarity that all four have in common is that they see being Death as a job, which is not something they share with the older personifications. With this sense of work, comes the modern thoughts of having a sense of pride for one's work, yet also being sick of one's job. It is also a sign that Death is adapted to the time it is written in and a part of our modern society's perceptions.

Three of the four see being Death as an actual job, insomuch as two of them (the skeletons) take a break from being or doing their jobs. M-Death has his own title for it, Death Merchant, and connects it with his other job as thrift store manager. G-Death is the only one who never actively calls being Death a job.

The three real Deaths have been at their work since the dawn of time. Neither one of them mention remembering anything else. It is only Charlie who is new to being Death, and it is a job which only they can do. There must be a Death, or there will be consequences. Again, this is the deal with three of the four Deaths. If Charlie does not collect soul vessels, the world will end; in Portugal people are not able to die or to regain life and fatalities occur in both books about P-Death.[403] Someone must be Death – if they did not do it, someone else would have to.

[401] Gaiman, 2014, p. 54
[402] Pratchett, 2013, p. 14
[403] *Mort* and *Reaper Man* by Terry Pratchett

Powers and abilities

All of the Death are able to be seen or invisible more or less at will. Charlie is the only one who has to be "on the job" to be unseen. The other three Deaths are able to move about and be present wherever they like or need to be. S-Death is the only one able to change her form.

Symbols and items

Both skeletons have a scythe and Charlie has his sword-cane, but G-Death is the one who actually has a symbol which represents her as Death, namely her Ankh.

Family, home and pets

Three of the four have families; P-Death having adopted his. The three of them have good, although very different, homes and all three even have pets. S-Death seems to lack all of these things. She has neither a pet nor a family; she even lacks any sort of acquaintances. Her home, though she has one, is only a cold, bare room. What distinguishes her from the immortal Deaths is that she is the only one who falls in love.

Personalities and appearances

As Deaths they are all authoritarian in regard to their work. Even Charlie gains more confidence through being a Death and utilises this confidence in the other aspects of his life. As far as their personalities go on a human level, they are all quite different:

Charlie is the beta male nerd who tries to get and have his life in order, juggling being a father, business owner and Death Merchant whilst also trying to keep the Forces of Darkness at bay. G-Death is a happy, quirky young woman who has no trouble rolling up her sleeve and take charge where it is needed. She definitely has no problems telling off her siblings when they are behaving stupidly. She takes her job seriously but finds it important to delight in the little things. S-Death is lonely and perhaps little naïve, who has not experienced much in her existence outside the working aspect. She seems to be mostly calm and collected, although somewhat headstrong. She follows through the ideas she sets her mind to. P-Death is, despite his own intensions, kind and curious, although also very strict and dutiful, and usually very bound to tradition. When he decides to do something for himself, he tends to go all out, relishing in his inquisitiveness and freedom.

Where the authors have found it possible, the appearance of the skeletons has been imagined quite dissimilar to each other. They are of different genders, which is to be distinguished through their pronouns and height differences. P-Death's height is not mentioned in any other way than that he is a tall figure. S-Death is marked with centimetres. She has the statue of a small female skeleton, so their heights differ. Both skeletons can move their bony orifice to express themselves, only P-Death has something likened to blue stars in his eye sockets. Both dress in cloaks and have scythe, though S-Death does not use hers anymore. The humans, again, apart from being different genders also have different looks. G-Death has wild, black hair and dresses only in black, while Charlie prefers retail suits.

Conclusion: the development of Death through the ages

It may be somewhat forward of me to say that Thanatos was the origin of the modern personification of Death, but we would not have the four Death personifications we have today without the previous ones. Although Death's personifications have gone through many transformations, we can still trace its roots back to Antiquity. Both Neil Gaiman and Christopher Moore have been inspired by and borrowed a lot from old myths and folklore, each putting their unique modern spin to it.

Thanatos has had a rebirth in modern fiction through G-Death, because Gaiman has used so much of Thanatos' background and history in his creation of *The Sandman* (which I have already written about under "Greek mythology in *The Sandman*" above). Of course, G-Death is neither male nor has she wings, but we can see clear lines between the ancient representation of Thanatos and his family in G-Death and her family. Both have Nyx (Night) as a mother, several siblings and are close to their brothers. We only know of the closeness between Thanatos and Hypnos because it has been depicted in art and hinted at by ancient poets. Gaiman has built a stable and deep relationship between the siblings Death and Dream, where Dream is a form of Hypnos. Traces of Atropos can also be found in G-Death; they are both clearly women and the all-knowing ability of Atropos as one of the Fates is mirrored in the omnipresence of not only G-Death but also of S-Death and P-Death.

Family seems to be an important aspect of the ancient Deaths and of the modern ones. All but S-Death have close relations, and both Thanatos and Atropos are not only siblings themselves but are most often presented with their brother and sisters.

Terry Pratchett on his part kept to the Medieval skeleton. With his cloak and horse, he rides as the Death of the Apocalypse. Both his and Saramago's Death engage in close contact with humans and are curious about them. Neither of them is seen dancing anyone to their grave, although Pratchett's Death does try dancing to figure out what fun is all about. Saramago has played around with a combination of the Reaper figure and the Seductress, although he mentions both Thanatos and the Fates and other names known from Grecian myths.

What is missing from the new Deaths is the violence of the Keres and the seductiveness of the Renaissance. Saramago's Death transforms herself into a beautiful woman and manages to seduce a man, but not with the result that he dies.

The new aspect of Death is the sense of her or him actually having to work. Our modern society has a very different relationship to jobs, than one used to before. Trades used to be learnt either through family members or as apprenticeships. One would most likely stay in that occupation all one's life. Class climbing and shifts in society are fairly new in our society. Being able to choose an occupation disregarding one's background and to change careers later in life is a luxury which we have received in the latter years in our society.

The new Deaths also show us the harsh side of their work: isolation, misunderstanding, being met with fear and loneliness. It is a never-ending job without holidays and seldom any thanks. If Death does not do his or her work, it usually leads to horrible consequences. In *Alcestis*, Thanatos suffers the same drawbacks.

This naturally reflects on Death's character trait, how it was seen then and how it is presented now. The Deaths of old were either deities or their helpers, but although we might say with our modern views that they were doing a job, their own sense of it was probably not the same as we would define it now. Being sick of one's job is also a fairly new luxury. Just quitting and doing something else or going on strike was probably not something one could imagine Death doing in ancient times.

Another distinction is personality. The former Deaths, particularly the early ones from the Dark ages, have little to no personality traits. They are just a means to an end, to show what

happens if one goes against the monotheistic belief and sins. The modern Deaths on the other hand have personality, desires, wishes, hobbies etc. and more interactions with other creations. The Grecian deities also had these things to a certain degree; Thanatos has a family, home and sometimes even desires (the soul of Alcestis). But these traits are not enough to describe him and make him feel human in the same sense as the modern ones.

Modern Deaths are written for entertainment, while the older Deaths belonged to different systems of religious belief. Sometimes, there was a sense of entertainment in the stories, but there would also always be a morale at the end. Back then, belief was used a tool and now there is only entertainment. Today we know that these characters are and were invented. In the olden days people actually believed these personifications to be, at least partly, real. The Death characters in the modern stories add humour to death, whereas the old ones brought practicality.

In a way, we may say that the types of Deaths presented in fiction today are a mixture of the ones presented in the past, resulting in the most common Death figures we find throughout history: the human Death and the anthropomorphic skeleton. The new ones are an upcycling of the old Death presentations.

Lessing wrote that "The modes of dying are endless; but there is only one Death"[404]. In answer to this, I will say that there are as many Deaths on the planet as people who are able to imagine their own versions of Death. But in the end, all these Deaths may just be different facets of the same Death. The possibility to imagine Death is endless, but there is still just one death. I hope to contribute to changing the ambivalent relationship our society has to death by making it clear that we can give Death a face through literature and art. Our feelings towards and connections to death is still the same as it was almost three thousand years ago. Thanatos was paradoxical in the way he was presented. The good and the bad Death. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance there were presented ambivalent feelings towards death and dying, it being able to be so much more than just scary. Through literature, Death is not only been given a form and a voice, but it is also connected to humanity through humour, sorrow and equal emotions and that being Death is also a profession.

[404] Lessing, 2013, p. 213

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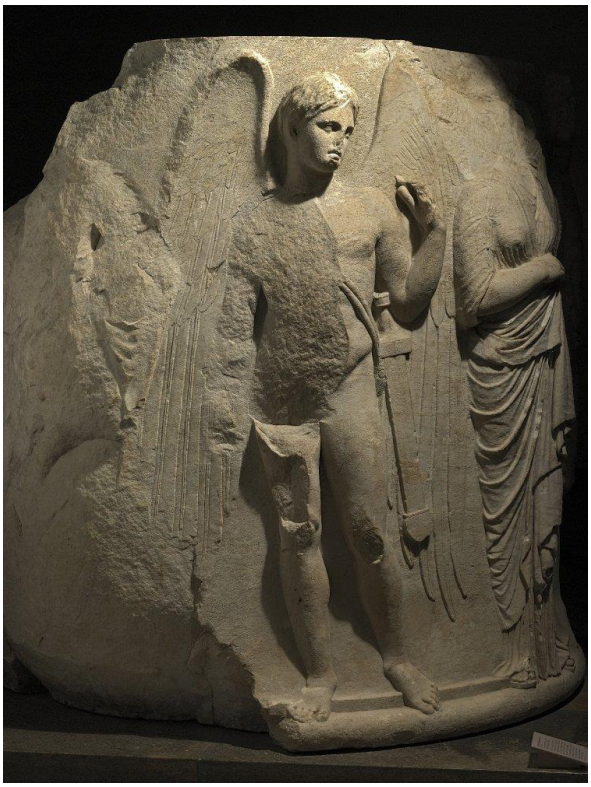

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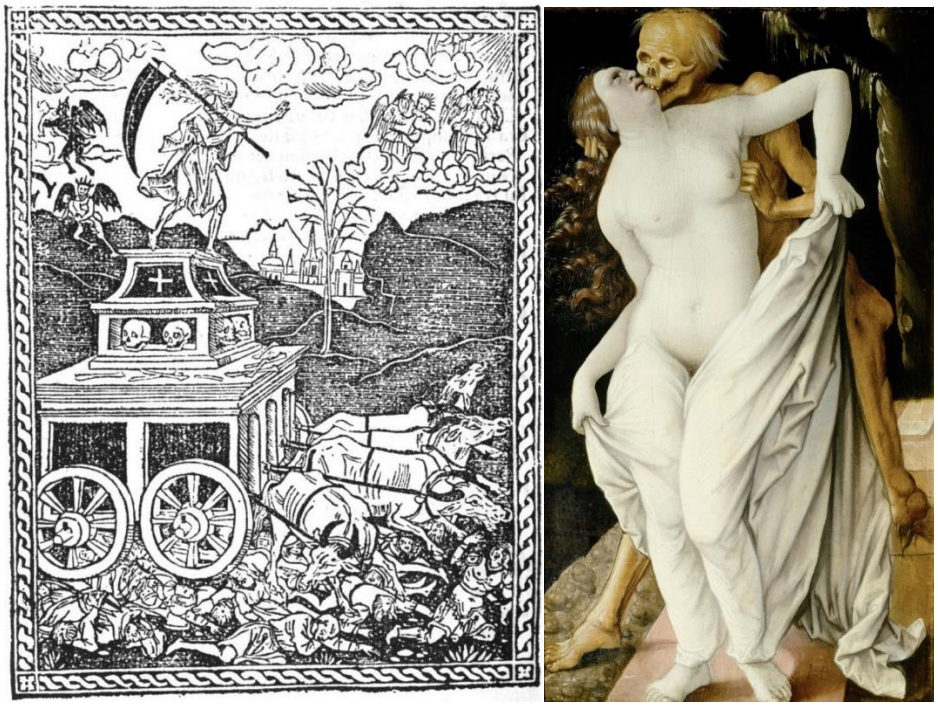

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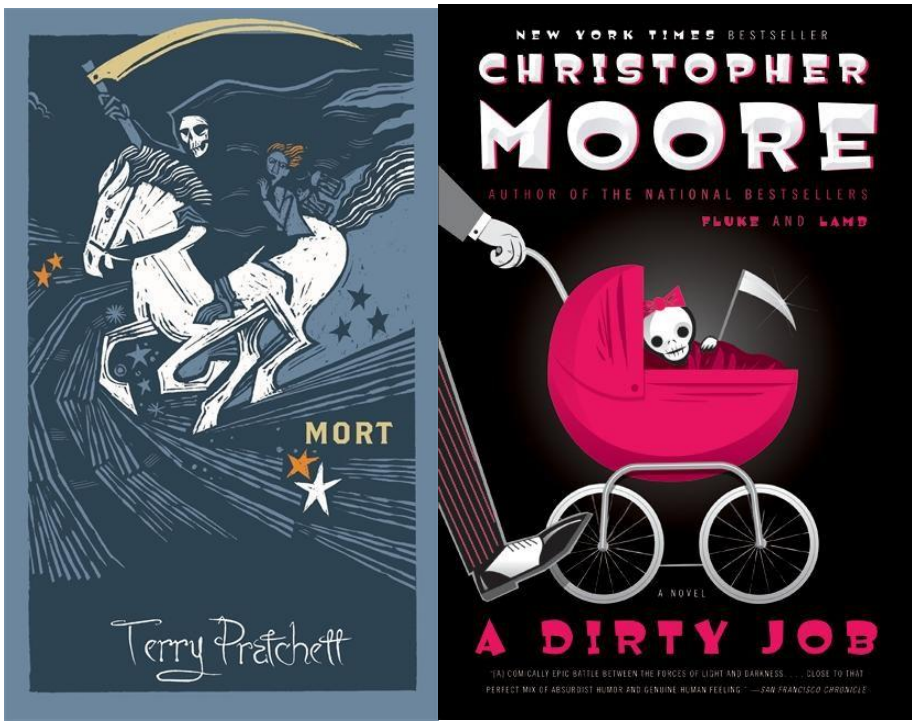

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Chapter 3

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