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Bringing Death to Life:

The Personifications of Death in Zusak's *The Book Thief*, Moore's *A Dirty Job* and Pendle's *Death: A Life*

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Abstract

This essay examines the personifications of Death in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job* (2006) and George Pendle's *Death: A Life* (2008). The personifications are analysed in terms of gender, anthropomorphism, (im)mortality, agency in conceptual death and attitude towards their occupation as Death. The personifications are also compared to previous portrayals in relation to fear, denial and acceptance of death. The essay is based on a close reading of the three literary works, and it is argued that the authors give Death human characteristics, force Death to reflect on mortality, and disconnect personified Death from the responsibility of conceptual death in order to portray Death as a humane, likeable and sometimes humorous character. Death as an amiable character seems to differ from some earlier portrayals, where Death tends to be treated with respect, distance and fear. However, these two ways of depicting Death both originate in a fear of death, and could thus be seen as two sides of the same coin, where the earlier portrayals seem to express the fear in a rather direct manner while the more recent ones convey it indirectly through the need for portraying Death in a positive, comforting and reassuring way.

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Introduction

Death is possibly the only thing that is certain in our lives. It results in sorrow, pain and misery for the living, but perhaps also in relief from all those things for the dying. Some accept death's inevitability, some deny it, others fear it, and – as will be seen in this essay – a few write about it. Throughout history, the personification of Death in Western literature is comparatively rare, which might be a sign of a general hesitation to engage in these issues. Notable, well-known instances of such personification include the morality play *Everyman*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death". During the last century, however, personifications of Death seem to have increased in quantity, with a boom in the 1980s when Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman and Piers Anthony all published depictions of personified Death. The contemporary portrayals seem to differ from earlier ones; they describe Death as a likeable character with gentle traits, and often in comical or almost farcical ways, whereas previous descriptions show signs of fear, respect and distance. In this essay, I will examine three novels written in the twenty-first century that all include personifications of Death that are different from the dark and often frightening image portrayed in traditional depictions.

The first novel that will be discussed is Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* from 2005. In this novel about the Second World War, the character of Death narrates the story of a German girl called Liesel Meminger, whose foster parents decide to hide a young Jewish man in their basement. Death visits Liesel's surroundings multiple times, and as the war proceeds, Death reveals his thoughts about collecting the souls of men, women and children, and his astonishment at what humanity is capable of.

The second novel I will discuss is Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job* from 2006, in which there are several personifications of Death. While it remains unclear who decides who is going to die, everyday people work as so called death-merchants, collecting and storing soul vessels. One of them is Charlie Asher, a normal middle-aged man living his ordinary life until his wife dies and he starts witnessing traffic accidents and people suffering from illness while simultaneously trying to raise his baby daughter. Later, he is forced to face the powers of the Underworld, whose leaders threaten to take over the world. Charlie, who is a beta-male – the absolute opposite of an alpha-male – initially struggles with his tasks as a death-merchant because of the recent loss of his wife, but gradually, he learns to accept them.

The last novel I will consider is George Pendle's *Death: A Life* from 2008, which claims to be Death's first memoir. Death shares his thoughts about his upbringing in hell and his negligent father, his addiction to Life and the time he spent in rehab because of it, and his encounter with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. From his description of an existence where he is misunderstood, feared, and lonely, it becomes clear that being Death is not the easiest of fates.

As mentioned, there seems to have been an increase in literature involving personifications of Death during the last century. However, they still remain comparatively few. Consequently, there is also a lack of research about personifications of Death in general, and about the three novels investigated in this essay in particular, which is partly why they were chosen for this analysis. Also, since they are all written during the first decade of the twenty-first century, they have both culturally and historically-specific similarities and differences in common. The essay will also take into account previous depictions of death, and sociological research about humanity's attitude towards death. I will examine the characteristics of the personifications of Death mentioned above from both physical and psychological points of view, argue that the authors try to portray warm images of Death, and demonstrate differences and similarities between earlier and recent depictions.

Background

Although the aim of this essay is not to analyse the function of personifications in general, it is important to introduce and explain the concept. A personification can be defined as "the representation of a thing or abstraction as a person" ("Personification"). It has been part of mythology, popular culture, art and literature for a long time – Joanna Wojtkowiak suggests since 800 B.C. (805). In literature, it is a common tool, especially in lyric poetry, where entities such as the wind can be addressed as a person (Nishimura 90). Further, the personifications can be given anthropomorphic traits and abilities – of both physical and mental character, such as an actual human body and willpower – gender, attires and the power to speak (Wojtkowiak 805).

In Greek mythology, the god of death, Thanatos, is not cruel, but rather a "kind, inevitable visitor" who gently brings the end of life with the touch of his wings (Wojtkowiak

805). This image can be contrasted with the one that appeared later, during the Middle Ages: “la danse macabre”, which can be translated to “the dance of death” – the view of Death as a grim dancing skeleton that often laughs as he comes after people (Wojtkowiak 806). The skeleton or skull image is also associated with the Grim Reaper, a robed skeleton with a scythe or a sickle. Macabre depictions such as these can be seen in for example horror stories such as Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death”.

Personifications of Death mirror how humans imagine death (Wojtkowiak 805). As far as personifications of Death in literature are concerned, there is thus a connection between the portrayal of Death and the author’s attitude; the portrayal can be seen as a reflection of the author’s and possibly also the surrounding society’s idea of functional, conceptual death. Robert Kastenbaum and Ruth Aisenberg suggest that there are four main images of death: 1. The Macabre – “a portrayal of repulsive physical decay animated by a personality that is viciously opposed to life”; 2. The Gentle Comforter – a personification that “has a wise and reassuring appearance” and is “powerful, sympathetic and understanding”; 3. The Automaton – a “humanoid blank” that looks like a human being, but lacks emotional capabilities and soul; and 4. The Gay Deceiver – “a physically attractive and sophisticated person who tempts his victims with veiled promises of pleasure – then delivers them unto death” (166).

Research shows that personifications of Death can be linked to not only a society’s attitude towards death, but also to the death anxiety of individual persons (Lonetto 404). People who experience strong death anxiety tend to describe Death in negative ways (Bassett and Williams 23). However, even more positive images of Death, for example as a gentle figure, can to some extent be connected with anxiety, since they express the need for comfort and consolation of death fear (Bassett et al 163). This argument would suggest that contemporary literature that involves personifications of Death reflects fear in a less extensive way than earlier depictions of personified Death, but that they still reveal death anxiety since they do not portray death in a neutral and accepting way, which some researchers suggest would be represented by mechanical robot-like images (Bassett et al 163). The fact that contemporary literature portrays Death in a less frightening way not only reflects but likely also affects people’s way of thinking about Death.

Who is Death?

Describing a fictive character can be challenging, and perhaps even more so when that character is Death. On the one hand, this might be because it is hard to know what to expect when trying to capture something – or someone – that everyone knows of, but no-one truly knows. On the other, it might be because Death's traits might not easily be accounted for in understandable ways, due to their complex, and sometimes supernatural, qualities. There are, however, a few perspectives that can be helpful when discussing Death. In this section, Death will be analysed in terms of gender, anthropomorphism and mortality.

It is a curious fact that even though a personification of Death very possibly could be sexless, the depictions in all of the three novels define Death as either male or female.¹ Our imagination seems to be limited to what we already know. Generally, there has been a tendency to gender Death as male, perhaps because Death can be related to power – a concept usually associated with men in Western culture. This has been the case in drama, poetry and prose. The morality play *Everyman* from 1508 shows Death promising God to “cruelly outsearch both great and small” (*Everyman* l. 73). Researchers like Edward E. Foster tend to analyse this Death as male (1). In Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* from 1667, Death is also male: “on me let Death wreak all his rage. / Under his gloomy power I shall not long / Lie vanquished” (ll. 241-243). Likewise, Poe's short story “The Masque of the Red Death”, originally published in 1842, also depicts Death as a male character (50). In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from 1891, where Death is not an actual character but only mentioned briefly, Death is said to have touched a young actress and “taken her with him” (102).

Likewise, both the Death in *The Book Thief* and the one in *Death: A Life* are male. Since this is not explicitly stated in *The Book Thief*, Jenni Adams argues that “Zusak's Death does not claim any specific gender” (224). Linguistically, however, it can be assumed that Death is male, since he continually uses the male pronoun when referring to himself. This is the case in the following passage, for example, where Death refers to himself as male when thinking about a story that Liesel has written down and lost in the aftermaths of a bombing:

¹ Due to the fact that not all of the descriptions of Death explicitly state Death's biological sex, the discussion will be based on Death's gender, that is, its sex according to “social or cultural distinctions” (“Gender”) and how the personifications identify and refer to themselves. However, there are no indications in the texts that Death's sex and gender in any way stand in conflict with the traditional binary view of male and female.

“How could she ever know that someone would pick her story up and carry it with him everywhere?” (Zusak 557). A similar argument can be made in the case of Pendle’s *Death: A Life*. Besides the fact that he repeatedly refers to himself as male, he is also described as “the only son of Satan and Sin” (Pendle synopsis backside), which makes it clear that he both considers himself to be male, and is perceived by others as male.

Although Moore’s *A Dirty Job* is more straightforward and states Death’s gender in less implicit ways, it is perhaps the most interesting of the three novels seen from a gender perspective. This is both due to the fact that it features both male and female Deaths – or so-called ‘Death Merchants’, as they are referred to in the book – but also because the novel seems to play with the ideas of feminine and masculine. The main character, Charlie, is described as a “Beta Male”, which is someone who – in contrast to the Alpha Male – is not gifted with “superior physical attributes” such as “size, strength, speed, good looks” (Moore 31). Being a Beta Male, Charlie also seems to lack courage, living “like an ant walks on the surface of water, as if the slightest misstep might send him plummeting through the surface to be sucked to the depths below” (Moore 3). Lacking both physical strength and valour, Charlie is neither a stereotypically masculine man, nor a traditional frightening portrayal of Death – a fact that will be further discussed later in this essay.

Charlie is not the only one of the Death Merchants who differs from earlier depictions of Death. Exploring the city one day, Charlie meets a woman in her late thirties named Carrie, “pretty in a lady-cop sort of way, with a nice smile”, who also works as a Death Merchant (Moore 194). The novel even deals with readers’ ostensible expectation of Death being male by having Charlie being surprised that there are female Death Merchants: “He’d envisioned all the Death Merchants as being men, but of course there was no reason to think that” (Moore 193-194). Based on Charlie’s statement, and the fact that the story features female Death Merchants, it could be argued that the book questions the validity of the tendency to imagine and depict Death as male. The fact that Carrie is described as an attractive woman and that Charlie finds himself wondering “if he should maybe ask her out” (Moore 194) seems to go along with an argument made by Kathryn James that “death is inextricably tied to sex/uality” (13). This is the case in *The Sandman Series* from 1988, for example, where Death is a young, sexy, perky goth-girl (Gaiman n. p.). However, the ending of *A Dirty Job*, in which it is revealed that Charlie’s six-year-old daughter Sophie is “the Luminatus” – “the Master of All Death” – challenges the idea of death as sexual, given that children do not fit into a sexual context physically or mentally (Moore 378). Thus, the

portrayals of Death in *A Dirty Job* not only confront the expectation of Death as male, but also defy the notion of Death as inherently sexual.

Even though Death in all the books can be described as either male or female, some of them are not as easily defined in terms of what they actually are. However, they all seem to be the result of anthropomorphism, that is, “[t]he attribution of human personality or characteristics to something non-human” (“Anthropomorphism”). In *The Book Thief*, there are several references to Death’s “arms”, in which he carries souls, as well as to his “breathing” and “footsteps” (Zusak 4). Death also has the ability to pick up physical objects in his hands, which is the case with Liesel’s book (Zusak 15). The instances where Death seems to resemble a human being do not end here. In the following passage, in which Death describes his appearances, it is suggested that he looks similar to the reader:

I do not carry a sickle or scythe. I only wear a hooded black robe when it’s cold. And I don’t have those skull-like facial features you seem to enjoy pinning on me from a distance. You want to know what I truly look like? I’ll help you out. Find yourself a mirror while I continue. (Zusak 329)

In the passage, Death may be implying that he looks like a human, or he is suggesting that he changes looks and reflects the expectations of the person who is dying, which would mean that we all see or make our own death. Either way, he refutes the idea of the Grim Reaper – the personification of Death usually portrayed as a skeleton with a cloak and a scythe (“Grim”). Even though he dismisses the idea of himself looking that way, he does have a positive attitude towards it: “I like this human idea of the grim reaper. I like the scythe. It amuses me” (Zusak 79). In combination with Death’s suggestion that he looks like you or me, it would seem that the idea of the Grim Reaper is so off the mark that he finds it almost ridiculous, and therefore amusing. Similar anthropomorphic characteristics can be seen in Pendle’s Death, who supposedly has “good cheekbones” (138) and a dark and “peculiar” voice (xi). During the novel, Death even goes from having neither veins nor blood in them (Pendle 26) to growing a heart (Pendle 186), a gradual change based on emotional growth and empathetic capability – the more humane Death becomes, the more human he gets.

In *A Dirty Job*, the personifications of Death do not merely have anthropomorphic traits – they are actual human beings. As argued previously, the novel shows diversity among the personifications by portraying both men and women. Additionally, it features

representations of Death of different ages – Sophie is only six (Moore 378) and Anton is somewhere in his sixties with “long, thinning gray hair” (Moore 192). The Death Merchants are also diverse in terms of skin colour, since Charlie is white and Minty black. In a discussion between the two of them, prejudice and racism are touched upon when Minty argues that cabs will stop for Death Merchants when they are retrieving soul vessels in general, but not for him since he is black (Moore 81). The novel thus seems to address prejudice both related to gender – as already mentioned – and skin colour through the expression and sometimes defiance of expectations.

Even though the anthropomorphic tendencies are both clear and numerous, there are also indications that the Deaths have supernatural powers. Zusak’s Death describes himself and his unlimited ability to carry souls as “miraculous” (537). Similarly, the Death in *Death: A Life* refers to himself as a “supernatural creature” that for example never experiences fatigue. The Deaths also seem to have the ability to be invisible, or at least to remain unseen. In all of the novels, Death goes unnoticed when retrieving souls. Minty in *A Dirty Job* explains the Death Merchants’ status in the following way: “Not invisible, so to speak, it’s just that no one sees us. You can go right into people’s homes and they’ll never notice you standing right beside them, but if you speak to someone on the street they’ll see you [...] It’s sort of a will thing, I think. I’ve tested it” (Moore 81). It is suggested that the Death Merchants control to what extent they are visible, or at least noticeable, to others while retrieving soul vessels. Likewise, Pendle’s Death has made himself “imperceptible to all things”, simply because the sight of him frightened the living to death (88). Clearly, there is a contradiction between the fact that Death’s appearance is referred to in all three novels and the fact that they are all invisible to some extent – a contradiction that further indicates that Death is supernatural, or at least has supernatural abilities.

To discuss Death’s own mortality may seem paradoxical, since Death’s death can be hard to imagine, but it is not an uncommon concept in a Christian context, where it is said that Death will be undone on the Day of Judgement. The idea is not new in literature either, as exemplified by the last line in John Donne’s poem “Death, Be Not Proud”, published in 1633: “And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die” (n.p.). Likewise, all three personified Deaths discussed in this essay are faced with their own possible conceptual death, that is, the end of their existence, in one way or another. Although the Deaths’ existences seem to be based on different premises, it is worth noticing that the discussion of mortality or immortality is both present in all of the novels and breaks with the conventional view of the

two being binary opposites; they are all concerned with what Kathryn James refers to as “the blurring or the violation of the boundaries between life and death” (20). The Death in *The Book Thief* clearly has some kind of incarnated existence; he has a consciousness, is able to move and so on. This is usually the basis of mortality. Yet he is unable to die, which is indicated in the following passage where Death ponders human life: “Still, they have one thing that I envy. Humans, if nothing else, have the good sense to die” (Zusak 522). The statement not only reveals that Death is incapable of dying, but also implies that he would like to die, or at least be capable of doing so.

This attitude can be contrasted with that of Death in *Death: A Life*, as he thinks: “how lucky I was not to have been born a mortal. The traumas of a finite existence were horrific” (Pendle 65). However, his immortality does not seem to be as unthreatened and obvious as he originally believes – rather, it is dependent on God’s good will, which he later shows awareness of: “I knew that without God none of this would exist – including myself” (Pendle 141). It is clear that the novel draws upon a conventional, Christian context. Indeed, Death’s existence nearly comes to an end as God and Jesus decide to phase Death out, since it would be ironic if Death died and they feel that they have not been “ironic enough of late” (Pendle 222). It can be argued that the use of the phrase ‘phase out’ reflects Death’s unclear status as living, a fact that Death himself reflects on: “Such an ugly phrase. It lacked a sense of finality, the clear cut that separated the living and the dead” (Pendle 225). Both the fact that Death can potentially be phased out and the fact that he feels that the possible event lacks complete finality indicate a blurring of the border of mortality. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Moore’s novel. Given that the Death Merchants are human beings, they should reasonably be mortal. Partly, this presupposition is correct – Charlie later dies, at least physically (Moore 380). Nevertheless, corporal death does not necessarily seem to entail spiritual death, since Charlie’s soul lives on in a body that consists of diverse parts from animal carcasses, which can be seen as a defiance of the view of mortality as something absolute (Moore 384).

Is Death Good or Evil?

Determining whether Death is good or evil is not as easy as one might perhaps imagine, since personified Death usually is connected with conceptual death – that is, the end of life – and this association may incline one’s opinion towards the negative, since Death then becomes the symbol of loss and grief. In this section, I will discuss Death from the perspective of responsibility for and agency in conceptual death; I will also examine what attitude Death holds towards his occupation, and show some contrasts to how older personifications of Death are presented.

Whether or not Death is responsible for and active in conceptual death affects our view of and response to Death as a character. All of the novels have in common that although the Deaths collect souls, they have not made the decision regarding who is going to die. In *The Book Thief*, Death addresses the readers with the following fact: “You are going to die”, forcing the readers to face their own mortality already on the first page (Zusak 3). The direct discourse continues as Death resumes: “I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. [...] I will carry you gently away. At that moment, you will be lying there [...] You will be caked in you own body” (Zusak 4). According to Adams, the somewhat abrupt change of tone in the last sentence “evokes a powerful sense of abjection”, and indeed, the direct tone in the threat of being caked in ones own body can make one feel inferior and powerless (224). Adams also argues that the contrast between the comforting tone in the first sentences, where Death carries the soul in his arms, and the confronting attitude in the last, with the description of the caked body, creates the view of Death as “both agent and alleviator” of the “incomprehensible threat” of death (224).

It could be argued, however, that Death lacks agency in death, since he arrives to gather the souls of those who have already died, rather than killing people by taking their soul. A passage in which Death describes how he meets the souls of Jews killed in Nazi gas chambers illustrates that it is other factors than Death himself that are connected to conceptual death: “When their bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up [...] their spirits came towards me, into my arms” (Zusak 372). The passage suggests that bodily death precedes the ascendance of the soul. Also, it is indicated that Death has rules that he is obliged to follow. For instance, he wants to comfort Liesel when her family and friends have

died in a bombing, to “crouch down” and say “I’m sorry, child” (Zusak 14). Nevertheless, he controls his impulse, reminding himself that such behaviour “is not allowed” (Zusak 14).

He also seems to lack complete understanding for who is responsible for deciding the moment of Death, trying to communicate with God in order to get answers: “‘God’. I always say that name when I think of it. ‘God’. Twice, I speak it. I say his name in a futile attempt to understand. ‘But it’s not your job to understand’. That’s me who replies. God never says anything. You think you’re the only one he never answers?” (Zusak 373). The passage does not provide any answer as to whether or not God is responsible; however, the fact that Death does not know who is responsible indicates that it is not him, and that if it is, he is not aware of if and can therefore not be said to control conceptual death deliberately. Also, the passage once again shows how the novel draws on a Christian context, both through the fact that Death prays and the fact that God is not in any way to be blamed for individual deaths.

In *A Dirty Job*, the fact that there are multiple Death Merchants would divide any responsibility for conceptual death among them, lessening the burden. However, it is explicitly stated that the Death Merchants are not actively part of death. When Charlie first meets Minty, he is not aware of the system of the Death Merchants, but believes that he is the only Death. After having seen Minty in the hospital room where Charlie’s wife Rachel passed away, he accuses Minty of having murdered her, which makes Minty explain: “I wasn’t instrumental in Rachel’s death. That’s not what we do” (Moore 76). He continues: “We don’t kill people, Mr. Asher. That’s a misconception. We simply facilitate the ascendance of the soul” (Moore 80). Indeed, the Death Merchants simply gather so-called soul vessels, objects that contain a person’s soul after their death, and store them until another person “is ready to receive it”, making them “soul reassignment agent[s]” (Moore 89). According to *The Great Big Book of Death*, the Death Merchants are supposed to get a calendar, put it next to their bed, and the names of the people whose soul vessels they are to gather – who sometimes have been “dead for weeks” – will be written in the calendar each morning (Moore 89-90). The Death Merchants thus neither decide who is going to die, nor form an active part in any person’s death. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that they are good, but it does make the reader more inclined to perceive them as such.

A similar system can be seen in *Death: A Life*, where Death simply reads the names of the people who are going to die in *The Book of Endings* – which lists “the exact time, date, and place of everything’s designated end” – and helps move their souls along (Pendle 65). Death is aware that humanity does not necessarily perceive him as uninvolved in decision

making regarding death, and therefore tries to explain what he feels is a “major misconception” of his role:

I don't actually kill anyone. I don't rip out the heart, or squeeze out the brains, or suck out the blood. I don't pull the trigger, or push the button, or put sharp things where they're not meant to be. I'm not responsible for you and your loved ones dying. No, you living do a great job of dying without my help. I just turn up once the convulsions have calmed down and the pulse has stopped, and I move the souls along. (Pendle 49)

It is evident that Death is not responsible for conceptual death. Indeed, his task is not to “torment, or tempt [...] but to usher, to escort” souls into “the Other” (Pendle 46). The mentioning of ‘the Other’ suggests the existence of some kind of afterlife, yet Death himself does not seem to have any knowledge of this afterlife, as he thinks about the souls he escorts into the Other, and states: “I never really thought too much about where they were headed. It was beyond the scope of my job” (Pendle 48). It is indicated, however, that reincarnation is a possibility, but Death adds that such matters are “outside [his] jurisdiction”, which once again demonstrates that Death's involvement in and responsibility for deciding who dies and what happens to them afterwards is very limited – if he has any at all (Pendle 108). Although it is indicated in Pendle's novel that humans themselves are responsible for dying, the question of responsibility still remains unclear – as is the case in the other two novels. If neither God nor Death is responsible, then who is? The question remains unanswered – a fact that may lessen the possible fear of God or Death, but that also can create fear of something other, or someone else. This can be seen as one of the limitations of the personification of Death in fictional contexts: things beyond human knowledge and certainty cannot be represented.

It is also possible to discuss Death's character from a moral point of view based on his attitude towards the occupation as Death. All of the novels have in common that they display the difficult aspects of being Death and thereby show Death as a character sometimes deserving of pity. In *The Book Thief*, Death repeatedly mentions his need for regular distraction, since it keeps him “sane” and helps him “cope” (Zusak 5). Additionally, he states that he needs to go on a holiday (Zusak 329). However, he is aware that this is not an option: “The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style holiday destination, whether it be tropical or the ski-trip variety?” (Zusak 5). Death himself responds: “The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted

me to make a conscious, deliberate decision – to make distraction my holiday” (Zusak 5). Clearly, Death feels that it is his duty to continue to collect souls, since no one else is able to do it. His decision shows that he thinks that his task is significant, and the fact that no one else can perform it makes him and his role important.

However, the fact that Death needs to find distraction suggests that some part of his occupation is mentally challenging. This humanizes Death and makes him seem familiar and easy to identify with. In the following passage, Death observes the colour of the sky to distract himself from seeing the loved ones of the soul he collects. He comments on his need for distraction from them:

It’s the leftover humans. The survivors. They’re the ones I can’t stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling amongst the jigsaw puzzle of realisation, despair and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs. (Zusak 5)

Evidently, Death finds it hard to have to see the consequences of conceptual death, to observe the sorrow that it leaves behind. The passage discloses both interest in and sympathetic tendencies towards the so-called “leftover humans”. An example of the interest Death feels in the ones left behind is when he visits the funeral of Liesel’s brother, although he repeatedly tells himself that he should “keep a good distance” from it to spare himself and not become too involved (Zusak 23). Nevertheless, he does not take his own advice, and he joins Liesel and her mother in the cemetery: “I was with them. I bowed my head” (Zusak 23). Death bowing his head could be seen as a sign of respect towards the dead, although his reluctance to go to the funeral indicates that he finds such matters painful, mentally challenging and perhaps also revealing with regards to one of his flaws; that he is “not too great at that sort of comforting thing” (Zusak 565).

It is not only the survivors who make Death’s task difficult. Becoming emotionally involved with the living seems to make it harder for him to collect their souls, which the death of Liesel’s best friend Rudy illustrates. Death comments that “taking a boy like Rudy was robbery – so much life, so much to live for” (Zusak 262). Collecting his soul seems very challenging to Death: “He does something to me, that boy. Every time. It’s his only detriment. He steps on my heart. He makes me cry” (Zusak 565). The use of the word ‘detriment’

suggests that Death would prefer not becoming so emotionally attached, since it makes his work more emotionally demanding. Indeed, being Death seems nearly unbearable at times, and Death seems to question whether or not humanity is worthy of his efforts. Therefore, Death collects a selection of items and stories “[e]ach one an attempt – an immense leap of an attempt – to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it” (Zusak 16). He seems to remain somewhat hesitant however, concluding that he is “haunted by humans” (Zusak 584).

Charlie, one of the Death Merchants in *A Dirty Job*, also seems hesitant towards the occupation. Initially, he tries to avoid collecting souls, stating: “I don’t want this job. I have a job, and a kid” (Moore 82). Gradually, however, he learns that he cannot avoid the task and therefore accepts it, a little excited by the fact that he cannot tell anyone about it, because while the concept of being a Death Merchant seems “a little dire”, he likes “the idea of being a secret agent” (Moore 91). However, the fact that the Death Merchants are not allowed to reveal to others what they are, and are not supposed to talk to each other, seems to become overwhelmingly oppressive after a while. Minty, who has been a Death Merchant longer than Charlie, feels the loneliness of the occupation “profoundly” and wishes that he could “talk to someone who had a clue about what his life was like” (Moore 260). Clearly, being a Death Merchant results in involuntary solitude, which makes them feel isolated and secluded.

A similar feeling is portrayed in *Death: A Life*, where Death expresses both regret and discontent regarding his occupation. He says that he is tired of listening to humans complaining about life, declaring: “Well, let me tell you that being Death is no picnic either. I’ve suffered heartache, cruelty, maltreatment, neglect. I didn’t always want to do this, you know? I have feelings too” (Pendle xii-xiii). Indeed, there are instances where Death expresses the wish not to be Death any more, and he starts pondering the possibility of retiring, and even to have a life, since he wants to “fill the void” inside of him (Pendle 155). As he becomes addicted to life, “the once-beloved nothing” fills him with “utter loneliness”, pushing him to tears (Pendle 161). The addiction to life is partially due to his infatuation with a woman named Maud. It is not until he recalls something most souls have mentioned, something that is “a plague and a pleasure, a virus and a virtue”, that he understands that he is in love (Pendle 115). Gradually, he starts to find soul collecting repulsive and tries to run away from his tasks as Death (Pendle 170-171). Ultimately, however, after having spent a long time in the rehabilitation centre where he is placed by The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Death returns to fulfil his duty and feels nothing but “a calm, empty serenity”

(Pendle 215). Surprisingly enough to him, it feels “good”, “like Home”, to be back inside bodies to detach the souls (Pendle 210). He replaces the Archangel Gabriel, who collected souls instead of Death during the period, and Gabriel asserts that he “never knew it would be so hard” to be Death (Pendle 216).

The Deaths in the three novels investigated in this essay to some extent all differ from traditional portrayals of Death. Zusak’s Death is presented as a character with moral sense: he symbolically steps on a photo of Hitler after having collected the soul of a Nazi woman who died in a bombing (564). Also, he considers what responsibility the average citizen had in the Holocaust, and feels compassion for both the children who are too young to understand what is going on but sufficiently old to experience the fright of bombings, and for the families who did not support Nazism (Zusak 403). Death thus pities the ones who suffer the consequences of the war without having the ethical stance in favour of the battle. Even though it is indicated that Death is against evil, he does not seem to treat malevolent souls very differently. Death briefly mentions the end of the war, when “Hitler had delivered himself” to Death’s arms, but does not explicitly state his feelings about this event (Zusak 582). On the one hand, this complicates the view of Death as moral, since evil deeds seem to lack consequences in his treatment during the soul collecting, even though he has the ability to treat good souls very well, carrying children and victims of the Holocaust extra gently. On the other, however, if Death were to treat these souls in a bad way, the view of him as good would perhaps be even more problematic, since Death himself then would be capable of evil.

The Death in *The Book Thief* is not only presented as a moral character, he is also portrayed almost as a soothing and healing power, who cures the pains inflicted by life. When Liesel’s brother dies from hypothermia, Death comments “when I picked him up originally, the boy’s spirit was soft and cold, like ice-cream. He started melting in my arms. Then warming up completely. Healing” (Zusak 21). Evidently, Death is not a destructive power – rather the opposite – a warm embrace that heals former injuries. Death himself assures that he “can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that’s only the As”, describing himself with positive, emotional and loving adjectives (Zusak 3). Subversive to traditional views, Zusak’s Death ensures that he is “not malicious” (7). However, there can be “great malice [...] in allowing something to live” (Zusak 270), and he refers to some of the souls he collects as “saved” from the miseries of life in wartime (Zusak 372). Indeed, many greet Death “like their last true friend” (Zusak 418) and he promises to bring them “home” for good (Zusak 500). This portrayal of Death as a warm embrace bringing souls home creates what Adams

refers to as a “compassionate and quasi-parental” image that offers “consolation” through the suggestion of “the possibility of a consciousness after death” (224-225).

Similarly, Charlie is presented as ‘the good guy’, since he tries to save the world from dark powers. Charlie refers to these powers as “sewer harpies”, because they whisper to him from the sewers (Moore 145), but *The Great Big Book of Death* – which is a guide for the Death Merchants – more diplomatically calls them “Underworlders” (Moore 82). Really, they are “the Morrigan”: Nemain, Macha and Babd (Moore 122). The Morrigan originate from Irish mythology and are usually connected with doom and death in battle (MacKillop 335-336). In Moore’s novel, they try to take over the world, and Charlie feels that it is his duty to stop them and defend the world from disaster (321). *A Dirty Job* thus shows Death as a good and protective force. Both Zusak’s and Moore’s depictions can be contrasted with the one in Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death”, where Death – a personified pestilence – goes to a masque and produces nothing but “terror”, “darkness” and “decay” (50). The vivid descriptions of “the horror of blood” and the “sharp pains” Death inflicts are very different from Zusak’s Death’s warm embraces and Moore’s Death Merchant hero who tries to save the world (Poe 41). Moore’s novel, however, does have some similarities with another story; Terry Pratchett’s *Mort*, a novel in the Discworld series published in 1987, where Mort – who is an ordinary man – becomes Death’s apprentice (22).

Death: A Life is in some ways a continuation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Both depict Death as the son of Sin and Satan, and question God as pure goodness; God can be interpreted as a totalitarian leader and Satan as a democratic rebel – at least initially. In Pendle’s novel, Satan wants to “instigate an Angelic Workers Republic” led by a “Central Seraphic Council” (7), and Death is, as mentioned, someone who admires life rather than hates it. In *Paradise Lost*, however, he is described as “Grim”, transmitting a frightening image of Death (Milton 42). Pendle’s novel can also be compared to the morality play *Everyman*, since God controls both Deaths. Death in *Everyman* is at God’s will, his “commandment to fulfil” (n.p.), and as argued in the discussion about mortality, God controls Pendle’s Death’s life conditions. However, the Death in the play is depicted in a darker manner, given that he will “run over” and “cruelly outsearch” all living things (*Everyman* n.p.), whereas Pendle’s Death is described as a trustworthy “constant” that life can “always rely on” and therefore loves (230-231).

Fearing Death?

One assumption about literature is that it both depicts and prescribes, meaning that texts both reflect and transform the context in which they are written. Since no one is able to tell what it is like to die, or in any way affect or influence the experience, this may seem irrelevant to literature involving personifications of Death. However, it can be argued that the personifications reflect how we imagine death and what attitude we have against it – even though the personifications are limited in terms of what we are able to imagine. This is what Wojtkowiak claims – that personifications of death mirror what we think about death, “especially when death is given a particular character” (805).

What, then, do the three novels analysed in this essay reveal about how we imagine death? Personifications of Death are in themselves a confrontation with death. The depictions analysed in this essay all try to close in on death and familiarize it, breaking the view of Death as a constructed “other” (James 20). According to Satoshi Nishimura, a personification as a literary device is “conventional” and therefore often familiar to readers (90). Personifying Death can thus be seen as an attempt at making the unfamiliar “other” – Death – more relatable and familiar through anthropomorphic characteristics. It could be argued that the familiarization is the most evident in Moore’s *A Dirty Job*, since the Death Merchants are actual human beings, and diverse in terms of gender, age and skin-colour.

The novel also directly addresses themes such as death avoidance – Charlie observes dying people “so far in denial about what was happening to them that they were still buying five-year-calendars” (Moore 206). The avoidance or denial of death is logically based in the fear of death. The reasonable response to fear then, if one is forced to confront it instead of avoiding it, is to create some sort of comfort. Adams suggests that the parental, consoling image of Death softly carrying souls in his arms portrayed in *The Book Thief* reflects the desire for comfort through “posthumous escapes” (228). Indeed, Zusak’s Death states that when dealing with souls that have had a extra hard life – the Jews in the case of the story about Liesel and the people around her – he picks each soul up “as if it were newly born” (373). The need for comfort comes through the awareness of the inevitability of death and the uncertainty of its character – which can constitute so great a threat to a persons “ontological security” that any confrontation with death is altogether avoided (James 2). Personifications of Death of a gentle character can thus be seen as something that lessens the fear they

themselves have inflicted by confronting death – they are both the sickness and its remedy. This type of personification can be seen as an example of what Kastenbaum and Aisenberg call The Gentle Comforter (157-158).

In general, the fact that Death tends to have a “flexible and adjustable nature” in modern portrayals exposes “the human desire to control death” (Wojtkowiak 807). These portrayals may be seen as a reflection of what Angela K. Banjar refers to as “The Art of Death” – the increasing trend during the last two decades in critical care of making an effort to “cheat death” and “elongate the dying process” using “aggressive measures” (35). The fact that we have more control over the dying process in contemporary society might be the reason why personifications of Death as grim and frightening, such as Poe’s in “The Masque of the Red Death”, are less frequent. This sort of depictions can be said to correspond with Kastenbaum and Aisenberg’s category The Macabre (155-156). Such images are strongly connected to “fear of death and death avoidance” (Bassett et al 169-170). Pendle’s Death addresses these images directly and refutes them as he says: “I’ve seen the pictures. You think I’m all grins and dance macabres, and interminable games of chess on deserted beaches. Well, it’s not like that” (xii-xiii). The fact that Death comments on these images and negates their accuracy indicates a distancing strategy towards the frightening depictions.

Evidently, all of the novels examined in this essay engage with death. However, they also – somewhat inevitably – engage with life. Is it possible, then, that the stories not only have something to say about death, but also about life? Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö observe that a finite existence could both be seen as something that “robs life of meaning” since “everything comes to an end anyway” and as something that forces us “to act on things now” (xii). The latter option is supported by Kastenbaum, who claims that “we live more fully and wisely when we have come to terms with our own mortality” (448). In other words, death can act as something that – or in the case of personifications, someone who – clarifies the meaning of life (Gilbert 333). Thus, the fact that all of the novels confront the reader with his or her own mortality entails that they might actually influence the reader to live a fuller life. Charlie in *A Dirty Job* captures this in a sentence: “I was afraid to live, so I became Death” (Moore 361). His statement reflects the psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s argument that “death reminds us that our time is limited” and that we therefore live more fully once we have experienced death around us (117). Kübler-Ross’s research is even referred to by Charlie himself, who talks about having gone through the stages of experiencing death – one of them being acceptance – with reference to “this Kübler-Ross lady”, thus demonstrating not only his

knowledge about death research, but also his having come to terms with death and therefore living more consciously (Moore 129).

In *Death: A Life*, this attitude is pertinent as well, as can be seen in a discussion between Death and Phil the Raccoon, who represents all living things in The Creation. Phil the Raccoon says that all living things “appreciate Life for what it is, in all its filthy glory” and that Death provides the knowledge that it will one day be “over” (Pendle 232). Overall, there is an acceptance of death’s existence and inevitability in Pendle’s story, which can be seen in the passage describing Death as “a natural force of Creation” (50). Death is also called “an intrinsic part of Life”, which is further developed in the metaphor of death as the door “you leave the house through”, arguing that the door is not less part of the house merely because you leave through it, just like death is not less part of life just because it ends it (Pendle 231).

However, the mentioning of souls in Pendle’s story complicates the view of the novel as completely accepting of death, since it indicates the existence of an afterlife. The existence of an afterlife can, according to Shelley Kagan, make people “reasonably worry about the badness of death” (206). The belief in the survival of death is not an idea that Kagan finds rational in itself, but the fear that the belief creates is based on rational principles, since death then constitutes a possible threat to your soul; death, on the premise of an afterlife, can be bad for you (207). An acceptance of death as a phenomena is thus based on the principle that there is no afterlife – an acknowledgement of the statement that “[t]he death of my body is the end of my existence as a person” (Kagan 206). Then, death cannot be bad for you, since you do not exist. Since this is not the case in either of the novels analysed in this essay, neither of them can be said to portray acceptance of conceptual death.

The novels do, however, try to approach the fear of death that – based on the previous argument – is inherently entailed by their portrayals of Death as a soul collector; a depiction that supports the belief in the existence of the soul. In *The Book Thief*, as argued previously, the fear of death is approached and consoled through the image of Death as a comforting power that carries souls gently. Although this image is visible in both *A Dirty Job* and *Death: A Life* as well, there is another, more pertinent strategy of dealing with the difficulties and hardships that accompany death with the belief in an afterlife apparent in the novels – a sense of humour.

In Moore’s novel, the fact that Charlie is a beta-male – a “disadvantaged pushover” – clashes with the traditional view of Death as a figure of authority, power and fear (Bainschab

39). This creates an absurd situation, and according to Alexandra Bainschab, Charlie's status as "a humorous character" provides "a certain level of comedy" in the whole novel, due to his cliché characteristics (40). Bainschab further argues that Moore's novels tend to show that "desperate circumstances" are "certainly easier to deal with if one does not take life too seriously" (100). In the case of *A Dirty Job*, desperate circumstances are not uncommon, and they are often dealt with by means of the novel's tendency not to take life, or death, too seriously. There are several instances of dark humour, one of them being the moment where Charlie describes his mission as a Death Merchant as being "a Santa's Helper of Death", combining a positive image usually connected with children with the image of death, usually not associated with children and traditionally not viewed as positive either (Moore 79). Also, chapter 18, the chapter in which Charlie's mother dies, is called "YO MOMMA SO DEAD THAT..." – a both absurd and dark name (Moore 222).

Similarly, Pendle's *Death: A Life* incorporates comical elements. When Death is being phased out in the second round of a wrestling game between him and Jesus – which is in itself a comical situation – all life on earth supports Death by going on strike until Death is saved from his fate, chanting lines such as: "2-4-6-8, who do we appreciate", "10-12-14-16, who keeps Earth looking pristine", leading all the way up to "1898988-1898990-1898992-1898994 who is waiting at the door" (Pendle 235). Also, Death addresses the reader and comments on the beginning of his memoir, which describes his childhood in hell:

I know what you're thinking. We're only two pages in and already we've covered rape, incest, mutilation, and abandonment. But in my family's defense you should remember that we were in Hell, Mother was the embodiment of Sin, and Father was Satan, Master of Misrule and Lord of Lies. Finger painting wasn't really an option. (Pendle 4)

The absurdity of discussing difficult matters such as rape, incest and so on, combined with the mentioning of finger painting, creates a bizarre image that evokes a sort of sarcastic humour, similar to the macabre humour also apparent in Moore's novel. This indicates that Pendle's writing too suggests that life, and perhaps more importantly death, is easier to deal with if one has a sense of humour about it.

Conclusion

In this essay, personified Death has been analysed in terms of gender, anthropomorphism, (im)mortality, responsibility, attitude and presentation, closing with a discussion about fear of death and coping strategies. I have argued that by giving Death human characteristics, making Death reflect on his or her own mortality, and disconnecting personified Death from the responsibility of conceptual death, the authors portray a nuanced, humorous and warm image of Death, and that even though these depictions indicate a more relaxed or accepting attitude towards death than previous portrayals, they still reveal a certain need of describing Death as a gentle or at least principled figure – a need that is ultimately based on a fear of death.

While the Deaths in Zusak's *The Book Thief* and Pendle's *Death: A Life* are male – which is consistent with most personifications of Death – there are some exceptions in Moore's *A Dirty Job*, featuring both female children and adults as Death. All of the Deaths have anthropomorphic characteristics, which familiarize Death and allow the creation of warm depictions. Also, the fact that the Deaths are faced with their own possible or impossible mortality gives the personifications the opportunity to ponder the value of life. Further, they are presented as more likeable than the traditional sinister view of Death through the removal of the immediate responsibility for and connection with conceptual death, and by sometimes having difficulties with performing their task as Death.

The fact that Death is depicted in a less frightening and distanced way shows that today's society is not as afraid of Death as previous portrayals suggest that older societies were, but the warm and sometimes humorous descriptions of Death and the possibility of an afterlife can be explained by defence mechanisms that reveal that we still to some extent fear death. The confrontation with this fear through the embodiment of Death reminds the reader that life is finite and that it is important to fill the limited time we have with as fulfilling experiences as possible. In other words, the encounters with Death in the novels discussed in this essay can give the reader a reason to try to live, and not merely be alive.

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