

CROSSING THE BRIDGE: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF BEING IN THE PRESENCE OF DEATH

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Crossing the Bridge:
Literary Representations of Being in the Presence of Death
BA Thesis

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Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Who is Death?.....	2
3. Being in the Presence of Death.....	6
4. Death is More than a Job.....	11
5. Conclusion.....	14
6. Works Cited.....	15
7. Summary.....	16
8. Sažetak.....	16

1. Introduction

Life and death are two necessary aspects of the existence of the living. In return, conceptual death cannot exist without the living; it has to be thought about to have value and it has to act as a cessation of life to have a purpose. If we were to look at the living as a result of life and not a synonym for it, we could understand how life is necessary for personified Death, but the living are not. Through the analysis of *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and *On a Pale Horse* by Piers Anthony I will argue that, unlike conceptual death, the character of Death does not need to be sustained by the living; it exists outside the borders of being an incarnation.

The first work that will be discussed is *On a Pale Horse*, a fantasy novel published in 1983 by Piers Anthony. The focus is placed on Death and his successor Zane. He takes on the role of Death when he accidentally kills him, thus ending up in a messier situation than the one he left behind; he has to go against Satan himself, to save the soul of a woman he loves.

The second novel, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, was published in 2005, and it is a gut-wrenching story about the period of the Second World War. The novel is interesting because Death takes on the role of the narrator and introduces the reader to the book thief – a young girl named Liesel Meminger. As the story progresses, we learn a lot about her life during an awful period in time, and we also learn a lot about Death. He is both amazed and haunted by humans.

In the following chapters, the relationship between Being and Death will be analyzed to prove that Death does not necessarily need the living, but they need Death. Death will also be analyzed in terms of mortality, physical appearance, and psychological aspects to prove that Death exists as an autonomous entity, not dependent on the living like conceptual death. Lastly, I will argue that personified Death has a purpose beyond being an incarnated cessation of life.

2. Who is Death?

Professor Joseph Carroll proposed the idea that the “evolved human need to make imaginative sense of life necessarily includes a need to make sense of death” (6) and how we live our life strongly impacts the image of Death we create. Another similar theory comes from a poem entitled “Things” by Lisel Mueller. The last stanza states that by giving what was beyond us human characteristics, people created a sense of control and a certain type of safety (Mueller 26) which explains why people chose to personify what they feared most – death. Personification “allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities” (Lakoff and Johnson 32). It is an attribution of human characteristics to an abstract quality, or in this case, death. Among all living beings, humans are on a higher scale of development. Well, personified Death is a scale or two higher, since they¹ are a supernatural being that happens to be represented as a human or human-like. In this chapter, Death will be analyzed in terms of mortality, physical, and psychological aspects proving that they exist as an independent being.

Piers Anthony presents two Deaths in his novel *On a Pale Horse*: one is a predecessor and the other a successor. As the title itself may indicate, Piers Anthony reshapes an already existing version of Death. He was inspired by the Biblical version of the fourth horseman: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth” (*Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments*, Revelation 6:8). In the *Bible*, Death provokes fear and creates chaos. However, when Piers Anthony’s personification of Death is introduced, he is only doing his job: “The figure that appeared was garbed in non-reflective black, with a hood shrouding its head. It closed

¹ When there is no specification of gender, Death will be referred to with they/them/their pronouns.

the door behind it silently, then turned to face Zane full on. A bald, bony skull looked eyelessly at him: This was Death, come to collect him” (Anthony 27). Later on, it is shown that each Death that would follow would have the same physical appearance when in their attire. Throughout the novel, Zane's predecessor is referred to as a rules-following average Joe; he takes care of business and does not allow for the personal aspect of his life to be an issue. In this way, he differs from his successor. He is chosen by the other incarnations: Fate, Nature, War, and Time, to assume the office of Death because of his stubborn and compassionate nature. When he becomes Death, he comes into possession of Mortis, an explanation for the title of the novel. Mortis is Death's steed capable of shapeshifting into transportation of any sort.

Chronos, the incarnation of time, explains that the incarnations do not exist not as a person but “As a personification,” [...] “An Incarnation of an essential function of existence. Persons differ, but the role continues.” [...] “We are also human beings, and that human quality is important” (Anthony 50). Death is not simply an incarnation of death; he is also a human being capable of existing outside of his role. Zane further explains that he is “a living man performing an office” and is alive and has the flesh and feelings of a man (Anthony 129). However, Death is considered immortal, unlike people. There is however a loophole since he cannot die only if he is not murdered because he is not affected by old age or sickness. There seems to be nothing human about the bony personification at first, but Zane's predecessor bleeds and eventually dies. This personification is more than just giving death a vessel; we encounter a paradox of Death being alive and being able to die. Piers Anthony emphasizes that Death is just as fragile as we are. He demonstrates that even Death makes mistakes and becomes careless. It is a human quality to be careless and it is a human quality to be mortal. After Zane takes his place, it is revealed that all Deaths share the same origin; they were human and killed their predecessor, thus taking his

place. In this sense, Death is a human who continues his life on a different plane of existence. Under his attire, which provides him with a form of a skeleton, there is flesh, and under his frightening exterior, there is a person, capable of love, caring, and compassion.

Zusak's Death in *The Book Thief* does not appear to other characters, nor do they see his face until the last few pages of the book when he finally talks to Liesel. Since Death narrates the novel, he provides a short description of himself:

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 264)

Zusak chose to imagine Death as a person but nothing more is said about his appearance. However, we know that he physically exists; he has a body. Death makes several references to his footsteps, hands, and arms, as well as his breathing and heart. However, he explains: "The human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle, and I have the endless ability to be in the right place at the right time" (Zusak 416). He draws a line between himself and humans on more than one occasion. Death states that by looking at ourselves in the mirror, we have seen his face, which might be Zusak indicating that Death is reflected in all of us just as much as life. Nevertheless, Death is not human but a supernatural being who shares similarities with the living. Death is indicated to be immortal but also dissatisfied with this particular fact: "Still, they have one thing I envy. Humans, if nothing else, have the good sense to die" (Zusak 416). Throughout the novel Death underlines his fairness: "Please, trust me. I most definitely can be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the As. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me. [...] Does this worry you? I urge you don't be afraid. I'm

nothing if not fair” (Zusak 9). Although he is not human, he is still compassionate and values life.

Death equals the end of a life, which in turn means that if there is no life there is no death. The character of Death is a paradox in this sense. In Anthony's novel Death truly is alive by all means; he is technically a human, and in Zusak's novel, Death's actions, emotions, and behavior indicate that he is alive. Taking this into consideration, Death needs life to exist. However, he does not need the living to give him existence. Unlike conceptual death, the character of Death does not need the living to create a physical image of them before they can appear or materialize. They exist on their own plane of existence and purposefully chose when they will be perceived by the living. Both Deaths have their own physical bodies, and qualities that define them, and they would still have them even if they had no contact with the living.

3. Being in the Presence of Death

In his work *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing*, Graham Harman points out that “as soon as we are born, we are already old enough to die” and how “the specter of death is always with us” (71). Humans and death are interrelated. In a sense, humans are defined by being mortal and conceptual death does not exist without the living.² However, in the next chapter, we will analyze in what relation are Being and personified Death, and consequentially, what are the responses to Death.

Carroll explains:

Responses evoked to depictions of death can include virtually any conceivable emotion. Death can be made a matter of comedy (black comedy, the macabre). And it can evoke joy—as when Dante in the *Paradiso* and Bunyan in *Pilgrim’s Progress* envision their protagonists ascending to heaven. In Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” as Ivan is dying, he has an experience like that reported by many people who have had near-death experiences—a vision of light and a feeling of universal benevolence. “‘So that’s what it is,’ he suddenly exclaimed aloud. ‘What joy!’” (Carroll 8)

In both of the primary works that will be analyzed, different responses to Death are depicted depending on the character who is dying, or on those who are in close relations with those people. It is simple to detect how the responses to Death are very subjective and do not depend only on the physical appearance of Death but rather on the aspect of being ready to die.

In the novel *On a Pale Horse*, Zane is the first person we see interacting with Death. He actually wants to commit suicide and Death appears at that crucial moment and startles him. In a cocktail of mixed emotions, Zane accidentally shoots Death with his only bullet, killing him on

² It is important to note that in the second section of *Being and Time* published by Heidegger in 1927, he focused on Dasein, or human being, and its temporality and response to death (Inwood 11).

the spot. In this scenario, the response to Death is fear and the correlation between Death and Dasein is created when Zane chooses to kill himself; Death has to assess his soul. Suddenly, while Zane is spiraling over murdering Death, Fate comes to his door explaining he must take over the position of Death in the office. From this point onward, Zane becomes Death. This personification of Death is invisible to those who do not think of him, much like conceptual death does not exist until it is thought about:

“Perhaps I misspoke myself. You are not physically invisible; you are socially invisible. People see you, but do not recognize your significance, and forget you once you pass. But when you remove the uniform, your powers fade. You are then vulnerable; you can age and be touched and hurt. So don’t step out of character without reason.” (Anthony 31)

This is an indicator that Death is always present in the physical world, but people choose to ignore him, so he does not provoke feelings of fear and such because he is simply not relevant to those who are not expecting him. Dasein can also see Death in a form it sees fitting at the moment or has a necessity for. In a span of just a few pages Zane is seen struggling with his new job as Death and two different responses of those who are dying are shown through his collecting of the two first souls. His first soul – a woman he found fighting for her life after a car accident – does not want to die and she opposes Zane as he tries to take her soul. As she was his first soul to collect, she did not see Death as comforting and ready to ease her pain, she saw him confused and scared – probably just as much as she was. Nevertheless, her suffering ends with Death: he is necessary for the soul to move on from the body. On the other hand, his second client, who was an old man, greets him as an old companion. He had recognized Death having already encountered him before. The old man is happy to see Death and even scolds him for taking too long. To Zane’s surprise, the client is not afraid and explains he could not wait to escape the

prison that is his body. This proves that Death is necessary to the living; without him, humans live past their expiration point and thus live in pain and misery not being able to die. As opposed to Heidegger, who takes interest in “being-towards-death, since this attitude is with us at all times even when it is concealed by our absorption in distracting curiosities” (Harman 71), Piers Anthony does not focus solely on the attitude of people towards Death but on Death’s side of his presence in people’s lives. Throughout the novel, Death proves to be a comforting presence, unlike conceptual death. He saves many lives, and those that he cannot save have their souls gently extracted and saved for later assessment.

A rather comforting presence is also that of Zusak’s Death. He is not physically present at all times in the novel, as the story does not revolve around him, but it is indicated that he is always present like an omniscient narrator: “I’m in most places at least once, and in 1943 I was just about everywhere” (Zusak 527). On certain occasions, Death presents the reader with a dilemma; he claims to be noticeable with his behavior but also makes a point of explaining he was not noticed. He recalls a day when his breathing was loud while he was supposed to come for the soul of Liesel’s brother, but notes that he is surprised that the guards did not notice him as they walked pass him (Zusak 17). On that same day, he explains that while extracting the soul of her brother, Liesel caught him out and how there was no doubt about it (Zusak 29). However, he seemingly refers to death and not himself. Liesel does not see him, but notices that her brother has passed away. It is indicated many times throughout the novel that Death does appear in front of people but he is not seen by them; they can only see him if he so chooses. When Death finally meets with Liesel face to face before collecting her soul she can see him, and they engage in conversation.

Death recalls seeing the book thief three times. Through Death's recollections of those occasions and his retelling of her story, we see her response to death. The responses vary throughout the novel and the five stages of loss by Kübler-Ross and Kessler: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, have their representations within the book. It is important to underline that not all stages have to be experienced; in certain cases, only some are experienced or, in really special cases, none are experienced. They also do not have to follow the order in which they are placed (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 18). Although the five stages of loss could have all been experienced by Liesel after the loss of her loved ones, the focus is primarily placed on a single stage at the moment Liesel is in Death's presence. The very first time Liesel is in contact with death is when her brother dies. Her primary reaction is to start shaking him which Death finds foolish: "For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. Es stimmt nicht. This isn't happening. This isn't happening" (Zusak 22). Thus the first stage of loss is demonstrated: denial. The second stage, anger, is shown when Liesel learns that her biological mother is presumed to be dead: "I knew it. The words were thrown at the steps and Liesel could feel the slush of anger, stirring hotly in her stomach. I hate the Fuhrer, she said. I hate him" (Zusak 101). Bargaining and depression come into play after the bombing of Himmel Street when Liesel loses almost everyone and everything she loves. After she sees Rudy's body she bargains with the pain and does anything not to feel the pain of the loss (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 25):

She grabbed him by his shirt and gave him just the slightest disbelieving shake. Wake up, Rudy, and now, as the sky went on heating and showering ash, Liesel was holding Rudy Steiners shirt by the front. Rudy, please. The tears grappled with her face. Rudy, please, wake up, Goddamn it, wake up, I love you. Come on, Rudy, come on, Jesse Owens, don't

you know I love you, wake up, wake up, wake up. . . . But nothing cared. The rubble just climbed higher. Concrete hills with caps of red. A beautiful, tear-stomped girl, shaking the dead. Come on, Jesse Owens. But the boy did not wake. (Zusak 453)

She finally gives him the kiss he so longed for, and eventually, when she separates from his body, she does not say goodbye. Death is amazed by her resilience. Depression is the one stage that could have been experienced following all the aforementioned deaths, but it is most noticeable after she realizes that her adoptive parents had died; her father's death hurts even more so than her mother's. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler write "the death of a loved one is unmatched for its emptiness and profound sadness" (33) and as Death would so kindly explain he "could tell that this was who she loved the most" and "the book thief was truly an irretrievable mess" (Zusak 455). The stage of acceptance comes last; when Liesel herself is facing Death.

As mentioned before, the responses to both conceptual and personified Death differ. Death does not stop being fear-inducing simply because he is essentially alive. As far as the relationship between the living and Death is concerned, the living need him as a means to escape suffering that arrives at a certain stage of life. Death is necessary as a transition from one plane of living to another but he is not the one doing the killing. When the time is right, Death simply takes the soul of a person and carries it away. In such a manner, Death and Dasein have a give-and-take relationship. Dasein gives a soul and Death takes it away, which translates to Dasein being able to move on from the suffering of being in the in-between-state and Death having a job. Both are valuable to each other. Nevertheless, people depend on Death more than he depends on them, and Death does not need the living to exist.

3. Death is More than a Job

What would define an incarnation of Death is the ability to take a life or to take a soul. For the two Deaths chosen for the analysis, this does not mean that they are Death only because of their job. In the same way “the possibility of death is [...] just one feature of Dasein among others” (Inwood 69), Death’s strongest connection to Dasein, i.e. his job, is only one aspect of him. Death is both Death as a profession and he is Death by nature, which changes depending on a personification. The job of Death is defined in both novels as collecting souls. Piers Anthony’s Death is needed to collect only the souls that are equally good and bad and those that are more one than the other go to either Heaven or Hell without Death’s personal help, but they need Death’s approval. In *The Book Thief*, Death also has the job of collecting souls, but he has to collect the soul of every dying person. Both Deaths are important for ending suffering that the living would have to endure without their help. However, Death can be separated from his job and still be Death.

Throughout the novel *On a Pale Horse*, indications are given that Death exists outside the perimeters of his job. The best example is provided when Zane, refusing to take the soul of a woman he loves, decides to go on strike, thus putting a stop to collecting all souls. As Nature previously explained to him, incarnations are necessary to mankind, and without them, the living are damned (Anthony 207). He learns that Nature is right after deciding not to perform his job thus impacting the living horribly. The hospitals become overfilled with people who cannot die and are as such stuck in a state of constant suffering. Death on the other hand is not impacted himself on any other level other than emotional since he is compassionate. He does not get overthrown, he is not killed, and he does not stop existing. Eventually, he becomes aware of his power:

“Death has to be inviolable, absolutely certain. Not even God, the Incarnation of Good, acted against Death when I declined to exercise my power in the world. Only Death can determine his business. Therefore you had to be powerless against me in this instance. I cannot defend this by logic; I simply know it is true. I have faith in my office.” (Anthony 262)

Technically, Death is an incarnation by occupation, but if he is not performing his job, he still has a life of his own outside of it. It is his good will to help people die because he is aware of the negative effects a world without Death brings. Zane does not like his job at first, but continues to assume the position of Death so he can remain alive. Later on however, he becomes aware of his importance and that “Death is the most sacred right of the living; it is the one thing that should never be denied” (Anthony 240).

Opposite to Anthony’s Death, Zusak’s Death has the same awareness, so he is in a constant state of work. He does not go on strike or a vacation, but he wishes to:

As I’ve been alluding to, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I’ve been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style vacation destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision to make distraction my vacation. Needless to say, I vacation in increments. (Zusak 10)

Death places emphasis on being tired many times. However, as opposed to Anthony’s Death, he is not replaceable. He is not mortal so he does not have a predecessor nor will he have a successor. He does not go on vacation because he understands he is needed by humans. By all

means, Death could abandon his post and decide not to collect souls, but he does not have the heart to do so. “Death is often haunted by the acts of love and hatred that humans are capable of, an unpredictability that is described as both appalling and fascinating” (Domínguez-Rué 516), and sadly because of his kind nature, Death is “haunted by the atrocities of the war and turns into a victim of trauma himself” (Buráková 69). There is nothing that would allude to Death being happy with his job; quite the contrary. According to Death, war is a mean boss, the sight of multiplying bodies and even the people that are left behind troubles him, and by the end of the novel he is “so tired” (Zusak 458) that he quickly goes over his meeting with Liesel. However Death might feel about his job, he remains professional and empathetic, and explains that each soul he takes is gently extracted and carried in his arms. Since Death is the narrator, Zuzana Buráková points out that “His fragmentary storytelling is arguably his attempt to be the witness, the story-teller, and the healer of the trauma simultaneously” (69), which indicates that he is, by his own choice, more than the job he performs.

There is a clear separation between the incarnation of Death that performs a job and Death as an independent being. Much like any person, Death is only defined by his job to a certain degree. Imagine an office party. One could ask an accountant what he is and he would state that he is an accountant. However, once he leaves his office he is no longer an accountant, he is himself, an XY person. If one were to ask Death the same question they would simply be Death in both scenarios. However, the accountant has to perform his job to be an accountant, but Death does not need to take a soul to be Death. He is Death both in the perimeters of our comprehensible reality, as a collector of souls, and beyond it, as an individual.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, personified Death has been analyzed in terms of their mortality, physical appearance, psychological traits, and relationship with the living in an attempt to prove that personified Death does not need to be sustained by the living, unlike conceptual death. Conceptual death does not have a role outside of being the end of a life. On the other hand, the incarnation of death in both of these novels, has a role outside of their job of collecting souls. They have their own mind, their own body, and their own life.

In the novel *On a Pale Horse*, while Zane is Death, he keeps a lot of his behavior and emotions because he is still technically human. He remains compassionate and stubborn as he was before, and manages to fall in love as Death. He proves that Death exists outside of his job, because he even stops collecting souls. His office stays intact, but the living are the ones who are suffering.

In the novel *The Book Thief*, Death is not technically human, but he is still alive in a sense. He is also compassionate, and goes as far as saying that it breaks his heart to see humans get hurt (Zusak 451). He usually points out his pain when those who are close to Liesel die, which again proves that Death is capable of empathy and even bonding with certain people. He also wants a pause from his job, and he could take one, but decides not to because he does not want people to suffer.

In both of the novels death and Death are divided; the existence of personified Death does not imply the abolition of conceptual death. In a certain sense, the incarnation of death is limited to what conceptual death represents, that is, the incarnation of death is limited to their occupation. Since Death is not strictly tethered to their job, and exists as an individual outside of his office, this proves that the character of Death does not exist solely in relation to the living.

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7. Summary

Humans have always been defined by mortality. If there were no living beings, conceptual death would not exist since the living give it value and purpose. However, this paper argues that the character of Death exists outside the borders of being an incarnation, as an independent being which has no need for the living. This is shown through the analysis of Piers Anthony's *On a Pale Horse* and Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. The character of Death is analyzed in terms of their mortality, physical and psychological aspects, relation to humans, and connection to their occupation.

Key Words: Death, the living, personification, The Book Thief, On a Pale Horse

8. Sažetak

Ljudi su uvijek bili definirani smrtnošću. Da nema živih bića, koncept smrti ne bi postojao jer mu živi daju vrijednost i svrhu. Međutim, ovaj rad tvrdi da lik Smrti postoji izvan granica inkarnacije kao nezavisno biće koje nema potrebe za živim bićima. Ovo je prikazano analizom djela *Na blijedom konju* Piersa Anthonyja i *Kradljivca knjiga* Markusa Zusaka. Lik Smrti analiziran je glede njihove smrtnosti, fizičkih i psiholoških aspekata, njihovog odnosa s ljudima i povezanosti sa zanimanjem.

Ključne riječi: Smrt, živi, personifikacija, Kradljivica knjiga, Na blijedom konju

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