

Death Has a Name: The Personification of Death in British Fantastic Fiction

Barbora Vinczeová

ABSTRACT

*The paper addresses the issue of the personification of death in British fantastic fiction based on an analysis of two novels, Pratchett's *Mort* and Lee's *Death's Master*. Common features are located and discussed, drawing parallels between the two representations of death. These parallels are found on several levels, specifically the appearance and personality of death, purpose and origin, the realm of death, sexuality and gender, tiredness and the substitution of death.*

KEYWORDS

death, personification, fantasy, fiction, Lee, Pratchett, British, *Mort*, *Death's Master*

Introduction

The tendency of men to attribute human features to inanimate or unknown things is natural in an effort to humanize the strange and the non-human, as “anthropomorphism is essential to the learning and understanding process. Humanity *needs* to bring its ‘deities’ down to a comfortable level for interaction, and *they* are often ready to accommodate us.”¹

There is perhaps no culture and no religion in which the image of death has not appeared:

Death is perhaps the most famous personification in literature, and one of the earliest is the dark-faced man with nails like eagle talons in tablet 7 of Sin-leqi-unninni's version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is best interpreted as a personification of death.²

Some depictions of death deal with appearance only, while others also discuss its gender,³ purpose, personality or motives. Today, many studies are concerned with the image of death in people's minds, distinguishing between several types such as the macabre, the gentle comforter, among others,⁴ or building an image of death based on the adjectives used to describe it.⁵

Death has not been excused from being reimagined in novels and in other forms of popular culture. Postmodern literature has taken inspiration from various myths, legends and tales. Comics,

- 1 Leilah Wendell, *Encounters With Death: A Compendium of Anthropomorphic Personifications of Death from Historical to Present Day Phenomenon* (New Orleans: Westgate Press, 2001), 5.
- 2 Daniel Nolan, “Personification and Impossible Fictions,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (2015): 57–69. Accessed August 28, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayt053>, 5.
- 3 Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 4 Robert Kastenbaum and Carol Herman, “Death Personification in the Kevorkian Era,” *Death Studies* 21, no. 2 (1997): 115–130. Accessed March 25, 2020. doi: 10.1080/074811897202038.
- 5 Jonathan F. Bassett and John E. Williams. “Personification of Death, as Seen in Adjective Check List Descriptions, Among Funeral Service and University Students,” *Omega* 45, no. 1 (2002): 23–41.

such as *Sandman* by Neil Gaiman (since 1989), feature the character of death, as do books (*The Book Thief* by Mark Zusak, 2005) as well as films (*Meet Joe Black*, 1998).

It is fictional works, specifically the genres of fantasy, science-fiction, and horror, which tend to work with the supernatural. Death as a human-like, but still non-human figure appears in works of British writers Terry Pratchett and Tanith Lee. This article compares and contrasts these two portrayals of death and draws a few conclusions about the greatest similarities and differences.

Several justifications make this comparison appropriate. Both authors were popular British writers of fantastic fiction. Terry Pratchett, famous for his *Discworld* series, might be more familiar name: “In Britain it has been estimated that 10% of all books sold are fantasy. And of that fantasy, 10% is written by Terry Pratchett.”⁶ On the other hand, Lee was not far behind, being “a prolific and popular writer who has produced over forty novels since the 70s [and who] has won the World Fantasy award several times.”⁷

Both authors were writing in the same era. Born only a year apart,⁸ they died in 2015. Pratchett’s first novel was published in 1971 as *The Carpet People*;⁹ Lee’s *The Dragon Hoard* also came out in 1971.¹⁰ The popularity of the two writers is indisputable. Their works transcended boundaries of fantasy genre, allowing it to expand and redefine itself. Pratchett “broke [the fantasy genre] down just to rebuild and release it to a new generation of readers and would-be writers who claim the man as a major influence.”¹¹ In a very similar fashion, Lee “disliked genre categories, preferring to distinguish only between fiction and non-fiction”¹² and her work “always mixed genres and blurred boundaries.”¹³

This article focuses on the analysis of the character of death in *Mort* by Terry Pratchett and *Death’s Master* by Tanith Lee. *Mort* was published in 1987 and was the first novel in the *Discworld* universe to focus on the character of Death. Similarly, Lee’s *Death’s Master* (1979) was the first in her *Flat Earth* series to focus on the character of death. Surprisingly, both authors invented a fictional universe where Earth is flat, but there is no evidence suggesting the latter publication took any inspiration from the former. Both analysed novels were successful: in 1980, *Death’s Master* won the *August Derleth* award for the best novel¹⁴ and in 2003, *Mort* was ranked among the top one hundred most-loved English novels.¹⁵

6 Andrew M. Butler, *The Pocket Essential: Terry Pratchett* (Harpenden: Pocket essentials, 2001), 7.

7 Jessica Tiffin, “Marvellous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern fairy Tale” (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2003), 128.

8 Terry Pratchett 1948–2015, Tanith Lee 1947–2015.

9 Butler, *The Pocket Essential*: Terry Pratchett.

10 Roz Kaveney, “Tanith Lee obituary.” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/01/tanith-lee>. Accessed March 25, 2020.

11 Craig Cabell, Terry Pratchett: *The Spirit of Fantasy* (London: John Blake, 2012), 233.

12 *The Telegraph*. “Tanith Lee, writer – obituary.” 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11636167/Tanith-Lee-writer-obituary.html>. Accessed March 25, 2020.

13 Matt Cardin, ed., *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to Our Deepest Fears* (Greenwood: ABC-CLIO, 2017), 540.

14 <https://www.worldswithoutend.com/novel.asp?id=1125>.

15 BBC. “Top 100.” 2003, http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/top100_2.shtml. Accessed March 25, 2020.

Both Pratchett and Lee are known for a specific sense of humour. Lee's writing was observed as "never quite parody, but a healthy dose of irony,"¹⁶ while Pratchett creates a "peculiar blend of tongue-in-cheek fantasy, cultural collage, parody, humanism, and incredibly bad puns."¹⁷ Consequently, it is expected that their portrayals of death naturally vary not only in appearance, but also in purpose, humanity and other characteristics.

It should be emphasised that it is not the intention of this article to force questionable similarities upon these works, but rather to point out common themes and motifs in the portrayal of death. It is also important to mention that although both Lee and Pratchett wrote a significant number of novels, this article cannot cover them in depth because of its aim and the limitations of scope.

The structure of this article addresses several points; specifically the appearance and personality of death, purpose and origin, its realm, sexuality and gender, tiredness and substitution of death.

Appearance and Personality of Death

Considering that death functions as a personified character in the analysed works, it is expected that it will take human form. In this section, a comparison is made regarding the appearance and personality of death.

If we look at mythology, we will see that "the Egyptians, when they thought of death, had in their mind's eye a personified being of horrific form."¹⁸ Brandon goes on to describe death from several points of view; Assyrians saw it as a being with two human arms and two serpent-like legs; Jews saw it as an angel-like figure with a flaming sword and Greeks had "the more sophisticated picture of Thanatos ("Death") as a winged youth, armed with a sword and of gentle mien."¹⁹

Death is sometimes portrayed as a fearsome entity, as seen in the persona of the Etruscan Charun, "represented with a most hideous countenance and armed with a hammer, with which he gives the death-blow."²⁰

In Catholicism, death is the fourth horseman of the apocalypse, famously depicted in paintings such as Gustave Doré's *Death on a Pale Horse* (1865) as a corpse in a robe on horseback holding a scythe, as well as in "Death and Life (1910–1915) [where] Klimt depicts death as a vague bodiless robe with a skull and bony hands holding a mace."²¹ However, "though classical symbols

16 Misha Burnett, "Guest Post by Misha Burnett: Tanith Lee's Tales Of The Flat Earth." *Castalia House*, 18. January, 2016, <http://www.castaliahouse.com/guest-post-by-misha-burnett-tanith-lees-tales-of-the-flat-earth/>.

17 Tiffin, "Marvellous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale," 159.

18 S. G. F. Brandon, *The Personification of Death in Some Ancient Religions*. The John Rylands Library, 1961, 321.

19 Brandon, *The Personification of Death in Some Ancient Religions*, 329.

20 Brandon, *The Personification of Death in Some Ancient Religions*, 329–330.

21 Joanna Wojtkowiak, "Personifications of Death," in *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2009), 806.

such as the skull are still used in modern images, in modern depictions, death possesses a more flexible and adjustable nature and is open to negotiation.”²²

Lee’s death is one of the five Lords of Darkness:

He was black, was Uhlume, satin black like panther skin, or polished black like a burnished black gem. And from very blackness he seemed carved, to the shape of a tall and slender man. But his hair was long and white as ivory, and his clothes were ivory, and his white hair and his white cloak furled and flickered behind his blackness as he strode, like smoke behind a thin black flame.²³

Lee’s death takes on human form. The description does not evoke a picture of a monster or a skeleton – death seems to be terrifying, yet references to his handsomeness are found.

Pratchett’s death looks much more like the Grim Reaper. His character is even called Death:

He is a 7-foot-tall skeleton of polished bone, in whose eye sockets there are tiny points of light (usually blue). He normally wears a robe apparently, woven of absolute darkness – and sometimes also a riding cloak fastened with a silver brooch bearing his own personal monogram, the Infinite Omega. [...] Death’s scythe looks normal enough, except for the blade, which is so thin you can see through it – a pale blue shimmer that could slice flame and chop sound. [...] His voice is felt rather than heard.²⁴

In appearance, it is Lee who portrays a more ‘human’ death, not a monster, a combination of a human and an animal, nor a supernatural being such as an angel. On the other hand, Pratchett personifies death as the traditional western image of the Grim Reaper.

The personality of death is a different matter. As already mentioned, while death is sometimes portrayed as a fearsome entity, although often only doing the necessary ‘job’ (the purpose of death will be addressed later), “[a] classical image of Thanatos is a barely dressed man with wings who ends people’s lives by a gentle touch. In this ancient representation, death is not cruel or frightening, but rather, a kind, inevitable visitor.”²⁵

In postmodernism, it has become common to portray death as a misunderstood or even a benevolent character. Kissova lists the example of death in Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, where death “detaches himself from the traditional depiction of Death as could be found in art and mythologies”²⁶ being more like “an employee, like a person complaining about work he hates but as a worker has to do. We trust this merciful Death who feels pity for the dying.”²⁷

Such detachment or freedom of interpretation is natural for postmodernism, which re-purposes received forms and concepts and consequently, “the idea of originality and authenticity is undermined and parodied.”²⁸

22 Wojtkowiak. “Personifications of Death,” 806.

23 Tanith Lee, *Death’s Master* (New York: Norilana Books; Winnetka, 2015), 25-26.

24 Terry Pratchett and Stephen Briggs, *The New Discworld Companion* (Lyngington: The Spartan Press, 2003), 106.

25 Wojtkowiak. “Personifications of Death,” 805.

26 Maria Kissova, “The Concept of Death in Children’s and Juvenile Literature: Reading and Interpreting Death in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak,” in *Re-Imagining Death and Dying*, edited by Dennis R. Cooley and Lloyd Steffen (Oxford, 2009), 62.

27 Kissova, “The Concept of Death in Children’s and Juvenile Literature: Reading and Interpreting Death in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak,” 61.

28 Jaroslav Kušnír, *Postmodernism in American and Australian Fiction* (Prešov: Univerzitná knižnica Prešovskej univerzity v Prešove, 2011), 28.

Death in *Mort* is not an evil entity, nor does it evoke fear. Pratchett lightens up the seriousness of the character, e.g., his horse is called Binky.²⁹ As both Pratchett and Briggs agree, “he is not cruel”³⁰ and “it is said that he doesn’t get angry.”³¹ Personality-wise, Death is very much like humans, developing personal likes and dislikes, using slang and appearing in comical situations while trying to understand humanity: “COME ALONG, BOY. NO LALLYGAGGING”³² and “TO HEAR LOUD MUSIC IN HOT ROOMS IS FUN?”³³ We can agree that “Death was one of his [Pratchett’s] finest creations”³⁵ which turned into a sympathetic character with understanding for humanity and affection for cats.

Uhlume shows considerably fewer emotions. Described as emotionless, distant and serious, “you could read nothing from his face.”³⁶ Uhlume says that “I am not necessarily compassionate”³⁷, although “Cruelty [...] is your food, not mine.”³⁸ Other than that, “he was a sad, ghostly and terrifying father.”³⁹

While Pratchett’s Death is cheerful and appears in situations such as “wearing an apron and holding a small kitten,”⁴⁰ Uhlume “said nothing and did nothing. Nothing really surprised him.”⁴¹ Lee’s death is more passive, his lack of actions attributed to boredom and exhaustion. Compared to Death in *Mort*, he lacks humour, but is occasionally ironic:

“I thought you were the doctor. I was mistaken,” said she. “I beg you to go.”
 “But you do not,” said Uhlume. “For these three nights you have prayed that you be relieved of one at least of these several mouths which must be fed, and these several miniature bodies which must be clothed and warmed.”⁴²

It can be concluded that Pratchett’s Death is more like the Grim Reaper in terms of appearance. His skeletal body, scythe and horse resemble portrayals of death such as in the noted painting by Doré. Nevertheless, the personality of Death here is far from grim – he appears cheerful, affectionate and sympathetic. Lee’s Uhlume does not at first sight appear as death, yet his behaviour resembles the reaper more than Pratchett’s personification. Uhlume is almost emotionless and takes little action, remaining constantly sad, melancholic and distant.

29 Terry Pratchett, *Mort* (London: Corgi Books, 2009. Google Books file).

30 Pratchett and Briggs, *The New Discworld Companion*, 107.

31 Pratchett and Briggs, *The New Discworld Companion*, 107.

32 Pratchett, *Mort*, 65.

33 Pratchett, *Mort*, 186.

34 Capital letters are used intentionally since this is how Pratchett indicates that Death has no audible voice.

35 BBC. “Sir Terry Pratchett, renowned fantasy author, dies aged 66.” 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-31858156>. Accessed March 25, 2020.

36 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 34.

37 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 26.

38 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 416.

39 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 157.

40 Pratchett, *Mort*, 276.

41 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 159.

42 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 33.

Although the portrayals of the two deaths are naturally different, both share a sense of humour. Pratchett puts his Death into comical or amusing situations, such as with the previously mentioned kittens which soften the image of death. Uhlume is not comical, although occasionally ironic or bitter. Neither of the analysed characters is cruel, yet Uhlume is emotionally unapproachable while Death develops likes and dislikes more easily.

The Purpose and Origin of Death

The purpose of death in mythology and religion is varied. In some cases, death is the god of the dead, the ruler of the land of the dead such as Hades or death personified collecting souls. For example, in Islam, “the Angel of Death (*malak al-mawt*) arrives, sits at the head of the deceased.”⁴³ The soul is then extracted and treated according to its good and bad deeds.

The motif of collecting souls is common in postmodern culture. In the movie *Meet Joe Black* (1998), death escorts a character into another life. In the television series *Reaper* (2007), the reaper’s job is to send escaped souls back to hell. The motif of “soul collecting” is also present in Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, in which death claims that “your soul will be in my arms. [...] I will carry you gently away.”⁴⁴

Pratchett’s Death has a rather clear job description: “I USHER SOULS INTO THE NEXT WORLD, said Death.”⁴⁵ As in the previously mentioned examples, death has become an escort to the dead – its primary purpose not being taking life. Killing is often attributed to an external force, fate, or destiny. Pratchett’s Death angrily denies being the cause of mortality: “I? KILL? said Death, obviously offended. CERTAINLY NOT. PEOPLE GET KILLED, BUT THAT’S THEIR BUSINESS. I JUST TAKE OVER FROM THEN ON.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Death in Discworld uses a scythe or a sword, depending on the person’s status, to cut the soul from the body.

Lee’s death is more ambiguous: Uhlume can kill, if he chooses to, and can also act as a collector of souls. He is usually not responsible for the character’s demise, which is again caused by fate or other factors: “Uhlume does not ordain the hour of your death. Your destiny ordains it. [...] Death is like the night. He comes when he must, but he does not choose the moment of his coming. He is a slave, too.”⁴⁷

However, Uhlume, being the embodiment of death, has one purpose above all: to ensure that everything mortal dies. He has one fear, and that is immortality. In a fight against a town with immortal inhabitants he is depicted as being afraid and aiming to destroy this place which threatens the existence of death:

“But answer me this, my lord. Do you fear what I have done?”
Tonelessly, Death replied:
“I fear it.”⁴⁸

43 Matt Stefon, ed., *Islamic Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2010), 84.

44 Mark Zusak, *The Book Thief* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2016), 14.

45 Pratchett, *Mort*, 25.

46 Pratchett, *Mort*, 25–26.

47 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 55–56.

48 Lee, *Death’s Master*, 329.

The purpose of both deaths is similar to some degree. Pratchett's Death has a clear "job" with given rules. On the contrary, Lee's Uhlume shows similar signs, such as soul collecting, but can also take life, while Pratchett's Death strictly denies killing people. Death in Discworld is more organized, while Lee's death has no clear aims and goals except to guarantee the mortality of normal mortal beings. To Uhlume, the only real threat is the immortality of people, against which he battles with all possible means.

Both novels touch upon the origin of death. In *Mort*, Death claims to have always existed alongside with humanity: "WHERE THE FIRST PRIMAL CELL WAS, THERE WAS I ALSO. WHERE MAN IS, THERE AM I. WHEN THE LAST LIFE CRAWLS UNDER FREEZING STARS, THERE WILL I BE."⁴⁹ The ever-present persona of death is equally unclear in *Death's Master*:

The gods perhaps had made him, once, long ago in the days of unformed things and chaos. Or perhaps he had only come to be since there was a need for him, or for his name. Yet here he was, and he stood there on the world's back, listening to that which pleaded, considering.⁵⁰

Both Death and Uhlume seem to have been present since the beginning – that is, if we consider beginning as the evolution of human consciousness. In both cases, the existence of death is conditioned by the existence of life.

Death's Realm

It is not unusual for Death to have a realm to rule over. This realm is either the land of the dead, some sort of underworld, hell, or purgatory. Some conceptions present a place for the dead souls with no punitive purposes, while in others it is a place of punishment or redemption. The common feature of such place is "the concept of a physical location inhabited by the dead."⁵¹ Generally, it is ruled over by an angel, demon or a death deity:

Many versions of Hell describe it as being somewhere underground or below the earth. The Egyptians say it was Amenti with pits of flame and demons. The Norse say the Yggdrasil tree had its roots buried in Hell. The Akkadians call it Kigal. The Babylonians call it Irkalia. To some it is a place of the dead and of no return while some say it is just a stopover region.⁵²

Death's realm in Discworld has no purpose of collecting souls in order to inflict punishment or to redeem their sins and it does not resemble hell in function. Nevertheless, Death's Domain is referred to as the residence of Death, where he lives with his human companions. It has a cottage, but otherwise is lifeless: "[...] there were no tree stumps to be seen; the trees hadn't been cut down in the circle, they'd simply been discouraged from growing there. Or had moved away."⁵³

49 Pratchett, *Mort*, 27.

50 Lee, *Death's Master*, 34.

51 Judith Fletcher, *Myths of the Underworld in Contemporary Culture: The Backward Gaze* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

52 Coulter and Turner, *Ancient Deities: An Encyclopedia*, 211.

53 Pratchett, *Mort*, 94.

Death also lives “outside time,” meaning that time does not affect those living with him and passes only in the world outside the domain. His domain also has several places for entertainment, such as a garden. The cottage Death lives in is described as large and

dry, dry as old tombs under ancient deserts. The air tasted as though it had been cooked for hours and then allowed to cool. The carpet under his feet was deep enough to hide a tribe of pygmies and crackled electrically as he padded through it. And everything had been designed in shades of purple and black.⁵⁴

The overall image of Death’s residence is gloomy. The colours of black and purple prevail, there is general lifelessness and the existence outside time conjures up a feeling of loneliness and alienation from the outside world. On the other hand, Death has embraced several aspects of the human way of living, such as the aforementioned garden, library, and a study. These aspects make Death’s realm in Discworld alienated from the depiction of the underworld or hell in mythology, where objects such as a fluffy carpet or rooms like a study do not belong.

Lee’s Uhlume lives in a realm called Innerearth, which is situated below the Flat Earth. Innerearth is portrayed as a vast, gloomy, empty space:

The plain below was a desert of gray dust, the hills were stone, and where their shadows fell they were black. Above, the sky of Innerearth was dull white and comfortless. No sun or moon or stars were lit here. [...] For sound, there was a deaf blankness, troubled in fits by a thundering wind. And though the wind thundered and pushed the clouds before it, it had no power, for the clouds went slowly and the grasses never stirred, and even the great cloak of Death hung slack as if its folds were full of weights.⁵⁵

Uhlume is the ruler of this land, although it does not contain souls of all the dead. One can stay in Innerearth only after striking a deal with death: “I. Sometimes, others. Others who have made the bargain with me, a thousand years in exchange for some favour only Death can grant.”⁵⁶ A thousand years of one’s company are the price that death asks for a wish to be fulfilled. Thus, Innerearth is filled only with such people as the others pass beyond, which is not known even to Uhlume:

“And when the thousand years are done, your soul is free to leave me.”
 “To go where?” asked Narasen, fierce and quick.
 “Do not ask for news of a life-beyond-life from me,” he said.⁵⁷

While Innerearth is by default empty, “a blank parchment where anyone may write what they wish,”⁵⁸ its functioning bears a striking resemblance to Pratchett’s Domain. In Lee’s universe, the dead fill the empty space with their fantasies, resulting in houses, buildings, palaces, exotic animals and plants. However, this is all equal to a hallucination:

⁵⁴ Pratchett, *Mort*, 39.

⁵⁵ Lee, *Death’s Master*, 38.

⁵⁶ Lee, *Death’s Master*, 39.

⁵⁷ Lee, *Death’s Master*, 36.

⁵⁸ Lee, *Death’s Master*, 67.

It is the illusion they make, these men and these women. [...] None of it is real, bits and pieces of their memories of the world and the world's riches, which they recreate here by their presence and because they cannot bear the Innerearth as it is.⁵⁹

Similarly, Pratchett acknowledges that Death's Domain is also a fantasy: "It's not real," she said. "Nothing's real here. Not really real."⁶⁰

While Lee's Innerearth bears more similarities to the mythological portrayal of the underworld, Pratchett also leans towards the aspects of gloominess, colourlessness and a general sense of dread. In *Flat Earth*, it is the dead who fill this void with their fantasies, while in *Discworld*, it is Death himself who creates surroundings to amuse himself and his companions.

The sense of false reality is explained in both novels. Death cannot make anything new or inventive: "He can't create, you see,"⁶¹ and only copies: "It's a copy of one he saw somewhere. Everything's a copy."⁶² Uhlume does not even bother to create and acknowledges that he is "the king of an empty kingdom."⁶³

In both cases, the two deaths live in "nothingness," outside the "real world." Time does not affect them, and they both fill the void with fantasies. Uhlume is more a ruler than Death, having created his own kingdom, trapping the dead for his own company and amusement. Death has no kingdom in this sense, since he rules over no souls, but has only a home, which resembles homes of ordinary mortals.

Gender and Sexuality of Death

The gender of death is an interesting and varied phenomenon through various cultures. While in English, the word Grim Reaper

would theoretically allow us to visualize the reaper as a woman as well, but we don't. German word formation is more explicit: "There is a reaper, Death by name," the folksong has it – "ein Schnitter," not "eine Schnitterin." Yet the female reaper is not at all uncommon in the art and literature of the French-, Spanish-, and Italian-speaking countries.⁶⁴

While Guthke claims that the female representation of death is not uncommon in Western culture, some authors perceive this representation an anomaly which became more popular with certain portrayals of death, such as in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series: "Here Death is depicted as a young and pretty girl, with a very pale face and black hair. [...] This feminine representation of death is anomalous in Western (English-speaking) culture but the popularity of *The Sandman* series may become a factor in opening the metaphorical door to a new conceptualization."⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Lee, *Death's Master*, 40.

⁶⁰ Pratchett, *Mort*, 145.

⁶¹ Pratchett, *Mort*, 145.

⁶² Pratchett, *Mort*, 145.

⁶³ Lee, *Death's Master*, 35.

⁶⁴ Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*, 7.

⁶⁵ Grazyna Drzazga and Magda Stroinska, "The grammatical gender of Death: a textual and discourse approach." *Text und Diskurs* 5, (2012): 218.

The need to assign a gender to death arises from the personification of the concept itself. In some cultures, death is assigned a gender based on the grammatical gender of the word – as often the case in Slavic languages, where the noun is feminine.

Both Lee's and Pratchett's characters are male, taking male pronouns and a male appearance. In Pratchett's universe, Death takes a human male form when appearing to the living. He is addressed as 'Mr', 'Sir' or 'Master'. He refers to himself as male: "I WASN'T CUT OUT TO BE A FATHER, AND CERTAINLY NOT A GRANDAD."⁶⁶ Similarly, there is no dispute about Uhlume's gender, who is also addressed as "lord," "king," and also takes male pronouns.

Sexuality is unavoidably related to gender, taking a morbid turn when assigned to death as a person. Yet, sexuality and death have been linked through the centuries. Shakespeare "makes the woman's death so striking specifically by infusing it with a potent sense of sexuality."⁶⁷ The relation of sexuality and death can also be observed in vampire stories, which "use the intimate and sexual relationship with death to mark active (female) sexuality as horrendous."⁶⁸

Love and death have been inseparable for centuries. In popular postmodern literature, the persona of death is also subject to this relationship. In the film *Meet Joe Black* (1998), Death falls in love with a young woman; Gaiman's Death in *Sandman* is not allowed any relationship with mortals, yet the possibility is not outlawed. José Saramago's Death from *Death with Interruptions* (2005) falls in love with a musician and pursues a relationship.

Pratchett's Death is capable of having relationships – he is fond of his apprentice Mort, has an adopted daughter Ysabell and keeps a servant. These relationships are work or family relationships and there are little to no hints at Death's sexuality. He is commented on as "I don't think he's the marrying type"⁶⁹ and displays no affection for the opposite or the same gender. He complains of loneliness: "I DON'T HAVE A SINGLE FRIEND,"⁷⁰ but expresses no desire to find a partner.

It would be possible to perceive Death as asexual. Considering the humorous tone of the book, the addition of sexuality to death might tone down the humour. Nevertheless, Pratchett does not avoid the topic of marriage for other characters.

Uhlume is strikingly contrasting in sexuality. The description of his appearance already paints him as a handsome and seductive figure with references such as "satin black like panther skin,"⁷¹ having slender hands and other characters seeing "his beauty too."⁷² It is also mentioned that "Death does not couch, Death does not couple,"⁷³ but in contrast with Death in *Discworld*, Uhlume is sexual to a much greater degree.

66 Pratchett, *Mort*, 318.

67 Sylvie Thode, "'As a Lover's Pinch': Death, Corpses, and Female Sexuality in Four Plays of Shakespeare," *The Nassau Literary Review*, <https://nasslit.com/as-a-lovers-pinch-death-corpses-and-female-sexuality-in-four-plays-of-shakespeare-d60ef8771d74>. Accessed March 25, 2020.

68 Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö, eds., *Death in Literature* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), IX.

69 Pratchett, *Mort*, 28.

70 Pratchett, *Mort*, 200.

71 Lee, *Death's Master*, 25.

72 Lee, *Death's Master*, 450.

73 Lee, *Death's Master*, 36.

Descriptions alluding to handsomeness and the seductive nature of death are completely lacking in Pratchett's universe, while Lee uses them with abundance. Uhlume even revokes his previous statement about not coupling by finding a female companion: "His smoke white hair brushed her cheek as he leant to her,"⁷⁴ and "Kassafeh, awash with adoration and fulfilment, raised herself and kissed the beautiful mouth of Uhlume, Lord Death. [...] And Death, who had been levelled by events, in some sort, to the replica of a man, responded to her kiss with an obscure intensity of his eyes."⁷⁵

Uhlume resigns himself to his romantic feelings, as demonstrated by the ability to kiss and lie with his head in his companion's lap. This can be seen as a reversal of the theme "death and the maiden," commonly depicting death as seducing and killing a beautiful young woman:

The tense relationship between lust and death is reflected in paintings such as *Death and the Maiden* (1517) by Nicklaus Manuel, in which the hand of death is under the woman's dress. Matthias Claudius's poem "Der Tod und das Mädchen" describes the dialogue between death and a young girl. The girl is begging death to pass her by, but death answers that he is her friend and he will not punish her. "You will sleep peacefully in my arms" are his last words.⁷⁶

Uhlume therefore goes from the romantic version of death which is not permitted love, to a romantic-sexual death able to have a lover as a result of a relationship which is the first of its kind and has "never been done in all the long history of men."⁷⁷ However, death is not the seducer, but rather the seduced.

Tiredness and Substitution of Death

The last common theme to be explored in both analysed works is the tiredness and the substitution of death. Both Uhlume and Death express the same tiredness that arises from the tedious and unchanging job for centuries. Boredom affects them both, resulting in forsaking – temporarily or permanently – their job and the domain they rule.

Death yearns to try what it feels like to be human. He travels to Ankh-Morpork, a Discworld city, in order to 'have fun'. These activities include getting drunk, gambling or dancing. Death perceives them as superior to his former job and insists on trying them, although with childish naiveté: "ALL THESE PEOPLE, PLEASE—THEY ARE HAVING FUN?"⁷⁸

As a result of Death taking a leave of absence, the role of death is passed to the apprentice Mort, whose personality fades as the characteristics of Death override it.

Uhlume is less demanding about his wish to leave his domain. He does not voice his wishes, yet this desire manifests through his actions. During the course of time, he allows the dead queen Narasen take over his duties to the extent that "those descending now and then forgot Death, and

⁷⁴ Lee, *Death's Master*, 451.

⁷⁵ Lee, *Death's Master*, 451.

⁷⁶ Wojtkowiak, "Personifications of Death," 805.

⁷⁷ Lee, *Death's Master*, 451.

⁷⁸ Pratchett, *Mort*, 187.

ran to her, begging favors. Queen Death”.⁷⁹ Uhlume cares less and less about the dead and takes more interest in the world of the living: “Whatever it was, it transpired that he surrendered that small kingdom, Innerearth, in favor of the other, greater one, the living world, where Narasen could not go”.⁸⁰

Restlessness and boredom are common for both deaths. Death in Discworld voices the desire to try some other way of life and actively pursues it, while Uhlume never complains about tiredness, yet passively hands his role over to Narasen. The exchange of roles is present in both analysed books – Death’s role is taken over by Mort, while Uhlume’s by Narasen.

This is an unusual take on a theme which Fletcher calls “the archetypal passage between life and death, and then back again”⁸¹ in relation to the myths depicting heroes descending to the underworld and coming back to the world of the living. In both cases, the character of death is the hero leaving their domain, reversing the archetype. The return – to their true purpose and world – is only made by Death, who finds out human entertainment is not for him and returns to his job, angry and dissatisfied with Mort’s function as death: “I AM BACK. AND I AM ANGRY”.⁸² Uhlume, on the other hand, does not miss his job and admits being tired: “The fatigue of a thousand centuries had caught him up. Why not?”⁸³

Both deaths deal with several issues, tiredness, boredom, and the need for new experiences. Death is very active in pursuing them, realizing human entertainment is not for him. Uhlume gradually loses his grip on his role and passively hands it over to the ‘Queen Death’, while he himself is attracted by the world of the living.

Conclusion

The paper analyses the personification of death in two works of Tanith Lee and Terry Pratchett. Both prominent authors of British fantastic fiction, their works appeared at a similar time and explored almost identical topics; the authors work within a fictional flat Earth universe which could suggest that one had been inspired by the other.

Several common motifs were identified while analysing the character of death: appearance and personality of death, purpose and origin, its realm, sexuality and gender, tiredness and substitution of for death.

Both Terry Pratchett and Tanith Lee had a specific way of understanding and exploring death as character. Tanith Lee’s death is darker, more ironic and passive. Her death is crafted into a character that, based on appearance, could pass for human. Pratchett’s Death is quite the opposite – sinister on the outside, but cheerful on the inside. This Death makes the reader smile, affiliating himself with kittens, parties and humorous situations which lessen the seriousness of the subject.

⁷⁹ Lee, *Death’s Master*, 452.

⁸⁰ Lee, *Death’s Master*, 452.

⁸¹ Fletcher, *Myths of the Underworld in Contemporary Culture: The Backward Gaze*, 6.

⁸² Pratchett, *Mort*, 298.

⁸³ Lee, *Death’s Master*, 452.

Similarly, Pratchett's Death lives in a realm that is again more cheerful and resembles human dwellings, having a cottage with a surrounding garden, while Uhlume's realm is a blank parchment for the deceased's fantasies. However, the unreality of both is again a common denominator – the absence of the real is exhibited in Uhlume's Innerearth and Death's Domain, both existing outside time and subject to their owner's decisions. It is again Death who attempts to look more human, while Uhlume rejects creating fantasies, unable to live in a world which is itself a lie.

While the appearance and personality of these deaths stand in binary opposites, a greater closeness can be found in the purpose and origin of death. Both authors concede the necessity of death to the living world. It could be stated that they based this necessity on the fact that everything alive must inevitably die. Similarly, neither of the two explains the origin of death, again alluding to the fact that death has existed since living creatures have.

Pratchett's Death eludes sexuality. While by default male, he is not interested in having a romantic or sexual relationship, confirming this approach by several quotes calling himself not suitable for such things. Sexuality might be the greatest difference between the two personifications. It could be speculated that adding sexuality to Pratchett's character might cause the loss of some of his humorous aspects. Lee's work in general is often highly sexual and her Uhlume tries to avoid love in the beginning on the basis of death being above sexuality, which he considers as strictly for humans. Later in the novel his opinion changes and he is seen with a partner. Sexuality per se is demonstrated not only by the presence or an absence of a partner, but also by attributing specific features to a character: e.g. Uhlume is described as sinister, but handsome along with numerous references to his good looks. Death, on the other hand, is never described as handsome and his appearance evokes fear rather than romantic feelings.

The last common theme was that of tiredness and substitution of death, again found in both works. This is dealt with in a very similar manner – both deaths are tired from their job and a replacement is made. However, there is a difference in the final resolution of the conflict: while Death actively searches for this replacement and decides to resume his duties, Uhlume passively allows his responsibilities move to someone else and does not strive to reclaim them.

We believe that this comparison offers a unique view on the perception of the selected topic by authors who made a significant contribution to British fantastic fiction, lived and wrote in the same time period and are recognized worldwide. The proximity of both analysed characters is rare. The closeness manifests in common motifs relating to the analysed characters, and yet distinctions originating from the authors' style are found. This is a confirmation that no matter how close the two authors stand, each has their own way of creating a unique character despite the common recurring motifs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bassett, Jonathan F. and Williams, John E.. "Personification of Death, as Seen in Adjective Check List Descriptions, Among Funeral Service and University Students." *Omega* 45, no. 1 (2002): 23-41.
- BBC. "Top 100." 2003, http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/top100_2.shtml. Accessed March 25, 2020.
- BBC. "Sir Terry Pratchett, renowned fantasy author, dies aged 66." 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-31858156>. Accessed March 25, 2020.

- Brandon, S. G. F. *The Personification of Death in Some Ancient Religions*. The John Rylands Library, 1961.
- Butler, Andrew M. *The Pocket Essential: Terry Pratchett*. Harpenden: Pocket essentials, 2001.
- Burnett, Misha. "Guest Post by Misha Burnett: Tanith Lee's Tales Of The Flat Earth." *Castalia House*, 18. January, 2016, <http://www.castaliahouse.com/guest-post-by-misha-burnett-tanith-lee-s-theses-of-the-flat-earth/>.
- Cabell, Craig. *Terry Pratchett: The Spirit of Fantasy*. London: John Blake, 2012.
- Cardin, Matt, ed. *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to Our Deepest Fears*. Greenwood: ABC-CLIO, 2017.
- Coulter, Charles Russel, and Turner, Patricia. *Ancient Deities: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Drzazga, Grazyna, and Stroinska Magda. "The grammatical gender of Death: a textual and discourse approach." *Text und Diskurs* 5 (2012): 205-221.
- Fletcher, Judith. *Myths of the Underworld in Contemporary Culture: The Backward Gaze*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Guthke, Karl S. *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Hakola, Outi, and Kivistö, Sari, eds. *Death in Literature*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.
- Kastenbaum, Robert, and Herman, Carol. "Death Personification in the Kevorkian Era." *Death Studies* 21, no. 2 (1997): 115-130. Accessed March 25, 2020. doi: 10.1080/074811897202038.
- Kaveney, Roz. "Tanith Lee obituary." *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/01/tanith-lee>. Accessed March 25, 2020.
- Kissova, Maria. "The Concept of Death in Children's and Juvenile Literature: Reading and Interpreting Death in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak." In *Re-Imagining Death and Dying*, edited by Dennis R. Cooley and Lloyd Steffen, Oxford, 2009, 57-67.
- Kušnír, Jaroslav. *Postmodernism in American and Australian Fiction*. Prešov: Univerzitná knižnica Prešovskej univerzity v Prešove, 2011.
- Lee, Tanith. *Death's Master*. New York: Norilana Books; Winnetka, 2015.
- Nolan, Daniel. "Personification and Impossible Fictions." *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, (2015): 57-69. Accessed August 28, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayt053>.
- Pratchett, Terry. *Mort*. London: Corgi Books, 2009. Google Books file.
- Pratchett, Terry, and Briggs, Stephen. *The New Discworld Companion*. Lyminster: The Spartan Press, 2003.
- Stefon, Matt, ed. *Islamic Beliefs and Practices*. New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2010.
- Thode, Sylvie. "'As a Lover's Pinch': Death, Corpses, and Female Sexuality in Four Plays of Shakespeare." *The Nassau Literary Review*, <https://nasslit.com/as-a-lovers-pinch-death-corpses-and-female-sexuality-in-four-plays-of-shakespeare-d60ef8771d74>. Accessed March 25, 2020.
- Tiffin, Jessica. "Marvellous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale." PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2003.

- The Telegraph. "Tanith Lee, writer – obituary." 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11636167/Tanith-Lee-writer-obituary.html>. Accessed March 25, 2020.
- Wendell, Leilah. *Encounters With Death: A Compendium of Anthropomorphic Personifications of Death from Historical to Present Day Phenomenon*. New Orleans: Westgate Press, 2001.
- Wojtkowiak, Joanna. "Personifications of Death": In *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*, edited by Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck, 804–807, Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2009.
- Zusak, Mark. *The Book Thief*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2016.

Barbora Vinczeová is a lecturer at the Department of English and American Studies, Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica. Professionally she is interested in computer-assisted translation, comparative literature and translation criticism. She has previously published papers on fantastic fiction of Tanith Lee, Catherynne Valente and J. K. Rowling.