THE GRIM REAPER, WORKING STIFF:
THE MAN, THE MYTH, THE EVERYDAY

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ABSTRACT

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Like any celebrity on the road to image production, the Grim Reaper has littered the pop culture landscape with guest appearances. He turns up in novels, comic books, children’s cartoons, romance movies, and more. Yet most serious academic attention to him—which little there is—persists in reducing his character to simplified concepts of mystery and evil. In this thesis, I seek to expand on such one-dimensional treatment of this increasingly fleshed-out character. Analysis of the figure of Death reveals he is more frequently portrayed as an “average Joe,” someone to whom we mortals can easily relate. Such characterization indicates a general loosening of society’s taboos against death.

I begin with consideration of artistic representations of Death from fourteenth century depictions of the dance macabre to nineteenth century images of Death passionately embracing young women. I contextualize such artistic works within the scope of a brief summary of the history of Western attitudes toward death, primarily referring to Philippe Ariès’ foundational text *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*.

With an eye on the continuing influence of this history, I then move into an analysis of common themes found in twentieth century popular culture appearances of Death, in movies such as *Death Takes a Holiday*, *Meet Joe Black*, and *Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey*; the comic book *Death Jr.*; and the television series *Dead Like Me*. We find in these examples Death engaging in behavior as a common man, acting with the desire both to feel some sort of human connection and to assert himself as a unique individual not restricted by the rules observed by those around him.
By appearing with increasing frequency in popular culture, Death has insinuated himself into our daily lives, not always noticed, but present far more often than we realize. His character indicates our returning awareness of the undeniable naturalness of death, of death’s inevitable presence within and effect upon our everyday lives.
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INTRODUCING: THE GRIM REAPER

Like any celebrity on the road to image production, the Grim Reaper has littered the pop culture landscape with guest appearances, but in the academic landscape he is in dire need of a new publicist. We do not traditionally associate the Grim Reaper with comfort or joy; we perceive him as shrouded by an air of foreboding mystery as heavy as the dark hooded cloak he wears. The great scythe he often carries contributes to his disturbing image, reminding us that he is also widely known as the harvester of souls. Even the most talented image consultant would have trouble keeping this recognizable appearance intact, at least initially, while still managing to craft an entirely different set of reactions to it. Clearly, the context has changed, and so must our analysis.

In films, novels, comics of both the print and web variety, video games, and television programs, the Grim Reaper has steadily progressed toward a friendlier, more comfortable image for the American viewing public. The shift did not occur immediately, and it is ongoing. Altering preconceived notions is a delicate process, particularly because many members of a society harbor the vast majority of those ideas without any deeper consideration as to why, because they are embedded in a thick layer of social beliefs and customs. This certainly holds true for the associations applied to the Grim Reaper. Consider American philosopher of ethics Fred Feldman’s off-the-cuff summary of perceptions of the Grim Reaper in Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death (1992):

In art and mythology, …the most compelling image of death is provided by the Reaper—the hooded skeleton bearing the huge curved scythe.

The Reaper is ugly and menacing…
Two aspects of the Reaper are especially noteworthy. He is *mysterious*. This is illustrated by the fact that the Reaper’s face is often hidden in the shadows of his hood. Death is taken to be weird or uncanny…

Death is also taken to be *evil*. This is illustrated by the Reaper’s malevolent glare. A visit from the Reaper is to be feared beyond comparison. (3, Feldman’s emphasis)

Feldman’s work does not focus on any specific visual representations of death, but on how society copes with death and grieving. His description of the Grim Reaper is brief and therefore very limited, reducing the character to a generalized impression. How accurate is this general perception of the Grim Reaper? Are “mysterious” and “evil” truly the two aspects of the Grim Reaper most deserving note, even today? As far as general descriptions go, do “mysterious” and “evil” remain accurate for the Grim Reaper as he is represented today?

Of course, we refer to him as the “Grim” Reaper for a reason. We do not perceive his task as particularly happy or light-hearted. His traditional form alone, even removed from associations of duty, inspires a certain amount of trepidation in even the most stout-hearted: a fleshless skull peering from the shadowy recesses of a black hooded cloak, intimidating scythe often in hand. Confronted by this foreboding image, we make associations with mystery and evil as commonly as Feldman suggests. However, we do find additional portrayals of the Grim Reaper which lend multiple associations and interpretations to the figure, and we might turn to these in the hope of gaining better insight into the (arguably) common and generalized perception of fear, mystery and evil attached to the figure. With such diverse representations of the Grim Reaper in popular visual media, examination of this icon can only increase our understanding of Western attitudes toward death and dying.
In recent years, we have frequently seen Death holding court in the media spotlight, not simply in the reporting of loss of life on news programs, but in fictional settings as well. Consider the spate of recent television shows dealing with death as a regular plot theme: *Six Feet Under, Family Plots, Dead Like Me, Crossing Jordan* and countless crime scene investigation and homicide investigation shows. Charlton McIlwain’s 2005 book *When Death Goes Pop* is an impressive analysis of the increased injection of death into the popular media landscape. (He pays particular attention to the show *Six Feet Under*.) His analysis extends beyond the overused debates about media violence to instead consider how the recent increase of death and dying in public discourse may be redefining our sense of community. However, as I read, I was struck by a glaring omission: McIlwain gives no significant consideration to any media representations of the Grim Reaper, the very personification of death, nor does he devote any attention to examining the nuances of meaning and significance various portrayals of the Grim Reaper may bear out. In fact, aside from very brief, passing mentions of the HBO program *Dead Like Me*, in which certain recently deceased individuals are recruited to become Grim Reapers, McIlwain does not refer to the Grim Reaper at all.

Considering the general lack of discussion of the Grim Reaper, aside from the occasional mention of him as typical death imagery and iconography in the discussion of death symbolism in art, perhaps we should not find McIlwain’s omission surprising. However, as such a standard and widely recognizable figure of death, the Grim Reaper and portrayals of him in mass media reveal a great deal about society's feelings about death. Surprisingly little investigation has been directed toward this well-known symbol, particularly since death itself is becoming so *en vogue* in popular media and also in academic circles.
Perhaps most scholars, like Feldman, simply accept the figure of Death\textsuperscript{1} as mysterious and evil and do not question his purpose beyond that general characterization. However, with the diverse portrayals of the Grim Reaper in recent popular culture, such mistakenly one-dimensional treatment of this widely recognized figure puts scholarship at a distinct disadvantage. When we do not consider the multiple additional manifestations of character the Grim Reaper assumes in popular media, we overlook clues to a Western understanding of death. Is the Grim Reaper simply mysterious and evil when he plays the role of the unworldly yet seductive Joe Black in the 1998 film *Meet Joe Black*? Is he simply mysterious and evil when he makes cameo appearances in the animated comedy television series *Family Guy*? Is he simply mysterious and evil when portrayed by men and women alike in the Showtime dramatic comedy series *Dead Like Me*? It bears pointing out, too, that the people of Mexico hold quite a different view of the Grim Reaper:

> In Mexico, where an annual celebration (El día de los muertos) is given over to Death and his victims, the reaper is much more approachable….Our Grim Reaper is mysterious and cloaked. That of the Mexicans is exposed, befriended, and teased about his boniness….Unlike Americans, who euphemize the newly deceased (or departed or defunct) but mock the buried and use morbid analogies but dread the reaper, the people of Mexico prefer to fraternize with the enemy and thereby steal away some of his symbolic power. (Quigley 21)

So a mysterious and evil Grim Reaper is not universal. Rather, different cultures append what sentiments are most in line with their cultural ideologies.

\textsuperscript{1} Throughout this project, I refer to “Death” and “the Grim Reaper” as though the two terms are interchangeable. While I do believe a case can be made for definite distinctions to be drawn between the two characters, for my purposes here, particularly in consideration of the number of my sources which use the two terms interchangeably, I have adopted a similar approach for convenience and brevity.
It stands to reason, then, that just as our perceptions of death do not remain frozen but shift and evolve over time, so too must the very figure so commonly used to represent death evolve, each incarnation influenced by the one before it. For this reason, this project begins with a consideration of historical artistic portrayals of the visage of death. I seek to contextualize these representations alongside a brief summation of modern Western attitudes about death, tracing the paths of scholarship established by those such as Philippe Ariès. From this foundation, I will shift my focus to more recent visual representations of the Grim Reaper in popular culture, paying particular attention to his increasing appearance as a common working man and what that representation implies about attitudes about death in everyday life.

As death becomes a less taboo subject depicted in mass media, its representative, its personification in the form of the Grim Reaper, is being made over as well, emerging as a more accessible character than the influential (and often parodied) figure presented to audiences by Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*. Numerous more recent portrayals present the Grim Reaper as an average working man (or woman). Increasingly removed from his traditional iconic representation, the Grim Reaper can also be seen wearing casual street clothes, dealing with thoroughly mortal and mundane problems such as interpersonal relationships and even, in the case of *Dead Like Me*, employment outside of his permanent duties involving the collection of the souls of the dead. Regarding those permanent duties, the Grim Reaper often struggles against the expectations placed on him, sometimes even going so far as to align himself with mortals, an idea depicted in the 1934 film *Death Takes a Holiday* and continued in that film's remake *Meet Joe Black* in 1998. That rebellion against a higher authority placing restrictions upon him is strongly reminiscent of what arises within a typical working man against an
obnoxious or oppressive supervisor. Numerous examples of popular culture clearly draw such parallels between the Grim Reaper and the average Joe.

I use many source materials to examine these different characterizations of the Grim Reaper. Though a short-lived television series, *Dead Like Me* clearly exemplifies many of the issues and interpretations at hand for the Grim Reaper, and will require special attention in my analysis. *Dead Like Me* addresses many overarching themes regarding fears and perceptions of death and dying, including questions of individuality and community, isolation and collectivity, grief, resistance, and the search for greater purpose or meaning to life. The show’s treatment of these themes places death in the everyday public sphere in an open and suggestive manner. This indicates society’s increasing willingness to engage in discourse about death and once again function with an acceptance of death alongside life. A consideration of the cycle of Western society’s shifting attitudes toward death as it relates to portrayals of the Grim Reaper follows in Chapter One.
CHAPTER I. DEATH LEADS THE DANCE: ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH THROUGH HISTORY

The earliest Western representations of a personified form of death can be found in fourteenth century depictions of the dance macabre—“an iconography that was frequent but not dominant” at the time (Ariès, Images, 157, emphasis in original). In The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature, Leonard Kurtz traces appearances of this theme in literature and art across Europe from the fourteenth to the early twentieth centuries. As Kurtz notes, “The earliest known use of the phrase Dance Macabré appears in a poem written by Jehan le Fèvre called the Respit de la Mort…[which was] composed in 1376 after the author had recovered from a severe illness” (21). Representations of a personified Death appear in art some time later, with perhaps the oldest fresco representation of the Dance of Death dated between 1400 and 1410, at Chaise-Dien in Auvergne, France. Images from this time period usually represent Death as “an emaciated figure [who] takes away the victims brusquely, sometimes assumes a tranquil pose and at other times seems to employ reason rather than force” (Kurtz 88). Much of the breadth of fifteenth and sixteenth century representations of the Dance of Death can be found in woodcuts of the time. In these images, the dead—not Death—lead the dancing. Death serves not so much as a leader or even as an active participant as he serves to accompany the skeletons of the dead. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Death is often shown with an instrument, particularly in Germanic woodcuts. Kurtz, for example, refers to a set of Dance of the Dead illustrations from southern Germany around 1480 to 1485, as reproduced by Albert Schramm. In them, figures are “arranged in pairs, one skeleton and one victim to a cut, Death usually holding the individuals with one hand and playing a musical instrument, a different one in each case…”
(97).² In many of these woodcuts (seen through the sixteenth century), such as Holbein’s 1538 *The Dance of Death*, Death proudly removes his resisting victims, “his face…split in a grin of satisfaction” (Ariès, *Images*, 176).

At this time we also see the emergence of a new theme which Ariès notes influences Western art into the twentieth century—the combination of death and eroticism. Within this trend, we find works such as those by sixteenth century artists such as Hans Baldung Grien (*The Young Woman and Death; Death Kissing a Young Woman; The Knight, the Woman, and Death;* and *The Three Ages of Woman and Death*) and Nicolas Manuel Deutsch (*Death and the Young Woman*), as well as by later artists such as Edvard Munch and Adolf Hering. These artists portray Death interacting with nubile young women in varying degrees of lechery—at times he simply leers at her, at other times he has her grasped in a passionate embrace. This image is occasionally visible even in modern popular representations of Death, although we more frequently find it with some shifting of degree. Rather than his advances being sexual in nature, more recent adaptations of this classic theme show Death striving for any sort of human connection, driven by a desire to feel and understand love—not necessarily passion—and feelings of friendship, belonging and community. Examples of this new treatment of the theme will be further explored in Chapter Two.

Nineteenth century representations introduce an interesting trend of Death visiting in disguise among common folk in everyday life, or at the very least having a greater depth of interaction and sympathy with the living—themes we frequently see in modern popular culture images of Death. In 1857, Franz Pocci wrote a series of eight brief stories, several of which

² It is interesting to compare these Germanic representations to those found in Italy from the same time. Italian portrayals of Death and the dead more frequently align with the Triumph of Death rather than the Dance of Death. Additionally, Italian portrayals also frequently represent Death as a monstrous female with wings. See Kurtz (1934) for additional information about the Italian treatment of the figure of Death.
feature Death performing his duties. In one of these tales he reveals his true form to a lady after talking with her while disguised as a knight. Kurtz also refers to Der Thor und der Tod, a one-act play written in 1900 by Austrian Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In it, Death (playing a violin) visits Claudio, a rich man with too much self-interest to pay attention to life and those living around him. Horrified at being faced with Death, Claudio protests that he has not really lived, so he isn’t ready to die. Death “calls him a fool [and offers to] teach him life before his end” and shows Claudio his mother, wife and friends who “had offered him life.” Claudio says “that since his life has been death, may death be his life” (272). Evoking a similar counselor-type Death, William Strang’s twelve lithographic plates, The Doings of Death (1901), highlight Death’s kinder, gentler side as he “does his work with reluctance, serving to comfort as a release from pain” (Kurtz 276).

In considering all these images of Death, we encounter numerous conflicting messages. Is Death a destroyer, mowing down his hapless and helpless victims like so many stalks of grain, or a charity worker, seeking to ease our pain as we shuffle off this mortal coil? Is Death a bat-winged monster or a knight with all the appearance of any man or woman next to us on the street? Do art and literature about Death evoke sentiments of fear and dread or complacent acceptance—even happiness—about its inevitability? To answer these questions and to gain a greater understanding of portrayals of the personification of death, we must extend our examination beyond artists’ representations of Death and the dying.

In the effort to resolve these seeming contradictions, scholars have investigated cultural attitudes toward, responses to, and interactions with death throughout history. Among these scholars, Philippe Ariès is most prominent. Author of the seminal Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present, Ariès proposes that fear of death did not really
arise until the twentieth century, when dying was removed from the home, sanitized and made unseen and unseeable. In that sense, for Ariès, the modern fear of death is really a fear of the unknown. He writes:

In a world of change the traditional attitude toward death appears inert and static. The old attitude in which death was both familiar and near, evoking no great fear or awe, offers too marked a contrast to ours, where death is so frightful that we dare not utter its name. (13)

For Ariès, this “household sort of death” of the past was “tamed death,” and today’s death, with its accompanying fear, is “wild” (14).

To illustrate this idea more clearly, Ariès points to historical use of cemeteries. Cemeteries were not always the tidily kept lawns dotted with tasteful stone markers that we are now accustomed to seeing. Rather, a cemetery was an open churchyard next to a church and often bordered by what are called charnel houses, with “the ossuaries in which skulls and limbs were artistically displayed,” an artistic practice which ended in the mid-eighteenth century (22). These bones were taken primarily from the common graves for the poor—ditches which held multiple corpses. “When one ditch was full it was covered with earth, an old one was reopened, and the bones were taken to the charnel houses” (22).

Furthermore, cemeteries were very much public spaces. Referring to the etymology of the word “cemetery” (“cimetière,” a place of refuge or asylum), Ariès states:

Thus, within this asylum called a cemetery, whether or not bodies were buried there, people began to reside, to build houses…[People] became accustomed to meeting within this asylum, …in order to carry on business, to dance and gamble, or simply for the pleasure of being together. (23)
However, in 1231 the Church Council of Rouen banned dancing in cemeteries, with excommunication the sentence for violation of the ban. Another council in 1405 “forbade dancing in cemeteries, [as well as] any form of gambling there, and forbade mummers and jugglers, theatrical troops, musicians, and charlatans to carry on their doubtful trades there” (24). Ariès refers to Berthold’s 1657 journal about a journey to Paris with the burlesque in drawing his conclusion that by this time the church had succeeded in making people feel “disturbed by the juxtaposition of death and life’s events” (24). Subsequently, we see even further distinctions drawn between the dead and the living—bones and signs of death gradually became unsightly and cemeteries became more and more isolated from normal areas of everyday life.

We can see, then, from this brief explanation of cemeteries, that not only were people less reluctant to interact and commingle in the space of the dead, but the artifacts of death—the bones of the dead—that we now consider so grotesque, unclean, and unsightly were once seen in a very different light. While today we may generally attach fright and disgust to the bony visage of Death, it is likely that at least prior to the seventeenth century, those sentiments were less pervasive; rather, the skeleton of Death was viewed with a fascinated awe as the mediator of “an imaginary space halfway between the natural and the supernatural” (Ariès, Images, 180). What happened in the intervening centuries to pull such representations of Death and its artifacts into the realm of fear and mystery?

To better understand that, we might begin by looking at Ariès’s summarization of man’s attitudes toward death. First, he outlines the idea of “Et morie-mur, and we shall all die” (55). As outlined in the discussion above, this attitude refers to the perception of death as the logical order of nature and therefore nothing to be treated with disgust or suspicion. Familiarity with the event and with its effects upon the body, particularly on a day-to-day basis, meant that one could more
easily accept death as the natural fate for every living thing. Ariès relates man’s second attitude to death as “la mort de soi, one’s own death” (55). The idea of the eventual death of all was turned inward and individualized. For Ariès, “from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries…Death became the occasion when man was most able to reach an awareness of himself” (45-6). Thus during this time period we see images of individuals side-by-side and even hand-in-hand with Death.

In the eighteenth century, a shift took place. Focus turned outward again, and man became “less concerned with his own death than with la mort de toi, the death of the other person, whose loss and memory inspired in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the new cult of tombs and cemeteries and the romantic, rhetorical treatment of death” (56). At this time, death came to be seen as “disquieting and greedy…a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world” (57). In the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, artistic representations played a close relationship between death and love, and the nineteenth century saw an alteration in the ritual of mourning as it had been practiced since the Middle Ages. At this time emerged the phenomenon of “hysterical mourning” according to Ariès:

mourning was unfurled with an uncustomary degree of ostentation. It even claimed to have no obligations to social conventions and to be the most spontaneous and insurmountable expression of a very grave wound: people cried, fainted, languished, and fasted… (67)

For Ariès, this newly developed practice clearly marks the shift of focus to la mort de toi, and moreover indicates survivors’ increasing difficulty in accepting the death of another person. By
the middle of the twentieth century that difficulty manifested itself even more clearly. As families became less capable of tending to their ill and dying in the home, the site of sickness and death was relocated to hospitals. Increasingly, the process of death occurred behind closed doors and what was once familiar and natural gradually became more shrouded in mystery, until the idea of death rivaled sex as a cultural taboo (Gorer, Ariès, McIlwain).

Social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, however, notes that as death “as a natural process” (195, emphasis in original) became more firmly entrenched in notions of fear, denial, and privacy, we can see a certain amount of resistance building against the taboo, a desire to exercise power over the fear, in the way that the mass media more frequently engages in portraying the violent death for audiences (Gorer). For McIlwain, this gradual shifting of death from taboo topic to popular discourse marks both a fear of and a craving for death, a desire “to keep it close at hand so that every now and then, and more and more, we take a peek into its dark shadows, hoping to fulfill some expectation about what it is like” (13). His analysis of that desire, as he applies it to Six Feet Under, can also extend to recent representations of death in the form of the Grim Reaper, with the same trends and themes making appearances.

As this chapter has demonstrated, images of the figure of Death have a rich and varied history. That richness and variation continues today; it seems in recent years the media has inundated us with representations of the character. Why the surge of images of Death? While we

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3 A brief list of examples: we find Death making appearances in well-known movies of multiple genres, from romances such as Meet Joe Black to comedies such as Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey and Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life; many television shows, such as Dead Like Me, Touched by an Angel, Cartoon Network’s The Grim Adventures of Bill and Mandy, as well as other cartoons including Animaniacs, The Simpsons, The Family Guy, South Park, and even a Mickey Mouse cartoon; novels such as Terry Pratchett’s Discworld series, Good Omens (also by Pratchett, written with Neil Gaiman), and Piers Anthony’s Incarnations of Immortality series; numerous comics, like Gaiman’s Sandman series, Garth Ennis’s Preacher, and webcomics like JACK by David Hopkins and Irregular Webcomic! by David Morgan-Marr; and several video games, such as Death Jr. (based on the comic book by Gary Whitta and Ted Naifeh), The Sims, and Grim Fandango. There are countless other examples worthy of consideration in addition to these; this simply serves as an abbreviated list of those instances which are most familiar to the widest audience.
will not find a simple and clear-cut answer to this question, I would like to propose considering sociologist Clive Seale’s “Media constructions of dying alone: A form of ‘bad death’” as a clue to approaching an understanding of the issue. In this article, Seale refers to Western society’s pervasive fear of dying alone and what such a death intimates about the deceased person’s character. In his examination of multiple news articles about people who died alone, Seale states:

A common portrayal of people who died alone was that of the reclusive eccentric…Self-neglect featured strongly in such stories…

[The] person’s (eccentric) relationship with animals as substitutes for human companionship was mentioned…

These sympathy-inducing reports, however, could sometimes turn into more critical accounts, where a death alone began to appear as retribution for character flaws. Elderly people living alone, for example, could be portrayed as partly responsible for their death alone through an unreasonable attachment to independence” (970).

Although a fictional character, the figure of Death ensures no one will die ignobly and alone. One may be odd, one may fail to take proper care of oneself, or one may prefer to cherish bonds of friendship with animals rather than with humans, but one is guaranteed a traveling companion when one’s time for passing comes. Death’s personified form serves as a reminder of human nature, human needs and desires—elements we strive for in life, and which do not necessarily flee us in the face of Death. If those human desires are significant enough for Death to pay attention to them, so much that he continues to pursue them even in his afterlife, who are we to ignore them while living? One need we frequently see Death express is that of human companionship. This theme is explored in Chapter Two.
CHAPTER II. DEATH MAKES A LOVE CONNECTION: EROTICISM AND RELATIONSHIPS

As discussed in the previous chapter, the sixteenth century saw the emergence of a particular theme in representations of Death: the combination of death and love or sexual attraction. Of course, these themes were evident in art and literature long before this period—we think not only of the myth of Persephone’s abduction to Hades, but also of classic romantic tragedies such as Romeo and Juliet and Tristan and Isolde. However, during the sixteenth century, artists began placing a humanized form of Death alongside nubile young women, lending these works an air of deadly eroticism the likes of which had not been seen before. This would influence Western art into the twentieth century. In these images, we see Death, no longer satisfied simply guiding the dead, but

As he passes on his way, the nimble skeleton seizes without compunction whatever perverse pleasures have been left behind by the inhabitants of the beyond. Shamelessly, he gropes lasciviously up the skirts of a young woman he has called for: the abduction becomes rape and violation. (Ariès, Images, 176)

German artist Hans Baldung Grien (1484-1545) utilized such imagery to varying degrees in several works, including The Young Woman and Death; Death Kissing a Young Woman; The Knight, the Woman, and Death; and The Three Ages of Woman and Death. In some of Baldung’s pieces (The Young Woman and Death and The Three Ages of Woman and Death) the figure of Death acts as a somewhat passive voyeur although he actively projects a sexual gaze. He lurks over the shoulder of the nude young women, his skeletal face frozen in a leering rictus, while she, the object of his desire, appears unaware of his presence or his intentions. In The Young
**Woman and Death**, her steady gaze is turned outward, to the viewers, and in *The Three Ages of Woman and Death* the beautiful young woman stares at her own image in the mirror she holds, her back turned to Death in blithe ignorance or arrogance, while the old woman faces Death with one hand flung out as if to ward him off. The women of *Death Kissing a Young Woman* and *The Knight, the Woman, and Death*, like the old woman in *The Three Ages*, are very much aware of Death’s presence, as he touches them quite forcefully. In *Death Kissing a Young Woman*, he grips the young woman’s side and head, forcing her to turn and meet his kiss. She presents the very image of resistance, her body held taut and her eyes turned away from his visage. The woman in *The Knight, the Woman, and Death* refuses to look at Death as well, instead burying her face against the knight she clings to, as he attempts to bear her away on his steed. Death’s grip on her is violent and determined, however, and he not only pulls at her outstretched leg, he also grips her dress between his teeth. The struggle is tense, and while we know the inevitable outcome—what mortal, after all, can withstand Death’s grasp indefinitely?—we cannot help but hope to see the horse bound away, the young woman safely freed from Death’s unwanted advances.

However, in works from this time, women’s interaction with a lascivious Death is not limited to ignorance or resistance. Nicolas Manuel Deutsch’s *Death and the Young Woman* (1517) portrays a cadaverous Death embracing a young woman as a lover. Their heads are turned gently toward one another—and one of his hands steals up her gown! She places her hand on his, but whether she intends to stop him or guide him is unclear. Her positioning suggests a certain amount of complicity on her part, and does not imply that she is simply passively receiving Death’s fondling.
Such erotic portrayals of Death continue to make appearances along art history’s timeline. Consider Edvard Munch’s representations of the same theme. His 1894 engraving *Death and the Maiden* shows the back of a nude female as she embraces and is embraced by the skeletal figure of Death. In this piece, the young woman clearly engages willingly in her actions with Death. She does not appear to be resisting the embrace; one can suppose, then, that she herself is an active force in this interaction. Another of Munch’s works, *The Kiss of Death* (1899), shows the female in a similar light. In this etching, Death’s bare, fleshless skull presses a gentle kiss against a young woman’s cheek. The woman looks away and appears indifferent to Death’s sweet advances. While we can see only the figures’ heads in this piece, the woman does not appear to be struggling in desperation or disgust. Rather, she passively accepts his kiss—but her very passivity seems to mark her control of the situation.

Compare Munch’s *The Kiss of Death* to Adolf Hering’s *The Young Girl and Death* (c. 1900). In Hering’s piece the shrouded figure of Death gently holds the young woman, bending her backward in his arms. Her body appears willing for the embrace, but we see on her face a sad and hopeless resignation. She does not struggle against Death, but unlike the stance of Munch’s young women, Hering’s young girl’s submission does not indicate control or agency.

We see the interplay between death and eroticism recast in recent popular culture. Where once Death grasped the young woman with the bony fingers of his skeletal form, he now frequently assumes human form. As with the placement of the cemetery in town and everyday life, this shift can probably be credited to society’s changing attitudes regarding the evidence of death and the decay of the human body.\(^4\) The image of an attractive young woman captured in a

\(^4\) Such representations in film and television often show the character as a flesh-and-blood human, or as a human obviously dressed and made-up to resemble the more iconic skeletal figure seen in artistic portrayals of earlier centuries. Cartoon and comic strip portrayals of Death, on the other hand, more frequently continue to use those skeletal figures in their representations. This division of fleshy body/skeletal figure may simply be due to the fact
passionate embrace with a skeleton—whether or not it represents a personification of Death—would likely raise uncomfortable questions about respect for the dead, not to mention the unspeakable issue of necrophilia (although only about ten percent of necrophiles are women [Quigley 300]). Today when we see Death engaging in acts of love, he does so fully flesh and blood, thus avoiding being “clearly guilty of reversing the natural order of things by performing what is a life-giving act with a lifeless body” (Quigley 301). This shift from skeletal to human lover attaches some element of social acceptability to the images. Moreover, when we see Death embrace a woman now, it is not in an empty attempt to release passion, but in an effort to gain some greater understanding of the human condition.

And so we see films such as the 1934 Death Takes a Holiday, in which Death approaches Duke Lambert and demands the opportunity to spend three days in the Duke’s home, posing as a friend, Prince Sirki. During his stay, Death seeks to experience the life and emotions mortals have access to but are denied to him. Death asks of the Duke,

> Can you conceive how weary I am of always being misunderstood? I see things that are gracious, fragrant, but if I come too near, if they feel the presence of my shadow, a horror comes upon their minds. If I touch a flower, it dies in my grasp. Can you conceive how lonely I am when there is nothing that doesn’t shun me, that doesn’t fade when I come near?...There is something here to be known and felt, something desirable that makes them fear me and cling to their life. I must find out what it is.

that it is far easier to use a human figure in live-action films and television shows than it would be to insert and manipulate computer graphics of a cloak-swathed skeleton. Additionally, use of a skeletal figure to interact with the living juxtaposes seemingly oppositional elements (living/decaying, flesh/skeletal), providing a means of visual humor often sought after by makers of cartoons and comic strips.
When the Duke reluctantly gives his permission—not that he is given much choice—Prince Sirki arrives, clumsy with the ways of the living, but ever-curious and very eager to make some sort of lasting connection. To this end, he pays particular attention to Alda and Rhoda, both women beautiful but materialistic, and Grazia, an enchanting woman with an other-worldly quality, who keenly felt the shadow of Death pass over herself and her companions earlier in the film. After a kiss, Alda leaves Death to find a man more interested in her, and who shares her love for life. Rhoda then comes upon Death and encourages him to choose her and believe the depth of her love for him. At this point he grabs her and ardently expresses his desire for her to see him as he really is. He asks her to look deep in his eyes and tell him what she sees, to which Rhoda responds, “Shadows.” He says, “Look into those shadows! Let your heart go to its wildest reach! I will you to know who I am!” Suddenly fearful at what she sees, Rhoda cries that she wants to live and backs away from him, denying him and turning instead to the comforting arms of her living friends.

Spurned again, Death (still disguised as Prince Sirki) finds Grazia. After a brief dance, Grazia employs a surprising amount of intuition, and tells him, “I think you’ve been holding life in your hands…I think you’ve been a little afraid of its beauty.” Death suddenly discovers what he has suspected all along.

Oh, you do know. Child…child, something new has been born in me, and I know the meaning of this life men leave here. A moment ago I knew only that men were dust and their end was dust and now suddenly I know for the first time that men bury a dream within them, a dream that lifts them above their dust and their little days. And you have brought this to me. I look at the stars and the water, Grazia, and you have given them new meaning. I feel the earth under me. It’s no longer
the earth men become but a world which you have made for me and which we share together. And yet I am alone, too, still alone.

Grazia: I think we’ll never be alone again. … You’re like the mystery that’s just beyond sight and sound, always just beyond my reach. Something that draws and frightens me.

At this point, Grazia asks “Prince Sirki” to take her with him when he departs. Here Death embraces the young woman, in a picture perhaps not terribly unlike Munch’s take on Death’s seductive side, and pleads:

Grazia, give me one hour of you. Let me hold you once and feel your life. You are the meaning of beauty that I must know. Grazia, let me hold you. Let me feel that ecstasy and know that I have lived.

We can draw a distinction between the love experienced here by Death and Grazia and by Death and the several young women of previous artists. Where Death’s previous dalliances with women are portrayed as the physical interactions of a lascivious power not to be trusted, in *Death Takes a Holiday*, Death discovers the satisfaction of a more pure love. More than that, he delights in finding a deeper understanding of another human, of crafting a significant connection with someone. He progresses beyond physical desires to a feeling of rightness in his heart and mind because of human bonding, and that theme resonates with many people.

*Death Takes a Holiday* was resurrected in 1998’s *Meet Joe Black*. When Death (played by Brad Pitt) assumes human form and takes the name Joe Black, he approaches Anthony Hopkins’s character, Bill Parrish, asking him to teach Death about life before Death has to take Parrish. Parrish first denies his request, saying, “You’re just a kid in a suit!” Death makes it clear that the issue is non-negotiable, and Parrish reluctantly agrees to allow Death to experience life
at his side. Appearing naïve and vulnerable, Joe Black quickly forms an attachment to Parrish’s daughter Susan. Separately, Joe and Susan learn from Parrish how important love—creating and cherishing that deep, special human connection—is to living:

Love is passion, obsession, someone you can’t live without. If you don't start with that, what are you going to end up with? Fall head over heels. I say find someone you can love like crazy and who’ll love you the same way back. And how do you find him? Forget your head and listen to your heart. I’m not hearing any heart. Run the risk, if you get hurt, you’ll come back. Because, the truth is there is no sense living your life without this. To make the journey and not fall deeply in love—well, you haven’t lived a life at all. You have to try. Because if you haven't tried, you haven’t lived.

When Joe and Susan do eventually consummate their relationship, it is clearly a physical union more along the lines of Munch’s *Death and the Maiden* than Hering’s *The Young Girl and Death*. Susan pursues the relationship, very much an active agent in her dealings with Joe. She even defies her father in the situation. After Parrish unsuccessfully tries to warn her away from Joe, he seeks to threaten Death himself, teaching Joe even more about the love between a man and a woman, as well as a father’s love for his daughter:

Parrish: How perfect for you—to take whatever you want because it pleases you. That’s not love.

Joe: Then what is it?

Parrish: Some aimless infatuation which, for the moment, you feel like indulging. It’s missing everything that matters.

Joe: Which is what?
Parrish: Trust, responsibility, taking the weight for your choices and feelings, and spending the rest of your life living up to them. And above all, not hurting the object of your love.

Joe: So that’s what love is according to William Parrish?

Parrish: Multiply it by infinity, and take it to the depth of forever, and you will still have barely a glimpse of what I’m talking about.

Joe: Those were my words [about death].

Parrish: They’re mine now.

Here we find the two films diverge. In Death Takes a Holiday, despite her friends’ pleas, Death takes Grazia with him when he returns to his normal state of being; in Meet Joe Black, Death-as-Joe-Black leaves Susan with the living. He does, however, return to her the man she had initially fallen in love with (the man whose body Death used while he posed as Joe Black, a man Susan met early in the movie) but takes her father, as had been intended all along. We cannot help but wonder at the discrepancies in the two Deaths’ decisions. Death-as-Prince-Sirki’s decision seems quite callous and selfish, compared to the sacrifice Death-as-Joe-Black makes in the same situation. Death-as-Joe-Black adds to that impression of sacrifice by willingly bending the rules of life and death, returning to life a man who is to rekindle a spark of that human connection Susan felt with Joe Black. The differences in these two characters’ handling of similar situations points to ideas of individuality and resistance commonly found in popular culture portrayals of Death.

For Charlton McIlwain, our dealings with death (and portrayals of Death, for that matter) indicate “the longing to know death” (14). This desire, to some extent, serves as “an expression of our will to conquer [death]. But beyond this, it is an expression, a longing, a crying out for and
seeking connection and community” (14). McIlwain suggests that sense of community will arise naturally once we “resurrect death from the sphere of privacy it has long occupied” (15). However, for the personified character of Death, dying does not belong in the private sphere, because for Death it is everyday, mundane, and routine—a job that must be done. Furthermore, for Death, a sense of community does not necessarily follow from this openness about dying. Instead, we find numerous examples of personified forms of Death, like Prince Sirki and Joe Black, solitary and lonely, yet yearning for something more, for a better understanding of what it means to be alive. Death’s discovery and understanding of community and human connection must be born of self-awareness. In Death Takes a Holiday and Meet Joe Black, Death discovers such connections in the form of romantic attachments and sexual attraction after the films’ Death characters explore within themselves what it means for them to be human. Other examples of Death forming human relationships do not necessarily follow this pattern of romantic love.

Consider, for example, the Generation X classic film Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey (1991), in which Bill S. Preston, Esquire, and Theodore Logan are killed by their evil robot doubles sent from the future.5 In order to save their girlfriends—indeed, to save the very fate of humankind—Bill and Ted must fight their way through Hell, meet God, and win the all-important San Dimas Battle of the Bands. Their first order of business to succeed in this mission, however, is to challenge and defeat the Grim Reaper following their deaths. In a blatant parody of Bergman’s The Seventh Seal, the Grim Reaper tells Bill and Ted they must defeat him in a

5 In the course of working on this project, I was continually amazed and amused by the number of times I heard, after mentioning the Grim Reaper was my topic of research, “Oh, like in Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey!” It quickly became apparent to me that at least for the people with whom I was conversing, this representation of the Grim Reaper is by far the most familiar, rather than those found in classic films such as The Seventh Seal, Death Takes a Holiday, or even Meet Joe Black. However, I found the case differed in the classroom: when informing my students (most of whom were 18 to 20 years old) of my topic, their initial reaction was often divided between Bill and Ted and The Family Guy, which has several episodes on which the Grim Reaper appeared (voiced by Adam Corolla in all but the single episode Norm MacDonald did). It will be interesting to see what versions of Death will be best remembered by future generations.
game before they can win back their lives. The game? Battleship, rather than *The Seventh Seal*'s chess. After Bill and Ted win the match, the Grim Reaper demands they play another game, best two out of three. (Bill and Ted: “No way!” The Grim Reaper: “Yes way!”) He makes a similar refusal to acknowledge his defeat after Bill and Ted win at Clue and NFL Super Bowl Electric Football. It is only after he is beaten at Twister that he reluctantly agrees that he is now Bill and Ted’s to command. He accompanies them to Heaven, where God advises them where to find the help necessary to defeat the evil robot doubles and save the world. As the film progresses, viewers realize that the Grim Reaper is not as reluctant to be party to Bill and Ted’s plans as he makes out to be. Indeed, in one scene (deleted from the movie, but occasionally shown when aired on television) the Grim Reaper complains that he feels unappreciated, and asks Bill if Bill likes him. Bill replies that he does, and to prove it, gives the Grim Reaper a stick of gum. The Grim Reaper’s desire for a sense of belonging reveals itself at the end of the film, also, when he takes an active part in defeating the evil robot doubles, and actually plays for Bill and Ted’s band Wyld Stallyns, helping them to win the Battle of the Bands.

The comic book miniseries *Death Jr.* also demonstrates Death’s desire for a feeling of connection with peers. When Death Jr. (DJ to his friends) starts attending a new school, it doesn’t take long for the other students to realize there is something different about him—especially when the class pet goldfish dies when DJ just looks at it. Such is the fate for Death’s young son, who later admits he fully expected the fish to die:

> I’ve never been good with fish. Or any kind of pets, really. Or potted plants. I’m really bad with those. I read somewhere that talking to your plants helps them grow. But it’s like the more I talked to mine, the quicker they died. (#1)
DJ falls in with a group of kids as unique as he is—Pandora, who has a “thing” for opening…anything; Stigmartha (who friends call Marty because “it’s handier” [#1]) whose hands bleed whenever she gets nervous; Smith and Weston, the genius conjoined twins; and Seep, the limbless boy in a giant test tube. After some stumbling, DJ comes to accept his powers as the one who will someday inherit his father’s business—and only then can he call these children his friends. DJ has to come to a fuller understanding of the rights and responsibilities of his future office before anyone can respect and understand him well enough to form a lasting connection with him.

We find a similar handling of the recently undead, perpetually 18-year-old Grim Reaper Georgia (George) Lass in the television series Dead Like Me, which aired from June 27, 2003 to October 31, 2004 on the Showtime cable network. While Dead Like Me’s fan following is considerably smaller than HBO’s Six Feet Under (a program with which Dead Like Me is frequently compared), the Dead Like Me fandom has remained active even years after the show’s cancellation. Discussions of Dead Like Me thrive on message boards, and fans continue to produce stories, art, videos, and music mixes devoted to the series. The Sci Fi Channel has planned to rerun the 29 episodes starting in summer 2006.

We can trace much of this continued fan activity to viewers feeling a connection with one or more of the characters on the program. Consider TV.com discussion forum participant rpali’s perspective:

I find it very reassuring that someone will be there when we die, explain what’s going on, and help us to move on.

…
After watching the last episode…I was horribly disappointed. These fascinating people, each so interesting with many experiences I can’t wait to learn about, have been snatched away from me. I’ve seen all there is to see. I can watch the episodes again (and I certainly will) but it’ll be like reliving a memory rather than moving forward with them. I’m not sure I’ve ever been so disappointed a show has been cancelled.

Viewers relate to the show mostly through George’s perspective, and it seems most viewers gain from the show some appreciation for life as they experience it every day. Dead Like Me frequently highlights the mundane aspects of life for both the living and the undead. Nowhere is this theme established more clearly than in the opening credit sequence, in which we see Grim Reaper figures swathed in the traditional black hooded cloak engaging in the following activities: walking a dog, working out at a gym, clocking in on the job, working at a cubicle, making photocopies, eating lunch, checking out women, riding the bus, playing basketball, doing laundry, and reading a romance novel (in an amusingly unexpected intersection of eroticism and death). The music playing during this sequence also plays to an appreciation for the routine. The instrumental song starts with staccato, repetitive chords played on a piano (representing those small, repetitive acts we all must perform each day, such as those acted out by the Grim Reapers to this music in the opening credits) but the song gradually shifts into a swinging tango-like tune (suggesting, perhaps, that for all its mundane inanity, life should be perceived as a dance to be enjoyed, not something simply to be endured). George’s thoughts in the episode “Vacation” elucidate this idea more directly: “Maybe death was the temp job, and life was the vacation. A vacation you were supposed to spend with the people that you loved…with the people who loved you….”
George’s understanding of this concept does not occur easily. From our first introduction to the character, we see George struggling to form typical human relationships. Part of this is due to her determination to behave as she wants to behave, not according to prescribed social conventions (this idea of individuality and resistance will be more fully explored in Chapter Three). We first see George (alive, at this point) interviewing for a temp position with a firm called Happy Time, her lack of interest clear. When her interviewer, Delores Herbig, points out that George has not smiled once since entering the office, George does not hesitate to ask what she (Dolores) has to be so happy about: “How far have you gotten? I mean, it’s not like this is a corner office with a view. And, like, every day you have to find jobs for people, most of which are probably better than yours, and that has to suck. I bet they don’t pay you much, either. Just…making an observation” (“Pilot”). But this is what George does: she observes, careful to maintain adequate distance from other people, positioning herself in the world so as to best drawl invectives against it.

After George dies, however, she is thrust into a new social sphere where she is expected—required—to remove people’s souls when they die. George suddenly finds her footing not so certain in the world, and struggles to understand her place within it. She does not relate well with her Grim Reaper colleagues, nor with her co-workers at Happy Time. When George meanders in to her job at Happy Time one morning, her voice-over tells us:

Late again. But what am I really late for? The marketing team’s latest porn recreation of Cassidy from Human Resources naked with areolas scanned from a Polaroid of Joe’s wife nursing their new baby? Frank from E-Commerce’s going away party? Barbara’s underground movement to institute Casual Friday? One desperate attempt after another to find something in common with someone else
and then clinging. ‘Hey! You have ten fingers? I have ten fingers! Let’s be friends!
We’ll make rules and slogans! Then if we find someone with nine fingers, we can
beat the crap out of them!’ (“Curious George”)

George’s biting observations about the rules governing the social interactions of the living help
elevate her above what she feels are futile and pathetic attempts at forming relationships.
However, some part of George does crave those human connections she failed to make while she
was living. Yet her attempts to reach out to her Grim Reaper colleagues do not meet with much
success. Her banter frequently meets only odd looks, as happens in this exchange with Roxy
(“She can kick your ass” [“Pilot”]) and their Grim Reaper cohort Mason:

Roxy [teasing Mason]: You ordered Mexican food in a German waffle house?

... George: I used to think that ‘soul food’ meant it came from Korea. You know,
’cause Seoul is a city…in…Korea…?

[Uncomfortable at the odd stares from Roxy, George flags down the waitress.]
Georges: ’Scuse me. Do you have any crackers?

Roxy [mutters]: You mean besides you?

[Mason tries to feed Roxy some beans from his platter.]
Roxy: Oh no no no. I don’t do beans. I got consistency problems….

Mason: I feel the same about custardy foods. … Tapioca’s like hell to me.

George: Mm, I can have yogurt, but it has to have cereal in it.

[This is met with more strange looks from Roxy and Mason.]
George voice-over: I was undead and kicking, but at a loss on how to live. And frankly, carving my own path seemed like way too much work. (“Dead Girl Walking”)

So rather than carve an entirely new path, George initially tries to maintain as strong a hold on her old life as possible—visiting her old home and family several times, even though her Grim Reaper supervisor, Rube, informs her doing so is against the rules of the undead. At some level, however, George realizes that she is simply “…in search of the relationship all of us are trying to recreate in one way or another” (“Curious George”). This voiced-over observation is accompanied by an image of one of George’s co-workers being clasped to Delores’s matronly bosom, suggesting that the relationship we all “are trying to recreate” is with our mothers. Significantly, it is only after what little remains of George’s relationship with her mother reaches its breaking point that George is at last able to break into the clique of her Grim Reaper colleagues. As she walks away from her mother’s house, dejected and rejected (her mother could not recognize George as her daughter, since Reapers are given new physical bodies once they are undead), Roxie pulls up in her meter maid vehicle and gives a tearful George a ride back to Der Waffle Haus, even going so far as to reach out a hand and sympathetically pat the younger girl. It is perhaps not an earth-shattering moment of clarity resulting in a spiritual connection between two people, but it is, for George, a start.

As George becomes more comfortable with her role as a Grim Reaper, and grows more accustomed to living her double life (reaper of souls part of the day, office assistant at Happy Time as the “living” Millie the rest of the time) she continues to attempt creating more human connections. She notes, “I really didn’t have any friends. I just had co-workers. And I really wanted a friend” (“Reaping Havoc”). At Happy Time, she attends scrapbooking meetings and
eventually joins the office bowling team. After George throws the winning stroke for her bowling team’s game, her cheering and joyful Happy Time colleagues hoist her onto their shoulders. George reflects, “In some strange, undead way…I was alive. I was flying” (“My Room”).6 This balance between feeling alive and having connections, and being undead and in solitude, proves delicate. Despite George’s great desire to make these lasting connections, she is repeatedly reminded by Rube that she is to maintain a certain distance from the living. Rube compares the proper distance to viewing a painting:

Rube: If you stand too close to a painting, all you see are patches of color. If you stand too far back, you can’t see any of the detail. Right now this is your particular perspective, and if you ask me—

George: I’m a little too close. (“Night Hawks”)

But sometimes it seems that the distance Rube insists upon is overrated. The other Reapers certainly have their own interpretations of what the proper distance is, and they form their own opinions about the value of human connections. Mason, for example, has this exchange with George:

Mason: You know this morning, when you said you spent your last day on Earth—your very, very last day on Earth—stapling?

George: Filing.

Mason: My god, that’s even worse. You said you regretted it, didn’t you.

George: Yeah, of course. Who gives a shit?

6 It is interesting to compare George’s feelings of life and vivacity in “My Room” to her feelings in the later “The Bicycle Thief,” when she decides to quit her job at Happy Time in order to pursue a better position with another company. The goodbye party George’s Happy Time coworkers hold for her closely parallels a funeral or memorial service. We see Dolores essentially mourning the loss of George. She gives a “eulogy” for George, and leaves the party crying. George, however, looks on the day differently: “It was the first day of the rest of my life. Sort of. I guess I was moving on. Another step, a new experience.” Furthermore, I find it significant that George returns to Happy Time three episodes later; this mirrors her undead life exactly, in her attempts to reconnect with her family and old life after she died.
Mason: My god, I give a shit. Rube tells us to be on the periphery. To keep away from...things, to keep our distance from...life, our family...

George: Yeah?

Mason: My god, it is nonsense. You get close, Georgie. You get close to everybody that ever meant anything to you.

George: Have you been drinking?

Mason: Of course I've bloody been drinking. And it's last call. And you gotta...you gotta drink up while you still can. (“Last Call”)

Mason’s advice comes after George loses her virginity to a living young man whose father she reaped (“Be Still My Heart”). In an obvious juxtaposition of sexuality and death, George approaches the living young man, Trip, during his father’s funeral. Some heavy flirting occurs—a new experience for George, who admits “Okay, another thing I regret is that I never learned to flirt. I guess it had something to do with the fear of rejection. Fortunately, fear’s grip loosens when you’re already dead” (“Reaper Madness”). They return to George’s home, fall into bed together, and Trip departs in the morning with promises to call her. This rare reminder of George’s sexuality contains echoes of the duality of death and love, reminding us again of past artists’ representations of Death seducing nubile young women. In Dead Like Me, however, the seduction occurs with the willing involvement of both the living and the undead participants, however much the living male may be taking advantage of the young woman, as we see when the events unfold. Furthermore, the nubile young woman is Death.

Another Dead Like Me character balances on the line between eroticism and death while trying to find a deeper, lasting human connection of her own: Grim Reaper Daisy Adair, who joins the team shortly after George’s arrival. Daisy is very upfront about her sex life, and she
often shares stories about the various leading men she was involved with while she was living—Clark Gable, for example, while she was acting in *Gone with the Wind*. Despite the numerous sexual encounters she describes to George and the other Reapers, Daisy is clearly a very solitary creature. Then, while assisting Rube with some clerical work organizing reaped souls’ last thoughts, George discovers Daisy’s sobering last thought: “Why has no one ever loved me?” (‘Vacation’) It is also in this episode that Daisy inspires George to consider the temp job analogy I referred to earlier:

   Daisy: Doesn’t it bother you, Georgia?
   
   George: What?
   
   Daisy: Everybody’s [last] thoughts are the same. Two-thirds are people who repent. The rest are people who forgot to do stuff or are praying or are alone. Shouldn’t there be more?
   
   George: More what?
   
   
   George: I guess.
   
   Daisy: And then—and then you die. And you might become a reaper, and the magic of creation, well, that turns out to be…lots of paperwork. It’s just so…it’s so everyday.
   
   George: Lots of people leave. There’s nothing everyday about where they’re going.
   
   Daisy: How do you know that’s true? Maybe we keep moving from one filing job to the next. My god. We’re all temps.
When considered in this light, attempts to create those sought-after human connections seem futile. Rather than accepting such a cynical and jaded outlook, however, Daisy finds new resolve to make what connections she can while she can. To this end, Daisy invites Mason, whose advances and flirtatious offers of friendship she has been steadily resisting, for drinks. Mason responds, “Don’t fuck with me, Daisy.” Her answer is frank and informed: “I probably won’t. But a drink isn’t going to kill anybody, least of all us. Right?” (“Vacation”)

In later episodes, we see Daisy seeking out religion—Catholicism, specifically—not in an attempt to atone for her previous sexual promiscuity, but to gain some sense of acceptance, of belonging to a greater community, of feeling loved and cherished, even if only by an unseen and unheard deity and his mortal representatives (those affiliated with the church). Daisy bonds with a priest, meeting with him on several different occasions to talk, and then reaps him. After she removes his soul, she is clearly affected by the tentative friendship they had formed, but she puts away the cross necklace she has taken to wearing, in a decision to focus her attentions on the people around her rather than a god.

The character Roxy Harvey likewise struggles with forming bonds. With her tough-as-nails personality coupled with her day job as a meter maid, Roxy has few people she can call friends. On the surface she appears to prefer her solitude, but one exchange in particular may indicate that even Roxy is not impervious to the longing for kinship. In “Curious George,” Roxy mentions to fellow Reaper Mason her intention to get a pet bird. Mason advises against it, not understanding how she could feel any sort of connection to a bird:

Mason: Because they’re weird. Man, I can’t relate to a bird. They’re so far removed. They’ve got different chromosomes. And they come from eggs.

Roxy: They’ve got faces.
Mason: So do cockroaches. [pause] What’re you gonna do with a bird?

Roxy: Stick it in a cage and feed it. What d’ya think I’m gonna do with it?

Mason: Well, I think you should at least get one you can eat.

Roxy: I’m gonna get a friend. I’m not gonna eat my friend!

Mason: They have brains the size of pistachios. It’s not smart enough to be your friend.

In awed tones, Roxy then describes to Mason a documentary she saw about a bird that was killed trying to protect its owner from a robber. Roxy insists the bird must have felt some sort of friendship for its owner. Roxy’s determination to create such a strong sense of friendship with a bird calls to mind Seale’s “Media constructions of dying alone: A form of ‘bad death,’” which mentions society’s perception of a character flaw in those people who die alone because they prefer the company of animals to humans (970). However, Roxy herself has already experienced a form of “bad death”: she was murdered by a jealous friend for money (Roxy was on the verge of filing a patent for her invention of the legwarmer). She is not bound by society’s perceptions of acceptable sentiments of friendship. Furthermore, to better foster the few relationships Roxy does have with humans, she (unlike George) is not limited by Rube’s cherished rules governing the interaction of the living and the dead. Roxy is at liberty to make choices as an autonomous individual as she sees appropriate to nurture the human connections she harbors. Sometimes those choices involve resistance or rebellion. Many figures of Death face similar decisions about their individuality versus the feeling of collectivity they crave, and when making those choices, Death often opts for the path of resistance to assert individuality.
CHAPTER III. “BITCH-SLAPPED BY FATE”: THE REAPER RESISTING THE RULES

Decidedly at odds with the pursuit of a sense of collective belonging, the figure of Death also often expresses a strident sense of individuality. This seemingly contradictory representation illuminates a paradox in human experience. As dreadful a prospect as dying alone may be, the fact remains that we do desire some degree of autonomy from the collective—so we can be remembered after dying as a unique individual, not simply swallowed up in the collective memory. We find this assertion of individuality even in American cemeteries, as folklorist Richard Meyer notes in his article “Pardon Me for Not Standing: Modern American Graveyard Humor,” published in Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture (2003):

Gravemarkers, throughout the larger part of their existence, have served to reinforce the cultural attitudes dominant at the time of their creation. Thus, despite being material surrogates for departed individuals, their tests have…reflected communal rather than personal perspectives and values….Beginning in the early 1960s, however, and growing at an exponential rate ever since, there has been a movement in American material commemoration away from collectively conventional expression towards its individual, personalized opposite. (153)

In Death Takes a Holiday, Death-as-Prince-Sirki finally gains insight into humans’ reasons for clinging to life and fearing him: love and the feeling of connection humans experience for one another. Despite his newfound understanding of those sentiments—or perhaps because of it—he selfishly takes Grazia with him when he returns to his realm, ignoring the pleas of her friends to leave her living with them. Death-as-Prince-Sirki comprehends their desire to keep her, and appreciates the sense of loss they will feel when he takes her. These are, after all,
the same emotions motivating him to keep her with him. However, Death judges his connection to Grazia greater than theirs. He has the power to take her, and he uses it for his own ends and happiness.

Death-as-Joe-Black acts similarly in *Meet Joe Black*, although his actions can be deemed less selfish than Death-as-Prince-Sirki’s. Rather than taking Susan with him as he would like, Death-as-Joe-Black permits her to remain among the living and instead only takes Bill Parrish, per their agreement. However, Death then sees fit to bend the rules governing life and death, and to make Susan some happiness, he returns to life a man she was attracted to at the beginning of the film. Death-as-Joe-Black’s actions are motivated by a desire to do good by someone other than himself, but they still mark a willingness to assert his independence and resist certain established rules as he sees fit.

I have already discussed the way the Grim Reaper of *Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey* acknowledged his desire for the bonds of friendship by aiding Bill and Ted in their quest and subsequently joining their band Wyld Stallyns. However, while the end credits of the film roll, we see mock magazine covers detailing the rise and fall of Wyld Stallyns in the music industry. Eventually, the magazine headlines describe the band’s breakup, due to the Grim Reaper striking out independently to pursue his own musical direction. This is a tongue-in-cheek treatment of the fate of many musical groups. But it also serves as an example of the figure of Death acting in accordance with his own personal motivations to secure his individuality. (Fans need not worry too much about the fate of Wyld Stallyns; the magazine covers that follow inform us of a reunion and later successes for the band.)

The young Death Jr. in the *Death Jr.* comic book likewise struggles to break free from what he sees as the limitations of group definitions of self to assert himself independently as a
capable individual free of his father’s influence. The demon Moloch uses this desire and DJ’s independent spirit to steal Death’s scythe and lock him away. Moloch makes the mistake, however, of underestimating DJ’s determination to set right the wrongs he has committed:

Moloch: I must admit, I’m mildly surprised that you even made it this far.

DJ: You’ll be mildly in pieces if you don’t hand over that box.

Moloch: [laughs] You really are a delight, aren’t you? I swear, if you had hair, I’d ruffle it. (#3)

Moloch then plays against DJ’s longing to feel as if he belongs to a group, his desire to have friends:

DJ, must we really fight? After all…we’re family….Think back, boy…Was everything I taught you really so wrong?…All I tried to do was save you from the life your father doomed himself to. A life of servitude. Of solitude. Have you ever met any of your father’s friends, DJ? No, of course you haven’t. And do you know why? Because he doesn’t have any. Who would ever want to hang out with Death? Is that really what you want for yourself? No friends? No fun? Forever? (#3)

Again, Moloch makes a serious miscalculation in using this line of argument against DJ. DJ realizes he does have friends. What’s more, his friends support him whether he toes the line of his father’s expectations or whether he asserts himself as a unique individual. This realization gives DJ the surge of confidence needed for him to defeat Moloch and save his father, and serves as an example of a character of Death finding an appropriate balance between collectivism and individualism.
Dead Like Me contains as many examples of individuals asserting their independence as it does instances of those same individuals expressing a desire to feel a deeper connection with other people. Several of these situations revolve around 18-year-old George Lass adjusting to her new role as a Grim Reaper. George is a young woman who, even while alive, relished her ability to assert herself as an individual with a unique outlook on life and to hold herself separate from the world around her. We are told she dropped out of college, despite her parents’ evident disapproval of this decision. She is skeptical of other people’s willingness to smile and accept without question whatever their lot in life. This tendency is complicated by the apparently random method by which one is “selected” to become a Grim Reaper.

George: Okay, I’m still having trouble with this whole ‘why me’ issue.

Rube: Well, you filled someone’s quota. Everyone’s assigned an unspecified allotment of souls to collect. Now, you don’t know how many until you’ve nabbed the last one.

Betty: …Oh! It’s like being the millionth customer served—except there’s no shopping spree. ("Pilot")

Betty later tells George, “It’s a destiny thing. Enjoy it.” In a voice-over, George notes, “They kept tossing around words like ‘destiny’ and ‘fate.’ The word ‘choice’ was never mentioned. That’s because I didn’t have one” ("Pilot"). In the face of this lack of choice in her afterlife, George does what she can to assert her independence and resist the role forced upon her. When her rebellion intersects with her duties as a Reaper, she is usually brought up short by Rube, who again and again sets her on the straight and narrow.

George’s first assignment is just such an instance—whoever will be seated on a train at track two, gate B, car six, seat four has the dubious honor of being her first reap. A young girl
with pigtails takes the seat. George’s voice-over tells us: “Her name’s Kirsty. She’s in kindergarten. She loves drawing and playing with Legos. Her favorite food is French fries in applesauce. And she has to die” (“Pilot”). George decides to save Kirsty, and does not take her soul. When the train wrecks, Kirsty lives and George is left feeling she has performed a great humanitarian deed—that is, until Rube confronts her on it.

Rube: Cardinal rule: Everybody dies. Now you’d better march on over there and you’d better take her soul right quick.

George: …You do it.

Rube: I can’t, no one can ’cept you. Death is nontransferable. She’s your mark. Only you can do the deed.

…

George: She’s just a little girl. She can’t die. It’s cruel.

Rube: It is cruel. It’s cruel she’ll never see what life is really like. It’s cruel she’ll miss out on so much love and pain and beauty. It’s sad for everyone in the world. Except for her. She won’t give a rat’s ass. She’ll be doing something different.

That’s just the way it is. (“Pilot”)

At this point, Pink Martini’s haunting version of the song “Que Sera Sera” plays in the background as George reluctantly finds Kirsty and pulls her soul. Once the job is done and Kirsty leaves George and Rube to enter the light, George reflects, “Is this it? Is this who I am? Am I really a Grim Reaper? I think for me, death was just a wake-up call.”

Even after Rube’s sobering lecture and information about what happens to souls that are meant to be reaped but are spared, George continues to question her role as a Reaper. She also persists in rebelling in whatever ways she can. Her next attempt to avoid her job serves as a
strong assertion of independence: she simply neglects to attend the daily Reaper meeting, leaving Rube unable to give her her next assignment. She says:

I was a deserter and there wasn’t much [Rube] could do about it. I didn’t sign anything, didn’t agree to anything. And I sure as shit didn’t shake anyone’s hand. I took no responsibility. But that didn’t stop him from trying to force it on me. I convinced myself that if I didn’t touch it, I wasn’t obligated. If I wasn’t obligated, I had no responsibility. ("Dead Girl Walking")

In this instance, Rube and Roxy force George to witness the consequences of her lack of action for the souls she is supposed to reap. They take her to the morgue, where her assigned reap’s body is being held, and George is horrified to discover the man’s soul is trapped inside his body. Not only did he have to suffer through his death, he experienced his own corpse’s autopsy.

Rube: Well, you really fucked the dog, peanut.

George: What?

Rube: [mocking her innocent tone] ‘What?’ You had an appointment.

George: I didn’t make an appointment.

Roxy: Beat her.

Rube: Doesn’t matter who made the appointment. You had an appointment.

George: Correct me if I’m wrong, but—[points to the corpse] mission accomplished.

Rube: You’re wrong. That was me correcting you.

George: I’m confused.

Roxy: He’s still in there, you silly bitch! ("Dead Girl Walking")
She hurriedly frees his soul and the obviously traumatized soul emerges thanking George for saving him. Rube tries to impress upon George the fact that obeying the rules and expectations in place for her is as big a statement as resisting them: “Cause and effect, peanut. Butterfly wings and ripples on a lake. What you do now matters. What you don’t do matters.” For Rube and for the souls she is expected to reap, George is significant as a member of a group—whether she elected to join that group or was forced to—and as an individual, and her actions (or inaction) affect others.

George continues to struggle with her new role, and makes further attempts to assert her autonomy. In a later episode, when one of Roxy’s reaps fails to appear for his appointment, George learns of a loophole to dying: if a reap doesn’t show up at the assigned time and place, the person’s life is spared and that soul is rescheduled for a reap at a later date. George takes it upon herself to try and save another soul, this time by actively preventing him from showing up to his assigned time. (It is for this reason that Reapers are to severely limit their interaction with the living.) Of course, her plan backfires and this attempt results in dozens of additional deaths which would not have occurred had George performed her original reap. Rube is infuriated by her blatant disregard for the rules once again, and tells her, “I need somebody to give me lessons on how to communicate with you, peanut. ’Cause I’m at a loss…. [Turns to leave and yells over his shoulder] I’d start sleepin’ with the lights on, if I was you!” (“Reapercussions”) George realizes that her determination to assert her individuality over Rube’s enforced restrictions prevents her from making a connection and bonding with him (“It was sad to realize he’d have my back if I hadn’t already turned it on him”) but instead of trying to make amends, she lashes out at him:

George: I know I piss you off, but you piss me off too!
Rube: Oh, I piss you off?

George: Why is it so easy for you to accept everything the way it is? Why don’t you ask questions?

Rube: Well, ’cause I’m not that curious. (“Repercussions”)

He gives her an assignment, tells her to get it right, and then hands her money to buy a waffle with a cherry on top. After he leaves, George asks Mason if he thinks she stirs up trouble.

Mason: Heed his advice and stay on his good side. He’s like a volcano, George, he erupts and he spews lava, and all the little villagers, they run around and—they run around for their lives. But, you know, he stops and you can go back to the safety of your own home.

George: How long is he gonna stay mad?

Mason: I’ve seen him stay mad for years. But it’s not like this pit bull mad, it’s like this disturbing, simmering, quiet rage mad. But he likes you, George. He’ll stay mad for less time.

George: Days? Weeks?

Mason: What was that other one, after that one?

George: Months?

Mason: Yeah, yeah, that’s the one.

While they eventually form a subtle but deep bond not unlike that between a father and daughter, George and Rube continue to butt heads throughout the series. (George: “I know it’s cliché to hate your boss, but you’re a real dickweed.” Rube: “What you’re feeling right now, that rage and frustration all knotted together, binding everything from your head to your digestive tracks? That’s my life with you” [“Reaper Madness”].) The tension is born of her frustration with his
acceptance of things the way they are, and his frustration with her continual questioning and attempts to do things her way, which he perceives as causing trouble.

In the meantime, George learns that Roxy actually caused the occurrence of the loophole which inspired her to actively prevent her own reap from attending his appointment.

Roxy had an even shittier job [as a meter maid] than me. I don’t know how she put up with it. [We see people yelling at Roxy, her meter maid truck being egged and vandalized.] I didn’t know J. H. Arnold was sunshine after a long, dark night of assholes. I didn’t know he greeted his ticket with a smile and said ‘You got me.’ I didn’t know he shared his favorite candy, a candy his silver-haired mother in Athens, Georgia, shipped to him special on birthdays and holidays. And I didn’t know [Roxy] got his name on a Post-It almost a year to the day after their brief but fateful meeting. But I do know there was something about him she thought was worth saving, because she changed his fate. (“Reapercussions”)

We then see Roxy flipping switches on a breaker box, causing Arnold’s alarm clock to turn off, which explains why he never showed up for his appointment. Like George, Roxy sees an opportunity to assert her independence and resist the rules established for Reapers. She feels a kinship for J. H. Arnold, and comes to the decision that changing his fate and preventing his death is worth defying Reaper convention.

George concludes “Reapercussions” by reflecting, “I’d been bitch-slapped by fate. But does that make me fate’s bitch?…Maybe fate doesn’t have the last word. Maybe fate doesn’t want the last word.” There are opportunities for Death to shuffle the hand fate has dealt. Carrying out the duties of the office does not necessitate a complete lack of autonomy.7 Death, as these

7 Comparatively, we also see Irregular Webcomic! featuring a number of Grim Reapers who each represent a different form of dying—for example, Death of Insanely Overpowered Fireballs, Death of Being Wrestled to Death
examples demonstrate, has ample opportunity to question what has previously gone
unquestioned, and even while creating the bonds of a sense of collective belonging, Death is free
to assert his individuality by expressing his free will. Death-as-Prince-Sirki did so by taking the
love of his life to the afterlife with him. Death-as-Joe-Black opted to do so by leaving the love of
his life behind, but granting life to another who would love her. Bill and Ted’s Grim Reaper
joined a band, left a band, and rejoined a band. Death Jr. defied parental warnings as well as the
limitations placed upon him by his father’s enemy. And George Lass questions, makes mistakes,
questions some more, and arrives at a deeper understanding of the people surrounding her, all the
while carving a niche for herself in the bizarre, fateful world she finds herself placed in.
CONCLUSION: UNVEILING THE NEW GRIM REAPER

These themes of collectivism and individualism are but two brief examples of myriad possibilities for scholars to consider in relation to popular portrayals of Death. However, for those representations to be as textured and complex as they have been throughout Death’s history, we must cease limiting our consideration of the character to sentiments of mystery and evil. As I have demonstrated with the examples in this thesis, popular representations of Death far more frequently assume human qualities in his roles. We see in him a longing to feel the bonds of human connection, just as any mortal feels. We see him struggle to create and nurture those bonds even as he strives to assert himself as an independent individual capable of acting only for himself rather than for the collective.

In this way, Death becomes an average Joe, someone with whom you or I can relate easily. We understand his longing to belong and yet at the same time to be held separate because we ourselves experience those desires. Furthermore, as we see especially clearly in Dead Like Me, Death’s duties are increasingly portrayed as an everyday job Death must tolerate before he can really live.

By making Death a person we can relate to, we remove him from the shadows of mystery and evil to which he was banished by scholars such as Fred Feldman. In appearing as a person motivated by the same desires as the living, Death is pulled from behind the closed doors of funeral parlors and morgues and placed alongside the matters of everyday life.

This mundane placement of death also reveals in people a propensity to embrace the macabre even beyond what is traditionally accepted at certain times of the year, such as Halloween. Montana Miller discusses several participants involved in “Every 15 Minutes” (a
drunk driving prevention program more fully described below) who eagerly volunteer to play certain roles, including that of the Grim Reaper:

The first year they did it, they asked for volunteers, and I jumped right up, saying I want to do it!…At Halloween I always dress up either as a vampire or, you know, some victim that looks like they’ve been in a terrible auto accident. I set my yard up like a cemetery scene. I have tombstones […] I’ve got pictures of cemeteries and stuff like that. I really like cemeteries! I mean, it sounds weird.

But I love going into old cemeteries. (66-67)

Actually, cemetery viewing is an increasingly popular pastime, for whatever reason, and scores of websites dedicated to the hobby can be found with a simple Google search. In fact, one website, “Death and Dementia” (http://www.deathndementia.com/category/death.html) archives countless links to such websites in addition to a variety of morbid pages documenting nearly every form of gory death imaginable, information about corpses and death and decay as a process, and stories about experiences with hauntings and other supernatural events.

Perhaps the morbid interest in mortals’ final resting places and circumstances of death could be related to belief in the supernatural in general, which is arguably on the rise, evidenced by the popularity of not only websites like “Death and Dementia” and the pages it links to, but a spate of shows such as Crossing Over with Jon Edwards, Ghost Hunters, and my personal favorite, Most Haunted. Folklorist Gillian Bennett finds that “popular belief in supernatural cause and effect is higher than one would have thought possible in predominantly rationalist cultures” (Bennett 11). She then imparts the findings of numerous researchers about supernatural belief, for example:
In the U.S., Richard Kalish and David Reynolds obtained an average of 44 percent positive answers to the ‘presense’ question (1973); Francis Harrold and Raymond Eve found that 35 percent of people thought ‘ghosts exist,’…38 percent thought ‘communication with the dead is possible’…(1986, table 1, p. 67)…” (11)

Bennett’s own research into women’s belief in the supernatural demonstrates to us the interesting significance of language when discussing more taboo topics with people. She says:

For my informants, [‘supernatural’] was not the neutral nor factual term it is for me—its connotations were wholly evil and taboo. As long as I said I was doing research on ‘the supernatural,’ I had only negative reactions, ranging from denial to hostility and even real fear. As soon as I took to speaking in vague fashion about ‘the mysterious side of life,’ people relented; they began to show decided interest and were eager to talk. (15)

Interestingly, Bennett also finds one factor that appears to significantly influence a woman’s belief in the supernatural: “It seems to be sociability itself—interest in others, and especially love of family—that most often predisposes women towards belief” (28). This is a fascinating reinforcement of the human desire to feel connections with our fellow man, juxtaposed in a most intriguing way with the issue of death and life after. Bennett’s *Alas, Poor Ghost!* is a strong start at consideration of the issue, but further study needs to be done to garner an even deeper understanding of Western society’s perceptions of death.

With so many portrayals of Death, there remain significant directions for future research. For this project, I limited my consideration to visual media. However, I cannot overstate the influence of portrayals of Death in literary series such as Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* series. Not only do we find themes of collectivity and individualism in them, but also that particular brand
of English humor permeating the very idea of the character. Comparison of Pratchett’s series alongside other popular representations of Death would yield an even deeper understanding of the character and his reflection of Western perceptions of and attitudes toward death and dying, particularly as those relate to ideas of humor about death. Furthermore, how do folktales about a personified Death or Grim Reaper compare to visual representations such as those considered here? Would we find those portrayals align with the “evil” and “mysterious” angle on Death, or with the idea of Death as an average Joe? Additionally, consideration of Death must eventually broach the East/West divide in order to achieve a more complete picture of human sentiments about dying. Death characters are portrayed in numerous manga and anime (Japanese comic books and animated shows, respectively), and the variation between these images of Death and Western images is intriguing. This issue fell well outside the scope of this thesis, but is deserving of attention for future scholarship, particularly as manga and anime continue to rise in popularity here in the United States.

Even when Death is not portrayed so straightforwardly as a common man—that is, even when he is still clothed in his hooded black robe and retains that air of all that is mysterious and unknowable—we can see his figure infiltrating everyday life in numerous ways. A number of people, upon learning the topic of my thesis, passed along to me their own findings of appearances of Death, in comic book series, comic strips, a review of a compilation CD (*Dead!: The Grim Reaper’s Greatest Hits*, with such songs as Ray Peterson’s “Tell Laura I Love Her” and Jan and Dean’s “Dead Man’s Curve”), and even a Grim Reaper Smurf. The Los Angeles County Coroner has embraced the popularity of morbid items and imagery associated with death and used it to turn a profit—by opening a gift shop selling items like toe tag and body outline key chains, a BBQ apron declaring “L.A. County Coroner has [graphic of a heart], spare hands,
spare ribs,” and a cutting board with the image of a body outline and the text “L.A. County Coroner[,] we have our work cut out for us” (http://lacstores.co.la.ca.us/coroner/). We find representations of the figure of Death at all levels of culture—in the high art discussed in Chapter One, in a variety of popular media forms, and in folk culture. In one relatively recent development of folk drama we find indication of a greater awareness of and comfort with the idea of death in our everyday lives, even the horrifying deaths accompanying drunk driving tragedies.

“Every 15 Minutes” is a drunk driving prevention program employed in high schools across the country. In what amounts to folk drama, students and community members stage a fatal auto crash and the aftermath of the resulting loss of life. In her study of enactments taking place in New Mexico, California and Maryland, folklorist Montana Miller notes that one of “the key structural elements” is the presence of a student acting as “a Grim Reaper character who pulls students from their classrooms to represent victims of drunk driving” (28). Variations are made to this character from program to program: “whether he carries a scythe or a staff; …speaks to students or is silent; his face is veiled or visible; more than one Grim Reaper…” (Miller 29). While school and program administrators prefer for the character to remain as in-character as possible, Miller reports frequent breaks to show Death’s more human side: one actor confessed to crying while participating in the program, others joked and laughed with friends, and another eagerly watched Jaws with other students when not reporting for his grisly duties in the classroom. And Death is greeted with heckling at least as often as he is greeted with horrified looks and tears when he does arrive to take away students.

What is significant here is not the range of reactions students have toward the figure of Death, it is that there is a range at all. While these varied reactions are likely due to participants’
awareness that these confrontations with Death are staged ("The world of the mundane and the world of the virtual are both in play here, and while everyone knows it isn’t real, they say emphatically, ‘This is no joke!’" [Miller 61]), the obvious bears pointing out: these are enactments, made as realistic and jarringly emotional as possible, of tragic deaths. In a handful of decades, we as a society have progressed from hysterical mourning for the dead\(^8\) to reluctance and outright refusal to acknowledge the presence of death to rapidly increasing representations of death (and Death) in the media to actively engaging in the staging of death.

And the figure of Death has glided along with these changes, still present and recognizable even after all these centuries. He has insinuated himself into our daily lives, not always noticed, but present increasingly often. His character indicates our returning awareness of the undeniable naturalness of death, of death’s inevitable presence within and effect upon our everyday lives. He especially assumes the role of advocate for humanity, frequently exhibiting most assuredly human traits. In art, in films, in folk dramas, Death reminds us of what it is to be human—to live, to love, and to die. Today, he no longer must grasp his victims and entice them with seductive kisses. Rather, he is now free to walk amongst the living and interact with them much in the manner of the living. He is, after all, just another man with a job to do—his job is just a little more permanent than ours, in the long run.

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\(^8\) Although some form of hysterical mourning does appear at “Every 15 Minutes” programs, it proves difficult to distinguish between those experiencing actual grief and those seeking the “intoxicating opportunity” “to command such highly charged attention from their communities” (Miller 81). Such attention-seeking tactics serve to remind me once again of that human drive to be noticed as an individual, even in the most challenging of situations.
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