

Thoughtful Laughter: Fantasy and Satire as Social Commentary in Terry Pratchett's Discworld

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I. Introduction

From the titanic clashes of good and evil in epic fantasies to the well-armed antiheroes of sword and sorcery, fantasy literature offers a little something for everyone. Yet even classic giants of the genre – J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Fritz Leiber, Alan Garner – are often reduced to well-designed escapism by traditional literary scholars. It is little wonder, then, that the sub-genre of comic fantasy, a mode of storytelling relying on puns and parody, resides at the bottom of the barrel when it comes to possessing anything of literary “merit.” However, recently the status of comic fantasy has turned into contested space, in large part due to award-winning British fantasy author and knight, Terry Pratchett. Pratchett was England’s number one best-selling author in 1996; even after his passing in 2015, he remains England’s second best-selling author to date – not to mention that he owns the rather dubious mantle of being the most shoplifted authors in the UK (Hooper).

Pratchett’s main body of work concerns the Discworld, a world shaped like (here it comes) a flat disc balanced on the backs of four enormous elephants who ride on the shell of an even larger sea-turtle as it travels through space. Despite the Discworld series being acclaimed for its “engaging storylines, meticulously described fantasy worlds, and [an] ever-expanding cast of recurring characters” (*Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*), it has also been consistently marginalized, if not outright scorned, for being “humorous diversions...entertaining escapism” (Penny). While this may have once been true – and Pratchett himself admits to early books, such as *The Colour of Magic* (1983), being novel-length gags (Penny) – the Discworld novels have since evolved from mere tongue-in-cheek, slap-stick parody into a full-fledged, satirical secondary world. According to Daniel Luthi in “Toying with Fantasy: The Postmodern

Playground of Terry Pratchett's Discworld Novels," "The hidden seriousness present in any true and thorough parody is now one of the core elements of the Discworld" (132). In a sense, the Discworld novels have "grown-up," making use of complex narratives and serious satire, and switching the critical lens from making fun of fantasy for the giggles to reflecting on our own world.

In effect, Pratchett's Discworld series "dump[s] uncomfortable human truths onto the table and sprinkle[s] them with fairy dust... steeping the nasty stuff in music and magic to make it more bearable without ever lying" (Penny). Combining conventions of the fantasy genre with satire, Pratchett retranslates social criticisms of the real world through spun-about fantasy tropes, inspiring both laughter and thoughtful reflection in his audience. By examining the use of comedy and satire in the fantasy genre and the purpose of secondary worldbuilding, this thesis determines how the Discworld constitutes a safe platform for social critique, with special attention given to one of Pratchett's most popular characters, Death.

II. Contextualizing Comedic Fantasy

"... what people generally have in mind when they hear the word fantasy is swords, talking animals, vampires, rockets (science fiction is fantasy with bolts on), and around the edges it can indeed be pretty silly. Yet fantasy also speculates about the future, rewrites the past and reconsiders the present." (Pratchett, qtd. Bryant)

It is of note that Pratchett is not the first to introduce humor and/or satire as critical elements of a fantasy narrative. Within literature, it is primarily science fiction which is

combined with satire, as a genre grounded in questioning what it means to be human effortlessly yields critique of the current social order. Nevertheless, “Writers from Ursula K Le Guin and Robert Heinlein to China Miéville have used the fantastic as an explicitly political space, imagining other worlds where humanity might organize itself differently” (Penny). In contrast to those authors, Pratchett uses a world merely a few shades off from our own rather than a completely separate fantastical world as a political space. As Christopher Bryant puts it, the Discworld is “one which interprets [our world] in order to criticize [it].” The “closeness” of the Discworld makes the messages it carries more accessible and thus more readily appealing to a large audience.

Similarly to the combination of fantasy and satire, fantasy and comedy is also not a new mix. John Grant, award-winning science fiction and fantasy author and editor, praises Pratchett’s work in his book review of the omnibus fantasy collection *The Compleat Enchanter: The Magical Misadventures of Harold Shea* (1975), claiming, “*The Compleat Enchanter* tales are seen as the ancestors of that strain of comic fantasy which has reached its current peak in the works of Terry Pratchett.” This is in reference to what Grant felt fell short about *The Compleat Enchanter* (1975); mainly, that the collection is enjoyable, but shallow, that the mechanics by which the world works have about as much development as a box made out of cardboard and duct tape. As it were, this lack of world-development is generally seen as a fault of the comedic fantasy genre – it is lovely to look at and fun to experience, but a good sneeze in the right direction will send the entire structure toppling. Certainly these descriptions can be applied to Pratchett’s early works like *The Colour of Magic* (1983), and not every Discworld novel is

perfectly stitched together, but Pratchett's writing has matured since its early days, giving rise to a world with steel support beams underneath the gags.

III. The Power of Laughter

Michelle de Villiers' thesis, "Carrying Death Away: Social Responsibility, The Environment and Comedy in Terry Pratchett's *Johnny and the Dead*," asserts that "Comedy allows us to see reality as it is, and so, if we are perceptive enough to realize this fact, we will be able to look upon our reality with more understanding" (4). Forms of comedy do exist whose sole purpose is to make people laugh, such as slapstick, which is defined by Britannica as "a type of physical comedy characterized by broad humour, absurd situations, and vigorous, usually violent action –" something Pratchett utilizes at almost every twist and turn. Pratchett, however, also takes up the rapier that is satire, a type of comedy which provokes laughter and actively illustrates an ethical purpose: to reform the guilty of their folly or vices. In his Discworld series, the tone of Pratchett's narrative voice is, in general, Horatian satire, which is the employment of "lighthearted mockery" and "gently reprimands folly" (Boyle 205). Critiques emanating from the Discworld are not meant to be harsh, but insightful comments regarding everyday failings of humans.

While he can come across as blunt or possibly abrasive, the slapstick humor Pratchett injects into the context of the satirical situation tends to soften the blow of the bite, creating a kind of liberation through laughter. Pratchett himself postulates, "Laughter can get through the keyhole while seriousness is still hammering on the door. New ideas can ride in on the back of a joke, old ideas can be given an added edge" (qtd. Villiers 1). The influence of laughter in making

social critique or new ideas more open to be received is also noted by Kirk Boyle in his book *The Rhetoric of Humor* (2017), where he affirms, “the comic performer wields influence by making us laugh” (204). The laughter is like the icing on the cake to a child, who will eat the cake (or satire) to be able to enjoy the icing. Pratchett’s use of endearing fantasy tropes, then, would be the multi-colored sprinkles which also makes his social critique more palatable, functioning in the same manner a vulture hat and fur stole do for Professor Severus Snape.

Generally such a combination of satire with ridiculous slapstick, puns, and parody would be hard to take seriously. In fact, such a mix may even appear to trivialize, and therefore render ineffective, the social critique, but Pratchett’s writing forces the above elements to harmonize with one another. A. S. Byatt asserts in the foreword to *A Blink of the Screen: Collected Shorter Fiction* (2012) that “Pratchett, despite the slapstick, the terrible jokes and the very clever complicated jokes, is somehow wise and grown up. As a reader, I trust him” (3). Award-winning science-fiction and fantasy author Neil Gaiman, who not only collaborated on a novel with Pratchett, but is also a dear friend, expresses similar sentiments; “Terry is just really good at human beings. He’s good at genuine human emotions” (qtd. Penny). The trust placed in Pratchett and his writing by the audience works in concert with familiar and relatable characters and scenarios to pave the way for comedy and critique.

IV. Secondary World

Essential to the fantasy genre is the concept of “world-building.” The writer’s imagination invents a world similar to, in varying degrees, our own, but which is understood as separate and therefore an “escape” from reality. This secondary world is an alternate, fictional world that is

internally consistent but not bound by the rules of the real, primary world. Andreas Kristiansen declares in “Subverting the Genre: Terry Pratchett’s Discworld as a Critique of Heroic Fantasy” that “To be a worthwhile literary achievement, the Secondary world needs to possess an internal logic of natural laws, governing bodies, politics and geography. It can be fanciful and different from the one we know, but it has to seem plausible and real.” He further argues that this plausibility is key, allowing audiences to make meaningful connections between the secondary and primary worlds. Ergo, ironically, authors utilize secondary worlds as “safe spaces,” addressing and pinpointing relevant primary world issues under the guise of a different universe; they are retranslating issues in a new setting, thus giving audiences a new perspective from which to engage with these issues.

Whereas high fantasy secondary worlds – Tolkien's Middle Earth, for example – are comprehensive and exhaustively detailed, comedic fantasy thrives on secondary worlds boasting superficial mechanics. In this, Pratchett’s Discworld stands out as one of strict, though utterly ridiculous, logic. The Discworld is no ramshackle universe merely making fun of fantasy tropes, it is entirely and meticulously built out of bad fantasy tropes, with rules consistently strange and, for the genre, strangely consistent. Such flexibility makes the Discworld the perfect harbor for social commentary as it can incorporate a multitude of narratives cohesively into one secondary world.

Another strength of the Discworld is in its exact level of detachment from the primary world. Ankh-Morpork, the largest city on the Discworld, may not exist on any map of Earth, but when Pratchett writes about Ankh-Morpork, Byatt argues “he is of course writing about us” (3). It, and the rest of the Discworld, is perfectly spaced between close enough so as to be easily

recognizable and far enough away so as to encourage audiences to let down their guard. Rather than building a brand-new universe, Pratchett's balance between our reality and full-blown, coherent high fantasy – as well as his aforementioned balance between the “jokes and daggers –” form a facsimile of our own. The Discworld possesses considerable merit, even if it is not as rigorous a secondary world as required by other fantasy authors, and a strong enough bedrock to be subsequently trampled by an elephantine cast of characters serving as more than simple escapism but as a reflection and satirization of the inhabitants of the primary world.

V. Death, A Character Analysis

Discworld inhabitants form quite the range: heroes, thieves, sausage salesmen, queens, kings, policemen, kings who are policemen, dwarves, vampire lawyers, trolls who do business, and witches who mean business. Noted examples include Havelock Vetinari, an ex-assassin and the current Patrician of Ankh-Morpork, whose philosophy and policies broker conversations about power and leadership; and Granny Weatherwax, the unofficial official head witch of the Discworld and flagship of discussion concerning strength, responsibility, and choice. As vibrant and deep as both of those characters are, it is Death who “may well be the only supernatural entity (strictly speaking, an anthropomorphic personification) which is known and acknowledged throughout the entire multiverse. His arrival is quite, quite certain...” (Pratchett, *The Folklore of Discworld* 226). Unmistakably shaped by the comedic, satirical, and fantastical construction of Discworld, Death is a trustworthy voice of social commentary.

One of the critical mechanics of the Discworld is that collective human belief and thought shapes metaphors into actual physical beings. Unsurprisingly, when Death appears, he is exactly

how one instinctively imagines him: a scythe-wielding, skeletal, berobed specter. Even though the audience immediately recognizes Death, in *Hogfather* (2009), Pratchett briefly deconstructs Death's appearance, discussing (blithely) the how and why behind the figure in modern, popular culture imagination:

The shape of Death was the shape people had created for him, over the centuries. Why bony? Because bones were associated with death. He'd got a scythe because agricultural people could spot a decent metaphor. And he lived in a somber land because the human imagination would be rather stretched to let him live somewhere nice with flowers.

Furthermore, Death's appearance and speech are given special consideration, ensuring that the Discworld's Death is separate from general versions of the Grim Reaper. Each bone of his tall, human skeleton body is "pleasantly polished," the depths of his eye sockets contain a piercing point of blue light, and his voice is oft compared to such sounds as that of the "clang of leaden doors of a crypt when slammed deep underground" (Pratchett, *The Folklore of Discworld* 226). Textually, Death's voice is portrayed to the reader by formatting his speech in all "small caps." Death's lines are also not enclosed by quotation marks, a format used only sparingly with two other characters – Death's granddaughter Susan and Death's superior, the angel Azrael – and denotes that, as Death has no vocal chords to speak of, his voice simply appears inside people's heads. The lack of enclosure and size of the lettering visually reinforces the power and lack of boundaries surrounding Death.

Similarly to how Death's speech is "othered," his material presence is "othered:" no one on the Discworld can see Death, not unless they are a witch, wizard, a cat, or dead. The inability to see Death is not due to any sort of magic on Death's part, but rather the constraints of human perception: THEY DO IT ALL THEMSELVES, he [Death] said. THERE'S NO MAGIC. PEOPLE CAN'T SEE ME, THEY SIMPLY WON'T ALLOW THEMSELVES TO DO IT. UNTIL IT'S TIME, OF COURSE (Pratchett, *Mort*). As "other," when living people (the aforementioned witches and wizards) do see Death, reactions often involve fear or discomfort. Anything concerning death and dying is coded as negative within society, making it par for the course that people rarely react positively to Death's presence.

Nevertheless, as much as Death is a construct of societal beliefs, he is also a construct of Discworld and thus of comedy, satire, and fantasy. Like the Discworld, Death's hard truths are delivered with humor in order to effectively deliver their content. As such, Death not only loves cats and curry, but also possesses a patient and exasperated curiosity about the living. The texts are littered with examples of Death's attempt to mimic human behavior, such as keeping an umbrella stand in his home which houses his scythe and sword (he has no use for an umbrella). Death's personality and motivation end up greatly contrasting with society's ingrained cultural connotation of Death. Despite his place within human imagination, the Discworld's Death is unsatisfied with the role given him and begins changing how he interacts with the world – he starts "to take an interest in people" (Pratchett, *Hogfather*). His interest places him both at odds with forces within the Discworld and in the perfect mix of settings comedic and serious to act as a vehicle of social critique.

Death, as a non-human, anthropomorphic personification of the act of dying, operates as a relatable “other,” providing an outsider’s perspective of humanity. The Discworld is populated with a number of similarly fascinating non-human entities (say, The Luggage, a sentient trunk both fiercely loyal and eerily homicidal), but none match Death’s cocktail of expected cultural markers, social commentary, and grandfatherly fascination and fondness for humans. Craig Cabell notes that Death “has been an important character throughout the Discworld series... Just as in real life, he floats in and out of different characters’ lives, cropping up and changing personal life stories” (142). By fleshing out Death into a distinctive incarnation of the Grim Reaper, Pratchett transforms him from a berobed skeleton into an insightful commentator. In effect, Death functions as a Horatian satirical character voice; his personality and unique perspective pair with humor to expose flaws and pose questions about human behavior and social structures.

VI. Complicated Canapés

Consider the following in the Discworld novel *Mort* (2009), where Death voices an observation about humans to his new, young human apprentice Mort: THAT’S MORTALS FOR YOU, Death continued. THEY’VE ONLY GOT A FEW YEARS IN THIS WORLD AND THEY SPEND THEM ALL IN MAKING THINGS COMPLICATED FOR THEMSELVES. FASCINATING. HAVE A GHERKIN. The social commentary here is obvious: life is short, yet despite this, we as humans insist on making things more complicated for ourselves. While a dutifully astute observation, the context of the social critique – or what inspired it – is actually quite humorous and not serious at all, a good example of the inclusion of slapstick humor. In this scene, Death comments about the

ludicrous complexity of a canapé – that is, of mincing up mushrooms, chicken, and cream and then putting them all into “little pastry cases.” Since to Death all of those foods are perfectly fine all on their own, he expresses that the extra work is unnecessary. His failure to understand human creativity with food implicates his outsider perspective to the ways of humans (he does not, in fact, need to eat), which is meant to be taken comically. However, Death’s comment still possesses an underlying thread of wisdom and thoughtful commentary about human nature, despite Pratchett packaging said commentary into a bite-sized remark from the Grim Reaper about food. The manageable portion size and framing makes it easier for audiences to digest and thus more accessible. This particular quote may not be particularly deep, but it does give a palatable example of how Pratchett shapes and distributes such commentary throughout his novels, and via Death’s character voice.

VII. Establishing Trust in Death

Of course, there is the query of why Death operates as a reliable source for social commentary. The concept of death, whether abstract or in the form of the Grim Reaper, carries several connotations: all-encompassing, inescapable, impersonal, and rather importantly, final. Hence, as an immutable cog in the wheel of the universe, Death is an inherently reliable carrier of knowledge, knowledge based on a lifetime of experience. Yet, Death does not resonate well with Pratchett’s audience because he is knowledgeable, he resonates well because he is relatable.

Many a time throughout the Discworld novels he features in, Death reminds the audience of the weight carried with his position, invoking his timelessness and awareness of his responsibility. One poignant moment appears in Pratchett’s *Mort* (2009) novel, Death abruptly

pulling his apprentice into an alley where they find a bag of drowned kittens in a decrepit rain barrel. Death is chillingly angry at the cruel treatment of the kittens. He tells Mort, THERE ARE TIMES, YOU KNOW, WHEN I GET REALLY UPSET. [...] YOU DON'T SEE PEOPLE AT THEIR BEST IN THIS JOB. Death's anger and frustration at the senselessness of the act and his inability to do more than offer the kittens respite mirrors the audience's. On the Discworld, Death may be inhuman, but he is not heartless. In his capacity for empathy, he is familiar to the audience as one of their own, and this familiarity fosters reliability. Death is intimately acquainted with all of the consequences of living, and it is this intimacy and empathy that establish the credibility of his observations and social critique.

VIII. A Guiding Voice (and Scythe)

Death's trustworthiness neatly lends itself to his eventual transition into a mentor and imparter of wisdom. Given that the majority of the Discworld's inhabitants cannot perceive Death until their time of passing, Death's knowledge and guidance is not truly meant for the Discworld, but for the other group of people who are aware of him: the audience. Lessons from Death always appear as conversations with another individual, but they are all either dead, imparters of wisdom in their own right (however questionable some of the wizards' advice may be), or a cat. It follows, then, that these conversations are not being held for the benefit of those in the conversation, but those reading the conversation.

This facet of Death first emerges in *Mort* (2009), where Death is the definitive and literal mentor to his apprentice Mort. During a fairly simple scene that takes place in the kingdom of

Sto-Lat, Death lands his flying horse, Binky, on top of the castle's tower. When Mort asks if anyone will notice Binky, the following conversation ensues:

WOULD YOU BELIEVE THERE COULD BE A HORSE AT THE TOP OF THIS TOWER?

He said.

“No. You couldn't get one up these stairs,” said Mort.

WELL, THEN?

“Oh. I see. People don't want to see what can't possibly exist.”

WELL DONE.

Here, a classic lesson trope occurs. It begins with the mentor – Death – answering the curiosity-driven question by the student – his apprentice Mort – with another question. The student then responds and consequently realizes the answer for themselves, the teacher confirming their realization and granting them praise. Death teaches, or encourages, Mort to realize and acknowledge the selective-blindness to which humans are prone. Pratchett once again employs slapstick with this social commentary, given that Mort's question arose from his concern about a the altogether odd, and illogical, concept of a horse perched on top of a tower. Essentially, the scene reinforces the previous discussion where Death informs Mort that people “allow” themselves to ignore his presence with the nonsensical imagery of Binky.

Hogfather (1996) enhances Death's role as a mentor by having him stand in for Discworld's tusked version of Santa Claus, the Hogfather, who is nonetheless a figure meant to ingrain early ideals of the good versus evil struggle through the promised reward (bribery) of

presents. In a scene recognizable to anyone who has seen *A Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), Death poses as the Hogfather at a department store where he begins gifting children exactly what they ask for rather than the pre-approved parent picks. Things are going fairly well until one little girl asks for a sword, at which point her mother becomes outraged.

“You can’t give her that!” She [the mother] screamed. “It’s not safe!”

IT’S A SWORD, said the Hogfather. THEY’RE NOT MEANT TO BE SAFE.

“She’s a child!” shouted Crumley.

IT’S EDUCATIONAL.

“What if she cuts herself?”

THAT WILL BE AN IMPORTANT LESSON.

This scene is wreathed in humor, enough that the seriousness of Death’s last sentence is surprising. Death himself is dressed as the Hogfather: a red suit and hat, a fake beard kept on by the hooks for the ears Death does not have, and a strategically placed pillow. Death’s childlike innocence is also on full display; he is truly excited to get to wear the mantle of the Hogfather, to be able to perform a duty (gifting toys to good girls and boys) that makes people happy about his presence for a change. His excitement allows for part of the scene’s hyperbole. If he’s going to be the Hogfather, he’s going to be the perfect Hogfather. The girl has been good and she asked for a sword, so she gets a sword – a very big, sharp, and pointy one. The concern of both the mother (for her child’s safety) and the store manager (for his sales, this Hogfather is giving away toys for free after all) fall on deaf ears. Death is the Hogfather, and the Hogfather gives presents.

However, underneath Death's endearing naivete is blunt wisdom. While true that Death gifted a small girl a dangerous sword, the very epitome of "you're going to poke someone's eye out with that thing," Death also placed a burden of responsibility on the child, one which – should the little girl hurt herself – will result in effective experiential learning. Acting as the fantasy version of touching a hot stove, the painful consequences of irresponsibility will not easily be forgotten. Death's lack of concern seems callous, but he better than anyone understands that such lessons are not fatal (usually) but vital. In a roundabout way, Death is doing an excellent job of standing in for the Hogfather: he is handing out presents and imparting lessons, although his lessons are more nuanced than "be good or else." The hyperbolic ridiculousness of the situation draws the audience into a familiar setting filled with laughter, intentionally lulling them into a relaxed state so that Death's responses strongly stand out. It is a reminder that underneath the nice red suit is not a fat man, but an ancient skeleton carrying much responsibility and wisdom.

Not all moments of Death imparting wisdom are wrapped in bright ribbons of silly humor, however. Returning to *Mort* (2009) and the kingdom of Sto-Lat, at the point where Binky is still on the tower, Death informs Mort that they are at the party to collect the soul of the king. The king is a just ruler but is going to be poisoned by his cousin, who has previously killed many other of their family members in his greed for power. Worse, the king's cousin is going to live a long life after succeeding with the murder. Mort, upon learning the unfortunate circumstances by which the king of Sto-Lat will die, is unable to accept the situation and voices as much to Death.

“Wait,” said Mort, wretchedly. “It’s not fair. Can’t you stop it?”

FAIR? said Death. WHO SAID ANYTHING ABOUT FAIR?

“Well, if the other man is such a –”

LISTEN, said Death, FAIR DOESN’T COME INTO IT. YOU CAN’T TAKE SIDES. GOOD GRIEF. WHEN IT’S TIME, IT’S TIME. THAT’S ALL THERE IS TO IT, BOY.

Notably, Mort neglects to ask if “we” can do something, but instead puts the burden of responsibility upon Death; he implicitly recognizes Death as the authority figure who wields the power to change this situation, but in doing so, reveals his naivety. Consequently, and yet again, Death is put clearly and solidly into the position of mentor. An almost parental tinge enters his master/apprentice relationship with Mort as he is tasked with the “life is not fair” spiel.

Addressing Mort as “boy” rather than by his name gives his tone a parental, chastising quality to it. There is nothing childish about the circumstances though, as Death and Mort’s intentionally inactive part in the scene is to let the king die, passively assisting in robbing the princess of her father. Nonetheless, Death does not budge against Mort’s very emotional, very human response. Death’s response, consisting of a rhetorical question and short, clipped sentences, is one with both authority and a blunt, exasperated gravitas. Additionally, the use of the address “boy” carries more than chastisement, it also emphasizes how Death perceives Mort’s stance on fairness as naive. Death and Mort’s conversation here is one the audience knows by heart, but the added weight given by Death’s role as the Grim Reaper transforms the conversation into a gentle reminder that life truly – all the world over and at any age or circumstance – is not fair.

Death's position on fairness in *Mort* (2009) is understandable even though audiences are expected to sympathize with the king's plight. After all, Death is an anthropomorphic construct, not a human being. Death never lets go of this philosophy with regards to his job, but his time as the Hogfather broadens his philosophy, making him more empathetic. Masquerading as the Hogfather, Death experiences surprising and disheartening glimpses into how humans treat each other and celebrate the spirit of Hogswatch Night, one of which is the discrepancy between gifts for children in families of differing economic statuses, even if the children have been equally good. When Death points this out to Albert, his wizard-turned-elf assistant, Albert tells Death that the Hogfather is responsible for giving gifts that maintain the economic status quo of the population, further asserting that you need to "be happy with what you've got." Death is unsatisfied with this answer, pointing out: IT'S RIGHT TO BE HAPPY WITH WHAT YOU'VE GOT. BUT YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE SOMETHING TO BE HAPPY ABOUT HAVING. THERE'S NO POINT IN BEING HAPPY ABOUT HAVING NOTHING. Albert is stymied, now "out of his depth in this new tide of social philosophy." The conversation between Death and Albert continues, Albert attempting to explain the "way things are" concerning the celebration of Hogswatch Night, at which point Death concludes:

IT IS... UNFAIR.

"That's life, master."

BUT I'M NOT.

"I meant, this is how it's supposed to go, master," said Albert.

NO. YOU MEAN THIS IS HOW IT GOES.

Death refuses to accept the “it is how it is” logic, not when there is something that not only does he think should be fixed, he currently wields the power to fix. Death continues to deconstruct this particular discrepancy with Albert, addressing the situational ethics by realizing that it is easy to be nice if an individual is rich. No one need resort to “naughty” actions like stealing food if one never has to worry about going hungry.

Here, Albert responds, bringing up Death’s own ideology of fairness while in his role as the Grim Reaper:

“When it comes to *fair*, master, you yourself--”

I AM EVEN HANDED TO RICH AND POOR ALIKE, snapped Death. BUT THIS SHOULD NOT BE A SAD TIME. THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY. He wrapped his red robe around him. AND OTHER THINGS ENDING IN OLLY, he added.

Initially, this anger seems at odds with Death’s original conversation with Mort about fairness; but Death cannot, on a whim, decide to stop doing his job or act outside the rules of his duty as it would have dire consequences, imbalancing the entire universe. Therefore, he is fair even if he cannot always take the morally pleasing action. Giving children a proper heap of presents though, no matter their family’s economic bracket, has no such consequences. Furthermore, the Hogfather’s duty is to reward the deserving, not preserve the cosmic balance of the Discworld. As such, by acting in the Hogfather’s stead, the normal restrictions on Death’s actions are relaxed, letting him think and operate outside his usual role.

At first glance, Death's unwavering insistence that Hogswatch Night is supposed to be about all things ending in "olly" is childlike and unbecoming of his stature. On the other hand, Death's outsider status ensures that while he understands the large strokes of how humanity works, he is unable to comprehend certain details like the necessity of canapés and the existence of unequal holiday cheer. Accepting a reality that not only negatively affects children, but is also fixable, is completely foreign to him. And it is an idealistic viewpoint, but it is also the morally correct viewpoint; the utter ludicrousness of a skeleton (albeit a very knowledgeable one) in a fake beard being more aware of the unfairness of the situation than some of the Discworld's human inhabitants breeds twin feelings of pride in Death and shame on humans, making this episode apt social critique.

IX. Conclusion

In spite of experiencing humans at their most unsavory, Death continues to serve humanity as the Reaper Man, perceiving that humans consist of more than their darkest times and believing in humans because he understands that belief is central to being human. Death asserts that HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE (Pratchett, *Hogfather*). Without the worlds of make-believe and fantasy, without belief in their inhabitants ("little lies" like the Tooth Fairy and the Hogfather), Death contends that humanity stops believing in the "big lies": justice, mercy, duty, and so on. Whereas humans generally think of the two categories of "lies" as mutually exclusive, Death tells us that belief in one is mandatory to cultivate belief in the other. His combination of ancient wisdom and almost childlike innocence endear him to the audience, acting as the spoonful of

sugar helping the medicine go down, in a, if not always delightful, at least deliberately thoughtful way.

Essentially, the Discworld itself can be seen as the collision point between the haired and the feathered, grounded in enough reality to make it recognizable and populated with enough of the fantastic to elevate it above the everyday mundane. Death's belief in humans internally leads to greater conviction about the critique both he and the Discworld at large pose, for unlike the majority of the comedic fantasy secondary worlds, the Discworld benefits from an in-depth construction and well-used satire that engenders social commentary instead of simply poking fun at fantasy tropes. Hence, the Discworld and its inhabitants become sites of meaningful dialogue and connection with the audience.

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