

Synopsis of THE LETTER FROM DEATH  
Lillian Moats

NOTE: This is a philosophical rather than a plot-driven work, so in this synopsis I have tried to utilize as much as possible the actual words of the “letter” written by the character of Death.

Death’s gender is not specified in the text and is slightly ambiguous in the illustrations until the tone softens somewhat and we see Death as feminine. I’ll use the pronoun “she” in this synopsis to avoid confusion.

The numbers below correspond to the sections of the book.

1. Death addresses and confronts the reader for characterizing death as the “enemy of life.”

*...Am I the enemy of life? No. I am passive. You are the enemies of life! How many of your own kind have you killed over these millennia? Murder, neglect – your beloved wars. And you call me the “Grim Reaper.” What do you know of me? Nothing!*

2. Death expounds on a myriad of heinous personifications of death that humans in varied cultures, and throughout history, have created and feared. Then in conclusion she asks:

*Why have you tormented yourselves—why have you insulted me—with such fantasies? Even those who laugh them off, laugh nervously. Who are the monsters? Not me. What your forebears imagined for themselves still works under the surface of your consciousness.*

*What do you—what did they—know of me? Nothing!*

3. Death defines herself.

*In the scheme of things, we all have a part to play. It falls to me to absorb your last breath. I don’t determine which breath it will be. In fact, my role is anything but aggressive. But when your life can no longer sustain itself, I have one moment with you, one moment in which to take in your final exhalation.*

*You can’t imagine all that I assimilate in that instant—the sentient remains of a life, the sum of remembrance. If there is suffering near the end, I am your release from that suffering. Contrary to entrenched belief, you have nothing to fear from me.*

Since Death’s perceptions are derived from those she takes in from humans and other complex creatures, Death’s relationship with humanity has slowly evolved.

*...It’s my simultaneous presence—here, there—wherever life is ending, as well as the long span of my conscious memory, that causes me to focus on your patterns, endlessly repeated patterns. Endlessly repeated folly. I’ll tell you outright that over the millennia, my feelings toward humanity have polarized.*

Death draws a sharp distinction between her relatively sympathetic relationship to individuals (“In all those singular moments I have with individuals, how could I be unresponsive to you?”) in contrast to the human species as a whole.

*...Your societies profess to love “Truth” even as you subvert it. I’m stultified by your concerted capacity for self-deception, and your devotion to the myths with which you rationalize your communal actions and inaction. It is the resulting destructiveness of your species that I find abhorrent.*

4. Death questions whether, as a species, humans are capable of even the most rudimentary observation of the world. They do not accept the amorality of the universe, looking instead to mythology and religion for answers.

*Look around you. What evidence suggests that I will be a gateway to justice, that you will die and thereby find every iniquity set right?”*

She goes on to note that:

*...historically, your religious leaders have been most apt to say of Heaven: “What God has prepared for us, cannot be imagined by the human mind.” This can hardly be said of Hell!*

5. In one of the longest sections of the book, Death provides a sardonic expose of Hell.

*Your fear of me has been almost indistinguishable from your fear of what comes after me. You have had anxious questions; masses of you have been taken in by those who claim to have authoritative answers. Hardly is there a religion on earth that has not devised a Hell with which to manipulate your guilt.*

Drawing on the “phantasmagoria of the Christian Hell,” she expounds on the outrageous answers to such questions as: Do people really burn in Hell? How long does the suffering last? Has any mortal been there and returned? (First person accounts are provided.)

6. Death writes: “*Your fear and guilt have been exploited for centuries because of the mystery surrounding me.* She goes on to explain, “*I did not know that accumulated frustration and anger could one day cause me to find a voice.*”

She speaks of the limitations of language ...

*Silence is my medium. Nothing is lost in translation. In silence I assimilate the mingled emotions that no word has ever touched. Even metaphor—the most artful tool you’ve invented—is for me a concession. In the very act of describing myself, have I constructed a cage from which I’ll long to escape?*

7. Death can no longer delay getting to the task she's assigned herself:

*to confront you with the Hell of your own making—the palpable one, lacking in humor, but not lacking in horror.*

She answers the same set of questions she used to describe imaginary Hell. The reader gradually realizes that what is now being described is war. Death concludes this sobering section by saying:

*The torments you feared from your gods, you've devised for your enemies, and have realized for yourselves.*

8. Death analyzes how humanity's unexamined fear of death has provoked war

*... One might conclude your fear of one another is inexhaustible, but underlying your militarism is your fear of me. Your dictum appears to be ... using any means necessary, force your enemies to face death before they can force you to do the same. It does not appear to matter whether the threat you feel from them is real or imagined. In war after war, you have chosen to send wave after wave of your barely grown children to meet me, rather than face me yourselves.*

She demands:

*Are you incapable of seeing patterns? Are you hampered by the narrow scope of individual memory?*

*A stick or stone can be enough to kill an enemy. But your enemy, too, might pick up a stick or stone. Carving a well-weighted club, though, gave you a fleeting sense of invulnerability, until an enemy made a well-weighted club. Then you needed to lash a rock to the end of your club before you felt the thrill you needed to counteract your fear.*

Death proceeds to cross-examine the reader about the millenniums-old weapons race, elaborating on its increasingly grisly capabilities. Repeatedly, she asks which weapon finally made its owners invincible.

She concludes the section:

*... While you're at it, biological warfare is awfully crude. Perhaps you should see how science could weaponize, say ... nanotechnology, genetic engineering. Why not draw up plans for robotic warfare?*

*You are, of course. Across your world, on your behalf, approximately half a million of your most brilliant scientists are working on such "advancements" of war.*

*Yet, you call me the "Grim Reaper!"*

9. Death asks:

*What on earth have you been thinking of? Are you not inherently vulnerable? Did you have to invent unnatural horrors? Droughts were not enough for you? Nor floods, nor hurricanes? Famine was not enough? Infestations, pandemics? Were the inescapable diminishment of aging not enough to make you face the frailty you all share?*

*No. Because the fact that you will one day cease to exist is what you have turned your world upside-down to avoid.*

She elaborates briefly on the “mental contortions” in which humans engage over the subject of death.

*I won't pander to your illusions, yet I take no perverse pleasure in underscoring them. I could say, as you sometimes do, “Don't shoot the messenger!” But then, what would that mean, given who I am?*

10. This section begins a tonal shift.

*To state my frank opinion, neither religion nor science nor technology (nor any other -ism or -ology) will save you. Yet, why would I bother to address you if I did not think you had the potential to save yourselves?*

While Death remains straightforward and blunt in her observations throughout the book, she has vented a measure of her fury about the communal destructiveness of the human species, and in this section begins to reveal more subtle psychological understandings of the individual psyche.

*Doubtless, you have concluded from my railing against the widespread violence of your species that I think human beings are naturally prone to kill their own kind. How little you know me still. I don't think anything of the sort.*

Death explains that she has experienced every human society through the psyches of its peoples. Not every culture has engaged in warring...

*In reporting that some form of war has been built into myriad cultures, I do not endorse the claim that concerted violence is bound to find expression in you. It is the collective credulity with which you accept and pass along a culture's approval of war that astounds and alarms me.*

Death challenges commonly accepted ideas about the relationship between violence and “human nature.” Then says:

*...No one could speak with more intimate knowledge than I about the instinctive aversion you have as individuals to killing your own kind, and the toll such a primal act can exact from the killer.*

She gives poignant examples of the anguish she has found in the final breaths of countless soldiers throughout history.

*...I know that the war stories you are used to hearing are not like these. Such accounts of personal anguish are censored or drowned out by the more “heroic” kind.*

*Why are histories of warfare written? Justification by the victors is a covert motive I discern. “Never forget the triumphs and sacrifices of our side,” your leaders implore you. But by what maniacal reckoning must more and ever more youths die so “none will have died in vain?”*

The section concludes:

*... Do you find this ironic—Death admiring those who cannot kill? Then how little you know me, even yet.*

11. Death has another bone to pick with the reader regarding the way she (Death) has traditionally been characterized.

*You call death—you call me—“The Great Leveler.” This, I detest. Why would I want to be used this way, as paltry consolation to those who have been made or kept poor; or worse, as rationalization for the greedy to plunder while they can? The Great Leveler!—as if, when I meet your kind, it is not entirely too late to correct the inequities you have wrought.*

In addressing such inequities, Death states:

*Surely you recall from your school days that it was the children most assured of winning who clamored to compete. For longer than any of you can remember, I have witnessed your species follow infantile leaders who, behind their idealistic rhetoric, have set rich against poor, fortunate against hapless while using the complacent among you as leverage.*

Having earlier exposed the folly of humans looking to an “afterlife” to provide justice, Death directs the readers’ attention to the condition of this world, saying:

*How ironic that, due in great part to your collective tolerance for the brinksmanship of the powerful, the survival of your planet now utterly depends on justice—fair and careful sharing of dwindling resources. I say again: I am no gateway to justice. If you want justice, you will have to do more than to wait for me and wring your hands.*

The section ends:

*As the irreplaceable vanishes, do you think there is no tomorrow? Or do you still convince yourself that endless tomorrows await you in some next world? In the spreading wars over resources, I see no inevitable Armageddon—just another unnecessary Hell advancing on earth.*

12. Now Death turns her attention more fully to the individual human psyche ...

*... do you not know what I know about the inner lives of human beings? How could that be, since I've acquired all of my knowledge from you? The difference must be that I've taken in the emotional legacies of all those who've come before you; whereas each of you is confined to your own skin, never able to live in another's mind—even momentarily as I do.*

She now begins to reveal the depths of her understanding.

*...for all my shock at some of the ways you behave in concert, I'll reaffirm that, singly, you are far easier for me to comprehend. I take from each final breath a thousand, thousand distillations—tinctures from childhood and even infancy, traces of your original longing which does not cease until that moment in which I take it in.*

She goes on to describe in greater detail the nature of her experience at each moment of death – the source of her knowledge.

*I could not translate into words the unspoken motivations I absorb from any human being who has lived more than a few years. You all have needs—bodily and emotional. They become more urgent if they go unmet. Your efforts to satisfy them may become, by your life's end, so twisted and out of scale that I must trace them back to your earliest hours in order to understand you. But I never interpret complexity as randomness. There are reasons for your actions, no matter how layered.*

Death introduces the subject of “good versus evil” which she will develop more fully in the next sections.

*How could I think of human beings in your simplistic terms “good” or “evil” when I have overwhelming evidence that conditions can exact, from any one of you, extreme cruelty or extreme compassion?*

*I cannot claim that my intimate knowledge of individuals has led me to unerring comprehension of you. On my part, incredulity is a frequent state of mind. Why is it that you do not work harder to create conditions that nurture the qualities you most admire?*

She chides the reader.

*... When I consider the superiority of your heartfelt personal intentions over your often barbaric communal actions, I can't fathom why you rarely think for yourselves, why you rarely speak your minds before authority, why you repeatedly line up behind ideologies, religions and paradigms. Are you that afraid of being alone?*

Death's rhetorical question only leads her to another ...

*Yet I ask myself how you can think for yourselves if you're not allowed to feel for yourselves? One can't occur without the other.*

She finds answers in her observations of the way so many human children are taught.

*...Too often, they are told that they should not feel what is most natural for them to feel. The stifling of your adult ideas and emotions begins with your humiliation in childhood.*

*A person who must suppress "unacceptable" emotions all his life can be manipulated unwittingly. His forbidden feelings become, at last, no longer identifiable as his own. He imagines them, instead, to be the untrustworthy traits of others. Then how easily he can be persuaded by the rhetoric of powerful leaders to project those traits onto outsiders—that is to say, onto the other.*

13. "With stunning frequency," writes Death, "you go to war against the other, based on a concept of 'good versus evil.'"

*...But when it comes to protecting your boundaries—tribal, national, and personal—I find that you more often mean "evil versus purity." Every organism has a boundary, yet only humans suffer confusion and angst about what is inside versus what is outside. Again and again I witness your fear of contamination.*

Death addresses the peculiarly human sense of vulnerability posed by psychological boundaries and, in regard to the perception of "evil", she remarks:

*It strikes me as bizarre that you see evidence for the existence of evil only in the behavior of your own kind. You do not call violent weather "evil," though whole cities can be ripped apart by storms. You are more likely to call them "acts of God." You do not label predatory animals "evil" though they may eat alive their screaming prey. Only in deceitful or vicious acts committed by fellow humans do you find confirmation that evil is alive and active in the world.*

Death makes it clear that she has found no evidence for this *force* humans call "evil" – though she has been outraged at millions of heinous acts.

*“Combating evil” provides your leaders with an ever-ready rationale for war. In the word “evil” itself is imbedded a consensus for drastic action; if an evil force exists, your collective will should be compelled to overcome it wherever it manifests itself. When you are persuaded that it is expressed in the actions of another nation, race, ethnicity, you pretend to make war against evil itself, not against their flesh and blood, which you know in your heart of hearts to be the same as yours.*

14. Death continues the theme of “evil versus purity” with her observations of how humans are taught in childhood that there are “good” and “bad” emotions, and that these cumulative, visceral lessons comprise everychild’s primer on “evil and purity.”

*Your calamitous fear of feeling hardly ends with childhood. Century after century, I assimilate the final breaths of humans still unconsciously guarding what they deem to be their boundaries. From childhood on, they have been compelled to maintain an illusory purity within, compelled to keep all that is evil out.*

*To “cleanse” themselves of the evil influence of the other, ethnicities slaughter one another. You fortify and patrol national borders as if they could protect you from what has always been within. Your world contracts as your vigilance expands. Only if you can stop annihilating your fellow human beings, might you have time to figure yourselves out.*

The section ends with Death’s testimony as to what she has found among all those who have died.

*You may go on searching among the living if you choose, but I am frankly relieved that among those of you who have died to date, I have not found one pure human being, much less one who was purely evil.*

15. Death returns to the theme of how she has been misperceived throughout the ages.

*I am as vast as you’ve often suspected—not vast in darkness or emptiness, as you’ve feared—but in the extent of my assimilation of final essences, yours and all the other living things on earth. Your grief has taught me much about the individual human condition—the fragility of your attachments, the pain of bereavement, the immutability of your deepest affections.*

*Until I found a voice, you had no way to know that I bear the cumulative sorrows of all who have ever died. Nevertheless, I resent the fact that for millennia I’ve been perceived as the villain in a scheme that adds to my own sadness as well as yours.*



She proceeds with forthright honesty.

*Try, at least, to grasp I am not “the enemy of life”—far from it. We are symbiotic. Life cannot renew itself without me. Disease and accident may be life’s enemies, but I am not; nor have I ever seen myself as yours.*

*I intensely dislike being—not the force, for I am the absence of a force—but the fact that thwarts your desire to live forever. Yet, I would be less than scrupulous if I did not try to help you align yourselves with the way things are; there is no immortality.*

16. Death offers the reader a verbal image to try on.

*Life is channeled through you only briefly, yet every current is transient in its stream. You are related to all that has come before you, all that will flow on. No less a part of nature are you than a wave that surges onto shore, only to be drawn back to the ocean. Why should you fear returning to the undifferentiated state from which you came? You do not seem to look backward in horror.*

17. Death begins this section by addressing the fact that century after century, certain religions and ideologies have instructed humanity in the notion of their supremacy above all other living things. She comments that the condition of the planet is finally mocking that fallacy.

*The differences I detect between you and other animals do not amount to superiority or inferiority. To me, though, there is this stunning contrast—you are storytellers, they are not.*

She speaks about narrative memory with which humans tell themselves the stories of their individual lives.

*...Most of you are unaware of the continual revisions you make in order to maintain the sense—or the illusion, I would say—of a consistent self. I’m not critical of this. It is the way you hold yourself together.*

She advocates exposure to a great sampling of stories from disparate periods and cultures, but cautions against clinging desperately to any.

*You use stories to explain to children life and death—most often, as they were explained to you. The myths I learned from your forebears expressed childhood’s magical ideas: that every event is willed by a sentient being, and that a parental gaze will be eternal. Myths and legends are second nature to you; yet you forget that, if it is a narrative at all, its origins are human.*

18. Death approaches the end of her letter not with the relief she had anticipated, but stirred by emotions “only silence can reach.”

*I'll offer this last observation. To me, the distortion of your original longing—longing that is so beautiful in your infancy—is the one great human tragedy from which so many others flow.*

*I'm talking about the simple longing to be held, to be gazed at lovingly, to be nourished and filled. It is your common beginning. Why do you disregard it as universal touchstone?*

*How can you not know how essential it is that these primal needs be filled at the beginning of every human life? For when such yearning is sorely unmet in its original simplicity, it mutates into a different kind of craving—for possessions, status, power—supremacy.*

She concludes the section:

*I have discovered from you that hope and faith can both grow out of longing. Hope does not require a leap away from careful observation of the world; faith too often does. For that reason, I cannot claim I have faith in humanity.*

*But—only because I know so intimately your underlying yearnings—I do have hope for you. Why would I have written this otherwise?*

19. The final short section, in full, is the following:

*What I am about to do in ending this narrative is something like dying. I feel obliged to make an object lesson of myself, as all supernatural beings would do for you if they had your welfare in mind.*

*They would tell you honestly that they have no existence beyond human imagination. They would say to you, Take care of one another, since I cannot, and live, live in this world, the only one you have.*

*You do not need to have faith in me; you do not need to fear me. As you finish this letter, let us change places for a final moment ... there will be no more of me left as persona after these, my last words—I will exist only in what you may have taken in.*

*As ever,  
Death*