

# SEEING WITH SHINIGAMI EYES: *DEATH NOTE* AS A CASE STUDY IN NARRATIVE, NAMING, AND CONTROL

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## Introduction

Ohba & Obata's manga series *Death Note* has been met with increasing global popularity since its introduction in 2003. *Death Note* comics originated in serial magazine form, became converted to trade paperback, and, eventually, were adapted into an anime TV series. The content has been consumed in multiple countries across the globe, including the United States. Multiple live-action Japanese movies have been made based on *Death Note* comics and the first live-action American movie adaptation is set to debut on the internet-streaming service Netflix in August of 2017. Despite growing popular interest in the *Death Note* manga and adaptations inspired by it, though, very little scholarly work has been dedicated to understanding the narrative's resonance with global audiences. Frohlich (2012) showed concern that this lack of understanding about *Death Note* could be detrimental because the story contains "apocalyptic ideas that are controversial and potentially dangerous [when] passed off as entertainment, stylized and made acceptable to a mass audience" (p. 143). In other words, Frohlich recognizes the powerful pedagogical potential of popular culture stories and wrote about his fears that *Death Note* sends dangerous moral

messages. Meanwhile, *Death Note* writer Ohba (2008) has claimed that the story does not have a moral, pedagogical mission. This essay will attempt to respond to the seemingly conflicting claims of Frohlich and Ohba by demonstrating that the values of *Death Note* creators are indeed conveyed through their story content and then extrapolating whether there are productive moral messages to be gleaned from the narrative. First, we will use pedagogical theory to explore whether a legitimate audience interpretation of *Death Note* content may be established, then provide a brief narrative analysis of *Death Note*'s major story arc, and, finally, offer a reading of the text that emphasizes a view of communication in which language is a major power mechanism.

## The Story/Stories

*Death Note* is a neo-noir(ish) story, coopting elements of classical noir such as bizarre/nightmarish situations, a fascination with death, interest in criminal characters and their point-of-view, a resistance to meta-narrative through-lines, and the use of typical characters such as an attractive evildoer, an outcast detective, and a femme fatale (Borde & Chaumeton, 1955). This permutation of noir may read as fascinating

to audiences because it incorporates pieces of classic detective stories while simultaneously splitting the narrative point-of-view and using “cold” (covert) methods of violence rather than the contemporarily popular and brash blood-spattering. *Death Note* is a cat-and-mouse game in which the cleverest person wins – and with insight into the thoughts of multiple major characters, the audience gets to play along with guessing which characters will be successful in their attempts to thwart the others.

More specifically, *Death Note* is about a brilliant high school student named Light who discovers a “death note.” This note, dropped by a Shinigami (“god of death”) named Ryuk, gives the owner the ability to kill anyone whose name is written in the note. The owner must also be able to picture the face[s] belonging to the name[s] being written in the note. While keeping his identity hidden and donning the moniker of “Kira,” Light uses the death note to begin killing convicted criminals in order to make the world a better place. He quickly begins expanding his use of the death note to kill those who resist him, who are a threat to him, or who meet his increasingly lax standards for what might constitute “evil.” (Light’s standards for good and evil are in flux throughout the series, while other characters such as Soirchiro and L have relatively fixed moral codes.) Roughly the first half of the series is dedicated to Light’s attempt to escape the suspicions of his father, Soirchiro, who holds various positions of authority with the Japanese police throughout the series. Soirchiro is aided by a mysterious detective who uses the codename “L” to protect his identity. L

suspects that Light is Kira, but is killed by Light and a Shinigami before he can gather conclusive evidence. The latter half of the series involves Light rising to power in the Japanese police force and working with his father while secretly maintaining his identity as Kira. In his work as a serial killer, Light recruits or otherwise seduces several followers to help him carry out his executions. One Kira-aide of note is a young girl named Misa who also carries a death note and who utilizes a power called the “Shinigami eyes” to be able to see people’s names above their heads when she encounters them. Light manipulates and exploits Misa to use her Shinigami eyes to tell him the names of potential victims. Meanwhile, L’s successor, Near, is able to take the research completed by L before his death and use the information to build a successful case against Light. In the end, Light is caught by Near and is eventually killed by Ryuk who has ceased to be entertained by Light’s antics.

### **Popular Culture as Pedagogy**

Popular culture stories, such as *Death Note*, should be given scholarly consideration because these stories hold pedagogical potential and are accessed by large audiences. If scholars are to understand developments in epistemology, ethics, and other praxical areas from cultural groups, communication through popular narrative must be considered. For example, Hammonds & Anderson-Lain (2016) advanced the position that “popular culture exists as the connections between people and *cultural artifacts* – objects that are

physical manifestations of the structured experiences of other people. Thus, popular culture is centered on understanding the collective experiences via cultural artifacts that connect us as humans...” (p. 111). This is to say that popular culture is a sense-making tool that connects people empathetically and/or intellectually through texts that either implicitly or explicitly tell stories – which are, on some level, simply manifestations of experience. Insofar as pop culture texts – such as comics, television, and movies – require forethought paired with selection and arrangement of information, they offer a “plot” and constitute a narrative from the author. These narratives are sometimes coded into the form of fiction, but they are still a reflection of the author’s logics and values – the experiences which were selected and arranged into the form of the text. The narrative position being applied to popular culture in this essay is consistent with Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm in which he articulated that “symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in communities in which there is sanction for the story that constitutes one’s life” (p. 6). Fisher’s argument about his original narrative paradigm (as well as virtually his whole body research after the establishment of his paradigm, collected in *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, 1987/1989) supports at least two of the notions about popular culture and their link to narrative and pedagogy being made in

this essay: (1) symbolic texts facilitate communal sharing of experience and (2) these empathetic “sharings” influence people’s life-stories.

One study by Botzakis (2011) confirmed by qualitative methodology that at least a certain type of popular culture consumer – adult comics readers – utilize stories as a sense-making tool. He concluded that, among those he interviewed, “comic book stories... helped [interviewees] make sense of life events... The interrelated stories and characters created contexts that helped [the reader] reflect on his own social world” (p. 119). Readers would search for sense-making tools in pop culture texts and then “operationalize... [their] found knowledge” by making adjustments in their approach[es] to true life experiences based on what they learned from comics. Botzakis’ research is especially germane to studying *Death Note* because *Death Note* began in comics form and its adaptations are rooted in this original form.

We agree, then, with Hammonds & Anderson-Lain’s (2016) extension on research from Fisher and Botzakis when they argued that “narrative [in the context of pop culture] does not merely act as an abstract concept or lens for understanding – narrative structures are functional pedagogical tools” (p. 121). In short, all popular culture – including *Death Note* – reflects the experiences of the author[s]. Even if these experiences are coded in the form of fiction, the fiction will always imply the values that have fidelity to the author through its narrative structure and content (Fisher, 1984). Popular culture scholars should therefore be interested in analyzing

and understanding popular texts such as *Death Note*, even if the authors claimed not to have a conscious moral argument for the text in mind, because the text will reveal values and logics that are being diffused. Further, if the coded experiences of authors are always present in their stories, it is reasonable to assume that legitimate hermeneutic readings of texts such as *Death Note* may be made, even without authorial backing of the interpretation.

### **Narrative Analysis**

In some ways, understanding the historical and cultural background of the *Death Note* series can provide insight into the motives of the creators in their storytelling. Napier (2010) argued that *Death Note*'s protagonist shows "echoes of the ancient Chinese school of philosophy known as Legalism" which involved a belief that "humans were inherently evil ('rotten') and needed strong rules and regulations to keep their baser nature under control" (p. 358). Under this interpretation, Light/Kira would be a righteous figure keeping order in the world of the story. Napier added that "the *Death Note* story has a lot to do with present-day Japan and with its current moral, social, and cultural dilemmas, such as the use of the death penalty, the fear of crime, the problem of bullying, and a pervasive sense of meaningless and alienation" (p. 358).

The genealogical elements mentioned by Napier help to provide a context for the ideological contents of the *Death Note* narrative. However, Napier's analysis focused on symbolic qualities woven into

the *Death Note* story without giving specific regard to the outcomes for the characters. Such ambiguity has left other scholars (e.g. Frohlich, 2012) to capitalize on the lack of analysis regarding consequences for characters in *Death Note*'s overarching storyline. Frohlich agreed with Napier that Light/Kira was a protagonist being utilized in the story as a mechanism for providing structure and order; though Frohlich was also more hesitant about whether *Death Note* may be understood in ways that are productive. He began his contention by quoting *Death Note* co-creator Ohba's response to a question about whether there are moral messages in his narrative:

"Not really. If I had to choose something, I'd say, 'Humans will all eventually die and never come back to life, so let's give it our all while we're alive.' Given that, I don't think it's very important to debate whether Light's actions are right or wrong. Personally, I only look at it as, 'Light is very evil,' 'L is slightly evil,' and 'Only Soichiro is good.' (Ohba & Obata, 2008, p. 69)

Frohlich (2012) then concluded that because Ohba did not make a "strong declaration of his ethical intent," that "readers are left to accept the ethics of *Death Note* at face value" (p. 149). But what are these ethics that are left for the audience to accept? Frohlich took a decidedly cynical outlook on the series, making a final argument for the dangers of *Death Note*:

"While apocalyptic religion, which concerns itself with the end of time, is not uniformly antisocial, it has

frequently been twisted throughout history and across cultures to justify violence against supposed evil persons... it is inconceivable that the world would be a better place if only the rigid morality of a small group of people were realized. In *Death Note*, Light Yagami stands as the god of the new world, killing countless people and consistently affirming a theology that justifies killing people for the greater good.” (p. 153)

Even though Frohlich provided a convincing case that elements of apocalyptic religion are a major feature of *Death Note*, we believe he fails to justify his conclusions that the story essentially supports and reifies utilitarian murder. One significant problem with Frohlich’s analysis is that he claimed to understand the narrative as an iteration of the American monomyth (p. 132). The explanation followed the generic narrative of the American monomyth (e.g., a community is met with great evil and a selfless hero emerges to defeat the evil) to the belief that “Light Yagami exemplifies most qualities of the monomythic figure” (p. 132). To summarize Frohlich’s reading of *Death Note*: Light is hero who emerges in a corrupt world to provide structure, order, and safety, albeit by potentially questionable methods. The methods are essentially justified in the story because Light does indeed inspire good in the world around him and he does not face any significant consequences for his actions.

The American Monomyth does not, however, fit the *Death Note* narrative in any concrete way. As we will explain, although the American monomyth may seem to have a loose fit to certain parts of the *Death Note*

series, it does not make any specific connections to the *Death Note* narrative. Further, we will argue, using Friedman’s (1955) typology on forms of the plot, that *Death Note* is best understood as two stories joined by a loose narrative arc.

Frohlich’s (2012) conclusion that *Death Note* affirmed “a theology that justifies killing people for the greater good” based on Light’s supposed success in making the world of the story a better place is an extremely oversimplified view of characters and the consequences of their actions (p. 153). Light’s story arc does not match the specific tenets of the American monomythic figure in several ways: First, Ohba was explicit that he believed “Light is very evil,” and, therefore, not designed as a selfless hero (Ohba & Obata, 2008, p. 69). Secondly, Light does not directly combat immediate threats of evil; instead, he kills criminals who have already been captured and/or people who he feels could expose him as Kira. Further, he often – either directly or indirectly - killed people who were actively doing good in the story (e.g., FBI agents and, eventually, his father, Soichiro). Third, Light’s moral code – specifically, who he is willing to kill and why – shifts over the course of the narrative, leaving him with no consistent moral structure, besides selfishness, to be identified in narrative. American monomyths, even as discussed by Frohlich, learn to act selflessly over time. Light’s narrative arc is the opposite of the one traditionally associated with the American monomyth. Fourth, Light’s ability to bring order and peace to a particular community, like American monomythic heroes, was stifled by his constant

willingness to betray and kill based on his selfish motives. Fifth, characters do not celebrate Light's behaviors at the end of the story; rather, he loses everyone he loves to either death or hatred and is killed after being outwitted by L's protégé, Near. Finally, monomythic narratives – in virtually any culture – are typically limited to telling a single story at a time. Based on these reasons, we may safely determine that Frohlich's attempt to understand the entire *Death Note* narrative by selecting only certain points from each of the stories in the series and wedging them together in the similitude of the American monomyth has neither hermeneutic coherence nor fidelity with Ohba's view of the characters. In short, Frohlich's interpretation does not shed light on the narrative rationality (Fisher, 1984) used by Ohba and Obata.

Friedman's (1955) typology on forms of the plot illuminated the structures of basic stories – structures which may be useful for analyzing popular culture stories, such as *Death Note*. Identifying which of these story structures may fit the *Death Note* narrative will provide framework for interpreting the original *Death Note* manga text and its direct adaptations. The work of assessing story elements for narrative rationality requires a basic understanding of narrative terminology and functionality. Even though the terms narrative, story, and plot are sometimes colloquially used interchangeably, these terms have also been used in more specific ways to convey differences in how tellings function. In overviewing various ways that narrative have been historically understood, Allison (1994) settled on defining narrative as “a

particular structure whereby human beings organize experience” (p. 109). These structures may be either told (narrated) or lived (narratized). Narratives that are told (e.g., past-oriented and duo-temporal), follow a coherent sequence of events, and feature a clear beginning, middle, and end are stories. Stories may then be broken down into “plots,” which Fisher (1988) practically defined as a selection and arrangement of experiences uses to reveal “patterns typically... expressed as hypotheses, theses, or thematic periods” (p. 49). The process of emplotment is the arrangement of thematic material into a coherent story structure. In perhaps simpler terms, Friedman (1955) concisely told us that a plot should “complete some process of change for the protagonist for the sake of the sequence of emotions which that process evokes in the reader” (p. 150). Sometimes a narrative will essentially be a single story with a single major plot. However, the original *Death Note* manga series and its adaptations is more complicated. In keeping of the markers of neo-noir, Ohba and Obata utilized post-modern methods of telling and resisted clear meta-narrative structures. Their narrative cannot accurately be understood as a single story or as having a single major plot. *Death Note* is clearly a single narrative with consistent elements (e.g., similar characters, story points, etc.), but extended over a temporal field marked by certain story boundaries, such as a beginning and end for Light's use of the deadly notebook. On the other hand, the *Death Note* narrative obviously concludes a plot structure in which Light completes a character arc/change, the status quo of the story

reaches a counterpoise, and the antagonist of the story (L) is defeated. After these events, another story begins when a second plot structure is imposed on the narrative. The second structure introduces a new antagonist (Near) and shifts focus away from Light's transformation of character in order to convey the way[s] in which Light's hubris became his downfall. When understood as a single narrative featuring two different stories, *Death Note* becomes a set of dark morality tales connected by warnings about the potentially creative or destructive powers of language, as demonstrated by use of the death note.

To be more specific about the stories included in the overall *Death Note* narrative, two plot structures identified by Friedman (1955) are easy fits for two different time periods in *Death Note*. Friedman argued that there are three broad categories of plots which can then be broken into more complex structures. These three broad categories are: plots of fortune, character, and thought. Plots of fortune are driven by changes in the circumstances of a story. Plots of character are marked by changes in the moral standing of a character or characters in a story. Plots of thought highlight the ways that a character or community's ideas and/or feelings are influenced over time. While *Death Note* does indeed spend time convey the inner thoughts and feelings of characters, these thoughts and feelings do not seem to provide overarching structure for a story in the narrative. Instead, we will argue that the first portion of *Death Note*, characterized by the conflict between Kira and L, is a form of a plot of character; meanwhile, the second

story, characterized by the conflict between Kira and Near, is structured by circumstances and constitutes a form of a plot of fortune.

When Light first found the death note, he began a transformation from reasonably normal student, to vigilante, to serial killer. The detective, L, attempted to catch Light and, in so doing, complicated Light's ability to function as a vigilante. Ultimately, L's involvement cornered Light into desperation and helped to facilitate Light's willingness to kill non-criminals. L also accepted more and more morally questionable policing techniques (violating privacy, explicitly breaking laws, and being willingly to let some people die for the greater good of catching "Kira") based on his obsession with the Kira case. The changes conveyed in this part of the story fit with what Friedman (1955) called a "degeneration plot," in which "a character change for the worse occurs when... a protagonist who was at one time sympathetic and full of ambition" is subjected to "some crucial loss which results in his utter disillusionment" (p. 163). Light's disillusionment with the world around him was clear at the start of the *Death Note* narrative before Light discovered the death note. He is melancholy, attentive to evils such as murder and robbery in the news, and his only significant life motive is his academic ambitions. Finding the death note and realizing its powers gave Light a new sense of purpose, which he protects to dangerous ends. His moral character degenerated during his conflict with L as he relaxed his standards for who was worthy of death and he manipulated people around him

(particularly, his faux-girlfriend, Misa) in order to fulfill the urges of god-complex.

After L was killed, Light's change of character was complete. A story began in which Light's moral character remained stable, but his circumstances became increasingly complicated by the investigation of L's successor, Near. The "Kira v. Near" story may be best understood as a "punitive plot," which Friedman described as plot that is marked by when "a protagonist whose character is essentially unsympathetic, in that his goals and purposes are repugnant, yet who may perhaps be admirable for his strength of will or intellectual sophistication" suffers "well-deserved misfortune" (p. 159). "Kira v. Near" fits as a punitive plot because Light has already finished the process of moral degeneration and the story shifts to essentially being about how he loses his loved ones (i.e., his father dying, his sister being kidnapped, and his co-workers/friends discovering his identity as Kira), was defeated at the hands of Near, and killed by Ryuk.

Neither storyline in the overall narrative imply that the authors condoned Kira's actions – while there may be moments of praise for Kira's intentions in the story, the first plot conveys moral degeneration and ends tragically with the death of a celebrated character (in other words: Light's victory cannot be fully enjoyed by the audience who lose a significant and sympathetic character). The second plot ends with Light losing everything of value to him and being killed. In determining the narrative rationality (Fisher, 1984) of Ohba and Obata, the interpretation that Light's actions

are condemned and that his methods of wielding evil are warning lessons end up being more coherent in consideration of multiple plots – and holding more fidelity with Ohba's description of the narrative's morality – than the apocalyptic religion argument advanced by Frohlich. Very simply, the corrupting nature of power seems to be the major theme of the overall narrative. Perhaps more insightful is the fact that the major tool of power used by characters in the series is language. Every move Kira makes to strengthen himself comes from words – his ability to access language to describe people gave him control of their fate. Interestingly, Ohba and Obata also utilized a narrative device called the "Shinigami eyes," in which a Shinigami could provide a death note owner with the ability to see potential targets' names floating over their bodies. Essentially, the Shinigami eyes gave death note users the necessary language to control someone else's life story. As Napier (2010) observed, a death note functioned narratively as "an object onto which identity is literally, but lethally projected" (p. 359). She rightfully argued that "in *Death Note*, the power to name, i.e., to recognize identity, becomes the power to kill" and to "expunge identity" (p. 359). The moral pedagogy of the series, then, may be in the series of examples and allegories that communicate that the way we talk about things influences the way we think about things... and that both our present and future identities depend on how we talk about ourselves and others. To "see with Shinigami eyes" is to discover language that gives access to power. Exploring this notion of naming and power

in the context of *Death Note*, and then examining true life applications, is one potentially productive way to approach Ohba and Obata's narrative.

### **Death Note as Communication Allegory**

In keeping with the theme of language and power, *Death Note* may be viewed as an example of the social constructivist theory of communication. Berger and Luckmann (1991) coined the term social constructivism based on the principle that people work together to create things in the material world around them (e.g., artifacts). They specifically focused on creation as a product of interpersonal or group interaction. Their theory has since been expanded to the notion that human interaction is the basis for the cultural patterns that create our social experiences. Post-modern epistemologies and pedagogies (Fassett & Warren, 2007) are largely grounded in this belief that [perceived] reality is cooperatively built from social experience. More modernist epistemologies may also be inclusive of the belief that language and perception play a significant role in understandings of reality as well; albeit with less emphasis on the absolute scope of language in creating reality. Regardless of epistemological approach, that language is a significant source of power is generally agreed upon across frameworks. Allegorical reference to social constructivism in *Death Note* becomes evident as the characters, mentally scrimmaging against each other with language and information, find their decisions intimately influencing one another. The coalescing point for social

construction in *Death Note* is naming through language.

To give context and provide an example: the first two characters introduced in the story, Ryuk and Light, create the chain of events that unfold over the course of the story because each of them were bored or otherwise dissatisfied with their lives at the beginning of the narrative. To compensate for this boredom, Ryuk decided to drop his book of death to be discovered in the human world. Light happens to find Ryuk's death note and immediately reads that "the human whose name is written in this note shall die." The audience is immediately exposed to the power of naming as related to the supernatural abilities of the note. Because of these abilities, Napier (2010) argued that Light is highly motivated to protect and use the death note because it is "an immensely powerful object of desire," similar to the 'the one ring' for Frodo in Tolkien's story *The Lord of the Rings*. In accessing his newfound power, Light constantly paired language with material consequences. The bond between language and reality is so closely knit in the narrative that Light cannot even use the death note without permuting language (e.g., someone's name) with someone's face. From a social constructivist position, Light's precise but hurtful use of language not only leads to the immediate consequence of particular people dying, but also the catastrophic chain reaction of impacts on others in the world of the narrative, including death and destruction to the lives of police investigators and the general world population. Recognizing language as a coalescing point of power is key to realizing

both the way *Death Note* characters actualize power and methods by which real individuals access power on a day-to-day basis.

The intimate, but almost dialectical connection between the abstract nature and the materiality of language is pervasive in the *Death Note* stories. For example, while Light wields the power of life and death by simply writing down names in his note, there are specific rules that govern the way the death note may be used. These rules include intricate details such as having merely forty seconds to specify the details of a death. Many of these rules limit the extent of Light's influence based on specificity of language. Within certain boundaries, though, Light possessed the power to dictate other people's actions through his writing. Language tied to the materiality of the body is a truth that all beings face in the *Death Note* narrative and is no less a reality to everyday people in true life.

In discussing language and materiality, Fanon (1967) hailed to the example of French colonists who used language as a form of control over their colonized subjects. In the Antillean Island of Martinique, the capital of Fort De France became a representation of French assimilation. One major element of this assimilation of acceptance into French culture was to speak like the French. The language spoken in these contexts constituted the existence and value of the native Martinician or Antillean people. In similar ways, language continues to construct contemporary existences. Language and existence go hand-in-hand, acting as either a form of domination that

can dehumanize – such as what is described in Fanon's work – or a technology to encourage and build people up.

Iwanicki (2003) elaborated on materiality and the body by saying that “just as we possess bodies that ‘mark’ our existence in the world, the ways in which we use and understand language also contribute to this process... no body/nobody is literally ‘invisible,’ and no word is neutral” (p. 496). The language we use contributes to defining existence: this is not only for the self, but for others consociated with our language as well. Language is not used in a vacuum – it shapes and is shaped in dialectic scenes or what Lefebvre (1991) called “social spaces” (p. 291). The concept of social space stemmed from the study of the sociology of space. One key element of social space is spacial-practice, which is an area where dialectic interaction is materialized. In short: thought, language, and action usually simultaneously interact and impact the world as they are happening. For example, kids in grade school might use stereotypical language (e.g., “nerd” or “jock”) that would not necessarily be socially expected or useful in very many other contexts. However, in school contexts, these labels may function to either elevate or deteriorate the reputation of other people and, therefore, determine how those people are treated by their peers. The use of language directly influences the material ways that people interact with each other in space. Lefebvre argued that it is common to see struggles for power and domination in such social spaces.

In *Death Note*, Light used language to actualize his own form of justice and inflict judgment that granted him a position of

domination in his social groups. In so-doing, Light tried to position himself as being even better or more powerful than the Shinigami – taking on the label (new name/new identity) of “Kira” to express his growing god-complex. Outside of *Death Note*, quintessential people use language as a tool of power on a daily basis as they compete for job positions, promotions, publications, political capital, etc. The way people use language in social spaces is often with the view that our existence is defined within a zero sum game. With limited jobs, ranks, and other positions of power, domination is a limited resource. Labeling other people, on both individual and group levels, lends itself to restructuring the way people think about each other with a re-centering of the self as a source of value or power.

In the end, *Death Note*'s allegory on language and power teaches us that narrative acts as an outline for action. Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1940) famously conducted a set of studies that indicated that language directly determines the way that we think – something exemplified all throughout the *Death Note* narrative and most explicitly with the death note itself. If words influence how we think, then descriptions from both ourselves and others impact who we think we are and what we believe we can do. For example, Wojecki (2007) extended from Sfar and Prusak's (2005) research on narrative identity by demonstrating that, at least in learning-oriented contexts, the way people talk about who they *are* (“actual identity”) typically determines their personal performance; however, the way people talk about who they *can be* (“designated identity”) can adjust present behaviors to fit

a possible future trajectory. Wojecki's study results harmonized with Sapir and Whorf to indicate the strong link between narrative and identity.

People commonly access designated identities to determine behavior. For instance, if a person wanted to take a vacation, they would go through a mental process of describing future-oriented situations (e.g., where to go, what to do once there, etc.). Mental decision-making processes would be influenced by previous stories that the vacation-goer had heard, such as choosing a destination that had been labeled by friends or other people as “fun,” “exciting,” “adventurous,” or whatever terms appealed to them based on their previous experiences. This process of imagining or verbally describing the future, much like a more optimistic version of writing names and situations in the death note, leads to the materialization of our stories. Allison (1994) called this process narratization. Narratization is the “ongoing mediation of [a person's] own physical and/or verbal actions within a temporally configured field in order to achieve an envisioned but, as yet, unrealized end” (p. 109). That is, people usually plan simple “plots” for their lives and then enact them. Humans learn from experience – prior stories – to determine which structures to act out in order to realize their goals. To complete the example: when the vacation-goer finally takes their vacation, they engage in a narratization process of the particular plot they set for the trip.

In *Death Note*, the connection between thought and language was woven together through labels. Kira continuously planned

how to create his new world via outlining when and where to kill and otherwise manipulate the life stories of the people around him. Equally as fascinating and allegorical is L's use of language and narrative in the Kira investigation. L accessed various, disparate facts – rogue “plot points” – that he connected together to form a narrative about Kira's identity. The stories that L told about Kira influenced other investigators and officers to follow his commands/plans for apprehending Kira. Both the death note to Kira and the almost mythical reputation of L give each character increased opportunity to wield the power of language.

In the end, Kira consistently rejected Ryuk's offer to give him the Shinigami eyes. While these powers would indeed give Kira access to more language and more power, it is clear why Kira consistently rejected the “eye power:” he was already the most verbally intelligent and linguistically skilled character in the story. Kira used his words to cooperate and encourage as well as to manipulate and murder. Even though he did not literally take the power of the Shinigami eyes in the story, it was as if he had their power already.

The power of words to access the identity and existence of another human being through naming, labeling, and narrating is no small ability. In the *Death Note* narrative, the connection between language and identity was literalized through the death note essentially giving Kira an opportunity to have ultimate dominance based on his power to manipulate other people's life narratives. Although often more unnoticed in true life,

language and how we use it still works to define our existence through actual and designated identities. The pedagogical warning of *Death Note* is to use language transparently and responsibly. In this vein, we agree with Soichiro that even though “nobody said it would be easy to speak the truth... [but] it has to be done. Especially something that is not easy to say” (Inoue, 2006).

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