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Death of the Endless and Fan Projections

The lives and experiences of an individual are contextualized by society and history. Through the framework of society and culture, we develop our identities and relationships to other individuals, groups, and institutions. Addressing the long history of comics, Harriet E. H. Earle states, that, "as soon as humans could make marks on surfaces, stories were being told and visually represented" (2021, 33). Earle does not only assert that the notion of images accompanying stories can be identified across cultures around the globe (Earle 2021, 34) but also that a proliferation of the comic in contemporary society can be observed (Earle 2021, 57). The internet and the increasing embedding of social media in our everyday lives provide sites for sharing, circulation, and appropriation of media texts, as well as the formation of communities dedicated to specific media formats and texts, including comics. Rob Salkowitz triangulates the burgeoning culture of (fan) conventions as "a multi-billion-dollar" (2021, 147) commercial enterprise and the history of comics fandom. While initially catering to "hardcore fans" (Salkowitz 2021, 147), Salkowitz marks the change in convention culture today where "big brands and celebrities with little or no connection to fan culture are as likely to be present at conventions as artists and publishers" (2021, 147). In exploring the popularity of fan conventions and comics, Salkowitz notes the intersectionality of fandom and comics, thus paving the argument for fan agency beyond convention culture.

Noting the shift from niche to mass culture concerning comics fandom, Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo stress the role of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986 and 1991), in shaping "the canon of comic books and graphic novels" (2016, 17). Like Beaty and Woo, Earle traces the legacy of comics as a subject for scholarly consideration back to Spiegelman's *Maus* and claims that comics as a medium are not only popular but also transmedial and intermedial, and that "the modern Comics world is diverse, inclusive, and accessible [. . .] though the journey to public acceptance has been long, complex and circuitous" (Earle 2021, 57–60). With the growing popularity and proliferation of comics, particularly as the medium invited interaction not only with and between readers but also with other media formats and texts, it is necessary to situate comics in practices and discussions of cultural representation, particularly those by fans. *The Sandman* (Gaiman 2013a, 2013b, 2019), according to Joe Sutliff Sanders (2018, 340–342), redefined the medium of the graphic novel and enjoyed immense success, which not only gained the series a dedicated fan following but is also deemed largely responsible for the fame and fandom that its writer, Neil Gaiman, later enjoyed. Exploring Gaiman's

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The Sandman universe, and specifically his character Death of the Endless as a case study, this chapter addresses fandom and practices associated with fanart. Sanders asserts that Gaiman has, since the release of *Sandman*, gained immense popularity. By positing Gaiman as a literary celebrity, who according to Beaty and Woo "commands a substantial fan base, augmented through canny use of social media" (2016, 61), we aim to, firstly, highlight the interaction between and the agency of the media producer, the media prosumers,[1] and the celebrity in textual meaning-making and, secondly, to illustrate the need for approaches that consider questions of remediation.

As we begin the consideration of the figure of the fan in relation to *The Sandman*, it is crucial to address the current discourse concerning comics fandoms. Fan studies scholarship has investigated comics fandoms from various perspectives and disciplines, including considerations of online and physical spaces, or the politics of culture concerning race, gender, and sexuality in comics – as, e.g., in the infamous "Comicsgate" debate[2] – or the relationship between the comics industry and fandoms (Healey 2009; Burke 2013; Scott 2013; Kohnen 2014; Perren and Feldschow 2018; Woo and Stoll 2021), or fan conventions at the heart of fandom and comics culture (Salkowitz 2021). With the shift afforded by new media, not only are media formats in a state of constant flux, but so are fandoms and fan practices, transforming strategies of composition, production, and distribution, as well as expectations of and appropriations by fans. Given this perpetual modification, the present chapter imagines the cultural text, in this case *The Sandman*, as constantly interacting with other media as well as with its producers and its fans. This interaction identifies the text *per se* as intermedial and transmedial in that, at any given point, shifts in processes of mediation and remediation can be observed.

As Jonathan Gray argues, "each and every media text is accompanied by textual proliferation at the level of hype, synergy, promos, and peripherals" (2010, 1). A media text is significantly influenced by synergetic elements like advertisements, trailers, casting choices, tie-in comics, films, books, or TV shows. Media texts also interact with other texts and influence meaning-making processes. Considering the concept of "death" as a paratext across different media, the term is certainly loaded with meaning across different philosophical, religious, and

1 Prosumers or rather prosumption can be described as the practices undertaken by active audiences that seemingly eradicate "the distinction between making and using media" (Gajjala et al. 2017, 1).

2 "Comicsgate" refers to the debate wherein primarily white male comics readers attacked publishers and comics that have pushed for diversity in relation to comics artists as well as characters represented in comics (Passmore 2019, 10–15).

metaphysical contexts and questions. Based on the socio-cultural environment of an individual, the concept would be perceived in a specific way and contribute to the meaning-making of life as well as the various notions of life after death. Likewise, exposure to media, especially texts that feature death, both as a state of non-being and as a personification, frame one's notion of "death." Death could be carrying a scythe and be dressed in flowing black robes, death could be the result of a car accident, Death is the kin of War, Famine, and Pestilence, or death is what awaits those who go to war; but Death can also be a grim reaper or simply the one guarding you from this life to the next. Every encounter with death, both in media and on a conversational level, creates a framework for how one may perceive the general concept. One's encounters with representations of death thus contribute to one's interpretation of it as a concept. Due to the vast amount of different deaths/Deaths in popular culture, the range of interpretations created by fans of various versions of death/Death is mind-blowing. A very specific and rather influential avatar of death is Death of the Endless from the *The Sandman* universe.

Gaiman's (and a great range of artists') *The Sandman* evokes a complex transmedial storyworld, expounded upon by an audiobook (Gaiman and Maggs 2020), an upcoming Netflix adaptation, as well as spin-offs such as the television series *Lucifer* (2016–2018, 2019–2020), which entails many different levels of layered and nested narratives. This complexity is representative of new media trends, especially in terms of the relationship between the producers and prosumers of media texts, which problematizes the notion of agency and meaning-making. Transmedia storytelling, which involves the expansion of the storyworld across various media and platforms, is also characterized by prosumption practices of media fans. These practices involve appropriation and reappropriation of media content by engaged amateurs and can potentially threaten "the usual power relations between makers and consumers, often conflating and democratizing them so that lines are blurred and domination is usurped" (Gajjala et al. 2017, 1). Natalia Samutina (2016, 433–435) highlights the link between fan fiction and world-building, which also adds to the transmedia storyworld of *The Sandman*. Using Samutina's notion of "active transformative reception" (2016, 436) through the lens of which prosumers view media texts one can identify fan-made multiverses that are anchored by existents of the transmedia storyworld, for example, specific characters (here: Death of the Endless). Contemporary fandoms, therefore, employ the archontic principle (more on that below) to enrich the storyworld, making it not only transmedial but also transformative. Tracing the coinage of the term and the conceptualization of *transmedia storytelling* to Henry Jenkins and colleagues, Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman claim that the contribution of fans in the expansion of the storyworld is

> a social, commercial and semiotic necessity of certain tales. [. . .T]he consumers (readers, viewers, users) consider that the extension of a narrative world is not enough so they ask for more. [. . .] The storytelling is so strong that the characters require more space and time to tell their stories. (Scolari et al. 2014, 2)

Gaiman's *The Sandman* also features this type of transmedia storytelling, as Sanders (2018, 338–341) chronicles with regard to the development of its fan base, particularly highlighting the pleasures of building a collection and the desire to appropriate and transform the text that prosumer fans engage with.

In its first instantiation, Gaiman's *The Sandman* is a long graphic novel of over 2,000 pages, initially published in 75 monthly installments. This form of publication – on a regular basis and of a length of about 26 pages each – is characteristic of the comic book format, thus complicating its status as an alleged graphic novel. Earle argues that the "graphic novel" is one of the more contentious terms in the study of comics. It has been occasionally served as a substitute for "comics," particularly for comics containing "violent" or "sexually explicit" themes, as well as for previously serialized works, at times elevating their status to "high culture" (Earle 2021, 17–19). Hence, one may refer to *The Sandman* as a graphic novel not only based on its serialized format, but also its length as a compilation of large volumes, and mostly for its formal and narrative complexity as well as the themes it addresses. Additionally, Sanders traces the relationship between comics fans and the "direct market" to "floppies," which he defines as "monthly, magazine-style comics" (2018, 337). Noting that the term "graphic novel" was already around during the publication of *The Sandman*, which was characterized by "consistently good writing, a reliable production schedule, and narrow initial exposure" (Sanders 2018, 337), Sanders argues that *The Sandman* was not the first ever graphic novel, nor a first graphic novel "from a major publisher," but that it "filled a crucial role in the history of US comics" by demonstrating "that the future of comics lay not in monthly serials but in bound collections" (2018, 337–338). He then goes on to assert: "The story of *The Sandman*'s place in the history of the graphic novel is one of tension – and transition – between the ephemeral and the permanent" (Sanders 2018, 338). *The Sandman* was "published in ten trade paperback volumes, containing either a full story arc or a collection of one-off issues, resembling a collection of interrelated short stories" (Mellette 2015, 319). This multiple format release illustrates the publisher's attempt to appeal to audiences that were keen on "comics" as well as on "graphic novels." At the writing front, Gaiman himself considered *The Sandman* as "comic-ish" and introduced himself as a comics writer, as Cyril Camus (2015, 309) retells in an anecdote in his appropriately titled article "Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* as a Gateway from Comic Books to Graphic Novels." In this recollection, a literary critic treated Gaiman in a pejorative manner as he learned

about his work as a comics author. When the title *The Sandman* drops, however, his behavior changes extremely, as he perceives this visual narrative as "more than just comics": It is a graphic novel. When told that he writes graphic novels and not comic books, Gaiman "felt like someone who'd been informed that she wasn't actually a hooker; that in fact she was a lady of the evening" (quoted in Bender 1999, 32). Beaty and Woo argue that Gaiman, who "commands a substantial fan base, augmented through canny use of social media" enjoys increasing popularity after his "forays into broader popular culture" (2016, 61). As someone who dabbled in Sherlockian fan fiction himself, Gaiman is credited with supporting fan fiction of the texts he produces, and encourages holding public readings of his works (especially during the Covid-19 pandemic that ensued in a global lockdown).

As a literary celebrity and often identified with the titular Sandman in terms of visual resemblance (see note 3 below), Gaiman, in turn, epitomizes a particularly salient example of authorial agency. Gaiman, who boasts a prominent digital presence via his social media handles – specifically on Twitter and Tumblr – is often identified as the "poster figure" for those media texts the production of which he significantly contributes to. As Gray points out: "Numerous paratexts (and intertexts) create an author figure, surround the text with aura, and insist on its uniqueness, value, and authenticity in an otherwise standardized media environment" (2010, 82). Although promos and bonus materials add to the overall perception of the text, it is not least the "poster figure," or celebrity associated with the text that invokes a great deal of interest among fans. Gaiman, whose works and words are characterized by certain stylistic elements that define "Gaiman-ness," is often identified as the "creator" or "writer" of various texts (and their adaptations), including *Good Omens* (2019–), *American Gods* (2017–2021), episodes of *Doctor Who* (2005–, S6E4, S7E12), *Lucifer* (2016–2021, the titular character is adapted from *The Sandman* universe), and the upcoming *The Sandman* Netflix show among many others. Gaiman's celebrity can mobilize his ever-growing fan community of the texts he produces simply by his association with them. Serving as one of the common ties between all of these texts, Gaiman, as both a literary and mainstream celebrity, is one reason for the migration of audiences and fans from one text to another. His activity on social media refreshes and keeps the memory of his long-standing works such as the *The Sandman* graphic novels alive, thereby adding another layer to its transmedia storyworld, wherein social media serves as a site of interaction between the producer and prosumers, enabling the collaborative culture that is characteristic of transmedia texts. Due to increasing textual synergy and proliferation in the age of new media, Gaiman's works have, over the past five years, been adapted and delivered in various media formats. Although the *The Sandman* series concluded as

graphic novels in 1996, the text continues to reinvent itself through later added prequels ("Overture"; Gaiman and Williams III., 2013–2015), paratexts, intertexts and adaptations, as is evident in the above-mentioned Audible example as well as in the Netflix adaptation of the comic that was announced in 2019 and is yet to be released.

On a number of occasions, Gaiman has been compared to the titular Sandman in that audiences have wondered whether the character's visual depiction was based on Gaiman himself.[3] Although Gaiman denies that Sandman is visually based on him (e.g., in the afterword to "Preludes and Nocturnes"), he does, in some interviews and social media interactions, acknowledge the similarities between his appearance and that of Sandman, particularly the hair and dress style (Hoad 2013; see also Boucher 2009). Audience and fan interpretations in particular revise the character of Sandman as Gaiman, and these interpretations are also reflected in the casting choices of the Netflix adaptation. Tom Sturridge, who is to play the titular Sandman, is seen wearing black in Netflix' promotional poster, with his hairstyle similar to how a young Gaiman wore it, as indicated in the promo image that appeared on the website of *Variety* magazine 2021. While producers take creative liberties when adapting a text, the intertextuality between the "source" text and the adaptation can be discerned only when the similarities between the two texts are perceptible. When existents of these texts are noticeably linked, the storyworld archive grows. This aspect is succinctly tied to the transformative practices of fan fiction through the archontic principle by Abigail Derecho (2006). Derecho examines fan fiction as a contemporary literary practice and uses the Derridian term "archontic" to characterize it, stating that a text is an open archive accrued upon by fan fiction, and that "an archontic text allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text's archive" (Derecho 2006, 64–65). Derecho (2007, 64) identifies intertextuality as a key feature of fan fiction, an assertion seconded by Samutina (2016, 434), who argues that the transformative nature of fan fiction enables prosumers to explore or co-create imaginary worlds. Intertextuality rests on the notion that the intertextual reference to another text is identifiable in the text being examined. With archontic texts, the "artifacts" that Derecho mentions make the fan fiction text

3 1) Zorbonaut asked: "Hi. I just noticed I've never seen you wearing anything that wasn't pitch black. Don't you ever ask yourself on a hot summer's day 'I could really stop with the casual Morpheus cosplay and wear something comfortable'?" (zorbonaut 2015, n.pag.);
2) The-faraway-here-and-now asked: "You look very much like Dream of the Endless. Is this purposeful?" (the-faraway-here-and-now 2011, n.pag.); see also Woods 2013, n.pag..

recognizable in the sense that they add to the archive of the "source text." Furthermore, apart from their intertextual nature, works of fan fiction are also deemed as "appropriative" (Derecho 2006, 64), wherein fan fiction creators engage with a text as a collective and also on a personal level.

As communities, fandoms self-regulate and through interactions among its members, perpetuate certain "dominant" theories, ideas or artifacts concerning the texts they are fans of. These "changed narratives" or fan-made "alternative universes" (Samutina 2016, 434) illustrate the interpretive and meaning-making practices that prosumers engage in. These practices are most evident in "ships," and "ascended fanon,"[4] since fans engage in textual appropriation and recirculation. On a personal level, fans often project their aspirations for a text or an artifact in the text on to works of fan fiction they create, thus changing the narrative, as Samutina suggests. The alteration in fan fiction texts, while significant, is in line with intertextuality and the archontic principle in that it is recognized as an addendum to the archive of the source text. Comics fans engage in various fan practices, such as collection of comics and special editions, participating in conventions, engaging in cosplay, etc. Concerning *The Sandman*'s conceptualization as a transmedial franchise involving collaborative culture, fan participation, and creative engagement highlight fan agency, "with fan-created cultural productions existing in self-governed communities that accord them canonical status and reading them as ciphers of both the individual's and community's desires" (Earle 2021, 111). As audiences filter media texts based on socio-cultural as well as media-specific contexts, they also commence the appropriation of that text and "contribute reflexively to the formation of the product, extending its range and appeal in a way that can allow other fans to pick it up and extend it further" (Earle 2021, 110). While some audience members tend to maintain this appropriation in their imagination and aspirations for a text or a character, others manifest these appropriations in the form of fantexts. According to Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, fantext is "the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom (or even in a pairing or genre), [which] offers an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of characters" (2006, 7). Appropriative fan practices as well as fantexts align with Derecho's conceptualization of fan fiction as archontic, since

4 "Ships," in fan fiction terms, refer to relationships between certain characters in a text who, according to the fans, share (often sexual) chemistry. These fans are known as "shippers." With reference to fan fiction authors, Sheenagh Pugh (2005, 244) defines "shippers" as fanfic writers and readers for whom relationships between characters are paramount. An "ascended fanon" is when a fanon ("fans' creation of details, plotlines, and characters unsupported by the original text" [Reijnders et al. 2017, 6–7]) becomes canon.

the source text is constantly layered with the interpretation of its audiences. As Hellekson and Busse argue,

> [t]hese multitudes of interpretations of characters and canon scenes are often contradictory yet complementary to one another and the source text [. . . creating] a larger whole of understanding a given universe. This canvas of variations is a work in progress insofar as it remains open and is constantly increasing; every new addition changes the entirety of interpretations. (2006, 7)

When considering a fantext, one can examine the changing interpretations of a text and its components because of the various filters that the fan appropriation generates. In this sense, the appropriation by the prosumer contributes to the larger understanding of the text and its consumption while also highlighting the relationship between professional and amateur transformative works.[5] Busse (2017, 46) suggests that transformative works can be understood in their negotiation and engagement with the source text, thereby identifying the appropriation of texts as both an individual and collective practice. As audience members appropriate Death, they transform her from how she is in the "source text," making fantext an amateur transformative work.

Furthermore, fan dialogue often also circulates around casting choices of adaptations of beloved texts. For example, fans particularly discussed the casting of Kat Dennings as "Death of the Endless" in the above-mentioned Audible adaptation of *The Sandman* based on their perceptions of both Death's character as conceived in the source text and Dennings's previous work in television and film. Gray argues that paratexts are intended to "proffer 'proper interpretations', some preceding the show's arrival in the public sphere, thereby setting up pre-decodings" (2010, 81). Along this line, Gaiman took to his social media to announce the release of *The Sandman* as an Amazon Audible Original, with Kat Dennings voicing Death of the Endless.[6] With this announcement, Gaiman indicated his endorsement of Dennings as fitting for the role of Death. Despite it being an audio-only text, Dennings's appearances in various roles in television certainly constitute a sort of paratext in that they alter the view one would have of Death and, consequently, of the graphic

5 Media convergence has blurred the boundary between the amateur and the professional, given the interpretations by both parties of the text.

6 Gaiman wrote: "It's astonishing. (And this is just the first three books.) So proud to be part of it. You can preorder at http://adbl.co/TheSandman #TheSandmanaudio" (Gaiman 2020a, n. pag.); "You are going to be able to listen to the full cast #TheSandmanAudio at @audible from July 15th. This will be @DirkMaggs's adaptation of the first 3 Graphic Novels. They are stunning, with the cast of your dreams . . ." (Gaiman 2020b, n.pag.).

novel at large.[7] This would also be true of the other cast members, such as James McAvoy, Michael Sheen, or Andy Serkis. Furthermore, with the roles Dennings has played previously, she sets up a degree of expectations or, as Gray suggests, "pre-decodings" (2010, 81) by means of which audiences evaluate the text.

The interpretations and meaning-makings by fans are transformative and open up the text to revision and appropriation based on audience perception. The appropriation of the text can take place in numerous ways, one of which is through the creation of fantexts (such as fan art and fan fiction) and its circulation among fan communities. Busse claims that the context of writing fan fiction – the paratextual frame – is relevant to understand it in the first place, comparing it with "ephemeral traces" (2017, 53).[8] Contextualizing a text and then revising it based on fan interpretations highlights the agency of the prosumer and their prosumption practices. Above all, Gaiman's concept of Death functions as an ideal example to elaborate the notion of ephemeral traces and contextual consumption further. Gaiman's Death of the Endless contradicts the general perception of a personified death in western popular culture, and particularly these contradictory elements are often the subject of fan creations. This appropriation grants agency to the fan artists, thus lending them a medium to express their desire for a character to be portrayed in a particular manner.

One reason for Death of the Endless to go against the grain is the fact that various artists contributed to *The Sandman*'s visuals.[9] This provides nuances exceeding comics or graphic novels with only one visual artist. Furthermore, Death increases this special quality by deviating from many known concepts of

7 Dennings thus fits into the producers' and fans' view of how Death of the Endless looks like, based on the original work as well as on fan art and other medial adaptations. The original Death, however, had her own role model to fit. Mike Dringenberg, one of the main artists for *The Sandman*, met a waitress who matched his imagination of Death. He drew the character based on Cinamon Hadley's looks and, by that, established her design by himself. All other characters stem also visually from Gaiman's imagination.

8 Busse uses José Esteban Muñoz's definition of "ephemeral traces" (Muñoz 2009, 28) to describe what is left after a performance, such as in theatre. According to Muñoz, these traces contain, amongst others, lived experiences which prevail much longer than the duration of the initial performance. This finds expression, in the case of fantext, as Busse (2017, 53) explains, in the fans' comments and discussions that are necessary to understand the given fiction. She identifies this as the paratextual frame of fan fiction.

9 In the spirit of participatory observation, our own personal image of *The Sandman*, for instance, is strongly influenced by Sam Kieth, Jill Thompson, Bryan Talbot, and Dave McKean. This, however, might not be the case for all readers.

death both in her visual and narrative characterization. To begin with, Death is female. She is one of the seven siblings that occupy abstract realms and are collectively called "The Endless." These siblings are Dream (also called Morpheus or the titular Sandman, who is the protagonist of the overall storyline), Delirium, Desire, Destruction, Despair, Destiny, and finally Death. Camus describes them as "anthropomorphic embodiments of 'eternal human traits'" (2011, 91). This elevates them even above God or gods in general. They represent and personify the respective concepts in reference to humanity, i.e., human emotions, beliefs, needs, and urges. Death is an essential element since everybody dies. She is the one collecting the dying people and accompanying them into her realm, the realm of Death. She embodies the bridge between life and death, even hinting that there might be some kind of afterlife (which is never disclosed). All things that live must die and therefore pass through her realm. This makes her unique already.

Figure 1: Death in "The High Cost of Living #1" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 23).

However, there are quite a few features and attributes which grant Death a special place amongst her siblings as well as amongst other conceptualizations of death, especially in popular culture. Although many different artists are involved in her visual depiction, she remains recognizable based on some constant features that never seem to change too much. For example, the depictions of her

Figure 2: Death in "The Sound of Her Wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 208).

Figure 3: Death in "Season of Mist: A Prologue" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 546).

indicated above (see Figure 1–3) are all drawn by various artists, namely by Chris Bachalo (Figure 1), Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III (Figure 2) and Mike Dringenberg (Figure 3) and belong to different stories of the *The Sandman* narrative, but in spite of this variation, they maintain a specific representation of the character of Death of the Endless. Among the most obvious signifiers of the character is her black hair, which often, but not always, covers part of her face. By

that, she hides not only her facial expression but also at least one of her eyes and, therefore, her identity and soul. In these instances, one cannot see both of her eyes and thus not peek into her soul, which in turn prevents one from judging her character right away. This provides her with an aura of mystery and secrecy. It appears as if she does not want to "reveal herself" completely, which indicates her knowledge exceeding those of others, and she does not share all of it. Her character thus gains depth and at the same time a high level of attraction. She arouses curiosity and casts automatically a spell over anybody she meets, including the reader. Moreover, she often has a unique mark under her eye, which references to the Eye of Horus. It symbolizes Heaven and light, which readily connects her with her function as a guardian between realms. The Eye of Horus is seen as a symbol of prosperity, protection, regality and is associated with the afterlife. In addition, she always wears black clothing as well as her necklace sigil, a "symbol of life, and the soul" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 42). This "ankh" is based on an Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol representing life as well as life after death.[10]

The employment of Egyptian symbols of life and death is of particular import here not only to enhance the narrative and Death's characterization but also to add a specific layer of intertextuality that often finds expressions in fan fiction, particularly in fan art. An example for this is the fan art by the DeviantArt user Gloriecilla, which reimagines Death as an Egyptian queen through their interpretation, perhaps even evoking a similarity between Death and Cleopatra, as indicated in Figure 4. The Egyptian reimagination has Death looking almost like Queen Cleopatra as she frequently appears in popular culture. Gloriecilla's Death of the Endless is adorned with a golden headpiece and has her forehead framed by a fringe, which is quite distinct from how she appears in the graphic novels with dense wavy locks that cover nearly half her face. Instead of highlighting her mysteriousness, this particular fan version thus opts to illustrate her as regal and powerful. However, she is still recognizable as Death because of her necklace and the eyelash curl by her left eye, reminiscent of the Eye of Horus. The ankh necklace that Death is often sporting in the graphic novels is an Egyptian symbol for life after death, so visualizing Death as an Egyptian figure might be a logical variation. Additionally, Death has an aura of "untouchability" about her, which Gloriecilla's artwork both conveys and elevates. Cleopatra-esque Death seems untouchable not only because she is Death, but also because she appears dignified and regal. This power of

10 Furthermore, it is said to be an instrument in a life-giving ritual during which the loop is filled with some sort of liquid, which shall symbolically provide life (Schwabe et al. 1982, 457).

meaning-making and meaning-changing opens up a dialogue with the source text and its archive as well as the fan community, claiming agency as to the peripherals surrounding it.

Figure 4: Cleopatra-esque Death (Gloriecilla 2017).

Although her very nature, being Death, symbolizes the end of a life or an entire existence, the mark under her eye and her sigil suggest otherwise. Dying, and hence Death, do not necessarily entail an end; instead, these symbols represent the beginning of a new life, an afterlife. Although the Eye of Horus only refers to an afterlife, without making any claims about its pleasantness, it suggests that the afterlife might be better than life on earth. No suffering that is stereotypically linked with death might await; instead, people head into an afterlife in Death's realm at her side, which, by her characterization, does not seem too bad. Moreover, Death's necklace highlights her task to guide people from one realm to the other. It suggests that life on earth is merely an interruption of the never-ending life in her realm, as she accompanies people into the world during birth and out of it in death. Existence thus never ceases; it just changes states. The ankh around her neck as a recurring attribute indicates that her duty and powers deviate from stereotypical concepts of death that are mostly limited to gathering the dying. Moreover, it also symbolizes her character in much the same way as Superman's or Batman's iconic logos do, especially for her brother Dream. A special wall in Dreams home contains picture frames with

the sigils of all his siblings that enable him to communicate with them at any given time (Gaiman et al. 2013, 629). This means that Death of the Endless also does not represent dying as her most dominant identifying feature. People die for various reasons, but she is not causing this and therefore not guilty or responsible in any way. She is simply the guardian of those in the process of leaving life as well as those entering it, guiding them from one realm to the other. She usually exercises no power over life or death herself, as she does not decide who dies, but stands by them, nonetheless. Although this may seem to take from her the power of actually ruling over death, she is not represented as a weak or as a passive character. Death is a strong character and can actually change the rules of who dies if she wants to, but this is seldom the case.[11]

The most important and unique feature of Death of the Endless, however, especially in contrast to other personifications, remains the fact that she is represented as female and young. Most embodiments of the concept of death in literature as well as in popular culture rely on contrasting attributes, usually being male and rather old. Gaiman refers to such seemingly unspoken understandings of the figure of Death, yet challenges how death should be portrayed in *The Sandman* (see Figure 5). In this storyline, "The High Cost of Living," the boy Sexton meets Death and chooses not to believe her identity since she does not fit his stereotypical opinion of how death should look like. In his view, "death's this tall guy with a bone face, like a skeletal monk, with a scythe and an hourglass and a big white horse and a penchant for playing chess with Scandinavians" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 31). Gaiman breaks with these clichés by presenting the reader with a young and beautiful girl who looks not at all dangerous but has an aura of melancholy and untouchability. She seems distant, yet seeks being close to humans. She only connects with them in their very first and very last moments, and enjoys it greatly, although this is often one-sided, especially on her second visit. She loves humans and therefore does her best to make their ends as pleasant as possible, remaining calm and thereby exuding a notion of security and intimacy. She tries to explain what is happening as much as necessary and as little as possible, making the process of dying less lonely. Moreover, she just listens to what people have to say in their dying moments, particularly about what troubles them. It is hard for Death, however, to interact with people in their most vulnerable and emotional state. Almost nobody is happy to meet her since her appearance leaves no doubt that the end is

11 In "The Sandman #13: Men of Good Fortune" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 326–350), Death grants Hob Gadling eternal life because he simply refuses to die and for her own amusement. He meets Dream once every century who observes his sufferings. Finally, Death offers him to end his life, but Hob still refuses to die. Death allows him his wish again and therefore exemplifies that it is she who decides in the end.

Figure 5: Challenging representations of Death in "The High Cost of Living #1" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 31).

near. This is the reason why she spends one day a century as a mortal.[12] In this storyline, she spends it with Sexton. This is also the reason why she looks like a teenage girl, as she occupies the body of one already dead or dying and tries to

12 She uses the body of Didi, a sixteen-year-old who has lost her entire family to a robbery gone bad. At least that is the story she made up. Death explains to Sexton that Didi's family has never existed, that it is just a nice touch to make her feel more comfortable in Didi's world (Gaiman et al. 2019, 7–35).

connect with people in other moments than those of birth and death. However, she does not disguise herself. Using a human body is necessary since humans could not cope with her natural appearance, which is a rather common trope regarding celestial beings. She still introduces herself as Death, accepting all potentially negative reactions. No matter how people treat her, Death remains calm and rational, which ascribes a very reasonable and controlled nature to her character.

Figure 6: Death and Hazel in "The Time of Your Life #3" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 217).

Although she is a rather emotional being, she does not allow her feelings to influence her behavior or actions. In another storyline in the *The Sandman* narrative, "The Time of Your Life," she refuses to make a deal with Hazel, who wants to trade her life to save her dying son Alvie (see Figure 6). "A life for a life" is a deal many incarnations of death are well known to accept, but this is not the case here: Death straightforwardly rejects the offer. She could comfort Hazel by explaining that there was a universal balance and that Alvie must die for some specific reason, but this would be a lie and Death does not choose it. Rather, she is honest and trustworthy and accepts the burden of crashing Hazel's last hope. She embraces her duty and role to collect the dying, thus leaving the living behind in their agony. This loyalty to her role as well as her willful acceptance of emotional distress greatly influences her visual depiction. Although she appears as a young and pretty girl, she is serious and has a sober composure. Her presence conveys a feeling of dignity and authority based on how she is visually presented inside a specific panel, e.g., in the way she is sitting or standing, how she holds her head and waves her hair, or her general body posture. Her composure and the aura of dignity are enhanced by the way she talks to people and, even more so, how she listens. Listening is one of the few stereotypically female-connoted characteristics Death retains. In sum, she is a young, female embodiment of the abstract figure of Death as well as the personification of all emotions and feelings connected with death, dying, and an abstract and undefined afterlife, who unites all these ideas, assumptions, or concepts in her visual portrayal. Although many different artists present their own versions of her, highlighting their artistic skills and imagination as well as paying homage to the original creation (Earle 2021, 115–116), she distinctly remains Death of the Endless.

This is one reason why fans get particularly creative with regards to this character. The freedom of her visualization – as long as she remains clearly identifiable through the three main features of her sigil, the mark under her eye, and her black hair and clothing – invites fan artists to interpret her and create their own respective version of Death, participating in an ongoing series of portrayals. As Busse (2017, 50) states, fanfiction and, by extension, fan art, must be seen as part of an ongoing conversation. Thus, it is never complete or final, and sometimes even classified as "WIP," work-in-progress. It engages with both the original work and other products of fanfiction, charging the conversation with intertextuality and intermediality. In other words, fanfiction by nature correlates with other works as well as their discourses and cannot be regarded as completely independent. Fanfiction rather lives off of this interactive and productive discussion. Fans from all kinds of backgrounds engage in it on conventions, digitally in forums and chats, and especially on platforms that are

not primarily aimed at fan exchanges, such as social media. They thus create new communities which "function as 'affinity spaces' [. . .] in which like-minded individuals find one another and advance one another's skills" (Lamerichs 2018, 16). Fan art in general thus means not only to engage with the original work and other (fannish) versions of the represented characters, but also with the creators – both of the original and of the fan art. This puts the personalities in the focus, too, and has the power to elevate authors and creators to celebrities, just like Gaiman himself. This also illustrates that fan art operates across formal limitations and shifts between different genres and media.

Figure 7: Interpretation of Death (Uriel 2019).

Fan art featuring Death of the Endless engages with her different realizations by various *The Sandman* artists to which fans respond with their own visualizations. Some of these examples stick rather closely to the original, while others only borrow her three dominant characteristics (see Figures 7–9). Some deviate much more, for example by depicting Death with huge breasts or showing her almost naked (see Figure 10). This hypersexualized visualization implies her having even more power over others by eliciting sexual desire and projecting an aura of dominance, experience, sexual liberty, and self-determination.[13] This illustrates the power that fans exercise by creating fanfiction. Another example shows her next

13 Death's hypersexualized portrayal opens a discussion about her being subject to a male gaze while experiencing a moment of empowerment instead of being objectified, which cannot be addressed here in detail.

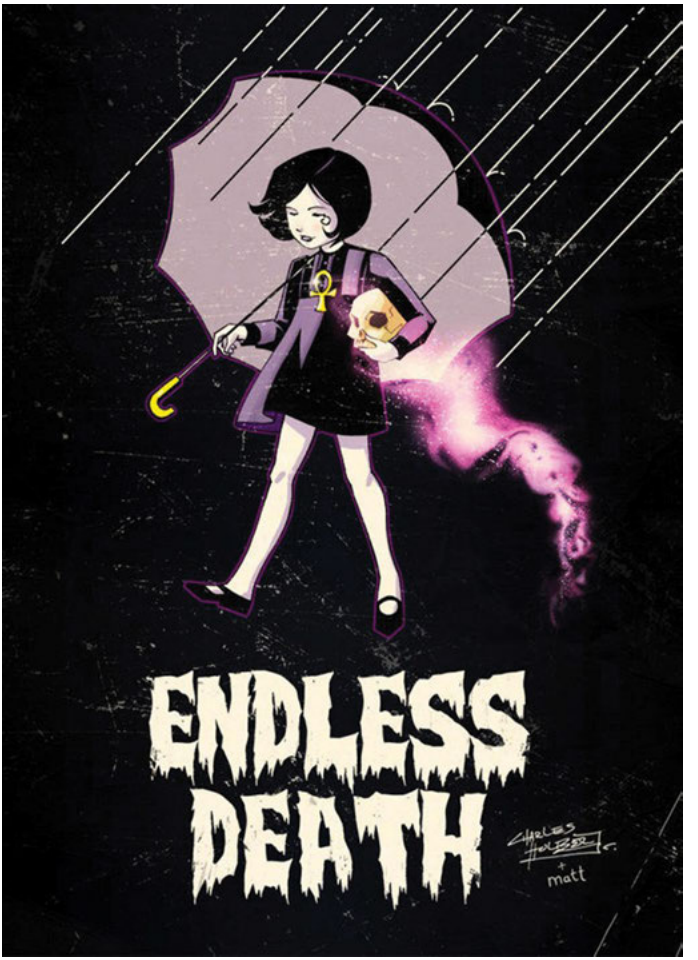

Figure 8: Interpretation of Death (KidNotorious 2009).

to a more stereotypical portrayal of death, accompanied by a winged skeleton (see Figure 11),[14] while others even provide her with wings (see Figure 12). These versions highlight the fact that fan art is constantly evolving and developing.

14 Here, like in many other examples, Death is accompanied by the figure of death from the TV show *Supernatural* (2005–2020). On the one hand, this brings to the fore the importance of this particular show to fan art of Death of the Endless. On the other hand, it illustrates that these contrasting concepts of death do not have to contradict but can rather complement each other, symbolized by their interwoven hands, which "links" their respective narratives.

Figure 9: Interpretation of Death (Mordecai 2019).

Furthermore, it brings to the fore close relations to other concepts and depictions of celestial beings, such as angels. Wings are merely hinted at in the original work (see Figure 13). In this sequence of "The Sound of Her Wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013, 200–224), Dream spends the day with Death. Although the reader cannot see Death yet, a shadow behind Dream invokes her through an indication of dark wings. Dream states: "From the darkness I hear the beating of mighty wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013, 215), which suggests that Death, approaching here, indeed has wings that are merely not perceivable when she appears in her human form. Dream's speech underscores her powerful and sublime identity. Wings are therefore a potential further characteristic identity marker of Death that some fan artists take up, depending on how close Death's depiction should position her towards either a human or a celestial being. Her having wings stresses her non-human nature visually and thereby distances her from the humans she is visiting. In artworks such as the one reproduced in Figure 12, her relation to the Endless seems to be more important than her link to humanity.

Figure 10: Death pin-up (Szerdy 2020).

Figure 11: Interpretation of Death with Supernatural's death character (MasterOfFear n.d.).

Figure 12: Interpretation of Death (Cho n.d.).

Figure 13: Dream hearing Death approach in "The Sound of Her Wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 215).

What becomes clear through all these examples is that fan art surrounding Death is often concerned with freeing her from her narrative setting and context, a limitation imposed by the creators of the source text. *The Sandman* was published by DC and therefore belongs to the DC Universe (DCU), which now is a multiverse, positioning Death and all the elements of the *The Sandman* universe in the DCU. Theoretically, she can meet other characters from the DCU, like for instance Superman or John Constantine.[15] In fact, *The Sandman* indeed contains certain connections to other DC works, for instance by referring to the character Scarecrow or to the Arkham Asylum in Gotham City (Mellette 2015, 324). Diegetic encounters with characters from other comic book universes or franchises are difficult and rare for legal reasons. Fans, though, do not have to stick to such rules and norms, as fanfiction "by its very nature has specific freedoms regarding content, form, and length" (Busse 2017, 49). As a result, there are many interpretations of Death meeting, for instance, Marvel characters like Wolverine (see Figure 14). Her kissing him on the forehead implies a blessing with immortality, a reference to the special healing powers of this Marvel character. Thus, this fan art presents its own explanation for Wolverine's ability to recover from any wounds and thereby avoiding

Figure 14: Interpretation of Death kissing Wolverine (Celis 2014).

15 Examples for these meetings inside the DC Multiverse are *Action Comics Vol. 1 #900* (2011), where Death appears alongside Superman and Lex Luthor, *Captain Atom Vol. 2 #42* (1990), where she meets Nate alias Captain Atom, and *The Books of Magic Vol. 1 #4* (1991), in which she and Destiny appear as the universe's last two inhabitants.

death. This brings to the fore the agency of fans through their art, which is at liberty to extend or create new intertextual and intermedial connections. By borrowing from both DC and Marvel, these fans playfully imply a new multiverse that bridges legal and production-oriented gaps and, by doing so, initiate an even broader discourse of intertextual references.

Fanfiction, therefore, can be a site of change through its potential to combine different storyworlds and have various characters, which are usually strictly separated, interact. It thus can create new fictional worlds beyond the limitations set by specific publishing houses and also "reinvigorate our understanding and interpretation" (Earle 2021, 116) of both, the source text and prior fan-created text. The dynamic agency of fans is evident in the cyclical appropriation of the text and its existents (here, Death). By virtue of a text being archontic, its revision and (re-)circulation through canon, adaptation, or fantext is undertaken by authors and fans alike, indicating fans' claimed agency in the process of production.

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