

Divinity and its Imitation in the Utopian Visions of *Death Note* and *Parable of the Sower*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the impact of divinity and divine imitation in the anime series *Death Note* by Tsugumi Ohba and the novel *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, comparing the philosophies of their respective protagonists and the success of their utopian visions. *Death Note*'s protagonist's utopian vision become dystopian because of his violent tendencies and pursuit to become a god, while *Parable of the Sower*'s protagonist's utopian vision succeeds because of her trust in others and her view of god as an ever changing force that people must shape to survive.*

INTRODUCTION

Divinity and utopia are often intertwined. Utopia represents an idealized society and shapeshifts based on a person's perception of a perfect world. The utopian concept has existed for hundreds if not thousands of years, even if it did not have the title of "utopia" that Thomas More coined in 1516. Early examples exist in Christian narratives such as the Garden of Eden and the prospect of eternal paradise beyond the earthly plain, if a person is virtuous in life and follows teachings in the Old and New Testaments. In modern examples, literature and television shows such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and the anime adaptation of the *Death Note* manga series by Tsugumi Ohba focus on returning paradise to Earth, although the success of each work's utopian vision is determined by the protagonists' view of God and how they choose to imitate divinity. *Death Note's* utopian vision is a failure because its main protagonist focuses on obtaining godhood, while *Parable of the Sower's* vision is successful because it relies on the betterment of society and viewing God as change.

Butler's novel highlights issues like dependence on material possessions, class status, and family dynamics to correct them and create a perfect representation of what society should be in post-apocalyptic Los-Angeles, while *Death Note* focuses on human nature's violent tendencies and purging the world of sin in modern Japan. Utopia for one person cannot exist without encroaching on the happiness of another, leading ultimately to failure, sometimes at a catastrophic level; it is a desert mirage: beautiful and full of possibility and hope, but when examined up close, it dissolves into nothingness. Pure utopia cannot exist on Earth, because humanity is flawed. It seems logical, then, that a perfect being, or deity, would be the sole entity that could create a perfect world. *Parable of the Sower* recognizes that human imperfection and stresses that God is an ever-changing force, while *Death Note* explores the consequences of when a person tries to achieve godlike status to rule over a society and the disastrous consequences that follow for its protagonist.

Death Note follows Light Yagami: a genius, hard-working high school student who finds a black notebook referred to as the "Death Note." It allows him to kill anyone he pleases by writing their name in it, and he forms a tenuous alliance with Ryuk—the *shinigami*, or "death god," that dropped the notebook in the human world. Light starts using the Death Note to eliminate major criminals in

the world in hopes that he will someday rid the world of everyone who he has judged to be evil and thereby become a god. His utopia stands on the idea that he is the sole person who can save the world. However, as the police start investigating and he matches wits against a brilliant detective, Light starts eliminating anyone who gets in his way, including innocent police officers. His plans for a perfect society seem to be precluded by those who are unwilling to accept change or recognize the overall good that Light is doing in the world, at least in his own mind.

Light's inevitable death at the hands of police is not due to society's ineptness at recognizing his perfect vision. Light's utopia fails because it is founded on violence, selfishness, and pride. In contrast, the Earthseed settlement created at the end of *Parable of the Sower* is built on a sense of trust and community. Lauren Olamina, Butler's protagonist, recognizes that utopia is formed not just by one person but through the efforts of many to create a better society. While Light relies on intimidation and violence to achieve his goal, Lauren and her friends care for one another and see each other as equals who are all trying to escape their own dystopias. Light only views others as puppets in his master plan, resulting in the deterioration of his mental state and the loss of focus on his noble, if misguided, efforts to rid the world of crime.

GOD AND UTOPIA'S IMPACT IN *DEATH NOTE* AND *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

Death Note, an anime series set in modern-day Japan and referencing Japanese gods of death like the *shinigami*, draws inspiration from other cultures and themes. In fact, *Death Note* explores concepts that date back to early Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman periods. In his article, "The Divine Human Being," Helmut Koester explains that, in early Greek civilization, being godlike did not strictly adhere to a person being good. Rather, it was "reserved for those special individuals who, by their powerful and inspired deeds, had demonstrated that they were in fact more than just human" (Koester 244). This can be applied to *Death Note* from episode one, where Light discovers the Death Note and uses it to control death and eliminate criminals. Light is committing hundreds of murders, but his actions fit the Greek model for a divine person, as he is intelligent, powerful, and given power to control others' deaths by the influence of a *shinigami*. He is fighting for a just cause, to create a better world, even if he is going about it through drastic means.

As he kills innocent police officers and detectives that try to catch him later in the series, though, the theme of divine imitation transfers into the Hellenistic and Roman periods of the concept of divinity, where Koester states that divinity became a tool for “shaping philosophical theory and religious propaganda” (244). Divinity was ascribed to those in positions of power, such as emperors and kings, and limited to men because women were unable to hold those same positions (244). This version of godhood becomes Light’s central aim. He wants to secure the power and glory of a divine being without considering the consequences of his actions to the innocents who stand in his way. The power of a god tempts Light, but he does not accept the responsibility that that power entails. It also feeds into his callous treatment of Misa Amane, who shows up in Episode Eleven and becomes Light’s partner in crime. He uses her as a pawn for his own gain and does not value her life above the criminals he kills.

Death Note not only draws inspiration from older versions of Christianity but also modern tenants of it. Being godlike in modern Christianity refers primarily to enacting good deeds and, in some cases, martyrdom, according to Anders Petersen’s article, “Attaining Divine Perfection through Different Forms of Imitation,” but the idea of revering and worshipping a being that has ultimate control over life and death remains firm (13). This premise of reverence and worship is present in *Death Note* as well. Light hopes to achieve godlike reverence for himself, but his interactions with actual gods undermine this concept of showing the divine respect and reflect Light’s selfish nature. Episode One displays this when Light first encounters Ryuk and treats him as more of an accomplice or servant (albeit bribing Ryuk to do his bidding with apples can be construed as a metaphor for the forbidden fruit that the serpent tempted Adam and Eve with in the book of Genesis). Initially, Light shows some fear of Ryuk, but once he realizes Ryuk will not harm him, he grows confident and explains his master plan to rid the world of crime and become a god in the process. The flaw in this conversation is when Ryuk remarks that if Light murders all criminals, the only bad person left will be Light himself. Light disregards him, saying, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m a hardworking honors student who’s considered to be one of Japan’s best and brightest” (“Rebirth” 00:20:51-00:20:59). Light believes his academic prowess is enough to judge others for their sins. The thought does not cross his mind that intelligence is not enough to condemn people. Until this point in

his life, Light has been a person of exemplary character and success; he has been praised for all his achievements. Since he has been put on such a high pedestal by peers, friends, and family, Light cannot fathom being wrong. This justification points to larger issues that prevent his utopia from coming to fruition, such as self-absorption, confidence, and hunger for power, which become dangerous factors as the series progresses. Light is not concerned with Ryuk's observation about him being the sole bad person left once his work is finished, because he believes his hard work and intelligence justify his actions. His merits serve as a shield to deflect any dissenting opinions others have of his actions, and from this point, it becomes clear that Light is incapable of examining the flaws in himself that he is so shrewd at seeing in others.

Lauren Olamina's concept of the divine contrasts to Light's idea of divinity and the traditional concept of God found in Christianity. While she was raised in a Baptist household, Lauren does not see God as an entity the way many people believe in a "big-cop-God or big-king-God" or the way that others think "God is...nature" (Butler 15). Her family and many of the townspeople believe God watches over them and that He will steer them through dark times. In essence, a supreme being polices their actions, executes justice, and controls the world around them. If the townspeople are faithful and virtuous, they will be safe from the evil outside their walled community. However, Lauren states, "Some say God is a spirit, a force, an ultimate reality. Ask seven people what all of that means and you'll get seven different answers. So what is God?" (Butler 15). No one offers Lauren a clear definition of what God is; even people who have a similar concept of God have different thoughts or views on how God acts or what God specifically is. This creates a schism between her beliefs and those of the people around her.

Since her world is subject to violence and poverty, the idea of God as a sentient being does not sit well with Lauren. She compares the sentient God that her father and others believe in to "a kind of big kid, playing with his toys. If he is, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane" (Butler 16). In Lauren's mind, this God is not benevolent. He allows bad things to happen to good people, because humanity exists for his amusement. Any suffering people experience is not his concern. Lauren cannot comprehend a being that would allow evil to exist in the world or stand by and watch people destroy themselves and others. The discrepancy of views concerning God's presence

and the divine, coupled with the poor, dystopian world Lauren finds herself in, leads her to stray away from conventional beliefs of God. She concludes that God is not a sentient being or nature. Rather, “God is Change,” which is a concept that shapes humanity and that humanity can shape (Butler 17). God is neither responsible for hurting people nor for helping them. The poor state of Lauren’s world is humanity’s fault, and humanity must make amends for what it has done and help others. After her town is set ablaze, Lauren decides to change what displeases her in her world and spread her teachings without being dogmatic or treating the people who accompany her as servants or mindless pawns. She recognizes that they must all band together to survive.

LIGHT'S AND LAUREN'S PHILOSOPHIES

Light and Lauren are also set apart in their reasoning behind creating a perfect society. Light is concerned with his own ego and power more than the well-being of those around him. He does not start with the intention of forming a functioning society. He wants to eliminate sin from the world. As early as Episode Two, internet cults start to worship him and his murders, thinking that a god is passing judgement on the wicked. He sees the world as a thing that he can shape to suit his own needs, rather than a home for other people as valuable in terms of life as himself. He allows himself to be enthralled in the persona that internet cults have created for him. Philip H. Jos points to the tendency of the frightened to look to a higher power, which is arguably what followers of Light do in *Death Note*. It makes sense to worship someone and be spared rather than fight and be killed. It also points to Light’s worshippers experiencing an “us versus them” mentality, where they are excited for the destruction of sinners and for a god to lead them. Light’s utopia hinges on this prejudice and fear with his followers, leading to an unsustainable belief system and shaky society.

In contrast, Lauren’s utopia is focused on a better world and the importance of life. Jos explores the effects *Earthseed* has on society and how it provides a non-dogmatic structure and belief system (1). Jos mentions that “fear is a dominant shaper of human thought and behavior” and that “the core message of all great spiritual traditions is ‘Be not afraid’” (1). Lauren sees her *Earthseed* religion as a solution to a dying society, writing in her *Earthseed* journal that “when no influence is strong enough/ To unify people/ They divide” (Butler 103). The harsh environment Lauren and her

friends are exposed to greets them with violence, death, and struggle. It is relentless and will not cease until someone decides to fight for a better world. Lauren wants her teachings to reach other people and for them to recognize that they can either unite and influence change or divide and be destroyed by it.

When comparing these two belief systems, though, Light exhibits an understanding of something akin to Lauren's Earthseed religion in *Parable of the Sower*—that God is change. Lauren describes in her writings: "All that you touch,/ You Change./ All that you Change,/ Changes you./ The only lasting truth/ Is Change./ God/ Is Change" (Butler 79). In Lauren's religion, God is not a static being. God is a dynamic concept, ever-changing in the universe and being altered by people daily, which both aligns and contrasts with the world of *Death Note*, regarding how Light changes his world and the presence of gods. Death gods like Ryuk may exist in Light's world, but Light's perception of deification is skewed. Once he discovers the Death Note, and Ryuk explains that it is Light's to keep and use as he pleases, he realizes that the notebook is his ticket to godhood. It grants him control over life and death and puts him farther up on a pedestal away from normal people. Light recognizes that all the Death Note influences, all the evil lives it can take, can change the world for the better. However, if Light had thought about the concept of change and God as Lauren does, he may have stopped and realized that using the Death Note changes himself as well as the surrounding world. Each murder brings Light further from his once noble cause of ridding the world of evil and closer to becoming a monster consumed by power. Light's behavior becomes predatory and he develops a twisted view on the concept of God and change instead of Lauren's original philosophy of Earthseed, leading to his downfall later in the series, while Lauren succeeds in creating her Earthseed community.

The other factor shaping Light's philosophy and its ultimate failure is the influence of Ryuk. Despite how Light seems to dismiss and not revere Ryuk, Ryuk is still a god and an influencer. He is by Light's side nearly all through the series, and when Light sees that Ryuk does not care who is killed or to what end Light is using the Death Note, it sends a message that Light's actions are valid. The two characters also begin their tenuous friendship with Ryuk dropping the notebook in the human world because he "was bored," and Light began using it because he "had been bored too" ("Rebirth" 00:16:57

-00:18:22). Compared to Lauren, who created the Earthseed religion to help others and understand a cruel world, Light did not have anything else to do with his time. Being a god was a pastime, something that could hold his interest when school and sports could not. This points to the larger issue that, while Light was trying to rid the world of evil, it did not fall strictly into his intent. Killing criminals became a byproduct of using a notebook that could give him godlike status. Ryuk's own boredom and lack of purpose reinforces Light's disinterest in others as well. In Episode Four, "Pursuit," Ryuk says, "We [the shinigami] lead meaningless, empty lives... we no longer even know why we exist. In fact, I doubt there's any reason for our existence at all" ("Pursuit" 00:05:22-00:05:38). This quote not only reinforces the idea that the *shinigami* have no definitive, virtuous purpose, but that taking human life has no meaning. In the grand scheme, regardless of whether what they are doing is right or wrong, Ryuk thinks it is pointless, but they still have this immense and horrible power to kill others. If a god like Ryuk does not care who Light kills or how many die, why should Light have the slightest bit of guilt? Those around Light are pawns to fulfill his ego, rather than people to save.

THE INFLUENCE OF GIFTED INDIVIDUALS

The impact of gifted individuals on society and what happens when society fails the gifted is also important when evaluating what creates utopia versus dystopia. Douglas W. Texter focuses on Lauren's gift in *Parable of the Sower* and argues that gifted children can change society for the better by rising above the ordinary to achieve greatness. He relates this to Lauren and her belief system that is Earthseed, and how she and her group begin a new community amidst a rotting society. Lauren's linguistic prowess and "ability to empathize with and organize others around a shared mission" allows her to create a better life for her and her friends (Texter 15). However, Texter also insists that gifted individuals who are cast out or ignored can become bored and narcissistic, which lead to problems later in society. Lauren is an individual who has positive gifts and traits: she shares pain and pleasure with those around her, and she is also smart. She takes it upon herself to create a new belief system in Earthseed and lead her friends and followers to a safer life.

Texter's observations can also be applied to *Death Note*, in which Light is an example of gifts

that are not exercised properly. Light tells Ryuk he wants to become a god, to have people know of his existence,” and thinks he can create a better world. Light shows traits of narcissism and does not put confidence in anyone but himself. He thinks he is above everyone and should be the one to pass judgment on the wicked, while failing to acknowledge his own flaws. Light’s inflated sense of importance and disregard for others is arguably his greatest downfall, because it isolates him from family, friends, and his sense of right and wrong that he still clings to in the beginning before spiraling into madness at the end of the series.

Light’s narcissism and Lauren’s selflessness contribute to the execution of their ideas, as well as their respective failures and successes. Jerry Phillips examines the reinvention of utopia and degeneration of American society in *Parable of the Sower* and Lauren’s success in creating a utopia at the end of the novel. Lauren’s view of God shapes her utopia, and Phillips insists, “In Lauren’s view, change or God has no necessary direction” (4). By believing that God is an ever-changing force without distinction between good and evil, Lauren can focus on the chaos and problems that have arisen in society and overcome them. She does not ascribe her misfortune to God hating her or her being deserving of awful things. Lauren believes that God only exists as change. She creates the conditions needed for a better society through her view of reality and Earthseed, where people help each other and do not focus so much on the exchange of goods and money to survive (Butler 22). This will result in a sense of community and goodwill towards others, prompting people to change for the better and strengthen their community. Lauren changes her environment through her teachings and actions. She protects the people in her group and considers them to be a makeshift family, even going so far as to share her view on God with them, which produces trust and camaraderie between Lauren and her group members. Conversely, Light works in solitude, outside occasional help from Ryuk and Misa. He does not share his views on morality and justice with other people outside one or two humans and relies on anonymous strangers to worship his god-like persona that circulates on the internet. In Light’s quest to become a god, he does not consider that he needs to change. He believes he is infallible, and everyone must bend to his will or face lethal consequences.

Karen Slawner also examines the justification for violence to preserve order and justice, beginning with references to the death penalty in the United States of America and assessing the

moral problems associated with some acts of violence being legal while others are illegal. Slawner discusses the Final Solution's results that attempted to create an Aryan utopia, where the Nazi party viewed genocide as a rational solution. They were concerned with defeating a common enemy and tried to eradicate the Jewish population in the most efficient way possible. Slawner asserts that law is often built upon the foundation of violence, where violence is used to preserve it, and it is through the condemnation of violence that justice can be achieved (460). In the context of *Death Note*, Light is also trying to achieve a utopia through violence. Most of his victims die of heart attacks, and Light kills thousands to wipe the Earth of crime. Although Slawner's argument focuses primarily on governments executing violence, it can also be applied to the individual. Light kills those who contest his moral code or law under the pretense that he is the only person capable of cleansing the world of crime and violence. Slawner states that violence does not equal justice, arguing that "by deconstructing law and by revealing its foundation upon violence that we can move toward justice" (460). To her, violence for the sake of justice is not true justice, which contradicts Light's rationale. His violence is only a means to grab power and instill fear. Light's goal is to become a god in a perfect world, and madness precludes his sense of justice as the series progresses. However, examining Light's endeavors from Slawner's point of view provides insight into the inherent flaws in Light's judgement. From her quote, it becomes clear that Light was doomed from the start and that true justice is not won through violence, especially at the hands of a single person.

Not only does violence create dystopia, but there are social and economic problems that also prevent Light's utopian vision from being a true utopia. Jim Miller delves into the causes of dystopia in Octavia Butler's works, arguing that *Parable of the Sower* highlights cultural, economic, and environmental problems that contribute to the violence and dystopian elements in Butler's futuristic version of America—issues that are not at all addressed by Light in *Death Note*. Miller explains that these problems are all interconnected and refers to the division of the rich and the poor in Butler's novel. He states, "There is a constant low-level class warfare going on between the have-little and the have-nots. The walls protect Lauren's neighborhood, but simultaneously make it a target for those who covet what little they have" (Miller 14). Lauren's community, while poor, is still wealthier than others outside the community walls, up until the neighborhood is burned and pillaged for resources.

It highlights the larger issue of people committing crimes to preserve themselves and their family members. Furthermore, people who are discriminated against because of their race cannot get into primarily white, gated communities. Then, they must settle for low-paying jobs on the outside or fight and kill to survive, perpetuating a cycle of destruction, while Lauren's Earthseed community seeks to combat these issues through diversity and community. Lauren does not exclude the people she travels with based on their race or gender and recognizes that they all have done terrible deeds to preserve themselves and survive. She does not blame her friends for their actions.

However, Light targets criminals without much remorse. Lauren knows that people outside communities must fight to survive; not all of them want to commit crimes for fun, like pyro addicts, and even she kills people to survive. Lauren tries to keep her and her companions safe on their journey and, as they bond, they become stronger and settle down to create a diverse, safe community. *Death Note* does not address issues of racism or class differences. This might be because the main setting is Japan and Light comes from a well-off, middle-class family, but it is nonetheless an important issue and contributes to the overarching reason why Light's utopia fails. He wants to punish people because of their crimes, while not examining the reasons why these people commit crimes. Light's morality is black and white, where those who steal or murder are always at fault. Without a grasp of complex issues like racism, class disparity, and environmental problems, Light is unable to consider that some criminals may not deserve to die. They might be stealing to feed themselves or trying to create a better life in a desperate way. Light's worldview leaves no room for moral gray areas. There are those that are good, bad, or against him, and the latter two categories are punished accordingly. Light's and Lauren's approaches to their societal issues determine the failure and success of their utopias, where Light ignores them, and Lauren recognizes that crime is only a symptom of a larger issue.

CONCLUSION

The promise of utopia in *Death Note* is one that is obscured and sabotaged from the moment that Light discovers the notebook. Although his intentions to create a pure world are noble, if misguided, they are precluded by his desire to reign as a god and feed his ego. Light's inability to

consider other factors that drive people to commit crimes, as well as Ryuk's lack of guidance and his use of violence in the place of true justice, are all catalysts to his inevitable downfall. At the end of the series, in Episode Thirty-Seven, "New World," Light is finally caught and discovered to be the killer that detectives have been searching for for the last few years. Light tries to talk his way out of it, laughing maniacally and insisting that, while he is Kira, he was the only person "who could create a new world" ("New World" 00:11:39-00:11:44). Despite the people he has killed, Light still clings to the notion that he is special—that he is the only person who could have ever gotten this far and created a world almost crime-free. He still does not see the negative impact, even when the lead detective, Near, tells him that he "has only confused himself with a god" ("New World" 00:12:05-00:12:07). Near does not toy with the idea of Light being right. He shows him what he truly is—a sick man trying to imitate a god. When Light attempts to use the Death Note one last time, he is shot and flees the scene, bleeding and dying. Ryuk watches him from afar before writing Light's name in the *Death Note*. Light dies on the middle of a staircase in a warehouse alone, symbolizing that he was caught between the life of a normal person and ascending to become something greater. In another context, it could also mean that he dies in nothingness, as Ryuk mentions in Episode One that humans who use the notebook can neither go to heaven or hell" ("Rebirth" 00:15:05-00:15:11). He leaves behind a legacy of terror and a world gripped with fear at committing a single wrong deed, not a utopian paradise.

In his quest to achieve a better world, Light became a monster far from a god. He strayed from justice, fighting for himself rather than the betterment of others. His quest to godhood removed him from what it meant to be human: to show compassion for those who are not perfect and to recognize his imperfections. A utopia founded on the premise of violence or the purging of those who do not fit a strict idea of "good" cannot exist, and those who try to be gods will ultimately fail. Lauren's community in *Parable of the Sower* thrived because it was founded on the betterment of other people, not just Lauren herself. She saw those around her as equals and treated them as she wanted to be treated. Humanity is flawed, and it is only through recognizing those flaws and the societal pressures that push people to commit crimes that people can move towards a better version of themselves and their world. If those flaws are not recognized, and people do not learn to embrace each other as Lauren and her friends did, it leads to chaos and further strife. Light chose to see the world in rigid

constructs of good and evil, without evaluating his own judgement or each person based on their merits. He saw only their problems and dismissed their lives. Light might have evaded capture and caused terror for years, imposing his ideas of good and evil on people, but in the end, he died a cruel, heartless psychopath, akin to the criminals he killed. The world of *Death Note* is far better off without him trying to impose his own flawed will on others, while Lauren's world in *Parable of the Sower* is better with her and others changing it without trying to be gods.

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