

Reading *Death Note* as a Cautionary Tale

—Exploring Dystopia, paraphrasing Sam J. Lundhill

"And if you tolerate this, then your children will be next."

—Manic Street Preachers

Thanks to [minakichan](#) for insights on the death penalty and retentionist nations.

This essay is a speculative reading of *Death Note*. It is informed by history and current world events, and it applies utopian and dystopian theories in its analysis.¹ I believe that the manga's failed utopia (or rather, false utopia) presents a dystopian vision of Japan and the world. That is, the narrative at once mirrors and questions contemporary values by criticising Japanese crime and law enforcement as well as international terrorism.² Kirism would benefit only a minority of the world's population: the story shows that, ultimately, the price of lower crime rates is global fear and loss of freedom. In effect, Light's utopia is a dystopia for most of the industrialised world³. As with most literary dystopias, the series depicts a world that comments on current political and social climates to serve as a warning for the future.



Death Note paints a cynical portrait of human nature. Light tells Ryuk, "Start looking around you, and all you see are people the world would be better off without." (1) Indeed, most characters in the series epitomise the poorest human qualities, such as greed, cowardice, pride, and vengefulness. Depictions of campus bullies, corrupt businessmen, and street thugs support Light's claim that people are rotten. For Light, the baseness of human nature justifies the creation of utopia. All central characters reveal deep flaws, save Soichiro Yagami. Even L, Near, and their allies demonstrate that those who fight evil are not morally infallible, as seen in their means of pursuing Kira (deception, torture, abduction). However, this moral ambiguity is inherent in the struggles—both fictive and real—of authoritative institutions to protect people from destructive elements.

People tend to criticise any acts that authorities take during crises; this is true of government, military forces, and police. Curtin writes, "Japan's image as one of the 'safest countries in the world'...[is] downgrading...Public confidence in the police has plummeted to below 50%, an all-time low." In the manga, collaborations between law enforcement and private organisations are similarly greeted with distrust, even when they are more effective than conventional means. In Kira's regime, traditional policing agencies are forced to turn to groups that smack of vigilantism, such as L's task force and the SPK. In fact, Kira's demise results from the convergence of civilian and police organisations as much as it does from luck. Furthermore, agencies must work without official authorisation when the NPA and FBI later withdraw from the investigation. Soichiro states, "The police...have run from the case with their tails between their legs. Would anyone call that competent?!" (21) The NPA's perceived incompetence—even "impotence," as Near puts it—is a timely reference to Japan's low confidence in law enforcement. (66) Furthermore, such institutions' loss of authority and autonomy is characteristic of bureaucratic dystopias.

It is impossible to read the series in its cultural context without considering capital punishment, for Japan is one of the world's few industrialised democratic nations to practise the death penalty. Kira's justice is similar to how public figures manipulate Buddhist tenets to support the death penalty in Japan—a cause that many people deem immoral⁴. Where real-life Japan's death penalty is a matter of law, Kirism enforces natural laws rather than penal laws (although penal law is incidentally enforced). That is, Kirism posits that murderers are evil *and* should be eliminated. Kirism can thus be read as a critique of how some organised religions are used to institutionalise morally repugnant ideologies. This use of bureaucratic enforcement and control begins in the period after L's death.

The world evolves into a totalitarian dystopia in parallel to Light's growing ambitions. As Light uses his multiple roles of Kira, L/Watari, and NPA intelligence officer to gain knowledge and power, Kira uses the

¹ My use of dystopian terminology is based on Niclas Hermansson's definitions at the [Exploring Dystopia](#) website.

² 'Terrorism' is a controversial term with a plurality of meanings. In this essay, I use it to refer to acts of violence intended to instil fear on a national or international scale.

³ *Death Note* is really only about the industrialised world because high crime rates and terrorism are usually among the bigger problems of first-world nations. Like many dystopias, Kirism's effects are mostly seen in densely populated, urban areas.

⁴ "A basic teaching [of Japanese Buddhism] is retribution," says Tomoko Sasaki, a former member of the Diet (Japan's parliament), an ex-prosecutor and a leading advocate of the death penalty in the [Liberal Democratic Party]. "If someone evil does something bad, he has to atone with his own life. If you take a life, you have to give your own."

media to manufacture fear—a common dystopian device. His methods include garnering corporate support for Kirism and Sakura TV programming to evangelise and influence. Light's use of mass media is no surprise, given that Japan is a television-centric society. Yet, in real-life Japan, executions are performed secretly and not reported until after the fact. By contrast, Kira judges publicly and on live television. Echoing reality, high-profile crimes and Kira's subsequent judgments add to the Japanese "public's growing sense of insecurity." (Lane)

It is appropriate that Kira is Japanese when one considers Japan's attitude towards the death penalty. Although there are abolitionist movements in Japan, support for capital punishment is strong because it "provides a psychic release from the pressure and degradation of conformity, repression and overwork." (Fox) Whatever the reason, the consensus is that the Japanese people want the death penalty. Light confirms this perspective: "This is what human beings are like, Ryuk... *This* [pointing to a pro-Kira website] is what they really think." (2) In addition, other characters are against Kira's judgments, but not necessarily his ideals; L is a significant example of this incongruity. Matsuda, who acts like a Greek chorus, does not support Kira, but seems to agree with some of his principles.⁵ Furthermore, Light's death might be read as an argument for the death penalty in lieu of divine retribution. While his death is certainly an example of poetic justice, the manner in which it is portrayed denies any attribution of moral justice. As Matsuda does after shooting him, I think we are meant to feel pity—if even the smallest shred—for Light. Also, the flashback before Light's death juxtaposes his past idealism with the pathos of his demise. Indeed, his decline and fall are the stuff of Aristotelian tragedy⁶. In fact, the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* (imitation of reality) can be applied to the entire series, for it presents a dystopian vision of an external reality. A notebook of death cannot exist in the real world, but the world that develops as a result of the death note *could* exist.

In its mimetic function, I believe that the series represents Japan's two largest mass murders in recent history. The Ikeda Elementary School massacre and the Tokyo Subway nerve gas attacks are dark blots on the national psyche and refute the world's perception of Japan as a relatively safe country. Light's first victim takes hostages in a nursery school; the scenario is reminiscent of the 2001 Ikeda Elementary School massacre. The Ikeda massacre was horrific for many reasons, not the least being the victims' ages; it is the second-worst mass murder to occur in Japan in recent years. School massacres are psychologically scarring and receive extensive media coverage; they are more likely to make international headlines than other crimes, save terrorist acts. Light's first judgment occurs in a school, and Kira is gradually likened to a terrorist. Kira is aptly tied to the most what are universally regarded as the most harrowing—and sensationalised—crimes.

In its adherents' fanaticism and the violence committed in its name, Kirism is analogous to Aum Shinrikyo, a doomsday sect internationally regarded as a terrorist organisation. Raye Penber's death on the Tokyo Subway platform evokes images of the nerve gas attacks that Aum Shinrikyo inflicted on the Tokyo and Yokohama subway systems in 1995. Indeed, the effects are probably still felt today. An NPA survey found that the victims still suffered "mental and physical trauma" at least four years after the attacks. (Millett) In the manga, the FBI murders are portentous because they are Light's first mass killings of non-criminals. Therefore, Kirism's success as terrorist ideology is rooted in the 'successes' of the hostage scenario and Raye's death. If terrorism is violence (or the threat of it) used for large-scale social engineering, then full-fledged Kirism is no better than terrorism.



The series also indirectly refers to terrorism in the context of 9/11. Curtin notes that in Japan, "the once-cherished sense of personal safety appears antiquated, and national security has been supplanted by deep anxiety about crime and global terrorism." Naomi Misora alludes to this "deep anxiety" when she tells Light that she joined the FBI in September 2001—the same month of terrorist attacks in the United States. In reality, within the same month, the FBI made subsequent attempts to bolster and improve intelligence agent recruitment.⁷ I believe that Naomi's implied experience foreshadows the symbolic equation of Kirism with terrorism.

Despite my comparing it to Aum Shinrikyo, Kirism is no fringe cult. In the manga's third arc, the global shift in social attitudes secures Kira's hegemony, including institutionalised killings. This is entirely

⁵ In classical Greek theatre, the chorus is a group of actors whose primary function is to provide commentaries on the dramatic action (they are passive and are not part of the diegesis of the play). The chorus often voices the opinions of the play's ideal audience.

⁶ Tragedy, as defined in Aristotle's *Poetics*, is a person's downfall that occurs as a direct result of his own deeds. The end of the tragic hero, usually a king or other man in a high position, elicits pity.

⁷ For more information, see Cumming and Masse's extensive report on FBI intelligence reform.

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believable, for rising crime rates and terrorism cause cultures to be inured to violence. The state of the world today might have been unthinkable ten or even five years ago. Like terrorism, Kirism has people living in fear. The manga states that in 2009, "[t]he world continues toward a dark era where Kira is the law." (60) As a result, Kira's threat is so far-reaching that other governments publicly accept his ideology, whether or not they condone his actions.



Ultimately, does the narrative support or condemn Light's ideals? It turns a promising, idealistic student into a mass murderer, and other characters constantly voice pro- or anti-Kira ideologies. At best, *Death Note* is inexorably ambiguous. The series shows how Kira's punishments, and the culture of fear that they breed, are widely accepted by 2010. Like the real thing, fictive terrorism is normalised in the post-9/11 world. The Kira cult in Chapter 108 even suggests that some oppressive ideologies will never want for adherents. *Death Note* conveys a fundamental scepticism of the possibility of utopia because it questions humanity's ability to resist evil. It cautions us to not give in to cowardice when faced with corruption, complacency when threatened with violence. If one man's utopia is another man's dystopia, then surely one's morality is another's perversion. The narrative offers no absolutism, no

axis of right and wrong. This is perhaps the story's most pertinent thought for the very real culture of fear in the world today.

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