

Justice of the new world

Alexandra Li
PHIL 220W

Human beings are restricted by their incapacabilities for being humans, but they are forever on their way in pursuit of justice. Sometimes, this road to the ideal world seems so long that people hope for a god to enforce justice. As one of the most popular and high-rated Japanese animations in history, DeathNote has the power to make people question about real meanings of justice and the right path to an ideal world. This paper will discuss how twisted justice is used to institutionalize oppression and why seeing people as a cause of evil will promote injustice.

The story begins with 18 years old Yagami Light accidentally picking up a "DeathNote," which offers its user the ability to kill anyone whose face is known by writing down their real names. With his faith in justice, Light decides to use DeathNote to execute "corrupted people" for a more just society, believing the world has degenerated because of people's evilness. He claims himself as "the god of the new world," and his supporters call him "Kira" (killer). During the six years as a DeathNote user before his death, Light has killed 124,925 people, and the worldwide criminal rate has dropped by 70%. He has created a world where most people feel safe.

Even after 15 years of the anime's release, millions of fans worldwide still argue about whether and why Light is wrong. It is a fight not only between reality and people's hope for a world where justice is always served but also among millions of different definitions for justice.

Though I never agreed with Light's ideology, I understand why his world seems appealing. When

I saw senior Asian citizens being pushed to the ground and imagine the same happens to my family, I saw Light. When I heard the news of an acquaintance murdered by an Uber driver, I wonder if I will, for the first time, feel safe alone in a taxi in Light's world. The truth is that Light's new world is filled with false hopes and more rooted oppression. I will use Young's Five Faces of oppression to examine how killing criminals permit structural oppression. I will also illustrate how this new-established order generates further oppression by covering up social problems and depriving people of their freedom.

The criminals Light killed belong mainly to four categories:

- wanted fugitives
- imprisoned major criminal offenders shown on TV but not necessarily on death row
- terrorists and war initiators
- people during the commission of crimes being reported live on TV

We can see that many people, especially those from the former two categories, are likely to be wanted or incarcerated for political reasons and are also subject to the justice system that often regards wealth as more decisive than innocence. Ironically, Light sees himself as god but still relies on the judicial system to direct him.

Apart from the fact that many of Light's killings contribute little to his great cause of erasing evil people, evilness cannot be killed by taking away its carrier. Crimes are only instantiations of injustice that stand out the most, and criminals are also not randomly selected individuals. Most of them are born in poverty or flames of war, where almost all tragedies begin. They lack the

chance to receive proper education and have little chance to become high-paid professionals later in life. This creates a vicious cycle that's too difficult to break as long as wealth disadvantage leads to lesser opportunities, and low-paid jobs mean working but not gaining the deserved benefit(Young 49). These are powerless people being exploited economically and politically in ways they can be of use and ignorant about using their reasons to make decisions because of lack of education(Young 56). The "bootstrap myth" is always a myth, and though laws hold people responsible for their actions, the same cannot be said about their destinies. Taking away their lives is like waiting outside a black box to check the quality of products and discarding inferior ones without opening the box but simply hoping the quality improves.

People, though, are not emotionless objects and what lies at the core of our story is also not criminal execution, but the message Light sent out to the world—anyone who dares to cross the line will be put to death. Most people he targeted have already been labeled as "threats." Hence, there is no need to renew those labels, but killing them with supernatural power generates genuine fear because it is beyond most people's comprehension. Light invents this godlike figure to put people in constant fear so that they will do nothing that may qualify as criminality.

This new social order has three critical implications. First, Kira is the only law. Anyone alive is a "good" person, so no one has the right to accuse others of anything. This consensus repudiates all legitimacy of social justice movements and other attempts to reform the current system because Kira is the god who determines rights and wrongs. Making systematic change requires abolishing existing rules/norms before designing new ones. The "abolish" part is inevitably accompanied by

(armed)conflicts and demonstrations, which will only be another break of rules in Light's world. The Black Panther Party was officially defined as "threats to national security" back in the 60s but that was only an excuse for preserving white privilege. Light will not use "threats to security" as an excuse because he really sees them as threats and does not realize what he is preserving.

The truth is, disallowance for changes places another weapon in governments' hands to consolidate their rule. It preserves and guarantees the privileges enjoyed by the upper class and justifies oppression by denying its existence. Though indirectly, Light denies the existence of social issues because he has already dealt with the "cause," kills those who fight for their rights, solidifies social class structure by empowering privileged groups, and equates power to justice, changing to disobeying and public enemy. With powerful people resorting to gain more for themselves, economic exploitation will only intensify. The privileged ones will continue to concentrate wealth in their own hands and leave lower class people no choice but to do nonprofessional works while the former squeeze their values(Young 51).

Third, simple statistics of the crime rate will be taken as the only indicator for social progress, creating the illusion of a secure and equal society. This false appearance suggests that one will encounter nobody but kind-hearted people since "our god" will take care of the bad ones, and there is no place for you to suffer. Only stories of peace and harmony will be told because oppression has left and so does the pain it caused. Oppressed groups undoubtedly experience cultural imperialism because their perspectives are completely rejected and their sufferings erased(Young 59). Their struggles are invisible in a society that permits no injustice, and many of

them will be driven to stealing or other criminal activities. There will be no progress when there is no problem, which is the real threat to human existence.

However, a rapid drop in crime rates and decrease of wars has to mean something, and it does—a more homogeneous society is forming through years of genocide. The time that there is a lesser amount of people to be executed has already come, but that does not mean fewer people are dying. The unshakable system of oppression will continue to afflict oppressed people and eventually causing their lives through marginalization so they won't be able to afford a living, but it is never hard to find groups to oppress(Young 53). Countries with a single race are not more equal than multiracial ones, and oppression reproduces itself by finding the weaker and historically disadvantaged ones. The human population will decrease as long as justice is treated not as a fight against oppression but as a performance to preserve false peace.

People cannot help but imagine what they might do with a DeathNote, and most are tempted to do at least something with this super ability. However, can supernatural ability be a shortcut to justice? Light's story can probably answer this question. His ideology is dangerous not only because of mass murder but because by wrongly identifying the cause of injustice, he erases actual oppression and empowers injustice. It is a fake Utopia and true tyranny. Though sometimes depressing and frequently unsafe, the current world allows for the freedom to fight for justice. In that sense, perhaps we are living in a more idealistic world than Light's people are.

Citation

Young, Iris Marion. "CHAPTER 2. Five Faces of Oppression". *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 39-65. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400839902-005>

The House We Live In: Race--The Power of an Illusion.

The Black Panthers: Vanguard Of The Revolution.