Justice and Society as pertains to Death Note by Kirk Glover

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Visual Arts: Anime

Death Note

Death Note is a story about a young man who wishes to reform the world through the use of a mystical note book. The note book has the ability to kill anyone whose name is written within it. The young man, named Light, decides to use the book to fight injustice and kill criminals. Light's use of the notebook seems to many people to be a judicial reform on the world, taken on the form of retributive justice. Retributive justice can be described as “an eye for an eye”. Light or as he is called by other people: Kira, kills people only for killing another human being. Eventually Light decides that he is a god and will reform the world. At this time, Light's form of justice seems to drift into a form of Utilitarianism, where the punishment is dealt out to make the world become a better place. To many people this seems like a fair form of justice, but over the course of the series, Light's actions become increasingly tyrannical, dealing death as punishment to lesser crimes. He defends himself by killing anyone who finds out his identity as Kira, which while it may fall under Utilitarianism it still is a form of Retributive justice. Immanuel Kant shows the flaw in Kira's form of justice in his book. The Metaphysical Elements of Justice, he says "Judicial punishment can never be used merely as a means to promote some other good for the criminal himself or for civil society, but instead it must in all cases be imposed on him only on the ground that he has committed a crime." As such Light's imposed justice is flawed. This essay will explore how Light in Death Note shows that justice is dead in modern society.

Death note has many motifs that give significance to the actions of the characters. Eyes, for example, are large, staring, never blinking, their colors change inhuman. Light has many of scenes, so does his nemesis: L. The unwavering stares of many of the characters could merely be taken for an art style, where many internal dialogs happen within instances of seconds. But if we look at another end of it, where the staring eyes belong to dead people, a common theme emerges. This gives way to a message that most of the characters are already dead or near dead. A macabre anime indeed.

The story mainly deals with L trying to capture Light, and Light trying to kill L before his identity as a god of justice: Kira, can be found out. The mental fights between these become the main points of the story. The mental agility these two show are not what is important but what both of them believe is correct. Both are representative of a form of justice. Light as a type of absolute justice, that is brought down from an all mighty figure, and L who believes in deduction, evidence, and mortal law.

Justice is a concept that humans have created. However, we also attribute justice to god in natural disasters, karma, etc. Throughout many religious texts, there are parts pertaining to how justice should be dealt out. The Bible has “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot,” Death Note takes this concept and gives it mortal form. Kira, a mortal is given inhuman powers. Kira, or Light, refers to himself as a god. He is willing to sacrifice almost anything and anyone in the sack of justice. L, the great detective, also sees himself as a person who has justice on his side. He seems nearly fanatical in his devotion to catch Kira. Many points in the anime, L will sacrifice someone else without their permission. He will even go so far as to put himself into a position where he will die to catch the killer. Many of his decisions do not sit well with the task force he builds to catch Kira. Many arguments break out amongst them, yet L rarely abandons his position. If we look at the moral decisions both of them make there is in fact very little different about that two other than where they believe their right to judge other people comes from. Light believes himself god and L believes himself the arbiter of human law.

One may be wondering what eyes and justice have to do with each other. Neither have much to do with each other when taken in context yet there is a famous saying “justice is blind”. Death Note has so much staring because everyone is trying to find the truth. Light is trying to find L's name, L is trying to find out who Kira is. As said earlier, many characters who are dead have the same eyes are people staring. Death Note seems to be trying to say that justice, is in fact, dead. Justice is not blind, it sees, through the eyes of a people who are already dead. One can take this one step further and say the only true justice in this world is death.

Kira seems to take the world by the throat. People praise him, others curse him, in some cases, people worship him. Criminals fear him, with good reason. Society seems to have accepted that there is a greater power at work trying to clean up the world. Many people approve of his methods or so it seems. As the story progresses more of the world leads itself to follow Kira and his form of absolute justice. At the end of the story we see that the world has gone back to the way it was without Kira, crime has gone up to the levels was at before Kira started judgment. It appears that people do fear breaking the law but going against Kira. Death Note is trying to say that trying to make the world change through justice and laws changes nothing, one cannot change the nature of people through strict tyranny or law. Society merely bends itself to the ruling authority because of fear of punishment, not because they wish to.

Death Note makes certain observations about society. Rukk, Light's incorporeal partner, says that his world is dying, and mentions that the human world is much more interesting. Note that Rukk does not say that the human world is not dying as well, merely that humans have a motivation still. Light constantly says that the world is rotten, it needs to be cleaned up. Light wishes the world better by removing everyone who does not follow his vision of a perfect world, starting with criminals. Taking what was said earlier in context with what Rukk and Light are saying, society is indeed rotten and there is also no answer to fix it.

In closing, Death Note wishes to make us see that justice is merely a device used by the authority to keep everyone in line. No alternatives to the original justice system or Light's justice system are mentioned by the end of the series. However alternatives have been offered by other people, but are seemingly idealistic. Indeed, Allan Moore takes this to heart in his book V for Vendetta when his character V confronts a statue representing justice and says “She [anarchy] has taught me that justice is meaningless with freedom. She is honest. She makes no promises and breaks none.” Anarchy is one of the few proposed alternatives to a dead justice system, that is to say no justice system whatsoever. Hence back to the final message of death note, justice is dead.
Works Cited

Kant, Immanuel, translated by John Ladd: The Metaphysical Elements of Justice, pg 138

Moore, Alan: V: V for Vendetta volume 2 pg 7

The Bible, New Living Translation Exodus 21:24