Death Note's Interesting Genre by Bryan Gawinski

The state of the world is deteriorating while the heads of both government and police forces stand idly by and do nothing about. A young student ponders over this thought constantly as he watches the news daily to find only murders and crime to be worthy of the media's time. This student is Yagami Light and his griefs of the world around him are the beginning of the supernatural horror series called *Death Note*. Through a distinctive combination of otherworldly, vigilante justice and crime-solving intellectual combat, *Death Note* brings viewers into a dark world where it holds more emphasis on intellectual battles than physical combat. The world of *Death Note* is derived from Western-style adaptions of Gothic and detective story genres to set the stage for an egotistical adult bent judging humanity and his battles against sleuths who think his intentions are nothing but murderous injustice. *Death Note* cannot be accurately defined within one genre due to the combination of Gothic imagery and detective strategies so the series effectively intertwines the dominant features to form its own genre.

The *Death Note* series has a unique perspective of combining two uncommon genres for an anime so it must be analyzed at its core aspects to fully grasp the genre. An apt description of the genre is called "irregular detective fiction" or henkaku tantei shosetsu which was first established by Koga Saburo of the magazine *Shinseinen* around the year 2010 (Matthew, p. 13). During this point in Japan's literary scene, writers in this genre were more classified under 'science fiction' in which the story didn't focus on theoretical problem-solving, but in *Death Note*'s case, the use of shinigami and paranormal means to kill adds an unusual twist to make the series go outside the bounds of a normal detective and science fiction genres. A blog makes a more pertinent argument about *Death Note* that the story employs rational, objective detective methodologies while incorporating elements of the gothic and fantastic absurdist. Main writers of the genre were Edogawa Rampo and Yumeno Kyusaku who wanted not for fellow writers to use the Western Gothic writing style but to add Japanese sensibilities to it and make it their own style (Asleep). The latter explanation of irregular detective fiction fits more into the series' supernatural justice and police attempting to stop that which they don't comprehend. Both the protagonist, L, and antagonist, Kira, use intensive deductive skills in order to figure out each others identity throughout the entire series while characters, their personalities, and the world around them is filled with darkness. While the story structure takes a more detective fiction genre, *Death Note*’s artistic and symbolic aspects take its influences from Gothic imagery and events that attracted writers like Tsugumi Ohba and Edogawa Rampo to make irregular detective fiction.

Unlike many of the anime series of its time, *Death Note* genre relies on both Gothic imagery and themes and noire detective work to build up plot that has its bases in old Western literature. The western Gothic style of writing used in *Death Note* was first invented by the writer Horace Walpole, who wrote the 1764 novel called *The Castle of Otranto*, which has been replicated in film, poetry, and writing to this very day and is the predecessor to the modern horror genre. Elements that typically constitute something to be of the Gothic style are settings that create sense of claustrophobia and entrapment of sorts, an atmosphere of suspense and mystery, an ancient prophecy, bad omens or visions, supernatural events, high emotions, women in distress, women threatened by powerful males, and a metonymy of gloom and horror ("Elements of the Gothic Novel"). The series may not contain an ancient prophecy or completely dreary settings throughout the entire anime, but the other attributes are thoroughly spread into many scenes, actions, and personalities of the characters. The times when Light tries to push his goals of domination further, he uses Misa, his supposed girlfriend, or Kiyomi Takada, a news reporter and love interest Light had, as emissaries of messages by using the affection they have for him to his advantage. Light pressures them both with the promise of being his wife in the new age he rules in, but casually throws them aside when they prove worthless to his cause. The supernatural events are predominant throughout since Kira is killing all his targets by simply writing their name in book once he sees their face and having death gods called "shinigamis" constantly following those who own the actual Death Note. Even the settings commonly exhibit feelings of gloom and entrapment since the rooms most events take place in are always dark and have little room for large groups of people. For example, Light would constantly write in the Death Note when he was in his dark, cramped room, and L often sat in a dark room when researching or on his computer to name a few. Although the Gothic style of writing and art affects nearly every part of *Death Note*, the genre it evolves into also has many viable aspects in the anime.

As the Gothic style changed and became adapted into writing by other authors, the horror genre came into existence in with a much more powerful presence. The horror genre that predates itself on Gothic contains many similar elements, but horror elements include strong language and graphic violence to establish an otherworldly setting, an antagonist with paranormal abilities, exaggerated personalities for antagonists, and unexpected occurrences or 'pop-outs' ("Characteristics of the Horror Genre"). *Death Note*'s writer, Tsugumi Ohba, used both genres effectively in his work, but instead of feeling completely nervously and scared like you would with any horror writing or film, the viewer feels more of a suspenseful air in which you wait in anticipation to see how Kira and L think in order to stay one step ahead of each other. Light obviously has paranormal abilities due to the Death Note he uses and shinigami he sees and both sides of the story meet many unexpected happenings like when Light meets Ray彭耐's wife, who had information that could solve much earlier who Kira was. Unexpected occurrences that happened quite often as well were the deaths Kira performed with the Death Note since only he and the shinigami knew what would happen and the police teams investigating didn’t know when he would strike next. It makes sense as well for *Death Note* to be part Gothic world instead of a complete horror one because if the story were focusing more on scarifying the viewer then it would take away importance of the intellectual detective battles that make the series into irregular detective fiction. The anime as a whole uses an intense of psychological insight and deductive reasoning to build up the plot in the genre, but a work by another irregular detective fiction writer contains similar events that can further show its relation to the irregular-detective-fiction genre.

One of the first works to be introduced into the distinctive genre was *Dogura magura* by Yumeno Kyusaku that tells the story of a mental health patient who is trying to figure out his identity from two psychologists. The main character in *Dogura magura* constantly fears that he may be a murderer by the name of Kure Ichiro, but by the end of the novel, he finds out he really is the murderer (Bolton, Csicsery-Ronway, Jr., and Tatsumi 12). Light in *Death Note* does not worry, but embraces the idea of being a murderer in order to create his new world and the idea of killing does not even bother him to the point that it seems he has two different personalities, one being Kira and the other being Light. He constantly switches in between the two while the character in *Dogura magura* fights to repress any association or memory to his murderous side. By the end of the mental patient’s journey his actions become so programmed that he exhibits repetitive killing actions and feels little emotion for killing those close to him as he fails to return to the life he previously had( Bolton, Csicsery-Ronway, Jr., and Tatsumi 18). Light is just as willing to sacrifice all those who love him as he uses the Death Note and feels no remorse when his family slowly crumbles around him due to the gradual involvement in the investigation and events surrounding the Death Note. Both characters lose their sensibilities as human beings, either unintentionally or knowing full well of the consequences yet these are the main points of both works in order to build story and character development. Light uses his cold intellect and logic to win against those who oppose his new world yet it doesn’t work out and it ends in failure just like the mental patient's journey of self discovery. The two stories differ greatly in terms of setting, style, and plot, but their focus of intellectual struggle and ideas of unnatural means of discovery truth and meaning leads the stories into the genre irregular-detective fiction.
The anime *Death Note* contains many elements of several different genres of writing and storytelling to form the interesting genre of irregular-detective-fiction that has been used since early science fiction writing of the early 1920s. It contains all of the sleuthing and deduction that any detective series would have and combines it with the dark and dreary aspects of western horror/Gothic style of art and writing. It even goes beyond these to add a supernatural aspect into the series that gives each character and story element an interesting way to solve the problem or crime that arises through use of shinigami and the mysterious Death Note. *Death Note* is most certainly a unique anime of its time yet it takes many ideas and themes from its predecessors to further solidify its standing in the genre of irregular-detective-fiction. A police force trying to solve mysterious murders that occur from simply writing a person's name in a notebook when they can't exactly say when the murders will occur goes well beyond any one genre so *Death Note* keeps its story tied to multiple genres with an emphasis on one major genre to keep the plot interesting.

Citations