

Analyzing the Transformation of Death in Tarot from Renaissance to Modern Rider-Waite Depictions

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Death is one of the world's greatest fears and therefore has been questioned, analyzed, and transformed into various depictions and understandings in various mediums. The myth of Death as a personified figure is centuries old, its depiction has been passed down through oral stories to artistic figures and themes. In northern Italy's early Renaissance era, Death was used as a figure within the playing cards of *Trionfi* and other significant allegorical figures. This card deck was rediscovered and given further meaning in the tarot decks we know today such as the Rider-Waite Tarot Card Deck by Arthur Edward Waite. The nuanced evolution of the Death archetype within Tarot and *Trionfi* cards not only reveals distinct continuations from past eras but also serves as a bridge connecting us to history. Through a profound exploration of artistic and literary depictions, alongside an analysis of the functions and meanings embedded in the myth, we uncover threads that bind the present to the past.

A myth is a traditional story or construct depicting a natural or social phenomenon. A key factor differentiating myths from legends or fables is that they are religion- or belief-based. Legends are based on historical events, and fables involve life lessons typically depicted as metaphors and play a lesser role in culture than myths. Before a cohesive language was conceived, myths began as stories passed down orally or artistically. Most myths are centuries old, before a cohesive language was conceived, myths began as stories passed down orally or artistically. Therefore it can be difficult for historians or mythologists to assign meaning and understanding to the stories without being a part of that society or culture. To build a guide and ensure consistency, various functions of mythology are applied to refer to multiple meanings and significance of stories and their respective cultures (Thury & Devinney, 2017). The mythological functions to be discussed in this paper are the metaphysical function defining what it means to be human as well as the psychological function of what it means to be a good human. An allegory

refers to a literary or artistic device showing characters or events to subtly represent abstract or moral messages. Occultism is the practice and analysis of hidden or secret knowledge related to paranormal, mystical, or supernatural phenomena such as astrology or alchemy. Mysticism is a spiritual practice involving direct and personal experiences and connections with the divine using contemplative methods and traditional religious practices. Esotericism is the pursuit and understanding of occultism through secretive or symbolic means. Each of these terms is highly relevant to the purpose of the Tarot cards' modern uses and relations to the author of the Rider Tarot deck.

Another tool used to aid in the understanding of myths is collectively understood archetypal theories that give structure to the way the stories are constructed and how they eventually evolve. Carl Gustav Jung was a psychoanalysis and psychiatrist who lived from 1875 to 1961 and was extremely passionate about creating theories on the topic of the human condition from his experiences with his patients. He believed that a connection to something of higher power will aid in understanding oneself via the unconscious such as dreams and mythology. He coined the concept of the archetype under the collective unconsciousness which refers to a mythic theme or character trope that is present within multiple cultures over multiple generations and geographical locations. Symbols that depict a larger meaning of a certain belief or faith can also be considered an archetype such as pentagrams or swastikas. Another theory referred to as the dispersion theory suggests that as people of all cultures and locations moved geographically, so did their customs and beliefs. Why they had moved ultimately did not matter to this theory, but how the movement progressed can explain certain developments or shifts within the stories that were shared. Slight changes and shifts within a story can cause the creation

of a new interpretation or even a new story as a whole, illuminating the importance of studying the respective dispersion.

Mythological study has various challenges to modern historians and mythologists from the antiquity, or ancient past, of most myths making the creation of direct definitions and analysis difficult. Tools previously described such as mythological functions and archetypical theories are used to combat these struggles. With the given frameworks comes a smoother process of creating a cohesive understanding of the rich moral, cultural, and spiritual significances each myth holds to that point in human history leading into modern times. Two separate theories, such as the Jungian and Dispersion theory, on archetypes greatly impact the evolution as well as the pathology of myths across the globe. One reputable scholar may use one of these tools differently than another equally reputable scholar from a different location, creating different realities and expectations of the studied myth. Previous interpretations and analyses may be built off of differing theories using specific ideas and interpretative techniques. Such evolutionary processes of storytelling can create contradicting definitions and individual beliefs connecting to the same mythical story.

Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942) was a reputable scholar and author of multiple works revolving around spirituality and occultism history, he conceived The Rider Tarot deck in 1909 and it is his most famous work. He has two books on mysticism, two on the legends of the Holy Grail, and other works studying topics such as the Jewish Kabbalah, Freemasonry, the 17th-century cultural movement the Rosicrucian Order, alchemy, the Tarot pack, and devil worship in France. He was profoundly involved in multiple occult organizations including a secret society known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as well as being involved with the Freemasons and the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross (Brewer, 1983). Multiple affiliations with

cultural and societal groups as well as multiple works studying occult history sets him as a well-known and reputable source of mystic interpretation. It is important to mention another historical figure as the cards were not used for any occult or fortune-telling purpose until the 1800s, presumably started in France by a man named Court de Gebelin (Waite, 1996) within his work *Monde Primitif, analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne* (The Primitive World, analyzed and compared with the modern world) specifically in Volume 8, Book 1, pages 365 to 410. It is important to define Antoine de Gebelins' significance within this essay as he is the most proclaimed origin of modern occult use through Tarot cards. The Protestant Museum states he was born in France around 1724, he originally was a great scholar studying philosophy, ethics, and controversy, however, around 1750 he began studying theology and eventually strictly literature. A fun fact obtained from Britannica, he worked with Benjamin Franklin in support of United States independence within his literary work *Affaires de L'Angleterre et de L'Amérique (1776 et seq.; Affairs of England and America)*. His most popular work would be that of *The Primitive World, Analyzed and Compared with the Modern World* where the Tarot is discussed within a theory of allegory. Another important note on his work involving the trumps of the Tarot is that there are multiple errors on various premises, however, how work will be used within this essay as a primary source of the card depiction within the Victorian era (European 1800s).

As originally mentioned in the introduction, the first purpose of such cards was an infamous ordinary game of the Renaissance era called the game of Trionfi or Tarocchi (Italian for *triumphs*) which originated in northern Italy and involved a deck of 78 cards with two groups of trump cards and pip cards. There are 22 trump cards and 56 pip cards, the pip cards have four subcategories including wands, pentacles, cups, and swords. The trump cards have a unique ranking style where some can be used as wild cards and some are more valuable than others. The

premises of the game revolve around trumps in a trick-taking game that was later incorporated into games such as Bridge requiring strategic skill (Dummett & McLeod, 2004). Within the preface of *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, Arthur Edward Waite proclaims the use of Tarot cards to “...contain a very high symbolism, which is interpreted according to the Laws of Grace...” (Waite, 1996 pg vii) over intuitions or any sort of pretext. Laws of Grace is referring to the Divine relations of God and Heaven, directly opposing mundane intuitions such as a gut feeling. Waite defends his position and motives as he would normally be involved with higher mysticism over a trending form of fortune telling, he also claims nobody in their “right mind” would defend occult arts as divinatory truth as proposed by some historical scholars. To summarize the use of Tarot cards in the modern day through the research and work of A. E. Waite, those with a creative mind can depict spiritual truths from historical and allegorical symbolism that are not easily put into words. This is within the quote ranging from page vii to viii:

“As poetry is the most beautiful expression of the things that are of all most beautiful, so is symbolism the most catholic expression in concealment of things that are most profound in the Sanctuary and that have not been declared outside it with the same fullness by means of the spoken word.”



Number XIII
Death.

Within *Du Jeu des Tarots (The Game of Tarots)* by Court de Gebelin, Death is depicted as a skeletal figure reaping the bodies and souls of various humans such as kings and civilians as “nothing can resist its murderous scythe” (Court de Gebelin, 1781 pg 17). Reasoning is applied to its number rank as “the number thirteen was always looked upon as unhappy” (Court de Gebelin, 1781 pg 17), he claims events of misfortune probably happened on that day leading to its negative association, he also speculates on the possible thirteen Hebrew tribes, referencing the biblical tradition of twelve Israelite tribes descended from the sons and grandsons of Jacob from Genesis 49. He does not

go further into this speculation, but in a new paragraph, he claims that Death’s presence within the game is a metaphysical reminder of the war-like premise the game serves as it does not end until “the death of the king” (Court de Gebelin, 1781 pg 17). Finally, he refers to a previous volume in his work offering a history of the calendar which includes a skeletal figure known as Maneros that urges guests of a feast “...to not commit suicide by greediness” (Court de Gebelin, 1781 pg 17). Through this evidence, Court de Gebelin offers the general depiction of the card to be a reminder of death, or a Latin phrase and art movement titled *Memento Mori* translating to remember you must die.



The Rider Waite Tarot deck's artistic representation of Death is similar as the main character depicts a skeletal figure passing over bodies of variously valued individuals, including a King who had lost his crown. In a literal sense, the card can contain metaphysical significance referring to the transition from existence on Earth into the afterlife, however, in modern descriptions, a psychological function has taken over. Differing from the figure in *Du Jeu des Tarots*, this card features Death who is suited in knight dark armor, holding a black flag featuring what is referred to as the Mystic Rose¹ representing life in white,

while riding a pale horse with black reigns featuring skeletal detailing. Standing before him are three living figures of different ages and statuses, this representation is the same as before clarifying that all are equal before death and none can escape its fate. Death is not only representative of biological beings but also ideas and social constructions such as class structures or hierarchies. In the background stands two pillars with “the sun of immortality” (Waite, 1996 pg 120) shining between them, these pillars are also seen in The Moon card which is representative of imagination as well as the unknown. Waite points out that Death has no weapons of any kind, yet the king, woman, and child have fallen “while a prelate with clasped hands awaits his end” (Waite, 1996 pg 120). Waite concludes the description by summarizing its modern meaning of rebirth, creation, destination, renewal, and rest. These applications are seen

¹ The Mystic Rose is said to represent life, however it bears great similarities to the Tudor Rose which is England's traditional floral heraldic emblem named after Henry Tudor (Henry VII) who united the House of Lancaster (represented by the red rose) and the House of York (represented by the white rose) through marrying Elizabeth of York therefore ending the Wars of the Roses. This was a major transformative event for England involving many deaths as well as a rebirth of the new union.

predominantly as psychological referring to various passages from lower to higher such as mindsets or career progressions.

The exploration of the Death archetype within Tarot and Trionfi cards provides distinct evolutionary insight into the intricacy and depth between past and present. The myth of Death once feared and literal, slowly evolved into an accepted form of change and transformation while still keeping its function as the succession of the living. Its reinterpretation during the Victorian era revealed the nuances of moral hope and societal outlooks on life and death into how it is viewed and depicted today. The exploration has extended beyond artistic and literary analysis to the application of functions, theories, and archetypal frameworks which contributed to a richer understanding and cultural significance toward Death. The most common obstacle within this study was sources being in Old English, Italian, or French, however, the diversity of language within its oral journey displays its cultural significance. The succession of Death within mythology continues today in various mediums that contain windows into past messages with continuing relevance and cultural depth.

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