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"ME" IN OTHER REALMS: REINTERPRETATIONS OF IDENTITY IN FANTASY FICTION

Abstract

This article presents the notion of identity as perceived in Tanith Lee's award-winning novel *Death's Master*. It focuses on the four main relations between identity and other concepts found in the novel, often resulting in identity conflict. It also addresses the traditional and non-traditional perceptions of the given phenomena, e.g. rejection of motherhood, gender fluidity, collective identity and the identity of abstract notions personified, such as death. Our goal is to examine the different concepts of "self" as related to social standing, sexuality, gender or nature. The overall aim of the article is to present how the author reworks the concepts of traditional identity in relation to stereotypical representations of the characters.

Key words: identity, Tanith Lee, *Death's Master*, fantasy, fairy tales

INTRODUCTION

The late Tanith Lee belonged to the most prolific British authors of science fiction, horror and fantasy. Having written 90 novels and 300 short stories[2] in her life and being the first woman to win the British Fantasy Award[3] in 1980 for her novel *Death's Master*, since then she continued producing high-quality literature resulting in awards such as two World Fantasy

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[2] P. Farrell, "Tanith Lee Dead: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know", *Heavy.com*, 26 May 2016, at http://heavy.com/entertainment/2015/05/tanith-lee-dead-dies-cause-of-death-funeral-esther-garber-husband-john-kaiine/, 15 August 2016.

[3] *Ibid.*

Awards for best short fiction (1983, 1984) plus eight more nominations[4] including five more nominations for the British Fantasy Award. In 2013, the author received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the World Fantasy Convention[5] and two years later, in 2015, she was awarded the Bram Stoker Award® for Lifetime Achievement.[6]

Considering the number of published novels and short stories, the author addressed numerous themes in her fiction. While her works are most commonly considered as falling into the genres of fantasy, horror, science fiction, and the new weird, she has also "reinterpreted fairy tales with even more frightful twists. . . . She also wrote lesbian fiction under the pseudonym Esther Garber."[7] The scope of her work is represented by themes such as immortality and vampires (the *Blood Opera* trilogy), gods and demons (the *Flat Earth* series), identity and becoming (the *Birthgrave* trilogy), love and robots (*Silver Metal Lover*), alternate universes and utopia (the *Four BEE* series), fairy tale retellings (*Red as Blood, or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer*) and many others. She is also known for her erotic writing (*Fatal Women*) and did not avoid themes of homosexuality or bisexuality, with her characters often being androgynous or even capable of changing gender. Indeed, gender, alongside sexuality and identity, are prominent and recurring themes in her works.

In this article, we analyse the concept of identity in Lee's famous novel, *Death's Master*.[8] We have chosen this novel for several significant reasons, one of them being the recurring theme of identity running through the entire novel, whether being related to gender, social standing, parenthood or sexuality. In her work, Lee

> captured like few other modern writers a gothic, not to say goth, sensibility in which the relentless pursuit of personal autonomy and sensual fulfilment

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[4] D. Schweitzer, "Interview: Tanith Lee", *Realms of Fantasy*, 2012, at http://www.rofmag.com/author-interviews/interview-with-tanith-lee/, 15 August 2016.

[5] "HWA Announces 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award Winners", *Horror Writers Association*, 2015, at http://horror.org/hwa-announces-jack-ketchum-tanith-lee-2015-lifetime-achievement-award-winners/, 15 August 2016.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] S. Roberts, "Tanith Lee, Fantasy and Horror Novelist, Dies at 67", *New York Times*, 1 June 2015, at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/02/books/tanith-lee-fantasy-and-horror-novelist-dies-at-67.html?_r=1, 15 August 2016.

[8] The novel was first published in 1979 and reprinted in 2010.

leads her characters to the brink of delirium, as well as to a fierce integrity that can cohabit with self-sacrificing empathy.[9]

Our aim is therefore to present the author's notion of identity frequently resulting from the above-mentioned "personal autonomy and fierce integrity" and highlight how it relates to traditional perceptions in a case study of the selected novel. In Lee's world, these perceptions are twisted, changed and reinterpreted, introducing new and unusual viewpoints which contradict the stereotypical portrayal of characters, morality and ethics.

Another reason is the low number of academic publications on Tanith Lee, and we intend to contribute to those that have already been published, in the hope that academia takes up interest in the author and devotes as much attention to her as to similar famous British authors, such as Terry Pratchett. Regarding the already-published works, we rely on *The Hidden Library of Tanith Lee* (2001) by Mavis Haut as our primary source, since it is the only publication exclusively dealing with the author and her works. Although several other authors have analysed Lee's work, this is most commonly in the form of articles focusing on a specific topic, such as: vampires (*The Blood is the Life: Vampires in Literature* edited by Leonard G. Heldreth and Mary Pharr), werewolves (*Tanith Lee's Werewolves Within: Reversals of Gothic Traditions* by Lillian M. Heldreth), fairy tales (*Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* by Jack Zipes), robots (*Robots and Romance: The Science Fiction and Fantasy of Tanith Lee* by Sarah Lefanu), and the narrative structure of fairytales (*Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* by Cristina Bacchilega).[10]

Identity, a seemingly natural and simple concept, is complex and multilayered, having relations to other social and behavioural concepts. To best understand identity, we list several definitions, ranging from simpler "knowing who I am" or "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is"[11] to deeper questions, such as "Where, among the different aspects

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[9] R. Kaveney, "Tanith Lee obituary", *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015, at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/01/tanith-lee, 1 February 2017.

[10] B. Vinczeová, "A Journey Beyond Reality: Poetic Prose and Lush Image in Tanith Lee's *Night Master*", *Prague Journal of English Studies*, vol. 5.1 (2016), p. 72.

[11] "identity", *Oxforddictionaries.com*, Oxford 2016, at http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/identity, 15 August 2016.

we show to people, and among the metamorphoses we pass through in the different stages of our life, is our identity?"[12] The concept of conflicting identities is often addressed to in the book analysed here – whether it is a conflict between the male and female identity, or the identity of a mother versus that of a queen. It is not unusual for this conflict to result in tragedy, which "becomes ineluctable when characters are unable to extricate themselves from the conflict between who they are and who they are supposed to be."[13]

Identity conflict is, therefore, based on "what am I" versus "what am I supposed to be", and even "what I want to be". This dilemma results in the inability to answer the first question posed, which is knowing "who oneself is". Mavis Haut focuses on Lee's *Birthgrave* trilogy in relation to identity as something that "true identity can only be recognised through confirmation by another."[14] However, this may be also applied to Lee's other works and her writing in general, such as manifestations of changing identity connected to names or gender: "a change in name indicates a shift in identity."[15] In fact, these manifestations of identity are present in the novel analysed here, regarding which we address identity conflict, as well as the changes of identity relating to name, gender, sexuality and nature.

We have structured this paper into four main parts focusing on the representative character for a selected phenomenon. The first part analyses the concept of social standing conflicting with parenthood, as represented by a queen who is often regarded as an atypical example of a ruler. In addition, the conflict between a male and female identities appear alongside sexuality, since the queen is portrayed as homosexual, yet is forced to bear a child. The concept of sexuality and gender in relation to identity is addressed in the second part, where we observe an androgynous and gender-changing character and focus how their personality changes with a selected gender. The third and fourth parts of the article focus on non-human characters, such as demons and the personification of death.

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[12] R. Langbaum, "The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature", *The American Scholar*, vol. 34.4 (1965), p. 581.

[13] Z. Bi, Sk. Shaheen, "Literature and Identity in Diaspora Writings: With special reference to Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*", *ELK Asia Pacific Journals – Special Issue* (2015), p. 3.

[14] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library of Tanith Lee*, London 2001, p. 14.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

In Lee's universe, demons stand very close to nature, their identity often reflects and copies natural phenomena, such as dying in winter or creating life from plants. In the last part, we present the character of death personified, which goes through a radical change in the novel, first having little or no identity, but one which is gradually acquired and formed. We also address the issues of identity conflict, the accepted and unaccepted, the traditional and contemporary.

A MOTHER OR A QUEEN

The most apparent and perhaps the deepest conflict of identities can be found in Lee's character of Queen Narasen. This ruler of a fictional land called Merh is described as "trained and raised . . . as if she were son rather than daughter, preparing her to rule after him, and this fitted her inclination very well."[16] The Leopard Queen is known for her love for killing leopards, her homosexuality, and for being cruel, but just. The image of a queen who enjoys hunting and women conflicts with the traditional perception of a queen being good and kind, as well as secondary to a king. Neither does her image lean to the "evil queen" as seen in fairy tales such as *The Snow Queen*, or the character of Disney's *Wicked Queen*. We mention fairy tales because Lee's stories often include fairy tale imagery, symbols and motifs, such as the significance of numbers, repetitions, wishes, and so on:

> although Lee wrote comparatively few actual fairy-tale narratives, a strong awareness of mythic structures and the expectations of magical narrative underpin much of her writing.[17]

On the contrary, Lee's queen is depicted as strong, self-aware, and very clear about her sexuality ("'I do not lie with men,' said Narasen"), while in her character we find both vices and virtues.[18] She is proud, but loves her

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[16] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, Winnetka 2010, p. 14.

[17] A.E. Duggan, D. Haase, H. Callow (eds.), *Folktales and Fairy Tales: Traditions and Texts from around the World*, Greenwood 2016, p. 573.

[18] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

country and is capable of making sacrifices. We do not observe a character that is black and white, thus not the

> simple binaries: rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, smart and stupid, kind and cruel, good queen and bad queen. But closer scrutiny reveals a rich canvas of queens who rule capably in their own right, who reign deceitfully in their sons' absence, who are falsely accused of murder who actually attempt murder, who suffer infertility, who grieve the loss of their children, who survive their fall from grace, who vie with other queens for power, who protect their families and realms, and who subvert social and political expectations.[19]

The conflict arises from a curse cast upon the queen: "When Narasen is fruitful, then the land shall bear fruit," thus condemning the queen and her land to poverty, famine and plague unless she gives birth to a child.[20] The conflict is apparent right away: either the queen should ignore the curse and watch her land die, or she should sacrifice her identity in order to save her land. Lee follows the pattern of fairy tales, where "pregnancy and childbirth have always been significant," although this time the need for pregnancy is based on a curse, not in a desire to continue the royal line.[21] We know that Narasen is opposed to sleeping with men, but "she suffered it, and her people praised her," although it was against her nature.[22] The identity of the ruler won the conflict within Narasen, forcing her to act so as to save her country, despite the fact that "she had thought of the child with distaste"[23] and that she "eschews fertility, preferring the manly pleasures of leopard hunting."[24]

Although the concept of parenthood and motherhood are foreign to the queen, she accepts the role of the mother for the sake of her country. She suppresses her own identity and takes up an identity that is forced upon her – the identity of a parent. Here, we observe the distinction between the desired and the expected; the wanted and the necessary; the natural and unnatural. For Narasen, the concept of motherhood is

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[19] J.E. Carney, *Fairy Tale Queens: Representations of Early Modern Queenship*, New York 2012, p. 6.

[20] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[21] J.E. Carney, *Fairy Tale . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[22] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[24] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit*., p. 51.

unnatural and her character violates the traditional perceptions of women as birthgivers and happy mothers. The roots of this conflict are based in her homosexuality, but also in the rejection of the feminine. She does not enjoy pregnancy: "She could not ride or hunt; she had no appetite for food or drink or exercise"[25] and she "endured the pregnancy stubbornly as she had endured all she had undertaken in order to retain Merh."[26]

The distaste for being a mother grows in the Leopard Queen and the refusal of this new identity is apparent with her ideas to murder the child: "Yes, she might well kill this child," and the need to get back her former identity associated with masculinity, demonstrated in hunting and lying with women.[27] This does not happen since the queen dies after childbirth, thus sacrificing herself for the sake of her land.

In the character of Narasen, we see a rejection of the feminine; the queen acts like a king, she has few or no maternal instincts and she accepts pregnancy only to save her country. We can see she is disgusted with herself, considering herself "fat as a great whale stranded aboard the pitiless land . . . [and] a warrior and a man who had been forced to play at motherhood."[28] We may say that until her death, she had retained her identity as a queen, then putting her country first and herself second. As she had never embraced the concept of parenthood, we perceive this identity as forced upon her, resulting in the above-mentioned tragedy as a consequence of identity conflict.

In the end, we must mention that the characters in Lee's universe "live" even after dying, in the land of the dead. The importance of this fact lies in the queen's identity, which she is unable to lose even after death, as well as in death's kingdom, "where far from serving Death, Narasen grows so shrewish that Death quits his own kingdom to escape her."[29] Since she was unable to remain a queen in the world of the living, she does so in the world of the dead, ascertaining her identity as a powerful ruler regardless of the land she rules.

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[25] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

THE FEMININE AND THE MASCULINE

While the relation of identity and gender is an underlying theme in the case of Queen Narasen, it is fully present with her child, Simmu, who "is born in understandable gender confusion."[30] Not only does the child seem androgynous at first, but it can change genders, being described as "fluid of gender and semi-androgynous"[31], consequently given a name that means "twice fair"[32], both in the male and female form. Although the child is able to change genders at will, he mostly appears as male and the author uses male pronouns when referring to him:

> Despite Simmu's habit of slipping from one gender into the other according to the occasion, the two [Simmu and his friend] appear mainly as male.[33]

Androgyny has always been a prominent theme in literature, whether ancient or modern:

> The double-sexed figure shifted in terms of its representation from classical mythology to discourses of medicine and psychiatry in nineteenth-century sexology.[34]

The double-sexed figure may refer either to androgynous characters, transsexual or hermaphrodites and has been a theme constantly occurring in the work of prominent authors, such as Virginia Woolf or Angela Carter[35]. Tanith Lee works with androgyny shifted to the level of gender fluidity, and in terms of fantasy, she creates a character who can select a gender at will because of his supernatural parentage.[36]

The changing genders are associated with shifting identity: Simmu in his male form behaves differently from his female form, including having a different physical appearance (female or male reproductive organs and

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[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[32] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

[33] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[34] T. Hargreaves, *Androgyny in Modern Literature*, New York 2005, p. 7.

[35] See T. Hargreaves, *Androgyny . . .*, *op. cit.*

[36] Simmu's mother is the Queen Narasen and his father is a revived man sent by Death.

physical characteristics), as well as sexual orientation. He uses the name Shell when in female form, indicating the relation of a name to one's identity. The concept of homosexuality fades since Simmu uses his female sexuality to seduce men and vice versa. The conflict in this case arises from the opposition of male and the female, as well as on the level of human versus the non-human. Since Simmu was rejected by his own mother, it was fictional demons that brought him up:

> Nurtured by demon Eshva women, suckled by tigers and deer, he is outside any moral or social contract, with no duty even to speak or maintain a fixed gender. His graceful androgyny and whole, undamaged Eros endear him to demonfolk.[37]

Consequently, typical human features, such as speech and social interaction appear only later in his life:

> Before it could chatter out one word of human speech, the child could charm the bird from the cloud and the snake from under the stone.[38]

In the character of Simmu, we therefore see as natural, in the sense of being related to nature, his ability to communicate with animals and plants. However, the "human natural" is missing, having been omitted in childhood and never acquired.

The ability to change genders comes from the child's mother and her distaste for men. As the Leopard Queen was forced into pregnancy to save her country, after learning that her child was a boy, she wanted to have him killed: "If it is a man, take it and throttle the thing."[39] Right after being born, the child uses the ability of changing genders instinctively as an act of self-preservation: "Bless the gods, lady, for it is a son. . . . It is a female child."[40] In the beginning of Simmu's life, there is no distinction between its male and female identity; it is represented by childhood playfulness, used as a game and taken as granted: "The child, intrigued by the stone boy, had assumed its female sex to complement him."[41] The transition is

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[37] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
[38] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 54.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

described as "swift, as a chameleon would rearrange its colors, or a flower fold itself at the going of the sun."[42]

Later in life, Simmu lives in a priesthood, which forces him to keep his male gender, but it is only as "jealousy does . . . stir the return of his sexual fluidity"[43] since he "mislaid the knowledge he can be other than male."[44] As he is driven by the erotic, by seeking pleasure which includes seducing both male and female, Simmu's ability to change genders cannot be repressed for long. His male form can, however, be perceived as original, since he was born male and spends most of his life as a male. Maleness is associated with the ordinary, the normal, the expected and the human. Simmu appears as a man mostly during the day, and the female form has a connection to the supernatural, the night and darkness. When seducing his male friend Zhirem, Simmu conceals his female form as a dream, as something unreal and impossible in ordinary life: "I am your dream. How can I be otherwise, seeing I am the youth, Shell and also a maiden."[45] Later in life, "his heedless fluidity comes to an end and his sex will change only when he is asleep," again relating the concept of femininity to the night.[46] Night as the feminine and unconscious, and day as the masculine and conscious appear as motifs based in mythology[47] as the "opposition of Masculine and Feminine, day and night, consciousness and the unconscious".[48]

In Lee's universe, the portrayal of gender fluidity in the character of Simmu represents a constant conflict, a battle which cannot be won. This fluidity is related to his upbringing and lack of humanity. Similar to his mother Narasen, it is humanity that is forced onto Simmu, since amongst humans he retains his male form, and changing into a female becomes less frequent, painful, and eventually impossible. In order to transform, he "caught up . . . with himself,"[49] while later, the change is described

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[42] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[43] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

[44] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[46] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

[47] M.I. Wali, *Shakespeare's Syzygy of Meaning*, Pittsburgh 2011.

[48] E. Neumann, *The Fear of the Feminine and Other Essays on Feminine Psychology*, Princeton 1994, p. 43.

[49] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

as "terrible, this transformation".[50] Changing into a female is also unacceptable in a "normal" world, as it is a feature that demons have and use. Simmu's conflict between being human and non-human is resolved in his death. After being forced to lead a human life as a man, surrounded by riches and confined in a palace with a wife, Simmu loses his self that is associated with magic, night, nature and the supernatural. Again, we perceive a tragedy resulting from the conflict of identities.

NATURE VS. NURTURE

A strong relation based on the connection of identity and nature may be observed with non-human characters. Most of all, it is the Eshva who share a resemblance to wild animals rather than humans. Being described as of demonkind, they do not speak, use only gestures and are naturally curious, though their attention span is very short. Their "wordless language which seemed written on the air in somber lights" indicates diversion from humanity – although they understand the human language, they never speak it.[51] Their acts are random and often playful, and they seek "a fitting toy for the Eshva to play with".[52] Playfulness and curiosity are the major defining characteristics for these creatures, and their emotions are short-lived: "it was not the sort of love that lasts, the Eshva being the Eshva."[53] We mention the Eshva as in the novel they serve as a random natural force when they take up interest in Simmu and raise him. This "upbringing" is, however, not conscious; they rather keep the child company and do not consciously teach him anything. There is a constant danger of the child being left alone, since "they would have tired no doubt, the demon women, of their charge, or they would have forgotten it."[54] Their identity seems more collective than individual – all of them are described as beautiful, with dark hair and pale skin, and their only distinction is based on gender. Their collective name, the Eshva, represents all of them, since they are never named as singular beings.

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[50] *Ibid.*, p. 405.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[54] *Ibid.*

While the Eshva, with their curiosity and proximity to nature, resemble wild animals rather than humans, they are defined by the lack of intention or self-consciousness. They are motivated only by their curiosity and interest in the bizarre. However, we would like to address the character of the Demon Lord Azhrarn, who like the Eshva, serves as a natural force, yet has motives and goals. Haut associates his character with nature itself, and highlights references to natural cycles, such as his rebirth – spring, or his death – winter. "His response to natural beauty is often a turning point in the narrative," as seen when he saves Simmu's life because of his attractive physical appearance.[55] The strong relationship with nature is stressed in the demon's transformations, during which he often takes the form of wild animals, such as an eagle or a panther.

Azhrarn's identity is conflicted. On the one hand, he is a stereotypical evil demon in that his wickedness is for his own amusement, as well as being capricious, cruel and vengeful. On the other hand, he is interested in anything bizarre, beautiful or weird with no necessarily cruel motive. "He is always contradictory" and no one can anticipate his mood and actions.[56] Since his nature is "ambivalent and unpredictable", he resembles destructive natural forces.[57] His goal is always to avoid boredom, and therefore "he seeks constant engagement" whether as an act of kindness or malice.[58] He deflects himself from human nature, his only motive being his own amusement.

Following the pattern of the previously mentioned characters Narasen and Simmu, we may also talk about gender in Azhrarn's case. Although he can change shape and become an animal, he can also change his gender and take on a female form. However, while in Summu's case we perceive androgyny and gender fluidity, Azhrarn's maleness is much more pronounced. He lacks feminine attributes and even in his female form, he evokes fear and terror. His identity remains unchanged even when he takes on another shape. While Simmu uses his ability to choose gender in order to seduce the opposite sex, Azhrarn is clearly bisexual and has lovers that are both male and female.

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[55] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

A strong motif of secrecy is related to the demon, and the author "shrouds Azhrarn in a certain aura of mystery."[59] What seeps through the veil of enigma is an inhuman creature fascinated by humanity, lacking human motives:

> The motives of the demons were both complex and simple. What intrigued them, they permitted liberties and rapture. What was fruitless or insolent or unwary, they eradicated.[60]

Azhrarn therefore serves as an external force rather than a character; he views humans as his amusement and his actions serve only one goal, that is to keep himself entertained.

DEATH AND IDENTITY

The figure of death personified often appears in mythic stories, fantasy novels or fairy tales. It has been depicted in paintings, literature or other forms of art in many cultures and religions, whether as a skeleton with a scythe or an angel. As a main character in works of fiction, such as Terry Pratchett's *Mort*, Mark Zusak's *The Book Thief* or José Saramago's *Death with Interruptions*, death is perceived as having a certain character, being male, female, or androgynous, physical or non-corporeal, and with features and an identity attributed to it by the given author. The personification of death appears in fairy tales such as *Godfather Death*; mythology, represented by a god of death, e.g. Hades; or modern fictional fairy tales, such as Rowling's *Tales of Beedle the Bard*:

> Different cultural contexts, different group-specific views, as well as different individual attitudes create different images of death.[61]

Let us address then the identity of death in Lee's universe and build it from references to his gender, physical appearance, actions, motivations and goals. The author follows the patterns of personifying death, giving

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[59] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[60] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 436.

[61] K.S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*, Cambridge 1999, p. 5.

it human characteristics and making it appear as a person, "rather than remaining shapeless and chaotically threatening".[62] In Lee's universe, death initially appears as male. He is black, "satin black like panther skin, or polished like a burnished black gem. And from the very blackness he seemed carved, to the shape of a tall and slender man. But his hair was long and white as ivory."[63] The contrast of black and white is complemented with references to his physical beauty: "His face was rare, inexplicable and desolate."[64] We can also observe that death is named as Lord Uhlume, making him one of the five lords of darkness rather than an abstract character.

Concerning the nature of death, Uhlume fits rather the Romantic Age as "the last best friend" rather than the notion of death in the Renaissance as the "devil incarnate".[65] This may be because of the opposition of Azhrarn as the lord of demons and Uhlume as death. This opposition is not only physical – Azhrarn is depicted as pale, with black hair, wearing black clothing, while Uhlume is dark, with white hair and white clothes. While Azhrarn is often referred to as wicked and cruel, Uhlume lacks a streak of malice and although he claims: "I am not necessarily compassionate"[66], he "is always polite and without human cruelty"[67] and "courteous and impassive".[68] The lack of cruelty on death's side is often evident in the novel: "'Cruelty,' said Death implacably, 'is your food, not mine. Even now, not mine.'"[69]

In opposition to Azhrarn, who constantly seeks amusement and escape from boredom, death has a sense of purpose. This purpose can be perceived as "being death", that is, being himself, which turns out to be exhausting: "In his dealings with mankind, Death can seem like a beleaguered adult amongst a swarm of demanding children."[70] The concept of death exhausting itself is not new – the need to pass the identity of death for someone else to "become death" has appeared in popular fiction, such as Pratchett's *Mort*, or in the television series *Dead Like Me*. Uhlume "seems

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[62] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[63] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] K.S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death . . .*, *op. cit.*
[66] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
[67] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[69] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 416.
[70] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

to want to perceive himself through human understanding"[71] and since attributing human characteristics to himself, it is unavoidable for him to grow tired: "He alters gradually – remaining gentle and impartial, but increasingly exhausted and despondent."[72] His weariness is "mortal" and "the fatigue of a thousand centuries had caught him up. Why not?"[73] The conflict between the inhuman and human aspect of Uhlume is not judged. When the author rhetorically asks "why not", she indicates that even death has a right to peace.

In the end, Uhlume refuses to return to his kingdom of the dead. The conflict between who he is and who he wants to be is resolved when the dead Queen Narasen "grows more death-like than Death in his usurped kingdom."[74] Uhlume does not give up his identity as death, merely ignores it while he rests amongst humans and "Queen Death" takes care of his responsibilities. The part of Uhlume's identity that is death is repressed as he clings to humanity, while Narasen sheds her humanity and become more like death. However, until the end of the novel, Uhlume does not cease being death, but rather lends his function to another.

Death in Lee's world is therefore tied to characters with a name, personality and specific characteristics. Uhlume serves as a kind, but necessary death, a representation of the romantic "unavoidable end" without an intention for mischief or malice. The conflict that arises is because of the "tiresome job"; we can see him growing weary and exhausted, no longer accepting his identity as death and yearning for rest. "Being death" is passed to "Queen Death", namely Narasen, who fulfils the function of death, though we perceive no certainty and no final assurance that it will remain so.

CONCLUSION

Identity serves as one of the main themes of Tanith Lee's *Death's Master*. It may be observed on many levels and relates to one's social standing, gender, sexuality or nature. In the novel it is often conflicting, a choice between

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[71] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 52.
[73] T. Lee, *Death's Master*, *op. cit.*, p. 453.
[74] M. Haut, *The Hidden Library . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

two possibilities. We can also perceive identities forced upon characters, as well as the resulting tragedy, such as the death of a character.

In case of Queen Narasen, the ruler's identity is in contrast to typical queens and often is she compared to a man, who is forced to take on motherhood. There is a strong motif of masculinity, which is a defining trait for Narasen, seen in hunting and her preference for women, indicating a resemblance to a king rather than a queen. The conflict between her identities arises from forced motherhood, which the queen undergoes unwillingly and considers a necessary evil. The motherly instinct is not present; the queen perceives pregnancy with obvious disgust and her hate manifests in thoughts of killing her child. The conflict of identities between mother and queen, parent and ruler makes Narasen an intriguing character who is punished with death for refusing to be a mother. However, after dying, she achieves being a queen in the land of death. The strength with which Narasen clings to her identity as a queen beyond death is admirable, and we can say that even forced motherhood did not destroy it.

Gender fluidity is associated with identity in Simmu's case, who struggles between the human and the non-human. Here, the humanity is related to maleness, the ordinary, the normal. Simmu appears as male during the day; daylight indicates the true nature of things. The night symbolised the strange and unaccepted, in this case, the change into a female. This change is handled as secret, and allusions are made to the relation of the feminine with the night. Simmu's tragedy lies in humanity being forced upon him, when he is expected to stay and live like a mortal man. After losing the ability to undergo transformation, he loses a part of his self and ends his life tragically.

In non-human characters we perceive collective identity, demonstrated by the lack of individual differentiations. The fictional Eshva serve as an example of creatures that stand between humans and animals. Although they have a strong relationship with nature, being able to communicate with animals and plants, they lack human traits, such as speech or motives. They do not appear as individuals and they are never named individually. While the Eshva are collective beings, Azhrarn, as a character, is closely related to nature as well. He differs from the former by possessing motives, and his identity is contradictory. On the one hand, he serves as a portrayal of traditional demons, such as in the Bible, whose wickedness and desire to cause mischief harm humanity. On the other hand, his weakness for the interesting and the beautiful make him less threatening. The author often

employs an aura of mysticism around the character, cloaking his intentions, motives, and thoughts. His identity remains unclear and unresolved. Although it is decidedly non-human, it is attracted to human aspects of life.

With the character of death we perceive the author's choice to employ a personification of death, that is, a character representing an abstract notion as a physical being. As many other authors, Lee makes death a person with certain attributes, which give death an identity and a sense of self. These attributes manifest as personality traits, such as kindness, patience and loneliness. Uhlume fits the romantic perception of death rather than the portrayal of cruelty promoted during the Middle Ages. Death as an identity is, however, transferable and is not necessarily tied to a character. Thus, after passing his duties to Narasen, it is only the function that is transferred, with both characters being referred to as "death". It seems that the identity of death as a concept exceeds ties to one character and in order to be maintained, can be attributed to another.

The presented case study as a literary analysis of the selected novel shows that identity is a strong and an ever-present theme in Lee's *Death's Master*. We have pointed out the identity conflict as a struggle between the individual and society, the male and the female and the human and the non-human. Although this analysis focuses on one novel only, future research could be encouraged to relate the above-analysed concepts to Lee's work in general, thus providing a complex and an in-depth image of identity as a theme in the author's novels. It would be also fitting to point out Lee's place among the British fantasy authors, an aim that calls for a thorough and broad evaluation and comparison from the point of view of objective literary criticism.

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