

Interpreting the Tarot: The Death Card

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(an edited version of an earlier article that appeared in *Lady Letter*, vol. 1, no. 3)

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Facing your mortality is a difficult task. For some, it is impossible. So, when the Death Trump, the thirteenth card of the Tarot's Major Arcana appears, questioners can become anywhere from mildly anxious to seriously worried. Understanding the symbolism and meaning of the Death card can help lessen anxieties and still fears that an actual death is approaching.

The Death card doesn't necessarily signify the death of the questioner or anyone the questioner knows; it also symbolizes change, rebirth, and evolution.* The symbolism present in most decks concentrates on the universality and necessity of death, the cyclic nature of death and rebirth, and the inward path one travels to achieve spiritual excellence. The discussion here draws from the images of Death cards from several tarot decks, including the Rider-Waite, Swiss 1JJ, Haindl, Thoth, Piatnik-Weine, El Gran Tarot Esoterico, New Golden Dawn, and Herbal.

Skin & Bones

The imagery of the Death card is powerful and evocative. The figure of death, often represented as a skeleton, dominates most cards. The skeleton reminds us that our physical body will be reduced to bones after death. One possible interpretation or allusion is to reaching a deep understanding because one "feels (or knows) something in the bones." The skeletal frame can be seen, also as the vehicle that gives us structure (bones) and flexibility (joints). As such, it is what C.G. Jung would call an alchemical *conjunctio*, a union of opposites.

Death & Rebirth

Death is sometimes smiling or sullen, cloaked or bare. In a few cases he is faceless (Herbal), openly menacing (Esoterico, Piatnik-Weine) or even gleeful (New Golden Dawn). As the Grim Reaper, he uses his scythe to harvest the life of old men and women, children, clergy, all in his path. The dismembered body parts of his victims are scattered at his feet. In some cases they seem to be sprouting from the ground, as though they are planted in the earth. This is one indication that the Grim Reaper is also a god of rebirth and regeneration; he reaps life in order to sow life. The Hebrew word assigned to this card is Nun (pronounced *noon*); as a noun it means "fish." As a verb, however, it means "to grow, to sprout." Therefore, the death figure in this card is representative of all gods and goddesses of regeneration. The scythe is also a symbol of the crescent moon, bringing to mind the waxing power of the Maiden aspect of the goddess and the waning, destructive aspect of the Crone.

There are additional reminders of rebirth included in the images, too. In the Rider-Waite deck, just behind the flowing river, at the top right corner, a path leads between two pillars. In the distance is a sunrise, symbolizing new life and new beginnings. There is an ankh in another deck, ancient symbol of rebirth. In the Tarot of the New Golden Dawn the skeleton depicting death is shown in two positions: with arms outstretched and with arms crossed, representing Osiris slain and risen. Rather than corpses, the Thoth deck shows embryo-like figures being whipped up by Death's frenzied scythe.

In interpreting the Death card, this element of rebirth is extremely important. Although change may come unexpectedly, it makes way for new opportunities. What "dies" might be anything from an outmoded way of thinking to a relationship. The scythe may be cutting away an old way of life, unnecessary ties to materialism, closed-mindedness, anything the questioner has outgrown, so that new energy can be dedicated to developing a new way of

life, a new relationship, etc.

Spiritual Transformation

The Death card is also a card of spiritual transformation. Many cards include a symbol of a fish, which figures largely in many religious systems, representing new life, eternal life, or rebirth. But fish are also a symbol of wisdom gained through trial. In the story of Jonah and the Whale, Jonah is swallowed by the great fish and remains in his belly for three days. During this time Jonah undergoes a personal transformation and is then "reborn" when the whale vomits him up.

This path of personal transformation and spiritual development is illustrated on some cards with a triumvirate of creatures: scorpion, serpent, and eagle. Each creature represents a higher level of personal enlightenment on the path to spiritual wisdom. The Death card is ruled by Scorpio, the scorpion representing the initial level. (Scorpio rules the organs of reproduction; scorpions may sting themselves in times of extreme threat.) Therefore, the goal or the task awaiting the individual who draws the Death card might be to face their fears, to accept the challenge to meet their shadow and use the experience as a tool for personal growth. The challenge is a serious one, but the person who accepts it will benefit greatly, as did Jonah. In the Golden Dawn system, Death is called the Child of the Great Transformers.

Reading the Cards

In summary, the Death card in a tarot reading may symbolize change, motion, unexpected action, an ending, or a completion of something in the questioner's personal life. The card tells the questioner that fresh starts, rebirth and advancement will follow. On another level, it may also present a challenge to the questioner to face fears, or to confront their shadow. It may be suggesting that the questioner eliminate obstacles that prevent them from growth. Finally, death is a natural, necessary part of life; this card may symbolize an actual death, though this is not necessarily true. It may also represent that the querant has experienced a death recently. The Death card helps us to accept that some things must end before others can begin.

*However, if the cards in the reading seem to strongly reinforce an actual death, or if the questioner is requesting information directly related to someone's death, a seriously ill person's health, or even a past life, then the card might indicate physical death. I know one reader who, before a reading, asks her guides to never reveal a death to her. You might ask this, too, if you are not up for it.

Some Facts About the Death Trump

Planetary Ruler: Mars

Zodiac Sign: Scorpio

Body part: Organs of regeneration/sex

Path on the Tree of Life: Netzach to Tiphareth (Victory to Beauty)

Hebrew Letter: Nun, meaning fish (n.) or growth (v.)

Deities: Osiris, gods/goddesses of rebirth and regeneration