

On a Pale Horse Study Guide

On a Pale Horse by Piers Anthony

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Plot Summary

In a world where magic is as powerful as science, Zane is a balanced soul: half good and half evil. When he decides to kill himself, Death comes for him to take and judge his soul, and Zane shoots Death instead. He discovers that he must take Death's place, and further, he discovers that he's been manipulated by supernatural powers to save the beautiful magician's daughter Luna and foil Satan's plans to gain control of the world. Zane breaks all the rules of Death, going on strike and warring against Satan. He emerges victorious, having earned Luna's love and brought compassion to the role of Death.

Zane begins his journey in a magic shop, where he is considering magic stones that he can't afford. The dealer gets Zane to agree to give up his fated love in exchange for a wealthstone, which Zane later realizes only finds stray change. Depressed and broke, Zane resolves to kill himself, but as he is on the verge of shooting himself, he is startled by the approach of Death. Filled with fear, Zane shoots Death. Fate appears and tells Zane that now he must take on the role of Death.

Zane dons Death's protective cloak, and with the help of Death's magical stones and magical horse Mortis, Zane sets off to take the souls of those who die in a state of balance between good and evil. He experiences moral quandaries about the souls he takes, especially when he feels the sins attached to them are unfair. Zane saves some of the lives he is supposed to take and wonders if he is doing justice to his role.

Then, Zane is called to a dying magician. The powerful man offers Zane his daughter in exchange for helping save her from a mysterious plot. The magician has given his daughter some of his sin, so that he would be a balanced soul and could talk to Death. He arranged with Fate to put Zane in Death's office, to help his daughter.

Zane takes the magician to Purgatory. He tentatively agrees to help Luna, the magician's daughter, but he refuses any sexual favors in exchange. Zane sees Luna again, and they confess their sins to each other. Zane feels guilt over the mercy killing of his mother, who was kept alive by machinery and wanted to die. Luna feels guilt over allowing a demon to rape her mind in exchange for learning black magic to help her father. The two start to care about each other.

Zane learns that Satan has arranged an early death for Luna, because 20 years in the future she will go into politics and foil Satan's plans for ruling Earth and capturing millions of souls for hell. Zane refuses to take Luna's soul, which has become balanced through a selfless act of sacrifice. He goes on strike, refusing to take any souls. Satan sends Hellhounds and monsters after Zane and finally captures and begins torturing Luna. Zane goes to her and fights off Satan's minions, finally battling Satan himself. Zane has learned the full power of Death's office. He saves Luna, defeats Satan, and becomes a compassionate and merciful Death.



Chapter 1, To Buy a Stone

Chapter 1, To Buy a Stone Summary

In a world where magic is as powerful as science, Zane is a balanced soul: half good and half evil. When he decides to kill himself, Death comes for him to take and judge his soul, and Zane shoots Death instead. He discovers that he must take Death's place, and further, he discovers that he's been manipulated by supernatural powers to save the beautiful magician's daughter Luna and foil Satan's plans to gain control of the world. Zane breaks all the rules of Death, going on strike and warring against Satan. He emerges victorious, having earned Luna's love and brought compassion to the role of Death.

As the novel begins, Zane is in Mess o' Pottage, a store that sells magic stones. The proprietor offers him a deathstone, which darkens strongly when Zane holds it, showing that potential death is near for him. Then, the proprietor shows Zane a lovestone, which glows strongly, showing that potential love is also near. Zane cannot afford either stone. The proprietor makes a deal with Zane. If Zane will lead the shopkeeper to Zane's potential love, letting the proprietor connect with her, in exchange the proprietor will give Zane a wealthstone, which finds the user money. Zane tests the wealthstone, finding a penny under his shoe, and agrees to the deal.

The lovestone leads Zane on the course he would have taken anyway, heading home on a magic carpet. The proprietor follows. In the air, the carpet in front of Zane, which holds a beautiful, wealthy-looking woman named Angelica, suddenly falters and starts to fall. The proprietor rushes in to save the woman, making an instant connection with Zane's fated love. When Zane sees the woman's beauty and wealth, he begins to regret his deal.

Zane walks to his rundown apartment. On his way home, he sees the ghost of Molly Malone, who has been summoned to the city of Kilvarough as a mascot. Anyone who Molly sees is close to death. A man comes up to Molly and tries to take her wheelbarrow at gunpoint. Hotheaded Zane rushes in and attacks the gunman, shooting him in the process. The gunman runs off, with a likely fatal wound. Molly offers Zane her body as a prize, but Zane declines. He heads home and finds he's being evicted for non-payment of his rent. His photographs of auras don't make him any money. He tries to use the wealthstone but realizes that it's only good at finding loose change.

Zane decides to kill himself. He takes the gun he got from the mugger and points it at his head. As he's about to pull the trigger, a figure walks into his apartment. Zane realizes that this figure is Death, a skeletal creature wearing a cloak. Zane is startled. Suddenly, he no longer wants to die, but his finger is still on the trigger. He jerks his hand away from his own head and lets off a bullet. The shot hits Death in the face, and the figure collapses to the ground. Zane has killed Death.



Chapter 1, To Buy a Stone Analysis

The opening of the novel sets up the character of Zane. He is broke and depressed. He has two paths open to him at the beginning of the novel, which are revealed by the lovestone and the deathstone that the shopkeeper shows him. Zane may soon have great love, or he may soon have death. Although he doesn't realize it, by choosing wealth over love, Zane has also chosen death. He feels, on some level, that he is not worthy of a love that will change his life.

The first word of the novel is "death," and the anticipation of death hangs over the first chapter. The deathstone darkens sharply as Zane first holds it, a more severe reaction than the shopkeeper has seen. The flying carpet that Zane rides is old and potentially dangerous. Even Zane's encounter with Angelica, his potential love, is an encounter with death. Her carpet gives out, and she begins to fall. Death is all around. When Zane encounters Molly Malone, it is another encounter with death. Molly is a ghost, a symbol of death, and she also predicts death. Anyone she sees is close to death. It is no surprise when Zane decides to kill himself. His death has been stalking him throughout the chapter.

However, Zane is an impulsive character. He impulsively confronts the mugger who tries to rob Molly, just as he would likely have impulsively saved Angelica if the shopkeeper were not there. His drive to kill himself is impulsive. This impulsive nature is also what leads Zane to change his course at the last moment. The impulse to live overtakes him, as he is on the verge of death. Instead of dying, Zane kills.



Chapter 2, House Calls

Chapter 2, House Calls Summary

A woman comes into Zane's apartment. She is Fate, and she explains to Zane that since he has killed Death, he must take over the office of Death. Zane takes Death's cloak, shoes, gloves, watch, and jewelry at Fate's urging. The cloak and gloves will protect him magically. If the previous Death had wrapped his hood tight around him, he would not have died. He was careless. The shoes will allow Zane to walk on water. Zane is disbelieving, wondering how he could manage so many souls, and Fate explains that Death only personally comes for the souls that are in balance between good and evil, like his own, unconsciously taking all the other dying souls. Zane will weigh and judge balanced souls, sending them on to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory for further analysis.

Zane's neighbor comes into the apartment, having heard the shot, and believes that Death's body on the floor is actually Zane. Like most people who are not about to die, she does not recognize Death, mistaking him for a police officer. Zane reassures her that he will handle things, and the woman leaves.

Zane goes outside and finds Death's car, which seems to be magical. He discovers that he has a bracelet that points him toward the next soul he needs to take, or "client," as Fate termed it. The bracelet also has a gem that shows how near the client is. He discovers controls that allow his car to warp through time and space to arrive near his destination. His watch shows how much time he has before the client's death. He arrives at his destination to witness a car crash. Horrified, he pauses. Fate appears and explains that Zane must take the suffering woman's soul to let her die, and Zane pulls the soul from the woman's body, mangling it with inexperience.

Zane's next client is an old man who speaks another language. Zane finds that another piece of Death's jewelry, an earring, can translate. The old man is eager to die, trapped in a sickly, suffering body. Zane remembers his own mother, who he freed from suffering by killing her when she was trapped in a hospital, hooked up to machines. Zane takes the man's soul, carefully this time. In Death's car, Zane finds magic stones that allow him to measure the good and evil in the soul, and he also finds a makeshift way to send souls up to Heaven or Down to Hell.

Death's next client is a baby of an impoverished, abused mother. Zane is horrified that the baby's soul is tarnished. Exhausted by the strain and constant stream of deaths, Zane toys with his watch. He finds that he can pause the time before the next client's death and delay a death for 10 minutes. Zane wonders about the baby's soul, not knowing how to deliver it to purgatory. Then, he hears a voice from someone with him in the car.



Chapter 2, House Calls Analysis

Fate sets up Zane as a judge. His main job as Death is not to take people's souls, but to judge souls. That is why he is only called to deaths where the person's soul is balanced between good and evil. Death himself, the judge, is also balanced between good and evil, so that Death will be able to empathize with those whom he judges. However, Fate only gives Zane minimal information. Neither Zane nor the reader gets a manual on what it means to be Death or how Death operates. Zane gets to learn by experience, and the reader will learn along with him, experiencing all the confusion and questions that Zane does.

Zane's first encounters as death show the positive aspects of Zane's new job. First, he must take the soul of a woman in a car accident. When Zane arrives on the scene, the woman is suffering, and she needs Death to come and take her, in order to alleviate her suffering. The old man is also suffering and wants to die. He welcomes Death. In both these instances, Death's purpose is to free the soul when the body is no longer a capable vessel. Death's clients are in a state of living death which is painful and unnatural, but only Zane can help free them. In essence, Zane must reenact his most horrific memory and his heaviest sin. He must provide death out of mercy, as he did with his mother. These experiences will help Zane work through his guilt over his mother's death.

The third soul that Zane must take introduces the moral quandaries Zane will face about being death. The soul is a baby, not yet old enough or aware enough to sin. The soul is unformed, and yet the baby is marked by evil and sin. Zane does not know what to do, and this soul is the horrific puzzle that makes Zane stop to think, leading to his next encounter. The writer stops the chapter at the introduction of an unnamed character to create curiosity and make the reader read on.



Chapter 3, Ewes and Does

Chapter 3, Ewes and Does Summary

Chronos, the personification of Time, is sitting in the car next to Zane. He introduces himself and explains that he came in response to Zane toying with the watch. Chronos explains how the watch keeps track of Death's backlog and how Zane can stop time completely with the watch. If Zane does a bad job as Death, his soul will accumulate evil and go to Hell. If he does well, he will go to Heaven. Every Death kills his predecessor, but other Incarnations, like Chronos, earn their positions in other ways.

Zane asks Chronos about the baby and learns that evils like incest or rape embed themselves on the souls of the children of those crimes, because of the beliefs and guilt of the people who have sinned. Zane is uneasy at the idea and asks about Purgatory. Chronos says that Zane has a mansion in Purgatory and shows him the button to turn his car into his pale horse Mortis, who will know how to get to Purgatory. After Chronos departs, Zane turns the horse back into a car and goes to his next appointment.

The next client is at a women's pigskin match between the Ewes and the Does. The game mixes magic with normal play, and the women's sexual attributes are emphasized. At one point, a spell makes one of the players effectively naked. Zane is so caught up in the game that he is late taking the soul of one of the players, who is killed in a tackle. He chastised himself for making the woman suffer by losing sight of his purpose.

Death's next appointment is at a school. In the nurse's office, he finds a young boy dying. The nurse recognizes Zane as Death because she works with the dying and knows that the boy's death is near. The nurse explains that the young boy is a drug addict, and he has committed sins to get drugs. The nurse believes he suffers from genetic depression that led him to self-medicate, but at heart, he is really a good person. Zane comforts the nurse by telling her that the boy's soul is balanced between good and evil, and he may not be doomed for his sins.

Zane hears another commercial for Hell as he considers the boy, doomed by circumstance to sin before even reaching adulthood. He takes off for his next appointment, at a remote cottage on a mountain. Zane decides he doesn't want the role of Death and that he will let the next client take it. The woman meets him outside the cottage. She has taken poison because her husband has left her for a younger woman. Zane begs her to take an antidote and then kill him and take his place. The woman is horrified at the thought. They talk, and Zane convinces her that she should live and free her soul from sin. He realizes that he was wrong to want to die and give up his office. They both agree to live.



Chapter 3, Ewes and Does Analysis

The structure of Chapter 3 is very similar to Chapter 2. Zane is given important information by another incarnation, this time Chronos, who tells him about his watch, his horse, and Purgatory. Then, Zane takes three more souls. The pigskin match echoes Zane's first client. The woman in the car accident is suffering, and Zane does not help her quickly enough. His fumbling is because he is new at being Death, and he is confused. In this chapter, Zane is distracted by things around him and makes the same mistake, getting to the dead woman too slowly. He must remind himself to be fully aware of his office at all times.

The second death in this chapter is like the young baby's. Zane is still struggling with the idea of a baby that's marked by sin even before it is aware of the world or capable of taking actions. Because people believe in the sin of incest and rape, and in the mark of Original Sin, the mark is made tangible. People's beliefs create the reality, but the reality is unfair, ungoverned by the free will of the sinner. The same is true of the drug-addicted child. He is not fully formed and suffering from a genetic condition of depression that he self-medicates. To what degree can he be held accountable for his sins?

At the third death, Zane must come full circle, back to how he got to be death in the first place. He returns to the idea of suicide, but he must have the help of his client, another suicide. This encounter allows Zane to re-examine his own decision to kill himself earlier in the book. He realizes when talking to the woman that suicide is wrong. When Zane tried to kill himself, he was unjustly punishing himself. Through his interaction with the woman, Zane revitalizes his belief in life, rejects his earlier suicide attempt, and is ready to move forward.



Chapter 4, Magician

Chapter 4, Magician Summary

Zane's next appointment turns out to be in his hometown on Kilvarough, at a wealthy estate guarded by magical griffins. Zane finds Death's scythe and takes it with him as a weapon to protect him from the powerful griffins. The owner of the house is a powerful magician who is dying, and he begs Death for a few minutes to talk to him, offering Zane an option on his daughter's love.

The magician's daughter's name is Luna. At first, she comes out naked, and Zane is not impressed by her. Then, she realizes someone else is there, and she goes to put herself together. When she reappears, she is very beautiful. Zane believes that he's not good enough for anyone so attractive, and he's also still stinging from losing Angelica. The magician explains that his daughter is in danger from a plot against her. He searched for someone who could help her and found Zane. He arranged with Fate for Zane to become Death so that Zane can protect his daughter. The magician wants Zane to protect her in exchange for her love and offers Zane a stone that will magically make Luna love him. Zane refuses, disgusted by the idea.

The magician is a practitioner of powerful black magic which damns the user, but he transferred some of his many sins to his daughter's soul so he would be balanced and could talk to Zane. The magician's time is finally up, and Zane takes his soul. Then, Luna says that she will honor her father's offer by giving Zane her body. She is using a magic stone that suppresses her grief and emotions. Zane refuses to take advantage of her, but Luna feels an obligation to her father's wishes. They finally agree to go on a date.

Zane's next appointment is on the water, and Zane discovers that Mortis can also become a speedboat. Zane rescues his drowning client, unable to watch the man die. Zane implores the man to use the time to change the balance of his soul to good. Upset at his own good deed, Zane needs a rest. Mortis takes him to a pasture in Purgatory, where Zane meets Fate again. She says he's merely going through an adjustment period. She points him to Purgatory, a nearby building complex.

Zane classifies all the souls in his bag except two, the baby and the magician. He brings them to Purgatory, which seems like a bureaucratic office. The receptionist directs him to a computer, which in turn directs him to put the souls into machines. The first machine spins the baby's soul to extract the good and evil, but the machine finds neither. The computer explains that the soul is inherently half good and half evil because it was born of sin, like incest or rape. Since the baby died without using free will, it cannot be sent to Heaven or Hell. It will stay in Purgatory and work there, like the receptionist. The next machine allows the magician's soul to talk to Zane. The magician begs Zane again to go after his daughter. He is pleased to be in Purgatory for as long as he can, where his task is tabulating the good and evil in his soul.



Chapter 4, Magician Analysis

As Zane faces the griffins at the magician's house, he begins to experience his own powers. The magical creatures are vicious, and yet Zane can deflect them with a deathly look and the threat of his scythe. This is the power that Zane must fully harness in order to complete his mission, but he does not yet understand that he has a mission.

The magician presents Zane with the uneasy information that he has been manipulated to this point; he also presents Zane with a goal. Zane must save the magician's daughter, but Zane does not know why or how. The reader is intrigued by the mystery, but Zane is still caught up with the loss of Angelica. He is still tied to his past as a human and not yet ready to assume a new life. Just as he did not really see the opportunities given to him by the lovestone, Zane does not see the opportunities presented by the magician and his daughter.

Zane shows himself to be essentially good and able to withstand temptation, another factor that will allow him to succeed against Satan. Zane is not drawn into lust by Luna's nakedness. He refuses to take advantage of her for his own gratification. Zane empathizes with others, and this is one of his key character traits. Empathy allows Zane not to take advantage of others and to work to alleviate suffering wherever it occurs.



Chapter 5, Luna

Chapter 5, Luna Summary

Mortis takes Zane to Death's funeral-home mansion in Purgatory. He finds that he has a staff of Purgatory-bound souls and mail from Earth in his mailbox. Zane directs the myrrh scent to be changed to a pleasant odor and insists on answering his letters. He watches TV and finds that the news is personalized to him, commenting that he's running behind schedule and making annoying changes in routine. The butler explains that Purgatory is inhabited by the dead and the Incarnations of Death, Fate, Time, War, and Nature. When Zane finds out that among his staff is a concubine, to provide for his sexual needs, he hastily puts off meeting the staff and gets back to work.

Death collects souls and answers letters, including explaining to a little girl that death had saved her mother from pain, and that her mother went to heaven. Zane improves at his job but wonders at the senselessness of many deaths and is angered by Satan's constant interference in the world and advertisements for Hell, which break the pact Satan has with God not to interfere with humanity. Zane continues to save some of the scheduled clients. By error, Zane is sent to the bedside of a fifteen-year-old boy named Tad who has cancer. He is dying, but he is also mostly good. Everyone has kept the truth of his disease from him, and Zane talks with the boy and tells him the truth before taking his soul and letting it float to Heaven.

Zane discards the garb of Death to meet Luna for his date. Zane still does not feel he's worthy of Luna. They talk about Luna's father and about death. When Zane calls Luna "pure," she shows him two stones, one that detects lies and one that measures sins. Using the stones, they share their sins. Luna confesses that, unknown to her father, she sold herself to a demon in exchange for learning black magic to help her father. Instead of being in balance, like her father believes, she is 75% evil because of her own and her father's sins.

Zane confesses to embezzling from an employer and rejecting a woman who was poor and unattractive, who later killed herself. He finally admits to killing his mother because she was in pain, hooked up to machines in a hospital. He gambled and embezzled because the hospital bills had left him impoverished. Luna shows Zane her paintings of auras, and Zane is amazed that she has such a similar creative interest to his own aural photography. They have that in common, as well as committing sins to help parents. Luna explains more about the power of black magic to damn souls; white magic is only powerful for good people. They agree to another date, and Zane departs.

Chapter 5, Luna Analysis

As the new Death, Zane shows himself to be an independent spirit. The news is critical of Zane, reflecting how Zane is critical of himself in his own mind. Still, he does not let



criticism, from himself or others, stop him from doing what he feels instinctively is right. Zane insists on answering mail sent to Death, saving people who he can, encouraging good, and easing pain. He rejects the sin of lust when he refuses to sleep with Luna and when he is terrified by the idea of a concubine for Death. Zane's biggest sin is self-doubt.

Zane's sin of killing his mother is not truly evil. He believes that it is wrong and a sin, but he does it only out of compassion and love for his mother. However, that sin leads him into a spiral of further sins. Finding himself in debt, Zane embezzles money, gambles, and is so desperate to make ends meet that he refuses to marry a girl who loves him. Later she commits suicide. Perhaps Zane's most culpable sin is greed. Instead of accepting poverty, he has tried any means to find wealth, and in fact, his greed is what led him to lose Angelica and end up as Death. Still, Zane's greed is forced upon him by the circumstance of poverty, through no fault of his own. To what extent is Zane responsible for his sins? How much of his experience is forced upon him by fate, and how much has been governed by his choice and free will?



Chapter 6, Death's Dominion

Chapter 6, Death's Dominion Summary

Zane finds himself taking the soul of a soldier in a battle in a South American country called Niqueldimea, and he meets Mars there, the personification of War. Mars argues that war brings glory in death, while other deaths bring no honor. They witness a little girl martyr herself with a grenade to kill a soldier. Zane is horrified, while Mars admires the child. Another child, a boy, runs up to a soldier but gets killed with a flamethrower. Zane must take his soul. Mars argues that war is no worse than other deaths and that it is the instrument of social change.

Zane's next stop is a run-down nursing home. His client, an old man, is tied to a chair because he can't hold himself up, and there aren't proper facilities to take care of him. The old man is happy to die, but he wants one thing first: to hear the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy." No music is allowed in the nursing home because the owner dislikes noise. Zane determines to give the man his wish, but the displeased receptionist leaves a message on the owner's answering machine.

Zane gathers together a reluctant drug-addicted rock band from the dance hall next door and a reluctant black singer from the choir at the church on the other side who doesn't know about singing white music. He gets a hymnal with the tune in it. People gather outside at the commotion as the band sets up. Meanwhile, the owner has received his messages, and the police are on his way. Zane stops them at the nursing home door with his deathly presence. Finally, the performance starts. The performance is glorious, with people who have gathered at the door falling to the ground in rapture. Two of the elderly die during the emotional performance, and Zane takes the soul of his client. As he leaves, he sees that social services has arrived and is pleased to think that the owner will be taken to task for the conditions at the nursing home.

On the way to the next appointment, Zane passes a billboard war between a car dealer and a flying carpet dealer. His client is a blind atheist who is killing himself, and Zane talks with the man before he dies. The soul dissolves when Zane takes it. The unbeliever cannot be held in the afterlife. Zane's next client is at a hospital, hooked to machines, a reenactment of his mother's death. He fails at first to take the woman's soul because of the machines, and he pulls apart the machine to let her die. When the whole ward admits that they all want to die, Zane turns off the power to the ward, releasing them from living death.

Chapter 6, Death's Dominion Analysis

Zane meets another incarnation, War, and it goes against all of Zane's instincts to understand the necessity of suffering. War, however, sees a big picture instead of the



individual suffering. Zane will need to take on some of War's viewpoints in order to survive and defeat Satan.

At the nursing home, Zane is adamant about granting the dying man's wish. He cannot stand seeing the pointless lack of joy in the old people's lives. Zane believes in quality of life, in alleviating suffering and creating joy, instead of merely prolonging life under any conditions. This is an extension of Zane's act of mercy killing for his mother. A song is the least that Zane can offer.

Essentially, Zane creates a miracle at the nursing home. He brings together drug addicted musicians and narrow-sighted choir singers who cannot appreciate music beyond their own. He crosses cultural boundaries and forces people who are separated to come together under God. The hymn is miraculous because it is an expression of God on Earth. It is not only music; it is those who are divided coming together in union. To the drug addicts, it is better than drugs. To the choir singers, it is the glory of salvation. To the old man, it is an experience that leaves him ready to die. Zane has become, unbeknownst to him, a minion of God on Earth.



Chapter 7, Carnival of Ghosts

Chapter 7, Carnival of Ghosts Summary

Zane goes to pick Luna up for a date and she insists that they should go out. She also asks Zane to wear his death cloak. She seems giddy, kissing his skeletal form. Zane shows her one of his letters, from a child who is afraid to go to sleep because of the prayer, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Luna insists that Zane call the little girl, Ginny, right away to assure her that sleep doesn't cause death. Zane phones and promises not to take Ginny in her sleep. If she dies, he will wake her before taking her soul.

Luna and Zane run across Molly Malone, and Zane reveals that he's the same person who helped her earlier and that he's become Death. Molly sees Luna, and Molly supposes it's because Luna's had a date with Death. Luna, though, reveals that she's foretold her own death within the month with deathstones. She's artificially elevating her mood with magic to prevent herself from falling apart. She invites Molly for a ride, and Molly takes the couple to the Carnival of Ghosts.

At the carnival, Molly leads Zane and Luna on a historic tour, traveling through the past to see cavemen painting and the mythic Minotaur's maze. Molly explains that though she's illiterate, she's learned a lot during her death, and she's an informed tour guide. Zane realizes that Molly has predicted that Luna will save the world from Satan in twenty years, which conflicts with the prediction of her death in less than a month.

As Zane and Luna tour through medieval China, Zane is upset at Luna's impending death. Luna says that she is unclean and therefore unfit, and the two discuss their sins again. Zane can't blame Luna for what she's done. Molly says sometimes one must sin to do the right thing. As the tour reaches Europe, Zane and Luna kiss.

Luna tells Zane that she feels empty and lost since her father's death. She also knows that the demon she sold herself to waits for her in Hell, and she doesn't believe she can improve the balance of her soul in the time she has left. The tour reaches Pearl Harbor and then on to the future and World War Three. Satan and God both want the third war to happen when more souls are leaning toward their side, but the souls on Earth are in balance. Zane complains about Satan breaking the pact of non-interference with humans. After the historic tour, Zane and Molly visit the dinosaur petting zoo, play carnival games, and go through the tunnel of love before they depart.

Chapter 7, Carnival of Ghosts Analysis

Zane and Luna's love interest grows, but Luna is not facing her problems. Instead, she is hiding behind her magic, creating a false appearance for her emotions, just as she creates a false appearance for her body with magical enhancements. Still, Zane is drawn to Luna and he learns the first hint about the plot against her, Molly's prediction



that Luna will help defeat Satan in twenty years. Molly, because of her status as a ghost, has knowledge of the future, but Zane does not yet understand the full meaning of Molly's prediction.

The approach of World War Three is yet another indicator of Satan's plans. No one knows the exact date of the approaching war, but it's to Satan's advantage for the war to occur when there are a maximum of evil souls on the planet. Satan wants to balance as many souls toward evil as he can and then incite a war that will bring them into his domain, Hell. Against this backdrop of a larger plot, though, Luna and Zane are slowly falling in love.



Chapter 8, Green Mother

Chapter 8, Green Mother Summary

Mortis has a message for Zane, so Zane turns him into a horse and uses his translator to communicate. Nature, the Green Mother, wants to talk to Zane after he picks up his next soul. Mortis advises bringing Luna along, and Zane takes her to his next appointment, at a dance hall. Zane and Luna arrive early, and they watch the dancers. Two men come up to them and ask Luna if she can dance. She says that she can, but they're looking for someone who cannot. The two men seem to have some kind of bet. Luna, they say, can be the judge. They find a man who cannot play guitar and a woman who cannot dance, and they give them a magic guitar and magic shoes.

The man begins to play beautifully, and the woman begins to dance. At first, Zane and Luna enjoy the show. Then, it becomes clear that something's wrong. The man cannot stop playing the guitar, and the woman cannot stop dancing. The magic items are taxing their physical capabilities. The woman falls down dead, from a heart attack. She is Zane's client, and he takes her soul.

Mortis takes Zane and Luna to Nature's home, but Zane goes in alone. He finds a car and starts down the road. At an intersection, he almost hits a pedestrian because of a cyclist who swerves to pass the man. Zane curses the cyclist for carelessness and the pedestrian for not paying attention. The road leads him to a foul-looking bog. He sees a nearby shed, and inside there is a hot water bottle. Zane wonders why it's there, and then realizes it must be his transportation somehow. He finds that it levitates and uses it to fly over the swamp.

Above the swamp, Zane flies past a boy flapping his arms to fly and then is almost hit by an airplane. He curses the inept boy and the careless airplane. On the other side of the swamp, Zane finds himself at a lake. His water-walking shoes don't work, and he swims across. Partway there, a canoe passes by, dunking him, and a motorboat nearly hits them. Zane curses their careless indifference.

Finally, Zane reaches Nature's fortress. Nature appears wrapped in fog and calls Zane by Death's Greek name, Thanatos. She explains that the three collisions, on land, sea, and air, were actually the same event, and Zane saw it from three perspectives as the three participants. The test is designed, Nature says, so that others cannot come into her fortress so that they can have privacy. Only an Incarnation could pass through.

Nature explains that each Incarnation has power in his or her domain, suggesting that she could restore a soul, and she creates a sexual urge in Zane to prove her power. In defense, he briefly pulls Nature's soul from her body, causing her to stop inflicting him with lust. Both have proved their powers. Though none of them are completely free, each has power and might help the others.



Still, Nature is vague. She explains to him five modes of thought, linear thought that makes several connections, parallel thought where several facts lead to one strong conclusion, creative thought that leads to many ideas, schizoid thought that leads only in a circle, and intuitive thought that leaps to a conclusion. Zane returns to Luna and Mortis. They take the soul back to the dead girl's body, to see if Nature can truly restore it. She wakes, and Luna helps her with magic, though it risks her own soul.

Chapter 8, Green Mother Analysis

The men who endanger innocent lives to test out their magical items lack the essential quality that makes Zane a good death and suited to saving Luna: empathy, or compassion. They do not care what their devices do to the people they test them on. Luna gets a taste of what Zane's work is like from this scene and also from the letter Zane received from the little girl. She begins to understand his work and his moral quandaries. Both Zane and Luna are appalled by the carelessness of the men, using innocent people to test potentially dangerous magic items.

The test that Zane passes to get to Nature's house is a test of empathy. Zane passes through a near collision three times, and he meets himself at that intersection. He fails to see himself in the 'strangers' that he passes, and for once Zane's empathy fails him. He is angered at the others who seem to be going too fast, too slow, or not looking out for others. However, his empathy does not fail him completely. Zane is able to avoid the other "selves," preventing a potentially deadly accident.

Each of the Incarnations that Zane meets shows Zane something important that he will need to defeat Satan. War shows him the importance of looking at the big picture and of being able to fight. Nature shows Zane his own power over souls, even the souls of other Eternals. She also shows Zane five modes of thinking that he must use to overcome the tasks that will face him in the future.



Chapter 9, Bureaucracy

Chapter 9, Bureaucracy Summary

Zane catches up on his case load and considers his task. He decides that he'll do what he thinks is right, without worrying about whether it damns his soul. He goes to take the soul of one of two miners who are trapped without air. He tries to comfort the other miner, who is filled with guilt although he is bound for Heaven. His mother, too, was suffering a fatal illness, and after her son inadvertently let her know she was terminal, she died in the night. When the man loses consciousness, Zane asks his client if he needs anything. The miner has a song running through his head and asks Death to tell him a story about it.

Zane makes up a story about Wilda, a whale whose family is killed by whalers. She wants to understand why and disguises herself as a human to go among humans. Wilda finds that whalers only want to make a living and survive, and a whaler falls in love with her. She loves the whaler but is conflicted and flees back into the ocean, where she meets another whale. He turns out to be a squid, disguised as a whale, trying to understand why whales slaughter squid. Wilda realizes that whales are just like whalers and that it's all a matter of viewpoint. She returns to human form and marries the whaler.

After Zane takes the miner's soul, he goes to Purgatory to ask about Luna's fate. The computer implies that someone scheduled Luna's early death but won't say who. Zane tries to use carefully worded questions to eke out the information. Following the computer's hints, he phrases his questions negatively, asking who could not be responsible and who does not have a motive for scheduling Luna's death. By process of elimination, Zane discovers that Satan has scheduled her death and covered his tracks. The computer signs off with the words, "Any time," and an hourglass, which Zane takes as a hint that he must consult Chronos.

Zane's next client is a ten-year-old, marred with sins of sex after being seduced by a female neighbor. He dies in a fire, and Zane summons Chronos to set back time and prevent the fire. Chronos congratulates Zane on his excuse to talk privately, protected by Mortis from eavesdroppers. He tells Zane that the future is changeable, and that twenty years from now, if she doesn't die, Luna will become a politician and foil Satan's plot to install his minion in high power in the U.S. Then, Chronos sets back time, and Zane wakes his client, cautioning him to give up sin and wake the house, saving the victims.

Zane goes to see Luna, who is haggard with worry and grief. She says that the stones predict they must not have sex, and Zane holds her hand. He cannot bear to lose her. Zane files a petition against Satan for wrongly ordering Luna's death, but the hearing will not be for ten days.



Chapter 9, Bureaucracy Analysis

The story that Zane tells the miner about Wilda the whale is another story of empathy. It reflects the lesson that Zane learned on the path to Nature's house, a lesson he is keenly attuned to. The whale uses empathy to understand the whalers. She becomes one of them. However, she must also understand what her existence as a whale means to others, and this is the lesson she learns from the squid. Ultimately, Wilda begins to understand the big picture of existence and begins to empathize with both those who harm her and those she harms. This understanding and empathy takes away her anger, and she is able to find love.

In Purgatory, Zane further unravels the plot against Luna that he must confront. The computer clearly cannot answer his questions straightforward, and Zane must use his intuition and intelligence to come up with backward questions that will give him the information he wants. He can't get a straight answer to questions, so he must ask negative questions. He is also intelligent enough to recognize that the computer is sending him to consult Chronos. The picture is further clarified when Chronos explains that Satan is plotting against Luna to prevent her from foiling his plans twenty years in the future. Zane's first step is to try to stop Satan through the existing rules, but Zane has already shown himself to be a rule-breaker. He will certainly need to break rules to overcome his foe.



Chapter 10, Hot Smoke

Chapter 10, Hot Smoke Summary

Zane's caseload is light, giving him 30 extra minutes before his next appointment. He goes early, to Nevada, where a virginal girl has sold herself to be sacrificed to a dragon in order to help her indebted family. The dragons are from an endangered species called Hot Smoke Dragons that only eats virgins and is protected by a group called Dragoons. There is a theory that the Hot Smoke Dragons only eat virgins because at one time there was a bad outbreak of venereal disease. Virgins were likely to be unaffected by the disease, and so the Hot Smoke Dragons that ate virgins were likely to survive. The dragons evolved to only eat virgins.

Luna suddenly appears by the caged virgin. Since Luna is dying anyway, she has chosen to take the girl's place. She is a virgin, technically, since she reveals that the demon raped only her mind. Zane is helpless to stop Luna, since she has chosen her fate. The dragon comes, carrying a rare dragon egg on its back, to the pleasure of the Dragoons. Luna is given only a knife to defend herself, and she fights against the dragon, though it is useless. Zane wants to help, but Luna begs him not to use his deathly aspect to scare off the dragon. He complies, realizing that if he stopped Luna, the virgin would die. By the rules, only Luna can save herself. She takes the dragon's egg and uses it as a shield, over the protests of the Dragoons. They plead for her to help the endangered species, and Luna puts the egg down safely. Then she throws herself at the dragon and is consumed.

Time has counted down. Zane realizes that the virginal girl is good, while Luna is now balanced, because of taking the virgin's place and saving the egg. He was called to assist at Luna's death. Unable to take Luna's soul, Zane stops time. Chronos, Fate, Mars, and Nature all come to the scene. Remembering the mode of parallel thought, Zane realizes that all the Incarnations have worked together to bring him to this moment, so he can stop Satan. Zane commits to never take Luna's soul. Chronos turns time backwards and removes Luna from the dragon's grasp, stopping time again. The Incarnations explain that, if he will not take Luna's soul, Zane must go on strike and refuse to take any souls, entering into a war with Satan.

Nature magically brings a lamb to the site for the dragon to eat, and the Dragoons agree to let Luna and the virgin go, their duties fulfilled. Luna remembers being eaten by the dragon, and Zane explains the situation. Luna is in limbo, but her soul cannot leave the Earth.

Chapter 10, Hot Smoke Analysis

Luna's physical purity essentially saves her, since it makes her fit to take the place of the virgin. She has sold herself to a demon, but she has not given up her virginity to



him. She loves Zane, but she hasn't given herself physically to him either. Zane rejected the offer of her body from the magician, and so Zane also has contributed to Luna's ability to balance her soul by taking the virgin's place. Luna believes she is doomed to hell, and so her act of mercy has no component of self-interest, much like Zane's act of killing his mother, which doomed him to guilt and poverty. The lack of self-interest lightens Luna's soul. Even when she has a chance to protect herself with the dragon's egg, Luna compassionately puts the creature above herself.

Zane, however, cannot let Luna be sacrificed. He has come to a turning point, when he must make a decision and take action. Luna is dead. This is bad for Zane, but it is also bad for the Earth, since it means Satan's plans will go unopposed. Although Zane's instinctive refusal to take Luna's soul is an expression of his love for Luna, he will soon realize that he is fighting for something greater than Luna's happiness or companionship. By saving Luna, Zane enters into a battle with Satan that will be the climax of the novel.



Chapter 11, Satan's Case

Chapter 11, Satan's Case Summary

Zane goes to his mansion in Purgatory to await events. Satan appears to him on his television, trying to talk him into allowing Luna to die. He promises not to take her to Hell and offers Zane the sexual favors of a succubus. Satan argues that there is no absolute truth and says that his role is merely to define and punish evil, a necessary task. Satan says that killing Luna now will allow him to purge much evil from the world in the future and that he's working for the greater good. She can go to Heaven, and mankind will benefit. Satan flatters Zane, reiterates Zane's misgivings about sin by saying that good souls are coming to Hell, and accuses God of not paying attention.

Although Zane feels himself swayed by Satan's charm and arguments, especially the reiterations of Zane's own misgivings, Zane still does not give in. Satan offers Zane a tour of Hell. Zane thinks it's a trick and opts to wait for the review, but Satan points out that many humans are suffering, without being able to die, while they wait. Satan pushes Zane to visit Hell, but Zane continues to refuse. Finally, Satan agrees that he will free Luna if Zane visits Hell and is unconvinced by Satan's arguments.

Zane consults with Fate, who assures Zane that he is fated to survive the trip to Hell, but she cannot say whether Satan would honor his bargain to free Luna. Fate suggests that Zane hire a guide, and Zane thinks of Molly Malone. Though Satan is not happy, he cannot prevent Molly from coming, and Fate brings her. Molly is argumentative toward Satan, obviously disliking him. Many of her friends are in Hell, and she looks forward to the opportunity to visit them.

At Molly's urging, Zane finds that he can step out of his body. They travel to Hell through the TV screen. Satan exhibits a furnace room, where he says slum lords who denied heat to their victims must labor at the furnaces. Zane approves of the punishment, remembering the uncomfortable slum apartments he's lived in. Satan claims that after the souls have repented, they move on to heaven. Then Satan shows Zane the wasteful, forced to live on nothing but others' castaways. Zane again agrees that waste should be punished.

Molly is concerned that the tour is sugar-coated and is anxious to see her friends. She insists on going to the Ireland area, but first Satan shows Zane Hell's Kitchen, full of succulent-seeming food. Molly stops Zane from eating, warning that eating Hell's food traps a soul there. Satan says that the luscious food is for his minions and offers Zane luscious foods, exquisite sex, and even Chopin's latest superb music. Molly continues objecting to Satan, and Zane says that they should go to the Irish quarter to see her friends.

The Irish litterers are sentenced to eternally pick up trash from never-clean snowy streets. Molly recognizes an old friend, Sean, who has been paying for his littering for



longer than his lifetime. Molly tries to adjust her friend's glove, but he pulls his hand away. Then, Molly falls into Zane, pushing him into Sean. The tour ends, with Zane still unwilling to collect Luna's soul. Zane and Molly are whisked back to Purgatory, but before Satan disappears off Zane's TV, he promises to send his minions as Zane's servants.

Chapter 11, Satan's Case Analysis

Satan uses every type of ploy to try to convince Zane to give in to him. Satan offers bribes of sex, but Zane has already shown himself to be immune to the sin of Lust. Satan also offers to send Luna to Heaven instead of Hell, assuring Luna's eternal happiness. By rejecting this offer, Zane shows that he's not only concerned about saving his love, but also about the greater good to all humankind. Satan then tries to couch his goals in terms of the greater good. Zane seems to be easily swayed by Satan's lies. He should know that Satan is lying, because Chronos, who has seen the possibilities of time, has told Zane that the future, if Satan is successful, is grim and full of suffering. Zane, however, is too distracted by Satan's slick arguments.

Zane should also know that Satan doesn't merely want to reform sinners, a necessary task. Even without Molly pointing out that Satan encourages sin, throughout the story, Zane has been bombarded with posters from Satan advertising Hell and encouraging lust and other sins. Why would Satan want to encourage sin, if his main goal is to punish sin where it occurs? If Hell is a reformatory, why would Satan be actively trying to recruit members? Isn't it better to prevent sin than to have to reform the sinner afterwards? Zane seems under Satan's spell, unable to conclude that Satan must be lying to him about Hell.

Satan plays on all of Zane's doubts and weaknesses. Zane hates suffering, and so Satan points out that Zane's strike is causing suffering. Zane remembers the poorly heated buildings he was forced to live in, and so the first inmates of Hell that Satan showcases are the slum lords and heating management bureaucrats who deprived people of heat on Earth. Zane sees the necessity to punish evil. Zane is pulled into Satan's argument. Still, he stands steadfast, refusing to give in.



Chapter 12, Paradox Ploy

Chapter 12, Paradox Ploy Summary

After Molly and Zane return to Zane's mansion, popping out of his television set, Molly begins to make physical advances to Zane. However, the advances are a disguise. Molly really wants to talk to Zane without Satan being aware. Under the guise of her sexual come-on, Molly points out that Sean's clothes were an illusion, something she noticed while trying to adjust Sean's glove. Zane realizes that it's true. When Molly pushed Zane into Sean, he felt bare skin, not clothes. The litterers, guilty of a minor offense, are sentenced to freeze naked on the frozen streets of Hell.

As Zane is about to leave his mansion, he is confronted by a brutish, threatening chef sent from Hell, who practically orders Zane to delay his plans in order to eat a meal. When Zane tries to leave, the chef tries to detain him. Zane, however, finds he can send the thug's soul back to Hell with hardly an effort. He reaches out, snags the soul, folds it up, and throws it down to Hell. The thug is gone.

Satan then sends Helen of Troy to seduce Zane. She is beautiful, but Zane reminds her that he is in love with another woman. He is working to help one of Helen's sister's in womanhood. Zane convinces Helen of Troy not to betray Luna by seducing him, and although she will surely be punished in Hell, Helen departs. Mortis warns Zane that Hellhounds are on the way, but before they arrive Zane is able to confirm with the Purgatory computer that no soul has ever left Hell. Satan lied.

With six Hellhounds approaching fast, at first Zane is stuck in a loop, but he recognizes the circular thinking that Nature told him about earlier. Zane tries to find another mode of thought. He uses linear logic to realize that if he cannot run or avoid the fight, he must fight the Hellhounds. Therefore, using linear thinking, he needs a weapon, and the weapon he has is his scythe. War told him that he'd need to use a weapon, and at least Zane knows how to swing it from classes he's taken in farming. Zane uses his magical scythe, and it is very effective at decapitating and destroying the hounds. Zane sends the last of them scurrying back to Hell in fear. Zane has started uncovering his power.

Zane goes to Luna's house. Luna is concerned about the terrible suffering caused by Death's strike. She shows him a painting she's been working on of a car accident causing terrible suffering to the victim, who cannot die. Zane insists that the suffering that's happening now is only to prevent much more suffering in the future, and he tells Luna what he's discovered, that no souls ever leave Hell. A man bearing a gun breaks in, saying that Satan has removed Luna's magical protections and that he's here to kill Zane, whose powers have been revoked because of his insubordination. Luna throws herself at the gunman and is shot in the leg.

Zane sees red and disarms the gunman, felling him. When it is over, Luna heals herself with a magic stone. Zane sees that he's gouged out the attacker's eye and heals him.



The attacker is horribly frightened and runs off. Luna confesses that, though she's attracted to him, with the turmoil of the situation, she cannot say that she loves him. Zane understands. He leaves, believing Luna is safer without him. As Zane rides away on Mortis, a beggar throws a suffocation spell at Zane, depriving him of air. Mortis tells Zane to use his scythe, and Zane finds that the scythe is hollow. He uses it as an air tube.

Next, Zane must face a "preying mantis," a giant version of a praying mantis. He remembers Nature's creative thinking mode and manages to elude the mantis by making a dummy of himself with his cloak and scythe and sneaking slowly toward the monster, which can only see motion. Zane finally latches on to the monster's leg. The two struggle, and the monster gets Zane in its jaws. He awaits the impending doom, but then he realizes that the monster can't kill him. His soul is in balance, and there would be no Death to take him. It's a paradox that protects him, and Satan's threats are all bluffs.

Chapter 12, Paradox Ploy Analysis

Finally, Zane begins to see Satan's lies. He should have seen through them before. Sean's crime is littering, and he's already spent more than a lifetime picking up litter from the streets of Hell. Is he not repentant? Can Zane's sense of the wrongdoings of others really justify that? Zane is willing to forgive Luna summoning and selling herself to a demon, but he cannot put himself in the place of a litterer, perhaps because he does not truly know the litterer's story. How could Satan have so effectively pulled the wool over Zane's eyes as to take him in completely? The best decision that Zane made was to bring Molly along with him to help point out Satan's lies and pull Zane out of the hypnotic spell of evil, which blinds him to others' misery. If it weren't for Zane's native empathy, perhaps he would have been completely taken in.

Once Zane leaves Hell, having successfully resisted Satan's thrall, he is immediately attacked. The minion's Satan has sent to see to Zane's comfort are really there to distract Zane and keep him from acting. Once Zane sends the chef and Helen of Troy back to Hell, Satan knows that he is at war. He immediately sends his Hellhounds to attack. Zane's powers, only hinted at earlier, must be fully explored for Zane to survive.

As Zane battles increasingly difficult foes, he uncovers his own powers. He also has to use all of the modes of thought that Nature unveiled for him. This is perhaps the most useful tool that the other Incarnations revealed to him. Zane is able to exert his free will in order to defeat Satan's minions. Only by recognizing his own inherent power and not giving in to circumstance or to what seems inevitable can Zane win.



Chapter 13, Though Satan Bar the Way

Chapter 13, Though Satan Bar the Way Summary

Zane returns to tell Luna what he's discovered, but she's gone. He finds a note from Satan, threatening to torture Luna until Zane takes his next soul. Satan appears on Luna's television. He has arranged that Luna is no longer his next client, and he promises that her experience will change her balance for good or evil, so that Zane cannot come for her. He shows Luna being threatened by thugs, but Luna, realizing that Satan is trying to throw her soul out of balance, refuses to either reject or accept Satan. The thugs begin to torture her.

Unable to stand seeing Luna tortured, Zane pleads with her to curse Satan. Luna, though, does not believe the disembodied voice. She says it must be the Prince of Lies. Zane tries to use one of the modes of thought Nature explained and has a leap of inspiration. He tells Mortis to take him to Luna, and he flies off to the rescue.

Mortis takes Zane to a satellite above Earth. Zane is challenged by one of Satan's minions, and he pulls the man's soul half out of his body, sending the guard fleeing. Mortis gallops past three more minions, and then they are challenged by a man with a machine gun. The bullets are blocked by Zane's cloak; the Father of Lies has lied about Zane's magical powers being gone. Zane destroys a Hellhound with his gloved hand. He finally makes his way to Luna, where he quickly scares away the thugs with his scythe.

Zane is challenged by a new opponent, who magically summons flames, which Zane plows down with his scythe. The new opponent reveals himself as Satan. Zane experiences a moment of self-doubt, but when he sees the thugs returning to torture Luna, he is enraged. He turns on Satan, declaring his power, which Satan cannot deny or take away. Satan throws a fireball at him, but Zane does not dodge. It cannot hurt him. Satan accuses Zane of hiding behind his magic items, but Zane is unafraid and casts away the cloak of death. Zane reaches into Satan to hook his soul, and the devil dissolves away.

Satan is defeated. All his bluster has been bluff. Satan's dominion is evil, and Zane's dominion is death. Satan cannot cross death. Zane has rescued Luna and also earned her love. Zane verifies that Luna is safe and has Chronos turn back time to stop the unnecessary suffering the strike caused. The TV news in Purgatory tells Zane that the other Incarnations plan to support him after his trial period, and Mortis, too, sides with Zane. Zane will enter his full-fledged Deathdom with a soul balanced toward good.

When Zane takes up his normal rounds, he pauses to tell a mother that her baby's death is a relief from suffering and that the infant, born in sin, will go to heaven, which is Death's choice. She says he has compassion, and he realizes that is the quality that suited him for his task and that Luna loves.



Chapter 13, Though Satan Bar the Way Analysis

Zane is able to withstand Luna being tortured because he is not only concerned with Luna's or his own wellbeing. Zane is concerned with the fate of the world and overcoming Satan. When he slips and begs Luna to save herself, his slip is only momentary and comes from compassion. Zane's final use of the modes of thinking is to make an intuitive leap to the realization that Satan cannot defeat him. Zane has complete power over death. This is ultimately the realization of Zane's free will and his personal power.

Zane does not need to rely on the garb of death or any magic items given to him. He discards all of his outer supports and relies only on his personal qualities to ultimately banish Satan. Like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, Zane has had the power all along, and it is a power that cannot be denied him or taken away. The author implies that each person has the same choice. Every person has free will and personal power to reject Satan and evil. Though circumstances seem to force us to bad choices, the choice is ultimately up to us.

In the end of the novel, Zane has Luna. He also has his mansion and his livelihood as a powerful and successful Death. In fact, he has achieved the three things that the stone merchant's stones promised him in the beginning of the book: wealth, love, and death. Zane has gone from having nothing to having everything, through the recognition of his personal worth and power. He no longer doubts that he is worthy or capable.



Characters

Zane/Death/Thanatos

Zane is at the lowest point in his life at the beginning of the novel, and it's also the end of his life, in a way. Some time previously, Zane's mother was in the hospital, sentenced to death by a terminal illness. Worse, she was sentenced to continuous pain with no promise of salvation by expensive life-support systems that had already depleted all her savings. She begged her son to help her die, and he did. This memory is the key element of Zane's character. He is both overcome by guilt and driven by compassion. He is willing to sacrifice his soul and to sin in order to alleviate suffering for fellow human beings.

When Zane, after losing all his money, also loses his chance for love, he determines to commit suicide, but when Death comes for him, Zane kills Death instead of killing himself. This rite of passage, killing the former Death, ensures that the new Death is capable of taking life. Zane passes this test, and he must then take on the role of Death. As Death, Zane tries to apply his personal morality to his role. As he did with his mother, he doesn't merely follow rules or other people's codes. Instead, he does what he believes is right. He is essentially empathic toward others and saves people from dying when he can. He also encourages people to save their own souls from sin. When Satan tries to interfere with the world of mortals to gather souls for Hell, Zane stands up to him.

Zane values love, and he falls in love with Luna, the woman Satan schedules for death to prevent her from later foiling him. When Zane first refuses to take Luna's soul, he is doing it out of love for Luna. However, his motivation mutates into a desire to foil Satan and do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Zane has compassion, but he also puts aside his compassion during the war with Satan. He knowingly inflicts suffering on many dying mortals so that he can ultimately save millions from eternal torture in hell.

Luna Kaftan

Luna is the daughter of a black magician. She loves her father dearly and also respects him. This love and respect for her father overrides all of her other instincts, including self-preservation. Luna's sins are all for the sake of her father, allowing her to be both a soiled, fallen woman and a pure, virginal woman simultaneously. Unknown to her father, Luna learned black magic by summoning a demon and letting him rape her mind. She did this to help her father, and it has marked her soul with sin. Zane forgives Luna this sin because her desire to help her father, whatever the consequences to herself, resonates with his desire to help his mother.



Luna also carries the weight of half of her father's sins. Her father, to balance his soul and so meet Death and go to Purgatory, gave Luna half of his sins. With the weight of her father's sins and her own interaction with demons, Luna is weighted toward Hell, though the circumstances of her sins make them excusable to both Zane and the reader. All her sins have the motive of love for her father. Zane sees Luna as a good person, although she is filled with sin. He measures her subjectively, instead of with the objective measures of his measuring stones.

Because of her father's death and her interaction with the demon, Luna is wary of love. She consents to give her body to Zane, but she is much less willing to give her mind and soul to him. Because of Zane's kindness and compassion, though, she comes to love him. Luna, however, also becomes convinced that she cannot escape her fated death. Believing she is destined to die, she chooses to save another person when she dies. She changes places with a virgin who is slated to be fed to a dragon. Through this selfless act, Luna changes the balance of her soul. She becomes balanced between good and evil, and therefore Death is summoned to the site of her death. Ultimately, this allows Zane to save Luna. Through her selfless act, Luna saves herself.

Satan

Satan is constantly present in the novel, and he is categorically evil. Hell runs incessant ads in newspapers, in magazines, on billboards, and on TV to encourage people to turn to Satan and turn their souls over to Hell. He appeals to lust and greed in everyone. By advertising Hell in this way, Satan is cheating on his pact with God not to interfere with human beings. Satan also schedules Luna for early demise to further his control over mortal Earth and bring more souls into Hell.

When Zane defies Satan, Satan tries to convince Zane that his side is the best. Although Zane knows that Satan's ads encourage sin, Satan portrays Hell as a place where sinners learn to repent their evil and are therefore cleansed to go to Heaven. Zane is taken in by Satan, until Molly Malone reveals that this is just another pack of lies from the Prince of Lies. Satan tries to bribe Zane with sexual pleasures and convince him with untruths, but Zane remains defiant.

Finally, Satan unleashes Hellhounds and monsters to track down Zane. All of Satan's show of strength is a lie, as well. He is essentially powerless against Zane in the realm of Death. All decisions about the soul leaving a body are in the province of Zane alone, and although he can be influenced, he cannot be overthrown. As long as Zane knows his own power, there is nothing Satan can do to counter him. Satan, ultimately, is a bully and a blusterer.

The Stone Seller

The proprietor of Mess o' Pottage, a shop that sells magic stones, tricks Zane into giving up his fated love Angelica in exchange for a worthless wealthstone.



Angelica

Angelica's magic carpet is in front of Zane's when it falters and begins to fall. In the normal course of events, Zane would have saved Angelica, and the two would have fallen in love. Instead, Zane has sold his chance at happiness to the stone seller for a worthless wealthstone. The stone seller saves Angelica and earns her gratitude. Zane is depressed at missing his chance at the beautiful and apparently wealthy Angelica, and in his imagination, he imbues Angelica with all good qualities.

Molly Malone

Molly Malone is the ghost of an Irish fishmonger who roams the streets of Zane's home city hawking cockles and mussels. She was summoned through magic to the city of Kilvarough as a mascot, but she is not very popular since she has a special talent. Anyone who Molly can see and interact with is near death, so if someone is seen by Molly, that person knows he or she is going to die. Zane saves Molly from a mugger before his death, and she later leads him and Luna to the carnival of ghosts. Molly also acts as Zane's companion on his tour through Hell, and she is able to reveal to him that souls are not reformed in Hell. They are merely tortured and kept in Hell. No soul has ever left.

Fate

Fate is an Incarnation, like Death, an immortal office that is held by a human soul. Fate is responsible for fate and chance, leading people through the paths of their lives. Fate sees each life as a string, and the string is cut short at the person's death. Fate has three aspects: Clotho, the youngest and most attractive aspect, who spins threads of human existence; Lachesis, the middle aspect who appears as a middle-aged woman and patterns the threads and determines their lengths; and finally, Atropos, who appears as an elderly woman with large, threatening scissors and cuts the threads at the end of a life. Lachesis is responsible for leading Zane to become death, so that he may ultimately defeat Satan. She also introduces Zane to his role as Death.

Mortis

Mortis is Death's pale horse. Mortis can appear in different aspects, to help Zane. He can be a horse and talk with Zane through Death's translating stone. As a horse, Mortis can travel to Purgatory and anywhere on Earth. Mortis can fly, though he has no wings. He gives Zane advice and stands by Zane through all his trials. Mortis can also appear in the aspect of a magic car and a magic boat.



The Magician

Luna's father, a powerful black magician, realizes that Satan is conspiring against his daughter. He arranges for Zane to become Death and then to become his daughter's protector, to save her.

War/Mars

The personification War, also known as Mars, is an Incarnation, like Death. War is an immortal office held by a human soul. Mars sees death in war as giving glory to the dying soldiers, an everlasting benefit that can't be won in any other way. He also sees war as a necessary part of life and creating social change. War helps Zane realize that to fight Satan, he must use his weapon, his magic scythe.

Nature/The Green Mother

The personification Nature, known also as the Green Mother, is an Incarnation, like Death. Nature controls the natural impulses of man, such as lust. She lives in a well-guarded castle and appears clothed in fog. Nature teaches Zane about different modes of thinking, which he uses to ultimately defeat Satan.

Chronos/Time

The personification Chronos, or Time, is an Incarnation, like Death. Chronos controls time. When Zane uses his watch to stop time, Chronos is aware of the change. Chronos helps Zane move back time and change the past.

God

While Satan is present throughout the story, God is not. God does not interfere with the trials of mankind or of the Incarnations in Purgatory. God seems absent. Satan says that God simply does not care, but Zane continues to believe that God is remaining pure by honoring his pact not to interfere with humanity, despite Satan's constant cheating.



Objects/Places

Mess o' Pottage

Mess o' Pottage is a store that sells magic stones. The proprietor convinces Zane to lead him to love using a lovestone in exchange for a worthless wealthstone.

The Wealthstone, Lovestone, and Deathstone

At Mess o' Pottage, the proprietor shows Zane three stones. The lovestone shows that Zane will soon encounter a great love. The deathstone says that Zane will soon encounter death. The wealthstone finds a penny on Zane's shoe. Zane agrees to take the wealthstone in exchange for leading the proprietor of the shop to Zane's potential love, a deal he later regrets when he discovers that the wealthstone only seems to locate loose, unattached change.

Kilvarough

Kilvarous is the city where Zane lives. The ghost of Molly Malone has been magically summoned to the city as a mascot.

Death's Scythe

Death's weapon is a scythe. The scythe is magical and easily slices through Hellhounds. The scythe is also hollow and Zane uses it to breathe air when he is enclosed in a suffocation spell.

Death's Watch

Death's watch tells Zane how long he has to get to his next appointment with a "clinet." The watch also has a button that allows him to delay a person's death and a button that allows him to stop all time, except for the Incarnations.

Death's Cloak, Gloves, and Shoes

Death's hooded cloak makes him appear with the aspect of a skeleton. The cloak has protective magic and prevents Death from being shot, burned, or otherwise injured. Death's gloves give his hands a skeletal aspect, also. Like the cloak, the gloves protect Zane in the role of Death. Death's shoes are magical and allow Zane to walk on water.



Death's Magical Stones

Death has a magical translating stone that is mounted on an earring. Death also has a bracelet, with stones that show the direction and distance to the next client. In addition, Death uses a set of magic stones to detect the quantities of good and evil within each soul he takes.

Purgatory

Purgatory is a bureaucracy. Souls that are in complete balance go to Purgatory, where they work as civil servants or as servants for the Incarnations, like Death.

Hell

Satan takes Zane on a tour of Hell to convince Zane that Hell is actually a reformatory. Satan emphasizes that the souls are paying penance for their sins on Earth, instead of being tortured, but this turns out to be a lie.

Death's Mansion

Death has a mansion in Purgatory, complete with servants. The TV in Death's mansion tells him news especially about Death.

The Magician's House

Luna's father has a well-appointed house and grounds. Griffins protect the grounds, and an invisible Luna Moth protects Luna inside the house.

The Computers in Purgatory

The computers in Purgatory seem sentient, but they are bound by the bureaucracy that runs Purgatory.

Nature's House

When Zane goes to see Nature, he passes through a maze where he meets himself three times, once as a pedestrian, once riding a simple vehicle like a bicycle, and once riding a mechanical vehicle like a car. In each instance, Zane does not recognize himself in the other travelers and has near-collisions. Nature says that the convoluted path where the traveler meets himself will give them privacy.

Themes

Sin

Death's main role is to weigh the balance of goodness and sin in any soul that he takes. Zane, in his role as Death, has many quandaries about the sins he finds on mortals' souls. Zane must take the souls of babies who are marked with sin through being born of incest or rape or other sinful acts. He also learns of sins that were committed for reasons of love and loyalty, like Luna's sin of summoning the demon. Zane's own sin is in this category. He suffers guilt, and his soul is heavy with sin. Still, Zane only killed his mother because she begged him to and because she was in constant pain, with no hope of reprieve. Motivation is not taken into account (except when Luna considers balancing her soul by doing good deeds before she dies; then, her selfish motivation would 'negate' her good acts while a selfless motivation does nothing to negate sin.)

How are sins defined? In the novel, sins seem to be defined by guilt and perception of an act as sinful. However, this leads to the damnation of souls like Zane's which are filled with sin and guilt for an act that might not be truly wrong, as well as young babies who have committed no sin but are condemned by society for being born out of sins such as incest and rape. These inconsistencies bother Zane because they seem unfair. When he runs across a young addict who has committed sins to feed his addiction, he can't help but wonder why such a young soul can be condemned for sins that are largely brought about by his situation. The boy seems fated to sin. Since Fate is, in fact, an Incarnation in the novel, fate is a real element of existence, and in many ways people are not responsible for their sins. They are fated to sin.

The novel does not address the forgiveness of sins. Sins can only be outweighed by good acts. The characters cannot take confession and give penance; there is no baptism to save a baby's soul from original sin. There is no forgiveness for being unable to control one's situation. The reality of sin is strict and unforgiving and damning. The book leaves the reader with unease about sin, but despite all the qualms, Zane, as Death, does the best he can to do good, and this seems to be the writer's recommendation for the reader as well.

Death

Zane respects the role of Death. He sees death as something that is natural and necessary, as people age and life moves through its cycles, much as Mars sees war as a natural part of the balancing of life in the human condition. Zane sees that death can be compassionate, saving people from suffering. He believes in the right of people to die, and he is willing to sacrifice his own soul to allow not only his mother, but other people, to die with dignity. Because Zane respects death, he allows Luna to choose the manner of her own death by sacrificing herself to a dragon.



However, Zane also abhors death that comes at the wrong time or is unnecessary. He realizes the scope of death that occurs through carelessness or cruelty. He rebels at Luna's death, in part because he loves her but also in part because he believes her death is wrong. He believes that life should be lived fully and then ended with dignity, in the manner of the person's choosing. Luna has chosen her manner of death, and she has chosen to die with dignity. Still, her death is wrong. Her life has wrongly been cut short by forces for evil. Ultimately, this is why Zane rebels.

Through trying to fulfill the office of Death, Zane gains more and more respect for death. Death itself is not evil or ugly. Suffering is evil and ugly. Death is natural, necessary, and beautiful, if it comes at the right time.

Modes of Thinking

The way that Zane defeats Satan is through using different modes of thinking that Nature points out to him. Zane has been toyed with by Fate, and he has been manipulated by Satan. He has been marked with sin for an act of compassion. All of these forces are outside of Zane, working on him. These forces push Zane along paths he does not want to follow. They interfere with his free will. By showing him the modes of thinking, Nature is bringing Zane back to his free will. He is able to take power from his mind to influence his world.

Mother Nature tells Zane that there are five modes of thinking. Straight, linear thinking moves from one idea to the next in a string of logic, and Zane uses this to find the courage to fight Satan's Hellhounds. Circular thinking leads the mind in circles, going nowhere. When Zane finds himself thinking this way, he is able to recognize it and break out of this destructive mode of thought. Creative thinking pulls all kinds of new ideas together, and Zane uses this mode of thought to combat the preying mantis monster. The fourth mode of thought is moving from one idea to a strong conclusion, with much evidence, but this mode moves slowly. The fifth mode is intuitive thinking. Zane also uses intuitive thinking, making a leap to a conclusion, to finally outwit Satan.

The solution to sin and problems is exercising free will. Zane learns this, as he gains the power of his role of Death. The modes of thinking allow human beings to access their free will and control the world around them, instead of merely being controlled by fate.

Style

Point of View

On a Pale Horse is told from a third-person semi-omniscient perspective, from the point of view of Zane, the main character. The story follows Zane's progress, as he becomes Death, learns about Death and his fellow Incarnations, unravels the plot against Luna, falls in love, and battles and defeats Satan. Zane's misgivings about the nature of sin, death, Heaven, and Hell are an integral part of the story, and through experiencing the story from Zane's perspective, the reader follows along with the moral quandaries Zane wrestles with.

Zane is also in the dark about many of the machinations going on behind the scenes in *On a Pale Horse*. The magician, Luna's father, tasks Zane with caring for Luna but gives him no clue of the plot against her. Fate, Chronos, Nature, and Mars all know more than they tell Zane, including why he, particularly, was chosen for his role. Zane must slowly unravel what is going on, and the semi-omniscient narration allows the reader to slowly uncover the story of Satan's plot along with Zane. The reader also is carried along with Zane as he realizes how he can defeat Satan.

The reader follows Zane's thought processes. Zane often asks himself questions: "How could a soiled, sullied person like him expect to win the love of an angel?" He ruminates on the justification for assigning sins to children and babies. He even fumbles along, trying to figure out how to start Death's car or get out of the clutches of a preying mantis. Throughout, the reader is led by Zane's personal experiences.

Setting

The setting of *On a Pale Horse* is in a time similar to the present on Earth and a place similar to the reader's world. However, Zane's world has an alternate history. In Zane's Earth, magic developed along with science, from the time of Newton to the present. Magic and science exist side by side, competing with each other, as evidenced by the competing billboards for magic carpets and cars. Magic is either white or black, so it is dangerous. Most powerful magic is black magic and leads souls into Hell. Science is neither good nor evil, but it is not as spectacular as magic. The magical setting allows Zane to take on an immortal persona, but it also forms the backdrop for considering big questions of good, evil, sin, fate, and death. By personifying good in God, evil in Satan, fate in Fate, and death in Death, Anthony is free to completely explore these aspects of human existence.

In the story, Earth is a place barraged by Satan's advertisements, where people are actively lured toward sin and damnation. Earth is the battleground between good and evil. Purgatory is machine-like, following prescribed functions. Heaven is never visited in the story. It remains separate from the action, a goal but one that is never seen and little



understood. Heaven cannot be imagined by the characters. Zane, however, does visit Hell. Although Zane sees people being punished in Hell, Hell is a place of lies. Zane does not see the true, eternal torture of souls. Satan hides behind lies and illusions in showing off Hell, just as he does in his verbal arguments.

Language and Meaning

Piers Anthony's novel is about a world of magic, myth, and the supernatural. God and Satan are real characters, and Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory are real places. Death, Fate, War, Nature, and Time interact. All these concepts are large, important ideas that cross boundaries of culture. When Zane finds himself in such an important role, he begins to take on a mode of speech that reflects that importance, sending off Satan's minion with a "Be gone, vermin," whereas earlier he rushes at Molly Malone's attacker with the more prosaic, "Leave Molly alone!" His language in the course of the story becomes more formal, high language, in keeping with his station as Death.

All of the characters' modes of speech reflect their backgrounds and their lifestyles. Molly Malone brings an easy but archaic street language to the story. The computer from Purgatory speaks with a cautious exactness. Mother Nature speaks in a roundabout, organic way, expressing her nature. War speaks in a hearty, combative way, expressing his nature. The personifications' characters come through in their mode of speech, and even human characters' names make them personifications in a way. Angelica is an angel. Luna is the moon, the governor of love.

The language of Piers Anthony's book also combines many human mythologies. Time is not merely Time, but also Chronos. War is known as Mars. These are creatures of human lore. In much the same way, then, Satan is a creature of lore. Anthony mentions that in the heyday of magic, all kinds of creatures of myth have been brought into existence. Perhaps this includes Chronos and Mars, and perhaps even Satan is a construct of human perception more than anything else. This might explain the distinct absence of God, whose nature is unknowable and unimaginable.

Structure

The novel begins at the main character's lowest point. Zane has fallen to the pit of despair, and he is ready for an encounter with Death. Though in one way, Zane dies, he also lives. He is transformed. The first chapter leads up to Zane's transformation, and the transformation puts Zane on a journey of self-discovery through which he can redeem himself and find his own power. As Death, Zane goes through a period of orientation through the next two chapters, when he figures out how to perform his tasks. Then, he is confronted with a problem that he must solve: saving Luna.

Zane's love for Luna develops as the details of the plot against her begin to unfold. Saving Luna becomes a quest for Zane, a rite of passage that he must complete in order to fulfill his transformation into Death. The story of Luna beings its climax in Chapter 10, when Luna, believing she must die, sacrifices herself to a dragon to save



another. Luna's death again spirals Zane to a low point. Once more, he has lost love. This could be considered the end of the second act of the story, the turning point that leads up to the conclusion.

Instead of letting love escape again, Zane determines to save Luna at all costs, and this leads to a change in the story. Zane has committed to save Luna, and he has therefore committed himself against Satan. The other Incarnations appear and explain to him that they have brought him to this point so that he can defeat Satan. The remainder of the story is Zane's battle against Satan. Satan changes tactics at each turn, trying to lure Zane to his point of view, threatening him with monsters, and finally torturing Luna. Zane discovers his personal power to confront Satan in a climactic battle in the final chapter.



Quotes

"Zane's mind began to numb around the edges. Death—he had a deep guilt there. He looked at his left arm, feeling a spot of blood burning into the skin. He pictured the face of his mother as she died. How could he ever exonerate that memory?" —Chapter 1, page 3

"Zane looked. The death's-head gaped back at him, encased in its hood. His hands in the gloves were skeletal, and his ankles above the shoes were fleshless bones. He had assumed the visage of Death." —Chapter 2, page 31

"Unprofessional? Who was he to fancy himself a professional in this grim business! Still, he did have a job to do, and he might as well do it properly. At the very least, he could do it in a manner that relieved distress, rather than promoted it." —Chapter 3, page 64

"'You are uniquely qualified,' the magician insisted. 'When, through my black arts, I perceived the nature of the conspiracy against my child, I knew she would have to have a champion to guard her as I could not. I researched diligently to locate that champion, neglecting my health in the process, and at length identified you.'" —Chapter 4, page 78

"Luna's very impurities matched his. How could a soiled, sullied person like him expect to win the love of an angel? Only a fallen angel could be within his grasp!" —Chapter 5, page 126

"Zane decided. He was already doomed to Hell for his violations of the standards of his office. What did he have to lose? He wanted to do what was right, regardless of the consequence." —Chapter 6, page 152

"What sort of doom was stalking him, even after he had assumed the office of Death? He had been appalled at the way so many people died; now his feeling intensified. Luna was not merely another person. She was a personal acquaintance, and perhaps more. Surely more!" —Chapter 7, page 161

"'Well, you don't suppose any of us are completely free, do you?'" —Nature, Chapter 8, page 187

"Zane considered. He realized that the dying needed someone to hold their hands, not to shun them. It was hard enough for any person to relate to the unrelatable. Zane had to try to help." —Chapter 9, page 198

"He still had time to do something to prevent what he least wanted to see. But he knew he would not. Luna had selected the manner of her termination, and it was a worthy manner. The kindest thing he could do for her, ironically, was to let her be roasted and chewed to pieces by the dragon." —Chapter 10, page 227



"'Naturally I am the Father of Lies, a title I carry with pride,' Satan responded equably. 'Truth is only as each person sees it; there is no absolute standard of integrity.'" — Chapter 11, page 244

"'Death is inviolate, as it must be, not to be tampered with by the likes of you. Where Death has dominion, the Lord of Flies has none.' Zane took another step. 'Now get behind me, Satan, and disperse the ilk you brought here.'" —Chapter 13, page 296



Topics for Discussion

In what ways are the lives of the characters and events of the story governed by predestination or fate, and in what ways do the characters exercise free will?

What is the nature of God in the story? Why is God absent from the story?

What makes Zane a good Death?

What makes Zane uniquely qualified to save Luna?

Is Luna's act of selling herself to a demon to learn black magic really a sin? Why or why not?

Why does Zane seem so easily drawn in by Satan?

Is Zane's act of killing his mother when she begs to be released from pain really a sin? Why or why not?

Zane disregards rules when he becomes Death. Is it dangerous or wrong for Zane to substitute his own judgment for the established rules? Why or why not?

Why is Purgatory run by bureaucracy?