

Death Note: The True Reason Everyone Hates The 2nd Half

Death Note is a massively beloved anime of the 2000s, a TV show that is able to appeal to an audience beyond just anime fans. The writing is clever, the characters are layered, and it is full gas, no breaks entertainment. For a lot of people, Death Note is one of the greats, an anime to be revered for decades—with the asterisk being that the second half plummets in critical reception. It is commonly believed that Death Note's quality takes a turn for the worse after Kira's victory over L, one of the most iconic events in anime. Not everyone feels this way, of course, but that is the opinion of an overwhelming majority, with the biggest detractors believing it outright ruined the show. Why is this the case? Why do fans and critics alike think it goes downhill? The answer might not be what you expect. I would suggest a majority are not even aware of why they feel this way. Often the blame is placed on L's death, an unrelated issue, that just so happens to coincide with the true reason nearly everyone hates the second half of Death Note.

Whether you realize it or not, the anime's decline is not as simple as one character dying. If you simply did not like that L was no longer in the story, well, I guess this doesn't apply to you. Although, for anyone else that felt Death Note lost steam or was no longer as engaging on the whole, I likely have your answer for what resulted in you feeling this way. If your experience is limited to the anime, you have no way of knowing but it is not a great adaptation in ways that are hard to see at first glance, with these problems manifesting more prominently further into the episode count.

What is the Actual Problem?

The episodes following L's death are noticeably weaker than the ones that preceded. The writing is no longer as tight, the inner-monologue is not as engaging, and the characters feel more lifeless than ever. Many will attribute these factors to L's death because this downgrade in quality becomes noticeable almost immediately after, but there's plenty of interesting stuff going on in these episodes. It covers society's reaction to Kira becoming a public, cult-like figure, L's successors pursuing Kira as a form of competition, dramatic twists that surpass what came before, and Light's descent into madness and devilish egotism. There's a lot to like here, conceptually speaking. I don't believe that L being dead suddenly means there's no merit to the story. So, if L's absence isn't the problem, what went wrong? What is the root cause that led to weakened writing, story, and character?

Glancing at the manga reveals a startling revelation—a fact that brings the anime down to its knees. Notice how I’ve referred to the “second half” of Death Note? Well, when pertaining to the anime, that’s not actually correct. Recall that L dies in episode 25, the turning point in not only the story but its seemingly diminishing quality. Episode 25 is roughly two thirds into the total 37 episode count. This does not hold true in the manga. L dies in the middle of volume 7—just over halfway into the story—and, in theory, that means the anime should be just shy of 50 episodes (give or take a few). Death Note’s anime is seemingly a full adaptation in the broadest sense as it covers the major story and character events but to call it a full adaptation is wrong. That is because, in reality, the manga’s 2nd half was condensed down to the anime’s last 3rd. It begs the question: If most of the major plot points are still in place, where does this timesave come from? To adapt the story in this amount of time, corners must be cut and, as expected, this means that something has to be lost. Unfortunately, this is exactly where the anime undercuts itself. This is the root cause of the various issues previously mentioned. The pacing is a disaster and, as a result, there are some major ramifications that happen to coincide with L’s death, problems that arrive at the same time but are not directly related.

Inner-monologue Has Taken a Hit

When I was showing a friend Death Note for the first time, one scene in particular threw both of us for a loop—regardless of the fact I’ve been a fan for over a decade. To set the stage: Near is sitting in a room, he has determined there is an X-Kira that is working alongside the true Kira. The room spins a little, his eyes glow blue like the Avatar, he suddenly spots Mikami on one of the dozens of TVs, and, without hesitation, claims him to be X-Kira. That is it. No more, no less. He just solves the mystery without explanation. This scene immediately felt strange, as if something went terribly neglected. Death Note is a story that prides itself on long winded explanations of a character’s thought processes through inner-monologue. This was an unfortunate exception. This should have been Near’s moment in the spotlight, as he begins to put all the evidence together to finally pin down Kira for good. Yet, the scene and Near are entirely robbed of all credibility. He is exceedingly intelligent, so it’s expected he could solve the mystery but seeing him come to that conclusion without observable deliberation is uninteresting. Now, take a look at this same scene in the manga. Notice how much inner-monologue there is. All of Near’s thought process is laid out in front of the reader. The logic he uses to reach his conclusion is available. The manga shows a pathway to the

answer, a pathway formed by his inner-monologue. His discovery of Mikami is justified in the manga and underwhelming in the anime.

Beyond characterization, in which I do prefer L, what really separates L and Near's portrayal is that one was allowed to show their skill in deductive reasoning and the other was not. When L, the most popular character, dies and is replaced by a kid who can solve the mystery with no shown effort, it's hard to think the decline of Death Note was anything but the result of L's death. Although, is that really fair to Near? It's one thing to think Near has a boring personality, which I don't even think is true, and another to think Near was a bad antagonist because he isn't as smart as L. The reality is the anime just didn't give Near the time he needed to breathe. His logical reasoning is foregone and he has less time to show off his intellect. He has been effectively reduced to a mystery solving plot device that does not earn his succession to L or triumph over Kira. Cutting out inner-monologue, like that of this scene, so haphazardly cannot do anything but undermine the characters and their stories, considering that's largely how their personality, intelligence, and deductive reasoning is expressed.

Even the inner-monologue that doesn't fundamentally change the story has value. The seemingly throwaway thoughts often highlight a character's confidence, hesitation, frustration, or any number of emotions. Part of what makes the inner monologue believable is how the character goes through different possibilities, sometimes taking trains of thought that have dead ends and having to reconsider what the best course of action is. Light, in specific, is always thinking but also always countering his own thoughts. Recall the tennis scenario, in which Light has to decide whether to win or lose in a friendly game of tennis. He contemplates which one to choose, which one looks less suspicious. He debates that the winning is too aggressive and would raise suspicion, it's what Kira would do, but if he takes the loss wouldn't that be even more suspicious, as if he's trying to look innocent. He is starting to panic, running through every outcome of the two options. Eventually, he calms down and decides to win because, at the end of the day, it's not enough to prove whether he is or isn't Kira—they're just playing a game of tennis, after all. This is the kind of scenario that makes Death Note so engaging even when the psychological battle is trivial and non-important to the direction of the story. Whether Light wins or loses, it doesn't matter. What matters is how he handles the situation within his thoughts. You can remove his inner-monologue and the result is the same, Light beats L and the story continues. However, when removing all of Light's inner-monologue, what is lost is more than just story—the scenario is now simply uninteresting. It's just Light beating L at tennis and who is going to be as entertained by that? Of

course, that is not the case for this specific scene or most of what was adapted into those first 25 episodes. It's only past that point that this problem rises to prominence.

Destroying the Details

I wish I could say it ended with some inner-monologue being removed, but it doesn't. The time crunch took its toll in other areas too. Unfortunately, the anime suffers from the total removal of entire scenes or, at the very least, pages that give additional information. This can be a simple scene of the task force conversing about the possibility that they could all be killed if they hand over the notebook to Sayu's kidnappers. Maybe it's just Light boiling over and yelling at Misa in the middle of a tense moment. Even small moments like establishing Mellow's motivation to obtain the notebook are forgotten. Worst yet, an entire subplot involving Mellow and Light having a battle through manipulating the President of the United States is completely disregarded. I could name endless scenes that have at least something removed, if not the entire scene. The point is, these individual cuts don't seem like much because they usually aren't but the problem arises when every chapter has numerous cuts. Even though the larger picture is the same, the finer details are gone. The flavor text, additional information, important character building—it's all sacrificed to make a quicker paced story that rushes from one moment to the next. Death Note wasn't ever meant to be that kind of story though, was it?

Take this scene, for example: Light convinces the task force members to not inform the rest of the Japanese Police of the NPA director's death or Sayu's kidnapping. He suggests that Kira may have done it, has access to police information, and, by telling the rest of the police force, they are putting Sayu's life at greater risk. This is fine, I guess. It seems like a simple move to make things go his way but I kinda don't like that he can throw up such a simple argument and no one has anything to say about it. In a brief moment cut from the anime, the manga shows Ide prompting the discussion of informing the rest of the police force, to which Light reveals Kira killed the NPA director to put a stop to Ide's suggestion. Because this is cut from the anime, it seems far weirder when Light suggests that Kira killed the director and to not inform the other departments—there is no prompt for him to make this move. In the manga, the following reasoning Light gives to substantiate his claims and convince the rest of the task force is incredibly detailed and thought out, as to not bring attention to himself while still limiting the police force. Light's inner monologue is far more revealing and his argument is far closer to the kind of logical reasoning we saw from him in the earliest parts of Death Note. This scene has not been ruined in the anime but it's been cut down

to only the outcome, the effect without the cause. It remains true that they do not inform the rest of the police and investigate the situation themselves, that much is true, but Light's calculating manipulation to get to that outcome is lacking in that rich detail that makes Death Note so engaging. It's the difference between a simple suggestion and meticulous manipulation—a shocking split between two versions of the same scene.

This is but one example of how these episodes are the same in content but lacking in context and good delivery. This is the result of time crunch, the removal of details to fit more story into less episodes. Cutting corners recklessly may get us to the same destination but the bulk of Death Note is constantly being gutted of its greatest strengths: the logical and often entertaining thought processes of its characters and also the level of detail that goes into Light's manipulation tactics. Maybe my example doesn't seem overtly harmful but these wounds are all over Death Note's adaptation and it is bleeding out. To be frank, I was trying to read through the manga while watching the anime and noting every time the inner monologue was cut or a scene was shortened but, eventually, I gave up. For every inner thought I heard, another was silenced. For every page turn, one was skipped. At a certain point, it felt useless to cover every single cut. It felt like I was describing half of the manga rather than pointing out differences. Although, I want to give a shout out to a Tumblr post that goes over every notable difference between the two. Give it a look if you want more examples of just how different the two versions are. It is ridiculous how much has been removed from the anime, it's almost upsetting.

Removing What Made Death Note Special

What made Death Note such a special manga and anime (during its first two thirds) was its dedication to building its story out of excruciating details. Remember when, nearing the beginning, Light made a contraption to burn his death note in the event that anyone found it? It never comes up again, it's never relevant to the story, but witnessing Light's thoroughness to cover his tracks, hyper-analyzing situations, and thinking his ways out of corners—that was the heart and soul of Death Note's writing style. How about when, for an entire episode, we watched him internally panic as he tried to find out the name of a woman who had information that would reveal him as Kira? To a fly on the wall, all that happened was him following and talking with another person. But to us, the audience inside his head, so much more was happening. That was what made Death Note a classic and the latter 12 episodes are lacking in that department.

Maybe this is a little hyperbolic, but the last 12 episodes are more like a glorified recap than a fully realized adaptation. They fall short of what made it special. Yes, Light and L's battle of the minds was the peak but that doesn't mean what came after had to be bad—because the manga remains good so the anime has no excuse. L being gone is kind of a bummer but that doesn't prevent Near, Mellow, or Light from being engaging characters with unique, intellectual conflicts. These adaptive flaws do not stem from L's death but a lack of attention to detail, details that were in the manga but removed from the anime. I won't say the second half of the manga is as incredible as the first, but it sure is a whole lot better than the anime adaptation. Although, I haven't even explored why the second half of the manga is good, only why the anime's adaptation isn't good. In another video, I'm going to be exploring just that. Next time, I'm covering the manga version of Death Note's divisive second half.