

## THE STORY

The **Loudspeaker** sets the scene by introducing the characters of the play: **Emperor Overall**, who has shut himself away in his palace; the **Drummer**, who is not quite real, like a radio; the Loudspeaker, who is more often heard than seen; a **Soldier** and the **Girl with the Bobbed Hair**; **Death**, a veteran soldier; and **Harlekin**, who laughs in spite of his tears. Harlekin describes this world—in which the living no longer laugh, the dying no longer die, and life and death have lost their meaning. Everything is upside-down and nothing follows the rules of society as we know them.

Death laments the current lack of respect for his power. Once upon a time, soldiers dressed in military finery to meet him on the battlefield. Now, the Emperor's tanks make a mockery of him.

The Drummer delivers a mandate from the Emperor: a declaration of a war to end all wars, with no survivors. Men, women, and children will all carry weapons in this war, and Death will lead the way. But Death is outraged, for it is his job—not the Emperor's—to take men's lives. He breaks his sword, declaring himself on strike.

As the Emperor monitors the war from his office, he begins to understand Death's scheme. People cannot die. He tries to prevent panic, telling his subjects that once they are liberated from the tyranny of Death they will have eternal life.

Two soldiers—one male, one female—oppose one another on the battlefield. They are natural enemies, but when Death cannot separate them, love consumes them. The Drummer tries in vain to urge them back into battle.

Because of Death's refusal, there is a total collapse of society as the people rebel against being caught in limbo between life and death. The Emperor is reminded of memories from his childhood, and they give him pause. Death regrets the suffering he has caused, and he is prepared to make peace if the Emperor will agree to be the first to succumb to the new death.

The Emperor agrees, humanity is restored, and Death returns to the suffering people, who sing, "Come, Death, our honored guest. Descend into our hearts. Lift life's burdens from us, and lead us to rest, our sorrow's ending."