

## **Tales of Tristoria: Exploring Finding Meaning of Life Through Acceptance of Death**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Humanity has their own meanings of life. Those meanings are meant to guide them towards fulfillment. People have different triggers that propel them to find their meanings of life, for example death anxiety. This novel project follows Trista, the bearer of a Curse which has the power to kill her if she uses it. As a result, she fears death and struggles to find her meaning of life, because she feels sorrow caused by her death anxiety. To better explore the issue, I apply Paul Wong's Meaning Management Theory about meaning of life and death anxiety in the story. I find that death anxiety makes someone like Trista experience a life-changing experience to motivate her to find meaning, and the death anxiety subsides when a person finds meaning, accepts, and no longer fears death. A person who finds meaning will live life to the fullest based on their meanings.

**Keywords:** Meaning of life, death anxiety, death acceptance

### **INTRODUCTION**

The meaning of life has always been a very subjective and diverse subject. Although the fact of the matter is that there are no universally accepted truths about what is classified as meaning of life, some arguments have made a closer comprehension regarding what it truly is. According to George and Park et al. (2013, p.371), meaning of life is described as "a sense of core goals, direction in life, and enthusiasm regarding the future". Added with the idea from Wong and colleagues (Reker, G.T., & Wong, 1988, as cited in Wong, 2011) in which they said that meaning of life is a "cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment" (p.221). From their definitions, I managed to draw a red line about meaning of life as worthwhile or fulfilling goals which someone needs to achieve in order to give them directions as they walk towards life and lead them to be able to experience the feeling of accomplishment in life.

To make a concrete reasoning of what those worthwhile goals are, Kasser and Ryan (2001) narrowed down those goals as internal and external goals. External goals are the 7 set of goals that someone needs to have in order to fulfill the society's expectations, such as achieving wealth, family, relationships, physical appearances, wealth, etc. On the other hand, internal goals are the goals that an individual needs for them to develop psychologically, as they progress towards the stage of fulfillment. Examples of these internal goals are: working to support the family, being a teacher in order to educate the students, etc. Understanding these goals portray a clearer outlook on what meaning of life is can narrow down the diverse definition of meaning life, although I will only use internal goals to develop for this creative thesis, because it closely relates with my second topic about a major crisis that triggers someone to search for their internal goals.

For the ways on achieving meaning of life, I will use a concept from the Meaning Management Theory where Paul Wong (2011) mentioned that there are two ways on how meaning can be achieved. The first one is the meaning making process, where someone is involved in a process of

adapting and implementing society's values into their lives. The sources of the values are also referred to as 7 sources of someone's meaning of life. From those 7 sources, an individual constructs meaning based on the values that prepare them towards maturity. The second way is the meaning of life seeking concept, where someone has been involved in the process of finding meaning ever since they were born, where they had to understand the meaning of certain events and objects to survive in life. With the definition and concept of meaning of life out of the way, I will apply this concept for my main character, Trista, who is searching of her meaning during the story, following the concept of meaning of life seeking process, she discovers and tries to understand the provided information about her role as the Chosen and eventually finds her meaning of life, in the form of a worthwhile goal which is to protect the world.

Cook-Deegan (2018) mentioned that there may be several instances that may trigger someone to search for their meaning of life: when they undergo an important life-event, serving others in a meaningful way, or going through a life-changing experience. I decided to choose life-changing experience as the main trigger for someone to search for meaning. Paul Wong (2011) through Meaning Management Theory also proposed a similar cause for someone to search for meaning, which is a major stressful event such as death. With that being said, I want to focus the topic onto the second issue which is death anxiety. Death anxiety is the most important trigger for an individual to search for the meaning of life. Barrett (2013) mentioned that death anxiety is fear and anxiety related to anticipation and awareness of dying and nonexistence. Learning from the theory's concept, death anxiety exists in the fear of loneliness and fear of ultimate loss through death. These fear concepts drive someone to experience sorrow, grief, and anxiety of parting with a loved one. Wong (2007) further suggested that in the face of all these sufferings, someone has to have an attitudinal value which believes a person has to let the negative feelings turn to an encouragement for them to search for what makes their life worthwhile beyond their death anxiety. I will apply this concept of death anxiety in the story where Trista is going through a major stressful event, having a death anxiety, feeling deep grief and sorrow due to her Curse. She has trouble living life because her fears restrict her. Until at some point, Trista learns to take an attitudinal approach towards her crisis and her anxiety serves a trigger to search for meaning of life.

After someone finds a meaning of life, the threat of death anxiety will be alleviated. Instead of fearing death, a person will accept death as it is. Wong (2007) with the Meaning Management Theory argued that death acceptance is a state of defense mechanisms against death where someone protects their life not by fearing, welcoming, or glorifying death, instead living life to the fullest based on the meaning of life. One concept from the same theory is the neutral acceptance towards death (Wong, 1994, as cited in Boyraz, 2014). In Boyraz's journal article, it was noted that the thing that connects death anxiety and neutral acceptance was the purpose in life, as the research found people who had the neutral attitude were shown to have stronger meaning in their lives. In the acceptance stage, someone will make the most of their lives amongst the threats of death. Having said that, I will apply the concept in the aftermath of the story, where after she finds meaning of life, Trista lives her life based on her meaning. Her meaning of life is to preserve everyone and at this stage, Trista achieves neutral acceptance stage, where she no longer denies her death anxieties, instead she proactively uses her remaining magic life from the Curse to seal hell in order to protect the world.

For the form of my creative thesis, I have chosen to base it on a novel. My purpose for choosing a novel as my form is because there are not many novels, especially in Indonesia's literature, that explore the topic about meaning of life. Next reason why I chose the novel is because the form is linked with the genre and topic of my project. Mathies et al. (2020) said that readers of the works of fiction can be emotionally invested through both the intensity of the expositions of the story, but

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also the complexity of the characters in the story. Because I chose novels, I can thoroughly explore the plot, setting, and the characters' thoughts and actions for the readers to enjoy. In addition, after understanding the difficulty and broad definitions about the meaning of life, I came to the conclusion of writing this novel with the hopes of it giving both entertainment and education for my readers. Considering how deep the topic for this creative project is, I decided to lighten up the story by using simple, yet imaginative wordings for my novel.

As for the genre, I chose the fantasy genre, with high fantasy as the particular subgenre. Fantasy genre in a nutshell is a genre that typically features the usage of magic, for example in the portrayal of the secondary world of the story, existence of supernatural elements and creatures, and other magical feats. There are also lots of common fantasy tropes within the story, such as a prophecy used to foretell future events. As for the subgenre of this creative project, high fantasy, is a genre where essentially the story is told in an imaginary world. High fantasy stories can not take place in our world, as this is the most defining aspect of this genre. I will introduce a brand new world with its own set of rules and propositions. Although I mentioned before about the imaginary world and fantasy depictions, I will ground those elements at some point, in a sense limiting the fantasy elements as they do not distract my readers from the characters' struggles and thoughts. Nowadays, the fantasy genre has been associated with the clear depiction of well-written psychological characterizations (Silva et al, 2013). This sentence means that although the characters of this story can do supernatural feats, they have their own problems that make them relatable to the readers. I believe that excessive fantasy elements are not always a good thing, since fantasy stories tend to create unrealistic expectations towards the real world and distract people from things that matter in the real world (Rao, 2018).

Through this creative work, I raised two questions, one regarding how death anxiety triggers someone to search for meaning of life, and the second question is about how a person's life changes after he or she finds meaning of life. Death anxiety, as a major crisis someone needs to go through, lets someone feel deep grief and sorrow, where with an attitudinal value someone implements in life, he or she will turn their greatest suffering into a trigger for them search for meaning of life. After they find what their fulfilling goal is, they will accept death as it is and make the most out of life based on what their own versions of meaning of life.

My creative work follows the story of Trista, a bearer of a magical Curse that gives her the ability to kill anyone, but it comes at the risk of losing her own life should she use the Curse's power. This event leads Trista to be plagued with fear regarding her imminent death at the hand of the Curse, and she wonders what the point of her existence is. She continues to ponder about a way to be free of the Curse for so many years until a decisive moment persuades her to take a stand and go on a journey to seek for her own meaning.

## **OUTLINE OF CREATIVE WORK**

### **Theme**

The theme of my story is finding the meaning of life through accepting death and how the meaning can lead into the best possible life. In accordance with my theme, my main character in my creative work, who suffers because she is about to die due to her own deadly curse, seeks the sole reason why she is alive. She goes through hardships as she goes into a journey with her friends as supporting characters until she reaches the end of her destination. At the end of the journey, she finally finds the meaning of her life. Trista's meaning of life is to be a "sister" for her companions that always takes care of them, and to ensure the world they live on is peaceful.

Trista's death fears are shown through the Curse she bears and the character Thanatos, whom she refers to as Death. She has the thoughts on why she has to bear the Curse and why her life has no meaning anymore. Trista is stuck on her life and struggles to tell anyone else her problem with the Curse, avoiding close connections with other people in fear of losing them. Trista is the "Chosen One" who bears the fate of saving the world in exchange for her own life, with the power of the Curse which can reform the world. She denies and blames her fate for slowly killing her, but at the same time she also wonders if she should live for a while longer when she does not recognize her point of living. Trista's destiny begins to shift when she progresses in the story as she finally realizes her role and meaning that will let her help others.

### **Plot**

The story starts with an exposition of Trista, a woman who suffers because of the Curse of the Living. The curse radiates dark magic which shortens her lifespan every time she uses her magic. As a result, she begins to wonder about her meaning of living as she thinks her life is dependent on the single curse. One day, she meets Hero and Vice, two kids who are friends with her sister, Helen, whom she later befriends as well.

They spend a peaceful day together until at night, an evil angel called Thanatos descends into Trista's residence. Thanatos claims to partake in his role to fulfill the 'prophecy' to make Trista a vessel as the Angels' Goddess. The Angels are revealed later as the beings that rebel against the Goddess of Life, and desire their own version of Goddess of Death so they can have a being omnipotent enough to revert the world to nothingness. Trista hesitates whether she should fight and risks using her magic, however, after Thanatos incites an incident with her friends and sister, she breaks out of her doubt and attacks him. Thanatos decides to leave her alone after noticing her magic curse blooming, signaling her awakening. After the fight, the kids ask Trista about what just happened, to which she answers them all by showing them her curse mark.

After some deliberation, Trista and the three kids decide to begin their journey to see the Goddess of Life who dwells at the top of the World Tree, for her to erase Trista's curse. Trista and her companions rise into action from the obstacles and hardships along the way. She experiences love, hate, and injustice which shape the world as she discovers the Elemental Magics. She discovers her sorrowful fate and the truth from a prophecy. She grows as a person and gets closer with her travel companions as they travel together.

Trista and the group encounter Thanatos again. After a refusal to hand Trista over, a fight ensues. Trista and the group fight rather well and hold their own for some time until Thanatos transforms into a demon-like form. The irony happens in the story where Trista's search for the Elemental Magic, added with her dark Curse and innate Light magic to help her see the Goddess of Life, are also what Thanatos needs to make Trista reborn as the Goddess of Death. Charging in with the intent to kill, Thanatos quickly holds the upper hand and overwhelms everyone. As he is about to deliver a finishing blow, Trista's conviction to protect the kids reaches its climax. She uses her curse's full power when the others deliver their respective elemental attacks to Thanatos as Trista finishes him off.

Wounded and weakened, Trista falls to the ground after performing a rigorous action, but a light heals her. Then, Trista is in a room on top of the World Tree, Yggdrasil. Diana then appears before them and she asks about what they wish for. Trista, who realizes that the Angels still exist and the world will never be truly at peace with them around, resolves to ask the Goddess to use her remaining

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magic and life to seal Nibelheim. This kills the Angels and essentially, Trista herself. “Thank you for giving me forever within my temporary life”. After those parting words, she disappears into the sky. Trista’s goal to protect the peace survives to the kids whom she left behind. They begin to do what they each deem to be the ultimate goals in life. The story concludes with Helen, Hero, and Vice venturing out into the world that they have fought hard to protect. They swear to cherish memories about Trista and to continue what she always dreamed to do, living life to the fullest.

## **Characters**

### **Main Character:**

Trista

Age: 21 years old

Trista has long black hair, wears a black outfit and shorts with crosses decorating her suit. She wears brown gloves in order to cover her Curse mark. She keeps her emotions and fears to herself, although as they progress throughout the story, she starts to be vulnerable with her companions. Due to her past, she experiences fear about death and what would happen if she dies. Trista is the “Chosen One” who is destined to be a being that can change the world. Due to this, she wonders if she has her own role or meaning on why she has to stay alive the way she is. Trista’s kind and compassionate nature makes her innate power the Light, the one who protects others.

### **Supporting Characters:**

Helen

Age: 15 years old

Helen has red eyes and wears a reddish tunic. She also wears black stockings and brown boots, with a fire adorned headband on her head. She is Trista’s mischievous little sister. She often does things which make her sister roll her eyes. Helen has a bright and cheerful personality which makes her lit up everyone’s mood. She has very close connections with Trista, due to them growing up together without their parents. Helen’s joyful nature makes her innate power the Fire, burning everyone’s spirit and cheers them all up.

Hero

Age: 15 years old

Hero has a gray, unbuttoned vest and brown shorts and shoes. He has a rather simple design because it resembles his personality as a simple and straightforward man. Hero is one of Helen’s friends, and later becomes Trista’s travel companion. Hero is courageous, making him leap into danger the first chance he has. Hero’s fearless nature makes his innate power the Wind, symbolizing his simple yet persistent and fearless personality.

Vice

Age: 15 years old

Vice has blonde hair and a white royal garb, as well as a noble crest on his suit. His history with the nobles of the world have created his tendency to be suspicious of others and become cold to others. He is Helen’s other friend and later serves as Trista’s travel companion. He often questions everything and gets frustrated as others do not follow his ways. Vice’s critical and sharp nature makes his innate power the Lightning, the one who is sharp and at times, quite disastrous.

Thanatos

Thanatos is a fallen angel from heaven. His ultimate goal is to make Trista the Goddess of Death through fulfilling her role as the “Chosen One”. Thanatos’ motivations are derived from him

witnessing the death of humanity when he became an angel. He saw how the world is a failure as long as humans keep pursuing what they want by hurting another. He plans to revert the world into darkness, so that everyone can live in bliss without killing each other.

#### Loki

Loki is the former “Chosen” before Trista. When he was the Chosen, he was met with an unfortunate accident involving the people in his village. Because of the event, Loki became disgusted and planned revenge on the villagers. Loki became a fallen angel as a result. His ultimate goal is to take revenge against all of humanity by killing them.

#### Diana

Diana is the Deity and Goddess of Life who resides in Asgard, the heaven in this world. She only shows herself to the one worthy of her presence, the “true Chosen One”. She protects and watches over the world from her own throne in Asgard. Diana descends and appears before everyone as they get to the top of World Tree.

#### Setting

This novel is set in a secondary world with imaginary settings. The story starts in the interiors of Trista’s house which is close to the forest. Next, I will be moving to a magical hill where fairies live, an ancient underground temple, and a magical village. At the climax part of the story, the protagonists move to a realm made to resemble hell, the Nibelheim. Finally, at the end of the story the characters will go to Asgard, another realm resembling heaven. They will return to Trista’s house, where the story first begins at the conclusion of the story.

#### CONCLUSION

I learned a lot through the writing process of this novel. For instance, in deciding the genre, at the beginning I chose a pure slice of life story with no fantastical elements involved, since the basic premise of my story is mostly about psychology. However, along the way, I learned that fantasy stories also work well to portray psychological issues. In fact, it will make the story more entertaining and appealing to the readers, especially since fantasy stories do not serve stale story backgrounds. Although having said that, there are times where I must tone down the fantasy elements if they do not serve additional coherent purposes within the story. Having one genre standing out too much between the two would not make for a good story, as balance is the key. Fantasy in the end helps me reinforce the psychology as it also brings emotions and thoughts in the form of magic. So, as much as I did not think of fusing the two together at first, I learned that it is possible through balancing the amount of each genre in order for me to enhance and improve my story and insights for future endeavors.

Second, I learn from this process that other than visual elements of the story, characters of the story also matter. Before starting this project, I focused more on how to make better visuals and put aside the special quirks of my characters. But as I write, I realized that characters also matter. Through an attempt to create character dynamics, I tried thinking all possible ways. My characters ended up having one trait on each of them that makes them special. I find out that in my previous writing attempts, I lack characterizations. But in this creative work, each character can have different ways to deal with things, whether it’s facing it head on, being afraid, or facing all the dangers by himself. These are basic ways for someone when they face problems in life, so I can make them more relatable for the readers to enjoy their characterizations and progressions. For me, although I only have one main character, I got attached to all four of them as the writer and the reader of the story.

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