

Still: A Screenplay Exploring Death Anxiety - The Fear of Losing a Loved One

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ABSTRACT

The fear of death has long plagued people for its unknown implications and the burden of grief that comes with it; however, it is not something that people often acknowledge. This work intends to highlight that fear-related issues should not be understated as trivial negative emotions and need more awareness. Using the death anxiety and protection motivation theories, I discovered that there are hidden conflicts behind death anxiety that people need to address to minimize their symptoms and eventually undergo a successful coping process. The story follows the struggle of Sasha, who initially rejects her beloved Kaiser's death by creating alternate universes to save him but then slowly realizes that her interferences are harmful. In the end, she finally accepts his death and moves on. Through that angle, this work aims to motivate people that while death happens inevitably, they can always handle their fear through a more positive mindset.

Keywords: death anxiety, codependency, coping, science fiction, dark fantasy, alternate universes

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *The Denial of Death*, cultural anthropologist and author Ernest Becker wrote, "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else" (Becker, 1973, p. 17). This concern is ironic because humans treat death as a mystery, while death is the only certain thing in life because it will happen to all of us without exception. It is not death itself that frightens people, for we cannot truly fear what has not happened yet, but rather it is the hidden fears and conflicts behind the thought of our loved ones' deaths that scare us. For example, it can be the feeling of being abandoned, loneliness, unable to take care of oneself, and others. People tend to hide behind their fear of death to avoid confronting those true causes. As a result, they are unable to cope in a healthy way and can be overcome with harmful emotions. Because of that, I decided to write a work about the struggle of someone with death anxiety, or specifically, the fear of losing a loved one. I hope that this work can raise more awareness of this mental syndrome and encourage people to accept their fears as part of the vulnerabilities of love.

All of us may have experienced death anxiety to various degrees. As a child, we are afraid of being separated from our parents whenever they are away. This grows into adulthood, where we live haunted by the mysterious implications of death, and this dramatically affects the way we view our relationships with others. By working on this topic, I want people to realize that while death is inevitable, they can always do something about their other fears and have a more positive mindset. Another thing why this topic is essential to discuss is because of its connection with mental health. A recent study indicated death anxiety as a predictor of mental health conditions (Menzies et al., 2019), and numerous studies have demonstrated symptomatology of various disorders, including anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, etc. On that note too, death anxiety is currently sweeping across the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic, where this phenomenon has not only created confusion and chaos in our lives but has also put us in an indefinite period of mortality salience, where no one is sure about their and others' wellbeing and safety.

Death anxiety has a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms among patients. The fear of losing a loved one also particularly leads to codependency. Research indicates that people tend to become increasingly defensive in harmful ways to themselves and others when death anxiety is aroused. For example, in a situation where one has this fear, that individual will do anything to avoid conflict with their loved ones to always keep them close and happy. Unfortunately, these efforts break the living connection, making the object of their love more of a possession and their relationship distant.

However, it is also important to note that fear can be a powerful motivator if seen from the right perspective. According to psychotherapist and founder of *Harley Therapy*, Sheri Jacobson, the positive side of this fear involves understanding that the passing of our loved ones is an unavoidable fact of life. It can mean considering our own mortality and realizing we can cope (Jacobson, 2019). This coping process may be challenging but assessing the real reasons behind this fear and believing in oneself will be worthwhile. Furthermore, while we cannot prevent other people around us from one day dying, we can still find support to take steps forward so that we are no longer overwhelmed by the idea of being in charge of our own lives.

The format of this creative work is a full-length screenplay. A screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogues and descriptions, and placed within the context of dramatic structure. To put it simply, it is the art of visual storytelling (Field, 1984). A good film, however magnificent the cinematography and visual effects are, cannot stand on its own without a solid script as its blueprint. Additionally, more so than the other formats, a film can grant a cinematic experience with an immersive portrayal of real-time imagery that can reach out directly to the audience. Therefore, I choose this format because my story incorporates many visual elements such as illusions and the diverse settings of the alternate universes.

This screenplay falls into the genre of science fantasy with an emphasis on dark fantasy. Science fantasy is a mixed genre that combines science fiction and fantasy tropes. As an extension of the fantasy genre, dark fantasy is a segment of fiction that often highlights characters' struggles against their morals due to the absence of high fantasy's aspect of the good side always triumphing at the end (Landrith, 2004). Science fantasy thrives from the thrill of the unknown and imaginative worlds and how we place humanity within that context. My story explores the speculative idea of alternate universes which has been widely debated in both the scientific and literary realms. The dark fantasy side of my story revolves around the grim aspects of humanity such as violence and war. In short, by implementing this genre, I want my story to be as authentic to the real world as possible while still incorporating magic realism and supernatural elements.

I am doing secondary research for this thesis. I collected the data from online journals and used two psychological theories to answer the statement of the problem. The first and second statements, which question the causes and responses toward death anxiety, are answered using the Freudian Death Anxiety Theory in the journal article, *A Theoretical Exploration of Death Anxiety* (2015), written by counseling psychologist and professor Mark Hoeltherhoff. I also listed several medical symptoms of death anxiety from several medical journals and articles to support the theory. The third statement, which explores the coping process of someone with death anxiety, is answered using the Protection Motivation Theory, founded by Dr. R. W. Rogers in 1975 and later expanded in the journal article, *A Meta-Analysis of Research on Protection Motivation Theory* (2000), with fellow researchers Donna L. Floyd and Steven Prentice-Dunn. This creative work aims to reveal that hidden unconscious conflicts are the real reasons behind death anxiety. Next, this work shows how codependency is one of the significant indicators of someone who suffers from this fear. Moreover, I want to show that one can successfully cope with death anxiety by assessing their mental capabilities.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, was the first to use the term thanatophobia or death anxiety. He considered that people could not truly believe in death as a real occurrence, so death-related fears must stem from unaddressed childhood trauma. In his view, the unconscious is not concerned with death because it has not been subjectively experienced (Hoelterhoff, 2015, p. 6). Instead, death anxiety is a defense mechanism implemented to deal with secondary unconscious conflicts. In my story, the main character Sasha suffered a harsh and lonely childhood before meeting Kaiser who befriended her despite their differences. Her death anxiety developed because she was afraid of being alone again without him.

Death anxiety has many health effects that vary among patients. According to *medicalnewstoday.com*, medically reviewed by professor and psychologist Timothy J. Legg, the physical symptoms of death anxiety include but are not limited to: immediate anxiety when thinking about dying, panic attacks and stomach pains, and avoidance of situations that discuss death (Cadman, 2018). The psychological effect that I want to point out is codependency. Most researchers agree that codependency is a "dysfunctional pattern of relating to others with an extreme focus outside of oneself, lack of expression of feelings, and a personal meaning derived from relationships with others" (Fischer et al., 1991, p. 87). Codependents, busy taking care of others, forget to take care of themselves, resulting in a disturbance of identity development. It also typically leads to high self-sacrifice, suppression of one's own emotions, and attempts to control or fix other people's problems (Dear et al., 2004). In the story, Sasha becomes increasingly distressed after she keeps failing to save Kaiser from his death. As a result of her defense mechanism, Sasha shows physical signs of panic attacks and headaches when the topic of Kaiser's death is aroused. Specifically, the one effect that this work highlights is her symptoms of codependency: high self-sacrifice, persistent worries, and over-exerting of oneself in prioritizing Kaiser's wellbeing over her own.

After understanding the real causes and the symptoms of death anxiety, the story focuses on how to accept this fear and move on. The protection motivation theory deals with how people cope with and make decisions in times of harmful or stressful events in life. These decisions are "a way of protecting oneself from perceived threats" (Floyd et al., 2000, p. 409). The cognitive mediational process consists of threat appraisal and coping appraisal. Threat appraisal is the assessment that a recommended coping response may successfully avoid the occurrence of an aversive event, while coping appraisal is the belief that a recommended coping response can effectively prevent the occurrence of the aversive event (Floyd et al., 2000). In my creative work, the cognitive-behavioral appraisal process on handling this fear starts with Sasha evaluating the various factors that are likely to ensure that she engages in the recommended preventive response. First, she estimates the harm and threats from her fear responses by acknowledging the real reasons behind her fear. Then, by analyzing her previous decisions, she concludes that her interference and approaches to saving Kaiser are actually harmful to others and herself. After realizing that, Sasha tries to identify how she can effectively change her behavior for the better. This is shown by trusting Kaiser's choices and letting go of her attachment. Sasha understands that she must allow Kaiser's death to happen and believes in her actions that she could do that by not interfering with fate anymore.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Premise & Design Principle

My work follows a young woman who continuously creates alternate universes to save her beloved from his inevitable deaths. Through her struggles in failing to break the cycle of death and unravel the enigma of this mysterious phenomenon, she will slowly realize that her interferences have consequences toward herself and others. This work aims to show that the fear

of losing a loved one can gravely impact a sense of self and connection with others and that every coping process begins with accepting the fear rather than avoiding it.

Pitch

- a. In the current universe, Sasha is a temple's servant determined to protect Crown Prince Kaiser who is challenging his family's arrogant ideals by supporting the anti-war campaign.
- b. She tries to unfold the politically motivated conspiracies that endanger Kaiser and is suddenly hit by visions of the temple's deity, the connection with her original universe, and the mysterious Cabin that grants her the ability to create alternate universes.
- c. After understanding that they are trapped in a cycle, Sasha finally realizes her selfishness in denying Kaiser his heroic fate, helps him achieve his goal and accepts his death peacefully.

Characters

Main Characters:

- Sasha
Age: 23 years old
Sasha is a young woman of medium height and delicate features. In the current universe, she is a servant in the Restisawa's temple and usually wears a plain robe attire befitting of her low rank. She forms an unlikely friendship with Kaiser in childhood after he saved her from bullies. Sasha starts off passive with the issues happening in Tristhen, only focused on Kaiser's wellbeing, but later on forced to get involved for his sake. She is emotionally dependent on Kaiser because she is afraid of being alone without him. With Kaiser, she is mostly gentle and patient, but this is only because she does not want to anger him. When provoked, she can be impulsive, cunning, and able to resort to violence. After realizing that Kaiser still dies in every universe, she becomes desperate and grief-stricken because she does not want to lose him. Sasha will do anything to protect him in each universe, even at the cost of herself and others. It is hinted that her memories of the original universe are hazy and she does not fully understand the Cabin's power. Her strength is her love for Kaiser, and her weakness is the fear of losing him. Protecting him is her biggest desire, but by doing that, her love confined him from his goal instead of supporting him as true love should.
- Kaiser Soma
Age: 26 years old
Kaiser is the Crown Prince of Tristhen depicted as a handsome man with aristocratic features. He wears his formal attire when performing his duties and a casual outfit when he is alone with Sasha. He is conflicted with the war and estranged from his parents due to their different views. Kaiser is ambitious, caring, and passionate in his duties as the Crown Prince. As the story progresses, his desire to bring peace and protect his loved ones grows. At first, he agrees with Elhak, not knowing his uncle's real goal, because he wants Sasha to live freely in a safer Tristhen. But after knowing the truth, he chooses to sacrifice himself so the entire corrupted line of his family will end with his death as well. He wants to be together with Sasha, but he prioritizes her future over his desire. In their childhood, Kaiser always wants to protect Sasha. In the following universes and the current one, he wants to give her the best life that he could. His fear to lose her motivates him, and his love for her is his biggest weakness because if he stays with her it means he would stop fighting and let things be as they are. In the current universe, if he stops fighting, Sasha and the rest of her people will be dead. While Sasha is selfish, Kaiser is selfless.

Supporting Characters:

- The Guardian
Age: Unknown
The mysterious and genderless guardian is always accompanying Sasha during her time in the Cabin. It is not clear whether they are real or just another fragment of Sasha's imagination who represents the logical side of her conscience instead of Sasha herself who is disillusioned by her fear. The guardian is covered head to toe in a black cape.
- The Gauri (Elhak's daughter)
Age: 22 years old
The Gauri is a beautiful young woman who holds the highest position in the temple and manages the country's religious affairs. She is selected as the Gauri Restisawa by the royal family because of her ties to the family being the King's niece. Because she is a fake Gauri, she cannot actually perform any rituals that require a bond between her and the deity. She supports her father's ambition in exchange for her quitting the position because she secretly loathes it. The Gauri also knows about Sasha and Kaiser's close friendship and taunts Sasha about it when she is confronted. The young woman is manipulative, obedient, and emotional. She lives with the other priestesses and her servants in the temple.
- Elhak Soma
Age: 59 years old
Elhak is the King's younger brother and Kaiser's uncle who thirsts for the crown. Kefas approaches him to kill the King and his family to take the throne and have Tristhen join the Union for their personal benefits. He orders his daughter, the Gauri, to spread news about the deity rejecting the war and calling for the King's abdication. At first, Elhak plans to use the demonstration to kill the King's family so they can pass it as an accident. However, because that plan fails, he becomes more desperate and resorts to influencing his nephew Kaiser to do the killing. He knows Kaiser's personal vendetta against his parents and also his love for Sasha, so he uses that to his advantage. Elhak is ambitious, devious, and selfish.
- The Royal Family (Kaiser's family)
Age: The King (62 years old) and the Queen (60 years old)
The House of Soma has been ruling the State of Tristhen for years. Like most nobles, they believe in the supremacy of their high castes and discriminate against the lower castes. King Soma refuses to join the Union because of his arrogance in thinking Tristhen is better than the other states. He is selfish and will do anything necessary to win the war. The Queen, while not involved directly in the war, also supports her husband's ideals, and wishes Kaiser to do the same. The King and Queen are estranged from their son.
- Representative from Kefas
Age: 50 years old
A representative sent by the government of Kefas who works with Elhak in their scheme to take the throne and get Tristhen to join the Union for personal benefits.
- The High Priestesses
Age: Vary (30 – 40 years old)
The high priestesses help the Gauri handle the affairs and ceremonies in the Restisawa Temple. They are mostly from the higher caste and treat the servants cruelly. Like the others in the temple, these ladies often wear robes signifying their ranks.

- Lady
Age: 35 years old
This lady is a member of the royal family who visits the temple during the breakfast scene. She is apathetic toward the current anti-war riots and sees the war as a business opportunity instead.

Conflict

The root of the conflict is that Kaiser is fated to die, whether it is in their original universe through a mysterious explosion, or through several other reasons in every universe they are in. In her goal to protect him, Sasha will be fighting against external threats and also an internal battle from being very adamant about saving Kaiser at all costs to finally accepting the truth and letting him go. Despite Sasha being the protagonist, this story will also feature the struggle and development of other characters, mainly Kaiser. From the very beginning, Kaiser is bound to sacrifice himself for other people's future, especially for Sasha. The emotional conflict in the story is the clash between Sasha and Kaiser's goals and obstacles. They have the same goal, which is protecting each other, but their different methods and perspectives pose a hindrance that they must learn to solve as the resolution.

Synopsis

Pulling a dying Kaiser from an explosion, Sasha finds a desolated Cabin where she tries to resuscitate him but fails. Consumed by her grief, she cannot accept the reality of his death, and the mysterious power of the Cabin grants her the power to create alternate universes where Kaiser is alive in each of them. She cannot control how each universe will turn out, but she is determined to use every chance she has to save him. However, she soon realizes that Kaiser still continues to die in every universe although she always tries to protect him from danger. She finds a red thread connecting all the deaths, in which Kaiser always dies selflessly as a hero for the greater good or protecting other people.

In the current universe, Sasha is a servant in the Gauri Restisawa temple and Kaiser is the Crown Prince. Their country, the State of Tristhen, is caught up in a war with a neighboring state that forces them to join a union of other states. The royal family refuses, and they resort to funding the war by illegal means. Kaiser publicly disapproves of his family's methods and supports the anti-war campaign and abolishment of the caste system. As the country continues to engage in demonstrations and conspiracies, Sasha is haunted by visions of the deity Restisawa and her original life. It is then revealed that she is the real high priestess, the Gauri, and the deity's power has a connection with the Cabin. This current universe is actually the original universe as it comes in a full circle. They have been stuck in a causal loop where the explosion in the original universe causes the alternate universes to happen, which itself is the cause of the current universe's existence.

After unraveling the mysteries, Sasha begins to understand the consequences of stopping Kaiser from fulfilling his heroic duties and letting him repeat the same tragic fate. She also realizes that his reason for fighting so hard in every universe is to ensure a happy future for others and herself, including in this current universe one. She helps him reveal the conspiracy of his uncle, who incites the whole political conflict and sets him up as the people's hero by choosing to let him die as he wishes. In the end, Sasha accepts his death as a freedom to both of them.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this creative work is about the exploration of the reasons, effects, and coping process of someone dealing with death anxiety, specifically, the fear of losing a loved one. The narrative is woven around the structure of the science fantasy genre, incorporating

alternate universes and dark fantasy elements. In essence, my screenplay serves to illustrate the struggle of balancing the reality of death and the abstractness of human feelings such as fear and love when confronted with death. This is shown by how Sasha's rejection of Kaiser's death initiates the existence of the Cabin and the imaginative alternate universes where she tries to save him. She is not only trying to save Kaiser from dying, but also saving herself from the pain of losing him.

The first purpose is to show that death anxiety happens not simply because a person fears death, but rather s/he fears what comes after death. These hidden conflicts can vary depending on each person and can be dangerous if left unaddressed. Sasha has always been dependent on Kaiser for her happiness. He rescued her when she was a child and befriended her despite their clashing statuses. Because of this, she is afraid of being alone again and repeating the trauma of his departure from her life. By using the power of the Cabin, Sasha wishes to spend more time with Kaiser and finds a way to save him.

The next purpose shows that, as a result of those internal conflicts, Sasha manifests several symptoms and behaviors which further indicate her as someone fearful who does not have self-agency for herself and always puts Kaiser above her own choices. There are the physical symptoms related to general anxiety such as feeling nauseous and having headaches when she is faced with the threat of Kaiser's death. Her psychological symptoms, particularly in relation to codependency, include: being extremely worried about Kaiser's risky decisions for his goal, relying on predictability shown with how she believes that Kaiser will die after the riot, and being afraid to upset Kaiser to the point that she forces herself to agree with his choices despite knowing how dangerous it is because she does not want Kaiser to be distant from her.

The last purpose reveals Sasha's resolution on healing her trauma and believing in herself that she can move on. The previous two purposes lead to this ending, a positive note to the audience that everyone can cope with their fear no matter how hard it is. Through examining her decisions, Sasha becomes aware of how reckless and destructive her behavior is in keeping Kaiser away from his destiny. At one point, Kaiser himself said that she only thinks of herself and what she thinks is good for others without even understanding that her interferences are harmful. She begins to analyze her decisions, and although at first she is still stubborn, she soon changes her mindset after seeing Kaiser's sacrifices in the other universes and the current one. Thus, Sasha continues her coping process of believing in herself to let him go and finally turning her fear into a motivation to help Kaiser. In the end, Sasha sees her fear as an opportunity to welcome vulnerabilities and as a catalyst for personal growth.

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