

Turning Around: A Novella Exploring Escapism and Its Impacts on an Individual's Development

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ABSTRACT

Escapism is a universal act people have done at least once in their life. By escaping from responsibilities, they seek solace but depending on the frequency, it can become detrimental. This creative thesis explores what escapism and its impacts are that affect an individual's development. As a novella in the genre of science fiction, this work uses Longeway's theory of escapism, focusing on the model of self-suppression and self-expansion. This story follows Lukas, a human, and IFT-199, an alien, who are indulging in escapism in their own way. Lukas shows self-suppression through his obsession with online conspiracies and avoidance of his aspiration while IFT-199 shows self-suppression through the ignorance of her powerlessness in her act of revenge. At the end, they grow with self-expansion by finding new aspirations in life. Through their struggle, this novella shines a light on the importance of understanding escapism, especially with its characteristics.

Keywords: escapism, impacts, personal development, self-expansion, self-suppression

INTRODUCTION

The act of escapism, which varies in different ways depending on each person, is the act to avoid unpleasant realities (Longeway, 1990). By practicing it, a person can find comfort and temporary relief amidst overwhelming problems he encounters in life. Stress itself is defined by Elizabeth Scott (2024) as any change that causes physical, emotional, or mental strain. In addition, the data acquired through a Gallup survey examining adults in 122 countries estimates that 41% of adults are experiencing a lot of stress (Ray, 2022). On the other hand, Deloitte conducted a survey in 2021 which showed that 4 in 10 millennials and Gen Zs are stressed all or most of the time due to life expectations (UK Therapy Guide, n.d.). Therefore, people resort to escapism to have a personal time where they can distract themselves from real-life challenges and reduce stress at the same time. This can be done by consuming entertainment such as video games, movies, or songs while others may rely more on their own active imagination, including daydreaming, fantasizing, or even creative hobbies.

However, escapism can also result in harm which halts personal growth. By obsessing over entertainment, people neglect responsibilities, relationships, and physical health. Escapism becomes their source to run away from what is important in life. This tendency contrasts John L. Longeway's description (1990) which describes the act of avoiding problems as something irrational for humans to do. He proceeds by addressing humans as non-escapists, meaning that at some point, humans are prompted to face the challenges and obstacles in our life. This act serves to balance our self-awareness instead of getting distracted all the time. On the other hand, without control of our self-awareness, we become ignorant towards the danger of constantly running away from unpleasant emotions that need to be addressed. Moreover, excessive indulgence in escapism can bring an unhealthy way of looking at life. Excessive internet use is one of them, with it referred to as "harmful or disproportionate amounts of time or money spent using digital network applications" (Jouhki et al., 2022, p. 1). Kumar and Mondal (2018) lists some of the risks of excessive internet use, such as the impairments of real-life relationships,

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psychological effects such as stress and anxiety, negative emotions such as loneliness and low-esteem, and poor academic achievements for students. Despite it being a coping mechanism, what should have been a stress-relieving activity turns into an avoidance of life.

Given these facts, it is important to understand the nature of escapism. There is a significance in a thorough discussion that can further enhance people's understanding about this phenomenon. It is only fair to see the good in escapism if done right, for example as a tool to unwind, considering the increasing number of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety which is estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be 280 million people worldwide (Santilli, 2023). Escapism has merits, and it is a proven fact that cannot be ignored. On the other hand, it is unwise to ignore the damage it can cause to people whose life revolves around this tendency. What is bad about escapism needs to be addressed as well, especially when the outcome is negligence of self. For those reasons, we choose escapism as the underlying issue that pushes my discussion in the form of creative work, specifically a novella.

According to Kate Marshall (2020), novella is a compelling form of fiction with a compact length which is between a short story and novel. It is capable of condensing one complex subject matter at a time into an easily digestible story with its well-written characters, interesting setting, and great plot. In addition, since it is longer than a short story, the story can tackle one central idea which is often considered a life-shaping episode or an arc (Hardy, 2005). That means novella gives room for a deep analysis of one topic through characters study in the story while also maintaining the interesting aspect that a story should have. Another advantage of using novella is the sensory details described in its prose to set the scene and arouse the readers' imagination better than other creative forms.

The genre of this creative work is the science fiction genre, often shortened to sci-fi or abbreviated to SF. As described by Wyatt and Saricks (2019), science fiction "explores worlds that could exist, with a particular interest in futuristic science and technologies" (p. 93). Wyatt and Saricks further elaborate the separation of science fiction genre into two main categories: hard science fiction and soft science fiction. The former focuses on scientific accuracy based on mathematical sciences while the latter emphasizes the societies and characters within the story without explaining every scientific term in detail. In this case, we use soft science fiction to focus more on the topic of escapism. Besides creating an imaginative world that arouses imagination, science fiction as a genre also confronts intricate and complex human drama. An example of this is how the main character in *Dune* by Frank Herbert (1965) paves his destiny through life's obstacles in forms of politics, religion, and relationship. By combining otherworldly elements and challenges that humanize my characters, we can have a more elaborate discussion about escapism in an interesting way.

To give a thorough exploration regarding this topic, my creative work implements the theory of escapism described by John L. Longeway (1990) as activities that draw us away from troubles occurring every day. In its nature, escapism is a double-edged sword, meaning that it is both beneficial and detrimental depending on how an individual perceives it. In the case of escaping through excessive online behavior, it can give rise to the association between deficient emotional regulation and problematic internet use (Jouhki et al., 2022). On the other hand, healthy escapism also serves as a temporary respite which allows relaxation and rejuvenation that potentially can promote skill development and personal growth (Mandy Kloppers, 2014). Therefore, an individual might search for temporary relief to lift the burden that takes a toll on his mind and physique, but indulging too much in it can lead to him neglecting his responsibilities. This understanding of escapism is needed to find the best balance between the positive and negative. To dissect what escapism is in a greater detail, Stenseng et al (2012) provides two types of escapism, which are self-suppression (prevention motives) and

self-expansion (promotion motives). Self-suppression involves engaging in preventative actions or suppressing negative emotions and troublesome thoughts (Stenseng et al., 2023). Self-suppression often manifests in two key areas: thoughts and emotions. Thought suppression refers to a mental strategy that is considered an effective way to regulate thoughts (Wang et al., 2020, p. 1) especially when it comes to unwanted thoughts, hence it has become a standard practice done by everyone whether consciously or unconsciously. Emotion suppression is a strategy in which individuals modify their emotions according to environmental demands (Brockman et al., 2016). On the other hand, self-expansion refers to activities—both physically and mentally—that motivate people to broaden their experience and knowledge (Dobson et al., 2024). There are two types of self-expansion that an individual can experience. The first is relational self-expansion which, according to Mattingly and Lewandowski (2013), means the inclusion of others where partners' identities intertwine with each other. This leads to the importance of relationships which play a crucial role in the process. The second type is non-relational self-expansion. This type of self-expansion refers to a person who looks out for novel and challenging experiences on their own (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014). Finally, both self-suppression and self-expansion have their own effects which can be encapsulated into two categories: negative effects being avoiding reality and narrowing the mind with delusions, and positive effects being giving temporary relief amidst burdening thoughts and emotions and causing a self-growth journey.

This novella follows Lukas, an isolated teenager who escapes into online conspiracy theories after his band breaks up and his parents favor his accomplished younger brother. Hence, he suppresses his thoughts to cope with his unpleasant emotions such as insecurity and loneliness. One day, an injured alien named IFT-199 suddenly appeared in his room using her race's portal technology. From IFT-199, Lukas learns that she runs away from her colony because of her refusal towards her race's plan to conquer Earth. This leads her to recruit Lukas to pilot a stolen Combat Unit and stop the invasion. As they confront the impending catastrophe, they form an alliance which deepens their characters through shared vulnerability. With that in mind, this story answers two problems that this paper analyzes: what drives my main characters to resort to escapism and what the impacts on them are.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

Escapism can both chain individuals with burdens and liberate them for growth, depending on whether they confront or avoid reality. This theme acts as a double-edged sword, which consists of self-suppression and self-expansion. While the former can provide temporary relief, suppressing one's emotions can lead to the avoidance of feeling and thought, loss of connection, and detachment from reality. This part is portrayed in the personality of Lukas, the first main character, in which he feels security and comfort from avoiding the insecurities coming from outside such as his brother's talent that overshadows him and the disbandment of his high-school band that he is fond of and insecurities from within such as his inability to have a social connection with other people. IFT-199 practices escapism by running away from her colony, thinking that her act is her way to claim her own agency even though in reality, she is still repressing her fears, doubts, and guilts of what the consequences might be if she fails, resulting either in the destruction of Earth or her colony in the hand of another alien species.

Plot

The story begins with an exposition about Lukas, the main character, who is engaging in his usual internet forum about many world conspiracies and myths while trying to finish a song

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he has been writing since his high school band disbanded. His escapism manifests in his obsession with online conspiracies and music. Suddenly, a portal opens in his room, and an injured young girl named IFT-199 steps through. Meanwhile, the exposition rewinds a little to IFT-199 inside a spaceship. She refuses an order from her colony's council to begin Earth's conquest. Her defiance leads to a chase with one of the pursuers being her teacher, ADV-003. He warns her about the consequences that might arise following her irrational and reckless misconduct. If she insists on her selfishness, there is a chance that her colony cannot survive the attack from another colony in this intergalactic battle. However, she does not care about ADV-003's opinion, thinking that her action is fully justified. After defeating her teacher who loses on purpose, she plans on using a teleportation device to escape to Earth. However, her teleportation suffers from damage inflicted by her chasers, causing it to malfunction. Because of that, she cannot pinpoint the exact location and ends up in Lukas' room.

The rising action begins as soon as IFT-199 wakes up. Lukas has tended to her wounds, but they struggle to communicate, hence causing a tense and chaotic introduction. Using a translation device, IFT-199 explains to Lukas about her being a deserter from her alien colony. She wants to escape from her colony this entire time because of her dislike for what her colony is doing. They engage in conversation while IFT-199 uses a navigation system to search for her spaceship which got separated when she teleported before. As they talk, IFT-199 receives a message from Kragtar's chieftain through a holographic call, stating the Earth's demise in 24 hours. Her colony is also planning to arrest her and Lukas since he has become a witness, prompting another chase scene using a teleportation device. After a while, they soon arrive at a barren desert where IFT-199 further reveals her alien colony's intention to take total control over Earth to gain an advantage in a centuries-long intergalactic war. However, because of her injury, she finds it difficult to achieve what she wants. Therefore, she asks Lukas to help her prevent the invasion by her spaceship. Lukas reluctantly agrees but struggles when the robot, which responds to emotional states, challenges him with his insecurities. It forces him to confront repressed memories of his family and his bandmates' departure that initially causes his escapism.

Unable to handle the emotional strain, Lukas exits the cockpit, overwhelmed by anxiety. At this critical moment, IFT-199 forces Lukas to try again, not realizing the burden it puts on him. They argue, and as it escalates, they end up throwing punches at each other. IFT-199 gets the upper hand with her background as a soldier. As she beats Lukas, she also mentions how powerless and useless Lukas is because of his tendency to hide from his own insecurities. This argument marks their separation, but before IFT-199 leaves, Lukas also gives her a piece of his mind, especially related to her cockiness.

The story will hit its climax when the alien forces arrive to capture them. IFT-199 prepares to face them alone. She begins to realize her fear towards failure that she has been suppressing this entire time. If she fails, her escapism means nothing, and that staggers her from doing her best. However, Lukas, who finds it in his heart that he cannot just abandon Earth, re-enters the cockpit. This time, he channels his emotions, particularly his love for music, into piloting the robot. By confronting his insecurities head-on, he successfully activates the robot and fights alongside IFT-199, managing to repel the alien forces and send them out of the solar system.

For the resolution, Lukas and IFT-199 develop a mutual respect. IFT-199 decides to return to her colony. IFT-199 realizes that escaping from her colony will not change anything. Her suppressed fear turns into confidence as she tries to change the way her colony works from the inside. She still believes that invading countless planets and civilizations is a wrong thing to do, but she knows that there is a better way to oppose it rather than just running away. This

incident grants her the courage to change things from within. On the other hand, Lukas plans to finish the song he is still writing. He does not know what he wants to do after that, but with his newfound courage, he plans to take a little step one after another, starting with going out of his room. In the end, as their relationship grows into a genuine friendship, they promise to stay in contact whenever possible. As the parting gift, Lukas gives her a name based on the title of the music he is still writing.

Characters

Main Characters:

- Lukas
Age: 20 human-years old

Lukas is a young man who finds himself unable to connect with others, hence prompting him to engage on forums about conspiracy theories. He is quite timid and easy to give up by deprecating himself, hence his lack of ability to communicate with others. Occasionally, he becomes sarcastic only in his head, as he is having a hard time translating it into words. At the same time, he also harbors curiosity towards many things, a tendency which translates to his obsession towards online conspiracies. Lukas lives in an apartment far from his hometown to attend college. However, he has difficulty in socializing and following his studies, so he drops out of college, the fact unbeknownst to his parents who believe he is being a proper student and still give him allowance for his life expenses. In addition, knowing that his parents favor his younger brother more, who excels in anything he does, he has doubts whether his parents love him or not. In addition, knowing he cannot meet his parents' expectations, self-suppression becomes his method of avoidance. Therefore, from day to night, he engages in any conversation related to conspiracy theories he can find on the forum to escape from such thoughts and emotions. At the same time, after his high school band disbanded and he saw his bandmates going their own separate ways with aspirations, he was left alone. To this day, he is still trying to finish a song he has been writing since his band's disbandment, though he finds it very difficult, especially with his insecurity.

- IFT-199 / Lilium
Age: 252 Kragtar-years old (21 human-years old)

IFT-199 (Infiltrator-199), whose name will change to Lilium towards the story's ending, is a member of Kragtar race, an alien species who is currently taking part in a universal battle with another colony, who was tasked to conquer the Earth. To strengthen their force, the Kragtar race seeks to conquer planets and turn what is left into their territory. Although this race has no concept of family, years before the story, IFT-199 had a mother figure who was killed at the hands of her own colony. That becomes Lilium's main reason to escape from her oppressive colony, in which she runs away to avoid the order to destroy Earth. At first, this initial escape caused by her defiance and rebellious tendency makes her believe that she must save Earth and search for a more meaningful existence, fueled by her desire to expand herself. She believes that her choice, led by her agency, can bring change upon her colony. It leads her to avoid thinking about the consequences that would happen if she failed, and later, it is revealed that she alone is indeed powerless against her colony. That realization causes her to evaluate herself again. At the end, she accepts her own powerlessness and realizes that escaping and trying to fight her own colony is not the way. Instead, she is determined to change her colony's way of doing things from inside. She also desires a name rather than just using a code that portrays her as an object.

Supporting Characters:

- ADV-006 (IFT-199's Mother Figure)
Age: 720 Kragtar-years old (60 human-years old)

Although only mentioned, ADV-006 plays a part in informing the world-ending scenario caused by aliens to the people on Earth. She is not IFT-199's biological mother, but they have spent a lot of time together, with her teaching IFT-199 about some interesting things that can be found on Earth, like music, games, and others. She grew fondness and fascination towards the planet instead of commencing the task given to her, which was to observe the Earth as a potential planet to be conquered. That led to her announcing the impending doom that her own colony would cause to the Earth. However, her act of appreciating Earth's culture was deemed as a betrayal, hence her death at the hands of her own colony. Her influence can be found in IFT-199's characteristics and desires.

- Kragtar's Chieftain
Age: 1332 Kragtar-years old (111 human-years old)

As the leader of his clan, he possesses strong determination and power over his colony. That becomes the source of his stoic personality, which puts duty first and foremost. He is the one who instructs IFT-199 to infiltrate Earth because he knows her capability. When IFT-199 betrays the colony, he takes over the job himself, launching his army to create many irregular incidents across the globe. If he achieves his desired outcome, whether destruction or prosperity of his army, he will do anything.

- ADV-003
Age: 960 Kragtar-years old (80 human-years old)

ADV-003 (Advisor-003) is another member of the Kragtar race. He acts as IFT-199's teacher who believes in her potential. His effort throughout the years is shown in IFT-199's skill which excels other infiltrators at her age. Although his training is harsh, he cares about IFT-199, which becomes the main reason why he supports IFT-199's decision to run away from the colony even if it might bring harm to him. At the same time, IFT-199 also cares for her teacher, hence her dilemma as she experiences both self-suppression and self-expansion.

Conflicts

My novella focuses on two types of conflict: man versus self (internal conflict) and man versus man (external conflict). The former is described as a dispute happening within a character's mind and heart (Kenny, 2022). This type of conflict happens in Lukas' battle against his own insecurities and IFT-199's desire to stop her colony's violence. As the story progresses, both characters confront their inner troubles and turmoil which drive them to change. On the other hand, man versus man focuses on the dispute between a character and an outside factor (Padmi & Jayantini, 2022). Scenes that show this conflict are spread throughout the story, mainly with interactions that happen between Lukas and IFT-199, Lukas and his family, IFT-199 and Kragtar's Chieftain, as well as IFT-199 and ADV-003. Arguments and mutual understanding that happen in several instances help the main characters to grow, completing their respective character arc.

CONCLUSION

This creative thesis explores escapism in the form of novella with the genre science fiction which allows a deep character study amidst a speculative world. The analysis is done by applying Longeway's (1990) theory of escapism, focusing on self-suppression and self-expansion. In my story, both models are shown through Lukas, a withdrawn teen, and IFT-199, a defecting alien. Both initially suppress their struggles in their own way, but as they are confronted with challenges, they begin to embrace their flaws and insecurities, hence starting the process of self-expansion. With this approach, my story argues that escapism can be beneficial because of its positive effects but also can be detrimental because of its negative sides.

In the process of writing this thesis, we have improved my discipline in writing more consistently despite various mood shifts. We also learned the importance of constructive criticism without over personalizing it. In addition, we gained the skill to incorporate complex themes such as escapism into narrative fiction that makes the discussion around the related topic more engaging. Using this newfound knowledge and skill, we aim to polish and publish this novella online after expanding each character's backstory and the science fiction elements for depth. My next plan will be to develop new stories that we can also publish on dedicated online platforms.

As we analyzed the subject matter for this thesis, we realized that the topic of escapism, although a common occurrence that most people have done at least once in their life, has yet been used as the main topic discussion in many articles or thesis. The inclusion of primary research such as the usage of Google Form can add more credibility to this analysis. Examining demographic differences such as age groups is another method that can improve the weight of this research. Finally, exploring other genres of creative writing can offer fresh perspectives on the theme, broadening its appeal and nuance.

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