



On the Motif of “Escape” in Narration

Xinyao Yuan¹ and Jiangang Yang²(✉)

¹ Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China
yuanxinyao@sjtu.edu.cn

² Shandong University, Jinan, China
yjg@sdu.edu.cn

Abstract. In the realm of narrative literary works, it is common to encounter episodes of characters escaping. With consideration to the independence of the escaping subject, the motives behind the action of escaping can be categorized into three types: self-liberation, emotional support, and absolute freedom. The action of “escape” serves a variety of crucial functions in the narrative process, including refining characterization, adding complexity to the storyline, and providing momentum for the development of the plot. Additionally, it plays a powerful role in shaping the two environments of the previous existence and the future world of pursuit. The observation and classification of the action of “escape” provide an opportunity for a deeper comprehension of the richness and subtlety of narrative art. Overall, the analysis of the theme of “escape” emphasizes the potential of narrative storytelling to explore the intricacies of the human experience and to provide valuable insight into the human condition.

Keywords: escape · narration · liberty · freedom

1 Introduction

In literature, we often see characters escaping from their situations, whether it be to avoid their present difficulties, pursue love or ideals, or yearn for absolute freedom. The term “escape” itself can be broken down into two meanings: “to leave” and “to avoid.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘escape’ is defined as “to break free from confinement or control; to get free from a place or situation; to flee.” It can also refer to “the act of escaping or the state of having escaped” or “a means of escaping, especially a secret or cunning one.” In literature, the term ‘escape’ can have various symbolic meanings, such as a character’s attempt to break free from societal expectations, personal limitations, or oppressive circumstances. Thus, “escape” should not be only simplified as fleeing or runaway.

Previous studies on “escape” in literature have mainly focused on the analysis of individual texts, with few systematic overviews from the perspective of literary theory. Heilman [1] defined “escape literature” and illustrated the way that separates escape works and that other type; Macpherson [2] analyzed the escapist literature and the Literature of Escape in women’s movement; Dai [3] analyzed the four instances of “escape”

and “return” in Lu Yanshi’s life in order to examine the predicament and desire for freedom experienced by older intellectuals; Cui [4] analyzed the motif of “escape” in D.H. Lawrence’s novels, using it as a means to reflect on cultural values that prioritize the pursuit of desires; Zhao [5] examined the continuity between Morris’s latest work “Home” and his previous works through the lens of the theme of “escape as a return”. However, as “escape” is a highly symbolic act in literature, the diversity of its subjects and the complexity of its motives necessitate a more meticulous observation and classification of this behavior from the perspective of the subject’s independence and the purpose of the action. Such research could help us gain a deeper understanding of the richness and subtlety of narrative art.

2 Categorization of “Escape” in Narrative

From the perspective of the independence of the escape subject and the purpose of their behavior, we can define the destination of the escape action as either “pure relief” or “seeking new support”. In addition to these two types, we can also see in some stories that the protagonist is not in a hurry to get rid of something or pursue something, but simply escapes for the sake of absolute freedom. This section will discuss these three types of escape in detail.

2.1 Seeking Self-liberation

The first type of escape is the act of escaping from a known predicament to the unknown. At this point, the protagonist of the escape is in a state of imprisonment, eager to change the status quo to gain liberation, but not clear on what they will face after escaping and without a clear direction. In the novel *Les Misérables*, for example, Jean Valjean’s first four escapes were carried out with completely useless and even foolish plans. “He was like a wolf, always wanting to escape when he saw the cage door open. His instincts told him to escape, but his reason told him to wait. But in the face of such a strong attraction, his reason finally disappeared, leaving only instinct” [6]. In this kind of escape, what dominates him is the animal instinct to break free from the cage, and he has no concept of where to go after escaping. And the outcome of the escape is always being captured and arrested again.

There are also some people whose escape is forced upon them, and in this case, if they choose to stay, they will face disaster. Therefore, this type of escape is an inevitable act, and where they flee to is not so important. In *Water Margin*, for example, Lin Chong, who had been a drillmaster of 800,000 banned soldiers, was forced to escape after being repeatedly framed. Obviously, joining bandits was not his original intention, but a last resort.

In addition, this type of action occurs more often in literary works with female liberation as the theme. In *A Doll’s House*, for example, after Nora cried out, “now I believe that first and foremost I am a human being, just like you - or anyway, I must try to become one,” [7] she resolutely walked out, slamming the door with a loud bang. The meaning of this escape is diverse. It is not only a re-examination and rethinking of love at the family level, but also a self-awareness and pursuit of the subject status of women

who are treated as pets. It is also a direct confrontation with the legal system under the discourse of bourgeois male superiority: "I must figure out whether society is right or I am right".

Similarly, a hundred years later, the female protagonist in *Runaway* also made a similar action, but this time, the author focused on the emotional changes of the escapee after the escape. The beginning of the story is very similar to *A Doll's House*. The female protagonist was also living in her husband's "love" and discovers her husband's male-centered and male-supremacist thinking because of a special event. She also chose to escape. But after that, she found that she not only cannot integrate into the outside world but also had no place to settle herself. "But strangely, she was doing all these things while hoping to find herself on the bus. Like Mrs. Jamieson would say, and like she herself might hope to say, she took control of her own destiny. She would no longer be subjected to fierce glances or influenced by others' negative moods, causing her to furrow her brow every day. But then what else could she care about? How would she know if she was still alive?" [8].

In this escape, she realized that her husband still holds an important and irreplaceable position in her life, especially since she had become accustomed to living under his protection. Facing a world that would be completely unfamiliar and even unimaginable after escaping, she longed for a sense of independent and complete self. However, she discovered that the so-called "self" had already been distorted by male discourse and patriarchal domination, to the point where even her own existence was uncertain. At this point, the escape in search of self-liberation becomes a game played only with oneself.

However, not all escapees seeking self-liberation are women. In *Sons and Lovers*, Mrs. Morel comes from a middle-class background, while her husband is a miner from a working-class family. She wishes to transform her husband to become a more noble person in line with her own lifestyle, using her own will to dominate him [4]. The couple had three struggles, and Morel progressively realized that he was weak. In the third struggle, he packed up and left home. The outcome of this escape was also to return home secretly in the dark. The author uses this to demonstrate the oppression and triumph of the civilized person represented by the powerful wife over the natural person who lives in a natural way in the industrialized background.

In "What Happens after *Nora Leaves*", Lu [9] gives the conclusion that this type of escape has only two outcomes: either degeneration or return. The protagonist who escapes after awakening to his subjective consciousness has a gap between his spiritual world and the reality, which gives rise to the desire to escape. However, this desire cannot completely sever the attachment on a material level, making the escape of the subject extremely difficult due to the conflict between the spirit and the flesh. Therefore, it can be said that this escape, born of the desire to break free, is doomed to a tragic ending from the outset due to its incompleteness in breaking away from the material world.

2.2 Seeking Emotional Support

In the act of escaping, many characters made the decision to pursue new emotional support after weighing their current situation and future prospects. This emotional support is often centered around love and ideals. Their escape is not just a fleeing from home, but rather an inner drive to seek consciousness. However, this type of decision

does not necessarily mean rationality. For example, in the beginning of *Runaway*, the elopement of Carla and Clark is described as follows: “She regarded him as the designer of their future life, while she was willing to be his captive. Her obedience was natural and willing” [8]. At this point, Carla is still in an underdeveloped state, which means her escape seems to be a bold pursuit of love, but in reality, it is absolute obedience to her lover. Such escapes are also common in novels that revolve around love, such as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where Teresa runs away to be with Tomas, etc.

On the other hand, many male-centric escape stories are focused on concrete prison break plots. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy’s escape demonstrates the power of maintaining humanity and rationality in the dark. In *The Criminal Lu Yanshi*, Luyanshi’s escape represents his commitment to his wife’s spiritual wellbeing. In *Les Misérables*, after Jean Valjean surrendered himself to the authorities to save Champmathieu, he escaped again to take care of Fantine’s orphaned daughter Cosette. At this point, his escape is more like a key part of self-redemption, responsibility, and commitment. After being converted by the bishop, Jean Valjean no longer lives for himself, but instead spends his life pursuing a clear conscience and a bright soul. He escaped for the rest of his life under the warrant, fulfilling his promise to Fantine, and the word “escape” thus carried some romantic and idealistic connotations.

As the purpose of these escapes deepens, we can see a special type of subject. Their escape is not caused by the breakdown and disharmony of family relationships, but rather the inevitable result of an inner drive to expand consciousness. The “known” they are escaping to is a utopia constructed by personal ideals. In *The Rainbow*, the pursuit of three generations is based on the adjustment of gender relationships - the pursuit of harmonious gender relationships, and the establishment of a harmonious family. In the pursuit, they interpret the expansion of self-consciousness. They depart from their homeland, expand their lives externally, and achieve self-realization through continuous exploration of their survival status. In addition, in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Connie and Mellors nurtured new life in the paradise of trees, flowers, and animals, and with their ideals of saving society, they permanently escaped from Ragby, completely breaking away from the ugly reality of society. They openly resist industrial civilization and the small forest they escape to is the utopia in their hearts. This escape is a way of opening up a new world with the power of new life, and is both a departure and a rebirth.

2.3 The Pursuit of Absolute Freedom

The term “escape” itself carries a dual meaning of “escaping from” and “seeking after,” but there is a special type of escape where individuals flee from the “known” towards the “void.” These individuals do not seem to have a clear reason to reject their current life, nor do they have an ideal in the distance to pursue. Instead, certain factors in their character make them have an almost obsessive desire for absolute freedom, and therefore they escape for the sake of “escape,” living their lives in betrayal.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the representative of “lightness of life,” Sabina, should have felt happy when her lover finally betrayed his wife and joined her. This should have ended her “journey from betrayal to betrayal,” but at this moment, she “heard the call of rebellion blowing from afar again, and realized that she was powerless to resist its summons” [10]; therefore, she escaped. In this betrayal, she was secretly ecstatic

for this escape, but once the escape ended, “what could she betray again?” She did not know. She spent her life practicing Sartre’s “Hell is other people,” and even betrayed her family, spouse, love, and country for absolute freedom. However, when none of these remained, she fell into emptiness and concluded that the pursuit of freedom was meaningless, ultimately leading to the “unbearable lightness of being”.

On the one hand, the writer is using this seemingly meaningless escape to depict the absurdity of modern human consciousness and reveal the irrational nature of humanity. But on the other hand, from the perspective of existentialists, individuals must be situated in their actual situation and gain their own existence through their actions. People are free and depend on the values they choose. At this level, escape becomes a way for characters to prove their own existence, and it is also an extraordinary way of rebellion against their own alienation.

3 The Function of “Escape” in Narrative

After the above analysis, we can see that the action of escape appears at the beginning of a novel as the start of the story, in the middle as a plot twist, or at the end as the finale of the story, creating intriguing effects as follows.

3.1 Refine Characterization

On the level of character, the action of “escape” can enhance the completeness of a character by adding richness to their personality traits through detailed descriptions, unique expressions, and choices of behavior. “Escape,” as an action with strong subjective consciousness, can often stimulate the desires hidden deep in a character’s heart, revealing them, or it can completely change the character’s fate, making their inner world more abundant. For instance, in *A Doll’s House*, Nora’s escape is seen as a feminist awakening and a bold rebellion against patriarchy in feminist literary criticism, expressing the requirement for human liberation and the desire to change the existing social order, thereby having unique artistic appeal. Furthermore, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy’s escape reveals his calmness and composure throughout his time in prison, while Sabina’s escape in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* propels her towards the lightness of life.

What is more interesting is that the first escape often accompanies the second and third escape, and the symbolic meaning of each escape is different. It is these different types of escape that shape and manifest the protagonist’s personality. For example, in *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean’s first four escapes were based on instinctive avoidance, showing his bestial side, and at this point, his character was formed based on a single concept or quality. The fifth escape is driven by his personality pursuit, shining under the glow of the bishop, which means he must either surpass the bishop or fall into a state worse than a prisoner. He chooses the former and must escape from his original identity as a prisoner to pursue the bishop’s benevolence and universal love. This redeeming escape reveals the conflict between his real identity and ideal realm, leading to the transformation of his character from “flat” to “round,” thus evoking all the emotions we possess.

3.2 Promote Plot Development

On the level of plot, “escape” makes the story more convoluted and provides impetus for the development and twists of the story. In this regard, Aristotle’s theory of “peripeteia” and “anagnorisis” can be borrowed. A complex action can be achieved through peripeteia and anagnorisis or both, leading to the resolution of the story. Peripeteia and anagnorisis must arise from the structure of the plot, which is a series of events combined according to the principles of probability [11]. Escape creates the possibility for characters to make further discoveries, and can also act as a form of peripeteia to propel the story towards its climax. For example, in the case of Kara’s escape mentioned earlier in *Runaway*, her escape led to her “discovery” of Clark’s special place in her life and her own insignificance and helplessness as an individual, which ultimately led her back home. While she appeared to be continuing her life as before, in reality everything was different, “there was a seemingly attractive subconscious buried in her heart, and a temptation that was always hidden” [8]. However, this temptation can only remain as such, as it was the escape that allowed her to understand it.

Conflict and contradiction between characters are the core of plot development. In Hegel’s “dialectical theory,” both conflicting parties have their own rationality and one-sidedness, and the “eternal controversy” is the ultimate victor. In “escape,” the essence of the escaped and the escaped-from is actually a struggle between two ethical forces, and both will be highlighted while the individual is punished. In *Sons and Lovers*, for example, Morel and his wife represent primitive natural humans and civilized humans of the industrial age respectively. The failure of their escape represents the oppression and victory of civilized humans, represented by the powerful wife, over natural humans who live according to natural ways. Morel henceforth exists in the family as the “other” and is speechless, while the seemingly victorious wife is tormented by her excessive possessiveness. This escape not only highlights the theme, but also lays the groundwork for Paul’s later Oedipal complex, further forming new causal relationships and advancing the development of the story.

3.3 Shaping Two Environments

On the environmental level, “escape” powerfully shapes two environments: the previous living conditions and the future world being pursued. Engels proposed to “truthfully represent typical characters in typical environments,” and this typical environment can be highlighted by the stark contrast between the escape destination and the origin.

In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Connie and Mellors originally lived in the lifeless and decaying Ragby estate in an industrial society. The Ragby estate is a representative of decay and lifelessness. In Lawrence’s words, “Ragby Hall was a long, low old red building, started somewhere in the mid-eighteenth century, and added on to till it was a chaos of a place, with a mild sort of efficiency. It stood on an eminence overlooking a prospect of long, grimy township, which ran right up to the colliery hill at the back; it was a smallish, red-brick village, but grimed-in from the colliery, and with a sort of half-life of its own” [12]. As a result, the lifeless Ragby estate and the uncommunicative people of Tevershall, like a solid wall, tightly imprison Connie in a world that is dead-like. The destination they ultimately choose is a small forest in the hunting grounds, also a

metaphorical social sanctuary, which liberates them from ethical ideals. It is precisely this escape action that forms a strong contrast between the two environments, shaping two completely opposite social landscapes.

4 Conclusions

The examination of the concept of “escape” in narrative literary works reveals its multi-faceted nature. By analyzing the motives behind the action of escaping, we can categorize it into three types: self-liberation, emotional support, and absolute freedom. The act of “escape” serves several important functions in the narrative process, including refining characterization, promoting plot development, and shaping the environments of the previous existence and future pursuit. Through careful observation and classification of “escape” in literature, we gain a deeper appreciation of the richness and subtlety of narrative art. Overall, this analysis highlights the power of narrative storytelling to explore the complexities of the human experience and to provide insight into the human condition.

Our analysis of the theme of “escape” in literature and film suggests that pursuing one’s desires and aspirations does not necessarily require physical escape. Instead, it can involve inner liberation and peace. In the film *Passengers*, for example, Arthur advised Jim, who wanted to escape, to focus on the present and not be preoccupied with things beyond his control. Jim ultimately chose to stay, then built a new world with Aurora on the spaceship, creating a spiritual home that cannot be found elsewhere. Continuously escaping can lead to a sense of emptiness or getting trapped in another prison. In such cases, staying put and focusing on building the inner world may be a better choice.

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