MAKING IN TERMINALLY ILL ADOLESCENTS JOHN GREEN'S THE FAULT IN OUR STARS: RESILIENCE, IDENTITY, AND EXISTENTIAL MEANING

- *Author:* ***Azimova Shahnoza***

1st year student of Navoi state university

Navoi, Uzbekistan

email: shaxnoza122007@gmail.com

•*Scientific advisor:* ***Shavkatov Sherzod Shavkatovich***

•*Teacher, Department of Practical English*

•*Navoi state university*

•*Navoi, Uzbekistan*

email: sherzodbek.shavkatov.uzb@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper examines the psychological dimensions of resilience, personal identity, and existential meaning-making in terminally ill adolescents as portrayed in John Green's 'The Fault in Our Stars' (2012). While prior scholarship has centred on the novel's emotional and romantic dimensions, this study draws on Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, Erik Erikson's theory of identity development, and Martin Seligman's positive psychology framework to interrogate how Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters construct meaning in the face of imminent mortality. Adolescence, widely regarded as the critical developmental stage for identity formation, is complicated dramatically when a life-threatening illness disrupts normative developmental trajectories. This paper argues that Green's characters do not merely endure cancer but actively re-author their identities through narrative, relationships, humour, and philosophy. The study explores how Hazel's literary obsession with 'An Imperial Affliction' mirrors her search for an authentic narrative of death without closure, while Augustus's fear of oblivion drives him toward legacy-seeking behaviour. The paper further investigates how parental dynamics, peer*

interaction, and institutional structures such as the cancer support group function as both constraints and enablers of psychological growth. This research contributes to the interdisciplinary field of health humanities and adolescent psychology by demonstrating how Young Adult Literature can serve as both a mirror and a model for understanding the inner lives of seriously ill young people. The paper concludes that resilience in these characters is not passive endurance but active, meaning-directed engagement with an uncertain and foreshortened future.

***Keywords**: Adolescent identity, existential psychology, logotherapy, positive psychology, resilience, terminal illness, Young Adult Literature, meaning-making, health humanities, coming of age.*

Adolescence constitutes the most psychologically volatile phase of human development, characterised by the simultaneous negotiation of identity, autonomy, sexuality, and social belonging (Erikson, 1968). When a life-threatening illness such as cancer is introduced into this already turbulent developmental landscape, the resulting psychological disruption is profound and often underexplored in academic discourse. Young Adult (YA) literature has increasingly emerged as an important site through which such experiences are dramatised, humanised, and interrogated. John Green's 'The Fault in Our Stars' (2012) stands as perhaps the most prominent contemporary literary engagement with this intersection of adolescence, illness, and existential crisis.

Unlike earlier cancer narratives in both literature and film that tended toward sentimentality or tragedy, Green's novel presents illness not as a plot device but as a lived psychological reality. The novel's protagonists, sixteen-year-old Hazel Grace Lancaster and seventeen-year-old Augustus Waters, are not merely sick teenagers in love — they are richly realised psychological subjects grappling with questions of legacy, love, identity, and the nature of existence itself. It is this psychological depth that makes the novel a uniquely valuable text for interdisciplinary analysis at the intersection of literary studies and adolescent psychology.

This paper situates the novel within three intersecting theoretical frameworks: Viktor Frankl's logotherapy (1959), which posits that the search for

meaning is the primary human motivation; Erik Erikson's (1968) psychosocial model of development, particularly his concept of identity versus role confusion; and Martin Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of well-being. Through these lenses, the paper investigates how Hazel and Augustus negotiate resilience and meaning in contexts where the conventional markers of adolescent development — career planning, romantic futures, long-term friendships — are rendered uncertain or impossible by illness.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this research is to undertake a psychologically grounded literary analysis of adolescent resilience and meaning-making in 'The Fault in Our Stars'. The specific objectives are: to apply Frankl's logotherapy to the existential negotiations of Hazel and Augustus; to examine how Erikson's model of identity development is disrupted and reconfigured by terminal illness; to assess how Seligman's positive psychology framework illuminates the characters' emotional coping strategies; to investigate the role of narrative, humour, and interpersonal relationships in sustaining psychological well-being; and to demonstrate the broader value of YA literature as a resource for understanding and supporting adolescent mental health in clinical and educational contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, close-reading methodology informed by psychocritical and interdisciplinary approaches to literary analysis. Primary source material is drawn from Green's novel 'The Fault in Our Stars' (2012), supplemented by reference to relevant secondary sources including academic psychology literature, health humanities scholarship, and literary criticism. Analytical frameworks are drawn from Frankl's 'Man's Search for Meaning' (1959), Erikson's 'Identity: Youth and Crisis' (1968), and Seligman's 'Flourish' (2011). The study does not claim to offer clinical diagnosis of fictional characters but rather uses psychological theory heuristically to illuminate the novel's representations of adolescent inner life.

HYPOTHESIS

This research proceeds from the hypothesis that the psychological portrayal of Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters in 'The Fault in Our Stars' reflects empirically validated patterns of adolescent coping with terminal illness, including the centrality of meaning-making, identity renegotiation, and relationship-based resilience. It is further hypothesised that the novel's treatment of these themes is sophisticated enough to contribute meaningfully to clinical and educational understandings of seriously ill adolescents, and that engagement with such YA texts can serve as an effective tool for fostering empathy and psychological literacy among readers, educators, and carers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, developed from his experiences as a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, holds that the will to meaning is the most fundamental human motivation (Frankl, 1959). For Frankl, meaning can be found even in unavoidable suffering through what he termed 'attitudinal values' — the freedom to choose one's response to unchangeable circumstances. This framework is particularly resonant for terminally ill adolescents, who face precisely such circumstances. Hazel's philosophical acceptance of her condition, however painful, and Augustus's fierce drive to leave a legacy both represent distinct but equally valid modes of logotherapeutic meaning construction.

Erikson's (1968) fifth stage of psychosocial development — identity versus role confusion — posits that adolescents must forge a coherent sense of self from the competing demands of biological change, social expectation, and personal aspiration. For healthy adolescents, this process unfolds across years of experimentation and social engagement. For Hazel and Augustus, cancer collapses this temporal horizon radically. Yet Green's novel demonstrates that identity formation does not cease under these conditions — it is simply reconfigured, often producing a precocious wisdom and self-awareness that distinguishes these characters from their healthy peers.

Seligman's (2011) PERMA model identifies five pillars of well-being: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.

Though developed primarily for clinical and educational contexts, the framework maps productively onto the novel's psychological landscape. The humour that Hazel and Augustus deploy, the depth of their relationship, their literary and intellectual engagement, and Augustus's quest for accomplishment through legacy-seeking all reflect dimensions of the PERMA model, suggesting that positive psychological flourishing is possible even within the shadow of terminal illness.

HAZEL GRACE LANCASTER: IDENTITY AT THE THRESHOLD OF MORTALITY

Hazel Grace Lancaster is introduced to readers as a young woman who has internalised her illness so thoroughly that she has constructed an identity almost entirely around her status as a dying person. At sixteen, she has been living with thyroid cancer since the age of thirteen, and the physical reality of her condition — the oxygen tank she carries everywhere, the damage to her lungs, the ever-present possibility of acute deterioration — has shaped every dimension of her psychological life. Her depression, she insists famously in the novel, is not a side effect of cancer but a side effect of dying. This philosophical distinction is itself evidence of remarkable psychological sophistication.

From a Franklian perspective, Hazel's central psychological project is the search for a meaningful narrative of death. Her obsession with Peter Van Houten's novel 'An Imperial Affliction' is not merely literary fandom — it is an existential quest. The novel ends mid-sentence, without resolution for Anna's mother or the other characters, and Hazel is desperate to know what happens after the ending. Her need for narrative closure mirrors her need to understand what her own death will mean for those she leaves behind, particularly her mother and father. The journey to Amsterdam to confront Van Houten is thus not merely a romantic adventure but a logotherapeutic pilgrimage.

Erikson's framework illuminates Hazel's identity struggles with particular clarity. Unable to plan for a career, uncertain of whether she will live to adulthood, Hazel has foreclosed many of the exploratory behaviours that characterise healthy adolescent identity development. She resists falling in love with Augustus precisely

because she is acutely aware that she is what she calls 'a grenade' — someone whose death will cause irreparable damage to those who love her. This is not merely self-pity but a considered ethical position, a form of identity foreclosure undertaken out of care for others rather than psychological limitation.

Hazel's eventual surrender to her relationship with Augustus marks a significant psychological shift — from protective withdrawal to courageous engagement. By the novel's end, her famous final words, 'I do, Augustus. / I do,' represent not merely romantic commitment but an affirmation of meaning, relationship, and the value of a life lived fully even within its foreshortened arc. Her spiritual and philosophical growth across the novel constitutes a remarkable instance of what psychologists term 'post-traumatic growth' — the paradoxical deepening of self that can accompany serious illness and loss (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

AUGUSTUS WATERS: LEGACY, OBLIVION, AND THE DRIVE FOR SIGNIFICANCE

Augustus Waters presents a psychologically contrasting but equally nuanced portrait of an adolescent negotiating terminal illness. Where Hazel's primary anxiety concerns the pain her death will cause others, Augustus is consumed by a terror of oblivion — the fear of dying without having mattered, without having left a trace significant enough to outlast his brief existence. His fear, as Hazel observes, is not of death itself but of insignificance. This distinction places Augustus squarely within the Franklian framework of meaning-seeking, even as his specific mode of meaning-construction differs fundamentally from Hazel's.

Augustus's initial cancer — osteosarcoma, for which he lost a leg — appears to be in remission when the novel begins, and he presents himself with the easy confidence of a survivor. His intelligence, wit, and physical attractiveness mark him as someone who might plausibly aspire to a significant life. His love of video games, particularly games with grand heroic narratives, reflects his desire for a life story with weight and consequence. Yet when his cancer returns aggressively late in the novel, this aspiration is thrown into crisis. The recurrence strips away his

performance of confidence and forces a more authentic confrontation with his mortality.

From an Eriksonian perspective, Augustus's crisis is one of generativity in miniature — the adolescent version of the adult desire to leave something meaningful for future generations. His wish to use his 'Wish' (from the Genie Foundation, a Make-A-Wish analogue) for Hazel rather than himself is one of the novel's most psychologically revealing moments. It represents a genuine developmental achievement — the subordination of self-interest to relational care — that Erikson associates with more advanced stages of psychosocial development. That Augustus achieves this at seventeen, under the pressure of terminal illness, speaks to the accelerating effect of extreme adversity on psychological maturation.

RESILIENCE AS RELATIONAL: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF THEIR BOND

The relationship between Hazel and Augustus is not merely the romantic centrepiece of the novel — it is the primary psychological mechanism through which both characters achieve resilience and meaning. Research in health psychology consistently demonstrates that social support is among the most powerful buffers against the psychological distress associated with serious illness (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Green's novel dramatises this finding with unusual sophistication. The bond between Hazel and Augustus functions simultaneously as emotional sustenance, intellectual stimulation, and existential companionship.

Their shared humour deserves particular psychological attention. The gallows humour they deploy — joking about death, cancer, and disability in ways that would be deeply uncomfortable among healthy teenagers — serves multiple psychological functions. It creates solidarity, reduces the isolating stigma of illness, exerts cognitive control over terrifying circumstances, and asserts a form of identity that transcends the patient role. This use of humour as a coping strategy is well-documented in the clinical literature on adolescent cancer patients and is associated with better psychological outcomes (Martin, 2001).

The trip to Amsterdam represents the relational and existential apex of their bond. Removed from the institutional contexts of hospitals, support groups, and parental care, they are free to experience themselves as simply two people in love, exploring a beautiful city. The fact that Augustus chooses this moment to reveal his cancer's return — and that Hazel chooses to remain present rather than retreat behind her protective walls — represents the fullest expression of the relational resilience the novel charts.

PARENTAL DYNAMICS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Green's novel is notable among YA cancer narratives for its thoughtful treatment of parental psychology. Hazel's parents are portrayed with unusual depth and complexity. Her mother's revelation that she has been secretly pursuing a social work qualification — so that she will have a purpose and identity beyond being Hazel's mother — is one of the novel's most psychologically astute moments. It acknowledges that the psychological burden of caring for a terminally ill child threatens to consume the carer's own identity, and that healthy parenting under these conditions requires the parent to maintain their own sense of self and purpose.

The cancer support group, which frames the novel's opening and serves as the site of Hazel and Augustus's first meeting, functions as a complex institutional space. On one level it represents the medicalization of adolescent suffering — a well-intentioned but often patronising attempt to contain and process grief within structured parameters. Patrick's repetitive facilitation style and the group's physical location in the 'literal heart of Jesus' are treated with gentle irony by Hazel. Yet the group also serves genuine psychological functions, providing community, reducing isolation, and — crucially — providing the social context in which Hazel and Augustus's relationship can begin.

EXISTENTIAL THEMES: RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE QUESTION OF AFTERLIFE

'The Fault in Our Stars' engages more seriously with questions of religion and afterlife than most contemporary YA fiction. Augustus is more conventionally religious, expressing a belief that they will meet again after death, while Hazel is

more agnostic and sceptical. This difference in their metaphysical orientations creates productive tension and genuine intellectual dialogue. Van Houten, the broken, alcoholic author they travel to meet, represents a nihilistic endpoint — a man who has allowed grief to destroy his capacity for meaning-making entirely. His refusal to provide Hazel with the closure she seeks is initially devastating but ultimately liberating, forcing her toward a more self-authored existential position.

The novel's title, drawn from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar — 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings' — ironises its own pessimism. Where Cassius argues that human agency, not fate, determines our lot, Green's novel suggests a more complex dialectic: cancer is indeed a matter of biological fate, not personal fault, yet how one responds to it — the meanings one constructs, the relationships one nurtures, the legacy one attempts to leave — remains a domain of genuine human agency and choice. It is in this space of response that Hazel and Augustus locate their humanity, their dignity, and ultimately their resilience.

CONCLUSION

'The Fault in Our Stars' offers far more than a moving love story between two terminally ill teenagers. It is a psychologically sophisticated narrative about the human capacity for meaning-making, resilience, and identity under extreme existential pressure. Through the frameworks of Frankl's logotherapy, Erikson's psychosocial development theory, and Seligman's positive psychology, this paper has demonstrated that Hazel and Augustus engage in genuine psychological work that reflects and illuminates the experiences of real adolescents navigating serious illness.

The novel suggests that resilience in the face of terminal illness is not a matter of passive endurance or heroic stoicism, but of active, relational, and meaning-directed engagement with an uncertain and foreshortened future. It demonstrates that adolescents — even those confronting the most extreme circumstances — retain the capacity for psychological growth, philosophical depth, and genuine flourishing. Young Adult Literature of this quality thus serves not only as entertainment but as

an important resource for educators, clinicians, and policy-makers concerned with the psychological well-being of seriously ill young people.

Future research might productively explore comparative analyses with other YA illness narratives, or examine the psychological effects of reading such literature on adolescent readers themselves — both those who are ill and those who are not. The health humanities represents a vital and underexplored space for interdisciplinary inquiry, and 'The Fault in Our Stars' stands as one of its most richly rewarding primary texts.

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