

## The Struggle for Existence in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* in the Light of Existentialism

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**Roshini Peter**

M.Phil. English Literature, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli

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### Introduction

In the novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, author John Green has created a soulful story that brings out the themes such as life, death, love and pain with heart wrenching emotion. However to me, this novel is a real page turner for its vision of existence and facticity. Sixteen year old Hazel Grace suffers from terminal thyroid cancer and thus lives with the fear of being a grenade. Augustus Waters suffers from a touch of osteosarcoma and is obsessed with Oblivion, the idea of being remembered for something after life. In this novel, the author tackles the themes of Choice and Commitment, and Dread and Anxiety. The objective of this research paper is to illustrate the philosophy of Existentialism and the facticity of Hazel and Augustus as they try to evaluate what meaning their lives have.

### Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that views human existence as having a set of underlying themes and characteristics such as anxiety, dread, freedom, awareness of death and consciousness of existing. Heidegger, the leading figure of Exist.; coined the term "thrown" human beings are "thrown into existence" and that "existence is prior to essence." The philosophers who influenced Existentialist writers are Kafka, Albert Camus and Hemmingway and maybe even author John Green.

One of the major themes of existentialist theory is facticity a concept defined by Sartre in his work *Being and Nothingness*. Facticity is said to be both a limitation and a condition of freedom. The idea of facticity is present in the title of the novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. Author John Green takes the title from a line in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar:

*"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."*(7)

The word "stars" here refers to fate. In Van Houten's return letter to Augustus, John Green brings out the theme of facticity by saying that, "even though Cassius seems to say that the problem is not fate but within oneself." Van Houten argues that that is easy to say when one is privileged but it's untrue when one lives through true adversity. As Green's title directly calls out, the fault for their (Hazel and Augustus) dying of cancer is not their doing but fate.

Hazel receives the answer to her question, that she always feared in her mind, through these lines: "I want you guys to have a life, I said. I worry that you won't have a life... After a minute, Mom said, I'm taking some classes. Online

... Imagining my mom as a Patrick. It made me think of Anna's mom. She would've been a good social worker, too"(24). The reason why Hazel was fixated on finding out what happened to the characters in the novel *An Imperial Affliction* after the protagonist Anna dies and Anna's mother is left abandoned after her death. Is that the situation of Anna's mother brought fear to Hazel on what will happen to her own parents after her death. But after Hazel's mother gives her the news that, she is studying to be a social worker to counsel families. Hazel receives the answer she was looking for in *An Imperial Affliction* and is thus greatly relieved.

Another aspect of facticity is that it entails anguish, both in the sense of freedom that produces anguish when limited by facticity. Existential anguish is a term that is generally held to be a negative feeling arising from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. The anguish that characterizes the existentialist vision of life is shown in the following passage: "And here it was, the great and terrible ten, slamming me again and again... The waves tossing me against the rocks then pulling me back out to sea so they could launch me again into jagged face of the cliff, leaving me floating face up on the water, undrowned"(21). Hazel uses the image of drowning, to describe the pain she feels having lost Augustus Waters. Here the symbol of water relates to Hazel's suffering of having fluid in her lungs not allowing her to breathe, it also connects to Augustus's last name "Waters" because; "He has become the source of her greatest pain." As with Augustus's death, Hazel seems to lose more than just Augustus, but also all of the memories they shared. Thus Hazel considers this of being smashed by waves and unable to drown, meaning there's no relief to her pain.

The Existential philosophy of the Absurd is a philosophical school of thought which states that the efforts of humanity to find an inherent meaning would ultimately fail. Because the sheer amount of information as well as the vast realm of the unknown makes total certainty impossible.

As per Kierkegaard, Soren, Journal, 1849:

*What is the Absurd? It is, as may quite easily be seen, that I, a rational being, must act in a case where my reason, my powers of reflection, tell me: you can just as well do the one thing as the other, that is to say where my reason and reflection say: you cannot act and yet here is where I have to act... The Absurd, or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon faith... I must act, but reflection has closed the road so I take one of the possibilities and say: This is what I do; I cannot do otherwise because I am brought to a standstill by my powers of reflection.*

The support group meetings held in an Episcopal church shaped like a cross, introduces the theme of Absurd through these lines:

*"We are literally in the heart of Jesus." he said. "I thought we were in a church basement, but we are literally in the heart of Jesus." "Someone should tell*

*Jesus,” I said. “I mean, it’s gotta be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart.” “I would tell Him myself,” Augustus said, “but unfortunately I am literally stuck inside of His heart, so He won’t be able to hear me.” (16)*

The leader of the support group, Patrick mentions that the group meets in “*The heart of Jesus.*” As the church is shaped like a cross and he utilizes prayer at the end of the meeting. But Hazel and Augustus joke on Patrick’s comment. As the two consider this as a fairly meaningless ritual and turn towards different philosophical explanations to find meaning in their lives. Despite the name, Hazel Grace definitely isn’t the religious type. Hazel has a nihilistic view of life. She believes life has no meaning and it leads to death with nothing afterward. She sees her whole existence as a cancer’s perk. As Nihilism: ‘Nihil’ meaning Nothing, is a philosophical position arguing that the world and its human existence has no objective meaning, purpose, essential value, comprehensible truth or reality. It considers existence to be useless. But Hazel’s philosophical standpoint changes through her relationship with Augustus. She realizes that after death people live on through their relationships with their loved ones and the impacts they make on the lives of other people. Thus, the nihilistic philosophy she upholds at the beginning of the novel transforms.

Death is the key element of this novel. We all will die someday but it happens to Hazel and Augustus much sooner. Wrestling with the big issue of life and death as having cancer makes every moment potentially perilous for both of them. Although the two characters try to live by their support group mantra, “*Living our best lives today*”, every action, relationship, and experience is cast in the shadow of their impending mortalities.

The response to oblivion by the two main characters in the novel are unconnected. For instance, Augustus says: “Sometimes I dream that I’m writing a memoir. A memoir would be just the thing to keep me in the hearts and memories of my adoring public” (16). Augustus is afraid of fading into oblivion after he dies. He believes that, without doing something tangible that lives in people’s minds after he’s gone, he won’t have mattered. His significance, like his consciousness will simply be consumed by oblivion after his death. Augustus is obsessed with the idea of dying for something heroic and leaving behind a grandstory to tell of himself, in order to give his life and death a meaning. But as for Hazel, the fear of oblivion strikes her in a different note. Hazel views her approaching death as an event that will severely damage those around her. As Hazel compares herself to a grenade waiting to explode anytime, she is concerned in protecting those around her from the pain of her death. Hence she only wishes to know that those close to her, and her relationships with them, will carry on after her demise.

We can come across another aspect of the theme death, when Hazel reads these words from Augustus to Van Houten in the letter that Lidewij sends to her: “*I got my wish, I suppose. I left my scar*” (313). This brief quotation touches on separate ideas. First, it speaks out Augustus’s desire to be remembered after his

death, which is a main preoccupation of his throughout the novel. Here, he says he got his “*wish*.” Since Augustus, always dreamt of doing something heroic, he sacrifices his wish from “The Genie Foundation” to take Hazel to Amsterdam. This act allows him to survive after death and his legacy lives on with Hazel and her parents forever.

The quotation also emphasizes the dual nature of pain in the novel. The “*scar*” Augustus leaves is an emotional one, that brings pain to Hazel. It refers to the fact that Hazel will be hurt by Augustus’s death. This is the reason why Augustus wished Hazel would die before him so she wouldn’t have to be harmed by knowing he is going to die. But at the end, his death had left a scar on Hazel. But the pain that left this scar, wasn’t a harmful one to Hazel, as she genuinely loved Augustus and that he mattered a lot to her. She demonstrates this understanding during Augustus’s eulogy when she says, “*Without pain, we couldn’t know joy.*” (272) She realises that death is an event that allows us to live and love to the fullest. In the end it becomes clear that life is defined by our relationships with others, and the importance and meaning of these relationships is demonstrated through the pain felt when a loved one dies.

### **Conclusion**

Author John Green brings out two main themes of the novel; facticity and death in the light of existentialism. The major characters of the novel, Hazel Grace and Augustus Waters who are involved in the daily basis of living with their cancer, finally find the meaning in their lives at the end of the novel. They provide us with thoughtful life lessons such as: It doesn’t matter how long we live in this world but what all are the good deeds we accomplish. In spite of the fault in their stars, Hazel and Augustus proved a happy existence within the limited span of time. Hence enjoy the little things in life within the span of existence. The novel in essence sides with this idea: “*No matter how little time we have, we can make an impact in others as well as in the world we live.*”

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