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DIPLOMA THESIS

The development of adolescent identity in selected novels by John
Green

Vývoj identity adolescentů ve vybraných románech Johna Greena

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I have written this diploma thesis, “The development of adolescent identity in selected novels by John Green,” exclusively by myself under the supervision of PhDr. Tereza Topolovská, PhD. and that in the process I have used only the sources cited. I declare herewith that I have not used this thesis to gain any other degree.

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ABSTRAKT

Americký autor literatury pro mládež John Green ve svých knihách často ztvárňuje postavy, které byly zasaženy smrtí blízké osoby, zažily traumatizující událost či trpí nemocí, která je určitým způsobem omezuje. Protože adolescence je důležité a citlivé období jedince, ve kterém se poprvé plně utváří a upevňuje identita, tyto zážitky musí nutně ovlivňovat jejich způsob vnímání sebe sama. Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tím, jak si dospívající hrdinové ve dvou vybraných dílech od Johna Greena – *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) a *Looking For Alaska* (2005) – utvářejí svou vlastní identitu a současně se vyrovnávají se smrtí a/nebo traumatem. Jako teoretický rámec analýzy slouží koncept (inter)subjektivity od literárních kritiček Robyn McCallum a Karen Coats, který se zabývá opozicí mezi jedincem a jeho okolím. Tento základ je pak doplněn o koncept psychologického vývoje od Jamese E. Marcii. Středem a podstatou stabilní dospělé identity jsou mezilidské vztahy, nutné pro úspěšné začlenění do společnosti. V případě, že chybí, je jedinec marginalizován jako riziko pro ostatní, případně umírá jako důsledek svého statusu.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

John Green, literatura pro mládež, adolescence, dospívání, identita, Other, smrt, zármutek, smrtelná nemoc, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Looking for Alaska*

ABSTRACT

The American YA novelist John Green frequently centres his books on characters that have been struck by the death of somebody close to them, by a traumatic event, or suffer from debilitating illness. Since adolescence is an important and impressionable period of life during which one's identity is firmly established for the first time, such experiences inevitably have a lasting impact on the person and their sense of self. This diploma thesis analyses how the teenage heroes in two selected works by Green – *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) and *Looking for Alaska* (2005) – construe their identity when simultaneously facing death and/or trauma. The analysis takes as its foundation the theories of (inter)subjectivity and of the Other by literary critics Robyn McCallum and Karen Coats, respectively, and is complemented by the outline of psychological development from James E. Marcia. Interpersonal relationships are at the crux of a stable adult identity, and are essential for successful integration into wider society. If these are missing, the individual is marginalised as a threat to others, possibly dying as a consequence of their status.

KEY WORDS

John Green, young-adult literature, adolescence, maturation, identity, the Other, death, grief, terminal illness, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Looking for Alaska*

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Introduction

In the past two decades, there has been an upsurge in the publication of young adult (YA) novels that feature characters that come into close contact with death or find themselves in situations that may be perceived as extreme and/or traumatic, ones that permanently colour their lives (Flood, “Death wishes”). Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) tells the story of one girl’s suicide and how she manages to haunt the people who, in some way, facilitated her death by their actions or inactions. *Before I Fall* (2010) is the debut by Lauren Oliver whose main protagonist is a teenage girl who dies in a car crash and relives her last day several times in order to understand herself and her life. Or, there is Ned Vizzini’s *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* (2006), a semi-autobiographical novel from inside the psychiatric ward of a New York hospital.

YA novelists now tend to include more and more taboo subjects in their works, such as mental health issues, death, and sexuality, and this recent fascination with these topics has become a literary phenomenon (Flood, “Death wishes”). It is only one of the many things that has urged critics to look at children’s literature (which the YA genre is a part of) more closely. They consider what is motivating children to read certain books and the influence these may have on readers that are at such an impressionable and vulnerable time in their lives. Although children’s literature would be usually regarded as simple entertainment for its target audience, it actually often tackles topics that are serious and also relevant to its readers (Hintz and Tribunella 10).

John Green, a YA literature author, whose popularity skyrocketed since the publication of his 2012 novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, may be included among such novelists. He often portrays characters that are suffering from an illness, or have another issue that challenges them mentally and/or physically. Moreover, Green’s novels, strangely and notably, often feature death in various shapes and forms, which leads to the question as to why Green uses it so much and whether there is a purpose to it. Given that Green is highly interested in being able to shape teenagers’ values and morals through his books, it would appear Green uses death and traumatic experience as a challenge for his characters (Barkdoll and Scherff 68). They are teenagers who are at a point in life when they are growing and forming the basis for their adult lives: their identity. So if they are exposed to

something as momentous as a death, it has a considerable impact. Death is a means for them to discover something new and meaningful about themselves as it helps them realise what is important, and therefore, hopefully learn to manage and navigate their life better. To be able to properly examine why death or other traumatic events are so significant for a person, we need to first look at how identity is actually formed, what is essential to its development, and what happens in the case where the individual is unable to proceed with their psychological growth.

First, since we are dealing with fictional characters, we will look at the literary representations of growth and maturation predominantly through the prism of the theories of Robyn McCallum and Karen Coats. Both women focus on the process of forming identity, which is a sign of a fully developed adult, as portrayed within children's literature. They look at the interaction between the individual and society, how the latter is important in the course of the establishment of identity as one needs someone or something else to be able to clearly distinguish one's self. McCallum calls the result of the negotiation between a person and the environment "subjectivity," while Coats puts the individual in an opposition with an "Other," another person or a societal discourse that simultaneously helps and constrains the person in regards to what they can and cannot do (3; *Looking Glasses* 3). The ideal outcome is that the child transitions from the egocentrism, inherent to childhood by foregoing their personal wants and needs in the face of societal demands; this in turn offers them a certain amount of freedom and agency over their own life. It is the mastery of this constantly fluid opposition that is the mark of maturity and adulthood.

Because McCallum's and Coats' perspectives may be labelled as external views on the issue, the theory of a psychologist James E. Marcia complements and helps with understanding of the internal processes involved in adolescent identity formation. As identity is founded upon previous childhood experiences, the adolescence and young adulthood are periods when the person has finally amassed all that is necessary for the full realisation of their identity. Their identity must be integrated with the newly emerging demands of society – the individual must transform from being-cared-for to being a caregiving member of society (Marcia, *Ego Identity* 579). The child's basic identity is deconstructed and rebuilt as the individual negotiates the relationship with their

environment to successfully become part of it while also retaining a sense of independence. The connection between literary and psychological theories is the necessary presence of some other entity that prompts the individual towards self-inquiry and helps with the exploration of the self.

Additionally, the formation of self and identity is the central issue to be resolved during adolescence and if there are any further emotional crises, for example, the death of a close relative, it can have an impact on development. The traditional narrative within literature, which is in turn a reflection of real life, presents growth and identity achievement as a fairly straightforward journey that any adolescent can, and must, undergo (Trites, *Conceptualizations* 1). However, in case the external presence needed for this process is lost, the identity development then may be slowed, stunted, or even prematurely resolved in small children, depending on the circumstances. Marcia's theory offers an explanation as to how precisely, in what way, the sense of identity is impacted by loss or other significant changes to one's circumstances. Karen Coats labels those who are, for whatever reason, eventually unable to cope with the crisis and successfully resolve it as "abject characters" (*Looking Glasses* 150). These characters lack the tools to establish a reciprocal relationship with another person, and thus are shunned by society because they represent what must be overcome in order to achieve identity and to function properly within society. Such characters are the heroes of Green's books.

Out of the complete works of John Green, two have been selected as the most appropriate for the purposes of this thesis – *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Looking for Alaska*. They both present characters that have issues with achieving identity and may also be considered the best examples of abject characters to be found in Green's novels. In *Stars*, Hazel suffers from terminal cancer and refuses to engage with other people, as she does not see the point when she is going to die very soon. When she meets a boy, Gus, in a cancer support group, she is gradually persuaded by him that it is important to create and maintain human connection as it is what makes life worth living. Gus must also tackle numerous losses: he loses a leg to cancer, he loses the life he envisioned for himself, and then, in the end, he must deal with his impending death from recurrence. He too must learn to value the relationships he has in order to feel like he has led a full life and be content in his final

days. Both Gus and Hazel's sense of identity is muddled with cancer and they must find agency and control in any way they can to feel like their life has significance in spite of their health issues.

The eponymous character of *Looking for Alaska* (2005) wrestles with past trauma that has weighed on her since she was a little girl and influences her behaviour now that she is a teenager. The unresolved emotions connected to the event are at the centre of her incapacity to progress in her life and achieve a stable identity and adulthood. She is eventually pushed to death by a succession of events that remind her of the past and cause her to act recklessly. The other protagonists of the book, her friends, are unable to see Alaska's issues due to their self-centredness and lack of compassion. Issues which they cannot resolve in time and it is only Alaska's death that provokes them to do so. In trying to understand the motivation of Alaska's behaviour they will hopefully understand her and subsequently themselves better, thus helping their emotional growth.

Theoretical part

1 Children's literature: its assets and the objections to it

“I don't write children's books. I write, and somebody says, ‘That's for children.’” – Maurice Sendak in conversation with Stephen Colbert (Stout).

For a long time, children's literature has been considered unworthy of literary criticism as it was deemed too easy and simple, too transparent to merit a closer inspection (Hintz and Tribunella 2). Perry Nodelman, a children's literature critic, believes that children's literature is viewed as inferior to “adult literature” in the sense that we see children as the Other and by extension, the literature targeted at them as well (29). Since children's books are written by adults who make assumptions about childhood based on their memories and the influence of social discourse, the stories represent the consensus of what society believes children (should) experience during their early years and later, rather than accurately “represent[ing] the reality of childhood” (MacLeod np.). It is questionable whether authors remember their childhood experiences correctly or whether they are tainted with nostalgia. It is possible that one's childhood is never as innocent as one remembers it, that “children are always more like adults than adults are ever able to see” (Nodelman 33). There are writers who, by their construction of children as “rounded, capable individuals, wise and flawed in their decisions and actions,” allow the characters “adult possibilities” (Sarigianides 228, original emphasis). They blur the delineation between adult and children's literature, aiming to prove that the latter is not inferior to the former. We may give the examples of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* or J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* saga as novels that are all read by all age groups although they may be classified as YA or children's books.

According to Hintz and Tribunella, the usual objections to children's literature are the following: (1) children's literature is too simple and obvious to be read critically; (2) children's literature is pure, innocent, uncontroversial; and (3) critical analysis takes the fun out of reading children's literature (2-3). The first objection originates from the belief among writers that since the audience is generally young, the writing is easier and does not

require much effort (Law 17). It is difficult to clearly delineate the boundary between children's and adult literature. If we accept that they are more or less the same, the former traditionally defined merely by its audience, than the act of writing is the same and the labour involved therein as well (Coats, "YA Literature" 323). The author John Green posits "the basic tools a writer uses are the same no matter the audience. [...] dialogue, description, structure, characters, conflict, and so on" (Barkdoll and Scherff 69). The presumed simplicity may have to do with the themes and motif that could, on the surface, appear very straightforward and clear, thus undeserving of further study.

The answer to the second point of criticism is that children's literature and its subject matter has changed since we started to differentiate between children's and adult books. In the 1960s, there was a shift in the perception of what is appropriate for young audiences. Before, children were protected by adults, sheltered from the "starker realities," the new generation of writers offered readers an unfiltered view of the world, sometimes of the "worst that adult society can do and be" (MacLeod np.). Stories filled with serenity and hope were replaced by contemporary realism that introduced anxiety and pessimism. The happiness of childhood was replaced by the difficulties of growing up – changing bodies, turbulent emotional lives, the tension between individualism and community (Coats, "YA Literature 316). Arguably, by portraying the "lives, pleasures, fears, and anxieties of children" realistically, writers simply cannot avoid examining topics which are usually associated with maturity and adulthood as gloomy as they might be (Hintz and Tribunella 2).

With regards to the final point, the fear that deeper analyses of children's literature will remove pleasure from reading, is unfounded and unreasonable. John Green would actually argue that critical analyses *add* fun into reading because it is a way to appreciate the literature more (Barkdoll and Scherff 69). Typically, there is the underlying presupposition that children's literature is intended purely for enjoyment – it is simply a transition point before readers move onto the "capital L literature" (Coats, "YA Literature 317). However, reading children's literature critically markedly improves the experience one has with the books. It helps highlight the social and historical contexts of the book, and sparks discussions with children about books' themes. Also, while young readers may

sometimes struggle with the story, critical reading may help them to understand and appreciate literature more (Barkdoll and Scherff 67).

It is expected that children's books are different from books for adults because the audience is different as are the reading skills the audience possess (Hunt 3). But, it would be unwise to dismiss children's literature as something marginal that is intended only for pleasure, because it "exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation" (Coats, "YA Literature" 315). Children's literature deserves to be read critically as it uncovers the ideas and the beliefs of the authors, which in turn reflect the views of society, all of which the readers ingest unwittingly. It can also offer a sounding board for the child's own experience of childhood and adulthood, and "provide the comfort of knowing that one is not alone" in what is happening to them during the sensitive period that is childhood and teenage years (Crago 187). During this period, when everything appears incredibly overwhelming, reading can help with making sense of the world and navigating it. And surely, where adult literature may seem too distant for children and adolescents, children's literature can function as a bridge over to the classical canon later on (Coats, "YA Literature" 316-7).

2 John Green: the author and his motivations for writing

John Green is an author who deliberately chose his literary genre, in his case YA literature, because of the impact the stories he presents in his works can have. He has clearly stated on numerous occasions that he enjoys writing YA literature for specific reasons. For one, it allows him to “participate in values-formation” when teenagers are becoming adults (Barkdoll and Scherff 68). Green is intrigued by the chaos and intensity of adolescence and adolescents as they are trying to navigate the world and make sense of it. He perceives books as tools that help us to “feel unalone”, “[give] shape to the world” and “connect us to others” in the period of life which is defined by feelings of alienation and confusion with regard to one’s feelings (Green, “Does YA Mean Anything” 19). Yet, his characters are not ordinary teenagers, they are people who are in the middle of the most vulnerable stages of life who also have to wrestle with issues outside of their control.

While it may appear that Green became famous suddenly in the 2010s with the publication of *The Fault in Our Stars*, he had been consistently writing and creating for more than half a decade by then. His debut novel *Looking for Alaska* received generally positive reviews and the 2006 Michael L. Printz award for a “book that exemplifies literary excellence in young adult literature” (“Printz Award”). However, it was not until *The Fault in Our Stars* that Green attained wider recognition, which was further cemented by the book’s massively successful film adaptation two years later. Up to that point, Green had published three solo novels and two in collaboration with other authors, but his fan-following grew mostly out of YouTube videos devoted to various topics. What was at first a means to stay in touch with a sibling who lived on the other side of the country, quickly grew into a worldwide community of people, and resulted in a large fanbase that was prepared to devour anything that Green put out.

By the time *The Fault in Our Stars* was published in 2012, Green had enough fans that the novel instantly landed at number one on the *The New York Times*’ bestseller list. It was the top YA novel for forty three consecutive weeks and remained on the list for one hundred and twenty four weeks overall (Talbot np.). Green was labelled as a “Teen Whisperer” by *The New Yorker* for he was thought to understand precisely what it is that

teenagers want to read about. Green's respect towards his adolescent readers and their "emotional depth" seems to be at the crux of his popularity (Talbot np.).

Green recognizes the importance of adolescence as a period of great discovery and learning about one's self. Teenagers try so many things for the first time and do so with verve and dedication. All these experiences are processed through a filter of heightened emotions with intensity that is so particular and peculiar, and so often written off by adults as mere "raging hormones" (Lewis et al. 43). Teenagers' emotionality and passionate sentiments tend to be considered embarrassing, but Green believes that they ought to be valued because they are immediate, unfiltered and therefore sincere (thesoundandthefury)¹. Adults often devalue the "emotional depth of adolescents" which may come across like pretentious philosophising, but teenagers are aware that this period has a significant impact on their future (Talbot np.). They seek to find their proper role, be it in family, society, or relationships, for the first time as a separate entity from their parents (Talbot np.). Green himself is interested in this investigation of life's purpose and writing YA fiction allows him to approach the topic without the sarcasm and cynicism of adulthood (Flood, "John Green").

The search for the reasons of one's existence also means learning of the freedom to choose and the responsibility that comes with it, which may be quite stressful for a person in such a vulnerable period of life (Fitzgerald 794). Through storytelling, Green is trying to offer readers a solution to the inevitable feelings of existential anxiety about one's direction in life, connection with others and the world as a whole. He interprets the possibility of the eventual meaninglessness of human existence, the "the way-down-deep-darkness-which-is-you," as a feeling that people seek to evade at all costs ("Does YA Mean Anything" 19). For him, all the forms of entertainment, including books, are distractions from the darkness, a means to escape from ourselves and the void that hides inside us (Green, "Does YA Mean Anything" 18). But TV, games, and phones are far more effective distractions than books, so, if children turn to literature to distract themselves from the pain inside, there must be something more in it than just pure distraction. Reading

¹ Green is very active on social media as it is where he has established and amassed his fans. He mostly uses Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit, where he appears in "Ask Me Anything" threads. The latter website is where he engages under the alias "thesoundandthefury," posting about his charity work, discussing his books etc.

represents the possibility to connect with a story that resembles ours and thus, provides comfort by informing us that our struggle is shared by others and that it is possible to find a solution.

Literature helps readers grapple with the questions that surface during teenage years and connects them to others. Books can become guides during the tumultuous period of adolescence, a time which involves the tension between the loss of childhood innocence and possible painful experiences to come. Reading books creates a sense of empathy, a feeling which Green affirms is the “central thing” to take away from books, rather than “identification” (Barkdoll and Scherff 70). Stories provide different perspectives and opinions, thus allowing us to for imagine ourselves in the position of the other, to see the world through the eyes of another, and thus to understand the complexity of human life better (Crago 182; Kellaway). For Green, books are not to preach about morality and to impart lessons; they ought to offer reprieve from an often overwhelming world and promote connection with human experience (“Does YA Mean Anything” 18). Fiction is successful because it affects readers, it helps them to some extent understand the often senseless and confusing world they live in.

2.1 Green’s books and the issues of “sick-lit”

The immense popularity of *The Fault in Our Stars* invited a greater scrutiny of Green and his work and the response has been ambiguous – he is lauded for his realistic depiction of teens with atypical issues, such as terminal cancer or OCD. But, he is also sometimes regarded as a part of the so called “sick-lit” subgenre of YA literature that has been accused of monetizing teenage emotions (Elman 189). The majority of reviews of Green’s books are positive and praise his novels that are narrated in a poised, smart manner by “preternaturally smart” characters (Flood, “John Green”). They enjoy a fairly ordinary life – building friendships, relationships, experimenting with sex and alcohol – all the while battling whatever it is that threatens their lives. The underage drinking and sexual encounters present an issue for critics who feel it is inappropriate in YA fiction despite the fact that teenagers are naturally compelled to explore what is forbidden to them. It is this behaviour and its depiction, for example, a graphic scene of oral sex or binge drinking on campus, that are at the centre of Green’s novels being continuously challenged in the

United States (“Frequently Challenged YA Books”)². Green has also been accused of sentimentalising, even glorifying, the unfortunate conditions of his heroes. He argues that he is trying to do the opposite; he knows from first-hand experience what it is like to suffer from a terminal or mental illness (Flood, “John Green”)³.

The repeated portrayal of poor physical and mental health may classify Green as a writer of what Julie Elman would call “teen sick-lit” that developed as a part of the new realism in children’s literature during the second half of the twentieth century (175-6). It has been somewhat re-discovered and redressed at the beginning of the millennium with Alice Sebold’s *Lovely Bones* and consequently published YA novels that included murders of children and teens, teenage suicide, accidental and/or tragic deaths of relatives and friends (Flood, “Death wishes”). The criticism of this particular subgenre is based on the presumption that the authors exploit fears and anxieties and use the commodification of human emotions to gain popularity in today’s “affective economy” (op de Beeck 63; Elman 188-9). But, Elman also argues that teenagers do experience disabilities, fear, and “excessive emotions” and realistic depiction of what it is to be a sick teenager may actually prove “transformational” for readers (178). Rather than trying to pathologize something that happens naturally and thus perpetuating the image of the sad teenager in opposition to “emotionally ‘stable’ adults,” the realistic portrayal in these books should be highlighted (Elman 178, 189).

While Alison Monaghan would also interpret the “dark content” of sick-lit as possibly detrimental to the “sense of self [and] relationships” that are still developing at the time, she also acknowledges the power of narration and its effects – it is true that if any kind of traumatic experience, such as (the threat of) death, is to be dealt with, storytelling is one of the most potent means to do so (33; Capshaw Smith 118). Tragedies do not avoid children and teens – young people die, loss happens regardless of your age and there is a long history of literature that chronicles these stories. The journalist Alison Flood sees the

² Green did not hesitate to devote one whole YouTube video to the defence of *Looking for Alaska*. He explained why he thinks the controversial scenes are perfectly valid for the purposes of the story. Apparently, he is easily upset by criticism and does not mince words when it comes to defending his novels.

³ Green suffers from a severe case of OCD and anxiety much like the character Aza in his *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017) and for a period of time he worked with terminally ill patients as a chaplain in a children’s hospital which inspired *The Fault in Our Stars* (Flood, “John Green”; Talbot; Cooper 107).

troubles and drama in the YA fiction as a way to discuss larger issues and questions that so many people of that age face. Readers can experience a kind of catharsis through reading about another person's troubles and it is not only children's literature that is full of extreme emotions – adults, too, read to be moved (Flood, "Death wishes"). The books reflect the intensity of emotions of the teenage years and allow the exploration of extreme drama and possible moral choices in the safety of one's home. Adults must not somewhat censor children's literature in the name of protecting childhood innocence. For one, it is not possible in today's world and secondly, it "patronisingly" presumes that young readers are "incapable" of dealing with complex issues (Daley-Carey 469).

Literature represents a means of distraction from the unpleasant aspects of living, and offers a chance to find a way to cope. John Green writes stories of characters that experience physical or mental suffering and emotional turmoil to show that there is value and meaning to be found even in these difficult and painful parts of life (Cooper 107). He may create his heroes in a way that appears sensational and immediately draws the attention of the public, but once engaged with the story, the readers can then connect with the lived experience of another person and see what it would be like to be them. Stories inspire empathy, defined as an "ability to understand another's perspective [...] and to put oneself in [their] position" (Kümmerling-Meibauer 127-8). This skill is necessary in order to function properly in society because empathy shifts the focus from oneself onto another person and creates connections that are crucial for growth and maturation. Sick-lit may be emotionally exploitative at times, but it can help the young reader realise that even people who experience horrible things can find positivity and meaning in their life. Reading Green's books may alleviate the teenage existential anxiety in that it shows how to appreciate life and urges the reader to become an "engaged human," to pay attention to others and thus understand oneself better (Cooper 107).

3 Ideologies and Concepts of Identity in YA Literature

Green sees empathising and connecting with other people's experience through reading as a way of helping young readers better grasp their own existence and of providing comfort during the process of forging a sense of self within the world. He considers empathy development to be the main purpose of his novels because he realises how important it is to foster relationships that make one see things from a different perspective, and as a consequence, engage better with others. Books, according to Green, are manuals on how to emerge from the existential darkness towards greater clarity in regards to life ("Does YA Mean Anything?" 18-9). This, also, partially, serves as the foundation for the theories of literary critics Robyn McCallum and Karen Coats – they, too, perceive overcoming self-centredness and interaction with other people as the ultimate means to grow and achieve maturity.

McCallum and Coats especially emphasise the importance of another entity, which Coats generally labels as the Other, in the process of creating an individual's identity. This "Other" is another person or the "social discourses, practices and social ideologies", with whom a child enters into dialogue (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 17; McCallum 4). They function as a point of reference for the growing child, an entity in opposition to which they define themselves and negotiate their understanding of self. The result of this dialogic relationship is (inter)subjectivity, the cornerstone of the identity of a young adult. It means the child has proceeded from the egocentric childhood into adulthood, developing relationships with the world and others.

Moreover, McCallum and Coats examine exactly how YA novels inadvertently influence readers by imparting on them ideologies about growing up, i.e. what the proper way to grow up is, how to behave as a child or an adolescent and what happens to those who do not acquiesce to the idea(l)s (Trites, *Conceptualizations* 1). Children's literature is largely written by adults and authors tend to portray within the stories the social discourses that represent what is deemed desirable in society in general (Thein and Sulzer 47). However, these representations within literature may carry negative implications for those who are unable to proceed successfully along the prescribed trajectory. They are likely to be left out or marginalised. The authors of novels with atypical characters, such as authors

of sick-lit, can offer alternatives to the traditional narratives of children's literature and, by extension, of life.

3.1 Dialogic construction of subjectivity

The impulse for defining one's identity comes from the presence of another body, physical or abstract. An individual is unable to assert their identity unless they create a two-way relationship with someone or something serving as an opposition. As they become aware of the existence of an Other, they need to feel distinct from them, to occupy a unique position within society (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 19). The Other becomes implicated in identity formation at the very beginning of a child's life, usually in the form of a caregiver, who names them and makes them distinct (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 17). Early in the child's development, there comes a moment when they are made aware of an external world, meaning the child realises they are individual, "distinct and coherent entity" in themselves (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 19). There is a difference between them, their self, and an Other who is a part of the outside world.

McCallum feels it is virtually impossible to have consciousness outside of a relation with another being: "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another" (71). This means that an Other is necessary for realisation of one's self, since only from the position of the Other is one able to see one's self – a sense of identity is formed when we put ourselves into the place of the other and recognise their position (McCallum 70-2). We cannot see ourselves as directly as others see us and so we construct a sense of self by appropriating the stance of the Other, who might be as much real as imaginary, and from there glimpse the image of our own self⁴.

McCallum interprets the resulting identity as "subjectivity," a sense of personal self that is created through dialogue "with society, with language, and with other people" (3-4). Subjectivity means that the individual acquires a "sense of [...] identity as a subject [...] and as an agent" (McCallum 4). They are subject to external forces which they must yield

⁴ It is possible to define this approach as a form of objectification and therefore passive, whereas McCallum speaks of agency in the creation of the self, thus seeing the completion of the self from the position of another person/entity in a positive way.

to and agents capable of “deliberate thought and action” in the face of outside pressures (McCallum 4). Coats echoes McCallum’s definition of subjectivity as containing both a passive and active component – achieving subjectivity means that we have the agency and responsibility that goes with it, but we are also bound by the constraints, the limitations beyond our influence, represented by rules and laws that are enforced by society (*Looking Glasses* 3). Subjectivity is a “movement between that which we control and that which controls us,” the constant balancing between the subject and object position of our human being (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 5). By learning how to navigate this opposition between agency and subjection, we can insert ourselves firmly into society and function as a fully developed adult.

Subjectivity is considered the goal of maturation as it is a necessary tool for interconnection with other people and participation in the social world, and it stands in direct opposition to the extreme self-absorption of the childhood self (McCallum 48, 99). If the child (and subsequently young adult) is not able to proceed from the self-centredness characteristic, typical of the earlier periods of life, the otherwise neutral sense of the word “solipsism” becomes more pronounced⁵. The inability to progress on the developmental path leads to the opposite result, to the “inverse of intersubjectivity” that manifests as “social alienation, a separation of the self from the society”, possibly ending in a “fragmentation or dissolution” of the individual’s self (McCallum 99, 115). When a young adult successfully evolves into a fully developed adult human being, they have experienced and engaged in the interaction with their environment (McCallum 256). It facilitates the construction of identity since the individual must suppress their egocentrism in order to negotiate their position in society and in their interpersonal relationships. They must surrender to the “existing social codes, structures, and practices” but in turn, the submission also allows them to act and to make choices independently (McCallum 256-7).

This image of personal growth is a central concern of adolescent fiction. Children’s literature aims to reflect the process of maturation and its need for interconnectedness “without which the identity of the individual remains stunted” (McCallum 132). The wish to develop human connection, the necessity of feeling loved, and the sense of belonging

⁵ “solipsism, n.1.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/184295. Accessed 7 April 2019.

and cooperation permeates throughout literature for children (McCallum 48). Our world is created and structured by stories and we, in turn, are formed by these narratives, hence the importance of representing various experiences of growing up in children's literature (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 1). However, the image is often overly optimistic as the heroes that are empowered to act independently and make choices about their own life are mostly "idealistic and unattainable" models for readers (McCallum 257). Those who refuse to move forward may do so out of personal choice, but those who are incapable, or simply struggling with moving forward into adulthood, are punished for it as well (Daley-Carey 468, 479). YA fiction shows adolescents that something is inherently wrong with their status as a teenager – it is imperative to become an adult and leave adolescence behind, in Trites' words: "either [conform] to societal pressures or die" (*Conceptualizations* 1). This is why representations of narratives outside the norm are important for children as they offer an alternative for readers who feel otherwise. John Green uses his fairly unconventional characters to provide his audience that identifies with them a possibility of a fulfilled life in spite of their peculiarities. The negative implications of growth will be further explored in the following chapter.

3.2 The role of abjection within adolescent identity

The teenage years are marked by extreme emotional swings much like the toddler years, the period of the first emergence of a rudimental identity (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 145). The emotional turmoil is a result of negotiations between the childhood and adult selves, when adolescents must relinquish the negative parts of their identity, such as childish tantrums and egocentrism, and learn how to move within society's prescribed boundaries (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 142). The need to expel the unwanted is what causes adolescence to be labelled as a "condition of abjection," encompassing society's fear of its innate breaching and challenging of boundaries (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 142). It is an "in-between time" when all that we know and believe about children is challenged, as well as all that we assume and value about maturity (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 142).

The exploration of "individuation" is perceived as precarious by society as, in learning to balance the subject and the agent portion of their identity, adolescents risk overstepping the line of what is considered appropriate (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 142). The

successful establishment of identity means that the adolescent has recognised their place in society as being both subject to power and acting as an agent, empowered to make decisions. To ultimately refuse the abject is to hold a clear position in society as a mature adult who is able to control their behaviour. If the adolescent does not succeed in ridding themselves of the abject impulses of their teenage years, they are unable to successfully emerge from adolescence and by extension childhood, from their inferior position into adulthood (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 145).

If the adolescent cannot achieve adult subjectivity, they either choose to repeatedly harm or even kill themselves in order to get rid of the abject, or they become “willing victims of abjection,” revelling in their status (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 146). One way or the other, they find a way to possess at least some sense of agency in their marginalized status. Those who cannot cope with the intensity and the sense of violence in dealing with the loss of childhood, with the abjection of adolescence, those young adults fall into an altered state. They lose contact with reality and other’s reality – such a person can neither function as a subject nor an object and they also cannot become an Other for someone as they are essentially evicted from life (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 145). Yet even these abject characters have their role in the scheme of identity formation. From the point of view of society, a certain number of people fixed in the abject position is necessary, even desired, for the acquiring of individuality of others. In YA literature, and in real life too, abject characters serve as “foils and props for establishing [a] clear and proper identity” (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 150). That means that they help support the position of the people who do complete the individuation process by being what the latter must learn to suppress and direct elsewhere. Thus, those who develop individuality help to perpetuate the need for abject characters by asserting their distance from the socially undesired (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 143, 151).

It might be interesting to examine the links between power and sexuality because it is also something adolescents must learn harness as sex can “hurt people,” and especially in women can lead to marginalisation (Trites, *Universe* 85, Daley-Carey 481). Out of the many rites of passage teenagers experience the first sexual encounters are among the most exciting. It may be the first time that they become aware of their own power. It is another

sphere in which to interact with an Other and the interaction is pleasurable as it creates an “illusion of unifying the Self and the [desired] Other” (Trites, *Universe* 115). What makes overt sexual pleasure an abject behaviour is not only its prematurely acquired power, but also its connection with parts of body that had been “gendered but not consciously sexualized” before adolescence (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 143). This newfound “eroticism” is a way of dealing with the shift in perspective – now, the body can function as a tool of power. However, it is presumed that adolescents should not possess such power as sex is another realm of power that is allegedly reserved for adults, and so teens’ overt sexuality must be curbed. Often, in the case of female sexuality, if a girl appears to have “sexual agency”, she is quickly curtailed for daring to challenge the “patriarchal” norms (Daley-Carey 481). The excessive enjoyment of sex is undesirable and thus must be treated as other negatively perceived, abject behaviours.

For a long time, children’s literature had been “silent on the topic of sexuality” as if we were trying to make ourselves believe that children are devoid of sexuality (Nodelman 30). Sex equals power and this might be the reason why sexuality is not portrayed at all, or only in a very constrained manner, within YA literature (Trites, *Universe* 85, 116). There is a very ambiguous approach towards sex where teenagers’ sexual exploration is somewhat regulated by repression, or is made more palatable by including a didactic message. There is never pure enjoyment of one’s sexuality, there is always a lesson to be extracted from the experience in order to make the adolescent aware of the possible harm such power may bring (Trites, *Universe* 102). Negative representations of sexuality provide an occasion to put the adolescent back into their respective place as someone only coming into their power. Although the conversation within society about sex and gender has been shifting considerably as of late, the representations of sex and similarly controversial subjects still remain relatively conservative with a “safe return to normality and sociality” (Daley-Carey 469). Considering children as sexless creatures makes it hard for both us and them to talk about it as they may not possess the language to do so as a consequence (Nodelman 30).

4 Negative implications of ideology within children's literature

Although YA fiction increasingly includes stories of characters that do not follow the traditional trajectory of coming-of-age stories, i.e. overcoming the “condition of adolescence” by becoming an adult, it still largely promotes “culturally-sanctioned” forms of growth and maturation (Trites, *Universe* 19). Consequently, these generic conventions of children's literature implicitly marginalise adolescents for whom a “linear trajectory” of growth and maturation is unachievable (Daley-Carey 479). Adolescents who lack what is needed to acquire subjectivity, the position of subject and agent, remain on the margins and serve merely as abject individuals who help others to grow up and mature (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 150). Sometimes, the person decides to stay on the outside and intentionally does not attempt integration, but at other times, it is not the person's fault – they cannot become adults because something prevents them, be it their body, health, or traumatic experiences (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 151). People with terminal illness or traumatic experience serve as “objects of inspiration [and] pity” that others can use as “vehicles” of emotional growth, helping others to achieve the desired subjectivity (Kumbier). Simultaneously, there are many attempts to normalise these states, to help the afflicted adolescent overcome the issue. It is simply inconceivable not to grow up, not to participate in society – to heal and recover however becomes an imposition (Daley-Carey 479).

If a novel features a character with personal issues, they usually overcome them to comply with the “socially-validated” trajectory from childhood solipsism into adult subjectivity (Daley-Carey 471). Sick-lit and its authors, for example John Green, Mark Haddon, or Eimear McBride, offer readers alternative stories and narratives of growing up although they may be challenging to process and not as straightforward. They understand that subjectivity has a “fluid, fragmentary, and constantly evolving” quality much like life which is also “capricious and random and unfair and arbitrary” (Daley-Carey 468; Cooper 107). The whole of childhood is marked by liminality⁶, full of uncertainty and crises, out of which the individual ought to eventually emerge both as an agent of their life and a subject to “existing social expectations” (Daley-Carey 470, 473). In the case of people afflicted by

⁶ “A transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life; spec. such a state occupied during a ritual or rite of passage [...]” In “liminality, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/248158. Accessed 10 August 2019.

illness or trauma, it is possible that liminality and marginalisation become their only way of life. Sick-lit confronts the “boundaries which limit subjectivity” and thus also the existing “social and cultural paradigms of identity formation” (McCallum 118). The troubled characters do usually act as foils for their healthy contemporaries on the journey towards adulthood, but within sick-lit they are allowed their own subjective existence.

The ideology of growth and maturation within YA literature tends to imply that any deviation from the clear-cut path is a “sign of dysfunction and failure” (Daley-Carey 483). The stories within the genre of sick-lit encourage readers to see that even those who deal with pain have value and their life has meaning. Those who battle with similar conditions and feelings can find in these narratives a “way of articulating their own sense of alienation, aggression or low self-esteem” (Crago 187). They can also call into question the effects of the norms imposed by society, reflected within the literature, on those who do not fit the mould. Just because the characters are seemingly incapable of reaching subjectivity, does not mean they cannot somewhat acquire it on their own terms. Their precarious existence can actually prove valuable in that they may find it easier to answer the “big questions” as John Green sees it (see ch. 2). All their experience can facilitate the search for “meaning and significance” in life that may otherwise seem senseless (Fitzgerald 794). If one of the characteristics of adulthood is the “freedom to choose and the ability to create one’s own life” than no one paradigm should be superior (Fitzgerald 794). Characters within the sick-lit occupy an equally valuable position as those within traditional YA narratives.

5 Stages of Identity Development

When we are looking at the portrayal of growth and maturation within YA literature and its influence on readers, it is worthwhile to look at how exactly the process of building identity in particular unfolds. Psychology provides readers and critics with the necessary vocabulary to describe what actually happens to the characters in the novels, and analyse the internal and external factors forming the individual (Pond 88). These are the processes that also interest McCallum and Coats in that they are at the origin of subjectivity, a defining feature of adult identity.

Psychologists would agree with YA novelists that adolescence is the most important stage of a person's life as it is the period when the building blocks of later life – identity – is formed (Pond 88). One of the reasons as to why abject characters possibly struggle with their identity is not being able to cope with loss, which is a skill essential to growth and maturation. The psychologist James E. Marcia describes four statuses of identity: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion, built on Erik Erikson's theory of human development. Identity achievement is conditioned by interconnecting and building relationships with people, the depth of which can be determined by the level of intimacy. His work shows how identity comes into being and the possible issues teenagers may encounter in the process of identity formation. Some of Marcia's theory supports the ideas contained within YA fiction and there are parts that provide an explanation for the unconventional characters in sick-lit. His framework offers language to analyse better what happens to the individuals who struggle to reach subjectivity, or who appear unable to reach it.

5.1 Origins of identity

It is not until adolescence that the child has all the "raw material" necessary for growth and maturation, to experience and overcome the crisis of identity typical for this period of life, involving "defin[ing], over-defin[ing] and redefin[ing]" themselves (Marcia, *Transitions* 21; Erikson 87). Identity is a result of a crisis, an exploratory and self-reflective process in which the individual attempts to accommodate and to integrate the personal, individual characteristics with social demands (Marcia, *Transitions* 21). There are "internal and external systems at work" which the person must "distinguish between

and reconcile” to achieve adult identity (Pond 88). The child collects information from the very beginning of their life by means of observation, later using it to follow the rules and fulfil the expectations of society, to gain a sense of belonging and “communal meaning” (Erikson 22, 71). The “mutual affirmation” we receive from others is the place of origin of identity – it is established only when we “confirm or negate” ourselves and one another clearly (Erikson 219-20).

To make sure that the young adult has enough time to deal with the transformation from their child self into their adult self, the majority of adolescents enter a moratorium stage. It is a period of time that allows them to deal with and integrate the identity elements they have been ascribed and have amassed since the earlier years of their childhood (Erikson 128). The liminality of teenage literary characters is essentially the moratorium stage, a time of suspension out of which the individual must emerge in order to become a legitimate member of society. This is the time to leave behind all the inappropriate childish characteristics and adopt adult behaviours. Adolescents in this period are “treading water,” seemingly still on the surface but “working furiously” within to explore and find options worth committing to (Pond 89). The stress and struggle of keeping afloat are typical circumstances of growth, necessary for moving forward, that are to be expected, and are almost “desirable” (Marcia, *Ego Identity* 581).

If a teenager encounters difficulties during the crisis of the transition period, they may end up adopting a negative identity, which is understandably the opposite of the desired outcome. It may be caused by internal or external forces. In the former case, the ego processes may be faulty, impairing the quality of the self-other relationships so crucial to the development of the self (Marcia, *Ego Identity* 584-5; McCallum 70). Karen Coats puts ego at the beginning of individuation when an individual must sever ties with Mother, the original Other, and assert themselves – it is how they learn how to manage the constant and continuous “self-other transactions” that shape the self (*Looking Glasses* 37; Marcia, *Ego Identity* 584). If this process is compromised, it results in issues within the individual’s relationships as they consequently suffer greatly with separation, somewhat incapable of dealing with losses (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 37). External causes, such as disabilities or trauma, may lead to the formation of abject characters, excluded from adult society in spite

of “[doing] nothing to deserve their fate” (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 151). Whichever the cause, being made aware of the inadequacy of one’s identity in the eyes of other people can push the adolescent towards adopting a negative identity (Erikson 1976). They would rather be utterly bad, or even dead, by their own choosing than be “not-quite-somebody” for the society, and through this choice they are able to maintain at least a sense of “mastery” (Erikson 1976).

5.2 Identity statuses

Identity is present throughout life, so even from the very beginning we possess a kind of identity. It represents the elementary structure of an individual that supports all the changes in the years to come after adolescence. It is only during the teenage years that we have adequate cognitive abilities to fashion our own identity out of all the partial identifications of the preceding years (Marcia, *Transitions* 21) We decide what we keep from the previous stages and how we will incorporate into the “social contexts” of adulthood, while retaining a sense of agency through the choosing of one’s role (Marcia and Josselson 619). There are four types of identity that can be established after the exploration of adolescence: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity diffusion (identity achievement is the best outcome and diffusion the worst).

Moratorium is basically the first identity status that the adolescents will enter unless there are circumstances that led to the adoption of one of the other statuses. The whole of adolescence could be perceived as one long moratorium during which the individual investigates their options before deciding on a set of “characteristics, beliefs, responses, [and] morals” that are the basis of identity (Pond 91). Moratorium can take many forms and it is important not to pathologize whatever the individual may display (unless it is illegal or harmful), e.g. extreme emotional reactions or certain behaviours. They are simply taking the necessary steps to determine which options out of the “socially suggested identities” work for them (Pond 91). The most important thing is for the teenager not to get overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and/or anxiety to the degree that they become “blocked” in the status (Marcia and Josselson 620). To prevent the individual from shifting into a pathological struggle or weaker statuses of identity, adults ought to provide the necessary help for them to cope. Additionally, whenever a person is dealing with the crises of later

life stages, or any crisis for that matter, they revert back to moratorium stage as it offers the chance to take time to reflect and resolve the issue.

The weaker identity statuses, possible negative outcomes of moratorium, are foreclosure and identity diffusion and are marked by a lack of exploration and unavoidably arrested development. Diffusion specifically results in marginalisation or alienation where the individual finds it hard to plant themselves “meaningfully” in society, unable to formulate a purpose and aim of their existence (Marcia and Josselson 621). Since identity is formed on previous “childhood experience”, it is possible that the origin of this inability lies in the earlier stages of life, for example, familial relationships (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 7). Such individuals do not live for the future or for other people, and yet, they need others for support while exhibiting emotionally remote and solitary behaviours (Marcia and Josselson 621). Although people with identity diffusion may seem fine, their life has no direction and they may experience despair due to a “sense of meaninglessness” of their existence (Marcia and Josselson 621). These individuals need help moving back into the moratorium stage so that they can determine what is wrong, and adopt healthier behaviours.

Fortunately, we have a fresh opportunity to resolve past issues every time we enter another life stage (if we wish to do so) as the crises emerge anew in each and every other phase of development (Marcia and Josselson 618). Otherwise, the refusal to change leads to a form of psychological “stasis” when the person fears the outcome and so moves backward or “[remains] stuck” (Marcia, *Transitions* 27, 20). This is the worst possible outcome as it means arrested development where the person remains childlike, seemingly safe in old habits, but dead inside. The imperative of YA fiction: “change or die,” is applicable even to the world outside of literature where, with every new stage in life, we must progress and evolve if we wish to survive (Marcia, *Transitions* 27).

Practical part

The practical part will now look at concrete examples of identity formation and its representation in two YA novels by John Green – *Looking for Alaska*⁷ and *The Fault in Our Stars*⁸. Green’s characters tend to have, in the words of *Stars*’ Hazel, a “*hamartia*,” a “fatal flaw” that prevents them from reaching full adulthood, or makes it difficult for them to find their place in the world according to traditional literary narratives (*TFIOS* 20-1 original emphasis)⁹. In *Stars* and *Alaska*, the main protagonists grapple with terminal illness, and trauma and grief, respectively, making the establishment of their identity more difficult in that they are trying to solve an additional crisis on top of the normal struggles of adolescence. The analysis will examine these examples of identity formation in teens and the issues they may encounter in the process due to trauma or illness, and how it influences their relationships with other people. It will look at identity as a product of the dialogue between the individual and others, and what the consequences are if the individual refuses to come out of solipsism and engage with people. And lastly, what the consequences of being in the state of abjection are, i.e. if or when the individual is unable to proceed towards adulthood due to experiences of trauma or death.

6 *Looking for Alaska*

Looking for Alaska is John Green’s debut novel published in 2005. *Alaska* describes a significant time period in the life of the main character Miles Halter, namely, his junior year of high school. Readers meet Miles at the point of entering the transition stage of identity as he wants to separate himself from his parents and be on his own as he moves from childhood into adulthood. The space of a boarding school functions as a microcosm of the adult world into which the students will enter after graduation. For example, there is a certain social hierarchy between the rich kids and the poorer ones, they learn how to create and navigate relationships with new people, and they learn to recognise and grapple with the authorities they are subjected to. At the same time, it is a safe space in which students are allowed to try out new things and experiment with the boundaries of

⁷ Subsequent page references preceded by *LFA* are given in parentheses in the text.

⁸ Subsequent page references preceded by *TFIOS* are given in parentheses in the text.

⁹ In classical literature, this fatal flaw was an innate quality of a tragic hero that was impossible to escape and was the cause of their eventual destruction.

acceptable behaviours all under the surveillance of teachers. In Alaska, the parental figure is embodied by Mr Starnes, the Dean of Students, who corrects Miles and his friends when needed (*LFA* 24, 71).

Miles' stay at the boarding school is marked by a tragic accident involving his new friend Alaska, which divides the narrative into two parts – *Before* and *After*. Apart from the expected issues of being adolescent and existing in a new environment away from his family, Miles and the rest of his friend group have to deal with the loss and grieving of Alaska's unexpected and violent death. Before, they were exploring the world and its opportunities within the safety of school – the traditional experience of identity development as usually described in mainstream YA literature. Loss of a friend and subsequent grief further add to the emotional stress and struggle of adolescence that may well leave them stuck with an identity that is unfavourable later in life. The manner of coping and the outcome depend on previous life experiences and the support the person receives in the aftermath of such events (Marcia, *Transitions* 28). This is especially important for teens as they already have a tendency to engage in risky behaviours. Normally these behaviours would not be an issue, but in the particularly complicated time of grief, may prove fatal for further development of the individual (Marcia, *Ego Identity* 581). Miles and his friends must deal with what Alaska herself was not able to (due to inadequate support on her father's side) – the loss of a loved one and grief.

6.1 Before

In the life of every teenager there comes a time when they need to attempt to function on their own, to find their proper identity apart from their parents who have supported them until that point. This is the case of Miles Halter who is aware it is high time he moved on from the comfort of his parental home: "I'd lived with my parents for sixteen years and a trial separation seemed overdue" (*LFA* 13). He decides to leave Florida to attend the boarding school his father went to in Culver Creek, Alabama (*LFA* 9). Miles hopes to acquire a new identity, one which would be unburdened by his past, yet he cannot avoid building upon his childhood experiences and relationships (Marcia, *Ego Identity* 579, 585). He will need to integrate the new and reformulate the old parts of his identity to create a whole new, adult identity that he could go into the world with (Marcia, *Transitions* 21, 27).

Miles imagines it as a kind of baptism, as if he was “being born again,” having “no known past” and the opportunity to construct a whole new identity (*LFA* 260, 15). He willingly separates from his parents who have provided the support and scaffolding for his child identity and aims to stand as his own person. Within the school environment, a micro-reflection of the real world, he can create relationships and learn to negotiate the influences of outside forces, such as teacher’s authority.

One’s identity is construed in “dialogue with others,” so company is necessary to help build it, otherwise the person will remain too self-centred, unable to reach subjectivity and hence maturity (McCallum 256,115). Until that point, in his Floridian public school, Miles had been on his own without genuine friends, spending most of his time with famous dead people, their biographies and “dying declarations” (*LFA* 11, 18). He preferred to be on his own, closed off with his parents from the outside world, avoiding its unpleasant experiences. Nearing adulthood, he realises that it would only lead to a “lonely life” because he cannot avoid venturing out of the safety of home and engaging with others if he wants to grow (*LFA* 260). In Culver Creek, he is excited to find “real friends” who would help him to build his true identity, the one Miles keeps fantasizing about: “I wanted to be one of those people who have streaks to maintain, who scorch the ground with their intensity” (*LFA* 260, 63). He aspires to be fearless, remarkable individual just like the people from books. However, his lonely existence means that he does not really know how to operate amongst people and as much as he is trying to appear cool, Miles longs desperately to be liked. He comes across as insecure and keeps second-guessing the actions and reactions of other people. When it appears that the Colonel, his roommate, does not take to him immediately (even though he thought he should have) Miles wells up (*LFA* 20). When he is pranked by other students, he wonders what has made them “already dislike [him]” after only a couple of days at Creek (*LFA* 37).

He is afraid that there is something inherently wrong with him, that he will be left on the margins and that the prank might have been an attempt to eliminate him by drowning as he is a newcomer, still an outsider to other students (*LFA* 37). If he refused, due to his frustration, to make friends or was unable to make connections and integrate into the social hierarchy of the school, he would risk becoming Coats’ abject character that would be left

to their own devices, possibly sacrificed as a way to get rid of the undesired (*Looking Glasses* 150). Miles knows that he is universally not liked by the other “rich kids” therefore he needs to stick with the Colonel despite the awkward start to their relationship (*LFA* 20). He is impressed by the Colonel from the very beginning and clings to him even though Miles does not like “being bossed around” (*LFA* 48). Miles understands that any other scenario would only be worse, admitting that “if the Colonel thought that calling me his friend would make me stand by him, well, he was right,” (*LFA* 38).

So, in the course of the first few weeks, the Colonel and Alaska become Miles’ closest friends and they introduce him to the world of mischief – they drink, smoke, kiss, trespass on people’s property and more (*LFA* 24, 48, 57, 100). As teenagers they entered the transitory stage of their identity formation, the moratorium which allows them to demonstrate “provocative playfulness,” while society, the school, decides to turn a blind eye as long as the behaviour is not detrimental to those involved (Erikson 157; Marcia, *Ego Identity* 581). Miles and his friends do what is typical for teenagers – trying out adult behaviour and seeing what they can get away with, challenging the perception of children as innocent and docile beings (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 142; Nodelman 30). Disobeying the rules normally has consequences for Culver Creek students but they are free to explore as long as they are wary of being too conspicuous. They are still watched by Mr Starnes, “the Eagle,” who monitors their every step and punishes them should they be too careless so as to get caught or harm themselves (*LFA* 24). Adult “support and confirmation” in the uncertain and vulnerable time of moratorium is important, otherwise the playful exploration may turn into pathology and a form of self-destruction (Marcia, *Ego Identity* 581). Alaska’s behaviour suggests that the latter indeed might be her case – she appears to use drinking and smoking as a means to obliterate herself.

Pathological and self-destructive impulses – routinely abusing alcohol to excess, smoking, or brazen sexual behaviour (“He loves weed like Alaska loves sex,” the Colonel quips about a classmate; Edna St Vincent Millay was Alaska’s “hero” because Millay had “a lot of sex”) – are all manifestations of “identity struggle” (*LFA* 59, 110; Marcia, *Ego Identity* 581). Moreover, Alaska seems preoccupied with death, joking that she “smokes to die” and that she “may die young [...] but [...] smart” (*LFA* 57, 66). There is also her eerie

omnipresent question: “*How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?*” which Alaska defines as “doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you” (*LFA* 189, 101 original emphasis). Joking about death and existential questioning may be a normal part of teenage experience and it also may be a “typical dysfunctional thought processes” of someone who experienced trauma as a young person (Fackler et al. 96). It eventually emerges that Alaska endured a traumatic experience as a very small child when she witnessed death – the death of her mother no less – that filled her with suffering.

6.1.1 Alaska’s trauma and identity

Eight years old Alaska experienced an incredibly distressing situation when her mum died before her very eyes, moreover, her father blamed her for not calling an ambulance: “How could he not? [...] Little kids can dial 911. They do it all the time” (*LFA* 145). With her mother deceased and her distant father who could not cope, Alaska lost her parents as well as the supportive environment that parents provide during one’s formative years. Young children lack coping mechanisms and cannot process grief properly which, combined with the loss of a support system, results in impaired processing of separation and loss that influences identity formation in the future (Keenan 25; Marcia, *Ego Identity* 584). Alaska was also prematurely faced with having to construct an identity when the one provided by her parents was suddenly lost, however she could not as it seems there was no one who would step in and help her (Holland ch. 7 np.). As a consequence, even though as a teenager she should be in the moratorium stage like Miles and the Colonel, Alaska in fact already operates with a diffused identity, a status which is marked by being unable to “find a place in an ordered universe,” accompanied by a “sense of meaninglessness” that leaves her impulsive and agitated (Marcia and Josselson 621). Her overindulgence then can be a way of stifling the emptiness inside, trying to forget the trauma, and it can also be a way to “hurt [herself] without killing [herself]” as a punishment (Barkdoll and Scherff 70).

When children experience trauma, things and thoughts associated with the event can provoke heated outbursts, more so if the child lost their mother. This might be the reason for Alaska’s overreactions to emotionally tricky situations (Holland ch. 4 np.; Kast 63). In these moments she seems to regress back to her childhood self, sobbing like a “tsunami, [...] loud and childlike” or erupting into “childlike half-screams” (*LFA* 116, 160). She is,

by her own admission, a “deeply unhappy person” who does not know how to ask for help other than talk about death half-jokingly (*LFA* 150). Only after she shares her trauma with them are they able to “glimpse her as she might have been” (*LFA* 146). The rest of the time, Alaska keeps them in the dark about who she really is to avoid further loss and separation (Fackler et al. 94). Her friends are unable to support her because they are too self-centred still and do not possess the tools themselves. They are rather aggravated by her mood swings, Miles describing her as a “bitch,” annoyingly sly and unpredictable (*LFA* 41, 117, 93). They do not understand her and are not really trying to as they still do not possess the empathy to do so and thus cannot comprehend the motivation behind her behaviour.

Alaska needs to understand that suffering, as she sees it, is an ineluctable and universal part of life, although it might sometimes appear unnatural, unjust, or untimely (Marcia, *Transitions* 33). Ideally, Alaska would receive proper help and be told that “losing and failing” is an everyday occurrence in human life, and subsequently would be able to move into the moratorium stage to take the time necessary for dealing with the grief and move beyond it (*LFA* 262; Marcia and Josselson 621). Lacking the necessary support to help her move forward from the stasis of her diffused identity, Alaska is headed for disaster. She is “scared by her inaction into action,” refusing to be paralysed by fear again, to “ruin everything” again (*LFA* 147, 117). She does not understand that she did not cause her mum’s death as her father implied – often there is no rhyme or reason to someone’s death (Fackler et al. 95). Alaska learned to suppress the grief and guilt over her mum’s death, but now that another loss is imminent – that of childhood – she is overwhelmed by emotions and does not know how to deal with them (Holland ch. 4 np.).

She does not know how to process the necessary loss of and separation from her childhood because, to Alaska, it evokes the worst thing that happened to her, and she does not possess the tools to deal with it. Since her friends perceive her as simply being a moody teenage girl (characteristics which are sometimes similar to the “behaviour of grieving”), they remain silent (Holland ch. 19 np.). Ultimately, Alaska is unable to contain herself and not long after she shares her story with others, there is a string of events that pushes her over the edge into breakdown. Forgetting her mother’s death anniversary, Alaska feels like she has disappointed her mum again and so in an attempt to rectify her

failing, wants to lay flowers on her grave. The combination of emotional distress and alcohol causes Alaska to crash the car she is driving, dying in the accident.

6.2 After

Death of a person close to them reminds teenagers of their own mortality, of the fact that they “would know more dead people” and the “bodies [will] pile up” (*LFA* 205). Teenagers do not often think about death as their last day is still far in the future, but of course the experience of death as one of life’s most stressful situations affects them greatly (Holland ch. 12 np.; Kast 63). It is difficult enough to be an adolescent as it is and another crisis, such as death and grieving, may be a danger to their mental health and growth as it was to Alaska (Holland ch. 19 np.).

At such a vulnerable time, proper help is needed to process the experience well and move forward, stronger; as in identity formation, in grief the presence and aid of others help us to make sense of the events and survive (Holland ch. 18 np.). Mr Starnes who, as an adult, should offer support to students actually does not offer any direct help other than a few words, even though he grieves for Alaska as much as they do. He declares that “school is important,” life must continue and encourages the boys to overcome their grief as quickly as possible (*LFA* 213). For Miles and the Colonel, it is likely their first encounter with the death of someone close and they are only learning how to cope with all the conflicting feeling, such as guilt and anger, loneliness, and sadness (Holland ch. 6 np.). Similarly, to young Alaska in the moment of her mum’s death, Miles and the Colonel are “paralysed into silence, terrorised” by the death of their mutual friend (*LFA* 173). In order not to become “mired” in grief like her, they will need to lean on one another for support, since no adult appears to be of help Miles cannot “afford to lose the Colonel” (Holland ch. 1 np.; *LFA* 193).

They become united not only in their mourning and pain, but also in their guilt and anger over Alaska’s death. Guilt and anger are normal in the course of dealing with loss, although they are particularly intense if the survivors feel as though they somewhat facilitated someone’s death (Holland ch. 2, 6 np.). Such is the case of Miles and the Colonel who know that they “should have stopped” upset and drunk Alaska that night (*LFA* 174). They are angry at themselves and they project the anger onto her because they

fail to grasp that her trauma might have led Alaska to act and react the way she did. Miles and the Colonel call her “stupid,” “impulsive,” “selfish bitch” that apparently had no reason to be upset enough to kill herself (*LFA* 174, 197, 179). They aim to uncover what happened that night to understand the rationale behind Alaska’s behaviour, although it is for quite selfish reasons as what they find out might absolve them of their guilt (*LFA* 192). Despite knowing of Alaska’s trauma, the “worst day” of her life, they cannot conceive of it as the true cause until the very end of their investigation (*LFA* 145). But, the decision to try to comprehend Alaska is the first time they try to “understand another’s perspective,” which is crucial to achieving subjectivity and therefore maturity (Kümmerling-Meibauer 127-8).

To emerge from grief, it is necessary to forgive oneself for what one did or did not do before the death of the person as well as forgive them (Holland ch. 20 np.). Compassion enables us to not become stuck in remorse and change our perspective on a loss and/or change, to see it positively as something that promotes growth and resilience (Holland ch. 20, 21 np.; Marcia, *Transitions* 19). Miles and the Colonel made a mistake that contributed to the death of their friend and they must accept, as part of their life experience, the consequences of actions that they could not predict because they “could not see the future” (*LFA* 259; Holland ch. 20 np.). Miles eventually interprets forgiveness as the answer to Alaska’s question about the meaning of human suffering, in a way as an excuse for his behaviour. Yes, compassion is important for grieving and getting beyond grief, however, in Miles’ case it is also somewhat an easy way out of the guilt he feels after Alaska’s accident. He is not able to face the fact that it might have been his focus on his (imaginary) relationship with Alaska and his selfishness, not caring about what is happening to her, that caused her to crash the car.

Before coming to Culver Creek, Miles did not want to be involved in the complicated adult world, he imagined “[building] a small, self-sufficient world in a back corner” and “pretend that [he] was not lost, but home” (*LFA* 260). If he had continued that way, he would have probably reached identity foreclosure, having made no exploration, wishing external conditions to change rather than changing himself (Marcia and Josselson 620). Eventually, Miles decides to “leave behind [his] minor life” in order to make “real friends”

who would help him to explore rather than living with the “last words of the already-dead” (*LFA* 206, 260). He thinks that he can discard his childhood completely, but it defines him still as he remains rather self-centred, used to being the centre of attention and having the love of his parents. A sense of belonging and human connection is undoubtedly central to be able to operate in society and achieve maturity, but it cannot be at the expense of other people (McCallum 132). Reaching full maturity is conditioned by suppressing egocentrism and results in a healthy identity. It means the person respects others and is prepared to cope with outside, sometimes unpleasant, influences (McCallum 48).

Sadly, it takes Alaska’s dying, and the Colonel’s insistence on finding out what happened, to push Miles to think about someone else than just himself and his feelings and to start the process of healing. Were he open to listening to Alaska and really thought about her rather than about himself and his “precious [...] fantasy” of her, she would not have had to die (*LFA* 204). Miles must now deal with the negative emotions of guilt and grief through compassion and forgiveness so that he does not get “terrified into paralysis” like Alaska and can continue in his emotional growth (*LFA* 260). After processing his grief, at the end of the story, he is where he started: at the beginning of his path towards maturity¹⁰.

6.2.1 Alaska as an abject character

Besides being the main female character, Alaska also represent an abject character, someone who “disturbs identity, system, order” of the traditional trajectory of growth and “act[s] as [a foil]” for others (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 138, 151). Coats perceives the abject character as a “bolster” for others in their search for subjectivity and after that, they are renounced completely even though they might have done nothing to deserve the status of abjection (*Looking Glasses* 150-1). In the course of the story, Alaska helps Miles and the Colonel with the establishment of their identity while she herself perishes (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 151). Her outlier status is most likely due to the combination of trauma in childhood, an event that she could not control, that left her feeling powerless and scared and led to PTSD and diminished mental well-being (Holland ch. 4 np.). She was deprived of the process of emancipation from her mother, which would prepare her for the

¹⁰ The way Green writes would at times imply that Miles is actually looking back on a somewhat decisive moment of his life. We can only hope that it is the case and in his later life, the tragedy of Alaska’s life did help him to overcome his self-absorption.

adolescent “detachment” and “establishment of boundaries” (Keenan 25; Coats, *Looking Glasses* 144). As a consequence, Alaska has issues with separation and loss that manifest as emotional aloofness and seemingly overt sexuality at the same time – Alaska wants to fill the void she feels with human closeness and intimacy, but also keeps people at a distance so that she does not experience loss again (Fackler et al.94).

Support during grieving is necessary, particularly for children and youth, otherwise it may be harder to “understand and absorb” the chaos and complexity of grief, especially when it is connected to trauma (Fackler et al. 96; Holland ch. 4 np.) Alaska did not receive any initial support from her father, or other family members, and so when it came to the transitional point of adolescence, all the “ghosts” of her childhood resurfaced (*LFA* 99). Everything reminded her of her worst experience, bringing back the guilt and the grief and she became “paralysed by fear” again (Holland ch. 4 np.; *LFA* 147). Alaska’s “emotional vulnerability” and her failure to overcome childhood trauma meant that she was to be left on the margins, functioning merely to “make [others] different and leave” (Daley-Carey 475; *LFA* 206; McCallum 118). It is then possible that the accumulation of triggering events during the night of her accident led to such “psychological pain” that Alaska chose to die (Marcia, *Commentary* 133). The lack of “cognitive safeguards,” which she would have created had she had the support, and her identity diffusion, the inner chaos, led to one final impulsive act, one last attempt to be an agent of her own life rather than living in a constant subjection to fear and to her father’s blame (Marcia, *Commentary* 133, 137; Erikson 176).

The abject represents behaviour and character traits that are deemed undesirable. Whoever asserts their subjectivity in opposition to the abject character is at the same “complicit” in their creation and marginalisation (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 151). By shunning the outsiders, those who integrated into the “clean and proper” society, i.e. learned to navigate the subject-agent opposition, indicate that they do not condone the behaviour (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 151). Miles and the Colonel become “accomplices” in Alaska’s death as they are interested in her only when she “makes [them] laugh [...] and drinks wine with [them]” (*LFA* 192, 117). As much as Miles claims to try to “understand her ambiguities,” he does not allow Alaska anything besides positive emotions and resents

the negative parts of her personality (*LFA* 117). After she dies, he is preoccupied by their non-existent “secret love affair,” and jealous of his friends and others who profess their love for Alaska (*LFA* 204). Moreover, he is angry at her that she dared to take matters into her own hands “not thinking of [...] anyone” and “[kill] herself” (*LFA* 187). Losing a close friend is surely painful for Miles, but his behaviour is also a sign of overt egoism. He makes everything about himself, stopping only when it seems he could lose the Colonel as well, which would mean becoming an isolated, alienated person in his grief and frustration, an abject character like Alaska.

Gradually, Miles realises that had he “cared about her as [he] should have,” he could have supported Alaska and she would not have fallen apart, she “deserved better friends” (*LFA* 190, 260). Miles and the Colonel merely used Alaska for their own enjoyment and did not care enough about understanding her until after she died. All along she served as a prop for their emotional growth and they have to accept the guilt of facilitating Alaska’s death. The grief and self-blame they feel after Alaska’s death is similar to hers after her mum’s death, so they saw “where it led for her” and know they must deal with it, otherwise they will become like her (*LFA* 260). The chase after her “ghost” help Miles and the Colonel come “closer” as it shows them the importance of paying attention to other people and having the support of others in hard times (*LFA* 252). In a last attempt to redeem themselves, Miles and the Colonel drive the same route as Alaska on the night of her death. They take her place and they symbolically do for Alaska what she could not – pass through the trauma and grief, though they are the ones “still alive” and prepared for the future (*LFA* 254).

7 *The Fault in Our Stars*

After working as a chaplain in a children's hospital in his twenties, Green decided to use his experience several years later as a starting point of his most successful novel, *The Fault in Our Stars* (Cooper 107). The main heroine Hazel has already come to terms with her diagnosis of terminal cancer when she meets Augustus "Gus" Waters, a teenage cancer survivor, whose approach to life intrigues Hazel. She was ready to live out her remaining days closed at home with her parents, watching re-runs of *America's Next Top Model* and occasionally going to a cancer Support Group. It is there that she is approached by Gus who forces Hazel to come out of her shell and get out into the world she has refused to engage with so as to avoid hurting people when she dies.

Adolescence is usually a period of "emerging capabilities," of growing potential, yet for ill teenagers like Hazel, who has "never been anything but terminal," it is rather a time of "diminishing possibilities" – their development is stunted as bad health impedes their "independence, self-confidence and social functioning" (Kirkman et al. 2; *TFIOS* 166). Apart from the identity crisis that underlays the teenage years, they are dealing with approaching death and so finds themselves in a somewhat suspended state of living; they are neither a small child anymore nor will they ever be an adult. If identity formation is a "normative developmental task" which is imposed on adolescents and involves overcoming one's disability in order to accomplish this, then they are already condemned to not reach adulthood (Kirkman et al. 4; Elman 178). Hazel is depressive and resigned with regards to her future – she accepted the prospect of dying and is merely waiting "like Vladimir and Estragon" for the day of her death (*TFIOS* 88). Her sense of agency is dubious as she is colonised by her disease, and therefore in need of "parental surveillance" (Elman 179). Hence there is the "perpetual nearness" of her mother who one day "[decides]" that Hazel is depressed (*TFIOS* 5, 45, 3 emphasis added).

An encounter with serious illness can grant the adolescent "sudden, adult insight" into things. Life for them is dramatically foreshortened at a moment when it should only be starting and adolescents have to grapple with their mortality and its consequences prematurely (op de Beeck 75; Kirkman et al. 4-5). Apart from establishing identity, the young person is suddenly forced to think about the generative aspect of their life, its

purpose and meaning, which is not usually a pressing issue until the later years of life (Marcia and Josselson 618). Hazel's diagnosis came only months after her first period and she feels "robbed" of her future – "Congratulations! You're a woman. Now die." – knowing that she will "never grow old" (*TFIOS* 24, 305). She will not have any opportunity to try to produce or reproduce and through her dying will only hurt the people she loves the most. Hazel insists that her "depression is a side effect of dying" as "cancer is a side effect of dying," meaning that depression and dissatisfaction with life is a normal human condition and we are all waiting for the "relief" of death (*TFIOS* 3, 5; Sontag 54). She does not dispute that she "deserve[s] a life" – she goes to a Support Group and infrequently attends a couple of classes at local college – but she "[stays] alive" mostly for her parents, to "make [them] happy" (*TFIOS* 7-8, 294).

7.1 Hazel's identity in the face of cancer

The "lack of commitment and meaningful exploration" indicates that Hazel possesses a diffused identity. She is largely detached from the life outside her home and her parents are Hazel's "two best friends" (Marcia and Josselson 621; *TFIOS* 12). However, there is nothing much that Hazel can do to change her status because she is physically limited by the seriousness of her condition. Moreover, she is a constant reminder that "death can infect life" which, in combination with the omnipresent anxiety around dying in today's society, means that any effort "to feign normal social interactions" results in embarrassment as the healthy person does not know how to deal with someone visibly unwell (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 159; Sontag 12; *TFIOS* 47). Hazel is looking at other people from an "unbridgeable distance" created by her illness, therefore it is easier to exaggerate the "pain and fatigue" to escape (*TFIOS* 45). This "extreme solipsism" often leads to "fragmentation [...] of self," that can be overcome by establishing a relationship between the "self and world" (McCallum 115, 117). It is only after Hazel makes acquaintance of Augustus ("Gus") that she admits that she might have let cancer "succeed prematurely" in taking over her life and subsequently takes the opportunity to somewhat alter her status (*TFIOS* 32).

Hazel cannot connect with people because "illness repulses" and makes her "irreconcilably other" (*TFIOS* 36, 144). She also wants to "stay away" from others because

she perceives herself like a ticking bomb that will shortly explode, leaving in her wake “casualties” devastated by grief (*TFIOS* 99). She finds solace in a book called *An Imperial Affliction (AIA)* that for her describes the reality of death and dying in “just totally correct” manner and which partially informs her thinking about human existence (*TFIOS* 49). While she might have accepted her death, Hazel cannot understand the “absolutely inhuman nihilism of suffering” that is inflicted on people, all the more so if human “oblivion is inevitable” and eventually, “everything that we did [...] will have been for naught” (*TFIOS* 281, 153, 13). Growing up involves the responsibility to “define oneself”, to create one’s own meaning in life. In this search, people may experience “increased anxiety” and feelings of “emptiness” in the uncertainty of the task (Fitzgerald 795). For Hazel this is further accentuated because her cancer deprives her existence of meaning and she represents “nothing but [a] Sadness” for the people in her life (*TFIOS* 213). If cancer makes her disempowered, than hiding away from the world gives her at least some sense of control.

According to Coats, this “existential angst” with regards to death and the “banality of existence” can be resolved by creating an intimate bond with another person who provides an image of how to live (*Looking Glasses* 30). The remedy against “personal disintegration” in the face of the arbitrary “creation [and] eradication,” that is inherent to our universe, is “unity and connectedness” (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 30; *TFIOS* 266). The generative aspect of one’s life that comes to the fore for terminally ill teenagers is closely tied to subjectivity and therefore identity as both involve other people (Marcia and Josselson 623). When Hazel meets Gus, he is very much charging through life, having a new found excitement after he was cured of cancer more than a year ago. He lives more or less like a normal teenager who goes to school, plays videogames with friends, and pursues girls, the only impediment being his missing leg. When Gus approaches Hazel, she is surprised that “guys [can] turn [her] on” as she never experienced truly intimate relationships before cancer (*TFIOS* 17). At first, despite the mutual affection, Hazel resists getting together with Gus because she feels that she would be “committing an act of violence” (*TFIOS* 101). Yet, they share the experience of cancer and thus can relate on an “intellectual and emotional level” (Kirkman et al. 4). With Gus, Hazel feels as if they

inhabit a secret “post-terrestrial third space” of their own, away from the reality of her illness (*TFIOS* 263).

In the course of their intense relationship, Gus offers Hazel the possibility of exploring normal teenage experiences such as drinking alcohol, having sex, and travelling, in spite of cancer. When she eventually falls in love with Gus “slowly [and] then all at once,” she is describing the inconspicuous change in her and the active choice not to let cancer prevent her from living, not to let it “kill [her] before it kills [her]” (*TFIOS* 125, 121). Although Hazel may think that it is better to hide away from others in order to protect them from her impending death, the lack of connection is actually preventing her from filling her life with purpose and meaning.

Alone, her identity remains stunted as she is unable to “perceive the otherness of the world and of others” and so understand them, and thereby her own self (McCallum 99). Human bonds and connection are crucial as they provide people with “identity, [...] meaning, purpose [...], and a sense of security;” so the more we love, the more we grieve the changes and losses within those relationships (Holland ch. 2 np.). Thanks to Gus, Hazel is able to see the impact one can have on people and the value of the small human connections that can still be so fulfilling. If Hazel cannot spend her life in the “service of a greater good,” knowing that she has loved and been loved can make it easier for her when she finally leaves (*TFIOS* 169). She ultimately has to accept that unless she wants cancer to succeed, she must open up to people – she cannot avoid “[getting] hurt,” but she has a “say in who hurts [her],” and it is her choice as much as it is theirs (*TFIOS* 313).

Nonetheless, even though she realises that she “needs other people [and] [...] that she too is needed,” Hazel is careful and only lets in one new person: Gus (McCallum 81). He coaxes Hazel out of hiding and helps her experience new things, but when Gus dies, the “only person [she] [...] [wants] to talk to about [his] death” is Augustus Waters himself (*TFIOS* 262). He started the process of altering Hazel’s outlook, now it falls to Hazel to continue opening up to the world. Certain things hint at a shift towards a more exploratory approach to life which signifies movement into the moratorium stage of identity. She does not “need [her parents] like [she] used to,” putting herself in opposition to them, acting like an “old-fashioned Teenager” who can function more independently, without the constant

presence of her caregivers (*TFIOS* 255). Although Hazel may never reach adulthood, she is able, to some extent, to proceed through the steps of the separation from parents, to not be afraid of other people, and to partake in intimate relationships.

7.2 Gus' issues with identity

In terms of growth and maturation, Gus, like Hazel, has experienced cancer, losing a leg to osteosarcoma, and was faced with his mortality and the meaning of his short life. Being a teenager, Gus finds himself in the moratorium stage where he can try things and explore his options now that he is healthy, but his life perspective is still “transfigured by illness” (*TFIOS* 213). Terminally or chronically ill adolescent patients must deal with the “premature disruption” of their life which may mean that they will never achieve all that they envisioned (Kirkman et al. 3). Creating their own narrative can help them deal with this reality since it offers them a form of “agency and control” over their life (Kirkman et al. 3). The first time that Gus was forced to think more deeply about the motivation of his actions was on the “last day of [his] dual leggedness” when he could not fathom why he was practicing “free throws” mere hours before his possible death (*TFIOS* 30). Afterwards, he is determined not to “become [his] disease,” to be the agent of his life, not subject to cancer, and to “leave a mark” on the world so that he is remembered for something else than once being a “professional sick person” (*TFIOS* 32, 311, 100).

Having eventually regained freedom from illness, he now wants to use the opportunity to live life to the fullest like a normal teenager. Unlike Hazel, he is not scared of developing human relationships and is actively seeking them – Gus is the one who strikes up a conversation with her and later writes to their favourite author even though he infamously does not communicate with anyone (*TFIOS* 14, 67). Gus wants to be a definite hero of his own life and hero in the lives of others. For example, when he revels in being Hazel’s “Prince Charming”, who is “saving [her]” from her secluded existence (*TFIOS* 302, 237). His “weird” obsession with “heroism” goes so far that a large portion of his life seems like a carefully prepared performance, sometimes coming across as annoying (*TFIOS* 169). He fears that his experience will prevent him from having a “life or a death” that have value simply because there is “no glory in illness,” there is “no honor in dying of” (*TFIOS* 169, 217 original emphasis). It reflects Hazel’s attempts at having at least some

control over life when cancer took away any kind of certainty, only it is the opposite: where she is reclusive, he goes a long way to go out and meet people to make an impression.

The “uncertainty” of adolescence comes with the freedom to choose and define one’s existence and infuse it with meaning thus making death less scary and pointless (Fitzgerald 794). This can be as simple as realising our finiteness and deciding to be an “observer of the universe” and “live [the] best life today,” which would roughly translate as being present and “paying attention” (*TFIOS* 247, 97, 312). It seems that Gus has already realised this at the hospital earlier after he went through chemotherapy: “I decided to feel [...] excitement and gratitude just about being able to marvel at it all” (*TFIOS* 175). Later, Gus seems to be dissatisfied with what he has despite the fact that he has survived cancer, he is convinced that he needs to lead an “extraordinary life” in order to justify his existence (*TFIOS* 169). It appears that over a year after living without cancer, Gus has grown restless and the “simpler pleasures of existence” are not enough for him, he wants to “[outlast] death” by being “special” (*TFIOS* 16, 310, 240).

This is partially due to the fact that Gus had to give up his promising career as a professional basketball player when he lost his leg. Since his identity was undoubtedly influenced by the possibility of a future NBA career before his operation (he imagined that “[his] obituary would be in all the newspapers”), now he cannot come to terms with losing the prospect of notoriety (*TFIOS* 240). The amputated leg is a source of anxiety too, like the oxygen tank she constantly carries is for Hazel, as it is a “physical evidence of disease,” evidence of otherness that is hard to conceal (*TFIOS* 144). No matter how hard he tries to be normal, people will always treat him differently for it. On one hand, his performative behaviour then might be a means to cover up his insecurity and to take control of how others perceive him. On the other hand, it makes him appear a little pretentious and self-centred (which is typical for teenagers), and needs to be eliminated in order to achieve fully-fledged identity. In order to establish the generative aspect of one's identity, it is essential to create the necessary connection with the world through the suppression of solipsism (McCallum 7; Marcia and Josselson 623).

The transition “entails loss and grief” which is doubled for Gus when he discovers that he had a recurrence and so he is grieving his approaching death, the subsequent lack of control over his body and consequently the failure to be exceptional (McCallum 61). Left with only a couple of weeks to live, dying without a “story worth telling,” he needs help seeing that in spite of his untimely death and ordinary life, he will not be just “unremembered casualty [...] in the [...] war against disease” (*TFIOS* 281, 311). Gus helped Hazel to recognise that “to develop human relationships” is an “essential part” of construing one’s identity and life in general, and she is now the one who comforts Gus in his plight (McCallum 132). She reminds Gus that he does not need to be “the first man on Mars” to feel valued, all it takes is to focus on the things and people at hand: “You say you’re not special because the world doesn’t know about you, but [...] *I* know about you. [T]his is all you get” (*TFIOS* 240-1). The relationships one has with other people help establish a sense of self and possibly help give value to life as one still impacts others in a small but significant way. Gus is at last able to admit that being “loved deeply but not widely” is more “triumphant” because, in their quest for immortality, people often leave “scars” (*TFIOS* 312). Blinded by the desire to “survive [their] death,” to be remembered in some way, they can hurt others. (*TFIOS* 312).

7.3 Hazel and Gus as abject characters

It has been repeatedly mentioned that cancer makes Hazel and Gus stand apart, they are relegated to the margins of society: either by their own choice or unwittingly by other people. To be sick means to occupy a distinctive place. After diagnosis, patients became citizens of the “Republic of Cancervania,” a universe unto itself that other people, try as they may, do not and cannot wholly understand (*TFIOS* 25). The experience of the illness permanently distorts the perception of the world. Even after having “no evidence of cancer,” patients live with the uncertainty of possible recurrence, “there [is] no *through*” with cancer (*TFIOS* 73, 45 original emphasis). As much as people are trying to help the patient, nobody really wants to “touch the dead” (*TFIOS* 268). They are repulsed by the all-consuming nature of cancer that robs people of vitality and the ability to self-transcend (Sontag 21, 67). Similarly to “screaming and crying” Gus in one of his lowest moments, the ill become subject to and humiliated by “fear and agony,” inspiring the pity of others

(*TFIOS* 245; Sontag 21). The others feel similarly distressed because they cannot support the patient in their fight with cancer and simultaneously avoid the topic of death in fear of their mortality. Hazel imagines herself at one point as a “ghost that both comforts and haunts” the visitors in the Anne Frank House, struggling up the narrow flights of stairs, drawing attention to herself as she cannot breathe (*TFIOS* 198).

At the same time, sick people become “objects of inspiration” (Kumbier). The battle with their illness turns into an example of heroic strength, as if cancer is fought with the force of their will: if they try and suffer long enough, they will overpower it eventually (Sontag 60). One of the girls, Lida, in Hazel’s Support Group professes her admiration for her:

Hazel is such an inspiration to me; she really is. She just keeps fighting the battle, waking up every morning and going to war without complaint. She’s so strong. She’s so much stronger than I am. I just wish I had her strength (*TFIOS* 131).

This gushing appears a bit strange given that Lida is in remission from a different kind of cancer and so has definitely experienced a struggle of her own. Now that Lida is healthy she has already distanced herself from the other cancer kids although, as noted previously, former cancer patients live with constant “uncertainty” about their health status (*TFIOS* 166). There is a peculiar ambiguity – someone who is admired for their willpower, regarded as an inspiration to the healthy majority of society, is then also dreaded because they remind everyone else that death is inevitable. Being a “[vehicle] for other’s emotional growth” but somewhat rejected by society basically makes Gus and Hazel abject characters (Kumbier). Indeed, the fact that they are both adolescents in the transition towards adulthood but suffering from terminal disease means that they will never reach it, they are “arrested,” “fated to live out [their] days as the [children] [they] were when diagnosed” (*TFIOS* 192).

Sometimes cancer is described as a sign of a weak will and lack of vitality, and while it stalls the development of the person, the cancerous cells keep multiplying, the growth

being “unregulated, abnormal, incoherent” (Sontag 26, 67). If cancer “implies judgments of deeper kind” then it is a judgement of the person as well (Sontag 43). Cancer overtakes the whole of body and the person becomes morally and psychologically determined by cancer, “[my] cancer is me” as Gus affirms (*TFIOS* 216). Their lack of vitality means that they cannot progress or survive at all, what is left is only the uncontrolled growing of the disease inside them which evokes the disruptive behaviour of abject characters and so the sick person becomes abject as well. They come to signify what needs to be avoided in the process of maturation, which is anything that invites chaos into an orderly system and which needs to be overcome, if needed by sheer force of will (Sontag 61, 67). Hazel would agree that there is something inherently wrong with cancer patients, as “side effects of the relentless mutation” that is life, they are being “taken out of the rotation” (*TFIOS* 49, 167). Yet she also believes that this does not make them “less human,” they are still able to “make art or contemplate philosophy” and function like other people, they only operate with a different worldview which is influenced by their illness (*TFIOS* 213).

Gus and Hazel are physically fixed in their teenage years forever, that is in the moratorium stage, they are able to somewhat resolve not only the identity crisis but also crises of other life stages; their need and desire for “self-actualisation” is unimpeded (*TFIOS* 213). While they are regarded by others as “pitiful,” “humiliated [creatures]” who represent what is undesirable in society, in terms of dealing with “mature and difficult” issues, they may even be better equipped to deal with them than most people (*TFIOS* 245). It is precisely because they are ill and dying and therefore have to deal with something most people “ignore” and refuse to acknowledge, such as their mortality and the impact they have on others (*TFIOS* 13). Moreover, as much as Gus and Hazel are limited by their illness, they are strangely, also, “the most liberated” as in certain areas illness “often suspends” the usual prohibitions that would apply for their healthy contemporaries (*TFIOS* 159; Elman 186). Hazel and Gus’ make use of this dispensation when they lose their virginity to each other, violating the “social conventions” that would view them as “desexualized” (McCallum 121; Elman 186). Their bodies, purportedly rendered “asexual” by the illness, are “eroticized” again when they decide to have sex (Elman 186). Their transgression making them agents who take control over their bodies that were up to that point a source of anxiety and a burden (McCallum 121; *TFIOS* 203).

Sexuality is complicated in that it can be a source of power over people and can “hurt [them]” if used for dubious purposes, and it is also a new realm in which to discover others and oneself, to learn how to interact with them and build parts of one’s identity (Trites, *Universe* 85, 115). As with anything that threatens the adult perception of what adolescent behaviour should look like, there are rules and regulations that ensure that teenagers do not become too “enamoured with their knowledge” of power and pleasure (Trites, *Universe* 116). Usually, the overstepping of societal norms would have repercussions, but for Gus and Hazel there is nothing that can be of consequence to them – “the worst has happened,” they are dying, and so they can do whatever they like (Flood, “Death wishes”). Their sexual act “repositions” them within society as agents with power in spite of their affliction and abject status (McCallum 121).

It is difficult for teenagers with a terminal, or any illness for that matter, to feel there is anything to life when one’s existence shrinks to treatments and hospital appointment, with future prospects possibly foreshortened. Hazel and Gus’ relationship is an example of how even cancer patients may lead a normal enough life and function as normal teenagers, experiencing intense love and being independent from their parents. Through telling the spring of her seventeenth year, Hazel notes the significance Gus had in her life and the story of their short-lived but intense love. The story is a means to remember Gus as long as she lives and is also a paper monument to him, a way to keep him alive even after all those who can remember them are dead.

Conclusion

Based on the literary and psychological theories presented, to achieve subjectivity and therefore identity, one must be willing to abandon childhood self-centredness and become a part of society. It rests upon leaving one's solipsism behind and establishing reciprocal relationships with other people to ensure the child's integration into society (McCallum 7). Identity is a product of negotiations of relationships and the recognition of one's position within society as both having agency over their life and being subject to the external forces represented by societal rules (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 3). Only if the individual is able to forego their selfishness and engage with an "[O]ther" whom they recognise as integral to their sense of self, then they can be said to achieve an identity that is suitable for adult life (McCallum 70-1). Those who are unable to leave behind their childhood self and integrate fully within society, allegedly cannot achieve a full identity and become abject characters as a consequence (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 138). They are usually people who have chosen abjection because they refuse to subject to the demands of society, or they are someone who truly cannot proceed towards adulthood because of some inherent flaw in their being.

The majority of Green's characters may be perceived as abject because there is something about their situation that makes it difficult for them to unequivocally leave their childhood behind and create the relationships necessary for subjectivity. They find themselves right in the middle of their teen years when they should, for the very first time, try to forge their identity and slowly but surely become adults. However, they cannot do so as they are simply incapable of coping with the condition of adolescence and to proceed towards adulthood due to the weight of their illness and/or trauma. They find it hard to plant themselves meaningfully within society as their perception of the world and their selves is warped and as a consequence, they struggle with the processes necessary for the establishment of identity. They isolate themselves and refuse to form the necessary relationships that would help them assert themselves and form identity, and so they become stuck in childhood solipsism or continue without a solid identity until they decide to change, or die.

The eponymous character of *Looking for Alaska* is haunted by childhood trauma that causes her to struggle with creating the necessary relationships which would help her not

only with the establishment of identity but also with moving beyond her issues. Alaska is unable to “achieve the maturity it would take to face adulthood,” making herself an abject character and so she dies (Trites, *Conceptualizations* 78). For Miles and the Colonel, her friends, who are still very much solipsistic, she serves as a tool for emotional growth as they realise that their self-centredness may have killed her. By recognising the noxiousness of their egoism, they reach at least partial subjectivity as they realise the significance of human relationships and what an impact they may have on others.

Hazel and Gus of *The Fault in Our Stars* are both influenced by their experience of having terminal cancer. They grapple with their identity that seems to be determined by the illness as well as with the meaning of their life in the face of impending death. Since they are somewhat rejected by society, but also lauded for their strength, they become a vehicle of growth for others. Hazel and Gus, like Alaska, are abject in their status as someone who cannot achieve adult identity because of terminal cancer. They are eventually able to defeat the alienation (Hazel) and self-centredness (Gus) when they establish a romantic relationship which makes them see value in their lives in spite of the illness. Again, they achieve partial subjectivity by actively deciding to come out of their solipsism and value human connection as something that helps them define their existence and its purpose.

If Alaska and Hazel, as the two main characters of their respective stories, were to be compared in their attempts to achieve subjectivity and identity, Hazel would be surely the one who was more able to do so. The girls share existential angst that may be resolved by the creation of bonds with other people who would provide them with image of how to live. Alaska merely attempts to mute the anxiety and uncertainty, which are typical for adolescence and which evoke her childhood trauma, by binge drinking and other risky behaviour. She *is* trying to create connections, but she is too scared to fully commit and her friends are not really interested in her unless she is bubbly and funny, giving them cigarettes and free alcohol. Hazel, on the other hand, is somewhat more empowered than Alaska in that she is not truly alone, having at least the support of her parents and doctors. She is able to recognize the necessity of being around other people in her life, and in spite of her fears, Hazel finally decides to start a relationship with Gus. Both Alaska and Hazel also engage in sex, but the former is too promiscuous and overt with her sexuality which

only makes her more abject in the eyes of the others since it is not deemed appropriate for a teenager, especially a female, to be so uninhibited in this area. Hazel and Gus' act of love is more of a source of empowerment in that as patients with cancer, they should not be sexually active at all. For them, sex functions as demonstration and affirmation of their vigour since they are generally perceived as already dead by the society, unable to lead a normal teenage life.

In *Stars* and *Alaska*, Green features characters that need, it appears, to experience something profoundly tragic to be able to grow, and they use other people in the process. The traumatic experience upends their world and makes them look at themselves and the world a bit differently, which in the end helps them mentally grow. Their identity achievement is never complete though, it is only ever partial as they gain ground in their identity, but lose the person that has helped them with it, and so they are back where they started. Therefore, they once again need to escape the solitary state and create new relationships, this time healthier¹¹, which could help them cement their identity. The loss of the other person that has been critical to their development (for Hazel or Gus, for Miles of Alaska), becomes ultimately a decisive moment of their life that helps them to move forward. In experiencing trauma and/or death, at least some of Green's characters are finally able to understand the importance of other people for the further development of their identity which would not be otherwise possible and would end in isolation and alienation (McCallum 71, 99). Those who are incapable of developing relationships or deal with their identity status slowly disintegrate until they perish.

¹¹ By "healthier," we mean relationships that will be possibly established with people who do not possess abject status and have already established the "clean and proper" identity as someone who has decided to leave childhood behind and is on their way to successfully integrate into society (Coats, *Looking Glasses* 151).

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