

# Psychological Conflict Reflected Through Symbolism and Metaphor in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*

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## Abstract

This article examines the literary techniques employed by John Green in his novel *The Fault in Our Stars* to depict the psychological and existential struggles of the protagonist, Hazel Grace Lancaster. Specifically, it analyzes how symbolism and metaphor serve as externalizing tools for Hazel's internal conflicts regarding mortality, identity, and medical dependency. The study focuses on three primary literary devices: the "grenade" metaphor, the oxygen tank as a symbol of physical limitation, and the fictional novel *An Imperial Affliction* as a psychological mirror. By employing a qualitative literary analysis, the article demonstrates that these devices allow the narrative to move beyond a mere "cancer story," providing a profound exploration of how meaning and selfhood are constructed in the face of inevitable destruction.

**Keywords:** John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel Grace Lancaster, Symbolism, Metaphor, Psychological Conflict, Existentialism, Young Adult Literature.

## Introduction

The landscape of contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction was significantly altered by the publication of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). While the genre often focuses on coming-of-age themes through social or romantic lenses, Green's work delves into the "sick-lit" subgenre with a unique philosophical depth. The novel tells the story of Hazel Grace Lancaster, a sixteen-year-old living with terminal thyroid cancer, and her relationship with Augustus Waters.

However, the core of the novel is not the medical progression of the disease but the psychological landscape of the patient. The primary challenge for any writer dealing with chronic illness is representing "invisible" pain—the emotional fragmentation and existential dread that accompany physical decay. John Green overcomes this challenge through the sophisticated use of symbolism and metaphor. This article argues that Green uses these literary devices to externalize Hazel's psychological conflicts, making her internal state tangible to the reader and revealing the complex relationship between the body, the mind, and the social self.

## Materials

The primary material for this study is the original text of *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, published by

Dutton Books in 2012. Additionally, the research draws upon theoretical frameworks of metaphor, specifically Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, and psychological theories of existential anxiety. The study also utilizes the fictional secondary text within the novel, *An Imperial Affliction* (AIA) by the fictional author Peter Van Houten, which serves as a crucial point of analysis for Hazel's internal mirroring.

## Methods

This research employs a qualitative literary analysis based on the "Close Reading" method. The analysis is structured through a thematic approach, categorizing the metaphors and symbols into three functional groups:

1. The Metaphor of Danger: Analyzing the "Grenade" as a representation of social and moral anxiety.
2. The Symbolism of Dependency: Analyzing the oxygen tank ("Philip") as a physical and psychological tether.
3. The Mirroring Effect: Analyzing *An Imperial Affliction* as a meta-narrative that reflects Hazel's cognitive and emotional state.

The study interprets these symbols through the lens of psychological determinism—how Hazel's physical reality

dictates her mental metaphors.

## Results

The analysis reveals that Hazel's psychological conflict is defined by a desire for "non-interference." Because she views her body as a failing machine, she perceives her "self" as a burden to others.

**The Grenade Metaphor:** Hazel repeatedly describes herself as a "grenade." The result of this metaphor is a psychological distancing from others. She believes her death is an inevitable explosion that will cause collateral damage to her parents and friends. This results in a conflict between her human need for connection and her perceived moral duty to isolate herself to minimize pain for others.

**The Oxygen Tank:** Referred to as "Philip," the tank symbolizes the loss of agency. Hazel's psychological state is one of constant awareness of her limitations. The tank serves as a literal and metaphorical "leash" that prevents her from achieving the traditional milestones of adolescence.

**An Imperial Affliction:** This fictional novel serves as Hazel's psychological anchor. The fact that the story ends mid-sentence reflects Hazel's own fragmented reality. Her obsession with the fate of the characters' parents reveals her deepest psychological fear: the fear that life (and her own parents' lives) will cease to have meaning once she is gone.

## Discussion

The use of the "grenade" metaphor is particularly significant in understanding Hazel's cognitive process. In psychological terms, Hazel is experiencing "anticipatory grief"—grieving her own death and the pain it will cause others before it has even occurred. By labeling herself a weapon of destruction, she attempts to take control of her narrative. However, Augustus Waters provides the counter-metaphor: the "cigarette." Augustus puts a cigarette in his mouth but does not light it, stating, "You put the killing thing right between your teeth, but you don't give it the power to do its killing." This dialectic between the grenade (inevitable harm) and the cigarette (controlled risk) represents the novel's central psychological debate.

Furthermore, the connection to *An Imperial Affliction* demonstrates how literature serves as a mirror for the traumatized mind. Hazel identifies with Anna, the protagonist of AIA, because Anna's story is not romanticized. The medical dependency, the social isolation, and the lack of a "heroic" ending in AIA reflect Hazel's lived reality. When Hazel says, "An Imperial Affliction was my book, in the way my body was my body," she is expressing a profound psychological merging of self and text. The unfinished nature of AIA is a metaphor for the unpredictability of terminal illness. Hazel's psychological conflict is rooted in her inability to "fathom her thoughts into constellations"—a metaphor for the cognitive fragmentation caused by trauma and the constant threat of mortality.

A deeper psychological tension in the novel exists in Hazel's paradoxical relationship with language itself.

Throughout the narrative, Hazel expresses a disdain for the "cancer kid" tropes—the euphemisms and flowery metaphors often used by Support Groups to sanitize the reality of death. She mockingly refers to the "Heart of Jesus" (the basement where the support group meets) as a literal and metaphorical trap. This rejection of traditional religious or optimistic symbolism highlights her psychological leaning toward existential nihilism. However, the irony lies in her deep-seated need for the metaphors provided by *An Imperial Affliction*. While she rejects the "stars" as romantic symbols of destiny—noting that the fault is not in our stars but in our biological reality—she nonetheless uses the "grenade" metaphor to articulate her social anxiety. This suggests that for a patient experiencing terminal illness, metaphors are not merely decorative literary devices but are essential cognitive tools for navigating a reality that is otherwise too terrifying to name.

The role of Peter Van Houten, the fictional author of *An Imperial Affliction*, further complicates this symbolic mirror. Hazel's obsession with finding out what happens to Anna's mother after Anna dies is, in reality, a projection of her anxiety regarding her own mother's future. She fears that her parents' lives are "unfathomable" without her, much like the stars in her mind. When she discovers that Van Houten is a broken, alcoholic man who cannot provide the answers she seeks, the symbolic mirror shatters. This moment represents a crucial psychological shift: Hazel realizes that no external narrative—no book, no author, and no metaphor—can provide a definitive resolution to the "unfinishedness" of life. This realization forces her to move from a state of medical dependency to a state of emotional autonomy, where she must find meaning in the "numbered days" themselves rather than in their eventual conclusion.

Finally, the oxygen tank, "Philip," functions as a constant reminder of the "biological leash" that governs her existence. Philosophically, Hazel exists in a state of "embodied consciousness" where she cannot distinguish her psychological self from her failing lungs. The tank is a metaphor for the artificiality of her survival. It represents the psychological burden of being "half-dead and half-alive," a liminal state that prevents her from fully committing to the world of the healthy. By externalizing this burden through the naming of the tank, Hazel attempts to create a psychological distance between her true self and the machinery of her survival. This process of externalization is a defense mechanism that allows her to maintain a sense of identity that is not entirely subsumed by her clinical diagnosis.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* utilizes symbolism and metaphor to transform the abstract experience of suffering into concrete images. The grenade, the oxygen tank, and the unfinished novel are not merely plot devices; they are externalizations of Hazel Grace Lancaster's internal struggles. They highlight her fears of being a burden, her battle with physical limitations, and her existential anxiety regarding the "mid-sentence" end of her own life.

The study shows that Green's use of metaphor allows for

a more honest portrayal of illness—one that avoids the tropes of heroism and instead focuses on the fragmented, uncertain, and deeply personal reality of the patient. Ultimately, the novel suggests that while the "fault" may lie in our stars (our circumstances), the meaning of our lives is found in the metaphors we use to understand ourselves and our relationships with others.

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