

Confronting Adversity with Strength: A Study of Psychological Resilience in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*

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Abstract

This study examines psychological resilience as depicted in John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, focusing on the challenges of living with cancer. Key concepts of psychological resilience, such as posttraumatic growth, optimism, and coping mechanisms, are central to understanding how characters navigate their struggles. The narrative illustrates emotional and physical struggles while highlighting themes of hope, love, and personal growth. The concept of posttraumatic growth is evident as characters find meaning and strength in their experiences, transforming suffering into a deeper appreciation for life. Optimism plays a crucial role, as characters maintain hope despite their circumstances, driving their journeys forward. Various coping mechanisms are employed to enhance resilience, emphasizing the importance of social support and shared experiences in overcoming adversity. The narrative illustrates how characters navigate and overcome obstacles, finding strength and connection in the face of life's challenges.

Keywords: (Psychological resilience, John Green, adversity, posttraumatic growth, coping mechanisms).

العثور على القوة في الشدائد: دراسة نفسية لروايات مختارة

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الملخص

هذه الدراسة تستكشف المرونة النفسية كما تظهر في رواية جون جرين "الخطأ في نجومنا"، مع التركيز على التحديات التي يواجهها الأفراد في حياتهم مع مرض السرطان. تعتبر المفاهيم الأساسية للمرونة النفسية، مثل النمو بعد الصدمة، والتفاؤل، وآليات التكيف، محورية لفهم كيفية تعامل الشخصيات مع صراعاتهم. السرد يسلط الضوء على الصراعات العاطفية والجسدية، مع إبراز مواضيع الأمل والحب والنمو الشخصي. يتجلى مفهوم النمو بعد الصدمة عندما تجد الشخصيات معنى وقوة في تجاربها، مما يحول المعاناة إلى تقدير أعمق للحياة. يلعب التفاؤل دوراً محورياً، حيث تستمر الشخصيات في التطلع إلى الغد رغم ظروفها، مما يدفع مساراتهم إلى الأمام. يتم توظيف آليات تكيف متنوعة لتعزيز المرونة، مما يبرز أهمية الدعم الاجتماعي والتجارب المشتركة في مواجهة التحديات. السرد يعكس كيف تتجاوز الشخصيات العقبات، وتكتشف القوة والارتباط في مواجهة صعوبات الحياة. الكلمات المفتاحية: (المرونة النفسية، جون جرين، الشدائد، النمو بعد الصدمة، آلية التكيف).

Introduction

Adversity is an inevitable part of the human experience. Individuals face countless challenges, setbacks, and hardships that test their resilience and mental fortitude. However, during these trying times, they often discover their inner strength and the power of positive psychology.

The term resilience, derived from the Latin "resiliens," meaning "to rebound," refers to the capacity to mentally and emotionally recover from adversity and return to optimal functioning. This concept is crucial for understanding how individuals navigate life's challenges while mitigating long-term adverse effects. Resilience is not a fixed trait but encompasses

attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that anyone can learn and develop (Southwick et al., 2014).

Emmy Elizabeth Werner, a pioneering developmental psychologist, conducted a groundbreaking longitudinal study in the 1970s on children in Kauai, Hawaii, a region characterized by poverty and high rates of alcoholism and mental illness (Werner, 1971). Her research revealed that while two-thirds of these children displayed destructive behaviors in their teenage years, such as chronic unemployment and substance abuse, approximately one-third exhibited remarkable psychological resilience, overcoming their challenging environments (Werner, 1989).

Norman Garmezy and Ann S. Masten define psychological resilience as “a process of, or capacity for, or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances” (Garmezy & Masten, 1991, p. 459). In the OHMI (One Handed Musical Instrument) project, children with physical and learning disabilities face societal challenges that increase their risk of adverse emotional outcomes. The project fosters resilience by providing a supportive environment where students can develop self-respect through musical skill acquisition. Teacher involvement is vital for motivating students and reinforcing their achievements, ultimately enhancing their emotional well-being and demonstrating how targeted interventions can help individuals with disabilities thrive (VicHealth Organization, 2015).

This focus on resilience is echoed in the work of Professor Sir Michael Rutter, a prominent figure in child psychiatry, who defines resilience as “an interactive concept that is concerned with the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences” (Rutter, 2006, p. 1). His research shows that some children can thrive despite adversity, emphasizing strengths rather than psychopathology. Rutter’s Isle of Wight study links cumulative risk factors to poorer outcomes while highlighting the role of positive parent-child relationships in enhancing resilience (Rutter, 1979). He also explores the effects of institutional deprivation, advocating for a lifespan perspective on resilience.

Cancer studies intersect with disability studies by examining the long-term physical and functional challenges faced by survivors. This field explores societal attitudes, biases, and the psychological and physical aspects of disability (Friedman & Owen, 2017). For example, sarcoma patients may undergo amputations affecting mobility, while those with head and neck cancer may struggle with speaking and eating, leading to emotional distress (Magasi et al., 2022). Additionally, patients with advanced cancer often experience low oxygen saturation despite supplemental therapy, resulting in discomfort and increased costs (Igarashi et al., 2020).

Amid these challenges, some cancer survivors report positive psychological shifts, known as post-traumatic growth (PTG). Introduced by American psychologists Tedeschi and Calhoun in the mid-1990s, PTG is measured by the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) and is viewed as

parallel to negative psychological consequences (Kadri et al., 2022). Growth after trauma can manifest in five key areas: discovering new possibilities that lead to reevaluating life priorities, developing deeper relationships through supportive connections, recognizing personal strength to overcome adversity, gaining appreciation for everyday experiences, and exploring spiritual and existential changes that provide comfort and meaning (Boulder Crest Foundation, 2022).

Optimism, like PTG, reflects the human potential to transform suffering into strength and purpose. It plays a vital role in resilience, enabling individuals to maintain hope and a positive outlook during challenges by viewing obstacles as temporary and seeking solutions (Landry, 2019). This aligns with the idiom “Every cloud has a silver lining,” which suggests that difficulties often come with hidden benefits (Milton, 1634). Optimistic individuals attribute outcomes to external and fleeting factors, while pessimists link negative outcomes to internal and enduring causes (Gavín-Chocano et al., 2023). Scheier and Carver (1987) expand the concept of optimism to include how past experiences shape future expectations, emphasizing that optimistic individuals are more likely to embrace challenges and maintain self-confidence. They exhibit perseverance, a positive outlook, and a belief in potential solutions (Scheier & Carver, 2001). Two types of optimism are identified: explanatory style optimism, which relates to attributing good outcomes to external causes, and

dispositional optimism, characterized by the expectation that positive events will outweigh negatives (Seligman, 1995; Scheier & Carver, 1985).

When faced with challenges, individuals employ various coping mechanisms that reflect psychological resilience. Psychologists Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). This definition emphasizes that coping is a dynamic process influenced by interactions between individuals and their environments. Strong coping mechanisms, which can be cognitive, behavioral, or emotional, help individuals manage stress effectively, while weaker mechanisms may lead to increased anxiety and sadness (Lavari, Erianti, & Rasyid, 2019). Additionally, coping strategies are affected by factors such as gender, age, and social support, which play a crucial role in an individual’s ability to adapt psychologically (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003).

Methodolody

The study employs a qualitative approach, centered on closely reading the novels. Its path is argumentative, illustrative, and analytical. The thesis follows the guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association (APA) for Research documentation. The study adopts a detailed examination of dialogues, monologues, and narrative descriptions that reveal the psychological and emotional states of the characters.

Literature Review

The Psychological resilience theory in literature highlights human strength and adaptability through characters facing trauma and adversity. It appears across genres, emphasizing recovery, growth, and broader social insights. Disability literature, in particular, offers unique perspectives on resilience and identity, making it a rich field for literary study.

Moussa and Adeeb's (2021) study, *The Significance of Optimism in The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, examined how the characters Hazel Grace and Augustus Waters confront their terminal illnesses with a hopeful attitude that enables them to live meaningfully. Their research highlighted that, despite suffering and loss, the characters find strength through love, personal motivation, and emotional support, demonstrating that optimism significantly enhances their psychological well-being and overall outlook on life.

A study by Nurhuda Fithroni (2017) entitled, *Psychological Relationship In The Fault in our Stars Novel: An Analysis of Social Exchange*, examined the relationship analysis between Hazel and August as the main characters in the novel. The study used J.W. Thibaut and H. H Kelley's social exchange theory, and focusing upon S. Fieldman's theory, discussing the relationship demands perpetuity factors such as similarity, reciprocity of liking, positive qualities, physical attractiveness, and physical appearance, concluding that the characters' relationship is satisfactory, stable, and interdependent.

A study by Nurul Nabila Said (2022), entitled *The Love Concept in Green's The Fault in Our Stars*, examined the impact of love conflict and conflict resolution in the novel. The Study used pure structuralism, focusing on the intrinsic factors of literary works, including characterization, plot, setting, and theme. The writer found that the conflict of love between the characters is disappointing, guilty, and sad.

Jamira's thesis, *The Positivity of Facing Cancer In The Fault in Our Stars by John Green*, explored how the novel portrayed optimism and resilience in the face of terminal illness through a psychological perspective, particularly motivational psychology. The study analyzed how the characters, although suffering from cancer, demonstrate strength, faith, and emotional support in navigating their struggles. It emphasized that a positive mindset enables the characters to endure hardship and find purpose despite their conditions (Jamira, 2017).

Bougherara and Bellakhdar's (2019) dissertation, *Defense Mechanism and Tragic Downfall in John Green's The Fault in Our Stars*, explored the novel's psychological dimensions through Freudian defense mechanisms and Aristotle's concept of the tragic hero. They examined Hazel Grace's coping strategies in facing cancer and Augustus Waters' tragic pursuit of greatness. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the study highlighted how the characters' psychological reactions and decisions shape their destinies and the novel's tragic atmosphere.

Discussion

Everyone faces difficulties in life, and overcoming them largely depends on our attitude. Maintaining a positive mindset is crucial, especially when dealing with challenges beyond our control. Psychological resilience helps individuals cope effectively, as highlighted by Peale (1952): “Belief in yourself! Have faith in your abilities!” One significant challenge is cancer, which requires strength and hope. In John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), the protagonist, Hazel Grace Lancaster, diagnosed with cancer, learns about resilience through her relationships, particularly with Augustus Waters, who also has cancer. Their bond deepens as they seek meaning, culminating in a trip to Amsterdam. Despite disappointments, Hazel finds solace in Augustus’s eulogy, which emphasizes the inevitability of misery and the power of choice in responding. Ultimately, Hazel affirms her happiness with her choices (Moussa & Adeeb, 2021).

Esther Earl, who inspired John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, passed away in 2010 at 16 after battling thyroid cancer. She met Green at a Harry Potter convention in 2009, and their friendship influenced his writing. Her death motivated him to create a narrative about teenagers in a cancer support group, helping him understand adolescent struggles better. Green emphasizes that while Esther and Hazel share some similarities, they are distinct characters, and he chose not to include many details about Esther’s life to honor her story (Bougherara & Bellakhdar, 2019).

The novel by John Green deals with a lot of important themes, mainly those related to adolescence, sickness, and death. At the heart of the novel is

the paradox of becoming independent while knowing that your life is short. Hazel and Augustus are both dealing with terminal cancer and are looking for meaning, love, and identity. The narrative emphasises the intensity of youthful emotions, including both natural emotions such as first love and more unconventional experiences such as witnessing loved ones grieve. It also underscores the significance of seizing significant life moments, such as travel and relationships, on an accelerated timeline as a result of illness. Finally, the novel delves thoroughly into the fear of oblivion and the desire for legacy, demonstrating that young individuals who are confronted with death continue to yearn to leave a significant impact on the world (Kirkman, Hartsock, & Torke, 2018).

The deep bond among the characters leads to significant personal transformations, reflecting the concept of posttraumatic growth as described by Tedeschi and Calhoun. This growth is evident in the novel as characters gain increased strength, improved relationships, transformed perspectives, spiritual growth, and heightened gratitude for life. Hazel's eulogy exemplifies this transformation, turning her grief into gratitude and finding strength in her love for Augustus. She emphasizes their deep connection through her reflections on infinite numbers, suggesting new possibilities for posttraumatic growth, such as finding meaning in loss, fostering resilience, and appreciating the value of shared experiences.

Some infinities are bigger than other infinities. A writer we used to like taught us that. There are days, many of them, when I resent the

size of my unbounded set. I want more numbers than I'm likely to get, and God, I want more numbers for Augustus Waters than he got. But, Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn't trade it for the world. You gave me a forever within the numbered days, and I'm grateful. (Green, 2012, p. 166)

The narrator's first-person perspective creates an intimate connection with the reader, expressing struggles and a unique view on love and loss. Reflections on infinities emphasize the value of experiences, deepening emotional engagement. Before Augustus, life was shaped by illness and pessimism, with books providing solace. Their relationship introduces new experiences, expanding awareness of life's constraints. This contrast leads to acceptance and gratitude, illustrating psychological resilience. As Kouzes and Posner (2014) highlight, individuals can transform adversity into strength, and Hazel exemplifies how painful experiences can foster inner strength and emotional maturity.

A support group for young cancer patients shares a sense of spirituality through prayers and discussions. Members, including Isaac, Michael, Lida, Augustus, and Hazel, introduce themselves and express their fears and experiences with cancer. The meeting ends with a prayer for healing and remembrance, prompting Hazel to reflect on her mortality.

At the end, we all had to hold hands, and Patrick led us in a prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, we are gathered here in Your heart, literally in Your heart, as cancer survivors. You and You alone know us as we

know ourselves. Guide us to life and the Light through our times of trial. We pray for Isaac's eyes, for Michael's and Jamie's blood, for Augustus's bones, for Hazel's lungs, for James's throat. We pray that You might heal us and that we might feel Your love, and Your peace, which passes all understanding. And we remember in our hearts those whom we knew and loved who have gone home to you: Maria and Kade and Joseph and Haley and Abigail and Angelina and Taylor and Gabriel and. (Green, 2012, p. 16)

The quote highlights spiritual growth through communal prayer, fostering unity among cancer survivors. Patrick's prayer for healing encourages connection, hope, and deeper faith as they face struggles together. This communal aspect strengthens individual faith and builds a supportive network, enhancing psychological resilience by helping individuals cope with adversity. The belief in a higher power, as expressed in "Remember that while the doctor treats you, God heals you" (Peale, 1993, p. 319), aligns with the communal prayer in the support group, fostering unity and resilience among survivors through a shared sense of purpose and divine presence.

In their conversation, Hazel and Augustus confront the emotional challenges of Augustus's cancer recurrence. Hazel experiences sorrow but gains strength from Augustus's reassurances about his choice to forego palliative chemotherapy for a trip to Amsterdam, highlighting his desire for control. As they reflect, Augustus expresses his yearning for life's pleasures

and his struggle against cancer. Hazel encourages him to see his fight as a personal war, motivating him to live fully in the present.

You get to battle cancer,” I said. “That is your battle. And you’ll keep fighting,” I told him. I hated it when people tried to build me up to prepare for battle, but I did it to him, anyway. “You’ll...you’ll... live your best life today. This is your war now.” I despised myself for the cheesy sentiment, but what else did I have? “Some war,” he said dismissively. “What am I at war with? My cancer. And what is my cancer? My cancer is me. The tumors are made of me. They’re made of me as surely as my brain and my heart are made of me. It is a civil war, Hazel Grace, with a predetermined winner. (Green, 2012, p. 138)

This quote marks a climax in Augustus and Hazel’s journey, revealing the harsh realities of cancer as Augustus confronts his terminal illness. His recognition of cancer as part of himself signifies a loss of control and an internal struggle, shifting the battle from external forces to a personal reckoning. This moment highlights themes of mortality, identity, and resilience, as they navigate their experiences and find strength in vulnerability. Roosevelt’s quote underscores that true resilience comes from confronting fear, leading to personal growth and a deeper understanding of life’s challenges.

Moreover, the improved relationships are pivotal, particularly illustrated during a picnic in the park, where Augustus Waters and Hazel Grace Lancaster share their feelings after a support group meeting. This

serene setting fosters open communication and vulnerability, strengthening their relationship through shared experiences. The quote, “I fell in love the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once” (Green, 2012, p. 82), captures the gradual and sudden nature of falling in love, mirroring life’s transitions. This rhythmic flow reflects the unpredictable yet patterned nature of human experiences. In the context of psychological resilience, this metaphor highlights how inner strength often develops quietly over time, revealing itself powerfully in moments of need. As Peck (1978) discusses, love involves the free exercise of choice, with two people loving each other only when capable of living without each other but choosing to be together.

In a support group, Hazel Grace meets Augustus Waters, who is there for his friend Isaac. While Hazel feels emotionally numb, Augustus passionately believes in appreciating life and finding beauty in everyday moments. He smiles at Hazel, expressing admiration for her, and after the meeting, he encourages her to embrace simple pleasures, hinting at the deep connection that will form between them.

Augustus half smiled. “Because you’re beautiful. I enjoy looking at beautiful people, and I decided a while ago not to deny myself the simpler pleasures of existence.” A brief awkward silence ensued. Augustus plowed through: “I mean, particularly given that, as you so deliciously pointed out, all of this will end in oblivion and everything. (Green, 2012, p. 17)

Augustus's direct speech reflects a mix of earnestness and playful confidence, revealing his genuine admiration for Hazel and appreciation for beauty. He believes in seizing every moment despite life's transience and acknowledges oblivion with lightheartedness, deepening their interaction. Committed to Hazel's happiness, he shares personal favorites that showcase his emotional resilience and joy in facing terminal illness. Augustus embodies a proactive philosophy, emphasizing the importance of finding meaning and maintaining a positive outlook, demonstrating that one can appreciate life's precious moments even amid adversity.

These personal changes are closely tied to how optimism affects coping mechanisms. Explanatory style and dispositional optimism are key types of optimism that influence how individuals handle adversity. In the novel, Hazel learns from Augustus about Isaac's successful surgery and visits him, contemplating his despair over Monica's breakup, which is more about her leaving due to his blindness than losing his remaining eye. Hazel highlights the significance of true love and meaningful connections, even in difficult times, demonstrating her dispositional optimism and resilience. Green illustrates this optimism by asserting that true love is a universal right, despite the harsh realities of cancer and suffering.

But I believe in true love, you know? I don't believe that everybody gets to keep their eyes or not get sick or whatever, but everybody should have true love, and it should last at least as long as your life does. (Green, 2012, p. 52)

The quote emphasizes that profound love is essential despite uncertainties in physical health and should persist throughout life. This belief underscores love as a source of hope and strength, fostering psychological resilience in adversity. By focusing on love's enduring nature, Green illustrates its empowering power, helping individuals face challenges with a positive mindset. As Bennet (2016) states, "It doesn't matter how many people you meet in your life; you just need the real ones who accept you for who you are and help you become who you should be" (p. 151), highlighting the importance of meaningful relationships and the value of a few genuine friends over many superficial ones.

Hazel experiences severe pain that feels explosive, like fireworks in her brain, causing her to scream for her parents. As her father drives her to the hospital, she lies in her mother's lap, overwhelmed and yearning to escape reality. While she admires the courage of cancer patients, she wishes to give in to her pain. However, she reflects on the temporality of pain and the body's ability to shut down when overwhelmed, demonstrating an optimistic explanatory style:

People talk about the courage of cancer patients, and I do not deny that courage. I had been poked and stabbed and poisoned for years, and still I trod on. But make no mistake. In that moment, I would have been very, very, very happy to die. (Green, 2012, p. 71)

Hazel reflects on the allusion to heroism in viewing cancer patients as courageous fighters, complicating this notion by revealing the profound

physical and emotional toll of her treatments. She describes the painful procedures and harsh effects of chemotherapy, highlighting her resilience and courage as a “cancer kid.” Green effectively portrays psychological resilience in young characters by showing their struggles and coping mechanisms in adversity. He emphasizes the harsh realities of illness and the extraordinary strength required to confront these challenges, showcasing the complex interplay between pain and hope in their journeys. As stated by Pritchett (2007).

Augustus Waters’ cognitive strategies in his conversation with Hazel Lancaster exemplify the influence of optimism on coping. He employs thought processes and mental reframing to manage his emotions. Initially, Hazel is upset by Augustus’s cigarette metaphor, which evokes her health struggles. However, after he clarifies that it symbolizes controlling danger without letting it harm him, she becomes more receptive and agrees to visit his house:

“They don’t kill you unless you light them,” he said as Mom arrived at the curb. “And I’ve never lit one. It’s a metaphor, see: you put the killing thing right between your teeth, but you don’t give it the power to do it’s killing. (Green, 2012, p. 20)

The speech reveals Hazel’s internal struggle as she rationalizes her decision to avoid crying in front of others, fearing her tears might burden them. This reflects her emotional suppression, as she tries to maintain strength by

clenching her teeth, looking up, and forcing a smile. Hazel prioritizes her loved ones' feelings over her own, showcasing her psychological resilience despite the toll of suppressing her genuine emotions. This aligns with the idea that "Sometimes, the hardest part is not letting go but learning to start over" (Sobon, 2011, p. 78), emphasizing the difficulty of managing emotions while seeking healing and renewal.

Conclusion

In *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, psychological resilience is vividly portrayed through the characters' journeys as they confront the harsh realities of cancer. Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters exemplify resilience by finding strength in their vulnerability and forging deep connections despite their circumstances. Their experiences illustrate how adversity can lead to personal growth, showcasing the transformative power of love and hope. The novel reveals that psychological resilience is enhanced through the characters' optimistic outlooks and supportive relationships. Key concepts such as posttraumatic growth manifest as the characters find meaning in their suffering, leading to a deeper appreciation for life. This growth is evident in how they navigate their challenges, turning pain into strength.

Furthermore, optimism plays a critical role, allowing the characters to maintain a positive mindset in the face of adversity. Various coping mechanisms are employed, emphasizing the importance of social support and shared experiences in overcoming hardships.

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