

## THROUGH HAZEL'S EYES: DISABILITY, IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

Gretty Andriana Br Sembiring<sup>1</sup>, Inti Englishhtina<sup>2</sup>

e-mail: <sup>1</sup>[grettyandriana0@gmail.com](mailto:grettyandriana0@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[inti-englishhtina@untagsmg.ac.id](mailto:inti-englishhtina@untagsmg.ac.id)

Affiliation <sup>1, 2</sup> Faculty of Language and Culture, University of 17 Agustus 1945  
Semarang

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of disability, identity, and personal agency through the character Hazel Grace Lancaster in the film *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014). Using the frameworks of Disability Studies, Narrative Prosthesis, and Jungian analytical psychology, the study analyzes how Hazel constructs her identity beyond her illness and how the film challenges traditional portrayals of disability. The findings reveal that Hazel negotiates her self-definition within both the medical and social models of disability, shifting from dependence to self-determination. Through her choices, relationships, and humor, she reclaims agency and resists being confined by her illness. This study concludes that *The Fault in Our Stars* redefines disability representation in young adult cinema, depicting disabled individuals as complex, autonomous, and emotionally capable.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Identity, Agency, Narrative Prosthesis, *The Fault in Our Stars*

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### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary media, disability representation plays a vital role in shaping how society perceives difference. Historically, individuals with disabilities have been portrayed as pitiable, heroic, or tragic, reinforcing stereotypes that limit their humanity. In young adult literature and film, such portrayals are particularly influential because they reach audiences in formative years of identity development. The 2014 film *The Fault in Our Stars*, directed by Josh Boone and based on John Green's novel, offers a nuanced depiction of disability through its protagonist Hazel Grace Lancaster—a teenager living with terminal cancer. Unlike many narratives that equate illness with weakness, the film presents Hazel as intellectually sharp, emotionally mature, and

deeply introspective. Her journey invites reflection on how individuals construct identity beyond medical conditions and navigate autonomy within physical limitations.

Disability Studies challenges traditional medicalized views of disability by emphasizing its social and cultural construction. According to Davis (2013), the idea of 'normalcy' is a social invention used to define and marginalize bodies that deviate from dominant standards. The Medical Model perceives disability as an individual pathology to be cured, while the Social Model locates the problem in environmental and attitudinal barriers. Mike Oliver (1990) asserts that 'society disables physically impaired people,' stressing that exclusion stems more from inaccessibility and stigma than from impairment itself.

Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) theory of Narrative Prosthesis explains that disability often functions as a structural and thematic device in storytelling. Rather than existing merely as background detail, disability becomes the mechanism that propels the plot and shapes character development. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel's illness serves both as a narrative foundation and as a metaphor for resilience and meaning-making. The story uses disability to examine universal human concerns—love, mortality, and identity—without reducing Hazel to her diagnosis.

From a psychological perspective, Jung's (1959) concepts of individuation and archetypes illuminate Hazel's internal transformation. Her evolution from self-protection to self-acceptance aligns with the archetypes of the Hero, Lover, and Caregiver. Joseph Campbell's (1949) *Hero's Journey* and Carol Pearson's (1991) modern archetypes further illustrate Hazel's growth as she confronts illness, embraces intimacy, and offers empathy to others. Together, these frameworks enable a multifaceted understanding of how identity, disability, and emotional strength intersect in Hazel's story.

This article examines *The Fault in Our Stars* through the lens of Disability Studies, integrating the Medical and Social Models of disability proposed by Lennard J. Davis (2013), the concept of Narrative Prosthesis by Mitchell and Snyder (2000), and Carl Jung's archetypal psychology. By combining these perspectives, the analysis explores Hazel's identity formation and her resistance to restrictive social norms. The study argues that Hazel's narrative embodies the transition from dependence to agency,

reflecting broader implications for how disability is understood in contemporary media.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the portrayal of disability and identity in *The Fault in Our Stars*. Primary data were drawn from the film's dialogues and scenes involving Hazel Grace Lancaster, supported by secondary literature on Disability Studies and character psychology. The analysis focuses on Hazel's expressions, decisions, and relationships to interpret how she negotiates autonomy and meaning within her medical condition. Thematic coding was applied to identify patterns related to identity formation, agency, and social interaction. Findings are interpreted through Davis's (2013) Medical and Social Models, Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) narrative prosthesis, and Jung's archetypal framework.

## DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the research findings and discussion based on the analysis of Hazel Grace Lancaster in *The Fault in Our Stars* movie. The findings are organized around the central research questions: how Hazel negotiates her identity beyond her illness and what messages the film conveys about living with a disability.

### 1. Hazel's Identity Construction Beyond Illness

Hazel Grace Lancaster is portrayed as an individual striving to construct her identity amidst the constraints imposed by her terminal illness. From the beginning of *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel is primarily defined by her medical condition – both by herself and those around her. This framing aligns with the *medical model of disability*, in which a person's identity is reduced to biological impairment and medical diagnosis. Hazel's self-perception as a "grenade" symbolizes her internalization of this model: she sees herself as a source of inevitable pain and destruction, bound by the limits of her illness.

As the narrative unfolds, Hazel's understanding of herself begins to transform. Her encounter with Augustus Waters becomes a pivotal moment that challenges her preconceived notions about love, life, and selfhood. Augustus treats Hazel not as a fragile patient but as a whole, engaging, and intellectually stimulating person. Through this relationship, Hazel learns to see herself beyond her medical condition. She begins

to embrace emotional intimacy, joy, and autonomy — elements of life she previously denied herself due to fear and guilt. This evolution reflects a gradual shift from the *medical model* toward the *social model of disability*, where disability is no longer perceived as a defining limitation but as one of many factors shaping personal experience and identity.

Hazel also demonstrates agency and independence in making her own choices. Her decision to question her parents' overprotectiveness and her determination to meet Peter Van Houten in Amsterdam highlight her growing self-assertion. She transitions from a passive recipient of care to an active subject capable of making meaningful decisions about her life.

Symbolically, Hazel's ever-present oxygen tank signifies both her physical fragility and her resilience. It becomes a representation of her ability to live fully despite dependency on medical aid — merging vulnerability with strength. Through this duality, Hazel reconstructs her identity not in opposition to her illness, but in harmony with it, integrating her physical limitations into a broader sense of self that includes love, intellect, and emotional depth.

Ultimately, Hazel's journey embodies a complex process of identity construction. She evolves from being defined by her illness to becoming the author of her own narrative — a figure of agency, courage, and existential reflection. In redefining what it means to live and love under the shadow of mortality, Hazel transcends the confines of disability, illustrating a nuanced portrayal of selfhood that exists beyond the boundaries of the body.

## **2. Hazel's Relationship as a Reflection of Identity Development**

Hazel's personal growth and evolving sense of identity are profoundly influenced by her relationships, particularly with Augustus Waters, her mother, and Peter Van Houten. Each of these relationships contributes to the shaping of Hazel's self-awareness and the negotiation of her place within the world. Through these interactions, she navigates the complexities of dependency, love, loss, and self-definition, which collectively reveal the multidimensional nature of her identity beyond the constraints of illness.

Her relationship with Augustus serves as the most transformative element in her development. Before meeting him, Hazel maintains emotional distance from others, convinced that her impending death will only inflict pain on those who care about her. Augustus, however, challenges this mindset by treating her as someone deserving of love and admiration, not pity. He introduces her to the idea that life's value is not determined by its duration but by the depth of the connections formed within it. Through Augustus, Hazel learns vulnerability, trust, and the courage to embrace happiness despite knowing its impermanence. Their relationship symbolizes a turning point — a movement from fear of attachment toward acceptance of emotional and existential risk, which becomes crucial to her identity formation.

In contrast, Hazel's bond with her mother reflects the tension between protection and autonomy. Her mother's care is rooted in love but often manifests as overprotection, reinforcing Hazel's identity as a fragile, dependent patient. Over time, Hazel begins to resist this imposed role, asserting her need for independence and emotional space. This shift signifies her transition from passive acceptance to self-determination — a crucial aspect of agency that allows her to view herself as capable and self-reliant.

Meanwhile, Hazel's encounter with Peter Van Houten represents a confrontation with disillusionment and the realization of her own intellectual and emotional strength. Van Houten, the author she once idealized, turns out to be cynical and detached, shattering Hazel's expectations. Instead of feeling defeated, Hazel's response to his cruelty demonstrates maturity and resilience. She recognizes that meaning and truth cannot be found in others but must be constructed within herself. This encounter reinforces her autonomy and emotional growth, affirming her ability to navigate disappointment without losing her sense of self.

Collectively, these relationships serve as mirrors reflecting Hazel's evolving identity. Through love, care, and conflict, she learns to define herself not by illness or dependency but by agency, empathy, and strength. Each connection contributes to her understanding of what it means to live authentically — to experience joy and suffering as intertwined aspects of human existence. In this way, Hazel's relationships become the framework through which she reconstructs her identity, ultimately emerging as a figure of emotional and existential empowerment.

### **3. Representation of Agency through Hazel's Experiences**

Hazel's journey throughout *The Fault in Our Stars* illustrates the gradual assertion of her agency – her capacity to act, decide, and shape her own life despite the constraints imposed by illness and mortality. Her experiences reveal how agency can coexist with vulnerability and how choice, rather than circumstance, defines selfhood. Through her relationships and decisions, Hazel demonstrates that living with disability does not negate personal autonomy but rather reframes it within new dimensions of resilience, love, and acceptance.

#### **A. Hazel and Augustus**

Hazel's relationship with Augustus Waters serves as a central narrative space where her agency is most visibly expressed. From their first meeting at the support group, Hazel is initially portrayed as emotionally withdrawn and skeptical toward intimacy. Her fear of hurting others after her death leads her to avoid deep relationships, believing that emotional detachment is a form of kindness. However, Augustus's presence disrupts this self-imposed isolation. Unlike those who view Hazel as a terminally ill patient, Augustus engages with her as an equal – someone intellectually curious, witty, and capable of meaningful emotional connection.

Through Augustus, Hazel learns that agency is not limited by physical condition but is reflected in the courage to choose life and love despite inevitable suffering. Her decision to reciprocate Augustus's affection signifies an act of self-assertion: a deliberate rejection of the passive role that illness had imposed upon her. Rather than letting cancer dictate her emotional existence, Hazel takes ownership of her desires and experiences.

This transformation is symbolically reflected in their shared moments – reading together, traveling to Amsterdam, and engaging in philosophical discussions about existence and oblivion. Each interaction underscores Hazel's evolving perception of herself as a subject of her own story rather than a victim of circumstance. In Amsterdam, for instance, Hazel consciously chooses to step outside her comfort zone, embracing both the physical risk of travel and the emotional vulnerability that comes with love. This decision embodies her growing autonomy and illustrates her redefinition of what it means to live meaningfully.

Furthermore, Hazel's response to Augustus's deteriorating health reveals another dimension of her agency. Rather than collapsing under grief, she actively chooses compassion and presence. She shifts from being the cared-for to becoming the caregiver, demonstrating emotional strength and maturity. Her acceptance of pain as an inevitable part of love signifies her evolution into a self-aware individual capable of navigating both joy and loss with integrity.

Ultimately, the relationship between Hazel and Augustus becomes a metaphor for the reconfiguration of agency within the context of disability. Together, they challenge the notion that illness diminishes one's ability to act, decide, and love. Instead, their bond highlights how agency can emerge precisely through moments of vulnerability – where choice, empathy, and courage coexist in defiance of mortality.

## **B. Hazel and Her Mother**

Hazel's relationship with her mother represents a fundamental aspect of her journey toward self-realization and agency. The bond between them is deeply rooted in affection, care, and mutual dependence, yet it also reflects the tensions between protection and autonomy that shape Hazel's identity. Throughout much of the film, Hazel's mother embodies the archetype of the *caregiver*, whose love manifests through constant vigilance and emotional support. However, this care often reinforces Hazel's perception of herself as fragile and dependent, illustrating how maternal affection can unintentionally restrict a person's sense of independence.

Hazel's mother structures her life around her daughter's illness, dedicating her time and emotional energy entirely to Hazel's well-being. This dynamic, while nurturing, creates an environment where Hazel's autonomy becomes secondary to her mother's protective instincts. Hazel, aware of this imbalance, often feels burdened by guilt – the fear that her death would leave her mother without purpose. Such guilt becomes a psychological barrier that prevents Hazel from fully embracing her own desires and decisions.

Despite this, the film also portrays moments of negotiation and growth between the two. As Hazel matures emotionally, she begins to assert her need for independence, challenging her mother's overprotectiveness. Her insistence on traveling to Amsterdam, for example, signifies a critical step toward reclaiming agency. Although

initially resistant, her mother eventually supports Hazel's decision, signaling a shift in their dynamic from control toward mutual respect. This act of permission is not merely parental approval but an acknowledgment of Hazel's right to make choices about her own life, even within the limits of illness.

Moreover, Hazel's recognition of her mother's resilience becomes a transformative moment in her character development. When Hazel learns that her mother has been studying to become a social worker, she realizes that her mother's identity extends beyond caregiving. This revelation alleviates Hazel's existential guilt and allows her to pursue her own emotional fulfillment without feeling responsible for her mother's happiness. Through this mutual understanding, both women rediscover individual purpose and strength, illustrating that care and independence can coexist without negating one another.

In essence, the relationship between Hazel and her mother encapsulates the intricate balance between love, dependency, and personal freedom. Their evolving bond demonstrates that true care does not mean control but the empowerment of the other to live authentically. Through this process, Hazel's agency emerges not in opposition to her mother's love but through it — a testament to the idea that emotional interdependence can foster, rather than hinder, self-determination.

### **C. Hazel and Peter Van Houten**

Hazel's encounter with Peter Van Houten serves as a defining moment in her emotional and intellectual development. Throughout much of the narrative, Van Houten represents an idealized figure — the author of *An Imperial Affliction*, a novel that profoundly shapes Hazel's understanding of illness, mortality, and meaning. She views him as someone who possesses the ultimate truth about life and death, believing that his insight could provide clarity about her own existence. However, her meeting with him in Amsterdam subverts these expectations, exposing the dissonance between Hazel's imagined ideal and the flawed reality of human nature.

When Hazel finally meets Van Houten, she is confronted not by a wise mentor but by a bitter, alcoholic man consumed by cynicism and grief. His dismissive and condescending attitude toward Hazel and Augustus shatters her long-held admiration. Rather than responding with despair, Hazel's reaction reveals remarkable composure

and maturity. She recognizes that Van Houten's cruelty stems from personal suffering rather than genuine malice, and she refuses to let his disillusionment define her worldview.

This confrontation becomes a pivotal act of agency. By rejecting Van Houten's nihilism, Hazel symbolically detaches herself from the need for external validation and authority. She no longer seeks answers about existence from others but turns inward, discovering that meaning must be self-constructed. Her ability to maintain empathy for Van Houten – despite his harsh treatment – underscores her emotional intelligence and moral strength. She tells him, "I think you are a brilliant writer but not a good person," a statement that encapsulates her capacity to separate intellectual admiration from ethical judgment.

The encounter also deepens Hazel's philosophical understanding of life and mortality. While Van Houten embodies the futility of surrendering to grief, Hazel emerges as a counterpoint – someone who acknowledges pain but chooses to find value in love and connection nonetheless. This contrast reinforces Hazel's evolution from dependency to independence, as she asserts ownership over her beliefs and emotional boundaries.

In essence, Hazel's meeting with Peter Van Houten signifies the culmination of her intellectual and emotional awakening. By confronting the collapse of her idealized expectations, she discovers the power of self-determination and the resilience of hope. The experience transforms her from a seeker of meaning into a creator of it – a defining moment that solidifies her agency and reaffirms her identity as a self-reliant, compassionate, and critically aware individual.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *The Fault in Our Stars* presents disability through a complex and multidimensional lens, most clearly embodied in the character of Hazel Grace Lancaster. At the outset of the narrative, Hazel is portrayed within the framework of the *Medical Model of Disability*, wherein her identity is predominantly defined by her illness, dependence on oxygen, and adherence to medical routines. This perspective initially confines her sense of self to that of a passive patient. However, as the narrative unfolds, Hazel's journey reflects a transition toward the *Social Model of Disability*,

emphasizing that the constraints on her life stem less from her medical condition and more from social and cultural perceptions of disability.

Through her interactions with Augustus Waters, her parents, and Peter Van Houten, Hazel is redefined not merely as a cancer patient but as a young woman possessing agency, aspirations, and emotional complexity. Although her illness functions as a narrative device—driving the plot and shaping her experiences—the film avoids confining her identity to her condition. Instead, Hazel becomes an autonomous subject who actively constructs meaning and purpose in her life.

From a literary-psychological perspective, Hazel's personal development resonates with Jung's concept of *individuation*, in which an individual integrates conflicting aspects of the psyche to achieve self-realization. Hazel's growth can also be understood through several Jungian archetypes that reveal universal dimensions of human experience.

First, Hazel as the *Hero* embodies existential courage rather than physical conquest. Her decision to travel to Amsterdam, despite her fragile health, represents an act of defiance against the determinism of illness and medical authority. In doing so, she reclaims control over her life and affirms her identity as more than her disease.

Second, Hazel as the *Lover* illustrates her capacity to embrace emotional intimacy despite fear and uncertainty. Initially hesitant to pursue a relationship with Augustus due to her belief that she will cause him pain, Hazel ultimately chooses to love freely, recognizing that affection and suffering coexist as integral parts of the human experience. This acceptance marks her emotional maturity and contributes to her individuation.

Third, Hazel as the *Caregiver* reflects her empathy and emotional strength, particularly in her relationships with her mother and Augustus. Despite her vulnerability, she provides comfort and stability to others—supporting her mother's emotional well-being and caring for Augustus during his decline. This archetypal role underscores the expansion of her identity beyond self-concern, revealing compassion as a core element of her humanity.

Through these intertwined archetypal roles, Hazel's narrative transcends reductive depictions of disability. She is not portrayed as an object of pity or inspiration but as a fully realized individual navigating love, grief, and self-discovery. The film thus challenges conventional stereotypes by depicting disability as one aspect of a broader human condition rather than a defining limitation.

In summary, *The Fault in Our Stars* delivers a compelling message about agency, equality, and dignity. It emphasizes that individuals living with disability or chronic illness possess the same capacity for love, autonomy, and purpose as anyone else. Hazel's representation contributes meaningfully to cultural discourses that advocate for inclusive and authentic portrayals of disability in contemporary young adult media.

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