

HUMAN MOTIVATION IN CANCER NARRATIVES: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF JOHN GREEN'S THE FAULT IN OUR STARS 2012

Dr. Syed Anwar Ali Shah^{*1}, Nazeef Ahmad², Tasneem Hayat³

^{*1}Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Chitral

²Mphil scholar, Department of English, University of Chitral

³Lecturer in English, Govt: Girls Degree College Chitral

¹syedanwar@uoch.edu.pk, ²nazeefzeshan1122@gmail.com, ³tasnimhyt92@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Syed Anwar Ali Shah

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17745075>

Received	Accepted	Published
05 October 2025	13 November 2025	28 November 2025

ABSTRACT

This study intends to explore the complex working parts of the psyche i.e. Id, Ego and Superego suggested by Psychanalyst Sigmund Freud and their effect on the behaviour of the main character Hazel Grace Lancaster in the novel *The Fault In Our Stars* (2012) by John Green. In the following literary research qualitative approach of investigation will be carried out through psychoanalytical lens of Sigmund Freud by employing content analysis method. The research tends to examine the need for human motivation in life especially in case of cancer patient Hazel in relation with Freud and Maslow's Model of Hierarchy of Needs.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, id, ego, superego, hierarchy of needs, human motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is the body of written works produced in a language in any country or age. The aim of literature ranges from providing pleasure to the readers to teaching and informing them about various aspects of life. The critical analysis of literature develops thinking skills and helps to get an insight to different aspects of a story e.g. cause and effect, character motivation, predictions, characters, settings etc. Psychoanalytic criticism is one way to critically interpret literary texts. Psychoanalysis is a set of theories and therapeutic techniques related to the study of the unconscious mind. It is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind. Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature. It deals with the idea that literature is

fundamentally entwined with the psyche. The object of this criticism, at its very simplest, can be the psychoanalysis of the author or of a particularly interesting character in a given work. The present research is an attempt to analyse the John Green's novel *The Fault In Our Stars* (2012) through the lens of psychoanalytical criticism as formulated by Sigmund Freud.

In this research the researcher has selected the novel 'The Fault In Our Stars' by John Green. It is tragic love story that deals with sufferings and death of cancer patients. In this novel green explored the psychological complexities i.e. fear, grief, pain and death etc. making cancer patients as a subject matter of the novel.

Green barrows the title of the story from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, where Cassius says "the fault dear Brutus is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings" (*Julius Caesar*, 1599). But contrary to what Cassius says, this

story establishes the notion that we are helpless before our destiny, and human have certain inbuilt psychological motivation and needs that affect our behaviour and make our lives complex.

Research statement

The present research focuses on the effect of the complex working of Freud's Id, Ego and Superego on the behaviour of the character Hazel Grace Lancaster and need for human motivation in lives of cancer patients specifically in case of Hazel with respect to Freud and Maslow's Model of Hierarchy of needs.

Research Objectives

- To examine the selected text through Freud's concept of Id, Ego and Superego and their impact on human behaviour.
- To examine need for human motivation in human life especially in case of cancer patients with respect to Freud and Maslow's Model of Hierarchy of Needs.

Research Questions

- How Id, Ego and Superego are working in the character of Hazel and what is their impact on her behaviour?
- How human motivation helps the cancer patients to revive and make their lives better and meaningful?

Significance of the study

The following research is significant as it contributes to the existing realm of knowledge and understanding. It is especially significant for people who are themselves cancer patients or who are around those who are suffering from cancer as it will show them that meaningful human interactions and human motivation can revive the cancer patients. Therefore I anticipate that the present research will make an original and innovative contribution.

Delimitations

The following research will focus on only one novel *The Fault In Our Stars* (2012) by John Green and particularly on the character of Hazel Grace Lancaster due to time constraints and also the scale of the study does not allow a large data to do work upon. It will also allow the researcher to explore the selected work intensively and to

be focused on the research questions as listed above.

Literature Review

The term psychoanalysis was coined by Sigmund Freud in 1896. Freud's Psychoanalytical theory extrapolates that our experiences and events shape our behavior and give certain patterns which are motivated by underlying unconscious desires. Throughout his life Freud worked on various techniques, methodologies and theories about mind, dream interpretation and the self. His work greatly influenced the newly developed social sciences such as sociology and psychology. It intellectually and academically revolutionized the modern times and many of its techniques were employed in counseling and therapy and therefore, significantly assisted in the treatment of shell shocked patients of the World Wars.

Number of different concepts of psychoanalysis has been explored in various studies, Shabrina Nur Husna's *Fear Reflection In John Green's The Fault in Our Stars* (2012): A Psychanalytic Approach gives the psychoanalytical as well as structural analysis of character and art of characterization employed in the novel *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). The research also shows that how the main characters have fear of facing physical and emotional pain and what role the minor characters like that of Issac, Mr. and Mrs. Lancaster etc. are playing in the novel. The research *Transional Development in Faulkner's Emile* (2014) by Asad

Mehmood, Roshan Amber and Iqra Jabeen examined the protagonist of Faulkner's short story who is cut off from the society and how social barriers and restrains caused in her mental sickness through application of Lacan and Freud's theoretical framework to prove that human beings cannot live a healthy life while being in a complete state of solitude.

Hande ISAUGLU in *A Freudian Psychoanalytical Analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter* (2015) explored from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective that how characters' lives and personalities have been affected because of disharmony between their id, ego and superego. The results of this disharmony cause inexpiable results for each character as Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale acted as their tempting ids ordered them, but the price of this love affair cost too much for both i.e. Hester

is condemned and isolated in the first place and Dimmesdale cannot resist against his conscience and punishes himself secretly to ease his pain and grief.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the following literary research qualitative approach of investigation will be carried out through psychoanalytical lens of Sigmund Freud by employing content analysis method.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalysis is a set of theories and therapeutic techniques related to the study of the unconscious mind. It is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind. Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature. Psychoanalytic literary criticism deals with the idea that literature is fundamentally entwined with the psyche. The object of this criticism, at its very simplest, can be the psychoanalysis of the author or of a particularly interesting character in a given work. Psychoanalysis as literary theory extrapolates that our experiences and events shape our behaviour and give certain patterns which are motivated by underlying unconscious desires. The unconscious is like a concealed cave where all the bitter experiences, desires, guilt and anxiety reside and hold the power to influence our behaviour. We as complex and sophisticated humans try our best to keep the unconscious buried and hence create certain defences in order to avoid direct confrontation with unpleasant content.

According to Siegfried (2014), the ego serves to three masters: the external world, the Id and the Super-Ego. And the part of the psyche that incorporates the morality principles is called as superego. The Super-Ego constitutes the internalization of cultural rules that are learned by the human through external guidance and influence mainly from the parents. The role of the superego is to achieve a balance between the desires of the id and the ego. According to Freud, the understanding of human thought process and behaviour can be done by examining the interaction among these three component parts of the mind.

Freud also gave the model of The Hierarchy of Needs to understand human motivations and behaviour in return. It is a model in which Freud and Maslow attempted to capture different levels of human motivation. It represents the idea that human beings are propelled into action by different motivating factors at different times e.g. biological drives, psychological needs, higher goals. The first level in hierarchy of needs pyramid consists of short term basic needs, also called as psychological needs e.g. Food, warmth, sex, water etc. the second level consists of long term safety needs e.g. Need for stability, security, order etc. the third level comprises of need for human motivation or social need for affiliation with friends and family. The fourth level represents the need for self-esteem the fifth level is of self-actualization i.e. desire to experience deeper fulfilment by actualising our human potential and last is the desire for self-transcendence i.e. to the sense of unity with all being.

Human psyche is very it determines our behaviours. Human psyche have certain motives, needs, desires, demands etc. that affect our behaviour and make our lives complex. In this paper the researcher aims to explore the strong relation of Hazel's id, ego, and superego on her behaviours and to show that if there is any lack in the hierarchy of needs defined by Freud then it becomes really difficult for a human being to act normal. Hazel's safety and security needs are not fulfilled enough because of constant anxiety of having cancer that is why Hazel is not able to move unto the next stage of hierarchy of needs i.e. need of human motivation which includes feelings of belongingness, love, and affection from one's friendship and family.

Research Method:

This paper employs qualitative research method, thematic analysis, to identify and interpret themes within the selected text, focusing on recurring ideas and meanings. It involves carefully examining the chosen text to extract meaningful insights and understand underlying themes

ANALYSIS

The Fault In Our Stars (2012) by John Green follows the poignant story of a young teenage girl named Hazel Grace who has been diagnosed

with thyroid cancer which has spread to her lungs. She lives a near-hopeless life with her loving parents but her life changes when one day, when she meets Augustus Walters, who is also a cancer patient. They instantly fall in love with each other but Hazel feels hesitant in terms of declaring her love for Augustus because she is afraid that her death will hurt him. Later, Augustus and Hazel embark on a romantic and carefree journey to visit

Hazel's favourite writer at Amsterdam where they spend quality time with each other. Afterwards Augustus announces that his cancer has spread everywhere in his body. Augustus becomes vulnerable, insecure and scared but in Hazel still loves him. She tells Augustus that she would not barter their short time together for anything in the world. Augustus dies shortly after. The novel concludes with Hazel reading a tribute Augustus had written for her. He says that getting hurt in this world is inevitable, but we do get to choose who we allow to hurt us, and that he is happy with his choice and hopes she likes her choice too.

The novel prominently deals with the sufferings and deaths of cancer patients along with exploring their psychological complexities i.e. fear, grief, pain, and death etc. The novel shows on one hand the fear of death and pain of the cancer patients but on the other hands shows that how human motivation help them to come out of their miserable state, to create their own happiness and cherish those blissful moments. The novel could be studied by application of Freud Psychoanalytical theory which could illustrate that how the working of Freud's Id, Ego and Superego are affecting behaviour of Hazel and Augustus especially Hazel and on the other hand to show according to

Freud and Maslow's Model of Hierarchy of Needs that Hazel's safety and security needs are not fulfilled enough because of constant anxiety of having cancer. As a result Hazel is not able to go up into the next stage i.e. to build close relationship with other people hence she tries to keep herself at a distance from Augustus e.g. at one instance in the novel, Hazel on her way back to her hotel in Amsterdam contemplates about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and her motivation level is so down because of her sickness that she places herself on a level less than human as she feels is she is unable to self-actualize. These

instances show the psychological complexities of cancer patients on one hand and later on Hazel romantic affiliation and empathy for Augustus demonstrate that how eventually she overcomes her fear and built strong relationship with friends and family along with developing great will and patience in herself to fight with cancer. The psychological working of Id (the primitive desire to live life) can be seen on the leading lady, Hazel Grace Lancaster who is a cancer patient. Hazel often worries about her remaining time and she thinks that she may die any minute. She worries about the possibility of pain that her cancer may inflict on her and leave her in severe danger of death. As a teenager who has cancer, she could not avoid the thought that she would die soon. She thinks of herself as a grenade that will explode one day and she fears that her death will hurt her loved ones. Here the working of Hazel's superego can be seen, which is the moral aspect of one's personality, as she has a moral sense inculcated in her that make her think and act accordingly that she should minimize the danger in case of her death. Hazel's father and mother are her strength who loves her very much and always supports her. On their wish, she joins a Support Group in church and makes a friend whose name is Isaac who has eye cancer. Isaac is told by doctors to undergo an operation to remove his eyes which are the cause of his cancer. And Hazel thinks that if it is possible she would have change her lung cancer into eye cancer, so at least she will be blind not die. This desire shows human basic psychological urge to keep on living for as long as one could. In the Support Group camp, Hazel also meets Augustus Waters, a friend of Isaac. He is 17 year old boy with Osteosarcoma who has fear of oblivion and wants to do something heroic before he dies which shows the working of Freud's concept of ego i.e. rational part of human psyche that motivates man to do rational acts and earn good name and reputation for himself. Augustus wants go live a life full of colours and glory and wants to do something magnificent before his death.

Augustus tells Hazel that he wants to have a special obituary in the newspapers when he die. He also does not like the fact that people show pity for them or make them feel as if they are different from normal people. On airport when he was going to Amsterdam with Hazel and her

mother he left them at airport terminal and said that he is going to pick up some food for the flight and he comes back at the last minute before boarding and later tells Hazel that he does not like it when people stare. That's why he went to an isolated place.

Caroline's death and feels empathy for her. Hazel and Augustus' mutual friend Isaac is also unable to cope up with the fact that his girlfriend will not be with him once he would lose his eyesight after his operation and he ends up breaking a number of trophies of Augustus, with his permission and then throwing up eggs on his girlfriend's car to let go of his pent up rage and anxiety. Hazel also have a lot of death related anxiety. She describes herself as a girl who has a lot of thoughts related to death and dying. Somehow, her life really looks like an empty glass before she meets her lover, Augustus. This feeling of uncertainty keeps her from living her best life and depresses her as the following quotation shows,

"Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death" (Green 144).

Hazel is conscious of her depression as she says, "Depression is not a side effect of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying" (Green 145). Green has shown in this novel that there is a relation between the characters' psychological condition and their behaviour. Hazel is a rational being who knows her condition as she mentions,

"What am I at war with? My cancer. And what is my cancer? My cancer is me.

The tumours 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 with a predetermined winner" (Green 86).

But despite being rational and pragmatic she at times fails to recognize the fact that her cancer is under treatment and there is always hope and also the fact that cancer is not the only reality in her life. She fails to recognize that her parents and Augustus are a beautiful part of her life and they can make her life much better and beautiful if she allows them to do so.

In case of Hazel, because of her constant anxiety of having cancer and looming fear of death her safety and security needs are not fulfilled. Her life is unstable and uncertainty hovers around her all the time because of cancer that is why Hazel is not able to go up into the next stage i.e. of interpersonal needs or need to build strong ties with other people. Hence, she tries to keep herself at a distance from Augustus and other people around her. She also feels very dejected when she thinks that she is a burden to her parents and a source of her their sadness. Here the ego of Hazel is working, which is the ego is the rational, pragmatic part of a person's personality as stated by Freud as she wants to minimize the danger and harm that her death could inflict on other people hence, she tries to avoid developing any emotional attachment to Augustus or with anybody else (McLeod, 2023). As it is clear in the example given below, I'm like. Like. I'm like a grenade, Mom. I'm a grenade and at some point I'm going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, okay? "I'm a grenade," I said again. "I just want to stay away from people and read books and think and be with you guys because there's nothing I can do about hurting you; you're too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? I'm not depressed.

I don't need to get out more. And I can't be a regular teenager because I'm a grenade. (Green 126)

"All efforts to save me from you will fail. It would be a privilege to have my heart broken by you" (Green 2012).

Hazel then decides to let Augustus with her until he or she die she feels sure after Augustus assurance her that keeping him away will not decrease his affection towards her. When Hazel and Gus kiss each other at Anne Frank Huis, Hazel thinks that whatever she went through because of her cancer have been worth it for this feeling of love and bliss she is having now with Augustus. When Hazel read eulogy for Augustus she said,

"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 201).

It shows that she has accepted the reality that any of them could die and she acts in a pragmatic manner to make her life better. The love of her

parents and Augustus makes her strong and produces in her an urge and desire to live her life for herself and for the sake of her loved ones. Transformation is evident in Hazel's worldview as after the death of Augustus when in a meeting of support group Patrick asks her that why she decides to live and not die, she says that she has a feeling that she owes a debt to everybody who does not get a chance to live and to the universe as well. So, she decides to continue her fight against cancer with a lot of will and patience even after death of

Augustus. This gives a glimpse of human's psychological need of love and care and show how it could bring a positive change in their life despite their pretence that they do not want anybody around them, (McLeod, 2023).

In the present study, content analysis method is employed to analyse the text. First step in content analysis method is the preparation of data and identification of the contents that the researcher intends to explore and defining the themes from the data. As per the content analysis method, in the current study, the theme probed by the researcher are the complex psyche and behaviour of the cancer patients. Then the next step is defining the approach which would be used to explore the text here deductive approach is used in which interpretations of the data are linked with pre-existing theories. The behaviour of the cancer patient Hazel is explored with the help of preexisting Psychoanalytical Theory of Freud and Maslow and Freud's Model of Hierarchy of Needs. Next step is application of theory on data and exploration of data from different dimensions as in the current study Hazel's awkward social isolation and its causes are studied along with showing the role of her parents and her friend Augustus in her life. The last step is drawing conclusions. This study concludes that Hazel's safety and security needs are not fulfilled that is why Hazel faces difficulty in moving up to the next stage of building social ties or bond with family, friends and other people around but human motivation in terms of romantic love and familial love brings a positive change in her life and transforms her personality.

CONCLUSION

The present research conducted a Psychoanalytical study of the novel *The Fault In*

our Stars (2012) by John Green. The Freudian psychoanalytical analysis of this novel shows that there is a strong relation of Hazel and Augustus' id, ego, and superego to their behaviours. Hazel Lancaster has a fear that her death will hurt people around her and Augustus Waters has a fear of oblivion. Augustus wants to do something heroic before he die which shows the working of Freud's concept of ego. The complex working of Id, Ego and Superego have strong effect on the behaviours of the characters under investigation. The result of this study also shows that there is a relation between the character's psychological condition and their needs or motivation in life. Human beings have a strong psychological need of love and care as it could bring a positive change in their life despite their pretence that they do not want anybody around them. The research shows that human motivation can help people to get out of their miserable state as Hazel is convinced by Augustus and she decides to let Augustus with her until he or she die. She realizes after Augustus' assurance that keeping him away will not decrease his affection towards her. It shows that she has accepted the reality and is acting rationally to make her life better. The love of her parents and Augustus makes her strong and produces in her an urge and desire to live her life for herself and for the sake of her loved ones hence she continues her fight against cancer with a lot of will and patience even after death of Augustus. This gives a glimpse of human's psychological need of love and care and show how it could bring a positive change in their life despite their pretence that they do not want anybody around them.

REFERENCES:

- McLeod, S. (2023). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
- Fithroni, N. (2017). *Psychological relationship in The Fault in Our Stars novel: An analysis of social exchange (Undergraduate thesis)*. UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. <https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/bitstream/123456789/36680/2/Nurhuda%20Fithroni-FAH.pdf>.

- Wikipedia contributors. (2018). John Green. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved December 5, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Green
- John Green (2018).. "Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 13 Nov. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/. Accessed 5 Dec. 2025.
- Marfiah. (2017). Mother-daughter's ego in the novel *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green (Undergraduate thesis). UIN Alauddin Makassar Repository. <https://repositori.uinalauddin.ac.id/7049/1/Marfiah.pdf>
- Nur Husna, S. (2016, December). Fear reflected in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012): A psychoanalytic approach (Undergraduate thesis). Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta. https://eprints.ums.ac.id/48270/20/NA_SKAH%20PUBLIKASI-nur.pdf Accessed October 2025).
- McGuinness, B. (2018, November 24). The hierarchy of human needs: Maslow's model of motivation. *Personality & Spirituality*. <https://personalityspirituality.net/article/s/the-hierarchy-of-human-needs-maslows-model-of-motivation.>, (accessed November 2025).
- McLeod, S. (2023). Id, ego, and superego (Freudian theory). *Simply Psychology*. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psych.html>
- Pangestu, N. A., & Sunardi, F. X. D. (2016). An incomplete psychological novel: A psychoanalytical analysis of Hazel Lancaster in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 16(1), 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.24071/joll.v16i1.144>