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## Young Adult Fiction: Inside the Mirror Image

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# Young Adult Fiction: Inside the Mirror Image



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

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## Abstract

Identity and image-of-self are concepts intertwined throughout the pages of Young Adult Fiction Literature. Characters in Young Adult Fiction interact with their surroundings and as a result form an identity based on these interactions. Research has shown how young adults respond to the feedback of their surroundings whether embodied by other characters or their environment. The way in which identity and the image characters see in the mirror are formed is directly related to the interactions characters experience in their daily lives. Interactions with landscapes, peers, illness, grief, and parents are the specific interactions discussed in this thesis. The novels *All the Bright Places*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *The Boyfriend List* provide characters who exhibit these identity-constructing interactions and fashion their identities based on the unique experiences with these interactions.



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## Image-of-Self and Identity

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who am I after all? A mirror does not only reflect an image, but also reflects all the people, places, and moments that image experiences. All of these elements add up to a single image that is reflected in the glossy surface of a mirror. A mirror reflects for a reason. It allows us to see the image the outside world encounters every day. A picture may be worth a thousand words and the image in the mirror is no exception. Our faces capture all of life's experiences and in turn help shape our identity or image-of-self. Identity and image-of-self for the purpose of this thesis are interchangeable because both deal with an important underlying aspect; how does the image in the mirror change with interactions? Interactions are not just subject to conversations or events experienced with other human beings, but in the course of everyday life; what external/internal/social forces impact the image seen in the mirror.

Young Adult Fiction is also interested in this concept of interactions forming a character's identity and identity construction has been a reoccurring theme in many YA Fiction novels. The purpose of identity and image-of-self is not to characterize specific people in the novels analyzed in a certain way, but to understand how their interactions with illness, natural surroundings, familial dynamics, peer pressure, society, and friends shape who they are. Some interactions are very responsive in that the YA Fiction affords the characters in the novels the opportunity to be on the receiving end of feedback from another human being, allowing image-of-self formation to begin at an understandable level.

The term 'interaction' is an all-encompassing term that derives its meaning from one object being acted upon, or a reciprocal action, and the influence an object/person/external force has upon an object. In this case, these actions that influence an object cause a reciprocal action that can be embodied by people, illnesses, strong emotions, and landscapes. An interaction throughout this text means a force is causing a reaction of the object and the reaction of the object is the identity formation in the characters of the novels. As characters navigate these interactions throughout the novels, the development of image-of-self and identity is the product.

Since interactions must be met with reciprocal actions, the term feedback is crucial in the identity construction conversation. Karen Coats' idea of a 'feedback loop'

directs the correlations made throughout each novel analyzed because of its versatility to adapt to the multitude of interactions a young adult might encounter in these novels.

“We conceive of identity as the outcome of a series of identifications and interactions with culture that produce multiple trajectories toward multiple endpoints; that is, rather than growing toward some authentic, core self that is somehow innate, we self-consciously fashion our identities from the images and discourses that culture makes available to us...continual process of testing, reflection, and social feedback with the goal of achieving a sense of inner coherence and external recognition” (“Dialogism, Development, and Destination: Young Adults in Contemporary Culture,” 54).

This “inner coherence” is how the characters from the chosen novels develop their sense of identity. This “inner coherence” is also related to Antero Garcia’s use of the term “consciousness of self” in his book *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres*. Garcia specifically touches upon the “consciousness of self” in relation to race and how a young adult’s identity is formed by interactions with racial identities created by popular culture. Although Garcia and Coats’s interactions differ, the underlying theme remains the same: external interactions shape identity and this sense of self Young Adult Fiction continues to expand upon and establish as a greater foundation for readers.

Identity and image-of-self are unique in that while these terms signal a sense of individualism, they are highly dependent on the external environment and its inhabitants. These interactions are not totally internal. While these interactions may stir a sense of internal reflection, external interactions ignite this moment of internal reflection when asking the question, who am I?

Karen Coats again touches upon young adult’s image-of-self in her chapter “Identity.” Her focus on outside sources impacting a young adult’s ability to find their authentic image of self is explained through her discussion of identity formation theories over the years. She quotes Sociologist Charles H. Cooley and his notion of the “looking glass self.” The image in the mirror or in the looking glass is epitomized by how “our sense of identity emerges through how we imagine others see and react to us” (“Identity,” Ch. 23). Without even realizing the influence other people and external circumstances have, young adults in these novels have already fashioned their identities based upon these interactions. The image in the mirror may be of one individual, but reflects a

multitude of experiences, people, and choices. Young adults become who they are, what they identify as, by their interactions with landscapes, grief, parents, peers, and illnesses, whether on purpose or by default.

## Interactions with Landscape

Location and spaces not only provide the setting in YA Fiction, but they also add another element to the layers of interactions young adults experience in literature. Susan Shau Min Tan explores this interaction with landscapes and how identity is formed as a result of landscapes within the scope of the *Hunger Games* novels by Suzanne Collins. Tan explains how the characters living within the districts in the novels define themselves through “false landscapes, warped spaces, and manipulated histories” (99). This national identity is shaped by how the characters interact within the created and unnatural arena where children fight to the death, but also within the districts and the resources available to each district. The external forces and how characters interact with the space and within the space shape how they view themselves and their identity.

“The centrality of landscape in the fashioning of identity as notions of place – inscribed through the physical presence of memorials and landmarks and in their imagined existence in cultural narratives – shape and root a collective sense of self” (97). This collective sense of self being realized because of landscapes is also an important aspect in *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Greene. Two landscapes, among many, that contribute to Hazel’s identity formation are the hospital and Anne Frank’s home in Amsterdam.

As Hazel navigates through her teen years suffering from cancer, she is no stranger to how the hospital impacts her identity. Throughout the novel, Hazel touches upon side effects of cancer, which is ultimately treated and talked about within the walls of a hospital. “I finally ended up in the ICU with pneumonia...and I was embarrassed by their desperation, disgusted that they wouldn’t just *let go*...And I remember wanting not to be awake” (Green, 25). Hazel’s memories of being in this hospital landscape are racked with sickness and the inability to escape this illness that has come to define her. The hospitable becomes part of Hazel’s identity because the hospital represents hopelessness and loss, which is how Hazel views herself in the eyes of her parents. Even when Hazel is at the hospital to support Isaac or Gus, Hazel still sees herself as a part of this miserable landscape in which bad news is delivered and her cancer became a part of her identity. “I went downstairs to the tiny windowless gift shop and asked the decrepit volunteer sitting on a stool behind a cash register what kind of flowers smell the



strongest” (Green, 76). This image of a depressing hospital gift shop also displays how this landscape continues to shape Hazel’s image-of-self throughout the novel. By using the words “windowless” and “decrepit,” the hospital is viewed as having no escape, which projects onto Hazel’s identity because within the hospital she cannot escape her illness. Just as Hazel views her illness as hopeless and even makes sarcastic remarks within the hospital landscape, we see Hazel develop herself as temporary. Hazel’s mom makes the remark “I won’t be a mom anymore” which inadvertently shows how Hazel would then cease to be a daughter (Green, 117). Being a daughter to her parents, although a sick daughter, is a part of who Hazel is. It is the hospital setting that has the power to take away parts of Hazel’s identity to make her just another side effect of her illness. Hazel creates a temporary identity within the hospital because at any moment, her cancer could erase an identity she created, but only exists when she is alive.

Anne’s Frank home in Amsterdam also provides a pivotal moment in Hazel’s identity formation. Amsterdam works as a space in the novel in which Hazel pushes herself to the limit to prove something to herself and in a way honor Anne Frank. The home consists of narrow staircase after staircase with multiple floors, which is a major obstacle for Hazel with ill-functioning lungs.

“It was fourteen steps. I kept thinking about the people behind me – they were mostly adults speaking a variety of languages – and feeling embarrassed or whatever, feeling like a ghost that both comforts and haunts, but finally I made it up, and then I was in an eerily empty room, leaning against the wall, my brain telling my lungs, *its’ okay it’s okay calm down it’s okay* and my lungs telling my brain *oh, God, we’re dying here*. I didn’t even see Augustus come upstairs, but he came over and wiped his brow with the back of his hand like *whew* and said, “You’re a champion” (Green, 198-199).

Augustus’s recognition of Hazel being a “champion” and overcoming the obstacles of the space in which they reside shows how Hazel then views herself in relation to this challenging landscape. Hazel forms her image-of-self as having the stamina to overcome barriers, even her illness which outside of her control and tries to dictate who she is and where she can go. The limitation of landscapes also provides a means for Hazel to discover her identity because as this space once confined Anne Frank, it allows Hazel a

sort of liberation in knowing she can now be this “champion” who is strong enough to overcome, even in a space once dictated by suppression.

In Jennifer Niven’s novel *All the Bright Places*, landscapes also shape the main characters, Violet and Finch. Both Violet and Finch struggle with the confinements of their home state of Indiana. To both Violet and Finch, Indiana impacts the way they form their identities, but in a negative way. Violet and Finch take a school assignment to find adventure within the borders of Indiana and begin to mold new identities after they find these hidden gems within a space they have both written off as disappointing and boring.

“I think I’ve got a map in my care that wants to be used, and I think there are places we can go that need to be seen. Maybe no one else will ever visit them and appreciate them or take the time to think they’re important, but maybe even the smallest places mean something. And if not, maybe they can mean something to us. At the very least, by the time we leave, we know we will have seen it, this great state of ours. So come on. Let’s go. Let’s count for something. Let’s get off that ledge” (Niven, 41).

This quote signifies how Finch believes they both can become something meaningful by visiting these incredible sights within a state with not much to offer. In this sense, the landscape serves as a way for characters to manipulate their surroundings to create an identity; “let’s count for something.” The fact that Violet and Finch visit settings that no one may ever find or care to look for shows how they form their identities based on setting strictly by what they idealize as their identities. Within a blank setting, untouched by other characters in the novel, setting provides a creative means of identity formation. Violet and Finch are so caught up in the depressing and monotonous aspects of their life that these places create an image-of-self that has purpose because these places “need to be seen.”

*All the Bright Places* also creates a landscape that commemorates the life of Violet’s sister her died in a car accident. Although the accident did not cause Violet to perish, it caused her image-of-self to be distorted and overcome with grief and the unhealthy feeling to give up. Finch directs Violet to this chapel so that Violet can reinvent how she sees herself; no longer a victim, but rather a healer.

“Taylor Prayer Chapel was created as a sanctuary for weary travelers to stop and rest along their way. It was built in memoriam to those who have lost their lives in auto accidents, and as a place of healing. We remember those who are no longer here, who were taken from us too soon, and who we will always keep with us in

our hearts. The chapel is open to the public day and night, and on holidays. We are always here” (Niven, 374).

By calling this chapel a place of healing, Violet tears apart the notion that a car accident could define how she views herself for the rest of her life. Violet spends most of the book blaming herself for not dying instead of her sister and how that creates a false sense of identity because she feels as though she is undeserving. This chapel reforms Violet’s image-of-self by showing her how to forgive. Instead of the wandering and hopeless identity Violet portrays at the beginning of the novel, Violet transforms her identity after interacting with this chapel to show how landscapes can cultivate an image-of-self already present in a human being, but it takes the setting to awaken this identity within the character.

E. Lockhart’s *The Boyfriend List* also deals with this notion of landscapes perpetuating identity formation. Fifteen-year-old Ruby struggles to create the right identity for herself within her private school community, Tate Prep. Ruby has grown up with the same classmates her whole life and is embedded within this prep school and cannot seem to escape. Ruby calls the school “Tate Universe” and comments on the people who reside within this universe “like even the people at the center of the Tate Universe feel like they’re on the outside” (Lockhart, 223-225). Tate Universe creates Ruby’s identity as an outsider. Although she has known these people her entire childhood, this school landscape creates an environment where everyone feels like an outsider. No one is really at the center of Tate because that total embeddedness within the school is unattainable. Karen Coats also agrees with this argument by stating, “Our embeddedness in community and the centrality of language to both crafting and communicating identity” is essential (Coats, 71). Thomas Bean and Karen Moni also do not shy away from the harmfulness landscapes can play in relation to a young adult’s identity formation; “Instead of clear anchors in family, community and institutions like schools to forge a coherent identity, these fluid spaces engender feelings of disconnection and alienation” (*Developing students’ critical literacy: Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction*, 640). Tate Prep is a fluid space in which everyone, according to Ruby, feels alienated and disconnected.

Besides Ruby's outsider image-of-self, Ruby also comes to realize her identity in relation to her home in Seattle, Washington.

“We live in a houseboat, which Kim and Cricket and Nora think is fun but is actually a horror, because I have *no privacy* (none at all, because the whole house is tiny and built on an open plan, so if I want to be alone I have to go into my microscopic bedroom and shut the door and even then my mom can hear every word I say on the telephone)” (Lockhart, 11-12).

This house boat creates an overwhelmed identity because of the lack of privacy Ruby feels all the time. The house boats location on water also shows how Ruby's image-of-self is anchored into the house boat. Within the walls of Ruby's house boat, Ruby has an exposed identity characterized by constant panic and anxiety. The smallness of the space and the fact that it is an open floor plan actually creates an identity that is the opposite of being open. Ruby must cope with her inability to express how she truly feels which ultimately leads to Ruby seeing a therapist almost every day to discuss how she can form her own identity outside of a house boat. The houseboat imposes restrictions on the way she talks, the way she moves and interacts and ultimately how she would live her life to create an identity not currently supported on the floating landscape.

Not only do characters experience identity formation within specific landscapes, but identity formation also has a place when dealing with the sad uncertainties in life: grief.

## Interactions with Grief

Grief is defined as sharp sorrow that is many times attributed with the death of a loved one. Grief is also a product of interactions and how characters in YA Literature interact with this anguish helps to construct their identity and how to cope after a great loss. *All the Bright Places* and *The Fault in Our Stars* deal with grief associated with the loss of someone. Violet in *All the Bright Places* struggles with immense grief after the death of her sister and the death of Finch. By the end of the novel, Violet comments on how she wears this grief and it becomes part of who she is, essentially Violet's identity is characterized by her interaction with grief.

“My face looks like my face, only different. It is not the face of a carefree teenage girl who has been accepted at four colleges and has good parents and good friends and her whole life ahead of her. It is the face of a sad, lonely girl something bad has happened to. I wonder if my face will ever look the same again, or if I'll always see it in my reflection – Finch, Eleanor, loss, heartache, guilt, death” (Niven, 339).

Violet recognizes that her interactions with grief will always stay with her, even long after the causes of her grief have subsided. Violet's image in the mirror is a direct reflection of the loss she feels. Her identity then becomes a part of her outward appearance and grief is no longer just an internal interaction, but worn on her face every day. This shows how internal identities can materialize into the expressions worn on characters' faces. Violet is who she is because of what/who she has lost.

Hazel in *The Fault in Our Stars* comes to realize how her interaction with grief reveals her true identity because of the author Peter Van Houten. When Hazel is leaving Gus's funeral Peter Van Houten explains how he believes grief opens up the doors to reveal your true identity. “Grief does not change you Hazel. It reveals you” (Green, 286). Peter Van Houten lost his daughter to cancer and turned to drinking and disrespecting others as a means of dealing with his grief. Van Houten shares how this is his true self that was revealed when he interacted with grief. Taking what Van Houten says and applying it to Hazel shows how Hazel revealed her true identity by interacting with grief after Gus's death. Hazel did not turn to unhealthy means to cope, but rather honored Gus's wishes to live a full life. Hazel's interaction with grief revealed the survivor image-of-self that was within Hazel the whole time, but took an external interaction to reveal it.

## Interactions with Peers

While only some characters interact with grief in the novels analyzed, interactions with peers is a focal point within each YA novel. “Feedback is critical: if our performance gains us recognition, we are likely to repeat it, at least until we find a new model worth trying” (Coats, *Identity*). Peers are extremely prevalent in YA novels because adolescents and teens regard the opinions of their peers superior to any other opinion. This “new model” Coats explains in regards to identity formation is constantly changing in YA fiction novels in response to the reactions of a character’s peers. Characters are willing to try on different identities to find the identity most suitable amongst their peers. “Our sense of self is marked by continual responsiveness to the feedback of others rather than a stubborn adherence to an abstract ideal that might set us apart from our peers” (67). Again this feedback loop is prevalent in how a character interacts with their peers. Characters do not want to be seen as different from their peers and direct their identity formation in line with the identity they feel is acceptable by their peers. While each character is interacting with their peers and fashioning their identity based on these interactions, their peers are also going through the same process.

In *All the Bright Places* Violet’s identity starts to form as a direct product from her interactions with Finch. “Finch is the hero, not me. I’m just a girl pretending to be a hero” (Niven, 121). Violet views Finch in such a high regard because he seems to go against what is popular in society and is completely himself without concerning himself with others’ opinions. Violet’s identity is then formed as a pretender and inauthentic because she cannot disregard the opinions of others as well as Finch. This is why Violet does not consider herself a hero, but rather “pretending to be a hero.”

Finch is also impacted by his interactions with Violet in that he does not see himself as worthy of her affections.

“You deserve better. I can’t promise you I’ll stay around, not because I don’t want to. It’s hard to explain. I’m a fuckup. I’m broken, and no one can fix it. I’ve tried. I’m still trying. I can’t love anyone because it’s not fair to anyone who loves me back. I’ll never hurt you, not like I want to hurt Roamer. But I can’t promise I won’t pick you apart, piece by piece, until you’re in a thousand pieces, just like me. You should know what you’re getting into before getting involved” (Niven, 227).

Finch also describes his image-of-self as dangerous because he warns Violet that he will pick her apart, even though his intention is not to hurt her. Finch is so used to failed interactions with peers and automatically assumes this identity of hazardous to those around him.

Hazel in *The Fault in Our Stars* also understands her identity in relation to the interactions with peers when she encounters a young girl who asks directly about her oxygen tank she must roll around with her because of her cancer.

“Any attempts to feign normal social interactions were just depressing because it was so glaringly obvious that everyone I spoke to for the rest of my life would feel awkward and self-conscious around me, except maybe kids like Jackie who just didn’t know any better” (Green, 47).

Hazel understands the physical components of her cancer and how these physical limitations already define her identity in a certain way to her peers. Hazel describes an abnormal identity in relation to this interaction with a peer because of how people will feel “awkward” and “self-conscious.” This also projects an identity onto her peers because Hazel assumes that for the rest of her life, social interactions with her peers will not be “normal” because she must identify as being irregular because of her cancer.

Ruby in *The Boyfriend List* also represents the importance of interactions with peers in the way she interacts with her friend group. Ruby and her friends come up with a list of what it means to be a good friend to one another.

“5. If your friend has already said she likes a boy, don’t you go liking him too. She’s got dibs. 6. That is unless you’re certain it is truly “meant to be.” Because if it’s meant to be, and who are we to stand in the way of true love, just because Tate is so stupidly small? 8. Tell your friends every little detail! We promise to keep it just between us” (Lockhart, 39).

This identity to being a good friend is projected onto Ruby by this list and if Ruby cannot fulfill these rules then her identity becomes a “bad friend.” Ruby does in fact break one of these rules causing her “friends” to tell Ruby that she has lost her identity of being a good friend.

“I never thought you could betray one of us like that. It’s so wrong”  
 “Don’t you even want to hear my side of it?”  
 “What side could you possibly have?”  
 “So you’re dumping me as a friend? Without even talking about it?”  
 “I don’t even know what kind of friend you are, anymore” (Lockhart, 49).

Even by the end of the novel Ruby finds herself with her neighbor as her true friend. This list created by her peers may have defined her as a bad friend by their standards, but let the way to Ruby discovering how to actually be a good friend to her neighbor and not let other peers create a list of qualities to express her real identity.

In addition to interactions with peers, parents also provide important interactions for identity formation from the moment of birth. All types of parents influence characters in the way characters view themselves.



## Interactions with Parents

“Adolescence is a period of human life when the brain, still more intensively than before, learns to recognise and attribute mental states to ourselves as well as other people” (Nikolejeva ,86). The volatility of the adolescent stage in life is very much a product of how we are raised and the environment we grow up in. Parents contribute to this atmosphere immensely with their interactions or lack of interactions. “Attributing mental states” deals with identity in that image-of-self is formed by how these interactions with parental figures either build up or destroy self-image. How main characters see themselves is a direct correlation of the image their parents think they see or distort to fit a certain mold. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel waivers between loving the protectiveness of her parents to feeling smothered. Hazel’s relationship with her parents solidifies how she characterizes herself in the mirror and how her relationships are depicted because of her parents’ image of herself.

“I went to Support Group for the same reason that I’d once allowed nurses with a mere eighteen months of graduate education to poison me with exotically named chemicals. I wanted to make my parents happy. There is only one thing in this world shtter than biting it from cancer when you’re sixteen, and that’s having a kid who bites it from cancer” (Green, 7-8).

Hazel realizes the implications of her disease and the impact it has on her parents and because of this, Hazel comes to a realization of who she is. “I wanted to make my parents happy” shows a selfless identity of Hazel’s that allows her to see outside her situation and sympathize with people who love her dearly. Even though Hazel has to fight this horrific disease, she puts herself outside of this “pity bubble” to understand the emotions of others and react to these interactions. Hazels knows her cancer does not just impact her own life, but her parents who have spent their whole lives by her bedside. Even though Hazel sees the bleakness of her situation, she is still dedicated to keeping her parents hopeful.

“The primary goal of identity construction in contemporary culture is recognition from others; ultimately, what we desire is to matter to the people who matter to us” (Coats, *Identity*). Coats touches upon a major aspect of identity construction: desire. Through fashioning our identity based on interactions with our parents, we hope we matter to them as much as they matter to us. Hazel feels this sense of desire and understands how much

she matters to her parents. When describing how she feels about Gus, even though she recently found out he was going to die from cancer, she has a moment with her father that helps shape Hazel's view of herself in relation to how her father feels about her. "But it was sure a privilege to love him, huh?" "Gives you an idea how I feel about you." "My old man. He always knew just what to say" (Green 278). By Hazel being able to attribute the love her father feels for her as a privilege reinforces her attitude of wanting to fight cancer and attend support group to keep her parents happy. Hazel feels this love from her parents and in this moment understands who she is as a loved daughter. Even amongst doctor's appointments, hospital visits, and trips to Amsterdam, at the heart of it all, Hazel is loved and "matters" to her parents. This contributes to how Hazel feels a sense of purpose and hope moving forward after Gus dies because she has this support behind her. Her parents' love and how Hazel comes to know this love fashions a resilient attitude Hazel uses to continue on after Gus dies.

Hazel's parental love and how this love molds her identity is the product of loving parents which takes a different form in *The Boyfriend List*. Ruby feels suffocated by her parents, not only because she can never escape them on their house boat, but because her parents are too focused on her as an only-child.

"Are you going to vomit? If you're going to vomit, let me help you to the bathroom."

"No thanks."

"Then are you depressed? Do you know what the symptoms are?"

"Dad, please."

"Does the universe seem pointless and bleak? Do you think about suicide?"

"Leave me alone!" (Lockhart, 5).

In this interaction above, Ruby interacts with her father in a frustrated manner because all of Ruby's feelings and events in her life always seem to also be the property of her parents for them to make comments or suggestions. Her father and mother come from a place of love and want Ruby to be happy, especially since she has been seeing a therapist, but this love is overbearing and unrelenting. When parents are too invested in character's health, relationships, or feelings, the main character tends to pull away to find some solace in just being alone. Although Ruby is an only-child, which would suggest more time spent alone, Ruby finds herself always in the presence of her parents without a means to break free and self-reflect on her own. Because of this hovering and inability to

experience life on her own, Ruby creates a private image-of-self she only shares with her shrink.

As the novel progresses we see Ruby's "boyfriend list" comprised of people who barely even pay attention to her, but she considers them in a way a boyfriend. This can correlate to how suffocating her parents are and how she views other people's relationships with her. Those who do not even pay attention to Ruby somehow find a place on this list because Ruby finds peace in people who do not know all the intimate details of her life.

"At home, my dad is always asking me questions about stuff, wanting to know the details of all my friends and their lives. And my mom is always interrupting anything I'm talking about to tell me stories about when she was young, and how she felt just like I do – only worse. It was weird to talk and have someone listen quietly for half an hour" (Lockhart, 43).

As Ruby reflects on how she is able to truly express herself without interruption to her shrink, her image-of-self becomes fashioned after people who ignore her because this kind of interaction is completely different than the smothering she feels at home. Her only real boyfriend, out of the fifteen she has listed, Jackson, does not pay attention to her through her description in the novel. This shows how her parental relationship forms her identity when in a romantic relationship. Ruby does not mind a partner who does not ask for all her intimate details or try to project their feelings on her.

The result of Ruby's relationship with her parents creates a passive identity in Ruby. Even when Ruby is very bothered by something Jackson or her friends would say, Ruby does not stick up for herself as a product of not wanting to share too many personal details. Ruby creates this "receiver" type of identity because she allows people to talk to her or take actions against her because she would rather not have to explain herself. Until Ruby begins to know her strength at the end of the novel, with the help of her shrink, Ruby lets many things just happen to her without argument. Even as we see a shift in how Ruby views herself by the end of the novel, she still thinks about Jackson and how she would let him walk all over again because of how much she misses him.

*All the Bright Places* also touches upon parental guidance gone wrong and how the complete absence of parenting causes a very distorted image-of-self. Throughout the novel, Finch suffers from Bipolar Disorder, yet is given no help from his divorced

parents. Finch conceives in his mind his father wants nothing to do with him and has already replaced his children with his second wife's kids. "What did you think would happen? Damn right he's a delinquent, and a criminal, and an emotional wreck, and a major-disappointment-weirdo-fuckup. Be grateful for your daughter, sir, because trust me, you would not want my son. No one does" (Niven, 259). Even though this is the inner-monologue Finch projects on his father's thoughts, Finch fashions his identity as being a worthless son based on these thoughts. His father pays no attention to Finch and is too busy with his new family to take care of the family he already has.

Finch creates an identity of being replaceable based on his relationship and interactions with his father. "You do not want my son" directly correlates to how Finch believes himself to be useless, even in the eyes of Violet who loves and supports Finch. When Finch kills himself, his father acts completely shocked, showing how far removed he is from Finch's life and feelings. The direct interaction between Finch and his father shows how Finch fashions his image-of-self based on the image he thinks his father has of him. Finch allows his identity to be shaped by his father instead of turning to other relationships to see how he could mold his identity based on interactions with people who truly care about him, like Violet. Coats comments on this idea that we "fashion an identity that gives us the kind of recognition we crave" (*Identity*). Finch wanted to be recognized by his father, but the recognition he received turned into a self-destructive identity. This identity formation example shows the power of parental interactions and how characters take their parental figure's views of them seriously and form their identity based on their interactions with these figures, either positively or negatively.

Violet in *All the Bright Places* also recognizes the importance of parental guidance in the identity formation process. After losing her sister in a car accident, Violet is lost in life and only goes through the motions day by day. Her parents sense these directionless and hopeless attributes because Violet used to be optimistic, involved in many extra-curricular activities, and always spending time with her friends. Violet feels like she lives in a different world from her parents until Finch helps her realize what her parents' love actually means. "In that moment, I'm thankful I'm not a parent and I wonder if I ever will be. What a terrible feeling to love someone and not be able to help them. Actually, I know exactly how that feels" (Niven, 349). For most of the novel,

Violet cannot understand why her parents are so obsessed with her well-being and wanting to make sure she leaves the house and starts writing again like she used to. How invested her parents are in making Violet happy again is apparent to Violet by the end of the novel and she begins to mold her sense-of-self off of her parents once Finch has died. By understanding how to love unconditionally, even in desperate situations when no amount of help seems to be the answer, Violet sees how the parental role creates a identity in herself and the children of other parents. Violet places herself in the shoes of her parents and creates a sympathetic identity that contrasts her initial belief that no one could help her or understand her sadness in the loss of her sister. She can now comprehend what it means to be a parent and love so selflessly, even in the midst of tragedy and when that love is not reciprocated. Violet grows up through her identity formation in relation to the interactions with her parents. Even in seemingly hopeless situations, Violet still conveys love because of the love she is shown by her own parents.

Parental interactions that lead to identity formation are pivotal in a young adult's life because every characters has parents, whether present or not. Parental interactions can be easily understood by the reader because of the universal notion that everyone has a set of parents. Although every character has parents, illness is a unique interaction only some characters in the novels analyzed experience to help form their image-of-self.

## Interactions with Illness

“To amplify the dilemma, characters are placed in extreme situations in which identity formation is accelerated” (Nikolojeva, 265). Illness is characterized as one of these extreme situations, especially when it happens to a child; a young adult with so much life still yet to live. Illness is at the center of discussion and a main contributor of identity formation in *All the Bright Places* and *The Fault in our Stars*. Whether the illness is mental or physical, how young adults cope with this interaction creates an image-of-self and what a character sees in the mirror is a product of the battles they are facing internally or externally.

In *All the Bright Places* Finch struggles with the mental illness Bipolar Disorder. From the very beginning of the novel, we see how Finch uses sarcasm and quick wit to cover up his suffering. This illness directly impacts his personality, mainly because it is a personality disorder, but also in the way he interacts with everyone else because of this interaction with illness. “I’m fine. Believe me, if I decide to kill myself, you’ll be the first to know. I’ll save you a front-row seat, or at least wait till you’ve got money for the lawsuit” (Niven, 271). While the reader only gets to experience Finch’s identity formation in relation to his illness through his internal thoughts, Finch’s feelings about illness show how he feels defined by his illness. “Labels like “bipolar” say *This is why you are the way you are. This is who you are.* They explain people away as illnesses” (Niven, 272). The way Finch portrays an illness as a label shows how he feels his identity is portrayed by just one word. This one word “bipolar” dictates who he is and the image he sees in the mirror embodies what the word “bipolar” means. “They explain people away as illnesses” describes the distorted sense of identity Finch has created with his interaction with illness because “bipolar disorder” to Finch is all-encompassing and dictates the core of his being.

“You are not alone...*Actually I am, which is part of the problem; we are all alone, trapped in these bodies and our own minds, and whatever company we have in this life is only fleeting and superficial*” (Niven, 272). Finch also allows his illness to separate him from the rest of society. Such an individualized and singular identity shows how Finch characterizes himself completely alone because of his illness. This mental illness not only controls Finch, but forces Finch to write himself off as a just an illness in which no one

else can understand because he must face it completely on his own. This interaction with illness is detrimental to the formation of identity because Finch is never able to overcome the power of the interaction. Some interactions are not always positive interactions, Finch experiences this negative interaction with illness and ultimately lets illness win when he commits suicide.

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel suffers from battling cancer; a physical illness interaction. Hazel, like Finch, is very sarcastic at the beginning of the novel showcasing how Hazel does not want to be pitied for who she is because she considers her identity to be “Cancer Hazel.” Hazel is so used to people only asking about her illness that she is shocked when Gus asks about her life outside of having cancer.

“I already told you my story. I was diagnosed when—“

“No, not your cancer story. *Your* story”

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who becomes their disease. I know so many people like that. It’s disheartening. Like, cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people-over business. But surely you haven’t let it succeed prematurely” (Green, 32).

Gus’s feelings on cancer as just another aspect of every-day life, instead of an identity-molder shows Hazel how to overcome her identity of “Hazel who has cancer.” “Without futurity, Hazel does not invest in identity formation. Her vision of herself in a few years is restricted a list of condolences on a web page” (Nikolojeva, 265). Hazel is so attuned to letting herself be defined by her illness that her identity that is prevalent in the beginning of the novel is stagnant without room for improvements. “...when I died they’d have nothing to say about me except that I fought heroically, as if the only thing I’d ever done was Have Cancer” (Green, 100).

By the end of the novel, Hazel begins to separate herself from her illness to construct an identity outside of having cancer. Hazel comes to the realization that “there is no glory in illness. There is no meaning to it. There is no honor in dying of” (Green, 217). Hazel overcomes this barrier that states the only heroic or worthwhile thing she would ever do in her life would be battling cancer. Hazel’s identity will always be a product of interacting with her illness, but it will not be the defining trait. Hazel realizes her identity of being smart, witty, a good friend, a daughter, rather than a girl who battles cancer every day.

## Why YA Identity Construction Matters

Whether you are a middle-aged adult or a pre-teen picking up your first Young Adult novel, YA Fiction resonates. YA Fiction has a unique audience because it captures the feelings of so many age ranges within a simple binding; it is ageless. YA Fiction has such a broad audience because we have all been one of these characters. Even though we may not be a fifteen-year-old girl struggling with high school drama on a house boat in Seattle; we all know the feelings of humiliation, desperation, infatuation, and skepticism. These feelings are attributed to others' actions and how these actions then shape the image we have of ourselves. We can all relate to a time when we second-guessed ourselves and how we viewed ourselves in relation to our interactions with others. Ruby in *The Boyfriend List* comments on how she is a terrible apologizer.

“I am definitely a bad apologizer. I talk too much. I leave the whole thing until way too late, and then I babble on, and end up not saying what I mean and starting whatever argument it was over again. It never comes out right. Well, truth be told, I usually still think the other person was wrong, and that's probably why” (Lockhart, 213).

While many of the readers may not be a fifteen-year-old high school girl, this self-reflection is an aspect of every reader's life. You do not have to be a high school girl to realize you have a hard time apologizing. We have all been Ruby at one point, we have all thought ourselves to be right, even when we are wrong, yet still cannot admit our faults. That is the beauty of YA Literature and the identity formations it conveys with characters. No matter who the character is, any reader can see themselves in the characters' feelings. Maria Nikolajeva also comments on the uniqueness of YA literature and how identity formation is so crucial in this genre because of how it impacts the readers' own image-of-self.

“It has been repeatedly claimed that adult authors are unequivocally in a position to portray young characters' mental and emotional states because they have once been children and therefore remember what it was like to be a child. Purportedly, this enables them to express artistically the experience of a child self” (Nikolajeva, 90-91).

The young adult can supply some of the most challenging moments in a human being's life. Finch, Violet, Gus, and Hazel all grow up with traumatic experiences, some ongoing like illness, and some sudden such as car accidents. The emotional states



experienced by these characters give rise to the reader's emotions because we have all felt the uncertain future weighing down upon us at some point in our lives. We all know what it is like to be scared and to wrestle with the unknown. Emotions especially are not always the easiest to explain or put into words, yet YA Fiction allows us this privilege by giving a voice to our adolescent selves in the form of dynamic characters. "Fiction takes on the challenge of representing a physiological and psychological condition through the only means fiction has – words" (Nikolojeva, 89). Identity construction takes these emotions and grants characters an avenue to explore who they are and who they want to be by honing in on their experiences and interactions with very emotional foundations. These emotional, traumatic, or even trivial interactions still matter in the grand scheme of forming identity which can be a very abstract concept. We can look to the words on these pages in YA Fiction novels and have something tangible to describe who we were as young adults and how those interactions formed who we are today.

Through every subgenre that is encapsulated under the umbrella of YA Fiction, readers and characters find their voice and their way of viewing themselves. While the actual books may be fiction, the relationships and interactions within the pages are real and define what it means to construct an identity based on external and internal forces. Finch said it best in *All the Bright Places*, "I will always be here, in the offerings and people I left behind" (Niven, 378). Identity construction begins and ends with interactions and those interactions never leave the image we see staring right back at us in the mirror.

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