

The Fault in Our Stars

Speaker: Ray Slavens

John Green: John Green was born in Indiana in 1977 and grew up in several cities and states including, Michigan, Alabama, and Florida. He worked for a short time at Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Columbus, Ohio while studying to become an Episcopal priest. Working there with children who were suffering from life-threatening diseases inspired him to write *The Fault in Our Stars*. He is also a well-known video blogger on YouTube and humanitarian.

Green’s fourth novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, was published in 2012. The title comes from William Shakespeare’s play, *Julius Caesar*, when Cassius says to Brutus, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings” (Act I, Scene 3, Lines 140-141). Cassius is trying to convince Brutus not to let Caesar become the emperor, that such an action would not be good for the nation. Cassius is saying that their position as underlings is not the fault of the stars or fate but of their own weakness of character. How does this apply (or not apply) to the lives of the characters in Green’s novel?

Literary References: There are many other literary allusions or references throughout the novel. T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a poem about a man questioning his place in the universe, wanting to affect some kind of meaningful change in his world, and lamenting his inability to communicate and make connections, is referenced on pages 86, 153, and 164. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55, a poem about poetry immortalizing the subject of the poem, even when time will destroy the subject’s body and statuary dedicated to the subject, is referenced on page 112 and in other parts of the book. William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheel Barrow” is quoted in full on pages 246-7. Other references to literary works in the book include Emily Dickinson’s “There’s a Certain Slant of Light” (page 18 and in the title of the fictional Peter Van Houten’s book, *An Imperial Affliction*), Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (page 152), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (page 191), Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (page 193), Wallace Stevens’ poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (page 204), and Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay” (page 278). Many of these works are classics that are taught as part of the young adult (high school) curriculum in many institutions. Many of them have also been banned at various schools for a variety of reasons.

Alleen Pace Nilsen, et al, argue that “poetry must speak to our students through topics and issues that are relevant to them using language and rhythm which they find appealing” (183). If this is so, to what degree are the literary references used by Green appropriate for a young adult audience?

Anne Frank: There is also a long discussion of Anne Frank on pages 197-204. Frank was a teenager when she wrote the diaries that would become her literary legacy, and like the main characters in the book, she died young, in her case at the hands of the Nazis in Germany, before having the opportunity to live her life.

Themes: Set in a seemingly indifferent universe, the main characters fear their own oblivion, their erasure from time, and their fear of never doing anything, like Prufrock in Eliot's poem, that makes a difference in their world. It is interesting that this novel seems so fatalistic, even nihilistic, considering its author's deep Christian faith. Themes such as the fear of oblivion, the indifference of the universe, and suffering as a necessary part of life, are ones that all of us must deal with to some degree in our time, but the characters in this novel must deal with them at an early age, when, perhaps, fully living life should be their main concern, rather than pondering their own mortality that is fast approaching.

Existentialist Philosophy: Existentialism, which is referenced in the book, is a mid-twentieth-century philosophy that suggests that life is only meaningful in the sense that we, as individuals and groups, agree to give it meaning. Life and death, in and of themselves, are meaningless. We must try to make them meaningful as we live. This seems to be one of Augustus's main concerns throughout the book.

Metaphors: In addition, metaphors abound in the novel, such as Hazel's reference to herself as a grenade that is going to go off and destroy those around her when she dies, something she tries to avoid. Another metaphor is Augustus's use of unsmoked cigarettes to metaphorically take the power away from death and cancer. Drowning and water tend to take on metaphorical meaning beyond their literal meanings as well, from the water pumped out of Hazel's failing lungs, to the rain outside their hotel after visiting the Anne Frank museum.

Contemporary Realistic Fiction as a Genre: Alleen Pace Nilsen, et al, describe this genre as "young adult fiction with real-world settings in historical periods not far removed from our own" (103). Romantic quests and stories of friendship are common in this genre. And these stories often deal with peer groups such as the cancer support group the characters attend, and the relationships of the main characters and their parents and families. The physical body is another element that Nilsen, et al, discuss, and in this novel, the body is discussed in two significant ways – both in terms of teens discovering their own and each other's bodies in terms of sexuality, and in terms of the cancer that grows within and as part of their bodies.

Modern problem novels are a subgenre in which the problems faced by the characters of the novel become the main focus of the novel. *The Fault in Our Stars* shares all of these characteristics. It is a novel about the friendship between Isaac and Augustus, Isaac and Hazel, and it is a romantic quest in which Augustus pursues and gains Hazel's love. The novel is also shaped by the overwhelming problem of cancer and the struggle to survive its devastating effects. In addition, Nilsen, et al, describe a tragedy in the following way:

First, there is a noble character who, no matter what happens, maintains the qualities that the society considers praiseworthy; second, there is an inevitable force that works against the character, and third, there is a struggle and an outcome. The reader of the tragedy is usually filled with pity and fear – pity for the hero and fear for oneself that the same thing might happen. The intensity of this involvement causes the reader to undergo an emotional release as the outcome of the story unfolds (120).

Green's novel might seem an easy fit with this definition. Certainly, the characters have praiseworthy qualities and endure terrible struggles. But would these characters like to be described as tragic heroes? Or would they reject this categorization as cliché and reductive?

Works Cited

Green, John. *The Fault in Our Stars*. Penguin, 2012.

Nilsen, Alleen Pace, et al. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 9th ed. Pearson, 2013.

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