

The Fault in Our Stars: A Deconstruction

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed and proved the unpredictability of language and the lack of unified meaning in the novel written by John Green, The Fault in Our Stars, which was analyzed using Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction Theory. This employed qualitative research design. Thirty adopted guide questions were used in the literary analysis. Deconstruction was divided into first and second readings. The initial reading highlighted elements, binary oppositions, and hierarchy of terms present in the novel. The hierarchical oppositions include: life/death, old/young, health/sickness, masculine/feminine, optimism/pessimism, active/passive, and fiction/reality. In this stage, the text appeared to be a unified whole. However, the unprivileged terms became equal to their respective opposites in the second reading. This destroyed the notion of hierarchy altogether. The reversal of the oppositions dismantled the intended meanings with the observed irreconcilable details. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that Deconstruction has been useful in examining the unavoidable contradictions and irresolvable ambiguities present in the text. Thus, absolute interpretation is impossible. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers should be careful in giving students fixed interpretations. Teachers should be able to discuss comprehensively the grammatical, functional, literal, and figurative meanings of a literary work and the different characteristics of language including its flaws, inconsistencies, and ambiguities.

Keywords: contemporary literature, language ambiguity, literary analysis

INTRODUCTION

Literature shows a perfect representation of how language works. As literary texts are created, the different language rules, system, patterns, theories, and usage are utilized. However, language is usually taken for granted assuming that it always communicates what must be communicated. People are so exposed to the way language works, including its rituals and patterns, that if misunderstanding occurs, people assume that the error is in them, not in language. Hence, language is considered as a dependable tool that communicates the values and ideologies inculcated in literary texts.

However, Tyson (2015) contradicted the stability of language by enumerating the following observations:

- (1) language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable,
- (2) continually disseminating possible meanings;

has no center, no stable meaning, no fixed ground; and (3) human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only identities are the ones they invent and choose to believe. (pp. 258)

Hence, literature is like language it contains—unstable and ambiguous. Considering the assumption that language is naturally vague and not a clear and efficient tool for communication, the Deconstruction Theory enters the spotlight.

Deconstruction Theory was a development led by literary theorist and philosopher, Jacques Derrida during the late 1960s. This theory adheres to the notion that every utterance can give limitless meanings. One statement can mean different things. And another meaning paves way to another one, until it reaches such point when one statement contradicts another as it moves from one meaning to the next one.

Teaching students to arrive at only one interpretation of a text poses many problems. It is impossible to come up with one correct and final interpretation because literal and rhetorical structures cannot be distinguished from each other. Language is so ambiguous that one word, phrase, or sentence can have varied meanings. People give different meanings to statements depending on many factors that can affect their understanding. The capability to comprehend and feel is common to all humans, the only difference lies in the way they experience things that make them react differently.

It is for these reasons therefore, that this study was conducted to observe, analyze, and prove the ambiguity and instability of language that enhance the tension and makes unity of meaning impossible. Moreover, *The Fault in Our Stars*, a novel written by John Green was used in this study. Using a contemporary novel in this study provides a good model of the form and meaning of modern English.

On Deconstruction Theory and Criticism

Deconstruction is definitely one of the most complicated literary theories to exist. Appleman (2015) described deconstruction as an intellectually sophisticated theory that questions many basic assumptions, both literary and philosophical. Deconstruction looks at what makes a text whole and what holes are in between its pieces; in other words, what is said and what is left unsaid.

Deconstruction is a philosophical and literary criticism led by French literary theorist and philosopher, Jacques Derrida during the late 1960s. The word was derived from the French verb *déconstruire* which means to break down into components. Pulido (2011) wrote that deconstruction is a very effective tool in providing a different perspective in analyzing literary texts. It is considered as a part of poststructuralism since it continues where structuralism stops. While

structuralism ensures a definite meaning of the text, deconstruction allows readers to arrive at different interpretations as long as it is supported by signification and language organizing principles.

Deconstruction does not try to adhere to basic assumptions that served as guides in the past. Appleman (2015) had enumerated basic assumptions which are negated by deconstruction. These include:

(1) language is stable and has meaning people can all agree on, (2) the author is in control of the text s/he writes, (3) works of literature have an internal consistency, (4) works of literature have an external relevance, (5) one can take the author's or poet's word for what s/he writes, and (5) a set of interpretive tools can be reliably used to interpret a literary text. (p. 60)

Derrida as cited by Gorman (2011) explained that deconstruction questions the aforementioned conventions. It asks a literary critic to read hesitantly, to not take a work of literature at its face-value and to question the assumptions the author asks a reader to make. Deconstructive readings liberate new meanings and rupture the hierarchy of the binary oppositions that construct social reality. Hence, it is a process that occurs when a text is studied in different perspectives that it begins to deconstruct and breaks away from the authority of the "is."

On Deconstruction Process

Deconstructive reading is a unique critical reading as it does not attempt to establish meaning but rather prove that what the text is saying and what it is *really* saying are not the same. Gorman (2011) cited the words of McQuillan asserting that there are no rules, no criteria, no procedure, no program, no sequence of steps, and no theory to be followed in deconstruction. However, if the works of Derrida will be scrutinized, a strategy can be extrapolated.

Dobie (2011) explained in detail the necessary steps in making a deconstructive analysis. The process begins with ways similar to what is used in formalism. That is, the reader engages in a close reading, noting the usual operation of all the elements in the text. The second step in the process is identifying the binary oppositions. The third step requires the reader to identify the unavoidably favored part of the binary opposition. Dobie (2011) explained that turning the hierarchy upside down highlights ideas that seemed marginal and make them central. The focus begins to be given to the elements that once were considered unimportant. The comments that were once ignored are brought to the center of the analysis, and a minor character is considered as someone who has a great impact on the plot. The grammatical structures of the text are also inspected to search for ambiguities in sentences that appeared to be typical. The last step in deconstructing a text is to

consider further the implications of what was deconstructed. This means that empty tradition should be abandoned as it has the ability to influence an unaware reader.

However, deconstruction does not have the aim to resolve the tension present in a text. It does not wish to turn the chaos into something stable and unified; rather it emphasizes those tension to see what people will acquire from them.

It must be reiterated that the text can be read in several ways thereby emphasizing that meaning is always provisional, always ready to give way to other meaning. Strictly speaking, the critics job is not to deconstruct a text but to reveal how deconstruction happens in the text itself.

This study examined language used in John Green's novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, through the Deconstruction Theory and Criticism. Specifically, it intended to (1) discuss the theme, ideology, and other elements present in the text, (2) identify the binary oppositions or tensions, (3) recognize the hierarchy of the terms, (4) seek multiple interpretations, and (5) determine the characteristics of language used in the texts analysed.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design. A literary analysis that was guided by Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction Theory and the 30 guide questions adopted from Dobie (2011), Mangione (2014), and Appleman (2015). The researcher selected John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, one of the highly recommended contemporary novels published in 2012.

The analysis started in noting all various elements—characters, plot, settings, symbols, and point of view. This highlighted the main theme and ideological assumptions the text was built upon. Then, the identification of the binary oppositions followed which involved recognizing the term which was more privileged. The hierarchical oppositions assert that there is a side of the hierarchy that is more superior, more privileged, and more important than the other one.

Hence, the next step included the study of the marginal: the discarded, the denigrated, the unessential, the fragmented, and the subordinate term. This was supported by the details that conflict with or undermine the hierarchy. This is the so-called central tension. After identifying the conflict, the critic looked for details like dialogues, denotations, connotations, allusion, and imagery that weakened the tension of the text. This involved the process of looking for words, phrases, and sentences with double meaning. This was possible by reading the text slowly and methodically.

As a deconstructive reader, the researcher read the text against itself. It required the need to look for errors, contradictions, conflicts, ambiguities, and multiple meanings. Deconstructive readers looked at the ways a text says something different from what it intends to mean or the ways texts do not always mean what they say.

Lastly, the researcher looked for the points in the text where it fails to unite. From the data that were gathered, the researcher exposed how the text is unable to resolve its ambiguities. This included the identification of the implications of the collapse. It must be noted that the researcher did not resolve the thematic tensions in the texts into some stable, unified interpretation. Strictly speaking, the critic did not deconstruct the text; but rather showed how the text deconstructed itself.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study has shown that Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction Theory and the 30 guide questions adopted from Dobie (2011), Mangione (2014), and Appleman (2015) have been useful in examining the unpredictability of language. The lack of unified meaning in a text was shown by identifying the theme, elements, oppositions, hierarchies, contradictions and ambiguity of John Green's novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*.

I. Ideology and Elements

The plot, point of view, style, and symbols were all present to support the theme of the text. The plot began with a sick Hazel Grace Lancaster who joined a Cancer Support Group where she met Augustus Waters. The two immediately became friends because of their intelligent conversations about life and death. Hazel then shared her favorite novel, *An Imperial Affliction*. After finishing the book, Augustus shared the same frustration Hazel had about the novel's lack of ending. Augustus then invited Hazel to fly to Amsterdam to meet the novel's author, Peter Van Houten. The Wish of Augustus was granted by the Genies Foundation, and the two went to Amsterdam with Hazel's mother. However, the two were disappointed when Van Houten did not share the ending but rather insulted their cancer. By the end of the trip to Amsterdam, Augustus told Hazel that his cancer returned. After they went back to Indianapolis, his health worsened. Augustus died after a month. Hazel later found out that Augustus wrote a letter to Van Houten where he asked the author to write a eulogy for her. In the letter, Augustus expressed his admiration to Hazel Grace. He ended it with a statement that he was happy with his choices and he wished Hazel to do the same. Hazel answered, "I do."

The novel was presented through a first-person point of view of the main character, Hazel Grace Lancaster. The author's writing style was conversational. Symbols used were water, video game, swing set, and stuffed toy. The novel talked

about life and death, religion and philosophy, family, coming of age, and literature (fiction). These are emphasized by the words and phrases that fit into categories that the author presented.

II. Binary Oppositions

Binary oppositions are contradictions mentioned in the novel which include 1) life/death, 2) adult/child, 3) health/sickness, 4) masculine/feminine, 5) optimism/pessimism, 6) active/passive, and 7) fiction/reality.

Life over Death

Life is defined as a period between birth and death or the state of being alive. It also refers to having the ability to do the things—living life with the best of abilities. On the contrary, its binary opposition which is death means the end of life. The concept of death is immediately mentioned in the first paragraph as Hazel admitted that she devoted her free time thinking about death. In many parts of the novel, death was considered as the exact opposite of life. The statement *the world contains a lot of dead people* suggests that the world is divided into two: the people who are alive and those who are dead.

Life is a more privileged term than death. The main purpose of the characters was to continue living while avoiding its negatively accepted counterpart which is death.

Statement of Value: Life must be lived the best way.

Adult over Child

In the novel, the main characters are teenagers who are surrounded by adults. The presence of older people was needed since the younger ones were suffering from cancer. In the interaction of these characters, different views clash about life. This binary opposition was not discussed directly in the novel; however, the differences can be observed in their roles and activities. The reactions of the young and old in different situations of the novel also vary.

In the beginning, adults are more dominant as shown by how Mrs. Lancaster decided that her daughter, Hazel, was depressed because of her lack of desire to do activities. Many situations show that young and sick characters rely on older people around them. Psychosocially, adults are expected to have defined and stable values and behaviors. They have a good sense of their own identity and maintain positive relationship with people around them

Statement of Value: Adults are responsible for children.

Health over Sickness

Among the sick characters in the novel are the young characters: Hazel, Augustus, and Isaac. Hazel had thyroid cancer, Isaac had eye cancer, while Augustus was in remission after losing his right leg due to osteosarcoma. These characters represented people who needed to face their own obstacles because of physical limitations caused by their respective illnesses. Coincidentally, characters like the parents and the doctors were considered void of any disease. The novel was able to show how they normally fulfill their duties because they were healthy.

Being healthy was considered the better situation in the novel. Being a cancer survivor means being the victor in a war against cancer. On the other hand, sickness being the unprivileged term of the binary opposition was backed up by Augustus' statement that there is no glory in illness.

Statement of Value: Good health enables humans.

Masculine over Feminine

In the novel, differences in gender orientation can also be observed. These dissimilarities also show various reactions in the different situations presented. Typical gender roles were obvious in Hazel's parents. Her father was a hard-working, employed man, while her mother was a nurturing, over-protective housewife and mother. Meanwhile, Hazel, herself, obviously played a traditional feminine role as a young woman who loved to read books, watch a television show about female models, and contemplate about life and the universe. On the other hand, Augustus reflected typical interest of a young man like playing videogames and reading action-packed novels.

The roles and behavioral expectations assigned to each gender show that masculine is more dominant than feminine. This is also observable in Van Houten and his assistant, Lidewij. Men are generally pictured as the boss, while women tend to be in the supporting position.

Statement of Value: Masculine is stronger than feminine.

Optimism over Pessimism

Although the characters had reasons to be negative because of the challenges brought by cancer, positivity was still exemplified in the novel. Augustus personified positivity when he said that he is on a roller coaster that only goes up. On the contrary, Hazel gave a negative tone by just mentioning that she devoted a lot of her time thinking about death. This is also mentioned by Julianti (2018) in her analysis of the personality development of Hazel using the theory of Feist and Hurlock. She noted that Hazel hated her life before she met Augustus who gave her more reasons to continue living.

Optimism is considered as the more privileged term. Hope which was a very significant component is highlighted in many parts of the novel. This was exemplified in the daily statement of the Cancer Support Group: *Living the best life today*, and in the *Encouragements* displayed in Augustus' house.

Statement of Value: Optimism helps people to live better.

Active over Passive

Hazel exemplified passiveness in life when she did not want to go out of their house and join a support group. Hazel's nonparticipation in deciding for her medication is another example of passiveness. Meanwhile, Augustus was a complete opposite who seemed to be active and was obsessed with doing something heroically.

Active is considered as the privileged term because it is the characteristic successful people possess. The negative aspect of passivity was shown by Hazel. Details in the beginning of the novel showed that Hazel let people decide for her life which did not help her achieve something significant.

Statement of Value: Active people achieve more.

Fiction over Reality

Literature was a main factor which the plot revolved around. The book, *An Imperial Affliction*, is a novel that only exist in the story and it divides the novel into two: fiction and reality. Hazel has a lot of questions about life and death which she believed can be answered by fiction.

Fiction was deemed preferable by the characters. Although Hazel's reality of cancer was very similar to the details of her favorite novel, *An Imperial Affliction*, Hazel obviously preferred to live in fiction to her own reality.

Statement of Value: Fiction is an escape from harsh reality.

III. Reverse of Hierarchy

The statement of values was not wholly supported by the elements of the text. The characters, events, statements, and elements contradicted the initial beliefs and hierarchies from the novel. Gorman (2011) also observed these in his study which suggested that the ideological and social structures that are based on the seemingly static binary oppositions can be deconstructed by "irruptive elements of the text."

Death over Life

First, life was assumed to be lived the best way. Life is more privileged than death. But in the novel, some thoughts and statements from the characters did not support the aforementioned hierarchy. For instance, Hazel shared her belief of the inevitability of death. She also stated once that she would have been *very, very, very happy to die*. Another character that contradicted the value of life is Max Mayhem, the protagonist of the fictitious novel, *The Price of Dawn*. Augustus considers Mayhem as a hero because he keeps on fighting and killing bad men to save the weak. These observations were similar to the findings of Jamira (2017) who stated that the characters' acceptance of their mortality helped them realize that time "was precious and they wanted to learn as many life lessons as they could."

Child over Adult

Some elements of the novel also contradicted the statement that adults are responsible for children. Adult was considered as the privileged term. But this is not wholly supported. For example, Doctor Maria allowed Hazel to go to Amsterdam because she believed it was still Hazel's life. This showed that Hazel was still in control of her life even if she was dependent on her parents. Also, Augustus and Hazel adhered to philosophies which their parents cannot even understand. Another, in a documentary in Anne Frank's museum, Otto Frank said that most parents do not know really their children.

Sickness over Health

The next statement emphasized that good health enables humans. This is supported by Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which states that basic needs should be addressed before one moves to another level of needs. This means that Augustus and other cancer patients are stuck in the second level of the pyramid unable to feel secure with their health. This was strongly contradicted by Augustus stating that not because he was sick he would be unable to feel love, gain respect and do art. As the novel progressed, Augustus and Hazel experienced love even though they both have cancer. They were also able to ponder on the concepts of life and death. The results of the study of Valencia (2016) on war metaphors of cancer also support these observations. He concluded that the characters of Hazel and Augustus prove that there are other metaphors for cancer aside from war metaphors which compare cancer to "fight" or "battle" and the patients as victims. He added, "it is possible to create images outside of the conventional and frequently reinforced images."

Feminine over Masculine

The statement that masculine is the stronger gender had been also contradicted in the novel. Hazel embodied a strong feminine character who dismantled the hierarchy. In the beginning, Hazel appeared to be a fragile and pessimistic character but as the novel progresses, she shows her strong personality. This means that strength is not only shown by physical attributes but by reactions,

attitude, and overall personality. Another, masculinity was always deemed stronger not just in terms of physical attributes but also emotionally. Men are always stereotyped to be strong and cannot show emotions or cry in times of hardships. This is negated by male characters like Augustus and Hazel's father. These claims were also parallel to what Gorman (2011) observed with the characters in the works of James Joyce, Sean O'Casey and Paul Howard who challenged the gender norms of their cultural contexts.

Pessimism over Optimism

Optimism which is more privileged than pessimism is supported by the statement that optimism helps people to live better. However, this was also contradicted by the fact that Augustus who was an optimistic character did not achieve a better life and eventually died in the end.

Reality over Fiction

The statement that fiction served as an escape from harsh reality was negated by author Van Houten himself. He explained to Hazel that his book *An Imperial Affliction* was just a fiction and nothing happened to the characters after it ended midsentence. He further emphasized that it was a mere novel and not some historical enterprise. This suggested the limitation of fiction which cannot always serve an escape.

All in all, the reversal of the opposition dismantled the intended statement of meaning by showing that 1) one term cannot be totally separated from the other, 2) characteristics cannot be solely attributed to one term, and 3) the presence of one term triggers the other.

IV. Multiple Interpretations

Some words in the novel were used in different ways. These include the words *death, kill, home, let go, finished, forever, gone, conscious, boy, and fight*. Some words also have other definitions besides the standard meaning such as *always, cigarettes, grenade, infinite, job, professional, stars, and heart*. Moreover, there were also sentences that proved that the author intended a different meaning than the ones directly stated.

John Green is an author known for his profound dialogues, unique symbolisms, and witty metaphors. The author's playful writing style created the possibility of multiple meanings. Green used many mundane things to refer to abstract concepts. By presenting something that readers ordinarily encounter, Green easily explained ideas by connecting the strongest similarity of the two. The author relied on the common understanding of the readers which he would combine with another meaning. The following daily objects were used to convey varied

meanings: *scrambled eggs, stuffed toy (Bluie), swing set, water, grenade, and cigarette.*

Furthermore, *The Fault in Our Stars* is a text that unknowingly exemplifies ambiguities of language. Many words and sentences from the text can be understood in two or more possible senses or ways. Ambiguity can either be lexical or structural. And both types exist in the novel.

Readers had the assumption that language is stable and it has meaning which people can all agree on. That means that a set of beliefs and assumptions were constructed to create a definite and unified meaning. However, the creation of only one meaning became impossible with a deeper analysis of the different elements inside and outside of the text. This is similar to the findings of Wibowo (2015) who observed the internal conflicts of Lang Leav's poem which showed that the meanings and interpretations of the text are always shifting and fluid.

The new meaning discussed is not the final intended meaning of the text but served only as a proof that meaning cannot be a stable convention—as proposed by structuralism. Deconstruction rejects the belief that language is fully representative and capable of producing a fixed meaning and interpretation. And thus, the interpretation below is presented to offer a meaning that is different from what is stated in the first part of the study.

The Fault in Our Stars is a novel of life and death. It highlighted the young love of Hazel Grace and Augustus and how the presence of cancer and death did not stop it. Sufferings and failures are all parts of life. But one can still live a good moment and consider it forever. There are things that humans can control, and there are those that are inevitable. Pain caused by humans' choices are their own faults but the pain that one was not able to choose is a fault in the stars—in the randomness of life and fate.

CONCLUSIONS

This study had shown that Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction Theory has been useful in examining the texts' ideology, theme, elements, binary oppositions, hierarchy, multiple meanings, and language's ambiguity. By identifying the said features of the contemporary novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, the study proved that the text contain unavoidable contradictions and irresolvable ambiguities. Therefore, it is impossible to arrive at an absolute interpretation of the text.

Deconstructive reading includes the identification of elements such as plot, point of view, and style that worked together to support the theme of the text. This theme then was supported by words and phrases that contribute to the literal meaning of the text. Deconstruction also enabled the reader to study the binary

oppositions or tensions and which between the terms is privileged. The elements that supported the hierarchy can be identified through a closer look of the text. Statements of values and beliefs emerged from the privileged terms.

However, the stability of the elements and meaning of the text are dismantled as the hierarchy was reversed. In the second reading, the meanings first stated in the initial reading were contradicted by the characters, events, elements and details. Associated meanings complicate the oppositions and the focus of meaning shifted as the minor characters' story were considered. Other details such as the dialogue, denotation and connotation, and literary devices such as allusion, and imagery weakened thematic tension. With the second reading, the reversal of oppositions tore down the intended meaning of the text as new possibilities of understanding emerged.

Lastly, through a thorough reading of the text, it can be concluded that words, phrases, and sentences have different meaning aside from the standard and assumed definitions. There were statements that prove that the author intends a different meaning than the one that is directly stated. Meanings become unstable as the author uses language to convey one thing and mean another. Also, the readers have the tendency to add to the meaning expressed in the text. This addition may be based on prior knowledge and experiences.

Overall, the research showed that language cannot create a stable and definite meaning. A deconstructive reading of the literary work revealed how language unknowingly exemplifies vagueness and ambiguities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study conveyed the need to do further exploration of contemporary literature most especially fiction. Since this study only made use of one young adult novel, there is, therefore, the possibility of exploring other works of contemporary authors to strengthen the present findings using the same standards of analysis on texts' ideology, theme, elements, binary oppositions, hierarchy, multiple meanings, and language's ambiguity, future researchers may also want to examine other genres, like poetry and drama, to determine other writing styles and practices contemporary writers may have. Moreover, though literature reflects reality, teachers should be careful in providing students definite ideologies and meaning from the text. Activities should be included that allow students to also include their own knowledge and experiences to what they are reading. As literature may serve as a springboard to teaching grammar and language, every literature teacher must be aware of the different characteristics of language including its flaws, inconsistency, and ambiguity. The teacher must be able to discuss comprehensively the grammatical, functional, literal, and figurative meanings of a literary work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher would like to extend her appreciation to the editorial board of the UNP Research Journal, the unknown referees and the whole University of Northern Philippines for providing an avenue for knowledge production and research advancements. Her gratitude is extended to the people who shared their expertise, time, and effort for making this endeavor possible.



A Refereed and Indexed Multidisciplinary Research Journal
of the University of Northern Philippines
Vigan City, Ilocos Sur
2700 Philippines