

*"I just want to not be me": The Struggles of Growing  
Up in Young Adult Literature*

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## Introduction

“I just want to not be me” (Vizzini, 2015, p. 19).

Teenagers all over the world face various different problems from unrequited love through to drug abuse and mental disorders when it comes to growing up. This more or less difficult time in the life of almost every young adult is not only influenced by hormonal changes in the maturing body but also by other external and internal factors, such as complicated family relationships, the urge to conform to social norms, peer pressure, illness and mental disorders, moving, changing schools and therefore social environments, and coping with loss. Young Adult Literature (YAL), which is literature featuring primarily young adults as main characters and is aimed at a young audience from approximately the age of 12 to the age of 18, responds to the various different problems coming of age entails and conveys comfort and encouragement to young adults who are directly affected by problems and helps adolescents who are not concerned to better understand others and the world around them.

In this diploma thesis I will focus on the depiction of prevalent problems in the US-American young adult novels *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Due to the fact that the discussion of solely the problems depicted in the three young adult novels would not be sufficient in order to investigate and evaluate if the novels present a coherent, credible approach to the portrayal and resolution of complex problems, coping strategies the main characters apply, as well as family and support systems will be included in my analysis. By taking these aspects into account, it will simultaneously be revealed if the young adult novels take multiple dimensions into account demonstrating that complex problems require much effort to be solved. I will attempt to show that the above mentioned young adult novels convey an empowering, hopeful message for young readers, despite the fact that the main characters have to tackle dark and controversial problems. Therefore, I will analyze how the problems which the main characters have to face are depicted, which coping strategies are used, who helps young adult characters to overcome hardship, and if certain criteria which point at dark YAL conveying an empowering message can be found in the novels. Additionally, I will look at frequent (gender) stereotypes concerning young adult characters which are used in many young adult novels and I will investigate if they apply to the three young adult novels which will be analyzed in my thesis. I chose the above mentioned books

for a more detailed analysis since I would like to show that among clichés concerning problems of teenagers, such as unrequited love and being an underdog, there exists a much broader variety of complex struggles, which the main characters in YAL have to face. I would like to demonstrate that YAL which deals with controversial problems in an empowering way has several different advantages for not only young adults who are directly affected by the issues discussed in books but also for those who did not know anything about the topics before.

The first chapter of my diploma thesis will provide a theoretical framework starting with information about and characteristics of YAL. After that, benefits of YAL will be presented and an overview of the history of YAL and current trends will be given. Furthermore, the representation of adolescents in YAL will be discussed, including negative effects stereotypical depictions of adolescent characters have on young readers which will also be investigated in the three young adult books I chose for detailed analysis since the realistic and authentic depiction of dynamic adolescent characters in YAL is of considerable importance for young readers to establish a connection to main characters. The next subchapter will deal with theoretical insights into the struggles of growing up the young adult main characters in the three chosen young adult novels have to face, namely depression, and mental disorders in general, and the problems colored and indigenous young adults face on their quest for identity. In order to be able to prove my assumption that the above mentioned young adult novels convey an empowering, opposed to a hopeless message for adolescent readers, although they deal with dark, frustrating, and controversial problems, criteria in YAL which point at a hopeful approach to complex issues will be gathered in this section. Finally, an overview of postmodernism and neo-realism will be given since the three young adult novels which will be analyzed in this thesis belong to this literary period.

Chapters two, three, and four will focus on the young adult novels *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie respectively which considerably differ in the problems the main characters have to face in the course of growing up. However, the three novels have in common that they deal with serious, complex, and 'dark' problems. These books have been chosen for a detailed analysis of narrative and structural features, the problems which are faced by the young main characters and the impacts they have on the protagonists, how main

characters cope with issues and which kind of support is offered by family, friends, or other institutions.

## 1. Young Adult Literature

This section will start with an attempt to define the genre YAL. Also, it will be mentioned why YAL gained popularity throughout the last decades among young readers. Furthermore, similarities and differences between YAL and literature intended for adults, and a definition of the YAL subgenre realistic fiction will be provided. It is important to understand what YAL is and which characteristics it has as the three young adult books which will be analyzed in the following chapters of this diploma thesis are representatives of the subgenre realistic fiction.

In general, it can be said that there exist many definitions of YAL which sometimes differ only slightly from each other. According to Brown and Stephens (2007), YAL is literature about young adults which is aimed at readers between the ages of eleven and eighteen years. YAL books deal with a great variety of different topics which are relevant to the lives of young adults, such as problems many teenagers face when coming of age, making new experiences, and becoming aware of one's desires and dreams (p. 6). Bushman and Parks Haas essentially agree with Brown and Stephens concerning what YAL is, however, they include the aspect of the similarity of the language which is used in YAL and the language used by young adults in everyday life in their definition: "YAL has many common characteristics: Conflicts are often consistent with the young adult's experience, themes are of interest to young people, protagonists and most characters are young adults, and the language parallels that of young people" (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 2). Nilsen and Donelson (2009), as an example, define young adults as "those who think they're too old to be children but who others think are too young to be adults" and suggest that YAL is literature which is read, either in their free time or at school, by teenagers between the ages of twelve and eighteen (p. 1). However, Nilsen and Donelson (2009) do not mention in their definition that the characters in YAL are approximately the same age as their readers (pp. 2, 3).

Although YAL might seem to be a distinct genre of literature intended for young readers it tends to become more similar to literature written for adults. This becomes obvious when looking at the themes which are dealt with in adult literature and YAL. Some of the common themes which are frequently found in young adult novels, such as "... rites of passage, search for identity, familial relationships, need for independence, and interpersonal relationships," are also to be found prevalently throughout all literature (Brown and Stephens, 2007, p. 14).

Santoli and Wagner (2004) agree that the topics which are dealt with in YAL and in adult literature are very similar, however, they make one important distinction: The contents in young adult novels are in many cases presented in a less complex and more tangible way for adolescents (p. 68). Whether a book which deals with the life of a young adult is finally promoted as YAL or not has sometimes solely to do with marketing decisions. Therefore, works in which a young adult appears as a main character does not necessarily mean that they are intended for adolescents. Those books which are also called apprenticeship novels or “Bildungsromane” are in many cases written as adult reflections on youth which involve the struggles of the main character to grow up and gain knowledge about the world. Examples for apprenticeship novels would be books, such as *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers. However, there are some books which were originally intended for adults but have become especially popular among young adults and in classrooms. Some representatives of this phenomenon would be *Cold Sassy Tree* by Oliver Burns, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (Brown and Stephens, 2007, p. 18). Roxburgh (2005), as an example, suggests that there is no difference between the adult and the young adult novel and that one merely has to make some distinctions (p. 5).

The subgenre realistic fiction and its popularity among teenagers will be discussed in this paragraph. According to Bushman and Parks Haas (2006), young adults enjoy reading realistic fiction novels since they provide a realistic and credible depiction of the world. Consequently, the characters are attempted to be constructed in a multidimensional way in order to make young adults empathize and identify with the main characters. Nowadays, common topics of realistic fiction primarily include problems and challenges young adults encounter which help them develop and grow as a person. Realistic fiction can be categorized into four distinct types of plot in order to provide a more precise categorization of this subgenre in YAL. All four types share the properties of the storyline which revolves around a main character who faces a conflict with either a person, nature, society, or themselves (p. 31). Realistic literature does not solely attempt to reflect reality, it merely shows a particular version of what is real. Due to the fact that the perception of reality is no stable truth in the ever-changing world, realism as a literary movement which strives for the representation of what is real is in constant change, too, which explains the existence of a history of different realisms throughout literature (Fluck, 1992, p. 67). Neo-realists react to current cultural and aesthetic developments and create a new way of presenting recent realities: “What we get in

consequence, is, as always in literary history, a hybrid – a mixture of modes in which the relations between various narrative strategies are newly negotiated” (Fluck, 1992, p. 79). Especially groups of people who want to stand out from the mainstream culture, express themselves, and present important truths about their cultures and lives, such as Chinese-American, Native-American, and Black or Afro-American writers, produce neo-realist literature. Therefore, neo-realism is the most efficient, new medium for minority groups to find expression (Shechner, 1992, p. 32). It has to be mentioned that not only realistic fiction but also other YAL subgenres, such as fantasy fiction and dystopian tales, are hugely popular among today’s teenagers. Some examples would be the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer (Strickland, 2015).

Furthermore, YA literature can also be evaluated concerning other categories, such as style and point of view (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, pp. 37, 38). According to Bushman and Parks Haas (2006), authors have to take many aspects into consideration when deciding on which point of view they want to use in their works. Different perspectives can make a story more or less effective and therefore have to be chosen wisely. The omniscient point of view, as an example, provides insights into all characters and is frequently used in young adult novels. Whereas the first-person point of view is more restricting and readers only get an insight into the subjective thoughts, memories, and experiences of one character, and therefore only his or her view of the world and other characters. The first-person perspective in YAL has the advantage that it allows young adults to a greater extent to personally and emotionally connect with the main characters (p. 37). Concerning this aspect, Roxburgh (2005) agrees with Bushman and Parks Haas:

The first person limited point of view in the young adult novel is worth discussing in other terms. As opposed, let’s say, to a character in a theatrical performance or a movie, character in many young adult novels is revealed not so much through action or through appearance or through description, as through direct or indirect discourse. Character is made manifest in and by the protagonist’s voice. The constituent elements of voice are diction and syntax, word choice and word order. (p. 7)

Since an omniscient point of view might not attain the desired effect a book should have and a first-person narrative mode restricts readers’ insight into the story considerably, contemporary YAL authors frequently play with point of view and apply different perspectives within the

same book, mostly making the change from one to the next chapter which allows authors more freedom and possibilities (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 37).

To sum up, YAL is literature which deals with the lives of teenagers and is intended for a young audience. The blurry line between young adult novels and adult novels is sometimes not easy to identify since there are many similarities between the two genres. Furthermore, realistic fiction is a very popular subgenre of YAL because it attempts to portrait characters and their experiences especially realistically. Last but not least, the choice of perspective in YAL is of considerable importance for the effectiveness of the whole story and therefore should not be underestimated by authors.

### **1.1. The Benefits of YAL**

This subchapter will deal with beneficial effects YAL can have on its young readers. The advantages of emotionally moving and realistic depictions of relevant topics which meet the needs of young adult readers will be discussed in this section. Moreover, the effects YAL has on the development of self-knowledge, the knowledge about others, as well as other cultures and places in adolescents will be dealt with in this subchapter.

First of all, it has to be mentioned which benefits young adult novels can have for their readers. Offering young adults literature which will change teenagers' lives and encourage them to read is sometimes a difficult task. Each and every person approaches a book with different prior knowledge which significantly affects the way someone experiences a piece of literature. Generally, there is a tendency that books which emotionally move their readers, let them learn important lessons about others and themselves, make them want to develop as a person, and foster their imagination are those which will possibly stay for a long time with their readers and will have a considerable impact on their reading habits (Brown and Stephens, 2007, pp. 66, 67). According to Santoli and Wagner (2004), reading YAL considerably fosters the literary understanding of high school students and in many cases makes students to life-long readers (pp. 65, 66).

Due to the fact that YAL (primarily realistic fiction) addresses problems and aspects of teenagers' everyday lives, this kind of literature is especially appealing to young adults (Brown and Stephens, 2007, p. 4). Bushman and Parks Haas (2006) claim that young adults

are better able to put themselves in the shoes of the characters and understand complex conflicts if the characters are well-developed and dynamic (p. 33). Being confronted with interesting characters and topics and issues which are relevant and interesting for young readers gives them the possibility to empathize with the main characters. By focusing on various common aspects of changes many teenagers might go through during puberty, the youthful characters in YAL go on adventures, face and cope with difficult situations in their lives, struggle with their own identity, find love, and thus grow and develop as a person. Although some young adults do not directly experience these particular situations and problems themselves – which might accompany coming of age – while reading, YAL can prepare them for difficulties they might face or others are facing, can show them that they are not alone with their problems, and can help teenagers learn to understand others and empathize with them. Therefore, the genre of YAL emerged in the past decades as a literary field of considerable importance and popularity among young readers. Additionally, teachers increasingly accept YAL primarily due to the fact that YAL improved its quality considerably throughout the last decades. Furthermore, since many authors realized that there has been a high market demand for YAL during the last years there exists a broad offer of distinct YAL today it becomes easier and more pleasant for young readers to find a book which suits them and meets their needs (Brown and Stephens, 2007, pp. 4, 5).

YAL entails many other benefits: It enhances self-knowledge, the knowledge about others, and the world which surrounds them. Self-knowledge is gained by comparing oneself and one's current situation to characters, their problems, and joys. Readers recognize themselves in the fictional characters which gives them the possibility to learn about themselves through the experiences of others. What is more, Young readers gain important insights into moral issues characters have to face and develop an understanding of the complex nature of certain situations which also require complex solutions. Furthermore, adolescents gain valuable knowledge about others by reading young adult novels and realize that other people have different perspectives and values which helps young adults to understand and respond with sensitivity to others (Brown and Stephens, 2007, pp. 69, 71): "The reader witnesses the lives, the trials, the victories, and the defeats that characters experience. This framework allows readers to compare their beliefs and reactions with those of the characters" (Brown and Stephens, 2007, p. 68). There is a technique, called bibliotherapy, which agrees with the above mentioned benefits YAL can have for young adults. Bibliotherapy involves guided reading of literature which helps children and adolescents to develop important personal and

social skills, including identifying with others, discovering that others are similar to themselves, and realizing that there is mostly more than only one solution for problems (Bohning, 1981, p. 166). Another aspect which has to be mentioned is that reading YAL is a great way to familiarize teenagers with minority culture in order to raise awareness and tolerance. YAL can familiarize adolescents' with other cultures and traditions which makes them aware of the fact that young people from all over the world are similar to them and face the same problems and challenges. Furthermore, reading young adult novels can also promote imagination and creativity among teenagers (Brown and Stephens, 2007, p. 68). For example, Roberts (2012) agrees with Brown and Stephens' views about the beneficial effects YAL has on young adult readers and proposes that it should be taught in schools in order to make students identify with the characters and learn how to deal with problems (pp. 89, 90).

To sum up, YAL is particularly interesting for young readers because of the many different and relevant topics it covers and the multidimensional characters (which is, of course, not a quality which is exclusively held by YAL) it features which makes it easier for young adults to put themselves into the shoes of the characters. Problems and solutions are depicted in complex ways in order to represent the nature of the world credibly and realistically. Moreover, reading about the experiences of different YAL protagonists enables readers to discover themselves in characters which helps them to learn about their own lives and others as well as about other cultures. Last but not least, YAL does not solely serve didactic purposes but also can be seen as a means of entertainment for young adults.

## 1.2. The History of YAL

In order to understand the current trends and developments in YAL it is of considerable importance to delve into the history of the genre. In this section, the focus will be placed on the origins and development of YAL. Finally, current trends and changes in YAL will be mentioned.

Although many people believe that YAL developed in the 1950s and 1960s, the origins of this genre can be found much earlier in literary history. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries this type of literature which, of course, differed considerably from what people consider as YAL nowadays primarily had the purpose to teach adolescents good behavior and was not directly intended for young people but for adults. At that time, parents wanted their children to read this literature which mainly dealt with religious and mythological contents in order to guide young adults' behavior. Children and young adults were taught Latin, which was considered to be very important in the Middle Ages, in order to be able to read the literature of the masters at an early age. Although young adults might have enjoyed reading romances more, they were expected to read the classics to become adults as fast as possible since back then the period of being a child was considered an inconvenient phase in the life of a person. There were some slight changes in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries concerning children's literature but it was still held on tightly to the old religious and didactic literary traditions. However, in 1719 *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe followed by Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) were published. These books were soon adapted for young readers and became early children's classics and therefore can be viewed as important steppingstones in the evolution of children's literature and YAL. Additionally, John Newbery started publishing small children's books in the mid-1700s which were intended to entertain its young readers. However, this idea strongly contradicted the prevailing philosophy of that time which emphasized the importance of moralistic and didactic literature (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, pp. 272-274).

The children's books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century enjoyed considerable interest from young readers. In this century affordable printing methods were established, the middle class grew, the church gradually lost importance in society and the perception of the child changed in terms of sentimentalizing it (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 274): "The literature that emerged for young adults remained pious and sober, but it hinted at the possibility of humanity's

experiencing a satisfying life here on earth. Books reflected adult values and fashions, but of this world, not merely the next” (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009, p. 41). The characteristic literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which was directed at young women emphasized the importance of domesticity which means that the female main characters conformed to the values of home and family and behaved according to social conventions. To the contrary, children’s literature aimed at young men largely promised that hard work would result in success in life. Additionally, the male heroes in the books adhered to traditional values and therefore acted as role models for young readers. Prime examples for children’s and young adult books of this century were *Black Beauty* (1877) by Anna Sewell and *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) by Kenneth Grahame (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 274).

The new genre of the domestic novel appeared in the mid-1800s. These novels had the purpose to teach young adults traditional values and moral lessons: “... no tobacco, alcohol, adultery, or divorce was allowed in domestic novels” (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 274). Women were expected to be submissive to men, to value the conservative social, political and cultural principles, as well as the bible. Therefore, the self-sacrificing protagonists in domestic novels did not differ considerably from each other. Some examples for domestic novels are *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) by Susan Warner, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and *St. Elmo* by Augusta Jane. At the same time, the dime novel and series books emerged and were especially popular among young adults due to the fact that they were quite inexpensive, small and easy, as well as fast to read (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, pp. 274, 275): “These various novels – domestic, dime, and series – gave rise to a great deal of literature that was read by young people” (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 275). Due to the growing interest in young adult novels, an increased sense of competition emerged among publishers at that time (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, pp. 274, 275).

Although literature for children and young adults changed considerably from the Middle Ages to the mid-1800s there is one aspect which very much stayed the same during this long time period, namely the importance of values and morals in young adult novels. This drastically changed with the publication of Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s *The Story of a Bad Boy* in 1870. This work no longer featured idealized young characters, who acted morally and served as role models for children and young adults, but adolescents who were portrayed more

realistically. “Bad-boy stories”, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, flourished during that time (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 276).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the highly predictable formula fiction with its most important representative Edward Stratemeyer was the prevalent literature for young readers. Stratemeyer wrote numerous series of books and his literature was extremely popular among young adults. His books were especially attractive to young readers because of several elements Stratemeyer applied, such as “... mystery, excitement, and suspense, and a protagonist who would always triumph against terrible odds” (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 277). However, the books were also known for their bad quality involving poorly developed plots and a lack of relationship to reality (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, pp. 276, 277). Additionally, there was a distinction between books for boys and books for girls at that time, however, books for boys were considered to be more demanding than the inferior books for girls (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009, p. 51).

In the 1930s and 1940s a new literary trend for young adults started to flourish – the career novel which provided young readers with insights into different professions (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 278). Furthermore, in 1938 paperbacks entered the mass market which made reading more practical and affordable for young adults (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009, p. 61). It can be said that novels for young adults during the 1940s and 1950s primarily dealt with moralistic, simplistic, traditional, and superficial social conventions, such as jobs, family, and dating. In other words, literature for young adults in the USA was quite conservative and provided a limited range of young adult experiences (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 278). During this time, controversial topics, such as alcohol, drugs, sexuality, and early pregnancy, used to be excluded and frowned upon in YAL:

Taboos may never have been written down, but they were clear to readers and writers. Certain things were not to be mentioned—obscenity, profanity, suicide, sexuality, sensuality, homosexuality, protests against anything significant, social or racial injustice, or the ambivalent feelings of cruelty and compassion inherent in young adults and all people. Pregnancy, early marriage, drugs, smoking, alcohol, school dropouts, divorce, and alienation could be introduced only by implication and only as bad examples for thoughtful, decent young adults. Consequently, young adult books were often innocuous and pervaded by a saccharine didacticism. (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009, pp. 61, 62)

However, a small number of young adult writers already applied elements of realism in their works. For example, *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) by Maureen Daly, is considered the first contemporary young adult novel to apply new, realistic criteria concerning the depiction of young adults. She deals with taboo topics, such as alcohol, homosexuality, and smoking considering these as normal aspects of life – which was, of course, not well received by conservative adults. In 1951 *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger introduced the so-called new realism followed by cynical literature which depicts the political, economic and social problems of that time (Bushman and Parks Haas, 2006, p. 278).

As can be seen, the current, realistic young adult novels of today have undergone a history of change. According to Brown and Stephens (2007), the origins of the contemporary young adult novel can be found in 1967 with the publication of *The Outsiders* by Susan Hinton. This novel revolves around two competing gangs of boys who live by themselves. With this approach Susan Hinton radically opposed the persistent literary tradition of books about girls, whose only concern is to get a date for the upcoming prom. Therefore, YAL gains more credibility and becomes more serious. *The Outsiders* is an early example of a young adult novel and equates adolescences with rebellion. Although the novel is representative of the late 1960, its theme of classic conflicts between social groups is still of interest for young adults (Brown and Stephens, 2007, pp. 14, 15).

It is important to mention that there is a crucial distinction between the importance of the role of the family and adults when it comes to early realistic young adult novels of the 1960s and more recent ones. Early young adult novels tend to focus primarily on negative rather than on positive adult role models and family plays a minor or no rule at all. On the other hand, recent young adult novels put more emphasis on the depiction of either positive or negative family relationships and impacts of these relations on the protagonists' lives. The role of adults in current young adult novels also tends to be more positive and complex (Brown and Stephens, 2007, pp. 15, 16).

Apart from the role of adults and differences in viewpoint in YAL, there have been many other changes in the genre from the 1960s onwards till now. For example, in the 1980s YAL was considered to be narrated from the first person. Nowadays, YAL takes on a broad variety of, in some cases, sophisticated points of view which include shifts in point of view or multiple narrators. Furthermore, the genre was expanded in order to include different types of

writing, such as "... historical fiction, fantasy, mystery, biography and autobiography, information, drama, and poetry" (Brown and Stephens, 2007, p. 16). In early YAL the primary focus was placed on disturbed young adults and youth rebelling against authority figures, whereas contemporary young adult novels rather concentrate on the needs, interests, quests for identity, and problems of youths. What is more, contemporary young adult novels, such as other novels and films, incorporate aspects of cultural and ethnic diversity of society (Brown and Stephens, 2007, pp. 16, 17).

In conclusion, YAL went through a considerable development during the last centuries. The highly didactic and religious contents of books intended for adolescents in the 15<sup>th</sup> century remained the same till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The church gradually lost influence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was dominated by literature conveying traditional and moral values of domesticity. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century marks an interesting turning point with the new popularity of "bad-boy stories" breaking the tradition of showing idealized young adult main characters. After the conservative 1940s and 1950s, contemporary YAL developed. According to Brown and Stephens (2007), some representatives of today's YAL offer credible plots with fully developed, multidimensional characters, sophisticated language, as well as crucial and relevant themes for young readers which break old patterns. Moreover, due to the inclusion of different kinds of literature, YAL represents the wide range of lifestyles and young adult experiences (p. 17).

### 1.3. The Representation of Adolescents in YAL

This section will deal with the typical depiction of young characters, including the prevalent topics and issues which occur in contemporary YAL and the conception of 'youth' in YAL. Common stereotypical depictions of adolescent characters and gender differences will be investigated in this chapter.

There exist strong correlations between today's American teenagers and the depiction of young characters in YAL. This is quite plausible since in realistic fiction authors try to develop their protagonists in a credible and realistic way, so that young readers are better able to personally and emotionally connect with them. Additionally, the problems and challenges teenagers face in the course of growing up in young adult novels equate those of young people. There are many problems and challenges characters have to face, such as the quest for identity, striving for independence, the increasing importance of the peer group, dealing with physiological changes and emerging sexuality, relating appropriately to members of the opposite sex, thinking about future careers and education, establishing their own political views, values and ethics, the changing relationship with parents, gender inequalities, the changing family structures, developing awareness concerning ethnic and cultural diversity, the use of drugs and alcohol, and the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases (Brown and Stephens, 2007, pp. 54-62).

According to Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis (2014), adolescence is socially constructed: "As much as gender, race, class, and sexuality reflect socially constructed categories of accrued, and often problematic meanings, so, too, does adolescence represent a social category of significations currently viewed as 'true' but understandable as constructed" (pp. 4, 5). They also argue that adolescence is not to be understood as a universal experience since young people obviously make different experiences which is crucial when writing YAL and creating authentic characters: "some are rebellious, some are compliant, some feel as if their lives are tumultuous and some as though their lives are stable, some have strong peer networks and some do not" (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis, 2014, p. 5). Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis (2014) also suggest that the construction of adolescence has major consequences for young adults: "Ideas of adolescence inform how young people are worried over, administered, talked about, advocated for, and arranged in settings, including in public schools and in relation to texts intended for their consumption" (p. 6). Conveying young

adults these constructed opinions adults are holding about them in YAL puts young people into an expectant, passive mode of waiting instead of actively constructing their own surroundings which often results in an identity crisis. Consequently, crises of identity are no side effects of the natural aspect of being a teenager but they are socially constructed (Petrone, Sarigianides and Lewis, 2014, p. 6).

Furthermore, in some didactic young adult novels adulthood is pictured as being superior to youth in terms of knowledge and experience in life: "... behind every disempowered teen narrator is an empowered adult author conveying ideology about the superiority of adult norms" (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis, 2014, p. 8). Even young adult novels which feature the strongest main characters draw on wise and powerful adults when situations get out of hand. It also has to be mentioned that some young adult books use adolescents as metaphors, in order to raise awareness for, as an example, broader cultural concerns. For instance, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain uses its main character to represent the metaphorical possibility of the United States to change social issues, namely race relations (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis, 2014, pp. 8, 9, 11).

Moreover, characters created according to beauty standards, a conservative approach towards (female) sexuality, and an underrepresentation of characters from ethnic minority communities are frequently found in US-American YAL. Many young adult novels conform to the prevalent ideal of beauty in society: Thin women are more beautiful and powerful than larger ones. There exists a strong connection between body image, sexuality, and weight. Thinner young women in YAL are depicted as being in control and more capable of managing life than larger women – who are frequently depicted as sexually passive and irresponsible. Additionally, young women's sexual desires are mostly considered as a primitive force which must be held under control. Although, for instance, *Forever* by Judy Blume features female sexuality in a more open and relaxed way, her main characters conform to the current trend in YAL and society: "In *Forever*, the protagonist Katherine is thin, promiscuous, but in control, while her best friend, Sybil, is fat, desperate, and vulnerable" (Kaplan, 2003, p. 7). Furthermore, when it comes to the depiction of adolescent sexuality, YAL tends to adapt a more conservative, moralizing approach especially about femininity and sex, homosexuality, and alternative ways of living: "most YA texts depict "the calamitous consequences of carnality" by showing the ways that youth are punished when sex leads to too-early parenthood" (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis, 2014, p. 11). It has also been revealed that if it

is not mentioned that a character in young adult novels is thin or large, readers would rather assume that the protagonist is thin. The same is true for skin color – if ethnicity is not mentioned readers would rather assume that the main character is white which is a clear indicator for the underrepresentation of colored or indigenous main characters in YAL (Kaplan, 2003, pp. 6, 7).

Gender stereotypes are frequently found in YAL which affect both sexes and can be dangerous for young readers. Gender stereotypes in young adult novels do not only deprive their male and female main characters of opportunities outside of traditional conceptions of gender and role models but convey flawed and restrictive messages to young readers about the world (Jacobs, (n.d.) p. 20):

Gender stereotypes in literature prevent the fullness of female human potential from being realized by depriving girls of a range of strong, alternative role models. I believe that male potential is also stunted by such material. Everything we read, from sexist advertisements and women's magazines to romance novels and children's books, constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men. (Fox, 1993, p. 84)

In many cases, girls are presented as the weak and passive sex, while boys and men are portrayed as strong, insensitive, and not vulnerable. Therefore, many young readers try to force themselves to conform to those norms, denying their real personalities for the sake of fitting in and fulfilling the expectations of society. It has to be mentioned that the following characteristics of female and male protagonists do only apply to highly stereotypical instances of YAL: Such young adult novels which are directed at girls primarily feature beautiful female main characters whose only concern is to find a perfect boyfriend whose most important trait is to look fantastic and to be popular among peers. However, in recent years girls have been encouraged to empower themselves and rely on and honor their ‘girl power.’ This power entails that characters are free to explore who they really are and accept themselves without fearing judgement or rejection from others. When it comes to male protagonists in YAL this power does not necessarily apply (Jacobs, (n.d.), pp. 20-22):

We as a society have worked toward this for decades and have won it—for girls. Girls are encouraged to expand their roles and enter fields once considered traditionally male. On the other hand boys are not encouraged to cross gender boundaries for fear of being criticized as sissy or effeminate. There is no doubt that boys are just as capable as girls of being intelligent,

creative or imaginative. But to participate in activities that highlight these abilities considered unmanly. Boys, too, need the right to discover and explore their talents, whatever they may be, without being judged as less of a person. (Jacobs, (n.d.), p. 22)

Male characters are in many cases depicted as emotionally colder and aggressive since caring and showing concern for others is considered as a feminine trait. Therefore, negative stereotypes are reinforced (Jacobs, (n.d.), p. 22). Moreover, “Girls are condemned if they make mistakes, and males are excused from mistakes because they are allowed the "boys-will-be-boys" maxim” (Peterson, 1996, p. 2). An overall tendency shows that there is a considerable under-representation of females in picture books for children. The same is true for young adult novels which do not show a balanced representation of both sexes. There is also an under-representation of males displaying “female characteristics,” such as showing concern for others (West, 2010, p. 38).

In conclusion, contemporary YAL attempts – and manages in many cases – to realistically depict challenges young adults have to face and what it means to be a teenager by, for instance, including relevant topics for adolescents and multidimensional characters. However, some young adult novels still fail to authentically represent teenagers. It is difficult to break free from the socially constructed nature of adolescence, the assumption of a universal experience of youth, the superiority of adulthood, and conservative approaches to sexually active young adults, homosexuality and alternative ways of living. Additionally, the stereotypical depiction, especially concerning gender stereotypes, of young adults and the urge to conform to questionable beauty standards in YAL is to be considered as problematic.

#### 1.4. The Struggles of Growing Up in YAL

First, there are the ordinary hassles of growing up - parents, peers, the opposite sex, the world of work, finding one's place. Then there are the problems that make today's headlines, the stuff out of which teenage problem novels are made - drugs, teenage suicide, abusive parents, abortion, racism, poverty, disease. Sometimes there are extraordinary crises-terrorist attacks, hostile government agents, criminal conspiracies. Young readers in our time expect crisis. (Nelms, Nelms, Lilja, Vogel and Zancanella, 1987, p. 102)

This subchapter will present information about the problems which are relevant for the main characters in the three young adult novels which will be analyzed in the following chapters. The phenomenon of the depiction of severe problems young adult characters in contemporary YAL have to deal with, such as depression and other mental disorders, suicide, cancer, and indigenous and colored adolescents' quest for identity, will be discussed. The important distinction between novels dealing with serious issues either in a hopeless or an empowering way will be drawn which will also be analyzed in the three adult novels in the following chapters.

Due to the fact that, for example, depression and other mental disorders, as well as suicide and illness among today's young adults are common issues (for recent statistics see 2.3. *Growing Up with Cancer*, 3.3. *Under Pressure: Growing Up with Depression*), it is no surprise that young adult novels attempt to present these seemingly dark and controversial taboo topics. According to Mulet (2014), "Every generation brings its own set of challenged, banned, or simply controversial titles which are contested in classrooms, communities, and by parents, teachers, and administrators alike" (p. 26). However, there is a tendency that some of these books which had previously been challenged or banned are included in the canon of the next generation – for example, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Great Gatsby* were banned or censored when they were first published (Mulet, 2014, p. 26). Berger (1986) argues that young adult novels are especially useful for adolescents to approach and learn about difficult and complex topics, such as suicide, because authors include recent scientific findings which provide young adults with important knowledge about such topic:

The young adult is able to learn some of the reasons why teenagers commit suicide; the characteristics of people considered to be at high risk to commit suicide; the role family, friends, and relatives play in triggering suicidal thoughts as well as their ability to help prevent

or avert a suicide; the value of seeking and utilizing psychiatric counseling; the effect suicide has on "loved ones" as well as peripheral people; and the effect it has on society. (p. 14)

Additionally, Berger (1986) claims that books intended for young adults about taboo topics have a demystifying effect. Suicide in books is either prevented which gives the person concerned and his/her family and friends the chance to overcome the hardships, which caused the attempt to kill himself/herself, such as it is the case in *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, or the person concerned commits suicide and leaves behind devastated and frustrated family and friends. When the latter applies, young adult readers realize which painful, irrevocable, and horrendous effects suicide has on loved ones and simultaneously serves as a daunting example (p. 15).

Due to the fact that there are still widespread misconceptions about mental disorders, YAL authors increasingly try to shed light on this neglected issue. According to Scrofano (2015), it is of considerable importance to establish distance from the old, stereotypical beliefs about mental illnesses:

We need stories of mental illness that focus on the illness as a biological brain disorder, a chemical imbalance in the brain. What's exciting about the recent YA literature of mental illness is that it treats mental illness as a medical problem while a lot of older literature has treated mental illness only symbolically, as "madness." (p. 15)

Furthermore, novels about and written by members of minority ethnic communities can, according to Hughes-Hassell (2013), help colored young readers with their quest for identity (p. 221). Tatum and Moule argue that the ethnic and racial identity development is especially challenging for colored and indigenous young adults since they

... are more likely to be actively engaged in exploring their racial and ethnic identity than are white adolescents (Tatum 1997). As Beverly Tatum explains, teens of color, indigenous teens, and biracial teens think of themselves in terms of race or ethnicity because that is how the rest of the world sees them (Tatum 1997; Moule 2010). On a daily basis, they must navigate a world where other people are making assumptions about who they are and what they can achieve based on their skin color. (as cited in Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p. 218)

Therefore, it is of considerable importance to provide young adults of minority ethnic groups with YAL which helps them to find themselves in order to get rid of the prevalent opinions which are distorted by stereotypes others hold about them. Hughes-Hassell (2013), for

example, argues in favor of counter-storytelling in YAL which means that stories about people whose voices are frequently neglected (poor people, people of ethnic minority groups, LGBT voices) are being told in order to challenge the so called ‘single story’ (p. 212, 215). The ‘single story’ refers to stereotypes most people have against certain groups of people in society:

Multicultural literature can not only challenge the single story, ... , but also encourage and empower teens of color and indigenous peoples to take action in their own lives and in the world around them. It does this not by denying the hardship and prejudice that many of them face but by showing that, despite the disadvantages that correlate with their skin color, culture, and/or social class, they can overcome the constraints placed on them by the dominant culture as represented by the single story. (Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p. 217)

Therefore, showing young members of minority ethnic groups through YAL that representatives of their community are able to live a self-empowered life – which contradicts the ‘single-story’ – can make a great difference for them.

However, the portrayal of dark, challenging, and racial topics in YAL also faces criticism. As an example, Gurdon (2011) argues that the depiction of controversial and dark topics in YAL deprive young adults of their innocence and encourages young readers to imitate destructive behavior and criticizes, for example, works of YAL, such as Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and Suzanne Collin’s *Hunger Games* (p. 3). She argues:

If books show us the world, teen fiction can be like a hall of fun-house mirrors, constantly reflecting back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is. There are of course exceptions, but a careless young reader — or one who seeks out depravity — will find himself surrounded by images not of joy or beauty but of damage, brutality and losses of the most horrendous kinds. (Gurdon, 2011, p. 1)

Gurdon faces considerable opposition from various authors. Goldberg (2014) argues that “By nullifying the experiences of some teenagers’ experience, she [Gurdon] effectively labels those unfortunate individuals as the other, further perpetuating the identity crisis that afflicts many adolescents.” Alexie (2011) also responds to her article, drawing on his own experiences as an unprivileged Indian child and the experiences he made working together with many children and young adults, telling him about their problems. Alexie argues that condemning YAL which features controversial topics serves only one purpose: To protect

privileged children from reality who do not face or have not yet faced complex problems. Consequently, those young adults who face major struggles are ignored and left behind with their problems. However, it is exactly those young adults who would need books, such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the most in order to realize that they are not alone and that one can overcome hardship (p. 2, 4).

And there are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged. They read because they live in an often - terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books - especially the dark and dangerous ones - will save them (Alexie, 2011, p. 4)

Although antagonists of the depiction of extreme problems and controversial topics of growing up in YAL, such as cancer, suicide, abuse, racial issues, LGBT literature, and depression, frequently argue that reading about these issues and topics would rather frustrate young adult readers and deprive them of their innocence than help them cope with their problems and learn about the world, it has to be made a crucial distinction at this point (which, in my opinion, Gurdon fails to do): The value of such young adult books dealing with extreme struggles and controversial, dark topics is dependent on whether the overall message they convey is either hopeless or empowering and how adolescent characters deal with their problems (Louie and Louie, 1992, p. 54).

A hopeless message is conveyed when young adult characters do not actively contribute to find a solution to their problem: “Success due to innate talent, circumstances, or aimless effort will not empower adolescent readers to excel over life's hardship” (Louie and Louie, 1992, p. 54). Reading about the struggles of such helpless characters, of course, does not strengthen young readers’ faith in the possibility to overcome struggles and in themselves. An empowering message is, on the contrary, conveyed when a dynamic adolescent character is willing to tackle problems he/she faces, assumes responsibility, and thus grows as a person which simultaneously encourages readers to be confident and actively live their lives and solve their problems: “A dark tunnel adventure becomes a trophy in life only when the person finds an exit at the other end. ... Authors must describe the character trials, their efforts to overcome, their motivation to reach their goals, and their joy of achievement” (Louie and Louie, 1992, p. 53, 54). Thacker (2007) agrees with Louie and Louie concerning the important distinction between young adult novels which deal with problems in either a hopeless or an empowering way. He adds that books which deal with serious issues in

realistic ways yet containing humor and ironic self-reflection, should be included into the curriculum (p. 18). Nelms, Nelms and Horton (1985) also agree with the authors above:

The best problem novels, however, still go beyond cliché and formula. They avoid sensationalism and sentimentality. They present interesting and complicated characters – adolescents and adults. They tell stories with genuine conflicts and crises, suspense and surprise, thematic significance, and credible resolutions. And, perhaps most important, they maintain a balanced perspective, often with wit and a sense of humor. (p. 92)

Lacy (2015) argues that humor is an especially effective technique in YAL to communicate serious taboo topics and “uncomfortable realities,” such as being a child of alcoholics (p. 9). Lacy (2015) draws on Mark Twain’s humorous writing style in order to explain the function of humor in literature to raise awareness of controversial topics – “As a writing strategy, humor allows Twain to critique contemporary social ills while creating psychic distance between his readers and the issues. He is able to address problems critically yet, at the same time, minimize the threat of offending or alienating his audience” (p. 9). Since humor creates a certain distance between the contents which are discussed and the reader, YAL which deals with dark topics can be enjoyable for young adults without disillusioning them.

In order to provide a clearer overview of the elements which are indicators for an empowering depiction of dark and controversial issues in YAL, the list below contains above discussed important criteria which point at empowering messages in dark YAL:

- The portrayal of dynamic and interesting characters
- Characters who assume responsibility and actively tackle their problems
- Characters showing personal development through dealing with their problems
- Characters’ efforts to overcome problems must be visible
- Going beyond cliché and dealing with serious issues in a realistic way
- Humor and ironic self-reflection to establish distance and deal with challenging topics
- The depiction of crises and suspense
- The presentation of realistic resolutions
- The positive feelings young characters experience when they overcome hardship must be portrayed

To sum up, YAL dealing with dark and controversial topics gains momentum due to its relevance among today's young adults. It is a useful tool for adolescents to learn about complex taboo topics and to eliminate widespread misconceptions about issues and groups of people, such as mental illnesses, suicide, and minority ethnic groups and therefore has a demystifying effect. Multicultural YAL gives voice to members of ethnic minority communities and helps them to develop their own identity. Although some antagonists of YAL which focuses on dark and challenging topics argue that such literature would take away adolescents' innocence and have a depressing effect on them, they fail to take into consideration that there is an important distinction to be made between dark YAL which deals with problems in a hopeless or an empowering way.

## 2. *The Fault in Our Stars*

*The Fault in Our Stars (FOS)* by John Green revolves around the sixteen-year old first-person narrator Hazel Grace Lancaster who suffers from thyroid cancer which spread to her lungs. Due to a new, apparently miraculous tumor-shrinking medical treatment she is told to be able to live some more years. Her illness requires her to constantly use a portable oxygen tank in order to help her breath. Hazel lives a rather secluded and boring life, reading her favorite book *An Imperial Affliction* by Peter Van Houten again and again which deals with a terminally ill girl. Her biggest wish is to get to know how the story continues and what happens to all of the characters in the novel since the book ends in the middle of a sentence – presumably when the main character dies. Hazel insists on not letting any more people into her life to save them from the pain she will cause them when she dies. She therefore frequently refers to herself as being a “grenade.” She is lovingly cared for by her parents who make her attend a cancer patients’ support group so that Hazel would meet new people and find friends to escape her depressing everyday life routines and to tear down the walls she builds around herself. In the cancer patients’ support group Hazel encounters Augustus Waters, a charming seventeen-year-old, who beat osteosarcoma and attends the support group meeting in order to accompany his friend Isaac. Hazel and Augustus immediately get on well with each other and spend much time together. Hazel struggles with sticking to her initial plan of not letting anyone into her life, however, Augustus is determined to stay, though they agree on just being friends. Hazel and Augustus manage to get into email contact with Peter Van Houten who even invites them to visit him in his estate in Amsterdam. However, Hazel has to be brought into hospital because her lungs have filled with fluid, and after initial problems with doctors, who would not permit Hazel to get on an airplane because of her difficult health condition, everything turns out well and Augustus, Hazel’s mother, and Hazel head to Amsterdam which makes a dream come true for the girl. When Augustus and Hazel arrive at Peter Van Houten’s place, they are absolutely disappointed by the author who turns out to be a frustrated, cynical, and tactless alcoholic who does not provide any answers to Hazel’s questions about her favorite book *An Imperial Affliction*. Furthermore, it is revealed that he was not the one who invited the teenagers to visit him in his house but his assistant Lidewij. Nevertheless, Augustus and Hazel have a beautiful time dining and visiting, for example, the Anne Frank house and spend a romantic night together. However, the story takes a dramatic turn when Augustus confesses to Hazel that he had his body scanned and that his cancer had

returned and spread in his whole body. In the last part of the story, Augustus' health condition declines radically and suddenly he is the "grenade." Augustus stages an unofficial funeral for himself because he wants to hear Hazel's and Isaac's eulogies he had asked them to write for him. It is only a few days after the 'pre-funeral' that Augustus passes away. Hazel is devastated but she feels happy again when she gets to know that her mother had started taking online courses in order to become a social worker helping families cope with cancer. Finally, Hazel finds out from Isaac that Augustus had written something for her which he had sent to Peter Van Houten so that the author could rewrite it for him in order to make it sound more sophisticated. It turns out to be a eulogy for Hazel and the book ends with Hazel reading it.

The title *The Fault in Our Stars* derives from a Shakespeare quote, which John Green, the author, mentions in a letter from Peter Van Houten to Augustus: "Were she better or you sicker, then the stars would not be so terribly crossed, but it is the nature of stars to cross, and never was Shakespeare more wrong than when he had Cassius note, 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars/ But in ourselves'" (*FOS*, p. 111). With contradicting this quote he implies that people cannot be held responsible for some circumstances in their lives. Hazel and Augustus obviously cannot change the fact that they suffer from cancer. Hazeleger (2013) agrees with my statement and adds the following observation:

The notion of stars being indicative of one's fate also feeds into Van Houten's second allusion to Shakespeare, that of the star-crossed lovers, which is the description of the two lovers from *Romeo and Juliet*. By referencing the star-crossed motif *TFIOS* employs the same dramatic irony as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: the reader knows right from the start that the love story can end in nothing but tragedy. (p. 70)

This dramatic discrepancy of awareness accompanies the reader throughout the book and lets one assume that Hazel (due to her instable health condition) possibly dies in the end of the book.

John Green was born in Indianapolis at the 24<sup>th</sup> of August in 1977. He is a very popular author of young adult fiction and a video blogger, publishing educational videos online. After John Green graduated from Kenyon College with double graduation degrees in English and Religious Studies, he worked as a student chaplain in a hospital and intended to become an Episcopal priest. However, during his work with terminally ill children he realized that he would rather become a writer. He started working as a publishing assistant for the book

review journal *Booklist*. During his work as a critic he wrote his first coming-of-age romance novel, *Looking for Alaska*, which was published in 2005 and received the American Library Association's Michael L. Printz Award in 2006. After his first book, *Looking for Alaska*, *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006) and *Paper Town* (2008) followed, which were received with much enthusiasm among readers. In 2012, John Green published his most famous young adult novel *The Fault in Our Stars* which was made into a film in 2014 (John Green, 2012).

John Green devoted *The Fault in Our Stars* to a girl called Esther Earl who suffered from cancer and died in 2010. He got to know her during the time he worked as a chaplain in the hospital for terminally ill youths. Green's friendship with Esther and her whole family and friends influenced his writing considerably. Although John Green insists that his readers should keep in mind that his book is fictional, he admits that there are some similarities between the main character of his book, Hazel Grace Lancaster, and Esther Earl (*The Fault in Our Stars* John Green, n.d.). He emphasizes the fictional nature of his book in the author's note:

This is not so much an author's note as an author's reminder of what was printed in small type a few pages ago: This book is a work of fiction. I made it up. Neither novels nor their readers benefit from attempts to divine whether any facts hide inside a story. Such efforts attack the very idea that made-up stories can matter, which is sort of the foundational assumption of our species. I appreciate your cooperation in this matter. (*FOS*, Author's Note)

## 2.1. Unexpected Turns and Sophisticated Teen-Language

This section of my diploma thesis deals with structural and narrative elements in *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green. Structural questions, such as which parts the novel contains and why, how does the action succeed, where is the novel set, when does the story take place, and when are the struggles of growing up introduced will be dealt with. The narrative perspective and its significance for the story will be discussed in this section.

### Structural Elements

The realistic fiction novel *FOS* is divided into twenty-five chapters. The first chapter presents the most important elements about the story to the reader, namely that Hazel has cancer, that her parents care for her and want her to make friends because of her secluded life-style, and the first encounter with Augustus Waters during the first cancer patients' support group meeting and Hazel's immediate interest in him. This chapter provides a foundation for all the action which follows. Due to the fact that the chapter starts quite immediate the reader is drawn into the middle of the slowly rising action. In addition, the reader obtains a brief insight into the most important characters which is deepened in the second chapter. Chapter two which starts with Hazel joining Augustus (whom she just met) in order to go to his home for the first time to watch a movie, also gives more details about Hazel's and Augustus' illnesses which are revealed in dialogues. The action slightly slows down during this chapter because there are long dialogues and no ellipses or summaries. In the next chapter, Hazel's aversion to the fact that healthy people treat her differently is introduced which is a recurring topic in the novel. Chapter four is dedicated to Hazel's obsession with *An Imperial Affliction* by Peter Van Houten –which is already mentioned briefly in the first chapter of the novel. Therefore, it can be said that an implicit hint which points at the topic's relevance for the next chapters is provided. At this point of the story, the action is quite steady – neither rising nor falling.

Chapters five, six, and seven are particularly important for the story. At the beginning of chapter five, an ellipsis can be found which spans a week and a very short summary of what Hazel did during this particular week is presented since it has no relevance to what happens next and therefore speeds up the action. After that it is revealed that Augustus is in contact with the author and that the teenagers are invited to Amsterdam which means that there is a sharp rise of action. Tension is created in this chapter, since the reader already knows how much it would mean to the main character to meet Peter Van Houten. However, chapter six

and seven which deal with Hazel's decision to distance herself from Augustus in order to not cause him too much pain when she dies and Hazel being taken to the intensive care unit because of her lungs had filled with fluid respectively, cause a drastic turn because a trip to Amsterdam seems to be impossible for Hazel at this point. This turn stagnates the action, which had already built up and the reader has to adapt to a completely new status quo.

Chapter eight begins with a frustrating cancer team meeting in which doctors suggest that it would be too dangerous for Hazel to go to Amsterdam. However, by the end of the chapter Hazel is allowed to go which is an unexpected turn and actually marks the first climax of the story. The following three chapters serve as transitional ones which prepare the reader for the meeting with the author and slow the action down. The reader witnesses an argument Augustus has with his parents before they are about to leave for Amsterdam which can be interpreted as a foreshadowing of his relapse. In chapter twelve, the day of the meeting with Peter Van Houten is depicted which lets the action rise but also fall slightly due to the disappointing outcome. It is also the chapter in which Hazel's and Augustus' relationship reaches its peak, which makes the next chapter especially emotional for the reader.

Chapter thirteen indicates the second climax of the story since there is, again, a dramatic turning point: Augustus tells Hazel that his cancer returned. This moment changes everything for the protagonist, the succession of the subsequent action, and serves the purpose to shock the reader. This impact on the reader stems from the quite unpredictable nature of the situation, as one would rather assume that Hazel is the one who dies in the end. The following chapters are dominated by the depiction of Augustus' decline and indicate the falling action. Chapter twenty deals with the last good day of Augustus – Hazel and Isaac meet Augustus in the Heart of Jesus (the Episcopal Church in which the cancer patients' support group meetings take place) in order to read the eulogies they had created for him. This chapter is of considerable importance for the last chapter. There are ellipses of several days between the last few chapters and tension is building up again in the twenty-second chapter, when Hazel finds out that Augustus had written something for her before he died. John Green plays with the reader because it seems to be hopeless to find the manuscript. However, in the last chapter Hazel finally receives the eulogy Augustus secretly wrote for her which allows the story to end on a positive note.

The story is narrated in a linear, chronological order, sometimes interrupted by Hazel's childhood memories or emails she or Augustus receives from her favorite author Peter Van Houten. The story time covers an unknown number of months. However, since Hazel gives a hint at the very first page of the book that it was "Late in the winter of my seventeenth year ..." and the fact that she never celebrates her seventeenth birthday in the book, one can assume that the story time might span about three months (*FOS*, p. 3). The first lines of the chapters provide the reader with an approximate temporal framework, frequently starting with the following expressions: "The day before we left for Amsterdam [...]" (*FOS*, p. 129), "A few days later" (*FOS*, p. 230), "One morning, a month after returning home from Amsterdam [...]" (*FOS*, p. 239), and "A couple days later" (*FOS*, p. 279). There are ellipses of several hours, days, weeks, and months to be found speeding up the action. Especially in the last chapters of the book when the action starts to fall ellipses are frequently used.

*FOS* is primarily set in Indianapolis, and most of the action takes place indoors. Indianapolis is pictured as a rainy and foggy place which mirrors Hazel's emotional and physical condition at the beginning of the story quite accurately: "The sky was gray and low and full of rain but not yet raining" (*FOS*, p. 120). Hazel spends most of the day in her room, reading her favorite book. The fact that Hazel spends most of her time in her house reflects her parents' and her own desire for security and protection. Since Hazel and her parents cannot do anything to stop her cancer from destroying her, they feel the urge to do something to ensure at least some degree of security. There is a limited number of other places Hazel visits regularly which include the Heart of Jesus, Augustus' home, hospitals, and Isaac's home. However, all of those places are connected to Hazel's illness and are similar to her home since Isaac's and Augustus' parents are, too, quite protective and concerned about their children's health. Therefore, one has the feeling that not only Hazel's illness but also her hometown itself has a restrictive effect on her. However, everything changes when Hazel, Augustus, and Hazel's mother are in Amsterdam which is known to be a liberal city which offers an abundant supply of opportunities. The teenagers feel free and unburdened exploring the city on their own, drinking alcohol, climbing narrow, steep stairs in the Anne Frank Haus, and kissing and having sex for the first time. It is the first time in the novel that Hazel obtains a sense of independence since even her mother gives her space in Amsterdam. Back home Hazel maintains this independence to a small degree since she spends more time with Augustus although her parents would prefer her to be more at home.

### Narrative Structure

*The Fault in Our Stars* is narrated by Hazel Grace Lancaster in an autodiegetic first-person narrative mode. The reader gets to know a lot about Hazel since he/she is constantly confronted with her thoughts in a quite orderly form of an inner monologue. The reader therefore finds himself/herself in the shoes of an almost seventeen-year-old girl suffering from cancer and receives a subjective picture of Hazel's surroundings and everyday life, embellished with her mostly humorous comments. The frequent dialogues between her and Augustus as well as her and her parents allow the reader to get to know the other characters as well. The reader also witness Hazel's real thoughts when she comments on situations and dialogues and expresses her actual feelings.

The autodiegetic first-person narrative instance in *FOS* is especially effective because it allows the reader to win deep insights into the life of the protagonist and how she feels about and deals with growing up with cancer. Due to the first-person narrative mode the reader witnesses how brave Hazel is since she manages to keep her true feelings to herself – which are sometimes frustration with her situation, fear of dying, and sadness – in order to make her family, and friends feel better. Although the reader's view is restricted to Hazel's perceptions it makes the story in some way more exciting since one is put into Hazel's shoes and is able to strongly empathize with her. Additionally, the intentions and feelings of other characters are unfolded slowly in dialogues which makes the story more immediate, interesting, and unpredictable for the reader – there is no discrepancy of awareness (which often occurs in other narrative situations, such as in an omniscient third person narration) since the reader always knows as much as the protagonist does.

Another significant aspect which has to be mentioned is the language which is used by the protagonist in *The Fault in Our Stars*. Hazel's narrative is very elaborate and sophisticated. It appears as if a well-educated adult was speaking rather than an almost seventeen-year-old girl, which means that typical youth-language is rarely used in this novel. However, when considering Hazel's hobbies – before she meets Augustus Waters – which were reading and watching television shows, and the fact that she already takes courses at college, it is plausible that she expresses herself in more eloquent ways. Hazeleger (2013) suggests that the impression of Hazel using sophisticated language stems from her usage of formal words which are combined with simple, colloquial terms which serves the purpose to imply that

teenagers are able to understand and use complex language (p. 47). She uses word plays, neologisms, and metaphors. Intertextuality is used, and Hazel frequently quotes poems or refers to authors and books. Augustus Waters who expresses himself in sophisticated ways, too, is known for his obsession with symbols. According to Hazeleger (2013), “The teenagers in this novel all have a tendency to swear, but typically only use more euphemistic forms of the word "fucking", such as "freaking" and "frigging"” (p. 38). Hazeleger (2013) also argues that the main characters swear violently only in situations of great frustration (p. 38). Hazel does not only speak in a sophisticated manner but also the way she deals with her illness and everyday struggles is exemplary. One can assume from these instances that Hazel is – although she is bodily weak due to her illness – a strong female character which means that she is not displayed as a stereotypical weak girl who is only interested in beauty, good looks, and getting a boyfriend as fast as possible. She also does not conform to the ideal of beauty in YAL which becomes obvious when she explains what she looks like when she sees Augustus Waters for the first time: “I had this pageboy haircut, and I hadn’t even bothered to, like brush it. Furthermore, I had ridiculously fat chipmunked cheeks, a side effect of treatment. I looked like a normally proportioned person with a balloon for a head” (*FOS*, p. 9). This makes Hazel even more authentic and shows that she is an ordinary person with flaws and weaknesses. If Hazel had been portrayed as a wonderfully pretty and attractive girl no one would have wondered why Augustus – who is, on the contrary, described as a handsome young man – had chosen Hazel. Due to the fact that Hazel is portrayed as an ordinary girl one can assume that Augustus loves Hazel not only because of her physical appearance but most of all for her personality. It can be said that Hazel is portrayed as a dynamic and interesting teenager which is one of the most important criteria of a young adult novel dealing with challenging contents to successfully convey an empowering message.

## 2.2. Growing Up with Cancer

“And I can’t be a regular teenager, because I’m a grenade” (*FOS*, p. 99).

After having discussed structural and narrative elements, this section of my diploma thesis will deal with prevalent struggles Hazel has to face and which impact they have on her. Her main problem is growing up with cancer, however, her illness is complex and entails innumerable other issues which will be broached. Only the most prevalent struggles will be elaborated in this section which are Hazel’s inability to lead a healthy teenage-life with ‘standard problems,’ direct effects of growing up with cancer, Hazel constantly worrying about her health condition, her intentions to stay away from people in order to spare them pain with her death, the feeling of not fitting in because of being treated differently by healthy people, and her fear of being an emotional and financial burden for her parents.

Hazel Grace Lancaster does barely face ‘standard struggles’ of the usual American teenager, such as what to wear for the prom, unrequited love, or quarrelling with her best friend. Hazel hardly pays attention to usual young adult problems since she knows what it means to have ‘real problems.’ The girl mostly attempts to perceive the world around her rationally and tries to make the lives of her parents easier by behaving grown up and strong which is mirrored in her use of sophisticated language. There are only a few instances in the whole book in which Hazel actually behaves and has problems like a ‘regular’ – meaning healthy— teenager. For example, at the beginning of chapter five she is waiting for Augustus Waters to call her after they had spent some time with each other: “I did not speak to Augustus again for about a week. I had called him on the Night of the Broken Trophies, so per tradition it was his turn to call. But he didn’t” (*FOS*, p. 64). The reader notices that Hazel is desperately longing for a call from Augustus. She is getting more and more impatient and immediately wants to grab her phone when it eventually rings. Augustus finally calls Hazel when her family and she are having dinner together – which means that phones are forbidden. Hazel’s parents are deep in conversation while she tries to finish up her dinner as fast as possible in order to be able to call Augustus back:

... they didn’t even glance over at me as I ate faster than I’d ever eaten, transmitting items from my plate into my mouth with a speed and ferocity that left me quite out of breath, which of course made me worry that my lungs were again swimming in a rising pool of fluid. (*FOS*, p. 65)

In this short passage of the book she experiences what many young adults go through when being in love. A further ‘usual’ problem Hazel faces is a brief feeling of jealousy when she finds out that Augustus had had a girlfriend called Caroline who died of brain cancer. However, this jealousy is quickly replaced by herself feeling miserable because she let Augustus into her life and she believes that consequently, he will see her die, and suffer from the loss.

### **Problems of having cancer**

Although these ‘standard problems’ can indeed cause trouble for a teenager going through the transition from child to adult, Hazel seems to have more serious problems to deal with. The first lines of the book immediately reveal that something is not right with her:

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. (*FOS*, p. 3)

In the next line the reader gets to know that it is not depression which makes life hard for Hazel, but living with cancer. Hazel describes both – depression and cancer – as being “side effects of dying” (*FOS*, p. 3). This immediate way of presenting the most important, constantly recurring aspect of the book, and life-dominating problem of the main character to the reader sets the tone for the whole story. The reader finds him-/herself in medias res and is at first overwhelmed by the sad information he/she is provided with in a dry kind of way. However, this does not mean that the book is depressing and frustrating throughout, as the narrator is actually very humorous and sarcastic.

Growing up with cancer entails many accompanying problems for Hazel, such as depression, withdrawal from the outside world, and the restrictions of her daily life due to cancer – feeling weak and tired after a minimum of physical exercise, being dependent on doctors, medicine, and her parents, the constant fear of tumor growth and dying, vomiting after eating, feeling to be a financial and emotional burden for her family, and the impossibility of leading a normal life with ‘normal’ teenage problems. All of these struggles are recurring in the book and convey a coherent picture about the difficulties Hazel has to face. The realistic depiction of complex problems in YAL does not only contribute to adolescents’ ability to empathize with

the main character but also is an important criterion when it comes to conveying an empowering message in YAL which focuses on difficult issues.

Each year approximately 70,000 adolescents between the ages of 15 to 39 are diagnosed with cancer, which amounts to 5 percent of cancer diagnoses in the United States. Statistics reveal that teenagers are more prone to suffer from cancer than older young adults and young children (Adolescents and Young Adults with Cancer, 2015). According to the American Cancer Society, cancer is listed on the fourth rank for causes of deaths among young adults between 20 to 39 years of age (What Are the Key Statistics..., 2015). When looking at these statistics, raising awareness about cancer in adolescents through literature seems to be meaningful and important in order to present insights into the complex nature of this disease. Furthermore, one has to take into account that cancer not only affects the person concerned but also all the people who are indirectly affected, namely family and people who care about the young cancer patient. This means that literature about young adults fighting cancer does not only appeal to and help adolescents who suffer from cancer but also to those who are indirectly affected. Stammers (2013), a Senior Lecturer in Bioethics and Medical Law, praises John Green's *FOS* for addressing medical issues in an appropriate way: "It is an exquisite example of how the humanities can reach deeply into essential parts of medical education that the comparative objectivity of science cannot" (p. 656). The following problems are issues which are caused by Hazel's cancer.

### Worries

Living with cancer does not only mean to bear physical pain but also entails many psychological issues, such as Hazel constantly worrying about her own health condition. Hazel is very attentive to pain and immediately pictures her tumor growing and spreading or fluid gathering in her lungs. The following quote gives an example for Hazel worrying about her health. Augustus and Hazel are in the car and Augustus is driving: "He slammed the brakes, and I flew forward hard enough that my breathing felt weird and tight. I thought of the PET scan. *Don't worry. Worry is useless. I worried anyways*" (*FOS*, p. 84). She is in a constant state of uncertainty, not yet death but not really living at the same time: "I was left on the shore with the waves washing over me, unable to drown" (*FOS*, p. 105). In this quotation Hazel refers to water as something dangerous which is a recurrent topic in the novel. For example, the fluid which gathers in her lungs is life-threatening and takes her breath away –

Hazel compares her difficult health condition with being left alone and almost drowning on a shore due to the helplessness her illness entails. Hazel's cancer is omnipresent throughout the book. She thinks and worries about her health in many everyday situations and sometimes while talking to other characters about topics which do not have anything to do with cancer. This shows the reader that thoughts about one's terminal illness are ever-present and can become life-domineering. Hazel constantly has to have her body PET scanned in order to spot irregularities. A further instance of Hazel worrying about whether her cancer is spreading would be the following passage in which Hazel noticed that she had slight difficulties breathing: "I had a PET scan scheduled in a couple weeks. If something was wrong, I'd find out soon enough. Nothing to be gained by worrying between now and then. And yet still I worried. I liked being a person. I wanted to keep at it. Worry is yet another side effect of dying" (*FOS*, p. 65). Although Hazel is concerned about her health condition many times throughout the novel, she mostly keeps her unsettling thoughts to herself and, of course, the reader in order to not burden others with her problems.

#### Avoiding relationships with others

Hazel's concern for other people and her intention to "minimize the casualties" when she dies, or in other words, her desire to avoid getting close to other people in order to not cause them pain with her death, makes life more difficult for Hazel (*FOS*, p. 99). At the beginning of the book she leads a quite reclusive life, always sticking to the same routines – which are reading her favorite book *An Imperial Affliction*, attending some college classes, and watching *America's Next Top Model*. It is only when her doctor and parents convince her of going to the cancer patients' support group that she inevitably has to get in touch with other adolescents. There she meets Augustus Waters and Isaac. Hazel enjoys being around Augustus and opens up. However, when she finds out that Augustus had a girlfriend who died of cancer and who therefore hurt him a lot, she realizes that she cannot bear the thought that she would do the same to Augustus, and every other person who is close to her when she dies. When Hazel and her parents are having dinner together at that particular evening Hazel answers flippantly to her mother's question:

"And how's your friend Isaac?" "Blind," I said. "You're being very teenagery today," Mom said. She seemed annoyed about it. "Isn't it what you wanted, Mom? For me to be teenagery?" "Well, not necessarily *this* kinda teenagery, but of course your father and I are excited to see you become a young woman, making friends, going on dates." ... "I don't want to go on dates

with anyone. It's a terrible idea and a huge waste of time and –" "Honey," my mom said. "What's wrong?" "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?" (*FOS*, p. 99)

There are only very few instances throughout the book that Hazel behaves in an impulsive, 'teenagery' way when her parents are around. After this emotional outburst, she does not attend the cancer patients' support group for some time. Hazel also tells Augustus that she only wants friendship although it is obvious that she would also long for a relationship with him.

### Being treated differently

Besides the fact that Hazel does not want to involve more people into her complicated, cancer dominated life she loathes it that people treat her differently as soon as they realize that she is ill – which is obvious because she always has to have her portable oxygen tank with her. When Hazel meets her old friend Kaitlyn, she does not feel comfortable with her because Kaitlyn reminds her that it will never be like it once used to be between them. Generally, it is difficult for Hazel to lead normal conversations with people since in many cases they only see her as a poor, ill girl and perceivably try to avoid certain topics:

The other thing about Kaitlyn, I guess, was that it could never again feel natural to talk to her. 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. (*FOS*, p. 47)

Being around healthy people is a challenge for the young girl since she can see how life for a person with functioning organs would be like. Therefore, Hazel sometimes prefers to be alone. Although Hazel likes Kaitlyn and her other friends, she often uses her cancer as an excuse that she has to go home:

So I excused myself on the grounds of pain and fatigue, as I often had over the years when seeing Kaitlyn or any of my other friends. In truth, it always hurt. It always hurt not to breathe like a normal person, incessantly reminding your lungs to be lungs, forcing yourself to accept as unsolvable, the clawing scraping inside-out ache of underoxygenation. So I wasn't lying, exactly. I was just choosing among truths. (*FOS*, p. 45)

There is another passage in chapter ten in which Hazel expresses her aversion for being treated and looked at in strange and pitiful ways when people realize that she has cancer. She feels like an outcast who does not fit in and will never be treated like a normal person. Hazel, Augustus, and Hazel's mother are on their way to the preboarding area of the airport on their way to Amsterdam: "I could feel everybody watching us, wondering what was wrong with us, and whether it would kill us, and how heroic my mom must be, and everything else. That was the worst part about having cancer, sometimes: The physical evidence of disease separates you from other people" (*FOS*, p. 144). Presenting these feelings to the reader makes one realize that there are many different aspects in life which make suffering from a terminal illness even harder for people concerned and raises awareness which is not only important for young adult readers but also adults, since one cannot imagine the everyday struggles a young cancer patient has to deal with.

#### Being an emotional and financial burden to her parents

Another cancer related problem Hazel faces is that she often feels like a burden, especially for her parents. Hazel frequently refers to herself as being a "grenade" who will cause pain to everyone who is close to her when she finally 'explodes.' She is very sorry for her parents, whom she obviously cannot spare the pain. Hazel holds herself responsible for the struggles her parents have to go through having her as their daughter and feels guilty. She wants to make her parents happy, even when this means that she has to do something she would rather not want to do, such as attending the cancer patients' support group: "I wanted to make my parents happy. There is only one thing in this world shittier than biting it from cancer when you're sixteen, and that's having a kid who bites it from cancer" (*FOS*, p. 7, 8). When Hazel and her parents are in a tense Cancer Team Meeting with Hazel's doctors in order to discuss her health condition and medication, Hazel asks if she could get a lung transplant. However, her doctor negates this request since she is not considered a strong candidate for a transplant. Her father starts crying: "I hated hurting him. Most of the time, I could forget about it, but the inexorable truth is this: They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha and the omega of my parents' suffering" (*FOS*, p. 116). This is also the reason why Hazel often wants to hide her true feelings from her parents. For instance, when she feels like crying, she either fights her tears or goes into the garden so that no one would notice:

Much of my life had been devoted to trying not to cry in front of people who loved me, so I knew what Augustus was doing. You clench your teeth. You look up. You tell yourself that if

they see you cry, it will hurt them, and you will be nothing but a Sadness in their lives, and you must not become a mere sadness, so you will not cry ... and you look at the person who loves you and smile. (*FOS*, pp. 213, 214)

Another example for Hazel feeling like a burden for her parents is when she remembers the sentence her mother said years ago when Hazel nearly died because her lungs filled with fluid:

She said, "I won't be a mom anymore." It gutted me pretty badly. I couldn't stop thinking about that during the whole Cancer Team Meeting. I couldn't get it out of my head, how she sounded when she said that, like she would never be okay again, which probably she wouldn't. (*FOS*, p. 117)

This sentence hits Hazel very hard because she knows that she would destroy her parents' lives when she dies. It appears that Hazel lives her life primarily for her parents at the beginning of the book. She desperately wants to please them and spare them pain.

Apart from the emotional stress Hazel causes her parents, she also considers herself a financial burden for them. Hazel's cancer treatment is quite expensive and her parents do everything they can in order to provide their daughter with the best treatment possible. When Hazel euphorically tells her mother that Peter Van Houten invited Augustus and her to Amsterdam she suddenly realizes that her parents do not have the money to afford international travel for her: "It occurred to me that the reason my parents had no money was me. I'd sapped the family savings with Phalanxifor copays, and Mom couldn't work because she had taken on the full-time profession of Hovering Over Me. I didn't want to put them even further into debt" (*FOS*, p. 79). Hazel's mother, of course, wants to desperately fulfill her daughter's dearest wish. However, Hazel assures her that she will find a different way and that her mother should not think about spending money on the journey which actually works in the end since Augustus uses his wish from The Genie Foundation which grants sick children wishes.

In conclusion, Hazel has to face innumerable struggles at a young age which are all caused by her illness. Constant worries about her health condition are daily fare for the young woman and her desire to involve as few people as possible in her life because of the fact that she wants to spare them pain makes life hard and lonely for Hazel. Hazel often feels like a social

outcast and an emotional burden for her family due to her illness. Furthermore, she holds herself responsible for her parents' financial problems which makes her feel guilty.

### **2.3. Humor, Positive Thinking, and Literature as Coping Strategies**

After having provided an overview of Hazel's predominant struggles of growing up, I will move on to coping strategies the young woman uses in order to bear the weight of her problems. One of the most striking coping mechanisms Hazel uses is humor which considerably helps her to make it through the day. Even if it is hard sometimes she tries to think positive and be grateful for what she has. In addition, Hazel finds comfort in literature and the possibility to find out how her favorite book *An Imperial Affliction* ends. Those three aspects will be discussed in this section.

Hazel is a strong character who fights the battle against cancer bravely by not letting it determine her life entirely. In order to be able to do so, she above all tries to see things with humor and stay positive. According to Lacy (2015), humor is a means of considerable importance in YAL in order to narrate stories with challenging contents:

Although humor takes on different forms for each author, they all use a playful and lighthearted tone in order to present and confront challenging subject matter. In addition, their protagonists all offer different, but creative and productive responses, including humorous responses, to the adversity in their lives. Such models can help readers identify and broaden their coping strategies, encouraging them to recognize and expand their own sense of agency. (p. 10)

Humor is applied in all three young adult novels and serves the above quoted purposes. Hazel's humor is not conventional. Sometimes she has a dry sense of humor, she can be quite sarcastic, and uses black humor and gallows humor many times throughout the book. Hazel most of all jokes about cancer itself and cancer patients which would not be appropriate for a healthy person to do. However, she knows the struggles and therefore has the 'privilege' to do so. At the beginning of the novel it somehow feels wrong to laugh about the jokes Hazel makes about cancer, however, after some chapters one gets used to the black humor and understands that it helps Hazel to cope with her complicated circumstances and that she is a normal person after all. Hazeleger (2013) argues that Hazel only feels confident joking about

her health condition with the narratee, Augustus, and Isaac, but not with her parents – she does not want to upset them because she knows that they would take her jokes seriously (pp. 33-35). In the following passage, Hazel is at a cancer patients’ support group meeting for the first time and she learns that many young cancer patients would live into adulthood. She thinks about cancer statistics, joking about everyone’s intention to survive longer than the other support group members:

(Which meant there was quite a lot of competitiveness about it, with everybody wanting to beat not only cancer itself, but also the other people in the room. Like, I realize that this is irrational, but when they tell you that you have, say, a 20 percent chance of living five years, the math kicks in and you figure that’s one in five... so you look around and think, as any healthy person would: I gotta outlast four of these bastards.) (*FOS*, p. 5)

This considerable variation of the mood throughout the book – which reaches from hilarious to sorrowful – makes it also easier for the reader to digest the contents of the novel and establishes distance. Hazel’s life is sad and frustrating enough. She does not want to make it worse by talking about how unpromising her future or certain situations might seem to be. As an example, when Hazel and Augustus meet Hazel’s mother after they had the disappointing meeting with Peter Van Houten they choose to recount the depressing story in a humorous way:

We made the story funny. You have a choice in this world, I believe, about how to tell sad stories, and we made the funny choice: Augustus, slumped in the café chair, pretended to be the tongue-tied, word-slurring Van Houten who could not so much as push himself out of his chair; I stood up to play a me all full of bluster and machismo, shouting, “Get up, you fat ugly old man!” “Did you call him ugly? Augustus asked. “Just go with it,” I told him “I’m nah uggy. You’re the uggy one, nosetube girl.” “You’re a coward!” I rumbled, and Augustus broke character to laugh. (*FOS*, pp. 209, 210)

Although it is hard to live with cancer, Hazel tries to stay positive. She sometimes cannot avoid thoughts about her longing for health but she always attempts to think positive and to be grateful for the little health she has: “... I would give up all the sick days I had left for a few healthy ones. I tried to tell myself that it could be worse, that the world was not a wish granting factory, that I was living with cancer not dying of it, that I mustn’t let it kill me before it kills me. ...” (*FOS*, p. 121). Hazel does not surrender and allow cancer to fully determine her life and who she is. Such passages demonstrate that Hazel is considerably

struggling with her illness but at the same time it is shown that one can still make the best out of apparently hopeless and frustrating situations by using one's (limited) agency which is positive thinking in this instance. Unfortunately, Hazel cannot solve her problem of having cancer with positive thinking, however, it makes it easier to cope with life and shows the reader that she puts considerable effort into staying mentally sane and is fighting against her illness, despite her unpromising health condition. Her positive thinking and humor prevent her from slipping deeper into depression. There are also some small advantages for adolescents who suffer from cancer which are addressed in the book. When Augustus, who is a horrible car driver, tells Hazel that he had failed his driving test three times and that his fourth attempt had been just as bad as the others but the instructor had let him pass the test, Hazel suspects a Cancer Perk: "Cancer Perks are the little things cancer kids get that regular kids don't: basketballs signed by sports heroes, free passes on late homework, unearned driver's licenses, etc." (*FOS*, p. 23). What is more, Hazel's dearest wish to go to Amsterdam, which was granted from The Genie Foundation, was a welcome Cancer Perk for Augustus and Hazel. Furthermore, Hazel is grateful for the short time she was able to spend with Augustus although she would have wished for more time. She mentions this in her eulogy she prepared for Augustus: "But, Gus, my love, 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" (*FOS*, p. 260).

Besides Hazel's frequent use of humor and positive thinking, despite the difficulties she faces in her life, reading serves as an important coping strategy for her. Reading not only makes Hazel forget reality for some time but also means a lot to her personally. She reads the book *An Imperial Affliction* by Peter Van Houten over and over again because she can empathize with the protagonist Anna who also suffers from cancer. Hazel admires how the book is written because it depicts the struggles of having cancer at a young age very well without being a 'typical cancer-book.' It is only towards the end of *FOS* that Hazel realizes that Peter Van Houten's daughter died of cancer which makes her feel sad for the man. The fact that her favorite book ends in the middle of a sentence makes the story, according to Hazel, on the one hand more plausible since Anna probably dies or gets too ill to continue writing, but on the other hand Hazel desperately wants to know what happens to all the other characters in the book. She especially wants to know what Anna's mother will do after her death and if she and the Dutch Tulip Man will get married. When Hazel finally gets the permission from her doctor and parents to go to Amsterdam she is full of joy. However, Peter Van Houten only

tells her what happens to Sisyphus the Hamster, denying her further information about all the other characters. Hazel's obsession with the characters of *An Imperial Affliction* has obviously something to do with her own uncertain health condition. Her cancer could any time grow and spread again or fluid could fill her lungs and kill her. However, this is not Hazel's main concern. She rather worries about what will happen to her own parents and Augustus (before she realizes that he would die earlier) after her death. Transforming this real-life concern into a piece of literature gives her the chance to at least get to know what will become of the fictional characters. This ray of hope keeps her going and she is absolutely determined to find out: "If I could just stay alive for a week, I'd know the unwritten secrets of Anna's mom and the Dutch Tulip Guy. I looked down my blouse at my chest. 'Keep your shit together,' I whispered to my lungs" (*FOS*, p. 128). When Hazel learns that her mother is taking online courses in order to become a social worker Hazel is full of joy and immediately connects the good news about her mother – who is living her own life – with the characters from *An Imperial Affliction*:

I couldn't get over how happy I was, crying genuine tears of actual happiness for the first time in maybe forever, imagine my mom as a Patrick [the social worker of the cancer patients' support group]. It made me think of Anna's mom. She would've been a good social worker, too. (*FOS*, p. 298)

Hazel had been so focused on finding out something about the fictional characters in order to transfer the information to her real life that she is finally overcome with joy when she suddenly finds out something real. It shows that made up stories can indeed have a considerable impact on people's lives and that literature can mean a lot to its readers. Louie (1990) argues that due to the fact that adolescents empathize and identify with young adult characters who struggle with 'real' problems, introducing YAL which revolves around adolescents who read books in order to find solutions to their problems to young adults, fosters readers' interest in literature and their believe that literature could help them cope with their own problems, too (p. 282). It also has to be mentioned that neither the book *An Imperial Affliction* nor the author Peter Van Houten do exist. John Green merely based the imaginary book on two works, namely *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace and *The Blood of the Lamb* by Peter De Vries (Bennett, 2014). John Green states:

I can't make *An Imperial Affliction* real. It's not the kind book I could write well, and on some level, the thing that we imagine will always be better than any real approximation of it that

might come to exist. But if you wish to read *An Imperial Affliction*, I'd encourage you to read *Infinite Jest* and *The Blood of the Lamb* and then try to blend the feeling of those two books. (as cited in Bennett, 2014)

The title *An Imperial Affliction* stems from the poem "There's a Certain Slant of Light" by Emily Dickinson (Bennett, 2014).

To sum up, Hazel's strange sense of humor prevents her from drowning in an ocean of depression caused by her unpromising health condition. Joking about everything which even includes her own illness makes life definitely easier for the girl and all the people around her. Hazel always tries to see the world and her situation in a positive way, although reality sometimes rains down relentlessly on her. Finally, her favorite book *An Imperial Affliction* means a lot to her and provides a source of comfort. Her determination to find out what becomes of the characters of the book keeps her alive and active.

#### **2.4. Important Support Systems**

This section of my diploma thesis will deal with the protagonist's family relationship and other support systems, which help Hazel cope with her problems. First of all, the role Hazel's parents play when it comes to helping her with her problems will be discussed. Other support systems, such as the cancer patients' support group, will also be mentioned. Furthermore, Augustus who takes on an important role in Hazel's life will also be dealt with.

Hazel is fortunate to have a very supportive family environment which helps her to keep fighting the battle against cancer. In general, Hazel's parents are portrayed in a highly positive way which conforms to current trends in YAL. They are self-sacrificing, always in close vicinity to Hazel, convey comfort and emotional support, and lovingly care for their daughter. Hazel even considers her parents as her best friends. They want to do everything to make her feel better. Hazel's mother does not work anymore in order to be able to care for her and be there in case there is an emergency. She is very attentive and appears within seconds when Hazel calls her: "'Mom,' I said. I did not say it loudly, but I didn't have to. She was always waiting. She peeked her head around the door. 'You okay, sweetie?'" (*FOS*, p. 113). Hazel's mother always wants to talk about problems which is the reason why Hazel sometimes tries to hide her feelings from her in order to be left alone and not bother her mother:

I stayed in the backyard because Mom was always really smothery and concerned when I was crying, because I did not cry often, and I knew she'd want to *talk* and discuss whether I shouldn't consider adjusting my medication, and the thought of that whole conversation made me want to throw up. (*FOS*, pp. 121, 122)

Hazel's parents are very understanding and patient with their daughter. As an example, after the passage in chapter six in which Hazel claims in an emotional outburst that she is a grenade who will destroy everyone who loves her with her death, her parents leave her alone for some time but then come into her room and convey comfort. Her father is speaking:

“You are not a grenade, not to us. Thinking about you dying makes us sad, Hazel, but you are not a grenade. You are amazing. You can't know, sweetie, because you've never had a baby become a brilliant young reader with a side interest in horrible television shows, but the joy you bring us is so much greater than the sadness we feel about your illness.” (*FOS*, p. 103)

Additionally, Hazel's parents worry about the emotional and social wellbeing of their daughter and therefore they encourage Hazel to become more active and make friends: “Mom: ‘Hazel, you're a teenager. You're not a little kid anymore. You need to make friends, get out of the house, and live your life’” (*FOS*, p. 7). Hazel's mother, for example, suggests that Hazel should meet her old friend Kaitlyn in order to get Hazel out of the house and leave behind her depressing everyday routines. Furthermore, attending the cancer patients' support group is not Hazel's but her parent's and her doctor's idea because Hazel shows symptoms of a clinical depression. Towards the end of the book the reader witnesses Hazel's personal development. Her initial sad, depressing, and lonely life had changed considerably not only due to the extraordinarily helpful support from her parents but also because of her own efforts to live her life. Hazel assumes more responsibility over her own life, opens up to others, becomes slightly more independent, and spends the last days of Augustus' life by his side – following her personal interests.

Another point which has to be mentioned is that not only Hazel but also Hazel's parents are not depicted as stereotypical male and female characters. Hazel's mother is a very active, self-empowered, independent, and well-educated woman. Hazel's father, on the other hand, is depicted as an emotionally instable person who cries a lot. He cannot bear the thought that Hazel could die any day. Hazel's father also admits that being an adult does not mean to be omniscient: “‘I don't know what I believe, Hazel. I thought being an adult meant knowing

what you believe, but that has not been my experience” (FOS, p. 223). This portrayal of Hazel’s parents contradicts the frequent stereotypical depiction of adults as being superior to adolescents. Additionally, *The Fault in Our Stars* does not conform to common gender stereotypes.

A further important place where Hazel finds support is the cancer patients’ support group. Although Hazel had not been excited about attending the support group at first, it helps her considerably to open up and start living her own life instead of waiting for death to come. It is not so much the conversations and contents which are dealt with in the cancer patients’ support group which make Hazel feel better but it is the people she meets there who make her life worth living again: Augustus, the love of her life, and her friendship with Isaac. Therefore, everything changes for Hazel after the first support group meeting. She suddenly leads a social life and meets her new friends frequently which makes her life more exciting and gives her new strength. In addition, attending the cancer patients’ support group shows Hazel that she is not the only one who suffers from a terminal illness, which is a cold comfort but at least something.

Last but not least, Augustus Waters provides emotional support and helps Hazel to stay positive. Due to the fact that Augustus knows what Hazel goes through, because of his own experiences with cancer, Hazel is more willing to accept words of advice and encouragements from him. Augustus gives Hazel the feeling that he understands her, unlike when she is with healthy people, such as her old friend Kaitlyn who pity her and choose their words wisely in order not to hurt her feelings. This is completely different with Augustus since he does not treat her differently or acts strange when she is around. They are sarcastic and make fun of each other all the time. They even joke about their health conditions. Their shared sense of humor makes life easier for them. In the following quote Augustus is in hospital, Hazel and Augustus’ sister Julie and her children are there:

“I can only hope,” Julie said turning back to Gus, “they [her children] grow into the kind of thoughtful, intelligent young men you’ve become.” I resisted the urge to audibly gag. “He’s not that smart,” I said to Julie. “She’s right. It’s just that most really good-looking people are stupid, so I exceed expectations.” (FOS, p. 251)

Augustus is a further reason why Hazel wants to stay alive. Hazel discovers how beautiful it can be to love and to be loved by someone dearly. Spending time and sharing her interests and

above all her passion about her favorite book *An Imperial Affliction* with Augustus makes her life more enjoyable and worth living. Furthermore, in the course of the novel Hazel slowly realizes that Augustus can decide for himself if he is willing to hazard the consequences of getting emotionally attached to a girl who is doomed to die and therefore learns to hand over responsibility: “I didn’t want to be a grenade. But then again, he knew what he was doing, didn’t he? It was his choice, too” (*FOS*, p. 164). This is an important step Hazel makes because she quits blaming herself for things she cannot be held responsible for and she manages to overcome her feelings of guilt. When Augustus finally tells Hazel that his cancer came back Hazel realizes that it was foolish of her to try not to love Augustus in order to spare him pain: “I couldn’t be mad at him for even a moment, and only now that I loved a grenade did I understand the foolishness of trying to save others from my own impending fragmentation: I couldn’t unlove Augustus Waters” (*FOS*, p. 214).

It can be said that Hazel is a fortunate character when it comes to the people who offer support and help her with the struggles she has to face every day. Hazel’s self-sacrificing parents care lovingly for her and do everything to make her happy. The cancer patients’ support group helps Hazel to open up and make friends. Furthermore, Augustus Waters turns out to be a fierce friend who brings happiness and love into Hazel’s life.

In conclusion, Hazel faces numerous struggles which accompany her terminal illness. However, she is a multidimensional, self-empowered female character who actively tries to make the best out of her difficult cancer-dominated life by opening up to peers, being positive, and humorous. *FOS* provides young readers with deep insights into the life of a self-sacrificing, intelligent, and passionate young cancer patient who is determined to live her life despite the problems she faces. None of the characters conform to frequent gender stereotypes and beauty standards which enhances authenticity and shows young readers that every person, no matter how ill or ordinary he/she is, deserves a place to be featured in popular culture.

### ***3. It's Kind of a Funny Story***

This chapter will deal with the young adult novel *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini. In this section a summary of the contents of the novel and information about the author will be given.

*It's Kind of a Funny Story (KFS)* revolves around Craig Gilner, a fifteen-year-old shy and ambitious boy from Brooklyn who desperately wants to be accepted by a prestigious high school, namely the Executive Pre-Professional High School, in order to be accepted by a good college so that he will get a lucrative job. After months of excessively studying for the entrance exam, he is finally taken by the Executive Pre-Professional High School. Craig starts meeting Aaron, a confident and popular boy from his old school, who is also accepted at the same high school as Craig. The boys watch movies, throw parties, drink alcohol, and smoke marihuana together. He enjoys spending time with Aaron, until his friend starts a relationship with Nia with whom Craig is secretly in love. Craig feels increasingly frustrated and starts neglecting preparations for the Executive Pre-Professional High School over the summer holidays. Therefore, he starts the school year with a massive accumulation of readings and tasks he has to catch up on. Due to the rising demands he has to meet for high school, his frustrating love life, and the pressure he feels when he thinks about his strict future plans which had been building up throughout the previous months, Craig's body and psychological condition worsen until he finally cannot bear the pressure anymore. He surrenders and stops eating, he feels more and more depressed, and has troubles sleeping. He admits to his parents that he is feeling miserable. They immediately send him to a pharmacologist who diagnoses a severe depression. Consequently, he is prescribed medication and sent to a therapist. Craig labels the aspects of his life which cause his depression as "Tentacles" which include certain subjects at school, homework, and the pressure he feels when he thinks about his future. On the other hand, he calls aspects of his life which make him feel better "Anchors" which are video games, riding his bike, and drawing maps. When Craig was a child, he had always wanted to draw maps professionally once he would be a grown up. Craig starts feeling better after some time but then quits taking his antidepressants which tremendously worsens his mental condition, until Craig decides to kill himself early in the morning by jumping off Brooklyn Bridge. However, just before he is about to leave in order to commit suicide he calls a suicide hotline and hospitalizes himself. He is brought into the adult psychiatric section of the hospital because he is told that the psychiatric section for teenagers is currently being

renovated. Craig has to stay in the mental hospital for five days. During his stay in Six North he gets to know many people who suffer from different mental disorders and makes new friends. After he overcomes some setbacks, such as his friends finding out where he is and making fun of him on the telephone, his principal calling in the hospital, him struggling with the thought that gossip will spread about his mental condition, and work for school piling up, Craig manages to slowly get better and starts eating and sleeping properly. He gradually realizes that he can actually change certain aspects in his life – such as his friends and schools. Craig also starts seeing a girl called Noelle in Six North. However, their slowly developing relationship is endangered when suddenly Nia visits Craig because she had broken up with Aaron. Craig and Nia kiss but he realizes that he does not like her character and therefore he is relieved when his roommate discovers them and makes Nia leave. Noelle forgives him because of his honesty. During his stay in Six North, Craig rediscovers his passion for drawing maps in the art and crafts sessions which becomes a new important “Anchor” for him. Consequently, he decides – with the help of his therapist Dr. Minerva – that he wants to transfer to an art school. He also wants to volunteer at the hospital, once he is feeling better. The book ends with Craig saying goodbye to everyone, exchanging numbers, and talking to Noelle about meeting in the ‘real world.’ He leaves the hospital and feels that suicide is no option anymore.

The title *It's Kind of a Funny Story* is, in my opinion, misleading when reading the first two hundred pages of the novel since it appears like ‘it is kind of a far too depressing story’ for a title like this about a boy who severely struggles to cope with life and consequently with depression and suicidal intentions. However, one presumes that the story has to take a turn in order to conform to its title. When reading the whole book, which is written in a very humorous way, and thinking about the title again in terms of Craig reflecting upon what actually happened before and during the last five days in Six North the title would make sense. After his stay in the mental hospital, Craig can clearly identify what went wrong in his life and how he could have prevented things getting out of hand. Due to the fact that he can see reality clearer after his stay in Six North, some of his worries and new experiences he had made in Six North which might have seemed troublesome and strange when he was in the particular situations actually appear amusing and at the same time questionable (such as the love he felt for Nia) in retrospect. Therefore, it could be considered as ‘kind of a funny story.’ The title could also be interpreted as a common, ironical way of starting a story about one’s life.

Ned Vizzini was born in Manhattan on April the 4<sup>th</sup> in 1981. He was a popular writer of young adult novels which primarily revolve around young adults struggling with depression and anxiety. Despite addressing and raising awareness about such serious topics, Vizzini always attempted to work with humor in his novels (Yardley, 2013). Ned Vizzini started writing about teenage issues for the *New York Press* at the age of fifteen and published his first book *Teen Angst? Naaah...* four years later. His first book was followed by *Be More Chill* which was praised by *Entertainment Weekly* to be one of the Top Ten Books for the year 2004. *It's Kind of a Funny Story* was published in 2006 – and adapted into a movie in 2010 – which was chosen by the American Library Association to be listed among Best Books for Young Adults in 2007. *House of Secrets* was the last book Ned Vizzini published before his death (KFS, Ned Vizzini).

There are many parallels to be found between the life of the author and the main character, Craig, in *KFS* – Vizzini states in an interview, “Eighty- five percent of *It's Kind of a Funny Story* comes from my real life. One hundred percent of it comes from my (limited) knowledge of life” (Blasingame and Vizzini, 2007, p. 608). For example, Vizzini attended an exceptionally strict high school, namely the Stuyvesant High School. In addition, he suffered from depression and spent five days in the mental ward of a Brooklyn hospital in 2004. Due to his first-hand-experiences with this severe mental disorder, Vizzini always wanted to help young people to fight depression and anxiety, by openly talking to groups of students and writing about the struggles he faced. Ned Vizzini is of the opinion that the media contributes to teenagers thinking that adolescence is an extremely difficult time for youths in which they have to make life-determining decisions and fight with their parents. He encourages young people in his books to not blindly follow these stereotypical expectations. Instead, according to Vizzini, teenagers should relax, make friends, and find out about their passions and discover what makes them happy (Yardley, 2013).

### 3.1. From Chaos to Order: Structural and Narrative Elements

Structural elements, such as the parts the novel contains and the succession of the action, the setting of the novel, temporal aspects of the story, and when the struggles of growing up are introduced will be dealt with in this section. The narrative perspective and its significance for the story will be discussed.

#### Structural Elements

The following pattern applies to the structure of *KFS*: Scrofano (2015) argues that YAL which deals with mental illnesses follows a certain pattern: At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist is ashamed of his/her mental condition, afraid of what others would think about it, and is determined to hide his/her problems. A climax is reached when the mental problems become too intense to be handled which finally leads to the protagonist accepting help and treatment (p. 18). *KFS* is divided into ten parts and fifty chapters. The particular headlines of the parts provide the reader with a hint about semantic, spacial, and temporal information of the chapters they contain. The story can be seen as an initiation novel because the protagonist goes through a major personal development during his stay in the mental hospital, returning as a more grown-up person, who learned a lot about his own life and the lives of others.

The first chapter in “PART 1: WHERE I’M AT” begins, such as *FOS*, in an immediate way – in the middle of a party at Aaron’s place – with the first sentence: “It’s hard to talk when you want to kill yourself” (*KFS*, p. 3). The reader is introduced to the main topic of the novel, namely Craig suffering from depression, and some of the struggles which accompany this mental disorder. In the second chapter, the reader finds himself/herself in a therapy meeting with Craig and Dr. Minerva, learning more about Craig’s health condition. The meeting is interrupted by a flashback which is of considerable importance for the story: Craig is thinking about the time when he was four years old and had spent most of his time drawing maps. He had always dreamed about drawing maps as a profession. In the following chapters, the focus is laid on Craig’s family. The first part of the book raises interest since the reader is now familiar with the struggles of the protagonist but does not know what exactly happened to Craig.

“PART 2: HOW I GOT THERE” provides answers to this question. In the following chapters, the narrator moves two years back in time: When he was accepted at the Executive Pre-

Professional High School. At the same time, Craig starts seeing Aaron and Nia more frequently and jealousy as well as frustration builds up inside of him. Additionally, work for school piles up and he finally admits his being depressed to his parents and is prescribed medication. The action rises considerably at this point of the story and the reader is intensively confronted with Craig's negative thoughts. Chapters twelve and thirteen slow down the action and take away the tension which build up, since he is prescribed medicine and starts feeling slightly better. However, at the end of the chapter Craig quits taking his antidepressants which fosters suspense and two months later the suffering starts again.

“PART 3: BADOOM” is one of the key parts of the story since it deals with the day Craig decides to kill himself. The title of the chapter is very appropriate because Craig's decision to commit suicide comes quite abrupt and has a shocking effect on the reader. Chapter fourteen and fifteen serve the purpose to create tension since Craig thoroughly plans his suicide, prepares himself. Although the reader is aware of the fact that Craig will not kill himself – because it is just a flashback – Vizzini manages to let the action rise sharply and make one assume that Craig might attempt to commit suicide and fail. Everything changes for Craig when he phones the Suicide Hotline. Therefore, chapter fifteen marks the climax of the story. From this part onwards, the action follows a chronological pattern which also mirrors the organizing effect the hospital has on Craig's life.

“PART 4: HOSPITAL” is a transitional part which prepares the reader for the following chapters and introduces, as the title suggests, the Argenon hospital. At the end of this part in chapter eighteen, Craig realizes that he is brought to the adult psychiatric, namely Six North. The reader notices that Craig is not enthusiastic about this revelation due to the prevalent stereotypes people (and he himself) have about psychiatric facilities – which, however, change considerably during his stay. The action rises slightly, because one is curious about what the mental hospital will be like. The chapters in “PART 5: SIX NORTH, SATURDAY” primarily focus on the familiarization of the reader, along with Craig, with Six North and its patients. In this part, the reader is confronted with Craig's fear about what others might think about him being in a mental hospital. In chapter thirty-one in “PART 6: SIX NORTH, SUNDAY” Craig draws his first map in the shape of a human head, which he calls a brain map. This chapter is of considerable importance for Craig coping with his depression and later for his making the decision to transfer to an art school.

Chapter thirty-nine in “PART 8: SIX NORTH, TUESDAY” marks an unexpected turning point in the story when Nia suddenly appears in the hospital and tries to seduce Craig. Tension is building up in this chapter since one suspects that Noelle’s and Craig’s relationship will suffer from this incident. However, Noelle forgives Craig and the action falls again. “PART 9: SIX NORTH, WEDNESDAY” is another part of significant importance for the personal development of Craig. In chapter forty-four he meets his therapist Dr. Minerva who asks him if he had ever thought about going to a different school. This is the first time Craig considers transferring schools and is happy thinking about leaving the Executive Pre-Professional High School. In the following chapters, the reader gets the impression that Craig is gradually gaining control over his life and consciously makes decisions which will help him stay sane in the long term. Before the story comes to an end, Craig and Noelle come closer to each other in chapter forty-nine which lets the action rise for the last time.

*KFS* is set in different places in New York. Craig used to live in a rundown apartment in Manhattan when he was four years old and wanted to become a map maker. He was happy at that time. Some years later his family moved in a better apartment in Brooklyn. Craig refers to Brooklyn as “a big fat blob with its own ugly shape across from Manhattan; it looks like Jabba the Hutt counting his money” (*KFS*, p. 31). He would rather want to live in Manhattan which he associates with success. However, when Craig is in Six North, everyone envies him for living in a good neighborhood which makes Craig appreciate the place he lives more. When Craig prepares for the entrance exam for the Executive Pre-Professional High School he spends most of his day in his room studying. The apartment appears to be claustrophobic and restrictive, especially when Craig gets depressed and is bed-ridden and incapable to do anything. The apartment is the place in which he hides his mental disorder from the outside world. Aaron’s apartment, on the other hand, is a place of anarchy. Aaron and Craig have parties, do drugs, drink alcohol, and meet girls there. However, at the same time Aaron’s place mirrors chaos and decay – Aaron’s parents do not care about their son and Craig is feeling worse constantly seeing Nia and Aaron together and noticing that Aaron does better at school. The Executive Pre-Professional High School is also a setting of considerable importance in the book. Although no action takes place there, the school is omnipresent and looming in the head of Craig, threatening with pressure the protagonist is unable to bear. Everything changes when Craig is in Six North in the Argenon hospital. Six North is a place of simplicity for Craig. His days are scheduled in activities, such as drawing and playing cards, which are easy to handle for him. Craig finds himself in a safe environment with many

“Anchors,” whereas the ‘real world’ of school, homework, and future plans seems to be full of “Tentacles.” Six North is the place which allows Craig to develop personally and to learn that he is the one who can change his life by cutting the “Tentacles” which burden him.

The temporal structure in *KFS* is rather messy at the beginning of the book and it is not quite clear when the action takes place – approximately a short time before Craig decides to kill himself. There is also a brief flashback which interrupts the main storyline in order to provide the reader with essential information about Craig’s dreams when he was a child. “PART 2: HOW I GOT THERE” deals with how Craig got depressed which started two years ago. The temporal structure of the first two parts could serve to mirror the confusion and instable mental condition of Craig. The main storyline is continued in the third part when Craig decides to kill himself and phones the suicide hotline. Starting at the beginning of this part, the story time covers exactly six days and is narrated in a chronological order which reflects the contents of the novel since Craig slowly begins to get his life back together. Additionally, the headlines of parts five to ten provide the reader with exact temporal (Saturday-Thursday) and also spatial (Six North) information and the first chapter of each part starts in the morning and the last ends in the evening.

### Narrative Elements

*KFS* is narrated by Craig Gilner in an autodiegetic first-person narrative mode, as it can also be found in *FOS*. The story is written in present tense, except for “PART 2: HOW I GOT THERE” which tells the story how Craig got depressed, and a short flashback in chapter three which are written in past tense. The first-person autodiegetic perspective is very effective in this book since the reader is granted access to the thoughts and feelings of the main character and is consequently able to intensively perceive Craig’s inner struggles. Due to the fact that Craig suffers from depression, other narrative techniques would not be powerful enough to depict the mental problems he has to cope with. Such as in *FOS*, the struggles of the protagonist are depicted in a direct and immediate way. The reader frequently witnesses inner monologues of the protagonist which tend to be, unlike Hazel’s in *FOS*, more incoherent, disorganized, and sometimes strange – which clearly reflects his mental disorder. As an example, Craig often leads an inner dialogue with himself. In this scenario, he sees himself as a soldier and the other voice (which is actually also his own voice) belongs to an army commander who tries to motivate him.

Another aspect which has to be mentioned is the language used in *KFS*. Essentially, Craig and his friends use common teen-language, frequently including slang words and expressions. As opposed to *FOS*, the dialogues in *KFS* are less eloquent and elaborate although Craig is an intelligent young man due to the fact that he is hardworking and accepted at a prestigious high school. The language resembles spontaneous speech and therefore seems to be less artificial and closer to reality than the language used in *FOS*. Ned Vizzini also plays with humor in order to make the contents easier to digest for the. He states in an interview: “Humor is the glue that holds my life together, and I transferred that philosophy to Craig. When things really break in your life, what else can you do but laugh at them? We laugh when somebody falls. Humor and pain are intimately connected” (Blasingame and Vizzini, 2007, p. 608).

### **3.2. Under Pressure: Growing Up with Depression**

“It was almost like a reverse nightmare, like when you wake up from a nightmare you’re so relieved. I woke up into a nightmare” (*KFS*, p. 12).

This chapter will discuss prevalent problems Craig has to deal with. The protagonist’s struggles with depression and suicidal intentions which are caused by many other aspects in his life, such as school, his non-existent love life, and his urge to conform to social conventions, will be dealt with in more depth in this subchapter.

#### **Depression**

The ultimate consequences of all the struggles Craig has to deal with in his life are depression and suicidal intentions. The problems accumulate to an extent which becomes unbearable for the young protagonist and as a result contribute to the development of this mental disorder. Similar to Hazel’s cancer in *FOS*, Craig’s depression is realistically depicted as being a complex disease which entails various other physical and psychological issues which make life more difficult for the protagonist. This affective disorder causes Craig, besides his constantly lowered motivation and mood, problems with eating, sleeping, expressing himself, excessive sweating in stressful situations, and working efficiently. Due to these problems he suffers from an inner conflict and even seriously considers to kill himself. This inner conflict is made visible and is directly depicted in the novel by Craig leading conversations with himself, picturing himself as a soldier at war who is encouraged by an army commander. This

implies that Craig is at war with himself and has to fight against his own body in order to stay alive. Craig also pictures a man in his stomach, who would not allow him to eat properly. Craig's difficulties with eating are a recurring aspect in the book: "The absolutely worst part of being depressed is the food. A person's relationship with food is one of their most important relationships. I don't think your relationship with your parents is that important" (*KFS*, p. 32). Not being able to eat like a normal person frustrates Craig and restricts his life considerably. This struggle stands out and the reader witnesses Craig's thoughts about food many times during the first parts of the novel: "I take my first bite – a carefully constructed forkful of chicken, rice, and squash – and mash it into my mouth. *I will eat this*" (*KFS*, p. 40). These passages make clear that something which most people take for granted can cause others considerable troubles. Apart from his problems with eating, Craig has sleeping problems because his thoughts tend to start moving in seemingly endless circles in his head, constantly confronting himself with his problems and worries. He spends hours lying in bed like this. Due to the fact that he cannot satisfy his basic needs Craig's body is not able to work properly: "I'm going to try and eat. Then I'm going to try and sleep. I dread it. I can't eat and I can't sleep. I'm not doing well in terms of being a functional human, you know?" (*KFS*, p. 29). Due to the fact that his body is too weak to function properly, Craig is not able to work efficiently which has a detrimental effect on his performance at high school. Therefore, he finds himself in a vicious circle which seemingly becomes increasingly impossible to escape from. Consequently, Craig feels that suicide is the only option left in order to break free from his struggles: "I look at myself in the bathroom light. Yes, I'm okay. I'm okay because I have a plan and a solution: I'm going to kill myself" (*KFS*, p.126). Ned Vizzini shows the various detrimental effects depression can have on its victim and how a suicidal person might behave. As a result, young adult readers not only read an exciting story but can also learn about this serious mental illness and how it manifests itself. This valuable knowledge raises adolescents' awareness and sensibility and might even empower them to notice a cry for help from colleagues or friends who suffer from depression and have suicidal intentions.

In *KFS*, depression is pictured as a chemical imbalance connected to difficult challenges one faces in life which has to be cured through medication and psychotherapy:

"Mr. Gilner." Dr. Mahmoud puts a hand on my shoulder. "You have a chemical imbalance, that is all. If you were a diabetic, would you be ashamed of where you were?" "No, but –" "If

you had to take insulin and you stopped, and you were taken to the hospital, wouldn't that make sense?" (*KFS*, p. 240)

This depiction of depression conforms exactly to what Scrofano (2015) suggests concerning the representation of mental illnesses in YAL, namely a biochemical approach to mental disorders. When considering recent statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health from 2015 about adolescents suffering from depression, three million young adults aged 12 to 17, which amounts to 12.5 percent of the US population of this age group, suffered from at least one major depressive episode in the course of the past year (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Therefore, YAL about depression is a relevant topic for today's adolescents, can raise awareness among young adults, and show those who suffer from depression that they are not alone.

#### Executive Pre-Professional High School

One of the most prevalent "Tentacles" Craig has to face is to meet the high demands for the Executive Pre-Professional High School. The term "Tentacles" is a metaphor which can be interpreted in the way that the problems he labels as such are tentacles of some kind of a dangerous submarine creature entangling and dragging him down into a deep, sinister ocean of depression, taking away his breath and agency. The term "Anchor" – which also refers to an object which is associated with the ocean – is a metaphor which stands for safety, being grounded, and having something to hold on to. At the beginning of the book Craig is optimistic since he managed to succeed in the entrance exam, however, he soon realizes that he cannot handle the pressure of upcoming assignments. Instead of working harder he turns numb and incapable of catching up with work, slipping deeper and deeper into depression. Craig starts believing that he is not good enough and that everyone can handle school better than he can: "Why were the other kids doing better than me? Because they were better, that's why. ... I was just smart and I worked hard. I had fooled myself into thinking that was something important to the rest of the world. ... Nobody had told me I was common" (*KFS*, p. 96). Thoughts about his high school can immediately temper each spark of delight Craig feels. For instance, when his principal calls in Six North, Craig does not want to speak to him because he thinks that he will be expelled from school due to the assignments and classes he had missed. Craig also feels overwhelmed when he imagines all the emails from school he had not been able to respond to during his stay at the hospital. Ned Vizzini precisely shows Craig's feelings and his extreme bodily reactions in these instances, such as sweating and

thoughts circling in his head which makes the reader empathize with the main character and understand how serious the struggles are. Since Craig still feels miserable about school after he had spent five days in Six North, one assumes that he will have a hard time once he leaves the hospital and that he will probably not be able to handle reality. This feeling is raised in the reader in many passages throughout the book since Craig believes that he has no other choices and that his decision to attend the Executive Pre-Professional High School is irrevocable and ultimate: ““I thought like it would be good to have a reset switch, like on the video games, to start again and see if you could go a different way”” (*KFS*, p. 103).

### Conforming to social conventions

Another struggle of growing up Craig has to deal with is his believe that he has to act according to social conventions. Until chapter forty-four in “PART 9: SIX NORTH, WEDNESDAY,” Craig is convinced of the fact that he is expected to live a ‘successful life’ and that there is only one way to achieve this: He has to attend a prestigious school to be accepted at a good college so that he will get a lucrative job in order to be able to care for his own family (*KFS*, p. 107). In a therapy meeting with Dr. Minerva, Craig reveals that he is afraid of living an unsuccessful life: ““Well, I won’t get to join clubs, get credits, participate in stuff, get extra-credit... I’ll fail’ ‘At school.’ ‘Right.’ I pause. No, it’s not exactly school. It’s what comes after school. ‘At life.’ ‘Ah.’ She pauses. ‘Life.’ ‘Right.’ ‘Failing at school is failing at life”” (*KFS*, p. 385). Craig holds on to this believe about what a prosperous life has to look like and his plans so tightly that he does not even dare to consider that this definition might not apply to his personality and actual needs and talents. He does not realize that following this ‘dream,’ which turns out to be a hunting nightmare, slowly destroys himself. The reader witnesses this clearly throughout the book because Craig’s obsession with following his plan in order to act according to social conventions is omnipresent. Adult norms about what a successful life has to look like and that a teenager has to adhere to these norms in order to be able to become a valuable human being are challenged in *KFS* since Craig nearly destroys himself by doing so. Ned Vizzini declares in an interview: “Craig made a wrong turn when he tied his happiness to his accomplishments. He also, way back before the novel began, denied his status as an artist and turned to something that he thought would give him more traditional success: his specialized high school” (Blasingame and Vizzini, 2007, p. 607).

What is more, Craig is ashamed of being depressed and above all ashamed of his stay in a mental hospital. He is afraid of people gossiping about his mental condition and being viewed as an abnormal outcast who cannot cope with life: “What am I going to do? It’s starting to hit me under there. I’m in the *hospital*. I’m supposed to do *stuff* tonight. There’s a party – a big one – at Aaron’s house. Am I going to be able to go? And if I don’t go, what will I say?” (*KFS*, p. 173). Therefore, Craig wants to withhold his stay in the mental hospital from his friends. However, when they finally find out and do not take Craig seriously, he is devastated but this experience helps him to grow as a person since he learns that he can choose who should be his friends and decides to break contact with Aaron and Nia. Realizing that one has control over many aspects in his/her life is a lesson of considerable importance for young people, especially when it comes to the peer group which takes in one of the most important aspects of the lives of young adults during puberty (Siegler, DeLoache, and Eisenberg, 2011, p. 506).

Furthermore, Craig always wants to live up to people’s expectations. Although Craig’s parents are understanding and proud of their son, they indirectly expect him to perform well at high school. This feeling is mediated because his parents are interested in how Craig is doing at school and ask him about courses which makes Craig nervous and intensifies his believe about the necessity to perform extraordinarily good at school: “‘How’s biology class?’ Mum asked. Biology class was hell. I had to memorize these hormones and what they did and I hadn’t been able to make flash cards because I was too busy clipping newspaper articles. ‘Fine’” (*KFS*, p. 97). Another example for Craig’s urge to fulfill people’s expectations would be that he feels anxiety and frustration building up as soon as he thinks about the emails he had not been able to respond to during his stay at Six North. Therefore, he worries more about the disrespectful message he might convey to the person who had sent him an email by not answering it than about his current, instable health condition. The reader notices that school entails many different and complex problems for Craig which accumulate to an unbearable amount of stress.

### Love

Craig has no luck when it comes to love at the beginning of the novel which contributes to the development of his depression. Due to the fact that he had already had feelings for Nia for a long time, it is especially depressing and frustrating for him when finally his best friend,

Aaron – who represents the opposite of Craig due to his carefree way of living and dealing with school – starts a relationship with her. At first Craig does not want to admit to himself that their relationship bothers him. However, the fact that Aaron, Nia, and Craig spend much time together makes Craig’s psychological condition worse and jealousy builds up inside of him: “I thought I was cool with it, but as I saw them – sitting with each other, sitting on each other, hugging each other, touching each other’s butt, smiling and kissing, in Aaron’s room or in public – I started to get more and more pissed off” (*KFS*, p.91). He also imagines that Nia chose Aaron over him because Aaron is more intelligent, has a better sense of humor, and is physically more attractive. However, throughout the book Craig gradually realizes that it is just a physical attraction he feels for Nia which he had confused with love. Craig also realizes that it would be foolish to keep envying Aaron since his friend is actually worse off than he himself since his parents do not care for him, he is depressed too, and he is quite superficial.

### **3.3. Breaking Fresh Ground:**

#### **Coping with Depression through Self-Empowerment and Self-Realization**

“I’m asking for simplicity, for purity and ease of choice and no pressure. I’m asking for something that no politics is going to provide, something that probably you only get in preschool. I’m asking for preschool” (*KFS*, p. 266).

This chapter will deal with the protagonist’s coping strategies. Aspects of his life, such as his longing for simplicity, including drawing maps, riding his bike, and video games which help him with his problems and make life easier for him, will be discussed. Moreover, Craig copes with his problems by searching and accepting professional help and making life-changing decisions.

Craig loathes activities which entail many different steps and never lead to a satisfying result, such as writing a paper for high school which means that he has to go to the library in order to do research, which consequently prevents him from checking his e-mails, which causes stress because he cannot reply to them. Already in the first therapy session with Dr. Minerva in chapter two and four, it becomes clear that he enjoys activities which require a minimum of complexity the most. For instance, the reader learns that Craig likes playing video games and riding his bike. Both follow clear, simple rules which helps him to relax. He also appreciates

the fact that activities in the hospital are easy and scheduled which makes him feel better quickly. Another example for a simple activity which helps him cope with his problems would be that Craig used to passionately draw maps when he was a child because it was easy for him to do and he could finish it: “It comes naturally and it passes the time and it feels a little more accomplished than playing cards” (*KFS*, p. 331). When he rediscovers this passion again in *Six North*, drawing maps becomes his most important “Anchor.” Constructing maps helps him calm down and focus his thoughts on a single thing. His maps can be interpreted as metaphors: He is searching for order and structure so that he can find his way in life. It has to do with developing one’s own identity, losing, and rediscovering one’s own passions and talents. Craig also attributes a symbolic meaning to them by drawing brain maps which he associates with his own brain and other people’s brains:

But I see how it could look like a brain, like if all roads were twisted neurons, pulling your emotions from one place to another, bringing the city to life. A working brain is probably a lot like a map, where anybody can get from one place to another on the freeways. It’s the nonworking brains that get blocked, that have dead ends, that are under construction like mine. (*KFS*, p. 292)

At the beginning of the book, Craig is overwhelmed with his problems and does not have the strength to deal with them on his own. This is the reason why he finally decides to tell his parents about his depression who immediately organize professional help for him. The step to admit his problem is very brave of the main character. Therefore, Craig is a male character who is aware of his own feelings and weaknesses. He is not portrayed as a stereotypical emotionally cold young man but he is viewed to be a vulnerable, compassionate boy who does not hesitate to admit (at least to himself and his parents) that he has problems and communicates his feelings. He also rediscovers his talents and potentials as an artist in *Six North* which contradicts stereotypes about males in poorly written YAL. Craig is a dynamic character who assumes responsibility when he decides that he wants to live. He makes use of professional institutions when he finally calls the Suicide Hotline and decides to hospitalize himself which prevents him from committing suicide. This ‘new beginning’ gives him the chance to tackle his problems which contributed to the development of his mental disorder. Therefore, Craig can serve as a role model for young adults in similar situations, showing that it is brave and necessary to accept help from others. At first, it is hard for Craig to accept the fact that he is in a mental hospital: “Oh my God, it hits. I’m in the mental ward” (*KFS*, p.

181). However, he goes through a considerable personal development during his stay in Six North. Craig gets to know many other patients who suffer from different mental disorders and learns to treat them with respect. In the end, he realizes that Six North is a place which helped him remarkably to cope with life but at the same time he is determined to not come back again. When Craig talks to his sister, Sarah, towards the end of the novel, one witnesses that Craig gained more self-confidence, openness, and accepts things which he cannot change and changes those which only mean trouble for him: “‘Are you embarrassed by this place?’ ‘Yeah, but whatever.’ ‘I am too,’ I say. ‘It’s just a good type of embarrassment’” (*KFS*, p. 416).

Another effective coping strategy Craig applies in order to get better is his choice of making life-changing decisions, such as breaking contact with his thought-to-be-friends and transferring schools. In parts two to five, Craig relies heavily on his best friend Aaron and Nia. His self-esteem is dependent on how they picture him and therefore he desperately wants to keep his stay in Six North a secret. However, he realizes that he has no real friends in chapter twenty-eight after Aaron and Nia had called and made fun of him. During the next chapters he suddenly realizes that this friendship with Aaron and Nia is actually very stressful and absurd since one should not be afraid of revealing problems and being harassed for it by friends. Therefore, Craig notices that his ‘friends’ were contributing to the development of his depression and decides to distance himself from them. This is the point at which Craig starts making life-changing decisions. In the following quote, Craig talks to a nurse called Monica about this decision: “‘Well, I told them... ‘Screw you,’ basically. The main one, Aaron. I told him ‘Screw you.’ ‘Did that make you feel good?’ I sigh. ‘Yeah. [...]’” (*KFS*, p. 272). The reader witnesses Craig’s personal development because at first he is quite sad about the fact that he has no real friends anymore but in the course of the book he makes new friends and realizes that he is better off without Aaron and Nia and pities them for their superficiality. In addition, Craig’s decision to change schools is his most significant step towards sanity. It is only in “PART 9: SIX NORTH, WEDNESDAY” that Craig suddenly realizes that he can cut the “Tentacles” school entails, too, in order to free himself from the pressure and consequently go out into the ‘real world’ and take the chance to live a happier life. In this quote he thinks about what the school did to him for the first time:

And look where it got me. One stupid year – not even one, like three quarters of one – and here I am with not one, but *two* bracelets on my wrist, next to a shrink in a room adjacent to a

hall where there's a guy named Human Being walking around. If I keep doing this for three more years, where will I be? I'll be a complete loser. (*KFS*, p. 392)

After this chapter, a significant amount of pressure is taken away because the reader was confronted with Craig's depressing thoughts about the Executive Pre-Professional High School for such a long time that one has the impression that Craig will never be able to cope with school. The passage in which Craig realizes for the first time that he can change schools comes not only unexpectedly for him but also for the reader. The protagonist is extremely surprised that he had not been able to come up with the idea to transfer schools by himself. Therefore, the reader feels relieved, too, because of Craig's brave decision to transfer schools and one believes that the protagonist will be able to stay sane. Through these life-changing decisions Craig puts a considerable amount of effort into getting better which shows that problems cannot solve themselves but that it takes actions to actually make things happen. The reader witnesses how relieved Craig feels after he had accepted help and changed aspects in his life.

### **3.4. Six North and Parents as Support Systems**

This subchapter will deal with important support Craig receives in his fight against depression. First of all, the role his family plays, when it comes to emotional and physical support, will be investigated. The important support Six North, its employees, and its patients provide for Craig in order to fight his depression will also be analyzed in this subchapter.

Similar to Hazel in *FOS*, Craig is fortunate to live in a supportive family environment which helps him to cope with his problems. Craig's parents and his little sister, Sarah, are portrayed in a positive way which conforms to the current trend in YAL and they are very concerned about Craig: "My family shouldn't have to put up with me. They're good people, solid, happy. Sometimes when I'm with them I think I'm on television" (*KFS*, p. 31). Craig's parents take him seriously when he tells them that he is depressed and immediately provide him with professional help: "My parents are always looking into new ways to fix me. They've tried acupuncture, yoga, cognitive therapy, relaxation tapes, various kinds of forced exercise (until I found my bike), self-help books, Tae Bo, and feng shui in my room" (*KFS*, p. 38). When looking closer at this quotation, one realizes that at the beginning of the novel his

parents are determined to ‘fix’ him and that “They’ve tried” many things to make Craig feel better which gives the reader the feeling that Craig himself had not actively put too much effort into getting well. This changes when he finally decides that he wants to live. According to Scrofano (2015), the relationship between young adult characters and their parents or adults in general should be balanced and parents should be seen as children’s collaborators fighting the mental illness together, rather than being portrayed as those people who solve their children’s problems (p. 19). Craig’s parents in *KFS* can be considered as such collaborators once Craig is in the hospital who merely support Craig to cope with his problems himself. Especially Craig’s mother cares deeply about her son: “She’s taken such good care of me since I got bad; I owe her everything and I love her and I tell her these days, although every time I say it, it gets a little diluted” (*KFS*, p. 37). Craig’s mother is very relieved and proud of her son when he calls her from the hospital and tells her that he hospitalized himself because he felt suicidal: “My mom seems happier about me getting into the hospital than she was about me getting into high school” (*KFS*, p. 170). His father, on the other hand, does not allow and show too many emotions. He is demanding with regard to Craig’s performance at high school which increases pressure for Craig. However, Craig’s father is also understanding and accepts – slightly reluctantly – Craig’s decision to quit high school and attend an art school: “‘What art school are you going to go to?’ Dad asks. ‘Manhattan Arts Academy? It’s easy to transfer to with my grades –’ ‘Oh but Craig, that’s the school for kids who are all screwed up,’ Dad says” (*KFS*, p. 415). According to Scrofano (2015), Craig’s parents are portrayed in an exemplary manner when it comes to how they deal with their son’s mental illness: “their attitudes about mental illness are enviably progressive, and they are nothing but encouraging to their son” (p. 18). When comparing the parents in *FOS* to the parents in *KFS* it becomes obvious that Hazel’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lancaster, provide in general stronger emotional support for their daughter than Craig’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gilner, do who rather support Craig by offering him professional help. The reader obtains this feeling because Mr. and Mrs. Gilner are less present in the story than Mr. and Mrs. Lancaster. In *KFS*, Craig does not have deep, emotional conversations with his parents which fosters the impression that his parents offer less emotional support. However, this observation is never depicted as a problem in the novel.

The mental hospital Six North represents a support system of considerable importance for Craig. He is well received in the hospital and the nonjudgmental way of treating each other and the relaxed atmosphere teaches him to open up and encounter others with respect. The

fact that life in the hospital is regulated down to the last detail helps Craig to quickly adapt to the daily routine and gives him the opportunity to reorganize his own life by, for example, rediscovering his passion for drawing maps. Craig is also encouraged by the employees in the hospital to keep fighting: ““We don’t want to lose you. Think of your talents. Think of all the tools you have. From your hands to your feet”” (*KFS*, p. 189). Six North is the place where Craig learns many important lessons about himself, life, and other people which simultaneously allows the reader to learn about these aspects, too. Craig gives up on stereotypes he had had before coming to the mental hospital and makes new friends. Additionally, Craig gets to know many patients, who do not even have a family or a place to stay once they would leave Six North. In the following quote, Craig thinks about his own situation and his roommate, Muqtada, who mostly spends his days in bed:

Maybe it’ll be good to be with someone like him, someone who seems worse off than me. I never really considered it, but there are people worse off than me, right? I mean, there really are people who are homeless and can’t get out of bed and are never going to be able to hold a job and, in Muqtada’s case, have serious problems with temperature, all because their brains are broken. Compared to them I’m... well, I’m a spoiled rich kid. (*KFS*, p. 202)

The other patients envy Craig for living in an apartment in Boston because they consider it as a good neighborhood. Only when one of the patients, Bobby, is delighted because he is granted a place to live outside of the hospital, Craig realizes that he is actually quite privileged and that his fear of not having a career and consequently ending up homeless on the streets will never come true: “This guy just got a place to *live*. Me? I have one. I’ll always have one. ... *If Bobby can get a place to live, I think, then I can get a life worth living*” (*KFS*, p. 317). Craig starts to understand that his irrational ways of thinking make life more difficult for himself and starts cherishing the value of having a loving family and a place he can call home. Furthermore, Craig receives valuable support from his therapist Dr. Minerva who helps him to find out that he has choices and that he can make use of them. It has to be mentioned here that “Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom, medicine, commerce, handicrafts, poetry, the arts in general, and later, war” (Cartwright, 2014). It is no coincidence that Vizzini chose the name of the goddess of wisdom and arts for Craig’s therapist Dr. Minerva who helps him to discover and use his artistic potential.

In conclusion, the book ends on a life-affirming, positive, and hopeful note which conveys encouragement and strength to those who have to face similar struggles. This is achieved

because Craig is a dynamic character who goes through a considerable personal development by putting much effort in solving his own problems and therefore he gains control over his own life. Vizzini does not only write for young people who suffer from depression but also for teenagers in general. Reading about depression, the problems it entails, and suicidal intentions fosters young adults' knowledge about these issues and can enable them to support people concerned by showing them that there exist institutions which can help them. Vizzini shows that sometimes aspects of one's life which were thought to be healthy and important to oneself, such as attending a good school or friends, sometimes have to be reconsidered and critically questioned. It is especially hard for young adults to realize that some of their friends – who are in many cases as important as family to them during this time of their lives – are actually not at all supporting them and make life more difficult for them. It is a hard and often painful lesson to learn, however, it can change everything to the better, as can be seen in the novel. According to Louie (1990), reading about characters who strive to find themselves by considering alternative ways makes readers reflect upon choices they have in life (p. 282). Also the urge to act according to social conventions, such as attending a prestigious school, is observed critically and Vizzini shows that one should never ignore one's needs and talents as well as underestimate the power of one's own decisions. Ned Vizzini knew exactly what it felt like to be depressed and therefore conveys an authentic, honest, and realistic depiction of this disorder which makes his message even more powerful. Although he committed suicide and lost the battle against depression, he conveys a hopeful message with this book to those who struggle with this affective disorder and might even save some of them.

#### ***4. The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian***

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (PTI)* by Sherman Alexie revolves around a fourteen-year-old, intelligent Indian boy called Arnold Spirit Junior. He lives with his loving parents – his father is an alcoholic, – his tolerant grandmother, and his older sister, Mary, in the Wellpinit Reservation. His family, such as most of the Indians living in the reservation, is extremely poor. Arnold's life is not only difficult because of the poverty he faces and numerable other problems which poverty entails, but also because he had been born with too much fluid building up in his skull and consequently had had a surgery when he was six months old. His fragile brain causes him seizures and his unusual physical appearance – he is slender, wears glasses, has a large head, and big feet – means that he is bullied by peers and adults in the reservation. Therefore, Arnold spends most of his days inside the house reading books and drawing cartoons, which is his favorite hobby. He passionately plays basketball with his best friend Rowdy, a hot-tempered, brutal, and emotionally cold boy who protects Arnold. When Arnold starts high school in the reservation, his initial happiness about school immediately changes into desperation, frustration, and anger when he receives a geometry book which had belonged to his mother thirty years ago. He furiously throws the book and accidentally hits his teacher Mr. P who forgives Arnold and encourages him to leave the reservation and attend a white high school in Reardan. Arnold's parents immediately agree with his decision to transfer schools. However, leaving Wellpinit in order to go to a white school means even more trouble for Arnold, since many members of his tribe view him as a betrayer. Moreover, his best friend Rowdy hates him for leaving him behind. Arnold feels lonely and misunderstood during his first days and weeks he spends at the Reardan High School. He has problems adapting to his new peers and following the new rules of white society. Therefore, Arnold believes that he does not fit in – neither in the reservation, nor in Reardan. During his first days at Reardan, Arnold punches Roger – a boy from his school – for insulting him with a racist joke about Indians. Instead of punching back, Roger leaves Arnold alone and starts respecting him. Arnold also becomes friends with his classmate Penelope, a beautiful, blonde girl to whom he frequently refers to as his 'semi-girlfriend' and Gordy, a highly intelligent boy who helps him with his studies and gives useful advice. After some time at high school, Arnold is well received but still keeps his poverty a secret because he is afraid of his new friend's reaction. However, Roger finds out and tells Penelope who strongly sympathizes with Arnold which means a lot to him. Arnold is talented enough to join

the basketball team of Reardan. However, during their first match against the basketball team of the reservation, Arnold is harassed by his tribe and Rowdy beats him senseless during the game so that he has to be brought into hospital. The story continues with two alcohol-related deaths which have a devastating effect on Arnold. Arnold's grandmother is run over and killed by a drunk driver, and Arnold's father's best friend, Eugene, is shot by one of his drunk friends. Arnold is not bullied anymore in the reservation after his grandmother's death and he excessively draws and writes lists about things he enjoys during this time in order to cope with his loss. The second important basketball match between Reardan High School and Wellpinit High School is a great success for Arnold since he contributes considerably to Reardan winning the game. Not much time passes when Arnold is informed that his sister Mary and her husband had burned to death because they had lost consciousness – due to alcohol – in their trailer which had caught fire. This traumatic incident, which was again caused by alcohol, is especially hard for Arnold to process. However, when his friends and teachers at Reardan show that they care for him, he feels hopeful again. In the end, he realizes that he is not only a Spokane Indian but that he is multi-tribal because he belongs to many other tribes, such as “the tribe of cartoonists,” “the tribe of basketball players,” and the “tribe of funeral-goers” (*PTI*, p. 217). Finally, his best friend Rowdy accepts Arnold's decision and his being a ‘nomad’ and the book ends with them playing basketball together.

The title of the book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* already gives a hint about the main issue of the story, namely the protagonist struggling with his own identity because he is torn between Wellpinit and Reardan. Although Arnold has never pictured himself as a prime example of an Indian – which would according to stereotypes entail being physically and mentally strong – he feels less of an Indian after transferring to Reardan. The claim of the title to narrate an ‘absolutely true’ story reminds of, for example, American sentimental novels of the post-revolutionary era, such as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple, a Tale of Truth* (1791) which intended to enhance the credibility and effect of novels (Charvat, 2015). However, in Sherman Alexie's case the absolute claim of truth is rather to be understood as ironical.

Sherman Alexie is a filmmaker and a writer of short stories, poetry, and novels. He was born on October the 7<sup>th</sup> in 1966 in the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. In his work, Alexie primarily writes about his experiences being a Native American (Flanagan, 2017). When he started publishing his stories, he was the youngest Native-American to

become famous on a national level because he manages to depict Indian life in a humorous non-sentimentalizing way, connecting tradition and pop culture (VanSpanckeren, n.d., p. 152). With his first collection of short stories called *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which was published in 1993, Alexie won the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction. Two years later, Sherman Alexie published his first novel *Reservation Blues* which was followed by *Indian Killer* (1996). In 1997, Alexie worked together with the Cheyenne/Arapaho Indian filmmaker Chris Eyre and produced the award winning film *Smoke Signals* (1998). Among other awards, Sherman Alexie received the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2010 for his short story collection *War Dances*. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was published in 2007 (Flanagan, 2017). *PTI* is a semi-autobiographical story, was Sherman Alexie's first young adult novel, was well received by family and friends in the reservation, and even inspired many other Indian adolescents to attend a better school. Therefore, the characters, situations, and experiences he writes about are directly related to his own life (*PTI*, pp. 245, 248). For example, Sherman Alexie was hydrocephalic, lived in the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, he played basketball, and transferred to Reardan High School. After high school, he attended Gonzaga University, transferred to Washington State University in order to study pre-med. However, Alexie fainted in Anatomy class, which made him decide to change his major to American Studies, because of his passion for poetry and his talent for writing in which he graduated with a bachelor's degree (Flanagan, 2017).

#### 4.1. The Absolutely True Diary: Structural and Narrative Elements

Structural questions, such as which parts the novel contains and why, how the action succeeds, where the novel is set, when the story takes place, and at which point the struggles of growing up are introduced will be dealt with. The narrative perspective and its significance for the story, will also be discussed in this section.

##### Structural Elements

*PTI* belongs to the YAL subgenre realistic fiction and is written in some kind of a diary form, as the title *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian* already implies, sometimes interrupted by e-mails Arnold receives from his sister. The book is also structured similar to a diary and contains short sentences, monologues, and dialogues. Each ‘chapter’ does not begin with the common phrase ‘dear diary’ but with a new head line, for example, “The Black-Eye-of-the-Month-Club” (*PTI*, p.1) or “Rowdy Sings the Blues” (*PTI*, p. 48) which provides the reader with a hint about the contents of the particular section of the book. Such as *KFS*, *PTI* can be seen as an initiation novel because the protagonist goes through a considerable personal development by leaving the reservation behind and entering a completely new world, namely Reardan High School, returning as a more grown-up person who learned a lot about his own life and the lives of others.

The first chapters of the novel give important information about Arnold, such as his low social status in the reservation due to his unusual physical appearance and emotional weakness, his parents and their problems, and his best friend Rowdy. The reader already obtains a first glimpse at the struggles Arnold faces. Generally, the novel contains many unexpected turns and the reader finds himself/herself on an emotional rollercoaster ride. The chapters with the titles “Because Geometry Is Not a Country Somewhere Near France” and “Hope against Hope” are of considerable importance for the story: Arnold hits his teacher Mr. P. with his mother’s geometry book, is encouraged to leave the reservation, and finally decides to attend Reardan High School which marks a sharp rise of action and the climax of the story since everything changes for Arnold after his decision. This life-changing decision increases Arnold’s chances in life but simultaneously contributes to his identity-crisis. The following chapters intensely deal with Arnold’s initial struggles to adapt to his new school and his feeling estranged and rejected from his own tribe. In chapter “Hunger Pains”, Arnold and Penelope become friends which makes life at Reardan easier for Arnold. Furthermore,

Arnold introduces the deaths of loved ones, such as his grandmother, Eugene, and his sister, in an immediate way. As a result, the reader is overwhelmed with the unexpected information he/she receives and the action rises. The chapter “In Like a Lion” is another important chapter in which Arnold’s basketball team wins the game against the Wellpinit basketball team. The last chapter “Talking About Turtles” deals with Arnold and Rowdy becoming friends again which makes Arnold’s wish come true and allows the story to end on a very positive and hopeful note.

*PTI* is narrated by Arnold in a chronological order, sometimes interrupted by short flashbacks which mostly deal with happy memories about his friendship with Rowdy. These flashbacks indicate that Rowdy means a lot to Arnold and that he misses his best friend. The story time covers approximately a year, since the reader knows that Arnold transfers to Reardan in the middle of the semester because he does not want to wait until the semester break and the book ends in Arnold’s summer break. There are ellipsis of several days, weeks, and months to be found in order to speed up the action. The diary entries sometimes seem to be written randomly, and in irregular temporal intervals. When it is necessary for the reader to know about temporal aspects, he/she is provided with information about when the action takes place, mostly at the beginning of a chapter, such as “So the day after I decided to transfer to Reardan ...” (*PTI*, p. 48), or “A few days after I gave Penelope a homemade Valentine ...” (*PTI*, p. 169).

*PTI* is set in two places: The Wellpinit reservation and in Reardan High School. The former is, on the one hand, described as a place of great beauty: “The reservation is beautiful. I mean it. Take a look. There are pine trees everywhere. Thousands of ponderosa pine trees. Millions. I guess maybe you can take pine trees for granted. They’re just pine trees. But they’re tall and thin and green and brown and big” (*PTI*, p. 219). It is the place, where Arnold’s family, best friend, tribe, and their deep-rooted traditions are. On the other hand, the reservation is described as a place of poverty, death, alcoholism, and hopelessness. Living in the reservation is viewed as an absolute term which destroys dreams and determines the sad, unsuccessful fate of an Indian. Reardan, on the contrary, is depicted as a place for privileged, white people who are provided with hope, education, a bright future, and success in life. However, after some time Arnold learns at the white high school that he had imagined an idealized picture of Reardan and its students as he realizes that his white friends have problems, too – such as Penelope being a bulimic with a racist father.

### Narrative Elements

*PTI* is narrated by Arnold Spirit Junior in an autodiegetic first-person narrative instance. The first-person narration provides the reader with a subjective, sometimes unreliable, and exaggerated point of view of a fourteen-year-old and establishes the same effects, such as in *FOS* and *KFS*. However, there is one major distinction: Arnold in *PTI* addresses the reader directly. Arnold poses questions, explains situations, assumes reactions from the reader, and addresses the recipient which involves the reader into the story: “Do you know what happens to retards on the rez?” (*PTI*, p. 4), “You probably think I’ve completely fallen in love with white people and that I don’t see anything good in Indians. We’ll that’s false” (*PTI*, p. 152). Arnold also refers directly to his own writing which emphasizes the impression that he is writing the diary himself and similarly strengthens the illusion that the book itself is written by a fourteen-year-old boy. Furthermore, the book contains passages which vary in font and font size (*PTI*, p. 30). This sometimes serves the purpose to put emphasis on certain words and phrases or to show emotions, such as in the following quotation: “I HATED THAT SIGH! I WANTED TO PUNCH THAT SIGH IN THE FACE!” (*PTI*, p. 92). Therefore, the events in the book are mirrored in the way they are written. Arnold also frequently starts writing lists (*PTI*, pp. 61, 62, 176, 177) which enhances the feeling that the diary and its characters are real. The drawings which demonstrate Arnold’s creative abilities help to bring the protagonist and other characters to life and add an additional dimension to the story.

The increased involvement of the reader, playfulness with language itself, the inclusion of drawings (the usage of intertextuality), and self-referentiality are common techniques in postmodernism. Postmodernism emerged, as the term suggests, after modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, continues till today, and is to be found in art, architecture, and literature (Malpas, 2005, p. 5). In general, it can be said that there exists a distinction between the terms ‘postmodernism’ in literature and ‘postmodernity.’ Postmodernism entails artistic representation and style in literature, whereas postmodernity stands for the cultural context or the historical epoch (Malpas, 2005, p. 9). For example, VanSpanckeren (n.d.) provides the following definition for postmodernism in literature:

Postmodernism suggests fragmentation: collage, hybridity, and the use of various voices, scenes, and identities. Postmodern authors question external structures, whether political, philosophical, or artistic. They tend to distrust the master-narratives of modernist thought, which they see as politically suspect. Instead, they mine popular culture genres, especially

science fiction, spy, and detective stories, becoming, in effect, archaeologists of pop culture.  
(p. 137)

Writers of postmodernism apply several different techniques to establish a ‘postmodern style.’ The first technique is self-reflexivity which means that authors frequently refer to themselves and their writing and thus break the illusion of the text being real. This literary device which confronts the reader with the artificiality of the text is also referred to as metafiction or, in other words, fiction about fiction. In order to distance postmodern literature from conventional forms of literature it became increasingly experimental and interactive. Therefore, more importance is placed on the role of the reader and a new relationship between the author and the reader is established. This new role of the reader is not only concerned with the pure reception of a narrative but also with the construction of the text itself. The reader, becomes an active part in the process of creating and receiving a story (Lindas, 2013, pp. 14-16). A further postmodern technique would be intertextuality. Intertextuality refers to the relationship between one text and another. Other common techniques applied in postmodern literature are playfulness, irony and black humor, pastiche, temporal distortion, and magical realism (Sharma and Chaudhary, pp. 194, 196).

Additionally, repetitions are frequently found in *PTI* in order to put emphasis on certain aspects – for example, Arnold’s exhaustion with people getting drunk in the reservation after his grandmother and Eugene died in alcohol-related accidents: “It was all booze and God, booze and God, booze and God” (*PTI*, p. 171). The language in *PTI* is very similar to the language used in *KFS*, which means that it is written in an informal register, featuring teen-language and slang. Such as *FOS* and *KFS*, *PTI* is written in a humorous way which not only serves the purpose of entertaining the reader but also of helping one to make reading the novel a pleasant experience, rather than a frustrating one due to the various difficulties Arnold faces.

#### 4.2. Where Do I Belong?: The Struggles of a(n) (Part-Time) Indian

“Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white down and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger. I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other. It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job. And it didn’t pay well at all” (*PTI*, p.118).

This section of my diploma thesis will discuss prevalent struggles Arnold in *PTI* faces. The most striking problem Arnold encounters as a “part-time Indian,” namely his identity-crisis due to being torn between his tribe and the white high school and the problems which accompany this issue, will be dealt with in this section. Arnold’s problems which entail his being an Indian, such as living in poverty and hopelessness, alcoholism in the reservation, deaths – mostly due to alcoholism, – and facing racism, will be broached.

##### Identity struggles of a part-time Indian

Although Arnold sometimes attempts to adjust to common expectations people might have about Indians, such as being a tough, dauntless warrior who has an extraordinarily close connection with nature, he has never felt much like a ‘real Indian’ and mostly cannot hide his emotions: “Maybe I could just drop out of school completely. I could go live in the woods like a hermit. Like a real Indian. Of course, since I was allergic to pretty much every plant that grew on earth, I would have been a real Indian with a head full of snot” (*PTI*, p. 58). His attempts to act like a ‘real Indian’ are therefore not to be taken seriously and rather serve the purpose to mock emotionally cold male behavior which is also presented by Rowdy who does not show any feelings and is “... the toughest kid on the rez” (*PTI*, p. 15). For example, tough male behavior is made fun of when Arnold explains the rules for fistfights which rather seem to be quite ridiculous than honorable (*PTI*, pp. 61, 62). Additionally, Arnold’s passion for drawing cartoons and the fact that he frequently cries and is depicted as a slim and weak boy contradict the stereotypical depiction of male characters: “I’ve always cried too easily. I cry when I’m happy or sad. I cry when I’m angry. I cry because I’m crying. It’s weak. It’s the opposite of warrior” (*PTI*, p.75). Therefore, *PTI* does not foster gender stereotypes but makes readers aware of them and questions them by making fun of them.

Arnold’s initial feelings of not being a ‘real Indian’ are enhanced once he starts school in Reardan: “Zitty and lonely, I woke up on the reservation as an Indian, and somewhere on the road to Reardan, I became something less than Indian. And once I arrived at Reardan, I

became something less than less than less than Indian” (*PTI*, p. 83). Arnold feels inferior to the other students in his high school and he believes that he does not deserve anything because he had always been taught in the reservation that he is an unsuccessful Indian: “So what was I doing in racist Reardan ... Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn’t deserve to be there I knew it; all of those kids knew it. Indians don’t deserve shit” (*PTI*, p. 56). This shows that he has already internalized certain stereotypes about his ethnicity which includes, for example, the notion that he is not going to achieve anything extraordinary in his life.

One gets the impression that Arnold discovers a slightly intimidating and unusual whole new world when he first arrives at Reardan High School: “Then the white kids began arriving for school. They surrounded me. Those kids weren’t just white. They were translucent. I could see the blue veins running through their skin like rivers” (*PTI*, p. 56). Arnold finds himself in a world which does not work according to the rules he used to play by in the reservation which causes much confusion. For example, the rules for fistfights do not apply in Reardan when he punches Roger: “I had followed the rules of fighting. I had behaved exactly the way I was supposed to behave. But these white boys had ignored the rules. In fact, they followed a whole other set of mysterious rules where people apparently DID NOT GET INTO FISTFIGHTS” (*PTI*, pp. 65, 66). Arnold is sneered at in Reardan when he says that his name is Junior which contributes to his feeling different, misunderstood, and lonely: “They were laughing at my *name*. I had no idea that Junior was a weird name. It’s a common name on my rez, on any rez. You walk into any trading post on any rez in the United States and shout, ‘Hey, Junior!’ and seventeen guys will turn around. And three women” (*PTI*, p. 60). Arnold’s identity-crisis also becomes obvious when considering the way he refers to himself as ‘Arnold,’ when he is in Reardan and ‘Junior,’ when he is in the reservation which emphasizes his feeling of being torn: “I felt like two different people inside of one body. No, I felt like a magician slicing myself in half, with Junior living on the north side of the Spokane River and Arnold living on the south” (*PTI*, p. 61). This indicates that he never really feels like a whole person who fits in somewhere. He is torn between two completely different worlds which, both, would always remind him that there is one part of himself which does not belong. During the first few weeks in Reardan, Arnold experiences the tough consequences of his decision to transfer to Reardan since he feels very lonely and sad: “I just walked from class to class alone; I sat at lunch alone; during PE I stood in the corner of the gym and played catch with myself” (*PTI*, p. 83).

Another burdensome problem Arnold encounters due to the fact that he leaves the reservation and becomes a 'part-time Indian' is that he faces much criticism and harassment from his own tribe and, worse, from his best friend. Although he had never been popular among peers in the Wellpinit Indian Reservation and had been bullied before, his decision to transfer schools makes things more difficult for Arnold because people in the reservation take his decision personally and view it as an insult: "'You'll be the first one to ever leave the rez this way,' Mom said. 'The Indians around here are going to be angry with you.' Shoot, I figure that my fellow tribal members are going to torture me" (*PTI*, p. 47). Arnold plays basketball for the 'enemy' – namely Reardan High School – which makes the overall situation even tenser. Arnold is viewed as a betrayer which makes his identity-crisis worse. He neither feels secure in the reservation nor in Reardan. Being rejected by his best friend Rowdy is especially hard for Arnold which is witnessed by the reader through the frequent passages in which Arnold directly utters that he misses Rowdy and the flashback chapters in which Arnold writes about memories of experiences he had with Rowdy. The reader learns that Arnold has to make many sacrifices for his dream to escape his hopeless existence for a brighter future.

#### Poverty, alcoholism, and senseless deaths in the reservation

Besides Arnold's identity-crisis which accompanies his being a part-time Indian, he faces many struggles growing up as an Indian boy in the Wellpinit reservation. Poverty is a prevalent issue in *PTI* which causes many other problems in- and outside the reservation, such as hopelessness, alcoholism, and deaths. Poverty contributes to Arnold thinking that he does not deserve anything and that his fate is determined due to his being an Indian:

It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow *deserve* to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and *there's nothing you can do about it.* (*PTI*, p 13)

Before Arnold makes life-determining decisions, his mind is too focused on having no perspectives as an Indian so that he does not even consider that he actually has choices. Therefore, it can be said that Arnold had already internalized the believe that there is only one way, or, in other words, a 'single story' for him. The consequences poverty has for Arnold's life are represented in several different ways: The constant lack of food, the shortage of

money for fuel which means that Arnold sometimes has to either hitchhike or walk the long way to school, and ragged, old clothes, “At school I went dressed as a homeless dude. It was a pretty easy costume for me. There’s not much difference between my good and bad clothes, so I pretty much look half homeless anyway” (*PTI*, p. 77). Arnold is embarrassed by his poverty and wants to hide it in Reardan because he is afraid that his new friends would reject him for being poor. Being poor is simultaneously accompanied by the feeling of hopelessness and a lack of perspective which fosters alcoholism to flourish in Wellpinit. Consequently, reckless drunk behavior causes senseless deaths in the reservation which lead to great grief: “Grandparents are supposed to die first, but they are supposed to die of old age ... THEY ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO GET RUN OVER AND KILLED BY A DRUNK DRIVER!” (*PTI*, p. 158). Death is omnipresent in the reservation and is pictured as one of the most distinguishing aspects between white people and Indians:

Jeez, I’ve been to so many funerals in my short life. I’m fourteen years old and I’ve been to forty-two funerals. That’s really the biggest difference between Indians and white people ... And you what the worst part is? The unhappy part? About 90 percent of the deaths have been because of alcohol.” (*PTI*, pp. 199, 200)

Another struggle Arnold faces as an Indian is racism and stereotypes: “During one week when I was little, Dad got stopped three times for DWI: Driving While Indian” (*PTI*, p. 46). This quotation shows that Arnold had already been exposed to racism from an early age on and talks about it as if it was something regular and inevitable in the life of a Native-American. He also faces racism when he comes to Reardan. For example, Arnold is insulted by Roger’s racist joke after his first days at the white High School, Penelope’s father is racist and warns Arnold to stay away from his daughter, and one of his teachers does not accept Arnold’s correct answer to his question because he is an Indian. These instances confirm Arnold’s assumptions that white people are racist and increase his feelings of alienation and otherness. Arnold also witnesses stereotypical assumptions of white people about Indians: “And what’s more, our white dentist believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did, so he only gave us half the Novocain” (*PTI*, p. 2). However, Arnold is full of stereotypes about white people and himself, too, when he comes to Reardan:

And let me tell you, we Indians were the worst of times and those Reardan kids were the best of times. Those kids were *magnificent*. They knew *everything*. And they were *beautiful*. They were beautiful and smart. They were beautiful and smart and epic. They were filled with hope.

I don't know if hope is white. But I do know that hope for me is like some mythical creature.  
(*PTI*, pp. 50,51)

Arnold has, on the one hand, a splendid image of successful, and beautiful white people in his mind. On the other hand, he believes that every white person is racist. However, Arnold himself is once called a racist by his friend Gordy when Arnold asks him how to win the heart of a white girl: “So what does that mean?” I asked. ‘I think it means you’re just a racist asshole like everybody else.’ Wow. In his own way, Gordy the bookworm was just as tough as Rowdy” (*PTI*, p. 116). Throughout the book, Alexie frequently hints at the injustice Indians faced in the past and still are facing. These instances are introduced in a playful and humorous way, rather than in a condemning one in order to establish physical distance between the reader and the content. This serves the purpose of not offending the reader. Moreover, humor is used to point out social ills, such as the still existing oppression and discrimination of Native-Americans. Arnold could therefore be seen as a metaphor challenging the treatment of Native-Americans in society similar to Huckleberry Finn in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain questioning race relations.

The following quote shows the humorous approach to serious topics. Arnold and his family are celebrating Thanksgiving: “Hey, Dad,’ I said. ‘What do Indians have to be so thankful for?’ ‘We should give thanks that they didn’t kill all of us.’ We laughed like crazy” (*PTI*, p. 102). The answer of Arnold’s father is humorous and bitter at the same time which simultaneously triggers two strong, opposing emotions forcing readers to think about the contents. Studies show that memories of situations in which people experience strong emotions are stored for a long time in people’s minds (Waude, 2016). According to Hughes-Hassell (2013), dealing with racial issues in YAL is especially effective because it provides colored and indigenous adolescent readers with experiences which are familiar to them and allows white teenagers insights into the lives and challenges of others (p. 221).

### 4.3. Lost and Found: The Individual Story of a Multi-Tribal Boy

This subchapter of my diploma thesis will discuss coping strategies Arnold applies in order to deal with his problems. First of all, the importance of Arnold's decision to transfer to Reardan High School and his efforts to adapt to Reardan by making new friends and overcoming his own stereotypes and consequently developing a sense of self-reliance in order to escape the vicious circle of Indian life will be mentioned. Furthermore, Arnold's attempt to cope with his problems by drawing comics and making lists will be broached.

Arnold's decision to transfer to Reardan High School is the most important decision he makes in order to fight his determined fate to live a sad Indian life in poverty. Although it causes some major inconveniences for him, such as his tribe and best friend rejecting him and being forced to adapt to a white high school, he manages to find new friends, gathers first-hand experience about white people, and overcomes his own stereotypes about them and himself. Arnold's choice to leave behind everything he had been used to despite the harassment and criticism he is going to face and opt for the hard and lonely way in order to be able to live a hopeful life conveys a highly positive, empowering message.

Initially, Arnold is very skeptical towards his decision to transfer to Reardan High School and feels insecure about his own skills and inferior to white people because he had always been exposed to the notion that white people are better than Indians. However, he assumes responsibility of his own destiny by deciding to attend Reardan High School and soon realizes that he is a likeable and clever boy and starts to believe in his skills and talents: "First of all, I learned that I was smarter than most of those white kids ... I was way smarter than 99 percent of the others. And not just smart for an Indian, okay? I was smart, period" (*PTI*, p. 84). Due to the fact that he can perform better than most of his white colleagues, his stereotypes about his own inferiority start to crumble. The reader witnesses Arnold's personal development and how he gradually gains self-reliance. Arnold grows with the challenges he has to tackle and is a dynamic character who changes from an insecure, pessimistic boy to a respected and self-empowered young man. Arnold also realizes that his white classmates have problems, too, and therefore he appreciates his family and the reservation more: "And, trust me, there are plenty of Reardan kids who get ignored by their parents. There are white parents, especially fathers, who never come to the school. ... On the rez, you know every kid's father, mother, grandparents, dog, cat, and shoe size" (*PTI*, p. 153). Additionally, his friendship with Gordy

and his slowly developing relationship with the popular girl Penelope increases Arnold's reputation among peers which helps him reduce his loneliness. In the end, he still refers to himself as being a lonely Indian, however, his mindset has changed and he knows that he is not the only one and that his loneliness serves a greater purpose: "I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream" (*PTI*, p. 217). It has to be mentioned that Arnold refers to himself as being an American in this quotation for the first time. Therefore, he claims to belong and that he can achieve anything he wants, such as any other American, if he keeps striving for self-development. Moreover, Arnold's feeling of being torn between Reardan and Wellpinit fades in the course of the novel. Arnold realizes that he does not only belong to one single tribe but that he can be more than that. He finally accepts the way he is and that he belongs to several different tribes: "I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms ... And that's when I knew that I was going to be okay" (*PTI*, p. 217). The reader witnesses the positive feelings and positive changes in personality and mind set Arnold experiences when he finally manages to cope with his problems and accepts himself the way he is.

Other important coping strategies Arnold applies are drawing cartoons and creating lists. Arnold refers to his cartoons as 'lifeboats' which help him to communicate with the world and simultaneously to cope with it: "So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation. I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats" (*PTI*, p. 6). Such as Craig in *KFS*, Arnold draws in order to express his feelings and escape the difficulties his world provides him with. Drawing cartoons is one of his personal coping mechanisms and he points out that everyone has his/her own strategies to overcome hardships in life, some of them are self-destructive, such as drowning one's sorrows – "He does not, in other words, repeat his father's self-destructive choices because he has enough resilience to create hope for himself" (Lacy, 2015, p. 23). The reader witnesses by observing Arnold's cartoons that he is an insecure boy who actually strives for love and appreciation. According to Lacy (2015), "The creative act helps him cope with his anger, his insecurities, his loneliness and isolation and also gives him a sense of self-worth" (p. 21). Drawing and creating lists of things he enjoys in life especially help Arnold cope with the death of his grandmother, Eugene, and his sister: "I kept making list after list of the things that made me feel joy. And I kept drawing cartoons of the things that made me angry. I keep

writing and rewriting, drawing and redrawing, and rethinking and revising and reediting. It became my grieving ceremony” (*PTI*, p.178). Arnold is able to express his feelings of anger and sadness in his drawings which he otherwise could not convey.

I draw because words are too unpredictable. I draw because words are too limited. If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning. But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it. (*PTI*, p. 5)

In this quotation, Arnold emphasizes the limits of language which reminds of postmodernist views, and the demand for art in order to overcome barriers which language fails to do.

#### **4.4. Parents, New Friends, and Teachers as Important Support Systems**

“It’s one of the simplest sentences in the world, just four words, but they’re the four hugest words in the world when they’re put together. You can do it. I can do it. Let’s do it” (*PTI*, p. 189)

Although Arnold’s parents have major problems, such as poverty and Arnold’s father being an alcoholic, they care deeply for their son and support him to realize his dreams. At the beginning of the novel, the reader already witnesses that Arnold has a good relationship with his parents: “But I can’t blame my parents for our poverty because my mother and father are the twin suns around which I orbit and my world would EXPLODE without them” (*PTI*, p. 11). When Arnold tells them that he wants to attend Reardan High School they take him seriously and immediately agree: ““Okay,” they said. Yep, it was that easy with my parents” (*PTI*, p. 46). The reader learns that it is not self-evident in the reservation that parents encourage their children to attend a better school in order to have a chance to live a better life because they are concerned with bigger problems. Rowdy’s parents, who are drunks too, represent a counter-example to Arnold’s parents because Rowdy’s father is highly abusive, beats his son, and does not convey any emotional support. When taking these circumstances into account, Arnold’s parents are pictured in a quite progressive and highly positive way. They and his grandmother also provide him with emotional support which helps Arnold to stay positive and stick to his plans: ““Just remember this,”” my father said. ‘Those white people aren’t better than you.’ ... He hugged me even closer. ‘This is a great thing,’ he said.

‘You’re so brave. You’re a warrior.’ It was the best thing he could have said” (*PTI*, p. 55).

Although Arnold appears to be happy with his family environment – or at least seems to have successfully managed to find ways to emotionally deal with his parent’s alcoholism and other flaws – the reader gets the impression that he would long for more love.

The reason Junior depicts himself begging the world to “love him, love him, love him” is because there is no one in his present life capable of loving him in the way that he needs and wants. Virtually everyone he knows is defeated, self-involved and/or battling his or her own insecurities and feelings of worthlessness. (Lacy, 2015, p. 21)

It is hard for Arnold to stay positive when, as an example, his father does not come home for Christmas and appears again after a week of drinking. At the same time, his father excuses himself and even gives him a five dollar bill as a present: “Wow. Drunk for a week, my father must have really wanted to spend those last five dollars. . . . He could have spent that five bucks and stayed drunk for another day or two. But he saved it for me. It was a beautiful and ugly thing” (*PTI*, p. 151). Arnold interprets his father giving money to him as a sign of deep affection since he could have spent it on his addiction instead. Lacy (2015) points out that Sherman Alexie depicts the conflict between Arnold’s relationship with his father and his father’s alcoholism in a balanced way without simplifying the problem: “He avoids the temptation of extreme, all-or-nothing thinking — His father is a bad man because he drinks—and chooses instead to tolerate the ambivalence in their relationship” (p. 23). In the end, Arnold realizes that many of his white friends at Reardan High School are not as fortunate when it comes to support from their parents which makes him appreciate everything his they do for him even more and is grateful for the support his parents offer: “Sure, my dad has a drinking problem and my mom can be a little eccentric, but they make sacrifices for me. They worry about me, they talk to me. And best of all, they listen to me” (*PTI*, p. 153).

Life at Reredan High School is difficult for Arnold, however, he gradually and actively tries to make his life easier by making friends in Reardan who teach him important lessons and support him. His new white friends help him in many different ways: Gordy, as an example, makes Arnold aware of his own stereotypical thinking, helps him with his studies, and gives advice. Penelope gives him the feeling that he is a lovable, handsome person, and also indirectly makes Arnold aware of the fact that white people indeed have problems, too, since she is a bulimic. When Roger gets to know that Arnold is poor and frequently has to walk the long way to the reservation, he drives him home. Arnold learns that he does not have to be

ashamed of his poverty and hide it from his friends, which makes him realize that people see and like him for who he is, and he opens up to others: “If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing” (*PTI*, p. 129). Arnold’s new, white friends finally give him the feeling that he belongs, despite the fact that he is an Indian, and that they care about him: “Wow. All of these white kids and teachers, who were so suspicious of me when I first arrived, had learned to care about me. Maybe some of them even loved me. And I’d been so suspicious of them. And now I care about a lot of them. And loved a few of them” (*PTI*, p. 212). Not only Arnold had learned much about himself and others by engaging with his white peers, but also his white friends. The novel shows this gradual development and makes aware of frequent stereotypes. The message is that they can be overcome if one is willing to make one’s own experiences.

Finally, Arnold receives important support from Mr. P, his teacher from the reservation, and his basketball coach in Reardan. Mr. P is the one who initiates Arnold’s life-changing and life-affirming decision – he encourages Arnold to leave the reservation and to attend Reardan High School: ““You’re the smartest kid in the school. And I don’t want you to fail. I don’t want you to fade away. You deserve better”” (*PTI*, p. 40). Mr. P makes Arnold aware of the fact that life in the reservation forces adolescents to give up and that Arnold still has the chance to do something against it:

“All your friends. All the bullies. And their mothers and fathers have given up and their grandparents before them, and me and every other teacher here. We’re all defeated.” Mr. P was crying. I couldn’t believe it. I’d never seen a sober adult cry. “But not you,” Mr. P said. “You can’t give up. You won’t give up. You threw that book in my face because somewhere inside you refused to give up.” (*PTI*, pp. 42, 43)

The reader obtains the impression that Mr. P does not solely encourage Arnold out of purely altruistic intentions but to a great extent out of guilt since he confesses to Arnold that he had treated Indian children in cruel ways, trying to take away their identity (*PTI*, p. 35).

Nevertheless, Mr. P’s encouragement finally makes a whole new world full of hope and opportunities visible for Arnold. Also Arnold’s basketball coach accepts him the way he is – for example, he does not make fun of Arnold when he cries – and provides him with emotional support: “And then I cried, and felt ashamed of my tears. But Coach knew exactly what to say. ‘It’s okay,’ Coach said to me, but he was talking to the whole team. ‘If you care about something enough, it’s going to make you cry. But you have to use it ...’” (*PTI*, p. 144).

In conclusion, *PTI* is a good instance for counter-storytelling, which is also mentioned by Hughes-Hassell (2013), since Sherman Alexie portrays the difficulties being an Indian entail. Simultaneously, he tells a story of hope, growth, and self-realization. Although Arnold initially believes that there is only one way for him to go, namely the single way of obeying to his predetermined destiny of being an unsuccessful Indian, he finally chooses not to be defined by the ‘single story’ but to define himself and embrace his multi-tribal nature: “... multicultural literature as counter-story can make the oppression and victimization of people of color and indigenous peoples visible—visible to themselves and to the majority culture. It can show that racism and inequality still exist” (Hughes-Hassell, 2013, pp. 225, 226). Young adult readers are able to gain valuable insights into minority ethnic culture which contributes considerably to learn important lessons about tolerance.

## Conclusion

The aim of this diploma thesis was to analyze the struggles of growing up the main characters in the three young adult novels *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, *It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie have to face. In the course of my analysis, some similarities between the three novels manifested itself. Especially concerning narrative elements, the portrayal of non-stereotypical, realistic, and authentic characters, and the use of humor attracted attention. I decided to focus on the most striking similarity the three books show in my analysis: Every book deals with a highly complex and frustrating issue which is tackled actively and bravely by the main characters, which conveys an empowering message.

My analysis has shown that the three young adult novels deal with extreme struggles of young adult characters which yet convey an empowering, hopeful message to young readers due to many different elements the authors took into consideration in order to be able to portrait a coherent representation of the problems the young adult characters face. The protagonists' struggles with growing up are depicted in a credible way and are dealt with on several different levels – the characters' complex problems entail many other issues which are actively tackled, the protagonists are supported by various people and institutions, and apply effective, personal coping strategies to feel better. For example, in *FOS*, Hazel does not surrender and stays hopeful and positive although she cannot solve her problem of having cancer and knows that her illness is going to kill her in the near future. She accepts her determined faith and copes with her problems in various ways and appreciates a highly supportive family environment. Craig in *KFS* suffers from a severe clinical depression, caused by many different issues he faces in his daily life and nearly gives up. However, he admits to himself that he needs professional help, assumes responsibility, and makes life-changing decisions, realizing that he can make things happen and gains power over his own life. Arnold in *PTI* decides to opt for the hard way, separating himself from his tribe in order to find hope in a white high school where he learns important lessons about life and tolerance, opens up, makes new friends, and realizes that he can belong to more than one tribe. Arnold develops personally because of the hardships he faces throughout the story. He does not allow his ethnicity to determine his life but writes his own history. Therefore, my attempt to demonstrate that the above-mentioned young adult novels convey an empowering, hopeful

message for young readers, despite the fact that the main characters have to tackle dark and controversial problems, was successful.

The three young adult novels do not foster gender stereotypes and the characters do not conform to beauty standards which contributes to the impression that the protagonists are multidimensional, dynamic, and authentic characters with flaws and strengths. The male main characters in *KFS* and *PTI* do not conform to stereotypical male behavior, such as acting emotionally cold and being careless. On the contrary, Craig and Arnold are both sensitive and caring young men who at first try to hide their insecurities and weaknesses but learn to accept and appreciate themselves and their skills in the course of the novels. The protagonists exploit their full potentials when it comes to their passion of creating art, conveying a positive picture about male characters who are free to express themselves in all kinds of ways which no longer debriefs young men of their opportunities. The same is true for *FOS*. Although Hazel is depicted as a physically weak young woman due to her illness, she is mentally strong. Hazel is portrayed as a highly intelligent, confident, and self-empowered girl.

It has to be mentioned that showing that the three books in question convey an empowering message despite the fact that they deal with frustrating issues does not mean that one can draw general conclusions from these findings. It can merely be said that it should be taken into consideration that YAL dealing with controversial and dark topics does not necessarily mean that it conveys a hopeless image of a cruel world to adolescent readers. The message conveyed by YAL which focuses on extreme problems of growing up is dependent on the way the struggles are depicted, problems are tackled by the main characters, and responsibility over their own lives is being assumed. Therefore, it can be said that agency is the focus.

It can also be concluded that neglecting or ignoring stories about unprivileged young adults facing serious problems in their lives only contributes to declaring those as ‘the other,’ or, in other words, “outcasts” who are marginalized and whose assumptions about being different and therefore not important enough to be included in popular culture are reinforced.

Therefore, it is important to also narrate stories about unfortunate young adults in order to show unprivileged adolescents that they are not alone, that there is hope for them, and that there exist non-self-destructive weapons in order to cope with serious problems. As Arnold in *PTI* says, “We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away” (*PTI*, p.

107). The empowering and encouraging way in which problems are dealt with and tackled in the three young adult novels makes young readers aware of new, effective, and healthy coping strategies. A hopeful message of living one's own life is conveyed, "So now live for real, Craig. Live. Live. Live. Live. Live" (KFS, p. 444).

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