Humor As Coping Mechanism In John Green's *The Fault In Our Stars*

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ABSTRACT
Humor has increasingly been recognized as an adaptive psychological strategy that promotes emotional resilience and mental well-being. However, studies examining humor as a psychological defense mechanism in literary works remain limited. This study aims to investigate how humor functions as a psychological defense mechanism in John Green's The Fault in Our Stars and to examine the differences in the use of humor by Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters based on Sigmund Freud's Relief Theory. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach using close reading to analyze selected dialogues and narrative descriptions containing humorous expressions. The findings reveal that humor performs three major psychological functions: releasing psychic tension, protecting the ego from emotional distress, and enabling the characters to confront illness and mortality with dignity and emotional stability. Furthermore, Hazel predominantly employs irony, sarcasm, and metaphor as self-protective strategies, whereas Augustus utilizes wit, exaggeration, and playful conversation to reduce anxiety, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and sustain hope. These findings confirm that humor operates as a mature psychological defense mechanism rather than mere entertainment. The study concludes that Freud's Relief Theory effectively explains the adaptive psychological function of humor in the novel. The findings contribute to psychoanalytic literary criticism by demonstrating that humor serves as an important coping strategy for maintaining emotional resilience and may provide a theoretical reference for future interdisciplinary studies integrating literature and psychology.

Keywords **:** *Humor; Coping Mechanism; John Green's; The Fault In Our Stars.*

ABSTRAK
Humor semakin diakui sebagai strategi psikologis adaptif yang berperan dalam meningkatkan ketahanan emosional dan kesejahteraan mental. Namun, penelitian yang mengkaji humor sebagai mekanisme pertahanan psikologis dalam karya sastra masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis fungsi humor sebagai mekanisme pertahanan psikologis dalam novel The Fault in Our Stars karya John Green serta mengidentifikasi perbedaan penggunaan humor oleh Hazel Grace Lancaster dan Augustus Waters berdasarkan Relief Theory Sigmund Freud. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan metode close reading terhadap dialog dan narasi yang memuat ungkapan humor. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa humor memiliki tiga fungsi psikologis utama, yaitu melepaskan ketegangan psikis, melindungi ego dari tekanan emosional, serta membantu tokoh menghadapi penyakit dan kematian dengan martabat serta kestabilan emosional. Hazel lebih banyak memanfaatkan ironi, sarkasme, dan metafora sebagai bentuk perlindungan diri, sedangkan Augustus menggunakan kecerdasan verbal, hiperbola, dan percakapan yang bersifat jenaka untuk meredakan kecemasan, mempererat hubungan interpersonal, dan mempertahankan harapan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa humor merupakan mekanisme pertahanan psikologis yang matang, bukan sekadar sarana hiburan. Temuan ini memperkaya kajian sastra psikoanalitik dan memberikan implikasi bagi penelitian interdisipliner yang menghubungkan sastra, psikologi, dan mekanisme koping emosional.

Kata kunci : *Humor; Mekanisme Mengatasi Masalah; John Green; The Fault In Our Stars.*

INTRODUCTION
Over the past few years, the topic of humor has become popular in psychology research Recent psychological studies indicate that laughter enhances emotional resilience and psychiatric health as well (Berger et al., 2021). as a psychological tool that helps people have a strong emotional response to challenges. With the global community beginning to recognize the effects of mental health issues,

particularly in and following the COVID-19 pandemic, humor has become a minor but influential way of coping. It assists people in being able to redefine suffering, build more enduring relationships with one another, and in re-establishing psychological order. According to the results of the studies conducted by Delle Donna (2021) and "Humor serves as an adaptive coping mechanism that helps individuals regulate stress and maintain psychological well-being." Dixon (2021), humor-based interventions and self-enhancing humor styles considerably decrease perceived stress levels, which creates an impression that laughter is an adaptive reaction to trauma and uncertainty. This social and psychological consciousness marks a wider cultural transformation towards the importance of emotional intelligence and self-controlling as important aspects of human well-being.

Therefore, the question of humor in literature is exceptionally important. scripts that touch on disease and death usually have the element of humor that humanizes suffering and provides the audience with emotional balances. A vivid illustration is *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), the novel written by John Green and it contains the story of two teenage cancer patients. The novel illustrates the way in which humor is interwoven into love, loss and strength, which shows that the laughter is not an act of denial but rather a courageous act as well. In modern society, where illness is frequently discussed with stigma or pity, the comedy of this novel is a counter-story: that grief and sorrow may co-exist with laughter and create a sense of meaning.

The Fault in Our Stars has been studied with respect to its linguistic, psychological, and thematic elements in the past. Wijaya and Helmie (2019) analyzed the speech acts in the novel, whereas Young & Kyranides (2022) considered the life hardships of Hazel and Augustus through the prism of Individual Psychology. On the same note, Marzona and Bago (2023) have talked about the internal and external conflicts of the characters and Utami et al. (2020) have analyzed the language characteristics of women in the speech of Hazel. These works add to the knowledge of the dialogue and emotional complexity of the novel. But none of them explore the role of humor as a coping mechanism, a gap which restricts our understanding of the fact that the emotional word of the novel adds to its psychological richness.

In addition to the study of novel, scholars have also studied the role of humor in the real world. Delle Donna (2021) showed that humor could diminish stress in healthcare workers, whereas Outley, Bowen, and Pinckney (2021) discussed humor as an act of resistance and coping in the marginalized population. In the same vein, Sucamele (2021) discovered that humor fosters unity in high stress work places such as space missions. Simione & Gnagnarella (2023) additionally validated the fact that, affiliative and self-enhancing styles of humor result in a more positive feeling of emotional regulation in social contexts. However, even with this empirical knowledge, not many researchers have applied this psychological knowledge to literary or cinematic representations. This discrepancy shows that there is a gap that needs to be addressed through interdisciplinary approach that can bridge the gap between psychology and literary studies

This is also a socially sensitive subject in the way the younger generations bring out their vulnerability. In contemporary digital culture, humor is a frequent response to pain, whether it is through memes, irony, and jokes on oneself, as an example of how humor naturalizes discourse of emotion. the youth who serve as the protagonists in this novel indicate more universal tendencies of the generation: humor is a survival mechanism that goes around and is a form of resistance to the lack of hope. This view of *The Fault in Our Stars* therefore does not just limit itself to literary appreciation; but rather it serves as a study of how humor can be used to show how people are adapting to an age of uncertainty.

The theory of Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst, regarding humor, especially his Relief Theory as explained in his book Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), is the basis for this study. Freud posits that humor isn't just a way to get a rise out of things, but is also a well-developed psychological mechanism that can help people discharge pent-up emotions and defuse psychic tension. Humor is an attempt by the ego to face the suffering, rather than run away from it. Jokes, irony, sarcasm, and playfulness are ways people unwittingly process fear, anxiety, emotional struggle, and make it psychologically more bearable. In this regard, humour is an adaptive mechanism used to prevent the overwhelmed feeling or to keep a balance in emotions when suffering from distress.

Freud's theory comes into play especially in The Fault in Our Stars, which tells the story of two teenagers with terminal illness coping with their emotions. All throughout the story, Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters use humour as a way to speak about cancer, death, uncertainty and their relationship.

Their silly banter does not imply that they have no idea how severe their illness is. Rather, they show an unacknowledged attempt to cope with psychic pain. Freud's view on these funny expressions is that they are a way of releasing pressure in the psyche, and an evidence of the healthy functioning of the ego's defense mechanisms against despair without denying reality. Humor is thus part of the psychological survival and not just a form of amusement.

In this light, the present study will discuss humor as a psychoanalytical defense mechanism in The Fault in Our Stars. This study is different from earlier studies which mostly examine linguistic characteristics, characterization, conflict, or, psychological resilience as a whole, in that it specifically studies the unconscious psychological function of humor. This study, using only Freud's theoretical approach of Relief Theory, aims to explore how humorous expressions contribute to the main characters' alleviation of emotional tension, to their psychological attunement and to their maintenance of their sense of identity in the face of illness, suffering and death.

This study is guided by two main research questions. First, it seeks to examine how humor functions as a psychological defense mechanism in *The Fault in Our Stars*. Second, it aims to investigate the differences between Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters in their use of humor as a psychological defense mechanism throughout the novel. In line with the research questions, this study has two primary objectives. The first objective is to explain how humor functions as a psychological defense mechanism in *The Fault in Our Stars*. The second objective is to analyze how Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters employ humor to relieve psychological tension and cope with suffering, illness, and mortality based on Sigmund Freud's Relief Theory.

RESEARCH METHOD

Close reading is the main approach of the research as it is the primary tool of analysis of the textual aspects of the novel. Close reading is the careful, detailed and systematic analysis of the particular passages in order to discover deeper meaning, pattern and functions. By reading closely this study finds out that humor in the form of sarcasm, irony, dark humor, affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor can be found in the text and she examines how these occurrences are used by the characters to cope. Such an approach would enable this study to listen to the finer aspects of diction, tone, voice of the narration, and contextual elements that would lead to the development of humor and the reasons behind it being significant in the narrative.

Source of Data

The Fault in Our Stars (2012) by John Green is the primary source of data in this study since it is a novel. The information is in the form of the chosen dialogues, the descriptions of the narratives and the interactions of the characters which include the humorous elements or the emotional and psychological reactions of the characters to illness. These comic passages are gathered by means of repetition and taking notes. Some of the sources of secondary data will be theoretical books, scholarly journals, and past research on humor, coping strategies, illness narrating, and literary critique.

Method of Data Collection

The method of data collection has a number of procedures. The first step made by a researcher is to read the novel to get an entire picture of the plot, characters, themes, and narrative structure. Second, this study performs focused reading to find passages about humor that are expressed explicitly or implicitly. These passages are then marked, classified and recorded in accordance with the kind of humor they represent, and their applicability to the research questions. Third, every comic expression is analyzed in the context of the narrative surrounding to interpret its emotional purpose and meaning.

Method of Analysis

The analysis of the data is carried out close reading. The analysis starts about identifying humorous expressions in dialogues and description of the story in any direction related to Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters. Then each quotation is analyzed to see how the humor is used as a psychological defense. The interpretation looks at uncovering the psychological tension in the characters, dissecting how humor is a

relief from emotional tension, and studying how humorous expressions are a way to avoid anxiety, fear, grief and emotional conflict. Humour is not just entertainment, but an unconscious way the characters are using it to face illness, suffering, and death and to stay emotionally stable. Lastly, the results are analyzed in the context of Freud's psychoanalytical theory in order to understand how the humor helps the characters cope psychologically and emotionally in the novel.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Humor as a Psychological Defense Mechanism

The analysis of humor in *The Fault in Our Stars* is grounded in Sigmund Freud's Relief Theory, which conceptualizes humor as one of the most mature psychological defense mechanisms because it enables individuals to confront painful realities without denying them (Freud, 1905/1955). Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, humor in the novel serves as an unconscious strategy through which Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters regulate emotional tension, protect the ego, and maintain psychological stability while confronting terminal illness and mortality. Through irony, sarcasm, metaphor, exaggeration, and playful dialogue, the characters transform emotional distress into experiences that are psychologically more tolerable. Consequently, humorous exchanges in the novel should be understood as manifestations of psychological adaptation rather than as simple literary devices.

The findings indicate that humor primarily functions in three interconnected ways. First, it releases psychic tension generated by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Second, it protects the ego from overwhelming emotional distress while allowing the characters to acknowledge reality. Third, humor enables the characters to confront illness and death with dignity instead of despair. These functions collectively support Freud's (1905/1955) proposition that humor represents the triumph of the ego over suffering.

Humor as the Release of Psychic Tension

One of the clearest illustrations of humor as a release of psychic tension appears during Hazel and Augustus's first conversation after leaving the cancer support group. While Hazel contemplates mortality by imagining "the last drive to the hospital," Augustus deliberately interrupts the growing emotional intensity with humor:

"You're killing my vibe here, Hazel Grace. I'm trying to observe young love in its many-splendored awkwardness." (Green, 2012)

The conversation later develops into Augustus's famous cigarette metaphor:

"They don't kill you unless you light them," he said. "And I've never lit one. It's a metaphor, see: You put the killing thing right between your teeth, but you don't give it the power to do its killing." (Green, 2012)

Although the dialogue appears playful, it reflects Augustus's psychological strategy for confronting his awareness of death. Hazel naturally associates ordinary experiences with mortality, revealing the constant psychological burden of terminal illness. Rather than responding with fear, Augustus reframes the conversation through irony and metaphor, converting the cigarette—normally associated with illness and death—into a symbolic object deprived of its destructive power. According to Freud (1905/1955), humor functions by releasing psychic energy accumulated through anxiety and emotional repression. Augustus does not deny the possibility of death; instead, he changes its emotional meaning. His repeated insistence that "*It's a metaphor*" illustrates an unconscious attempt to regain psychological control over circumstances beyond his control.

The humorous exchange also serves an interpersonal function. Augustus intentionally redirects Hazel's attention from anxiety toward playful philosophical discussion, thereby reducing the emotional burden shared by both characters. Freud (1905/1955) argues that humor operates simultaneously as an individual and social defense mechanism because it relieves emotional tension while preserving interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, Augustus's humor protects not only his own psychological balance but also Hazel's emotional well-being, allowing their relationship to develop despite the constant awareness of death.

A similar psychological function appears immediately after the support group meeting. Having listened to discussions about death, fear, and the names of cancer patients who had already passed away,

both characters leave the church carrying considerable emotional weight. Instead of prolonging the solemn atmosphere, Augustus humorously interprets the church's slogan:

"We are literally in the heart of Jesus." (Green, 2012)

Hazel immediately joins the joke:

"Someone should tell Jesus. I mean, it's gotta be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart." (Green, 2012)

The exchange continues until the narration simply states:

"I laughed." (Green, 2012)

This seemingly simple response carries substantial psychological significance. Moments earlier, Hazel had silently imagined that her own name would eventually appear among those remembered after death. Augustus's literal interpretation of the church slogan transforms an emotionally oppressive environment into a shared moment of absurdity and laughter. Rather than eliminating awareness of illness or mortality, humor temporarily alters the emotional perspective from which those realities are experienced.

Freud's (1905/1955) Relief Theory explains this transition as the release of accumulated psychic tension. The laughter does not indicate denial of suffering but demonstrates the ego's capacity to convert anxiety into a psychologically manageable experience. Augustus's playful reinterpretation of language distracts both characters from the emotional burden of the support group while maintaining their awareness of reality. Hazel's brief statement, *"I laughed,"* signifies the successful discharge of emotional energy that had accumulated throughout the meeting. In Freud's terms, humor enables the ego to restore psychological equilibrium without suppressing painful truths.

Across these interactions, humor consistently emerges whenever emotional pressure reaches its highest intensity. Moments involving fear, uncertainty, vulnerability, or anticipation of death are repeatedly followed by ironic conversation, playful exaggeration, or metaphorical language. Rather than functioning as comic relief for readers alone, these humorous exchanges reveal the characters' unconscious attempts to regulate overwhelming emotions. This pattern strongly supports Freud's (1905/1955) argument that humor is one of the most mature defense mechanisms because it allows individuals to experience suffering without becoming psychologically dominated by it.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that humor in *The Fault in Our Stars* functions primarily as a mechanism for releasing psychic tension. Hazel and Augustus never deny the reality of cancer or the inevitability of death; instead, they transform emotional pressure into shared laughter through metaphor, irony, and playful dialogue. By converting fear into a psychologically tolerable experience, humor enables both characters to preserve emotional resilience and continue engaging meaningfully with one another despite the constant presence of suffering. These findings directly answer the first dimension of the study by confirming that humor operates as an adaptive psychological strategy through which psychic tension is safely released while emotional balance is maintained, consistent with Freud's Relief Theory (Freud, 1905/1955).

Humor as the Protection of the Ego

Beyond releasing psychic tension, the findings demonstrate that humor also functions as a mature defense mechanism that protects the ego from excessive emotional distress. Freud (1905/1955) argues that the ego constantly negotiates between external reality and internal emotional conflict by employing unconscious defense mechanisms that reduce anxiety while preserving an individual's perception of reality. Unlike denial or repression, humor enables individuals to recognize painful circumstances without becoming psychologically overwhelmed. This perspective is further supported by Christoff and Dauphin (2017), who explain that humor allows people to acknowledge suffering while diminishing its emotional impact.

Throughout *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters repeatedly encounter situations that threaten their psychological well-being, including terminal illness, uncertainty about survival, and the fear of causing emotional pain to those they love. Instead of expressing despair directly, both characters frequently transform their deepest fears into ironic or metaphorical humor. In doing so, they maintain emotional control while continuing to engage with reality, illustrating Freud's (1905/1955) view that humor represents one of the healthiest forms of ego protection.

A prominent example occurs when Hazel attempts to distance herself emotionally from Augustus because she believes that loving her will inevitably cause him suffering after her death. Rather than expressing her fear literally, she frames it through a striking metaphor:

"I'm a grenade. At some point I'm going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, okay? I'm a grenade and you're crazy to want to forget that." (Green, 2012)

Hazel's metaphor combines irony, exaggeration, and emotional honesty. Although the image of comparing oneself to a grenade is initially unexpected and even humorous, it simultaneously communicates profound guilt, fear, and vulnerability. Instead of identifying herself merely as a terminal cancer patient, Hazel converts her emotional conflict into figurative language that softens the psychological intensity of her confession. The humorous metaphor allows her to communicate painful emotions without surrendering to despair, illustrating Freud's argument that humor changes one's emotional response to reality rather than reality itself (Freud, 1905/1955; Christoff & Dauphin, 2017).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Hazel's statement reflects the ego's effort to regulate anxiety by creating psychological distance from an emotionally threatening situation. She fully recognizes that her illness may eventually hurt those she loves, yet humor enables her to express this fear in a manner that remains emotionally manageable. As Freud (1905/1955) argues, humor signifies the ego's refusal to be defeated by painful reality. Rather than denying the possibility of death, Hazel reshapes its emotional meaning, preserving her psychological balance while confronting an unavoidable future.

The communicative function of humor is equally significant. Meyer (2000) argues that humor serves as an effective interpersonal strategy by reducing emotional tension while sustaining social relationships. Hazel's metaphor illustrates this function clearly. Through humor, she expresses vulnerability without completely exposing her emotional suffering, allowing difficult conversations about illness, love, and mortality to occur without overwhelming either herself or Augustus. Consequently, humor functions simultaneously as self-protection and emotional communication.

A second illustration appears in Hazel's well-known observation:

"The world is not a wish-granting factory." (Green, 2012)

Although concise, this statement reflects Hazel's characteristic use of dry irony to confront disappointment and uncertainty. By comparing the world to a factory that does not manufacture wishes, Hazel rejects unrealistic expectations while presenting this painful realization through witty figurative language. Rather than lamenting her circumstances directly, she expresses acceptance of reality in a calm and intellectually humorous manner.

Viewed through Freud's Relief Theory, this ironic statement represents another mature defense mechanism. Hazel understands that terminal illness cannot be overcome through hope alone, and humor becomes an unconscious strategy for moderating expectations and preventing additional psychological disappointment. Freud (1905/1955) maintains that humor enables individuals to accept unpleasant truths without emotional collapse, and Hazel's remark demonstrates precisely this process. She neither abandons hope nor denies reality; instead, she reframes disappointment through irony, allowing the ego to preserve emotional stability.

The findings consistently reveal that Hazel's humor is characterized by metaphor, irony, and restrained wit rather than spontaneous joking. These expressions do not diminish the seriousness of her illness but instead reduce the emotional burden associated with it. Humor therefore becomes an adaptive psychological resource through which fear, guilt, disappointment, and vulnerability are transformed into emotionally tolerable experiences. This interpretation aligns with Christoff and Dauphin (2017), who argue that humor enables individuals to confront painful circumstances while protecting psychological integrity.

Overall, the analysis confirms Freud's (1905/1955) proposition that humor functions as a mature defense mechanism capable of protecting the ego from anxiety without distorting reality. Both the "grenade" metaphor and the "wish-granting factory" statement illustrate how Hazel employs humor to regulate emotional conflict while maintaining awareness of her condition. Rather than avoiding painful experiences, she reframes them through irony and metaphor, preserving dignity and psychological resilience despite terminal illness. These findings therefore strengthen the first research question by demonstrating that humor in *The Fault in Our Stars* serves not only to relieve psychic tension but also to shield the ego from emotional distress while maintaining psychological balance.

Humor in Confronting Illness and Mortality

The findings further demonstrate that humor functions as a psychological strategy through which the characters confront illness and mortality without surrendering to emotional despair. According to Freud (1905/1955), humor represents the highest expression of the ego because it enables individuals to acknowledge painful realities while transforming their emotional impact into something psychologically bearable. Rather than denying suffering, humor allows people to endure it with dignity and emotional stability. Throughout *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters repeatedly employ humor to face terminal illness, reinforcing Freud's proposition that humor is a mature defense mechanism that sustains hope without distorting reality.

One of the most compelling examples occurs after Augustus learns that his cancer has metastasized. Instead of responding with self-pity, he invites Hazel and Isaac to attend his own pre-funeral so that he can hear their eulogies before he dies:

"I have a little request. I'd like to attend my funeral. I want the two of you to give eulogies for me before I die." (Green, 2012)

Although the request is impossible in literal terms, its absurdity creates gentle humor within an otherwise devastating situation. Augustus deliberately transforms one of life's most tragic rituals into an opportunity for gratitude, friendship, and emotional connection. Rather than allowing death to define his final days, he reshapes the experience through irony, demonstrating that humor can coexist with grief without diminishing its seriousness.

Freud's Relief Theory provides a clear explanation for this response. Freud (1905/1955) argues that humor allows the ego to resist emotional defeat by altering one's psychological reaction rather than changing external reality. Augustus fully recognizes that his death is inevitable, yet he refuses to surrender to fear. As Christoff and Dauphin (2017) suggest, humor enables individuals to adapt emotionally to painful circumstances while maintaining psychological integrity. By organizing his own pre-funeral, Augustus unconsciously reclaims a sense of agency over a situation that would otherwise leave him powerless. The humorous request therefore becomes an act of psychological resilience rather than denial.

Humor in this scene also strengthens interpersonal relationships. The pre-funeral creates a space where Hazel, Isaac, and Augustus are able to express affection, gratitude, sadness, and even laughter simultaneously. Freud (1905/1955) maintains that humor regulates not only individual emotions but also shared emotional experiences, allowing people to confront suffering collectively. Instead of isolating themselves within grief, the three friends transform the anticipation of death into a meaningful farewell that celebrates friendship as much as it acknowledges loss. Humor thus operates as a shared coping mechanism that preserves emotional closeness during an otherwise unbearable experience.

This emotional maturity is further reflected in Hazel's eulogy during the pre-funeral ceremony:

"You don't get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who hurts you. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers." (Green, 2012)

Hazel's words reveal a significant psychological transformation. Earlier in the novel, she attempted to distance herself from Augustus because she feared that loving him would inevitably cause suffering. During the eulogy, however, she accepts that emotional pain is inseparable from meaningful human relationships. Although the occasion is organized around Augustus's approaching death, the speech balances sadness with warmth and quiet humor, reflecting acceptance rather than hopelessness.

From Freud's perspective, this scene exemplifies humor as the ego's capacity to endure painful reality without emotional collapse (Freud, 1905/1955). Augustus's decision to hold his own funeral and Hazel's emotionally balanced response demonstrate that both characters have moved beyond fear toward psychological acceptance. Humor does not eliminate grief; instead, it reframes the experience so that suffering becomes emotionally manageable. The coexistence of laughter, affection, and sorrow illustrates Freud's argument that mature humor transforms emotional pain without denying its existence.

Across these episodes, humor consistently functions as an adaptive response to terminal illness. Augustus refuses to become merely a passive victim of disease, while Hazel gradually replaces avoidance with emotional acceptance. Their humorous interactions preserve dignity, strengthen interpersonal bonds,

and allow both characters to maintain psychological equilibrium despite the certainty of death. Rather than escaping reality, they consciously embrace it through irony, metaphor, and playful conversation.

Overall, the findings confirm that humor in *The Fault in Our Stars* serves as a mature psychological defense mechanism for confronting illness and mortality. Consistent with Freud's Relief Theory (Freud, 1905/1955), humor enables Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters to acknowledge the inevitability of death while preserving hope, emotional resilience, and meaningful relationships. The novel therefore portrays humor not simply as a literary technique but as an adaptive psychological strategy through which individuals transform unbearable emotional experiences into psychologically tolerable ones. These findings complete the first research question by demonstrating that humor functions simultaneously as a release of psychic tension, a protection of the ego, and a means of confronting suffering and mortality with dignity.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that although Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters employ humor to cope with terminal illness, they differ substantially in the way humor functions as a psychological defense mechanism. Consistent with Freud's Relief Theory (Freud, 1905/1955), neither character uses humor to deny the reality of cancer or death. Instead, both unconsciously transform emotional distress into psychologically manageable experiences while maintaining awareness of their condition. Their contrasting personalities, however, shape distinct patterns of humorous expression and reveal different strategies for achieving emotional stability.

Hazel primarily employs humor as an inward-looking defense mechanism. Her humorous expressions are characterized by irony, sarcasm, understatement, and metaphor rather than spontaneous jokes. Statements such as *"I'm a grenade"* and *"The world is not a wish-granting factory"* (Green, 2012) illustrate how she transforms fear, guilt, and emotional vulnerability into figurative language that softens psychological distress. Rather than concealing reality, these metaphors allow Hazel to acknowledge the inevitability of loss while maintaining emotional control. Freud (1905/1955) argues that humor enables the ego to confront painful truths without becoming emotionally overwhelmed, and Hazel consistently demonstrates this psychological process by converting internal conflict into reflective humor.

Hazel's use of humor also develops throughout the novel. At the beginning of the story, irony functions primarily as a protective barrier that limits emotional attachment and minimizes the possibility of future suffering. As her relationship with Augustus deepens, however, humor gradually shifts from emotional avoidance to emotional acceptance. Instead of using metaphor solely to distance herself from others, Hazel increasingly employs humor to acknowledge love, grief, and mortality as unavoidable aspects of human existence. This progression indicates that humor not only protects the ego but also facilitates psychological growth by enabling acceptance of experiences that were previously perceived as emotionally threatening.

In contrast, Augustus Waters employs humor in a more expressive and interpersonal manner. His jokes, exaggerations, playful metaphors, and spontaneous wit consistently reduce emotional tension while strengthening social relationships. The cigarette metaphor, the playful interpretation of the "Literal Heart of Jesus," and his request to attend his own pre-funeral (Green, 2012) all demonstrate his tendency to transform situations associated with illness and death into opportunities for connection and optimism. Whereas Hazel's humor primarily regulates her internal emotional state, Augustus uses humor to influence the emotional atmosphere surrounding him, reassuring both himself and those closest to him.

Freud's Relief Theory (Freud, 1905/1955) explains Augustus's behavior as another manifestation of mature ego functioning. Rather than allowing fear to dominate his final months, Augustus repeatedly reframes frightening experiences through irony and playfulness. His humor does not trivialize suffering; instead, it restores a sense of agency over circumstances beyond his control. As his illness progresses, the nature of his humor also changes. Early in the novel, humorous exchanges primarily establish friendship and romantic intimacy. Following the recurrence of his cancer, however, his humor becomes increasingly reflective, allowing him to preserve dignity, express gratitude, and confront mortality without surrendering to hopelessness. This development illustrates that humor remains psychologically adaptive even when external circumstances become progressively more severe.

Although their humorous styles differ considerably, both characters ultimately fulfill the same psychological function described by Freud (1905/1955). Hazel relies on introspective irony and metaphor to regulate fear and vulnerability, whereas Augustus employs socially oriented humor to reduce anxiety and encourage emotional resilience in others. In both cases, humor serves neither as denial nor escapism. Instead, it enables the characters to reinterpret painful experiences in ways that preserve emotional balance while fully acknowledging the reality of terminal illness.

These findings reinforce Freud's proposition that humor represents one of the most mature psychological defense mechanisms because it allows individuals to experience suffering without psychological disintegration. The evolution of humor in both characters further demonstrates that psychological adaptation is dynamic rather than static. Hazel gradually moves from emotional self-protection toward acceptance of intimacy and loss, while Augustus progresses from playful optimism to courageous acceptance of death. Despite these different developmental trajectories, both characters consistently use humor to maintain dignity, preserve meaningful relationships, and regulate emotional distress.

Overall, the findings answer the second research question by demonstrating that Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters employ humor through distinct yet complementary psychological strategies. Hazel's humor is predominantly introspective and protective, whereas Augustus's humor is expressive and relational. Nevertheless, both forms of humor perform the same adaptive psychological function described in Freud's Relief Theory (Freud, 1905/1955): they transform fear, grief, and awareness of mortality into psychologically tolerable experiences that sustain emotional resilience. Consequently, *The Fault in Our Stars* portrays humor not merely as a literary device but as an essential mechanism through which individuals preserve psychological stability, interpersonal connection, and human dignity while confronting suffering and inevitable death.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Freud's Relief Theory (Freud, 1905/1955) effectively explains the psychological function of humor in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. The findings demonstrate that humor functions not merely as entertainment but as a mature psychological defense mechanism that enables Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters to regulate emotional tension while confronting terminal illness, uncertainty, and mortality. Specifically, humor serves three major psychological functions: releasing psychic tension, protecting the ego from emotional distress, and enabling the characters to confront illness and death with dignity and acceptance. Although both protagonists employ humor as an adaptive coping strategy, they do so differently according to their personalities. Hazel predominantly relies on irony, sarcasm, and metaphor as forms of self-protection, whereas Augustus uses wit, exaggeration, and playful conversation to relieve tension, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and sustain hope. Overall, the study confirms that humor plays a significant role in fostering psychological resilience, emotional stability, and personal growth without denying the reality of suffering.

This study is limited to the analysis of selected dialogues involving the two main characters through the perspective of Freud's Relief Theory. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to examine *The Fault in Our Stars* using other Freudian defense mechanisms, such as repression, denial, or sublimation, to provide a broader understanding of the characters' psychological responses to illness, emotional conflict, and death. Comparative studies involving literary works that address similar themes of illness, grief, trauma, and loss are also recommended to explore how humor functions as a psychological coping strategy across different texts. It is expected that this study will contribute to the development of psychoanalytic literary criticism and serve as a useful reference for future research on the relationship between literature, psychology, and humor.

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