



Love as Performance: Romance and the Spectacle of Tragedy in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*

Research Scholar Ms. Nancy
Chaudhary Bansi Lal University, Bhiwani

Abstract- Love has long been idealized as an authentic and spontaneous emotion and never existed in isolation; it is an idea continuously shaped, interpreted, and performed across generations. Embedded in myths, literature, and cultural practices, the experience of love is passed on not only as an emotion but as a narrative that people learn to inhabit. In contemporary fiction, these inherited scripts often influence how characters understand and enact their relationships. This paper investigates such performative dimensions of love in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, arguing that the novel portrays love not merely as authentic feeling but as a culturally constructed spectacle. It explores love, illness, and mortality through the lens of teenage protagonists, Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, this study analyzes how the characters consciously enact their love within the narrative's tragic framework. Their romance becomes a self-aware performance, influenced by their awareness of terminal illness and the literary archetypes they seek to emulate. Augustus, in particular, embodies a hyper-idealized lover, crafting moments of grandeur that blur the line between genuine affection and theatricality. Furthermore, the novel engages with metafictional elements, where characters navigate their own literary fate, reinforcing the theme of love as a scripted experience. By deconstructing the novel's romantic and tragic tropes, this paper explores how *The Fault in Our Stars* simultaneously critiques and reinforces the expectations of love and loss in contemporary fiction. The study ultimately argues that the novel presents love as a performative act, wherein characters and readers alike participate in the spectacle of tragedy. Through this approach, the research sheds new light on Green's work, positioning it within broader discourses on love, literature, and cultural scripting.

Keywords- Performativity, Theatricality, Tragedy, Constructivism, Identity, Simulacra.

I. Introduction

Contemporary young adult fiction has evolved into a genre that not only narrates adolescent experience but also reflects the cultural mechanisms through which emotions, relationships, and identities are shaped. John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* stands at the center of this shift which lies a deep engagement with how love is performed, staged, and scripted. It also functions as both a bestselling novel and a cultural phenomenon that defines how young readers imagine love, illness, and tragedy. While most readings of the novel focus on its themes of grief, illness, and coming-of-age, far less attention has been given to how the novel constructs love as a theatrical act



shaped by cultural expectations. Beneath its surface of sincerity, the novel actively negotiates the tension between lived experience and the cultural scripts that govern how love and loss should appear. It follows the love story of Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters, two teenagers who meet at a cancer support group. Hazel Grace Lancaster, a sixteen-year-old girl battling thyroid cancer that has spread to her lungs, and Augustus Waters, a charismatic and confident seventeen-year-old who lost his leg to osteosarcoma. While their relationship is often seen as an authentic emotional bond, it is also shaped by literary and cinematic influences, aligning with the aesthetics of tragic romance. Moreover, they both are aware that their love story follows the trajectory of doomed romance, reminiscent of Shakespearean tragedy and cinematic portrayals of young love cut short. Through their journey together, they navigate the complexities of illness, love, and the meaning of existence. However, their relationship is not merely an organic emotional experience but a self-conscious enactment of love as a grand literary and cinematic spectacle. Rather than merely experiencing love, Augustus actively constructs his role as the heroic, poetic lover, performing grand gestures that align with traditional romantic tropes. As Augustus himself declares, “I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up, my friend (TFIOS 11).”

Grounded in Butler’s performativity theory that views identity and emotion as socially enacted constructs, this paper interrogates Hazel and Augustus’s relationship as a performance structured by cultural expectations. As Butler asserts, “There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.” This perspective reinforces how Augustus and Hazel do not simply fall in love; rather they enact love in ways shaped by pre-existing romantic and cultural narratives.

Additionally, Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, which argues that modern experiences are often copies of pre-existing representations rather than original phenomena, provides a critical lens through which to analyze TFIOS. As Baudrillard states, “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning (Baudrillard 79).” The novel blurs the line between lived experience and performed romance, turning love into an aesthetic spectacle that conforms to pre-existing cultural script.

Augustus Waters does not merely fall in love; he performs love, shaping his relationship with Hazel in ways that mirror grand literary and cinematic gestures. From the outset, Augustus casts himself as a tragic hero, constructing an identity rooted in romantic spectacle rather than unfiltered authenticity. His words and actions function as part of a larger-than-life script, aligning with cultural expectations of the poetic, self-sacrificial lover. A defining moment of Augustus’s performativity is his symbolic use of the unlit cigarette: “You put the thing that does the killing right between your teeth, but you don’t give it the power to do its killing (TFIOS 20).”



This famous cigarette metaphor functions as a performative gesture, reinforcing Augustus's role as a tragic, self-sacrificial hero. His habit of holding an unlit cigarette symbolizes a deliberate assertion of control. The presence of cigarettes diminishes as Augustus loses control over his cancer and slips toward his death at the end of the novel. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra suggests that in contemporary culture, people often imitate representations rather than experiencing things authentically. Augustus does not merely experience love—he acts out love in ways that resemble grand literary and cinematic romantic figures.

He performs the “noble lover” trope, taking Hazel to Amsterdam, creating carefully curated moments that feel as though they are “written” for an audience. His grand gestures, particularly during the Amsterdam trip, exemplify this performative love. When he takes Hazel to Oranje for their picturesque dinner, complete with champagne and a scenic canal view, he is not merely expressing affection but crafting a moment that mirrors cinematic and literary ideals of romance. Similarly, his dramatic confession at the Anne Frank House—kissing Hazel in a setting steeped in historical tragedy—further reinforces his role as a star-crossed lover, shaping their love story within the framework of grand, almost theatrical romance. At Oranje, Augustus orchestrates a quintessentially cinematic romantic moment: “We were in the middle of the street in a faraway land, beneath a star-spangled sky, and we were laughing at this ridiculousness, and I felt Augustus watching me (TFIOS, 164).”

This famous cigarette metaphor functions as a performative gesture, reinforcing Augustus's role as a tragic, self-sacrificial hero. The ability to keep the cigarette in his mouth, but never light it stands as an act of control. The presence of cigarettes diminishes as Augustus loses control over his cancer and slips toward his death at the end of the novel. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra suggests that in contemporary culture, people often imitate representations rather than experiencing things authentically. Augustus does not merely experience love—he acts out love in ways that resemble grand literary and cinematic romantic figures.

His final act—writing Hazel a eulogy before his death—mirrors the structure of romantic tragedy, echoing Romeo and Juliet and other doomed love stories, but also cements his role as a lover who ensures their narrative adheres to the aesthetics of tragic romance. In doing so, Augustus transforms his impending death into a spectacle of devotion, ensuring that Hazel's memory of their love remains framed within a grand, poetic ideal. This is particularly evident in his letter to Van Houten, where he articulates his final thoughts on love and eternity.

This performativity aligns with Fredric Jameson's assertion that “We cannot imitate dead styles, we can only speak through masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.” (Jameson 91). Augustus and Hazel's love follows pre-existing romantic scripts rather than creating something entirely new. Their love is a performance crafted within pre-existing romantic ideals, shaped by literature, movies,



and tragic love stories. Augustus's final letter to Hazel captures this performative aesthetic: "You gave me a forever within the numbered days (TFIOS 260)."

This reinforces how Augustus's love is framed within an aestheticized tragedy, ensuring that his relationship with Hazel aligns with the grand narratives of star-crossed lovers. This line not only encapsulates Augustus's perception of love as something timeless despite mortality but also reinforces the performative nature of his affection—he is consciously shaping their love story into one that will endure beyond his death. The deliberate act of composing a eulogy while still alive, much like his theatrical cigarette metaphor, exemplifies his tendency to romanticize suffering, mirroring the dramatic farewells of classical literary lovers.

Unlike Augustus, who actively embraces and performs the role of the grand, tragic lover, Hazel Grace Lancaster exhibits a more critical engagement with the romance script. While she is deeply moved by Augustus's gestures, she remains skeptical of overly dramatic expressions of love, resisting the idea that their relationship should conform to conventional narratives of doomed romance. Hazel's awareness of the performative aspects of love allows her to navigate their relationship with a level of self-awareness that complicates the traditional tragic love story.

One of Hazel's defining characteristics is her resistance to sentimentalized portrayals of love and suffering. She often undercuts Augustus's grand romantic gestures with humor and pragmatism, demonstrating an awareness of how their relationship is shaped by external narratives. When Augustus first expresses his affection for her, she responds with caution rather than immediate reciprocation: "I'm a grenade and at some point, I'm going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, okay? (TFIOS 99)."

Hazel distances herself from the ideal of the self-sacrificing heroine, refusing to romanticize her illness or frame herself as part of a grand love story. Unlike Augustus, who sees love as an opportunity for poetic transcendence, Hazel initially views love as a risk—one that could cause unnecessary suffering to those around her. Her reluctance to fully surrender to the tragic romance script aligns with Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, which suggests that reality is often mediated by pre-existing representations. In this context, Hazel is resisting the pressure to enact a love story that feels predetermined by cultural narratives.

Despite her initial skepticism, Hazel is not immune to the influence of romantic ideals. Over time, she begins to embrace the beauty of their love, though she does so on her own terms. In Amsterdam, where their relationship deepens, she allows herself to experience romance while still questioning its constructed nature. When Augustus orchestrates a dinner at Oranje, a moment straight out of a cinematic love story, Hazel acknowledges the beauty of the experience but also subtly mocks its performative quality: "We stared at the waves in the dark and watched the boat lights turn at the Anne Frank House. 'You're so busy being you that you have no idea how utterly unprecedented you are' (TFIOS 201)."



This moment represents a shift in Hazel's perspective—while she remains aware of the constructed elements of their romance, she also recognizes its significance. This balance between critical detachment and genuine emotional investment echoes Roland Barthes's notion of love as both excessive and insufficient: "To try to write love is to confront the muck of language: that region of hysteria where language is both too much and too little, excessive and impoverished (Barthes 99)."

Barthes's insight highlights Hazel's struggle with articulating love in a way that feels authentic rather than scripted. Her love for Augustus is real, yet it exists within a framework that has been shaped by literature, cinema, and cultural expectations. She is both a participant in and a critic of the romantic spectacle, embodying a tension between sincerity and performance.

As the novel progresses, Hazel's engagement with the romance script becomes more nuanced. While she never fully embraces Augustus's theatricality, she comes to appreciate the ways in which performance can provide meaning in the face of mortality. Her final words to Augustus, mirroring his eulogy to her, reveal a subtle acceptance of the tragic love narrative they once resisted: "I do, Augustus. I do (TFIOS 299)."

By repurposing the traditional wedding vow in this moment of farewell, Hazel both acknowledges and subverts the classic romance script. She accepts the weight of their love story but does so in a way that feels personal rather than performative. In this way, *The Fault in Our Stars* ultimately suggests that while love may be shaped by pre-existing narratives, it can also be rewritten, adapted, and made one's own. Hazel even acknowledges this theatricality, remarking on the artificial perfection of the moment: "It was a perfect evening. It was a perfect evening until it wasn't (TFIOS 165)."

Green underscores how love in *TFIOS* is deeply tied to an aesthetic of fleeting beauty and inevitable loss. This mirrors the structure of *Romeo and Juliet*, where love is heightened by its impending tragedy. Shakespeare's lovers, much like Hazel and Augustus, experience a love that is intensified precisely because it is brief. As Juliet poignantly states: "It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden; / Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say 'It lightens (Shakespeare Act 2 Scene 2)."

This reflects the 'hyperreality' of love in *TFIOS*—where the intensity of the relationship is inextricably linked to its inevitable ending. Augustus and Hazel's love is not just a personal experience but a performance of the tragic romance trope, reinforcing Baudrillard's notion that modern experiences often imitate pre-existing representations rather than existing as purely authentic moments. Hazel's reflection that "Pain demands to be felt (TFIOS 63)." encapsulates the novel's engagement with the spectacle of tragic love.



II. Conclusion

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, love is not just an emotion but a spectacle, shaped by literature, cinema, and cultural ideals of tragic romance. By examining TFIOS through the lens of Butler's performativity and Baudrillard's simulacra, this paper demonstrates that Hazel and Augustus's love is not merely an organic emotion but a self-conscious performance of tragic romance. However, this very awareness elevates their romance to something grander, more poetic—more performed. Hazel, initially resistant to embracing a love she sees as fleeting, ultimately succumbs to the script, recognizing that their love, no matter how brief, holds meaning within the tradition of star-crossed lovers. As Augustus poignantly states: "You gave me a forever within the numbered days." (TFIOS 260) Their story, therefore, is not a blending of authenticity and performance but an illustration of how deeply personal emotions become shaped, framed, and mediated by cultural expectations. Through this interplay, Green presents love as an experience that is always already constructed—performed, inherited, and scripted—revealing how contemporary romance is inseparable from the spectacles through which society learns to feel.

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