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Just Because Somebody's Dead, You Don't Just Stop Liking Them": Representations of Death and Mourning in Contemporary Literature for Young Adults

Johnston
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“Just Because Somebody’s Dead, You Don’t Just Stop Liking Them”:

Representations of Death and Mourning in Contemporary Literature for Young Adults

By

Jeremy Johnston

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language,
Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

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2016

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by

Jeremy Johnston

APPROVED BY:

S. Holloway
Faculty of Education

D. Price
English Literature, Language, and Creative Writing

N. Markotić, Advisor
English Literature, Language, and Creative Writing

Monday, April 18, 2016

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representations of death and mourning in a survey of twelve realistic, contemporary young adult novels. These authors open a dialogue between the text and its readers on the physical aspects of death by depicting character deaths through the use of corporeal language and imagery. The portrayal of mourning that follows each death reflects an active-based process that sees principle characters working through their oscillating emotions and grief. This process effectively illustrates how those characters strive to maintain a connection to the deceased, which allows readers to evaluate their own notions of bereavement. This study proceeds with an exploration of how principal characters respond to the changes in their lives that arise following a death, and concludes with the assertion that contemporary young adult literature provides a social space for readers to participate in shared mourning practices with the texts' protagonists.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my immediate family: Sandy and Tom Johnston, Alissa and Jason Shanahan, and Paige and Noah Shanahan. I am forever grateful for their unwavering support.

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This project would never have existed without the direct influence of several people. I wish to thank my immediate family for encouraging me to pursue this degree, and for continually supporting my goals. I would like to acknowledge my readers Dr. Danielle Price of the English Department, and Dr. Susan Holloway of the Faculty of Education. Thank you for taking the time to review this project. I wish to recognize Dr. Dale Jacobs, Dr. Katherine Quinsey, Dr. Carol Davison, and the rest of the University of Windsor's English department. Your guidance and advice throughout the construction of this thesis has been invaluable. I would also like to thank James Gray and Michelle Walsh for being such forgiving roommates and reminding me to take mental breaks. To the graduate students that have become a second family: thank you for suffering through the many conversations on death and mourning over the last year. More importantly, thank you for the high fives on the good days and the hugs on the bad ones. A special thank you goes to Batman, whose existence was the doorway into fiction that I chose many years ago; I have yet to look back. Lastly, I wish to thank my advisor Dr. Nicole Markotić. Words do not feel adequate enough to describe the amount of the respect and admiration I have for the woman who, during our many sarcastic exchanges, gently reminded me that I may have something to say. Imagine that.

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Introduction

The genre of adolescent literature did not appeal to me until after my own adolescence ended. I had read novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye* during my teen years, and enjoyed them, but overall the Young Adult (YA) genre held no appeal to me. Even curiosity about the Harry Potter series, which swept across North American culture, eluded me during the early-2000s, the prime of my teenage years. It was not until the summer of 2012 when I read Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* that I began to think more deeply on the subject of adolescent literature. This book posed issues of alienation and identity crises, which I discovered to be common tropes in much of YA fiction. I started reading more YA novels, trying to develop my understanding of the complexities of teenage life by asking questions I never thought to ask during my own adolescent years. After reading *Perks*, the emergence of movie adaptations of YA novels – such as *The Book Thief*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*¹ – brought further attention to the genre, and I found myself picking up more books that contributed towards the cultural shift in North America – as in the increasing popularity of YA novels – that began with the commercial success of *Harry Potter*. Why were these novels, and their subsequent movies, so prominent in contemporary popular culture? More importantly, as a field of study, what literary merit do these YA novels carry with them? And what literary focus do they offer both adolescent and adult readers? Thus began my intellectual curiosity on the subject.

Not until I read John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, followed by Green's first novel, *Looking for Alaska*, did I see a particular trend arise: in a great deal of YA

¹ And the film based on *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* itself.

literature, characters die. More importantly, a wide variety of characters die: friends, acquaintances, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, relatives, love interests. A large body of teen fiction includes or deals directly with death as a prominent component of adolescent life, and many of these texts base their plots on teenage characters learning to respond to personal tragedy. I found the depiction of teenaged mourning particularly interesting for a few reasons. For Young Adult authors, representations of death and mourning can be a controversial undertaking. Parents or others in positions of authority over teenagers often have a hand in what those teens – at least those in their early teens – are reading, so YA authors may be cautious about how they address “adult” topics such as death. Further, for YA texts that do offer death and mourning as prominent features of their protagonists’ lives, how do those components influence the growth of the novels’ characters, and in what ways do those characters respond to loss? As a result of these questions, I formulated a research study designed to examine a collection of primary texts that reflect a survey of how the YA genre represents teens mourning death.

In the opening chapter of this study I analyze the concept of death in YA literature. I investigate how and when YA authors introduce death to their protagonist(s), and therefore their readers. I discuss the ways YA authors describe death through the language of corporeal imagery, and how that influences readership interpretation. I next examine how characters in YA texts react to death in the immediate sense. By this I mean in the initial moment characters watch or hear about someone they know dying. Towards the end of the first chapter, I examine the kinds of death that YA novels tend to introduce, and why deaths from suicide and illness appear prominent in YA literature. I have designed chapter one to provide a framework for viewing death in YA texts, and how YA

authors use a variety of writing strategies to contribute towards building a social space for protagonists – and thus their readers – to think about and confront the subject of death as a fact of life.

The second chapter involves an exploration of mourning in YA fiction. Oscillating emotions are central to the adolescent experience in YA novels, and I examine how characters not only shift between feeling happy, sad, and angry (among others) in response to personal tragedy, but how at times they feel many of these emotions at once. Anger, specifically, emerges as a prominent emotion in YA texts dealing with death, as characters exercise their aggression in a variety of ways. For example, anger can be expressed against parents, friends, other family members, a higher power, oneself and, in the event of a suicide, even the deceased. While not all characters feel anger in mourning, many YA novels reflect at least one character who does. One reason is likely due to anger's innate intensity, which allows for the tension within the narrative to reach a climax, creating a cathartic realization for characters about the nature of their grief. Lastly, mourning in YA texts often involves characters maintaining an emotional connection to the deceased in an effort to subvert death, keeping the dead "alive" through memories and language. This gesture is significant because it suggests that one's relationship to the deceased does not end completely in death. As a result, chapter two not only illustrates YA literature's aesthetic reflection of mourning, but also its practical potential as a catalyst for readers to think of their own notions of grief, ultimately creating a dialogue between the text and readers about the nature of bereavement.

The final chapter examines how confronting death in YA novels encourages bereaved characters to relearn different aspects of their respective worlds. For characters experiencing grief, this process typically involves changes in four areas: one's physical surroundings, one's social surroundings, one's relationship to the deceased, and one's relationship to oneself. These changes include, but are not limited to, the role of certain objects or mementos left by the deceased, the role of familiar rooms or locations, the role of particular friends or family members, how the bereaved remembers the deceased, or how bereaved people come to view their own identities. Indeed, death and mourning are important catalysts for change in many YA novels, but the timing of these changes prove equally important. Whatever change authors deem most crucial for their protagonists to experience often occurs near the end of each novel, sometimes in the novel's final words, purposefully leaving readers with a character's optimism that effectively works to ease the difficulty inherent in the challenging topics, death and mourning. These hopeful endings create a space for readers who desire to confront notions of death, grief, and change, both in and outside YA texts.

In my conclusion, I contend that Young Adult authors direct their teenage readership – particularly ones experiencing grief – towards notions of recovery, acceptance, and personal growth, by establishing a social space for readers to take part in shared mourning processes with the texts' protagonists. Further, the maturing process in YA fiction suggests to readers that while death is experienced on an individual basis, mourning is both intimate *and* social. Protagonists confronting death, especially for the first time, will react uniquely to their loss, but as the process of mourning involves grappling with oscillating emotions while important elements of life begin to shift,

protagonists begin to accept the social nature of bereavement. They turn to friends and family, just as friends and family turn to them, for assistance when grief proves overwhelming. This shift into a socialized process of mourning between characters also reflects the potential relationship between readers and a text's protagonist. Just as characters turn to each other for support, so too may grieving readers turn to YA texts for a sense of understanding as they observe protagonists experiencing similar personal tragedies.

While not a complete survey of the YA genre, this study intends to demonstrate prominent narrative patterns within YA fiction that offers readers both a deeper aesthetic understanding of death and grief, as well as the practical potential of a genre of literature that empowers readers to confront some of life's challenging subjects. Death and mourning are important topics for adolescents as they enter into adulthood, and YA fiction allows teens to engage with the complex nature of these particular subjects. However, with a growing body of YA texts to choose from, which texts would effectively illustrate these narrative patterns?

The novels I selected for this study I chose in the interest of realism, by which I mean I chose no novels with characters influenced by magical or fantastical elements. In fact, the only novel with any supernatural component is Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, which, while narrated by the character Death, reflects a story limited by the real history of WWII. Yes, Death does move throughout the story, but Death never communicates or interferes with characters or "real world" events. Though the narrator presents himself as a supernatural being, his omniscient relationship to the characters maintains their construction as realistic beings in a mimetic world. The YA novels I focus on include:

The Book Thief, The Catcher in the Rye, Thirteen Reasons Why, The Fault in Our Stars, Looking for Alaska, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, The F—It List, Monoceros, The Last Time We Say Goodbye, The Outsiders, Playlist for the Dead, and All the Bright Places. While I could have reviewed many more texts and authors, this particular collection of novels reflects quite a variety of approaches toward the topics of death and mourning. Further, the publishing dates of these novels – ranging from 1951 to 2015 – indicates the consistency of patterns that continue to permeate the YA genre. While some authors are represented more than others, all the novels depict adolescents facing death in their lives (often for the first time), subsequently forcing them to embrace and work through their grief.

Primary Texts (Organized by Date Published):

- Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. (1951).
- Hinton, S.E. *The Outsiders*. (1967).
- Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. (1999).
- Green, John. *Looking for Alaska*. (2005).
- Zusak, Marcus. *The Book Thief*. (2005).
- Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons*. (2007).
- Mayr, Suzette. *Monoceros*. (2011).
- Green, John. *The Fault in Our Stars*. (2012).
- Halpern, Julie. *The F—It List*. (2013).
- Falkoff, Michelle. *Playlist for the Dead*. (2015)
- Han, Cynthia. *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*. (2015).
- Niven, Jennifer. *All the Bright Places*. (2015).

Chapter One

“Death Be Upon Us”: Confronting the Corporeal Image

Why is incorporating death into YA literature relevant for adolescents? Roberta Seelinger Trites contends that while adolescent fiction often reflects a modern day *Entwicklungsroman* – a story of growth of some kind – for its reader(s), this growth often stems from teenage protagonists learning to negotiate their identities in relation to power structures in their lives (x). Trites finds that adolescent literature, in part, incorporates the essence of Michel Foucault’s theory that “power comes from everywhere;” thus, in Young Adult (YA) texts, “power is everyone” (x). For younger children, their parents or others in positions of authority often tell them what to do, what to say, and how to act. Part of being a teenager, however, means developing a sense of agency, and recognizing the level of power one holds in relation to the structures around oneself. Institutional structures, as they relate to adolescents, include government, identity politics, and parental authority, among others, while adolescents must also learn the role of biological imperatives such as sex and death in their lives. For Trites, “[death] is, perhaps, even more powerful in the human mind than sexuality, for although in theory some individuals can live asexually, no one avoids death” (117). Therefore, since death is inescapable and consequently continually relevant, YA authors enact strategies to approach death as a subject in their writing. How authors introduce death, what kinds of death authors introduce, how authors depict death, and how their characters immediately react, are all integral components of illustrating for YA readers the severity, uncertainty, and reality of death as an inevitable component of life.

How authors introduce death in YA literature can set a precedent for how readers come to imagine death as a component of their own lives. In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker contends that contemporary Western culture denies death because it is a terrifying thought to acknowledge, thus Westerners actively repress their anxieties. Becker states, “This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression – and with all this yet to die” (87). In other words, many Westerners actively deny death in response to the anxiety and “fear” of losing their ability to live life as they understand it. As people get older, this fear becomes more prominent. Carl Jung notes, “Just as, [earlier in our lives], fear was a deterrent from life, so now it stands in the way of death” (5). With age comes the act of allowing fear to manipulate one’s perceptions of death; so, for children growing into adolescence, the “fear” of confronting death that permeates much of Western culture influences how they view death in their own lives. Thus, for many YA authors, incorporating a death into the lives of their characters forces readers to engage with the subject.

In an effort to combat cultural denial, introducing death on a personal level is an effective strategy for YA authors. John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* is a novel about Hazel Grace Lancaster, a teenage girl with terminal cancer, joining a cancer support group and falling in love with Augustus Waters, a teenage boy with osteosarcoma. Their relationship builds throughout the narrative before Hazel must face the fact that Augustus dies before her. Early in the novel, Green incorporates death as not only a component of his protagonist’s mindset, but the minds of his readers as well. The novel opens with Hazel proclaiming, “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...and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death” (*The Fault 3*). From the beginning of the text, Green establishes a personal relationship between death and Hazel. Hazel, interestingly enough, does little else *but* think about death, not out of morbidity, but as a practical reaction to her medical reality. Similarly in *Looking for Alaska*, Green introduces readers to Miles “Pudge” Halter, who has a fixation with the last words of famous people, and promptly tells his parents that he has chosen to attend a boarding school in Alabama because, as the poet Francois Rabelais said before he died: “I go to seek a Great Perhaps” (5). Once he arrives at Culver Creek Preparatory High School, Miles’s new roommate, Chip Martin, introduces Miles to Alaska Young, a beautiful but emotionally unstable girl, whom Miles begins to fall in love with. Over the course of the year, the three students, along with their other friend, Takumi Hikohito, drink, prank other students, and bond through sharing each other’s past. In doing so, Alaska reveals that her mother died when Alaska was eight years old, and with Alaska watching helplessly. Alaska is never able to get over the guilt she feels for not helping to prevent her mother’s death, and one night her emotions, heightened by intoxication, lead her to drive drunk, and get into a car accident that kills her instantly. The remainder of the narrative sees Miles, Chip, and the others at Culver Creek, learning to face life without Alaska. By introducing death in the form of a fascination with famous last words, Green foreshadows much of the novel’s tension early by introducing death in Miles’s mind as personal but abstract. Green’s novels begin with supplying readers with information that death is on the forefront of his protagonists’ minds, pushing it to the forefront of his

readers' minds, and thus establishing a personal connect between the subject (death) and readers, and all within each novel's opening few pages.

In fact, introducing death as a personal but abstract concept occurs often in YA texts. Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* is a novel about two depressed teens, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, falling in love over the course of the school year, and beginning a project where they visit all the strange and unique landmarks within the state of Indiana, where they live. However, Theodore's depression eventually overwhelms him, leading him to commit suicide by drowning himself, which devastates Violet, who spends the rest of the narrative grappling with grief. The topic of death permeates the novel, and Niven emphasizes that topic early, as Theodore opens his narration with the question: "Is today a good day to die?" (3). Here, Niven introduces readers to her protagonist as he contemplates the idea of death from the ledge of a bell tower at school. He is not witnessing a death, nor is he dying; he merely ponders it. Julie Halpern's *The F—It List* is a novel about an adolescent girl, Alex Buckley, learning of her best friend Becca's cancer, while simultaneously mourning her father's death from the year before. Becca slept with Alex's boyfriend on the day of Alex's dad's funeral, and the two girls have a falling out, but the news of Becca's cancer is enough to convince Alex to try to repair their relationship. Becca shows Alex her fuck-it list, things she wants to do before she dies, but due to her cancer she cannot. So Alex agrees to complete the list on Becca's behalf. Doing so allows her to meet new people, such as Leo, who share Alex's passion for horror movies, and to reconnect with her mother and younger brothers, whom she feels slightly disenfranchised from in the wake of her father's death. Alex opens her narration with the statement, "The only thing worse than having my best friend sleep with

my boyfriend the night of my father's funeral would be if she killed my dad herself" (1). Alex certainly has a personal relationship with death, but readers are introduced to the topic as an abstract, angry thought, rather than a practical description of her father's final moments. Alex's statement informs readers that while she may be focusing on the relationship between her and Becca, the topic of death is present in her mind. Moreover, in *Monoceros*, a novel that follows the lives of many characters – students, faculty, and family – after seventeen-year-old Patrick Furey commits suicide, Suzette Mayr opens the novel referring to Patrick as “the dead boy,” which gives readers cause to think about why he is dead, without Mayr actually depicting the death itself (11). By referring to Patrick in this way during the novel's opening, Mayr puts Patrick in the foreground of readers' attention even though he is no longer “in” the story. Shortly afterwards, Mayr introduces readers to Faraday, a teenage girl who sits at her desk and is “whacked between the eyes” with the news of another student's death (18). Through the mind of Faraday, and by labeling Patrick as “the dead boy,” Mayr chooses to push readers to confront the *idea* of death as a part of life, as opposed to describing the graphic specifics of Patrick's hanging. Perhaps more importantly than the abstract nature of death's introduction in these texts is the timeliness of the introduction. Green, Niven, and Halpern all introduce death in their opening sentences, while others such as Mayr do so within the first few pages, choosing to open a dialogue early between the text and readers. By addressing death quickly, YA authors force readers to embrace death as a topic of discussion, making it difficult to reject or ignore, as well as foregrounding death as a narrative force in these books.

In a novel about Liesel Meminger, a nine-year-old girl who struggles through the hardships of living with a surrogate family, the Hubermanns, in Germany during World War II, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* offers a more nuanced approach to the introduction of death. Operating as the text's narrator, Death becomes a three-dimensional presence, "which serves simultaneously to confront...adolescent [readers] with the fact of death (in both an abstract and a historically located sense) and to offer protection from the most unsettling implications of this fact" (Adams 223). By using Death not only as a character but as the narrator, Zusak opens a dialogue with readers that rids itself of the middle connection (a human narrator) and creates a point of contact where the speaker (Death), the subject (death), and readers meet directly. Further, Zusak's Death makes no distinction between the fictional world and readers' worlds, deepening the subject/reader relationship. As Death proclaims:

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A colour will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away. At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

(Zusak 4)

Death addresses readers directly, which Jenni Adams asserts forces "a realisation of [their] own mortality, while the image of being 'caked in your own body' evokes a

powerful sense of abjection, effectively confronting [readers] with both the terror of death and the extent to which it defies straightforward depiction” (224). Interestingly, Adams continues, “the compassionate and quasi-parental image of Death bearing away the freed soul in his arms...articulates an opposing impulse to console” (224). These oppositional notions create a paradox for Zusak’s Death, who acts as both an agent of and a protector against the biological inevitability of life’s end. Effectively, Zusak manages to introduce the reality of death and its unavoidability, while fostering a relationship that offers readers the chance to embrace this realization.

Other YA texts seek to introduce and recognize death as an intimate, physical presence. S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* is a novel narrated by a teenager named Ponyboy, who depicts his struggles growing up as a member of a gang. Along with his older brothers, Darry and Sodapop, and his best friend, Johnny, Ponyboy is part of a gang called the Greasers, whose lives are constantly in danger as they wage war against their rival gang, the Socs. Midway through the novel, Ponyboy and Johnny are out walking one night when five opposing gang members approach the two friends with intentions to harm them. Ponyboy expresses the altercation vividly: “the Soc caught my arm and twisted it behind my back, and shoved my face into the fountain. I fought, but the hand at the back of my neck was strong...I’m dying, I thought...I fought again desperately but only sucked in water” (56). The Soc eases up shortly afterwards, as teeth-chattering Ponyboy notices Johnny, eyes wide in shock, staring at the image of another Soc, Bob, whose body lies in a pool of his own blood. “I killed him...I killed that boy...They ran when I stabbed him,” Johnny says slowly (Hinton 56-57). Hinton introduces death twice in this incident, and both descriptions are corporeal in nature. Ponyboy thinks he is dying

when a Soc holds him face-down in a fountain, and the physicality of the description focuses on body parts: arm, back, face, hand, and neck. Further, the image of Ponyboy forcefully sucking in water gives an intensity to the scene that emphasizes Ponyboy's physical struggle to breathe. The second description follows Bob's actual death. Again, Hinton focuses on the physicality of the event, describing Bob's body, his pool of blood, and Johnny's face. The second description reinforces the first, as Hinton offers two illustrations of faces being smothered: one in water, the other in a pool of blood. Interestingly, Hinton does not shy from giving readers cues on what to imagine, as Ponyboy describes Johnny watching the body with his "eyes wide" and "staring." This language not only illustrates Johnny's confrontation with death, but it forces *readers* to confront the graphic nature of the event itself.

In *Death and Representation* Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen explain how "Although death poses a metaphysical problem, it is a physical event... This is where death aligns most clearly with sexuality: with the body" (20). Thus, representations of death are, by definition, "part bodily knowledge" (Goodwin 20). The relationship between death and the body is reflected in a variety of YA texts. In a novel about teenager Alexis Riggs working through her grief after her younger brother, Tyler (Ty), shoots himself in the chest, Cynthia Hand's *The Last Time We Say Goodbye* opens with Alexis, the narrator, informing the reader during a therapy session that she "can't visualize the Ty that isn't dead. My brain gravitates toward the end. The body. The coffin. The grave" (3). Alexis's description reflects an intense present that blocks her from thinking of the past or future. The image of her brother has "grown hazy" in her mind; she cannot recall an image of her brother from an earlier time, a happier image that

the therapist recommends she focus on. Similarly to Hinton, Hand uses physical language: brain, body, coffin, and grave. Each word reflects a physical connection to Ty's dead body, illustrating Alexis's confrontation with death, which then allows readers to confront death. Effectively, death in both texts emerges as more than an abstract concept. Ponyboy's attacker ceases his assault at the sight of his friend's dead, inanimate body, and Alexis's vivid memory of Ty's corpse replaces all memories she has of her living brother. By introducing death through physical representations, Hinton and Hand lead both their protagonists and their readers to face death as a part of their corporeal environment. Both texts engage their readers in a dialogue about what death can look like, the nature of a dead body, and how its tangible presence informs the protagonists' everyday thinking. Thus, the use of death as an abstract concept *and* as a physical event work to establish death as an intimate subject for not only protagonists, but readers as well.

Not all teenagers, however, will come face-to-face with death as a part of their physical environment. David Balk and Charles Corr site one study that polled over 1,000 American high school students and found that "90% of those students had experienced the death of someone whom they loved...In nearly 40% of the sample, the loss involved the death of a friend or peer who was roughly their own age," and in "20% of the sample, the students had actually witnessed a death" (19). Thus, while facing death is a large component of adolescence, the experience does not always come by observing death directly, and many YA novels reflect this mimesis in their narratives. Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* is one example of indirect contact with a character who has died. The novel follows Clay Jenson after he receives a box of cassettes that he is instructed to

listen to. When he plays the first of the seven cassettes, he discovers the voice of Hannah Baker, a classmate who recently committed suicide by overdosing on pills, though readers are not informed of the details of her death until later in the novel. On the tapes Hannah outlines how on each of the cassettes are the reasons (i.e. the people) responsible for her depression and why she killed herself. To begin the novel, Clay narrates for the reader how tomorrow at school he will go to class, taught by Mr. Porter, who will “be the last to receive a package with no return address. And in the middle of the room, one desk to the left, will be the desk of Hannah Baker. Empty” (Asher 4). Effectively, there are no “buzz words” for readers to face in this sequence. Death is not described or even mentioned, only implied. Hannah’s fate is eventually revealed, but Asher strategically opens the dialogue about death with the mystery regarding her whereabouts. Why is Hannah gone? Where did she go? Clay and the novel’s readers are left to grapple with her absence, but Asher eases both into the process by focusing on the mystery of her disappearance, instead of confronting them with the harsh physicality of depicting her death. Stephen Chbosky also eases readers into the subject of death in his YA novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, an epistolary novel about a teenage boy, Charlie, learning to make friends as he enters into his first year of high school, while simultaneously mourning the death of his aunt Helen *and* his best friend, Michael. Charlie opens his narration by penning a letter to an unknown narratee, and he promptly describes himself as both “happy and sad” following Michael’s death. Charlie explains how he may have achieved his current mental state, “after my friend Michael stopped going to school one day last spring” (3). Charlie’s principle, Mr. Vaughn, then informs the school that one of their students has “passed on” (Chbosky 3). The language here is important. Charlie’s

description of this event in the passive voice creates distance between death as a subject and the text's readers. Initially, death is an implied act: Michael merely stopped going to school. The death is half personal, half general. The word "friend" suggests a closeness to Charlie; however, as this is the first time Michael has been mentioned as a character, the depth of that connection is left ambiguous. Further, Mr. Vaughn's use of "passed on" perpetuates a generic, passive approach to the subject. He represents the cultural denial of death that permeates much of Western culture. For Mr. Vaughn, the students are better off knowing as little as possible about Michael's suicide; he manipulates the way his students view Michael's death. As a character, he works to represent the contemporary cultural ideals that the novel actively opposes. Mr. Vaughan has no presence in the novel beyond this description, which suggests that his role as a character is to illustrate how passive approaches to topics such as death unnecessarily complicate those topics for already confused adolescents such as Charlie. Further, Charlie spends the entire novel being open and honest, giving readers the impression that growth does not come from hiding or repressing one's feelings.

The Catcher in the Rye is a novel by J. D. Salinger about Holden Caulfield, an adolescent boy who runs away from his school, Pencey Preparatory, as he struggles to connect to the world around him following the death of his brother, Allie. Holden visits old teachers, wanders around New York City, talks to prostitutes, drinks alcohol, and worries constantly about his sister, Phoebe, whom Holden feels responsible for in the wake of Allie's death. Salinger emphasises the relationship between passive and active language once Holden introduces death as a subject. Writing a composition for another student, Holden decides to write about his brother Allie's baseball mitt. Holden explains,

“He had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink. He wrote them on it so that he’d have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up to bat. He’s dead now” (Salinger 49). This sequence is Salinger’s introduction of death in the text, and the shift in voice illustrates a distinct relationship between form and content. As John Green explains:

The gut-punch of those last three words is brilliant: a present tense sentence in a past tense novel. We go from imagining a kid standing in the outfield reading poetry from his glove to knowing that this kid is dead. Not that he died or that he passed away, but that he *is dead now*. The tense reminds us that the dead don’t stop being dead, that they remain dead, and that is how they haunt us. (Course)

Salinger’s writing strategy effectively forces death into the narrative. Just as Green and Zusak and Niven open their texts with an arguably abrasive introduction to death by giving their readers no time to prepare, Salinger executes a similar idea, but much later into the novel. It is the uncertainty of death’s arrival in each of these YA texts that reflects the authentic nature of the subject itself. Further, Salinger does not protect readers from the introduction of the subject. Death is not mentioned subtly, or alluded to by Holden; readers are not given a chance to anticipate its arrival in the text. Just as Holden is left to deal with the effects of Allie’s death, so too must readers. The narrative shifts from a teenage boy with angst to a teenage boy with angst *in mourning*². This shift offers readers a more complex illustration of Holden’s emotional state.

In addition to the way YA authors introduce death in a text, the language they use to describe death is equally important. Roberta Trites contends that in many children’s

² This reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* by critics is relatively new.

novels, “deaths are reported by indirect narration or in the speech of another character,” while deaths in YA novels are often “far more immediate” (120). In other words, in children’s novels deaths tend to be alluded to, while in YA novels deaths are often dealt with directly and intimately. Borrowing from the language of theater, this distinction sets up a dichotomy between what Trites refers to as “onstage” and “offstage” deaths, as YA novels tend not to protect their readers from the intimacy of death through “the filter of indirect narration” (120). *The Catcher in the Rye* offers two specific deaths whose descriptions work in opposition. The first is Holden’s brother Allie’s. Beyond the three-words, “He’s dead now,” Holden only mentions that Allie died of leukemia, before describing how much he loves his brother, and how much readers would have loved his brother as well (Salinger 49). This description is more in line with a children’s novel: the death is offstage, there is mild detail, and a distinct shift in the narrative towards more positive subjects such Holden’s love for his brother. The novel’s second death, however, comes to readers differently. Salinger introduces the death of James Castle, a boy Holden knew at Elkton Hills, a prep school he used to attend. Holden explains how James made a snarky comment towards one student, causing that student to gather some friends and beat on James until he had no choice but to jump out of a window. Here, Holden’s descriptive language shifts:

I was in the *shower* and all, and even I could hear him land outside. But I just thought something fell out of the window, a radio or a desk or something, not a *boy* or anything. Then I heard everybody running through the corridor and down the stairs...and there was old James Castle laying right on the stone steps and all.

He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over the place, and nobody would even go near him. (Salinger 221)

Holden makes an immediate connection between a heavy, physical object – radio or desk – and the human body. Holden not only insists on hearing him land, giving readers a sense of the event’s sound, but the imagery of a radio smashing on stony steps becomes synonymous with a human body responding in the same manner, giving readers a stark visual and auditory image as well. Salinger is forcing death upon readers’ senses when Holden describes the dispersed teeth and blood, adding to the graphic nature of this event. Interestingly, Holden’s views on death evolve with age, which offers a fictional representation of Robert Kastenbaum’s suggestion that, “As the prospect of death becomes a matter of realistically closer concern the subjective time fields quite possibly could come more and more under the influence of the individual’s attitudes towards death” (101). Holden recalls the details of James’s death so vividly in part because he is younger in this scene, and his views of death were not yet influenced by age or experience. Though he recalls the incident later in life, his memory of the event is quite detailed since it was Holden’s first encounter with the subject of death. Conversely, Holden glosses over Allie’s death. He informs readers that Allie is dead, but hardly goes into any detail beyond that description, which is a fictional reflection of Louis Lagrand’s idea that “in the process of grieving, avoidance behavior is commonplace” (4). Holden makes a clear effort to avoid describing his brother’s death. Indeed, he chooses to focus on more positive images such as Allie’s baseball mitt, which Holden imagines when thinking of a topic for an essay. Thus, a distinction can be made in how Holden views death based on how intimately he describes it. His older self reflects the influence of a

culture that actively seeks to deny the subject of death: the older he gets, the less he has to say about it. This development in the narrative works to give readers cause to question Holden's thought process: why does he detail a stranger's death, but say little about the death of someone whom he was close with? By creating a space for readers to question his protagonist, Salinger enters into an important dialogue with his readers about the nature of death, how the bereaved respond to it, and the unpredictability of grief.

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* Chbosky complicates Michael's death when Charlie finds out from another student – instead of from someone in a position of authority – that Michael shot himself. Here, Chbosky tactfully phrases two different descriptions of the same death. Charlie's principal informs the school that Michael has "passed away," while another student claims Michael "killed himself," since his mother "heard the gunshot" whilst playing bridge with Michael's neighbours (Chbosky 3). The difference is small but important, since the description becomes a plot device. At their core, realistic YA novels reflect teenage life as narratively authentic. They "speak to teens in their own language and talk about events and situations that are not always positive, comforting, or easy" (Bodart 31). In *Perks*, imagining the sound of a gunshot is not comfortable for the characters nor readers, but is more accurate than the principal's description, which comes across as disingenuous. Yes, Michael did pass away, but the circumstances were more tragic than the principal allows. On the topic of death, Audrey Gordon and Dennis Klass contend that, "Grave problems can arise when we deny the seriousness of the subject," since people do not often grieve "when they are supposed to" (76). Many YA novels strive to represent such emotional messiness. Charlie's principal is willing to keep his students' understanding of Michael's death to a minimum in an effort

to reduce the need for a genuine response on behalf of the school. The novel reveals that it is difficult, however, to keep information of that caliber secret. Once the true nature of Michael's death emerges, the school responds by gathering Michael's friends to speak with a counselor, which gives Charlie the impression that the only reason the adults acknowledged Michael's suicide is because "they were afraid some of us would kill ourselves" as well (Chbosky 3). Charlie focuses on the administration's disingenuous effort, possibly hindering his ability to understand his friend's death, and contributing to his unstable mental condition. Like Salinger, Chbosky offers a dichotomy between a passive description and an active one, illustrating how graphic depictions adhere to the honesty of teenage language, though even teens who prefer a stark "truth" may prevaricate.

John Green also does not shy from foregrounding corporeal imagery to describe death. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, before Augustus Waters's osteosarcoma eventually claims his life, Hazel receives a call from him at 2:35am: Augustus is at a gas station, and he needs assistance. Upon arriving, Hazel witnesses Augustus sitting in the driver's seat, "covered in his own vomit, his hands pressed to his belly where the G-tube went in" (*The Fault* 244). Days later, Augustus Waters dies in the ICU, "when the cancer, which was made of him, finally stopped his heart, which was also made of him" (*The Fault* 261). Here, the body and death are interconnected. Augustus's body, his cancer, and his death are all described by Hazel in physical terms. Words and phrases such as "covered," "pressed," and "went in" all relate to Augustus's bodily state. Allan Kellehear refers to dying as "the life we live in the urgent space created by the *awareness* that death is soon to engulf us," and Augustus's physical struggle fictionally reflects this idea (2). With

death imminent, and the gas station scene generating urgency, Hazel describes Augustus's state unflinchingly: his inability to move his own vomit-covered body from the vehicle, hands pressed to his stomach to cover an opening in his skin, all emphasize his physical decay. Green's descriptions set up a stark visual for readers, as the sights, sounds, and pains of Augustus's active dying demand their immediate attention. When Hazel says to readers that the cancer and his heart were both *made* of Augustus, Green illustrates how both death and life occupy the same space in the body; both are of equal importance, which shifts perspective of the person being invaded by disease, to the fatal disease as being integral to that body.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Green is equally as explicit in his corporeal depictions. When Alaska Young describes her mother's death to Miles and the Colonel, her experience is starkly intimate:

I came home from school. She gave me a hug and told me to go do my homework in my room so I could watch TV later. I went into my room, and she sat down at the kitchen table, I guess, and then she screamed, and I ran out, and she had fallen over. She was lying on the floor, holding her head and jerking. And I freaked out. I should have called 911, but I just started screaming and crying until finally she stopped jerking, and I thought she had fallen asleep and that whatever had hurt didn't hurt anymore. So I just sat there on the floor with her until my dad got home an hour later. (Green 119)

In presenting Alaska's details in such a bleak way, Green emphasizes the harshness of watching a parent die. Roberta Trites explains that in YA novels, "adolescents learn about their own mortality by witnessing the death of someone who is not necessarily going

gentle into that good night” (120). The image of her mother “holding her head” and “jerking” is almost as shocking for readers as it is for Alaska’s friends. Further, in response to the visual, Alaska’s own body reacts in unison, screaming and crying with every jerk until her mother’s body stops. Thus, though Miles narrates the novel, Green brings readers briefly into the mind of Alaska, who forces the sights and sounds of her haunting experience upon her listeners, whom are remarkably unprotected from its explicit content. By presenting the scene in this way, Green creates a direct confrontation between the text and its readers on the physicality of death, using this passage to generate the opportunity for thoughtful dialogue on the nature of Alaska’s mother’s death.

The relationship between death and the body, and the description of that relationship, proves integral to its representation of authenticity. Sarah Goodwin asserts: “We can figure the relation between death and representation as one that involves not just abstract terms but also real bodies. That is to say, death is not simply a general term, but also a very particular one, represented in and through the body” (6). Contemporary YA authors, particularly those writing realistic fiction, actively strive for this shift from the abstract into the corporeal. In these YA novels, death is permanent and the body should reflect that permanence. As Alexis describes her brother’s body in *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*:

He looked like he was made of wax. One of his eyes were coming open. He had beautiful eyelashes – thick and dark and curved just right – and between the seam of lashes there was a sliver of pale gray, like dirt snow. His lips were almost black. This was before you saw him, before the makeup and the formal clothes and the stiff folded hands. There was a smear of blood on his neck, disappearing

under the sheet. I was struck by the urge to pull back the sheet and see the wound that killed him, something that would explain this terrible mystery of him being this empty thing when I'd just seen him twelve hours earlier. (Hand 374)

For Alexis, the physical state of her brother's body is all she can focus on. His eyes began to pop and his lips lost their colour. His body shut down, becoming an "empty thing" that Alexis could not understand. As this passage indicates, dead bodies in YA texts do many things. They change colour, texture, even stiffen, and they do not return to life. Coming to terms with this physical depiction of mortality is the responsibility of both the characters in the text *and* readers.

Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* issues a similar corporeal description.

When Violet Markey arrives at the Empire Quarry swimming hole looking for Theodore Finch, one of the unique locations they visited earlier in the novel, what she finds is rather haunting. With his car parked off to the side, his clothes folded neatly in a pile, Violet realizes Finch has committed suicide, and must watch as the authorities bring his body to the surface, "swollen and bloated and blue" (Niven 337). Similarly to Hand's depiction, a change in form and colour is the focus of Niven's representation. When someone drowns, the body fills with water causing an expansion in its form, and Niven does not mince words. The body is no longer alive and vibrant, but a "dead, dead blue thing" (Niven 338). Although short in nature, this description conveys a compelling image of a drowned body, providing Violet and readers the opportunity to react viscerally, another example of how YA authors enable their readers to confront the graphic nature of death.

For characters in contemporary YA texts, accepting death's initial presence can be difficult. Sandra DeMinco argues that in many YA novels, "A young adult's reactions to death and its aftermath may be similar to that of an adult but [as Joseph Glass adds] 'with fewer resources and abilities and less maturity to deal with them'" ("Young Adult"). Markus Zusak illustrates this lack of abilities in *The Book Thief* when Liesel Meminger loses her composure in response to her friend Rudy's death. Rudy and Liesel become close friends as the novel develops, with Rudy developing feelings for her, but when the street they live on is bombed in the midst of war, everyone she knows dies, including Rudy, which devastates Liesel. As the narrator Death explains:

‘Rudy’, she sobbed, ‘wake up...’ She grabbed him by his shirt...gave him just the slightest disbelieving shake...‘Rudy, please’. The tears grappled with her face.

‘Rudy, please, wake up, Goddamn it, wake up, I love you. Come on, Rudy, come on...I love you, wake up, wake up, wake up’...But the boy did not wake. (Zusak 535)

Liesel is a girl distraught with grief and in utter denial of Rudy's death. The repetition of her requests for Rudy to wake highlights the cruel hopelessness of her situation: Rudy is dead, and there is nothing she can do to change that fact. Liesel's actions also reflect what Jacques Derrida refers to as a duty "To occupy [a dead friend's] silence or to take up speech oneself only in order, if this is possible, to give it back to him" (95). By shouting at Rudy to wake up, Liesel strives to give Rudy his speech back, so that he may live and express himself once again. She vocalizes herself relentlessly in order to fill the void left by Rudy's silence, desperately seeking a reaction from his lifeless body. Interestingly, Liesel begs Rudy to "wake up," as if to displace death with the idea that he is just

sleeping. However, Liesel's efforts remain ineffective, her words have no purchase in a realistically presented world, as Zusak uses this passage to illustrate the permanence of death, even for children. Further, the intense present of the adolescent perspective reveals itself in this scene, as Liesel cannot comprehend anything outside the body. She is lost in disbelief and overwhelmed with anguish, as she grabs at and begs Rudy's *body* to respond to her pleas. Thus, Zusak presents readers with the essence of Liesel's difficulty in the aftermath of Rudy's death: no matter how hard, she tries she does not have the resources or ability to bring him back to life, and that is the reality she must live with.

The onstage death and the hopeless attempts to prevent it have recently become hallmarks of the YA genre. Trites argues, "This confrontation with death seems essential for adolescents to gain knowledge of death's power and of their own powerlessness over it" (120). Ponyboy faces a few significant deaths in *The Outsiders*, and constantly finds himself unable to intervene. For example, in response to Johnny's death, Ponyboy states: "I tried to say something, but I couldn't make a sound" (Hinton 149). In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Clay Jenson laments his inability to prevent Hannah Baker's suicide which causes him tremendous grief. "With my face pressed against the bars, I begin to cry. If anyone is walking through the park, I know they can hear me...I would have helped her if she'd only let me. I would have helped her because I want her to stay alive" (Asher 280). Clay struggles with his ineffectiveness, collapsing into his emotions and wailing in a public setting with no regard for how others view him. Just as Clay must come to terms with Hannah's death, so too must readers, whom are left to contemplate with Clay the guilt of acting "too little, too late."

YA author Julie Halpern approaches the notion of powerlessness with a more humorous tone. Alex Buckley is *The F—It List*'s heavily sarcastic narrator, and even in moments of emotional distress – such as reacting to the idea that her best friend could die from cancer – Alex clings to humour. In a moment of crisis Alex proclaims:

Nothing I did ever helped anyone. I couldn't stop my dad or Leo's brother from dying. I couldn't stop Becca from getting cancer. She could still die. My mom could die. My brothers. What if there were a zombie attack, and I was the last person left on earth? Everyone around me dying, everyone becoming the undead, and I was the only one left living? (Halpern 224)

Halpern's shift to hyperbole works to undercut the building emotional tension within Alex. The passage begins with a serious recognition of Alex's helplessness at stopping the deaths around her, and her inability to stop potential deaths from occurring, which portrays her emotional distress. Her worries build upon themselves, adding to her grief and understanding of her role in relation to death as a subject. Although Alex may not be entirely aware of how ridiculous her zombie scenario sounds, Halpern allows readers to recognize the escalation of Alex's remarks from sincere into the realm of the ridiculous, offering a humorous depiction of the mind's tendency to be its own worst enemy. Readers can laugh at this passage in an effort to remind themselves that everyone feels helpless at times, as the passage acts as an outlet for both Alex and readers. By presenting to herself a horrible future that she will not *actually* have to experience, the zombie apocalypse allows for humour to fit within the context of uncontrollable death, which helps ease the process of confronting a difficult subject.

Echoing Liesel's efforts to wake Rudy in *The Book Thief*, Alexis describes standing over her brother's dead body in *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, when "Mom stepped forward and laid shaking hands on Ty's chest, like maybe she could wake him, and when he didn't stir, she tipped her head back and a sound came out of her that was sheer pain" (Hand 373). This scene reflects Derrida's notion that one attempts "to occupy [a dead friend's] silence" in hopes of giving the dead a voice (95). Readers watch Alexis's mom make an effort that proves pointless in bringing life to a dead character, yet nevertheless offers characters and readers visual relief. The dead do not come back. Cynthia Hand subverts DeMinco's notion that young adults may react to death similarly to adults but with less maturity, when it is Alexis's mom who loses her composure upon witnessing Ty's body, while Alexis remains relatively calm. Alexis describes her mom's scream as "a mix of a howl and wail that didn't even sound like a voice anymore, that didn't sound exactly human," while Alexis proclaims, "All I wanted to do was stand and stare at Ty" (Hand 374). This juxtaposition illustrates two polar opposite reactions possible in an event of this nature. One character loses emotional control, and one becomes completely numb. Psychologists and psychotherapists argue that when confronted with death, the mind's defensive responses can be overwhelmed, "often leading to extreme reactions" (Balk 7). Thus, because these professionals portray polarized emotions as characteristic responses to a loved one's death, contemporary YA authors recognize the importance of depicting such reactions to their readers. In doing so, YA authors create a spectrum of responses that readers can interact with throughout each narrative.

In fact, many characters in YA texts experience a number of common emotional reactions when confronting death in the immediate present. One common reaction is to respond with disbelief. Just as Liesel gave Rudy a “disbelieving” shake, frequent reactions to an immediate death is the rejection of its possibility. When something tragic occurs it is not surprising for disbelief to intervene on the mind’s behalf; “it’s natural to close your eyes to what is hurtful” (Grollman 14). Such psychology tends to translate onto the pages of YA novels in interesting ways. Ponyboy responds to Johnny’s death by stating: “Johnny was dead. But he wasn’t. That still body back in the hospital wasn’t Johnny. Johnny was somewhere else – maybe asleep in the lot, or playing the pinball machine in the bowling alley...I convinced myself that he wasn’t dead” (Hinton 150). After Johnny dies, Ponyboy rejects the idea that Johnny will never come back into his life. He tries to convince himself that Johnny is well, and not in the sense of a heavenly existence, but alive somewhere in the natural world. More importantly, Ponyboy separates his image of Johnny from the dead body. Johnny cannot be the body in front of him at the hospital because Johnny is always available; Johnny is always there for him. He may be asleep somewhere or off playing pinball, but Johnny is always around if Ponyboy needs him. If Johnny *is* the body before Ponyboy’s eyes then it means that he is never coming back to life, and Ponyboy finds that reality unacceptable.

In *All the Bright Places* Violet Markey cannot fathom Theodore’s death, proclaiming to first-responders when they ask her to identify his body: “That’s not him. That is a swollen, bloated, dead, dead blue thing, and I can’t identify it because I’ve never seen it before” (Niven 337-338). Similar to Ponyboy, Violet separates her image of Theodore from the dead body in the water. She convinces herself that it cannot be the

Theodore she knows and loves because she does not recognize what is in front of her. In Suzette Mayr's *Monoceros*, Faraday "cannot believe she now personally knows a person who is dead" (20). The irony here is that Faraday does not know Patrick Furey *personally*. Patrick is merely a boy who bought an iced cappuccino from her one time, and they shared a few classes. What the irony of Faraday's thought reveals is how deeply a death can affect those *outside* the deceased's immediate social circle. Even those who knew little about Patrick feel his absence at school. His death disturbs the social atmosphere: a result Faraday struggles to comprehend. Thus, reconstructing reality in these texts acts as a response to the intensity of emotions felt by characters when confronting death in the immediate presence.

For many YA authors, the descriptions of characters' disbelief when confronting an immediate death reflects one of Ernest Becker's strands of denial: to try to exert control over the anxiety death produces. John Stephenson argues, "As the reality of death impinges upon our consciousness, we respond to our growing anxiety by repressing the subject" (35). By repressing the fact of death, the mind keeps the deceased alive. Fictional reflections of this psychology are found in many YA novels such as *Looking for Alaska*, where John Green illustrates how relieving the act of repressing death can be in the immediate sense. Speaking of Alaska Young, Miles determines, "She's not dead. She's alive. She's alive somewhere...She's just playing a trick on us," which allows Miles to feel "much better, because she had not died at all" (141). This response echoes Ponyboy's reaction to seeing Johnny's dead body. Miles likewise convinces himself that Alaska is not dead but alive somewhere nearby. He does not need any firm details regarding her whereabouts, he just needs to convince himself that she is still alive, well,

and capable of returning to him at some future point in time. By fixating on this delusion, Miles, at least temporarily, distracts himself from the idea that Alaska is never coming back to life. Further, the delusion actually causes him to *feel better*, suggesting that it may be beneficial to one's health to perpetuate one's delusion no matter how unrealistic. Here, Green puts readers at an interesting crossroad. Up until this point in the story there is no indication that Alaska has or will come back to life, suggesting that Green is emphasizing for readers that Miles is unable to accept the reality he lives in, and as a result will cause some of those readers to start disconnecting from Green's protagonist for acting so foolishly. However, readers experiencing a similar state of denial about their own grief may empathize with Miles's efforts, drawing them closer to him as a character in the text. This particular passage works to create a fissure between potential readers: some will find Miles's happy delusions irritating – as do some characters in the novel – others will find themselves understanding Miles's struggle, connecting with him in a new way. On the topic of readers connecting to characters, Samuel and Claire Gladding argue:

“Behaviorally, principle characters...may model actions for the reader participant and ‘show’ him or her proper and appropriate ways of relating to self or others” (Gladding).

Thus, Miles's reaction to Alaska's death gives readers the opportunity to either connect with or reject his denial, or perhaps experience both at once. Audrey Gordon and Dennis Klass discuss the dangers of ignoring the severity of a given situation, but for someone who is experiencing his first real death, death becomes almost unfathomable (76). As Miles naively maintains: “People do not just die” (Green 142). Regardless of which path readers take in response to this notion, Green's passage enforces a deeper effect: he enables readers to confront their views on facing an intimate death. By opening a social

space for readers to engage with characters on the nature of disbelief, Green, Niven, Mayr, and Zusak reflect a variety of approaches to a component of grief (disbelief) that can be difficult for adolescent readers to understand, and put readers into a third-party position, observing principle characters as they grapple with denial and delusions.

Another reaction to death in YA literature is more physical, sometimes violent, which can arise as a response to feeling powerless to death. When one cannot prevent death in the physical sense, one may then express oneself physically, as “the body reacts...to the tragedy in your life” (Stephenson 25), and many YA novels incorporate this idea into their narratives. In his texts, John Green depicts both the notion of acting out aggressively in response to death, *and* the idea of one’s body reacting involuntarily violent. Following Augustus’s death in *The Fault in Our Stars*, Augustus’s friend Isaac, another member of the support group Hazel joins, curses “the universe and God himself” while searching for “trophies to break,” emphasizing his desire to express himself physically (262). This reaction is a call-back to an event earlier in the novel, when Augustus enabled Isaac to vent his frustration over a break-up by breaking a number of his basketball trophies (*The Fault* 62). Both events connect directly to the idea of a physical response to the overwhelming nature of grief; however, Green is quick to point out how ineffective such a reaction is. While it may seem easy to purposefully react violently to grief – especially for teenagers full of intense hormones – Augustus is careful to remind Isaac, who does not feel any better post-outrage about the break-up, that there is a reason he feels the same: “[Pain] demands to be felt” (*The Fault* 63). This response emphasizes how important it is not to hide from one’s grief: no matter how many trophies Isaac smashes it will not fix his romantic relationship, nor will it later bring Augustus

back to life. Thus, Green is careful about how he depicts such acts of violence, showing the appeal, but also the lack of satisfaction that mere violence provides the characters.

In *Looking for Alaska* Green depicts how the body is capable of responding to death on its own, producing a violent reaction internally. Miles exclaims following Alaska's death:

I stood up and ran outside. I made it to the trash can outside of the gym...and heaved toward Gatorade bottles and half-eaten McDonald's. But nothing came out. I just heaved, my stomach muscle's tightening and my throat opening and a gasping, guttural *belch*, going through the motions of vomiting over and over again. (Green 140)

Here, Miles loses some control of his body. He is so disgusted by the notion of Alaska's death that he cannot stop himself from dry heaving. According to psychologist Louis Lagrand, "There are literally hundreds of aches, pains, and physical responses associated with loss" that "vary in intensity" (43). This passage in Green's novel reflects such psychology in very corporeal ways. Miles's reactions stem from his gut, whereas Chip (also referred to as "The Colonel") responds vocally. "The Colonel was screaming," Miles explains. "He would inhale, and then scream. Inhale. Scream. Inhale. Scream" (Green 140). Moreover, Green continues to make use of aggressive language in both passages. He draws attention towards corporeal words such as "stomach" and "throat," as well as actions such as "gasping," "scream," "tightening," and "heaving." As a result, Green illustrates the intense and graphic nature of the body, offering readers a reflection of how severe confronting death can be for some characters. Importantly, each character responds differently to Alaska's death, reinforcing the idea that responses to death vary

among individuals, which includes levels of intensity. Chip's reaction is intense, but not *as* intense as Miles's.

Lagrand also contends that crying is “probably the most helpful physiological response for the body. It is a pathway of release for emotions gone awry. Crying must not merely be permitted, it must be encouraged” (42). In an effort to illustrate the importance of crying as healing release, contemporary YA authors are quick not only to present crying as a suitable response but depict crying as a response from adolescents and adults alike. As adolescents enter into adulthood it is important to know that adults cry. Just before the news of Alaska's death breaks, the school's headmaster looks at Miles: “He was crying, noiselessly. Tears just rolled from his eyes to his chin and then fell onto his corduroy pants...His eyes blinking the tears down his face, the [headmaster] looked, for all the world, sorry” (Green 139). When Augustus's mother calls Hazel regarding his death, “She was just crying on the other end of the line” (*The Fault* 261). Alexis's mom cries in *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, Alex's mother cries in *The F—It List*, and when Liesel wakes to the sight of her dead brother in *The Book Thief*, “There was a woman wailing. A girl stood numbly next to her” (Zusak 22). Here, Zusak juxtaposes polarizing emotions. A loved one dies; a still-living adult character cries while another stands quiet. The use of tears helps to portray the overwhelming grief. Lagrand maintains the cultural gender-norm that “males tend to repress their tears much more than females, believing it to be a show of strength if they do not cry” (42). In an effort to subvert that cultural perception, YA authors often illustrate a mix of boys and girls crying: Clay Jenson cries in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the school's male headmaster cries in *Looking for Alaska*, and Chbosky's Charlie establishes himself early in the novel as “pretty emotional” (8). In the

YA realm, crying is an acceptable form of physical expression, and both adolescent boys and girls in these books, witness their parents cry, and even stereotypically male authority figures cry. Such projections naturalize the act of crying, and the physical presence of tears, as a “normal,” even helpful, response to death.

Lastly, the kinds of death YA texts introduce are important for readers to confront. Whether it is murder (*The Outsiders*), suicide (*The Last Time We Say Goodbye*), car accident (*Looking for Alaska*), terminal illness (*The Fault in Our Stars*), or a casualty of war (*The Book Thief*), death occurs in a variety of ways. The seemingly random nature of its depiction in YA novels reflects the uncertainty of death’s nature. There are no forms of death kept from adolescent eyes. Whether in the aforementioned acts or through the characters who die – a friend, a lover, a parent, a sibling, among others – death is not bound by human wishes. Jacques Derrida maintains that when two people form a relationship, “one must always go before the other,” which is “not just a law of destiny to which we all must succumb but a law of friendship that friends must acknowledge” (13). While acknowledging the idea that a friend will die problematizes Western culture’s notion of avoiding the realities of death, many YA texts foster the opportunity for readers to reach such a conclusion. These YA texts act as examples of characters coming to terms with the loss of either a loved one or an acquaintance, which brings to readers’ attention the idea that those they know are bound to die eventually. Therefore it is important for adolescents to be aware of the potential of death in their lives, *and* what that death could look like.

There tend to be two kinds of death, however, that appear frequently in YA texts. The first is suicide, which comes in many forms. In *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*,

Theodore drowns himself; in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* Michael shoots himself; in *Monoceros* Patrick hangs himself; and in *Thirteen Reasons Why* Hannah overdoses on pills. These occurrences appear as fictional representations of Syed Husain and Trish Vandriver's notion that, "Suicide is seen more and more clearly as the way out of a desperate situation, which has left the adolescent feeling confused, angry, and frightened" (91). In fact, YA writers convey all these emotions. In *Monoceros*, Patrick Furey is angry about his inability to form a meaningful relationship with another boy, Ginger, while simultaneously frightened of the threats against his life by Ginger's girlfriend, Petra (Mayr 10). That the novel begins with his death also contributes to the unexpected nature in which suicides tend to occur. Like the characters in the text, readers are forced to confront Patrick's death immediately, before spending the length of the novel trying to figure out why he committed the act, and what that means. By starting with Patrick's death, the narrative reflects how there is no going back after a suicide, only forward.

Thirteen Reasons Why is a novel dedicated entirely to the compartmentalization of Hannah Baker's reasons for ending her life, as the novel is organized into chapters that each represent one of the "thirteen reasons" she killed herself. As mentioned, the novel opens with Clay Jenson receiving a box of cassettes. Pressing play on his cassette player, he hears Hannah's voice: "Hello, boys and girls...I hope you're ready, because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why" (Asher 7). As the novel progresses Clay begins to learn his role in what eventually led Hannah to suicide, giving readers a frame-by-frame breakdown of Hannah's descent into a mindset where she no longer saw living as a viable option. The impact of bullying can be difficult for some

teens to understand, particularly ones who have not had to experience its effects, and Asher's methodical breakdown of Hannah's personal journey offers a multitude of opportunities for readers to pause and reflect about the consequences of their actions, the permanence of death, and its effects on others.

Another common death in YA novels tends to relate to a form of illness. Often mental illness effectively acts as a link to suicide. In *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, Ty struggles with depression and eventually shoots himself. In *All the Bright Places*, Theodore suffers from depression and anxiety and eventually drowns himself. Mental illnesses left unchecked, say psychologists, can lead to severe consequences for teenagers: "The lonely, depressed adolescent will perceive only that there are many more well-functioning peers, thereby depleting even further those reserves of self-esteem that thus far had defended against hopelessness. The result may be suicide" (Balk 154). For YA authors, understanding the role mental illness plays in the depictions of these horrific events may help readers make connections between themselves and the characters. If readers see a depressed character acting a certain way and recognizes those traits in themselves, it could act as a catalyst for change. Literary critic Paula S. Berger states that by approaching these difficult issues "within the safe confines of a novel...adolescent [readers]...can maintain discrete distance while absorbing potentially useful information" (14). In other words, while not a primary function, YA novels may offer readers some insight into the mind of an emotionally fragile teenager, and what signs to look for if that teen has a mental illness. More importantly, "Young adult novels on suicide also serve the function of demystifying suicide as well as eradicating any romantic notions adolescents may have" on the subject (Berger 15). As a result, YA texts dealing with

suicide work as entertaining *and* educational pieces of literature, forcing readers to acknowledge how much they know and how much they do not know on the subject of suicide, and the implications of death. Recognizing that many North American teens share similar issues is a large element of combating the isolation often felt by those caught in transition between childhood and adulthood, and many YA texts offer readers an opportunity to observe how similar life is for the books' characters. These YA texts uncover the denial of death, and often especially suicide, imposed by much of Western culture, offering the opportunity for adolescent readers to learn to live more compassionate, informed lives.

It is also important for teens not to ignore the realities of those with a terminal illness, and many YA novels offer the opportunity for readers to confront their notions of a terminal adolescent. In *The Fault in Our Stars* Hazel Grace suffers from thyroid cancer, as well as a “long-settled satellite colony” in her lungs” (5). She is terminally ill and refers to herself as a “grenade” just waiting to go off (99). Alex’s friend Becca in *The Fault in Our Stars* is not technically terminally ill, but her cancer is quite active and could take her life at any time.³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross contends that “those who can talk about terminal illness will find their patients better able to face and acknowledge it” (28-29). Though Kübler-Ross speaks of doctors, her advice extends to authors as well. When YA authors offer a seemingly authentic depiction of the ebbs and flows of a terminal disease, and authors write about adolescents experiencing terminal illnesses, then teen readers are given the opportunity to observe some of the difficulties unique to a form of death that is

³ Other examples include: Jesse Andrews’s *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, where Rachel Kushner’s terminal cancer does claim her life; and Jenny Downham’s *Before I Die*, where Tessa Scott’s acute lymphoblastic leukemia turns terminal and kills her as well.

often more drawn out than other kinds. Principle characters with terminally illnesses in YA texts then become a textual insight for teen readers into the experiences of facing certain diseases, which further uncovers the cultural denial of death. As well, by approaching this topic in a novel, teen readers delve into a tragic narrative, from which they may emerge at “the end” whole and even elated following their experience.

How deaths are described, how they are visually portrayed, can be as shocking as they are influential. Hazel Grace reminds readers that depression is not a side effect of cancer: “Depression is a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really)” (*The Fault* 3). Hazel’s focus in this passage is to draw death to the forefront of readers’ attention. However, while death is the biological inevitability all living organisms must face, Hazel does not suggest that dying or watching friends and family die will become easier when one understands this fact. Indeed, Hazel calls herself a “grenade” at the very moment in the novel when she tries to emotionally withdraw from friends and family, in the hopes of lessening the devastation her death will have on others. Thus, Hazel actively opposes attempts to deny her death, choosing instead to embrace her terminal state. If literature is a reflection of its time, then contemporary YA authors of realistic fiction are working diligently to subvert a cultural denial of death. Between North American school shootings, increasing rates of suicide, illnesses, and an ever expanding adolescent population, the prevalence of death is rampant for contemporary young adults. YA authors carry a great deal of responsibility as they attempt to strengthen the dialogue between young readers and the subject of death; in their depictions they allow today’s youth emotional space to confront such a difficult subject.

Chapter Two

“Nobody Taught Us to Quit”: Making Mourning Active

I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand...I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands...I need to know that these people exist. I think you of all people are alive and appreciate what that means. At least I hope you do because other people look to you for strength and friendship and it's that simple. At least that's what I've heard. (Chbosky 2)

Fifteen-year-old Charlie's opening narration in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* reflects many components of a literary work of mourning. For Charlie, the narratee is special for not only being “alive,” but for being someone who appreciates that fact. This indicates that Charlie knows someone who is dead and/or did not appreciate being alive. Coupled with needing to know that people such as his narratee “exist,” Charlie suggests to readers that the dead person was close to him, as the deceased's absence has given Charlie doubts about how he views the people around him. He is no longer sure if people “listen” or “understand” him, signifying that the person he lost may have held that role in his life. Further, Charlie expresses hope that through his letters his narratee will understand him because he needs – indicating desperation – “strength” and “friendship,” suggesting that Charlie feels weak and alone. Each sentence in this passage contributes to the idea that Charlie is mourning the loss of someone close. His response, a literary one, is to pen letters to not only work through his newfound loneliness but the grief brought on by his recent loss. Although he is unsure if writing through his grief will help, he has “heard” it may be a start, and thus his letter writing is his attempt to enact his own healing.

Chobosky's novel addresses some interesting questions: what does it mean to mourn the death of a loved one? How does the human mind grapple with the resulting complex emotions? Sigmund Freud provides a useful definition for what it means to mourn a significant loss. Freud defines mourning as work; it is inherently action-based. Mourning involves attempts by the mind to remove any attachment to the lost love object, and these attempts are "carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy" (Freud 245). Here, mourning indicates a sense of progression where bereaved people move from one emotional state to another as they work through their grief.

Kathleen Woodward defines Freud's notion of work as follows:

[Mourning] is psychic work which has a precise purpose and goal: to "free" ourselves from the emotional bonds which have tied us to the person we loved so that we may "invest" that energy elsewhere, to "detach" ourselves so that we may be "uninhibited." Mourning is "necessary." It denotes a process which takes place over a long period of time. It is slow, infinitesimally so, as we simultaneously psychically cling to what it lost. (85)

Psychically clinging to what is lost also reflects some contemporary grief theories, which suggest "a shift away from the presumption that successful grieving requires withdrawal of psychic energy from the one who has died," favouring the recognition of healthy "symbolic bonds with the deceased person," and focusing on "the possibility of life-enhancing 'post-traumatic growth' as one integrates the lessons of loss," (Neimeyer 3-4). Here, notions of "work" and "growth" are still deeply connected. While bereaved people may maintain their connections to the deceased, growing from their "lessons of loss" still requires effort and work; it is still action-based. Many YA novels reflect this notion of

working through mourning in their narratives. Christian Riegel argues that literary works of mourning, “as artistic constructs,” serve two important functions: “For the individual creator, the act of writing itself often performs a psychic function and becomes the work that is required to mourn loss, and for the receptors of the text, the work provides instructive models for coping” (XVIII). Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, among many other characters in YA texts, exemplifies Riegel’s theory, as writing and sharing their stories function as examples of working through their grief. Further, while not their primary purpose, many YA texts simultaneously act as social spaces for teen readers to participate in shared mourning practices with the texts’ protagonists, using a shared language of grief to open a dialogue between the text and teens experiencing their own personal traumas, which offers readers the opportunity to openly reflect on their own views of mourning.

For some protagonists in YA novels, working through grief means grappling with a mixture of complex emotions. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie explains the complexity of his emotional state in the novel’s opening letter. Charlie writes: “So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I’m still trying to figure out how that could be” (Chbosky 2). In this passage Charlie is open about his confusion. He does not drift between feeling happy and then sad, rather he feels both simultaneously. Michelle Falkoff’s *Playlist for the Dead* is a novel about Sam, whose best friend Hayden commits suicide and leaves Sam a playlist of songs to listen to. Over the course of the novel Sam starts to notice terrible things happening to the bullies who bothered Hayden while he was alive, and Sam puts it on himself to figure out why. Initially, Sam does not understand how to handle feeling multiple emotions in the wake

of Hayden's death: "Laughing felt wrong, but also good, and the fact that it made me feel good also made me feel guilty, which brought me back to wrong. Really, I didn't know how to feel" (6). Like Charlie, Sam struggles with understanding his emotional state. Both characters depict someone experiencing deep trauma for the first time, and both characters express that it feels unnatural to feel joy in the midst of loss. "There is something counterintuitive about putting positive emotion and grief in the same sentence," argues George Bonanno (36). "Historically, positive emotions received almost no attention in the bereavement literature...It was assumed that a joyous emotion during grieving could only interfere with or suppress the normal process of working through loss" (Bonanno 36). Many characters in YA texts represent a subversion of Bonanno's observation. Positive emotions are as common as negative emotions when grieving, and Chbosky continues to illustrate this subversion as *Perks* develops. For example, Charlie decides to give his friend Patrick a mixed tape for Christmas with a select group of songs that Patrick enjoys on the first side, and a collection of songs that Charlie enjoys on the second side. Charlie writes: "I hope Patrick likes it as much as I do. Especially the second side. I hope it's the kind of second side that he can listen to whenever he drives alone and feel like he belongs to something whenever he's sad. I hope I can be that for him" (Chbosky 62). Here, Charlie begins to recognize the power of positive emotions in the midst of grief, and although he may not fully understand how it is possible to feel two different things at the same time, he hopes that he can help Patrick find happiness and meaning, especially when sad. Charlie's efforts illustrate for readers that just because one feels sad does not mean that one is not capable of finding joy.

In Julie Halpern's *The F—It List*, Alex Buckley races to her friend Becca Mason's house after learning she has cancer, and Becca's mother is distraught with grief. Although Becca is not dead, her mother is emotionally fragile, so when Alex helps Becca shave her head in preparation for the chemotherapy, "tears and shudders erupted" from Becca's mom (Halpern 36). Becca, in response to her mother's hysterics, explains, "I'm fine without hair. Just pretend it's for a big role starring opposite Hugh Jackman" (Halpern 37). What happens next is a narrative reflection of Bonanno's suggestion that occasional moments of joy act as "respite from the trench of sadness that makes grief bearable" (47). Mrs. Mason, witnessing the image of her daughter, head shaved and prepped for medicinal treatment, succumbs to her grief in an emotional outburst. But her daughter's humorous commentary on the matter provides a necessary distraction. Alex says, "I saw the smile I had hoped for spread across her mom's face. She loved Hugh Jackman" (Halpern 37). Mrs. Mason is able to put aside the awfulness of her daughter's condition in favour of imagining a more positive scenario, one where her daughter co-stars with a favourite actor. Bonanno writes: "We move back and forth emotionally. We focus on the pain...its implications, its meanings, and then our minds swing back toward the immediate world, other people, and what is going on in the present. We temporarily lighten up and connect with those around us" (40). The exchange between Becca and her mom narratively reflects this idea, as Becca's joke causes an emotional shift in her mother that allows her to escape her own fixations, return to the present moment, and delight in her daughter's humour. This scene is subtle but effective, reminding readers that when it comes to grief, sadness and happiness are not mutually exclusive. Initially Mrs. Mason's grief does render her bereft of joy. Indeed, her mourning reflects what

Alessia Ricciardi refers to as “performance of a work,” or mourning as a “psychically transformative activity” (21). It takes sincere effort on Mrs. Mason’s behalf to smile when her daughter makes a joke, and it is that action-based motive that reflects Ricciardi and Freud’s notion of working through the mourning process.

Moments of joy and happiness are spliced into many contemporary YA novels that deal with bereavement, strong reminders for readers that tragedy can provoke oscillating emotions. *The Book Thief*’s Liesel Meminger experiences nightly nightmares following her brother’s death, but whenever her surrogate Papa, Hans Hubermann, plays the accordion for her, it causes her to “grin herself stupid” (Zusak 37). In *All the Bright Places*, Violet Markey, mourning the loss of Theodore Finch, climbs to the top of Purina Tower with a group of friends, when they each begin to dance and laugh boisterously. Violet exclaims, “I have to lie back and hold my sides because the laughter has taken me by surprise. It’s the first time I remember laughing like this in a long, long time” (Niven 368). This passage is a narrative reflection of Bonnano’s idea that robust laughter and sincere smiling are healthy forms of expression during periods of grief because they give the mind a break; “they allow us to come up for air, to breathe” (39). John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* offers an example of a more elaborate representation of embracing joy in the midst of grief. Following Alaska Young’s death, Miles Halter and many of the other students and administrators at Culver Creek Academy are left to finish their semester in bereavement. Miles, channelling Alaska’s love for school pranks, gathers his friends and plays a prank during the end of term assembly, as the crowd “erupted with laughter and deafening, sustained applause – the largest ovation by a good measure in Speaker Day history” (Green 209). Even the school’s principal, “The Eagle,” who

endures the weight of the prank, informs Miles following the assembly, “Don’t ever do anything like that again...But, Lord, ‘subverting the patriarchal paradigm’ – it’s like she wrote the speech,” before he smiles and walks away (Green 210). The principal recognizes that the students could use a reason to smile, and while he eventually puts an end to the prank, he does not punish anyone for its occurrence. In fact, he manages to smile himself. Kevin Newmark contends that some authors use the shock of laughter in their writing to “bring us face to face with a radical discrepancy or disjunction within the very composition of the human self” (242). In many YA novels laughter works in the same way. “The Eagle” recognizes the laughter and joy Miles generates with his prank, though he also understands its inappropriateness, bringing him to face a contradiction within himself: does he stop the prank immediately or let it play out briefly? By smiling at Miles and the other students before leaving their presence, “The Eagle” reveals that the prank moved him on some level as well. Both parties mourn the death of Alaska, but when one group finds a reason to smile in grief, “The Eagle” finds a reason to smile as well. While the default emotion in response to death in many YA texts may be sadness or deep sorrow, moments of laughter emphasize the complexity of grief, and the back and forth nature of working through mourning.

For principle characters, sharing their stories functions as a “staging ground for emotion,” where reflecting on times when they are either happy or sad (or both) becomes a performative component of working through their grief, while simultaneously working as a “focalizer” for readers and *their* grief, “which they can see reflected to them in the literary work” (Riegel XIX). Observing principle characters laughing in the text, or offering readers a chance to laugh on their own, serves the purpose of generating a

dialogue between the text and readers about the complex nature of grief. Jonathan Hart argues that understanding the work of mourning can be found in the “making, reading and interpretation of literature and life,” which suggests that adolescents can benefit from the experience of *reading* about the grief work written in many YA novels (X).

Principle characters working through complex emotions in YA texts often involves fits of anger as well, though responses to anger can differ in many ways. Holden Caulfield reacts to his brother’s death in *The Catcher in the Rye* by smashing in all the windows of his family’s garage, giving his parents the idea that he needs to be psychoanalyzed (Salinger 50). His reaction comes from a pure state of confusion, while illustrating the emotional connection Holden feels for his brother, Allie. “It was a very stupid thing to do, I’ll admit,” says Holden, “but I hardly didn’t even know what was going on, and you didn’t know Allie” (Salinger 50). Thus, Holden indicates to readers that he knows his actions do not make sense, but they do not always have to when grief becomes a part of everyday life. Freud contends that mourning and grief work “involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life,” and Holden is conscious enough of his actions to inform readers that his violent outburst was abnormal but also justified (243). In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel Lancaster reacts angrily upon entering her car moments after Augustus Waters’s funeral, only to find Peter Van Houten, the man who treats Hazel and Augustus horribly when they visit him in Amsterdam earlier in the novel, sitting in the backseat. “Ah ah ah ah GET OUT OF MY CAR,” she shrieks in a moment’s rage, followed by a threat to dial nine-one-one (*The Fault* 283). When Van Houten begins to break down emotionally, Hazels thinks bitterly, “As if he had the right to cry over Gus. Van Houten was just another of the endless mourners who did not know him, another

too-late lamentation on his [Facebook] wall” (*The Fault* 283). Hazel’s bitter reaction stems from the events in Amsterdam, where Van Houten treats them poorly due to his own anger in grief. During their brief conversation in the car, however, Hazel comes to realize that Van Houten lost his eight-year-old daughter to cancer years before Hazel and Augustus visited him: “I considered the honesty with which he had written about cancer kids; the fact that he couldn’t speak to me in Amsterdam except to ask me if I’d dressed like her on purpose; his shittiness around me and Augustus; his aching question about the relationship between pain’s eternity and its value” (*The Fault* 285). Van Houten thought that Hazel had come to mock his loss, and he reacted angrily, but now he needed to apologize. In short, both Hazel and Van Houten come to regret their anger and resolve their differences. By depicting these two very different characters reacting (and acting) quite differently to a similar emotion, Green illustrates the unique qualities of working through mourning. Holden, Hazel, and Van Houten illustrate for readers the complex nature of mourning: sometimes one thinks clearly and calmly; sometimes one thinks questionably and destructively.

Principle characters may also direct their anger away from another individual and towards a higher being. In *Monoceros*, Gretta Furey – Patrick Furey’s mother and a devoted Catholic – begins to deny the existence of God and Hell after Patrick commits suicide, though she keeps a rosary “for decoration, for irony” (Mayr 157). Alex Buckley expresses considerable anger in *The F—It List* when friends and family suggest that her father’s death was part of God’s plan: “Um, fuck you? And fuck God. Seriously, if the god they believed in was giving out dead dads and cancer, I wanted nothing to do with him” (Halpern 62). Both Gretta and Alex find it difficult to look to a higher being in the

midst of their grief, though Gretta's shift appears more drastic because of her background as a devoted Catholic. This shift also reflects Freud's notion of the mourner's "grave departure" from normal life. On the other hand, Alex never expresses any adherence to God or a religion, as this passage is the first time she mentions God in the narrative, suggesting that until her father's death she was at best neutral on her notions of God. Further, Alex fortifies herself when a loved one suggests, "God only gives you what you can handle," replying: "Of course I can handle what was doled out to me. Because I was forced to. What were my options? Not handling it?" (Halpern 62). In short, Alex's anger leads her to the same conclusion as Gretta Furey:

It's pretty damn hard to believe in God when you've lost so much. I know some people go the opposite way. God can be a great thing to lean on, like a falling star to make all your superstitious wishes come true. But no matter how long I prayed, I knew my dad would never come back. So why bother? (Halpern 62)

Gretta and Alex's reactions toward a higher power do not indicate a uniform response – even Alex recognizes that some people respond differently – but their reactions do reflect one potential object of aggression. In doing so, both characters illustrate how different forms of meaning arise from similar situations. Although both are mad at the idea of God, Gretta's anger comes from a sense of betrayal for God not intervening and stopping Patrick from taking his life. Further, since Catholics "aren't allowed to commit suicide," how can Gretta believe in Hell if that is where her son will end up? (Mayr 21). Alex's anger not only stems from other characters expecting her to embrace God, but from the idea that no God should exist that would purposefully give people cancer and take parents from their children. Gretta's God did not intervene when he should have, and if Alex's

God did intervene then she wants no part of him. Two very different responses to the same sense of anger at the idea of a “higher power.” However, both responses reflect a performative component of working through grief. Thus, although YA texts include a variety of characters struggling with complex emotions, the consistent performative aspect of bereavement that permeates the YA genre creates a dialogue between the text and its readers, reinforcing Riegel’s notion of a “focalizer,” on negotiating overwhelming emotional responses to loss by working at/through the influence of grief.

Another object of aggression is frequently the bereaved themselves. This reaction occurs most notably following a suicide. In *About Mourning: Support and Guidance for the Bereaved*, Savine Gross Weizman and Phyllis Kamm write: “When a loved one has committed suicide, there is often a perseveration of ‘ifs’: ‘If I’d only paid attention; if I’d only been with him; if I’d only listen’” (103). There is no shortage of character reactions that reflect this “if perseveration” in contemporary YA literature, likely due to the notion that when a character commits suicide there is a desire by surviving characters to distribute accountability. When Roberta Trites argues that adolescents “must learn what portion of power they wield,” she points out that protagonists often discover this power by confronting social institutions or biological imperatives (such as death), which leads these characters to confront how much power they have to stop a loved one from committing an act such as suicide (x). However, this negotiation of power is not an easy process. In *Monoceros* Gretta Furey becomes overwhelmed with guilt following Patrick’s suicide, and thinks to herself:

Because you are evil, you continue to live...Because what you did to your son was the word *evil* as a verb, a verb that means to ignore someone to death, that

locket winding around your boy's neck, lurid neon signs, a verb that means to stand by, place your hands over your eyes while someone dies in front of you. The verb of not putting your hand out to save. That verb. (Mayr 115)

Here, Gretta not only thinks that she is responsible for Patrick's death, she convinces herself that she was failing him long before he commits suicide. She transforms the word "evil" into a verb, making her role in his death active. Just as Freud's mourning is action-based, so, too, is Gretta's evil. She blames herself for actively ignoring the signs of his struggle. Mayr calls attention to Gretta's ignorance with the images of "neon signs" and a "locket winding" around Patrick's neck, which suggest that Patrick's issues may have been large and attention-grabbing, all while figuratively hanging around his neck, choking his will to live bit by bit. Gretta feels guilty for closing her eyes to Patrick's signs, pretending they did not exist and that her son was not giving her and her husband the clues she now sees clearly. Each act of denial is an act of betraying her son and his figurative cries for help. As a result, Gretta directs part of her anger towards herself, viewing herself as evil for not only ignoring her son's struggle but for remaining alive while he is dead.

Guilt and anger are easily intertwined by the bereaved following a suicide. In *Playlist for the Dead*, Hayden commits suicide and leaves behind a playlist of twenty-seven songs for his best friend Sam, who is certainly "pissed off"; however, Sam cannot help but think: "I was pretty sure it was my fault...I'd listened and listened, looking for the song that would confirm it, the song that would lay all the blame on me" (Falkoff 6-7). Sam listens to the playlist repeatedly, consumed by a sense of guilt, waiting for the lyrics that would declare him responsible for Hayden's death. In doing so, he illustrates

for readers how active his mourning is: even in his angry state, he continues looking for clues regarding Hayden's suicide because he "knows" he will find proof. His motives are partially selfish, in the sense that he hopes he is *not* to blame for Hayden's death, but until he receives this confirmation he is left to grapple with the complex combination of anger and guilt. Violet Markey feels both angry and guilty following Theodore Finch's suicide in *All the Bright Places*. Grabbing a calendar marked with the special days between Theodore and herself, Violet begins to write in the remaining blank spaces: "*I hate you. If only I'd known. If only I'd been enough. I let you down. I wish I could have done something. I should have done something. Was it my fault? Come back. I love you. I'm sorry*" (Niven 343-344). Here, Violet shows a wide range of emotions at once, from anger to guilt to shame, ending with a sense of desperation. Brooke Davis argues that mourning is not a "neat narrative arc...It is not one thing, or the other thing; it is lots of things" (303). Here, Violet reflects Davis's observation of feeling "lots of things," particularly in oscillating fashion. Further, writing down her thoughts in the blank spaces of where she and Theodore record their memoirs offers a visualization of her complex emotional struggle. The act of writing out her oscillating emotions illustrates for readers that she is actively trying to work through her grief, literally spelling out how she feels, allowing readers to follow her progression. Readers observe each emotions as it comes to her mind, ultimately leading to a stark visualization – the calendar – of how mourning is a mixture of good days and bad days; positive emotions and negative emotions. Thus, for both Violet and her readers, her act of writing notes – the work of mourning – becomes an act of understanding grief.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles and his roommate, Chip, argue about the night of Alaska's death, with Chip yelling, "If she loved you so much, why did she leave you that night? And if you loved her so much, why did you let her go? I was drunk. What's your excuse?" (Green 171). These questions weigh on Miles's pre-existing guilt; they burden him with more responsibility than he already carries. In response, Miles storms out of the room, collapsing into his emotions while in solitude: "I hated myself...not only because I let her go but because if I had been enough for her she wouldn't have even wanted to leave. She would have just lain with me and talked and cried, and I would have listened and kissed her tears as they pooled in her eyes" (Green 171). Miles holds himself completely accountable for failing to save Alaska's life. Any attempts to deny his guilt are forgotten when Chip begins to call Miles out for his behaviour, causing Miles to accept the idea that he is responsible for Alaska's death, regardless of the fact that he never forces her to drive drunk. Again, readers observe Miles as he struggles to work through his complex emotions. He is angry at Chip for placing the blame on him, while simultaneously distressed by the guilt and shame of believing Chip's claim. Further, by lamenting how he was not enough for Alaska to stay, Miles's reaction narratively reflects Weizman and Kamm's idea that following a suicide bereaved people try to "undo what happened, trying to make things right by bargaining and reiterating all the 'might-have-beens'" (103). Guilt and anger leave Miles stuck in the "might-have-beens," as he believes that if he had been enough for Alaska he would have been able to save her from her self-destruction. He feels guilty for not doing more to make her want to be with him, at least enough so she would stay. Clay Jenson expresses similar sentiments following Hannah Baker's suicide in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Clay writes "I would have helped her

if she'd only let me. I would have helped her because I want her to be alive" (Asher 280). Clay's motives are half selfish and half noble, and underlying both statements is a sense of guilt for being unable to act in time. Clay wishes he could have done more so that Hannah would have felt comfortable enough to go to him for help. In *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, Alexis actually envisions an "alternate version" of the night her brother, Tyler, shot himself in the chest. Alexis writes:

In that reality – which I know isn't a reality but a fantasy, wishful thinking, a prayer that goes unanswered – Ty tells me what I need to know. That he is sad. That he's stuck in the present. He can't get perspective. He's lost the future...I tell him that I love him. And me telling him those things is enough to slay his demons. And he lives through the night. He lives. (Hand 370-371)

Here, Alexis imagines a timeline where her brother *does* seek her help. She knows it is not practical to think in such terms, but doing so helps her cope with the reality of his death. In her vision Ty is open, honest, and hoping to salvage his will to live. More importantly, Alexis gets to be his saviour. She gets to tell him the one thing he needs to hear in order to get him through his struggle. In her vision, Alexis becomes a hero; in reality, she remains helpless. Depending on the situation, the blame the bereaved place upon themselves can reveal itself in a number of different ways. In these books, some focus on wishing to undo the death, others imagine a different scenario altogether, one where they are the heroes and save lives. Thus, while a number of complex emotions may overtake the mind and body at points during bereavement, recognizing that one's behaviour is a result of these oscillating emotions can offer a sense of perspective,

particularly for readers, who witness these principle characters grow as they learn to negotiate the power they wield whilst working through their grief.

The deceased are not exempt from being objects of attack, as Bonanno explains, “It is not uncommon...for bereaved people to feel angry at lost loved ones for not caring for themselves better when they were alive. Sometimes bereaved people feel that by dying, the loved one has abandoned them,” and many YA narratives reflect such anger (36). Miles Halter certainly gets angry at Alaska after she kisses him for the first time, slips into the night and, supposedly, takes her own life: “It was not enough to be the last guy she kissed. I wanted to be the last guy she loved. And I knew I wasn’t. I knew it, and I hated her for it. I hated her for not caring about me. I hated her for leaving that night” (Green 171). Miles feels betrayed by Alaska after the two begin a small romance, one that Miles completely invests in. Miles’s feelings do not prevent Alaska from driving drunk in the middle of the night; they are not enough to keep her alive. Readers observe Alaska’s struggle to handle the complex emotions that lead to her death, before shifting to watch Miles struggle with his own fragile state. Green offers a dichotomy here: one character does not manage to work through the grief of her mother’s death and she eventually dies because of that fact, while another character must learn to work through the grief and anger he feels for Alaska, who puts him in the same emotional situation that she was in before her death. Thus, *Looking for Alaska* provides its readers the opportunity to observe both the success and failure of working through mourning and complex grief.

In *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, Alexis rants aggressively towards her brother, Tyler, after coming across the post-it note he left on his bedroom mirror before

committing suicide, which Alexis believes Tyler left as an attempt at a romantic statement:

It's not romantic. You blew a chunk of your chest out and died in a puddle of your own blood...And the little girl next door, Emma, you know, she came outside when the ambulance drove up and she was there when they opened the garage door and she saw you like that. She's six years old. Awesome statement you made there...You aren't Jim Morrison, Ty. You don't get to be some kind of tragic rock star who died young and everyone builds a shrine to. You get to be a stupid-ass kid. The only people who will remember your 'statement' are Mom and me, and that's because we hurt too much to forget...You asshole. (Hand 271-272)

Immediately Hand draws readers to corporeal imagery, forcing the image of Ty's chest missing "a chunk," and contrasts this image with the notion of their neighbour, a little girl. Here, the graphic and violent description collides with the innocent image, which works to reflect Alexis's complex emotions while also generating a mix of feelings in readers. The image of Ty's body may make readers angry or disgusted, while the image of the little girl may evoke feelings of sadness, more anger, or a combination, offering readers a more complicated understanding of Alexis's internal struggle. This passage also illustrates Alexis's attempt to work through her grief. She is venting, and there is a pace to the passage that quickens as it progresses. She belittles Ty as being less important than Jim Morrison – who tragically died young – and as a selfish kid who willingly brought grief upon her and their mother, and their six-year-old neighbour. She calls him a "stupid-ass" and an "asshole," as the increase in cursing reflects her growing intensity. In essence, she expresses her hate for Ty for doing what he did without considering the

ramifications for anyone else. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, while listening to the tapes that Hannah left behind, Clay reaches a point of frustration: “I hate what you did, Hannah... You didn’t have to do it and I hate the fact that you did” (Asher 145). Like Alexis, Clay turns his anger directly towards the deceased. Of course, in these particular texts – and others that incorporate contemporary psychological notions of suicide and bereavement into their narratives – feeling anger towards the deceased narratively represents suicide as an act that, argue Syed Husain and Trish Vandiver, “represents the ultimate form of rejection. The suicidal person is letting his or her friends and family know they were not able to help with the adolescent’s problems and that the adolescent does not value them enough to live” (107). The idea that the deceased did not value other people may not be the emphasis of these YA texts, but the way in which their protagonists respond at points in the narrative suggests that the potential of such an idea exists within the characters’ frame of mind, giving readers an opportunity to reflect on whom they value in their own lives.

Historically, Freud defines the work of mourning as an effort to reach full “detachment of the libido” from the lost loved object (245). Robert Kastenbaum agrees with Freud; however: “The process is complicated by our resistance to letting go of the attachment. We want to stay in touch with the ‘lost object’ in any way we can. This need can sabotage [one’s] efforts to accept the loss and return to normal life” (352-353). Occasionally in YA novels reflecting this idea, principle characters go to great lengths to maintain an emotional connection to the person lost. Trites notes one of Salinger’s subtle examples of attachment in *The Catcher in the Rye*, as Holden “wears a red hat to invoke his dead brother’s memory; Allie, who died of leukemia, was a redhead” (117). In a more

overt example, midway through the narrative Holden finds himself depressed, and responds by “talking, out loud, to Allie” (Salinger 129). Here, Holden invokes an old memory he has of hanging out with a friend, Bobby Fallon, and wanting to shoot their BB guns, when Allie overhears them chat and wants to join, but Holden reminds Allie that he is still a child so he cannot come with them. Now that Allie is dead, Holden thinks, “So once in a while now, when I get very depressed, I keep saying to him, ‘Okay. Go home and get your bike and meet me in front of Bobby's house. Hurry up’...I keep thinking about it, anyway, when I get very depressed” (Salinger 129-130). Holden’s attempt to alter the memories of his past, perhaps out of guilt for how he treated his younger brother, and because he did not get a future chance to act differently, not only reveals itself as a direct attempt to maintain attachment to his brother in some way, but illustrates his effort to reconfigure the meaning Allie has in his life. Further, during a conversation with his younger sister, Phoebe, near the end of the novel, Holden answers her claim that he does not like anything by maintaining, “I like Allie” (Salinger 222). When Phoebe tries to refute her brother’s response by reminding him that Allie is dead, Holden explains: “I know he’s dead! Don’t you think I know that? I can still like him, though, can’t I? Just because somebody’s dead, you don’t just stop liking them, for God’s sake” (Salinger 222-223). Growing up, Allie was a nuisance, but now that Holden is older (and Allie is no longer that nuisance), Allie becomes a lifeline; a beacon Holden gravitates towards in the midst of his grief. When Holden gets depressed, the memory of Allie becomes a place of joy (and partly guilt), keeping Holden grounded in an effort to prevent himself from giving up all hope completely. Holden’s actions illustrate for readers that although the dead do not stop being dead, characters continue to love them.

A desire to remain attached to the deceased reveals itself in other YA texts. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, shortly after Augustus's death, Hazel describes her inability to discuss her loss: "The only person I really wanted to talk to about Augustus Waters's death was Augustus Waters" (*The Fault* 262). Eventually she does pick up her phone and call his number just to hear his voice. For Holden Caulfield, his imagined conversation with his dead brother works as form of respite. After Hazel gets Augustus's voicemail beep she sulks: "The dead air on the line was so eerie. I just wanted to go back to that secret post-terrestrial third space with him that we visited when we talked on the phone. I waited for that feeling, but it never came" (*The Fault* 263). Although it takes time, Hazel does manage to think and talk about Augustus without the sense of urgency she felt just after his death, and during a simple chat with her friend, Kaitlyn, Hazel recalls her relationship with Augustus calmly:

It was nice to spend time with someone so interesting. We were very different, and we disagreed about a lot of things, but he was also so interesting...He wasn't your fairy-tale Prince Charming or whatever. He tried to be like that sometimes, but I liked him best when that stuff fell away. (*The Fault* 302)

Here, Hazel's emotional attachment to Augustus has settled; she is content in her construction of the boy she fell in love with. Hazel manages to prevent herself from only focusing on the fact that Augustus is dead, choosing to embrace a more welcoming image of her lost love. This transition illustrates how the dead still have meaning in the lives of the bereaved.

Forms of attachment vary from text to text. Hannah Baker's final words on the tapes she sends Clay in *Thirteen Reasons Why* are "I'm sorry," to which Clay responds:

“And now, anytime someone says I’m sorry, I’m going to think of her” (Asher 280). The idea of recalling Hannah Baker every time he hears the word “sorry” seems exaggerated, but it reflects how difficult Clay feels it will be to work through his grief. In *The Book Thief* Liesel Meminger finds a copy of *The Grave Digger’s Handbook* in the snow by her brother’s graveside, which she collects and takes with her to the Hubermanns’ house. She hides the book under her mattress and frequently pulls it out throughout her first night, “Staring at the letters on the cover and touching the print inside,” although she has “no idea what it was saying” (Zusak 38). For Liesel, who does not read, it does not matter what the book is about, what matters is what it means; it represents the last time she saw her brother and her mother (Zusak 38). *The Gravedigger’s Handbook* memorializes Liesel’s brother and mother, offering Liesel respite in the lonely reality of living with a strange family in the midst of a war. In *All the Bright Places*, Violet Markey and Theodore Finch spend a great deal of time discovering new places to visit throughout Indiana. Near the end of the novel, Violet discovers an old drive-in that Theodore must have visited before he died, viewing the words on the tattered screen: “I was here. TF” (Niven 364). Violet then sees a bottle of red spray paint and marks “I was here too. VM,” takes a picture for safekeeping, and thinks: “His words are neater than mine, but they look good together. There we are, I think. This is our project. We started it together, and we end it together” (Niven 365). Violet finds attachment to Theodore by finishing the project that they started together, which maintains her connection to him. She feels calm in the presence of an image that reflects an important aspect of their relationship. In each of these YA texts, efforts to maintain connection to the deceased illustrate a positive form of attachment. Although for some characters there is a struggle to reconstruct the

meaning of the deceased in their lives, their efforts to do so represents for readers that one does not need to forget or “move on” when a loved one dies. Instead, many YA authors indicate how beneficial it can be to remember the deceased, even if the memoirs are sad.

According to psychologists, strengthening one’s attachment to the deceased is part of the social nature of mourning. George Hagman explains that “grief affects are not the external manifestations of private processes but are efforts to communicate...No matter how withdrawn into grief a person appears to be, he or she is struggling to maintain relatedness, whether to the internal representation of the dead person or to the social surrounding” (25). In other words, bereaved people need to maintain connection, either with the deceased, the people around them, or both. Understanding the way different people mourn can help strengthen one’s understanding of one’s own form of bereavement, and such psychology emerges in the narratives of many YA texts. Jacques Derrida affirms the social nature of mourning as an act that “works to open,” when someone “brings to the light of day and gives something to be seen...gives the force to know and to be able to see – and all these are powers of the image, the pain of what is given and of the one who takes pains to help us see, read, and think” (142). Here, Derrida emphasizes the roles of both writers and readers, as writers work to bring the labour of mourning “to light” while readers work to observe and contemplate on the nature of the authors’ work. Thus, while many YA novels are “chronicles of [a character’s] struggle to mourn, they also open readers to the particulars of grief” (Riegel XXII). The relationship between the text and its readers begins to act as a form of social mourning, as readers are free to observe, think, and contemplate on the principle characters as they labour through mourning. Further, by applying Derrida’s theory of open mourning within a given text,

readers can observe the same relationship between the text and themselves being expressed between two (or more) characters. As one character opens oneself to another about one's grief, the second character is then free to respond. Yes, dead characters, at least in "realistic" YA fiction, do not necessarily reply to grieving characters; however, once principle characters start a dialogue about their grief, they eventually connect with someone in their milieu.

This form of open mourning appears often in YA texts. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles and Chip drive to the site of Alaska's death when a passing ambulance causes them to reflect on the way Alaska died, opening a conversation where they both proclaim that sometimes they are glad she died the way she did. After, Miles thinks to himself, "It always shocked me when I realized that I wasn't the only person in the world who thought such strange and awful things" (Green 213). Both Miles and Chip think it is strange to feel relief over the way Alaska dies, but once they begin to discuss their thoughts openly with each other, they realize how similar they think; it becomes a bonding moment for both characters. In essence, they are able to work through an aspect of their grief – feeling happy Alaska died quickly – together. In Suzette Mayr's *Monoceros*, Walter, the guidance counselor at the school Patrick Furey attended, wishes desperately for acceptance of his homosexuality. After Patrick commits suicide, and Walter decides that life is too short to spend it in hiding, he chooses to drive to the western coast of Canada and settle in the most openly homosexual neighbourhood he can find (244). Here, Walter seeks a sense of community that he does not feel he presently has, and Patrick's death allows him to recalibrate himself in search of the relatedness he

desires. *Playlist for the Dead* depicts Sam, in his guilt and grief, feeling “a small sense of community” with his friends, Jess and Astrid. Sam explains:

We stood up and looked at each other for a minute, neither of us knowing what else there was to say. Then, almost as if she hadn't known she was going to do it, Jess reached out to hug me. I hugged her back, feeling her tiny collarbone against my ribcage. We stayed that way for so long it almost got awkward, but it didn't, and I felt this moment of relief that she really, truly understood everything.

(Falkoff 262-263)

After Hayden commits suicide, Sam spends much the novel trying find close friendship again. In this passage he comes to realize that other characters, particularly Jess, knew and lost Hayden as well; others mourn, as he does. The opening line illustrates both characters' hesitation, but just as Derrida argues that all it takes is one person to open up, Jess reaches for a hug, making herself vulnerable. Seeing her bring her pain forward, Sam embraces her arms, as the two characters share a moment where they labour through their grief together. Collectively, Miles, Walter, and Sam each come to realize the positive influence of mourning as a community. Miles feels comfort in the way Chip thinks, Walter seeks solace in a place more accepting of his nature, and Sam finds relief in the realization that someone understands him and his pain. Taking place near the end of each text, these examples provide readers with an optimistic sense of the power of social mourning as an effective method of labouring through their grief and complex emotions.

Relating to others, and remembering that they can help one face grief, is an important message for readers, particularly teens, to understand. Speaking on behalf of bereaved people, Louis LaGrand contends: “Seeking out friends and family, fostering

friendship and concern, as well as sharing our hurt and upset is our responsibility...Trusting others is essential and will be most helpful” (110-111). Many protagonists in YA novels learn this kind of trust. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden seeks a connection with his sister Phoebe by allowing her to hang out with him one afternoon; in *The Last Time We Say Goodbye* Alexis opens up to Steven, giving him her journal (the novel) to help him understand her better; in *The F—It List*, Alex and Becca reconnect due to Becca’s cancer, but Alex uses Becca’s ‘F—It list’ as a way to reengage with her social surroundings following her father’s death, working up the courage to start a relationship with a boy at school, Leo; and in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie, still dealing with Michael’s suicide, writes about driving home from his first party with Sam and Patrick: “Sam sat down and started laughing. Patrick started laughing. I started laughing. And in that moment, I swear we were infinite” (Chboksy 39). Charlie’s use of the word “infinite” in this passage is interesting: in a novel largely about him mourning the permanence of his friend and aunt’s deaths, and the feelings of disconnection brought on by his grief, Charlie embraces a brief moment of feeling eternal whilst out with his new friends. Being with Sam and Patrick allows Charlie to overlook the permanence of death, and imagine a connection to other people that he feels, even briefly, will never end. Altogether, each of these examples illustrate for readers a number of ways in which bereaved people attach themselves to a community, or put themselves back into a social environment as they deal with their grief. While not their primary purpose, by reflecting these ideas, YA authors not only provide for their readership the opportunity to follow the texts’ protagonists and characters as they grapple with the difficulty of traumatic loss, but they collectively reinforce the idea that bereaved people act differently in grief, providing

a sense of respite for teen readers who may be experiencing their own loss for the first time. Just as certain principle characters appear to feel relief once they embrace the social nature of mourning, so, too, may readers feel relief in observing the ways other characters grieve. By watching how different characters think, act, and respond to traumatic situations and complex emotions, readers may contemplate the similarities and differences between the characters they follow and themselves. The obvious benefit of this process for readers, at least for teen readers unsure about their thoughts and feelings, is the idea that someone else – even a fictional character – may, too, think such “strange and wonderful things.”

Christian Riegel writes: “By looking back at the labour of mourning in other contexts we are opened to other works of mourning and that opening in turn reflects upon ourselves and our contextual understanding of the work of mourning” (XXII). When people read they locate themselves in relation to a text; they process, think, and feel about what they are reading (Hart X). For teen readers, particularly ones experiencing the grief brought on by a traumatic experience, literature can be a catalyst for thinking about one’s own grief and of a friend’s grief. Literature can help one visualize how grief may look, how it may feel, and how others grapple with the vastness of bereavement. Young Adult authors may not offer a formula for mourning, but they do reinforce the idea that mourning matters, that people mourn in their own way, and one of the most important elements of facing loss is remembering that the bereaved are not alone. For teen readers navigating the narratives of loss and grief, YA literature becomes a powerful tool for informing readers of the social nature of mourning a death.

Chapter Three

“The Places We Fear the Most”: Embracing Change Amidst Grief

How does life change when a loved one dies? The philosopher Thomas Attig contends, “Grieving is nearly always complicated – ‘nearly’ because sometimes we grieve moderately for someone who was not particularly close...nearly ‘always’ because, ordinarily, grieving involves nothing less than relearning the world of our experience” (“Relearning” 33). Indeed, says Judith Butler: “Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance” (21). The idea of having to relearn one’s world is interesting because it recognizes how influential one person can be in another’s life. And, regardless of the depth of one’s relationship to another, when one person dies the other person must deal with the remaining void and its influence on all other matters of life. Sometimes these changes involve relearning one’s physical surroundings, ranging from mementos to one’s home or office; one’s social surrounding, such as relationships to parents or friends; one’s relationship to the deceased; and one’s relationship to himself (“Relearning” 39-40). For characters grappling with grief in many YA texts, relearning the world is crucial to their respective stories. In fact, many YA novels illustrate protagonists – teenagers – in transition following a traumatic experience, and labouring through this transition continues to reflect Sigmund Freud’s definition of mourning as work (245). By the end of each text the protagonists’ lives – and occasionally the lives of others – change beyond the mere loss of someone known or loved, to the way the bereaved interact with the world around them, and for many of these novels the most important changes occur as the texts come to an end. Thus,

contemporary YA novels not only reflect Attig's notion of combating the difficulty of grief by relearning the world in multiple ways – actively relearning the world in the process that illustrates Freud's definition of mourning as work – but many of the novels are structured to leave the protagonist, and therefore the reader, with a sense of optimism and hope.

For bereaved people, grief tends to elicit two types of responses. The first, Attig argues, is an effort to “put our lives back together,” while the second is to transition from “*being* our pain – being wholly absorbed in and preoccupied with it – to *having* our pain,” carrying it equally with love and joy, so as to “find and give meaning to our suffering” (“Relearning” 38). In other words, the first response reflects one's relearning of the world, while the second works to weave the many emotions of grief into one's relearned self. By overcoming some pain, and learning to carry what pain remains, Attig argues, “[people] become better able to contend with the challenges of relearning [their] worlds” (“Relearning” 38). Although Attig refers to the way real people respond to death as opposed to fictional characters, these types of responses reveal themselves in a variety of YA novels.

Following a death, one aspect of change bereaved people encounter arises when one faces “the things that those who died left behind,” and YA characters reflect this as well (“Relearning” 39). In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie struggles with guilt over the death of his Aunt Helen, who dies in a car accident on her way to buy Charlie his birthday present (Chboksy 92). As a result, he clings to one gift he received previously: an old 45 record with the Beatle's song “Something” on it. Charlie writes: “I used to listen to it all the time when I was little and thinking about grown-up things. I would go

to my bedroom window and stare at my reflection in the glass and the trees behind it and just listen to the song for hours” (Chbosky 68-69). For Charlie, Aunt Helen’s gift represents both her memory *and* a state of contemplation. Aunt Helen dies when Charlie is seven, and the 45 record becomes something deeply personal for him because he not only feels guilty for her death, but because it was a gift from his “favorite person in the whole world” (Chbosky 5). Thus, the record is a memento of her life that is only for him. Further, Charlie uses this memento as a means to pause and reflect about the world around him. It is in this state of contemplation that Charlie reaches an epiphany: “I decided that when I met someone I thought was as beautiful as the song, I should give it to that person...So, I was giving it to Sam” (Chbosky 68-69). Here, Charlie sets a goal for himself when contemplating what the record means to him: he will give it to someone he thinks is beautiful enough to deserve it. When aunt Helen dies, Charlie relearns the role of the old 45 record in his life; it changes from being just a birthday present to something that represents the bond and love between him and his aunt. Moreover, the relearning of the 45 record’s meaning influences Charlie’s life immensely, as the 45 record comes to reflect his love for Sam, his friend from school. Charlie thinks that Sam is just as beautiful as the song, and arguably his Aunt Helen, so he deems her worthy to receive it as a gift. Therefore, following Aunt Helen’s death, the old 45 becomes a vehicle for Charlie’s expression of intimacy, which, as an act, reflects Attig’s notion of giving meaning to one’s suffering. Although Charlie’s actions do not work to diminish the guilt he feels for his aunt’s death, they illustrate his attempt to use his suffering and pain as a force for personal growth.

Markus Zusak exercises similar tactics. Part of *The Book Thief's* plot revolves around the idea of relearning the role of personal objects, namely books. Early in the novel Liesel Meminger's brother dies, and during his funeral she notices "something black and rectangular lodged in the snow," which she picks up before she leaves the area (Zusak 24). The object Liesel finds is a book called *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, and it is the first book she steals. Although she does not possess the book prior to her brother's death, she receives it during the ceremony marking his death, therefore the book shifts from being an object Liesel could have avoided – had Liesel's brother lived she would not have gone to the graveyard, thus never coming across the book – to something incredibly personal. Zusak writes:

On her first night with the Hubermanns, she hid her last link to him – *The Grave Digger's Handbook* – under her mattress, and occasionally she would pull it out and hold it. Staring at the letters on the cover and touching the point inside, she had no idea what any of it was saying. The point is, it didn't really matter what that book was about. It was what it meant that was more important. The book's meaning: The last time she saw her brother. (38)

When Liesel steals *The Grave Digger's Handbook* it becomes a memento of her brother and the last time she sees him. She does not understand the words or its intended purpose, but the book develops a particular meaning after Liesel steals it; it reminds her of her biological family at a time of confusion and chaos, after she is taken from her mother in hopes of surviving WWII with another family, the Hubermanns. She keeps it close to her when she sleeps, when one is most vulnerable and unconscious (i.e. not reading), reinforcing the book's role as source of comfort and solace during a stressful transitional

period. Later in the novel the book acts as a bonding mechanism between Hans Huberman and Liesel, as he reads a little bit of it to her every night. Even though Liesel's desire to have it read to her was one "she didn't even attempt to understand,"⁴ there is no question of her fixating on the text (Zusak 66). Further, *The Grave Digger's Handbook* signals Liesel's ascension into the world of literature, as books become her way to not only escape the horror of the world around her – a world enveloped in war – but they become a direct means of education. Between Hans Hubermann teaching Liesel to read and write, and Frau Hermann giving Liesel access to her library, Liesel spends much of her free time sitting "with a small pile of books next to her," while "she'd read a few paragraphs of each, trying to memorize the words she didn't know, to ask Papa when she made it home" (Zusak 145). As a result, *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is a direct catalyst for Liesel relearning the world around her. It brings her closer to Hans, whom she begins to call Papa; it distracts her from the terror of wartime; and it helps her develop a deeper vocabulary as she matures. Gillian Rose argues that working through mourning requires "a combination of self-knowledge and action which will not blanch before its complicities in power – *activity beyond activity*, not passivity beyond passivity" (121). Liesel represents this idea of self-knowledge mixed with action. She is not passive as she negotiates the power death has in her life. At first, the handbook reflects her contemplation of death, before influencing her to seek more knowledge through more books. Although *The Grave Digger's Handbook* never ceases to represent her brother's memory, it triggers a growth in Liesel that stems from the feelings of intense grief that she felt shortly after her brother's death. Thus, for Liesel, *The Grave Digger's Handbook*

⁴ Death says Liesel partly wanted to be sure that her brother was "buried properly" (Zusak 66).

is both a talisman and a vehicle for finding new meaning in grief, and a means of focusing on a new future for herself.

Relearning physical surroundings also includes familiar places such as one's home or bedroom ("Relearning" 39). For many characters mourning a death in YA novels, such "relearning" has become integral to their maturation within the narrative. In *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, Ty's bedroom becomes a challenge for his family after he commits suicide. The first time Alexis visits her brother's bedroom after his funeral, she is overwhelmed:

His smell envelopes me – not just his cologne but that slightly goatlike aroma he had, and his deodorant, which smells faintly minty. Pencil shavings. Dirty Socks. Wood glue. Ty. I swallow. It's like he's still here, not in a ghostlike way, but like it never happened. (Hand 45)

Here, Ty's bedroom, its contents and smells, are all-too-familiar observations for Alexis, who while grieving still feels her brother's presence so immensely that it almost distracts her from the idea that he is dead. The pencil shavings and dirty socks suggest recent actions by her brother; that he has moved in some way, giving Alexis the impression that Ty was recently in his room and has only stepped out for a moment. She is stuck emotionally, caught between trying to handle Ty's memory, brought on by the contents of his room, while trying to accept that he is dead and not coming back to the house. Later in the novel, after multiple trips to Ty's room, Alexis finally visits Ty's space in a state of anger. Robert Kastenbaum maintains that grief work is "carried out through a long series of confrontations with the reality of the loss," and Alexis fulfills such a characterization in the novel (322). Ty's presence is no longer pertinent. "He's not here, but I want him to

be,” says Alexis: “There’s nothing. No sound. No smell. No Ty” (Hand 270-271). In this passage, the contents of Ty’s room have lost their influence. Nothing has been removed from his room, but the dirty socks, his cologne, the pencil shavings, no longer have an impact on Alexis. Although her response is involuntary – Alexis wants Ty’s presence in the room – she is forced to relearn the physical space around her. Ty’s bedroom no longer brings Alexis feelings of his presence, therefore she does not have to experience the loss over and over. Instead, the bedroom becomes a place of vitriol and anger. Before Ty commits suicide he leaves a note on his bedroom mirror that says, “Sorry Mom but I was below empty” (Hand 271). Although Alexis observes this note many times, when she enters into his room and no longer feels his presence she reaches a point of contempt, causing her to rip the note off the mirror, crumple it in her hand, and throw it to the floor. However, Alexis’s emotions oscillate from anger to guilt: she picks the note back up, smooths it out, and puts it back on the mirror, since she “can’t stay angry at him” (Hand 272). Interestingly, the feeling of Ty’s presence does not return as her mood shifts from anger to guilt. His presence remains lost, indicating that Alexis’s outburst frees her mentally to remember a more positive image of her brother, instead of the image of him shooting himself. This depiction illustrates growth in the way Alexis views her surroundings. Before this particular outburst, Ty’s room was a welcome distraction for Alexis, who understood the area to be a place where Ty was not dead but missing. He was out with friends or working, and he would return shortly. Over time, the reality of Ty’s death settles into Alexis, triggering an outburst but forcing her to come to terms with her physical environment. Thus, while Ty’s bedroom initially floods Alexis with her brother’s essence, she comes to learn that his presence does not arise from the physical

contents within the room, forcing her to imagine him differently, reflecting her relearning of this particular physical space.

One's social surroundings are also subject to change when a loved one dies, particularly between members of the deceased's immediate family. For example, when the family dynamic shifts following a death, siblings and parents may relearn their relationships. Attig contends that when relearning one's social surroundings, one challenges one's intimate relationships, reconsidering who one will continue to care for ("Relearning" 40). Many YA characters reflect such a challenge as they develop within their narratives. In J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield relearns his world in a variety of ways, but his relationship with his sister, Phoebe, changes significantly after their brother, Allie, dies. This change gradually reveals itself over the course of the novel. In order for Holden to relearn his relationship with his sister he must first grapple with his own notions of mortality, and his sense of himself as a "brother." Following Allie's death, Holden obsesses over the idea of things or people disappearing, which he is afraid will happen to Phoebe. Salinger alludes to Holden's obsession initially when Holden approaches a lagoon in Central Park, only to discover that he cannot find any ducks. Holden exclaims, "I didn't see any ducks around. I walked all around the whole damn lake – I damn near fell in once, in fact – but I didn't see a single duck. I thought maybe if there were any around, they might be asleep or something near the edge of the water, near the grass and all. That's how I nearly fell in. But I couldn't find any" (Salinger 200). Holden searches intently for the birds – almost falling into the lagoon – but he does not observe a single duck. Their disappearance confuses him. Jan Whitt writes: "Holden may or may not identify with the ducks that have no shelter in the winter,

but he empathizes with them and wants reassurance about their welfare” (147). The inability to locate any ducks worries Holden in the same way that he later worries about his own potential to disappear. While walking up Fifth Avenue Holden begins to imagine his disappearance: “Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again. Boy, did it scare me. You can't imagine” (Salinger 256). This event triggers a vivid response, as Holden explains: “Every time I'd get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, ‘Allie, don't let me disappear...Please, Allie’. And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd thank him” (Salinger 257). Collectively, each of these passages reflect Holden’s increasing fear of disappearing like Allie, whose death Holden could not prevent. First, Holden thinks the ducks have disappeared, then he thinks he will as well. In an effort to stabilize himself, Holden clings to the idea that Allie is saving him from disappearing, for which Holden is deeply thankful. This scene offers a narrative reversal: Allie died while Holden could do nothing, now Holden lives because of Allie’s intervention. By believing he talks with Allie, Holden performs what Karen Smythe refers to as “narrativized think-acts,” which work to give “voice to those absent ‘other human beings’ for whom the [bereaved] mourns” (17). Doing so allows Holden to work through his stress and fear of disappearing, and therefore his grief. While imagining a conversation with a dead person may seem strange to some readers, it is a practical reflection of Holden attempting to work through the times where his grief is most prominent. Moreover, Salinger’s use of ledge imagery – the image of Holden falling over an edge – when describing both the whereabouts of the ducks, and the street Holden

walks on, illustrates Holden's struggle to comprehend how his brother vanished in an instant: one moment he was alive, and the next he was not. By asserting that others "can't imagine" what his experience is like, Holden isolates himself, creating distance through language and through his actions. Since Holden is running away from school when these events occur, and he refuses to believe others can understand his mindset, he contributes directly to the realization of his own fear of disappearing.

Evidently, Holden's struggle with mortality reveals itself strongly in his relationship with his sister, Phoebe. Sneaking into his family's apartment late at night, Holden and Phoebe get into a deep discussion, when Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to do with his life. Holden responds:

I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy. (Salinger 224-225)

Here, Holden envisions himself as a protector of childhood innocence, particularly Phoebe's innocence. Standing on the edge of a cliff, Holden imagines spending his life saving innocent children from falling over the edge into what could be considered adulthood, or death. The "ledge" imagery appears once again, only this time Holden describes *himself* as the savior for those playing too close the cliff, when Allie becomes

that for Holden later in the novel. Dale Jacquette argues, “Holden would save those children, innocents like Phoebe, if only he could, where he was powerless to save Allie” (123). The guilt brought on by Allie’s death weighs so heavily on Holden that he not only feels responsible for the lives of those younger than himself, he would like to *make* himself responsible for their lives. Jan Whitt writes that Holden’s desire to rescue other children from harm provides evidence that Holden “is at heart a person invested in the lives of others” (146). Ironically, his imagined responsibility involves walking along the edge of a cliff, when he previously almost fell into the lagoon himself, suggesting that he has not entirely thought through his dream job, or his ability to do it well, as it stems from an emotional response to his brother’s death. Thus, perhaps Holden’s dream seems crazy not because he wants to be responsible for saving kids, but that he purposefully puts himself in danger as well. Moreover, Holden is okay with spending his life fulfilling this calling in service of Allie’s memory. He does not care who agrees with him or who questions his decision – he accepts it sounds crazy – but that does not keep him from wishing to save as many children as he can, especially Phoebe, from facing the same fate as Allie. Holden’s view of himself within this vision is also one that reflects his advanced age, as he is not running around playing with the kids, but he is still young enough to be there. There are no adults or, more precisely, no forms of assistance. The burden of saving these children rests solely on Holden alone, which illustrates the amount of responsibility he assumes in the wake of losing his brother. Thus, Allie’s death not only brings Holden closer to Phoebe due to his wish to protect her along with the other children, but it makes him worrisome over the notion of people (children) or ideas (innocence) disappearing in general.

Holden's desire to save Phoebe from her inevitable future, however, begins to shift as their relationship grows. Following their conversation regarding Holden's life, Phoebe decides to run away with Holden, a decision he disagrees with, but obliges for one afternoon to appease her. Over the course of the afternoon Holden frantically worries about Phoebe's safety, particularly when a double-decker bus drives by him, causing her to disappear briefly from his vision. His actions reflect his overprotective nature, as he tries to keep Phoebe safe from doing anything that would cause her to lose her childhood innocence. However, Holden reaches an epiphany over his relationship with his sister while she rides a carousel in Central Park. Watching her go around in circles, afraid she may fall as she reaches for a golden ring, Holden says: "But I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything at all. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (Salinger 273-274). This statement is in direct contrast to Holden's wish to keep Phoebe's childlike innocence intact. Previously, Holden imagines himself as a saviour and protector of children, who works tirelessly to keep them from falling off an imagined ledge. However, after spending time with his sister, Holden realizes that she must be free to live her own life and take her own risks, and there are some events that people – even ones as dedicated as Holden – not only cannot prevent, but *should not* prevent. While the notion of children falling off a cliff differs from a playground accident, the difference in Holden's attitude illustrates a sense of growth. Roberta Trites contends that it is not until Holden watches Phoebe on the carousel that he begins to grow within his grief, as he realizes "He cannot catch her – or anyone – to prevent her death," which may help ease his guilt over his inability to prevent his brother's death

(117). Holden's relationship with his sister makes an important transition while he watches her on the carousel. His observation shifts his understanding of responsibility from the sense of burden he formerly carried, as he learns to accept that he cannot be entirely accountable for Phoebe's, and thus in retrospect Allie's, safety. Rick Mayock adds, "He has a more mature understanding of the need for children to learn things for themselves. They have to take risks and have personal, passionate experiences in life" (50). Since Holden refrains from interfering, Phoebe remains free to have fun and make childlike mistakes. Watching someone manage to find joy in life, at a time when Holden is hard pressed to find any, offers an opportunity for him to see that even in grief one does not *only* feel sorrow. Phoebe's carefree actions and laughter opens Holden to feeling what he longed to feel since Allie's death: happy.

Holden also comes to recognize Phoebe as someone who accepts him. When Phoebe gets off the carousel she gives Holden a kiss and pulls out his red hunting cap from his pocket, placing it on his head. Holden asks, "Don't *you* want it," to which Phoebe replies, "You can wear it awhile" (Salinger 274). This emotional exchange deeply affects Holden, who expresses multiple times throughout the novel that he only puts on the hat in areas where he knows he "wouldn't meet anybody that knew me" (Salinger 158). Holden's hat is part of his identity, and he does not want anyone judging him for wearing it because he wears it for his own personal reasons. Strangers are free to look at it as they please, it does not bother Holden, but by keeping those he knows from seeing him in it he protects himself from being made fun of for mourning Allie in his own way.⁵ Marcus Schulzke adds: "[the red hunting cap] marks Holden out as an individual...Still,

⁵ Roberta Trites explains, "Holden wears a red hat to invoke his dead brother's memory; Allie, who has died of leukemia, was a redhead" (117).

Holden is embarrassed by the hat. It marks him out as being different from everyone else. He's especially concerned about it whenever he has to pretend to be older than he is" (107). Allie's death has left Holden in a vulnerable state, and the hat brings him comfort, so he does not want to risk being made fun of for wearing it. Thus, when Phoebe pulls out his hat and places it on his head before getting back onto the carousel, she affirms her acceptance of who he is as an individual, quirky hat and all, which is especially moving for Holden since Phoebe is *not* a stranger but someone he knows and loves. As Gerald Rosen argues: "Phoebe remains the only person who has *seen* where he is and who has *acted* in his behalf" (99). Phoebe understands Holden, and her actions prove monumental for Holden's spirit, uplifting him in a way that Holden had yet to experience since Allie's death. Holden explains: "I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth...I wish you could've been there" (Salinger 275). Phoebe's happiness and playfulness give Holden the means to feel joy. Her innocence and unconditional love are a mixture that allows Holden to open himself emotionally, even leading him to cry as he feels comfortable enough to publically mourn. For a brief moment in the story, Holden becomes a little happier, no longer just a teenager with angst but a proud brother. Also, Holden exclaims that he wishes that readers could be there with him, which is a stark difference from the Holden who previously proclaimed that readers could not imagine how he felt when he thought he was falling off the street corner. This change in tone is a significant suggestion of Holden's personal growth; it reflects Holden's sincere effort to work through his mourning. Overall, Holden's commentary reflects his relearning of his younger sister in two ways, as he comes to understand that she is not only someone who

deserves to take her own risks, but that she is someone who loves him completely, a connection Holden yearns for throughout the text. Thus, while both Holden's realizations stem from the grief that his brother's death brings, they also reflect Holden's ability to find meaning in his suffering.

Relearning social surroundings occasionally involves challenges in the relationship between parents and their children, and YA novels often reflect this idea within their narratives. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel Lancaster openly feels she is a burden on her parents due to her terminal cancer. At many points throughout the novel Hazel refers to herself as a grenade that is bound to go off, so she keeps to herself and stays at home to "minimalize the casualties," though she laments that her parent will not be spared from grief once she dies because they are "too invested" (*The Fault* 99). Hazel's ideology makes it difficult for her to connect with her parents because she is so busy trying to maintain a sense of distance. She feels both guilty and annoyed that her mother cannot find work because "she had taken on the full-time profession of Hovering Over Me" (*The Fault* 79). Hazel would love for her mother to find something else to preoccupy her time, giving Hazel a break from her mother's constant presence, *and* giving her mother something more positive to focus on, but in Hazel's eyes her mother only seems concerned with her daughter's health. Further, even with the amount of time that Hazel and her mother spend together, they still manage to keep important secrets from one another, which builds a great deal of tension between the two. Hazel fears that her death will mean that her mother will no longer feel she is a "mom," while her mother goes out of her way to hide the fact that she is taking college courses, preparing for life after Hazel dies. These secrets and the resulting tension act as important set-ups for

Hazel, who must re-evaluate her relationship with her parents entirely in the wake of Augustus's death.

When Augustus Waters dies, Hazel's relationship with her parents takes an interesting shift. Initially, Hazel sees her parents as one-dimensional people who, due to her illness, "walked around zombically, doing whatever they had to do to keep walking around" (*The Fault* 277). But after Augustus dies Hazel discovers that her mother has actually been working on her Master's in social work, so she can council families or lead groups of people going through their own illness. This news excites Hazel, who explains: "I was crying. I couldn't get over how happy I was, crying genuine tears of actual happiness for the first time in maybe forever, imagining my mom as a Patrick [a social worker]. It made me think of Anna's mom. She would've been a good social worker, too" (*The Fault* 298). Hazel makes multiple connections here. First, her emotional outburst is in literal terms, as she does not allow for misconstrued description. The tears she cries – and Hazel cries often – are ones of happiness, which is a stark difference from the tears she had shed since Augustus's death. Sometimes those tears were out of anger, sometimes they were out of pain, but when her mother breaks the news that she is preparing for a life outside of her daughter, Hazel cries in joy. Hazel's fear of leaving her parents childless (and causing them to divorce) also begins to settle when her mother makes it clear that both she and Hazel's father understand that one day Hazel will die, and they will have to carry on with their lives, but they will be doing it together. Judith Butler writes of mourning: "I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled" (21). Following Augustus's death, Hazel reflects Butler's idea when she begins to worry that her death will cause irreparable

damage in her parent's relationship, so she purposefully gets annoyed with her parents in an effort to create distance between her and them; however, not only does her effort bring them closer together as the novel progresses, Hazel comes to an important realization: she begins to understand that she is not the burden she thought, and she is *not* preventing her parents from making their own meaning out of their suffering. Attig adds that meaning can be made "in ways that may not have occurred had [one] not suffered loss," and Hazel's reactions reflect this idea of making meaning from loss ("Relearning" 43). In other words, as Hazel begins to see herself responding to Augustus's death, she learns to accept that her parents will also be able to respond to her eventual death. She imagines her mom as "a Patrick," which, although Hazel applauds Patrick's efforts, she does not connect with him or think he does his job particularly well. But the news of her mother working towards a similar position leaves Hazel excited for those who will get to join her mother's support group, as she exclaims: "She'll be a great Patrick! She'll be so much better at it than Patrick is" (*The Fault* 298). For Hazel, knowing that her mom will be putting her overwhelming compassion and understanding to good use offers solace in her life. Lastly, Hazel makes a reference to Anna, who is a character from the novel *An Imperial Affliction*, which is Hazel's favourite novel. In *An Imperial Affliction*, Anna has a rare form of blood cancer, in remission from the start of the novel, which returns and claims her life. Anna lives with her mother, who begins to date a Dutch man who sells tulips, but Hazel never finds out whether they end up together or not because the novel ends in the middle of a sentence, representing how Anna's death cuts not only her own but the stories of others short. Hazel explains:

I understood the story ended because Anna died or got too sick to write and this midsentence thing was supposed to reflect how life really ends and whatever, but there were characters other than Anna in the story, and it seemed unfair that I would never find out what happened to them. (*The Fault* 50)

This passage connects directly to Hazel's commentary on Anna's mom being a good social worker, as well as to Hazel's fears regarding her parents. Hazel loathes the fact that she will never find out what happens to Anna's mother and potential step-father since the story ends so abruptly, and this fear carries over into Hazel's life, as she fears what will happen to her own parents once she dies. She desperately wants to know that Anna's mom will be okay after Anna's death, just as she wants to know the same of her own parents. Mrs. Lancaster's news of her studies provides this narrative satisfaction for Hazel. It offers her an indication that although life will not be easy once Hazel dies, her parents will be okay. Hazel is relieved enough that she imagines Anna's mom being capable of similar options, giving her further solace. Thus, while Hazel's relationship with her parents – particularly her mother – is quite delicate at times, Augustus's death triggers a re-evaluation of their connection, which causes Hazel and her mother to share their secrets and fears with one another, forming a new bond that reflects Hazel's relearning of her social surrounding.

Working through grief can also trigger an evaluation of oneself. This evaluation may be of one's history, identity, or the role one plays in his or her own life, and sometimes responding to a death means making personal changes ("Relearning" 40). Many YA characters represent such a re-evaluation when they consider their future actions. For example, in Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* Clay Jensen feels responsible

for the death of his classmate, Hannah Baker. He has a fair reason to feel this way, as shortly after Hannah dies Clay receives a shoebox full of cassette tapes with Hannah discussing the thirteen reasons she committed suicide, and noting that anyone listening to the tapes was doing so because he or she was one of the reasons. Clay's guilt stems from the time that he and Hannah started working together, getting along great, although Clay never let it go anywhere romantic because "Hannah had a reputation" (Asher 180). Clay *did* have feelings for Hannah, but he did not have the courage to profess his true emotions until a party that took place a few weeks before Hannah's death, where he told her the truth, and she initially responded in kind, before succumbing to her own anxiety and poor mental health, pushing Clay away. After she dies, Clay thinks:

For a brief moment, I was able to admit it. To her. To myself. But I could never admit it again. Till now. But now, it's too late. And that's why, right at this moment, I feel so much hate. Toward myself. I deserve to be on this list. Because if I hadn't been so afraid of everyone else, I might have told Hannah that someone cared. And Hannah might still be alive. (Asher 180-181)

Even though Clay's hatred for himself comes *after* hearing the roles seven other students play in pushing Hannah over the edge, Clay still burdens himself with the brunt of the responsibility. He acknowledges that he made an effort to establish a connection, but he does not comment on Hannah pushing him away. Instead, he blames himself for taking too long to speak the truth. Hannah's reputation, spread through rumours started by other students mentioned on the tapes, scares Clay into keeping his feelings a secret out of fear of being judged by his peers, which keeps him from building a meaningful relationship with Hannah when she needed to know that she was not alone. For this reason, Clay starts

to hate himself and the role he played in Hannah's death. Unfortunately, Clay cannot prevent Hannah's death, but he can use it to evaluate his own actions moving forward.

Hannah's death becomes a catalyst for change in Clay, and this change reveals itself in the relationship between Clay and Skye Miller, a girl Clay used to have a crush on in middle school and a possible suicide risk. The day after finishing Hannah's tapes and sending them away to the next name on the cassettes, Clay walks through the hallway at school where he bumps into Skye, who is "walking down the same stretch of hall where [Clay] watched Hannah slip away two weeks ago" (Asher 287). Clay, already late for class, stops in front of his classroom's door as "dozens of faces turn," including Mr. Porter's, his teacher, but Clay no longer feels afraid of judgement:

A flood of emotions rushes into me. Pain and anger. Sadness and pity. But most surprising of all, hope. I keep walking. Skye's footsteps are growing louder now. And the closer I get to her, the faster I walk, and the lighter I feel. My throat begins to relax. Two steps behind her, I say her name. "Skye." (Asher 288)

Asher's imagery here is important. First, Clay views Skye and Hannah as one in the same. They either were or are a suicide risk, and Clay imagines Skye following in Hannah's footsteps both literally and figuratively. This time, however, Clay embraces his emotions, vast as they are, and reacts without hesitation. He puts his reputation on the line, in front of many faces, in an effort to strike up a conversation with someone he believes needs to know that someone cares. Cathy Caruth notes that when "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another" then the "trauma may lead...to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8). Clay's grappling with grief leaves him sensitive to the notion of someone

else's emotional struggle, which draws him to Skye, narratively reflecting Caruth's idea. Also, Skye's footsteps grow louder as Clay approaches, which is a literal reflection of their proximity, as well as a representation of Skye's presence becoming more known. For someone who "Over the years...learned how to avoid people," Skye's footsteps begin to draw more attention as Clay gets closer, suggesting how others are aware of her presence (Asher 287). Moreover, Clay's physical descriptions anticipate the burden of Hannah's death being lifted. Clay's movements make him move faster and feel lighter as he approaches Skye, which suggests that the weight of Hannah's death is lifting as he gets closer to her. Although the novel ends when Clay says Skye's name, and readers do not get to see more of Clay or his story, Asher leaves the novel with evidence of Clay's growth, as he learns to actively reach out to those around him, reflecting Attig's notion that "As [people] grieve, [they] relearn who [they] are at the centers of the worlds of [their] experience" (135). More specifically, Clay is trying to use Hannah's death to improve the lives of those around him, reflecting Arthur Frank's idea that: "In stories, the teller not only recovers [his] voice; [he] becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices. When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story" (xiii). By reaching out to Skye, Clay illustrates his awareness of Skye's perceived risk of suicide, which fictionally characterizes Frank's idea. Thus, Clay manages to relearn himself and the role he can play in preventing the suicide of those he knows by embracing the power of his own voice, and how by reaching out he could save someone's life. Further, by passing the tapes along to the next person on the list, Clay keeps Hannah's agenda going, giving another character the same chance at redemption. *Thirteen Reasons Why* does not offer solutions for suicide prevention, but Asher

recognizes that the basis for change starts with a conversation. In Hannah's case, she never got to understand the thoughts and feelings of those around her in any meaningful way. Asher, however, suggests that Skye *will* receive this talk because Clay actively relearns his role as a friend, something Hannah never felt she had.

In *The Outsiders*, Ponyboy learns a lesson similar to Clay's in the aftermath of Dallas and Johnny's deaths, when he realizes that he can make a difference in someone else's life. However, Ponyboy did not always feel this way. Before Dallas and Johnny die, Ponyboy feels a bit alienated within his gang, the Greasers, but he especially feels isolated from his brother, Darry. One night, Ponyboy runs out of his house crying and Johnny follows him. When they come to a stop Johnny asks him what is wrong, to which Ponyboy replies:

It was Darry. He hit me. I don't know what happened, but I couldn't take him hollering at me and hitting me too. I don't know...sometimes we get along okay, then all of a sudden he blows up on me all the time. He didn't used to be like that...we used to get along okay...before Mom and Dad died. Now he can't stand me. (Hinton 51)

In wake of their parents' death, Darry – the oldest brother – assumes the responsibilities of his two young brothers, Sodapop and Ponyboy. He cooks, cleans, shops, and takes care of them. By taking on all these tasks, Darry becomes a parental figure for Ponyboy, which changes their relationship significantly, and Ponyboy does not know where he stands with his brother. This passage comes on the heels of an argument between Ponyboy and Darry, leading to Darry slapping his brother, which shakes Ponyboy's emotions. The last line in this passage reflects the reality of Ponyboy's situation, one

where he feels out of place and no longer welcome in his home. He knows he is not really Darry's child, but he no longer feels like his brother either. Trites argues: "Ponyboy cannot grow to maturity until he can understand his brother's strictness as an act of love" (60). In other words, not only does Ponyboy have to negotiate the power death has in his life, he must also come to terms with the power his older brother now has as his legal guardian. Once the family dynamic shifts, Ponyboy struggles to figure out his identity in relation to his siblings. This feeling of isolation follows Ponyboy throughout the novel. Shortly after Johnny and Dallas die, Ponyboy hits his lowest point. When a car with three rival gang members pull up while Ponyboy sits alone, he thinks: "I wasn't scared. It was the oddest feeling in the world. I didn't feel *anything* – scared, mad, or anything. Just zero" (Hinton 170-171). Previously, Ponyboy felt isolated from his brothers, but in the wake of his friends' deaths, he feels isolated from his own emotions. At a time when he would normally be overwhelmed – he was outnumbered by his enemies – Ponyboy feels no emotion at all. Sandra DeMinco contends that in many YA novels, "death heightens the motivation to...withdraw, and hide feelings" ("Young Adult"). In this passage, Ponyboy withdraws his feelings so deeply he feels figuratively numb, as he is not scared of what he should fear: that the rival gang members might kill him. Further, he knows this reaction seems unnatural, but he is unable to process why he feels this way. This depiction of Ponyboy's state of mind illustrates the extent of his grief following the tragedies in his life. First, he has difficulty connecting with many other people, specifically his family, before ultimately disconnecting from himself. In this passage Ponyboy expresses complete alienation, but recognizing how unnatural it seems to feel

this way leads him to re-evaluate his life as a gang member; it allows himself to think concretely about his identity and who he wants to be in life.

At the end of *The Outsiders*, Ponyboy reads a letter from Johnny addressed to him, and it prompts Ponyboy to evaluate his own identity and role in society:

Suddenly it wasn't only a personal thing to me. I could picture hundreds and hundreds of boys living on the wrong sides of cities, boys with black eyes who jumped at their own shadows. Hundreds of boys who maybe watched sunsets and looked at stars and ached for something better... There should be some help, someone should tell them before it was too late. Someone should tell their side of the story, and maybe people would understand then, and wouldn't be so quick to judge a boy by the amount of hair oil he wore. It was important to me... And I decided *I* could tell people. (Hinton 179-180)

In this passage Ponyboy shifts from a feeling of total isolation to becoming the connecting tissue between street gangs across America. Ponyboy realizes how important he can be for others. Having lived through the deaths of his parents and a few friends, growing up in a street gang that fought against other boys like himself, Ponyboy begins to understand the strength of his own voice, and he wants to be the teller of the other boys' stories. He feels empathy for all the other boys who are caught up in the street gang life, all the boys who ponder in their most private moments about a life outside of their gang, and the futures those lives contain. Ponyboy's wish is to use his writing to save some of those futures from being lost the way Dallas and Johnny's were lost. His decision fictionally reflects Dori Lamb's contention that testimonial narratives survivors "not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in

order to survive” (63). In other words, for Ponyboy, telling his story validates the severity of it; it affirms the truth of his past, validating his grief, which motivates him enough to make a distinct change in his life. Sharing his story reflects Ponyboy’s active attempt to work through his grief. Further, Johnny dies with the hope that Ponyboy will use his smarts to look beyond the “street life” and move on to something better, and Ponyboy begins to believe it may be possible. At the very least, by writing his story, giving a voice to hundreds of kids in his position, Ponyboy hopes to illuminate for others in his world that even gang members are human. They think, they feel, they love, and they grieve. The novel ends with Ponyboy acknowledging his growth as he works through his grief, illustrating the relearning one engages in during the wake of someone’s death. In Ponyboy’s case, death became too routine, forcing him to realize that not only should someone speak out about the realities of gang violence, but that *he* was capable of doing so. Moreover, by becoming the person to do so he may evade the pitfalls of gang life.

Finally, relearning one’s relationship to the deceased is part of grieving in many YA novels. Jennifer Niven’s *All the Bright Places* ends with Violet Markey piecing together clues left behind by Theodore Finch before he committed suicide, which lead her to a chapel where she finds a note addressed to her in a bible. The chapel is a place that the two teens were supposed to visit together but never got to experience before Theodore’s death. In the note Theodore writes, Violet fixates on three lines: “*You make me happy... You make me special... You make me lovely*” (Niven 375). She reads the note over and over and memorizes it, particularly these three lines, before leaving for home. Once home, Violet concludes:

I don't need to worry that Finch and I never filmed our wanderings. It's okay that we didn't collect souvenirs or that we never had time to pull it all together in a way that made sense to anyone else but us. The thing I realize is that it's not what you take, it's what you leave. (Niven 376)

The novel ends on these words and they reflect Violet's developed understanding of Theodore Finch. When Finch commits suicide Violet is devastated and angry at him for making her fall in love with him before he took his own life. She sees him and his actions as selfish, while she is simultaneously overcome with guilt for not paying enough attention to him, hurting him in some way, and worse, not loving him enough to keep him from killing himself. Violet's focus rests entirely on everything Finch took away with his actions: the project they had been working on – where they visited all the important landmarks in Indiana – would be left incomplete; his parents would have to deal with losing a son; and Violet would lose a promising future with the boy she loved. However, she comes to realize that his depression was deeper than she ever could have known, and that he did not end his life to purposely hurt those around him or get back at those who wronged him. Instead, Theodore Finch commits suicide because he felt he had no more life left in him. He wanted Violet to know that from the time they met until the day he died, she was everything to him, which is what he articulates in the note (Niven 375). As a result, Violet learns to see Theodore Finch not as a confused, vindictive boy who was trying to make a statement, but as a boy who did not know what to do with his emotional pain, and could not figure it out in time to save himself. Attig writes: "We continue our connections with others even when we are separated...Such connections are much more abstract, as we discover, appreciate, and allow ourselves to be motivated by the values

and meanings embodied in the lives of the [lost]" (178). Violet reflects a very similar attitude to Attig's when she turns her focus from what Theodore took to what he left behind: an unconditional love that she will always have as long as she accepts it and the memories of their travels, even if their plans were left incomplete. The souvenirs and the video recordings of their journey would always be for other people, because the parts that matter the most are the ones she keeps in her head and heart (Niven 376). Thus, Violet Markey begins to find meaning in Theodore's death when she discovers that the Theodore she fell in love with remains in her memoirs. Memory then, serves as a function of working through mourning. By actively remembering Theodore fondly, Violet chooses to actively work through her grief, illustrating her growth as a character within the narrative.

In *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, both Alexis Riggs and her mother relearn their relationship to Ty in the wake of his suicide. For Mrs. Riggs, who cannot help but think that her son is still in pain, relief comes in the form a ghostly experience while driving. "I was crying," she tells Alexis, "and then I just felt it so strongly, that someone was there with me...It wasn't Ty...It was another voice. And it said, 'Will you put your son in my hands?'" (Hand 381). Alexis is taken aback by this news, but she knows that her mom believes the experience to be true. Mrs. Riggs goes on to explain that since this event, "I haven't felt Ty" (Hand 382). Although Alexis is unsure of God's role, Mrs. Riggs's experience illustrates a necessity to know that Ty is no longer in pain but is safe. For her, that comes in the form of the loving arms of a higher power that is neither named nor described. The ambiguity in the passage leaves room for different forms of religious or spiritual interpretation, but all that matters for Mrs. Riggs is that Ty is *somewhere*, finally

free from his depression, his anxiety, and the pain that his earthly existence provided him. Mrs. Riggs learns to view her son as someone beyond torment, embraced by a heavenly figure. Attig notes that sometimes the bereaved become “‘stuck’ or fixed in relation to the deceased,” but through the work of mourning one can avoid compromising one’s own personal development (177). Mrs. Riggs reflects this idea in her development as a character, as believing that Ty is free from pain is enough for her to begin focusing on other parts of her life, such her relationship with Alexis, who describes her mom’s first breath after sharing her story as “the kind of breath you take when a weight has been lifted from your shoulders” (Hand 380). The burden Mrs. Riggs feels for not preventing her son’s suicide lifts when she accepts that she is not responsible for him anymore, and that she is free to focus on the memories of a happier Ty.

Alexis also learns to focus on her own happier version of Ty. Early in the novel, Alexis’s therapist asks her to imagine happier memories of her brother, to which she replies: “Ty’s image has grown hazy in my mind. I can’t visualize the Ty that isn’t dead. My brain gravitates toward the end. The body. The coffin. The grave. I can’t even begin to pull up happy” (Hand 3). Overwhelmed by grief, all she can think about is the physical reality of her brother’s body. She imagines the way she saw him last, and it distracts her from seeing him in any other way. However, she does eventually manage to relearn her relationship to her brother. Cynthia Hand illustrates this growth through Alexis’s dreams. Throughout the novel Alexis has multiple dreams that involve her brother and her doing various activities, but they never bring her a sense of comfort. In her last dream, and the passage that ends the novel itself, Alexis is playing solitaire when Ty walks up to her looking a little different: “He doesn’t look like a ghost. He seems real. He even looks

taller to me, and older, like he's aged during the time he's been gone. He is not quite the Ty I knew" (Hand 383). Here, Alexis no longer imagines her brother as a phantom of her mind but a seemingly real person, who can still progress through time (he ages), sharing the memory with her; he is not just "a body." The physical imagery further suggests that Alexis is beginning to shift from her idealistic viewing of her brother as the innocent child who lost his way, to a person who is more complete in himself; a combination of the innocent Ty and the troubled Ty. This shift seems unsettling for her at first, but after starting a game of war with him, they begin to discuss how the last thing she said to him the morning before he committed suicide was that she loved him. Alexis did not recall saying these words, but Ty assures her it happened. Remembering this moment, Alexis explains:

I'm suddenly flooded with other memories of Ty. Good memories. So many good memories. Building my first snowman in that front yard with Ty...Teaching him how to drive...The funny way he laughed...My first day of kindergarten, when he clung to my hand and wouldn't let go when I tried to go off to school without him. (Hand 385-386)

Finally, Alexis is able to view her brother as someone more than the person who shot himself, as the brother she knew growing up. The various childhood activities, his laugh, all reflect an image of Ty that reminds Alexis that although she still finds the image of her brother shooting himself troubling, that does not take away their memories or their bond. In fact, the last memory she mentions is important, as it illustrates the reversal of roles between the siblings. On her first day of kindergarten, Alexis tells her brother that he has to stay while she goes, but she will be back for him. Now, sitting in her dream

playing cards with her brother, it is he who must leave Alexis behind, and she remains to miss him. Flipping over her last card of the game, Alexis whispers, “Bye, Ty” (Hand 386). This moment closes the novel and highlights Alexis’s growth in grief. She manages to view Ty as someone better than the selfish version of him that she focused on earlier in the narrative, and that is enough to bring her solace in the wake of his death.

For Miles Halter in *Looking for Alaska*, relearning Alaska *and* himself comes to fruition while he composes his final essay for his religion class. The assignment calls for Miles and his classmates to think of how the three major religions they studied – Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism – each bring a message of hope, and then write about their own cause for hope. Miles opens his essay by discussing how he came to this school looking for “a Great Perhaps, for real friends and a more-than-minor life” (Green 219). After Alaska’s death, Miles was not sure if finding that life would be possible, until he realizes that Alaska’s pain and guilt over her own mother’s passing led her to her own death, and Miles does not want that for himself. He writes:

So I still believe in the Great Perhaps, and I can believe in it despite having lost her. Because I will forget her, yes. That which came together will fall apart imperceptibly slowly, and I will forget, but she will forgive my forgetting, just as I forgive her for forgetting me and the Colonel and everyone but herself and her mom in those last moments she spent as a person. I know now that she forgives me for being dumb and scared and doing the dumb and scared thing. I know she forgives me, just as her mother forgives her. (Green 219)

Miles comes to forgive Alaska for driving drunk and recklessly because he learns his life has to continue without the Alaska he once knew, and forgiving himself is a way of

beginning to forgive her. He knows she will always be both the girl who captured his heart, and the girl who took her own life, but there will be a point where his days are not consumed with her memory as they have been up until this point in the novel. The last line of the passage is the most important, as it connects the two deaths in the novel. First, Miles knows that Alaska died feeling responsible for her mother's death, that she never in her life felt she deserved forgiveness for failing to call 9-1-1 when her mother needed help. So, when Miles begins to hate himself for failing to prevent Alaska's death, he takes on the role Alaska spent her life living. In the end, Miles understands that there was nothing Alaska could have done, she was only seven, and that her mother would have forgiven her. As a result, Miles is able to accept that, like her mother, Alaska would absolve him of responsibility as well. This realization symbolizes a shift in Miles's view of both Alaska and himself, as he learns the need for forgiveness in his search for the "Great Perhaps," and that he can become the version of Alaska that lives. By ending the novel with this tone, Green not only illustrates the extent of Miles's personal growth as he works through his mourning, but it indicates for readers different ways to generate meaning from the difficult nature of experiencing personal trauma.

In each of these YA texts, protagonists and other characters come to face the death of another character by relearning the world around them, which eventually leads them to what Butler refers to as "submitting to a transformation" (21). Sometimes these changes are in the way one views one's physical surroundings, other times in how one negotiates one's social surroundings, although both ultimately involve relearning one's own identity and the role of the deceased in one's life. The understanding of one's self and one's relationship to the deceased often appears at the end of these novels, sometimes

in the final sentences (representing a “death” of the narrative), which shapes readers’ responses by creating expectations of hope. Each novel ends with the idea that happiness, joy, and personal growth can be found while working through grief, and that while one must find a way to live in the wake of another’s death, it is *okay* to wish to continue living. Indeed, says Maria Cristina Melgar of Freud’s notion of grief work, “the working through of mourning leads to the principle of reality and to a desire to go on living” (118). For these protagonists, representing survivors of suicide, guilt, and anger play a large part in their inability to forgive themselves and the deceased, but over time they manage to look beyond who their loved ones were in their final moments, choosing to remember a different, happier version of the dead. This transition not only allows for some sense of personal growth, but leaves readers with the idea that surviving a loved one’s death is possible, and perhaps even desirable, given the alternative. As Belinda and Douglas Louie write: “It is when the characters are responsible for solving their problems that adolescent readers are most likely to be empowered to develop confidence in overcoming similar problems of their own” (53). Some characters take longer than others to relearn the role of tragedies in their lives, but they begin to do so by the time each novel ends, leaving readers with what Katherine Patterson refers to as “the hope of yearning. It is always incomplete, as all true hope must be. It is always in tension, rooted in this fallen earth but growing, yearning, stretching towards the new” (947). As the characters in these YA texts mature, working through their grief, confronting their oscillating emotions, relearning their roles and environments, they embody the strength and effort required to diminish grief’s power. There is no true “victory,” no happily-ever-afters; there is only moving forward. Some days appear harder for characters than others,

but they press on in their own way, remaining active and lively, honouring the dead as best as they can.

Conclusion

For some Victorian authors, writing consolation literature about those they lost was an effort to keep them alive on earth in some way, until the reunion in heaven could occur. One of the more notable examples of the Victorian elegy is Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.* Pat Jalland explains how *In Memoriam* "held deep meaning for many Victorians in mourning," as it acted as a form of consolation following the loss of loved ones (283). The core concept expressed from this text and others like it was the notion of "immortality in an afterlife with God and also the beloved family 'gone before'" (Jalland 283). A heavenly reunion was a naturalized hope for Victorian Christians, and Tennyson's text reflects the notion of finding "comforting assurance" in one's faith as one deals with the death of a loved one (Jalland 283). Herbert F. Tucker maintains that the inordinate length of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* "repeatedly raised the possibility that, if a pageant of grief can last for 131 meandering lyrics and for at least three Christmases, it just might last forever" (120). Jalland and Tucker emphasize the idea that writing about the deceased can act as a form of solace for bereaved people; it functions as an aspect of working through grief. Contemporary YA authors appear to be writing with a similar sentiment in mind, as the current efforts by YA authors to write of and about death and mourning, while not entirely identical to their Victorian counterparts, stems from a time when notions of mourning through writing emerged as powerful social influences.

What does remain from Victorian authors, influencing writers through the modern and contemporary eras, is the idea that literature on mourning can still hold deep meaning for the bereaved; it can still offer hope. Moreover, writing on mourning can be cathartic

for the author *and* readers. For authors, working through mourning occurs during the construction of a text. C.S. Lewis articulates his use for writing in mourning as follows:

I thought I could describe a *state*; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there's no reason why I should ever stop. There is something new to be chronicled every day. (59-60)

Through writing, Lewis comes to terms with mourning as an ongoing process. While he initially believed he could write through his state of grief, Lewis learns to embrace the daily challenges of bereavement that continue long after a loved one dies, and how chronicling sorrow through writing reflects the idea of mourning as an ongoing process. At the very least, Lewis helps emphasize how the act of writing creates meaning out of loss, and the fact that Lewis's epiphany on mourning came through the act of the writing helps to emphasize this point.

Virginia Woolf wrote extensively on mourning. In fact, the writing of Virginia Woolf, and the subsequent commentary by critics, help to situate one of YA literature's influential roles in contemporary Western culture. When discussing *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf describes her efforts to pen an elegy for her mother: "I did what psychoanalysts do for their patients...I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" (Woolf 81). Although Woolf claims to lay her emotions to rest once the writing process ends, critics have the benefit of viewing her collection of work holistically, offering a different interpretation of her writing. Commenting on Woolf's mental illness, separate from the influence of grief, Thomas Caramagno views her fiction as a "sensitive exploration of certain components of

her mood swings that . . . invites us to question how we construct meaning from a text" (3). Further, John Mepham comments on Woolf's critique of traditional Victorian mourning, arguing that her "insight into the connection between literary form and forms of mourning should be understood not as a symptom but an achievement, an achievement which has cultural and historical rather than purely personal significance" (143). Tammy Clewell asserts that this new critical understanding of Woolf's fiction reflects her "positive reinvention of mourning... as an ongoing experience, an endless process where the living separate from the dead without completely severing attachments ("A Consolation" 198). Thus, Woolf's writing is continuously influenced by her ongoing state of bereavement, and while she felt that writing allowed her to lay her emotions to rest, her collected works suggest otherwise: that there are always aspects of grief to write about as one mourns. Similar to Lewis, Woolf evidently chronicled her sorrow; both used their writing as a space to grieve. While chronicling sorrow may illustrate one reason why authors write about grief, what do readers get from reading about grief? Clewell argues that Woolf understood how her novels might "Step in and provide a kind of shared mourning practice ... for a culture bereft of viable expressions of grief ... by creating a social space and shared language for grief" (*Mourning* 13). In other words, Woolf provided her contemporaries (and subsequent readers) with an opportunity to use her texts as a means to work through their own grief.

It is my conclusion that Young Adult literature works in similar fashion for adolescent readers experiencing their own personal traumas. While death and mourning can function individually within a text, texts that focus on both subjects illustrate the collective power of creating a social space with a shared language for readers to safely

open a discourse with two of life's more difficult topics. Kathryn James writes in *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*, that "representations of death in [Young Adult] fiction can provide an unusually clear opportunity to understand some of the ways in which meaning is created and shared within a society" (2). Thus, YA fiction can act as a reflection of aspects of death and mourning that adolescent readers may be negotiating in their own lives, such as the biological functions of a dying body, the oscillating emotions that often result in response to the news of a loved one's death, or the challenges of relearning the world around them, and their roles within that world. By doing so, adolescent readers can observe how characters create and share meaning with each other, which, while not necessarily the primary intention, provides readers with some insight into the mind of a grieving teen.

Whether through corporeal imagery and/or graphic depictions, as I articulate in chapter one, the physicality of death is integral for many adolescent readers. Clewell argues that critics underappreciate how Woolf's reinvention of mourning was "stimulated by the cataclysmic traumas of the First World War," and how, "In her sustained effort to confront the legacy of the war, Woolf repeatedly sought not to heal wartime wounds, but to keep them open" ("A Consolation" 198-199). In essence, Woolf's writing kept the horrific nature of death, inspired by the war, on the forefront of her readers' minds. Purposefully, the same effort occurs in some contemporary YA fiction. For example, the narrative of John Green's *Looking for Alaska* is directly influenced by the events of 9/11. Green writes:

Right after 9/11, everyone on TV was talking about how this was a defining moment in American history, and how we would all view the world through the

lens of 9/11... I think what is meant by the phrase ‘post-9/11 world’ is really interesting: Humans tend to measure time within the framework of important events. In the Christian world, we date from the birth of Christ. The Islamic calendar dates from the Muslim community’s move from Mecca to Medina. *Alaska* is a novel about the most important event in these people’s lives, so it made sense to me to structure the story in the same way. (“Questions”)

Just as the First World War was a major cultural influence on Woolf and her writing, the events of September 11, 2001 were evidently influential on John Green’s novel. While Green does not reference 9/11 directly, the structure of the novel reflects a pre-Alaska death world and a post-Alaska death world.⁶ What is interesting about Green’s commentary is the way in which he describes how human beings measure time. According to Green, time is composed of before and after moments, leading to or influenced by a central event. Just as Tennyson’s response to the death of his best friend, Arthur Hallam, was to write *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, so, too, do the protagonists in YA novels choose to tell their stories in response to the loss of their own fictional loved ones. While it is difficult to define the actions of a character *before* an event in a narrative has yet to occur – in this study’s novels, the events being unexpected deaths – it is considerably easier to trace the actions of a character *after* the event in question, after each character’s actions are influenced by said event, and how those characters only understand “before” once they are in the “after.” Novels that open after the death has taken place, such as *The Last Time We Say Goodbye*, attempt to give the reader an idea of life before and after a significant death, but those narratives convey a protagonist’s voice

⁶ There is reason to believe that 9/11 has had a much wider influence on YA culture – in fact, nine of the twelve texts in this study dealing with death were written after 9/11 – but that is another topic of discussion.

already under the influence of grief. YA novels dealing with death inherently illustrate ways of responding to such a significant event, creating a space for readers to compare their own reactions to the protagonist's. Thus, YA literature allows adolescent readers to ponder their own notions of grief and bereavement, as the text becomes an "event" in readers' lives. I am by no means suggesting that reading a YA novel is the equivalent of a national tragedy or war, or even the equivalent of mourning an actual loved one, but by working with Green's definition of how human beings view time it becomes easier to see how some events, such as reading YA novels offering representations of death and mourning, become catalysts for new understandings and responses from adolescent readers on particularly difficult subject matter.

When teenagers pick up a YA novel that engages with these topics they open themselves up for a potentially deeper understanding of previous knowledge on the subject of bereavement, or they are forced to confront the subject for the first time. Either way, the YA text creates a space where knowledge is exchanged between the author and readers, the text and readers, and the characters and readers. These exchanges not only reflect what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the novel's "social heteroglossia" – indicated by the variety of individual voices within the text – but the dialogic nature of language itself, in which there is an "intense interanimation and struggle between one's own and another's word" (1073-1080). Readers must confront their understanding of death and mourning in relation to the way it comes to them in the text. When adolescents read a particular YA text with varying depictions of mourning as reflected by a variety of characters, they must negotiate what the characters illustrate for each other, *as well as* what the characters provide them as readers. This dialogue between the text and its

readers generates meaning, in what Reader-Response critic Louise Rosenblatt refers to as the “transaction” between the text and its readers (Lynn 68). By considering the depictions of mourning observed in different characters and contrasting it with their own notions of working through grief, readers exchange ideas with a given text that evolves as they continue to read more novels. Each time teens read a YA novel dealing with grief they take some of the information they observe and bring it with them when they read the next text, building on their previous knowledge and ultimately shaping the nature of the transaction they experience with the most recent book. Thus, through the act of reading, adolescents create an internal dialogue that reflects upon the ideas within themselves, and within the number of texts they read. For many adolescents, it is this internal dialogue between themselves and the YA novels they read that fosters a deeper understand of difficult subjects such as death, mourning, and grief.

By focusing on the relationship between the text and its readers, with the text acting as a theoretical social space of engagement, readers of YA literature, young and old alike, are free to contemplate topics such as death and mourning in a manner that emphasises both the individual *and* social nature of bereavement, informing readers of the vast responses possible in the face of grief, as well as literature’s practical potential in the introduction of adolescent minds to the difficult topics that they will inevitably confront throughout their real and literary paths.

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VITA AUCTORIS

Jeremy Johnston was born in 1988 in Barrie, Ontario. In 2014, he received a B.A. Honours in English Literature from Laurentian University. He is currently a Master's candidate in the English Literature program at the University of Windsor.