

Literary Tropes: The Battle of Words in Illness

Joy Eyisi Jr. ^{[a],*}

^[a] Department of Languages and General Studies, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Literary tropes are a universal type of creative expression that should be explored given how they capture the intensity of individuals suffering from severe disease. This study, therefore, aims to respond to two important questions: Are literary motifs prevalent in the compulsive thoughts of those suffering from diseases? What literary conventions appear to be predominant? Most of the studies that examine literary elements like metaphor and diseases seem to favour the medical personnel, Susan Sontag (1978;1988); Gavin Francis (2017). However, this paper critically analyses how John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* depicts patients with mental operations. By analysing the creative mental operations of affected characters, the study objectifies the presence of literary tropes in those operations and makes a proposition toward their identification. Derrida's theory of deconstruction is used for the: critical analysis and distilling of literary tropes. Meanings are implicit and deducible in creative mental operations; this substantiates the essence of artistic undertakings.

Key words: Metaphor, Paradoxical metaphor, Creative mental operations, Illness books, Disease, Illness, Deconstruction

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INTRODUCTION

This universality in creative expression is evident in daily experience. 'Artistic expression is universal. There is no human group existing today or ever known to have existed that did not engage in creative expression,' (Bloom, 2022, p.15). Creative expression involves music: singing and dancing, creating pictures and moving pictures, and the creative aspect of literature. Literary creativity as portrayed in mental operations via words in literary tropes, is particular to this essay. 'Literary creativity revolves around life... What this entails is that literature as well as literary tropes, derives its main essence from life...' (Owonibi, 2010, pp.38-39) and illness is an aspect of life. Illness is ill health the patient feels, while a disease is a structural/biochemical change resulting in organ dysfunction, (Cassell, 1976). In literature, creative writers employ these literary tropes in recreating the experiences in the minds of characters thus, depicting the sociological, psychological and rhetorical facets of reality. Since illness, an aspect of life is also a dimension of reality, this research seeks to answer two key questions: Are literary tropes present in the mental process of individuals suffering from diseases? What literary tropes seem to be dominant and influential?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literary tropes draw the reader's attention to varying ways of perceiving reality. By figuring out unexpected associations the tropes reflect, the reader arrives at diverse meanings. This foregrounds interpretation – 'the act of uncovering the meaning of a text,' (Marbaniang, 2014, p.2), specifically, the interpretation of the reader or listener. As a deduction, this characterises hermeneutics – "the art of interpretation." (Abulad, 2008, p.1).

Consequently, the study employs literary and analytical methods via close reading, to examine the literary tropes in the purposefully selected text, John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. The text is critically analysed from the rhetorical-hermeneutic perspective focusing on the characters' use of literary tropes to create their feelings and meanings regarding the disease that affects them. Hermeneutics stresses the relationship between interpretation and understanding. In addition to critical analysis from the hermeneutic perspective, the text is analysed against the backdrop of deconstruction.

The theory enables the distilling and critical analysis of the literary tropes. Specifically, transcendental signified, a tenet of Derrida's deconstruction is deployed in identifying the literary tropes in the text, implying that meaning transcends, and goes beyond just what is referred to. This suggests a multiplicity of meanings, an escape from the structural, organic, or constructural way of defining text. The theory as such, 'recognises that any human utterance has a multitude of possibilities for meaning,' (Dobie, 2009, p.156).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The mental compulsions of ailing individuals activated by the existence of diseases and their effects on mankind require ardent critical attention. Existing critical essays that discuss literary tropes and diseases are dominated by discourse on the literary tropes used by medical practitioners. However, there seems to be inadequate research in the area of literary tropes used by individuals in describing the experiences of their health condition. Studies such as Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988) deal with the metaphors that medical practitioners use, in the treatment of cancer and AIDS. The specific metaphors were not interpreted or given a meaning which is the essence of a literary endeavour. Kathleen Warden Ferrara in her book, *Therapeutic Ways with Words* (1994) examines the language used by clients and therapists in individual psychotherapy sessions in American Southwest. The focus was on the therapeutic uses of language. Gavin Francis's essay, *Storyhealing* (2017), discusses metaphor from the angle of clinicians. In his view, medical practitioners who adequately engage with literature will utilise metaphor the right way for the benefit of their patients. These essays and many others first, focus on metaphors from medical practitioners but do not give meaning to the metaphors highlighted. Metaphors used by the affected individual seem not to be critically analysed when they are mentioned. This gives the impression that inadequate research has been carried out in critically analyzing the literary tropes in the mental compulsions of individuals affected by disease (not medical practitioners). Thus,

this study first, objectifies the presence of literary tropes in the mental compulsions of individuals suffering from challenging diseases, and by critically analysing the creative mental operations, it makes a proposition towards their identification.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* relays the experiences of teenagers who suffer from cancer. Besides its manifestations in the lives of some other characters, it focuses on the core experiences of Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters. Hazel, who is sixteen years old, is diagnosed with Stage IV Thyroid cancer, and metastasis is taking shape in her lungs. She keeps on in the war against the disease, fighting with doses of an experimental drug known as Phalanxifor. On the other hand, Augustus, who is seventeen years old, suffers from bone cancer, known as osteosarcoma. One of his legs is amputated and he becomes free from cancer for one and a half years before the occurrence of a relapse.

The deconstructive theory of reading is employed in this analysis to assess the presence of literary tropes in the mental compulsions of the characters suffering from cancer. From the findings, a name is proposed for the literary tropes that seem to be dominant.

Literary Tropes of the Sky

At some point, Hazel thinks the cancer has spread to her shoulders and her brain. She wakes up in the morning with 'an apocalyptic pain fingering out from the unreachable centre of,' her 'head,' and she explains that her parents could do nothing to alleviate 'the supernova exploding inside,' her 'brain,' (43). The supernova, from Hazel's statement above, is relevant to this essay. The (SN or SNe) supernova(e) is a temporary 'astronomical event that occurs during the last evolutionary stages of a star's life,' (Krebs & Hillebrandt, 1983, p.2). The star could be an immensely large star or a white dwarf one. But typical of the destruction of the star is a final colossal explosion. Some theoretical research shows that the supernova is caused by either a spasmodic rekindling of nuclear fusion in a star that is already deteriorating or a spasmodic breakdown of the core of a massive star. New stars can be formed from the shock waves of the explosion. In relation to this view, with the text *The Fault in Our Stars*, it can be assumed that the fault in the literal star is the supernova, the event that leads to the star's explosion.

The title, *The Fault in Our Stars*, seems to be drawn from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In one of Peter Van Houten's letters to Gus, one finds that the title has its roots in Cassius' statement to Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, 'The fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars/ But in ourselves, that we are underlings.' This implies that humans are the architect of their circumstances, as stars refer to destiny. Arguably, the text is not in tandem with

Cassius' statement, as it seems to maintain that the fault is not in the willpower of the human but in the stars. In the ambit of this essay, stars symbolize the supernatural behind the lives of the characters. Hence, the fault is in the supernatural, not in the willpower of the characters. The text seems to state that the characters are not responsible for the situations in which they find themselves.

With the free flow of meanings arising from this title, it is assumed that there is a literal meaning and about three figurative meanings for this essay. The literal meaning shows that the fault in stars, our stars, (our – because the stars are in the universe inhabited and developed or destroyed by humans) is the event of the supernova explosion, that could lead to the formation of new stars. The first figurative meaning relays that if stars represent the human body as a container, the fault is in the event of the disease, cancer, invading the human body. The fault, then, is in the human body – the fact that it can be invaded. On the other hand, the second figurative meaning proposes that if stars represent the supernatural behind the lives of characters, it then means that the fault is in the supernatural and not within what the human mind can control. For the third figurative meaning, if the star is the human – man or woman (one's self) or willpower, then it is in relation to hamartia, in the sense that the fault – the defect is a moral flaw in one's character. Here, one's actions can result in the disease one suffers from. Using the literal and first figurative meanings, the event of the supernova explosion can be seen as the event of a disease explosion. But since the supernova can yield new stars, one wonders if a disease can also yield new stars (humans). This makes the metaphoric statement paradoxical.

Literary Tropes of Human Activity

Gus states, as he and Hazel discuss their hobbies,

... cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people-over business. But surely you haven't let it succeed prematurely, (13).

The term, 'prematurely,' suggests two implications: on cancer's end, he wants to believe that she has not let cancer succeed in its premature stage. And from her own end, he wants to believe that she has not prematurely, childishly without fighting, let cancer succeed. Furthermore, cancer is seen here, as a business mogul, a merchant, in the business of overtaking and accumulating people. Thus, cancer, here, is in the business of overthrowing people for its growth prowess. Expatiating this, when Gus laments his inability to affect or impart lives before he dies, Hazel tries to assure him that concerning the disease, there are no bad guys to fight, and 'even cancer isn't a bad guy really. Cancer just wants to be alive,' (99). Consequently, cancer is in the growth business of overtaking lives and cancer needs to grow. But does it really achieve this? In killing the host that it seeks to give it life?

The text suggests that though it fails in the business of its own growth, it excels in its business of taking over people and accumulating people, as seen in the allegorical wall made of dead people in the movie, *300*. The failed business of its growth is also seen in the long list of dead cancer teens from the support group Hazel attends. With this understanding, it is perceived that the description from Gus', *Like cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people over business* (13) is metaphoric and also has paradoxical tendencies.

One finds in the text that *Phalanxifor*, (33) is metaphoric but paradoxical in itself. It is a metaphor for tools used to fight against cancer. The irreconcilable circumstance is that while the tools are set to function, they make the individuals providing the tools penniless. And if the individuals become penniless, they might not be able to fight. Yet, they need to fight to stay alive. This claim stems from Hazel's understanding, 'it occurred to me that the reason my parents had no money was me. I'd sapped the family savings with Phalanxifor co-pays... I didn't want to put them even further into debt,' (33).

Literary Tropes of War

The death of Gus' ex-girlfriend, Caroline Mathers, makes Hazel worry so much that she decides to stay away from people so that she does not replicate what she feels were Caroline's actions. As she declares, 'Caroline Mathers had been a bomb and when she blew up, everyone around her was left with embedded shrapnel,' (TFIOS, 40). Hazel does not want to be a bomb like Caroline. As such she exclaims painfully to her parents,

I'm like a grenade, Mom. I'm a grenade and at some point, I'm going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, okay? ... I'm a grenade ... And I can't be a regular teenager, because I'm a grenade, (41).

This scientific metaphoric description is enhanced by Van Hounten's description of sick children. He was precisely referring to Gus and Hazel; on their visit, he says, 'you are a side effect of an evolutionary process that cares little for individual lives. You are a failed experiment in mutation,' (78). He thus refers to cancer as an evolutionary process.

However, analysing Hazel's belief, *I am a grenade* is a metaphor with paradoxical tendencies. If Hazel is a grenade, this suggests that all cancer patients are. This also suggests that the human body infected by Cancer is a grenade. A grenade is a small bomb or explosive device made to be thrown by hand or shot from a grenade launcher. The grenade is functional because it contains an explosive. Consequently, if the cancer-infected human body is a grenade, then the cancer in the body is the explosive. Notably, from the text, Patrick and Lida have a somewhat long remission from cancer, Isaac has been declared NEC – No Evidence of Cancer and Hazel is keeping her life with Phalanxifor. This implies that, cancer can be destroyed, eliminated, or controlled.

The contradiction lies in the premise drawn from the calculation,

If Grenade = G, Body = B, E = Explosive, Cancer = C
G contains E

and B contains C

Both E and C = Explosive

Hence, C = E as B = G, cancer is the explosive and the body is the grenade.

But if C can be destroyed, eliminated or controlled in action, can E be destroyed, eliminated or controlled while it is in action? The focus here is on the explosives and not their containers. Perhaps the containers might not be remedied once an explosion occurs. Regarding the explosives, E does not explode, it remains dormant till it is triggered. And once it is triggered, it destroys. On the other hand, C begins its destructive mechanisms the moment it settles in its container or host which is the body. So, the question remains, the moment C is triggered it can be stopped but can E be stopped the moment it is triggered?

Gus suffers from a relapse but he keeps it from Hazel till they had met Peter Van Houten. The day after meeting Peter, Gus describes his experience thus, 'I lit up like a Christmas tree, Hazel Grace. The lining of my chest, my left hip, my liver, everywhere,' (87). It was metastasis, the cancer had spread from his bones to other parts of his body. It was heart-breaking. No, heart-breaking is an understatement. It turns out, according to Hazel, that he becomes the grenade. The worst pain he feels, however, is the fact that he does not get to fight a winning battle or become a sacrificial hero, or leave a mark behind and so he feels that he will not be remembered by the universe. He constantly dreams that he is writing a memoir so that he will remain in the memories of his 'adoring public,' (95). Hazel encourages him, telling him that he is already in a war, fighting a disease, fighting cancer. But this does not go down well with him, therefore he laments,

Some war. What am I at war with? My cancer. And what is my cancer? My cancer is me. The tumors are made of me. They're made of me as surely as my brain and my heart are made of me. It is a civil war, Hazel Grace, with a predetermined winner. (TFIOS, 88)

And regardless of the fact that he tries to fight with the metaphorical statement, 'I'm on a roller coaster that only goes up,' (88, 91), and is still seen metaphorically smoking his unlit cigarette, one finds that he has given in, he has surrendered and might not be able to fight again. This implication, is carefully distilled at the point when he further declares to Isaac, 'not to one-up you or anything, but my body is made out of cancer ... I'm taken,' (91). He states that his body is not even made up of, but made 'out of,' cancer. Implying that his body does not consist of cancer but is produced from cancer – cancer was part of the constituents from which his body was formed. He already visualizes himself as taken and as well, dead. At

Funky Bones, he laments to Hazel, 'Last time, I imagined myself as the kid. This time, the skeleton,' (94).

Thus, the preceding indented excerpt, *my cancer is me*, a statement of grief made by Gus while suffering from a relapse, is metaphoric and at the same time paradoxical. This is because 'me' metaphorically represents every part of his body and everything concerning him. In the text, Gus claims that the cancer in him is his, not only because the cancer is inside him, but because, his body is created from cancer. So, a war against it is termed a civil war and not just a civil war with an unknown winner, but a civil war with a predetermined winner. As a result, his belief in the terminality of cancer kindles the ideological premise of the text, that cancer is a terminal disease and is equated to death – once cancer encounters a human's body, cancer conquers.

In deconstructing Gus' claim of his cancer war, as a civil war, one finds that the groups in the body or state, fighting against each other, existed as groups that made the body or state one and whole. This essay works with the understanding that a civil war occurs between groups in a state. The civil war consists of the rebel(s) and the government, the violence transcends a given threshold and it spans over a period of time. So, from the text, it is assumed that the rebel is the cancer while the government is Gus, hence, the statement, *my cancer is me*. Now, if cancer is not an alien and if it is Gus, why is it being fought? Can one actually fight one's self? So as Hazel puts it, 'he lay on his back, head turned away from me, a PICC line already in. They were attacking cancer with a new cocktail: two chemo drugs and a protein receptor that they hoped would turn off the oncogene in Gus' cancer,' (90). Now, they begin to attack cancer. If Gus is the cancer, then Gus is attacking himself in a civil war. And if Gus is attacking himself, how can he survive? More importantly, if Gus is his cancer as he calls it, why should a fight ensue in the first place? Illustrating this, *My cancer is me* –

Me = M, Cancer = C Civil War = CW

but then, M is being attacked by C, C needs to be eliminated for M to live,

CW ensues ...

If C = M, as C is attacked and eliminated, M is attacked and eliminated.

If C = M, can C be attacked and eliminated without attacking and eliminating M?

If C dies, M dies. Do both the government and the rebel perish in a civil war?

And in the text, C and M die because cancer dies and Gus dies or Gus dies and cancer dies.

All the characters in TFIOS, suffering from cancer believe that the cancer is theirs. Hence, the expression, 'my cancer.' For instance, from Isaac, we read: *my eye cancer* (7), from Hazel: *my lung tumors, my mets* (10), *my cancer* (37). Even the doctors in the text refer to cancer from the angle of the one who suffers from it. Dr. Maria, during the Cancer Team Meeting for Hazel, points out clearly,

'Phalanxifor continues to control your cancer growth,' and 'Your cancer is not going away, Hazel,' (47). This statement from her doctor became a fortress in Hazel's mind and she believes that she has 'never been anything but terminal,' and throughout, her 'treatment had been in pursuit of extending,' her 'life, not curing my cancer,' (67). Not only do they believe that their cancer is theirs, but they also believe that they cannot separate themselves from their cancer. Confused about Caroline's mean actions towards him, Gus wonders if the actions truly come from her or if they arise because of the tumor. This reflects in the narration of his experience to Hazel, 'yeah, I mean, it was the tumor. It ate her brain, you know? Or it wasn't the tumor. I have no way of knowing because they were inseparable, she and the tumor,' (71). They call it their cancer yet they fight against it. Fighting against what belongs to them or what is them or themselves. Can one fight oneself?

FINDINGS

The deconstructive critical analysis unveils disunities, flickering of meanings, and contradictions (paradoxes) channelled towards highlighting and identifying the literary tropes in the mental compulsions of Hazel and Gus who experience cancer.

The findings not only substantiate the presence of literary tropes in the mental operations of individuals suffering from diseases, but also proposes a name for the dominant and influential literary tropes. Thus, from the highlighted literary tropes below:

1. ... 'the supernova exploding inside,' her 'brain,' (43)
2. ... 'Like cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people over business' (13)
3. ... 'Phalanxifor,' (33)
4. ... 'I'm a grenade and at some point, I'm going to blow up, ...' (41)
5. ... 'My cancer is me.' (88)
6. ... 'my cancer, your cancer' (7, 10, 37, 47, 67, 71)

it stands to reason that the dominant and influential literary trope utilised by characters to explain their experiences in illness is a paradoxical metaphor. This is not just a mere metaphor but one that is paradoxical. As a result, the study proposes that it is not the case that every metaphor expresses a meaning that seems consistent with the phoric relations. Some metaphors portray meanings that are not in consonance, let alone reconcilable, with the items in relation. Hence, the possibility of paradoxical metaphors. In other words, the study putting a name to the literary tropes proposes the term, **paradoxical metaphors** to denote the co-occurrence of the two features - paradox and metaphor. It is an attempt to indicate the instances of these double collisions of literary features in the novel. Hence, the term is a working definition in the context of the critical mediation of the operations of metaphors

in this study. It implies that a metaphor which is a name or an idea that refers to something else other than the signified could be contradictory in itself, hence, having a paradoxical attribute.

Distinctly, this study indicates that the highlighted paradoxical metaphors are classified as antinomies, one of the three classes of Quine's classification of paradox. Antinomies have contradictory conclusions and rely on 'the current state of one's knowledge and one's ability to figure things out.' (Lycan, 2021, p.3). They 'bring on the crises in thought,' (Quine, 1962, p.85) showing the need for a drastic revision in our customary way of looking at things,' (Lycan, 2021, p.3).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This critical analysis has been able to verify the presence of literary tropes (figurative expressions) in the mental compulsions of individuals experiencing the effect of a disease. The figurative expressions are selected from the character's statements regarding the symptoms they experience, and their beliefs about the disease, cancer. The study proposes the name, paradoxical metaphors, as the literary trope dominant in the mental compulsions of characters suffering from life-changing diseases. It also affirms the indeterminacy of meanings, associated with paradoxical metaphors distilled from the selected text.

In addition to the focus of the research, the study highlights literary representations of cancer, as affected characters see the disease as, themselves, a long-settled satellite colony, a merchant or businessman, a fish (a slithering eel of insidious intent), the grim reaper, the supernova, the explosive agent in a grenade, and a life determinant.

Since the study has proposed the name, paradoxical metaphors, as the dominant mental literary compulsions in the minds of characters suffering from diseases, it recommends that further research be carried out to first, establish this name and then, assess the influence of paradoxical metaphors on individuals suffering from not only cancer but other diseases. The findings will encourage better communication within the medical space, enhance doctor-patient interaction, caregivers' services, and public health delivery.

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