Sexuality and Death in Young Adult Fiction

Representations of Controversial Themes in Popular Contemporary Novels

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the representation of two controversial themes, sex and death, in popular contemporary young adult fiction. The findings presented in this study are based on five of the bestselling young adult fiction novels of 2015; *Eleanor and Park* (2012) by Rainbow Rowell, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2012) by Jesse Andrews, *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *Paper Towns* (2008), and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), by John Green. The close readings of these novels explore their realistic presentation of the two topics that are typically deemed controversial in young adult literature, sexuality and death, and what reactions they are trying to create within their main targeted audience. The first chapter focuses on teen sexuality, and I argue that sexual development is portrayed in a positive manner in that it helps the characters to a better sense of self-understanding. The second chapter focuses on death, and I argue that these novels emphasize death as being brutal, but also that it is an unavoidable and natural part of life which brings with it an element of learning. Because the novels this thesis bases its findings on are all fairly new, there has been limited research previously conducted. For this reason, I will be situating my own arguments in relation to wider criticism on teen sexuality, death writing and contemporary young adult literature.
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Introduction

It is an illusion that youth is happy, an illusion of those who have lost it; but the young know they are wretched for they are full of the truthless ideal which have been instilled into them, and each time they come in contact with the real, they are bruised and wounded. It looks as if they were victims of a conspiracy; for the books they read, ideal by the necessity of selection, and the conversation of their elders, who look back upon the past through a rosy haze of forgetfulness, prepare them for an unreal life. They must discover for themselves that all they have read and all they have been told are lies, lies, lies; and each discovery is another nail driven into the body on the cross of life (William Somerset Maugham 129, Of Human Bondage 1945).

Margaret Edwards writes in The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts (1994) that: “It is a disservice to a young person, who must live dangerously, to acquaint him only with good, innocuous people in ideal situations” (56). Not everyone agrees with Edwards in her sentiment, as the primary works this thesis deals with have been opposed by adults who for different reasons have found them unsuitable for their intended audience: young adults.

Young adult literature is mainly texts aimed at an audience aged 12-18 years old. However, as Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen point out in Literature for Today’s Young Adults (2005); “there is a tremendous difference between 12-year-olds and 17-year-olds” (3). I believe that the novels this thesis deals with are aimed largely at older teens, and my arguments will be based on this interpretation. I will also during my analysis of these texts on occasion refer to the concept of maturity. In this context, I use the term to refer to characters that are able to behave themselves in a mature manner, or to characters that develop throughout the stories in the sense that they display a growth in understanding. I believe that the term is relevant in this thesis because many of the characters, who are all teenagers, become able to deal with serious issues that might be more related to adulthood than childhood, but they still prove to be able to adapt to their new-found consciousness.

Two of the topics that recur in many of these novels are death and sexuality, which are two of the most controversial topics that young adult literature can address. Despite the fact that some people object to the notion that these topics should have a central place in young adult literature, both death and sexuality are natural elements in young adults’ life. Edwards argues that: “Many adults seem to think that if sex is not mentioned to adolescents, it will go away. On the contrary, it is here to stay and teenagers are avidly interested in it. They will find out all they can about it and wise adults will make available reliable books that tell them what they wish to know” (54). Maugham’s quote at the beginning of this introduction coincides with Edwards’ argument that there is a need to address unpleasant truths in young adult fiction, because to not do so would be to instill youth with a lie about what life really is, and only prepare them for “an unreal life”, as Maugham calls it. Sheila Egoff, when writing
about the realistic novel in Thursday’s Child (1981), writes that “children do have specific problems of their own, some disruption in their lives, sibling rivalry, a lack of preparedness for contact with the realities of life such as death or sex” (48). Egoff’s claim concur with Maugham’s sentiment, in that there are things that happen in young people’s lives which are not being discussed in the literature aimed at this population. The point of departure for this thesis is ten books, and several of them have, as previously mentioned, been heavily opposed. I will argue that the reason why these books have received so many complaints, is because they all to some extent depict life as it actually is – at least closer to the “truth” that Edwards calls for. These books depict sexuality and death in such a realistic mode, that certain adults believe it is their mission to oppose them in order to protect young adults from reading about topics that they might not be comfortable with. Had these novels dealt with these controversial topics in an unrealistic manner, then there would have been nothing to oppose because of their obvious improbability.

Michael Cart argues in Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism (2011), that “Adolescence has always been viewed as a period of transition, of moving upward from one stage of development to another, and so it is not surprising that its literature, in the early years at least, should have been viewed as a ladder – or, more precisely, a rung on a ladder between children’s and adult literature” (23). The books this thesis deals with can be categorized as Bildungsromane, a term Jerome H. Buckley found somewhat awkward to use in the English language. In the preface to his book Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding (1974), Buckley suggests several synonyms to replace it with, such as “the novel of youth, the novel of education, of apprenticeship, of adolescence, of initiation, even the life-novel” (vii-viii). Bildungsroman as a genre is far from being a new concept. In Renaissance conduct books Bildungsroman often dealt with the reoccurring theme: “the making of a gentleman” (Buckley 20). Though the main theme no longer is that of becoming a gentleman, personal growth and the coming-of-age aspect is still a vital part of any Bildungsroman.

Kenneth Millard writes in Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction (2007) that: “‘Bildungsroman’ has been widely adopted as a term in literary criticism to characterize the generic conventions of any novel of youthful development” (2). Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847), Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1961), J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series (2014), and John Green’s Looking for Alaska (2005) are all examples of Bildungsromane, though they are written in three different centuries. Buckley argues that an “examination of
some representative Bildungsromane from about 1850 to the present should indicate how each
writer in turn learned to accommodate a powerful personal vision to the developing
conventions of the genre” (27). Literature does not exist in a vacuum, but is affected by the
contemporary society it is written in. Jane Eyre and Looking for Alaska are extremely
different both in terms of language and the conduct of their characters, but they both depict
the maturation of their main characters, and how they go through a journey of self-realization.
They are both obviously affected by the time they are written (1847 and 2005 respectively),
which is what Buckley refers to when discussing the developing conventions of the genre; the
main elements are still essential to the genre, though the social framework differs.

Jane McDonnell is in agreement with Buckley, and emphasizes in ”’A Little Spirit of
Independence’: Sexual Politics and the Bildungsroman in Mansfield Park” (1984) how the
Bildungsroman deals with the formation of identity of its protagonist:

The Bildungsroman especially, could be characterized as an ambitious text. As a
semiautobiographical, apprenticeship-to-life story, it deals significantly with the mental
history, self-determination, and identity of the protagonist. In other words, it is pre-eminently
the fictional form which celebrates subjectivity, autonomy and self-definition (199).

What McDonnell points out is that the Bildungsroman accentuates the journey of self-
realization of its protagonist. The “apprentice-to-life story” that the protagonist endures
results in a better understanding of the self. The Bildungsroman is a tale of learning about
oneself, but also about the world and how the self fits into that equation. The popular
reference to the Bildungsroman as a “coming of age” story does in itself emphasize the
protagonist’s development from the secession of childhood, and into the beginning stages of
adulthood.

Just as the content of the Bildungsroman has changed over the years, so has the term
young adult literature and what can be categorized as such. Michael Cart mentions To Kill a
Mockingbird and J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (1951) as examples, which were not
originally published for young adults, but have been embraced by so many teens that if they
had been released today, they would have been released as young adult literature (111). The
fairly new term “the crossover novel” refers to the blurred line between literature aimed at and
read by young adults, and the literature aimed and read by adults. Rachel Falconer argues in
The Crossover Novel (2009) that

crossover novels emerged into the public arena amid a cacophonous mixture of outrage,
disgust, defensiveness, and conspiratorial solidarity. The hostility to cross-reading (...)

3
suggests a broader anxiety about the blurring of boundaries between child or youth culture and adult culture in the millennial years (2-3).

Falconer points to a debate where there were concerns about what young adults were reading, as the topics that were discussed in adult literature were thought to be unsuitable for young adults. The crossover novel is a novel that attracts both a younger and an older audience, consequently making it difficult to firmly position it exclusively as either an adult or young adult book. Cart (111) does however point out that younger people reading books published for adults is hardly a new concept. Younger people who want to read adult books, fully aware of the fact that they are not allowed to read them, is not anything revolutionary. Adults reading books aimed at children or adolescents is not a new discovery either. The curious element of the crossover novel, however, is as Falconer points out, that “some contemporary children’s fiction is becoming much harder to distinguish from fiction for adult readers” (6). The question is therefore whether young adults books are starting to deal with more mature and perhaps controversial subjects than before, or whether the change lies with the readership, and if the bar as to what is considered suitable for the younger audience has been lowered. Falconer argues that “In a sense, the bildungsroman is a natural crossover genre, because it typically represents a protagonist developing from child to adulthood” (74). The five books that this thesis focuses on in particular detail during the forthcoming analysis deal with topics that are controversial because they are believed to be inappropriate for young adults, at least according to the complaints they have received, but these topics do nevertheless have a natural space in adult literature. These novels are therefore, if not crossover novels themselves, challenging the boundaries between adult and contemporary young adult fiction.

One author who used to be categorized as an author of young adult fiction but is now regarded as an author of adult fiction is Meg Rosoff. In her article “Identity Crisis? Not really” (2007), she explains why she believes that coming-of-age is an interesting topic to read about for all age groups:

> a good coming-of-age novel is as classic a literary form as a good political thriller or a good murder mystery. I’ve snuck all sorts of midlife crises into my novels, and they fit remarkably well, because if anyone knows the feeling of being lost and alone, it’s a teenager. Or a middle-aged woman. Or a hundred-year-old man. The gaining of wisdom is one subject that plays and plays (Rosoff).

Rosoff points to similarities amongst the intended audiences, and how the topic of development can relate to all genders and age groups. Implicitly, Rosoff highlights the fact that no one can monopolize the topic “coming-of-age” or claim that it belongs exclusively to
one specific genre. Learning is something you do throughout your life. Even though certain literature is aimed at a particular demographic, it can still seem appealing to a broader audience than initially intended. Falconer mentions the *Harry Potter* series as an example to prove how it “and many other children’s books do speak to adult readers” (1). Despite its main envisaged audience, it became hugely popular amongst not only children and young adults, but also with adults. The rules that decide what is young adult literature and what is not, are therefore not necessarily affected only by content, but also by marketing strategies.

Cart argues that if young adult literature wants to survive, it needs to present more to its readers than superficial and simplistic stories:

> If young adult literature is to have a future, it must be more than formula-driven fiction that begins and ends with a problem. It must be as real as headlines but more than the simple retailing of fact. It must also be enriched by the best means literature can offer: an expansive, fully realized setting; a memorably artful narrative voice; complex and fully realized characters; and unsparing honesty and candor in use of language and treatment of material. Young adult literature, in short, must take creative (and marketing) risks to present hard-edged issues of relevance so that it may offer its readers not only reality but also revelation and, ultimately, that desired wisdom (Cart 55-6).

Cart points out the need for authors of young adult fiction to write stories that are complex as opposed to trivial, and that readers can relate to. The above quote from Cart about the need for young adult fiction to address relevant topics coincides with the previous arguments made by both Edwards, Egoff and Maugham. This specific type of literature needs to refer to realistic concepts that are central to the demographic this literature aims at, in order to stay relevant. Buckley too, agrees with Cart when he states that a *Bildungsroman* “should uncover, along the way, some fresh perceptions of the unpredictable vitality of youth” (27). While Cart discusses the entire field of young adult fiction and Buckley only refers to the specific genre of the *Bildungsroman*, I believe that their arguments align due to the *Bildungsroman*’s close relation to young adult fiction. Edwards too believes that both the good and the ugly should be presented in stories for young adults, and that it is not harmful for the younger demographic to read stories that depict other than solely positive experiences – on the contrary, as readers might be inspired by how the characters deal with the challenges they are faced with: “Young people are not devastated by reading about unpleasantness. (Even as children, they applauded as the little pig boiled the big, bad wolf alive for supper.) We must let teenagers read of life as it is and learn how people of courage get the best of it” (Edwards 53).
Sara Hutchinson points out in her article “Let’s Write about Sex – YA Fiction as a Means of Learning about Sexuality” (2016), that: the “young adult novel can play an important role in providing young people with a source of sexuality information by offering a diverse range of characters and situations that they may not encounter amongst their own friendship group” (317). I agree with Hutchinson’s argument, but I would argue that young adult literature also offers information in regards to death and grief. Cart argues that young adult fiction is a powerful tool because it possesses a lot of power in terms of educating its readers in a non-academic manner: “We need wisdom. And for that we must turn to fiction – to young adult fiction, which is written for and about YAs and the unique problems that plague and perplex them. Why fiction? Because of its unique capacity to educate not only the mind but the heart and spirit as well” (qtd. in Cart 55, emphasis in original). Wisdom is a key word when discussed in relation to taboo, and especially when being conjoined with young adult fiction. Taboo in itself refers to something that is forbidden, or at least discouraged, to talk about. There are no open discussions about subjects that are considered to be taboo, which results in lack of knowledge because it is difficult to access information about them. Young adult fiction has therefore a unique role in young adults’ life, in that it can approach subjects that are considered to be taboo or controversial to discuss in a particular manner with specific age groups, and still hide behind the sentiment that they are fictive and not a description of “the real”. Literature therefore has the potential to portray contemporary topics that are considered controversial in a realistic but non-frightening manner for its readers, which then can affect their readers’ perception of such topics in a positive manner.

Edwards believes that the reason some topics have become taboo for young adults specifically, is because of older generations’ belief that it is the right thing to do, despite the possible consequences it might result in:

We do not want our adolescents to see the seamy side of life. We do not want them to suffer pain and unhappiness, and if we could, we would prolong the age of innocence indefinitely. Of course, if we should succeed in our efforts to do this, we should at the same time rob our young people of the opportunity to build strength of character and incapacitate them for the crises they are sure to meet (Edwards 53).

Taboos have developed within young adult fiction not in order to consciously render its readers incapable of dealing with realistic issues, but because of older adults’ need to shield young adults from aspects of life that they associate with adulthood. What is considered to be taboo or controversial in young adult fiction is affected by the contemporary society, and has changed throughout the years. Sex and death have both been common themes in young adult
literature for a very long time, but then they have usually been treated in ways that alleviate the sense of taboo (for instance Edward and Bella in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2007) who wait until they are married before having sex). What is considered to be appropriate for young adults to read about goes in waves, as for instance children’s literature in the 19th century often included death as a central topic. Donelson and Nilsen write about what one could and could not write about in young adult literature from 1941 to 1965:

Certain things were not to be mentioned – obscenity, profanity, suicide, sexuality, sensuality, homosexuality, protests against anything significant, social or racial injustice, or the ambivalent feelings of cruelty and compassion inherent in young adults and all people. Pregnancy, early marriage, drugs, smoking, alcohol, school dropouts, divorce, and alienation could be introduced only by implication and only as bad examples for thoughtful, decent young adults (71).

These topics might have been absent from young adult fiction fifty years ago, but most of these topics are today far less controversial. Cart argues in the chapter “Sex and Other Shibboleths” that young adult fiction has a long history of “taboo busting”, but also that “The one area of life that has most stubbornly resisted such taboo breaking is, however, human sexuality” (141). Cart’s argument is strengthened by the complaints that some of the novels this thesis deals with have received, due to their close dealings with sex and sexual development. I believe that one of the reasons why death is controversial in contemporary young adult fiction could be because, as Donelson and Nilsen writes, that “the general public seems to have an almost subconscious belief that children will model their lives after what they read. Since all of us want our children to be happy, we feel more comfortable when they are reading ‘happy’ books” (115).

Sexuality and death are two extensively researched topics within the field of literary criticism. There is also a large and rapidly growing field devoted to researching young adult fiction. At the present, there is for instance a lot of focus directed at the use of dystopia in young adult literature. There is, however, yet little criticism devoted to researching contemporary works’ use of teenage sexuality and death in a literary context. One possible reason for this might be that the young adult market has grown incredibly large so swiftly. It has become easily accessible thanks to many digital inventions such as Kindle and the internet, which makes analyzing everything young adults read worldwide an impossible project. It also became evident when writing this thesis that literary criticism on the ten books this thesis deals with is sorely lacking. The fact that these books are too new to have sparked criticism yet is obviously a relevant factor. This means that I in this thesis will make use of
wider criticism on teen sexuality and death writing in addition to theories on young adult literature, instead of criticism directed at the specific novels this thesis deals with.

This thesis has a clear didactic foundation in the sense that it will emphasize the role of young adult literature as being valuable in not only a literary context, but it will however not be using a didactic approach. I believe that young adult literature is an important asset and a big part of teenagers’ support system during the exciting teenage years. It would therefore be difficult for me to discuss these texts without reflecting upon their role as not only literary texts, but also as “guidelines” for their main targeted audience. Obviously, all novels aim to create a reaction of some sort amongst their readers, but the peculiar role of young adult fiction is that it is aimed at a demographic that are in the midst of a period of extensive identity development. With this view, I do not believe that I would have been able to discuss these novels and the controversial themes they deal with, without linking them to their role in today’s society and the signals they send to their impressionable audience. I am not trying to argue whether these books in particular should be used in the classroom or not or if they are suitable for all teenagers worldwide. Instead, I will try to show what these books truly convey to its readers by analyzing them more thoroughly. Didacticism will therefore color my readings of these stories, although all arguments will be rooted in literary analysis.

This thesis will be a snapshot of contemporary popular young adult fiction, and the way in which they deal with two areas often considered taboo for younger audiences: sexuality and death. The overarching argument is that the books which will be discussed normalize the idea that teenagers are capable of dealing with mature topics, such as sexuality and death. Both sexuality and death are normalized and portrayed in a realistic mode in these young adult fiction books, and these topics do not affect the lives of the characters in an exclusively negative manner. This thesis will mainly base its findings on comparative analysis between five of the ten books on the list. It will, however, ground many of its arguments within a feminist framework, specifically in regards to discrepancies concerning the portrayal of the male and female characters.

Young adult fiction has grown to become a large field consisting of many authors and even more literature. Ultimately I decided to use the bestsellers list from New York Times as the foundation of my thesis. The list, which consists of ten books, reads in chronological order from 1st to 10th place: John Green`s Paper Towns (2008), John Green`s Looking for Alaska (2005), Jesse Andrew`s Me and Earl and the Dying Girl (2012), Markus Zusak`s The Book Thief (2005), Ransom Riggs` Miss Peregrine`s Home for Peculiar Children (2013), John
Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2015), John Green’s *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park* (2012), and lastly Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2010). The reason I chose to base my thesis on this list is because these books represent what is actually being read. In other words, these are the books that currently have the most power, in that they are reaching the most readers. They are therefore more influential than more recently published but less popular novels. There were several elements that were noteworthy when reading these novels and comparing them to each other, but what particularly captured my attention was the way these novels addressed the concepts sexuality and death. Only five of the novels on the list will be discussed throughout this thesis, as we will focus primarily on three books in each chapter which deals explicitly with the topic at hand. The list is the foundation of this thesis, but there needed to be a form of selection in order to be able to conduct an in-depth analysis of how sex and death is presented and represented, and the novels that I have selected for each chapter are particularly interesting in regards to sexuality and death.

The ten books on this list are not the most recently published young adult fiction books, though they have all been published within the last 12 years. Many of the books have been adapted to the big screen, and consequently increased their book sales. *The Fault in Our Stars* increased its e-book sales with an impressive 267% after its UK release of the movie (Lewis 2014). *Paper Towns* (2015), *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (2015), *The Book Thief* (2013), *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* (2016) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014) have all been adapted into movies (year of film release in parenthesis), while *Thirteen Reasons Why* was released as a TV-series on Netflix this March (2017). After the movie success of *The Fault in Our Stars*, several other previously written novels by John Green managed to find their way back to the top of the best sellers list, such as *Looking for Alaska*. The movie adaptions are likely one of the key factors why Green dominates the lists so heavily, as people who have seen the movie adaptions of his movies have been inspired to read his books as well.

The reason that it is death and sexuality that is at the core of this study is because of their importance specifically within this age group. Sexuality and death can be interpreted as a beginning and an end: the beginning of a life as a sexual being, and the end of the physical life. The teenage years consists of sexual discovery and experiences, and is an instrumental period in the creation of self-identity. Sexuality is a widely researched topic within all areas of
literature, but it has a particular importance when it is discussed in relation to young adults - especially teenagers. The teenage years are a period of change, and one can feel trapped in a state of limbo because one is no longer a child, but not yet an adult either. There are a lot of biological changes happening within one`s body during this time, such as reaching puberty. This biological change also forces a behavioral one, creating a space for a new self-identity. The understanding of the self as a sexual being is a big part of this creation of identity, and it is therefore not surprising that the literature especially aimed at this demographic reflects the current complex transition of its targeted audience. It is arguably easier to be using literature to approach such complicated subjects with young adults in real life, because one can hypothesize and discuss it on a general basis. The inclusion of sensitive subjects in young adult literature can create a lower threshold for young adults to ask questions and acquire information that can make this transition easier.

Death, then, represents an end; a cessation of an individual`s life. However, it does also represent a new beginning. While being the end of the person who is dying, it introduces a new period for the people around the deceased. As we will see in Me and Earl and the Dying Girl for instance, there has never been a Greg Gaines in the world without there simultaneously being a Rachel Kushner. After her death, he needs to experience what the world is without Rachel in it. Greg has never had first-hand experience coping with death of anyone he knows, so he also needs to come to terms with death as a general concept. Not only does he need to understand that he can never see her again, but he also needs to accept the realization that nothing, or at least no one, lasts forever. Timothy E. Moore and Reet Mae points out in their article “Who Dies and Who Cries” (1987) that books can be a valuable source in introducing death to a younger audience: “Because role models in children`s books are themselves children, books may provide a particularly potent base of information concerning death and bereavement” (54). Since the Bildungsroman deals with self-realization and the acquisition of wisdom, the concept of death and all that it entails, could arguably be considered a natural topic in a Bildungsroman.

The first chapter will deal with the presentation of sexuality, focusing in particular on sex and sexuality development, and how this affects these characters` lives. I have in this chapter chosen to focus especially on Paper Towns and Looking for Alaska, both John Green novels, in addition to Rainbow Rowell`s Eleanor and Park. The reason that these three books will be the main subjects of attention is that they are particularly interesting in how they deal with young sexuality. We will investigate what the texts implicitly imply about teenage
sexuality, and in what ways they normalize teenagers as sexual beings through the ways that sexuality is presented. All three books discussed in this chapter have been challenged by parents who found these books unsuitable for pupils in high school. Sharon L. Nichols and Thomas L. Good argue in *American Teenagers – Myths and Realities* (2004) that “Historically, parents have not wanted schools to teach human sexuality because they believed that sex education classes would promote the sexual behavior of students. These beliefs have changed remarkably – perhaps because of the mounting evidence showing no relationship between sex information and sexual behavior” (106). Although schools now do teach sexual education, many are reluctant to agree to the usage of sexually explicit fiction books in schools, like John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*. I will therefore analyze what these books effectually imply concerning teenage sexuality.

Chapter two aims to take a closer look at the way death is presented, and how it impacts the lives of the characters. I will argue that death is portrayed in a realistic mode in the selected novels, and that the main characters gradually comprehend the ramifications of the death of their loved ones, after initially finding it to be comprehensible. When claiming that these novels are “realistic”, I mean that they are written in a genre that is close to reality, as opposed to for instance science fiction, and the scenarios which are described (car accident, cancer), are statistically not unlikely to happen. The focus will be on John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* and *The Fault in our Stars*, in addition to *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews. Despite the fact that for “Americans, the probability of living a long life has never been so high. Today’s youth will live longer and healthier than those of past generations” (Nichols and Good 260), it appears that there still is a certain fascination associated with death. There are ten books on the New York Times best seller list, and all but three of these deal with death as an explicit topic, clearly showing that it is a popular subject to both write and read about. It is worth pointing out that novels that address specific themes can help each other to rise on the best selling lists, as was the case with the “vampire-period” we experienced ten years ago, where *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries* (2009) and *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2010) (better known as the *True Blood*-series), amongst others, all experienced simultaneous success. Themes can have a domino effect on novels dealing with similar topics, and this might explain why books that depict death are currently experiencing sales successes.

This thesis will draw on common concepts within gender studies, such as the connection between gender and sex and how they work within some of these novels. Kate
Millett argues in *Sexual Politics* (1970) that: “Groups who rule by birthright are fast disappearing, yet there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another – the scheme that prevails in the area of sex” (24). Especially Eleanor in *Eleanor & Park*, as we will see, struggles with her sexuality because her body works against her, as she feels she fails to meet society’s criteria of what a young woman should look like. We will also in chapter two take a closer look at connections between gender and death. Judith Butler argues in her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* (2007) that “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). While sex is believed to be biologically determined, gender is a cultural construct. The texts this thesis deals with present gender as a cultural construct, and we will later see that such social constructs are something that Alaska in *Looking for Alaska* opposes greatly. When performed by a larger group that are thought to belong to one of these categories (for instance women vs. men) for a period of time, certain behavior is assumed as being natural: “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler *Gender* 185-6). The way gender is regulated does therefore affect the way sexuality is regulated, as gender brings with it a set of assumptions, including sexual behavior.

Ann E. Hoover and Stephanie A. Goodwin point out in their article “Masculinity/Femininity” (2007) that femininity and masculinity refer to “traits or characteristics typically associated with being male or female, respectively” (2, emphasis added). Rossella Ghigi points out in “Femininity” (2011) that “social theorists have generally referred to *sex* when alluding to men and women’s biological attributes (thus making reference to biological femaleness and maleness) and to *gender* when describing their culturally defined characteristics or the social organization of their lives (thus making reference to femininity and masculinity)” (Ghigi 2, emphasis in original). Kath Browne presents in “Gender and Geography” (2006) a simplified explanation of how the connections between gender and sex are linked: “theories of gender/sex range from essentialism (the biological separation of men and women), to social constructionism (the societal construction of gender), to poststructuralism (gender/sex comes into being through what we do)” (2). The associations linked to femininity and masculinity can vary in different societies, but “in Western culture, femininity has been traditionally associated with qualities such as nurturing,
understanding, submission, sensitivity, creativity, intuition, and passion” (Ghigi 2). It is important to notice that femininity and gender often are culturally linked, but that there is no biological reason for this: “Yet the temperamental distinctions created in patriarchy (“masculine” and “feminine” personality traits) do not appear to originate in human nature, those of role and status even less” (Millett 27). Femininity and masculinity are typically construed as opposites, and as Julie Nelson claims in “Thinking about Gender” (1992), “with masculinity claiming the high status of the line” (140). Masculinity is often viewed as comprising the more desirable attributes, whereas feminine qualities then are defined of complementary or opposite attributes to that of the masculine. Susan Brownmiller writes in *Femininity* (1984) that: “The world smiles favourably on the feminine woman: it extends little courtesies and minor privilege. Yet the nature of this competitive edge is ironic, at best, for one works at femininity by accepting restrictions” (3). ”Femininity refers to a set of attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors that are considered *typical* of or *appropriate* to the female sex in a given culture. These traits are generally labeled as opposite and complementary to others attributed to the male sex within broader dichotomic conceptualizations” (Ghigi 2, emphasis added). We will see this especially in *Eleanor & Park*, where Eleanor feels out of place because she is unable to fit in based on the imposed characteristics she as a woman is “supposed” to hold.

I will end this introduction with a quotation from Edwards, who points out that: “love is not always constant; and death will end us all. But *mirabile dictu*, the spirit of man can rise above every disaster” (53, emphasis in original). This distinction will be important for the subsequent discussions, all of which accentuate the division between the fact that love is contingent and death is a universal fact.
1 Sexuality

“Part of the wonder of becoming an adult is the awareness of the pleasures that can be had from relationships with the opposite sex” (Evelyn Baldwin 8, “What’s Going on Inside of Me? Emergent Female Sexuality and Identity Formation in Young Adult Literature” 2012).

Evelyn Baldwin’s quote above points out one of the major transformations that happens amongst adolescents when they take the step from childhood and into adulthood. Baldwin uses the word “awareness”, meaning that even if one is not personally engaged in any relationship with such a person, there is still the knowledge that such a relationship could develop. There is a realization that one might find someone else attractive, although the pool is not necessarily limited to the opposite sex. Considering how this transformation happens in real life, it is natural that this is a central topic included in literature aimed at young adults as well. Corinne Wickens argues in her article “Codes, Silences and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality in LGBTQ Young Adult Literature” (2011) that culture plays a big part in the development of a person’s character, regardless of it being conscious or not:

Having learned cultural and social mores regarding sexed and gendered bodies, individuals then perform in that manner, e.g., girls playing with dolls and boys playing with footballs, because that is what they learn is appropriate for their gender. Nevertheless, through language and discourse, culture constructs the boundaries that define properly manifested expressions of gender (150).

Wickens points out how culture and other instances are powerful in the shaping of cultural norms. Deborah L. Tolman makes a similar argument when stating in Dilemmas of Desire (2002) that: “girls’ sexuality does not develop in a vacuum” (3). Despite the fact that Tolman’s argument is directed towards girls, I suggest that it is a valid argument regarding all young adults, regardless of where they find themselves to be on the gender spectrum. When seeing other people behave in a particular way, one starts to believe that this is the “correct” way, and that one needs to adhere to these unwritten rules and internalize them (such as girls playing with dolls, boys playing football). Precisely because youth is in an impressionable stage of their lives, it is important to highlight during their period of extensive identity development that many social phenomena are constructs and that there is not one right way to be, which includes ways to act upon one’s own sexuality.

I believe that Wickens’ argument that individuals start to perform in the way they believe is expected of them, should be a central concern when analyzing young adult fiction.
Literature is a central part of the cultural discourse, and can at any given point throughout history say a lot about the society and the time it is written in. Nichols and Good point out that sexuality dominates our culture, figuring prominently in cultural products, including books, movies, television, and advertising. The prevalent message that sexuality is desirable for youth as well as adults conflicts with cultural mores that say youth should delay sexual activity until maturity. But like many forbidden fruits, sex is attractive, and youth will inevitably open the gate to sexual activity though the age for opening this gate varies widely within society. Parents and many other adults – especially policymakers – seem to want to deny sexual information to teens, even though such data might help youth to prevent health problems or even death (111).

Nichols and Good argue that one of the social mores that teenagers are subject to is the notion that they should abstain from embracing their sexuality. They are discouraged from even pursuing information about sexuality, despite the fact that their lack of information could have serious ramifications. In her book The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts, author Margaret Edwards asks rhetorically: “At what age are we to allow a young person to know of unpleasant things and sex?” (56). I interpret Edwards question as a critique of a society that is unwilling to provide youth with a realistic version of reality, as opposed to a glorified one. “Unpleasant things and sex” do exist, and despite attempts to prevent youth from learning about it, they eventually will. The status quo appears to be denying the sexual nature that exists within us all, especially that of young adults.

Bonnie Kneen points out in her article “Neither Very Bi Nor Particularly Sexual: The Essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature” (2015) that the “absence of bisexuality in YA fiction thus follows (and reinforces) a broader invisibility that is likely to shape most teenagers´ lived experience of bisexuality. For teenagers are in the process of constructing themselves as sexual beings” (363). Adolescence is a time where a lot of identity construction takes place, which includes sexual identity. Kneen`s argument is mainly aimed at the portrayal of bisexual characters, but I believe that it can also be interpreted to apply to characters who identify themselves as something other than bisexual. When combining Kneen`s and Wicken`s arguments, we see that not only do the teenage years consist of a lot of identity development, but also that it is a time in which one is easily affected. If literature aimed at young adults addresses different manifestations of sexuality, it can demonstrate that there are different ways to act upon it. If so, then it can become an aid in order to avoid limiting the gendered freedom of sexuality.

This chapter will discuss how teenage sexuality is represented in the currently most popular young adult fiction depict teenage sexuality. I will argue that the three novels
discussed all participate in normalizing the notion that teenagers are sexual beings by approaching it in three different ways. The novels in question are Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor and Park*, John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* and Green’s *Paper Towns*. These three novels have all been categorized as being young adult novels, but I believe that they are definitely aimed at the older population of that demographic. All three novels are sexual *Bildungsromane*, as they follow one or more characters as they all go through a journey where they have a sexual revelation of sorts. The coming-of-age aspect in all these novels is closely linked to the characters’ sexuality, which is why I choose to categorize them as sexual *Bildungsromane*.

The reason these three novels are the ones that will be discussed is because of their explicit dealings with teen sexuality. One can say that all three books are controversial, as they have all been banned from certain schools due to complaints. Indeed, as the National Coalition Against Censorship notes that Rowell’s invitation to speak at a school in Anoka County, Minnesota was withdrawn after *Eleanor and Park* became the subject of scrutiny by certain parents who accused it of “profanity” (NCAC 2013). The Coalition reacted to this decision, and argued that: “Would-be censors cry out that this-or-that literature/trash doesn’t belong in a classroom or a school or a library. But ignoring realities rather than confronting them, white-washing the world so it makes a prettier picture, is the antithesis of education” (ibid.). *Eleanor & Park* is, in addition to being a story about a girl and a boy who fall in love, a tale about domestic abuse, poverty and bullying. Instead of censoring books that might seem to deal with topics that are difficult to talk about, it could be used as a tool to approach sensitive topics. It is very often easier to talk about things that are difficult through literature than by using real-life examples, because you can see the situation from the outside, creating a more objective outlook.

A high school in Pasco County, Florida removed *Paper Towns* from an eight grade’s reading list, after having been made aware from a parent that the book makes references to “teen sex and masturbation” (Williams 2014). The parent who contacted the school board did not explicitly ask to have it removed, but simply wanted there to be some sort of warning for the content that it “might not be suitable for some children” (ibid.). Instead of creating one such warning, the school district chose to remove the book altogether, making organizations such as the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund encourage the school district to reinstate it and present it to an appropriate committee board. This has however yet to happen.
While *Eleanor & Park* and *Paper Towns* have been challenged by certain schools for their direct approach to sexuality, no book comes close to the complaints filed against *Looking for Alaska*. The novel topped the American Library Association’s list of the most challenged books of 2015, passing even *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012) (American Library Association), which is a book that centers around a woman who engages in a BDSM relationship. The reasons people named for challenging *Looking for Alaska* was that it contains offensive language, is sexually explicit and is unsuited for age group (ibid.). The book did not make an appearance on the list of most challenged books for 2014, but landed a 7th place in both 2012 and 2013.

Although these novels were banned from several schools, they all became popular enough to find their way into the best sellers lists. It appears that despite teenage sexuality being difficult for many adults and parents to approve as being a central topic in young adult fiction, young adults read a lot about it. Nichols and Good point out that this opposition to accept presentations of teenage sexuality is not only a problem that concerns young adult fiction exclusively, but that it is part of a cultural phenomenon: “There are literally millions of media references to the ways in which American culture struggles with youth’s developing sexuality. And, despite adults’ worries about their impact, many youth are left alone to mediate these scenarios” (95). It does seem like quite the paradox however, that by trying to “protect” youth from shielding them from the sexuality that surrounds popular culture, the result is that teenagers are even more unprepared for the future. Bryan Gillis and Joanna Simpson argue in *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature: Reading Between the Sheets* (2015) that “much of the information that teens do acquire comes from their peers. The literature that students are exposed to in middle and high school offers an alternative, as it has the potential to provide opportunities for teen readers to process the complexities of sex in the safety of their own hearts and minds” (ix). Because literature is one of the few informational sources that teenagers are “allowed” to use, a lot of responsibility falls on them.

### 1.1 The Sexual Awakening: *Eleanor & Park*

“She wanted him to touch her everywhere” (Rowell 257).

Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park* is set in Omaha, Nebraska. The story’s narration alternates between the two main characters, Eleanor and Park. Eleanor is the new girl in town, and on her first day of school she sits next to a boy named Park on the school bus. The first
time Park sees Eleanor he describes her like an accident waiting to happen; “With crazy hair, bright red on top of curly. And she was dressed like... like she wanted people to look at her” (Rowell 7). Eleanor ends up sitting next to Park, and he thinks a lot about how he can get out of the situation of sitting next to her. Even though the two seem to come from completely different worlds and initially have no interest in learning to get to know the other, they start to interact more and more before finally realizing that they are interested in each other. One of the challenges they are facing, however, is Eleanor`s family. Eleanor is a child of divorced parents, but her mother Sabrina has remarried. Eleanor`s stepfather, Richie, both physically and mentally abuses Eleanor`s mother, and on one occasion he even fires his gun inside their house. Eleanor and all her siblings are scared to be in the same room as him. This fear escalates when Richie learns that Eleanor has a boyfriend, and she is forced to flee her home, her mother, her siblings – and Park. With a little help from Park`s parents, Eleanor and Park drives to her uncle`s house in Minnesota, where she is to stay to be safe from her stepfather. Park is miserable without Eleanor, and the feeling appears to be mutual. He writes her tons of letters, but she only responds one time, and that is with a letter consisting of only three words, and it is up to the readers to guess what those three words are.

**Eleanor & Park** mainly focuses on the relationship between Eleanor and Park, and how external forces work against them. Both Eleanor and Park learn a lot about themselves through their relationship, and they realize that despite earlier beliefs, they are both sexual beings. The novel mainly deals with their own realizations as sexual beings, and shows how sexual development and young love can act as stabilizing conditions in teenager`s lives. It is far from love at first sight between the two, but it grows into a relationship that becomes mutually beneficial on different levels.

Eleanor has personally seen that love is not exclusively positive, and has because of this adapted a very mature view of love. Many teenagers are easily swept away by love stories, but Eleanor is not as easily affected, and is more critical of such stories. During English class, her teacher Mr Stessman wants to discuss *Romeo and Juliet* with the class. This tragedy by William Shakespeare is immortalized because of the love displayed by these two young people who do not wish to live if they cannot be together, and is for many the ultimate love story. Eleanor, however, disappoints Mr Stessman with her rather insightful analysis of the play:

> ‘You don`t seem troubled by their deaths, Miss Douglas.’ ‘I`m sorry?’ she said. She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘It doesn`t strike you as sad?’ Mr Stessman asked. ‘Two young lovers lay dead. *Never was a story of more woe.* Doesn`t that get to you?’ ‘I guess not’, she said. ‘Are you
so cold? So cool?’ He was standing over her desk, pretending to plead with her. ‘No...’ she said. ‘I just don’t think it’s a tragedy.’ ‘It’s the tragedy,’ Mr Stessman said. She rolled her eyes. She was wearing two or three necklaces, old fake pearls, like Park’s grandmother wore to church, and she twisted them while she talked. ‘But he’s so obviously making fun of them,’ she said. ‘Who is?’ ‘Shakespeare.’ ‘Do tell...’ She rolled her eyes again. She knew Mr Stessman’s game by now. ‘Romeo and Juliet are just two rich kids who’ve always gotten every little thing they’ve wanted. And now, they think they want each other.’ ‘They’re in love...’ Mr Stessman said, clutching his heart. ‘They don’t even know each other,’ she said. ‘It was love at first sight.’ ‘It was ‘Oh my God, he’s so cute’ at first sight. If Shakespeare wanted you to believe they were in love, he wouldn’t tell you in almost the very first scene that Romeo was hung up on Rosaline... It’s Shakespeare making fun of love,’ she said. (Rowell 44-5, emphasis in original).

Eleanor shows a very mature view on love in this passage, and her reading of the story might arguably be more supported by textual evidence than that of her teacher’s. She believes that love is something that comes gradually, which is a very pragmatic way of thinking about love; especially when you are 16 years old. Her well-articulated argument is a great contrast to her older teacher’s, who calls it not only a tragedy but “the tragedy”. Her teacher teases her by asking if she really is so “cold” and “cool” as she pretends to be, obviously trying to see if she is willing to stand by her opinion. Unlike many other teenagers and adults like her teacher who get easily absorbed in epic love stories, Eleanor makes rational assumptions based on the factual evidence. She reveals narrative details in Romeo and Juliet that supports her theory, and manages to see the big picture instead of being swept of her feet by an epic love story. She is probably affected by her own experience in life - that love is never as easy as it might initially appear. Her mother had probably never gotten involved with Richie at first if he had been abusive from the beginning, so it is a fair assumption to assume that their relationship got off to a good start before declining. Something as powerful as witnessing an abusive relationship first-hand will obviously affect your own perception of what “true love” and a “good” relationship is.

In one way there are actually many similarities between Romeo and Juliet’s story and Eleanor and Park’s own story. There are people who try to prevent them to be together, which only makes them want to be together more. They regard their relationship as being something private, and they do not go around sharing intimate details about it even with their friends. They are also faced with obstacles that seem to make it impossible for them to be together. Eleanor does however choose a less dramatic, though perhaps not as romantic, solution to the situation, by fleeing instead of killing herself. After Eleanor’s blunt response in class, Mr Stessman goes on to ask Park why Romeo and Juliet has survived for as long as it has, and Park’s response is also insightful, if not as critical:
Park seems to acknowledge that *Romeo and Juliet* is known for the feeling it brings to people when reading it, and not because of a probable story line. In one way he actually agrees with Eleanor, in that Shakespeare mocks young love. By pointing out that the story depicts what it is “like to be young” and “in love”, Park simultaneously points out that this is a *young* experience of love; an unexperienced one. You can still fall in love when you are older, but there is something special about being young, carefree and in love. “Old” love would indicate something else; something established and not as exciting as “young” love. *Romeo and Juliet* is fictional, but it is not necessarily unrealistic in terms of plot. The story alludes to a so powerful love that no one were able to prevent them from being together.

Eleanor and Park’s attitudes towards love and relationships are heavily affected by their own experiences at home and their sexual role models. Neither of them have had a relationship prior to when they meet each other, so it is a new experience in many ways. They are also both the oldest of their siblings, so apart from their parents they do not have any people close to them who can give any pointers as to what a “normal” relationship would look like. Park’s parents live in domestic bliss, and they openly love and kiss each other. Park’s dad met his wife when he was a soldier in the army, brought her back to the US with him, and they have been lovey-dovey ever since. Their happiness and love for each other is displayed on several occasions, for instance their dad’s spontaneous gesture when coming home from work; “His dad barreled into the kitchen and scooped his mom into his arms. They did this every night, too. Full-on make-out sessions, no matter who was around. It was like watching Paul Bunyan make out with one of those *It’s a Small World* dolls” (Rowell 25). Their love is not only displayed through actions, but also through words. Park’s mother sends Park’s brother Josh to his room, and their father keep talking while their mother is in the phone: “Their mother jabbed a long fingernail at his dad and covered the phone again. ‘I’ll send you to your room, too.’ ‘Honey, I wish you would,’ their dad said” (Rowell 104). Even though they have been married for a long time, they still act like stereotypical teenagers in love. They show Park how great marriage can be, and how it is possible to stay in love with each other even if the relationship started out difficult (with his mother leaving her home country and everything else behind).
Eleanor’s home is a great contrast to that of Park’s. She comes from a broken home, in all true meanings of the word, and lacks role models as the ones Park has in his parents. Her mother and father split up a long time ago, and she has next to nothing to do with her father. The relationship between Eleanor’s mother and her new husband Richie is far from domestic bliss, as it is clear that Sabrina is the victim of physical and emotional abuse from her husband: “Eleanor had pretended not to notice the bruises on her mom’s wrist” (Rowell 26). Eleanor is the oldest of all the siblings so she might be the most attentive who knows what to look for, but even her younger siblings realize that they live in a violent home: “Mouse was the one they’d send to knock on their mom’s door when they heard bedsprings... When it was worse than bedsprings, when it was shouting or crying, they’d huddle together, all five of them, on Eleanor’s bed” (Rowell 27). On one occasion Eleanor wakes up to Richie shouting and Sabrina crying, and it is all so bad that her little brother wets himself, and they are glad the baby doesn’t start to cry: “Even he seemed to realize that trying to make this stop would only make it worse” (Rowell 49). The next morning, Eleanor wakes up and her “mother was standing at the stove, more still than usual. You couldn’t not notice the bruise on the side of her face. Or the hickey under her chin” (ibid.). By adding the hickey, which is normally something one would give a person one is attracted to, Rowell blurs the lines between love and violence. The hickey might not necessarily be a sign of love but of lust, and emphasizes how intertwined love and violence is in Richie and Sabrina’s relationship. There are clear signs of abuse and sexual assault, although these can be misinterpreted as signs of affection, such as the hickey. Eleanor understands that this is not what a normal relationship looks like because she has seen her mother in a non-abusive relationship with her father. It does however appear that Eleanor’s first-hand experience of this violent marriage might have made her more rational and perhaps even cynical when it comes to love, which makes her want to protect herself as best as she possibly can.

Eleanor’s view on love and sexuality is not only affected by her mother’s relationship, but also by her own self-esteem. *Eleanor & Park* represents Eleanor’s attitude to her body as a barrier to being sexual. The notion that girls are supposed to be thin and petite in order to be attractive, is not something that Eleanor is the only person to feel. Susan Brownmiller writes that: “By the fifth grade I knew that bigness was not what I was after. Slight and slender were my grownup ambitions” (10). Eleanor’s body and relation to her sexuality are closely linked, because she does not feel attractive because of her size. The fact that Eleanor is not thin and little makes it extra difficult for her to understand why Park is interested in her: “The only
thing she didn’t like to think about, about Park, was what he could possibly see in her” (Rowell 78); “He missed her... Who knows what he missed. Her fatness. Her weirdness” (Rowell 86, emphasis in original). Eleanor is so self-conscious and unsure because of her weight, and this lack of self-esteem is not entirely self-inflicted. Eleanor is at one point going to babysit for her father’s new children, and unlike most parents who usually spoil their children when seeing them again after a long time, her father does not seem to think he needs to: “Maybe her dad would have ice cream... If he did, he’d probably throw it away before Eleanor got there. He was always dropping hints about her weight” (Rowell 96). Eleanor thinks this is unfair, because “she was starving all the time, and she was still enormous” (Rowell 202). It is mentioned several times throughout the story that Eleanor and her siblings get far from enough food at home, as the only time they have a proper meal is at Christmas. Eleanor is often hungry because of this, and her body is not a result of over-eating, despite that this appears to be the popular opinion.

Everyone notices Eleanor because of her body, and it “earns” her a nickname at school. She is nicknamed “Big Red”, and Park’s brother Josh believes it is because “she has red hair and giant tits” (Rowell 104). Every time anyone calls Eleanor “Big Red”, she is reminded that people are seeing her body, and shaming her for it. Not only is this mentally disturbing, but her body also gives her physical challenges. Her body is an obstacle for her in gym class for instance: “She didn’t want to run, period. It made her breasts feel like they were going to detach from her body. ‘I’m going to tell Mrs Burt that my mom doesn’t want me to do anything that might rupture my hymen,’ Eleanor said. ‘For religious reasons’” (Rowell 63). The comment Eleanor makes about rupturing her hymen might be an attempt at joking, but the fact that she does not want to say what the real problem is, is not funny. Her body is causing genuine problems for her, but she does not want to tell her gym teacher why. Instead of telling the truth she creates a reason, most likely because she does not want to discuss her body and particularly her breasts with her gym teacher. In order to avoid this, Eleanor creates a reason that she is comfortable with, and which might also signify something she is comfortable with: her sexual status as a virgin. Her feelings about her own body and her virginity are linked in her mind.

Eleanor’s self-consciousness does also make it difficult for her to make friends, because she is so unsure of herself. Eventually she makes two friends, and one of these girls is bigger than her. Eleanor has issues with her own body, but seeing this girl made “Eleanor feel bad about feeling so bad about her own body... And which also made her wonder why she
was the official fat girl in class” (Rowell 55). Being the “fat girl in class” is obviously taking its toll on Eleanor, otherwise she would not be this eager to get rid of that label. Eleanor keeps comparing herself to others, and her own body image is created through comparing herself to other girls. She sees herself as being either bigger or smaller than other girls, and lets the basis of that comparison be the main element of her creation of self-esteem.

_Eleanor and Park_ shows how Eleanor struggles to acknowledge her sexuality because of her body, but it also shows how breaking this barrier allows her to be sexual. After a while, Park and Eleanor find themselves in a place in their relationship where they want to touch each other: “all she could think about was Park`s hands on her waist, and her back and her stomach – which all must feel like nothing he`d ever encountered” (Rowell 239-40). Being as self-conscious as she is, Eleanor worries about what Park might be thinking instead of enjoying the experience. She has created a mental barrier for herself, and this barrier makes her unable to enjoy the touch of a guy she truly cares about. Instead of just feeling and enjoying, Eleanor keeps thinking and wondering what Park makes of her body. Eleanor compares herself to Park`s family, and feels that she does not fit in, solely based on how different her body is from theirs;

Everyone in Park`s family was skinny enough to be in a Special K commercial. Even his grandma. Eleanor could only be in that scene where the actress pinches an inch, then looks at the camera like the world is going to end. Actually, she`d have to lose weight to be in that scene. You could pinch an inch – or two, or three – all over Eleanor`s body. You could probably pinch an inch on her forehead. Holding hands was fine. Her hands weren`t a complete embarrassment. And kissing seemed safe because fat lips are okay – and because Park usually closed his eyes- But there was no safe place on Eleanor`s torso. There was no place from her neck to her knees where she had any discernible infrastructure. As soon as Park touched her waist, she`s sucked in her stomach and pitched forward. Which led to all the collateral damage... which made her feel like Godzilla. (But even Godzilla wasn`t fat. He was just ginormous.) The maddening part was, Eleanor wanted Park to touch her again. She wanted him to touch her constantly. Even if it led to Park deciding that she was way too much like a walrus to remain his girlfriend... _That`s how good it felt_. She was like one of those dogs who`ve tasted human blood and can`t stop biting. A walrus who`s tasted human blood. (Rowell 240, emphasis in original).

Again, we see Eleanor comparing herself to other people, in this case to Park`s family. She is extremely self-conscious about her own body, and refers to herself as “Godzilla” to emphasize how much bigger she is than the members of Park`s family. She thinks that she would need to lose weight even on her forehead in order to be part of that commercial. This displays how far Eleanor`s insecurity reaches, as she does not even see her forehead, a place not usually associated with weight or the need for weight loss, as being normal-sized. She also believes that her body will become a problem in her relationship with Park, as she
suspects that he might start to think of her as a “walrus” instead of a person. She uses demeaning words about herself and her looks, and does not really seem to have any belief that Park will be able to look beyond her body. She does however seem to regard certain areas of her body as being more “safe” than others, such as her hands and her lips. “Fat lips” seems to be okay, probably because it makes for better kissing, so in that particular aspect, “fat” is actually something positive. Her hands are also acceptable. Both hands and lips are small parts of the body, so there is really a very little area of her body that Eleanor feels comfortable being touched. Despite all these deeply ingrained insecurities, Eleanor wants Park to touch her. She calls it “maddening”, which can be interpreted in two ways. It could be maddening in the sense that Park drives her mad. He has awoken some emotions in her that she did not know that she had, and she wants to act upon it. The other way to interpret it is that she finds it maddening because she does not understand her own reactions to his touch; the fact that she actually wants him to touch her. It is obviously a big deal for her that she lets him touch her, as she has never let anyone this close to her before. The fact that she not only lets Park touch her but that she starts craving his touch, shows that she has undergone a great change in the perception of her own body. She has realized that Park`s touch means more to her than she thought it could, and this might indicate that she is starting to acknowledge the fact that she is a sexual person. This development has all happened naturally as the relationship between Eleanor and Park has developed, and it has happened despite their initial lack of attraction towards each other. The more time they spend together, the more Eleanor wants Park to touch her.

The relationship between Eleanor and Park makes them both learn something new about themselves. For Eleanor it is the realization that she can actually enjoy being touched, and that her body does not need to be a hindrance for her to get to know the opposite sex. For Park, on the other hand, their relationship gives him reassurance. He has, pre-Eleanor, wondered what sort of sexuality category he would fall under. Even though he finds himself sexually attracted to Eleanor does not consequently mean that he is heterosexual, it still seems to make him relax regarding his sexual preferences, because he now believes that he is “normal”. Park seems to have been giving this a lot of thought, as when he kissed a girl last year;

He’d even wondered – seriously, while he was kissing her, he’s wondered this – whether he might be gay. Except he didn’t feel like kissing any guys either. And if he thought about She-Hulk or Storm (instead of this girl, Dawn) the kissing got a lot better. Maybe I’m not attracted
to real girls, he’d thought at the time. Maybe I’m some sort of perverted cartoon-sexual (Rowell 72).

This element of the text, of Park not knowing who he really is, echoes a common teenage concern. Not knowing who one really is, is a very natural thought to have as a teenager. The teenage years play an important role in the understanding of one’s own identity, and consequently, own sexuality. With Eleanor, Park seems to have had an identity epiphany that he is neither cartoon-sexual nor homosexual, but he has simply never met anyone who intrigued him the way Eleanor does. The feelings he finds himself having are unknown territory, but an unknown he welcomes. Even the smallest touch between them makes him feel something intense, for instance when Park grabs Eleanor’s hand and holds it for the first time: “Park couldn’t imagine what his face had looked like when he touched Eleanor. Like somebody taking the first drink in a Diet Pepsi commercial. Over-the-top bliss” (Rowell 73). He describes holding Eleanor’s hand as “holding a butterfly. Or a heartbeat. Like holding something complete, and completely alive” (Rowell 72). An innocent gesture such as holding Eleanor’s hand makes his feelings run wild, which emphasizes how strongly he has started to care for her. There is also a big discrepancy between how Park thinks of Eleanor and how she describes herself; Eleanor compares herself to a “walrus”, while Park compares her touch to that of a butterfly’s.

As Park and Eleanor get more comfortable with each other, the sexual tension between them rises. They start off by holding each other’s hands, and after a while they start kissing. It has all been very innocent, but that does not mean that they have not been thinking about each other in a more sexualized manner. During an incident at school Eleanor learns that her nemesis has flushed her clothes down the toilet during gym class, so the only dry clothing Eleanor has left to wear is her gymsuit. Embarrassingly for Eleanor, she meets Park in the hallway while wearing only this gymsuit. The always so self-conscious Eleanor is naturally mortified, but Park is intrigued. That night, Park could not get the picture out of his mind: “Park turned off his light and crawled onto his bed. He lay on his back because he didn’t trust his front. Or his hands, actually. Or his brain” (Rowell 250). Eleanor is the only girl Park has felt sexually attracted to, and seeing her with so little clothes on has obviously affected him: “He could fill in some of the details now. He could picture Eleanor. He couldn’t stop picturing her. Why hadn’t he ever noticed how tight those gymsuits were? And how short...” (ibid., emphasis in original). It appears that they are both aware that this little encounter will change something between them, because some of the innocence in their relationship is lost.
Eleanor has unintentionally exposed her most vulnerable aspect of herself – her body – to a boy who cares about her deeply. Park wonders how they can go on from here: “How could he even look at her now? He wouldn’t be able to. Not without stripping her down to her gymsuit. Without thinking about that long white zipper. Jesus” (Rowell 251, emphasis in original). Park might have thought about Eleanor in a sexual way before, but seeing her flesh in real life has made it more than just an illusion: “It’s not like he hadn’t thought about it (a lot) – Eleanor under her clothes. But he could never fill in any of the details. The only women he could actually picture naked were the women in the magazines his dad every once in a while remembered to hide under his bed” (Rowell 250). Park desires Eleanor in a way that he has never desired anyone in real life before, and the part of Eleanor that she hates the most is the part that Park seems to want the most.

Eleanor and Park start to desire each other in a more sexual manner as their relationship develops, but they do not have any role models or any support system to lean on. Sexual education is normally an integrated part of the school syllabus, but it is natural that the topic at some point also will be discussed at home. Eleanor and Park’s parents have very different methods in terms of how to approach the subject of sex with their children. Park’s parents never really gave him any instructions about anything, and his sex education was sorely lacking: “His mom never talked to him about that kind of thing. And his dad hadn’t said anything more than ‘Don’t get anybody pregnant’ since he told Park about sex in the fifth grade” (Rowell 262). Park’s level of sexual education is clearly lacking, but Eleanor’s mother Sabrina, is even more vague when talking to her daughter. Instead of addressing Eleanor specifically and the choices she at one point might be forced to make, Sabrina chooses to implicitly imply what sex can do with your life. Sabrina has run into an old friend, Eileen, and her daughter Tracy is pregnant: “Eileen’s a wreck. Tracy got involved with a boy in their neighborhood, a black boy. Eileen’s husband is having a fit” (Rowell 266). Sabrina says she is glad that Eleanor is staying away from boys, but at this point there is reason to question whether she knows about Eleanor and Park or not. There is a notion of implied racism in Sabrina’s advancement, in that she points out that it was a “black boy” that got Tracy pregnant. Eleanor herself is dating a boy who is half-Korean, in a town where racism is an omnipresent issue. Sabrina has never seemed convinced that Eleanor really has been sneaking out to her “friend” when she in reality has been over at Park’s, and drops not-so-subtle hints about what she expects of her daughter when it comes to boys: “You’ve stayed away from them. That’s smart” (Rowell 267). Instead of telling Eleanor not to have sex or at least to
wear protection if she were to have it, she tries to scare her with what will happen if she at some point decides to have sex. Both Eleanor and Park are told by their parents to be responsible and not become or get anyone pregnant, but they are never told explicitly what they can do to be responsible. Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom writes in *Does God hate Women?* (2009) that “Sensible parents raise their daughters to be at least aware of the risk of pregnancy and STD’s and perhaps to postpone the complications of sex until they’re old enough to deal with them” (84). But what Sabrina does is not making Eleanor aware of the “complications” that sex can lead to, as she simply encourages her to abstain. There are possible physical consequences of sex, such as pregnancy and sexually transmittable diseases, but there are also mental consequences if one has sex before being ready. Sabrina’s “sex talk” with Eleanor is superficial at best, as it does not really provide her with any information.

Eleanor and Park might choose to not have sex, but that does not mean that desire is not present. At one point, Eleanor goes over to Park’s to visit him, and when he opens the door she notices that “His hair was wet and his T-shirt was kind of sticking to him. He was really happy to see her. That was obvious. (And nice.)” (Rowell 205). Even if they are not actually having sex, Eleanor appreciates the fact that Park (or at least Park’s body) seems to regard her as a sexual being. The tension between them eventually lead to a very intimate incident at Park’s house. Eleanor barely has time to ring the doorbell before Park drags her inside, and she describes it as “…something else. His arms were around her, and his face was in her hair, and there was no place for the rest of her to go but against him” (Rowell 253). This happens the day after Park saw her wearing only her gymsuit, and it seems as that has awoken some sexual instinct in him. Eleanor’s description of it being “something else” tells us that this is not how it usually is between the two of them, and indicates that there has been a change in their relationship – probably because Park now knows what parts of Eleanor looks like underneath the clothes. After this encounter, Eleanor starts thinking about what she has learned from it, which is that: “Park was covered with skin. Everywhere” (Rowell 257). It is not as if she did not know this beforehand, but now she has seen the skin and felt it herself, and it appears to make Park and what they have together more real for her. Both of them were initially unable to imagine the other person’s physicality since they have never been close to anyone else in this manner before, and consequently, they now have similar experiences concerning their physical awakenings. Despite the fact that they are home alone and obviously want to sleep with each other, they do not actually do it, showing a massive amount of will power from them both. It takes them several attempts to manage to free themselves
from each other, demonstrating how desperately they need each other, and how natural it now has become for them to be touching one another.

At the time, the incident over at Park’s house is the closest both Park and Eleanor have yet to be in terms of having sex with someone. But even though they decided to not go all the way, they still cannot keep their hands of each other. Later on, while in Park’s car, Park scoops Eleanor into his arms: “If you were watching them now (and you totally could because the windows weren’t fogged over yet) you’d think that Eleanor and Park did this kind of thing all the time. Not just the once before” (Rowell 278, emphasis added). They end up in the back of the car, where Park lands on top of Eleanor, and the chapter ends with Park thinking: “She arched her back and he closed his eyes. He’d never get enough of her” (Rowell 279). This ending is ambiguous, because in the manner they are described they appear to be having sex, but in the following chapter Eleanor reveals subtle hints that they had not actually gone all the way and engaged in actual intercourse. We hear Eleanor thinking that she “was sure something would give her away” (Rowell 280), making it sound like they did have had sex because she believes there is a change in her somehow. Later on, however, she confesses that “It hadn’t been a home run, anyway. They’d stopped at the second base. (At least, she thought it was second base. She’d heard conflicting definitions of the bases.) Still...” (ibid.). Since Eleanor never says what she thinks second base is, we do not know exactly what happens. But the “home run” she refers to is probably having penetrative sex, meaning that again the two have stopped before indulging in intercourse. They do however seem unable to stop later on, when Park drives Eleanor to Minnesota:

‘Eleanor, no, we have to stop.’ ‘No...’ ‘We can’t do this...’ ‘No. Don’t stop, Park.’ ‘I don’t even know how to... I don’t have anything.’ ‘It doesn’t matter.’ ‘But I don’t want you to get...’ ‘I don’t care.’ ‘I care. Eleanor...’ ‘It’s our last chance.’ ‘No. No, I can’t... I, no, I need to believe that it isn’t our last chance... Eleanor? Can you hear me? I need you to believe it, too.’ (Rowell 305, emphasis in original)

The blank spots in this encounter imply a lot about what is going on between the two. What Park refers to as “this” seems to be the sexual act of intercourse, which they have so far avoided indulging in. Now, however, seeing as the two might never see each other again, it becomes increasingly difficult to stop. The “anything” that Park mentions is a condom, because he does not want her to “get” pregnant. Even if they have been close to having sex on several occasions on this point, neither of them seem to have expected that they would be having sex now, so neither brought contraception. The question is if the card that Eleanor sent at the end with the three words are actually “I am pregnant”. Considering how proud Sabrina
was that Eleanor had been able to stay away from boys and sex, this would make an ironic ending to the story. It would also be a pretty brutal, though realistic, way for Rowell to demonstrate the responsibility sex entails.

Throughout their relationship, Eleanor and Park have very different opinions of what their relationship is and what is going to happen to them in the future. As already seen, they have very different views of love, where Park might be more romantic while Eleanor is more pragmatic and realistic. Park cannot imagine not loving Eleanor anymore, but even as they grow fonder of each other, Eleanor refuses to let herself believe that what she and Park have is going to last forever. A while after having left Park and her life in Omaha behind, a girl at Eleanor’s new school asks her if she has ever had a boyfriend. Eleanor answers no, while she thinks to herself that “Park wasn’t a boyfriend, he was a champion. And they weren’t going to break up. Or get bored. Or drift apart. (They weren’t going to become another stupid high school romance.) They were just going to stop” (Rowell 318). The always practical-thinking Eleanor has her mind set that she will avoid becoming a stereotypical girl who believes that her high-school relationship will last forever. She is not convinced that her first real love is the one and only for her, even though Park seems to disagree:

‘I’m not proposing,’ he said. ‘I’m just saying... I love you. And I can’t imagine stopping...’ She shook her head. ‘But you’re twelve.’ ‘I’m sixteen...’ he said. Bono was fifteen when he met his wife, and Robert Smith was fourteen... ‘Romeo, sweet Romeo...’ ‘It’s not like that, Eleanor, and you know it.’ Park’s arms were tight around her. All the playfulness in his voice was gone. ‘There’s no reason to think we’re going to stop loving each other,’ he said. ‘And there’s every reason to think that we won’t.’ I never said I loved you, Eleanor thought. (Rowell 243, emphasis in original).

Eleanor teases Park when saying “Romeo, sweet Romeo”, obviously alluding to the English class where Eleanor exposed how Shakespeare mocks the young couple in love. Park refuses to believe that they are not going to make it as a couple, and seems to have more faith in what their love can endure than what Eleanor has. Park confesses that he loves her, but merely assumes that she loves him back. We know that Eleanor cares about Park, but she never says that she loves him back. Even after having such a steep learning curve that has allowed Eleanor to enjoy being touched, and to have someone to care about as much as she cares about Park, she confesses to herself: “There’s no such thing as happily ever after” (Rowell 312, emphasis in original).

Teenage sexuality is often presented as a destabilizing element, and as something that can result in unwanted consequences. As an example, Carrie Ann Platt argues in her essay
"Cullen Family Values: Gender and Sexual Politics in the *Twilight* Series" (2010) that the relationship between Bella and Edward in the *Twilight* franchise has by many been criticized as being borderline abusive. The *Twilight* books were extremely popular, and the relationship between the two main characters, the vampire Edward and the human being Bella, were by many seen as desirable because the love between them was so strong. Yet, this relationship caused Bella to die and be resurrected as a vampire due to a very complicated pregnancy, and she needs to keep her family at a distance because she is afraid of hurting them. This is just one example of how teen love often is portrayed as desirable but that it brings with it a set of negative consequences. In *Eleanor & Park* on the other hand, the relationship between these two teenagers is one of the few positive and favorable aspects of their lives, as their sexual awakening and their relationship have had exclusively positive consequences for them both. Park has learned a lot about himself, for instance that it is possible for him to fall in love with a girl, something that has troubled him that he had been unable to do pre-Eleanor. Eleanor on her part manages to escape an abusive home because of Park. She is bullied at school and at home, and the only safe haven she has in her life is at Park`s. He is also the reason Eleanor manages to escape her abusive home with her life intact. Neither Eleanor nor Park have previously regarded themselves as being particularly sexual, but that all changes when they meet each other. They find refuge in each other, in a time where it seems as the world is working against them.

### 1.2 Assumed Sexuality and Objectification: *Paper Towns*

“What a treacherous thing it is to believe that a person is more than a person” (Green *Paper* 282).

*Paper Towns* is a 2008 novel by John Green, which rose to the top of the best sellers lists for a second time after the 2015 film adaptation. The novel centers around a group of friends who find themselves in the middle of the crossroads between childhood and adulthood. The novel`s main character and narrator is Quentin, popularly referred to as Q, and the novel portrays his fixation on his next-door neighbor Margo Roth Spiegelman. Margo and Q were childhood friends, and one of the memories they share from that time was finding a man who had committed suicide in the midst of their own neighborhood. As the years went by, they gradually lost contact and became mere acquaintances. One night Margo changes this when she climbs into Q`s bedroom and convinces him to be her accomplice for a night where she is planning to “right a lot of wrongs” and “wrong some rights” (Green *Paper* 30). After an
exhilarating night with Margo, Q is left with the hope that they can rekindle their friendship – and maybe even become more than that. He is therefore disappointed when he realizes the next day that Margo has disappeared, leaving everyone in the dark about where she has gone and when, or if, she’ll come back. Q becomes obsessed with Margo after her sudden disappearance, and he is convinced that she has left so that he can prove to her that he can, and will, find her and bring her back. After enlisting the help of his friends and driving across the entire East Coast, Q finds Margo in Agloe, a town that is not a real town but a so called “paper town”, a trick used by map developers to avoid copycats. Disappointingly for Q, Margo has not left Orlando so that Q could find her, but because her old life suffocated her. He realizes that he has not fully grasped who Margo is, and that ultimately, he never can.

The paper town metaphor is a reoccurring theme throughout the novel, as there are many examples of assumptions and prejudices, especially concerning the way Q sees and thinks of Margo. A paper town is a technique map developers created to avoid other companies stealing and distributing their maps. In addition to all the real towns and places, they would add names of places that would not exist; paper towns. If this fake place later made an appearance on a competitor’s map, they would be able to sue them for copyright infringement. The town of Agloe, New York was initially one such paper town, until someone built “The Agloe General Store” there and consequently made Agloe into a real place (Green Paper 236). The place that once did not even exist on the map suddenly became a real place. This is what much of the story in Paper Towns is about: seeing things that might not be there, but trying desperately to make them real, and believing it so hard that they appear real in the process. This is what Q and his friends do throughout the novel, as they have made Margo into a “paper girl”, meaning that their perception of Margo and her sexuality is thought of as being truth rather than perception. Paper Towns represent Q as being unable to understand Margo as a person, but rather sees her as a concept. He has created his own version of Margo based on their earlier friendship, and he is unable to alter this version. Q fails to take Margo’s feelings and beliefs into account, because he is so convinced that he has managed to define who Margo Roth Spiegelman really is. Instead, he sees Margo’s abrupt departure as a challenge for him; he believes that this is his chance to prove to Margo that he is worthy of her love. Q is convinced that if he is able to find her and bring her back home, then they can finally indulge in a romantic relationship, just like their very own fairy tale.

Margo’s last name Spiegelman means “mirror man” when translated from German. This mirroring happens several times throughout the novel, as different people who think they
know Margo impose her with specific qualities. They are so convinced that they know what she is like, and in the process they disregard that fact that they might not be able to fully grasp her. In *Paper Towns* there seems to be two versions of Margo: the image of Margo and the *real* Margo. The image of Margo is the Margo people believe her to be, and the one that we see and interpret through Q’s point of view. The *real* Margo however is basically impossible to know who is because of her unpredictability, but also because she is barely present in the story. *Paper Towns* is roughly 300 pages long, and even though Margo is present for under a hundred of these pages, she is still the main topic of discussion. It is therefore self-explanatory that one does not really get to know Margo when we only hear about her from Q’s point of view. The image of Margo, or the idea of her, is the more frequent version of Margo that readers are presented with throughout the story. She appears to be a complex, unique young woman who has always been somewhat of a mystery, especially for Q. Despite his awareness that he is incapable of understanding who she truly is, he tries throughout the entire novel to find and “save” Margo, because he sincerely believes that it is what she wants him to do. Q is convinced that if he is able to find her and bring her home, then all her previous problems will magically disappear. He projects his own feelings on to her and keeps making assumptions about what it is that is best for Margo, and what Margo wants and needs.

Adolescence is usually the period in one’s life when one has an excuse to make irrational choices due to all the hormones that are raging, which *Paper Towns* has many examples of. We learn for instance that Margo’s boyfriend cheats on Margo with her best friend (Green *Paper* 37), and some of the “cool kids” have destroyed bikes belonging to younger students at Q’s school (Green *Paper* 94). Unlike many of his peers, Q shows very few signs of defiant behavior in any way. He is portrayed as being very mature, something that becomes evident especially in terms of how he talks about Margo’s physical appearance. He obviously finds her attractive, but unlike how the Colonel in *Looking for Alaska* talks about girls, Q describes Margo with a high level of admiration and reverence. He is fascinated with Margo, and talks about her in a sophisticated and respectful manner: “Margo’s beauty was a kind of sealed vessel of perfection – uncracked and uncrackable” (Green *Paper* 50). When attempting to describe Margo’s appearance, Q thinks to himself that “In the end, you could not say that Margo Roth Spiegelman was fat, or that she was skinny, any more than you can say that the Eiffel Tower is or is not lonely” (Green *Paper* 50). This comparison of Margo to the Eiffel Tower shows how difficult Q finds it to describe Margo, because she is one of a kind, and he appreciates how different she is from everyone else. There is no building in the
world that can compare itself to the Eiffel Tower because it is so unique as it stands in Paris, towering over the city; similar to how Q thinks Margo stands out compared to everyone else he knows. Despite this affectionate simile, Q does literally objectify her, in that he is comparing her to a building. His idealization of her is affectionate, but at the same time he is distancing himself, and everyone else, from her. He puts her on a pedestal and believes her to be so much more complex and interesting than everyone else he knows.

The phrasing of Q’s affection is peculiar, as it is very different from how his peers talk about women, and especially how they talk about and objectify Margo specifically. On the other hand, Q does not appear to be describing a person when he describes Margo, but rather a thing, or something unapproachable. When comparing Margo to the Eiffel Tower, Q arguably puts her on a pedestal. It might appear that his maturity only exists at a surface-level, as he does not really seem to be describing a person, but rather a thing or something immortal. “Lonely” is not a relevant category to describe a building, in the same manner that Q believes that “fat” or “skinny” are not relevant categories to describe Margo. He does not seem to believe that they are appropriate to describe Margo, but these words are used every day to describe other people. Again, we see that Q thinks of her as a concept or an idea, rather than a person, and is distancing her from other people.

Q is not alone in admiring Margo, as it seems to be a universal truth amongst the students attending Winter Park High School that Margo Roth Spiegelman is different from everyone else. Even though she is portrayed as being different in a mostly positive way, she is not protected from being objectified in a more sexist way than Q thinks of her. Q’s best friend Ben, who coincidentally is a virgin, freaks out when he learns about Q’s night with Margo, engaging their friend Radar in the process:

‘Oh my God, if you hooked up with her, you have to tell me every single thing that happened. You have to write me a term paper on the look and feel of Margo Roth Spiegelman. Thirty pages, minimum!’ ‘I want you to do a photo-realistic pencil drawing,’ Radar said. ‘A sculpture would also be acceptable,’ Ben added. Radar half raised his hand. I dutifully called on him. ‘Yes, I was wondering if it would be possible for you to write a sestina about Margo Roth Spiegelman’s breasts? Your six words are: pink, round, firmness, succulent, supple and pillowy.’ ‘Personally,’ Ben said, ‘I think at least one of those words should be bumbotron.’ (Green Paper 88, emphasis in original).

While Q’s way of thinking about Margo is to not give her body human characteristics, his friends seems to think of Margo as nothing but a body. Ben and Radar’s response show that they have obviously given Margo’s appearance quite a lot of thought. Q’s hangout with Margo comes as a surprise to them both, but instead of asking what the two were doing while
hanging out, they choose to direct all their questions toward Margo’s body, and how well acquainted Q managed to become with it. The objectifying way Ben and Radar talk about Margo is a great contrast compared to how Q talks about her. Q describes her as a work of art, as something that can never receive justice through words. His friends also use art to describe Margo as they ask Q to either make a drawing, a sculpture or to write a sestina about her, but they only want to know about her body and what she looks and feels like under her clothes. Q also seems to be okay with this little game, as he “dutifully” calls on Radar, implying that he does not seem to have that much of a problem with his friends talking about Margo in this mode. However, when Q himself is describing Margo, he uses words that are less obviously degrading to women, as when he calls her beauty “perfection”. He also describes the entire person, as opposed to Ben and Radar who mainly focuses on Margo’s breasts, and uses words such as “pillowy”. They seem to not care about Margo the person, but rather Margo the body. Q obviously thinks of Margo as something more than just the sexy body his friends describe. He does not disagree with what they say and he does not seem particularly bothered by his friends` utterances, but he could also be accepting their reaction because he understands their surprise when learning that he actually spent an entire night out with the Margo.

The initial reaction that Ben and Radar have when learning that Q hung out with Margo, is connected to their assumptions about Margo and her sexuality. They want to know all about her breasts, and the only apparent way that Q would have acquired knowledge about Margo’s breasts, is if they had engaged in a form of sexual activity. Both Radar and Ben are fully aware that Q is a virgin, and that Margo is not. Ben`s first reaction when learning that Margo and Q hung out is thinking that Q and Margo might have had sex. He might jump to this conclusion because he knows that Margo has had sex with other people before, and so maybe she had it with Q as well. Even though he knows that Margo is sexually active, it is prejudicial to immediately assume that Margo sleeps with everyone she hangs out with. Ben seems to think of Margo, a person he does not know, to be the kind of person who sleeps with every guy she hangs out with, but lacks any other reason for thinking so other than knowing that Margo has had sex. She has never talked to Ben before, she has never publicly talked about sex, but Ben still immediately thinks of sex when the topic of Margo comes up. It seems that Ben compensates for his status as a virgin by discussing sex a lot and to talk degradingly about women. It is however not only Margo that is the victim of objectification from the male gaze in Paper Towns. Ben is unable to abstain from making sexist remarks even about Q’s mother: “Bro, I saw your mom kiss you on the cheek this morning, and
forgive me, but I swear to God I was like, man, I wish I was Q. And also, I wish my cheeks had penises” (Green Paper 14, emphasis in original). Ben is obviously teasing Q, but it nevertheless shows how sexually objectifying women in Paper Towns is so common and not limited to apply only to teenage girls, as not even mothers are protected from it.

It appears that how popular you are at Winter Park High School is highly connected to whether or not you are still a virgin. We learn that the most popular pupils, such as Lacey, Becca and Jase, are all sexually active. It is a universal truth that Margo is the unchallenged queen at this school, and she is sexually active as well. Q and his friends are not part of the popular gang, and they are all virgins. It is interesting how the ones that talk the most about sex are the ones that have not yet had it. The novel demonstrates how curious the ones that have not yet had sex are about the concept. It also demonstrates how many of the characters who are not yet sexually active misinterpret the actions of those who on one or more occasion have had sex. Because of their lack of understanding what sex really entails, we see that several of the non-sexually active characters are prejudicial towards those who are sexually active, and that they disregard all their other qualities.

Margo, the sexually experienced and challenging girl, becomes a manifestation of the adult world and everything it entails for Q. In her, he sees someone confident, someone who is not a child anymore, but an independent woman who owns her sexuality. Q’s obsession with Margo leads him to not see her for who she really is, or to be open for the possibility that there is no definite way to be or to define Margo Roth Spiegelman. He has developed his own image of who she is, based on the facts that he knows to be true about her. Eventually, Q starts to realize that grasping who Margo is might be a more complex task than he first thought it would be:

Margo Roth Spiegelman was a person, too. And I had never quite thought of her that way, not really; it was a failure of all my previous imaginings. All along – not only since she left, but for a decade before – I had been imagining her without listening, without knowing that she made as poor a window as I did. And so I could not imagine her as a person who could feel fear, who could feel isolated in a roomful of people, who could be shy about her record collection because it was too personal to share. Someone who might read travel books to escape having to live in the town that so many people escape to. Someone who – because no one thought she was a person – had no one to really talk to (Green Paper 199).

Q realizes that Margo might not be such a mystery as he has always believed her to be. Quite the contrary; she has been extremely direct in terms of uttering her wants and needs. Margo explicitly said that her life in Florida and the expectations people projected onto her suffocated her and that she needed to leave. It was Q who interpreted it thither that he should
follow her. He realizes that he and many others have believed her to be a paper girl, someone she not truly is. It speaks to Q’s favor that he manages to see the mistakes he has made in judging Margo, as he realizes that he has been measuring her up to an impossible standard because he never saw her as a person. He does however believe that this is not only his own fault, as Margo herself has actively been working to mystify herself: “The fundamental mistake I had always made – and that she had, in fairness, always led me to make – was this: Margo was not a miracle. She was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl” (ibid.). Q still does not appear to understand that Margo does not want to be, nor can she be, defined as one specific thing. He realizes that he has misinterpreted who she is, but he believes that he only needs to adjust his perception of her in order to get it right. Q therefore keeps imposing her with characteristics that he thinks “is” Margo. For instance, while trying to track Margo down, Q thinks to himself that: “To find Margo Roth Spiegelman, you must become Margo Roth Spiegelman” (Green Paper 226). Q is still convinced that there is a way to “become” Margo, despite the fact that he does not seem to know what that would entail. Q has previously acknowledged that: “Margo herself was – at least part of the time – very unMargo” (Green Paper 169), and so Q “needed to discover what Margo was like when she wasn’t being Margo” (Green Paper 170). But being “unMargo” is still being Margo. She might do things that seem out of character, but this appear to happen so much, that being out of character and doing impulsive and surprising actions actually is being Margo. Q does not seem to acknowledge this, as he continues to search for the “real” Margo, which most likely does not exist.

Green plays with the reader’s expectations when Q finally meets Margo in the paper town Agloe, New York. Q has put a lot of hard work into finding out where Margo had left to, and after all this investigation and a very long car ride, the expectations of ceremonial making-out and gratitude are intense. Q thinks to himself: “I want an event. I want to feel her heaving sobs against my chest, tears running down her dusty cheeks onto my shirt” (Green Paper 282). Q wants to be the hero, and he wants Margo to find solace in his arms. So it is quite the anti-climax when Margo’s welcoming words to the group are “what the hell are you doing here?” (ibid.). Q made it his life’s mission to find Margo wherever she went, because he believed the clues she left behind to comfort him were really encouragements for him to track her down. When he finally finds her he is disappointed, because she did not intend for him to find out where she was, even less did she expect him to come after her: “’I can’t believe you didn’t want me to find you.’ ‘Sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I’m
impressed”” (Green Paper 294). This scene displays exactly the problem that Margo has tried to address throughout the story: that you cannot truly know someone, because you cannot possibly know all there is to know about a person. Q might have been able to track Margo down, but he always assumed that Margo would want to be found, and to be found by him, despite what her intentions were. Q is not the only person who has been prone to make such assumptions, as his friends also joined the car ride to find her, and they also have personal beliefs about Margo’s sexual life that are unsupported by evidence.

During their reunion-scene in Agloe, Margo makes fun of Q and the reason he tracked her down, after Q having claimed that he just wanted to make sure that she was okay:

‘Oh, bullshit. You didn’t come here to make sure I was okay. You came here because you wanted to save poor little Margo from her troubled little self, so that I would be oh-so-thankful to my knight in shining armor that I would strip my clothes off and beg you to ravage my body.’ ‘Bullshit!’ I shout, which it mostly is. ‘You were just playing with us, weren’t you? You just wanted to make sure that even after you left to go have your fun, you were still the axis we spun around.’ She’s screaming back, louder than I thought possible. ‘You’re not even pissed at me, Q! You’re pissed at the idea of me you keep inside your brain from when we were little!’ (Green Paper 284-5, emphasis added).

Margo understands that Q has been unable to adjust his impression of her as they have grown older. Q never understood how Margo could be brave enough to approach the dead man they found together, and ever since she did, he has believed her to be this adventurous spirit who has no equal. Margo is not directly mad with Q about being unable to adjust his perception of her, because she acknowledges that: “People love the idea of a paper girl” (Green Paper 293). What she is saying, is that Q is not special in the way he imposes Margo with characteristics, because people love being able to see who other people are, and believe that they are fully able to grasp them. After being rebuked by Margo about this, Q finally seems to understand that “I can’t be you. You can’t be me. You can imagine another well – but never quite perfectly, you know?” (Green Paper 302). Q and Margo do end up kissing in Agloe, but they do not end up having sex. During Margo’s reprimand, Q thinks to himself that what she is saying is “mostly” bullshit, in that he acknowledges that not everything she has said is. Margo does not strip her clothes off and ask Q to “ravage her body”, and shows that she has free will, and does not sleep with everyone just because she at one point has had sex. Margo demonstrates by this that the assumptions Q and others have made about Margo are just that – assumptions. They are never going to be able to grasp the real Margo, insofar that the real Margo even exists.
1.3 Explicit Sexuality and Sexual Agency: *Looking For Alaska*

“Her underwear, her jeans, the comforter, my corduroys and my boxers between us, I thought. Five layers, and yet I felt it, the nervous warmth of touching – a pale reflection of the fireworks of one mouth on another, but a reflection nonetheless” (Green *Alaska* 93, emphasis in original).

In *Looking for Alaska* we meet Miles Halter, a boy whose life would never be the same again after attending Culver Creek Boarding School in Alabama. Going from being friendless at his old school, Miles quickly meets and befriends Chip Martin (nicknamed the Colonel), Alaska Young and Takumi Hikohito. Miles is himself ironically nicknamed Pudge because he is so skinny. Pudge starts to realize that he has feelings for Alaska, but since she already is in a relationship with a boy named Jake, Pudge starts dating a Romanian girl named Lara instead. After a night of drinking and truth or dare, Alaska and Pudge make out. This initially seems to be a good thing, as Alaska asks Pudge before they fall asleep: “To be continued”? (Green *Alaska* 159), clearly indicating that she wanted to kiss Pudge again at some point. After a while Alaska’s phone rings, leaving the readers to believe that is was her boyfriend who called, and she starts freaking out and wants to leave. Pudge and the Colonel helps her leave campus, before they go back to sleep in ignorant bliss. The next morning all the students are called into the gym, where it is announced that Alaska has died in a car crash. The Colonel and Pudge are racked with guilt that they helped her escape campus, because as drunk as she was she should never have been driving in the first place. After playing detectives, they start wondering whether it really was an accident or if Alaska actually committed suicide. Consequently, their sadness changes to anger at Alaska for making them accomplices in her suicidal mission. Now they all have a big task ahead of them: they need to learn how to live without Alaska Young, and with the sadness that she is no longer with them.

A central theme in *Looking for Alaska* is sex, particularly sexual control and female sexual liberation. One of the main characters in the story, Alaska Young, is a self-proclaimed sex-enthusiast, and constantly criticizes the patriarchy which she argues acts to limit female sexuality. Her outspokenness about sex is a big contrast to that of the novel’s narrator Pudge, who has never had a sexual encounter with a girl prior to when this story takes place. *Looking for Alaska* has been heavily criticized for its use of explicit language, and has been argued against by critics who claim that it is unsuitable for young adults. I will argue that *Looking for Alaska* portrays sex and sexuality in a realistic manner, in that it is something that is natural to be curious about, and that despite the novel’s use of explicit sexual language, the message it
sends is fairly traditional. These teenagers act as support systems for each other, and helps each other to develop their sexual agency in a safe environment.

Alaska Young enjoys having sex, and she is neither embarrassed nor secretive about it. At one point her friend the Colonel describes a school mate who is unable to stay sober as a guy who “loves weed like Alaska loves sex” (Green Alaska 59). Sex is a big part of Alaska`s life and it is also a part of her identity. But even if Alaska appears to be sexually liberated, she is concerned and engaged in women`s rights to do what they want with their bodies without being judged for it. Beth Ann Bassein points out in Women and Death (1984) that women have been advancing in other aspects of life, but that sexuality is still one of the key areas in which women have yet to achieve equality. Bassein writes that:

Society continues to be exceedingly backward, however, in accepting them as equal in every way to men. Even as women have been advancing, a persistent antagonism toward them have persisted and in this century has risen to a loud crescendo of outspoken and misogynistic protests as well as violent and destructive acts. The means of degrading women have not changed; in fact, these means are straight out of early history: women are still degraded because of and through their sexuality (149).

This is however not how sexually active young women are portrayed in Looking for Alaska, as no one seems to think negatively about Alaska because she has a lot of sex: that is just the way she is. The fact that women are regulated through their sexuality is something that Alaska is loudly opposed to. Her personal involvement in sexual activities might even be interpreted as rebellion against the patriarchy and its unwritten rules, as well as simply being for her own pleasure. At one point, Alaska reads a poem for Pudge, and tells him that it is written by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Pudge remembers having read her biography, but admits that the only thing he can remember about her was that “she had a lot of sex”, to which Alaska responds “without a trace of irony”: “I know. She`s my hero” (Green Alaska 110). It is difficult enough in the 21st century to be a sexually active woman without being labelled because of it, and Alaska recognizes the women, such as Millay, who have made way for newer generations to act upon their sexuality as they see fit without being judged for it. By mentioning Millay specifically, the novel strengthens the notion that Alaska`s personal beliefs are real issues. Edna St. Vincent Millay was a real person who wrote poems in the twentieth century, and who was known for her feminist activism. The novel here includes both fictive and real people who fought for the same principles, something which legitimizes Alaska`s concerns; it confirms that female sexual liberation is not only a concern in Looking for Alaska, but also in the real world.

Pudge`s sexual experience is a big contrast to that of Alaska`s, as he has limited to
zero experience regarding sex. He therefore quickly finds a mentor in Alaska, as her unembarrassed approach and willingness to talk about sex in explicit terms is of help for Pudge and many of Alaska’s other friends. At one point she tries to prepare Pudge for his future life of dating girls by introducing him to the different bases: “French, Feel, Finger, Fuck” (Green Alaska 121). Alaska does not use any metaphors when discussing sex with Pudge, as she uses a direct language that leaves very little to the imagination – and little to be misinterpreted. She does this on many occasions, including during one of the school breaks when Pudge and Alaska finds a porn movie. The sexually inexperienced Pudge starts taking mental notes, probably hoping to pick up a trick or two for himself, while the sexually experienced Alaska calls him out for it:

As if reading my mind, she said, ‘God, Pudge. Never do it that hard. That would hurt. That looks like torture. And all she can do is just sit there and take it? This is not a man and a woman. It’s a penis and a vagina. What’s erotic about that? Where’s the kissing?’ ‘Given their position, I don’t think they can kiss right now,’ I noted. ‘That’s my point. Just by virtue of how they’re doing it, it’s objectification. He can’t even see her face! This is what can happen to women, Pudge. That woman is someone’s daughter. This is what you make us do for money’ (Green Alaska 108).

Alaska obviously does not mean that Pudge personally makes her do porn, but she personalizes her message to make her point come across. She does not only verbally express her opinions about the porn industry, but also points out how the woman is degraded and objectified, because all they can see is her body and not her face. Even if Alaska is only a junior in high school, she manages to show great reflections on current challenges today’s society is facing. Alaska again uses concrete words, such as penis and vagina. By using the anatomical words for genitalia, Alaska shows that that she is mature enough to talk about it in a rational manner. She does not start laughing or feel uncomfortable; instead she shows great reflections on how porn affects political issues. Many could easily feel prone to use less explicit words in similar settings, but Alaska chooses to be direct. She is not trying to make subtle hints but take rather a critical stand against the porn-industry, and her maturity and ability to reflect upon its impact only strengthens her argument.

Alaska knows that her friend Lara likes Pudge, and has taken it upon herself to see to it that they become an item. Lara has been making subtle hints towards Pudge, but he has not been able to pick up on them. Alaska sees it as her calling to help Pudge, who is obviously lost when it comes to girls. During one of Alaska’s “interventions”, their friend the Colonel chimes in and comments on Lara’s appearance, which makes matchmaker Alaska furious:
‘Right, I know. And she liked you. You thought she was quietly discussing precalc, when she was clearly talking about having hot sex with you. Which is why you need me.’ ‘She has great breasts,’ the Colonel said without looking up from the whale. ‘DO NOT OBJECTIFY WOMEN’S BODIES!’ Alaska shouted. Now he looked up. ‘Sorry. Perky breasts.’ ‘That’s not any better!’ ‘Sure it is,’ he said. ‘Great is a judgement on a woman’s body. Perky is merely an observation. They are perky. I mean, Christ’ (Green Alaska 75, emphasis in original).

The Colonel’s response is a typical objectification of a woman’s body, which is exactly something Alaska criticized throughout her life. This incident strengthens Alaska’s earlier argument that objectification of women is a genuine challenge, seeing as the Colonel is doing exactly what Alaska claims to be a major issue in society. The Colonel might behave childishly or immaturely by commenting on Lara’s physical appearance, but his choice of words show that he is far from stupid. He changes his first assertion from the judgment that Lara’s breasts are “great” into what he believes to be a universal truth; that her breasts are perky. This appears to give his argument more depth, because even though he might still be rude, he is eloquent and consequently appear smarter. He is able to adjust his comment after being disciplined by Alaska, which might indicate that this is a conversation the two have had before. The Colonel does on one level appear to respect Alaska during this passage, as he says “sorry”, and adjusts his assessment. His apology could indicate that he admits that he is in the wrong. However, he cannot be very apologetic about it, as he goes on to make a new judgement on Lara’s body. He appears to be willing to agree with Alaska, but only to a certain extent. The Colonel switches his choice of words, but in the end he is still assessing Lara’s body. He seems to create the illusion that he agrees with Alaska rather than actually let himself be persuaded that objectifying women is wrong; instead of standing by his subjective judgement he adjusts his argument into what he believes is an “observation” and thereby truth about Lara’s body. Again, there is the sense that Alaska is the “teacher” in this relationship, in that she wants to teach the Colonel and all those around how to treat women, and consequently their sexuality, with respect.

Eventually, Pudge finds the courage to ask Lara to be his girlfriend. She accepts, and the two of them start spending more time together. One of the most controversial scenes in the book thereby follows, namely when Lara gives Pudge a blowjob. Michael Cart chaired the 2006 Printz committee, where Looking for Alaska won (78), and Cart admits that there were “grumbles revolved around a scene involving oral sex” (79). This scene not only displays how difficult it is to be young and to explore one’s own sexuality, but it also shows the importance of having a supportive system available when exploring sexual opportunities. In addition to this, it also shows how difficult it is to create support systems like the one Alaska is for Lara
and Pudge, as one apparently is not even supposed to write about scenarios like this one. Out of nowhere, Lara asks Pudge if he would like a blowjob. Pudge, who is happily willing to be on the receiving end of a blowjob, says that she shouldn’t feel that she has to give one, to which Lara responds that she wants to because she’s “just never given one” (Green Alaska 153) [sic]. Not really knowing what to do, Lara unbuttons Pudge’s pants, freeing his penis in the process and “wrapped her hand around it and put it into her mouth. And waited. We were both very still” (Green Alaska 154). Disappointingly, it all results in awkwardness, as nothing seems to happen. Despite this temporary awkwardness, the novel portrays Lara and Pudge as being very unashamed about what they are doing. Instead of ending the experiment when nothing seems to happen, Lara asks Pudge if she is supposed to bite or do anything else to increase his pleasure. Pudge thinks to himself that perhaps Lara is supposed to move her head up and down, but decides not to suggest it in fear that it could “choke her” (ibid.). It is clear that they are both inexperienced, but they try to make good of the situation by educating themselves by asking for help.

When Pudge and Lara realize that there is something that they are doing wrong, they decide to find Alaska and ask her for guidance: “She laughed and laughed. Sitting on her bed, she laughed until she cried. She walked into the bathroom, returned with a tube of toothpaste and showed us. In detail. Never have I so wanted to be Crest Complete” (Green Alaska 155). The fact that they feel comfortable enough to go to Alaska and ask her instead of browsing the internet for answers implies that discussing sex in detail with Alaska is not embarrassing. It is also important to point out that Alaska does not make fun of them for asking her for guidance and she does not act superior, but she does actually help them. Her laughing response is not necessarily condescending, as it easily can be interpreted as her surprise of being asked such an intimate question by people she knows well. She is completely comfortable in the role of giving her friends sexual advice, and not only does she explain what Lara needs to do, but she even demonstrates it. This scene could have been even more controversial if it had described exactly what Alaska does when demonstrating oral sex on a tube of toothpaste by describing her movements, but these particular details are withheld. This omission could be to avoid further controversy, but the novel has already managed to paint a picture in the reader’s mind of what exactly Alaska is doing, making a closer description of it superfluous. It does also reinforce the notion that Alaska is sexual without the novel objectifying her.

Bursting with new knowledge, Pudge and Lara give it another try. Pudge notices that
Lara “did exactly what Alaska told her to do, and I did exactly what Alaska said I would do, which was die a hundred little ecstatic deaths, my fists clenched, my body shaking. It was my first orgasm with a girl” (ibid. emphasis added). Their sexual experiment finally proves to be successful. Alaska and her thorough explanation of how to perform oral sex saves Pudge and Lara from fumbling for a much longer time, most likely resulting in making oral sex an awkward affair for them both in the future. The novel emphasizes how important it is to have people around you who can guide you when sexually experimenting, in order to make it become a positive experience. What the novel also points out is that this is not the first sexual experience Pudge has ever had, as it is implied that he has achieved orgasms before. His previous orgasms have however been achieved through masturbation, as this is his first orgasm “with a girl”, and by interpretation of context, his first orgasm with anyone else. In other words, Pudge knows that his body is able to achieve an orgasm and he knows what it is supposed to feel like, which is how he understands that he and Lara is doing something wrong. Despite his experience of knowing what an orgasm feels like, he is still unable at first to understand how he can achieve one through oral sex. Had this experience been shared between Lara and someone who had never had an orgasm before, it might have led to an even more awkward affair, as the boy then might not even have known if his body had been able to produce an orgasm, let alone feel comfortable to go and ask someone for help to achieve one.

In this short passage Green also manages to demonstrate sexual consent. It is Lara who suggests the blow job after asking Pudge if he has ever gotten one before, catching him completely off guard:

It was so brazen. I thought I would explode. I never thought. I mean, from Alaska, hearing that stuff was one thing. But to hear her sweet little Romanian voice go so sexy all of the sudden… ‘No,’ I said. ‘I never have.’ ‘Think it would be fun?’ DO I?!?!?!?!?!?! ‘Um. Yeah. I mean, you don’t have to.’ ‘I think I want to,’ she said (Green Alaska 154).

Pudge is obviously thrilled about Lara’s suggestion, but he still manages to give her a way out, should she want one. He explicitly says that Lara does not need to give him a blow job, even though he obviously is dying to try it out. This verbal exchange between them consists of few words, but it is extremely important. Lara has all the right in the world to withdraw her suggestion, and Pudge demands explicit agreement from Lara, in order to be completely sure that this is what she wants. In this passage, the novel emphasizes that no matter how eager you are and even if your hormones are raging, it is important to take your partner into consideration. Lara might have asked if Pudge had received a blow job before simply to see
his reaction and not because she was eager to give one. Consequently, Pudge`s response appears much more mature, because he shows that he respects his partner`s choice regardless of his own emotions. Consent is important to learn at an early age, making it exclusively positive that the novel demonstrates it by using two young and sexually inexperienced characters. These teenagers have limited sexual experience, but even they know that both parties should be in agreement before indulging in sexual activities. It is especially important for Lara who is on the giving end of the blowjob, because she is not being forced into giving someone else pleasure without wanting to. It is completely up to her whether she wants to do this or not, and she is allowed to be in control of her own body. The novel deals with an important current topic of discussion and shows how little effort it actually takes to create a safe environment for sexual experimentation, all within those two sentences.

*Looking for Alaska* does not shy away from embarrassing situations. The blowjob scene might be an uncomfortable read, but it quite effectively demonstrates how awkward entering the world of sex can be. Neither Lara nor Pudge have the slightest idea of what they are doing, and they make unexpected discoveries as they go on:

Lara unbuttoned my pants and pulled my boxers down a little and pulled out my penis. ‘Wow,’ she said. ‘What?’ She looked up at me, but didn’t move, her face nanometres away from my dick. ‘It’s weird.’ ‘What do you mean weird?’ ‘Just beeg, I guess.’ I could live with that kind of weird. And then she wrapped her hand around it and put it into her mouth (Green *Alaska* 154, emphasis in original) [sic].

Green adds humor to the situation by making Lara describe the penis as “weird”, which at first seems to offend Pudge, or make him seem insecure about his own presentation. The comment takes some of the edge off the situation, because Lara`s reaction is so spontaneous and honest. She could have used a lot of different words to describe the penis, but she says the first thing that comes to her mind. It is clear that this is either one of the first times or maybe even the first time that Lara sees a penis, due to her surprise. She says it is weird because “she guesses” that it is big; implying that she does not entirely know why she thinks it is weird. She seems to lack material to compare it to, so she makes a conclusion based on the one that is right in front of her. It all happens very straightforwardly, as there is no foreplay or creation of suspense: Lara comments on the penis` appearance, and then “put it into her mouth”. The lack of build-up emphasizes their inexperience and the lack of romance. I would argue that Green gives this scene authenticity by not romanticizing it. This scene might even be considered educational or comforting for younger readers, as Lara`s first reaction to seeing Pudge`s penis and calling it weird is extremely honest and might even be similar to the
reaction many young girls (and boys) have when seeing a penis for the first time. The novel normalizes the first sexual encounter with the opposite sex by showing that an awkward introduction to the world of sexual pleasure does not mean that it will always be like that. Pudge and Lara only needed two attempts to succeed, and they got off to a horrible start.

*Looking for Alaska* does not only describe the excitement related to physical experimenting, but it also shows how some people prefer emotional intimacy, especially Pudge. The oral sex is a welcome experience for Pudge, but the scene is described as anything but appealing as it is completely devoid of feelings or passion. There are no descriptions of sounds, surroundings or feelings, and the only adjective Green uses throughout the event is “nervous”. The lack of adjectives does not make it sound appealing, but instead it appears as something empty and merely an experiment. After Pudge has reached his orgasm, he admits that he was “embarrassed and nervous” (Green *Alaska* 155), showing that the situation he now finds himself in is uncomfortable. They do not discuss what just happened between them, they do not kiss or cuddle, but instead they go right back to doing homework as nothing just happened. This runs counter to the cultural idea that having sexual interactions for the first time is necessarily very dramatic, and that it does not have to be a big deal for the parties involved. Quite the contrary, as this event never is brought up again throughout the rest of the novel.

The type of intimacy that Pudge truly desires is not the physical one that he shares with Lara, as he would rather share a deep, emotional connection with Alaska. When Pudge fantasizes about Alaska and the two of them together, he does not think about oral sex or intercourse, but of a deeper bond: “I wanted so badly to lie down next to her on the couch, to wrap my arms around her and sleep. Not fuck, like in those movies. Not even have sex. Just sleep together, in the most innocent sense of the phrase” (Green *Alaska* 109). Pudge clearly craves more of an emotional connection with Alaska rather than have meaningless sexual relations with someone he does not truly care for. Alaska was known for being sexually active, but that is not what Pudge wants her for. He wants to be someone for her, and not just one she sleeps with. Pudge realizes after Alaska’s death that he cared for her in a completely different manner than she cared for him, and starts to resent her for it:

> I wanted to be the last one 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, and I hated myself too, 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 at her tears as they pooled in her eyes (Green *Alaska* 205).
The problem with Pudge’s statement above is that Alaska has never been portrayed as a girl who wants to be held while pouring out her feelings. Alaska craved physical connections, not emotional ones. Pudge is projecting his wants and needs over on Alaska, just as Q did with Margo in *Paper Towns*, because he desperately wants her, and not the other way around. Pudge seems unable to distinguish between what he feels and thinks and what is actually the truth. Alaska lived life fast and hard, and the prospect of Pudge kissing “at her tears as they pooled in her eyes” seems fairly improbable.

Alaska’s identity and her sexuality are so intertwined, that she is portrayed as sexual even after her death. Pudge and the Colonel starts cleaning out her room to remove “anything her aunt wouldn’t want to find” (Green *Alaska* 184). Pudge removes the condoms that he knew she always had laying around in case her boyfriend came to visit. He then starts “searching through her underwear for hidden bottles of liquor or sex toys or God knows what” (Green *Alaska* 185). It is not possible to forget Alaska’s sexual nature, as it was so deeply ingrained in her personality. Alaska’s political stand on gender-related sexual behavior therefore becomes the basis for a prank that Pudge and the Colonel decide to conduct at the end of the school year in Alaska’s honor. They hire a stripper to pose as a professor who “studies adolescent sexuality” (Green *Alaska* 241), and invites him to speak at an event at their school. This “professor” talks about objectification and the language we use to describe girls versus boys. It all climaxes after this professor’s admission that it is important to be “subverting the patriarchal paradigm”, before he strips down until he is wearing only his underwear (Green *Alaska* 248). In the aftermath of this interesting presentation their chaperon the Eagle, finds Pudge and the Colonel: “‘Don’t ever do anything like that again,’ he said. ‘But Lord, ‘subverting the patriarchal paradigm’ – it’s like she wrote the speech’. He smiled and closed the door” (Green *Alaska* 249). Even their teacher acknowledges that this prank was conducted in Alaska’s honor in that it was very true to the person Alaska was, due to her constant critique of the patriarchy as a means to oppress women’s sexual freedom.

Hoffman Reynolds Hays writes in *The Dangerous Sex: The Myth of Feminine Evil* (1966) that “The male who has to prove his maleness by the continual performance of the sex act with as many partners as possible is expressing a deep insecurity. In some ways it appears as though this type of behaviour harks back to the phallic phase in which men do not really accept the other sex, in other ways it reveals a hidden fear of impotence” (178). The similarity between this notion and Alaska’s behavior, is that they both seem to establish a truth by their sexual activity. While a man, according to Hays’ statement, might engage in coitus to prove
his manhood, Alaska uses sex to show that women want to have sex too. Alaska does not
have sex with “as many partners as possible”, but rather as much as she can with the person
she is in a monogamous relationship with. I would argue that the reason Alaska is so
outspoken about sex, is because she wants to highlight how society, and the patriarchy in
particular, expects women to not want to talk about and indulge in sex. When starting to
watch porn with Pudge, for instance, Alaska “commenced with her righteous indignation” that
the porn industry, or at least this movie specifically, “just don’t make sex look fun for
women” (Green Alaska 108). She believes that the patriarchy regulates women on different
levels, including their sexual freedom, and she wants to oppose this. It therefore makes sense
that Alaska not only uses her knowledge but also her voice, to address the pressing issues that
surround teenagers` developing sexuality. It is during the teenage years that one establishes
the foundation of sexual identity, and Alaska does everything in her power to oppose her
friends from integrating society`s sexual restrictions into their understanding of themselves as
sexual beings. Alaska naturalizes sex, female sex, and young female sex, and encourages her
friends to be aware of attitudes toward gendered sexuality that functions as dominant
discourses that are in fact arbitrary social constructs.

*Looking for Alaska* has become controversial due to its depiction of sexual
experimentation between teenagers, in that the novel is verbally explicit during such scenes.
Sex is a big part of the novel, both in terms of sexual experimenting and as a central topic of
discussions. Despite all the complaints that have been filed against *Looking for Alaska*, the
message it sends is fairly traditional; Pudge craves emotional love over empty, meaningless
sex. The novel has been criticized especially due to the blow job scene this chapter has
analyzed, but I believe that those who have opposed the book due to this scene have
misinterpreted its real message. What it depicts is a teenager who is broadening his sexual
experience, only to realize that immediate orgasms are far from being as satisfying as a
meaningful, platonic relationship with a different person. Pudge is sexually inexperienced and
he is all for experimenting in order to broaden his sexual horizont, but he clearly states that he
would much rather have a deep emotional connection like the one he imagines himself having
with Alaska, than merely indulging in empty sex with a girlfriend he is not particularly
interested in.

In this novel, Green acknowledges the sexual nature and curiosity in adolescents, but
he also shows that they are capable of making rational choices. All forms of sexual activity in
*Looking for Alaska* happen in safe, secure environments. We know Alaska uses contraception,
since Pudge and the Colonel removes them from her room after her death. Condoms not only prevent unwanted pregnancies, but it is also the only contraception, apart from the very similar “femidom”, that prevents sexually transmittable diseases from spreading. Alaska and her boyfriend act responsibly when using condoms during sex, as they are obviously aware of the consequences that sex could lead to, were they to behave irresponsibly. Pudge and Lara on their part demonstrate mutual sexual consent, by explicitly agreeing to engage in sexual activity. With limited sexual experience, it might be difficult to understand what the limits are for the other person and what they may or may not be willing to do. Pudge chooses the mature option when he asks Lara twice whether she truly would be comfortable with giving him a blowjob, instead of just interpreting hints as agreement. Learning to respect each other’s limits and acknowledge that there needs to be mutual consent is the only way to avoid sexual assault. There are no “blurred lines” between Lara and Pudge, because they both explicitly agree both verbally and bodily. There is no way of stopping the sexual drive of the teenagers in *Looking for Alaska* - just as there is no way to stop the sexual drive of teenagers in real life, but they have taken all measures possible to make sex become positive.

1.4 Representations and Reader’s Experience of Teenage Sexuality

“Some adults honestly think average adolescents will understand when we tell them that they are not quite ready for the stories of adult experiences presented in serious fiction and that they will be content to wait. Like fun they will!” (Edwards 56).

In all three novels discussed in this chapter, sexuality is a major topic. The books are all sexual *Bildungsromane*, and explore the ongoing identity creation of its characters. They all have different approaches towards the topic at hand, but they have in common that they demonstrate how exciting it is to be young and curious. *Paper Towns*, *Eleanor and Park* and *Looking for Alaska* all demonstrate that sexuality does not necessarily need to be dangerous. These novels instead display quite the opposite, as the development of sexuality in these novels lead not only to a better understanding of the self and personal identity, but it also leads to a new understanding of the world and other people in it. Kneen’s argument that “teenagers are in the process of constructing themselves as sexual beings” (363) is evident in these novels. Most of the characters in the books discussed are in the beginning phase of their sexual lives, and they are curiously, and somewhat awkwardly, trying to navigate their ways through.
What *Eleanor & Park* does is reassure the reader; even if you have insecurities and is aware of own imperfections, there is possible to be genuinely and highly loved by a different person. *Eleanor & Park* is the only one of the three novels discussed in this chapter that has a narration that alternates between the two main characters. This alternation affects the readers’ perception of them and what their relationship means to them both, because we as readers are allowed to experience it through both Eleanor and Parks’ point of view. For instance, we learn that Eleanor is extremely critical of herself, and if we had only heard her side of the story, we could have easily imagined that she had been gigantic. But because we hear from Park as well, we are presented with a very different opinion of Eleanor’s body. While Eleanor compares herself to a walrus (Rowell 240), Park compares her to something more light and elegant; to that of a butterfly (Rowell 72). The story also appears less confusing due to the alternating narration, because we as readers are allowed into the heads of both characters. Eleanor especially has a lot of secrets, and us as readers understand her behavior better than Park at times, because we know more of her story than he does. A very significant factor during adolescence is insecurity, and it is normal to question whether the person you are interested in likes you back, or if it is one-sided. When reading *Eleanor and Park* you can bask in the knowledge that both Eleanor and Park genuinely like each other and that they think about each other constantly. This is a privilege no one is not granted in real life, as there is no way to literally get inside someone else’s head. Since we get to hear both sides of the story, we understand how intense this journey is for both of them.

*Paper Towns* displays how desire for someone else might lead to incorrect assumptions about other people’s wants and their sexuality. Q repeatedly misinterprets Margo in order to make her fit in with the incorrect perception he has created of her. He is throughout the novel convinced that finding Margo is the obstacle he needs to overcome so that the two of them can be together; just like the hero’s mission in fairy tales. It never occurs to Q that Margo does not want to be with him, or that she has left not in order for him to find her, but simply for her own sake. Margo is presented as being a thing rather than a person, as she is often objectified to various degrees by both Q and his friends. It speaks to Q’s advantage, however, that the novel also displays him as being able to adjust his perception of Margo, and accept that she is not a “paper girl” that is only two-dimensional. She is a young woman with her own opinions and dreams, and her past says nothing about what she wants of the future.
Looking for Alaska is the novel that is most explicit in its representation of sexuality, as it presents sexual encounters in a fairly detailed way. John Green acknowledges the reader as being curious, especially in terms of Pudge’s personal encounters with the other sex. Green uses this curiosity about sex and sexuality to promote healthy and safe sexual ideals, and show that sexual development amongst teenagers does not necessarily result in a negative outcome. Pudge does get a blowjob which he undeniably enjoyed, but even though he appreciated the pleasure that followed it, he still demonstrates to readers that meaningless sex is not what the ideal is for him. We are encouraged as readers to seek out meaningful relationships, because they are what are being portrayed as being truly rewarding. The novel is not encouraging young adults to abstain from sex, but rather to be aware that there is something that can be more motivating and fruitful in the long run.

Nichols and Good pointed out in the quote from the beginning of the chapter that “youth will inevitably open the gate to sexual activity” (111), but that sexual information could ease the transition. As introduced in the beginning of this chapter, Looking for Alaska in particular has been heavily challenged for its depiction of teenage sexuality. It is however interesting how very different this reaction is compared to the one that the characters’ show. In real life, people are complaining about the book because of its sexual content. In the book, Alaska does not throughout the entire story receive even one negative comment about her involvement in sexual activities. Instead of judging Alaska for being sexually active, it would seem as people merely acknowledge it. It could be argued that John Green in this novel is presenting a sexual utopia, where it is acknowledged that teenagers are sexual, that they act upon it as they please (within a safe environment), and that it is okay to be as vocal about it as Alaska Young is. When Pudge and Lara wonder how to conduct a successful blow job, they consult Alaska, who proves to be a valuable support. Alaska is the support and possess a lot of the information that Nichols and Good calls for.

Kenneth Millard argues that “Adolescence, youth, innocence: they become an idealised fictional category which literary writers can use to give a particular urgency to representations of subjectivity and socialisation that highlight their own social and political anxieties” (13). This opportunity to address their own social anxieties is exactly what Rowell and Green have done in these novels, as they use their power as authors to present a topic which for many appears to be difficult to come to terms with. They do so by reassuring the reader that sexuality is not a negative factor in any of these young adults’ life; on the contrary, as it gives room for growth, understanding and identity development, and it can even work as
the most stabilizing factor in a teenager`s life. Michael Cart believes that sex has a natural part in young adult fiction, because: “Not to include sex in books for contemporary young adults (...) is to agree to a de facto conspiracy of silence, to imply to young readers that sex is so awful, so traumatic, so dirty that we can`t even write about it” (144). *Eleanor & Park, Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns* all present sexuality realistically, and none of these characters experience that as traumatic. These books display sex and the development of sexual identity realistically, in that they address the issues at hand and show that, yes: entering the sexual sphere can be challenging, but it is a learning process.

All three sexual *Bildungsromane* that are discussed in this chapter approach teenage sexuality as being a realistic concept, in that it is nothing that can just be shoved under a rug and then just left there. Teenagers will enter the realms of sexuality, and both *Eleanor & Park* and *Looking for Alaska* show the importance of having a supportive system in place when this is to happen. *Paper Towns* display how confusing life can seem, and that sexuality is a fluid condition. The authors present sexuality as something that comes naturally, and nothing that these characters need to strive to achieve. Sexuality is so naturally integrated into these novels, that removing it from the books would leave us with unrealistic novels that omit one of the major realizations in young adults` life: the realization of oneself as a sexual being.

These three novels have become the subject of criticism, because they normalize awkward experimenting and show how the teenage years are a search for identity. Views on sexuality are shaped by cultural conventions, and if even the smallest hint of impropriety in young adult fiction is enough for a book to be removed from libraries or school curriculums, it not only seriously limits what books are regarded as “safe” for teenagers to read, but it also reinforces the notion that sexuality amongst teenagers is not something that should be discussed in the open. As Millard argues: “Adolescents are important because of the ways in which they are at the forefront of social change, even while they are simultaneously the products of an adult social culture that shapes their development” (1). If adults continuously oppose these books because they believe the depiction of sexuality is abhorrent, then young adults will acquire these attitudes and find their own sexuality repulsive as well. The “adult social culture” affects their understanding and beliefs, and if adults are incapable of seeing the true message behind these books, then neither will young adults.

These three novels popularity and the complaints filed against them only represent the US, but I would argue that the nervousness around the approach of young sexuality is not a phenomenon that is geographically contained. While there are, admittedly, noteworthy
differences between the various nations in the Western world, we should also note the many similarities. Of particular interest for my argument is the notion of nervousness around the development of young adults’ sexuality. Recognizing the centrality of this particular phenomenon is important in the process of understanding the significance of young adult literature more broadly, especially because of young adult fiction’s role as not only literature, but also as being a part of young adults’ support system during the development of their sexual identity.
2 Death

"We are all the same age – very young – in our relationship with death” (Adam Phillips xx, On Flirtation, 1994).

Death makes frequent appearances in the most popular contemporary young adult fiction books. The characters that die, die in very different ways, such as suicide, accidents, war and cancer, and the wide range of causes of death emphasizes how fragile life can be. The only thing in this world that is one hundred percent certain is death. Or as Barbara Ehrenreich writes in Smile or Die (2009): “Death is as ‘natural’ as anything gets” (21). To explore how death is represented in young adult fiction books, we will in this chapter take a closer look at Me and Earl and the Dying Girl, The Fault in Our Stars and Looking for Alaska. In all these three books, one of the main characters dies, either by cancer or due to an accident. None of the narrating characters are the ones who die, so the story continues through the eyes of the mourners after the occurring death(s). Death and grief is therefore naturally a central theme in all three narratives. The deaths in the three novels discussed in this chapter are all portrayed realistically in the sense that they are statistically not unlikely to happen. I will argue that the narratives normalize death by demonstrating that losing someone you know is brutal, but it is also a natural part of life. Death is a difficult concept to grasp because it can never be fully comprehensible. These novels do however show how one can gain a better understanding of what losing someone truly means. I believe that these texts oppose the notion that death does not have a natural space in young adult literature, as they portray death as something difficult and complicated, but also that there is no way to escape it.

There is a long literary history of writing about death. There is something about the certain uncertainty about death that many writers appear to find fascinating. Adam Phillips points out in his psychoanalytic work On Flirtation that ”We are all the same age – very young – in our relationship with death” (xx). Phillips does not refer to actual age when stating that everyone is “young”, but rather to a state of mind. No matter how old you are, you can never acquire total maturity in relation to death, because you can only ever have second-hand knowledge of it. Dying is the one thing that you can never experience personally and then learn a lesson from. This means that unlike sexuality, children, teenagers and adults all have the same knowledge of what dying entails. However, one can experience death by proxy when someone close to you dies. This makes death particularly interesting in young adult fiction, because of the educational factor. Young adult fiction is popularly written as a form of the Bildungsroman genre, and such stories often possess either educational, or on fewer
contemporary occasions, didactical factors. When death is central, regardless of age, everyone has a lot to learn, particularly those who might never have lost someone they knew.

Sheila Egoff claims that it was the Puritans who “invented” children’s books, and their “pervasive didacticism” was clearly evident in these works (31). Certain themes concerning “moral consequences” made frequent appearances, and “The prolonged death scene, vividly described in a manner to the point of relish, was the central feature in Puritan children’s books” (ibid.). The Puritans did not shy away from writing about death, but rather used it as a pedagogical tool – and as a threat. Readers’ fascination with death did however not end with the Puritans, which becomes very clear especially in the Victorian era. Gerhard Joseph and Herbert F. Tucker are in agreement with Phillips about death being inaccessible to humans, and that all we really can do about it is to speculate. In their article “Passing On: Death” (1999) they write about the Victorians, and how

Like us, and like every generation since self-consciousness dawned on mortality, Victorian people could not know death at first hand. Yet they could not but know, and talk, about it. The one experience inescapably entailed by life, death nevertheless remains by definition empirically inaccessible to the living: a cognitive zero, it gives rise to an unending discursive speculation that exhausts whatever imaginative options culture and history make available to the speculator. Each society, each epoch fills in theblank of mortality with what lies at hand, and what lies to hand is its own clutch of preoccupations (110, emphasis in original).

Today, fiction books are more likely to maintain primarily an entertaining function. Despite the fact that young adult fiction’s main goal now is not to educate its readers, it is not necessarily completely without an educating factor. Contemporary young adult literature still educates its readers, but more often in a sense that pertains to lived experience as opposed to academic knowledge. Moore and Mae, who have researched the way children’s literature deal with death, point out that “proliferation of contemporary children’s fiction may provide important models for young readers concerning how to deal with death” (53). For instance, The Hunger Games (2009) and Divergent (2012) are fictional stories about places that do not exist in reality, but they nevertheless present political ideologies. Both series critique society through their pervasive use of ideological ideas. So even if these novels’ main purpose was simply to entertain, they also educate because literature and education are so deeply intertwined. I believe that this educational aspect also applies to the novels discussed in this chapter; although these works are fictional, they are educational on one level, to a large extent due to the realistic mode that they are written in. As Susan Sontag, the author of Illness as Metaphor – AIDS and its metaphors (1991), writes: “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well
and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place” (3). This emphasis on the inevitability of illness is illustrated in the novels discussed here as well, where the illness is presented as the pre-stage of the ultimate death. What we also need to pay attention to, though, is how the depiction of illness found in the novels is illustrated in such a way as to inform the reader that illness, despite being undesirable, is not necessarily the worst thing that can happen to you. Death is inevitable and is therefore a natural topic to introduce to young adults, including through literature aimed at this demographic.

*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews is partially written as a screenplay, and is a story about friendship, illness and the realization that bad things happen in the world. Greg Gaines has thus far survived high school by keeping a low profile and not getting involved with any of his fellow students. The only exception is his friend Earl, whom he makes secret movies with. Things rapidly change, however, when his mother forces him to spend time with his childhood acquaintance Rachel Kushner, who has recently been diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia. Greg finds it uncomfortable spending time with a girl he has not talked to for several years, and who he is sure will die. Unlike Greg, Rachel is not convinced that she is terminal, but as no amount of medicines and chemotherapy seem to have any positive effect on her condition, she decides to stop the treatment altogether. This infuriates Greg, who is only now starting to realize that Rachel will actually be gone when she dies. Initially seeming so calm and collected about the prospect of Rachel dying, Greg now seems to grasp how permanent death is. Rachel eventually dies, and in her funeral Greg learns something new about her. This seems to reassure him, because it proves that it is possible for a person to live on even after death.

*In The Fault in Our Stars* we are introduced to Hazel Grace, who was diagnosed with thyroid cancer three years ago. After nearly dying, she became a candidate for a medical trial to test out a new drug named Phalanxifor. Surprisingly, this medicine has had a positive effect on Hazel’s tumors, but she is still terminal and is living on borrowed time. Her mother insists she participate in a Support Group, and though Hazel usually despise these meetings, everything changes when a new kid named Augustus Waters joins. Augustus battled osteosarcoma, but he managed to beat it. The only present evidence of his battle is that he only has one leg. Hazel is immediately intrigued by this new addition to the group, and quickly learns that the feeling is mutual. The two become an item and start spending a lot of
time together, and eventually even go on a trip to Amsterdam. After returning, Hazel learns that Augustus’ bone cancer is back, and that he does not have long left to live. He gradually gets worse and loses more control over his own body for every passing day, and Hazel has to watch him fade before eventually, Augustus Waters dies. While mourning the loss of Augustus, Hazel becomes increasingly aware of the impact her unavoidable death will have on the people closest around her. She wants to make sure that her parents are ready for a life without Hazel, as they all need to accept that the day will come that she is no longer with them.

While cancer is the cause of the deaths in both Me and Earl and the Dying Girl and The Fault in Our Stars, the death of Alaska Young in Looking for Alaska is a result of drunk driving. As mentioned during the presentation of this novel in chapter one, Alaska dies in a car crash after consuming a high amount of alcohol. At first everyone believes that the car crash was an accident, but after investigating the events that occurred the night Alaska died, her friends start to question whether it was an accident or if Alaska went on a suicide mission. Alaska had on a previous occasion confessed that her mother had died right in front of her, and that it had never occurred to her to dial 911. This is likely one of the main reasons why Alaska is so impulsive and at times makes rash decisions, because she is afraid of being as inactive as she was that day. The day her mother died was the one day in her life where she wished she could have changed her actions. They find flowers in Alaska’s car and everyone assumes that she bought them to give to her boyfriend because she felt guilty having kissed Pudge. However, they later learn that the day they were drinking was also the anniversary of her mother’s death. The flowers were more likely meant for her mother’s grave than for her boyfriend. Her friends therefore start wondering whether the accident really was an accident, or if Alaska felt guilty for having forgotten the day her mother died, and found the guilt too heavy to bear.

2.1 Cancer Narratives and Experiences of Living with a Terminal Illness

“"I mustn’t let it kill me before it kills me” (Green Stars 121, emphasis added).

When poet John Keats, infected with tuberculosis, coughed and found that he had also coughed up blood, he exclaimed: “I know the colour of that blood! It is arterial blood. I cannot be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die” (Porter
What tuberculosis does with your body on a biological level is far from pretty, but it was nevertheless one of the most aestheticized diseases throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Many of the symptoms a person suffering from tuberculosis could show was weight loss, paleness, rosy cheeks and lips, which also were characteristics typically linked to feminine beauty. In other words, tuberculosis became not only a disease but also a tool, especially for women, to be perceived as beautiful. This is a big contrast to for instance AIDS, which, as Susan Sontag argues, “is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity. (I am thinking, of course, of the United States, where people are currently being told that heterosexual transmission is extremely rare, and unlikely – as if Africa did not exist.)” (111).

The connotations linked to these two diseases are presented as complete opposites, although both diseases are solely destructive. This suggests that illnesses also have a cultural dimension in addition to the pure medical one, and that illnesses can have varying degrees of status and connotations in different cultures at different times. This, I will argue, is something that *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Me and Earl and The Dying Girl* use to convince their readers of the seriousness of the disease of their characters. Because unlike tuberculosis, which enhanced what was perceived as beautiful exterior qualities, cancer has not been aestheticized. One of the most common consequences of chemotherapy for instance, is hair loss all over the body. For women with breast cancer, breast removal is common practice. Both hair and breasts are linked to femininity, and the lack of these feminine signifiers therefore equals a lack of femininity. The destruction inside the body is visible on the body, making it evident that you are sick as opposed to belonging to the elite, as tuberculosis once was thought to mean.

As the examples of tuberculosis and AIDS demonstrate, diseases can carry meaning through cultural associations and metaphors. Sontag highlights the difficulties many people have of discussing especially cancer in the public room, and argues that “today, in the popular imagination, cancer equals death” (Sontag 7). Because cancer popularly possesses an immediate association to death, it does not only become a diagnosis, but it also becomes an identity. Barbara Ehrenreich tells of her own experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer and how the doctors found “a cancer” in her body, and Ehrenreich “did not enter into it even as a location, a geographical reference point” (18). Ehrenreich found herself to be replaced by the cancer, and that she now not only had cancer, but she was cancer. This could be why some people choose to be secretive regarding their illness, concealing it from for instance potential love interests or people at the work place. This secretive approach does however imply that cancer is something to be ashamed of. Because of the associations linked
to cancer as a medical condition, it does give additional meaning to a fictional character in literature. By solely stating that a character has cancer, one has immediately created certain expectations in the reader. The use of cancer in *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Me and Earl and The Dying Girl* therefore adds an extra level of hopelessness to the situation of the sick characters. These novels make use of one of the few common diseases that frequently claims lives, with what is supposed to be the healthiest demographic. The novels have an aura of despair, in the sense that neither Hazel, Augustus nor Rachel smoke or drink or do anything that is scientifically proven to evoke cancer, and yet they all fall victim to it. I would argue that had they been diagnosed with any other disease than cancer, then the sense of doom would not have been equally present from the very beginning of the stories.

Today, almost all the diseases that ravaged during earlier centuries are highly preventable, and have fewer global outbreaks. There are vaccines which are proven to be highly effective to prevent for instance tuberculosis, smallpox and measles. It could be argued that the main reason these diseases are yet to be eradicated is because some people cannot afford the vaccines, while other choose not to vaccine themselves due to personal views, and not due to lack of medical knowledge. There is as of today no cure to reverse an HIV infection if you first have been exposed to it, but there are pills that can prevent the virus from developing into AIDS. With all these serious diseases practically defeated from the Western world, cancer has become one of the few common illnesses that still take lives. Admittedly, there have been some successful breakthroughs regarding cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and the HPV-vaccine, but there is still no treatment that is guaranteed to work. Unlike the abovementioned diseases, cancer is not contagious, which makes the overarching goal to understand how and why cancer cells occur. In his book *The Emperor of all Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (2010), Siddharta Mukherjee writes about the “history” of cancer, and how cancer research has developed during the last 70 years. Mukherjee acknowledges that scientists have made progress in terms of mapping mutant cancer cells, but also point out that “there are mountains beyond mountains. Once the mutations have been identified, the mutant cells will need to be assigned functions in cellular physiology” (454-5). The lack of successful treatments does create an aura of despair and hopelessness, as every cancer patient needs to acknowledge that the future is uncertain.

Mukherjee writes that cancer is “an ancient disease”, a “‘whispered about’ illness – that has metamorphosed into a lethal shape-shifting entity imbued with such penetrating metaphorical, medical, scientific, and political potency that cancer is often described as the
defining plague of our generation” (xiii). Cancer is not a disease that strikes exclusively amongst people belonging to particular age groups, geographical locations or any particular sex or gender. Because of the high number of cancer victims, the world is now currently fighting a “war on cancer”. The term “war on cancer” in itself is by definition somewhat of a contradiction. A war typically consists of at least two opposites that fight against each other, but this is not the case with cancer. Cancer at its most fundamental is simply abnormal cell growth, and the cells are all produced by yourself. In The Fault in Our Stars Augustus exposes this irony of cancer, as the only thing you truly fight when you are battling cancer, is yourself. When Augustus admits that his PET scan lit up like a Christmas tree, Hazel responds by ordering him to go to war. Augustus replies by asking: “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” (Green Stars 216). The thing Augustus is fighting is really himself. There is nothing he can do or anywhere he can go that will change that. As Sontag (16) writes: “no change of surroundings is thought to help the cancer patient. The fight is all inside one’s own body” (Sontag 16). The terminology Augustus uses to describe his illness does however emphasize the seriousness of cancer, and reinforces cancer as being a “war”. In the chapter “An Impatient War”, Mukherjee describes the process of how the National Cancer Act was agreed upon, and signed by President Nixon in 1971 (188). This guaranteed the sum of 1.5 billion US dollars over the next three years for cancer research, and sent a clear signal that this was a war the president was determined to fight with all tools at his disposal. This term did however stick, and is still being used today. Bryan Oronsky et al writes in “The War on Cancer: A Military Perspective” (2014) that

War brings with it a set of assumptions and these assumptions have dominated the discourse and infused the landscape of cancer treatment for over 40 years. The pharmaceutical industry talks in combative terms of weapons, targets, arsenals, armamentariums, therapeutic bull’s-eyes, silver bullets, and magic bullets; patients are ‘warriors’ encouraged to ‘win the fight/crusade against cancer’ and ‘conquer the disease’ and oncologists, described as ‘cancer warriors or fighters,’ attempt to achieve a maximal and rapid cell killing (387).

The similar vocabulary used to describe war and cancer reinforces the notion of cancer as being an extremely serious disease, and Sontag believes that “As long as so much militaristic hyperbole attaches to the description and treatment of cancer, it is a particularly unapt metaphor for the peaceloving” (Sontag 86). The language used to describe war is violent and speaks to destruction and despair, making it fundamentally difficult to use it to describe anything which is not exclusively negative. This combination of words used in warfare that
are also being used to describe cancer, does not only describe cancer as being a disease, but it also makes it a powerful metaphor.

Cancer is not randomly chosen as the central disease in these novels. By choosing cancer, the authors have already created assumptions about their characters because of the cultural prejudices and expectations towards the disease. There is yet no universal cure for cancer that is guaranteed to work, which establishes an uncertain element concerning the future of these characters. The lack of effective medical treatments makes the word “cancer” seem that much scarier, because it implies an uncertain, and often a shorter, future. The use of cancer in young adult literature specifically creates an aura of morbid irony. Life expectancy has never been higher, and dying of old age instead of a disease is common. It therefore comes across as that much more unfair that these young people who initially have their entire lives in front of them fall ill. As of now, it is not unusual to live until you are 80 years or more, but these teenagers are not even sure that they will experience the day that they legally can drink a glass of wine. It is understandable that it feels unfair that some people have the chance to meet their great grandchildren, while others are not expected to survive their teenage years. One of the teachers at Culver Creek high school said that “It is a law that parents should not have to bury their children” (Green Alaska 189). Parents “should” not be forced to do so, but reality is that some parents do. Instead of trying to shield young adults from the inevitable, Jesse Andrews and John Green show how cruel life can be, but also that the world does not stop for anyone. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* and *The Fault in Our Stars* portray the difficulties of watching someone you know slowly die of a terminal illness, and how losing someone close to you also makes you aware of your own mortality. These novels do however also portray that Hazel Grace and Greg are able to go on with their lives after the loss of Augustus and Rachel, as they both realize that death is a natural part of life.

*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* demonstrates the difficulties of grasping death and understanding the consequences of it, but it also exposes how cancer is viewed as a cultural phenomenon, and the prejudices that cancer can create. Greg Gaines has never lost anyone in his entire life. He is therefore unable to realize the seriousness when he comes home to find his mother crying, telling him that his childhood friend Rachel has been diagnosed with leukemia:

CLOSE-UP of Greg’s confused and kind of blank face; obviously he’s upset, but actually the really upsetting thing is that he’s not as sad as his mom – not even close – and he feels guilty and sort of resentful about this. Does Mom even know Rachel that well!? No. Why is Mom FREAKING OUT SO MUCH about this? Although, at the same time, why isn’t Greg freaking out more? Is Greg a bad person for not needing to cry about this? Greg has a premonition that
Greg is unable to comprehend his mother’s reaction, because he knows she never knew Rachel personally. He does not understand why she seems so affected by Rachel’s illness, but he does not understand his own reaction either. It is apparent by Greg’s comment that he is worried this will become an “annoying, time-consuming thing”, that he is not as worried about Rachel’s health as he is of his own spare time. Instead of thinking about how this diagnosis will affect Rachel, Greg worries that it will affect him. It might seem selfish, but it can also indicate that Greg does not exactly know what having leukemia really entails. His mother obviously understands the seriousness of the situation, and is probably projecting some of the feelings Rachel’s mother is experiencing; the fear of losing a child. This makes Greg’s response that much more of a contrast. Greg does initially seem to not let himself get upset by the news, but not because he thinks Rachel has a good chance of survival, but because he simply does not care. His lack of response in form of sadness, anger or even surprise, either shows a complete disinterest in Rachel, a lack of sympathetic abilities, or a lack of understanding the seriousness of cancer.

Greg’s mother and Rachel’s mother have arranged for Greg to come visit Rachel, even though the two of them have not had contact for years. Greg is not particularly upset by the fact that someone he has known for years has been diagnosed with a serious disease, but his mother forces him into talking to Rachel. His mother believes that Greg can be a positive influence on a very sick girl’s life, and possibly help lift her spirits. She is however failing to realize that Greg and Rachel have next to no contact, and the communication between Greg and Rachel comes across as tense. After two poor attempts at striking a conversation over the phone with Rachel, Greg receives an invitation from Rachel herself to come visit her. Since the two are mere acquaintances at this moment, Greg begins to think what they might talk about on his way over to Rachel’s and realizes that the topic of death might come up. Greg has not seen Rachel since before her diagnosis and does not know what shape she is in, nor does he understand what acute myelogenous leukemia is, but he is already convinced that Rachel will die. His assumption about Rachel’s cancer reinforces Sontag’s previous argument that cancer automatically equals death, at least where Greg is concerned. The thought of Rachel dying makes Greg uncomfortable, because he does not really want to discuss life and death with a person he believes is dying:
And, of course, she had cancer. What if she wanted to talk about death? That would be a disaster, right? Because I had somewhat extreme beliefs about death: There’s no afterlife, and nothing happens after you die, and it’s just the end of your consciousness forever. Was I going to have to lie about that? That would definitely be too depressing, right? Was I going to have to make up some afterlife for reassurance purposes? (Andrews 68).

Again, Greg demonstrates his lacking abilities to understand what Rachel is going through. It does not even occur to him that Rachel might just want someone in her life who can comfort her or who can pretend that everything is normal. He worries that he needs to lie because he is convinced that Rachel is going to die. He appears to assume that everyone believes that Rachel is going to die, including Rachel. He therefore also assumes that all Rachel could possibly want to talk about is death, and that it is his job to provide her with comforting consolidation. He shows no signs of actually worrying about Rachel and what will happen to her, but he is extremely worried about needing to lie to reassure her.

The novel portrays Greg’s growing concern as he gradually becomes more affected by Rachel’s disease. He could not have cared less when immediately learning that Rachel was sick, but he eventually grows unable to stay impassive any longer. When hearing Rachel say that she thinks she is going to die, Greg becomes really angry:

> Girls are insane, and dying girls are even more insane. Actually, that sounds fucked up. I take that back. ‘So I was right about what?’ ‘I think you were right when you said I was dying.’ I hate complaining about this, but at the same time, this made me feel like shit. I was so pissed off that she said this. I tried to swallow it. ‘I never said you were dying.’ ‘You thought I was dying, though.’ ‘No I didn’t.’ She was silent and it was infuriating. ‘I didn’t,’ I said, too loudly. I mean, this was a lie, and we both knew it. Finally, Rachel said, ‘Well, if you had thought it, you would have been right.’ We were silent for a really long time after that. Actually, I wanted to yell at her. Maybe I should have. JESUS CHRIST I HATE WRITING ABOUT THIS (Andrews 198, emphasis in original).

Even though Greg seems to direct his anger toward Rachel in this particular passage, it is a legitimate question to ask whether he is truly mad at her, or if he is mad about the general fact that she is dying. He becomes angrier throughout the passage as Rachel confirms what he has thought all along, and he says that he is “pissed off that she said this”, and not that he is pissed off with her. Greg has always believed that Rachel was dying, but hearing Rachel admit it herself is the first time he appears to get agitated by the thought. One obvious reason for this could be that he has been spending a lot of time with Rachel lately, and he now considers her a friend. Another reason is that he is starting to realize how awful it actually would be if Rachel died, because then she would be gone forever. Death has only ever been a word for Greg, something abstract, and he has never needed to truly contemplate what this means. Never has he lost anyone he has known before and has therefore never needed to deal with
their absence, but now he needs to face the fact that he will. The roles that Rachel and Greg had in the beginning have changed considerably. It started off with Rachel not believing that she would die, and Greg being convinced that she would. Now, Rachel seems to have accepted her fate, and even though Greg is still convinced that she will die, he is no longer content with it. It bothers him, and he is starting to get angry at the thought of Rachel dying. His passionate, and capitalized, comment emphasizes this anger.

The fact that *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* is narrated by Greg and not by Rachel makes a difference concerning the experience the reader is left with. The story revolves around Rachel and her cancer, but Greg is standing on the outside watching as the disease is gradually killing her. He is a spectator, and he cannot truly realize what she is going through, as he is experiencing it all by proxy. Nor does Greg have any experience with people who are battling cancer and what they are going through, and the first time he does so it is with a girl who is as old as he is. Ideally, they should be going to school together and do typical teenager activities, and we see how difficult it is for Greg to comprehend how different Rachel’s life is from his “normal” one. It becomes evident the first time he goes over to Rachel’s house after she has been diagnosed, that he has no idea as to how to behave around a girl who has gotten her world turned upside down. Greg does however have a very steep learning curve. We follow him from first initially seeing his mother’s response, to personally observing the consequences of cancer and cancer treatment, until he finds himself needing to accept that someone he used to know has died, and then needing to find reassurance that his own life will have mattered. If Rachel had been the narrator of this story, then the novel would presumably have ended with her death. We would have been able to witness her physical decline in a more intense way than that of Greg’s superfluous descriptions of how she looks, as it would have presented the reader with more in-depth descriptions of how it is to live with a terminal disease. However, if Rachel had narrated this story as opposed to Greg, we would not have experienced the impact her death had on the people around her, and see that they are able to continue their lives while holding on to their memories of her.

The concept of death is new to Greg, but for Hazel Grace in *The Fault in Our Stars*, it has been an ever-present thought for the last three years. For Hazel, her cancer has become such a big part of her life that it is difficult to separate Hazel from the cancer itself. The miraculously effective medicine Phalanxifor (which unfortunately is fictional), has made the tumor colony on her lungs shrink, but they will not go away. Hazel’s life does not permit her to ever forget that she is terminal, because it dominates so much of her everyday life. Hazel
has an external oxygen tank with her everywhere she goes, as she depends on being supplied with two liters of oxygen every minute since her lungs sucks “at being lungs” (Green Stars 8). Hazel later admits that this “was the worst part about having cancer, sometimes: The physical evidence of disease separates you from other people. We were irreconcilably other” (Green Stars 144). Hazel does not live the life of a normal teenager, because she is constantly reminded by her own body that she is not physically capable of being “normal”. The cancer overwhelmingly dominates her life, as when she goes to bed early because she “was really tired from” her “busy day of Having Cancer” (Green Stars 125). Hazel demonstrates how a person who has cancer also can become cancer, as she is living her life in limbo awaiting her unavoidable death. However, Hazel also shows how it is possible to break out of this depressing pattern, and how it is possible to have cancer and still behave like a normal teenager.

As a means of coping with her diagnosis, and consequently; her depression, her parents encourage her, or more correctly, they force her to attend a cancer support group. Hazel finds it ironic, however, as “The Support Group, of course, was depressing as hell” (Green Stars 6). Her mother wants Hazel to have as normal a life as possible, but for Hazel it is just yet another reminder that she is different. Hazel’s sarcastic recount of what a meeting with the support group with its “inspiring” leader Patrick looks like makes dying seem more attractive then attending one of these meetings:

The six or seven of us walked/wheeled in, grazed at a decrepit selection of cookies and lemonade, sat down in the Circle of Trust, and listened to Patrick recount for the thousandth time his depressingly miserable life story – how he had cancer in his balls and they thought he was going to die but he didn’t die and now here he is, a full-grown adult in a church basement in the 137th nicest city in America, divorced, addicted to video games, mostly friendless, eking out a meager living by exploiting his cancertastic past, slowly working his way toward a master’s degree that will not improve his career prospects, waiting, as we all do, for the sword of Damocles to give him the relief that he escaped lo those many years ago when cancer took both of his nuts but spared what only the most generous soul would call his life. AND YOU TOO MIGHT BE SO LUCKY (Green Stars 4-5).

The support group is supposed to help Hazel cope with her life and encourage her to stay positive, but it seems to have the exact opposite effect. Patrick is a survivor and he appreciates his second chance at life, but Hazel does not seem to find his life particularly attractive. In her eyes, Patrick is not living nor does he really have a life; he is only alive. Hazel might exaggerate her view on Patrick’s life by using words like “cancertastic”, and the very ironic “and you too might be so lucky”, but she clearly demonstrates that this is not a life that she wants. She refers to death as a “relief”, making her depression fairly evident. However, it
needs to be pointed out that Hazel is terminal, meaning that she knows she will never be able
to lead a life that is generally regarded to be normal. She will never be able to live a life where
she is not dependent of extra oxygen, so in reality, the only thing she is doing by using
Phalanxifor is postponing the inevitable. For Hazel, death might genuinely seem like a relief,
because it means that she no longer has to go to the hospital in the middle of the night with “a
supernovae exploding” inside her head (Green Stars 105), nor does she need to keep getting
her lungs drained from fluid. If she were dead, she would not need to comfort herself during
one of her seizures that “this will pass”, because she will “once and for all” be going (ibid.).
She would not be reminded every minute of the day how sick she is by her extra oxygen tank
and people staring at her and at it, nor would she need to worry about leaving her parents
behind anymore: “They might be glad to have me around, but I was the alpha and the omega
of my parents’ suffering” (Green Stars 116). Hazel does not complain about her life or
specifically about being sick, but one can assume that she would probably prefer a life where
she had been healthy over the one she has been given. However, when the alternatives she has
are either being dead or staying ill, it is understandable that life does not always seem as the
most attractive choice.

When Hazel meets Augustus for the first time, she is the sicker of the two. Augustus,
whom has been in remission for over a year, only joins the support group to support their
mutual friend Isaac. Augustus tells Hazel about what his life was like before he had to
amputate his leg, and fascinates Hazel with his stories. He tells about how he once started
thinking about hurdlers, and how they really do it more difficult for themselves than it needs
to be: “I started thinking about them running their hurdle races, and jumping over these totally
arbitrary objects that had been set in their path. And I wondered if hurdlers ever thought, you
know, This would go faster if we just got rid of the hurdles” (Green Stars 31, emphasis in
original). This mentality is something that Augustus demonstrates on several occasions
throughout the story, and is a very big contrast to that of Hazel’s. He wants to live as normal a
life as he possibly can, and he does not see the point in making life more difficult than it
needs to be. For instance, he is immediately intrigued by Hazel, and he invites her over the
very first time they meet. He is a very active character who takes chances, because he knows
how precious life can be. Hazel, on the other hand, is more reluctant to dive into something
unknown, even though she is the one who, in theory, has the shortest amount of time left.
Hazel’s reluctance to engage in anything apart from “having cancer” is emphasized when we
meet Augustus, who has a completely opposite take on life. Admittedly, there are many things
she cannot do due to the cancer, but at the same she restricts herself a lot; her only hobbies are reading and watching television. She seems to have settled with the fact that she is going to die, and she therefore sees no point in even trying to live a more eventful life. Her life is over before it is physically over.

When Augustus asks Hazel what her story is, she answers with her medical story, which disappoints Augustus: “Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who becomes their disease. I know so many people like that. It’s disheartening. Like, cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people-over business. But surely you haven’t let it succeed prematurely” (Green Stars 32). Again, we see that cancer is a dominant part of Hazel’s identity. Augustus has better knowledge than most what cancer can do to a person, but he points out that Hazel needs to live while she has the chance. Everyone will die at some point, not only those suffering from cancer, but that is no reason to not live while still being alive. Augustus hopes that Hazel has not let the sickness take over her life “prematurely”, meaning he knows that the disease at one point will be so domineering that she will have no choice but to lead the life it forces her to, but that time is not yet. Hazel starts considering whether she has become a person whose only accomplishment is to live with cancer, and to have yet avoided dying. Although she is dependent of her oxygen tank, it does not restrict her from doing all other activities apart from reading and watching television. As the relationship between Hazel and Augustus develops, the novel portrays Hazel as gradually managing to live more and take active choices in her life. It appears that it is easier for her to engage in activities if she has someone to share them with, as she now does with Augustus.

It is easy to forget that Augustus has ever been sick because unlike many of the other participants at the support group, he is more worried about living and having a life than he is about death. But even though Augustus is a survivor, he is still reminded every day that he has been sick, due to the fact that he only has one leg. Despite this disability, he tries hard to have a normal life. This is a big contrast to the way Hazel chooses to live her life the first time we meet her; she has cancer, and that is the main aspect of her life. It is only after she sees Augustus managing to live a more fulfilling life despite his disability, that she dares to dream of doing more with her remaining life than just watching Americas Next Top Model. It is arguable that Augustus might have more to live for because he appears to have a longer future ahead of him, but as we later learn, that is not the case. Death can strike when you least expect it, which is an ugly truth, but a truth nonetheless. Augustus is painfully aware of this, and every day he chooses to continue living. He frequently puts a cigarette between his lips but
never lights it, as his own personal metaphor: he puts what can ultimately kill him between his lips, but he never lights it, so it never gets the power to actually kill him. This way, he emphasizes the fact that he is alive by mocking death and proves that he is in control over his own fate. This can be interpreted as Augustus’ own way of taking control of his life because it is his choice, and he actively decides to not die. We later learn, however, that this is depressingly ironic, as Augustus in no way is in control of his own fate. Despite Augustus’ attempts and daily choice to continue living, he relapses, and the novel makes its readers painfully aware of the fact that neither Augustus nor we as readers, are completely in charge of our own lives.

Since Hazel is the narrator in The Fault in Our Stars, we see the impact Augustus’ rapid decline and death has on her, but the novel also presents a dying person seriously contemplating the impact her own death will have on the people around her. Greg might have found reassurance concerning his own death when learning something new about Rachel in her funeral, but his death is theoretically a more distant prospect than Hazel’s. She is constantly reminded of her own ill health, and her imminent death. What especially concerns Hazel is that she is an only child, and that her parents’ life will have no meaning when she dies. After Augustus’ death Hazel confronts them about this, and she says: “I worry that you guys won’t have a life, that you’ll sit around here all day with no me to look after and stare at the walls and want to off yourselves” (Green Stars 297). Hazel realizes that the world will go on even after her death, and she is concerned about how the people around her will handle that. She is not too worried about her own death, but she is more worried about what her parents’ reaction to it will be. These are factors that the “typical” teenager does not have to consider. But instead of being mad at the status quo, Hazel uses her time to ensure that the people closest to her will be able to deal with her dying. Hazel’s mom surprises her by explaining that she has been studying in secret, in order to eventually help other families in crisis. Hazel’s parents did not want to tell her because they worried she would “feel abandoned”, or that she would start believing that they are “imagining a world without” Hazel (ibid.). Hazel, however, finds solace in knowing that her mother’s life will have meaning after her death: “If I’m dead, I want you to know I will be sighing at you from heaven every time you ask someone to share their feelings” (Green Stars 298). Especially after falling in love with Augustus, Hazel realizes that trying to “spare” people from getting to know her is no way to live a life: “only now that I loved a grenade did I understand the foolishness of trying to save others from my own impending fragmentation” (Green Stars 214). Although Hazel
knows that mending her heart after Augustus` death will be difficult, she figures that it was better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all – just as Hazel`s parents feel about her.

In alignment with the way in which Hazel learns something new about her own existence, so does Greg understand that death is a permanent thing. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* portrays Greg as being unknowing or maybe even cold toward Rachel and the battle that she will be facing, but it also shows Greg being able to more fully comprehend what is actually happening to her. Judith Butler writes in *Precarious Life* (2006) that “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever” (21). As Rachel`s death slowly is approaching, Greg has an epiphany about what death really is, and shows how he has learnt something that will change him forever:

There was just something about her dying that I had understood but not really understood, if you know what I mean. I mean, you can know someone is dying on an intellectual level, but emotionally it hasn`t really hit you, and then when it does, that`s when you feel like shit. So like an idiot, I hadn`t understood until I was sitting there actually watching her physically die, when it was too late to say or do anything. I couldn`t believe it had taken me so long to understand it even a little bit. This was a human being, dying (Andrews 276-7, emphasis in original).

Greg would probably have understood his mother`s initial reaction had it happened now. He starts to fathom what it entails that Rachel is dying, and that nothing can change that. After realizing that Rachel is actually dying and will be gone forever, Greg seems to go through an existential crisis. He realizes that she will be physically absent for the rest of his life, and he will never be able to make her laugh again, he will never be able to show her any of his movies, and he will never be able to know what her last thought was. He is saddened not only by his own imminent personal loss, but also by the fact that the world will never fully be able to comprehend everything Rachel was and everything Rachel has ever said and done:

So I was sitting there and the whole time I had this insane wish for Rachel to wake up and just tell me everything she had ever thought, so that it could be recorded somewhere, so that it wouldn`t be lost. I found myself thinking, what if she`s already had her last thought, what if her brain isn`t producing conscious thoughts anymore, and that was so awful that I started completely bawling, I was making hideous sobbing noises like an elephant seal or something, like: HURNK HURNGK HRUNNNN (Andrews 277-8).

Greg seems to have matured throughout the story, because he is starting to allow himself to feel how awful it will be to lose Rachel forever. It is starting to dawn on him that her death will be permanent, and that he will never be able to ask her later if there is anything he starts
wondering about. She will never come back to life, as it were, and Greg finds the thought sobering.

Because of Greg’s unfamiliarity with the concept death, there was no way in knowing how he would react to the news that Rachel had died. The entire novel centers around her condition, and even the title itself alludes to Rachel’s unavoidable death. However, the way we learn that she has actually died is fairly anti-climactic by Greg informing Earl: “I dunno if you heard, but Rachel died” (Andrews 285). One could possibly expect a more ceremonial deliverance of these news, but the novel is also making a point about how non-special Rachel’s death is. Her death will never make any headlines, because the sad truth is that people die. Greg may obviously be sad about it, but it is just not that special. In the midst of his sorrow, however, Greg seems to be able to find reassurance that death does not mean a person has never existed. Greg had a breakdown when it dawned on him that Rachel truly would be lost forever, and that she at one point simply stopped existing. He does however seem to reevaluate this belief after Rachel’s funeral, as is has reassured him that even though she is gone, the memory of her is not:

I guess I want to write one more thing about Rachel. Rachel died about ten hours after Mom and I left the hospital. She had a weird Jewish funeral service at our synagogue and no one, thank God, asked me to say anything, and they didn’t show the film that we made. Rachel was cremated, and her ashes were sprinkled in Frick Park, where apparently she loved to go as a kid. She ran away there once when she was seven – not because she was trying to get away from home, but apparently just because she wanted to live in the woods and be a squirrel. It was weird to be learning something new about her even after she had died. Somehow it was also reassuring, though. I don’t know why (Andrews 295).

Andrews demonstrates how a person can never truly be gone, and there still is solace to be found after the passing of a loved one. Greg’s reassurance might solely be that he realizes that even though Rachel is dead, he will always have the memories of her and that way a part of her will always be alive. It could however also be a reassurance that when he one day dies, he will not be lost forever either. As long as people he once knew are still alive, then there will always be proof that he once actually lived. Hazel has a similar experience when encountering her favorite author, Peter Van Houten, in Augustus’ funeral. Van Houten tells Hazel that her “boy Waters” and he “corresponded a bit” (Green Stars 276). Hazel makes contact with Van Houten’s personal assistant, and quickly learns that Augustus had sent him a letter. In this letter Augustus asks Hazel’s favorite author if he “could write a eulogy for Hazel” (Green Stars 310). Even after his death, Augustus displays his love and affection for Hazel. He still manages to surprise her, reminding her that he once was real.
Susan Sontag argues that “Cancer is generally thought an inappropriate disease for a romantic character, in contrast to tuberculosis, perhaps because unromantic depression has supplanted the romantic notion of melancholy” (51). Despite this notion that cancer makes it difficult to embrace a romantic relationship, *The Fault in Our Stars* tries it best to prove Sontag wrong in these assumptions. In my reading of this novel, cancer and the evidence of cancer is not an obstacle when trying to engage in sexual activities, but rather a means to achieve it. Sex and cancer are not opposites where one exclude the other, and the novel seems to argue that to believe otherwise is to remove the inherent characteristics that make a person human.

When you remove a limb from a person`s body, you also remove a part of or alter their identity. Augustus had up until his surgery always had two feet intact, but after the surgery, he suddenly found himself to only have one. His life might not necessarily change that much, considering how far science have gotten in terms of creating artificial limbs. Nevertheless, his identity changes, because he is no longer in possession of the two limbs he has had since the day he was born. For Augustus, the lack of having two intact limbs has also affected his sexual identity. Hazel is surprised to learn that Augustus is a virgin, but Augustus does not think she should be surprised at all. He asks Hazel Grace to get a pen and some paper, and then to follow these instructions: “’Okay, please draw a circle.’ I did. ‘Now draw a smaller circle within that circle.’ I did. ‘The larger circle is virgins. The smaller circle is seventeen-year-old guys with one leg.’” (Green *Stars* 119). His lack of a leg does not just remind him daily of his near-death experience, but he also lets it define who he is as a sexual being. He thinks that it is natural for him to be a virgin when he lacks one leg, probably because he believes that it is unappealing for people who do not understand what he has gone through. The prosthetic is not “natural”, as in that it is not an innate body part. It is a visual sign that he is fundamentally different from the majority of people. Ultimately, his cancer has so far prevented him from getting to know who he is on a sexual level. Admittedly, having both feet intact is no guarantee to be more sexual either, but it is still regarded as being more “normal”. Despite believing that his prosthetic is a hindrance for him to rid himself of his virginity, it is actually an aid for Augustus when meeting Hazel. The reason Augustus only has one leg is because of his previous encounter with cancer, and it is this encounter that leads Augustus to attend the Support Group meetings in the first place. The element that binds Hazel and Augustus together is their cancer, and the fact that they understand what the other person is going through. Hazel knows what it means to be perceived as “different”, so Augustus’ lack
of leg does not scare her off. She accepts that his previous disease is a part of his identity, but also acknowledges that there is more to him than his illness. Their illnesses have been what has driven them away from their “healthy” friends, as they are, as Hazel puts it; “irreconcilably other” (Green Stars 144). But being “other” is what they immediately recognize that they have in common, and so it becomes the foundation on which they later build their relationship on.

Susan Sontag argues that “Cancer is considered to be de-sexualizing” (13). The physical evidence of the “otherness” cancer creates can appear scary for people who stand on the outside. In The Fault in Our Stars however, the main characters show a high level of understanding and do not let assumptions control their opinions. Augustus nevertheless decides to prepare Hazel for what she is about to see before they sleep together, because he realizes that the physical evidence of his disease is less visible than Hazel’s. It is easy to see that Hazel is sick since she is dependent of the oxygen tank, but Augustus can put pants over his legs and no one necessarily needs to notice that he only has one leg. When it becomes clear that they are going to sleep together, he therefore chooses to prepare her for what she is about to see. Without preamble, Augustus says to Hazel that “It’s above my knee and it just tapers a little and then it’s just skin. There’s a nasty scar, but it just looks like-“ (Green Stars 206). Instead of freaking out or backing out because of Augustus’ admission, Hazel chooses to kiss him. She is not scared of the physical evidence of cancer on Augustus’ body, but instead she seems curious about it. After undressing and situating themselves under the covers, Hazel lays her hand on Augustus, and let her “hand trail downward to the stump” (Green Stars 207). She caresses his foot so intently that Augustus even starts wondering if she has “an amputee fetish” (ibid.). The novel is opposing the notion that cancer needs to be desexualizing. Instead it is in this context described as something that makes the two people unique - but not in a negative way.

The relationship between Greg and Rachel might not be a sexual or even a romantic one, but it nevertheless becomes a very meaningful one for the both of them. Greg’s mother is aware that Rachel and Greg have been estranged for a very long time, but she is of the opinion that it is Greg’s responsibility to make contact with Rachel again, now that she is sick. The “new” relationship between them starts off as being forced from both parts, but eventually they both seem to appreciate it. We never hear much about Rachel having a social life after being diagnosed, apart from the occasional visit by her best friend Madison. It could be that her friends do not want to visit her now that she has cancer, but we never learn
whether she used to have an active social life pre-cancer either. Her current social life therefore basically consists of her visits from Greg, and later, Earls. Although these new meetings between them are awkward at first, it eventually seems that both Rachel and Greg start to appreciate them. Greg has always been somewhat of a loner who has always blended in everywhere instead of trying to fit in within a particular group of friends. Because of this, his best and arguably only friend is Earl. Therefore, when he starts hanging out with Rachel, it becomes a more personal relationship than what he has with most of the people he otherwise knows. Had Rachel never become sick, then Greg would not have treated her differently than he treats everyone else and they would never have rekindled their relationship. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* portrays cancer as something that therefore connects two people, instead of being a dividing force. Greg seems to want to convince the reader that he hangs out with Rachel purely out of selfish reasons; he says making her laugh makes him feel good about himself, but it is a legitimate question if Greg´s reasons really are as selfish as he claims them to be: “cheering Rachel up was one of the things I had gotten really good at, and when you´re good at something, you want to do it all the time, because it makes you feel good” (Andrews 180). Joking around with Rachel might make Greg feel better about himself, but it does not seem to hurt that Rachel appreciates his company. Greg can visit Rachel and it could benefit the both of them, meaning that Greg´s actions are more selfless than he cares to admit.

Cancer is what initially binds Hazel and Augustus together as well, but it is also what drives them apart. Despite the fact that they did not know each other for a very long period of time, they got to know each other rather well. For instance, Augustus gets to be a part of Hazel´s big dream which is meeting the author behind her favorite novel. He is also with her when they travel to Amsterdam, which is the first time Augustus ever travels by plane (Green *Stars* 147). In addition to this, they also lose their virginities to one another, creating a unique bond between them. They have both gotten a friend they might not even have known that they needed. Just when they think that they have a permanent support system in each other, cancer becomes a disrupting factor. It brings the relationship between the two of them to a halt, because Augustus gradually gets sicker and becomes incapable of conducting even the lightest physical activity. Eventually the cancer bereaves Hazel Grace of her closest friend, and we will never know what the two of them together could have become. The same can be said for Greg and Rachel. They were only allowed a short period of time to be friends again, so we will never learn what could have become of their friendship. Rachel changed quite a lot for Greg, for instance the fact that the movies he produced with Earl used to be a secret from
everyone else. Now everyone at school, including some parents, knows that not only is Greg Gaines capable of having friends, but also that he has a hobby. He is unable to maintain the anonymous role he has worked so hard to achieve. It is difficult to say whether things would have changes drastically for Greg if Rachel had survived her cancer. Considering how they used to be friends but then drifted apart, there is a very good chance that it would have happened again now, had Rachel survived. It is however worth pointing out that in both these two novels, cancer is portrayed as being deadly, but it is also the triggering factor that turns the lives of these teenagers around for the better. Neither *The Fault in Our Stars* nor *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* are pretending that cancer is not a serious disease that claims lives, but they also display how it might be seen in less pessimistic terms, such as how it serves as a means to make new friends and experiences that you will hold on to for the rest of your life.

Cancer is portrayed as being a disease that hurts not only the cancer victim, because naturally, it has a serious impact on the people closest to you as well. Hazel is an only child, and acknowledges that her illness affects the whole family: “There is only one thing in this world that is shittier than biting it from cancer when you’re sixteen, and that’s having a kid who bites it from cancer” (Green *Stars* 8). Although Hazel does not die during *The Fault in Our Stars*, there is still a lot of focus on what will happen to the family dynamic the day that she does die. Hazel knows that her parents love her, but she also understands that it is difficult to have a daughter with such a serious disease, and that the uncertainty concerning her health can be a heavy burden to bear. Hazel’s mother has been a stay-at-home mom ever since her parents took her out of school, and Hazel knows that her mother’s life is very much about keeping Hazel alive: “Her primary reason for living and my primary reason for living were awfully entangled” (Green *Stars* 143). Even though Hazel knows that it is difficult for her family to live with a daughter who is seriously ill, she knows that they find the alternative to be much worse. During one of her earlier emergency visits, Hazel overheard what her mother told her father when everyone thought Hazel was dying: “Mom sobbed something into Dad’s chest that I wish I hadn’t heard, and that I hope she never finds out that I did hear. She said, “I won’t be a mom anymore.” It gutted me pretty badly” (Green *Stars* 116-7). Hazel cannot change the fact that she is sick, but she can try her best to fight and keep on living, making sure her parents stay parents for as long as they can. She can also try her best to ensure that her parents are as prepared as they possibly can be, for the day that she is longer with them.

The major difference in the way *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* portray cancer, is through its use of point of view. Hazel, our narrator in *The Fault
in Our Stars has first-hand knowledge with cancer, and knows that it is possible to survive it. She also realizes what it means when Augustus tells her that his PET scan lit up everywhere. She is familiar with much of the cancer terminology, and she understands that his days are numbered. She does however spend a lot of time with other people who have or has had cancer in her support group, and so she knows that some people are lucky enough to beat it. Augustus has on his part always been able to treat Hazel as a person, and not as a “thing” that has cancer, as Ehrenreich described her own experience. Augustus probably remembers how it was like when he himself suffered from it, and how it affected how people behaved around him. His personal experience of it has affected the way he interacts with people now suffering from it. The fact that the narrators are not the ones that are dying leaves us as readers to experience their grief after the death of their loved ones. If Hazel had been the one who died, then we never would have seen how Augustus had reacted to her death. The end of her life would also have been the end of the novel. Instead, Hazel is left confronting her own death and the impact it undoubtedly will have on her loved ones. Greg on the other hand, is left to contemplate the prospect of losing other people he cares about, in addition to coming to the realization that he too, sometime in the future, will die. If Greg had died then we would never have experienced the epiphany he has about life, or the reassurance that he finds in learning something new about Rachel even after her death, which consoles him in regard to his own mortality.

2.2 Aftermath of a Violent Death

“But a lot of times, people die how they live” (Green Alaska 156)

While the people around Augustus and Rachel knew that they were dying, the same cannot be said of those closest to Alaska Young in Looking for Alaska. Those closest to Rachel and Augustus have to witness their loved ones in pain, but Alaska’s death might arguably be more violent to those around her, and more surprising for us as readers. Alaska dies in a car crash, leaving her friends not only grieving, but filled with unanswered questions. Mere hours before she dies, Alaska spends quite an ordinary night with her friends, where they are drinking and having fun. There is nothing that could have prepared neither her nor her friends to what is about to happen. It is therefore with shock and disbelief that Pudge and the rest of the student body receives the news of Alaska’s death from the schools’ chaperon “The Eagle”: 
The Eagle walked up to the podium and said, ‘Is everyone here?’ ‘No,’ I said to him. ‘Alaska isn’t here.’ The Eagle looked down. ‘Is everyone else here?’ ‘Alaska isn’t here!’ ‘OK, Miles. Thank you.’ ‘We can’t start without Alaska.’ The Eagle looked at me. He was crying, noiselessly. Tears just rolled from his eyes to his chin and then fell on to his corduroy pants. He stared at me, but it was not the Look of Doom. His eyes blinking the tears down his face, the Eagle looked, for all the world, sorry. ‘Please, sir.’ I said. ‘Can we please wait for Alaska?’ I felt all of them staring at us, trying to understand what I now knew, but didn’t quite believe. The Eagle looked down and bit his lower lip. ‘Last night, Alaska Young was in a terrible accident.’ His tears came faster, then. ‘And she was killed. Alaska has passed away.’ (Green Alaska 166-7).

The Eagle’s physical reaction emphasizes the violent way in which Alaska has died. He has throughout the story not been a man prone to showing his emotions, which is why his crying makes such a big impression on Pudge and us as readers. We are used to hearing that Pudge receives “the Look of Doom” from the Eagle, but now he just seems “sorry”. Pudge’s genuine surprise of watching the Eagle cry emphasizes the seriousness of the situation, and makes the readers understand that something serious is going on. Pudge has no way of initially knowing what has happened, but realizes it due to the Eagle’s crying. Alaska’s sudden death was violent but also surprising, because no one considered it to ever happen.

Despite the characters’ surprise of Alaska’s death, we as readers are not surprised to the same extent when we learn of it. Alaska’s death might not be completely predictable, but it was to a certain degree foreseeable. Throughout the short period Pudge knew Alaska, she kept making comments about death. At one point, when being confronted why she smokes so fast, Alaska answers “Ya’ll smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die” (Green Alaska 57). Alaska might be trying to act cool towards her friends by saying this, but it also shows that she is aware of the risks that follow when actively smoking. On a different occasion, Alaska acknowledges that there are risks linked to her frequent smoking, but she believes that there are worse things than dying from smoking too much: “‘I may die young,’ she said, ‘but at least I’ll die smart’” (Green Alaska 66). It is however not only Alaska’s explicit statements about death that gives this novel a sense of doom, as the novel seems to know something that none of the characters does. All the subheadings have names that point toward the day that Alaska dies, such as “One Hundred and Thirty-six Days Before” and “The Day After”. We experience the novel through Pudge’s point of view, but there appears to be an omniscient author that knows something that neither Pudge nor the readers do. The subheadings seem to point out that Alaska’s death was inevitable, as it was decided from the very first page that Alaska was going to die. It might also indicate that Alaska actually was suicidal, and that she and the novel knew something that we did not: that she always had planned to commit suicide. However, if her death was an accident, then all of Alaska’s allusions to death and the
subheadings are accidental, and the design of the chapters do not make sense. The novel seems to point out that it knows that Alaska is going to die, but in reality, no one can know such a thing in advance. We as reader will never know whether this makes sense or not, because we do not know the novel’s, or John’s Green’s, intentions.

Regardless of whether Alaska’s death was premeditated or not, it was violent in several ways. The crash itself must have made a terrible ratchet as the cars must have been driving at high speed and become totally wrecked in order to have managed to actually kill Alaska. One of Pudge’s friends try to comfort him with the fact that at least Alaska’s death was “instant”, but Pudge does not seem to find that reassuring at all:

The pain of those seconds must have been awful as her heart burst and her lungs collapsed and there was no air and no blood to her brain and only raw panic. What the hell is instant? Nothing is instant. Instant rice takes five minutes, instant pudding an hour. I doubt that an instant of blinding pain feels particularly instantaneous (Green Alaska 175, emphasis in original).

His friend is obviously trying to comfort him, but Pudge finds little comfort in his words. He knows what happened to Alaska’s body, biologically speaking, between the crash itself and until Alaska’s heart stopped beating. Whether she suffered for a second or a minute does not seem to matter all too much for Pudge, because however long Alaska suffered for, it was in his opinion still too long. Pudge is trying to empathize with Alaska in the moment that she died, but because he was not there to experience it with her, it proves impossible to imagine. Pudge “doubts” that her death felt instantaneous, which implies that he cannot know for sure what Alaska really felt in those last few moments of her life. There is a sense of bitterness in Pudge’s words, but they do not seem to be aimed specifically at his friend who tries to comfort him. His bitterness instead seems to be directed at the crash itself, and the fact that Alaska had to experience this “blinding pain” at all. One can only imagine what Alaska truly went through in that last moment, and whether she was in pain for what she felt was a longer period of time.

The novel points out how difficult it might be to acknowledge that a person is no longer with you, when they disappear without preamble. During Alaska’s funeral, Pudge continues to treat her like she is still alive: “‘Oh God Alaska I love you. I love you,’ and the Colonel whispered, ‘I’m so sorry, Pudge. I know you did,’ and I said, ‘No. Not past tense.’ She wasn’t even a person any more, just flesh rotting, but I loved her present tense” (Green Alaska 182). Because Alaska’s death was so sudden, her friends have not yet been able to get used to the idea that they will no longer see her. Pudge claiming that he loves Alaska “present
tense” can be interpreted as being romantic, but it can also signal that he is still in denial, and that he has not yet fully realized that he will never see her again.

As readers, we experience the unfairness of Pudge and the Colonel blaming themselves for what happened to Alaska. Despite not knowing whether her death was an accident or not, it is easy to become frustrated with Alaska after her accident, because we see how her death affects her friends, especially the Colonel and Pudge, in an extremely negative way. They are obviously sad that Alaska is dead, but in addition to this, they are also filled with guilt. They were the last two people to see her alive, and because of this, they feel that they are partly to blame for her death. The possibility that Alaska’s death might not be accidental but actually a deliberate suicide, changes Pudge and the Colonel’s perception of Alaska after her death. They were the ones who created the diversions that allowed Alaska to sneak out from campus to drive while intoxicated, which consequently led to her death, and because of this, they start contemplating whether they unknowingly participated in facilitating her suicide. The Colonel wants them to investigate this matter further, because it changes how he believes they should feel about her death: “if she knew what she was doing, Pudge, she made us accomplices. And I hate her for that. I mean, God, look at us” (Green Alaska 192).

Pudge and the Colonel are in the middle of grieving the loss of their loved one, which alone has taken its toll on them. But if it turns out that Alaska died on purpose, it could change two things dramatically for them. One the one hand, they could start hating Alaska for what she did to them, and thereby change how they will remember her. On the other hand, they could also start feeling even guiltier and believe that they were to blame to a larger extent than they already do. We as readers know that if Alaska really wanted to kill herself then she would have found a way to do it, and though we do not agree that Pudge and the Colonel should feel guilty, we understand that they do. Pudge believes that they are, at least partly, to blame because they “should have stopped her”, and the Colonel does agree, but he also points out that “we shouldn’t have had to” (Green Alaska 174). They are both bargaining, because they feel that her death was so unnecessary and they could have helped avoid it. It is a natural reaction to blame oneself when events like this occur, but that does not change the fact that it is completely useless. There is no point in reevaluating the choices they did on the evening that Alaska died because it will not bring her back. It is obviously easier for us as readers to understand this since we know that Alaska’s death was meant to happen, and because we do not in any way blame Pudge for that. We know that he cared deeply for Alaska and only
wanted the best for her, which is why we want him to free himself of the guilt that he has imposed on himself.

When cleaning out Alaska’s room, Pudge and the Colonel stumble across one of her books, where they discover a passage that makes them question the circumstances regarding the way in which Alaska died. They find a passage that Alaska has underlined, which ends with the question “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?” to which Alaska herself has scribbled “Straight & Fast” (Green Alaska 186, emphasis in original). This description seems conspicuously rooted in the way Alaska did die. Pudge and the Colonel have been told that Alaska “was so drunk she didn’t even swerve”, but the Colonel starts wondering whether it had been possible for her to actually be that drunk, because after all, “she ran into a cop car that had its lights on” (Green Alaska 187). Pudge’s initial reaction to the possibility that Alaska might have killed herself is anger: “I could see her staring down the cop car and aiming for it and not giving a shit about anyone else, not thinking of her promise to me, not thinking of her father or anyone, and that bitch, that bitch, she killed herself. But no. No. That was not her” (ibid.). Pudge has on several occasions been transparent regarding his romantic emotions towards Alaska, which might make it difficult for him to come to terms that Alaska would want to leave this world willingly. He takes her death very personally, and believes that by killing herself she is breaking the promise she made to him. It might seem selfish of Pudge to take Alaska’s death as personally as he does, but Pudge did care for Alaska in more ways than one. Pudge is not only grieving a friend, because he is also trying to mend his broken heart. If Alaska committed suicide she not only chose to leave this world; she also chose to not be romantically involved with Pudge. It is thus natural that Pudge because of this has a greater interest than most to figure out the circumstances around Alaska’s death.

Pudge and the Colonel launch an investigation to figure out with certainty whether Alaska’s death was purely accidental, or if she had showed signs of being suicidal prior to her death. The impetus behind Pudge and the Colonel’s investigation is not merely to figure out the details around Alaska’s death, so they can establish whether it was a suicide or not. If they learn that her death was purely accidental, then can, in theory, let go of their guilt and only grieve her death. They start by browsing the internet, where they search for warning signs of suicidal behavior. They both seem to agree that Alaska “displayed two of those warning signs”, even though she actually displayed several (Green Alaska 198). One of the signs of being suicidal is to joke about death, but the Colonel refuse to admit that she actually did that. Pudge brings up what Alaska had said on earlier occasion about her “smoking to die”, but the
Colonel writes that off by claiming that “That was a joke” (Green *Alaska* 199). The “joking” part is however exactly why the article lists as one of the warning signs. It appears that the Colonel wants them to investigate whether or not she was suicidal, only so they can learn that she was not. If this was an accident, he will be assured that there was nothing they could have done to avoid this from happening, and they can stop tormenting themselves with those thoughts. Pudge on the other hand, seems to want to find evidence to confirm his theory that Alaska did commit suicide, and that they, at least partly, were to blame for it.

Seven days after Alaska’s death, the Colonel gets angry with Pudge for refusing to come and get something to eat, to which Pudge thinks that: “He’s still very angry, I found myself thinking with a bit of pity. No reason to be angry. Anger just distracts from the all-encompassing sadness, the frank knowledge that you killed her and robbed her of a future and a life. Getting pissed wouldn’t fix it. Damn it” (Green *Alaska* 183, emphasis in original). Pudge wallows in self-pity, and does not even see it as an opportunity that he is blameless in Alaska’s death. At one point he “could think of nothing but having killed her” (ibid.). The novel shows how different people can have very different reactions to unexpectedly losing someone who were close to you. Pudge makes it seem as if he killed her personally, as if having held a gun to her head. The Colonel also took her death hard, but he realizes that there is nothing they can do to change it, and wasting away in self-contempt is not the way to deal with this.

*Looking for Alaska* portrays how the sudden loss of a friend can awake your own mortality. It seems that this bereavement has led the Colonel into a sort of existential crisis: “’I feel like I might die.’ ‘You might,’ I said. ‘Yeah. Yeah. I might. You never know. It’s just. It’s like. POOF. And you’re gone’” (Green *Alaska* 175, emphasis in original). They never expected Alaska to die, and so the Colonel realizes that what happened to her might actually happen to him as well. This is similar to the experience that Greg has in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, as he too, acknowledges his mortality through the death of Rachel.

Alaska’s death might have been quick and painless for her, but I would argue that it is the most violent death that has been presented in this chapter. As readers, we are allowed some time to prepare for the deaths of Rachel and Augustus, but we are not granted the same privilege before Alaska’s death. We are thankful that especially Hazel is allowed to bid Augustus a proper goodbye during his pre-funeral. This way, when Augustus later dies, she can be certain that she had nothing unsaid to him. He knew what she felt about him. Pudge is not granted this privilege, because he never imagined that Alaska would die so suddenly.
Consequently, he never got a chance to tell her what he truly felt, and to his own disappointment, he never learned what her last words were. He was bereaved of this opportunity, because her death was so sudden and unexpected.

For Pudge, losing Alaska is about the worst thing that could have happened to him. He became mesmerized by her way of life almost from the very moment he met her. But knowing that she had already had a boyfriend, he could not pursue any romantic wishes he might have had. On her last day, Alaska, Pudge and the rest of their group drink, and Alaska challenges Pudge to a truth or dare, which eventually leads to Alaska “daring” Pudge to “Hook up with” her – which he does (Green Alaska 158). Pudge has been dreaming about that moment for as long as he has known Alaska, and the same night as it finally happens, she dies. Pudge is, if possible, even more convinced of the feelings that he has for Alaska due to this night, and her death does not change that. On his way to her funeral, Pudge thinks about how unfair it was that Alaska died when she did, as he might finally have been in a position to engage in a relationship with her as something other than friends: “I felt the unfairness of it, the inarguable injustice of loving someone who might have loved you back but can`t due to deadness” (Green Alaska 181). Despite knowing fully well at this point that Alaska is dead, Pudge uses the present tense. This leaves us with a bitter aftertaste in our mouths, because we will never learn whether there could have become anything more between Pudge and Alaska, or if them making out was just simply a result of too much alcohol.

The reason we experience this through the eyes of Pudge as opposes to Alaska, is because we as readers are allowed to see how Alaska`s death affects those closest to her. Regardless of whether the novel intended to make its readers think about the impacts of suicide or not, it does have that effect. The novel does not explicitly state that Alaska`s death was a suicide, but there is not any proof that is was not, either. Not only do Pudge grieve the loss of his friend, but he is also tormented by all the questions he is left with. The novel does also show that driving under the influence has serious consequences, as Alaska was not even able to “swerve” (Green Alaska 187). Alaska`s death was, arguably, easily avoidable, and the novel seems to prove this by tormenting its readers with Pudge`s misplaced guilt.
2.3 Death, Gender and Narrative Expectations

“Congratulations! You’re a woman. Now die” (Green Stars 24).

Edgar Allan Poe once wrote: “The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (165). He was not alone in his sentiments, as history shows a pattern of aestheticizing the death of the female. This trend was located not only in literature, but also in other art forms, as Elisabeth Bronfen argues in Over her Dead Body (1992) that “The pictorial representation of dead women became so prevalent in eighteenth and nineteenth century European culture that by the middle of the latter century this topos was already dangerously hovering on the periphery of cliché” (3). Thomas Hood writes in his poem “The Bridge of Sighs” from 1844 where a young woman has committed suicide by drowning; “Death has left on her / Only the beautiful” (ll. 25-26). Death has washed away all her sins, and one can now only admire her young, beautiful, but dead body.

Roughly divided, death has been presented in two dominant ways: the beautiful, feminine death and the heroic, masculine death. The heroic masculine death was for instance the death of young Siward in Shakespeare’s Macbeth (1606), who was killed during battle. He was not stabbed in the back, which at that time indicated cowardice, and young Siward’s death was therefore nothing but heroic. The feminine death on the other hand is the poetic one, typically suffered by women, where their deaths are aestheticized; especially because of the assumption that a young woman leaves a beautiful corpse. I will argue that the novels this thesis deals with makes use of this stereotypical presentation of gender roles in relation to death, even though these are all written in the twenty-first century. I believe that there is a clear link between cancer and feminine qualities, even though cancer lacks the aesthetizing qualities that “feminine” diseases such as tuberculosis have. I will however also argue that The Fault in Our Stars reverses this paradigm, as it makes use of the reader’s expectations that a young woman will die, in order to create a bigger surprise amongst the readers.

Sandra Lee Bartky points out in “The Feminine Body” (1993) that “We are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement” (454). Her argument than one is born male or female can be debated further, considering how it is an ongoing debate whether or not to introduce a third sex. However, we see how there is no natural reason for the woman to be feminine and the male to be masculine; this standardization is a result of cultural influences and gender discourse, as gender is not an inarguable fact, but rather a culturally created phenomenon:
Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts (Butler Gender 10, emphasis in original).

Julie Nelson explains how the “traditional, dominant conception of gender” is based on dualism, where masculinity and femininity are construed “largely as opposites, with masculinity claiming the high status of the line” (139-40). Nelson mentions certain behaviors and attributes that are typically associated with one or the other, for instance that “hard” and “reason” are linked to masculinity, while “soft” and “emotions” are linked to femininity (140). Other typically feminine qualities are passivity, weakness, victimization and domestication. Brownmiller is in agreement with Nelson, and argues that

The masculine principle is better understood as a driving ethos of superiority designed to inspire straightforward, confident success, while the feminine principle is composed by vulnerability, the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict – in short, an appeal of dependence and good will that gives the masculine principle its romantic validity and its admiring applause (4).

Since there is an assumed link between male/masculinity and female/femininity, there are also characteristics imposed onto the two sexes in terms of behavioral attitude. Barbara Ehrenreich wonders if “it may be that, in some versions of the prevailing gender ideology, femininity is by its nature incompatible with full adulthood – a state of arrested development” (24). Brownmiller does on her part argue that “Femininity, in essence, is a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations” (2). I agree with Brownmiller’s point about the centrality of limitations in the definition of femininity, and would argue that inactivity can be seen as equally central. I will argue that there is hardly a more efficient way of imposing such limitations as Brownmiller mentions and therefore capture people in a state of arrested development, than to provide them with a physical disability or making them die so they are removed from the story altogether; consequently imposing feminine qualities on the characters in question.

Sontag argues that cancer is not poetic at all, unlike tuberculosis, and that “Nobody conceives of cancer the way TB was thought of – as a decorative, often lyrical death. Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease” (Sontag 20). I will concur that cancer is difficult to aestheticize, which to a large extent is due to the consequences of cancer treatment. Hazel does on one occasion point out
that: “I carried my disease with me on the outside” (Green *Stars* 146). Her ill health is visible for whomever who looks at her, and she is unable to hide it in any way. For her, the oxygen tank is a signifier of her cancer, but many other cancer patients experience hair loss all over the body, as is a typical side effect of chemotherapy. For many, especially women, hair is closely linked to their femininity. Susan Brownmiller points out that since “time immemorial, hair has been used to make a visual statement, for the body’s most versatile raw material can be cut, plucked, shaved, curled, straightened, braided, greased, bleached, tinted, dyed and decorated with precious ornaments and totemic fancies” (36). If a woman loses all her hair, it could therefore be argued that she loses part of her femininity with it. The hair’s primary function is merely a decorative one, as it has no real practical function. It does however signal whether one is healthy or not, as hair loss, at least in Western culture, is heavily associated with ill health.

In addition to hair loss, cancer might also result in amputation of body parts. This is exactly why Augustus, who had osteosarcoma, only has one real leg, and one prosthetic. It is normal procedure amongst patients with bone cancer to remove parts of or entire limbs to avoid proliferation of cancer cells. Considering how Augustus has nothing left of his foot beneath the knee, it is safe to assume that his case was rather serious. Either his tumor was so large that the best option was to remove the entire limb, or the tumor was located in a way that made it difficult to remove it without destroying surrounding tissue. Sontag claims that “it is thought that nearly any damage to the body is justified if it saves the patient’s life. Often, of course, it doesn’t work” (67). Removing a limb is a fairly serious procedure, and emphasizes the seriousness of the disease, in addition to the lack of alternative treatments. Augustus’ surgery strengthens Sontag’s argument, as his amputation did affect his remaining life, but it did not present him with considerable longer future prospects. In many ways the amputation actually reduces his quality of life. For instance, he used to play basketball while he still was a person of “dual-leggedness” (Green *Stars* 31).

That cancer is one way to ensure “arrested development”, and which makes female characters unable to fully live their lives, coincides well with Rachel in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* and Hazel in *The Fault in Our Stars*, who are both physically restricted due to their illnesses and to a large extent characterized by nothing other than their illnesses. Hazel emphasizes the irony of the fact that she was thirteen when she got her period shortly before being diagnosed. Just as Hazel is about to enter the ranks of womanhood, there is a new obstacle blocking her path. Hazel managing to get her period right before her diagnosis might
also symbolize that she is now a woman and not a girl, and she is therefore impure. Hazel tells Augustus about her medical story: “I told Augustus the broad outline of my miracle: diagnosed with Stage IV thyroid cancer when I was thirteen. (I didn’t tell him that the diagnosis came three months after my first period. Like: Congratulations! You’re a woman. Now die.) It was, we were told, incurable” (Green Stars 24). In her chapter “‘I Am Unclean…’”, Hays discusses how menstruation is taboo in many parts of the world, and “that the male attitude towards female sexual functions is basically apprehensive; women in short, are dangerous” (44). Although “Blood in all of its manifestations is a source of mana”, meaning power or prestige, there is an “ancient ambivalence” in the case of menstrual blood (Hays 40). Instead of being perceived as powerful, many women around the world are instead secluded while menstruating. One can therefore argue that Hazel was given cancer in order to stay in her own “arrested development”, as Ehrenreich calls it. Just as Hazel’s body becomes equipped to for instance carry children, which is something only women can do, she is diagnosed with cancer. She is trapped in a state of limbo, and she is not allowed by her cancer to become fully independent.

Unlike the death of Rachel and the imminent death of Hazel, Alaska’s death is a quick affair. While the people around here were deprived of their chance of saying a proper goodbye, Alaska at least did not have to suffer for a longer period of time. Sontag argues that “The policy of equivocating about the nature of their disease with cancer patients reflects the conviction that dying people are best spared the news that they are dying, and that the good death is the sudden one, best of all if it happens while we’re unconscious or asleep” (Sontag 8). Considering how Alaska might have fallen asleep behind the wheel or been “so drunk that she didn’t even swerve” (Green Alaska 187), her death could be categorized as what Sontag here refers to as “the good death”. Alaska was never forced to entertain the possibility that her death was fast approaching, as there was never any indication that it was going to happen. While we in The Fault in Our Stars experience Augustus’ corporeal decay as when he pukes on himself (Green Stars 244), we experience next to little of what happens to the bodies of neither Rachel in Me and Earl and the Dying Girl nor Alaska in Looking for Alaska. When Pudge arrives at Alaska’s funeral, he finds that the “coffin was closed” (Green Alaska 181), and he will not be able to see her one last time. We never learn whether Alaska’s body bore visible evidence of her accident, or if her body visually was unaffected by it. It is therefore possible to assume that she simply appeared to be sleeping, consequently leaving behind a young, “beautiful” corpse.
Despite initially entertaining its readers’ belief that it is the girl who is going to die, *The Fault in Our Stars* ends up mocking these expectations. In the beginning it adheres to traditional patterns, as we follow the life of a dying girl. We learn on the very first page that the narrator, a girl, has cancer, and shortly after we also learn that she is terminal. We follow her when she meets a boy, a cancer survivor, and when she ends up in ICU because of lack of oxygen supply. The whole story does at first seem to be that the novel will be building up towards Hazel’s death. Surprisingly, Green writes that Augustus has had a relapse and that his health is rapidly declining, consequently exposing the readers’ stereotypical expectations of a predictable storyline. It is certainly a twist, and Hazel suddenly finds herself, “for the first time in years” to be “the healthiest person in the room” (*Stars* 227). Hazel now possesses the role of care taker, as opposed to the role she has had so far through the story, which has been to be a sick person who must be handled with care. Green is in his own way making a feminist claim by sparing Hazel’s life, because he exposes the gender norms the story so far has fulfilled. By abruptly changing the story by killing off the male character and keeping the female one alive, Green disrupts the tradition of killing of the female characters.

Although *The Fault in Our Stars* spares the girl’s life and instead sacrifices the male lead, there is still a question of whether the novel truly challenges gender norms by killing off Augustus Waters. Augustus is male, and according to traditional gender norms, he should therefore represent himself in a masculine manner. This is the case in the beginning, as he is active and takes control over his own life. During his very first conversation with Hazel, Augustus lets her know that he thinks she is beautiful (Green *Stars* 16). He subsequently invites her to his place, wasting no time at all. He has already decided that he wants to get to know her better, and so he does everything in his power to make that happen. His habit of enjoying a cigarette without actually lighting it is another example of his agency. But Augustus gradually becomes weaker, more passive and therefore incapable of being active. He becomes dependent of others, clearly leaning more towards the feminine than the masculine. As he becomes more passive he also becomes more feminine, and consequently, he too becomes trapped in a state of arrested development. At one point he even loses control over his own body to the extent that he wets himself (Green *Stars* 239). The loss of bodily functions also entails that he is dependent of a wheel chair towards the end, which implies that he is dependent of another person simply in order to be able to move from one place to another. Augustus’ decline eventually culminates into the strictest form of restriction: death. At this point, Augustus does not display any characteristics typically linked with masculinity.
and manhood. His death has not been a heroic, masculine death; it has been time-consuming, painful and difficult, and gradually bereaved him of all humane qualities.

The novel portrays Augustus’ journey as an abolishment of masculine qualities. Because Augustus was such an active character in the beginning, this transformation appears that much bigger. The novel never seems to claim that femininity is in itself inherently negative, but that the deviation of masculine qualities is. Augustus become weak and frail, and gradually loses all control over his own life. He is no longer an active character, something that he himself is painfully aware of. In a last attempt of gaining control over his life, Augustus drives off in the middle of the night to buy cigarettes. He wants to put one between his lips again, to feel that he has at least a little control left over his fate. Unfortunately, during this excursion, he becomes unwell. Augustus calls Hazel, requesting her help. When Hazel arrives she finds him “covered in his own vomit”, and she “gagged from the smell” and saw that the “skin of his abdomen was warm and bright red” (Green Stars 244). Hazel suspects that something is infected, and while she inspects the state Augustus is in, he pukes, “without even the energy to turn his mouth away from his lap” (ibid.). Augustus has lost all control over his own body, and is at the mercy of his cancer.

2.4 Reader`s Experience of Death

“And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved” (Butler Precarious 20).

Jenny Downham`s 2007 novel Before I Die is narrated by Tessa who is dying of leukemia, and the story ends with her death. Considering how the story ends with Tessa dying, one never learns what impact her death had on the people around her, and how they cope with life without Tessa. This is a big contrast to the three novels this chapter deals with, as The Fault in Our Stars, Looking for Alaska and Me and Earl and the Dying Girl are all narrated by characters external to the deaths themselves. Because the stories belong to the survivors, the reader is faced to acknowledge the grief one is left with after the passing of a loved one. What both The Fault in Our Stars and Me and Earl and the Dying Girl do, is to show the readers that you can make a serious impact on people`s lives, despite having a serious illness. Being sick does not mean that you have to isolate yourself from the world, as the world might actually benefit from your experience. Rachel unknowingly teaches Greg about the circle of life, and how life sometimes in unfair, and yes – at one point he will die too. Augustus convinces Hazel that she is worth loving, knowing that it is not going to last forever. He
shows her that it is possible to have a life that consists of having a boyfriend and traveling, even though she is sick. All of this sends a message to us as readers, that we too will be able to cope with death when it comes our way.

The three novels display how the deaths of Alaska, Greg and Augustus force the other characters to acknowledge that they will not live forever either. Pudge in *Looking for Alaska* might not suffer from a terminal illness, but he becomes aware of his own - and consequently, everyone else’s mortality: there “comes a time when we realise that our parents cannot save themselves or save us, that everyone who wades through time eventually gets dragged out to sea by the undertow – that, in short, we are all going” (Green *Alaska* 146-7). However, Hazel in *The Fault in Our Stars* has throughout the novel been painfully aware that she is dying, and has because of this tried her best to shield people from getting to know her, in order to spare them the grief they eventually will experience when she dies. She does not in any way try to conceal her illness, or the reality she is living: “I’m not eating dinner, and I can’t stay healthy, because I’m not healthy. I am dying, Mom. I am going to die and leave you here alone and you won’t have me to hover around and you won’t be a mother anymore, and I’m sorry, but I can’t do anything about it, okay?!?” (Green *Stars* 296). Hazel is painfully aware that she is dying, and is struggling to understand why people would want to get to know someone who is seriously ill. However, we see how rewarding it has been for Augustus to get to know Hazel, and that she should not be hiding just because she is sick. It is difficult to not admire Hazel because we know that she is seriously ill herself, but she devotes all her free energy to ensure Augustus that she is there for him. From the small things like not being able to open the door, to eventually wetting himself, Hazel is there by his side and ensures him that it really is “no big deal” (Green *Stars* 240). Hazel knows what Augustus’ decline will eventually lead to, but there is never a question of ever leaving him because of it, and that she would not have changed a second of her time with Augustus. Despite the amount of grief she is forced to endure after Augustus` death, she recognizes that it was worth it. The novel emphasizes that a person who is dying is also worth loving, which makes Hazel realize that she cannot deny people to love her either.

*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* demonstrates different possible reactions to expected loss, and shows what a shock that first meeting with death can be. Greg is at first unaware of the true consequences Rachel`s death will involve, and he does not dwell on what that actually means. However, as the visual evidence of Rachel`s illness grows stronger, he is forced out of his comfortable, ignorant attitude, and needs to acknowledge that not only is
Rachel dying, but she is actually going to be gone forever. Greg Gaines is unprepared for the emotional consequences linked to the loss of someone he knows and possibly care about, but at the same time it shows how death is closely linked with personal growth. Greg’s realization might be a painful one that will alter his view on life forever, but it would have been impossible for him to live an entire life without experiencing such a personal loss. As Phillips points out, death ”is the catastrophic knowledge, the truly forbidden thing, that everyone has to be protected from because no one can be” (xx). Greg’s unexpected realization to what death really means is one that probably many of the novel’s readers can relate to. His experiences in this process can therefore reassure such readers that it is possible to cope in difficult situations, such as the risk of losing a friend. Also in Looking for Alaska does one find reassurance that your spirit can live on after death. Pudge and his entire class decide to honor Alaska by conducting a prank. Their teacher is flustered after the event, but even he admits that it was as if Alaska had written the script (Green Alaska 249). Although Alaska is no longer with them, she is with them in spirit. The prank that is conducted in her honor becomes a tribute to her and her legacy.

There might be possible to find reassurance and comfort about one’s own and others mortality in these texts, but there is no escaping that they are also fairly brutal. All three novels represent death as something realistic, as the reasons they die are statistically not unlikely to happen. Car accidents, as the one in Looking for Alaska, are a huge problem worldwide, but especially in the United States. According to the Association for Safe International Road Travels, 37,000 people or more die in road crashes every year – in the US alone (ASIRT). Alaska’s death is therefore not only tragic, but unfortunately also very common. In 2014, 9967 people lost their lives due to alcohol-impaired driving, which accounts for a staggering 31% of all traffic fatalities that year (National Center for Statistics and Analysis). Alaska’s accident occurred after a night of heavy drinking, so the tragic outcome of the upcoming accident is really not that far-fetched a scenario. In addition to Looking for Alaska, there is another book amongst the ten books on the best-sellers list that deals with driving while under the influence. In The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian Junior experiences his grandmother being killed by a drunk driver. On both occasions these deaths are described as tragic, to a large extent because they were both easily avoidable. If the people who had been drinking simply avoided driving under the influence, then the people around them would not have to be grieving the deaths of their loved ones. The mourners did not have any time to prepare themselves for the imminent losses either, as the
deaths were not only tragic, but also surprising. This leaves them not only with grief, but also with questions. It is fair to say that these novels show how unnecessary such deaths are, and how difficult it can be for family and friends of the deceased to accept that their loved ones are gone. Although these books are fiction, they still criticize a serious contemporary problem. Drunk driving is not described as being cool in any way, and so these books implicitly discourage drinking and driving.

Alaska’s death might be shocking, but it is not as surprising when the characters who have cancer die, as their battle against death have been happening over a longer period of time. Having someone around you that is battling cancer is an all too familiar scenario for a lot of people, seeing as it is estimated that as many as “39.6 percent of men and women will be diagnosed with cancer at some point during their lifetimes” (National Cancer Institute n.d.). Despite being a disease that can be traced back several thousand years, the most effective cure that currently exists is to shoot up the cancerous body with poison, hoping that this will kill off the cancer cells in addition to the healthy ones. It is, as the title of Mukherjee’s book’s insists, the emperor of all maladies, at least in the 21st century. If as many as four out of ten will experience being diagnosed with cancer at one point in their lives, then even more people will experience that someone around them falls ill to the disease. These narratives are fictional, but as proven, they are deeply rooted in a realistic issue. The novels leave the readers left to confront the very real possibility that someone they know, or maybe even themselves, will experience to be diagnosed with cancer at one point in their lives.

Augustus points out that death is and always has been a natural part of life: “There are seven billion living people, and about ninety-eight billion dead people” (Green Stars 151). Earl also displays a relaxed approach to death when saying: “People die. Other people do stupid shit” (Andrews 288). Death is not portrayed as this “big scary thing” that everyone dreads. John Green explains in an interview why death is such a frequent theme in his novels: “Well, I mean, adolescence is the first time you grapple with death and suffering as a sovereign being. You know, as a person separating from your parents or caregivers, you have to begin to formulate a world for you that includes suffering, and injustice, and universality of death, and that’s difficult to do. So, I think that’s why I keep coming back to it” (qtd. in Roschke 2015). For the characters in these novels, death is unavoidable, and the truth is, death is unavoidable in real life as well. I believe that the quote by Phillips that ”We are all the same age – very young – in our relationship with death” (xx), is displayed through these texts.
I believe that these novels portray death in a realistic manner, but it needs to be pointed out that they are not therefore real. Because all these novels only have one point of view throughout, and it is not through the eyes of the person who dies, we can never learn the “truth” behind these deaths. I believe that Elisabeth Bronfen makes a valid point when she, in her discussion on paintings of dying women, asks:

Depending of the position from which we view, we are dealing either with a violent decomposition of a female body through cancer or with a violent rhetoric which effaces the real pain through an allegorizing gaze. For do we ask ourselves, are these paintings skillfully done? Or do we ask ourselves, does the woman suffer? Do we see the woman’s pain? Can we really see the pain? (51).

I argue that when reading these novels, we cannot truly see or feel the pain that these characters are going through either – we can only imagine it. However, in all these three novels death is portrayed realistically, in the sense that cancer and car accidents are statistically likely to happen to people one knows. John Green has also done research into the world of cancer before writing The Fault in Our Stars, as he points to The Emperor of All Maladies in his acknowledgments (315). The fact that Green has done scientific research before writing this fictional work, strengthens the argument that these novels aim to portray death in young adult’s life in an authentic manner. It is a realistic concept, whether it is difficult to accept this or not.

The Fault in Our Stars, Looking for Alaska and Me and Earl and the Dying Girl show that when you are forced to deal with death as a realistic possibility, you learn to develop own coping mechanisms. These teenagers are not allowed to be protected from death, as it becomes such a big part of their lives. In The Fault in Our Stars death is not described as necessarily being the worst thing that can happen to a person, as the expectation of losing someone you care about seems worse than dying yourself. In Me and Earl and the Dying Girl we see how it is possible to go through something as traumatic as losing a childhood friend, and still be able to find solace. Alaska in Looking for Alaska might be dead, but that does not mean that her life had gone to waste or that she never made a difference in other people’s lives. Death is not described as being something exclusively negative, but it does not appear alluring either.

These books allow their readers to identify with the characters, and join them in their psychological journey from not understanding death to perhaps understanding it a little better, especially in Looking for Alaska and Me and Earl and the Dying Girl. The Fault in Our Stars is more subversive in the sense that Hazel knows more than for instance her parents, because
she has known so many who have died (people who attended the support group with her). For many of these characters, the prospect of death is in the beginning incomprehensible, but as the story evolves, it becomes more, although never fully, comprehensible. We, as readers, get to follow the characters as they gain experience about death, and we grow alongside them. The novels do reassure us as readers that every life matters, including our own, because we see how one death impacts so many people around the person who dies. As Greg says: “A person’s life is like a big weird ecosystem, and if there’s one thing science teachers enjoy blathering about, it’s that changes in one part of an ecosystem affect the entire thing” (Andrews 199). We might not be immortal, but the novels reassure us that our lives have mattered. These novels all seem to make the final points that death does not stop you from being a person. They do in no way disregard all the emotions that are involved when losing someone that you care about, but they also emphasize that it is common to lose people that you love. As Butler points out: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (Precarious 23). To love and to lose is part of life. Death will stop the physical interaction, as it is no longer possible to interact with the person who has died. It does however not change the fact that the person has actually lived, and that it therefore will always be evidence of that.
Conclusion

"Too many adults wish to protect teenagers when they should be stimulating them to read of life as it is lived. When a story is true to life and well-written, the teenager will do well to arm himself with whatever experience such a book has to give him” (Edwards 54).

In this thesis, I have investigated in what ways sexuality and death is represented in popular young adult contemporary fiction. This thesis has drawn its texts from the New York Times’ best sellers list in order to argue that these are the books that are actually being read by young adults. Because of my personal experience as a teacher, I have chosen to focus what reactions the novels are trying to create within its main targeted audience. I believe that these texts matter not only in a literary context but also in the educational sense, which is why I have focused in both chapters on the message that I argue these novels send to their readers.

We have seen that there appears to be a general nervousness in regards to the inclusion of death and sexuality in young adult fiction, as many of these texts have been challenged by adults who find them to be inappropriate reading material for young adults. This thesis has concluded, however, that neither sex nor death is portrayed in a particularly negative manner in these novels. Quite the contrary, as both sex and death in these novels bring with them a set of realizations, and a better understanding of the world. Because the novels this thesis have based its findings on are all fairly new, there has been limited research previously conducted. For this reason, I have situated my own arguments in relation to wider criticism on teen sexuality, death writing and contemporary young adult literature. This thesis offers insight into two significant fields within contemporary young adult fiction, sexuality and death, fields that as of yet has received very little attention in literary criticism. I also believe that, due to these novels’ newness and popularity, this thesis can be an indication of the direction that young adult literature is headed in.

In chapter one, we saw that teen sexuality is presented as something positive in Eleanor & Park, Paper Towns and Looking for Alaska. For Eleanor and Park, their relationship becomes one of the few positive and stabilizing factors in their lives. Neither of them initially thought that they were particularly sexual, but their relationship changes them in ways they did not imagine. Q in Paper Towns realizes that his sexual and emotional desires for Margo are not necessarily reciprocated. He eventually understands that sexual desire is not static, and he realizes that he can never fully understand a person, or a person’s sexuality. Pudge in Looking for Alaska realizes that the goal for him is a deep emotional bond with
someone he cares about, as opposed to an emotionless, sexual relationship with someone he does not care for romantically. Sexuality is in all three novels depicted as a journey. All the characters learn something about themselves or about others that will be with them for the rest of their lives. Sexuality is not portrayed as this big, scary thing that these young adults need to shy away from, but rather as a positive means that helps them to better understand who they really are.

In chapter two, which dealt with death, we saw how the authors make use of cancer and car accidents, which are statistically not unlikely to happen, and which reinforces the realistic aspect of these stories. These novels show how death impacts the lives of both those who are familiar with it as a concept, but also that death brings with it an element of learning. In *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* we see that Greg gradually starts to realize that death means an end, and that Rachel will be gone forever. Hazel, who herself is dying of cancer, understands in *The Fault in Our Stars* that her illness cannot stop her from living her life. Augustus’ surprising death reminds her that we are all going – not only those who are seriously ill. In *Looking for Alaska*, we experience the trauma that occurs in the aftermath of Alaska’s violent and surprising death. Pudge needs to not only realize that Alaska is gone, but he also needs to accept that there are many questions he will never learn the answer to. In this chapter we saw that Pudge, Hazel and Greg all were forced to acknowledge that death is a natural part of life. As readers, we are allowed to accompany them in their grief, and as they (to different extents) mourn their loved ones. I also emphasized that those who were closest to the people who died all became reassured that it is possible to live on after death through your legacy. There is in all these novels a sense of reassurance, in the sense that death does not erase all memories of your previous existence. Greg demonstrates this reassurance when he finds solace in learning something new about Rachel even after her death. Pudge is not able to stop loving Alaska simply because she died, which proves that she once existed – and still do. Hazel makes a similar experience, when she realizes that she cannot stop loving Augustus just because he is dead. The novels portray grief as being natural, but also that it is able to teach you something.

In general, this thesis has aimed to prove that these novels normalize death and sexuality, and that these themes therefore have a natural place in young adult literature. I have argued that they portray teenagers as being capable of dealing with life-altering events, and as they are normalized in literature, I hope they can be normalized in real life. As Edwards writes: “Few teenage novels will ever be classics, but they speak to young people in a
language they can understand on subjects that interest them” (59). These novels all have an educational dimension which I believe that educators, and adults in general, should value, and which we undoubtedly should use to support young adults in a time where they are searching for and forming their identities.

For further research, I would suggest to pay attention to the newer best-selling novels that succeeds these novels. The list that this thesis has been based on has been dominated by novels that portray sexuality in a positive manner, but this could be an exception. The list I chose to focus on was heavily dominated by John Green, probably because of his novels’ popularity on-screen as well during this period, and the list might be completely different were he not represented to the extent that he currently is. I would however predict that there might even appear more novels on the best sellers list that deal with death, partly due to 13 Reasons Why’s current success thus far after being released on Netflix earlier this year. Novels that feature specific topics and become sale successes do tend to have a domino effect.

For this very reason, I believe that there are grounds to be optimistic about the future of young adult literature. The texts that this thesis has based its findings on suggest that there currently is a trend to discuss sexuality and death openly – and acceptingly.

Alasdair MacIntyre writes in After Virtue (1985): “Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources” (216). Literature does not exist in a vacuum, and is undeniably affected by the time it is written in, and can therefore help its readers understand themselves and their role within a bigger society. I will therefore conclude this thesis by claiming that these novels can be treated not only as literary texts, but also as didactic tools. Due to their realistic presentation, they might be able to answer some questions for young adults that adults might not be able to answer for them.
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