



UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education

**Challenging normality and breaking boundaries of prejudice**

An analysis of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, how the protagonists in the novels challenge normality, and why literature discussing controversial issues is important for young adult readers

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate how the protagonists with disabilities in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* challenge society's normative views of taboos and break the boundaries of prejudice and to underline the importance for young adult readers to read such literature. Additionally, I will seek to answer how teachers can utilize contemporary novels discussing controversial topics in teaching the interdisciplinary topic of "health and life skills." To answer the thesis statement, I formulated three additional research questions: *How are taboo subjects, such as mental and physical disabilities represented in each novel? Secondly, how do the writers challenge normality and normative views on disability, and how do they let their characters vocalize their points of view? Finally, how do these representational techniques make it easier for pupils to relate to the main characters' viewpoints and issues concerning disabilities?*

In the novels, the protagonists' disabilities represent the taboo subjects they seek to challenge the normative views of. Both protagonists succeed in altering the reader's perspective of them for the better by inviting the reader to experience their journey from start to finish and view how they develop throughout the story. This development provides society with a different way of perceiving disabled individuals. By providing such development, the authors of both novels also succeed in enabling their protagonists to challenge normality. As for why young adult readers need to read literature like Green's and Haddon's that discusses controversial themes, it is because the novels can provide the young readers with necessary insight and inspiration which will develop their sense of compassion for people with other prerequisites than themselves.

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# 1 Introduction

I want to start with a quote that emphasizes the importance of young adult readers reading literature that revolves around controversial issues such as disabilities in the case of this thesis. Amber Moore (2017) underlines the importance of students reading literature, as it will influence their ability to critically reflect on essential topics as she writes:

Taking a disability studies approach to [texts] can certainly lead to an enhanced literacy experience for students, as it might influence students to begin to employ critical literacy practices such as combating stigma, oppression, and social inequalities. Part of this work in the literacy classroom is to identify, confront, and critique what is unjust in literature and to look for and reconsider the voices that are silenced or missing. Through critical literacy lenses such as disabilities studies, learners are able to name and rename the world, shift power dynamics, and legitimize new perspectives and experiences using literature as a vehicle (p.81).

In the passage above, she illustrates how students might be influenced by reading literature that challenges normative views in society. Essential topics such as fighting stigma, oppression, and social inequalities (ibid.) are critical for teaching young adults how to regard normality and their views of difference in society. By reading literature that matters, they are evolving and broadening their views and perspectives of the world and are contributing to the fight for a more inclusive and open society for every individual.

How do we create a society that includes every individual, that does not make everyone conform to normality and is not stigmatizing? This thesis will seek to answer this question. Disability is a phenomenon that has been exposed to a tremendous amount of stigmatization and embarrassment throughout history. However, why is this? The term “disability” is linked to the fact that one contains a trait or traits that differ from the “norm” in society. However, one can see a significant increase in acceptance that people have different prerequisites. Over the years, our communities have become more inclusive of individuals with disabilities, much thanks to the field of disability studies. Although society has become more inclusive of disabled individuals over time, a good part of society suggests that individuals with a disability are outcasts and should be treated differently than the ‘norm’ in society. This thesis addresses how the disabled protagonists in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and *The Fault in Our Stars* challenge society’s normative views of taboos and break the

boundaries of prejudice. The thesis addresses these research questions: *How are taboo subjects, such as mental and physical disabilities represented in each novel? Secondly, how do the writers challenge normality and normative views on disability, and how do they let their characters vocalize their points of view? Finally, how do these representational techniques make it easier for pupils to relate to the main characters' viewpoints and issues concerning disabilities?* I will argue that Hazel and Christopher are challenging normality breaking the boundaries of prejudice in their society by providing an alternate way of viewing them as individuals. Furthermore, by reading literature that functions as an encouragement for the disability studies movement, we are ultimately contributing to society altering its views of individuals with disabilities and encouraging inclusiveness.

Further, this thesis emphasizes why young adult readers should read such literature that challenges stereotypes and taboos and forces the reader to alter their perspective of normality. This notion becomes even more critical for young adults in education, emphasized in the new subject curriculum (LK20) and the newly introduced interdisciplinary topics. The new interdisciplinary topics will make the bridge between theory and practice smoother and give the pupils new eyes on different, “controversial” issues. By utilizing literature on disabilities, such as Green’s and Haddon’s novels, the teacher can use the newly instated interdisciplinary topics to teach young adults about controversial and vulnerable issues. Furthermore, the teacher can teach young adults that acceptance of people's ‘normality’ is not always uniform. Finally, reading such novels will teach the young adults about sympathy, empathy, and compassion and can start the movement toward a more accepting society of disabled individuals.

In this thesis, I will analyze two novels that contain main protagonists who possess mental or physical disabilities and thus try to challenge society’s normative view of such. The first novel is John Green’s Young Adult Fiction Novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. The novel is written from the first-person perspective of a young girl, Hazel Grace Lancaster, who has the diagnosis with thyroid cancer. Although all she wants to do is to be an average teenager who does not want her life revolving around her cancer, her family tends to get in her way of doing so. This is until she meets her soulmate in a cancer support group, and her life suddenly makes sense again. Hazel is not the only character in the novel who has a disability. We can see many different disabilities ranging from cancer to blindness to missing a leg. This novel grasps many important controversial issues for young adults to read about. Moreover, this novel adds a physical disability perspective, which is necessary for my analysis of the two



novels. The second novel is Mark Haddon's Young Adult Fiction Novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Alike the previous one, this novel is written from the first-person perspective of a young boy, Christopher Boone, who is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Similar to Green's novel, Haddon discusses many important themes, such as disabilities and normality, which is essential for young adult readers to gain insight into. In addition, the novel will add a mental health disability kind of perspective, which will be helpful in the analysis of the topic. One interesting find is that, in contrast to *The Fault in Our Stars*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* never explicitly mentions that the main protagonist has a disability in the form of Asperger's syndrome. However, the reader can comprehend this through Haddon's way of describing the protagonist's thoughts and actions. The individual with a mental disorder may often be 'read' for symptoms rather than for their personality, which Haddon has tried to avoid by leaving out the diagnosis from the protagonist's character.

I chose to analyze the novels alongside each other instead of individually because they are both novels with solid and expressive main characters who have disabilities. They both are opposed to a normalizing society filled with stigma. However, it is visible that the characters challenge society's views of them. The novels have been addressed many times before by numerous people. However, what will be significant in my research is that I will account for both novels alongside each other instead of individually. By doing this, I will get a more detailed comparison of the two novels. To investigate and answer my thesis statement and research questions, I will be looking into different theoretical perspectives. First, I will provide an account of some fundamental terms used in the thesis, which are disability, mental health disability, and physical disability. Secondly, I will discuss significant models from disability studies, specifically the medical and social models of disability.

## **1.1 Disability**

A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the need to do certain activities and interacts with the world around them (Williams 2020, p.3). This accounts for the visible disability and the disabilities one cannot see. In John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, both protagonists have a kind of disability.

As previously mentioned, the protagonist in Green's novel has a physical disability. A physical disability is a disability that one often can visually see, and Hazel's cancer diagnosis falls under this category. Similar to other forms of disabilities, individuals containing physical disabilities are exposed to stigma in society. Further, society might have more difficult barriers for individuals with physical disabilities to overcome than for those with mental disabilities. Individuals with physical disabilities might also be frequently exposed to pity from individuals and society since they are often related to sickness and medical diagnoses. In contrast to the protagonist in Green's novel, the protagonist in Haddon's novel has a mental health disability. Mental health disabilities are associated with developmental conditions that become apparent during childhood, which is the case of Christopher in Haddon's novel. Mental disabilities are often not recognized as a disability by society, as they are often invisible and cannot be visually seen by others unless they know of them. Furthermore, it has been proven that intellectual impairments are often more stigmatized than the physical ones (Bond 2017). Therefore, society might be particularly judgmental about this kind of disability. There is also a stigma regarding mental disabilities as disabilities, primarily exemplified by Christopher's meeting with the policeman who does not understand how to handle an individual such as him.

The defining of these terms becomes more critical as I start connecting them to the aim of this thesis. In the thesis, I will look at the disabilities of the protagonists in the novels and how the disabled protagonists challenge normality in their respective societies. By investigating the protagonists and their disabilities, we can see that they have a limited range of interaction in their society. This does not necessarily mean that their society is limiting them from participating. Still, they can only do so if they have the necessary or required support: "Disability is a restriction or limitation in the function of an individual's ability to perform everyday activities. This does not mean that a differently-abled person cannot participate equally" (Williams 2020, p. 11). There is a strong emphasis that the individual's support system is quite significant regarding the individual's participation in society:

When someone has a functional disability, social participation is possible only when the environment is supportive. If there is a lack of environmental support, then the distance between what the environment offers and what this person needs in order to participate fully creates obstacles that prevents full participation (Williams 2020, p. 17).

These statements can be closely related to the field of disability studies, as well as the medical model and the social model of disability, which will be accounted for in the next section.

## **1.2 Disability studies, social and medical model of disability**

The field of disability studies is an interdisciplinary area of study that views disability in the context of culture, society, and politics rather than through the lens of medicine or psychology (Rice 2018). She further elaborates that disability, through other fields of studies, is typically viewed as distanced from the “norm” to bring the disabled individual closer to the norm. However, the discipline of the social model in disability studies is a movement, like feminism, that seeks to empower disabled individuals instead of isolating them in society. This field, therefore, functions as the opposite of the other areas mentioned by Rice. What disability studies attempt to do, is to broaden the understanding of disabilities, to understand the experience of disabilities in society better, and contribute to a social change for people with disabilities (Rice 2018). Closely related to disability studies lies the concept of “ableism,” which is the discrimination and the social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior (Eisenmenger 2021). At the core of the concept lies the fundamental premise that disabled people require “fixing” and that the individual is defined by their disability (ibid.), a phenomenon revisited in the medical model. My research of the themes of these novels will therefore add to the discussion of disabilities in disability studies. To connect this thesis to disability studies, I will utilize two essential analysis models to analyze the novels. The medical and social models of disability are critical to my argument of how the protagonists in Green’s and Haddon’s novels manage to challenge normality in their respective societies.

According to the medical model of disability (Oliver 1983; PWDA), disability is a health condition dealt with by medical professionals. The term ‘disabled’ means less able to do certain things and is regarded as different than what is thought to be expected. In the protagonist’s case in Green’s novel, this would mean that she is less able to travel, socialize with non-disabled people, attend her regular high school, and do other things that a “normal” teenager her age can do. In the protagonist’s case in Haddon’s novel, it would mean that he cannot attend the schools that “normal” children attend or handle emotions and certain situations without assistance from a person who knows the individual’s disability and diagnosis. In the medical model of disability, a common mindset is that the disabled individual needs to be cured or ‘fixed’ (PWDA). Furthermore, this view puts the disabled

individual in a position where they are viewed as a tragedy and may be exposed to pity (PWDA). This is a severely outdated and stigmatizing view of society that puts the individual with the impairment responsible for overcoming the societal barriers they face.

On the other hand, the social model of disability, as suggested by Mike Oliver (1983), leaps from the idea that disability does not spring from the impairments of the individual but the barriers that the individual faces in society (UPIAS 1976). The social model (Oliver 1983), in contrast to the medical model of disability, states that a person does not have a disability but is thus disabled by society in a way that puts a label on the individual. Therefore, the social model focuses on the different attitudes and barriers that society places upon the individual that hinder them from fulfilling their needs and potential (AFDO). Colin Barnes (2012) underlines the importance of the social model. He states that “[t]o understand the significance of the implications of social model reasoning, it is important to remember that until very recently ‘disability’ was viewed almost exclusively as an individual medical problem or ‘personal tragedy’ in western culture” (p.12).

The social model was developed to help disabled individuals take action against discrimination, remove the barriers they face in society, and seek justice for equality and their rights (Shape Arts). Much of the disabling barriers that came up for discussion included prejudiced opinions and attitudes, which is a barrier in both Green’s and Haddon’s novels. Disability is a social construct created by social obstacles which can be eliminated (ibid.). Oliver (1981) further states that “[t]his new paradigm involves nothing more or less fundamental than a switch away from focusing on the physical limitations of particular individuals to the way the physical and social environment impose limitations upon certain categories of people” (p.28). This understanding of disability is further critically examined by Green, as it is precisely Hazel’s environment, particularly the people around her, which “impose limitations upon” her. The same essentially applies for Christopher in Haddon’s novel, as some of the people closest to him are also limiting his interaction, due to their belief that it is for his “own good.” Concerning the medical model, both Haddon and Green incorporated societal professionals, such as doctors and the police, who share the viewpoints and aspects found in the medical model. However, we can see that both writers try to criticize and challenge this outdated view by adding protagonists who challenge these views. We can thus claim that their approaches are aligned with the social model rather than the medical model.

### 1.3 Normality

In society today, every individual lives under laws and norms. The government sets the regulations and consists of a written list of rules for every member of society. If anyone were to break these laws, they would get punishment, either fines or prison. However, the norms in society are not as formal as the set of laws. Social norms are the unwritten rules of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors considered acceptable in a particular social group (McLeod 2008). Further, these norms tell us something about how to act “normal” in a society. On the other hand, normality revolves around the norm and what is “normal” regarding individuals’ behaviors. But how does one know the judges of “normality” in society? Normality is often based upon statistics and tells us something about what is most frequently resurrecting in a society, whether it is, e.g., attitudes, personality traits, or opinions. Clemmensen and K ppe (2021) write about the origin of the term normality and state: “Normality stems, etymologically, from the Greek word *nomos* meaning ‘what determines norms’” (p.235). Therefore, it is safe to say that those who decide what is normal and which “norms” belong to society are precisely that, the society.

Further, it is essential to connect the topic of normality to the concept of disability. As I have already established, normality springs out from the central idea that there is a uniform set of “norms” that society is to spring from. Whenever someone does not conform to this set of norms, they are considered “abnormal” or deviant from normality. This is precisely the connection that Davis (1995) makes between normality and disability, where he states:

In fact, the very concept of normality by which most people (by definition) shape their existence is, in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather, the concept of disability is a function of a concept of normality. Normality and disability are part of the same system (p.2).

This passage suggests that all disabled individuals deviate from society's norm, whether it is a physical or a mental form of disability. As society develops, the idea of “normality” is also under constant change and development. This is supported by Clemmensen and K ppe (2021), as they state: “Naturally, ideas about the world, society, and humans have existed prior to this, but it is interesting to consider that features such as instincts and emotions are not universal.” (p.236). This passage essentially relates to the protagonists in the novels challenging the normality in their society. They are both disabled individuals who deviate

from the norm in their respective societies yet manage to fight the stereotypes and social taboos they are exposed to.

### **1.3.1 Stereotypes, taboo, and stigma**

I previously stated that the protagonists in Green's and Haddon's novels challenge normality in their societies by breaking social taboos linked to disabilities. Therefore, it is essential to define the respective term. Taboos are closely related to the term controversy. Taboo subjects have often been a pinpoint for people who initially choose to shy away from the topic due to its controversy. The form of taboo subjects that Green's and Haddon's novels discuss are topics of disability, sickness, and death. These are all taboo subjects opposed to stereotypes and stigma in society, which will be analyzed in this thesis. A stereotype is a fundamental belief held by individuals of certain groups in society. These beliefs may be based on, e.g., sex, gender, identity, race, or religion. The social group of individuals with a disability is also exposed to stereotypes in society today. This social group may face stereotypes, including isolation, segregation, and mistaken perceptions (Momene 2015). As mentioned in the account for the medical model of disability, the medical model of viewing the disabled individual puts the individual in a position where they are viewed as a tragedy and may be exposed to pity (PWDA). Therefore, the medical model of disability has, in my opinion, contributed to the stereotypes that disabled individuals face in society today. In the novels, we can see representations of stereotyping based on their disability. In Haddon's novel, we can see a clear example of stereotyping Christopher as disabled because of the school he attends. Furthermore, in Green's novel, it is visible that Hazel is stereotyped and pitied since she wears a breathing tube in her nose due to her cancer, which immediately labels her as sick and disabled. The theme of stigma is closely related to stereotyping, as stigma often can be regarded as a direct effect or result of stereotyping. Stigma is when someone negatively views you because you have a distinguishing characteristic or personal trait that is thought to be, or is, a disadvantage (Mayo Clinic). Stigma may also often lead to discrimination and may cause the creation of stereotypes (ibid.).

## **1.4 Young Adult Fiction and LK20**

One of my aims for this thesis is to argue why it is essential for young adult readers to read literature consisting of controversial themes. In her book, Ria Cheyne (2019) emphasizes the importance for pupils to read literature that includes disabilities and taboos, as it promotes inclusion rather than exclusion. She explains that it "can depict all kinds of disability

encounter, and disability studies scholars have long observed that encounters with fictional disabled characters influence attitudes and behaviours in real-world encounters with disabled people” (p. 12).

Who are the young adult readers, and what kind of literature are they reading? According to Carlsen (2018), “like adults, teenagers have differing interests and attitudes towards reading. A broad and varied collection of reading material is therefore important in order to engage readers across the spectrum” (p. 127). He emphasizes the importance of meaningfulness to the reading material the reader chooses. This is the foundation of the genre of Young Adult Fiction, to which the novels analyzed in this thesis belongs. Young Adult Fiction is the genre that encompasses the large variety of novels that young adults are reading. The two books chosen for this thesis have been on the bestseller list for YAF novels for a long time. Several factors judge which novels end up on the bestseller lists. Still, a common denominator amongst all of the YAF novels is that they contain recognizable and easy themes for young adults to identify with. Beckton (2015) elaborates on this in his article, where he states that “[t]he increased sales of Young Adult fiction reflects genre/theme patterns occurring within the bestselling Young Adult fiction category overall” (p.6). This is further examined by Carlsen (2018), who underlines that among all the bestselling novels, there is “[...] a great variety of original, thought-provoking, and well-crafted literature for young readers” (p.128). This highlights the importance of having an own genre for teenagers and its significance for their identity development and personal growth.

While discussing the importance of having an own genre for young adult readers aiming to spark their development and unfold their self-identity, it is even more critical that the literature they are reading contains several aspects that they can identify with. Carlsen (2018) accentuates this as he argues that

Contemporary writers of youth fiction, too, tend to adopt the viewpoint of their teenage protagonists. The success of a teenage novel depends on whether it manages to describe the experiences and concerns of its readers in realistic terms, no matter whether the story plays out in recognizable or fantastical environments (p.130).

For the young adults using the experiences and lessons learned from reading literature, it is essential to present the readers with the enormous diversity of human affairs. The source of personal growth and identity development is finding out who you are as an individual and the

experiences you pick up along your way. Carlsen (2018) emphasizes this importance in his article:

An especially interesting feature of contemporary youth literature is the diversity of teenage perspectives represented. [...] Some protagonists are affected by particular medical conditions, either physically, as the main characters in *Wonder* and *The Fault in Our Stars*, or intellectually, as the narrator in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (p.130).

In the passage above, Carlsen underlines the importance of reading the novels side-by-side. By using the novels supplementary to one another, the young adult readers can acquire a broader understanding of diversity in society than they would by reading the novels individually.

Suppose the sole purpose for reading literature, besides the aspect of joy, is to spark the young adults' personal growth and develop their identity. In that case, it is crucial to justify why young adult readers should read contemporary literature. Moreover, Carlsen (2018) explains reading literature that represents controversial issues, such as disabilities, in the Green's and Haddon's novels. The fundamental thought interpreted from his statement is that young adult readers need to read contemporary literature that gives them a different viewpoint of humankind, as it often can relate to some of their own experiences and thus becomes meaningful for them:

Diverse as these teenage protagonists are, their stories show how social, cultural, and biological factors shape the experiences and outlook of every individual. Despite these factors, however, all of these lead characteristics undertake a journey often recognizable for readers in the process of defining their own attitudes, values and world views. Many works of youth fiction thus revolve around shared themes, such as friendship, family relations, love, sexuality, and identity (Carlsen 2018, p.130).

This notion is further elaborated on by Birketveit and Williams (2013). They elaborate on the significance for the young readers and how reading such literature may impact their experience with contemporary literature and controversial themes in their society. They also include the fact that many of the novels are written with a first-person perspective, which may provide the young readers with a unique view of a young person's experience of specific



themes. Furthermore, they believe this is an essential aspect of developing as individuals. I agree with their statement, as providing another peer's viewpoint and perspective is crucial to understanding and reflecting on other people's situations. Both Green's and Haddon's novels are written from the first-person perspective of young adults with disabilities, giving the reader a unique opportunity to tag along on their journey and experiences and using these experiences to develop their individuality. Birketveit and Williams (2013) underline the importance of young adult readers reading novels written from the first-person perspective as they write:

The majority of novels for teenagers [...] are written in the first person, allowing the reader the privileged position of identifying with the protagonist and knowing or understanding more than the other characters, as well as communicating the immediacy and intensity of experience and emotions. This offers teenage readers a unique opportunity to view the world through the eyes of others, and helps to generate insight and sympathy (p. 169).

Wilhelm's (2008) passage below shows some of the exact erudition as the passage above. He enhances the enormous diversity of possibilities that one can get from reading literature. Further, he underlines the importance of literature for individuals' personal growth and how it will change both society and the world for the better if everyone is to take part in this self-journey and develops their self-awareness, which the protagonists enact in Green's and Haddon's novels. Wilhelm (2008) writes in his article:

Literature is transcendent: it offers us possibilities; it takes us beyond space, time, and self; it questions the way the world is and offers possibilities for the way it could be, It offers a variety of views, visions, and voices that are so vital to a democracy. It is unique in the way it provides us with maps for exploring the human condition, with insights and perceptions into life, and with offerings for ways to be human in the world. Literature helps us define ourselves as we are, and to envision what it is we want ourselves and the world to be (p.53).

The passage above is acknowledged as a justification of why young adults should read literature that incorporates controversial themes in combination with easy topics that many young people find intriguing and entertaining. The simple meaning behind reading literature is for your mind to travel to another place in another time, develop a sense of compassion for

other people's individualities, and broaden one's perspective on life. Both Green's and Haddon's novels manage to do so with the help of their disabled protagonists, who have been welcomed with open arms by many young adult readers.

#### **1.4.1 LK20 and interdisciplinary topics**

While we can see a clear significance for young adult readers to read contemporary literature that discusses such controversial topics, there is also significant importance of utilizing such literature in education. This importance is primarily emphasized by the new subject curriculum (LK20) and the interdisciplinary topic of "health and life skills." We can see the significance of utilizing novels like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and *The Fault in Our Stars* in schools as well in The Education Act, where it is stated: "[Education is] to promote democracy, equality, and scientific thinking" (Opplæringslova 1998). This statement provides a fundamental baseline that every individual is equal and that we are not to discriminate or differentiate between pupils based on their situations. The Education Act further underlines that "schools and training establishments shall meet the pupils and apprentices with trust, respect, and demands, and give them challenges that promote formation and the desire to learn. All forms of discrimination shall be combated" (Opplæringslova 1998). It should not only be a source of learning about essential values in society but should also be enacted in practical terms.

According to the Norwegian Ministry of Education stated in the Core Curriculum of LK20, the interdisciplinary topics aim to develop pupils' ability to express themselves orally and in English writing. Thus, it should form:

the basis for being able to express their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and opinions and provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on the pupils' way of life and that of others. The ability to handle situations that require linguistic and cultural competence can give pupils a sense of achievement and help them develop a positive self-image and a secure identity (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2019a).

Although LK20 recognizes several pinpoints as to what the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" should cover, it does not provide any guidelines for reaching these goals nor how the teacher should put them into practice. Nor does it fully explain the terms health and life skills and how the pupils shall reach these goals or achieve such mastery. Thus, in this thesis,

I will show how contemporary Young Adult Fiction literature that contains controversial issues regarding human diversity can be utilized to teach the students about the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills. For the interdisciplinary topic to be able to teach the students about important issues, it is essential that the students are exposed to realistic examples that are adapted to their life situation. This will make it easier for the students to relate to this way of life and furthermore, can assist them in developing their self-image and identity.

Utdanningsdirektoratet (2019a) states that the primary goal for the interdisciplinary topic is that “[...] health and life skills shall give the pupils competence which promotes sound physical and mental health, and which provides opportunities for making responsible life choices”. The individual teacher can decide what teaching method and the material will be most suitable for their pupils to reach this goal. Working with texts in the English subject is one way of achieving the goals of the interdisciplinary topic, as the English Subject Curriculum (2019b) states that:

by reflecting on, interpreting and critically assessing different types of texts in English, the pupils shall acquire language and knowledge of culture and society. Thus the pupils will develop intercultural competence enabling them to deal with different ways of living, ways of thinking, and communication patterns. They shall build the foundation for seeing their own identity and others’ identities in a multilingual and multicultural context.

The passage above connects the importance of young adult readers reading literature challenging social taboos to the significance of utilizing such literature in education. These important theoretical frameworks will be essential in the following chapters, where I will analyze the novels individually, followed by a critical discussion of the importance for the young adult readers.



## 2 The Fault in Our Stars

The first novel analyzed in this thesis is John Green's young adult fiction novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. This novel is written from the first-person perspective of a young girl, Hazel Grace Lancaster, who has been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Although her biggest wish is to be an average teenager who does not want her life revolving around her cancer, her family tends to get in her way. This is until she meets her soulmate in a cancer support group when her life suddenly makes sense again. Hazel is not the only character in the novel with a physical disability, as we can see many different conditions of disabilities ranging from cancer to blindness to missing a leg. What is intriguing about the novel is the characters' courage to keep fighting even though it may seem like the universe is going against them.

The novel stands out because it narrates a story about a young girl living with an incurable form of cancer. It is typical for many cancer fighters and survivors to have a limited range of interaction with society. Individuals who live with cancer are often treated as "special" (American Cancer Society 2019), and the same goes for Hazel. She finished high school long before she was supposed to graduate and has little to no contact with her friends. Her only social interactions are with her doctor, her loving and overprotecting parents, and her cancer support group that she despises. Thus, at a certain point in the novel, the protagonist takes a turn and starts to challenge all the normative views of cancer that we meet earlier in the book.

*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green is a novel that head-on faces the taboos and stereotypes a teenage girl who battles cancer faces in her daily life. This chapter seeks to examine how a physical disability affects an individual's emotional state and how this affects the people who surround the individual. Further, I will analyze how and why the attitudes in one's environment affect a young person's experience with a disability. Finally, I will examine how the teenagers in the novel challenge society's stereotypes and taboos regarding their disabilities. Additionally, I will provide some theoretical aspects from 'disability studies,' such as the medical model and the social model of disability, to provide a deeper and broader understanding of the novel in connection with the field. The field of disability studies seeks to help disabled individuals take action against discrimination and seek justice for equality and their rights (Shape Arts). Therefore, it is essential to examine this topic. It gives disabled individuals a voice and an opportunity to stand up against the stigma and stereotypes they face in society. By showing a young character who challenges boundaries and "normality"

around her, Green's novel follows the central message of the social model of disability. It is society that sets limits for disabled people.

## 2.1 Depiction of disability

This section focuses on how Green's novel depicts changes in a character's life after she has received a cancer diagnosis. This section aims to explain the protagonist's emotional state because of her illness and functions as a transition to how this emotional state affects the people around her. It is crucial to analyze Hazel's life both before and after receiving her cancer diagnosis. Before receiving her diagnosis, Hazel was living a seemingly everyday teenage life. She went to high school, hung out with her friends, and watched TV – just like normal teenagers. When people instantly get struck by acute illness, alike the main protagonist, their life ultimately gets turned upside down. Suddenly their life, which may have been predictable and structured to begin with, develops into being unpredictable and messy.

Moreover, this applies to the adolescents in the novel, Hazel and her friends Augustus and Isaac. Alike Hazel, both Isaac and Augustus are familiar with the cancer diagnosis and the circumstances that come with it. Teenagers should not be dealing with dark matters such as cancer, which is not usually described as “typical teenager issues.” This is supported in Kirkman, Hartsock, and Torke's article, which states: “While their peers are planning for college, anticipating moving away from home and envisioning careers, [the adolescents in the novel] know they may never achieve complete and unencumbered independence” (Kirkman et. al. 2019, p.244). While Hazel's peers are planning and building their future, Hazel is stuck in a state of void where she cannot develop and move on with her life. The way that Hazel distanced and isolated herself from her loved ones is her way of coping with her disability.

The fact that the teenagers in the novel are handling dark matters is also supported by Sarah Shields (2013), who writes about the novel and states:

[Hazel, Augustus, and Isaac] move through the book dealing with what would be considered typical teenage issues, such as dating and homework, but they are compounded by the fact that they are also grappling with innately adult life choices. Hazel is asked to weigh in on her treatment options alongside her parents, all the while knowing that none of these options include a cure—just a way to prolong her life. [Augustus] has already experienced the burden of watching someone he cares about suffer through brain cancer and eventually pass away, and Isaac learns that teens who

do not have cancer, like his girlfriend, cannot necessarily handle being around him and eventually break his heart (p.19).

The passage above illustrates individual incidents where the novel's characters have been forced to deal with dark matters, such as cancer and death. Furthermore, the passage underlines how the topic of cancer has taken hold of the novel and how the characters deal with this daily. Although cancer is not the novel's central theme, it is still a fundamental topic that is crucial to recognize due to its importance to the characters. This is further acknowledged in Shields's article, where she argues that:

The author does a fantastic job of making sure cancer does not become the book's theme. It is merely an aspect of the plot that provides a sense of urgency to the characters. Hazel knows she does not have a long and healthy life in front of her, so she repeatedly asks herself how she can live now. She will not let her diagnosis plot the course of her life or make decisions for her; she embraces the minimal freedom she has now to explore literature, friendship, and even love (Shields 2013, p.20).

However, this perspective on life is something Hazel has developed over time both before and during the novel. At the beginning of the novel, the reader can sense that Hazel has begun to let her diagnosis control her life. One can understand this by the dark underlying tone of the plot; simultaneously, one can sense a form of sarcasm in the way she speaks. This is illustrated by the "grenade" metaphor, which the protagonist leans heavily on at one point in the novel.

Chapter six in the novel illustrates how Hazel compares herself to the metaphor of a grenade. She describes herself as a grenade that will blow up at any point, and she therefore wants to minimize the casualties and ensure that fewer of her close ones will get hurt when she ultimately loses her battle with cancer. This is her way of justifying that she pushes her loved ones away. The grenade metaphor would also illustrate why Hazel let go of her "old" life when she got diagnosed. There are several ways in which the reader can understand that she has let go of her "old" life. Before she got diagnosed, Hazel spent her time with her friends, watching tv, reading books, and going to school. When she initially got sick, she let go of her friends with whom she realized she did not have anything in common. She further finished high school before her peers and dedicated all her time to watching TV and reading her favorite novel. This form of distancing herself from the things and values that used to matter

to her before receiving a medical diagnosis is illustrated by her use of the “grenade” metaphor:

I’m like. Like. I’m like a grenade, Mom. I’m a grenade and at some point I’m going to blow up and I would like to minimize the casualties, Okay...I just want to stay away from people and read books and think and be with you guys because there is nothing I can do about hurting you; you’re too invested, so just please let me do that, okay? (Green 2013, p.99).

Here, the reader immediately understands that she has ultimately let her cancer control her by letting go of her life. Another implication of the paragraph is that she is asking permission from her mother to push away all the things she cares about. This is intertwined with the fact that she is trying to minimize the casualties and supports the notion of pushing away the things that used to matter to her in her “cancer-free” life. Moreover, the grenade metaphor might also be Hazel’s form of a protection mechanism or her way of “coping” with her illness. She believes that, by pushing away her loved ones, she is also protecting them from harm and getting hurt when she eventually loses her battle with cancer.

The grenade metaphor is further supported by Kirkman et. al., where they discuss how the main protagonist’s diagnosis has led to her isolation from society. In their article they briefly sum up Hazel’s development regarding how cancer has shown to dictate her life and much of her life choices:

Hazel’s disease has left her socially isolated, away from her high school peers, and constantly under the watchful care of her parents. Her only opportunity for socialisation is a paediatric cancer support group, where she meets Augustus (‘Gus’), aged 18 years with a history of osteosarcoma. The two become fast friends and relate on an intellectual and emotional level (Kirkman et.al. 2019, p.243).

The passage above shows how cancer led to her isolation from society, her friends, school, and everything else her life used to revolve around prior to her sickness. Therefore, it is safe to say that her condition harmed her life and ultimately led to her leaving many of the elements that made her the person she used to be behind. By isolating herself from society and the things that used to matter to her in her life before cancer, she is internalizing her medical diagnosis. This internalization made Hazel turn



into an individual whose life was dominated by their cancer diagnosis and also makes her conform to society's normative views of individuals who carry disabilities.

## **2.2 Perspectives of the main protagonist**

This section focuses on the ways Green's characters tend to alter their perspectives on the main protagonist as a direct consequence of her cancer diagnosis. In this chapter, I will therefore analyze the different ways that the five main character groups in the novel alter their perspectives and introduce the notion that the main protagonist resists their reading of her. Whenever a person gets a disease or a sickness, other people's perspective of that person tends to change. This is a process that can happen both consciously and unconsciously. Many times, this shift of attitudes comes from the lack of knowledge about the sickness itself, but it may also come from the fact that the individual does not know how to act, what to say or whether to comfort or sympathize with the person or not. Often, we can see a shift in the individual's behavior because of the sickness. As explained in the previous section, this internalization is also visible in Hazel's character in the novel. The protagonist learns to gradually challenge others' perspectives of her only as a walking cancer diagnosis. The people closest to her tend to alter their lives and change their perceptions of her after her cancer diagnosis. When someone ultimately gets sick and suffers from chronic illness, others' perspective of you eventually changes.

### **2.2.1 Social and medical model of disability**

To provide an account of the different perspectives of the protagonist in which the different character groups carry, it is essential to discuss them according to the various theoretical models that support these views. There are two effective approaches to disability studies that weigh the heaviest in the discussion of the field, which is the social model and the medical model of disability. Further, I will provide an account of these two approaches and elaborate on how these can be applied to Green's novel.

The medical model views the individual as sick and something that needs to be fixed. Furthermore, this view puts the disabled individual in a position where they are viewed as a tragedy and may be exposed to pity (PWDA). As elaborated on in the former section, tragedy is exemplified through Hazel's usage of the grenade metaphor in the way that she does not want to expose her loved ones to tragedy, and pity is illustrated through her sense of self-pity as well as the pity others might feel for her. This model of disability is an outdated view of

the disabled individual. It strengthens society's ability to stigmatize and stereotype these individuals and try to make them conform to normality. On the other hand, the social model considered the individual as disabled by the individual's barriers in society and was developed to help disabled individuals take action against discrimination, remove the obstacles they face in society, and seek justice for equality and their rights (Shape Arts). Moreover, disability is a social construct created by social obstacles which can be eliminated (ibid.). Oliver (1981) further states that "[t]his new paradigm involves nothing more or less fundamental than a switch away from focusing on the physical limitations of particular individuals to the way the physical and social environments impose limitations upon certain groups or categories of people" (p.28). This understanding of disability is further critically examined by Green as it is precisely Hazel's environment, particularly the people around her, which "impose limitations upon" her which she has also so painfully internalized.

These different approaches to disability studies apply to Green's novel, as we can see visible representations of both. In the next section, I will therefore provide an account of the different character groups in the novel that eventually have changed their perspective of the protagonist due to her physical disability. Consequently, I will use these approaches to analyze the different views the character groups have.

### **2.2.2 Hazel's family**

The first character group that initially changed their perspective of the main protagonist due to her physical disability is Hazel's family consisting of her mother and father. Her loving parents lived their normal life as a family of three, with a fair economy and regular jobs. When their daughter ultimately got her diagnosis when she was thirteen, they altered their life accordingly. Her mother began dedicating her life to taking care and keeping up with her daughter and her diagnosis, ultimately putting her own life on hold. As the main protagonist's cancer treatment cost a fortune, her father eventually started to work quite a lot more than he used to do before she got sick. This meant that he had to put his plans and wishes on hold. The fact that the main protagonist got a cancer diagnosis, which was viewed as a death sentence for her in many ways, was hard on the family. Especially with Hazel being their only child, it was natural for the parents to give up everything to care for their beloved only daughter. As a parent, the only thing you ever want is to protect your child and keep them safe and healthy, which is the case for Hazel's parents.

There is also a tendency for mothers to become over-protective and analytical about their child's behavior, which is visible in Green's novel as well:

Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death (2013, p.3).

This passage is the first one we meet in the novel. It illustrates how Hazel spends most of her time at home thinking about her death caused by her incurable disease, unlike most teenagers her age. She further elaborates that depression is not a side effect of cancer but of dying (Green 2013, p.3), and that she, therefore, qualifies as depressed. This might be a way for Hazel's mother to express that she feels responsible for her daughter being sick. Further, instead of blaming this attitude on her cancer, she suggests that there might be a natural, non-cancer-related reason behind her changed behavior.

### **2.2.3 Hazel's best friend**

Before her sickness, Hazel used to have friends she met up with and had common interests with. One of her best friends was a girl named Kaitlyn, whom she spent much time with. Kaitlyn is portrayed the typical teenage schoolgirl, obsessed with materialistic things, boys, and all the gossip she can bear. Although Hazel and Kaitlyn have always been friends, her presence and dis-presence in Hazel's life depict how Hazel's diagnosis has dragged her out of the world of normal teenagers like Kaitlyn. The main protagonist reflects upon this issue on several occasions in the novel. Hazel states:

I think my school friends wanted to help me through my cancer, but they eventually found out they couldn't. For one thing, there was no *through*. So I excused myself on the grounds of pain and fatigue, as I often had over the years when seeing Kaitlyn or any of my other friends. [...] The other thing about Kaitlyn, I guess, was that it could never again feel natural to talk to her. Any attempts to feign normal social interactions were just depressing because it was so glaringly obvious that everyone I spoke to for the rest of my life would feel awkward and self-conscious around me, except maybe kids like Jackie who just didn't know any better (Green 2013, p.47).

Here again, the reader can sense the underlying tone of depression and internalization of her medical diagnosis, in the way that she regards what everyone around her thinks about her and their point of view, exemplified through how her mother and her friends think of her. In the passage above, we can see that the change in Kaitlyn's perspective of Hazel has affected the main protagonist's comfort around her. There is an obvious barrier between the sick and the well, and it could seem like Hazel has given up the hope that they could maintain a somewhat regular relationship because of her sickness. Therefore, their relationship can be a physical representation of how challenges regarding health issues can create a barrier between those who are healthy and those who are sick.

#### **2.2.4 Hazel's doctors**

The third character group is probably one of the most relevant of them all; Hazel's primary doctor and the other doctors on her case. Hazel's primary doctor, Dr. Maria, has been with Hazel ever since she was first diagnosed and throughout her treatments. She is concise and confident when she makes her firm decisions and suggestions regarding Hazel's treatments. Although she wants what is best for Hazel regarding her sickness and her well-being, she also wants Hazel to live and experience life despite her condition: "[Travelling] would increase some risks, [...] but it's your life" (Green 2013, p.117). The other doctors that handle Hazel's case regarding cancer and her cancer treatments solely view her as a successful case of a cancer treatment that has not been working on previous patients. Therefore, they want her to follow their orders and not live her life in fear of destroying the progress and exposing their successful cancer case to any danger. This is aptly illustrated in the novel when Hazel has a meeting with her doctors to explore whether she could go to Amsterdam or not:

At the end, I asked if I could travel to Amsterdam, and Dr. Simons actually and literally laughed. [...] Placing a patient - one of the most promising Phalanxifor survivors, no less - an eight-hour flight from the only physicians intimately familiar with her case? That's a recipe for disaster (Green 2013, p.117).

These quotes illustrate some of the doctors' perspectives of Hazel as only a patient and not a teenager who wants to live her life and explore everything that the world has to offer. It is clear that their central perspective is that of a young girl who is one of their most successful cases in the field of specific medication. Therefore, their evaluation is that it is not safe to put this successful case in harm's way by allowing her to travel across the globe to seek her dreams for a couple of days. The doctors' perspective of their sick patients can be understood

by the medical model of understanding disabilities. As Siebers (2014) explains about the medical view of disabilities, “[t]he medical model changes people with disabilities into objects, steals their agency, and channels any findings into diagnosis” (p.1). In the novel, Green shows how this statement is set to life, as he creates different characters that do indeed objectify the main character due to her disability. Further, this correlates with the fact that the medical model seeks to ‘fix’ or cure the disabled individual, a common mindset among some of the doctors in Green’s novel. However, by adding the sick protagonist to the novel, Green also criticizes the medical model, thus challenging this misperceived discourse.

### **2.2.5 The support group**

The support group, “The Literal Heart of Jesus,” is something that Hazel never wanted to attend herself. The support group sympathetically views her and therefore contributes to making her life revolve around her diagnosis. They do not allow any negative thoughts that naturally occur when you are suffering from a severe diagnosis such as Hazel. Many people find it comforting to be part of a support group when they are going through something life-altering like cancer. However, Hazel does not view the support group like this and finds it annoying. However, her mother initially pushed her into attending the support group. Whether or not it is due to the guilt or responsibility that she might have felt about her daughter’s sickness, as mentioned earlier, is debatable. In a part of the novel, her mother states: “Hazel, you deserve a life” (Green 2013, p.7). This is an ironic statement for several reasons. Hazel’s mother wants her presumably short, cancer-full life to be good and happy as long as she lives. The irony is that even though Hazel’s mother wants Hazel to live her life, she is giving up her own life to give her daughter a life. Hazel’s mother believes that the support group might remove the “depression” that she supposedly diagnosed her daughter with at the very beginning of the novel. Therefore, it is thinkable that Hazel’s mother believes the support group can help her daughter make friends who are in the same situation as her. Her desire for her daughter to attend the support group is ultimately an attempt to help her daughter make the most out of the time she has left and not waste her time doing nothing. It is an attempt to justify that Hazel is still alive and needs to be enjoying life and meeting people to celebrate the fact that she gets to live another day. This attempt turns out to work, as the support group is where she ultimately meets people in her position.

### **2.2.6 Hazel's peers**

Although Hazel was never fond of the support group, it is where she met some of the most important and influential people. These individuals, Augustus Waters and Isaac, are also people who suffer or have suffered from cancer. The friends whom Hazel meets at her support group are in the same situation as Hazel and therefore know her perspective on life very well. Even though they are in the same position regarding their sickness, they develop a strong connection and a close relationship with one another. The fact that Isaac and Augustus have had cancer themselves makes them not create the same sympathetic perspective of Hazel as the other character groups. Furthermore, their relationship with Hazel proves to better her own perspective of herself and make her build a different position regarding her confidence, her life choices, and how she wants to live her life from that point.

This phenomenon is explored by Donna Reeve (2012), who states that

direct psycho-emotional disablism [which] can also occur within the relationship someone has with themselves, in the form of internalized oppression which is very difficult to challenge; it is often only through contact with other disabled people that one sees alternatives to the mainstream cultural lexicon that equate disability with loss and lack (pp. 84-85).

The phenomenon she explores is represented in Green's novel, as he shows how Hazel needs these peers to relate to in order to contest the norms both around her and inside her. An example from the novel is when Augustus asks Hazel to tell him her story, and she initially begins to tell him her "cancer" story. He then challenges her to think of herself as an individual beyond her sickness. Instead of conforming to society's view of her as disabled, her friends spark a change within her to change her own perception of herself and challenge the norms of "normality" in society. Ultimately, Hazel's connection with Gus and Isaac challenges her viewpoint of herself and her internalization.

## **2.3 Character development**

This section explains how different character groups' viewpoints have led to a change in the protagonist's perspective of herself. As mentioned previously, the protagonist's sickness has put her life in a state of void and isolation, making her unable to move on with her life. Therefore, Green decided that the only way for Hazel to get out of this state of void, is

through the help of her friends from the support group, Augustus and Isaac. Throughout the novel, the reader experiences a change in the main protagonist's perspective of herself. The novel starts with the protagonist going to the support group because her family and her doctors decided it would be good for her to be surrounded by people in the same situation as her. When reading about the first time Hazel went to a support group, the setting and the reader's feeling has a dark and sad underlying tone. Green illustrates this in the novel: "Then we introduced ourselves. Name. Age. Diagnosis. And how we're doing today. I'm Hazel, I'd say when they'd get to me. Sixteen. Thyroid originally but with an impressive and long-settled satellite colony in my lungs. And I'm doing okay" (2013, p.5). This statement from the protagonist bears the mark of habit and light depression. Moreover, it shows how Hazel has internalized her sickness and started to conform to the medical view of disability. Not only did her disability change other people's perspectives of her, but it also led to a total internalization of her sickness within herself. When reading this, the reader can sense that the protagonist would rather be anywhere than in the support group where she does not seem to know the point. The passage above illustrates how other people's perception of her has ultimately affected her perspective of herself and emphasizes that she has begun to conform to what others think of her. However, this is the start of her character development from accepting her sickness to challenging how other views her sickness and a way for her to stand in opposition against the taboos and stigma that arises from the topic. This perception is strengthened when the main protagonist is to present her life story to Augustus further in the novel:

So what's your story?" he asked, sitting down next to me at a safe distance. "I already told you my story. I was diagnosed when—" "No, not your cancer story. *Your* story. Interests, hobbies, passions, weird fetishes etcetera". "Um," I said. "Don't tell me you're one of those people who becomes their disease. I know so many people like that (Green 2013, p.32).

This is the exact moment in the novel where Hazel is forced to confront her own view of herself and her internalized view of her medical diagnosis. At this moment, Augustus explicitly points out that she has turned into an individual who has "become" their disease, and she is forced to take action against this. Thus, this becomes a significant turning point in Hazel's life and development on her way to challenging normality in society. When Augustus ultimately becomes a part of Hazel's life, her life begins to change and develop for the better. The reader can recognize a pattern where the main protagonist starts to enjoy her life a lot

more than she used to, she has fewer “outbursts” like the grenade metaphor, and she starts spending more time with her (new) friends. Her new friends, Isaac and Augustus, have positively impacted Hazel regarding her mental state. After she begins to spend time with them, the reader has also recognized a decrease in the number of depression signs that we could see quite often at the beginning of the novel. This emphasizes the importance of a sound support system when you are suffering from an illness such as cancer and surrounding yourself with people who make you focus on the good things in life. They are ultimately the ones who will help them fight the sickness.

In many ways, many character groups are in the middle between the medical model and the social model of disabilities. Most of the character groups have let Hazel’s disability affect their perspective of her, and some of them have developed a sense of pity and tragedy. At the same time, we can see that the same character groups are cheering for her and encouraging her to seize the day and live her life while she can, which is an aspect emphasized in the social model of disability. Ultimately, it is the character groups that conform to the social model of disability that sparks her change and development within herself and encourages her to challenge normality and the stigma she is opposed to.

## **2.4 Challenging normality**

The previous section analyzed how the protagonist internalized her sickness to the degree that she started to conform to society’s normative views of disabled individuals. Further, it investigated how she eventually got out of the pattern of internalization, through the help of her support system who made her realize that it is possible to live a “normal” life despite having a disability. Therefore, this section will seek to explain how the characters in the novel are allowed to break taboos in society that might not be allowed in reality. The protagonist manages to challenge normality by providing a different perspective of individuals with disabilities such as herself.

It is no secret that sickness and physical disabilities have been stigmatized and taboo in society. Although this is the case in the novel, the main protagonist and her friends have proven that they can be in opposition to and break the stigma, stereotypes, and taboos they are up against. Christopher Shinn (2014) states that “disabled characters are often seen as symbolizing the triumph of the human spirit, or the freakishness we all feel inside.” What he means is that disabled individuals contain traits that every individual might also have but do



not want to display. In that way, disabled individuals become a symbol of this triumph. This, in a variety of ways, conforms with the main protagonist, Hazel, and her friends in the novel. Although the characters have been through a great deal of suffering and pain in their presumably short lives, they thus somehow manage to find all the bright points and moments of happiness in their lives. Further, Shinn (2014) argues in his article that disability is often viewed as a metaphor and that people are more interested in disabilities being metaphors rather than something that happens to real people. This statement is quite problematic in Green's novel, as his novel is in opposition to this metaphoric understanding of disabilities. An essential aspect of the novel is this refusal to turn illnesses into abstract matters that do not relate to actual people. In a way, Green's novel compels the reader to see and witness something painful that remains a part of people's lives even if we would rather not think about it.

Some would argue that the characters in the novels are allowed to break taboos that might not be allowed to break in real life. The characters in the novel deal with many dark materials, such as cancer, amputation, blindness, and death. However, they can still play jokes on such dark matters that they face in their daily lives – which is admirable and something every reader of the novel can aspire to and strive for. According to Odhran O'Donoghue (2013),

a wonderfully cynical humour results when Hazel, Augustus, and Isaac (a mutual friend, blinded by “some fantastically improbable eye cancer”) trade barbs about each others' disabilities, or mock “cancer perks” (the privileges they are afforded through awkward sympathy) or the empty sentiment of Facebook memorial pages (p.582).

The fact that the characters are able to be humorous about their own situation and illness shows that they have reached a certain level of acceptance around their diagnosis and illness. Furthermore, it emphasizes their ability to fight the stigma and taboos revolving around the notion of disabilities in their society.

Furthermore, the characters' way of breaking taboos is, in many ways, a critique of the medical model of disability. It is easy to start feeling sympathetic and pitiful about people with sickness and disabilities, which is not how others should feel about them. Thus, it is also easy to internalize this sense of pity, along the lines of the form of self-pity Hazel is feeling. This could ultimately lead to their alienation within society, which the reader has witnessed

several examples of in the novel. Thus, they should be treated like any other member of society, which is underlined in Shields' (2013) article:

Many novels directed toward young adults regarding disease and death present the afflicted character as an "angel," only garnering sympathy from others instead of real relationships. Green's characters, however, are alive in a story, while simultaneously dealing with the ideas of death and dying. They do not let the inevitable stop them from living in the now. Hazel and Gus both have an innate love of life, bringing tears and laughter in equal and joyous measure (p.20).

If the reader were to develop pity for the characters in the novel, as emphasized in the medical model, instead of rooting for them as normal members of society, like in the social model of disability, it would moreover strengthen and emphasize the alienation of the disabled individuals in society.

## **2.5 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed the physically disabled protagonist John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, and how she challenges the normality she is opposed to in society. In the beginning of the chapter, the protagonist's shift in perspective of life was discussed. What came forward in the discussion, is that the protagonist's sickness altered her life to a large extent and made her lose her spark in life. This, moreover, is visible in the perspectives that the other character groups have of her. What the analysis of their perspectives showed, was that many of the groups supported both the social and the medical model of disability. However, special importance was placed on the character group consisting of Hazel's peers and her friends from the support group. This group is perhaps the only one that did not let Hazel's sickness affect their view of her as an individual and are the group that sparked a change within her. This supporting system is ultimately the key to her change, and what made her shift her life around.

Therefore, the way the protagonist challenges normality in her society is by providing an alternative way to view her as an individual. As an individual with a physical disability, society will have certain expectations and stereotypes regarding how you will look, act and portray your disability. However, when Hazel eventually is encouraged by her peers to take action and turn her life around, she portrays herself as a confident individual who does not let her sickness define her as a person. This, moreover, challenges society's stereotypical and

stigmatizing view of her and contributes to the social model of disability. By presenting yourself as an independent individual who is worth being treated as any normal individual in society, you are ultimately challenging society's norm of normality, recreating the notion of inclusiveness, and forcing a change in society.



### 3 The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

The second novel that will be analyzed in this thesis is Mark Haddon's young adult fiction novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Like the previous chapter, which analyzed disability in Green's novel, this novel will explore disability in Haddon's novel. Although both novels take on disabilities as a social challenge, the novels have different approaches to disability. While Green's novel contains physical disability, Haddon's novel contains a narrator with a mental health disability. In the novel, the author attempts to grant sympathy for the protagonist through depictions of the narrator's honesty and understanding of the world as an individual with ASD (autism spectrum disorder). Thus, this explains to the reader that the protagonist has a disability without explicitly mentioning it in the novel. As Ray (2013) underlines, "[r]eaders are never explicitly made aware of what makes Christopher "not normal," but his ostensible "disability"—possibly Asperger's Syndrome, a high functioning form of autism—shapes the narrative". The reader can understand this through the protagonist's thoughts, dialogues, and actions described in the novel. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate how the protagonist's disability shapes him as an individual.

Kukovec (2014) emphasizes that "[t]he book is beautifully written, thought-provoking, and empathy-inspiring" (p.147). *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* tells the story of a young boy, Christopher Boone, who carries the diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. Although this is not mentioned explicitly in the novel, the reader can understand this mainly through his unique character traits. The novel is written in the form of a first-person perspective of a young boy, Christopher, who has a mental health disability understood through his unique character traits. This is further explained in Kukovec's (2014) article. In her article, she points out that Christopher

who knows all the countries in the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,057; and thus has a photographic memory, is incapable of telling lies, and prefers animals to most people; he thus feels at a loss in the real world, which is full of ambiguity and replete with idiomatic use of words, and he feels safe in his world of numbers, order and his own unique system of interpretation of complex mathematical problems (p.147).

What makes the novel stand out is that the novel narrates the story of a young boy with Asperger's syndrome who eventually steps out of his comfort zone to look for his long-lost

mother and thus challenges society's normative view of him. An incident with the police on the night that he finds the dead dog shows how the "normalized" society tries to make every individual conform to the same norms, a central aspect of the medical model of disability. By creating a contemporary novel that includes a controversial theme such as disability, Haddon aligns himself with the fundamental principle of disability studies, which wants to challenge society's narrow-minded view of individuals with disabilities. Therefore, this chapter will seek to investigate how the protagonist with a mental health disability challenges normality in society and thus challenges social taboos and stereotypes.

### **3.1 Depitction of disability**

To understand how the protagonist challenges other individuals' reading of him only as his disability, it is essential to analyze how Christopher portrays his disability. Therefore, this section will focus on how the protagonist is shown as disabled throughout the novel and how this affects the individual's environment. What makes mental disabilities different from physical disabilities, as we investigated in the previous chapter, is that they are more often invisible than physical disabilities. Therefore, the individual who carries the mental health disability may come forward as "different," as there is no visible evidence of their disability. This perception is largely supported by the social model of disability, which emphasizes the fact that a person does not have a disability but is thus disabled by society in a way that puts a label on the individual (Oliver 1983). The social model is largely represented in Haddon's novel as well, as the protagonist has to a large extent, been labeled as disabled by society. Asperger's syndrome comes in a wide range of forms and shapes, and every individual is affected by their disability differently. Even though Christopher acknowledges that he is different, the protagonist himself does not recognize that he has a disability. When other people realize that he has some unique traits or point out his "diagnosis," the protagonist initially does not recognize this. As an individual with autism spectrum disorder (now referred to as ASD), it is difficult to understand other individuals' emotions and states of mind. Christopher elaborates on this in the novel, where he states that "I didn't understand about other people having minds" (Haddon 2004, p.145). Not recognizing other people's emotions may also have affected his ability to understand his own emotions. Therefore, there is substantial ground to argue that his mental health disability has to a large extent, influenced him as an individual and how he interacts with people and society.

In order to understand how the protagonist's disability shapes him as an individual, it will be necessary to analyze the structure and point of view of the novel, as well as the protagonist's language and thoughts to see how his mind works. From this point, the reader will be able to understand his disability, how this shapes him into the individual he appears as in the novel, and why he acts as he does. Further, the way Haddon utilizes this particular novelistic structure and point of view to challenge normalized views on mental health disabilities, he makes it possible for the reader to understand Christopher's way of thinking and regarding the world.

### **3.1.1 Structure of the novel**

The first step in analyzing how the protagonist's mind functions is to look at the novel's structure. According to Ray (2013)

[t]he most important way that the novel achieves its message that disability is a social construction is through point of view and using form to critique the dominant novel form: the novel is written from Christopher's perspective, rather than being about Christopher.

This further suggests a large amount of agency, utilizing subjectivity instead of passivity. At first glance, one can easily recognize that this novel has no conventional structure, which is a significant symbol of a story being narrated by the protagonist. Firstly, the chapters are organized in prime numbers, connected to his way of thinking. Christopher states: "I know [...] every prime number up to 7,507 (Haddon 2004, p.2). This way of demonstrating his knowledge is what makes the most sense in his mind. His diagnosis makes him think and process information in a certain way, which makes the most sense to him, which in most cases differs from the norm in society. Secondly, we can tell that it is not a traditional story structure, as the events do not occur in chronological order. The first chapter starts in the middle of the action, where Christopher finds his neighbor's dead dog. In contrast, the second chapter introduces Christopher and how he cannot easily understand other people's emotions. This unorganized structure of the novel is a way for the author to illustrate how events are occurring in the protagonist's mind. An interpretation of why the author chose to create the story in this unorganized order is to give the reader an insight into what it is like in the protagonist's mind. By having this specific unchronological order, the reader experiences the chaos and how detailed the world may seem for someone with ASD. The order of the story

also makes it easier and more manageable for the reader to understand and identify with the narrator.

### **3.1.2 Language and thoughts**

The author attempts to grant sympathy for the protagonist through depictions of the narrator's understanding of the world as an individual with ASD. Another way of learning this is through the language used in the novel. The reader gets a sense of unorder in the narrator's writing, as it is messy at the same time as it is organized and neat. Additionally, the language in the novel is 'childlike' and verbal in the sense that his thoughts and actions are emphasized mainly by rattling off his thoughts. This contributes to the fact that the protagonist is a young boy who feels the need to explain and tell the reader about every detail in his mind. To do this, he often departs from the actual story to explain a phenomenon or diverges into another story while telling a story. At the same time, he carefully explains everything in the novel down to every detail for the reader to be able to put themselves in Christopher's shoes to understand matters in the same way as he does.

The protagonist is made very aware of his disability because he feels the need to carefully explain everything to the reader, who is represented by a "neurotypical" in the eyes of the protagonist. Therefore, the protagonist believes that the neurotypical mind is "deficient" (Loftis 2015, p.127). The narrator states:

My memory is like a film. That is why I am really good at remembering things, like the conversations I have written down in this book, and what people were wearing, and what they smelled like, because my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack (Haddon 2004, p.96).

This is an illustration of how the narrator processes and perceives information with his mental health disability, which is a trait of his extraordinariness. This differs from how a "neurotypical" individual thinks and processes information.

The second way to explain the narrator's disability through the language is through his unique taste in different subjects. Christopher has very particular likes and dislikes, which are highly emphasized in the novel. A part of his disability is that he feels very strongly for or against something, and this is something we see in the novel. One way this is visible is that he is very hung up on details: "And Mr. Jeavons smells of soap and wears brown shoes that have



approximately 60 tiny circular holes in each of them” (Haddon 2004, p.5). His mind tends to focus on more minor details instead of the bigger picture. This often leads to a lot of confusion and disturbance in his mind and is a way for the reader to understand the mind of an individual with ASD.

A critical aspect for Christopher is the aspect of honesty and trust. Therefore, the protagonist also needs to be straightforward to the readers of the novel. Thus, the narrator is honest about the things he does understand and like, and the things that he does not understand, like humor and playing jokes. This is a big contrast to the previous chapter about Green’s novel, as the characters of the novel utilize their humor and play jokes as a means to challenge normality in their society. In Haddon’s novel, Christopher explains: “This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them” (Haddon 2004, p.10). His mental health disability provides him with limitations regarding social interaction, here in the form of humor. He does not understand humor and how it functions. By utilizing these kinds of statements in the novel, the author attempts to grant sympathy for the protagonist and thus explains to the reader that the protagonist has a disability without mentioning it explicitly in the novel. However, the novel is still funny to the reader as Christopher utilizes humor even though he does not realize it himself.

Finally, the mind of the autistic protagonist functions in a way that he cannot process many different things simultaneously. This is illustrated in the scene where he argues with the policeman after finding the dead dog. The policeman starts asking him many questions: ”He was asking too many questions and he was asking them too quickly. They were stacking up in my head like loaves in the factory where Uncle Terry works” (Haddon 2004, p.8). This statement from Christopher is a way to illustrate to the reader how the mind of the protagonist functions. Instead of using emotion to explain his state of mind, he reasons around logic and bases most of his reasoning solely on logic. Instead of stating that he felt upset, he tries to find a logical explanation for how he thought about this confrontation. Further, he illustrates it as something familiar to him, which he has seen before. He feels the need to explain it as something he knows what looks like, since he has seen it before, instead of illustrating it by using a metaphor because he does not understand metaphors. This form of response to confrontation is constantly repeated throughout the novel. He fails to understand conflict and feels overwhelmed and stressed, and often turns to lie down, groaning to block out the sensory overload.

I do not like people shouting at me. It makes me scared that they are going to hit me or touch me and I do not know what is going to happen. [...] She started screaming again. I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes and rolled forward till I was hunched up with my forehead pressed onto the grass. The grass was wet and cold. It was nice (Haddon 2004, p.4).

This is the protagonist's way of explaining that he was feeling overwhelmed. Christopher has previously explained how he does not understand other people's emotions. Therefore, he might have issues trying to explain and understand his own emotions, which sparks the feeling of being overwhelmed. This is also a passage in which the reader becomes more sympathetic towards the narrator as they start understanding his inner life better.

## **3.2 Perspectives on the protagonist**

Alike Green's novel, the society in Haddon's novel provides different perspectives on the disabled protagonist and narrator. Some of their views largely emphasize that Christopher is defined by his disability, which is a fundamental aspect of the medical model of disability. Therefore, this section seeks to explain the different perspectives of the protagonist that the multiple character groups of the novel have. The views will be justified through theory from the 'disability studies' field, specifically the social and the medical model of disability.

### **3.2.1 Social and medical model of disability**

The medical model views the individual as sick and something that needs to be fixed. Furthermore, this view puts the disabled individual in a position where they are viewed as a tragedy and may be exposed to pity (PWDA). This model of disability is an outdated view of the disabled individual. It strengthens society's ability to stigmatize and stereotype these individuals and try to make them conform to normality. On the other hand, the social model considered the individual as disabled by the individual's barriers in society and was developed to help disabled individuals take action against discrimination, remove the obstacles they face in society, and seek justice for equality and their rights (Shape Arts). Furthermore, for the purpose of challenging normality in society, the social model of disability provides great support as to doing this. As Clemmensen and K ppe (2021) argued, disabled individuals will deviate from the norm of society, whether they have a physical or a mental form of disability. This is a view that some of the character groups in the novel carry.

Therefore, it is essential to investigate the individual character groups' perspectives of the protagonist.

### **3.2.2 Christopher's family**

The first character group with a particular perspective is his family, particularly his father. The father is the protagonist's primary caregiver and guardian, as his mother left them when he was young. Ever since Christopher was a little boy, he had lived under the belief that his mother died when he was a child. The reality, however, is that she could not handle the stress of having a son with a mental health disability who needed immediate and special care. Although the protagonist's father loves him unconditionally, he struggles with his frustration over not understanding his son's behavior and the unfolding of his diagnosis. His frustration often leads to blowing up in anger to express his emotions. Christopher explains: "Then the next day Father said he was sorry that he had hit me and didn't mean to" (Haddon 2004, p.108). Although his father does not intentionally hurt his son, this is his way of handling certain situations that might occur when having a mentally disabled son. The father tries to cope with Christopher's condition for the best of his son. He organizes his meals according to the protagonist's preferences regarding his particular likes and dislikes. This is a way for him to cope with his disability and develop a form of understanding and trust for his son. Christopher's father wants him to be able to unfold his otherness and to be his true self, but it comes with limitations. A disability such as Asperger's Syndrome is not an abnormal disability for an individual to carry, but it comes with a few prerequisites.

As an individual who carries a mental health disability, such as the protagonist, trust becomes a big issue in their lives. It is visible in the novel that trust is a matter that weighs heavily on the protagonist and is a theme that dominates in several sections of the novel. Therefore, a significant moment is when the family does not recognize this. Christopher eventually finds out that his mother is not dead after all and figures out that his father had lied to him about this – which causes much uncertainty for him: "And then I thought I could go and live with Mother because she was my family and I knew where she lived because I could remember the address from the letters [...]" (Haddon 2004, p.161). When he finds out that his father killed the dog, he initially believes that his father can also kill him. The logical aspect of this matter takes over their trust for each other; emotions such as fear submerge and outweigh their trust: "I had to get out of the house. Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me, because I couldn't trust him, even though he had said, 'Trust me,' because he had told a

lie about a big thing” (Haddon 2004, pp.152-153). We can read this conflict with trust as the family is between the medical model and the social model of disability. As parents, they want to make life easier for him, but at the same time, they are doing contradictory actions that make life complicated and create a great amount of uncertainty for their son.

### **3.2.3 The police**

In literature, one can find several examples of government officials failing to understand how they should handle individuals with mental disabilities and challenges. The police officers in Haddon’s novel are no exemptions from this matter. The police officers in the novel are an accurate representation of how government officials very often do not know how to handle individuals who carry some form of mental health disability or disorder. This is visible in an incident between the protagonist and a policeman, where the policeman does not know how to handle the disabled individual: “The policeman took hold of my arm and lifted me onto my feet. I didn’t like him touching me like this. And this is when I hit him” (Haddon 2004, pp. 8-9). This incident occurred in Christopher’s meeting with the police officer on the night that he found the dead dog. At first, the police officer believed that Christopher might have had something to do about the dog dying. When the police officer began to ask many questions regarding his appearance at the scene, it triggered Christopher's “groaning” action to separate him from the noise of the world (Haddon 2004, p.8). This, of course, is an action that made it clear to the police officer that Christopher refrains from the norm.

The police are a solid representation of the medical model of disability. They do not understand how to regard individuals such as Christopher with mental disabilities. The police officer not knowing how to handle an individual with a mental health disability might be due to a lack of information about controlling these kinds of situations, which is an issue that might arise regarding social groups that are often exposed to stereotypes. The fact that they cannot keep a professional façade and handle the situation in a professional yet appropriate manner is directly affected by the medical model. This view of disabled individuals helps maintain the barriers that disabled individuals face in society and thus does not enable them to unfold their otherness and maintain their normality.

### **3.2.4 Christopher’s peers**

Christopher's peers are another character group that shares the particular view of disabled individuals aligned with the medical model of disabilities. The character group

of Christopher's peers can be divided into two sections. The first section is the disabled peers who attend the special school, and the second section is the non-disabled peers who attend the 'normal' school. The protagonist's peers from the special school all have some sort of disability or learning difficulty that requires them to attend a different school to get special education. The protagonist attends the special school but fails to recognize why he belongs to the special school. In one of the chapters, Christopher elaborates on the pupils at the special school:

All the other children at my school are stupid. Except I'm not meant to call them stupid, even though this is what they are. I'm meant to say that they have learning difficulties or that they have special needs. But this is stupid because everyone has learning difficulties because learning to speak French or understanding relativity is difficult and also everyone has special needs, like Father, who has to carry a little packet of artificial sweetening tablets around with him to put in his coffee to stop him from getting fat, or Mrs. Peters, who wears a beige-colored hearing aid, or Siobhan, who has glasses so thick that they give you a headache if you borrow them, and none of these people are Special Needs, even if they have special needs (Haddon 2004, p.56).

Here, Christopher clearly shows the arbitrary notion of normality, where he questions why certain needs are considered "special" whereas others are not considered this way. The answer to this question can be related back to the medical model of disability, where society problematizes medical diagnoses and alienates the individuals in society. The quotation above can be interpreted in different ways. In the first section, it comes forward that the protagonist feels that the peers who attend the same school as him are stupid because they have some sort of learning difficulty or disability – which I interpret as him feeling superior over his peers. In this interpretation, it is also thinkable that Christopher feels alienated from the special school since he believes that he is more intelligent than his peers and thus does not belong to a school for kids with learning disabilities. However, as the excerpt goes on, the reader can sense a form of understanding and tenderness within the protagonist. As he reflects on what it means to have special needs, it seems like Christopher develops a form of sympathy for individuals with special needs. In the same chapter, Christopher tells the reader that he is "going to prove that he is not stupid" by being the first to take the A-level maths and get an A grade (Haddon 2004, p.56). This statement from the protagonist substantiates

that he feels superior and, thus, alienated in the special school. Ray (2013), argues that the fact

[t]hat Christopher is in a special education class is the strongest evidence that he has a disability, but, as we will see, a disability studies perspective suggests that this evidence is more a reflection of how society perceives Christopher than an ontological reality.

This can mean that the protagonist is stuck in a void of uncertainty and insecurity, which can be a difficult position for a child such as Christopher to be positioned in.

The protagonist's peers from the 'normal' school contain a stereotypical view of Christopher and the special schools he attends. Christopher illustrates this in the novel: "sometimes the children from the school down the road see us in the street when we're getting off the bus and they shout, 'Special Needs! Special Needs!'" (Haddon 2004, p.56). The view that these kids have provides little insight into what it means to have special needs and is undermined by a lack of knowledge about the matter. Christopher's peers are a group that is purely representing the medical model. They view the narrator as only a mental health disability and not a child like themselves. His peers and their view of the narrator contribute to stereotyping, creating a stigma around disabilities, and further helps maintain the barriers in society for people with disabilities.

### **3.2.5 Christopher's teacher**

As an individual who deviates slightly from the norm in society, it is crucial to have a support system that accepts your personality and does not try to change the individual you are. In Haddon's novel, this support system consists of the narrator's teacher, Siobhan. Siobhan is a teacher at the special school and helps maintain Christopher's individuality and otherness. Alongside Christopher's father, she is one of the only people who understands and guides the protagonist through his life with a mental health disability.

Due to the strong emphasis the disability studies have put on undoing the environmental barriers, there now exist educated people who understand the challenges people like Christopher experience. Siobhan represents them. This is because she is trying to help the protagonist function as an independent individual in society. She teaches him about emotions, how to understand people, and how to follow the social norms in society, which are

commonly known to be challenging for people with ASD to understand independently. Christopher emphasizes this in the novel, stating that “Siobhan understands. When she tells me not to do something, she tells me exactly what it is that I am not allowed to do. And I like this” (Haddon 2004, p.39). This explains the trust and respect he has for his teacher, and that he believes that she wants him to succeed in unfolding his individuality. Furthermore, she supports the particular characteristics that make him who he is, and she does not try to change him in any way. This is what a support system is supposed to be, and furthermore, one of the main reasons why Christopher succeeds in standing against the opposition in society, and moreover manages to challenge normality.

### **3.3 Challenging normality**

This chapter has, till this point analyzed how the narrator portrays his disability and, further, which different perspectives the different character groups have of Christopher. The perspectives from the other character groups will be necessary for this section to investigate how the protagonist manages to challenge the normative views that society has on disabled individuals such as Christopher. To analyze how the protagonist challenges normality in society, it is essential to discuss some critical framework and aspects, such as his “special needs” and his support system, particularly the school he attends.

We can view the challenge of normality in society as a direct consequence of society’s view of individuals with special needs. Furthermore, Christopher’s way of challenging normality is by providing an alternative method for society to view individuals like him. At the beginning of the novel, we sense that Christopher has a limited range of interaction because he is easily misunderstood by people who do not know him and has issues trusting strangers. Therefore, one of the most significant moments is when Christopher decides to leave Swindon and go to London to live with his mother. This is an important event for several reasons. First, such events are not what society would expect from individuals like Christopher, as the stereotypical view of individuals like him usually underestimates them. It is further significant because he cannot predict what he will meet on his journey, but mainly because he decides to permanently move to London to live with his mother, whom he does not know anymore. At this moment, he is challenging several of the most important values to him as an individual, such as stability and safety. By challenging himself in this way, he is also challenging how others view him by proving that he can do more than what society has put limitations upon him.

At many points in the novel, we can see that many members of society are not equipped to understand individuals such as the protagonist. An example is when he meets the police officer who does not know how to handle the protagonist like he would take any other “normal” individual. This is another way of limiting his interactions in society and stereotyping him because of his disability. A well-known trait of Asperger’s syndrome is that the individual often requires a set of rules and frames for their daily interaction. However, when the protagonist sets out to seek his presumably dead mother, he breaks this range of interaction. Therefore, this is a significant moment in the novel and illustrates how the novel tends to challenge normative views of disability. This moment in the novel is essential in Christopher’s life. His condition relies heavily upon stability and clear limits. Therefore, the reader could not have predicted that the protagonist would take a leap and leave his safe environment. As this significant moment approaches the novel, Christopher chooses to base his choice on logic. This is illustrated in the novel:

And then I realized that there was nothing I could do which felt safe. And I made a picture of it in my head like this. And then I imagined crossing out all the possibilities which were impossible which is like in a maths exam, when you look at all the questions and you decide which ones you are going to do and which ones you are not going to do because your decision is final and you can’t change your mind. And it was like this. Which meant that I had to go London to live with Mother (Haddon 2004, pp.162-163).

Christopher will do anything for him to feel safe and bases his reasoning on logic. Therefore, the choices that made him feel unsafe were impossible to carry through. However, the fact that he chooses to go live with his mother, whom he has not seen for many years, is considered safe to him, is a bit confusing to the reader. However, in Christopher’s mind this is what makes the most sense since his mother is his family, and he therefore can trust her

In the novel, Christopher’s school is a special school for people with special needs. This school shows an improved institution that is beneficial for every individual, no matter their needs. We can see that the school institution supports Christopher’s otherness rather than trying to change or ‘normalize’ him. The school and its professionals can look past the individuals’ diagnoses. Moreover, we can see that the professionals provide and maintain Christopher’s otherness. We can see this in the light of his teacher, Siobhan. Out of all the adults in his life, she is perhaps the most understanding of his special needs and strengths. She



explains appropriate social behavior to him in a way that respects and helps his intelligence. In Green's novel, the peers support the protagonist and see her as herself. However, in Haddon's novel, Christopher's school and teachers function in that role. Having a well-functioning support system is essential in maintaining one's individuality and otherness and being able to unfold their personality without being judged, stereotyped, or stigmatized.

Ray (2013) emphasizes that "The Curious Incident provides a powerful critique of this category of 'normal'. Paradoxically, by challenging readers to see Christopher as 'normal,' the novel questions the very idea of 'normality' in the first place." This statement brings the reader back to examine what normality in society is. Who are the judges of normality, and how do individuals conform to the norms of normality? To answer how the protagonist challenges normative views on disability and normality, I want to return to the discussion of how the language in the novel represents the chaos in the mind of an individual with a mental health disability. To an individual born with ASD, like Christopher, his way of thinking and perceiving the world is his definition of normal. However, as Ray (2013) proposes,

language organizes the world in ways that often reflect power relationships, and so any critique of "normality" is fundamentally a challenge to the power of language to divide the world into hierarchies. Christopher's orientation toward language is one of suspicion; he knows that people often use language to make fun of him and that language obscures his perception of the world. In these ways, language can "naturalize" disability as abnormal.

Several examples from the novel fit appropriately with the passage above. A clear example is when Christopher's peers from the "normal" school yell "Special Needs" to the children attending the special school (Haddon 2004, p.56). By using the term "special needs", the peers from the "normal" school are creating a space between them and the other children, suggesting that they are ultimately "better" than the kids from the special school.

Furthermore, the fact that they are using such a negatively charged term is a form of ruling technique meant to point out that they have a condition that makes them "abnormal" and are intended to be alienated and isolated in society. As discussed in the previous chapter, Christopher Shinn discussed how one could challenge norms and normality in society. He exemplified disabled characters as the triumph of the human spirit and a sense of freakishness every individual feels inside (2014). The reader can see this statement as very suitable for Haddon's novel. Christopher relies heavily on honesty and is always very direct in his speech

and conversations with other people. This is a trait that many people in the real world probably wish they could enact, but it would not conform to the norms of society.

The novel has received numerous critical reviews and receptions, both good and bad. However, many fail to recognize the main character without labeling him with a disability. There is a tendency to focus on his disabilities (such as autism and Asperger's syndrome in this case) rather than his actual abilities, such as his exceptional math skills. This minimizes the complex themes and contents of the novel, where the other important themes are set aside. This is supported by Haddon, who writes:

curious incident is not a book about asperger's. it's a novel whose central character describes himself as 'a mathematician with some behavioural difficulties'. indeed he never uses the words 'asperger's' or 'autism' [...]. if anything it's a novel about difference, about being an outsider, about seeing the world in a surprising and revealing way. it's as much a novel about us as it is about Christopher. [...] labels say nothing about a person. they say only how the rest of us categorise that person. good literature is always about peeling labels off. and treating real people with dignity is always about peeling the labels off. a diagnosis may lead to practical help. but genuinely understanding another human being involves talking and listening to them and finding out what makes them an individual, not what makes them part of a group (Haddon 2009).

In society, there will always be people who challenge and judges us. Although we have seen these judges present in the novel, the protagonist does a fine job challenging the norms and limitations they have put in the society. The protagonist is highly aware that he is perceived as different in the eyes of the world and that his language, thoughts, and actions contradict the norms he is supposed to conform with. The way the protagonists in Green's and Haddon's novels challenge societal norms are similar. They both oppose society's norms by containing their disabilities, but they challenge these norms differently. Christopher challenges norms in his society by presenting an alternative way of viewing individuals with mental health disabilities such as himself, proving that their way of living does not have to be limited by specific barriers that society puts upon the individual. He furthermore shows that disabled individuals can conquer challenges in their lives independently, despite their disability – essentially proving the medical model wrong. On the other hand, Hazel challenges norms in her society by demonstrating that individuals can continue living their lives despite their

medical diagnoses and disabilities. Furthermore, she is proof that it is possible to live with a potentially fatal medical condition, proving that disabilities are not a hindrance to life itself.

### **3.4 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed the physically disabled protagonist Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and how he challenges the normality he is opposed to in society. Alike the analysis of Green's novel, the beginning of the chapter discusses how the protagonist portrayed his disability. Since the protagonist has a mental health disability, it was necessary to look into how he portrayed his disability to society. The analysis showed that his personality and how he expressed this were similar at the beginning and the end of the novel. However, at the end of the novel, the reader recognizes that Christopher's perspective of himself has changed. He had changed into someone who believed in himself and believed that he was able to participate in society individually and independently. Similar to the analysis in the previous chapter, it was necessary to investigate the different character groups' perspectives of Christopher. Also, here the findings were similar. The analysis showed that many character groups supported both models of disability, however, with slightly more emphasis on the medical model of disability. Nevertheless, one character group also had special importance in this novel. Christopher's teacher, Siobhan, is part of his support system. She is perhaps the one who had the most impact in teaching Christopher how to be independent, understand and regard other people, and, more importantly, understand himself. There is also ground to argue that Siobhan is the one who sparked a change within Christopher himself and gave him reason to believe that he is not different in the eyes of society; he is purely unique.

The protagonist challenges normality in his society by proving the society wrong regarding their assumptions about him. Usually, individuals with a mental health disability, such as Christopher, are exposed to many stereotypes and stigma in society. People will always have an assumption about you that might or might not be correct. However, by going on his adventure to London and acting for his wishes, he proves society's presumptions and stereotypes wrong and provides an alternative way to view him. This is seen as a contribution to the 'disability studies' movement and the social model of disability and is ultimately the actions that need to be taken to create change in society.



## **4 Discussion and importance for Young Adult Readers**

In the thesis, I have provided an in-depth analysis of the Green's and Haddon's novels according to relevant theories and discourses regarding disability studies. In the previous chapters, I have analyzed how the protagonists have portrayed their disabilities and how other characters in the story have perceived them and challenged other people's reading of them solely as their disability. The last point will be elaborated on more in-depth in this section. In this chapter, I will compare the novels with each other, discuss them side by side concerning the themes of disabilities, stereotypes, and social taboos, and finally discuss young adult readership and why such novels are essential for young readers to read. Finally, I will discuss why it is necessary to study these novels alongside each other and how this can be important for young adult readers and education.

### **4.1 Discussing Green's and Haddon's novels**

The earlier sections show Hazel and Christopher have been labeled as 'the other' and 'abnormal' in society. Therefore, they are isolated, alienated, normalized, and stigmatized by other community members, including government officials such as the police and medical doctors. This section will discuss some of the similarities and differences between the novels. The discussion will seek to respond to the first research question, which is the following; *How are taboo subjects represented in each novel, and how do the writers challenge normative views on disability?* Comparing the novels will strengthen the importance of reading the novels alongside each other and investigating how the protagonists challenge normality in their societies.

#### **4.1.1 Similarities**

Both novels focus on "ableism," which is the discrimination and the social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior (Eisenmenger 2021). At the core of the concept lies the fundamental premise that disabled people require "fixing" and that the individual is defined by their disability (ibid.). This does conform with the content of the medical model of disability, which also illustrates the disabled individual as someone who needs to be fixed. These theoretical views do not account for their individualities, wishes, dreams, or the fact that they are individuals who wish to live a life despite their disabilities. While the concept of "ableism" is presented as a problem, the field of disability studies and the social model of disability offers a solution to this problem. From

reading both novels, we can understand these concepts in practical terms. This is exemplified by the fact that the protagonists are two teenagers who, to the best of their abilities, live with their disabilities. Luckily, the teenagers are supported by their support systems, which help and assist them.

Through the analysis of the novels, we have also seen the importance of having people who support you in living with a disability. In Green's novel, this support system is particularly the family and friends from the support group. They helped get Hazel back on her feet and realize that there is more to life than damage control and managing her sickness. In turning her life around, she provides society with a different perspective of life with a physical disability. In Haddon's novel, the case is slightly different. Here, the question has not been about whether the medical diagnosis will disappear, as Christopher's diagnosis is something he will have to deal with for the rest of his life. Therefore, it is even more critical for the individual to understand how to cope and live with the disability to participate individually and equally as other individuals in society. The importance has also been that the individual shall be able to fight the stigma and the stereotyping that finds a place in society. To the protagonist's advance, the school and its professional is an institution that approves of and supports individuals labeled as 'abnormal' by a stigmatizing society that seeks to fulfill that every member of the community conforms to its norms.

Another significant comparison between the two novels is how the novels end. The endings in the books represent their state of mind and reflect their ability to stand up against the stigma they face in society due to their disabilities. Furthermore, we have seen a significant change in the protagonists' state of mind throughout the novels. However, there is a more substantial development within the character in Green's novel than in Haddon's novel. The genuine reason behind this is that the protagonists had different prerequisites in their lives and therefore have different ways of progressing in life regarding their disability. Consequently, we will not see the same progression in the two characters, as they will develop differently.

In Haddon's novel, it is visible that the protagonist goes on with his presumably everyday life. As I discussed in chapter 3, Christopher's character at the beginning of the novel is a bit wary and careful, but at the same time as he presents himself as the honest individual that he is. This is vastly different from how his character appears at the novel's end. Thus, he is still the same individual with the same personality he had initially. However, it is visible that he has brought with him the lessons he has learned both about himself and his abilities, society, and

the way they interpret individuals like him throughout the novel. His experiences throughout the novel have made him more robust and more equipped to handle his life independently, which is something he mentions explicitly in the novel. At the end of the novel, Christopher states: “And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything.” (Haddon 2004, p.268). This passage emphasizes that he has learned from his journey and what he has experienced on the way, and his experiences have made him better equipped for handling different experiences and situations on his own. The same case goes for Hazel in Green’s novel. In chapter 2, I analyzed the tone at the novel’s beginning, which I argued was dark and bore the mark of ‘depression.’ At the end of the novel, however, we can see a significant change in Hazel’s mindset. It is visible that she has processed, accepted, and adapted to her new lifestyle living with her disability, and she is okay in doing so. A large portion of this change is since she had a robust support system to motivate a shift from within. With the help of her family and her friends from the support group, she finally realized that it is possible to live a full life and be happy despite living with cancer.

#### **4.1.2 Contrasts**

First of all, they have significant differences in their types of disabilities. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel has a visible form of disability, referred to as a physical disability. In contrast, Christopher in *Curious Incident* has an invisible form of disability, referred to as a mental health disability. Therefore, the two individuals face different challenges in their societies, even though one would assume that they would face the same kind and amount of stigma. The differences in illustrations of the characters’ state of mind are primarily connected to their different types of disabilities. Hazel illustrates her isolating herself from her loved ones by using metaphors to explain how they might be affected by her disability. In contrast, Christopher uses a more practical approach to isolating himself by laying down on the ground, covering his ears with his hands to shut out the noise from the world. In correlation to their disabilities, they have different approaches to handling the challenges they face in society, which makes the protagonists differ from one another.

Further, the protagonists have different support systems, which guide them on how they progress and develop despite their disabilities. While Hazel has a slightly larger support system consisting of her family and friends from her support group, Christopher has a smaller

one consisting of his loving yet troubled father and his consistent teacher. However, this is quite relevant to how the protagonists handle their disabilities. In Hazel's case, it is a manner of coping with a disability that might eventually disappear, leaving her with a "normal" life free of disability in the best-case scenario. On the other hand, in Christopher's case, it is a manner of living a "normal" life with his disability, making the most out of his abilities.

Another difference between the novels is how they regard their environment and how they allow this to affect their personality. Hazel observes everyone around her and views herself in their eyes, particularly her mother and her old friends, letting this affect how she acts in society. Furthermore, she focuses on how she is perceived to a large extent, which differs from Haddon's novel. On the other hand, Christopher does not understand other people around her; he only feels their criticism of himself. Although he feels this criticism, he does not let this affect how he acts in society.

## **4.2 Challenging normality and breaking social taboos**

In the previous two sections, I have analyzed how the protagonists in Green's and Haddon's novels break the social taboos and stigma they are opposed to in society. The protagonists break the social taboos they face in society by questioning everyone's stigmatizing view of them. Furthermore, they challenge normality by providing society with a different perspective on disabled individuals. By proving stereotypes and stigmatizing views of disabled individuals as wrong, they force a change in society's norms and its definition of normality. Suppose someone asks about their integrity or somehow expresses that they are different from others because of their disability. In that case, the protagonists in both novels tend to alter their perspective by presenting them with a view of how living with a disability can look compared to society's beliefs. This way of portraying human emotions may appeal to young adult readers as well, which is an aspect that will be discussed in the next section. Both Haddon and Green's novels are written from the first-person perspective of a young adult with a disability. The reader tags along on their journey through life and experiences how they manage to challenge the norms and normality they face in society. As mentioned earlier, the characters challenge normality in society by providing an alternative way to view the disabled protagonists and illustrating how individuals containing disabilities fit into society just like any other individual.



The challenge of normality in Green's novel is quite visible: Hazel challenges norms in her society by demonstrating that individuals can continue living their lives despite their medical diagnoses and disabilities. Furthermore, she is proof that it is possible to live with a potentially fatal medical condition, proving that disabilities are not a hindrance to life itself. Although the characters have been through a great deal of suffering and pain in their presumably short lives, such as battling cancer, they thus somehow manage to find all the bright points and moments of happiness in their lives. Furthermore, some would argue that the characters in the novels are allowed to break taboos that might not be allowed to break in real life. The characters in the novel deal with many dark materials, such as cancer, amputation, blindness, and death. However, they can still play jokes on such dark matters that they face in their daily lives – which is admirable and something every reader of the novel can aspire to and strive for. The fact that the characters are able to be humorous about their own situation and illness shows that they have reached a certain level of acceptance around their diagnosis and illness, which proves the fact that they are “normal” in the same way as any other individual.

In Haddon's novel, the challenge of normality is also quite visible, but in another way than in Green's novel. Due to having a different kind of disability, Christopher's way of challenging normality is by providing an alternative method for society to view individuals like him. At many points in the novel, we can see that many members of society are not equipped to understand individuals such as the protagonist and that they carry a perspective of him as deviant from the “norm” in society. However, he goes out of his way to prove society wrong, and that he is able to take action just like any other “normal” individual. The protagonist is further highly aware that he is perceived as different in the eyes of the world and that his language, thoughts, and actions contradict the norms he is supposed to conform with. Christopher challenges norms in his society by presenting an alternative way of viewing individuals with mental health disabilities such as himself, proving that their way of living does not have to be limited by specific barriers that society puts upon the individual. He furthermore shows that disabled individuals can conquer challenges in their lives independently, despite their disability – essentially proving the medical model wrong.

### **4.3 Young Adult Fiction and how the novels appeal to young adult readers**

Young Adult Fiction is a genre of literature that aims to be suitable for adolescents. This kind of literature seeks to be appealing and meaningful while discussing essential themes useful for individuals in that period of their lives. Therefore, this section will justify why Green's and Haddon's novels, particularly the protagonists and the controversial topics, will help develop the young adults' independent thinking and create a deeper understanding of normality. Furthermore, the novels will teach young adult readers valuable lessons about life and make them aspire for personal growth. In this section, I will emphasize the importance of utilizing Young Adult Fiction literature in education and the importance of young adult readers reading literature containing controversial themes such as disabilities.

#### **4.3.1 Young Adult Fiction and education**

An alternative way of understanding the importance of young adults reading literature of significance for their personal growth and development of their understanding of normality is through such literature in school. The school is one of the most critical institutions in the young adult readers' life and, therefore, should function as an essential aspect in this section. A large amount of the topics from the Young Adult Fiction genre are possible to use in educational settings as well as for personal reading. Several steering documents in the Norwegian educational system make the individuals free to decide what they want their education to include. As the Young Adult Fiction literature counts for several topics and themes important for adolescents in their most crucial age, it is essential to facilitate an education that makes sense and is meaningful. In order to add some substantial ground for this statement, it is necessary to look to some of the critical steering documents to substantiate the choice of content in their education. The steering document I have chosen to include is the interdisciplinary topic of "health and life skills" to explain how literature can be used to facilitate this within the pupils. As previously mentioned, in the Core Curriculum of LK20, "the school's interdisciplinary topic health and life skills shall give the pupils competence which promotes sound physical and mental health" (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2019a). Furthermore, it also sought to form the basis for expressing their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and opinions and provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on the pupils' way of life and that of others (ibid.).

If the goal is to teach the pupils about controversial issues such as disability, sickness, stigma, and taboos, one of the best ways would be to indirectly experience this through the novel's plot and through the protagonists' experiences from living through this. This would help the pupils reflect on these topics and further reflect on others' ways of living their lives.

Moreover, this would give them insight that will be useful in creating and developing their own identity and mindset about other people. Using novels such as Haddon's and Green's in an educational setting will teach the pupils some lessons about empathy, sympathy, and compassion, thus teaching them that normality is a term that expands beyond what they might have believed in the beginning. As previously mentioned, both novels write from the first-person perspective of young adults with disabilities. This allows the reader to tag along on experiences and journeys, which the young adult reader can use in their development and creation of their self-identity. The usage of first-person narration in the novels underlines how the usage of the novels in an educational setting will be of significance for the students. The ability to relate to other people's situations and experiences is crucial in their own self-development. It is further essential to create a society that is more inclusive towards diversity, which is what the interdisciplinary topic aims to do.

Ria Cheyne (2019) provides a statement in her book *Disability, literature, genre: representation and affect in contemporary fiction*, which emphasizes the importance for students to read literature that includes disabilities and taboos, as it promotes inclusion rather than exclusion. She states that literature "can depict all kinds of disability encounters, and disability studies scholars have long observed that encounters with fictional disabled characters influence attitudes and behaviors in real-world encounters with disabled people" (p.79). Green's and Haddon's novels are great examples of literature that promotes inclusion rather than exclusion in society. The novels present realistic examples of young adults challenged by their disabilities in a normalizing society that puts stigma upon them and their medical diagnoses. However, instead of conforming to this society, they unfold their individuality and provide a different way of viewing them as individuals. They further promote the fact that they can live independently and on the same premises as any other individual in society, which are valuable lessons for students to learn.

Another critic that discusses the educational perspective of teaching disability literature, specifically *The Fault in Our Stars*, is Amber Moore (2017). In her article *Disabling*

*Assumptions*, she states that “using complementary texts and activities to fill in potential gaps in Green’s portrayal might be a strategy for ensuring that students have a more complex look at disability issues because these texts include voices from the disabled community” (p.79). This method of teaching disability literature allows the pupils to use their imagination and creativity more, which may open their eyes to the fact that disabilities are just like any other person. Her statement has also had individual significance to Green’s and Haddon’s novels, as the passage reflects on how the protagonists resist society’s reading of them only as their disability. Moreover, it emphasizes how they challenge the assumptions they face, which will function as an inspiration to the young adults reading such literature. Therefore, it is essential to include such voices instead of us patronizing them, as these voices can be used to show their perspective and point of view from the disabled community and can further promote inclusion.

As previously discussed, disabled characters, like the protagonists in the novels, are a representation of the triumph of the human spirit (Shinn 2014). In this sense, the pupil can understand the bigger picture, that people with disabilities, like the characters in the novels, are just like any ordinary individual. Therefore, I find it crucial for pupils to read this kind of literature. As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, both protagonists are allowed to break taboos that might not be allowed in reality. Both characters deal with dark materials and themes that young adults usually do not handle daily. The difference between the novels and reality is that the characters in the novels are allowed to play jokes about the dark materials they are dealing with.

#### **4.3.2 The novels’ significance for young readers**

In order to provide a correct response to why these novels appeal to young adult readers and why the readers must read literature that discusses controversial themes, it is necessary to examine which aspects the individual novels contain that hold significance for the young readers. The fact that the young adult readers can experience how the protagonists' process, accept and adapt to their lifestyle as disabled can inspire the readers. Further, this can provide the young readers with necessary insight and inspiration, which will develop their sense of compassion for people with other prerequisites than themselves. Regarding *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, pupils can discuss the communication obstacles that Christopher faces regularly. They should examine how people interact with him and whether they take his differences into account. This can open a broader discussion about mental illness

or difference, including how society perceives it, how it can be used to define people, how it affects family members, and how people can live full and satisfying lives despite the difficulties they face. The discussion young adults may have regarding *The Fault in Our Stars* is lot similar to the discussion about *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*: however, this discussion will revolve more around the physical aspect of disability. This can open a broader debate around illness in general, how it must be like to be struck by cancer at a young age, and how this affects a teenager's life. This will function as a gateway for the young readers to develop sympathy, empathy, and compassion for other young people who may suffer the same faith as the protagonist in the novel.

These implications raise the question of why young adult readers need to read the novels side-by-side?

First of all, reading both novels side-by-side makes it possible to reach a more extensive audience. People often seek what is familiar in a story to identify with the story, and this also accounts for students. As Carlsen (2018) emphasized, the protagonists' stories show how social, cultural, and biological factors shape the experiences and outlook of every individual, and that their journeys often are recognizable to readers in the process of defining their own attitudes, values, and world views (p.139). This underlines the importance of reading literature that is meaningful and appeals to the reader. In that way, stories with a female narrator might reach more female readers, and stories with a male protagonist would get more male readers. Thus, bringing in one novel from each gender will reach a broader audience and bring their disabilities to the discussion. Second, both novels and their protagonists teach their young readers that they can fulfill their hopes and dreams without letting society put boundaries or obstacles. The protagonists' disabilities, both mental health and physical, should never be considered obstacles and should be regarded as normal as any other human characteristic. Moreover, the novels can teach adolescents valuable lessons about essential topics such as social diversity, all the while being entertaining and instructive. Finally, the novels function as crucial building blocks that serve as a way for adolescents to create a broader understanding of these critical aspects of society. While each book can do so independently, it is more efficient and enhances reading the novels alongside each other. They complement each other. These reasons for reading the novels alongside each other are related to the social model of disability, which was developed to help disabled individuals take action against discrimination, remove the barriers they face in society, and seek justice for equality

and their rights (Shape Arts). Therefore, young adults must read the novels alongside each other to develop these values and essential perspectives on life.

#### **4.4 Chapter conclusion**

This section aimed to discuss similarities and contrasts between the novels, why novels are essential to read for young adult readers, and why they are necessary to read side-by-side. As a future educator, I also found it helpful to include a pedagogical and educational perspective. Although the novels seem quite different at first glance, they are quite similar. Both novels focus on the subject of “ableism” and how this should be fought in society. Both protagonists contain robust support systems that allow them to unfold themselves without conforming to society’s norms. Furthermore, the comparison showed that both protagonists came out of the story more robust and independent. They both found their ways of coping with their own identities as disabled, thus portraying this as the new “normal” in society.

Furthermore, the novels will teach young adult readers valuable lessons about life and make them aspire for personal growth. An alternative way of understanding the importance of young adults reading literature of significance for their personal growth and development of their understanding of normality is through such literature in school. As previously mentioned, in the Core Curriculum of LK20, “the school's interdisciplinary topic health and life skills shall give the pupils competence which promotes sound physical and mental health” (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2019a). Furthermore, it also seeks to form the basis for expressing their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and opinions and provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on the pupils’ way of life and that of others (ibid). If the goal is to teach the pupils about controversial issues such as disability, sickness, stigma, and taboos, one of the best ways would be to indirectly experience this through the novel’s plot and through the protagonist’s experiences from living through this

As for why it is important for young adult readers to read contemporary literature that discusses controversial issues like Green’s and Haddon’s novels, it is justified through insight and compassion. The fact that the young adult readers can experience how the protagonists' process, accept and adapt to their lifestyle as disabled can inspire the readers. Further, this can provide the young readers with necessary insight and inspiration, which will develop their sense of compassion for people with other prerequisites than themselves. The importance of

young adult readers reading such literature is neatly summed up in an article by Wilhelm (2008), who states:

As the world becomes a more complex and smaller place, it seems that self-understanding and the willingness and the ability to understand others will become ever more important. That is one big reason why I think literature is important for adolescents” (p.53)

This justification makes it clear that by reading this kind of literature, the young adults will develop their self-identity and compassion for other people and will furthermore continue the work of the field of disability studies. As we broaden our horizons for other people, we contribute to helping disabled individuals take action against discrimination, remove the barriers they face in society, and seek justice for equality and their rights (Shape Arts).





## 5 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate how the disabled protagonists in John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars* and Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* challenge normality and social taboos in their societies, and why young adult readers need to read literature that discusses controversial themes. The main research questions I aimed to address in this thesis are: How are taboo subjects, such as mental and physical disabilities, represented in each novel? Secondly, how do the writers challenge normality and normative views on disability, and how do they let their characters vocalize their points of view? Finally, how do these representational techniques make it easier for pupils to relate to the main characters' viewpoints and issues concerning disabilities? As I analyzed the novels and discussed them side by side, I became more intrigued by the minute.

The protagonists' disabilities represent the taboo subjects in both novels. However, the protagonist's situations are quite different. In Green's novel, the disability has developed over time, and therefore the protagonist has had a severe life change accordingly. Thus, the analysis of Hazel's disability revolved around how the disability affected her perspective of life. As discussed in chapter two, her life after receiving her diagnosis was challenging and caused her to be depressed. She started letting go of the things that used to matter to her, like attending school like an everyday teenager, and she stopped spending time with her friends – all signs that she let her diagnosis take over her life. The disability has not developed in Haddon's novel, as the protagonist was born with a mental health disability. Therefore, the analysis of Christopher's disability deviated from that of Hazel's, as it focused on how he portrayed his disability. Interestingly, his character development was surprisingly non-existing, as he managed to maintain his individuality and otherness throughout the novel even though he met many obstacles and stigma from society. In the analysis of both novels, I also discussed the different perspectives that the various character groups had of the protagonists in both novels, which were varied. In the eyes of the other character groups in the novel, the protagonists in both novels are often defined by their disability, which is emphasized in the medical model of disability. However, these stigmatizing views only fuel them to prove the opposite – that they can challenge their opinions of them solely as their disability.

As for how the novels challenge normality and social taboos in their societies, I have tried to answer this by analyzing the novels individually at first. In Green's novel, we can see that her connection with her friends who are in the same situation as she has significantly impacted

how she turned her life around and started challenging normality. In Haddon's novel, his challenge of normality came from a spark within himself as he understood what he could do independently. By comparing the novels to each other, I found out that for the protagonists to be able to challenge normality in their society, they need to have a solid and stable support system that helps them achieve what they want. In the case of the novels, both main characters have this reliable support system that gives them the necessary support, encouragement, and urges to reach their goals. In Green's novel, I investigated that Hazel's peers functioning as her support system required her to start re-living her life after getting her diagnosis. Ultimately, it took someone in the same position as her to make her realize that there is much more to her life than her diagnosis. The same goes for Christopher's supporting system in Haddon's novel, in which the most significant support comes from his teacher at the special school, Siobhan. The way that she supported him was to give him the necessary tools, information, and guidance as to how he could function individually and independently in society without being stigmatized for who he is. Therefore, I interpreted their supporting systems as representing the social model of disability. The social model was developed to help disabled individuals take action against discrimination, remove the barriers they face in society, and seek justice for equality and their rights (Shape Arts). Therefore, my analysis shows that Hazel and Christopher are challenging normality in their society by providing an alternate way of viewing them as individuals. They both succeed in altering the reader's view of them for the better by viewing their journey from start to finish. By providing such development, the authors of both novels also succeed in enabling their protagonists to challenge normality.

As for why young adult readers need to read literature like Green's and Haddon's that discusses controversial themes, it is because the novels can provide the young readers with necessary insight and inspiration which will develop their sense of compassion for people with other prerequisites than themselves. The novels function as essential building blocks that serve as a way for adolescents to create a broader understanding of these critical aspects of society. While each book can do so independently, it is more efficient and enhances reading the novels alongside each other since they complement each other.

This thesis, in many ways, contributes to the discussion of disability studies and why disability literature is crucial to read, not only for young adult readers but for everyone. The paragraph by Amber Moore (2017), as also mentioned in the introduction, explains this importance extensively:

Taking a disability studies approach to [texts] can certainly lead to an enhanced literacy experience for students, as it might influence students to begin to employ critical literacy practices such as combating stigma, oppression, and social inequalities. [...] Through critical literacy lenses such as disabilities studies, learners are able to name and rename the world, shift power dynamics, and legitimize new perspectives and experiences using literature as a vehicle (p.81).

By reading literature that functions as an encouragement for the disability studies movement, we are ultimately contributing to society altering its views of individuals with a disability. Inclusiveness is a term that should account for every individual, disabled or not. Therefore, every individual must take a stand for disability studies and the life-changing experience it can give the literature reader. As we broaden our horizons for humankind, we contribute to helping disabled individuals take action against discrimination, remove the barriers they face in society, and seek justice for equality and their rights.



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