

Summer 2019

## From Beyond The Grave: Dead Narrators In Young Adult Literature

Jessica L. Branton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Branton, Jessica L., "From Beyond The Grave: Dead Narrators In Young Adult Literature" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1947.  
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1947>

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

# FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE: DEAD NARRATORS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

JESSICA BRANTON

(Under the Direction of Caren Town)

## ABSTRACT

While scholars and critics have explored various aspects of young adult literature, few have focused on the popular, but odd, use of dead narrators. When examining the dead narrators of Veronica Roth's *Allegiant*, Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Lauren Oliver's *Before I Fall*, and Jess Rothenberg's *The Catastrophic History of You and Me*, it becomes clear that the dead narrators are used as a foil for adolescent growth and maturation, and they also allow young readers to empathize with and accept death through the protagonists. These protagonists experience a proto-adulthood as they die too soon to mature through time and are instead forced to grow up quickly. Narrators Tris, Hannah, Clay, Sam, and Brie all struggle with coming to terms with death and, in doing so, they learn to appreciate life.

INDEX WORDS: Young adult literature, Death, Dead narrators, Narration, Veronica Roth, Jay Asher, Jess Rothenberg, Lauren Oliver, *Allegiant*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *Before I Fall*, *The Catastrophic History of You and Me*, Problem novels

FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE: DEAD NARRATORS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

JESSICA BRANTON

B.A., University of Georgia, 2017

M.A., Georgia Southern University, 2019

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

© 2019

JESSICA BRANTON

All Rights Reserved

FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE: DEAD NARRATORS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

JESSICA BRANTON

Major Professor: Caren Town

Committee: Richard Flynn

Amanda Konkle

Electronic Version Approved:  
July 2019

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first must thank Dr. Caren Town for taking the time to work with me on this thesis. I know that at times it was rough, and that I needed a lot of help, but she managed to work through all of this and help me produce a good thesis. Without her help, I do not think this would have been half as good. Next, I need to thank Dr. Richard Flynn and Dr. Amanda Konkle for taking time out of their schedules to read and review my paper. I could not have asked for a better committee. All of the Georgia Southern staff has been incredibly kind and helpful, and I am so glad to have been a part of this community during my years as a graduate student.

Thank you to my parents and grandparents, specifically my dad, who reminded me that I would get through this and for always believing in me. Everyone in my family has been supportive and I needed them during the semester breaks to calm me down and help inspire me once more.

A special thanks to the friends who kept me sane during this time including Ally, Meghna, Jessica, Rosie, Ryan, and Hunter. I needed our late-night conversations and declarations of mutual tiredness and belief. When times got really rough, you were all there to put me on track and remind me that I have the ability to do this. Thank you for being the best support system I could ever ask for.

A final thanks to my boyfriend who has had to deal with my stress in full force. Despite my late nights, snappy attitude, and all-around nervousness, you have stuck by me and helped make our house a home. Thank you for cooking on Wednesdays, washing the dishes, and forgiving me when caffeine was the only thing keeping me awake. Thank you for being my rock.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	2
CHAPTER	
1 EXPLORING DEATH AND NARRATION IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE.....	4
2 “AM I DONE YET?” WRESTLING WITH DEATH AND DYING.....	29
3 “EVERYTHING AFFECTS EVERYTHING” MULTIPLE PERCEPTIONS OF DEATH.....	40
4 “IT’S NOT SUPPOSED TO GO THIS WAY” ACCEPTING DEATH’S INEVITABILITY...	51
5 “AND I WAS FINALLY READY” THE FIVE STAGES OF ACCEPTING DEATH.....	62
6 DEATH AS A GUIDING FORCE IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE.....	71
NOTES.....	75
WORKS CITED.....	77

## CHAPTER 1

## EXPLORING DEATH AND NARRATION IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Critics<sup>1</sup> have long examined both characters in and narrators of novels who have died, but exploring dead first-person narrators, especially in young adult fiction, is far less common. Some critics have explored death in young adult literature, but they do not delve into the importance of a dead narrator and what this death does to both the character and the reader.<sup>2</sup> This may, in part, be due to the focus on other issues in young adult literature; young adult literature is typically marketed toward people aged 12 and up (Wetta). Since most novels center on the myriad issues teens have, death may seem to be an easy subject to overlook since, for the most part, teenagers have a long time before they must deal with their own deaths. As teenagers begin to realize the transience of life, through multiple things like literature or discussions with friends and family, death becomes a common thought for them. Observing the dead narrators in these novels shows how the characters experience a sort of growth in their death. Since most of these protagonists<sup>3</sup> experience life after death, they can continue developing even after the apparent finality of their death. As most young adult novels do not span the entirety of a character's life, the death of the character helps the author accelerate the maturity of the character. In a way, the afterlife becomes the teenagers' proto-adulthood and grants them the wisdom that comes with living an entire life within the span of a few months. Though tragic, the deaths of these characters allow them to all mature and flourish more quickly than if they were to grow up. Confronting death allows the characters to understand their places in the world, how they affect the people around them, and what they could and should have done in order to be better people. For the purposes of this argument, I will be examining Veronica Roth's *Allegiant* (2013), Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007), Lauren Oliver's *Before I Fall* (2010), and Jess Rothenberg's *The Catastrophic History of You and Me* (2012).



Even though death is inevitable, parents often try to shield their children from it. Scholar Mark Speece worked with Sandor Brent on a study about children understanding death, and they used the ideas of the irreversibility, non-functionality, and universality of death to do so. This article shows how death becomes relevant for people at a young age. Speece and Brent found that before the age of seven, children thought “death is reversible; they attribute various life-defining functions to dead things; and they think that certain individuals (often including themselves) will not die” (1683). At age seven, children begin to understand these concepts. However, they still need to learn how to come to terms with death and thus, as young adults, part of their maturity will come from accepting death. This can be done through literature. In these and other young adult novels, death is a key element to the story, and the characters who struggle with it often mature from doing so. Through the growth experienced in death of their former selves, the protagonists in these novels gain a wisdom and maturity normally found in adults. By reading about death, teenagers come to terms with their inevitable end and learn about their place in the world. While this seems problematic, it is a necessary step as young adults move into adulthood. By accepting death, or at least reading about it, teenagers learn to wrestle with this and other intense, adult topics.

Roberta Trites discusses power in young adult literature in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, and she dedicates a chapter to discussing death, in which she finds that “For many adolescents, trying to understand death is as much of a rite of passage as experiencing sexuality is,” and that “death is the sine qua non of adolescent literature, the defining factor that distinguishes it both from children’s and adult literature” (117, 118). These may not be the only differences between children’s and adult literature, but the way young adult literature focuses on death is fundamentally different, as she says can be seen by Bob and

Johnnie's death in *The Outsiders*, since "the reader is not protected from either death by the filter of indirect narration" (Trites 120). By showing the death of a character in full, and without hiding it as a children's book might, young adult literature pulls back the curtain on a character's death and thus leaves the character, and reader, nowhere to hide. The protagonists in novels such as this one face death head on and are forced to deal with it. The lessons they learn from death, and what Trites considers to be the power they gain from it, are only learned once each character confronts the death of the person they once were.

Power and death are connected throughout these novels, and it is essential for the characters to accept their death, and what led them there, in order for them to fully move on; characters like Sam and Tris are able to move on to the afterlife, Brie is able to escape her afterlife with Patrick, and Clay is able to continue living. Despite the harshness of these young adult deaths, Trites considers these confrontations with death to be deeply important for "adolescents to gain knowledge of death's power and of their own powerlessness over it," and she adds that the characters who confront death "seem more empowered than they did when they still denied death's power" (120, 119). To Trites, death in young adult fiction empowers the reader and allows them to conquer death. However, she admits that they also confront their powerlessness against death. In part, Trites is stating that these young adult novels show readers the power they have over the vulnerability that comes with death, despite the terror and trauma associated with it. This power is important not only for the readers, but for the protagonist experiencing death as well. The protagonists, through their deaths, learn about their previous power over death as well as the ability to change certain aspects about their previous lives. In understanding death, the protagonists learn how to conquer life. Trites furthers this point by stating that "When they overcome their tragic vulnerability and avert catastrophe, transforming

the tragedy of their own mortality into at least some level of triumph, they experience a heightened awareness of what power they do and do not hold in their lives” (121). The idea that there is some level of triumph is important, because Trites is admitting that confronting death not only leads to success, but also to a realization of one’s own ineptitude. All of the protagonists triumph through their deaths because death allows them the maturity to change. Even though they are dead, these protagonists continue to develop and gain wisdom after death. The reader may be empowered by her understanding of death, but by understanding death she is forced to reconcile the fact that death is inevitable. There is nothing the reader can do to stop it and realizing that gives them power over death as it also gives them reason to fear it. This power over death grants the reader knowledge she can then use to succeed in life. Trites finishes by stating that:

Accepting one’s mortality is indeed a powerful rite of passage predicated on understanding oneself as finite. The knowledge of death may thus prove both more repressive and more empowering to adolescents than are discursive interactions with socially constructed institutions, authority figures, or sexuality. (140)

Death, then, is not just a tragic part of life but one that allows readers and characters a sense of power over who they are and their place in the world. Because they have first-person and dead narrators, these novels place the death of the character is at the forefront, which ultimately benefits both character and reader since this death teaches the character wisdom and maturity from which the reader could benefit. The protagonists succeed in death so that the reader can potentially do the same in his or her life.

Although Trites adds a focus on power to her discussion of death, the subject of death is not new for readers of any genre. In psychoanalysis, the drive towards death, which was later

labeled Thanatos but existed long before Freud, inspires people to learn more about it. According to Freud, “It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators” (Freud 289). As such, people look for literary and visual representations of death to help them understand (or contextualize) the end of life. This simulacrum of death can be seen clearly in literature as it happens on the page in front of the reader, and in the case of first-person narration, readers are forced to imagine that they are the dying or dead characters. Therefore, death in literature can be beneficial for both the character as well as the reader since it forces them both to confront death and what it may mean for the way they have lived their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Though readers may feel uncomfortable seeing representations of death, Devaleena Kundu states that “Death is conceived as an enemy or an ‘evil’ that calls for repression, and literature is littered with such unfounded renditions” (10). People fear death, but literature forces people to confront it. Each of the characters in the novels fear the idea of death but, as it is inescapable, they are each forced to confront it and continue dealing with the consequences. Kundu then uses Stephen Cave’s idea of the “mortality paradox” to discuss how there is “an intrinsic behavioral anomaly that propels us to invent techniques of postponing death while also adopting manners to manage those deaths that we do encounter” (12). The literature discussed in this thesis, therefore, “ensures that death ceases to be a ‘closed’ reality” (Kundu 19). By reading literature, especially literature about death and dying, the reader must accept death as something real. These protagonists have specific ideas about death, and how to deal with it, and when confronted with their own death it causes them all to change. However, readers also gain knowledge of how to circumvent their fears of death through novels. Although this will not apply to all readers, the studies used below show how reading about the death of someone can impact

the reader. This type of literature can help readers who have lost someone, since it can help them cope, or it can help readers prepare, at least partially, for how death may affect them. As for the protagonists, it appears that they may struggle to find an element of power, mostly through closure over death, but it is necessary for their development. Both the characters and the readers can gain knowledge and maturity through understanding death.

Since I will be discussing various types of dead narrators, it is essential to clarify the different forms of dead narration in novels. Herbert Klein's article "The Wonderful World of the Dead: A Typology of the Posthumous Narrative" breaks down the types of deaths one might encounter while reading. While his list is more extensive, his definitions of "the conscious dead," "the puzzled dead," "the ignorant dead," and ghosts are significant for my argument.

Klein begins with the conscious dead and defines it as "The traditional account of what happens after death is that the immaterial soul of the deceased detaches itself from the body and goes on a journey to some other place, often characterised as heaven or hell, where it will then dwell forever" (Klein). He continues: "protagonists are searching for a meaning - if not for their lives, then at least for their deaths" (Klein). Klein points out that the conscious dead understand their place in the afterlife, but "[in these] cases, the dead find it much more difficult to understand and to come to terms with their new state" (Klein). These types of dead characters mimic the reader's experience, as they both attempt to come to terms with the character's new state. While the next few types of dead must learn to accept their fate, the conscious dead have already realized the flaws of their past selves. Just as the character questions his or her situation, so does the reader, which allows him to examine death and what it means, as well as allowing the character to reflect on their mistakes, and in these novels, fix them. Like the reader, these

narrators still need answers about death, but, unlike the reader, the narrators can get those answers.

The puzzled dead, as their name suggests, are less sure of their state of being. Unlike the conscious dead, there is an element of confusion about their state and how they got there. Klein finds that

In all these narratives the protagonists at some point become aware of their state, and are thus able to achieve a certain degree of closure, i.e. they acquiesce in their condition and presumably find some sort of convenient arrangement, but there are also those who fail to find out what has happened and therefore are doomed to wander - often literally - in circles. (Klein)

The puzzled dead struggle with their new state of death in a way that may be similar to how the reader views his own death. This is immensely important for the readers because it forces them to learn about death and how it can affect the narrator. In terms of a proto-adulthood, the puzzled dead state is analogous to the time a living person has to grow up and gain wisdom and maturity; death condenses the time necessary to achieve this wisdom and maturity. These puzzled dead narrators are still young and have yet to gain any wisdom from their new situation. This group of dead must come to terms with their death, which means they eventually learn how to manage their problems with their death. These coping mechanisms, which differ with each novel, can be applied to the reader, who will eventually have to come to terms with either her mortality or the death of a loved one. The puzzled dead learn to recognize the issues with their views of reality and how they should fix them and, as such, some young adult readers can benefit from this as they may have a similar issue. This process separates the puzzled dead from the ignorant dead.

Klein defines the ignorant dead as people who do not acknowledge their deaths, and he states that “those who cannot make this step ... are doomed to a hell of their own making” (Klein). These texts can be “called wish-fulfillment fantasies, created by a wish to evade the inevitable and to replace it with something pleasant and gratifying in order not to have to face the fact of death” (Klein). The idea of ignoring the reality of death and trying to change it is regressive, because it could prevent the reader from realizing that death is something which must be accepted. These characters, like the reader, need to learn that the inevitability of death is not necessarily a bad thing, but to do this they must first confront it head on. If the characters do not do this, then they will lose their eternal life and will be unable to mature like the other type of dead narrators do. Like a *Bildungsroman*, narrators in these novels must learn to come to terms with their death and what that means for them. While it may not be the author’s only intent, the use of first-person posthumous narration allows both the reader and character the ability to experience death which should, in turn, allow them to understand its inevitability and grow from that knowledge.

The final form of posthumous narrative that I will discuss is ghosts. Unlike the Undead, which Klein also mentions, ghosts “can be perceived in the material world, but are not of it” (Klein). Unlike the other novels and types of posthumous narration, ghosts get the unique benefit of existing in both the living and dead world. More than that, ghosts have unfinished business left in the living world. Ghosts are not the most important posthumous narrators here, but they do represent the two worlds, living and dead, intertwining. Unlike the other types of narrators, a ghost’s unique position allows the reader the ability to explore how these two existences collide. Klein discusses how ghosts communicate with the real world and, in doing so, explores the key difference between this type of narration with the other types he discusses:

Ghosts are usually not very communicative as regards their mode of existence.

Sometimes they converse with the living, usually in order to complain of some wrong that has been done to them or that they have done themselves, in consequence of which they are damned to wander the earth until they are redeemed. (Klein)

Ghosts, which is what Brie in *The Catastrophic History of You and Me* is at times and Hannah in *Thirteen Reasons Why* is, still communicate with the land of the living. Unlike the two other narrators covered in this thesis, Sam from *Before I Fall* and Tris from *Allegiant*, Brie and Hannah's positions cause tangible strains on the other characters in their novels; all of the dead narrators emotionally distress their loved ones, but the two ghost narrators continue to interact even after death. Death in these novels, and others like it, may entice some readers but it also appears beneficial for some. Instead, I think the authors are trying to show the positives of death. Ghosts are able to affect the world of the living but are unable to remain in it.

Klein finishes his essay by discussing the purpose of posthumous narratives. He finds that "Fictional representations of the afterlife therefore do not only ask the question 'What is death?', but also 'What is life?'" (Klein). These questions are important for young adult readers who are beginning to make this discovery for themselves. In particular, the question concerning life forces the characters to reflect on their wrongdoings and realize that perhaps their way of living was morally wrong. Through death, these protagonists learn about their lives and what they needed to do to fix them. Thus, reading these types of novels helps young adults to explore death—such as through the afterlife or the way their loved ones reacted to their death—without experiencing it in real life. In that way, they get to both live in the present while also acknowledging that they cannot and will not live forever. It is an important balance that allows them to grow without the fear of death, but with the reality of its inevitability.



While all the narrators eventually become the conscious dead, through their journeys to accept their deaths, they each begin as different forms of dead narrators. Just as a child gains wisdom as she slowly matures into an adult, so too do these characters gain maturity and wisdom through the accelerated time of their deaths. Tris's moments as a dead narrator are brief, but in that time, she quickly accepts her death and strives to see the point of both it and her life, which means she belongs firmly in the conscious dead category. Through death, Tris learns to accept her past mistakes and move on to the afterlife. Hannah, whose narration is difficult to characterize, almost appears as a ghost narrator, since after her death she is still able to "interact ... with the world of the living ... aurally" (Klein). However, since she was alive at the time of her recorded tapes, which function as her narration, she may be better classified as the conscious dead since she has accepted her death and already "come to terms" with her new state of being. While the reader may not see much growth from Hannah, Clay, the living narrator who receives her tapes, grows immensely as a result of Hannah's death and hearing from her after her death. Sam is mainly an ignorant dead narrator, but she eventually learns to accept her fate. Her growth only occurs once she dies and repeats the same day to try and prevent it and is eventually able to escape the horrible cycle. Brie, the most complex of these narrators, begins as an ignorant dead, moves to a puzzled dead, and gains the ability to act as a ghost, before finally accepting her death and briefly becoming a conscious dead narrator. Brie's journey is the most similar to a child's journey into adulthood, as she learns at a relatively slow pace how she has affected the world and what she needs to do to be a good person. All of the protagonists begin in a state of ignorance about their place in the world, and all of them, except Hannah, eventually learn the "right" way to live and how each protagonist should have handled their lives. As first-person narrators, these characters gain knowledge through death which allows them to grow even after their death;

readers, who still have time to make changes in their lives, can benefit from the lessons learned by the characters.

Of equal importance to the representation of death in literature is narrative style in young adult literature. Mike Cadden, a YA narrative theorist, questions the authenticity of adults writing young adult literature. Cadden finds that “Novels constructed by adults to simulate an authentic adolescent's voice are inherently ironic because the so-called adolescent voice is never—and can never be—truly authentic” (146). This, of course, connects to the role of a narrator in a young adult novel dealing with death. As these novels are often written by a mature author, it is possible that the adult has more knowledge than a young adult and thus may not reflect an actual young adult's experience. Cadden continues:

[B]y employing an all-too-reliable young adult's consciousness, the YA novelist often intentionally communicates to the immature reader a single and limited awareness of the world that the novelist knows to be incomplete and insufficient. It is a sophisticated representation of a lack of sophistication; it is an artful depiction of artlessness. (146)

Since the novelist has more knowledge about the world, she attempts to limit the view of the character, in order to fit the limited knowledge an adolescent is assumed to have. The author should strive to create horizontal viewpoints, or perspectives from different characters around the same age group, in order to create a more complete outlook on situations such as death. Since the author is normally far removed from the reader and character, these horizontal viewpoints give them the ability to state their own opinions without making it the only opinion. It is important for these authors to create multiple perspectives or at least attempt a realistic young adult's perspective.

Cadden also considers the relationship between the young adult audience and adult writer to be a “top-down (or vertical) power relationship” and states that to fix this there needs to be an “equal (or horizontal) power relation[ship] between the major characters within the text so that the young adult reader has the power to see the opposing ideologies at play” (146). When dealing with novels about death, especially, it is important to represent a variety of positions on mortality, since readers will have very different views on the subject. Cadden argues that it can be problematic for novels to rely on a singular character, since the novels need to have a horizontal power relationship, but each of these novels provide diverse viewpoints despite being written in the first-person. *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Allegiant* both contain multiple narrators, and while Tris’s death in *Allegiant* is narrated solely by her, the rest of the novel deals with her boyfriend Tobias’ take on her death. *Before I Fall* balances a typical young adult perspective with the older version of Sam who is reflecting on the events in the novel. Finally, *The Catastrophic History of You and Me* is the most confined version of narration, since Brie is the only narrator, but the focus on her guide and friend Patrick effectively depicts two different perspectives on death. Thus, the first-person narration in these novels allows the characters the ability to mature through death firsthand, and the complexity of this narration allows for a more fully formed view of the world.

When two or more characters disagree, Cadden considers the novel to have achieved double-voiced discourse. He states that when these novels achieve this they help “young readers detect and cope with the irony, complexity, and contingency so rich in the world they hope so desperately to know” (Cadden 153). Therefore, first-person narration, when done correctly, will help young adults understand death (and many other topics) first hand since first-person narration puts the readers into the character’s shoes.

Susanna Salem takes a slightly different approach to discussing narration in young adult literature by focusing on reader response. For this, she sets up three different criteria: relatedness, spatial perspective, and identification (Salem 2). She prefaces her study by stating that one of the reasons why people read fiction is

the possibility to partake in experiences otherwise inaccessible to us because of our confinement to our subjective experience in the here and now of the actual world: by reading fiction, we can transcend this limited horizon and “experience” situations—if only in a second-hand fashion—that are removed with respect to place, time, and modality (nomological, deontic, etc.), thus taking on, as it were, a perspective different from our own. (Salem 1)

As Salem found, novels can be a great way for readers to explore something new without leaving home. For the most part, people are confined to their personal experiences, but reading allows them to witness something different in an accessible way. Through the simple act of reading the novels discussed here, the reader can understand a new perspective on topics such as death.

Salem concludes that first-person narration was “associated with a stronger feeling of being able to relate to the protagonist during reading than external focalization” (11). This shows how a first-person dead narrator may be important to readers through the connection between character and reader. Salem also discusses psycho-narration, which is defined in this article as a “way to present the thoughts and feelings of a character in an often condensed form in which the choice of expressions typically does not correspond to the idiolect of the character” (Salem 4). By being in the mind of the character, the reader can better relate to the dead character and see how this death could affect the world around them. Unlike children’s books, which mostly have deaths occur off stage, young adult books often have narrators who deal with the issue firsthand.<sup>5</sup>

Salem further supports this by stating that “describing the inner thoughts and feelings of a protagonist ... [using] first-person narration elicits a stronger feeling of taking over the perspective of the respective protagonist than narration in which no such insight into the inner mental life of the protagonist is given” (14). First-person narration is thus incredibly important for young adult readers who are trying to understand the world they live in. While Cadden finds some issues with first-person narration, it appears that Salem finds it beneficial. Since Cadden argues that first-person narration can be done correctly, and Salem argues that it does affect the reader, it appears that the type of narration found in the novels discussed in this thesis benefits the reader.

Fiona Hartley-Kroeger also discusses the benefit of breaking away from one’s subjective perspective of the world and, instead, trying to view the world objectively. She brings up the idea of someone in a bad relationship and how they are too involved to notice the problems while a “spectator – a friend, a non-involved party – can observe the relationship and make judgements about it with a certain degree of objectivity” (Hartley 281). In young adult fiction, as well as most novels, the reader is always treated as the objective party, because as soon as they close the book they are done with that character’s world. It is up to them to determine whether they want to continue reading the book and/or if the character is behaving the “correct way.” However, through first-person narration, the reader partakes in both the subjective and objective role. She is experiencing the situation “first-hand,” since the reader becomes the “I” of the character, but also at her own discretion. As the narrators in these novels are dead, the reader can experience death through the narrators without dying himself. A reader of *Before I Fall*, for example, should be able to recognize all of Sam’s shortcomings because he is distanced from the character.

Through death, all of these characters mature and, in turn, the reader benefits from the characters' experiences and hard-won wisdom.

Like Hartley, David Dudley examines a particular dead narrator and his effect on the reader and story in Poe's "Masque of the Red Death." Dudley finds that the narrator inside of the story exists in two conflicting spaces: "On the one hand, the narrator must be inside the story (and the abbey) as a witness to events. On the other hand, the narrator is outside the story as a reporter of events. As a witness the narrator is contained by the story, while as a reporter he contains the story" (171). Although this story is not primarily for young adults, its use of a prominent (potentially) dead narrator is similar to the novels in this thesis and focuses on this important distinction of narration. Dudley discusses how this dead narrator, who is both dead and not dead, calls into question the permanence of death as well as one's perception of death. All the characters in these novels should be dead, and thus they should not be able to say anything else about the story, but their existence both in and out of the story allows them to talk in this liminal space. The narrators can comment on their death, as evidenced by the continuation of their story after their deaths, but none of them are alive. Instead, their communication hinges on their existence in this grey area Dudley discusses. While I find this relatively positive, as it allows the reader to examine death at a distance, he finds this problematic, especially in "Red Death." To Dudley, this narrator makes the reader

recognize that we cannot successfully imitate the narrator's trick, for unlike him we are flesh and blood: time and death will not pause to see whether we remember their inevitability. The narrator is thus a fly in the soothing ointment of aesthetic distance, figuring and ridiculing both the author's and the reader's hope of escape into art. (173)

Unlike the narrator, Dudley says, the reader must face his or her own mortality. The uncertainty of the narrator's death is thus infuriating because it reminds the reader that narrator and reader are not the same. This collision of narrator and reader in adult literature, as Dudley describes it, parallels but does not fully mimic the relationship with young adult literature about death. Where Dudley finds death in this story to be problematic for the reader, the deaths in these young adult novels are relatively positive. At first the death may be tragic, but eventually all of the characters (and the reader) benefit from it.

To an adult, who recognizes his own mortality and the inevitability of death, this narrator would be considered mocking, because he is playing with the idea of death. He gets to go free and communicate to the outside world, whereas in real life a dead person is locked out of any kind of growth. In contrast, a young adult may not have yet understood his or her relationship to death. Thus, a narrator like the one in "Red Death" does not simply taunt the reader but shows the young adult how to view themselves. The interlacing narration of the narrator's existence as both alive and dead benefits all readers because, as Dudley explains, it causes the reader to reflect on his own mortality. This grey area becomes a place where the character can mature even without being alive, and the reader can learn from the character. For young adult readers, this discussion, which is becoming more frequent in popular young adult novels, gives them an insight into the possibilities afforded by death (such as an afterlife). Perhaps the popularity of death in novels is a result of the contemporary world, which readily shows death both in fiction and nonfiction; video games, movies, the news, and even Youtube videos have depicted death, and today's technology allows teens easy access to these media. As Trites states, a teenager's understanding of death grants her power and benefits her understanding of the world (119). By

examining narrators, like the one discussed by Dudley, the teenager is forced to reconcile with both the inevitability and unfairness of death.

Discussing dead narrators and their effect on their stories helps this idea of conquering death. Marta Pérez-Carbonell points out the significance of viewing death in her essay on Javier Marías's work by stating that "By portraying ghosts as storytellers, Marías can plausibly incorporate in his fiction events dominated by the uncertainty inherent in what does not happen or is not said" (507). Ghosts, as such, can dance between the reality of death and life in a way that humans cannot. Since they are dead, ghosts are able to comment on things that do not exist in the real world. Death, then, is not wholly limiting but opens the world up for new types of interpretations. While the narrators in these novels are not necessarily ghosts in the way that Klein describes, they all exist in the uncertain world of narration. Death also becomes a pseudo-adulthood for the characters. They are able to comment on things outside of the real world, and at times even affect them, but they are unable to fully touch the world of the living.

As this thesis argues for the usefulness of discussing death in young adult fiction, it is also necessary to determine whether literature, especially literature with first-person narration, can influence readers in any demonstrable way. Jennifer Del Nero discusses a case study where a group of seventh-grade students read about death in Gothic literature and "discussed how musing about fictional death in Gothic texts provided therapeutic relief from death that permeated their lives" (138). Despite reading works of fiction, the students found themselves learning, as Del Nero puts it, "meaningful lessons on life" and "realize[d] that phenomena like death defy full understanding" (140). This case study shows that adolescents, even those as young as seventh grade, are able to react to intricate ideas like death. Not only that but reading about death allowed the students to better understand themselves and each other. In this study, death allows the



readers to mature much in the way that the characters of these novels mature. While this thesis focuses on texts targeted for an older audience, Del Nero's essay suggests that students can comprehend and learn from reading about death in literature.

Like Del Nero, Janelle Mathis and Polly Vaughan use a case study to see how literature can affect the reader. Both discuss the eye-opening experiences of adolescent boys who read about suicide in young adult novels. Using three young adult novels, each containing at least one character who wants to commit suicide, Vaughan and Mathis found that the boys reading the texts were able to connect with the characters in the story.

YA literature is written in language that appeals to teenagers through characters with whom young readers identify and plots that mirror realistic adolescent situations.

Literature used in engaging ways strategically places the reader both within the story and outside as a knowing observer. We draw from the process of bibliotherapy that is based on the premise that reading can be a healing experience. (289)

This idea of bibliotherapy was useful to the authors of this study because it showed the ability of a book to affect a reader. The argument is that the reader can identify herself in the book and, in doing so, can benefit from learning how to deal with the situation as the characters do. While Mathis and Vaughan's use of bibliotherapy is important to note, since it deals with the usefulness novels can have, the novels in this study act more like a guide for dealing with death than a therapeutic session. The authors of this essay state that "individuals create their own identities through their self-perceptions. YA literature supports positive self-perceptions through opportunities to discuss the lives of others" (Mathis and Vaughan 300). Young adult literature, therefore, not only allows the reader a reflection of himself but also a positive look at other people. Thus, discussing death in young adult literature allows the reader to carefully navigate

the intense topic and, potentially, soothe his fears about the subject. By exploring death, without dying, the reader is given a look at both death and the wisdom it can bring.

While Maria Nikolajeva does not use a case study like Del Nero, Mathis, and Vaughan, she does discuss identity and physical space through cognitive narratology, which helps readers acclimate to the situations in a novel. She explores how an author's use of space affects the reader and draws out specific responses from the reader based on how a passage is written. Nikolajeva begins her paper with the science behind her claim: "as recent studies demonstrate, mirror neurons in our brains respond to fictional events, as well as to fictional characters' thoughts and feelings in the same way they respond to real events and real people" ("Haven't" 65). Nikolajeva uses this information to analyze the tone of several passages in excruciating detail to explain how they make a reader feel. She also defines cognitive narratology as "a direction of literary studies that explores how fictional texts, through various narrative devices, appeal to readers cognitively and emotionally" (Nikolajeva, "Haven't" 65). Both the definition of cognitive narratology and the studies she mentions show the ability for literature to affect the reader. She ends her paper by discussing the idea of embodied cognition versus a constructivist personality and character: "understanding identity as a social construction detaches the reader from the character, while embodied cognition, based on mirror neurons, stimulates empathy and makes encounter with fiction a more immediate experience" (Nikolajeva, "Haven't" 78). Essentially, the *experience* of the protagonist of a novel is more important than a *statement about* the protagonist. First-person narration helps the reader experience the character's adventures, or at least comprehend them, albeit at a distance.

In another article, Nikolajeva examines the idea of empathy and identity in young adult fiction by focusing on a novel called *Slated*. Here she stresses both the importance of empathy

and theory of mind, or “the ability to understand other people's thoughts, beliefs, and intentions independently of one's own,” in regard to novels (Nikolajeva, “Memory” 18). She finds that teens are easily able to empathize with a character but that:

The problem with young readers is their solipsism. They will most probably automatically identify with the protagonist, not least a present-tense first-person narrator/protagonist, unless prompted by the text to avoid it. However, such direct or immersive identification, when readers simply align with the character's thoughts and actions as if they were their own—the “just-like-me” assessment of characters—is limited to the readers' scope of experience and does not endorse mind-reading. For engagement with fiction, it is counter-productive. In real life, theory of mind is essential for interpersonal communication. (Nikolajeva, “Memory” 27)

Nikolajeva praises teens for their empathy while also warning that too much empathy is problematic. While empathy is important for the reader, since it allows her to experience something unique, it is important for her to have theory of mind so that she can avoid experiencing something problematic like abuse through the character. However, she stresses the importance of empathy and the fact that teenagers cannot escape it. She states that “we are undeniably affected by interaction with literature ... which is particularly pertinent for my argument, since in YA fiction emotions are frequently pitched against ethical values,” but she stresses that “The danger with *Slated* is that readers can be seduced to take Kyla's side, rather than consider an independent ethical position” (Nikolajeva, “Memory” 35). For Nikolajeva, teenagers will inevitably find themselves in a text, but it is necessary for them to separate themselves in order to remain independent individuals. If someone reads any of the four novels with dead narrators in this thesis, he should be able to empathize with the main character, but he

should also be prevented from fully experiencing the trauma of death. Instead, a reader should use these powers of empathy to determine how death could, and will, shape her life.

Though Nikolajeva, Del Nero, and Mathis and Vaughan cover the ability for the reader to connect or identify with the characters, Nikolajeva's chapter in Cadden's *Telling Children's Stories* discusses the issues with readers fully identifying with characters. Nikolajeva acknowledges the benefits of first-person narration, but she finds that even though this type of narration may be "more engaging, [and] allow[s] a total penetration into the protagonist's mind" the "engagement [here] is not the same as identification" ("Identification" 200). To Nikolajeva, these novels may enchant a reader into thinking he can see himself fully into the text, but in actuality, he is just engaged in the story. Furthermore, she discusses how fantasy novels require the reader to abandon their identification with the characters, since otherwise she could not fully immerse herself in the fantastical world, and how novels with a problematic character do not allow for identification (Nikolajeva "Identification" 198). I agree with Nikolajeva that full identification may not be possible, and indeed should be the goal, since falling "into the identification trap" can prevent readers from being unable to "comprehend what is actually going on in the novels and become so confined to the protagonists' subjectivity that they will ignore the repeated cracks that the texts offer" (Nikolajeva "Identification" 202). While full immersion can be problematic, the empathy and identification mentioned by Nikolajeva in her other articles demonstrate that there are benefits to identifying with a character. Likewise, the students studied by Del Nero and Mathis and Vaughan appear to benefit from such identification.

The characters in the young adult novels discussed in this thesis are deeply flawed and perhaps readers should not identify with them. For instance, someone fully identifying with Hannah and her arguments for suicide may overlook the horrible ramifications of her choice.

Instead, the narrators act as empathetic guides for the readers. As seen by Del Nero, Mathis, and Vaughn, it is common for students to identify and benefit from their connections with the characters and this partial identification is valuable to the readers. It is not necessary for a novel to teach lessons, but the narrators in these stories do provide the reader with a guide to conquering life by the way each narrator attempts to fix their deaths.

Though fundamentally different from depictions of death in both adult and children's literature, death in young adult literature can be productively compared to them. By reading novels which plainly discuss death, young adult readers can examine the subject for the first time in full, and this discussion allows them psychological power over death and the ability to understand that which the rest of the world may not have taught them. The use of first-person narration allows the reader inside the minds of the characters and thus, vicariously, to experience death. While it may be important for them to have some distance, as Nikolajeva explains, readers can still benefit from even the limited experience with the narrator. Finally, young adults have a lot to learn from first-person dead narrators, and novels like the ones discussed in this thesis can help them in this process. By looking at *Allegiant*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *Before I Fall*, and *The Catastrophic History of You and Me*, I will explore the usefulness of dead narrators as an example of how one can change as well as how death acts like a proto-adulthood for the characters and allows them the chance to change.

The first novel I examine is *Allegiant*, which has the shortest interaction with a dead narrator. While the main character, Tris, dies at the end, her death does not mark the end of her chapter, and her death provides a sense of closure. Coupled with the other deaths she witnesses throughout the series, Tris's experience is a good example of how death can affect a teenager. She is also the character who witnesses the most death throughout her life. These deaths both

devastate and, eventually, help her mature. However, in her brief time as a dead narrator, she appears to have gained maturity and wisdom not found through the rest of her interactions with death. As such, it is only through her own death that Tris can fully mature.

Next, I will focus on *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Like *Allegiant*, this novel's relationship with a dead narrator is not as obvious as the other two novels. The dead Hannah Baker's story is told through tapes which Clay, the main narrator, listens to. This novel creates a dialogue between the living and the dead and examines both the struggles of life, as well as dealing with the loss of a loved one. While Hannah does not appear to gain any wisdom from her death, Clay acquires maturity through listening to her discuss the events leading to her death, while also experiencing the present world without Hannah. In Hannah's death, Clay has achieved maturity and through her monologue he has gained a sense of closure.

*Before I Fall* begins with the death of the main character Sam and explores her attempts to survive the inevitability of death, since she desperately believes, and hopes, that she can prevent her death. As the main character is reliving the same day repeatedly, this novel allows me to examine Sam's desire for life paired with mortality. At the beginning of the novel Sam is incredibly naive and immature. She attempts to escape death, and the truth it brings, but ultimately realizes that she has to die in order to stop suffering. Sam gains solace only in her acceptance of death and the maturity it brings.

Finally, *The Catastrophic History of You and Me* centers on Brie's experiences in the afterlife and coming to terms with her death. The main character is dead for the entirety of the novel, which explores the expectation of death as well as the struggle to accept it. Like Sam, Brie matures through the novel, but it is only possible through her exploration and eventual acceptance of death.

Death acts as a condensed version of adulthood for these narrators, as it allows them to gain closure, maturity, and peace. Not every adult will achieve these things, most would acknowledge that these are desirable goals. As the narrators experience this proto-adulthood, they begin to act as guides for readers as they explore their own mortality, even though some narrators struggle with the inevitability of death while others struggle with the immediacy of it. Through the death of these narrators and their reactions to mortality, readers are guided through the importance of death, the pain associated with it, and the ways they can fix their life before it is too late. A reader may be unable to live past death like the narrators do, but they may be able to conquer life through these lessons. As each of these novels use dead narrators in varying ways and amounts, I have begun with the shortest representation of dead narration and ended with the fullest and most complex dead narrator.

By studying these four novels and their dead narrators, teachers and critics can understand the importance of novels like this for young adult readers. By listening to dead narrators, young adults can learn about death and how to cope both with death and with life. Like the characters, who all eventually understand that death is inevitable and critically examine their lives, the young readers should also learn that they have the ability to learn and grow, in part because of their exposure to death. The pseudo-adulthood death brings in these novels shows the possibility of maturity even at a young age. Death is not the only way to mature, of course, the metaphorical death of the young adult self is needed for the adolescent to emerge as a happy and ethical adult. Through accepting the death of their younger selves, characters in these novels are able to move on to the afterlife and find peace. Meanwhile, readers are able to learn the lessons imparted by these novels without dying and can, if they want, apply the lessons to their lives. By

letting go of their childish selves, and emerging into a more mature (and perhaps wiser) adulthood, readers of these novels can carry the lessons of life—and death—with them.



## CHAPTER 2

## “AM I DONE YET?” WRESTLING WITH DEATH AND DYING

Veronica Roth's science fiction novel *Allegiant* (2013) is the third book in the *Divergent* series, and it clearly shows the main character's journey through adolescence as well as her encounter with death. Beatrice (Tris) Prior both witnesses and experiences death in *Allegiant's* ending. In her last moments, the reader sees death from her point of view. At this time, Tris comes to terms with her own mortality. She forgives herself and determines that she has made her dead mother proud. Not only do her encounters with death change her personality and relationships, but her death allows her to accept her place in the world, just as the reader must. Although she deals with death throughout the series, and grows as a character, the weight of her previous wrongdoings is only rectified when she dies. Death allows her to accept her previous mistakes and grow because of it. While her actual death only occurs on two pages, Tris deals with death frequently throughout the series. Along with *Insurgent* (2012), this novel helps to explain the importance of death in young adult literature and eases the reader into an acceptance of death. Neither *Divergent* (2011) nor *Insurgent* have dead narrators, but the deaths in these novels are important in understanding Tris and her feelings about death and life.

As the protagonist in a series celebrating bravery, Tris deals with death, sacrifice, and war at the young age of sixteen. The *Divergent* series is about a dystopian world that is divided into five factions. Tris, on her sorting day, finds out that she fits into multiple categories and is thus Divergent. She hides this fact while joining the brave faction of Dauntless and leaves the meek and kind Abnegation behind. As with most YA protagonists, she attempts to outgrow the world of her parents through finding her new role in the world of Dauntless. When a nefarious

plot causes a war between the factions, Tris and her friends escape the Dauntless sector and attempt to save the world. During this time, Tris loses her parents and some of her friends.

Although I will not cover much of the contents of the first and second book in the Divergent trilogy, *Divergent* and *Insurgent* respectively, it is important to note the events that happen in the first novel and the impact they have on Tris in *Insurgent*. Not only does *Divergent* show who Tris is, as well as introduce the details of how this world works, but it also shows Tris dealing with multiple deaths. In particular, she struggles with the death of her mother, her father, and her best friend Will. Of all the deaths she experiences, the death of her mother and Will haunt her throughout the series. Her mother sacrifices herself for Tris, and Tris must kill Will after he has been mind-controlled to kill her; his death also causes issues with her other friend, Christina, because Tris lied to her about what happened. Finally, Tris's father is murdered at the end of *Divergent*. While his death does not affect Tris as much as the other two deaths do, since he was a bit strict and cold toward her, she is still deeply hurt by the loss of her strict father. All of this leads up to the third book, *Allegiant*, where she ends up sacrificing herself for the good of the world. While the death of most of her family is devastating for Tris, it also shows her that some deaths can have benefits. The deaths of her family members let Tris understand that some good can come from death, even if she does not realize this until later.

The second book in the series, *Insurgent*, finds Tris struggling with the death of her loved ones. At the beginning of the novel, Tris “wake[s] with his name in my mouth. Will. Before I open my eyes, I watch him crumple to the pavement again. Dead. My doing” (Roth, *Insurgent* 1). This opening line of the novel shows how deeply affected she was by his death. She is plagued by her self-defense killing of her friend as well as the death of her mother. In one chapter she notes that, despite her brother still being alive, she feels like “I’m the only one left.

The last Prior” (411). Death has caused her to feel isolated. This feeling of loneliness is echoed earlier in the novel when she sees a photo of her family and notes her father’s love for her mother and everything her parents sacrificed. This photo causes her to comment that, “Grief is not as heavy as guilt, but it takes more from you” (Roth, *Insurgent* 376). Tris feels guilty for her past actions and inactions. More than guilt, grief has ravaged this young teen. As an adolescent, Tris has not had time to fix her mistakes or even heal from things out of her control. This pain follows her throughout these first two novels and is amplified by the fact that she does not have the wisdom of adulthood to help her. She is still young, vulnerable, and learning how to heal. However, it is only through her death in *Allegiant* that this happens.

Not only does Tris experience guilt and grief from these deaths, but she also experiences PTSD. Despite dealing with battle and terror previously, Tris is frozen by the sound of a gunshot:

For a moment I am disoriented, and all I can see are the leaders of Abnegation on their knees on the pavement and the slack-faced Dauntless with guns in hand; all I can see is my mother turning to embrace the bullets, and Will dropping to the ground. I bite my fist to keep from crying out, and the pain brings me back to the present. My mother told me to be brave. But if she had known that her death would make me so afraid, would she have sacrificed herself so willingly? (Roth, *Insurgent* 457-458).

The deaths she witnesses are understandably traumatizing. Instead of readying herself for a fight, something she was trained to do in the Dauntless society, she is paralyzed. Tris believes death is avoidable because she wrongly believes her mother’s death was a choice. While this could be true, since it was a sacrificial death, her mother’s death was ultimately unavoidable. Therefore, Tris is burdened by her mother’s death, and it has clouded her understanding of death. She cannot separate her own trauma from the reality that death is inevitable. Throughout this series,

Tris does not have the time necessary to cope with the pain of losing a loved one or her PTSD which came from it, because she is a young adult in a time of war. Instead, the ending of *Allegiant* grants her a release from these symptoms and pain in a shortened amount of time. This is not to say that death is the only option for someone suffering, but rather that Tris, at least, receives maturity through her own death.

Tris does not find a solution to death in this novel. Instead, it is in her last moments alive, or at least her last moments speaking to the reader, in *Allegiant* where she finds peace. She must experience death and gain closure to better understand and deal with death as well as the issues that occurred in life. This does not mean that the reader must experience death to find solace. Instead, novels like this expose the reader to death in the contained and relatively safe fictional environment. In her last moments, Tris accepts the events of her past and appears to have gained maturity and wisdom that was not fully there in other novels. If nothing else, this text provides the reader with an insight to how death can affect a person and what to expect. Hartley-Kroeger points out that this experience with death is beneficial because the reader is experiencing the trauma vicariously without actually going through the traumatic death and thus can experience the benefits these characters receive when they die. There is a barrier between the reader and Tris, but as seen by other scholars like Mathis and Vaughan, Nikolajeva, and Salem, the reader can still empathize with Tris in these moments. Even if the reader does not know what she is going through, he/she is forced into her experience and to understand his/her feelings about death, just like Tris does. The closure Tris receives at the end of *Allegiant* allows the reader to gain closure without having to die. Regardless of how late this knowledge comes to Tris, both she and the reader gain knowledge on how death can be beneficial.

Tris's encounters with death and sacrifice throughout the series shape her as a character and force her to determine what is important in life. After her mother's death she desires to be worthy of that sacrifice, but her initial attempts at doing this fail since she is ultimately still acting selfishly; in *Insurgent*, her attempted sacrifice is only done to appease her mother's actions. Eventually, Tris does act selflessly, and it is through her death in *Allegiant* where she finally receives closure with the past. Tris gains an understanding of love through the sacrifice of her mother, but she realizes the complexity of this decision when she first attempts to mimic this deed in *Insurgent*.

When critics discuss this series, and the portrayals of death in it, they tend to focus on Tris's bravery. This, of course, makes sense since she initially chooses the Dauntless or brave faction. When critics discuss her sacrifice/death, they focus on the effect it has on others. Jennifer Barnes, who focuses on the psychology of the factions in the series, thinks "Tris's death serves a purpose, not just in the atrocities it prevents, but also in the way that it might cause other people to introspect, to question who they are, their vices, their virtues" (42). By the ending of *Allegiant*, Tris has proven her bravery repeatedly, but as Barnes points out, this final selfless act invites readers to evaluate their own lives. Barnes suggests that other people, like the reader, can benefit from Tris's selflessness and, potentially, depict their own version of selflessness.

Unlike the other books in the series, *Allegiant* alternates between two narrators: Tris and her love interest Tobias, who embodies self-reflection. Since this is the first dual narration in the *Divergent* trilogy, it appears odd, but this allows author Roth the ability to continue the story after Tris's death. Even though Roth has a secondary narrator to lean on, Tris's death does not immediately end her section. Instead, the reader listens to her thoughts, and appears to be directly spoken to, in the last few moments of Tris's life. Tris only spends a few pages as a dead narrator,

but that short segment of the novel grants the reader a brief insight into the world of the dead and the benefits Tris gains from it. Though ambiguous, her embrace with her dead mother solidifies these last few moments as occurring after death. In her mother's caring arms, the ones which originally shielded her from death, Tris is able to cross over into the afterlife and find solace.

After her death, the novel focuses on Tobias' side of the story and the impact of her death on him. Tobias is heartbroken by Tris's death and unable to function at first. However, he ends up continuing his life with the hopes that he will make Tris proud. In a way, this mirrors Tris's own reaction to death in *Insurgent*. This reflection is important for the reader who now needs to empathize with Tobias, but it also shows the unfortunate maturity that comes with a drastic change like death. Tris may have entered a pseudo-adulthood in her last moments before death, but Tobias also matures from experiencing the death of a loved one. The novel hints that the rest of Tobias's life is going to involve trying to accept Tris's death, just as she was trying to accept the deaths around her, but he has time whereas she does not. Even though the reader may not feel exactly what Tobias does, she is made to watch what this feeling does to a person in the last chapters of the novel. While Tris's final death is ambiguously portrayed, which Pérez-Carbonell notes is key to making the reader question death, Tobias provides the reader with an honest view of events. This dual perspective, which Cadden considers essential, allows the reader to experience death through Tris as well as how death affects a loved one, and gives the reader the knowledge from both perspectives. As Cadden suggests, the reader's view of multiple perspectives with both Tris and Tobias allows for a broader view of death and its effects. Without Tobias's view, however, the reader is still shown Tris's perspective as she dies and thus sees it firsthand.

In her last moments in the novel, Tris does not believe she is dead, yet she watches as her dead mother appears from behind her killer. Interestingly, she does not see an idealized version of her mother, but rather Tris notes that “There are still bullet holes in her shirt; through them I can see her wounded skin, red but no longer bleeding, like she’s frozen in time” (Roth, *Allegiant* 475). Tris does not encounter an idealized death, where her mother would be perfect and happy, but instead encounters the harsh reality that death can bring. This unidealized version of death is also a sign of maturity, as it is not colored by the naive idea of what a teen may think death should look like. This flawed and frozen view of Tris’s mother may cause the reader to reflect on the finality and reality of death. As a destroyed ghost, Tris’s mother should signal to the reader that death is not a perfect end even as it is inevitable.

Tris’s final moments reveal a lot about how she views death and what may come from it. Realizing that her mother could not possibly be there, Tris wonders if she is either “delirious from the blood loss or if the death serum has addled my thoughts or if she is here in some other way” (Roth, *Allegiant* 475). This decision to ignore the possibility that she is dead may mean that Tris is part of Klein’s puzzled dead, someone who may not realize her death has occurred, but upon discovering her demise she does not wholly reject it. Unlike the other novels that will be discussed in this thesis, Tris’s struggle with the concept of her death is brief. Tris has only one caveat before she will fully accept her death: the desire to make sure her loved ones will be okay without her. At this point, she asks her mother about what will happen to her friends if she dies. When her mom states that they will take care of each other, Tris deems the answer satisfying and “feel[s] a thread tugging me again, but this time I know that it isn’t some sinister force dragging me toward death. This time I know it’s my mother’s hand, drawing me into her arms. And I go gladly into her embrace” (Roth, *Allegiant* 476). Now that her worries are quelled, Tris can

embrace the reality of death. Tris's death has granted her solace that would normally have taken her much longer to find. Since she cannot grow into an adult and learn how to heal, her death quickly allows this. Through knowledge and acceptance of her death, Tris finds peace with death, and while not everyone can achieve this death it is beneficial to realize.

Her final moments, however, are spent speaking to the audience. Confirmed dead, since she sees her dead mother and has been shot, Tris asks herself, "Can I be forgiven for all I've done to get here?" and she answers "I want to be. I can. I believe it" (Roth, *Allegiant* 476). Roth could have shifted her perspective to Tobias, considering that he is still alive, or could have ended Tris's story with the embrace, but this moment ends up being an important reflection for Tris and the reader. Tris would, presumably, wonder about this question for the rest of her life and would maybe find the answer eventually but, of course, there is no way to tell. In death, she has gained the wisdom of an adult who knows that it may be impossible to be forgiven but it is necessary to try. The question surrounding forgiveness insinuates finality and offers the reader a chance at reflection. For Tris, this proves that she has achieved some level of growth since she decided that Christina would "never forgive me" (Roth, *Insurgent* 130). Death is Tris's adulthood but hers is inevitable and not something the reader should strive for. Instead, the reader should listen to Barnes, who believes that the purpose of the text is to recognize who you are and your purpose in life. Tris wants to be forgiven and only after her death does she believe it is possible. Instead of realistically cutting to Tobias, Roth forces the reader to connect with the dead Tris and ask himself if he can be forgiven like Tris does. As a guide, Tris's death shows the reader that there is hope and that he can apply these lessons to his life in order to better it.

Through Tris's mother's sacrifice, Roth portrays an inevitable but selfless death which causes Tris to become a better person. When the opportunity to save the world at the cost of her



life occurs at the end of *Allegiant*, she is not only willing to risk her life but happy to do so. The death of her mother has changed her and ends up affecting her even in death, when she happily goes to her mother's open arms. She has grown up because of witnessing and experiencing death, and through this growth she has become a better, selfless person. Elizabeth Norris focuses on this in her essay discussing bravery of the characters in the book and the readers outside of it. She finds that "There are teenagers out there who are like Tris and Tobias. They might make mistakes, but they're intelligent and honest and kind and selfless. They're brave" (Norris 110). By examining Tris's death, Tobias' grief, and everything they have done to get to these moments, the reader can reevaluate her own place in life

This is most easily seen in the comments and reviews on Goodreads and Twitter, where Tris's death has divided readers. *Allegiant's* reviews on Goodreads, which has 3.36 stars out of 5, discuss how terrible the plot's construction is, but also the importance of Tris's death. One user, who gave the book 4 stars, found that "her death. it's a heartbreaker, for sure, but she dies while being completely true to who she is, and her death is a good one, a useful one" (Karen). Though some readers are angered by Tris's death, Karen appears to understand that Tris's death allows her the ability to accept all of her earlier issues in life. Tris struggles, throughout all three books, to make her parents proud, but death is ultimately the only circumstance that allows her to do this. While a reader cannot, and indeed should not, wait on death to change, Tris, and the other protagonists in these novels, receive solace through the death of their immature selves. Eventually, the reader will grow and their younger selves will, in a sense, die just as these characters do. Karen goes on in her review to state that this death's effect on Tobias is "more powerful" than if Tobias had been killed off (Karen). Tris's death stands for something in and

out of the novel. She is a martyr to her friends, a reminder of love for Tobias, and an assurance that death is both inevitable and meaningful.

Other readers also see the value in her death, as one Twitter user tweeted that ““I hope they don't change the ending [in the film adaptation]. UNPOPULAR OPINION but I found closure in Allegiant ending Roth wrote! I felt it was fitting!” (twirlynao).<sup>6</sup> Not only was she affected by the death in *Allegiant*, but this user finds it important to keep her death in the cinematic remake. One reviewer, Kate, notes that she was angry because it appeared that Tris’s death did not matter, while another claims that he/she feels that Tris’s death proved that “All that matters is the grief and the death in the end. Veronica makes that point pretty damn clear. War is never romantic. Period” (Ain020596). This user goes on to discuss the purpose of Tris’s death and how it “feels highly subjective to everyone's personal interpretation” (Ain020596). As this user states, death can be interpreted in a variety of ways and this includes death of a fictional character. People like Ain find Tris’s death to be meaningful while others, like Kate, feel the opposite way. Books like *Allegiant* offer a new perspective of death, and while the reader cannot escape the permanence of death, Tris is granted the hope of a second life when she directly acknowledges the reader and tells them that she hopes she can be forgiven. One user created a discussion board asking, “why was Tris’s death necessary” and the responses underneath branch the question out further than just the novels. One user retaliates with: “Is any death necessary?” (Nuran). While readers appear conflicted by the content of *Allegiant*, most of them are moved to discuss death, both in general and more specifically, and how it changed things in the novel. Tris’s death, while controversial, inevitably affected many of the readers. These real responses show the impact this novel, and ones like it, have on the readers. While dread is usually

associated with death, closure comes from understanding the inevitability of death, and the reader of this novel is forced to realize that despite his issues he can potentially be forgiven.

Unlike the other texts in this thesis, Tris's role as a dead narrator is brief. However, her multiple interactions with death throughout the series highlight both the challenges and the growth that can come from it. Even though teens understand death, as Speece points out, most young readers will have a long time until they deal with death, so novels like *Allegiant* can be beneficial for teens who want to learn more. Tris's death grants her closure and growth, and her mother's sacrifice shows how death functions positively and negatively in a community. Through this, the reader should realize that her mistakes in life do not mean she can never be forgiven. Instead, the reader can learn to forgive herself and better her life through witnessing Tris's death. Tris gains closure in *Allegiant*, and by reading about her, the reader can reconcile herself to the inevitability and the necessity of death, while at the same time understanding the value of her life as she is living it.

## CHAPTER 3

## “EVERYTHING AFFECTS EVERYTHING” MULTIPLE PERCEPTIONS OF DEATH

The most controversial book in this thesis,<sup>7,8</sup> Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007), follows Clay Jensen after he has received seven tapes from his recently-deceased classmate and crush Hannah Baker. Hannah has created these tapes as her suicide note and has them sent to the people whom she believes led her to suicide. Hannah states that Clay “does not belong on this list,” and therefore he acts as our blameless guide to Hannah's thoughts (Asher 200). Despite her death, Hannah's voice continues throughout the text via these tapes, and Clay is forced to reconcile himself to her death, the classmates whom she says caused it, and his own inability to stop what has already happened.

Unlike the other books discussed, this dead character is not the main narrator. At times, she is the sole voice, but often Clay's thoughts interject. Still, Hannah's existence as a pseudo-first-person and dead narrator in the book acts as a guide for Clay. She shows him the permanence and unpredictability of death, both through her lack of communication as well as through the way her suicide affects others, and thereby gives him an otherworldly perspective on life. Asher's use of the tapes in this novel mimics a first-person narrator since it provides insight into what Hannah is thinking, feeling, and doing. More than that, the juxtaposition between the two narrators in most every way—living/dead, male/female—allows the reader a wider view of Hannah's death. There appears to be a conversation between the two characters as Clay answers questions that Hannah asks, or he thinks she is going to ask, but it is disjointed and imperfect. Hannah's narration only exists through the tapes and through the past; she is unable to answer Clay's questions nor can she answer for her faults. Clay's narration may be the main perspective given throughout the novel, but Hannah's voice is always present through the tapes.

Unlike Tris and Tobias's narration in *Allegiant*, Clay and Hannah's narration is uneven and alternating since Clay is presenting the transcripts of the tapes to the reader. Clay's is the main narration, since his voice frames both the novel and each of the tapes. Hannah's narration, on the other hand, is limited in length and time. She is still a narrator since she "narrates or gives an account" of her reasons for committing suicide, but unlike Clay she is relaying information about the past and from before her death ("Narrator"). While she narrates through the tapes, she does not have the freedom that Clay has in his narration. Clay moves the narrative forward, but Hannah is stuck relaying her story through a confined medium. The reader does not really know if Hannah has benefited from her death, as the other narrators appear to have, but Clay does eventually receive maturity and growth through his experience of Hannah's dead narration.

When Clay first hears Hannah's voice on the tapes, he is shocked. "No, I can't believe it. Hannah Baker killed herself" (Asher 7). Hannah will continue to speak to Clay throughout the novel in a stilted conversation. Even after hearing his tape, Clay is stuck in the land of the living. He is unable to respond to the voice which could have only predicted his questions. He must push through his denial of the death to further understand the situation, and he does this quickly. Now both intrigued and afraid, Clay listens to his dead crush's voice in the hopes of gaining closure.

Hannah's place as a narrator is further complicated when one considers her placement as both a dead narrator, since she is dead before the beginning of the novel, and one who was alive at the time of her tape recordings. Hannah is somewhat of a spirit guide for Clay as she does speak to him from beyond the grave, even if it is not in the same way as the other narrators do. In Klein's schema, Hannah would fit most easily into the category of ghost, though this is of course an uneasy comparison. She is filtered through Clay and other characters' perspectives, but the

characters cannot communicate with her. She also has unfinished business in this world, as evidenced by the fact that these tapes are meant to circulate to all the people listed. Although Clay has more freedom in his narration throughout the novel, since he is not limited to prerecorded tapes, both he and Hannah are confined in their inability to communicate with each other. There is growth and development, at least for Clay, but it does not come easily, nor does it take as much time as if he had gained this maturity from becoming an adult. Unlike Tobias and Tris, who regularly interact throughout *Allegiant*, Clay is only able to talk with the ghost of Hannah. As an auditory ghost, neither Hannah nor Clay can fully communicate, since the tapes can only predict Clay's answers which she can never hear.

Hannah is also unique among the other narrators in this thesis, as she has made the choice to kill herself, but Clay is similar to the other narrators since he does struggle to accept her death. Clay's narration is conflicted because Hannah is already dead and yet still speaking to him. Confronted by Hannah's desperation, and his own frustration with her suicide, Clay fights back against Hannah's isolation by saying, "Maybe you didn't give us enough to go on, Hannah ... And I liked the Hannah I met that night. Maybe I could've even loved her. But you decided not to let that happen, Hannah. It was you who decided" (Asher 249). This desperation to save Hannah, and therefore change the past, is mentioned frequently in the book. However, as most adults learn, you cannot change the past but must instead take those past lessons and apply them to the future. After one of Hannah's tape centered on her guidance counselor Mr. Porter, Clay finds himself wrestling with his inability to save her once more: "I would have helped her if she'd only let me. I would have helped her because I *want* her to be alive" (Asher 280; emphasis added). Clay wants to save the already dead Hannah because he is listening to her past recordings in his present, and this conflict mimics the conflict a reader may have about death.

Likewise, death for a reader, or a reader's loved one, is unavoidable. Instead, the reader and Clay must reevaluate their lives and how a death like this could affect them. It seems like Clay does change as a result of listening to the tapes, though it is not clear if the other recipients do, but hearing Hannah speculate about her death and the events which led to it causes Clay to realize his place in the world and how much one person can matter. Clay also needs to learn to accept Hannah's death, and he can only do this through maturity and knowledge. There is power in the vulnerability of death, as Trites points out, and Clay only realizes this when he finishes the tapes. He is not necessarily happy to have come to the conclusion, but he has grown through listening to these tapes and realizing not only how death affects people but how problematic people can be toward each other. At the end of the novel he, while clearly tired, wants to help Skye, who is sort of a friend of his, and he desires this because of what he has been through with Hannah.

Characters having one-sided conversations with the dead is a relatively common trope in literature. Sometimes it is through a séance with a medium, and other times it may be with a non-psychic character and the supposed empty room which contains an unseen dead character. However, Hannah's ghost and the way the book deals with it is different. The reader is privy to both Hannah and Clay's perspectives throughout the novel, each one being equally confined. Hannah is confined to her tapes, unable to further comment on the events of the world, and Clay is confined in his responses to Hannah. For most of the novel, the reader is forced into Clay's mind. Like Clay, the reader listens to Hannah's tape as a helpless observer. Meanwhile, the reader is also privy to Hannah's version of the truth, which remains on the tapes. Like Clay, the reader is begging Hannah to live. When Clay plays the first tape, the reader already knows the ending: Hannah dies. Offering a poor explanation of the afterlife, Hannah is hindered by her

death, and Clay is hindered by time, since all of her information comes too late. She may be a voice from beyond the grave, but she is almost as human as the male narrator. This inevitability mirrors what happens with death in the real world. This novel forces the reader to examine both Clay's distressed thoughts and Hannah's unchanging tapes. Through listening to these tapes, Clay exists as an unwilling audience to an event that already occurred and must now wrestle with his thoughts about her death. Eventually, he and the reader need to accept Hannah's death and leave their younger selves behind. Hannah's death is a barrier for him and the tapes act as a tantalizing look into death without any of the answers he desires. Just as Clay eventually grows through this interaction, as seen by his decision to run after Skye, so too can the readers benefit from experiencing the unwavering effect death has.

Not only is Hannah's death inevitable, but her conversation through the tapes is problematic for Clay and the other students who receive them. Several times throughout the book she admits to her faults. This is especially true in Clay's tape when she notes that "Yes, there are some major gaps in my story. Some parts I just couldn't figure out how to tell. Or couldn't bring myself to say out loud. Events I haven't come to grips with... that I'll never come to grips with" (Asher 201). Hannah is a fallible narrator, but this fallibility humanizes both her and the idea of death. She does not know what death holds, just like the reader does not know what to expect of a potential afterlife. As Freud discusses, we cannot imagine our own death, so it can be difficult to imagine what might lead to our death. The only thing someone truly knows about death is that it will occur. Instead, Hannah exists as a ghost from the past for Clay. Straddling two worlds, Clay and the reader must either listen to her side of things or put the book away. Hannah and Clay work together to examine death, what leads to it, and how it affects the living.



*TRW* allows for multiple perspectives on a singular death, something Cadden considers essential for young adult literature, and in doing so provides the reader with both an internal and external view of a devastating situation. Clay and Hannah, like most narrators, are fallible. Hannah is limited to her tapes and time, while Clay is a normal teenage boy who either misremembers many events or does not know about them. For instance, in one tape Hannah discusses teen magazines and tries to pretend that her only interest in them is for the surveys, and Clay responds with the idea that this is because she never wore makeup. However, Hannah admits that the tips were helpful, which causes Clay to ask, “You wore makeup?” (Asher 120). While this is a small issue, it shows the differences in perspective in the narrative, something that Cadden notes is important in novels with limited narration. Yet, Hannah is there to counteract Clay’s ignorance and provide a wider picture for the audience. Through this awkward and inconsistent conversation, the reader is provided with more information than if he had just the tapes or Clay’s thoughts.

While these examples of incomplete knowledge appear small, they ultimately align with Cadden and his thoughts on the importance of multiple narrators. Neither Hannah nor Clay can provide the full picture of what happened in the text without the other. Hannah’s tapes are incomplete and one-sided, and Clay is an observer who does play a role in her life but cannot represent or even articulate her struggles. Clay tries to figure out what he could have done to save Hannah as well as why he is on the tapes, and this struggle is important for the reader. Likewise, both narrators are affected by death differently since Hannah’s death is final for her, but Clay will have to deal with this throughout his life. Hannah’s death was devastating but inevitable, and Clay must learn how to cope with it.

At one point in the story, after wondering what he could have done, Clay remembers a conversation with Hannah. Clay confronts Hannah after watching her talk with Bryce, a terrible person who later assaults her, but she tells him that he does not need to “watch out” for her (Asher 148). Clay, reflecting on this memory, thinks, “But I did, Hannah. And I wanted to. I could have helped you. But when I tried, you pushed me away. I can almost hear Hannah’s voice speaking my next thought for me. ‘Then why didn’t you try harder?’” (Asher 148). While this is before Clay realizes that his role in Hannah’s death is not actually one that drove her to suicide, he still holds onto the desire to go back and change the outcome of Hannah’s life. By reflecting on his past and Hannah’s death, he has achieved some wisdom. Though Clay could have tried to save Hannah, her death is unavoidable and, while harsh, this may mirror readers who wish to save their dead loved ones. Clay gains power in his attempt to understand the inevitability of death, which is what Trites points out in her article on death in young adult literature. Once he comes to terms with Hannah’s death, he is able to help another person in need, and this novel shows readers how death, especially suicide, can affect others.

Clay may be the main narrator of the story, but Hannah’s narration, and her one-sided conversation with the tapes’ listeners, is equally important, as they allow the reader into the mind of a suicidal person. Hannah’s narration, along with Clay’s narration, helps draw in the reader. In the chapter labeled “Cassette2: Side B,” Hannah begins the tape by whispering. She has, in this moment, become a Peeping Tom just like Tyler, who had done the same thing to her earlier. This style of narration, and the way she purposely whispers, forces Clay to try harder to listen and imagine what she is doing. More than that, though, Hannah ends up narrating her movements and what she is doing. Nikolajeva’s article, which focuses on the use of space in a narrative to force

the reader into a similar mindset, can be seen through Hannah's narration. This narration encourages the reader to imagine herself in this situation, just as Nikolajeva suggests.

This wider perspective allows the reader to question both the living and the dead, and helps the reader come to terms with death. According to Goodreads, *TRW* is controversial. The American Library Association notes that this novel was the most banned book in 2017, and based on the reader's reviews it is not hard to see why (Gomez). Many users believe that the novel glamorizes suicide and are incredibly unhappy about that fact. One reviewer admits that she has "felt suicidal before. Briefly, never seriously. And yet, the thought that I don't think is that uncommon went something like this: *'When I'm dead, they'll all be sorry,'*" and connects this to the novel by explaining that she thinks "this book encourages that line of thinking" (Beth). Beth, and other readers like her, are desperate to prevent this book from encouraging a copycat suicide. They worry that it does not adequately express disdain for suicide.

The controversy around suicide in this novel has moved from reader reviews to academic research. Victor Hong conducted a study that observed what happened when young adults were exposed to the *TRW* television show. While the television show is not the novel, the first season mostly sticks to the novel and can be used to determine how the depiction of suicide affects people. Hong admits that further research is needed, but "the findings suggest a particular vulnerability to the show's themes among youths at risk of suicide and the importance of prevention strategies to ameliorate risk among these viewers" (Hong). In particular, the results found that "Over half of youth viewers (51%) believed the series increased their suicide risk to a nonzero degree; having a stronger identification with the lead female character was significantly related to this belief" (Hong). This study may be based on visual media, but it suggests an increased empathy with Hannah, which may be problematic, but it also indicates how powerful

characters like her are. This is further backed up by Nikolajeva's article, which finds that readers are often empathetic with characters regardless of whether it is a good or bad idea to be so. Clay cannot help but empathize with the deeply troubled Hannah and manages to benefit from this realization; unfortunately, as Hong states, the reader may become more empathetic, but should attempt to distance themselves fully from Hannah's point of view. Hopefully, Clay's narration will act as a barrier for the reader since he is empathetic toward Hannah but does not kill himself. Though this novel clearly affects reader, and seemingly for the worse, Clay should act as an empathetic barrier for the reader. Suicide is a controversial subject but recognizing its effect on readers and watchers allows the audience the ability to evaluate their own lives and issues.

In Mathis and Vaughan's case study of teenage boys reading about suicidal characters, they point out the positive effect the books they chose had on the boys. *TRW* accomplishes this same effect through Hannah's narration. Not only does the reader see Clay struggle with death and what it does to him, but the reader is given the reasons, thirteen to be exact, why Hannah killed herself. Hannah's suicidal feelings, and the people she claims causes those feelings, should show the reader the impact he can have on others as well as help him better empathize and understand what he might be going through. Asher answers questions about *TRW* at the end of this book, and in one he admits that he hopes this novel will show people that they need "to be aware of how we treat others" (Asher). The next question delves into suicide and how someone may associate herself with Hannah, and to combat this he encourages people to break down the stigma of suicide and talk about it, as well as get help if needed. Asher hoped that his book would benefit readers, and as such this novel acts as a guide for readers to either empathize with the characters or, if they see themselves in Hannah, get help before it is too late. This is similar to bibliotherapy, which scholars like Mathis, Vaughan, and Del Nero, as well as reader reviews,

endorse. Clay guides the reader through the story, with Hannah, and in doing so shows the reader how to heal after a loved one has died.

Despite the negativity surrounding the book, the ending is relatively hopeful for Clay. When Clay sees Skye headed down the path of suicide, he jumps at the chance to help her in the way he was unable to help Hannah. It is not a perfect resolution, nor would it satisfy readers who are desperate for Hannah to live, but it does provide the reader with the idea that life goes on. It also shows that Clay has learned from Hannah's death that people should be kinder to people as well as help those who need it. The tapes show Clay that there was a possibility for him to save Hannah, and while everyone does not need to save everyone else, he realizes that he can help others and that it can be important to do so. The unique setup of this novel shows the reader the inevitability of death, since Hannah is dead from the beginning, but also the importance in accepting death as seen by Clay's journey with the tapes. Clay can reflect on Hannah's death and though it creates a sense of finality, Clay's narration, and desire to connect with Skye, creates a sense of hope and life.

This novel examines the trauma associated with suicide, as well as the benefits of coming to terms with it. At the end of the novel, Clay decides to help his friend Skye and potentially prevent another suicide. By reading both Clay and Hannah's perspectives, the reader is able to understand death, as well as the events leading to it, and explored her empathy for these characters and apply it to her life. This is not to say that the only point of literature is to benefit the reader, but the effects it has on the reader could potentially be helpful. Likewise, not every reader will benefit from experiencing Clay's hardships. Still, Clay has grown from accepting her death, which is seen by his desire to help Skye. At the beginning of the novel, Clay was unable to talk to Hannah, only having one night with her at a party, but by the end of the novel he has

gained the desire to help others. Through Hannah's tragic death, Clay learns how to better his life and the lives of those around him.

## CHAPTER 4

## “IT’S NOT SUPPOSED TO GO THIS WAY” ACCEPTING DEATH’S INEVITABILITY

In Lauren Oliver’s *Before I Fall* (2010), Samantha (Sam) Kingston finds herself trapped in a loop of her own death. This young adult version of *Groundhog Day* shows Sam learning to deal with her death and growing from a shallow teenager to someone with a deeper perspective. Sam matures throughout the novel despite her death and learns the impact she has on people, namely through her bullying, and hopefully readers can learn this same lesson.

Sam begins this novel as a normal, well-adjusted teen celebrating Valentine’s Day. She goes to school with her best friends, plans to lose her virginity with her terrible boyfriend Rob (who appears to only be interested in sex), and goes to a party to celebrate the holiday. At the party, however, a girl named Julia Sykes, who is relentlessly bullied by Sam and her friends, calls them all bitches, gets beer thrown on her, and then runs out of the party. Sam and her friends leave, and soon afterwards they get in a car wreck, which is eventually revealed to have occurred because Julia committed suicide by jumping in front of their car. However, after these horrific events, Sam wakes up to it being Valentine’s Day once more. This occurs several more times. Every day, she inevitably finds herself back in her bed on February 14<sup>th</sup>. Throughout the novel, she spends these repeated days struggling to figure out how to escape death, how to save Julia, and ultimately how to be a better person. Although each day starts and ends the same way, Sam changes either what she does in between repeated days or how she acts. This results in her realizing how terrible Rob is, how awful she has been, the true love she feels for her ex-best friend Kent, and what life has and should have meant for her. She realizes that, while it is too late now, she should have been a better person and not been so obsessed with popularity. Her death is

similar to adulthood in that she learns what things are actually important in life and how she should handle situations maturely.

Sam's perspective in the novel, while limited by the first-person narration, is expanded by her self-reflexive and anachronistic thoughts, which serve as the sober, and dead, reality of the novel. This more knowledgeable version of Sam, and the one which appears outside of the original timeline of the novel (which I will refer to as anachronistic Sam) comments on her death to the reader and how the reader may be reacting to her moments of stupidity and naiveté:

*Be honest: are you surprised that I didn't realize sooner? Are you surprised that it took me so long to even think the word— death? Dying? Dead? Do you think I was being stupid? Naive? Try not to judge. Remember that we're the same, you and me. I thought I would live forever too. (Oliver 138)*

This anachronistic Sam, while a mediating and omniscient presence for the readers, is not only desperate for the readers to empathize with her, but she and the novel serve as a warning for teens that death can occur at any moment. Anachronistic Sam is like an adult, whereas the Sam in the present timeline is still an immature teenager. Eventually, the present Sam learns what is important in life, but she only realizes this after she struggles to accept her death. The reader follows the fragile and broken story throughout the novel, but she is frequently coached by this other and more experienced Sam. While not two separate narrators, this double-voiced perspective allows the reader multiple examinations into the world of the dead. Anachronistic Sam acts as the reader's guide, reminding "you" and not Sam that "*hope keeps you alive. Even when you're dead, it's the only thing that keeps you alive*" (Oliver 143). Here, she tries to imbue the reader with hope even after she is dead. Although this Sam is the same person as the narrator throughout the story, she provides a whole new perspective, which seems to be a result of her



death and acceptance of it. Meanwhile, the living Sam begins the story as the puzzled dead, temporarily becomes the ignorant dead, and eventually accepts death as an inevitable part of living. Not only that, but Sam finds her purpose in death.

Oliver discusses this idea in an interview in which she says that she wrote the novel during a hard time in her life and that it led her to the discovery of her life's purpose. She aims for readers to experience their own purposes, which is echoed in the novel when Sam realizes the only way to stop her time loop is to save Juliet. While someone's purpose may not be as drastic as dying for someone, his or her purpose is still crucial to living a fulfilled life and having 'painless' death. Reliving this same day and the death that comes with it grants Sam the time and knowledge necessary for her to gain closure and mastery over her past mistakes. As it was Oliver's hope to portray someone finding his/her purpose, the reader should take this idea and apply it to his/her life before it is too late. Sam attempts to do this, but ultimately accepts her fate and as she tries to rectify her past mistakes.

This dual view of her life, as the anachronistic Sam and the current Sam, reflects Cadden's argument that multiple narrators are essential for young adult literature. Even though this is the same character, both Sams have vastly different outlooks on the situations at hand. Anachronistic Sam addresses the reader directly throughout the text and both apologizes and defends current Sam's disbelief:

*I know some of you are thinking maybe I deserved it. Maybe I shouldn't have sent that rose to Juliet or dumped my drink on her at the party ... But before you start pointing fingers, let me ask you: is what I did really so bad? So bad I deserved to die? Is what I did really so much worse than what anybody else does? Is it really so much worse than what you do? Think about it (Oliver 86-87).*

Sam's view here is far more mature than at the beginning of the novel. While the anachronistic Sam is not much older than when she died, she has still gained a lot more perspective through her death and the events leading up to it. As a proto-adulthood, death allows Sam to ask the reader questions which the current Sam may not realize are important. Sam acknowledges her problematic behavior, but she makes sure that the reader realizes that she may not be the only one who acts this way.

The lesson from the quote above, to reflect on one's own culpability, is repeated throughout the novel. It is something that current Sam must overcome in order to pass on from her personal hell. This is related to Klein's idea of the ignorant dead. Before understanding the purpose of her life, Sam spends a majority of the book in steadfast denial of her death. After reliving her death date several times, she wakes up angry at the world and lashes out, as any normal teenager would: "She's a fraud: the whole world is a fraud, one bright, shiny scam. And somehow *I'm* the one paying for it. I'm the one who died. I'm the one who's trapped" (Oliver 190). What Sam fails to realize in this moment is that her death is inescapable. Although she is, understandably, upset over the repetition, this is a rather immature view of the world. She can be angry at the prospect of death, and can even blame it on specific things, but that will not change the outcome. Acting as the ignorant dead, Sam is trapped inside of a loop of her own creation. To escape, she must accept death, which she does not realize until the end of the novel. This acceptance is necessary for Sam to break out of this cycle and is also relevant for the reader.

Right before the end, however, she believes that she can survive the inevitable. Upon trying to save both Juliet and herself, and it not working, she thinks: "*It's not supposed to go this way. I'm supposed to save you*" (Oliver 318). This moment is filled with desperation. Sam firmly believes that she can save Juliet and herself. Unfortunately, Sam is destined to die in this

moment, and the only solace she has is preventing Juliet's death. While it is possible that Sam's potential survival was simply added to create suspense, I believe it is there because Sam, as the main character of her own story, probably did not consider her own death a possibility. It is naïve, yet understandable, that she wants to survive, but she cannot live forever, and while it seems like a young person deserves more time, the truth is that this is not always the case.

Unfortunately, Sam's belief that she can save Juliet without dying is nothing more than naive optimism. Thus, the next day occurs, and she is thrust back into her death date. She has matured and gained wisdom through her death, and while that is tragic, it is also an inevitability of growing up. When she realizes that she has to die, that there is no escape, life becomes beautiful to her again. Her last day becomes the hardest for her to leave behind. The realization that life is wonderful causes her to make the decision to accept her death, which is not easy for her now that she sees the true benefit to living. Like Sam, the reader must also accept the inevitability of death.

As Sam points out, "*maybe you can afford to wait. Maybe for you there's a tomorrow ... So much time you can waste it. But for some of us there's only today. And the truth is, you never really know*" (Oliver 274). While this realization comes too late for Sam, it is clear to the young adult reader. Oftentimes young adults do not focus on the possibility of death, something Sam notes early in the novel. Still, this novel shows that this recognition is necessary. At the end of the novel, when she has finally accepted her death and is about to pass on, she considers the importance of life and its moments:

*that's when I realized that time doesn't matter. That's when I realized that certain moments go on forever. Even after they're over they still go on, even after you're dead and buried, those moments are lasting still, backward and forward, on into infinity. They*

*are everything and everywhere all at once. They are the meaning. I'm not scared, if that's what you're wondering* (Oliver 475).

Sam has finally learned the importance of living through her last moments on earth. Her death has accelerated the time it would take to learn these lessons through adulthood, and has allowed her to make these connections now. Though a teen may feel as if he has no need to fear death, Sam only realizes the beauty of life once she understands the harsh reality of death's unpredictable and inescapable nature. This harkens back to Dudley and his discussion of the narrator in "Red Death." Like the narrator in this short story, the reader of Sam's story must come to terms with Sam's endlessly-delayed death. Sam experiences death but is initially allowed to live. To Dudley, this means that the reader must wrestle with this impossibility. Unlike Sam, readers may not get a second chance at life after dying. Instead, they must reconcile themselves with the fact that death is irreversible—a fact which Sam also must come to understand.

In one chapter, Sam, after having died multiple times, wonders if life has a point since she is destined to die:

That's what really breaks me—right then, when Elody says that. Or rather, when she reminds me that I said that: yesterday, six days ago, a whole different *world* ago. How is it possible, I think, to change so much and not be able to change anything at all? That's the very worst thing about all of this, a feeling of desperate hopelessness, and I realize my question to Elody is the question that's been tearing me up all along. What's the point? If I'm dead—if I can't change anything, if I can't fix it—*what's the point?* (Oliver 367)

This moment is important for Sam, because from then on she begins trying to right her wrongs and save herself and Juliet. Sam realizes that she has no way to prevent her death, and thus there

appears to be no reason to continue with life. She has been acting like a teenager, which she is, but her death has forced her to mature in order to move on to the afterlife. The lessons death has provided her are good despite the fact that it is horrible that she had to die. However, through her anachronistic monologues, Sam urges people to realize these lessons before it is too late for them. She cannot fully reap the benefits, but a reader can.

To many people, death is not only a taboo subject but a horrific one to discuss. In part, this comes from the fact that it makes a person question the point of life, just as Sam does. However, this moment of desperate hopelessness is not the end for Sam. Through several more experiences of death, Sam realizes that there is immense beauty in life and everything appears to happen for a reason. This is seen later when she stands in front of her ex-best friend/new crush Kent and thinks “of all the thousands of billions of steps and missteps and chances and coincidences that have brought me here, facing Kent, holding a pink-and-cream-swirled rose, and it feels like the biggest miracle in the world” (Oliver 371). By encountering death multiple times, Sam learns to appreciate life. The reader, in turn, experiences the same change by proxy since he sees Sam change and grow. Even though she is still dead, the novel suggests that death is worth it as long as you are a good person and have done your best to accept responsibility for your actions.

In Sarah Whitney’s critical study about Postfeminist gothic fiction and gendered violence, she briefly touches on posthumous narration in several novels including *Before I Fall*. While she does note that unlike previous female protagonists who die and “slip out before womanhood,” Sam does not “leave the narrative, but continues to speak from a celestial perspective ... [which] emphasizes death’s instructive qualities” (Whitney 52). While this perspective may be somewhat positive, Whitney is ultimately unhappy with the depiction of dead

girls since, as she argues later, “But in leaving the story altogether, her younger contemporaries suggest that the ‘elsewhere’ following this life might offer teenaged girls a frightening and unorthodox place of freedom and self-development—a grave of their own” (Whitney 58). Clearly, death should not be the only way to grow, and it is problematic if this is the lesson a reader gains. Similarly to the boys from Mathis and Vaughan’s study, a reader may benefit from novels like *Before I Fall* by applying these lessons to his or her life. Sam may provide an “intimate, confessional tone ... [which] asks adolescent female readers to similarly interrogate and reform their own lives” but this does not mean they should die to do so nor does it mean that Sam’s voice is the only way to reach this conclusion (Whitney 52). Clearly, this dead female trope can be problematic, but Sam does grow in her death. As such, *Before I Fall* effectively communicates with the reader, as Whitney notes, to benefit the reader in his or her life.

Sam’s growth is most clearly seen in her interactions with Juliet. From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Juliet is at the bottom of the high school food chain and Sam is near the top. She even heartlessly refers to her as “Psycho” and “start[s] making that screeching and stabbing motion from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*” (Oliver 45). By her second death, however, she begins to realize how horribly they have been treating Juliet and asks Lindsey why she hates Juliet (Oliver 154). However, Lindsey avoids the question, and Sam dies again. By the end of the novel, Sam realizes why Lindsey hated Juliet (Lindsey peed her sleeping bag but blamed Juliet) and has remorse for everything she’s done to her. Since Juliet was the one who caused her car crash, Sam begins making amends, realizes that “It’s not about [her],” and sacrifices herself to save Juliet instead of staying with the boy she loves (Oliver 468). Sam’s repeated deaths and the multiple days she relives helps her realize what a terrible person she has been. It took death, and

repeated days, for her to mature because she was unable to understand the beauty of the world before then.

The ending of this novel provides hope in the midst of death. Sam is no longer scared of death but finds it “*is full of sound and warmth and light, so much light it fills me*” (Oliver 475-476). Death, in fact, may be a welcoming moment at the end of one’s life. Sam ends the novel by telling the reader, “*The rest you have to find out for yourself*” (Oliver 476). These words, after expressing the good associated with death, are meant to encourage the readers not to be afraid of the inevitable. The entire novel follows Sam in her desperate attempt to prevent her own death, but in the end, she must succumb to it as everyone else does. Having learned the importance of life, however, she is ready to accept her fate and move on; in other words, she has grown up. As Trites discusses in her article, the acceptance of death, or rather the acceptance that one cannot circumvent death, gives Sam the power to move on. Without the acceptance of death, Sam would be unable to break out of this perpetual loop, since everything else she tries does not work. This power brings both current and anachronistic Sam peace at the end of the novel. This is not to say that this novel condones suicide, but rather it is meant to quell a reader’s anxiety about death. Like Del Nero’s case study regarding students who read about death in gothic literature, the reader of *Before I Fall* may learn meaningful life lessons by reading this text.

By using the dead, anachronistic Sam, Oliver provides readers with a foil for the inevitability of death. Even though teens may have time before they are forced to confront death, it is important for them to begin to discuss it. After her second day of dying, she brings up this topic with her friends and asks, “‘Do you think you’ll know, though?’ It’s suddenly important for me to talk about this. ‘I mean, do you think you’ll have an idea of it...like, *before?*’” (Oliver 133). Her encounters with death have made it feel necessary to talk about it further with her

friends. She has, after just her first experience with her death, realized that maybe she has been too caught up in young and immature things; again, this makes sense because she is a teenager but this novel is about her growth as a person. Since death is a serious and terrifying topic, as Kundu points out in his essay discussing literature's conversation with death, it benefits teens who will eventually need to deal with this harsh reality since they already understand death as evidenced by Speece. Through the death of Sam, both the reader and Sam learn to understand life.

Again, this can be seen in reader reviews left on Goodreads. Several reviewers note that this novel made them "view things differently after reading it" (guccii\_kth). On Goodreads, Kat Kennedy compares herself to Sam at the beginning of the novel and finds that "this book made me melancholy. I think about Juliet Sykes and remember that I once had my own Juliet Sykes. I wish I could go back in time and change that. I wish I could somehow make amends to her" (Kat Kennedy). Even though it reminded her of her faults, she admits that this book "made me glad that I did change, that I have tomorrow to keep trying and learning and growing. It makes me happy to think that even I deserved a chance at redemption and to choose a different way to live my life" (Kat Kennedy). If this novel had an effect like this on an adult, then it makes sense that the same would occur to a teenager reading it. However, both Nikolajeva and Trites show that adolescents have a unique position when reading these novels since they are on the cusp of becoming an adult. This novel clearly causes readers to reflect on their own past mistakes.

Like the other novels in this thesis, not everyone is happy about Sam's final death. One reviewer asks, rhetorically, why Sam had to sacrifice herself for Juliet and explains that Oliver intended "write a book about [the] cruel reality of teenage life and high school, [and] wanted to pass a message of values more important than money or popularity" (Karolina). However, I think



Karolina misses the point of Sam's death when she discusses Oliver's desires. It does appear as if Oliver wanted the reader to change, as evidenced by her interview and the growth Sam experiences, but I believe that, in part, Sam's death is just more proof that death is inevitable. While reviewers like Karolina may consider Sam's death superfluous, since she has the ability to go back in time and fix it, it is just as inevitable as death is in the real world. Sam desperately tries to save herself, but it never works because death is inescapable. By including Sam's death in this novel, even after seemingly giving her a chance to prevent it, Oliver is admitting the fragility of life and the inescapable reality of it; Juliet survives for another day but Sam does not. Unlike Sam, the reader does not get the opportunity to do over things if he messes up nor will he be able to change things once he dies.

Without the realization that death is inescapable, Sam would be trapped in her time loop indefinitely. She gains power over her situation once she accepts death and understands that the way she had been living was not ethical. Even though teens, often, have plenty of time before they die, this novel teaches them to value the life they have and to be a good person while they can. Sam learns from her mistakes through her death, and she does change for the better. A teen may not be confronted with the reality of death every day, but he should realize that it is always a possibility. As such, this novel provides the teenagers with the tools to live life to the fullest and be a good person.

## CHAPTER 5

## “AND I WAS FINALLY READY” THE FIVE STAGES OF ACCEPTING DEATH

Of all the novels covered, *The Catastrophic History of You and Me* (2012) by Jess Rothenberg is the only one that begins with the character already dead. Though it may seem unbelievable, Brie dies at the age of fifteen because of a broken heart and cheekily tells the reader that she is “living (well, not *living*, per se) proof” of this real medical condition (Rothenberg 3). Thus, dead Brie not only becomes the companion of the reader throughout the novel but also his companion through death. Brie explores different realms of the dead while simultaneously wrestling with the fact that she is dead. She is rather immature at the beginning of the novel, and she ends up injuring her ex-boyfriend without caring about the consequences, but through her time in the afterlife she experiences a proto-adulthood which allows her to grow. Luckily for Brie, and the reader (since he may also be lost), she is not alone in her reconciliation with death, but she is guided by Patrick her spiritual guide and old flame. Rothenberg flits between the world of the living and the afterlife in the novel, but mostly focuses on the afterlife, which gives the reader an inside view of what he might expect after death; surely, some people may not expect anything after death but these novels focus on the possibility of consciousness after death. Though there is no way to tell if this is a realistic look into the afterlife, it allows the reader the chance to imagine what happens after death. The book supplies an answer to the questions: “where do we go?” and “does our soul live on?”

Brie begins the story both angry and, literally, heartbroken by her boyfriend Jacob. Once Jacob breaks up with Brie her heart splits apart, and she begins her new adventure as a recently deceased person. After watching her funeral, Brie arrives in the afterlife where she meets a cute boy named Patrick. Patrick acts as a guide and helps her come to terms with death, which she

does using the five stages of grief. While some may be skeptical of Kubler-Ross' stages, Brie's experience with each step helps her accept her death. Each section of the book is titled after these stages and brings her closer to accepting her sudden death. She denies her death, and refuses help from Patrick in Part Two, and then gets revenge on Jacob and is angered by her struggling parents in Part Three. Next, she leaves the safety of the afterlife with Patrick and attempts to explore her new existence as a dead person with a girl named Larkin, who schemes to take her salvation and prevent her from having eternal life. In Part Five, she is overwhelmed by the sadness of her death, what she has done to her ex-boyfriend, and her earlier anger at Patrick. Acceptance is the final part in the book. In it, Brie accepts her death and attempts to save Jacob, who is about to commit suicide, but she also finds out that she and Patrick were lovers in a past life. Through these five stages, Brie realizes the inevitability of death and finds solace in the afterlife. Though some readers may not believe in either of these possibilities after death, the lessons Brie learns along the way may be helpful for readers.

In her article on dead narrators, Leila Sales considers the afterlife to be a "perfect fantastical realm: a world where none of us have been, but where all of us will someday wind up" (Sales). This idea, as well as the sad love story, is what likely attracts readers to this book. While Brie is dead throughout the novel, Rothenberg insinuates that one needs to come to terms with one's death and does this through examining the five stages of grief. Like a *Bildungsroman* of death, Brie learns about herself after death. Even though Brie is dead, death in this novel is not truly the end. Brie is still able to grow, learn, and do things similar to what she would do on earth. It may happen posthumously, but Brie does continue to grow after her death. Though Brie cannot fully affect the world inside the text, Sales argues that the readers are left with the lessons that Brie has learned and wants to pass on: "And we are the ones who are alive in the world,

ready to change it” (Sales). For the most part, this appears to be the case. This novel teaches the reader how to get through each stage of grief and ends, like most young adult fiction, with a happy/hopeful ending. Witnessing these stages is not only beneficial, but essential, to helping the reader cope with the inevitable, as well as showing them potential coping mechanisms to deal with losses and other issues. Brie, like the reader, cannot accept her death and can only find peace when she does. She has to recognize her lack of knowledge and her immaturity and grow from it in order to move on.

Of all of Klein’s types of dead, Brie best embodies the ignorant dead. Before entering the afterlife, Brie hangs around her family and even attends her own funeral. She appears puzzled by the continuation of life and desires to be a part of the living. While observing her family at her own funeral, Brie realizes that “They couldn’t know I was sitting on the stage, watching, just a few feet away. Wishing I could tell them everything would be okay, even if I wasn’t so sure. But the dead can’t talk, after all” (Rothenberg 11). That last statement is what bothers her throughout the novel. She wants to talk to her family, to yell at her ex-boyfriend, and be around her best friends. Simply put, she wants to be alive. With practice, she is eventually able to lightly influence the world; and in the case of her ex-boyfriend she is able to fracture his leg through the astral plane. However, she is still unable to fully replace her living self, which infuriates her. Since she is unable to return to the land of the living, Brie is forced to accept her place in the land of the dead. Before this can occur, she enters the stage of denial.

Denial and confusion go hand in hand in this novel. Brie appears in what she assumes is heaven but is ultimately dismayed by its appearance: “I’m not really sure what I expected the whole *After Life* thing to look like exactly, but I was pretty sure it would’ve had something to do with fluffy clouds and giant waterslides ... not quite” (Rothenberg 33). This speculation lines up

with a person's desire to know what happens after death, but the disappointment grounds the experience in reality. The reader cannot know if her perfect version of the afterlife will exist, but neither does he expect it to be a pizza restaurant.

Thankfully, this denial leads to Patrick providing Brie with the *D&G Handbook*. *D&G* (Dead and Gone) is meant to be a resource for the dead to cope with their new situation, but Brie immediately disregards it. This is a rather immature thing to do since *D&G* is meant to help her, but she does not realize this until much later in the novel when she opens it once again. Many teenagers may act similarly to Brie, choosing to ignore the written rules of something like a syllabus, until it is necessary. This repeated denial to get help prevents Brie from leaving purgatory, something, as Klein mentions, that is of her own creation. When she eventually believes herself to be dead, and unable to live again, she is able to interact with the world and slowly begins accepting herself. She has to grow in the afterlife in order to understand and accept her death.

At the end of the section marked Denial and the beginning of Anger, Brie gets to interact with the real world. This is problematic for several reasons. The most notable one is the pain it causes her. Having witnessed her family falling apart over her death, a common occurrence in families which have lost a child, Brie is angered by the limitations of her current state. For the reader, this once again proves the futility of death. Once someone is dead and gone she cannot change the world around her. This also shows that the world of one's younger self and adulthood is not so easily mixed. Brie wants to hold on to her past life, her youth and her opinions, but ultimately, she is forced to grow up. It is untimely and sad, but death is ultimately beneficial for her because it allows her to meet her soulmate again, help her family, and save her ex-boyfriend,

who was going through an incredibly tough time. Death is not the only solution, but when it happens to Brie she is then forced to mature in order to properly deal with it.

In the Bargaining section, a much shorter section than Anger and Denial, Brie ends up not bargaining to live again, but for her soul's salvation. She manages to just barely escape damnation. By the section called Sadness, it appears that Brie is truly on the path to acceptance. She interacts with the locals, since Patrick has been missing for a bit, and deals with the sadness inside of her. Finally, the Acceptance section lines up with the reader's acceptance of Brie's death. She has managed to interact briefly with, and help, the land of the living, she and Patrick end up being reunited past lovers, and Brie realizes that death may be the end, but that this does not overshadow life. At the time of Acceptance, Brie has matured far beyond her teenage years and realized that she could not hold on to her past life forever. Dying is inevitable, as is growing up, and this is important for a teenager to realize, but it should not be the defining moment for the teen. Instead, this book should act as a guide to dealing with death—yours or someone else's.

Though Trites does not talk about this novel, Brie's acceptance of death ultimately gives her power, as Trites contends. Once she realizes who she was in her past life and that her current death is her only reality, Brie is ready to pass on and is happy to do so. Every time she moves through the stages of grief, she is better able to manipulate the land of the living, and deal with the afterlife. This power then leads to better control over herself, and hopefully will lead the reader to have better control over her own life. Once she understands that she has to accept her own death, Brie is able to go back in time, reexperience life with her soulmate, and receives a happy ending where, even though she's dead, the people she left behind have healed from losing her. Her parents, friends, and ex-boyfriend, while still sad about her passing, have accepted her death and continued forward with their lives.

Like *Before I Fall*'s Sam, Brie Larson gets another chance at life. Near the end of the book, when she's desperate to fix everything, Brie experiences the last night of her death again, except this time, she gets a chance to make it better. While Brie still dies, this return to the moment that killed her allows Brie to finally accept her death (an idea she's been building toward throughout the novel). At peace with death, Brie visits her room one last time and upon looking at her reflection she realizes that, "more than anything else, I wished I had known just how lucky I'd been to have them in the first place. To have lived. To have loved. To have *been* loved. What else could a girl have asked for?" (Rothenberg 374). It is only after reconciling with death that Brie is able to appreciate life.

Both protagonists in *Catastrophic* and *Before I Fall* get a temporary, second chance at life, and it grants Sam and Brie new knowledge. The more mature versions of characters, which occur in these second chances, is similar to Cadden's preferred method of narration since it provides a new viewpoint for the reader by developing the idea that people can change and the inevitability of death does not mean it is terrible. The characters continue to grow despite dying, and the reader should see this second chance as evidence for why they should change before it is too late. First-person narration provides the reader with the experience and trauma of death which may help the reader rectify any issues he may have caused someone in the past. Viewing scholars like Mathis, Vaughan, Nikolajeva, and Del Nel show how texts can affect readers. These texts show that it is never too late to change, and that it is important to do so before one's death occurs.

Brie's second chance reliving the night of her death initially causes her emotional distress. She is ecstatic when she sees, and can touch, her mother and brother, but she is sad when she realizes that this is not her chance to live again. Instead, this time with her family

allows her to fix her past mistakes and shows the reader the ways in which she has matured. At the beginning of the novel, Brie is angry at her death and Jacob--so much so that she maims him. However, her time in the afterlife, and with Patrick, teaches her that life is not as simple as she made it out to be. She forgives Jacob and prevents him from killing himself, when initially she wanted him to suffer. Like an adult reflecting on the past, Brie cannot hold onto the memory or the past and instead must fix what she is allowed to and move on. In turn, this should show the reader that it is important to forgive others, as much for oneself as for other people. Through Brie's death, the reader should see the problems with holding on to anger and sadness and the benefits of accepting death and other transgressions which may occur in life.

Even though these characters get a second chance at life, these texts clearly point out the pain associated with death as well as its inevitability. Upon visiting her family, Brie learns that her death has caused a rupture in her parents' marriage. Infuriated by what has happened, she notes that "there was nothing I could do. Nothing but watch my sweet, once-perfect family fall apart around me ... *I hate this. I hate this so much. Everything is so unfair*" (Rothenberg 129). There is no doubt that death causes tremendous amounts of pain and in some cases, like Brie's, it can be so bad that it destroys a family. This ache she feels is a part of her process. She will eventually have to accept her death, which she does at the end of the novel, but right then the certainty of it hurts her. That idea that life is unfair, something which many people often think, is also something everyone should strive to come to terms with. Brie is unable to live and grow so instead she does so after death. Eventually, like Brie, the reader must accept death in order to move on.

Of all the novels in this thesis, *The Catastrophic History of You and Me* has the highest star rating on Goodreads, 4.04 out of 5, and the least amount of discussion (only 2,010 written



reviews). Several reviewers note the impact the novel had on them. One found that “the unfolding of the story helped me see the bigger picture and understand the faults possessed by each and every human,” even though he/she gave the book only 3 stars (Charu). Another reader vaguely discusses how the book “Helped me realize something again in my shitty life” (Gaelah Gabrieles). By reading novels like Rothenberg’s, readers appear to be finding similar issues with their own lives. Brie must go through the five stages of grief to come to terms with death, but Rothenberg shows the other side’s struggle as well. Her parents’ divorce, her brother is unhappy, and her ex-boyfriend (who she torments) wants to commit suicide. Death may be final, since Brie is never able to fully come back, but there is a necessary process for resolving one’s feelings with death.

There is no way for these protagonists to return to their life on Earth permanently, so instead they must reconcile their thoughts on death and the afterlife. In doing so, as is evident in the texts, these girls learn how to be better people. Even if this lesson comes too late for the protagonists, the reader can benefit from these ideas and potentially apply them to their own life. This is not the sole purpose of these novels, nor should it be, but it is clear from Goodreads and scholarly studies that some people do benefit from these books and their discussions of death. If nothing else, the protagonists in the novel benefit from death because it is the time which allows them to grow. Since they are dying, they are unable to circumvent their death and grow and learn these lessons, so their only chance to do so is in death.

By going through the five stages of grief regarding her own death, Brie allows the reader an insight into coming to terms with death in a realistic way. For most people, death is not an easy thing to accept and, like Brie, they may need to go through stages to eventually arrive at this conclusion. In her death, Brie gets to mature like an adult would and realizes her past mistakes

and immaturity. The youthful version of Brie dies but it gives way to a mature, and better, Brie. Death is not the only way to achieve this maturity, and readers should hopefully realize this, but the lessons she learns result from her time in the afterlife and leads her to accepting death and herself. As such, death is her proto-adulthood and can be used as a guide for readers as they develop. This should hopefully provide the readers with a guide to living better, healthier, and more mature lives.

## CHAPTER 6

## DEATH AS A GUIDING FORCE IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

All four of the novels discussed here depict the value of representing death in young adult literature. While their use of first-person dead narration varies, each of the texts deals with the issue of accepting death. By coming to terms with death, as Roberta Trites points out, young readers not only deal with this necessary and inevitable fact of death, but they can learn to reflect on their own shortcomings and, potentially, decide if they want to change something about their lives. Ultimately, dead narrators become a decidedly important tool to show not only how to cope with death but how to grow as a person. In understanding the deaths of these characters, the reader should learn lessons that are applicable to her life.

All of the narrators, except for Hannah, benefit from death through their experience in a proto-adulthood, which grants them knowledge and wisdom similar to what they would have learned had they lived; in *TRW*, on the other hand, Clay receives the proto-adulthood for the reader since no one knows what happens to Hannah after death. This proto-adulthood helps the narrators reflect on their previous shortcomings and realize what they could have and should have done to fix these issues. Death, while final in real life, is not so permanent in the novels. Instead, it offers the teenage protagonists a second chance. This second chance is problematic for some readers who may assume that this is the only way to achieve maturity or happiness, and instead they should use distance in their identification as Nikolajeva suggests so they can learn from the narrators rather than fully identify and emulate them. Still, the teenagers can learn from this proto-adulthood that the characters experience.

While there are many other texts I could have covered in this thesis, these four focus exclusively on first-person narrators who were either dead for most of the novel, spoke while they were dead, or both. Novels such as *Elsewhere* and *The Lovely Bones*, for example, are also

useful texts regarding dead narrators but did not fulfill my criteria. *Elsewhere* uses a third-person narrator, and although this narration follows her closely, it still creates a barrier between the narrator and reader. On the other hand, *The Lovely Bones* is considered an adult novel and, while it is read by many young adults, I wanted to focus on literature specifically directed to young adults. While I have narrowed my focus on death in literature, a variation of this thesis, which could focus on novels like *Elsewhere* and *The Lovely Bones*, could be vital to the discussion of how death affects people and how to cope with it.

Another pattern that emerged in my research was the use of dead female narrators. Apart from *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which features the live male protagonist, all the other works center heavily or solely on the dead narration of female protagonists and their deaths; this is even true in *Elsewhere* and *The Lovely Bones*. While this thesis did not focus on this idea, it could be further explored productively in later papers. For now, it appears that this may be a place for women to speak without being quieted; Hannah's tapes can be paused but her story is passed on to all of the characters she requested. Brian Norman, in his book *Dead Women Talking*, discusses this topic with classic and adult novels, such as *The Lovely Bones*, and focuses on the effect of silence which comes from death juxtaposed with the talkative dead. This may be reflected in the young adult texts mentioned in this thesis, but I wanted to focus more on how the novels' discussion of death impacted the growth of young readers and the young characters rather than what it means to have a dead narrator speaking.

The problem novel, which covers a variety of teenage issues such as drug abuse and divorce among other issues, and the sick-lit sub-genre, which depicts either a sick protagonist or loved one, dominate the field of the young adult novel, and literature containing death appears to be a new category within these subgenres. Confronting death is inevitable for everyone, and

young adult literature ends up being a prime place to discuss death. This is not to say that an adult does not need to cope with thoughts about death and the afterlife, but young adult literature allows teenagers to better understand death far earlier than they may in life. Young adult literature is all about growth and development, and the acceptance of death is another way to achieve this.

Often, young adult literature is criticized for being vapid entertainment for teenagers. However, there is much knowledge and many benefits which can come from this category of literature. By reading, and identifying with the main character, the reader should be able to grow just as the character in the novel does. While there may be simple entertainment novels in young adult literature, books like *Allegiant*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *Before I Fall*, and *The Catastrophic History of You and Me*, all depict strong protagonists who have to come to grips with fragility of life and their development should inspire all readers to grow and understand death as well

Dead narration, and specifically first-person dead narration, allows the reader to enter the mind of the character and grow, just as the character does. It is meant to ease the reader into the inevitability of death. First-person narration allows the young reader the ability to understand death without the trauma of actually experiencing it. The experience allows the reader to absorb the lessons that the dead narrators learned even though the reader may not have personally experienced the trauma.

While discussing death may seem taboo, especially with young people, there is value in reading about death. Teenage suicide and depression plagues adolescence, and books like these can be an important tool to counteracting these growing problems. By having narrators who act as empathetic guides, teens may identify with these characters and learn new ways to cope. Through the popular trend of dead narration, adolescent readers are given the tools to take

control of their own life Young adult literature doesn't necessarily have to teach a lesson to be valuable or enjoyable, but it can offer guidance and example to those who are open to the message In particular, death in literature is a tool which shifts the perception of the character, matures her quickly, and through these characters' stories provides the reader with a way to accept death and live life both ethically and fully. Not only is studying dead narrators in young adult literature important for scholars, but it is also important for readers who can learn from the mistakes of the protagonists and apply it to their own lives.

## NOTES

1. For more discussions on death in literature see: Brian Norman and his novel on dead narration as well as *Death in Literature* which is edited by Sari Kivistö and Outi Hakola, and *Death Representations in Literature* which is compiled by Adriana Teodorescu. See also Michael Cart and Amie Doughty.

2. Although the reader and narrator are often mentioned together in this thesis, they are not the same. Most often, the narrator acts as a guide for the reader, and the reader learns as the narrator does. However, first-person narration can often seem to conflate reader and narrator, and this confusion may be deliberate on the authors' parts.

3. While Hannah from *Thirteen Reasons Why* does not experience the afterlife, her tapes, which remain after her death, still deeply affect Clay. I am including *Thirteen Reasons Why* because it does contain a dead, first-person narrator who is speaking both beyond the grave and before it. Even though she can help Clay, unlike the other protagonists, she is unable to help herself.

4. While the meaning of life, as well as the point of being an adult, is different for everyone, these stories push the idea of characters who have previously been immature and, for some, morally wrong, growing and benefiting from that growth after death. Therefore, it seems as though the maturity and peace brought by death allows them to move on to a peaceful afterlife which some people may hope to achieve once they die.

5. Interestingly, young adult literature explores life after death more frequently than children's literature, where dead characters rarely come back to life. Perhaps this is because young adult readers have a clearer sense of growth and development in their lives and may want to extend that sense of possibility into the afterlife.

6. Unfortunately, I do not have much information regarding the age of the people who wrote this and other tweets and reviews throughout this paper. Since most of it was found on social media, people are not required to post their age nor do they often post their full birthdate (it is normally just the month and day). As such, I want to view them as readers of young adult fiction and will make the assumption, though it may be wrong, that they are the targeted audience.

7. The National Association of School Psychologists made a statement regarding the Netflix adaptation of the novel and warned educators to be wary of teaching this controversial book. Their issue with the TV show was its depiction of suicide. While the book itself does not contain graphic depictions of suicide, its link to the show, as well as the troublesome subject matter, has created controversy over the book.

8. Though this thesis will not cover the Netflix adaptation to this book, it is important to note the intense debate sparked by it. One review, boldly titled “How this guy’s mystery novel is saving teen lives,” discusses Jay Asher’s positive interactions with fans. Written in 2011, this article by Rob Brunner quotes a fan’s interaction with Asher where he says “I was suicidal when I picked up your book, and I identified with Hannah, and I wanted her to live” (Brunner). However, as the film adaptation became popular the view began to shift, or, at least, the negative view of the book came to light. Now, this book is synonymous with the idea of glorifying suicide and the detrimental effects it can have on someone’s mental state. These conflicting accounts are probably based on how the show portrays the suicide, since it is fully and bloodily depicted, while the book remains at a distance with Hannah’s suicide. The reader never sees Hannah’s death, but only witnesses it through passing.



## WORKS CITED

- Ain020596. Review of "Allegiant." *Goodreads*, 30 Apr 2012,  
[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18710190-allegiant?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18710190-allegiant?ac=1&from_search=true).
- Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Penguin, 2007.
- Barnes, Jennifer. "Divergent Psychology." *Divergent Thinking* edited by Leah Wilson, Benbella Books, 2014, pp. 29-43.
- Beth. Review of "Thirteen Reasons Why." *Goodreads*, 27 Aug 2011,  
[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29844228-thirteen-reasons-why?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29844228-thirteen-reasons-why?ac=1&from_search=true).
- Brunner, Rob. "How This Guy's Mystery Novel Is Saving Teen Lives," *Entertainment Weekly*, 2011, <https://ew.com/article/2011/06/10/how-this-guys-mystery-novel-saving-teen-lives/>
- Cadden, Mike. "The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2000, pp. 146-154.
- Charu. Review of "The Catastrophic History of You and Me." *Goodreads*, 07 Mar 2014,  
[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11387392-the-catastrophic-history-of-you-and-me?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11387392-the-catastrophic-history-of-you-and-me?ac=1&from_search=true).
- Del Nero, Jennifer. "Death as Insight into Life: Adolescents' Gothic Text Encounters." *Reading Improvement*, vol. 54, iss. 4, pp. 135-141.
- Dudley, David R. "Dead or Alive: The Booby-Trapped Narrator of Poe's Masque of the Red Death." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 30, 1993, pp. 169-173.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, Hogarth Press, 1953.

Gaelah Gabrieles. Review of "The Catastrophic History of You and Me." *Goodreads*, 22 Aug 2017, [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11387392-the-catastrophic-history-of-you-and-me?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11387392-the-catastrophic-history-of-you-and-me?ac=1&from_search=true).

Gomez, Betsy. "Banned Spotlight: *Thirteen Reasons Why*." *Banned Books Week*, 2018, <https://bannedbooksweek.org/banned-spotlight-thirteen-reasons-why/>

@guccii\_kth. "before i fall is such a great book y'all should read it. it may be "unoriginal" but i have thought about a lot of different bings and now view things differently after reading it." *Twitter*, 27 Feb. 2019, 03:53 p.m., [https://twitter.com/guccii\\_kth/status/1100906830379868161](https://twitter.com/guccii_kth/status/1100906830379868161).

Hartley-Kroeger, Fiona. "Silent Speech: Narration, Gender and Intersubjectivity in Two Young Adult Novels." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 42, no. 4, Dec. 2011, pp. 276-288.

Hong, Victor, et al. "*13 Reasons Why*: Viewing Patterns and Perceived Impact Among Youths at Risk of Suicide." *Psychiatric Services*, vol. 70, iss. 2, Feb. 2019, pp. 107-114.

Karen. Review of "Allegiant." *Goodreads*, 25 Oct 2013, [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18710190-allegiant?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18710190-allegiant?ac=1&from_search=true).

Karolina. Review of "Before I Fall." *Goodreads*, 31 Jul 2012, [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6482837-before-i-fall?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6482837-before-i-fall?ac=1&from_search=true).

Kat Kennedy. Review of "Before I Fall." *Goodreads*, 17 Dec 2011, [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6482837-before-i-fall?ac=1&from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6482837-before-i-fall?ac=1&from_search=true).

Klein, Herbert. "The Wonderful World of the Dead: A Typology of the Posthumous Narrative." *EESE*. 2002. [http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic22/kleinh/3\\_2002.html](http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic22/kleinh/3_2002.html).

- Kundu, Devaleena. "The Paradox of Mortality: Death and Perpetual Denial." *Death Representations in Literature: Forms and Theories* edited by Adriana Teodorescu, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 8-23.
- Mathis and Vaughan, "Acknowledging Ability and Agency in Book Discussion Communities: Adolescent Boys Experiencing Psychosocial Distress Examine Suicide in Young Adult Novel." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 12, iss. 3, 2018, pp. 287-302.
- "Narrator, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/125148](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125148).
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "Haven't you ever felt like there has to be more? Identity, Space, and Embodied Cognition in Young Adult Fiction." *Encyclopaideia*, vol. 21, iss. 49, 2017, pp. 65-80.
- . "Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction." *Narrative Works*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, n. pag.
- . "The Identification Fallacy." *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature*, edited by Michael Cadden, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, pp. 187-208.
- Norris, Elizabeth. "Ordinary Acts of Bravery." *Divergent Thinking* edited by Leah Wilson, Benbella Books, 2014, pp. 29-43.
- Nuran. Comment on "Why was Tris's death necessary?" *Goodreads*, 14 Aug 2017, 02:43 a.m., <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/18805835-why-was-tris-s-death-necessary>
- Oliver, Lauren. *Before I Fall*. Harper Collins, 2010. Kindle Edition

- Pérez-Carbonell, Marta. "Ghosts as Storytellers: Absences and the Phantasmagorical Nature of Javier Marías's Narrators." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies (1475-3839)*, vol. 93, no. 5, 2016, pp. 495-509.
- Roth, Veronica. *Allegiant*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2013.
- . *Insurgent*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2012. Kindle Edition.
- Rothenberg, Jess. *The Catastrophic History of You and Me*. Dial Books, 2012.
- Salem, Susanna, et al. "Does Narrative Perspective Influence Readers' Perspective-taking? An Empirical Study on Free Indirect Discourse, Psycho-narration and First-person Narration." *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics*, vol. 2, pp. 1-18.
- Sales, Leila. "The Problem with Dead Narrators: 'The Catastrophic History of You and Me.'" *TheDailyBeast.com*. [www.thedailybeast.com/the-problem-with-dead-narrators-the-catastrophic-history-of-you-and-me](http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-problem-with-dead-narrators-the-catastrophic-history-of-you-and-me). 21 March 2018
- Speece Mark, and Sandor Brent. "Children's Understanding of Death: A Review of Three Components of a Death Concept." *Child Development*, no. 5, 1984, pp. 1671-1686.
- Trites, Roberta. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- @twirlynao. "I hope they don't change the ending. UNPOPULAR OPINION but I found closure in Allegiant ending Roth wrote! I felt it was fitting!" *Twitter*, 20 Jul. 2016, 03:12 p.m., <https://twitter.com/twirlynao/status/755888229799301126>.
- Wetta, Molly. "Who is Young Adult Literature For?" *The Hub*. Young Adult Library Services Association, 18 Sept. 2015, <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2015/09/18/who-is-young-adult-literature-for/>. Accessed 12 June 2019.

Whitney, Sarah E. "Uneasy Lie the Bones: Alice Sebold's Postfeminist Gothic." *Splattered Ink: Postfeminist Gothic Fiction and Gendered Violence*. University of Illinois Press, 2016, pp. 23-58.