

**Modern-day Manifestation of *Carpe Diem*: John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012)**

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**Abstract:** Amidst constant tug of war between ephemeral life and inevitable death human beings strive for optimum pleasure as this only makes the journey worth its while. This basic instinct of human beings to draw pleasure and comfort has unflaggingly survived the onslaught of this dynamic world of social, cultural and economic transformation. Representation of intense and passionate love as the source of utmost pleasure and joy in literature through Carpe Diem motif roots back to the golden era of classical literature. This Carpe Diem motif, despite being a Classical phenomenon, has evolved, expanded and got enriched in course of time. This paper forays into tracing the interplay of the dormant theme of Carpe Diem in John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars* from the twenty-first century perspective. The paper is also a vindication of the entrenched Carpe Diem theme in the illness narrative fiction which is set in the modern day America.

**Key Words:** Carpe Diem, Ephemeral Life, Premature Death, Terminal Illness, Coup de grace, Epicurean Motif, Microcosmic Contentment.

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Amidst myriad intellectual debates and discussion over the nature of literature, stalwarts of literary world unanimously support the multiplicity of influences coming from all over the globe. The entity of literature is not monolithic, or in other words, restricted by the socio-cultural mores of a single race or nation. Though the statement is true to almost all extant literatures in the world today, it is particularly apt for English literature. In its nascent stage it looked up to the classical models (as emphasized by critics like Matthew Arnold later on) of literature to buttress its validity and excellence. The indebtedness of English literature to classical literatures like Greek and Latin is undeniable. Tragedy, comedy, elegy, lyrics, sonnet, satire are only few of the large body of literary genres which are borrowed and developed over the years. English writers also have been freely adopting literary motifs, forms, styles and ideas for their convenience to meet the demands of their ages. But the English literature draws its sustenance from the ability of the writers to mould, transform and renovate the available classical models as per the changing requirements of a particular era. The *Carpe Diem* is one such literary influence which has descended from classical literature and evolved through the ages in English literature.

While tracing back the onomastic root, we find, Latin poet Horace is the first one to use the term *carpe diem* which is evident from these lines from his *Odes*, “*Dum loquimur, fugerit invida / Aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*” (I, XI). Meaning of which is in short: enjoy yourself while you can. Ovid uses the term *Carpe* to mean “enjoy, seize, use, make use of” and the meaning of *Diem* is “day.” A literal translation of *Carpe Diem* thus would be enjoy the day or seize the day. Horace elaborates the motif in the third book of *Odes* where he presents it as an urge to put ones everything on present moment rather than waiting passively for the future happiness. Emphasizing on the conspicuous presence of *carpe diem* theme in classical literature, J.A. Cuddon in his book *Literary Terms and literary Theory*, says, “it is found in Greek as well as Latin poetry, recurs very frequently in many literatures and obviously arises from the realization of the brevity of life and inevitability of death” (113). Other critical terms closely resonating the quintessential message of *carpe diem* are ‘*collige, virgo, rosas*’ (gather the roses, girl), ‘*nunc est*

*bibendum* (now is the time to drink), '*de brevitae vitae*' (on the brevity of life), '*memento mori*' (remember that you are mortal) and '*ubi sunt*' (where are they now). The meanings of these terms are somewhat related to and yet distinct from *carpe diem*.

Being tempted by the unsatisfactory translation of the term, writers have used the motif to convey diverse ideas. Cathy Wendell, in her article titled "Carpe Diem Revisited: Ronsard's Temporal Ploys" on Ronsard's usage of the term, articulates, "construed traditionally as a compliment and an invitation and more recently as an instrument of seduction, *carpe diem* has received much critical mention but little critical attention." (1282). M. H Abrams in his book *A Handbook of Literary Terms* justifies, "carpe diem poem emphasizes that life is short and time is fleeting in order to urge his auditor – who is often represented as a virgin reluctant to change her condition – to make the most of present pleasures" (44). *Carpe diem* motif often illustrates the binary opposition of life and death with a strong undercurrent of the urge to enjoy the present moments. Though the term is used to represent diverse ideas such as, utilitarian persuasion of the lover, conflict between transient life and inevitable death, and Christian or didactic admonitions to meet one's doom, writers are mostly charmed by the epicurean spirit of the motif.

*Carpe diem* motif has among its early adaptations, embellished the poems of Ausonius and Ronsard. It also permeates lyrical poetry from fifteenth century Italy to sixteenth century Spain to seventeenth century England. The exquisite corpus of *carpe diem* poems boasts of works such as, Robert Herrick's "Corianna's Going a Maying", "To the Virgins to Make Much of time (Gather ye rosebuds, while ye may)", John Donne's "The Anagram", William Shakespeare's sonnets 3 and 4, Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress", Edmond Waller's "Go Lovely Rose", Edward FitzGerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "The Lover: A Ballad". The set of variations on *carpe diem* motif and the mutable nature of the meaning are highlighted in Sarah Gilead's article "Ungathering "Gather ye Rosebuds": Herrick's Misreading of Carpe Diem", where she affirms, "The longer the reader searches for the *Carpe Diem* message in Herrick's obviously *carpe diem* poem the greater difficulty she has in finding it" (150). Historically the manifestations of *carpe diem* motif are, to a degree of certainty, limited to lyrical poems. But sporadic manifestations of the motif in prose fictional works are rare but not non-existent. John Green's New York Times bestseller novel, *The Fault in Our Stars* (first published in the year 2012) is one such specimen where we find *carpe diem* motif in all its literary ramifications.

The life and death binary is constantly present as the harrowing back drop of the first person narrative of terminally ill Hazel Grace Lancaster in John Green's fiction *The Fault in Our Stars*. It is from this perspective of having numbered days to Hazel's life that the *carpe*

*diem* motif makes the first appearance in the narrative as the admonitory reminder of the end in its Christian or didactic sense. Life is the most amazing thing that happens in our planet but it comes with the certainty of its flip side that is death. Individuals have little saying in determining their life span which is shaped by a number of factors but they can simply decide in which manner they want to live the life- squander it in inactivity or make the most of it. The inevitability of death becomes heart-rending and almost unbearable when days of one's life are severely reduced by the terminal illness like cancer. Cancer causes intense suffering to the victims and also separates them from other healthy people around. Hazel Grace, the seventeen years old girl who is crippled by lung carcinoma, leads a lonely, inactive and home centered life without the ebullient spirit, a teenager generally possesses. The avowal, "...devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death (3)" of Hazel confirms the predominance of the morbid thought of death in her mind. Dr. Maria and her mother think she is suffering from acute depression which they think is the side effect of cancer. If we assume that peace and contentment are the side effects of life as opposed to the side effects of death in depression and worry discovered by Hazel, the motif of *carpe diem* becomes evident through the binary opposition.

Life on earth is combined presence of body and soul and from the strictest pragmatic point of view the existence of one without the other is hardly feasible. So the enjoyment of the day to its fullest extent through sensory pleasures only is incipient without the acquisition of uplifted spiritual state. Inclusion of the spiritual dimension in the *carpe diem* motif which is neglected by the Cavalier poets like Herrick, Lovelace and Suckling, is justifiable on the ground of satisfaction derived from human existence. Love has the power to provide satisfaction to both bodily desires and urge for the elevation of the soul irrespective of one's life span. Being pushed by her mother's insistence, Hazel's decision to go to support group for cancer kids, opens up the door to meet the love of her life Augustus Waters who jauntily brags, "I'm on a roller coaster that only goes up" (11). Gradually growing intimacy between Hazel and Augustus fills their respective dreary, uneventful and painful lives with perks, expectations and happiness. Hazel's outright dismissal of Augustus' fear of oblivion at the Support Group by saying, "... if inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that's what everyone else does" (13), is a prominent exhibition of the theme of *carpe diem* in the novel.

Enjoyment of human beings depends on their opportunity to do what their minds really long for. The fulfillment of human desires, wishes, dreams and aspirations invariably leads to the happy state of mind. The realization of the *carpe diem* theme in *The Fault in Our Stars* would have been incomplete without the masterly unfolding of dreams of Hazel and Augustus, the two protagonists in the novel. Hazel, as the only child of her parents tries her best not to hurt them more than they already are because of her hopelessly depressing illness.

Before meeting Augustus she wishes quiet conclusion of her life doomed by cancer. Apart from that her excessive fondness for Peter van Houten's book *An Imperial Affliction* gives rise to her most cherished wish of meeting the author in person to quench her curiosities which are left unanswered by the abrupt ending of the book. Apart from deriving pleasures from the momentary sparks of life, Augustus has no towering wish like Hazel. His love for Hazel intensifies to the extent which propels him to spend his wish granted by The Genies (an organization which finances the fulfillment of single wish of cancer kid) to fulfill her long cherished dream of meeting Peter van Houten. The passionate relationship Hazel shares with Augustus allows her to come out of the gloom of morbid, obscure existence. On the other hand Augustus, in soothing company of Hazel and his friend Isaac, forgets about his previous girlfriend Caroline Mathers who dies of cancer. Apparently two imperfect human beings, plagued by cancer, come together to transcend their limitations and embark upon the most exhilarating and thrilling journey of their ephemeral life. The journey itself underlines the essence of *carpe diem* motif as it concentrates on lapping up the fleeting joys offered by each passing moment, rather than grumbling about the oblivion after death.

The theme of *carpe diem* which revolves primarily around the principle of pleasure has evolved over the years and with that the sources of deriving pleasure have changed drastically. In modern day the contentment is not only restricted to the fulfillment of basic requirements like food, shelter, clothes and sex but goes beyond this and finds numerous sources of pleasure from contemporaneous cultural advancement and cyber world. As for example, in *The Fault in Our Stars*, the correspondent mail from Peter van Houten's attendant Lidewij Vliegthart makes Hazel ecstatic with joy. Augustus makes use of the internet to his advantage for establishing a link with Hazel's favorite author Peter van Houten. Hazel and Augustus not only use the mobile network to keep in touch with each other but profusely use the sms facility whenever the prospect of making a call becomes inconvenient (when Hazel is dining with her parents or Augustus is busy attending a class). The mobile network also helps them to escape to the so called third-space where they can enjoy each other's company without the disturbances of mundane world. They also derive momentary pleasures from watching movies on TV, playing video-games or typing the most hilariously appropriate advertisement for the old swing set on the merchant website meant for selling old goods. It is evident from such examples that without the incorporation of such advanced source's pleasure, the motif of *carpe-diem* would not have been driven home.

The cancer kids can hardly experience security and certainty of life after positive diagnosis of the disease. The cancer coup de grace always threatens to put out the light of life off. Hazel and Augustus both are chained up by the relentless cancer and as such the best way to live each day is to live as if it is their last. Despite the looming threat of death, Hazel is fully aware of the stipulated source of happiness in life as she confides, "I even tried to tell

myself to live my best life today” (97). The love relationship between two cancer kids treads on a very thin line of stability where they are not sure of seeing each other the next day yet their tireless effort to realize their dearest wish reverberate the *carpe diem* motive underneath. After the recuperation of Hazel from one of her chronic bouts of illness Augustus’ optimistic zeal is worth noticing. The following lines seem to vindicate the motif of *carpe diem*, “I’d always thought the world was a wish granting factory” (110). After braving all the health hazards caused by cancer, when the journey to Amsterdam eventually takes place it promises to be the experience of a life time. Though Hazel rues the fact, “...there is no shortage of fault to be found amid our stars” (112), it doesn’t deter her from undertaking the adventurous journey to Amsterdam. This indomitable spirit of plucking out happiness constitutes the epitome of *carpe diem* because in Hazel’s unabashed words, “What a slut time is. She screws everybody” (112).

She falls in love with Augustus abruptly and unexpectedly. She describes the process effectively with help of an analogy in these words, “... I fell in love the way you fall asleep, slowly and then all at once” (125). *Carpe diem* is always accompanied by the self-centered interest where a person is not always busy in seizing the day but at times becomes aware of the disadvantageous situation they are placed in. Even when she is on the delightful journey to Amsterdam, she is not completely oblivious of her plight. Her contemplation, “...I was for Dr. Maria a kind of Amsterdam, a half drowned anomaly”(172), is ingeniously witty and really poignant at the same time. Seeking pleasure often undermines the pain that comes along with it. But Augustus is ready to experience the whole spectrum of emotional as well as physical aspects of his relationship with Hazel. His comment, “Oh, I wouldn’t mind, Hazel Grace. It would be a privilege to have my heart broken by you” (176), only indicates at the wholehearted devotion. Thus overall the visit to the Dutch capital turns out to be the brightest spot of their lives together.

There is no better way to make the most of the fleeting moments of life than to strive for materializing one’s dreams and fantasies. On the surface level visit to Amsterdam is governed by the purpose of meeting Peter van Houten, the author of *An Imperial Affliction*. But it has far reaching consequences which leads to developments which are never thought of by any one of them. Amsterdam with its rich culture and hospitable ambience assuages their distress caused by cancer. The sumptuous dinner at ‘The Orangee’ not only provides fulfilling gustatory pleasure but more importantly adds on to the romance quotient in their relationship. Everything goes on very smoothly and falls into places till their much anticipated meeting with Peter van Houten shatters Hazel’s high hopes. Due to the unwelcoming attitude of the author, the meeting turns out to be the greatest disappointment of their trip. Instead of answering to the questions put forth by Hazel, van Houten gives free rein to his tongue to scourge them in the crudest possible way. His opinion about both of them,



“you are a side effect... of an evolutionary process that cares little for individual lives. You are a failed experiment in mutation”(192-193), speaks volumes about the heartlessness of his whole conduct.

Utterly insensitive and cruel remarks of van Houten are potent enough to rub off the charm of their visit to Amsterdam. But it is very amusing to note how the sources of pleasures keep constantly changing from time to time. Probably for this reason they are able to go on to extract as much happiness as they can from their only international trip. Augustus assures Hazel by saying, “Hazel Grace. No. I will grant you that you did spend my one and only wish, but you did not spend it on him. You spent it on us”(195). Hazel also realizes the shortage of quality time which is one of the salient features propagated by *carpe diem* motif. Her strong determination to make the most of the time is evident when she thinks, “I only had two days left in Amsterdam with Augustus Waters. I wouldn’t let a sad old man ruin them” (196). Instead of wallowing in the disenchantment caused by discourteous behavior of van Houten, they grab the opportunity to visit Anne Frank’s House with Lidewij Vliegthart and make the moment unforgettable with their first kiss.

The epicurean spirit of the *carpe diem* motif lays emphasis on plucking the rose buds before they lose their freshness and wilt away. Here plucking the rose bud has sexual connotation which reaches its apex with the consummation of two lovers. The manifestation of *carpe diem* motif in John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* attains comprehensiveness through act of having sex. Though the thought of copulation is by no means the dominant motive in the love relationship between Hazel and Augustus, it is undoubtedly complementary and essential part of their short life. Their love sublimates when they lose their virginity as teenagers in the hotel room of ‘Filosoof’ at the last leg of their trip to Amsterdam, highlighting the epicurean spirit of *carpe diem* motif, so fervently practiced by Cavalier poets from seventeenth century England.

After the visit the health condition of Augustus worsens but their effort to make the most of time within their limited physical and mental strength remains alive. The dispersed incidents like egg revenge on Isaac’s girlfriend Monica, Augustus’ visit to Funky Bones on the wheel chair, playing video games with Hazel in the general background of aggravating illness, give stress on the *carpe diem* motif time and again. Just a few days before the coupe de grace of Augustus, he calls for a pre funeral and also justifies the same by saying, “...I just this afternoon thought I could arrange a pre funeral, and I figured since I am in reasonably good spirits, there’s no time like the present ”(257). One of the subtler ways of gathering happiness is vicarious pleasure. Both Hazel and Augustus indulge in this indirect source of delight. Hazel tries her best to make sure that her father doesn’t lead a lonely and depressed life like Pater van Houten after her departure. Her motive is candidly expressed in these

words, “I don’t want you to become like a miserable unemployed alcoholic or whatever” (299). Augustus Waters on the other hand makes all the necessary arrangements for a sequel of *An Imperial Affliction* which remains the source of immense joy to Hazel even after his death.

The theme of *carpe diem* draws its sustenance from the individual exploits of a person and rarely cares about heroic deeds, ground breaking philanthropy, or actualization of higher philosophical ideals. The novelist has conveyed this message with firm resolution through the character of Hazel. Her discouragement of Augustus’ high flying ambition to leave a mark on society, felt long after his death only strengthens this point of view. Human beings are mortals and as such the significance of life lies not in its extensive span but the intensity of happiness milked from it. From this perspective pitifully shortened life of Hazel acquires significance who is quite content with her microcosmic world. Aggrieved Hazel, at Augustus’ discontent with his insignificant obscure life, retorts by saying this, “But this is all you get. You get me, and your family, and this world. This is your life. I’m sorry if it sucks” (241). The motif of *carpe diem* which thrives in momentary satisfaction is evident from Hazel’s eulogy for Augustus. Unlike Augustus she dwells in practical life and fittingly expects no other higher value from her relationship than they have enjoyed in their life time. This is the way to make even inconsequential common life worthwhile. Hazel’s opinion confirms this dictum when she says, “I will not tell you our love story, because- like all real love stories- it will die with us as it should” (259).

The statement- “some infinities are larger than other infinities” (205) aptly epitomizes the human existence on earth. Amit Vaidya’s autobiographical book, titled *Holy Cancer* also uplifts the value of catching temporary happiness from fleeting moments. In the book review of *Holy Cancer*, Arun Ganapathy points out this fact, “while my life is still determined by quarterly scans and I am only as healthy as my last scan- my happiness is a constant”(8). Personal happiness and not the everlasting fame is the aim of life. In the novel we find the theme of *carpe diem* vindicated by the satisfaction derived from the micro cosmic world of love which is cut short by cancer and death. The sublimity of happiness provided by bipolar, passionate and fulfilled love is unmatched by any other happiness in life. Here we may contend that the love of Hazel and Augustus conquers the torments of cancer and in this way the motif of *carpe diem* attains a whole new dimension in *The Fault in Our Stars*. The severe pain caused by the terminal disease gets alleviated by the balmy love relationship which finds expression in Hazel’s appreciative words- “...but, Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn’t trade it for the world. You gave me a forever within the numbered days, and I’m grateful” (260). Indeed they have derived most precious joy life has on offer in their extremely short-lived microcosmic contentment.



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