

**Love and Life choices in Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride* and
John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars***

Elpha E. Escabal

Claver National High School; Surigao Norte State University, Main Campus
Surigao del Norte, Philippines
Email: elvin.lava@deped.gov.ph

ABSTRACT

This comparative study analyzes love and life choices in Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride* and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, focusing on the protagonists' characters, conflicts, and symbolism. Using Formalism as the main theoretical lens, the study examines how Sparks and Green construct literary elements to depict love as a force that shapes decisions, personal growth, and relational dynamics. Psychoanalytic theory serves as a supporting framework, providing insight into the protagonists' psychological motivations, fears, and desires, which influence their choices. The research highlights key symbols such as art collection and Bull riding in *The Longest Ride* and Augustus's cigarettes and Hazel's oxygen tank in *The Fault in Our Stars* this serves as reflections of the characters' internal struggles and values. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study reveals how both novels portray love as both empowering and challenging, demonstrating how literary and psychological elements together illuminate human resilience and the complexities of moral and emotional decision-making.

Keywords: Love, life choices, bull riding, oxygen tank, cigarettes, art collection

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INTRODUCTION

Love is a universal human experience that profoundly shapes individuals' decisions and actions, influencing their personal growth, relationships, and moral development. In literature, love often intersects with life choices, presenting characters with dilemmas that test their values, resilience, and emotional capacity. Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride* and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* exemplify this intersection, portraying protagonists whose experiences of love directly influence their decisions and trajectories in life. Sparks' novel highlights the impact of generational love, legacy, and commitment on personal choices, while Green's narrative emphasizes love amid mortality and illness, exploring how intense emotional bonds guide characters through challenging circumstances.

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Love can be understood as an emotional, relational, and moral force that motivates individuals to act in ways that reflect their values, priorities, and aspirations. Life choices, on the other hand, refer to decisions that shape one's personal, relational, and ethical trajectory, often involving trade-offs, sacrifices, or long-term consequences. Research suggests that love influences cognitive and emotional decision-making by fostering empathy, attachment, and moral reflection (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Similarly, studies in literary psychology indicate that examining characters' choices provides insight into human behavior, moral reasoning, and resilience in the face of adversity (Mar, 2011). Integrating these perspectives, this study seeks to analyze how the protagonists' love experiences influence their life choices in the two novels, with particular attention to characters, conflicts, and symbolic representations of love.

The purpose of this research is to conduct a comparative analysis that highlights the interplay between love and life choices, examining how Sparks and Green utilize literary elements to depict emotional, moral, and psychological dimensions of decision-making. By exploring the protagonists' internal and external conflicts, their development, and the symbolism embedded in their narratives, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how contemporary literature represents the influence of love on human choices. This research not only enriches literary analysis but also offers insights into the ways literature reflects and informs readers' understanding of emotional resilience, ethical decision-making, and the complexities inherent in navigating life guided by love.

Statement of the problem

The study focuses on how love shapes the protagonists' decisions through characterization, conflict, and symbolism, guided by Formalist and Psychoanalytic approaches. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How is love portrayed as a force that shapes life choices in Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride* and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*?
2. How do the protagonists' character traits influence the life choices they make in the name of love in both novels?
3. What internal and external conflicts do the protagonists face, and how do these conflicts reflect the connection between love and decision-making?
4. How do Sparks and Green use literary elements such as characterization and conflict to construct themes of love and life choices?
5. What symbolic objects or motifs represent love, sacrifice, and personal choices in *The Longest Ride* and *The Fault in Our Stars*?
6. How does the psychoanalytic perspective explain the protagonists' motivations, fears, and emotional struggles in relation to love-driven choices?
7. In what ways do the two novels differ and resemble each other in portraying love as both empowering and challenging across different life contexts (adult vs adolescent experience)?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative literary research design that emphasizes interpretive analysis of meaning, themes, and human experience as represented in literary texts. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for examining how love influences life choices because it allows for close engagement with narrative structure, characterization, and symbolic meaning rather than numerical measurement. The study employs qualitative textual analysis to explore the ways love shapes decision making, personal growth, conflict, and relationships in two

contemporary American novels, namely Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride* and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. A comparative approach is used to identify convergences and divergences in the representation of love driven choices across differing life contexts. The analysis is guided primarily by Formalist theory, with support from Psychoanalytic theory, enabling an examination of literary elements such as characterization, conflict, and symbolism alongside the emotional and psychological motivations that underpin the characters' actions.

The study is literary and text centered in nature and therefore does not involve a physical research locale or human participants. Instead, it is situated within an academic and critical literary context where the two selected novels serve as the primary sources of data. The central subjects of analysis are the protagonists whose experiences and choices embody the thematic focus of love and life decision making. In *The Longest Ride*, these include Luke Collins, Sophia Danko, and Ira Levinson, while in *The Fault in Our Stars*, the analysis focuses on Hazel Grace Lancaster, Augustus Waters, and Isaac. These characters function as the analytical units of the study, as their emotional struggles and decisions provide insight into how love operates as a transformative force within the narratives.

The selection of the novels followed a purposive sampling technique, as the texts were intentionally chosen for their strong alignment with the themes under investigation. Both novels belong to contemporary romantic fiction and present love as a central influence on major personal decisions. Each work depicts protagonists confronting significant life challenges, such as career responsibility and long-term commitment in *The Longest Ride*, and illness, mortality, and emotional resilience in *The Fault in Our Stars*. The richness of their literary elements, including symbolism, internal and external conflict, and psychological depth, makes them suitable for analysis through Formalist and Psychoanalytic lenses. The protagonists were selected as the focus of analysis because their conflicts and choices directly reflect the study's core concern with love shaped decision making.

Textual analysis served as the primary research instrument, supported by the researcher's analytical framework. This method involved close and sustained reading of both novels to identify passages, scenes, and dialogues that reveal how love influences life choices. The researcher employed systematic note taking and annotation to capture key textual evidence related to characterization, conflict, and symbolism. A literary analysis guide was used to maintain consistency and focus throughout the examination of the texts, while the application of Formalist and Psychoanalytic perspectives allowed for deeper interpretation of narrative structure and psychological motivation. These combined instruments enabled a disciplined and reflective approach to understanding love as a driving force within the novels.

The data gathering procedure consisted of repeated and careful readings of the primary texts to ensure comprehensive familiarity with the narratives. During this process, significant passages were identified and documented based on their relevance to themes of love, decision making, sacrifice, and personal growth. Analytical notes were organized according to emerging thematic patterns, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in textual evidence. Theoretical guidance from Formalism and Psychoanalytic interpretation informed the reading process, helping to clarify how structural features and inner emotional conflicts interact to shape character choices. As the study relied solely on published literary works, ethical considerations focused on maintaining academic integrity through accurate citation, faithful representation of the texts, and avoidance of misinterpretation or plagiarism.

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative thematic and comparative textual analysis. The process unfolded in an integrated manner that examined character development, conflict, and symbolism within each novel before drawing comparative insights across the two works. Character analysis focused on traits, desires, fears, and emotional development to

determine how love motivates decisions and personal transformation. Conflict analysis explored both internal struggles and external challenges, highlighting how love functions in moments of moral tension, sacrifice, and pivotal choice. Symbolic analysis interpreted recurring images and objects, such as bull riding, art collections, cigarettes, and oxygen tanks, as representations of vulnerability, courage, commitment, and emotional connection. The findings from both novels were then compared to reveal how love shapes life choices differently across contexts such as adulthood, illness, mortality, and enduring responsibility, resulting in a cohesive understanding of love as a central force in literary representations of human decision making.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion section is grounded in a qualitative comparative literary research design that examined two primary textual sources rather than human participants. The study involved a purposive selection of two contemporary American novels, *The Longest Ride* by Nicholas Sparks and *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, with six central characters serving as the units of analysis, namely Luke Collins, Sophia Danko, and Ira Levinson, and Hazel Grace Lancaster, Augustus Waters, and Isaac. Data were generated through close textual reading and systematic qualitative analysis, guided by Formalist and Psychoanalytic theoretical perspectives. The analytical techniques employed included character analysis, conflict analysis, and symbolic interpretation. The discussion that follows is derived directly from the textual evidence gathered and is interpreted in explicit relation to the study's objective of examining how love functions as a central force shaping life choices across different contexts and life stages.

The characterization analysis reveals that personality traits play a critical role in shaping how love influences decision making within both narratives. In *The Longest Ride*, Luke Collins is portrayed as brave and responsible, characteristics that reflect his willingness to confront physical danger in bull riding while simultaneously acknowledging the long-term consequences of his choices on his romantic relationship. His bravery is not merely physical but moral, as it involves taking responsibility for the impact of his ambitions on others. Sophia Danko is characterized as ambitious and empathetic, illustrating the tension between self-fulfillment and emotional commitment. Her ambition reflects a desire for personal and professional growth, while her empathy anchors her decisions in emotional awareness and relational responsibility. Ira Levinson is depicted as wise and sentimental, functioning as a moral and emotional compass within the narrative. His wisdom stems from lived experience, while his sentimentality reflects the enduring influence of love across time, reinforcing the idea that past relationships continue to shape present choices. Together, these character traits emphasize adult love as a process shaped by responsibility, sacrifice, and long-term perspective.

In contrast, the characters in *The Fault in Our Stars* are defined by traits that reflect adolescent emotional intensity and confrontation with mortality. Hazel Grace Lancaster is characterized as thoughtful and resilient, indicating a deep capacity for introspection and emotional endurance in the face of terminal illness. Her thoughtfulness shapes her cautious approach to love, as she weighs emotional connection against the fear of causing pain. Her resilience allows her to engage in relationships despite physical limitations. Augustus Waters is portrayed as charismatic and courageous, traits that reflect his desire to live meaningfully and love boldly despite the inevitability of loss. His courage is expressed through emotional vulnerability and a refusal to let illness dictate the boundaries of his life choices. Isaac, described as loyal and sensitive, highlights the importance of friendship as a parallel form of love that sustains emotional stability. Collectively, these characterizations underscore how

adolescent love is shaped by immediacy, emotional depth, and an acute awareness of life's fragility.

The comparative findings demonstrate a clear contrast between adult and adolescent experiences of love driven decision making. Characters in *The Longest Ride* are shaped by long term responsibilities, moral accountability, and the negotiation between personal ambition and relational commitment. In contrast, characters in *The Fault in Our Stars* are driven by emotional urgency, resilience, and the need to find meaning within limited time. Despite these differences, both novels reveal that traits such as bravery, empathy, resilience, and loyalty consistently guide how characters approach love and life choices. This convergence suggests that while context and age shape the form of decision making, the emotional foundations of love remain universal.

Conflict analysis further illuminates how love operates as a decisive force within the narratives. In *The Longest Ride*, Luke Collins experiences a central internal conflict described as "Career vs Love," which represents his struggle to balance the demands and dangers of bull riding with his commitment to Sophia. This conflict illustrates a fundamental challenge in adult relationships, where personal ambitions must be weighed against relational responsibilities. Luke's decision-making process highlights that love requires compromise, sacrifice, and foresight, as his choices have long term consequences not only for himself but also for his partner. The conflict emphasizes maturity in love, where responsibility and accountability are integral to sustaining meaningful relationships.

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel Grace Lancaster confronts the internal conflict described as "Illness vs Love," reflecting her struggle to engage emotionally with Augustus while facing the limitations imposed by terminal illness. This conflict demonstrates that love continues to guide life choices even under severe physical and existential constraints. Hazel's decisions are shaped by an awareness of mortality, leading her to prioritize emotional connection and authenticity over self-protection. Unlike Luke's conflict, which centers on balancing ambition and stability, Hazel's conflict is defined by uncertainty and temporal limitation. This distinction highlights how love influences decisions differently depending on life circumstances, with adolescent love emphasizing emotional presence and meaning rather than long term planning.

Across both novels, conflict serves as a narrative mechanism through which love is tested and clarified. Luke's conflict reflects long term commitment, sacrifice, and moral responsibility, while Hazel's conflict underscores emotional intensity, resilience, and the desire to experience meaningful connection despite uncertainty. These findings reinforce the idea that love is a universal motivator of life choices, yet its expression and implications are shaped by contextual realities such as age, health, and life stage. The conflicts in both narratives demonstrate that love functions not only as an emotional experience but also as a guiding principle in navigating moral, practical, and existential challenges.

Symbolic analysis provides further depth to the understanding of how love shapes decision making. In *The Longest Ride*, the art collection symbolizes shared memories, values, and emotional continuity. It represents love as something enduring and cumulative, shaped over time through shared experiences. The presence of the art collection underscores how love influences life decisions by anchoring characters to relational history and shared meaning. Bull riding, on the other hand, symbolizes risk, courage, and sacrifice. Luke's participation in bull riding reflects the tension between personal ambition and relational responsibility, illustrating that love often requires navigating danger and uncertainty with careful judgment.

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, symbols emphasize vulnerability and mortality. Augustus' cigarettes function as a metaphor for control and defiance, representing his desire to assert

agency over a life constrained by illness. This symbol illustrates how love motivates characters to embrace life fully despite awareness of death. Hazel's oxygen tank symbolizes physical vulnerability and dependency, serving as a constant reminder of limitation. However, it also reflects how love continues to guide decisions even within these constraints, as Hazel chooses emotional connection over isolation. Together, these symbols demonstrate that love operates within both freedom and limitation, shaping how characters respond to risk, dependency, and existential fear.

The comparative symbolic analysis reveals that while the contexts differ, the function of symbolism remains consistent in illustrating love as a guiding force. In *The Longest Ride*, symbols reflect adult relationships grounded in long term commitment and responsibility. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, symbols highlight adolescent love shaped by immediacy, vulnerability, and mortality. Despite these contextual differences, both novels portray love as a force that informs courage, sacrifice, and emotional prioritization. The symbols provide tangible representations of internal struggles, reinforcing the connection between emotional experience and life defining choices.

In synthesis, the findings demonstrate that love is consistently portrayed as a central influence on life choices across both novels, despite differences in age, context, and circumstance. Character traits reveal how personal qualities shape responses to love, conflicts illustrate the moral and emotional dilemmas that love generates, and symbols provide concrete representations of how love operates within risk, vulnerability, and commitment. Together, these results address the study's objective by showing that love functions as a transformative force that guides decision making, personal growth, and relational dynamics. The analysis contributes to literary scholarship by highlighting how contemporary romantic fiction uses characterization, conflict, and symbolism to explore universal emotional experiences within diverse life contexts. These insights provide a foundation for the succeeding chapter, which will further integrate the findings into broader theoretical and literary discussions on love and human agency.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that love functions as a powerful and transformative force shaping life choices across different stages of human experience, as evidenced in the comparative analysis of *The Longest Ride* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. The findings demonstrate that while love is a universal emotional influence, its manifestation and implications vary significantly depending on age, circumstance, and life context. In Nicholas Sparks' *The Longest Ride*, love is portrayed within the framework of adulthood, where personal responsibility, long term ambition, and moral accountability strongly influence decision making. The protagonists' choices reveal that adult love often requires deliberate sacrifice, compromise, and the careful balancing of individual aspirations with relational commitment. In contrast, John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* presents love through the lens of adolescence and terminal illness, emphasizing emotional intensity, resilience, and the pursuit of meaning within limited time. The characters' decisions highlight how love motivates individuals to prioritize emotional connection and authenticity even amid physical vulnerability and uncertainty.

Across both novels, the analysis of characterization, conflict, and symbolism reveals consistent patterns in how love guides personal growth and ethical judgment. Character traits such as bravery, empathy, resilience, loyalty, and courage shape the protagonists' responses to emotional challenges and influence how they navigate relationships. Internal conflicts rooted in career responsibility and illness further demonstrate that love serves as a guiding principle in resolving moral dilemmas and life defining choices. Symbolic elements such as bull riding,

art collections, cigarettes, and oxygen tanks deepen this understanding by providing tangible representations of risk, sacrifice, vulnerability, and enduring commitment. Collectively, these literary elements illustrate that love is not merely a romantic ideal but a decisive force that informs values, priorities, and actions across differing life realities.

In synthesizing these findings, the study affirms that contemporary romantic fiction effectively captures the complexity of human relationships by situating love within realistic emotional and social constraints. The comparative perspective underscores both the universality of love as a motivating force and the contextual factors that shape its influence on decision making. Based on these conclusions, the study recommends that future research extend this line of inquiry by examining additional contemporary or cross-cultural literary works to further explore how love and life choices are represented across diverse social settings and age groups. Further studies may also incorporate other literary elements such as narrative structure, dialogue, and thematic progression to enrich understanding of how literature portrays human relationships and moral agency. Through these continued explorations, literary scholarship can gain deeper insight into the enduring role of love in shaping human experience and decision making.

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