

## A STUDY OF THE ELEMENTS OF DEPRESSION IN “ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES” (2015)

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### Abstract

The majority of research that exists on mental illness refers to the portrayals of adults with mental illness in films and television shows but limited research has been conducted on the portrayals of teenagers suffering from mental illness through a medium such as young adult literature. This study discussed and discovered the elements of depression behaviors depicted in the novel “All the Bright Places” by Jennifer Niven (2015). The writers chose to study the two main characters, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, and explored the elements of depression behaviors in the novel. Each text was descriptively examined using textual analysis and coded using a coding book. It was found that the novel depicts all elements of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (All-Or-Nothing Thinking, Overgeneralization, Magnification and Minimizing, Personalizing, Mental Filter, Jumping to Conclusions, Labelling, Emotional Reasoning, Mind Reading; and Disqualifying the Positive). To conclude, Niven has addresses not only depression and also suicide with a seriousness and realism. A beautiful juxtaposition. Despite the ending, she leaves the reader with a sense of hope, that it will get better although never easier.

**Keywords:** *Young Adult Literature, Depression, All the Bright Places*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Depression is a shared illness worldwide, with more than 300 million people being affected by it. Depression varies from usual mood fluctuations and short-lived emotional responses to encounters in everyday life. Especially when long-lasting and with relative or stern intensity, depression may become a severe health condition. It can cause the affected person to hurt significantly and function feebly at work, at school and in the family. At its worst, depression can lead to suicide.

Close to 800 000 people deceased due to suicide every year. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in 15-29-year-olds (WHO, 2018). According to Pirkis and Francis (2012), people with mental illness have been consistently depicted in the media as violent, unpredictable and dangerous. According to Fawcett (2015), the portrayal of individuals with mental illness follows typical bad stereotypes like being dangerous, underserving, sloppy and incompetent.

The purpose of this representation is to separate ‘them’ from ‘us’. If the portrayals of mental health are negative, eventually, the end result is an increase in stigma. From a sociological perspective, a person diagnosed with mental illness becomes involuntarily “labelled”. Whether we like it or not, the truth is that the media do hold some control in influencing people’s opinions about their surrounding and about the people who resides in it with them.

By manipulating the truth surrounding the lives/experience of people suffering from it as well as using sensational language, the media is actually spreading myths and stereotypes regarding mental illness. Therefore, encouraging fear into the public’s mind that leads to rash assumption being drawn.

The majority of research that exists on mental illness refers to portrayals of adults with mental illness in films and television shows (Whitley and Wang, 2017; Parrott and Parrott, 2015; Smith, 2015) but limited research has been conducted on the portrayals of teenagers suffering with mental illness through a medium such as Young Adult (YA) Literature.

Diane Scrofano (2015) claims that the fascinating thing about the recent crop of YA Literature that deals with mental illness is that it handles mental illness as an actual medical problem instead of, simply, calling it “madness” like so many older literatures had dismissively done before. Words have power. They possess the unique ability to wound or ease, to glorify or offend, to enlighten or deceive. Ultimately, words expose and help mold existing mindsets, mindsets that in return shape society’s behavior.

One place that these people can turn to for comfort, empathy, and understanding is through YA literature that tells stories of similar adolescent who experiences depression and suicide. The characters in these books are usually depicted as high school students and, like the adolescent reader themselves, are forced to face daunting obstacles in some shape or form in their daily life.

Curiosities are dealt with and answers are presented in the pages between when they read these young adult novels about mental illness. Unsettling as it is, there is a certain amount of comfort to be had from this new ‘mess’ of a fiction; it makes its readers feel less alone that they are other people besides them that are going through the same thing on the other side of the planet.

The thing that is most noticeable is that the response to these books have been remarkably positive with a lot of teenagers identifying themselves with the characters, even though the storyline (suicide, mental illness, starvation, murder) would sit on the outer fringes of what constitute as a normal day in most teenagers lives (Lewis and Dockter, 2011).

Aaron T. Beck is most famous for his ground-breaking approach known as cognitive theory (CT). Beck found that those suffering from depression tend to concentrate on the negative side of a situation, thus completely ignoring the positive (Hollon, 2010, p. 63). Thus, this study aims to explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression are depicted in the novel “All the Bright Places”.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (All-Or-Nothing Thinking) is depicted in the novel “All the Bright Places”?
2. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Overgeneralization) is depicted in the novel “All the Bright Places”?
3. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Magnification and Minimizing) is depicted in the novel “All the Bright Places”?

4. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Personalizing) is depicted in the novel "All the Bright Places"?
5. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Mental Filter) is depicted in the novel "All the Bright Places"?
6. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Jumping to Conclusions) is depicted in the novel "All the Bright Places"?
7. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Labelling) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*" ?
8. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Emotional Reasoning) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*" ?
9. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Mind Reading) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*" ?
10. Does the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Disqualifying The Positive) is depicted in in the novel "*All the Bright Places*" ?

The research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (All-Or-Nothing Thinking) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
2. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Overgeneralization) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
3. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Magnification and Minimizing) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
4. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Personalizing) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
5. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Mental Filter) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
6. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Jumping to Conclusions) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
7. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Labelling) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
8. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Emotional Reasoning) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
9. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Mind Reading) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".
10. To explore whether the element of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Disqualifying The Positive) is depicted in the novel "*All the Bright Places*".

## 2.0 YOUNG ADULT (YA) LITERATURE PHENOMENON

YA literature is not a new phenomenon in the world of publishing neither can it be considered as an old genre either. Regardless of its enduring reputation among people who reads them, it is only recently that the YA literature community received attention from literary judges. The reason is that YA literature struggles to separate itself from the larger category of children's literature.

In the beginning, there were really only two types of novels that lined up along the bookshelves: books targeted at adults and books targeted at children. Stories in children's literature are frequently pigeon-holed as having characters that lack depth, moralistic storylines and the conventional happy ending.

However, books marketed for mature readers deal with a wide range of issues. Their storyline focused on problems that both older teenager and grown adults usually faced with such as work stresses and

relationships difficulties, but these books also featured more mature situations such as marital divorce and manslaughter, often events adult character gone through (Coats and Fraustino, 2015; Glaus, 2014, Hunt 2017;).

Books that had a teenage character as the main protagonist and told stories about teenage struggles were trapped in the middle, teetering the fragile line between children and adult fiction. The term “Young Adult Literature” or YA Literature gained momentum in the 1960’s and as defined by Beach and Marshall, YA literature is simply “literature written for and marketed to young adults.”

To further elaborate the statement, Young Adult Library Services Association stated that it “referred [to] realistic fiction that was set in the real (as opposed to imagined), contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12-18” (Cart, 2008).

As hard as it was to differentiate between YA literature and other works of fiction, the same could not be said for its origin with many scholars agreeing that *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (1967) marks the starting point of modern YA literature.

The book dealt with the gritty side of teenage life while exposing the hostility of America’s gang culture. However, Mark Twain’s *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) is an even older novel that have been labelled as Young Adult. The beloved classic is frequently used in schools as a recommended reading list, have been added to the list of Young Adult novels because of the young age of the protagonist Huck that focusses on his struggle to make sense of the world around him.

The book chosen for this study was “*All the Bright Places*” by Jennifer Niven (2015). It tells the story of two teen’s experiences of living with depression. The book is comprised of two parallel narratives. The first is that of Theodore Finch, the school’s ‘freak’ who is morbidly obsess with death to the point of constantly thinking up ways of killing himself.

He lives with his two sisters and mother while his distant father plays “house” with another woman. The book’s second narrative is that of Violet Markey, a popular honour student at the school who secretly fights to recover from a car accident that had left her sister dead. Not only that, she has also withdrawn from everything that use to bring her joy.

The book starts off with them standing on top of the school’s bell tower and contemplating whether to jump or not. Somehow, Theodore manage to talk Violet off the ledge. The two form an unlikely friendship over a class project. Slowly, their relationship blossoms into an intimate one like the book’s jacket says, “It’s only with Violet that Finch can be himself” and “it’s only with Finch that Violet... can start living”.

They learn about themselves and each other while wandering the hidden wonders of Indiana but as Violet’s world brightens, Finch’s begins to darken (Niven, 2016).

The book delves further into mental illness, exploring the two main characters crippling struggles from it. “*All the Bright Places*” is certainly a sombre novel and the ending itself may not appeal to certain readers who expect sunshine and rainbows as a finale.

Like most things in life, sometimes finding that special someone does not mean that the illness will just disappear; the act of loving someone does not cure depression, which is an inappropriate lesson in a lot of Young adult books that talked about depression and suicide, wrapping up happy endings in a pretty neat little bow.

The truth is that sometimes people commit suicide even though they have countless reasons not to and the book offers just that, a possible real life ending one that is not necessarily sugar-coated or appealing. Theodore Finch is the kind of character who will stay with the reader long after finishing the book as he gives an insight to what it really means living with depression.

The readers will find themselves mourning along with Violet as she tries to comprehend her many physical and intangible losses.

The intense, riveting book has been dubbed the next “big thing” in the world of modern YA literature, and been compared to other Young Adult hits like *The Fault of Our Stars* and *Eleanor Park*. It was a New York Times Bestseller and garnered countless positive reviews from literary critics to the millions who read it with BuzzFeed (2015) calling it “an impressively honest depiction of depression”.

The book tackles the whole “two broken people falls in love with each other” trope head on like many young adult books have done in the past but “few do it so memorably” (Kirkus Reviews, 2014) like “*All the Bright Places*” did.

It is no surprise then that the book was featured in many literary list from BuzzFeed’s “24 Books That Are Straightforward about Mental Illness”, Young Adult Library Services Association’s (YALSA) “Dealing with Suicide & Depression in Teen Literature” to YoungMinds’s “10 Young Adult Books That reflect Mental Health Issues”.

The reason adults are so reluctant to talk about depression with adolescent stems from a very good intention in which there is a primal need to shield children from anything that might harm them in the future and in this case, it comes from the ‘depressing’ issue portrayed in YA Literature.

They do this by talking about it casually or completely ignoring the topic. And for young adult who were born healthy (mentally and physically), with supposedly zero grown-up troubles, reading about mental illness can be a gloomy matter and macabre.

This also goes to other controversial issues such as sex, drugs and any death related material where they are deem too depressing for young adult. What these people did not realize is that in return, they have already set up the teenagers with a rose-tinted view of the world.

A world where good always win, evil is defeated, the two lovers happily reunites after their lengthy struggles and the characters ends up having an epiphany sent from the heaven on important life lesson at the finale.

No wars, famine, prostitution, mental disorders or murder in sight. As the readers (especially young adults and kids) flip through the final pages of the book, they can sleep peacefully knowing that a happy ending is guaranteed for the characters, without any unpleasant doubt damaging their vulnerable little minds.

### 3.0 AARON BECK’S COGNITIVE THEORY OF DEPRESSION

Aaron T. Beck has been called “one of the leading clinical theorists of the half century” (Hollon, 2010, p. 63) and is most famous for his ground-breaking approach known as cognitive theory (CT). The concept came at a very much needed time in the world of psychology where the main method of treatment is psychoanalysis and dynamic theory was massively used.

Ultimately, Beck became dissatisfied with the psychodynamic methods that focuses on a person’s unconscious motivations and feelings and decided that the way a person observed, deciphered and gives

meaning in his/her everyday life, a process described as cognition, was fundamental to healing. He began to pour all of his concentration working on a cognitive approach to depression.

In 1961, Beck created a 21 question multiple-choice record called the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), one of the most widely used psychometric tests for assessing the severity of a person's depression. From there, Beck went on to further his research and in 1967, the cognitive theory made its debut in his first book, *Depression: Clinical Experimental and Theoretical Aspects*.

Later, he would branch out to include other psychiatric disorders, the result was *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* published in 1976. Throughout his career, Beck received various honors from the medical society but perhaps the highlight came when he received the Lasker Award, America's highly prestigious medical prize.

Dr. Joseph L. Goldstein, the chairman of the Lasker jury, said during the announcement of the award that cognitive theory is "one of the most important advances—if not the most important advance—in the treatment of mental illness in the last 50 years" (Hollon, 2010, p. 64).

The idea behind the cognitive theory is simple. Our thoughts have a powerful effect on our feelings and the way we behave which means that we get nervous, mad or unhappy when we think we have grounds to be nervous, angry or unhappy.

Simply put, it is our views, hopes, and understandings of what is happening around us that controls our feelings, not the situations we found ourselves in. Beck suggested that depression, in a way, was the result of a repeated predisposition to make sense of things in a pessimistic way and biased manner.

Beck's theory of depression comprises of three parts. People suffering from depression views themselves as someone who is worthless, a letdown and is terribly inadequate. To them the world seems like an awful, harsh, a cold place to live and the future is probably worse than the present. These views (often known as the cognitive triad) possess the person's mind in a very unhealthily negative manner.

Beck's theory proposed that through these central negative beliefs can lead to many other symptoms of depression. The triad consists of three beliefs.

For example, a mixture between negativity and helplessness will cause lack of motivation. Logically, a person loses appeal in things that they used to enjoy if they think that they will not gain happiness by doing them. People dealing with depression is controlled by an array of beliefs that mold their conscious perceptions.

These beliefs stem from the messages we collect be it deliberately or accidentally from families, friends, and other important contributors. As result from these belief, other aspect of depression arises such as somatic disturbances (e.g, loss of appetite), motivational disturbance (e.g, inactiveness and isolation), and affective disturbances (e.g, extreme sadness) (Beck et al., 1979).

Most of these thoughts have a knee-jerk quality to it. They seem to appear "out of the blue," without much goading and neither the individual is aware of it. As the individual's depression deteriorate, these thoughts progressively become monotonous and unpleasant.

If left untreated, they may control the person's thinking process, making it challenging to focus on a daily basis and participate in normal activities. Beck also found that those suffering from depression tend to concentrate on the negative side of a situation, thus completely ignoring the positive.

They have negative self-schema that leads them to interpret information in a negatively biased and distorted ways, a process known as cognitive bias/ distortions. These tendencies to think in a self-defeating manner encourages and support the negative cognitive triad. These tendencies include:

- a. **All-or-nothing thinking:** Thinking in absolute, black and white categories such as “always”, “never”, “every.” For example. “I won’t fit in” or “ I won’t know anyone at the party”
- b. **Overgeneralization:** Making broad interpretations from a single or few negative events.
- c. **Magnification & Minimizing:** Exaggerating and minimizing the importance of events. One might believe their own achievements are unimportant, or that their mistakes are excessively.
- d. **Personalizing:** The belief that one is responsible for events outside of their own control. “My mom is always upset. She would be fine if I did more to help her.”
- e. **Mental filter:** Picking out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively.
- f. **Jumping to conclusions:** Interpreting the meaning of a situation with little or no evidence.
- g. **Labelling:** Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m loser.”
- h. **Emotional reasoning:** The assumptions that emotions reflect the way we see things really are. “I feel it, therefore, it must be true.”
- i. **Mind reading:** You arbitrarily conclude that somebody is reacting negatively to you, and you don’t bother to check it out.
- j. **Disqualifying the positive:** Recognizing only the negative aspects of a situation while ignoring the positive. One might receive many compliments on a evaluations, but focus on the single piece of negative feedback.

#### 4.0 METHODOLOGY

In order to explore whether the elements of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression is depicted in the novel “*All the Bright Places*” , a coding book was used to textually analysed the elements of depression in the two main characters by isolating each passage in context and determining which elements was demonstrated based on Aaron Beck’s Cognitive Theory of Depression.

Content analysis is a research tool used to decide the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts. This study quantifies and analyse the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts, then make suppositions about the messages in the novel “*All the Bright Places*” (An Introduction to Content Analysis, 2004).

#### 5.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study intends to explore whether the elements of cognitive distortions in Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression is depicted in the novel “*All the Bright Places*”. It was found that, “*All the Bright Places*” has explored topics such as depression and suicide.

In this novel, the representation of mental illness (depression) follows the elements and factors that contribute to its behaviours.

The novel possesses all elements of cognitive distortions in Beck’s cognitive theory of Depression (All-Or-Nothing Thinking, Overgeneralization, Magnification and Minimizing, Personalizing, Mental Filter, Jumping to Conclusions, Labelling, Emotional Reasoning, Mind Reading; and Disqualifying the Positive). Each element was displayed to varying degrees as shown by the two main characters.

It is more apparent in Finch while Violet displayed only a few illogical thinking pattern. These findings can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Coding Book for this study**

Elements	Pages	Supporting literature
All-or-nothing thinking	11, 23, 39, 49, 221, 223, 278	According to Gonda, Pompili, M., Serafini, Carvalho, Rihmerr and Dome (2015), all or nothing is found in depressed people all over the World. As an ongoing way of perceiving reality, All-or-nothing thinking is emotionally and physically damaging. There are a couple of warning words that people often use when thinking in this manner: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always</li> <li>• Never</li> <li>• Impossible</li> <li>• Perfect</li> <li>• Terrible</li> </ul>
Overgeneralization	21, 50, 66, 270, 339	Depressed people often have an ability for (mistakenly) generalizing specific situations as a reflection of their own self-worth in a larger sense. Regions in the brains of the people in remission from depression did not “couple” as strongly as those never having an episode of depression. This could reveal insufficient access to details about what exactly was inappropriate about their behaviour when feeling guilty, thereby extending guilt to things they are not responsible for and feeling guilty (Ginat-Frolich, Klein, Katz and Shechner, 2017).
Magnifying and minimizing	9, 112	To exaggerate or inappropriately shrink the importance of things until they appear tiny/huge sort of “a binocular trick” (Neblett, 2017).
Personalizing	21, 35, 61, 77, 113, 141-142, 242, 347, 353	In depression, excessive self-blame is often accompanied by the equally maladaptive tendency to overgeneralize. People who had higher levels of self-blame also had the two regions (one involving socially appropriate behaviour and the other involving feelings of guilt), which suggests what’s going on in the brain and the specific behavior (Weeland, Nijhof, Otten, Vermaes and Buitelaar, 2017)
Mental Filter	148, 273	Psychologist call this style of dwelling on the negative thoughts “rumination” Research shows that people who ruminate are more likely to get depressed and stay depressed (Fresco, Frankel, Mennin, Turk and Heimberg, 2002).
Jumping to Conclusions	227, 228, 307	The Jumping to Conclusions (JTC) bias is a tendency to make decisions with certainty based on limited data-gathering. There is substantial support for its presence in patients with delusions (Fine, Gardner, Craigie and Gold, 2007; Garety and Freeman, 2013; Garety, Freeman, Jolley, Waller, and Dunn, 2011)
Labelling	5, 161, 227, 278, 307	Once you give a person a label, there is a real danger that you will respond to the label, there is real danger that you will respond to the label instead of the person (Rowan, 1998).
Emotional reasoning	63, 227, 278, 307,	Depressed people vary greatly in the degree to which they engage in emotional reasoning. Individual with remitted depression may show elevated of levels non-self-referent emotional reasoning compared with those who have never had a depressive episode, that is, rely on their emotions when forming interpretations about situation (Berle and Moulds, 2013).
Mind-reading	30	Research shown that depressed individuals have lower functioning in comparison with healthy matched subjects in reading the mind in the eye test and mindfulness scale (Nejati, Zabihzadeh, Maleki and Tehranchi, 2012).
Disqualifying the positive	155	Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another like “it doesn’t count” (Rnic, Dozois and Martin, 2016).

There are other YA novels that tackle these kinds of subject matter in which people can learn a thing or two from it. *My Heart and Other Black Holes* by Jasmine Warga is about sixteen-year-old Aysel who wants to die and fixate on planning her own death. The only problem is that she is not sure she is brave



enough to do it alone, afraid that she is going to flake out the last minute. The solution comes in a form of a website with a segment called Suicide Partners. There she meets a Roman aka FrozenRobot with a similar goal, so they made a pact to do it together. As things start to transform, feelings start to bloom and grow.

But as their get closer to their deadline date, Aysel begins to question if dying really worth it. Warga's elegant prose encourage the readers to look forward to the future even though the present seems bleak. It teaches the importance of seeking help in any form from making someone as a reason for living to being the reason for someone else's.

For a book that addresses depression and suicide, the story is surprisingly hopeful. It is a book about overcoming depression—however long it takes—and ultimately finding something to live for. In reality, we judge what we don't understand. In this case, we stigmatize people who are different than us because they break society's norms of a healthy sane person (Warga, 2017).

By reading Young adult books—or any type of book for that matter— that stays truthful to the portrayal of people dealing with mental illness, it helps facilitate a conversation. They can help the community to have a better understanding of the illness and assist the people who are suffering silently to recognize the warning signs and seek help professionally.

What makes “*All the Bright Places*” beneficial to readers of any age is the subtle way Niven addresses depression and suicide with a seriousness, realism, and hope. A beautiful juxtaposition. She ends her novel with Violet continuing on with the class project without Finch.

He helps her leave her isolated existence and live a fuller life than when she was first introduced in the novel. She grows as a person. In the case of people dealing with depression, loss and confusion about death, Young Adult novels addressing depression and suicide can be one source they can turn to for empathy and understanding.

These stories are available for them, written with them in mind, and can help cope with their difficult emotions. At the very least, these novels can encourage a place for that crucial conversation to begin.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Adolescents and adults need to know these novels are available for them and they need to know where these novels are. When people the dealing with debilitating issue need an emotional outlet, these books will be there for them.

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