





## **Cancer as a Shared Experience: Reading Melissa Kantor's *Maybe One Day* through Symbolic Interactionism**

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### **Abstract**

*Young Adult Fiction often presents illness in a way that helps readers understand how serious disease affects the emotional and social lives of teenagers. It offers both an authentic portrayal of medical conditions and a deeper exploration of their meanings. Melissa Kantor's *Maybe One Day* centres on the friendship between Zoe and Olivia, whose lives change completely when Olivia is diagnosed with leukemia. This paper studies the novel through Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism. It explains that people act according to the meanings that things have for them. These meanings are formed through social interaction and are modified through interpretation. By focusing on the representation of cancer and the interactions Zoe has with Olivia, health professionals, family members, and friends, this paper argues that cancer in the novel is understood not only as a medical condition but also as a shared social experience that is shaped through everyday relationships.*

**Keywords:** Cancer, young adult fiction, friendship, symbolic interactionism, illness narrative.

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## Introduction

Illness is one of the most powerful themes in literature because it forces characters and readers to confront vulnerability, loss, and the limits of control. Illness narratives in young adult fiction often place teenagers in situations where they face fear, pain, and uncertainty. These aspects make the stories emotional and relatable. In a way, it helps readers identify and acknowledge people with different forms of illness. It also acts as a guide to obtain a better understanding of illness. It helps the reader understand how illness affects everyday life, especially when the characters are young and are placed in emotionally intense situations. Among these narrative representations, cancer brings physical suffering, the possibility of death, and intense emotional strain into the lives of the patient and the people around them.

*Maybe One Day* by Melissa Kantor is a young adult fiction about cancer and friendship. “Aimed at readers aged 12 to 18, Young Adult (YA) literature features protagonists in their adolescence, with storylines often closely associated with coming of age, including first love, friendship, and familial tensions, romantic relationships, sexuality, health, and social hardship” (Mukherjee et al. 59). The story is narrated from Zoe’s view, giving it a distinctive experience for the readers. This allows the readers to witness not only Olivia’s suffering but also the emotional, social, and practical impact of cancer on the people around her. Olivia and Zoe are best friends, and the novel begins with them being rejected from NYBC. Though it is hard for Olivia, she has moved on to become part of other extracurricular activities. Whereas Zoe finds it difficult to take the news and considers it to be the worst thing happened in their entire life. When they are settling into their junior year of high school, Olivia falls sick and is diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, a cancer affecting blood cells. “Leukemia is a malignant hematologic disorder marked by the abnormal proliferation of blood cells, significantly affecting patients both physically and psychologically” (Xiang and Li 2). With this, their lives start to fall apart. Olivia’s experience with cancer is physically and mentally traumatising, but she tries to be strong and motivated with the help of Zoe. Meanwhile, Zoe’s family and friends stand by her as she tries to figure out her emotions about Olivia’s dreadful situation. Olivia dies even after the bone marrow transplant from Jake. The story does not end in a happy tone, but it does show the readers the importance of having the support of a best friend during a time of illness.

While the novel presents every relationship around Olivia, this research paper focuses specifically on how the shared experience of cancer is filtered through Zoe’s experience with Olivia’s cancer. This research highlights how symbolic interactionism plays a vital role in understanding cancer and its treatment. This framework is significant because the novel shows that cancer is not only experienced as a medical diagnosis, but it is also shaped through interactions that change the perspectives of people around Olivia. Hence, this paper hypothesises that cancer is represented as a shared social experience whose meaning is formed and reshaped through interaction among the patient, friends, family, and health professionals.

## Review of Literature

Young adult cancer fiction has been discussed in relation to illness, identity, and emotional development. Research papers on other young adult fiction also show that illness affects identity formation, autonomy, and relationships. Young adult literature has gradually carved out a space for its exposition of human emotions, illness, trauma, and emotional pain. Illness narration in adolescent fiction focuses on the closed circle around familiar, deep personal themes of identity, loneliness, resilience, and the complicated bonds between human connections. However, *Maybe One Day* has not received scholarly attention. Book reviews of the novel emphasise the friendship between the main characters and the emotional impact after diagnosis, but they do not examine how the meaning of cancer is shaped through social interaction. Researchers have largely overlooked *Maybe One Day*, particularly in terms of how it influences people's emotions and psychology.

Young adult cancer fiction has been discussed in relation to illness, identity, and emotional development. Roberta Seelinger Trites, in his novel *Disturbing the Universe* (2000) quotes that "Most adolescent literature bears some sort of didactic impulse. In a literature often about growth, it is the rare author who can resist the impulse to moralize about how people grow" (Trites 75). Young Adult Literature is fundamentally concerned with power over the body and identity, tensions that illness narratives bring sharply into focus. *Everything, Everything* (2015) by Nicola Yoon similarly acknowledges that illness narratives serve as mirrors of lived adolescent experience. "Every day you get up and learn something new. Every day you find something to be happy about" (Yoon 33). Research on other young adult fiction shows that illness affects identity formation, autonomy, and relationships. I was happy before I met him. But I'm alive now, and those are not the same thing (Yoon 181).

Rachael Lippincott "We need that touch from the one we love, almost as much as we need air to breathe. I never understood the importance of touch, his touch...until I couldn't have it" (Lippincott 270), contends that disease in adolescent literature is rarely depicted in isolation but is constructed through the interactions between the ill protagonist and the surrounding social world. Despite its thematic richness, Melissa Kantor's *Maybe One Day* (2014) has received little sustained scholarly attention. Book reviews in publications such as *School Library Journal* and *Kirkus Reviews* emphasise the friendship between Zoe and Olivia and the emotional impact of the cancer diagnosis, but they do not examine how the meaning of illness is shaped through social interaction. No scholarly study has subjected the novel to sustained theoretical analysis.

This article addresses that gap by applying symbolic interactionism, drawing on Herbert Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (1969), to show how cancer in the novel becomes a shared experience constructed through continuous symbolic exchange between characters.

### **Objectives and Aim**

The main objective of this research paper is to explore how cancer is represented as a shared social experience in Melissa Kantor's *Maybe One Day*. It uses Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework. It aims to examine how cancer is understood not only as a medical condition or crisis but also as a socially constructed experience, which is shaped by interaction. It also aims to analyse how Zoe's experience of Olivia's cancer is reflected through her emotional response and the way she processes information. This article also aims to highlight how the novel evokes empathy by showing how friendship and community can be reshaped in the face of serious illness.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical approach. The symbolic interactionism theory formulated by the sociologist Herbert Blumer is used for the analysis. In his book *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, under "The Nature of Symbolic Interactionism", he states that symbolic interactionism is based on three basic thoughts. First, people behave toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them. Second, the meanings of those things emerge from social interaction with one another. Then, when a person deals with things they experience, these meanings are altered and managed through an interpretative process (Blumer 2). The researcher uses this theory to analyse the interactions that happen after Olivia's diagnosis. This theory helps in explaining how the novel presents cancer as a social experience rather than just a biological event.

According to Blumer, people do not act toward things just because they exist; they act according to the meanings they attach to them. These meanings arise from interaction with others, and they continue to change as people interpret new situations. This theory is applicable to illness because patients and their loved ones often do not completely understand the medical terms. As researchers note that "Implications for practice: Patients are socialized by verbal and nonverbal communication practices in the outpatient clinic, which influences their expectations of what to talk about during their treatment. Methods are needed to support person-centered communication in outpatient settings, so patient care needs are met more broadly" (Prip et al. E695). This highlights how communication shapes the patients' understanding of illness. Therefore, they rely on explanations, emotions, and social cues to know what the illness means for their life. Symbolic interactionism helps in explaining both aspects of what happens in the story and the way the characters interpret the meaning of cancer.

### **Medical Reality and Understanding**

Applying the theory of symbolic interactionism in *Maybe One Day* shows that cancer is not a fixed medical label but a socially constructed reality shaped by conversations and relationships. Olivia's conversations with her family, friends, and doctors do not just describe her condition; they also help in defining what cancer

means to each of them. One of the clearest instances of symbolic interaction in the novel occurs in Zoe's interaction with Dr. Maxwell. During the initial stage, Zoe does not have a clear knowledge of cancer. For her, cancer appears as a frightening word associated with danger and loss. However, In chapter six of the book, Zoe's interaction with Dr Maxwell states her knowledge about cancer and the clarity of thought she gains after the interaction. Dr Maxwell explains the type of cancer Olivia has, its cause, and its cure. Medical terminologies are communicated in a manner that Zoe can emotionally and intellectually comprehend. This reflects the point that, "Mental health is becoming increasingly recognized as an important part of overall health, especially for patients with cancer" (Ray and Nguyen 2). Therefore, the health professionals here does not simply provide medical facts, but also offers reassurance and emotional understanding through communication.

The language used by Dr. Maxwell about the treatment is not complicated, even though she explained using medical terms. For instance, when she explains the drugs used to cure cancer, Maxwell says, "The drugs we're giving Olivia right now are drugs that target rapidly dividing cells, such as myeloblasts" (Kantor 61). This introduces Zoe to the scientific reality of cancer treatment in a simplified form. The importance of such treatment methods is reflected in the observation that "Prodrugs have been used to improve the selectivity and efficacy of cancer therapy by targeting unique abnormal markers that are overexpressed by cancer cells and are absent in normal tissues" (Souza, Pellosi, and Tedesco 483). While Zoe may not fully understand the technical aspects of treatment, the doctor's explanation allows her to associate chemotherapy with recovery.

Dr. Maxwell further makes sure that Zoe understands, so she uses words and imagery that are easily comprehensible to Zoe. For example, she explains leukemia as "The immature cells are strong and hard to kill. They're like child soldiers" (Kantor 61). She explains the side effects of chemotherapy as well. This makes Zoe more considerate, more attentive, and more aware of the harsher realities of cancer and its treatment. As young adult readers, one can get the basic information about leukemia through these interactions. At the same time, the emotional burden associated with illness is also emphasised in the narrative. The text also highlights the significance of emotional support and communication in the experience of illness as noted by scholars that "Designing psychosocial interventions that can affect anxiety, depression, and quality of life can be influenced by knowledge of the relationship between coping and stress associated with cancer" (Sonbol et al. 1). In this sense, the narrative follows Blumer's idea that meaning is produced in interaction. Therefore, Zoe's responses to Olivia's cancer are shaped not simply by private feelings but by the conversations, instructions, and reassurances that surround the diagnosis. Through this, cancer becomes a lived reality rather than an abstract fear.

### **The Lived Experience of Cancer**

This article looks at the instances that unfold the pain of the cancer patient and the harsher effects of its treatment. Kantor brings in the actual medical practices that are followed in the hospitals for a cancer patient to give an idea of what it feels like to have lived a life with cancer. Zoe's interaction reveals the literal pain Olivia experiences due to the treatment. Both of them share a special bond that makes Olivia vulnerable only around Zoe. The treatment process is unbearable for Olivia. She becomes weak after the chemotherapy, and she has to go for two rounds of it. These frequent rounds of it make her nauseous. Studies observe that "Chemotherapy and other medications used in cancer treatment (eg, glucocorticoids, narcotics, benzodiazepines, antihistamines, and antibiotics) often lead to adverse effects that mimic depression" (Rosenstein 103). This idea becomes relevant in Olivia's experience as the side effects of chemotherapy not only make her sick, but also affect her emotional well-being. These details matter because they show cancer not as a vague tragedy but as a physically demanding illness that affects the body day by day. Cancer not only causes unbearable pain for Olivia, but it also makes her feel embarrassed when her hair starts to fall after chemotherapy. Hair fall is one of the moments where the bodily effects of treatment become socially visible. Her embarrassment affects her self-image and adolescent identity. Here, the illness is no longer hidden inside the body; it becomes visible to others and changes Olivia's view of herself in relation to them.

The novel also represents the fear of losing a best friend, daughter, and sister and how it affects the characters. When they consider Olivia's cancer, they experience moments of suffering and the fear of losing her. However, the research paper specifically points out Zoe's emotions, pain, and fear whenever Olivia visits the hospital or when her situation becomes worse. The novel expresses the strongest relationship between Olivia and Zoe. Since the story is narrated through Zoe's point of view, Olivia's cancer is filtered through the perspective of a best friend who is trying to remain strong while struggling with fear, uncertainty and helplessness.

### **Cancer as a Shared Social Experience**

Right from the day Olivia is diagnosed, Zoe faces trouble expressing her emotions. She gets annoyed so fast because she cannot imagine her life without Olivia. Zoe panics over Olivia's medical condition. The narration primarily conveys through her thoughts. She wants to be available for her best friend, who is undergoing a very difficult phase. Her understanding of what matters in life alters through constant interaction with Olivia's cancer. Even though Zoe quits dancing, she agrees to continue Olivia's community service as a dance instructor. She undertakes this responsibility because it burdens her and causes it burdens her and distress when her best friend experiences sadness. She mentions, "Thinking about her squeezing her eyes shut to stop herself from crying made me furious" (Kantor 81). This line shows that Zoe transforms Olivia's pain into a form of anger and protectiveness. It reveals Zoe's deep internalisation of Olivia's suffering. This

emotional tension becomes visible when Zoe attends the fundraising event organised by their friends.

Zoe happens to read the poster about bone marrow transplants and realises the painful process of it. She cannot bear or accept the thought that her best friend might have to undergo this one day. There are several instances where Zoe gets anxious when Olivia's cancer is mentioned. Brief lines like, "My heart started racing" (Kantor 109) capture the intensity of the inner fear. Cancer here is felt in the bodies of the people who witness it. Zoe's panic when Olivia's cancer is mentioned shows that the illness extends beyond the patient and enters the physical and emotional state of those around them. Zoe's reaction shows how symbolic interactionism works at the level of everyday life. She often cannot express her emotions directly, and her fear appears in sudden anxiety and irritation. Zoe's fear is not merely internal, it is constantly created and changed by conversations, medical explanations, hospital visits, fundraising events, and Olivia's changing condition.

In chapter eleven, Zoe argues with herself, where she tries to convince herself that people at sixteen will not die of cancer. This thought is quickly challenged by her negative inner voice, which keeps reminding her that death is a real possibility in Olivia's case. Her outburst, "Well, she's *not* dead!" (Kantor 111), becomes one of the clearest expressions of denial. This instance shows how Zoe negotiates with the reality that is taking shape around Olivia. The emotional burden created by cancer is not only for patients but also for those who are emotionally connected to them. Studies observe that "Cancer survivors who continue to experience fatigue after curative treatment are at risk for mental health problems, including depression and anxiety symptoms. For cancer survivors who feel socially isolated, the association between fatigue and mental health may be stronger" (Kittel et al.1). Although this refers specifically to survivors, it highlights the larger psychological strain and emotional isolation associated with cancer. Similarly, Zoe's fear and anxiety increase as she witnesses Olivia's physical exhaustion and emotional suffering. Zoe's narration shows what it is like to be with a loved one who has cancer.

When Olivia's condition becomes serious, even after the bone marrow transplant from her brother Jake, Dr Maxwell and Dr Gold explain the treatment that will make her death less painful. Their professional interaction with the family members here shows another dimension of cancer treatment. Here, treatment is not only centred on cure but also on reducing pain and helping the family to face the final stage of cancer. This shows how medical communication changes the way cancer is understood at different moments. At this instance, Zoe sees Olivia panting and becomes anxious and thinks, "This is how Olivia is going to die" (Kantor 334). She has met with the physical reality of Olivia's cancer, and the meaning of the illness changes.

There are interactions that not only explain the perspective of cancer treatment well but also aid in understanding people. The car wash that is organised by the cheer squad irritates Zoe in the beginning. She resists because she feels that no

amount of fundraising can match the seriousness of Olivia's cancer. However, after having a few interactions with Stacey and other friends, she feels grateful for the love and support they provide for Olivia. The social interactions between the characters give a clear picture of each one's perspective, which eventually changes the perspective of others. What first seems superficial becomes meaningful through conversation and shared effort.

While Zoe has difficulty facing her life as a teenager, she tries to stay strong for her best friend. Whenever something happens in her life, Olivia is the first person she goes to. Having in mind that Olivia is facing a life-or-death issue makes Zoe stop to admit the hardships that she is facing. Amidst all the setbacks, Zoe stays strong for Olivia. The conversation that is built between every character shows a gradual change of perspective about cancer, relationships, and people. The social interaction with Olivia changes the people's perspective around her, especially Zoe's perspective of cancer, its treatment, and life. Scholars have observed that "Every patient's experience with cancer is deeply personal. Many face emotional and existential struggles that are difficult to articulate. In those moments, our role is to provide a safe and nonjudgmental space—one where patients can speak their truths without expectation or pressure" (Luong 238). This is reflected in the novel through the conversations shared between Olivia and the people around her. The narrative presents cancer as an emotional and social experience that requires empathy, patience and understanding. Cancer in the novel therefore becomes both a medical condition and a shared human experience that leaves lasting effects on everyone involved.

### **Conclusion**

The novel underscores the realities of cancer diagnosis, treatment, hair loss, relapse, denial, and death. The conversations built around Olivia's cancer reveal the characters' understanding of what it means in their lives. Therefore, all of these realities contribute to showing how the meaning attached to cancer arises from interaction and is modified through interpretation. By applying symbolic interactionism, the paper demonstrates that cancer is not just a biological fact but a lived and socially constructed reality. This paper has paid attention to Zoe because her perspective shows how a teenager lives with the fear of losing a best friend while also trying to remain present and supportive. She views Olivia's suffering, listens to medical explanations, and tries to interpret what each stage of treatment means. Zoe's emotional responses reveal the literal reality of the effect that cancer has on people around the patient.

Cancer remains a medical condition with physical and mental consequences that cannot be ignored. However, this novel presents it as a force that changes meanings, relationships, and identities through social interaction. It emphasises that cancer cannot be experienced in isolation. Therefore, this novel can be read as a powerful young adult cancer narrative in which cancer becomes meaningful through shared experience. It fosters empathy by showing how friendship and communities

can be reshaped in the face of serious illness. In this context, Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism is relevant as it explains that cancer takes on different meanings for different characters through their interactions.

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