People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

08 MAI 1945 UNIVERSITY-GUELMA   جامعة 8 ماي1945ـقالمة
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Romanticizing Mental Illness

in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Master's Degree in Anglophone Language, Literature, and Civilizations.

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July 2021

Dedication

To every person who has been of assistance to us; our beloved family and special friends.

Acknowledgements

First of all, we are very grateful to ALLAH, this humble work would not have been possible without his grace and blessings.

Immeasurable appreciation and deepest gratitude are extended to our supervisor, Mrs. BOUALLEGUE Nadjiba; her constant support and guidance at times of difficulty have been essential to carry out this work.

We are immensely appreciative to the jury members Mrs. BRAHMIA Lilia and Mrs. MAHTALI Ahlem for the time invested in reading our thesis.

We express our sincerest gratitude and warm appreciation to all hard working and respected teachers in our department.

Last but not least, we are greatly indebted to our parents whose affection, love, encouragement, and prayers empowered us to accomplish this thesis.

Abstract

Today, many efforts are undertaken to reduce the stigma related to mental illness. This is undeniably a positive thing. However, this awareness gives birth to new challenges that need to be defied. The efforts to de-stigmatize mental illness sometimes incite a romanticization of mental disorders. The thesis attempts to shed light on how mental illness is represented in young adult literature. It focuses on the dangers of romanticizing mental illness in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* (2015). Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* is selected as a main theory to charts the journey of the mentally ill from liberty and discourse to confinement and silence. Sociological and psychological studies are also employed to examine mental illness stigma and its destructive impact on individuals. The contribution of the thesis could be seen in regarding Niven's *All the Bright Places* as a novel that both de-romanticizes and romanticizes mental illness. The core message of this study is to show that mental illness is a serious problem that needs to be addressed objectively and accurately to break the stigma around it.

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Introduction

The representation of mental illness in literature dates back hundreds of years. However, the treatment of the topic has changed throughout history. Mental illness is and has a history of being a taboo topic. Though mental illness has taken a prominent place in the public eye, the topic remains under-represented in novels, especially in young adult genre. This genre has gained a fair amount of notoriety for its generalization and narrow depiction of mentally ill individuals. This misrepresentation can be seen in terms of the romanticization of mental illness. Romanticizing mental illness is defined as the portrayal of mental disorders as something glamorous, attractive, or beautifully painful. This trend has touched every form of media; from movies and social networks to young adult novels. One of these novels is Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*.

Jennifer Niven is one of the contemporary authors who ventures into the field of young adult fiction. She is an American screenwriter, journalist, and an associate producer at ABC Television. Niven was active since 2000 as she started writing non-fictional narratives, till the present time. One of her most notable works is the New York Times Bestseller *All the Bright Places* that has sparked controversy since its release in 2015. The complexity, as well as the growing interest for illness depiction in the field of literature, justifies the utility to conduct a research on this topic. However, very few literature researchers have dealt with the novel. Thus, criticism about the novel is scarce. The originality of the study can be seen in the exploration of the idea of romanticizing mental illness in *All the Bright Places*. Taking into consideration the newness of the theme, several studies about mental illness will be used as a medium to analyze the novel, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the American Psychiatric Association studies about bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. The study will also employ Patric W. Corrigan, Amy C. Watson, Bruce G. Link, and Rhea Gandhi's research about the effects of mental illness stigma on individuals. CatleaXmas

Ratushima, Haryati Suiltyorini and Patricia Dharma Widyantara's interpretation of the novel is employed.

The idea of this work has initially been chosen due to the increasing danger of romanticizing mental illness. The study seeks to focus on the stigma attached to mental illness and its tragic consequences on its sufferers. Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* is selected because it belongs to the category of young adult fiction on mental illness. The novel pivots around the stigma associated with mental illness and how the act of romanticizing mental illness affects the lives of characters.

This thesis is analyzed through one main theory; the French philosopher, historian, and literary critic Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* is used to trace mental illness representation throughout history. This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first is a theoretical chapter. It is entitled the representation of mental illness in literature and it is divided into three sections. The first section will provide an overview of mental illness in the field of history and psychology, using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*'s definition of mental illness and the internationally recognized psychologist Stephen P. Hinshaw's contribution of explaining the individuals' beliefs about mental illness. The chapter also includes Foucault's work about the evolution of mental illness. The second section will be devoted to the portrayal of mental illness in fiction; Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Jeffery Eugendies' *the Virgin Suicides* will be analyzed to explore how mental illness was represented. The third section will tackle the representation of mental illness in young adult literature; using Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Sophie Kinsella's *Finding Audrey* and Stephen Chbosky's *the perks of being a wallflower* as the main examples.

The analytical part of the study constitutes the second and the third chapters. The second chapter will deal with the stigma of mental illness which will be discussed in two sections, relying mainly on Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and James R. Dudley's research on stigma. The first section of the second chapter will explore mental illness in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* in which ananalysis of different characters will be conducted to understand the mental illness they suffer from and how people treat them. The second section will discuss the impact of mental illness stigma on the characters, how it affected their psyche and their social interactions with the people around them. The third chapter is entitled de-romanticizing vs. romanticizing mental illness in *All the Bright Places* and it is divided in two sections. The first section of the third chapter will discuss the de-romanticization of mental illness. The study shows that the way Niven approaches the idea of suicide proves her efforts in de-romanticizing mental illness. However, the second section will show that the novel carries some aspects of romanticization of mental illness through tackling the theme of love.

The phenomenon of romanticizing mental illness is a central concern of this study. Its negative impact on the mentally ill individuals alerts to the fact that this is no marginal issue. Ultimately, writers need to be aware that mental illnesses representation ought to be dealt with caution since it can lead the reader into building wrong ideas, stereotypes, and misconceptions about the matter.

Chapter 1: The Representation of Mental Illness in Literature

The following chapter will discuss the representation of mental illness in literature. It will rely on Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* which is essential in understanding the attitude towards mental illness over time. To probe into mental illness intricacies, the study examines many literary works, especially young adult novels.

1.1. Mental Illness through History

Mental illness is a worldwide phenomenon that dates back to the existence of mankind, there is no widely agreed consensus on the meaning of this term and its representation. However, it is defined according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM–5*) as: "a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological or developmental processes underlying mental functions" (qtd. in American Psychiatric Association 20). It can affect all people, regardless of their social status, gender, religion or historical background.

Suffering from mental illness can be devastating; there has been an alarming increase in its incidence across the globe. In addition, due to stigma and discrimination, many people suffer in silence and fail to reach their full potential (Vikram Patel et al. 27).This silent epidemic has been characterized as a neglected and increasingly burdensome problem affecting all segments of the population throughout the world. As claimed by Erving Goffman:

> There has always been a stigma attached to people with mental illnesses, even relatively minor ones such as clinical depression. People with mental illness are different. They don't fit in with society. People who choose to go against the social norms that have been established also don't fit in, so they too have a stigma attached.

While these people are not clinically labeled with some type of mental illness, they are still seen as "crazy". (130)

Mentally ill people were often classified with the criminals, the idle, the prisoners, and the mad throughout history, insane individuals are considered among the most vile and marginalized members of society. Peter Hayward and Jenifer A. Bright describe insane individuals as, "People with mental illness are perceived as dangerous and unpredictable; there is an implied belief that the mentally ill choose to behave as they do and have only themselves to blame for their situation". While the definitions, symptoms, pathologies, and diagnoses of madness vary from one period to another, this marginalization and repulsion remain constant (Tara L. Karaim 1).

There are many factors involved in the formation of individuals' beliefs about mental illness, and their attitudes and behavior towards those labeled as mentally ill. These include personal experiences of mental illness, the impact of the media, beliefs as to what causes mental illness (e.g. genetic, self-inflicted), and socio-cultural influences (Stephen P. Hinshaw) and most importantly literature. Thus, it is not surprising that the theme connected with the human psyche especially with its darkest sides has been explored by a great number of writers in different epochs (Maysoon Taher Muhi 3).

Myriad examples about the view and representation of people with mental illness are available in the history of all cultures. It has drastically changed over time, and its nature had been dealt with differently from one period to another. The French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault who had a strong influence not only in philosophy, but also in a wide range of humanistic and social scientific disciplines offers a very interesting study about mental illness representation in history. He was among the main figures who tackled the issue of mental illness. His notable work *Madness and Civilization* was a revolutionary exploration of

how our interpretations of madness have changed over time, he introduced exciting questions in both history and philosophy, such as: Where might the voice of the excluded and silenced be heard? To what extent is madness a social-construct? What does it mean to be mad or insane? Do these things exist outside the realms of reason? If they're unreasonable how can they be understood by reasonable means? (Then and Now 00:00-1:08).

According to Foucault, during the Renaissance, mad people were treated far better; they were not considered crazy, but rather different, they were respected and allowed to wonder freely, since they were a source of wisdom and reason. Thus, insanity was a kind of truth and madness was the sign of God's hand (Then and Now 2:45-3:43). A great example of this is William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which madness is one of the most pervasive themes. In the play, several characters could be considered mad but the most notable is Hamlet. His madness is feigned; yet, it has a touch of wisdom and method. As said by Polonius in the play: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (*Hamlet* 2.2.9). Despite showing clear signs of insanity, Hamlet is accepted. He is not locked behind doors.

After the Renaissance, Foucault describes madness as "the comic punishment of knowledge and its ignorant presumption" (39). This entails that madness was the result of excessive learning and acquiring knowledge. At the dawn of the Age of Reason (the 17th century), there occurred "the Great Confinement" of insane people which fluctuated between assistance and imprisonment. As highlighted by Foucault: "Together with the desire to assist was the need to repress, a duty to charity and a will to punish" (56). The main reason behind the creation of these houses was to avoid scandals. In the Classical Age, madness was defined as a blind surrender to desires; a disease that affects both body and soul, here mad people were seen as violent, dirty and filthy leading to the urge to separate them from the rest. They were considered less than human and the treatment was to restore them to what was purely animal within them, through which madness will be cured. However, despite being locked

behind bars, they were still desired to be seen and displayed like dancing monkeys (Theory and Philosophy 29:38-34:14). The same attitude of imprisonment was maintained in the 18th century. According to Elaine Showalter, the mentally ill were viewed as: "lunatics…as unfeeling brutes, ferocious animals that needed to be kept in check with chains, whips, strait-waistcoats, barred windows, and locked cells" (qtd. in Rachael E. Haas 20). According to Showalter, the mad were not seen as sick or in need of help but rather as a blight upon society.

The 19th century saw fundamental changes in society's response to the mentally ill. One of the most famous mad characters back then is Mrs. Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Her madness is seen as a state of degradation and bestiality. This kind of mental illness is clearly described in the novel as follows:

> In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange, wild animal: but it was covered with clothing: and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face… the hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet.(257)

Referring to Mrs. Rochester as "it" and later as a "clothed hyena" standing on "its hind feet" entails that madness at that time was not sympathized (Allan Beveridge and Edward Renvoize 411).

In the same era, with the emergence of the asylums, instead of simply locking mad persons up, authorities sought to raise their awareness. The aim was to replace repression by moral reasons, to make them aware of their own guilt, and take responsibilities as a mean for correction. All of this gave birth to the idea that mental illness is something to be fixed to return to the rhythmic life, mostly because doctors believed it was possible to cure patients by changing their environment. This idea is exemplified in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*

(1859) that offers an insight into a psychiatric hospital or asylum, as it used to be called in the 19th century. Anne Catherick, the main heroine of this novel does not seem to be utterly insane; however, she is considered an eccentric, faint-hearted and feeble-minded woman. She was placed in a lunatic asylum for treatment, as her doctor claimed in the novel that: "she [would] grow out of it" (48).This indicates that the best solution to cure patients is by putting them into asylums which played an important role at that time (Nikol Fridrichová 37).

After this period, societies started to flourish under liberty, science, and civilization. Medical treatments had seen a rise thanks to Sigmund Freud who created the practice of psychoanalysis in which the psychoanalysts were in charge of the patients' treatment. Foucault explains the change as follows:

> And it is to this degree that all nineteenth century psychiatry really converges on Freud, the first man to accept in all its seriousness the reality of this physician-patient couple, the first to consent not to look away nor to investigate elsewhere, the first not to attempt to hide it in a psychiatric theory that more or less harmonized with the rest of medical knowledge; the first to follow its consequences with absolute rigor. Freud demystified all the other asylum structures: he abolished silence and observation, he eliminated madness's recognition of itself in the mirror of its own spectacle, he silenced the instances of condemnation. (263)

Michel Foucault closes *Madness and Civilization* by comparing art and madness in the western culture, where people tend to be obsessed over artists whom they think are mad or suffer from mental illness. However, for Foucault art is directly opposed to madness because it is created by someone with skill who can communicate a cohesive narrative to the viewer or reader. In this sense, Foucault argues: "Madness is the absolute break with the work of art; it forms the constitutive moment of abolition, which dissolves in time the truth of the work of

art" (273). To Foucault, art is glorified beyond the fact of the artist's insanity. Foucault concludes that there is no madness in the work of art itself, but rather, an interaction between the work of art and the world which judged it.

1.2. Mental Illness and Fiction

As mentioned above, in the 18th century and 19th century, madness was viewed as something abnormal and needed to be fixed in asylums. Being confined in these houses was considered to be the best solution for disturbed individuals. Back then, some authors expressed their refusal of such treatment through their writings. Among them is Charlotte Perkins Gilman who offered an important 19th century short story about madness. Suffering from postpartum depression, Gilman's doctor suggested nothing but a "rest cure" treatment through which she was prevented from making any intellectual actions or "touch pen, brush, or pencil again" (qtd. in Gilman Charlotte Perkins). Seven years later in 1892, Gilman wrote the semi-autobiographical short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* to illustrate her own criticism for the medical field. She wanted to show that being confined does aggravate the problem.

In the story, Gilman mirrors her own medical condition in the life of her unnamed protagonist. Her character is imprisoned in one room by her husband who prevents her from performing any useful task under the guise of caring for her, leaving her with nothing but a damaged yellow wallpaper; the narrator says: "[I] am absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again. Personally I disagree with their ideas. Personally I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change would do me good" (322). The author explains in her article, "Why I Wrote *the Yellow Wallpaper*": "*The Yellow Wallpaper* "was" not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (6). She also clarifies in the same article: "work [is] the most important activity in defining a sense of self, because what we do is greater than what is done to us" (10).As the story goes, the protagonist

becomes more obsessed and starts to hallucinate about the wallpaper and eventually comes to believe that a woman is creeping on all fours behind the pattern, she soon begins to strip the remaining paper of the wall as an attempt to set the woman free, and slowly starts crawling thinking that she herself is the woman locked in the wallpaper. It can be concluded that the story aims to prove that the method adapted back then "confinement" is not suitable solution for all. Since mental illness varies from a patient to another and its cure cannot be generalized and imposed.

Mentally ill people have seen a huge difference in the way the rest of the world reacts to them across history. The reaction ranged from a complete confinement and fear to a total romanticization and glamorization. In the 20th century, many authors explored the theme of mental illness from an aesthetic perspective in their works. Among these works is Jeffery Eugendies' *The Virgin Suicides* published in1993. According to Megan K. Fox's review, the story narrates the lives of five ill-fated Lisbon girls (sisters) from the perspective of their neighborhood boys (the narrators of the novel). From the onset of the novel, the outcome is revealed to the readers. Readers know that the five girls will take their own lives.

The theme of suicide is approached with neglect. The author avoids the deep struggle that the sisters go through. Eugendies overlooks the suffering of the girls that is caused by depressive disorders and focus on the boys' obsession with the girls' beauty and mystery. Moreover, the novel lacks clarity in describing the mental states of five teenage girls that take their own lives, reducing them merely to unattainable beauties that inexplicably kill themselves after being oppressed by their parents. It also invites the readers to build a stereotype of those who suffer with mental illness as being helpless, unable to control their lives and dictated by the will of others, restricting their understanding of what it is like to suffer from mental disorder.

In her review about the novel, Megan K. Fox opposes the romanticization of mental illness, she states: "By depicting mental illness as something that resists clear meaning it renders it incomprehensible, unpredictable and unstable, perpetuating the myth that those who suffer from mental health issues will also possess these traits". For these reasons, the novel does not entirely fulfill its goal to depict the theme of mental illness correctly, as it tragically falls into some of the traps of misrepresentation.

1.3. The Representation of Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature

Throughout the 2000s, young adult literature has expanded at an incredibly fast pace and engaged with more complex issues, such as mental illness. For contemporary writers, this issue serves as a fuel for their artistic expression. The nature and the psychological evolution of the human mind elucidate the reason behind the shift of the representation of madness and mental illnesses in fictional works from classical antiquity to the present. The portrayal of mental illness in current literary works witnessed a new trend, as explained by Oliver Lunn in his article "A timeline of Mental Health Narratives": "In this day and age, mental illnesses are arguably the most overly glorified phenomenon. So much so that people, perhaps unconsciously, have started to idolize it. As preternatural as it sounds, it is indeed the unfortunate reality of our generation".

This generation is lost in the realms of illusions and misconceptions. The main reason behind the misconception is the blurred image represented in fictional works, and how it fails to meet the requirements of the accurate representation especially in young adult literature. Young adult literature is one of the best vehicles to convey the frustrations of mental illness because of its relatable and engaging content. However, it became a disappointment lately.

The objective of many contemporary writers is to attract more audience, and they view mental illness as the best means to fulfill this desire. Moreover, the majority of topics tackled

in today's young adult literature have very sensitive and questionable subject matters, such as suicide, divorce, bullying...etc. These topics can cause some controversy since what is considered as appropriate for one reader might not be for another. Even though the options for young adult readers are endless, they prefer sensitive subjects. Thus, they choose novels dealing with mental illness because they can relate in some way to the illness experience addressed there in, as Reid states: "books that adolescents would probably like and be able to relate to" (qtd. in Paramest Tri 3). Despite the success mental illness novels have acquired in the last decade, the misrepresentation is still going unnoticed.

One example where mental illness and suicide are represented as two sides of the same coin is Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) which was inspired by a similar case of the writer's family member who attempted to take her own life. It follows the journey of a boy named Clay Jensen towards uncovering the reasons why his classmate, and crush Hannah Baker kills herself. While Hannah Baker is still alive she records thirteen tapes with thirteen reasons for her suicide. These tapes are then sent to twelve people. In this novel there are two different storylines, one in the present about Clay's journey, and one in the past about Hannah's story. Asher narrates the tale of Hannah who killed herself because of what happened to her. People spread rumors about her, bullied her, harassed her, and everyone she cared about left her. All these incidents were reasons for Hannah Baker's suicide.

In "Jay Asher's 13 Reasons Why talks of suicide", Ali Jan Maqsoodin describes the success that the novel has achieved as follows:

> *Thirteen Reasons Why* has received recognition and awards from several young adult literary associations, and the paperback edition reached #1 on the New York Times Best Seller list in July 2011. A screenplay was written, based on the original release of the book, that became the basis of the dramatic television series 13 Reasons Why

released through Netflix on March 31, 2017. The screenplay contains several

deviations from the book, including additional characters and storylines.

However, the novel's success has also been met with backlash, becoming the third-most

banned book in the United States between 2010 and 2019 because of its sensitive theme. Yet,

the author made it clear that his intention was not to write about mental health issues, as his

story is more about how to treat people. In one of his interviews, Asher argues,

I thought about addressing the issue of mental health, but it would've gone against

what I was trying to say, if I had said Hannah Baker was clinically depressed or if I

had said she was bipolar, whatever I would have said, it would have made not just the

character in the book, but also a lot of the readers, dismiss everything that happened to

her.

Despite being cautious about capturing the emotion of the story's main character, Hannah

Baker, and gathering information from women about their high school experiences, the writer

did not prevent the book from receiving huge criticism and attacks after the increase rates of

suicide among young adults. The study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of

Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* shows that, "28.9% rise in suicide among Americans". The

number of suicides among youth was greater than that seen in any single month over the five-

year period researchers examined. In "Discovery mood and anxiety Program", Ben Mahoney

argues that the novel's main criticism was also brought from individuals in the mental health

community who were outraged by its triggering effects on mental illness victims.

Ultimately, Asher's choice to focus on suicide without paying attention to mental

health proved to be problematic. A harmful message is implied in his novel that those who

end their lives can serve as an inspiration for others by encouraging them to become more

empathetic. Eventually, these narrative choices romanticize and glorify the act of suicide rather than offer a realistic depiction of its consequence.

Romanticizing mental disability can take many forms, yet in young adult literature it often takes the shape of an actual love story. This kind of representation is found in Sophie Kinsella's *Finding Audrey* published in 2015. It narrates the life of a 14-year old girl with complicated anxiety issues because of a traumatic bullying incident that occurred between her and a group of girls at her old school. Audrey is now home-schooled and resides in her house most days; wearing dark sunglasses to prevent making eye contact, even with her parents and siblings. She has been making slow progress with her therapist Dr. Sarah. However, when she meets Linus, her brother's friend, a romantic connection develops and her recovery gains momentum. Audrey connects with him, and talks about her fears in a way she has never been able to do with anyone before. This kind of typical plot abounds in young adult literature; the story of teenagers who fall in love and try to fix each other. What readers grasp from this kind of novels is that mental illness is something to be "fixed" easily through finding love (Michele L. Dobbins 52-3). The author highlights this idea in the novel by saying: "Even when you think you have lost yourself, love can still find you" (85).

The symptoms described in the story are accurate; however, the problem is about Audrey's quick recovery after her quick developed relationship with Linus. This gives readers a wrong idea that people can recover from anxiety once they "want to". Realistically, such disorders take a long recovery process with a lot of setbacks. This book conveys an unrealistic message; if you get into a relationship, your health will immediately be restored to the required state. This hastened state was further emphasized by how quickly Audrey transitioned from not wanting to touch anyone or look at them, into having an intimate relationship with a stranger. Another thing that shows the abrupt recovery was towards the end when she loses her glasses and afterwards she is completely fine without wearing them

even though, in the previous day, she is not able to take them off even in front of her family. These details are not given enough attention and they are completely unreasonable. Moreover, they shape an unrealistic image about mental disorder and give a misrepresentation of the recovery process to teenage readers (Kyra).

By suggesting that teen love can fix anxiety, the writer is encouraging teens to believe that their high school relationships will have a lifelong impact on who they are and who they will become. Psychologically, teenagers are egocentric. This aspect prevents them from making decisions that do not directly help them. Taking into account the unrealistic portrayal of intimacy development, a young reader could get an inaccurate impression of high school love. Teen love is typically short-lived because of undeveloped interpersonal and social skills (Michael F. Shaughnessy& Paul Shakesby 4). Moreover, in the article titled "The Development of Intimate Relationships in Late Adolescence" E. L. Paul and K. M. White stated: "Concidering psychological findings that conclude teens date primarily for recreation and status achievement"(3). As a result, psychologically, this book fails to portray teen intimacy development realistically because love is not fireworks and roses; it is difficult and hurtful at times. Thus, young adult literature needs to dispel this luring image that "love" fixes mental illness.

Since young adult novels have such a great power to shape young people's minds, writers need to be mindful about the quality of their content and their adherence to reality. Crag Hill prompts in an article titled "Disability Bias and the Misrepresentation of Chronic Illness and Invisible Disability in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction" that, "we need to study what adult writers convey to adolescent readers, deliberately or unintentionally, and what that means" (18). According to South University associate professor Devin Byrd: "one reason mental health issues are misrepresented in books, films, new sources and TV shows is a misunderstanding of mental illness". Thus, it is no wonder adolescents have misrepresented

views of mental illnesses. Young adult literature is regarded as a powerful strategy to help individuals who suffer from a mental illness. Young adult literature is a double-edged sword that can liberate as well as imprison readers.

Chapter 2: Mental Illness in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*

The following chapter is dedicated to the stigma of mental illness and its negative impact on mentally ill people, relying on Jenifer Niven's *All the Bright Places.* The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section will be devoted to the analysis of different characters to understand what mental illness they suffer from and how people treat them. The second section will focus on the impact of this treatment on their psyche.

2.1. The Stigma of Mental Illness

Although highly prevalent, mental disorders frequently remain untreated. Despite the quality and effectiveness of mental health treatments and services over the past 50 years, many people choose not to obtain them. Stigma is a potential cause for unwillingness in seeking help (Patrick Corrigan 614).This phenomenon has been investigated by several psychologists, among them is Erving Goffman; one of the most distinguished social scientist and anthropologist of the 20th century. He eloquently defines it in his Theory of Social Stigma essay as: "an attribute that is deeply discrediting, and which reduces the bearer to a tainted, discounted one" (3). Stigma of mental illness is one of the most significant factors that prevent people with mental health disorders from seeking help.

As the stigma surrounding mental illness grew, many authors brought it to the forefront. Among these authors is Jennifer Niven; an American screenwriter, journalist, and an associate producer at ABC Television. She was active since 2000 as she started writing non-fictional narratives, till the present time. One of her most notable works is the New York Times Bestseller *All the Bright Places* that has sparked a lot of controversy since its release in 2015. It was her first young adult novel that follows the story of 17-year-olds Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, who meet at the top of their school's bell tower where they both plan to commit suicide. However, instead of jumping, they talk each other off the ledge and

soon develop a friendship that leads to a romantic relationship. Finch has an undiagnosed mental illness, while Violet is still struggling to recover after her older sister Eleanor died in a car accident. As the story goes, Finch's mental state gradually worsens, eventually he commits suicide.

Violet is in an ambivalent state; feeling depressed, muddled, guilty and angry, as she talks to herself: "You can't do this to me. You were the one who lectured me about living. You were the one who said I had to get out and see what was right in front of me and make the most of it …but then you leave. You can't just do that. Especially when you know what I went through losing Eleanor" (478). With a broken heart, Violet looks for a glimmer of hope; a way to defy her pain that she finally finds following Finch's traces as she continues the school project they started before he dies. In doing so, Violet discovers Finch's letter; in which he explains that because of her he felt safe, special, and happy. Reading those lines empowers Violet to look towards the future, as she says: "and I think of my own epitaph, still to be written, and all the places I'll wander. No longer rooted, but gold, flowing.I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me" (527).

Reading this novel, one can deduce that the author highlights various aspects of mental illness through the sufferings of different characters. Among the main characters is Theodore Finch; a 17 year old high school student, who serves as one of two narrators for this story. The novel starts by him saving Violet Markey from jumping off the ledge, fooling everyone that she is the one who saved him from committing suicide since an act like this is expected to be done by him; "a freak" as everyone calls him. This word has been followinghim since his talk with his ex-friend Gabe Romero, as Finch says:

I made the mistake of talking about it once. A few years ago, I asked my then good

friend Gabe Romero if he could feel sound and see headaches, if the spaces around

him ever grew or shrank, if he ever wondered what would happen if he jumped in

front of a car or train or bus, if he thought that would be enough to make it stop. I

asked him to try it with me, just to see, because I had this feeling, deep down, that I

was make-believe, which meant invincible. (203)

All those ideas and questions that Finch wonders and asks about seem normal to him; however his friend did not take him seriously. Instead he, as Finch says: "went home and told his parents, and they told my teacher, who told the principal, who told my parents, who said to me, Is this true, Theodore? Are you telling stories to your friends? The next day it was all over school, and I was officially Theodore Freak" (203). For Finch the word freak does not represent him, since he always views himself as being different, as he says: "Honestly, Violet, I don't know why the kids don't like me. Lie. I mean, I know but I don't. I've always been different, but to me different is normal" (92). However, his difference is only taken as weirdness by others, for instance Violet's parents refuse Finch's company of their daughter, especially after they spend the whole day together, as her mother says: "I'm sorry, Theodore. She shakes her head, and that one gesture says it all. I'm sorry that you will never he allowed near our daughter again because you are different and strange and a person who cannot he trusted" (338).

Another anguish that Finch receives is from Gabe Romero, who constantly bullies him and treats him like trash, and even wishing that he actually committed suicide as he shouts: "Why don't you go ahead and get it over with, freak?" (23).From this incident, it is clear that bullying plays a central role in worsening Finch's character. As Meaghan Warner, a Social Work Supervisor at the University of Texas claims: "The effects of bullying have serious and lasting negative impacts on our mental health and overall wellbeing. Bullying can cause feelings of rejection, exclusion, isolation, low self-esteem, and some individuals can develop depression and anxiety". Considering such serious effects, contemporary writers gave

bullying much attention, especially in young adult fiction in order to address the danger it enacts on teens since young adult literature is a: "very natural way to open discussions and to increase awareness of the topic of bullying." (qtd. in Janette Hughes and Jennifer Lynn Laffier4).

In the novel, the character of Finch is fascinated by death. Every day, he thinks of ways he might kill himself, and this is clearly shown in his words:

Is today a good day to die? This is something I ask myself in the morning when I wake up. In third period when I'm trying to keep my eyes open while Mr. Schroeder drones on and on. At the supper table as I'm passing the green beans. At night when I'm lying awake because my brain won't shut off due to all there is to think about. (14)

This kind of character seems to be a rising trend in young adult fiction despite its sensitivity; a character who views death as the only solution to end his suffering. However, readers find it uncanny, as Pauline Skowron Schmidt explains: "The novel presents Finch's sections as particularly heartbreaking. People are trying to help him, but he ultimately needs to want that help. His obsession with death is unnerving and his behavior effectively isolates him at school. As a reader, I wondered what would happen to a kid like Finch in the real world" (93).

Throughout the novel, Finch creates alternated versions of himself to match his multiple moods. He is very unpredictable and impulsive; nobody knows who the real Theodore Finch is, because he is always changing, he comes and goes as he wants (Catlea Xmas Ratushima and Haryati Suiltyorini 6).Moreover, he fears going "asleep" and prefers staying "awake" because according to him it is the only way to stay in control over his mind and body. All of these symptoms are clear signs of bipolar disorder, as the National Alliance on Mental Illness wrote about the novel: "Readers can see that what Finch is going through is bipolar disorder even though 'depression' and 'mania' are never mentioned, and he doesn't

receive his diagnosis until well into the book. Instead, Niven uses terms like 'Awake', 'Long Drop' and 'Asleep' to describe the cycles of his mood".

According to the American Psychiatric Association, bipolar disorder is defined as: "a brain disorder that causes changes in a person's mood, energy, and ability to function. People with bipolar disorder experience intense emotional states that typically occur during distinct periods of days to weeks, called mood episodes". The exact cause of bipolar disorder is unknown. However, research suggests that a combination of factors may contribute to bipolar disorder, and one of these factors is genes. Bipolar disorder often runs in families, which is mostly explained by heredity; people with certain genes are more likely to develop bipolar disorder than others (National Institute of Mental Health). Jennifer Niven explains bipolar disorder from Finch's perspective: "The thing I know about bipolar disorder is that it's a label. One you give crazy people. I know this because I've taken junior-year psychology and I've seen movies and I've watched my father in action for almost eighteen years" (380). From these words readers get to know that Finch's father also suffers from bipolar disorder.

In the novel, Finch attempts to commit suicide several times; his obsession over suicide stems from his early childhood memories; as his father used to violate him physically and emotionally, Finch mentions: "Ever since I was ten and he sent Mom to the hospital with a busted chin, and then a year later when it was my turn" (318). Finch's father should be the figure of a leader and a good example for his family, yet he fails in doing so. Knowing that her son is being neglected by his father, Finch's mother should give him more attention and love. However, the mother also neglects him when Finch actually needs help and attention from the one whom he thinks could understand his condition really well (Rawadan RezaRachman and Ali Mustofa 7). This situation can be expressed through Finch's thought in the following quotation: "I can go downstairs right now and let my mom know how I'm feeling—if she's even home—but she'll tell me to help myself to the Advil in her purse and

that I need to relax and stop getting myself worked up, because in this house there's no such thing as being sick unless you can measure it with a thermometer under the tongue" (259). Finch's mother never showed him sympathy or care. Growing up experiencing violence without affection, in addition to divorce, bullying…all together played a role in his character formation.

Finch's fear of losing control and going "asleep" leads him to look for something to keep him "awake". One of the things he tries is the bell tower incident as he explains: "Standing on the ledge of the bell tower isn't about dying. It's about having control. It's about never going to sleep again" (33). He struggles to find ways that keep him alive, until he meets Violet; his new obsession.

The second narrator of the story is Violet Markey who experiences trauma from the death of her older sister, Eleanor, in a car crash. As the novel shows, violet used to be enthusiastic, bright, skilled writer, and one of the popular girls in her school. As described in the novel: "She is cheerleader popular—one of those girls you would never think of running into on a ledge six stories above the ground" (17). However, all of this fades away after the accident; a tragedy that traumatized her. She is overwhelmed with grief for her sister, she wears Eleanor's glasses, changes her hair to look more like Eleanor's, she loses hope and becomes self-loathing. She even blames herself for living; she thinks she was the one who should have died since she was the one who asked her sister to take a different path, as she explains: "I don't want to pretend like everything's fine if it isn't, like we're fine if we're not. I miss her. I can't believe I'm here and she isn't. I'm sorry we went out that night. I need you to know that. I'm sorry I told her to take the bridge home. She only went that way because I suggested it" (504).

The new version of Violet is different; she is no longer interested in writing, she stops hanging out with her friends, and barely talks to anyone even her own parents. She starts experiencing extreme emotional sensitivity as a result of a constant and overwhelming nervousness; these characteristics are clearly highlighted in the following Michel Foucault's quote: "nervous sufferers are the most irritable, that is, have the most sensibility: tenuousness of fiber, delicacy of organism; but they also have an easily impressionable soul, an unquiet heart, too strong a sympathy for what happens around them" (155). She also starts having nightmares about death and loss, like the one she mentions: "That night, I have the same nightmare I've been having for months—the one where someone comes at me from behind and tries to strangle me. I feel the hands on my throat, pressing tighter and tighter, but I can't see who's doing it"(162). Violet loses hope in life and finds herself unconsciously thinking about suicide; as it is mentioned in the novel:

> She takes a breath, when I went to the tower, I wasn't really thinking. It was more like my legs were walking up the stairs and I just went where they took me. I've never done anything like that before. I mean, that's not me. But then it was like I woke up and I was on that ledge. I didn't know what to do, so I started to freak out. (90)

The symptoms that Violet shows throughout the novel show that what she is experiencing is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as it is mentioned in an article by Patricia Dharma Widyantara et al.: "Violet describes what kind of nightmare she has been regularly experiencing. She once again displays one of PTSD's symptom (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), which may imply what she is suffering from as it has been occurring for months since the accident she and sister got involved in" (qtd. in "The Plot of the Characters" 267).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is defined by the American Psychiatric Association: "a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic

event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident". Because of its intrinsic and topical interest, as well as its dramatic potential, PTSD has become the subject of a number of recently published young adult novels. While literature cannot replace a support group or therapy, it can help readers cope with grief and trauma. In an article titled Four Depictions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in YA, Philip Lee and Tom Low stated that: "Teens are not immune to PTSD, and several YA novels explore this disorder in different ways: through fantasy, dystopia, or realistic fiction. Some are from the perspective of the person suffering, while others explore what it's like to be a family member or friend".

Contemporary authors write about PTSD by detailing clear symptoms of re-experiencing, insomnia, isolation and avoidance after life-threatening events and presenting them in a manner that is accessible to its largely teenage readership. It gives young adult readers the opportunity to explore how significant trauma can leave psychological scars long after the physical ones have healed (Nishan Ghoshal and Paul O. Wilkinson 191).This illness led Violet to alienate herself from others. Despite the burden of her frustrations, Violet's friends did not notice the huge change in her character, nor tried to understand the sudden shift in her personality, except for Finch.

2.2. The Impact of Mental Illness Stigma

Negative connotations and false assumptions connected with mentally ill individuals may be as harmful as the disease itself. As stated by Patrick W. Corrigan and Amy C. Watson: "Many people with serious mental illness are challenged doubly. On one hand, they struggle with the symptoms and disabilities that result from the disease. On the other, they are challenged by the stereotypes and prejudice that result from misconceptions about mental illness" (16). Thus, mental illness results not only in the difficulties arising from the symptoms of the disease but also in disadvantages through society's reaction. In a recent interview with The

Associated Press, Rosalynn Carter noted that: "the one thing that holds progress back more than anything else is the stigma". Working from Goffman's initial conceptualization of stigma, James R. Dudley defined it as: "stereotypes or negative views attributed to a person or groups of people when their characteristics or behaviors are viewed as different from or inferior to societal norms" (qtd. in "Mental Health Stigma"). In this instance, there are common misconceptions regarding mentally ill people such as: "homicidal maniacs who need to be feared, they have childlike perceptions of the world that should be marveled at, or they are rebellious, free spirits" (qtd. in Robin M. Kowalski and Mark R. Leary 261).

These fallacies can stem from works of fictions, such as: Justine Larbalestier's *Liar* (2009) which demonstrates that characters with profound mental illness are criminalized and dehumanized. This leads young readers to drive out any of the undesirable traits and behaviors and thus enables them "to set up clear boundaries and establish a stable identity" (qtd. in Sarah Thaller 217). *All the Bright Places,* with its tragic outcome shows how the stigma about mental illness can worsen mental health issues. This stigma has affected almost all characters in the story. However, the main ones are Finch, Violet and Amanda.

In the story, Finch worries a lot about labels; he neither accepts to let the stigma define him, nor categorize himself among the mentally ill, as he shouts: "I'm not a compilation of symptoms. Not a casualty of shitty parents and an even shittier chemical makeup. Not a problem. Not a diagnosis. Not an illness. Not something to be rescued. I'm a person" (429). Even though he admits having bipolar disorder, he never pushes himself towards healing. Instead, the stigma following mental illness obliges him to distance himself from others, since social distancing is a common consequence of stigmatization, as Bruce G. Link et al. confirms: "Stigma associated with mental illness is widespread. It affects different life domains—e.g., interpersonal relationships … and recovery from mental illness—causing social exclusion and isolation for those afflicted" (qtd. in Christoph Lauber et al. 266).

Madness is often seen as a scandal that is why it attracts people attention since people are drawn to scandals, in this light, Foucault argues: "Confinement hid away unreason, and betrayed the shame it aroused; but it explicitly drew attention to madness, pointed to it. If, in the case of unreason, the chief intention was to avoid scandal, in the case of madness that intention was to organize it" (70).

Finch, after attending a group therapy, expresses his frustration towards the attitudes of the patients he met there and how they perceive their illness, all of which played a role in his decision to alienate himself, as he complains:

> I want to get away from these kids … I want to get away from the stigma they all clearly feel just because they have an illness of the mind as opposed to, say, an illness of the lungs or blood. I want to get away from all the labels. "I'm OCD, " "I'm depressed , " "I'm a cutter , " they say, like these are the things that define them … I'm the only one who is just Theodore Finch. (397)

Finch's alienation stems from his feeling of disconnectedness and dissociation from others. Indeed, Michel Foucault believes that the mentally ill: " found pleasure and even a cure in the changing surroundings, in the isolation of being cast off, while others withdrew further, became worse, or died alone and away from their families" (9). Consequently, he does not fit in the society and has always been treated differently, as he narrates: "Worthless. Stupid. These are the words I grew up hearing. They're the words I try to outrun, because if I let them in, they might stay there and grow and fill me up and in, until the only thing left of me is worthless stupid worthless stupid worthless stupid freak" (93). Meaninglessness, powerlessness, normlessness and estrangement from society and work are the main elements of alienation confronted by the mentally ill, all of which play a role in hampering the recovery

(Mark R. Warner 115). Alienation has been experienced by the mentally ill since ancient times, Foucault argues:

> Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained. Often, in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar two or three centuries later. Poor vagabonds, criminals, and "deranged minds" would take the part played by the leper, and we shall see what salvation was expected from this exclusion, for them and for those who excluded them as well. (7)

Moreover, Finch refuses to open up about his illness because he thinks it is difficult to explain it to his closest friends. He believes that it is pointless, he shows this by saying: "There's no way of explaining the Asleep to my friends, and even if there was, there's no need" (54). Mentally ill individuals are not able to fully engage with others, so they prefer silence since the world refuse to talk to them; Foucault confirms, "In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman" (10). Researchers have found that the reason behind this inability to open up is stigma, as Mumbai-based psychotherapist and counselor Rhea Gandhi claims that: "People are unable to generally talk about it because the feelings are so overwhelming, there is a lot of stigma, and friendship groups don't necessarily allow for vulnerable conversations, they allow for fun and gossip but not necessarily vulnerability" (qtd. in Rohini Chatterji).

Uncontrolled anger is another impact of stigma faced by Finch. Jordan Chamberlin and Patricia E. Deegan found that: "instead of being diminished by the stigma, many persons become righteously angry because of the prejudice that they have experienced" (qtd. in Patrick W. Corrigan and Amy C. Watson). In the story, Finch shows his uncontrolled anger as a reaction of the constant attacks he receives from his classmates, as he shouts after a fight

with Romero: "You put me here. You did this. It's your fault, your fault, your fault … I lock eyes with him and say, "You will never call me that again" (382). In an article written by Catlea Xmas Ratushima and Haryati Suiltyorini it is stated that: "Finch mentions several times in the book that he sometimes cannot control himself. He is struggling to control his mind and his action. Even the story is started with Finch explaining that he is on probation that year because the year before, Finch suddenly threw a desk toward a chalkboard. He also got in a lot of fights, especially with Roamer and his group" (7).

Finch's previous decision to deal with his illness on his own only played a role in exacerbating his symptoms, however studies have shown that: "individuals with bipolar disorder, when left untreated, will experience a worsening in symptoms that may lead to suicidal thoughts and ideation. In fact, studies show that at least 25-50% of patients with bipolar disorder attempt suicide at least once"(Agape Treatment Center).

Not being able to cope with the stigma surrounding his mental illness, Finch wishes for a world of his own, as he says: "It will be a world of compassion, of neighbor loving neighbor, of student loving student, or at least treating one another with respect. No judgments. No name-calling. No more, no more, no more" (122).According to Michel Foucault, "mania deforms all concepts and ideas" (125). Eventually Finch decides to commit suicide as a final solution to end his suffering, as stated in Rawadan Reza Rachman and Ali Mustofa's analysis about the novel: "What he has experienced make him really depressed and he thinks nobody could help him so he decided to end his life by suicide" (6). In this light, a qualitative study has been conducted on people with mental illness and a history of suicidal crises, the majority reported that stigma had contributed to their feeling at their worst (Alina Zlati and Georgia Black 257-8).

The stigma stuck with suicide continues even after the person's death. Surveys have demonstrated that: "higher stigma and shame scores in people bereaved by suicide when compared with people bereaved by natural morality causes" (qtd. in Alexandra L. Pitman et al.). Like in the case of Finch, his family refuses to consider that their son did suicide out of fear of stigma, this is shown in Violet's words: "Mr. Finch and Mrs. Finch, are insisting it was an accident, which, I guess, means we're free to mourn him out in the open in a normal, healthy, unstigmatized way. No need to be ashamed or embarrassed since suicide isn't involved" (484).

Despite its sensitivity, suicide has become a prominent theme in twentieth-century and contemporary literature (Andrew Bennet). As Valerie Peterson claims: "A significant amount of young adult books address real-life issues such as cutting, rape, violence, bullying, and suicide, and the number of such books published continues to grow each year along with the availability of young adult literature" (qtd. in "YAL and suicide featuring" 8). Since nowadays, readers are more likely to be interested in novels that feature suicide-related stories which came up as a result of the increase of suicide rates, as well as authors' own decision to tackle such issue.

The link between suicide and mental illness stigma is also emphasized in the novel through one of Violet's friends, Amanda Monk; a side character in the story, a popular cheerleader and Romero's girlfriend. The novel does not shed light on Amanda's character, except for her harsh and ruthless behavior towards Finch. She even advises Violet to be cautious near him, as she says: "I'd be careful around him if I were you" (75). Because for her he is only a freak, strange and a "weirdo" as she always calls him. However, as the story progresses, readers learn that Amanda also endures another kind of mental illness which is bulimia; an eating disorder. As she herself unveils her suffering at Life Is Life; a support group for teenagers who have either thought about suicide or tried it. Lambrini Kourkouta

et al. defined the term bulimia nervosa as: "a food intake disorder which is characterized by episodic binge eating (eating very large amounts of food in a short period of time), followed by the effort of purging all the unnecessary calories usually through vomiting, laxatives, diuretics and excessive exercise" (1). A person with bulimia excessively focuses on body shape or weight in their self-evaluation which results in the person's sense of self-esteem and self-worth being largely defined by the way they look (qtd. in National Eating Disorders Collaboration).

In the story, readers realize that Amanda is hiding her sickness and none of her friends knows about it, except for her parents. When she goes to the group therapy, she introduces herself as "Rachel" instead of her real name, as she mentions: "I'm Rachel, I'm seventeen, I'm bulimic … Secrecy is life" (396). In the group, Amanda meets Finch, and asks him not to tell anyone about her illness, this decision of hiding her identity and her illness stems from her fear of stigma, as she will be labeled different, as she herself thinks: "I guess now you [talkingto Finch] know you're not the only freak" (399). Amanda also mentions that she tried tocommit suicide as she says: "I tried to kill myself twice, both times with pills. I hide myself away with smiles and gossip. I am not happy at all" (396). This implies that she is not happy with her life, as she is faking being cool and cheerful in order to fit in the society. Amanda chooses to attempt suicide since "suicide can appear to be the best solution for a stigmatized individual" (Maurizio Pompili) because for her suicide is better than living with a mental illness as she explains: "It just feels like there's no choice. Like it's the most logical thing to do because what else is there … it's better if I was never here" (490).

From Amanda's words, the readers also get the hint that she is obliged to attend the group therapy as she says: "My mother is making me come here" (396). Her refusal to willingly receive treatment is linked to the idea that people suffering from mental illness do

not seek medical help since they are afraid of being stigmatized if they admit they need help (Georg Schomerus31).

Nowadays, many young adults have, or know someone with, an eating disorder which opens the question: What eating disorder-related texts are available to young adults? (Gretchen R. Voskuil) Indeed, Louise Rosenblatt argues that literature situates such issues "outside us, enables us to see them with a certain detachment and to understand our own situation and motivation more objectively" (qtd. in "Discussing Eating Disorders"). In this light, Voskuil adds that: "books about eating disorders can be what some call "triggering," as they could provide additional information, or even encouragement, regarding the "hows" of the disease". Women suffering from eating disorders are often portrayed as obsessed solely with appearances. Yet, novels published in recent years are beginning to showcase the true dangers of eating disorders; in addition, more works of fiction are accurately exploring the causes and behaviors associated with eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia (qtd. in "Representations of Women"). These works successfully tackle topics that allow readers to connect, relate, sympathize, and gain awareness. The message behind these books is: "you are not alone and you can get through it" ("Troubled Teens and Monstrous Others" 215).

Another character who experienced stigma is Violet. In her case, the stigma boils down in her unwillingness to open up neither to her parents nor to anyone else about her illness (PTSD) as she states: "I've stopped telling my mom anything" (34). Because each time she tries to open up, her mother reveals it to others. Thus, Violet prefers to keep silent in order to cope with her "invisible pain" alone. In an interview with *Teen Vogue* about the novel adaptation into a film, Elle Fanning, who played the role of Violet, states that: "In high school especially, those emotions are very heightened, and you do feel like everyone is against you, and you feel like everyone wants to put a label on you" (P. Claire Dodson). Indeed, it is extremely hard for Violet to open up to people and to tell them how she feels; it is such a

vulnerable position to put herself in, and she has to be extremely brave to do so. After being so isolated and scared for so long, Finch appears in Violet's life and helps her to get out of her shell and move on with her life.

The problem of mental health stigma is snowballing; recent research has shown how stigma affects psychological and social outcomes, as Babatunde Fatok highlights:

> Both stigma and discrimination has huge effect on the management of the disease as it can results in delay in diagnosis and therefore causes delay in entry into treatment and adoption of a healthy lifestyle, causes fear in disclosure of illness to important people in the family that will assist in the management of the disease and also causes restriction in participation involving activities of life and depression. (2)

Although research has gone far to understand the influence of the illness, it has only recently begun to explain stigma in mental disorder. Much work yet needs to be done to fully understand the vastness of prejudice against mentally ill individuals (Patrick W. Corrigan and Amy C. Watson). Fiction is certainly a powerful means to raise awareness about the stigma of mental illness.

Chapter 3: Romanticizing Vs. De-romanticizing Mental Illness in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*

This chapter is devoted to analyzing mental illness representation in *All the Bright Places* from two perspectives. The chapter is divided into two sections; the first section will be dedicated to show how Jennifer Niven attempts to de-romanticize mental illness. While the second section will discuss how she fell in the trap of romanticization.

3.1. De-romanticizing Mental Illness

Suicide is a major public health concern and therefore a topic of public interest. Currently listed as the 15th most common cause of death, and accounting for approximately 1.4% of all mortalities; more than 800,000 people die due to suicide, with even higher number of suicide attempts each year (Bernardo Carpiniello and Federica Pinna). It is often represented in mainstream media and in literature, both fiction and non-fiction. By definition, suicide is: "The act of deliberately taking one's own life or causing one's own death". Various causes of suicide have been studied, including mental disorders like depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder alcoholism, and drug abuse (Hassaan Tohid 178).

From Dante Alighieri's the Wood of Suicides and Geoffrey Chaucer's "Legends of Good Women" in the fourteenth century to novels by James Joyce, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James in the nineteenth century, representations of suicide are prominent in and critically important to the pre-twentieth century literary canon (Andrew Bennett 5). In ancient history, suicide was not allowed and regarded as sinful, as Russell Noyes says: "Suicide, like death, is a tabooed subject and a morbid topic not to be discussed except in the relative comfort of the context that considers it a sign of mental illness" (173). However, Andrew Bennett claims that:

With the gradual relaxation of religious and legal restrictions on suicide, its increasing medicalisation and pathologisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the sociologisation and normalisation of the act in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suicide becomes an increasingly prominent concern in canonical literature. (8)

Here Bennett believes that suicide is no more a tabooed topic. Michel Foucault states, "if they were once the rarest, they are today the most frequent" (211).Suicide has undergone many changes throughout history. Yet, considering how sensitive is the topics of suicides and self-harm, high risks were associated with covering this issue. One of the most dangerous consequences of covering suicide news is the 'Werther' effect. It occurs when a publicized suicide is correlated with an increase in suicides. It refers to the occurrence of suicides after media reports on suicide cases (qtd. in Schaffer Eva Rose). This effect is also referred to as suicide contagion and suicide suggestion. It is described as follows:

Readers may identify with characters in literature (real and fictional), especially if they are charismatic/ glamorous/romantic and can be idealised. Through a phenomenon known as 'social contagion' a depicted suicide can serve as a model for imitative behaviour. This contagious effect is caused by a combination of grief, suicide ideation and over-identification with the person or character who has died and/or the circumstances under which they took their life or made a suicide attempt. ("Depiction of Suicide" 2)

This effect originates from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* published in 1774, the earliest known example of suicide contagion. The novel is a story of pure love in which the main character, Werther, commits suicide. After the publication of the novel there was evidence of imitational suicides among adults. Many of the

deaths were men of a similar age to 'Werther' and even dressed in similar style to the character which later on resulted in the book being banned ("Depiction of Suicide" 2).

'Werther' Effect shows that novels are more than just a story to the readers. Novels have the capacity to shape readers' thinking either positively or negatively and reform their view towards the world. Since young adults are more susceptible to literature influence, they are more likely to imitate suicidal behavior (qtd. in Julie Miller 3). Consequently, it is advisable to avoid overly dramatizing suicide because it can glorify the behavior. This type of portrayal can certainly lead to an idealization of suicide.

Despite the complicated nature of suicide, there are some authors who have succeeded in depicting this issue and even contributed in raising awareness about its danger. In this respect, Michel Foucault argues: "This awareness, however, has a very special style" (212).Contemporary young adult authors are addressing the deepest, darkest issues, and reminding the readers what it means to live, such as KL Going's *Fat Kid Rules the World* (2003) and Phil Earle's *Saving Daisy* (2012).

Similarly, Jenifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* offers a safe distance from which one can investigate this looming topic; suicide. During the process of writing the novel, Jenifer Niven explained that she tried her best to depict suicide accurately as an attempt to destigmatize the issue. In an interview with Zoella Book Club, Niven states that: "As I was writing *All the Bright Places*, I interviewed experts on the subjects, but really I just put myself in the mind and heart of the boy I once loved. I had witnessed his struggle firsthand, but for the first time I tried to really step into his skin". Indeed, Niven's treatment of the stigma around mental health and suicide is what raises her novel from the ranks of other teenage love story (Caitlin White). Niven's choice to write about mental illness stigma stems from her own

personal experience which is brutally honest and sharp, in the article titled "Jenifer Niven's Top 10 Teen Books to Save Your Life", she explains that:

> Books reach into the darkest, loneliest parts of us and remind us it's okay. I wrote *All the Bright Places* because I once knew and loved a boy. And then I lost him, and it changed my life. But I wasn't sure anyone would understand me if I talked about it, so I wrote about it instead, knowing there are others like him, like me, who need to know that it gets better, help is out there, high school isn't forever, and life is long and vast and full of joy.

Furthermore, her past experience led her to focus her works on reducing the stigma. Caitlin White highlights: "This closeness to the issue clearly fuels Niven's passion for exploring the subject, and that passion has developed into her excellent, precise writing and the honesty of Finch and Violet". Niven wanted to make sure that it was handled with care. With this, she slams the door in the new trend of romanticizing mental illness. One of the ways Niven's exploration of mental health is unlike so many other books is her depiction of suicide as a tragic event. This depiction is clearly shown in the characters' reaction after Finch's death. Violet is the one who discovers Finch's suicide, at first she refuses to believe that he is actually dead as she says: "for a long time, I don't move. Because if I stand here like this, Finch is still somewhere" (468).Violet experiences a state of mixed emotions, fluctuates between grief and anger: "You can't do this to me. You were the one who lectured me about living… You can't just do that. Especially when you know what I went through losing Eleanor" (478). Finch's death leaves Violet broken and "forever changed" (487).

Finch's suicide has even affected those who used to bully him. From this detail Niven is hinting to the fact that even strangers and enemies consider suicide as extremely painful, indeed: "Even if you are not related at all, you may still find that you are deeply affected by

the suicide ("How Suicide Affects Others"). The tragedy of suicide is expressed Violet's words:

> At school, the entire student body seems to be in mourning. There is a lot of black being worn, and you can hear sniffling in every classroom. Someone has built a shrine to Finch in one of the large glass cases in the main hallway, near the principal's office. His school picture has been blown up, and they have left the case open so that we can all post tributes around it —Dear Finch, they all begin. You are loved and missed. We love you. We miss you. (483)

Another way in which Niven hits her target of deromanticizing suicide is through her choice of blurring the details of Finch's death, as Brett Haley mentions: "Niven consciously decided to blur the lines around the circumstances of Finch's death" since in any portrayal of a suicide or suicide attempt, it is better to give as little detail as possible about the method used (qtd. in Julie Miller 3).

All the Bright Places was a successful piece of writing; even its film adaptation was a blockbuster, giving suicide its needed value. Brett Haley, the movie producer, explains that: "I hope if you see the film, you can see that we were not in any way, shape, or form trying to be flippant or manipulative or sensationalize any of these issues, but rather ground them in reality in a human way and make people feel and think and take a moment and hopefully speak up if they are suffering" ("How Netflix's"). In addition, Justice Smith who played the role of Theodore Finch, explains how important to reach out and that the message intended for the public is that suicide is not something to be inspired of, by saying: "One thing that was important to me, when I signed up for the film, was that Finch wasn't martyred. I didn't want young kids to see themselves in Finch and think that, if they were to pass, people would finally see how special they were. That was not the lesson I was trying to show with the

character" ("All the Bright Places Ending"). As for the author, the message she tries to deliver to her audience is that:

> You are necessary. You are loved. You matter. You are the only you that exists in this world. You are not alone. It is okay to feel the way you are feeling, but it's not okay to try to handle it all by yourself. Reach out. Speak up. Let someone know how you're feeling, or if you're close to someone who is battling mental illness and you're worried about that person, reach out and speak up for them. Help is out there. It gets better. Life is long and vast and full of possibility. And know that even when life is darkest, there are bright places everywhere. Know that you are a bright place. (Zoella Book Club)

Through these words, Niven accentuates the importance of offering help to people with mental illness. According to her, mental illness is a condition which necessitates attention and consideration. Niven stresses the danger of romanticizing mental illness. Despite her efforts in defying the romanticization of mental illness, Niven's novel, *All the BrightPlaces*, one can see some aspects of romanticization of mental illness. Consequently, the reader wonders whether Niven falls into the trap of glamorizing mental illness.

3.2. Romanticizing Mental Illness

The stigma surrounding mental health and illnesses still lives and breathes all over the world.Globally, more than 70% of young people and adults with psychiatric illnesses do not receive any psychiatric treatment (Zhisong Zhang et al. 2). This means that such individuals are suffering silently and combating their invisible pain alone.As a result; there have been increased efforts directed to raising awareness related to mental health disorders, their diversity, symptoms, treatment, and ways to cope with them. Those efforts aimed particularly at reducing the stigma and cross the barrier of what has long been regarded as a social taboo.

(JadayelRola El Habbaland KarimMedlej466) In this respect, de-stigmatization represents: "a process of liberating individuals with mental disorder from the stigma, while prevention of stigmatization encompasses actions aimed at not relating stigma to mental disorder that is to individuals with mental disorders" (Miro Klarić and Sanjin Lovrić 911).

One tool through which destigmatization can be enacted is literature since "literature has taken on a more comprehensive role of mirroring society in order for human to study themselves and understand the underlying truths common to all people" (Anzar Ahmed 130). According to a recent analysis of literature written for teens, 25 percent of books reviewed were focused on illness/ mental issues (qtd. in Kia Jane Richmond 20).Therefore, one of the issues that should be at the forefront is how literature can help young adults to better understand and confront the stigma of mental illness (Kia Jane Richmond 19).

One powerful example in which literature has contributed to destigmatize mental illness and bring awareness is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. It is an epistolary novel that focuses on fifteen-year-old Charlie, who first turns to alcohol and drugs, then, seeks psychiatric help for symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression. Readers can easily connect to the characters, empathize with them, and understand their struggles. The core message behind this is that mental illnesses should be considered as a common illness and that any accompanying discrimination or exclusion can affect people in a way that may be worse than the disorder itself (Rola Jadayel and Karim Medlej465).

By destigmatizing mental health, people will be more willing to seek treatment. However, this process is double-faced, since any attempt to narrow down mental illness stigma may lead to its normalization. Destigmatization of mental illness has indeed significantly reduced the stigma associated with mental illness which allowed society to become more empathetic and supportive toward those experiencing mental illness (qtd.

Daniel Fu 1).Conversely, normalization also has downsides, including creating an environment that contributes to misinformation and distorted notions about what is and is not mental illness. Thus, mental health conditions will become more trivialized and overlooked (Cevin Casey Fleming 3).

The destigmatization of mental illness may lead some people to being unable to grasp the reality behind mental illnesses. Louise Savoie explains: "Depression is not just being sad, OCD is not being clean, and anxiety is not being worried. A lot of people these days do not understand the magnitude of these diseases and tend to use mental illnesses as descriptions of how they are feeling. Mental illnesses are not just mere feelings. They are diseases that require intervention". This phenomenon of using mental illnesses as adjectives is known as romanticization. It is "the depiction of mental illness as attractive or appealing to the viewer … glamorous and alluring than it truly is" (Natalya Wickramasuriya et al. 69).

This romanticization could lead to seeing mental disorders as something that can be easily diagnosed. Since there is little censorship over what is being published, somehow the attempt to "delete the stigma" surrounding mental illness has drastically changed towards a trend to "romanticize the stigma" ("Romanticizing Mental Illness in Lit."). Romanticization can come in many forms in social and mainstream media, such as, "memes about anxiety, songs about depression, art works inspired by various mental illnesses" (Luke Alexander 7:15-7:24). Furthermore, this glamorization can also be found in literary works. While literature mirrors society and allows readers to better understand the world they live in, there are very few examples of authentic portrayal of characters with severe mental illness in young adult literature ("Problematic Depictions" 255). Thus, Katie Stokes argues: "the issue of romanticizing mental health in literature or portraying it inaccurately with supernatural elements [is present]" ("Mental Health in Lit").

In *All the Bright Places,* the romanticization of mental illness takes the form of a love story, as stated by Mary C. Townsend et al.: "romanticizing mental disability can take many forms, but in young adult literature it often takes the shape of an actual love story" (qtd. in Michele L. Dobbins 109). Theodore Finch and Violet Markey weave together a story of their unlikely friendship and love, of saving and being saved.

Finch and Violet's friendship starts when she smiles at him after saving her from committing suicide as Finch narrates: "Violet smiles back. Immediately, I feel better, because she feels better and because of the way she smiles at me, as if I'm not something to be avoided. This makes twice in one day that I've saved her" (49).From this incident Finch starts to get interested in Violet. And he decides to work with her on a school project, as it is mentioned in the novel: "I choose Violet Markey … I shift in my seat so I can see her, elbow on the back of my chair. Violet Markey, I'd like to be your partner on this project" (51).When they start working on the project, they got the opportunity to spend more time together, to know each other more, and to develop feelings for each other, eventually fall in love.

Violet's love for Finch grows because he is the one who enables her to live again, to see the world from different angles, and to be her true self, as Jacob Stolworthy states: "… Violet says that Finch taught her, there's beauty in the most unexpected of places. And that there are bright places, even in dark times. And that if there isn't, you can be that bright place." As for Finch, his love for Violet develops because she is the one who understands him the most, as stated in the novel: "all because she's the first person I've met who seems to speak my language" (111).

Love is a dangerous aspect in literature on mental illness. Indigo Da Costa claims: "The idea that someone can save someone else can become complex when a romantic relationship occurs in a novel whose goal is to discuss a mental illness" (8). Thus, the idea of

saving someone complicates the idea of mental illness and its recovery. Moreover, romanticization of certain mental illnesses misleads the readers with the perception of curing mental disorder with love, which lessens the severity and belittles the attention around the issue (Grace Leong).

In the novel, Violet explains to her mother how her relationship with Finch played a role in healing her, as she shouts: "I love him, and he saved me. You can tell me later how unhappy you are with me and how I've let you down, but right now I need to do what I can to make sure he'll be okay"(432). From this quote, readers can clearly understand that Finch fixes Violet's disorder. However, Jack Fitztrick, in his YouTube video about the novel believes that: "Throughout the story, their relationship develops and Theodore sort of fixes Violet as if mental illness is something that can just be fixed by having fun and a better outlook … it's not that easy to fix these sorts of issues" (3:37-4:08).

It is true that human beings require the support of others to survive as Jenny Edwards et al. mentions: "people who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected" (4). This quote claims that being alone can be so very tiring; thus, support from the person's surroundings is vital in leading a healthy life with less mental illness issues.

However, John Morrissey commented on an article titled "Can Love Cure Mental Illness?" arguing: "No. Absolutely no. Love can't cure anything. Mental Illness is something you can't cure ... My mental illness caused all my loved ones to run for cover. They don't see me anymore, they don't talk to me anymore. It left me shattered, incapable of love." Indeed, romantic love is no better route for curing mental illness than medication and therapy.

Throughout the novel, Violet has never received any medical treatment to cure her illness (PTSD). However, the author shows that her condition has improved; eventually, she comes back to life. This change is not due to medication or treatment; it is related to Finch's love. Love helps rekindle her interest in the world around her; as Violet describes: "No more winter at all. Finch, you brought me spring" (371).

Post-traumatic stress disorder does require treatment, as Anxiety and Depression Association of America states: "the main treatments for people with PTSD are specific short term psychotherapies … plus medication which are sometimes used as an adjunct". The idea of "love as a savior" is widely mistaken. Love cannot be the sole cure to a severe mental illness. Mental illness necessitates professional help. Anupriya Saraswat argues: "I've often come across people saying 'Depression can be cured by love and support'. That isn't correct – depression [and other mental illnesses in general] can be treated medically, and the chances of improvement will be aided significantly with familial love and support. But medical intervention is a prerequisite".

The idea of linking romance with mental illness in fictional works contributes to worsening the situation of mentally ill individuals. The author of "Surviving Mental Health Stigma Blog", Laura A. Barton explains that, "part of the romanticism of mental illnesses is that someone who is mentally ill can be cured by love or that someone can be a cure for someone else's mental illness". This idea is present in books and it seeps into real life to the point that people with or without mental disorders are drawn to this fantasy. Thus, its potential effects are more serious than one might imagine. Indeed, Barton adds that:

Expecting "people" or "love" to be able to become a cure for mental illness contributes to stigma because it presents people with this false idea of what mental illness is and how it can be treated. When that rift exists between what people think

and what actually is, it creates a difficult situation for everyone involved, and those with mental illnesses face the consequences as people get angry and frustrated with them for not being or behaving how the person thinks they should.

So, what people need to realize is despite the fact that love can make dealing with mental illness easier, and has a critical role in helping mentally ill individuals to keep faith with life at times of psychological confusion and pain mental illness is not something that love can "fix".

All the Bright Places is a novel that de-romanticizes mental illness through its accurate depiction of suicide as something painful and tragic and requires empathy. Unfortunately Niven does fall into the trap of romanticizing it through the idea of love as a savior. With this unauthentic portrayal of mental illness treatment, she participates in distorting the real solution that people need to follow in order to seek a healthy life.

Conclusion

Numerous images depicting false attitudes towards mental illness are found in today's literature. Yet, it is difficult to pinpoint an exact place the misrepresentation of mental illness first began to bud, then blossom and now flourish. One of the popular and attention-drawing platforms in which mental illness is misrepresented is young adult novels. Young adult fiction has been more than just a story to the reader. It challenges their perceptions of the world and offers the opportunity to explore issues related to their daily life struggles. However, it is also home to unrealistic expectations and standards that are harmful for an individual's mental health. Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* is a young adult novel where the portrayal of mental illness has gotten out of hand. The use of the novel in this study was essential to show how authors, through their representation of mental illness, can fall in the trap of romanticization.

The study examines how the efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness have led to its romanticization. It reveals the relationship between normalization and romanticization, and illustrates how romanticizing mental illness can affect the progress of the characters experiencing mental illness. Despite the focus on *All the Bright Places*, the study also involves other young adult novels that tackled the issue of mental illness. For instance; Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* and Sophie Kinsella's *Finding Audrey*, are discussed in the study, because of their romanticization of mental disorders.

As the first chapter demonstrates, mental illness and its representation went through different stages across history. Starting from the Renaissance till the contemporary era, the mentally ill individuals have been considered as "Others", and their voices have constantly been excluded and silenced. This study shows that the stigma surrounding mental illness is the main reason behind this treatment. From Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, it is deduced that mental illness stigma has always been stuck with the mentally ill. Furthermore, the chapter investigates how young adult novels representation of mental illness played a role

in distorting the audience understanding of the matter. This is inherently dangerous because it damages the credibility of someone who could really be struggling.

The second chapter centers on the analysis of *All the Bright Places* and the characters' struggles with mental illness. It shows that the main reason behind the inability to seek treatment is the stigma. Stigma has proved to be a major factor in affecting the progress of the characters. This idea has been shown clearly in how Finch; the protagonist, is unable neither to cope with his illness, nor to reach out for help,Violet's inability to open up, and Amanda's hiding of her illness. In the novel, Niven tries to highlight the danger of mental illness stigma through writing about sensitive issues such as suicide.

The third chapter examines how Niven succeeds in tackling the notion of suicide by following the life of Theodore Finch; a teenager suffering from bipolar disorder who commits suicide. Niven depicts suicide as a tragic event; where she decides to blur the act of suicide, as well as showing how all of his relatives and friends have empathized with his death. In fact, the author's decision to write about suicide stems from her intention to fight the stigma. Accordingly, she contributes in raising awareness of the dangerous effect it causes. The novelist has also skillfully attempted to foster the importance of seeking treatment and speaking up.

Although up to this point there has not been any studies that link Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* with the idea of romanticizing mental illness, this study is able to detect some aspects of mental illness romanticization. The second section of the third chapter focuses on the idea of romanticizing mental illness through the idea of love. Violet easily manages to overcome her post-traumatic stress disorder after falling in love with Finch. This plot gives the reader the impression that love "fixes" mental illnesses. In view of that, Niven unintentionally contributes in glamorizing mental illness.

By reading literature about mentally ill characters, people are supposed to have a better understanding of the mind and society. However, the new trend of romanticizing mental illness in young adult novels has contributed badly in misguiding the reader towards forming wrong beliefs about this sensitive issue. Handled with care, a character with mental illness can not only enliven a story but also open readers' eyes to new experiences and perspectives. This thesis has been crafted to dismantle glamorizing ideas about mental illness and to help people who have not suffered learn how to help those who have.

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الملخص

اليوم، يتم بذل العديد من الجهود للحد من وصمة العار المرتبطة بالأمراض العقلية. هذا شيء إيجابي بلا شك. ومع ذلك ،
فإن هذا الوعي يولد تحديات يجب مواجهتها. حيث تصوَّر بعض هذه المساعي الاختلالات النفسانية على نحوٍ رومانتيكي. و
تحاول هذه الأطروحة إلقاء الضوء على المرض العقلي و كيفية تمثيله في بعض نصوص أدب الشباب. مع التركيز على
مخاطر التصوير الرومانتيكي لهذه الاضطرابات في رواية All the Bright Places لجينيفر نيفين. باعتماد الجنون و
والحضارة لميشال فوكو كنظرية رئيسية لرسم مسار المرضى العقليين من الحرية والخطاب إلى الحبس والصمت. وكذا
توظيف النظريات الاجتماعية والنفسية للوقوف على الأثر المدمر الذي تخلفه وصمة العار على المرضى. و يمكن استشعار
مساهمة الأطروحة في تناول الرواية كعمل يتناول المرض العقلي على نحو رومانتيكي أحيانًا و واقعي أحيانًا أخرى. و
يكمن الهدف المحوري لهذه الدراسة في إظهار جسامة المرض العقلي كمشكلة تستدعي المعالجة الدقيقة والموضوعية لرفع
الهالة السلبية والوصمة المحيطة بها.

Résumé

Aujourd'hui, de nombreux efforts sont entrepris pour réduire la stigmatisation liée à la maladie mentale. C'est indéniablement une chose positive. Cependant, cette prise de conscience fait naître de nouveaux défis qu'il faut relever. Les efforts pour déstigmatiser la maladie mentale incitent parfois à une romantisation des troubles mentaux. La thèse tente de faire la lumière sur la façon dont la maladie mentale est représentée dans la littérature pour jeunes adultes. Il se concentre sur les dangers de romancer la maladie mentale dans All the Bright Places de Jennifer Niven (2015). La folie et la civilisation de Michel Foucault est choisie comme théorie principale pour retracer le parcours des malades mentaux de la liberté et du discours à l'enfermement et au silence. Des études sociologiques et psychologiques sont également utilisées pour examiner la stigmatisation liée à la maladie mentale et son impact destructeur sur les individus. La contribution de la thèse pourrait être vue en considérant All the Bright Places de Niven comme un roman qui à la fois déromantise et romantise la maladie mentale. Le message central de cette étude est de montrer que la maladie mentale est un problème grave qui doit être abordé avec objectivité et précision pour briser la stigmatisation qui l'entoure.