
Self-Actualization in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, and in *Kafka on the Shore*

Literary texts are a pervasive medium for expressing opinion about the human condition and, as a result, common moral and ethical messages are found across a diverse range of stories. The novels *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* and *Kafka on the Shore* are not an exception to this as the authors comment on concepts of human nature and development. The main theme of *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews is how dramatic life events are often necessary to understand and accept true self-identity which is known as self-actualization. In *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami, how a person's ability to reach self-actualization is determined by having experiences that allow them to introspect and ultimately alter their perception of self. Self-actualization represents a concept that is derivative of humanistic psychological theory and the work of Abraham Maslow. According to Maslow, self-actualization is a multifaceted concept representing growth of an individual toward fulfillment of the highest needs — those for meaning in life. The process of self-actualization is present in both novels but, differ in the way they are presented and explored.

In *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, the process of self-actualization is apparent through dramatic life events that provide understanding and acceptance of true self-identity. The characters demonstrate that the lack of knowledge others have of them is a reflection of how little the character knows them self. At the beginning of the novel, Greg takes pride in his ability to live an anonymous existence. He refuses to associate himself with anyone as he believes that if no attention is drawn to him, no one can label or judge him. Greg refers to Earl, the sole person that resembles a friend in his life, as a co-worker, only making films with him and essentially cutting him off emotionally. He convinces himself that he prefers life this way, not truly knowing anyone and not being known. Although he does not acknowledge it at this time, Greg is struggling to navigate his identity and place in high school. The withdrawn character is unknown to his peers and to himself. This changes when his mother learns that Greg's old classmate from Hebrew school, Rachel Kushner, has leukemia and she forces him to spend time with her. Her presence in his life changes his mindset. This is exemplified when he says, "she pretty much knew exactly how I felt about certain things" and that he "can't deny that it feels nice when someone knows you that well" (Andrews 273). Greg and Rachel's friendship and her eventual death are the catalyst through which Greg is able to fully understand his identity. Through this dramatic change in Greg's life, he has an epiphany about who he is as a person and embraces it wholeheartedly. In the epilogue, he says "this book probably makes it seem like I hate myself and everything I do. But that's not totally true. I mostly just hate every person I've ever been. I'm actually fine with myself right now" (Andrews 293) and continues to explain that he will now pursue film school instead of the regular college he originally planned. At this point, his interests and identity as a whole are fully realized. Greg's journey to self-actualization is only made possible through Rachel's death, a dramatic life event.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, having an experience that triggers introspection is necessary to become self-actualized as it causes psychological change. Throughout the novel, the Oedipal prophecy Kafka's father imparts upon him torments him consuming his thoughts and entire being. When Kafka is describing this to Oshima he says "My father told me there was nothing I could to escape this fate. That prophecy is like a timing device buried inside my genes, and nothing can

ever change it." (Murakami 202) showing how he feels like he is trapped within the identity that his father created. He is unable to let go of the prophecy to the point where he can only see himself as a negative being. As Kafka progresses through the story he continues to grapple with feelings for Miss Saeki (mother figure) and Sakura (sister figure) and feels as though he has no escape from the prophecy, no control over his life. He is lost within himself and does not know who he truly is. Once Kafka is left alone in Oshima's cabin, Oshima tells him to avoid going into the forest. However, Kafka feels the forest calling out to him and sees venturing through it as the only way to overcome his internal turmoil. Kafka imagines the forest to be a representation of his own confusing psyche and as he continues deeper into the forest he ultimately confronts himself and reconciles. He undergoes an intense psychological experience, venturing into the depths of his own mind and comes out feeling stronger and ready to live a life unaffected by his father's idea of identity. His experience in the forest allows him to face his fears and gain important self-knowledge — only he can define himself. It is only through this experience that Kafka is able to go through the process of introspection and self-actualize.

In each novel, different aspects of self-actualization are the main focus which is communicated using varied means. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* brings the focus on the self in order to experience life without giving in to the self-consciousness of the adolescent. When a person is able to experience life this way, they are "wholly and fully human" (Maslow 147) and reach self-actualization. In this novel, self-actualization is conceptualized through a tangible event that causes a mental change in the main character. Greg begins the story as a teenager who is struggling to navigate his identity and his self-actualization comes as a by-product of his friendship with Rachel and her eventual death. The death is specific, and its realistic message causes Greg to be introspective and abandon his adolescent self-consciousness. *Kafka on the Shore* concentrates on acceptance of personal human nature in the stoic style. A self-actualizer is someone who accepts themselves with all their shortcomings and discrepancies from the ideal image without feeling real concern; they feel self-satisfaction. Kafka's journey to self-actualization is communicated through an intangible event. When he ventures into the forest he goes through a metaphysical experience. The forest becomes his mind and as he continues deeper inside he ultimately confronts himself. This is where the analysis and acceptance of his conscious thoughts and feelings occur. Each character's self-actualization is conveyed with emphasis on a different area of the concept and level of reality, but ultimately leads them to a path where they face the end, or themselves, and are forced to reconcile themselves in their new knowledge.

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl and *Kafka on the Shore* both reveal and provide insight into the process of self-actualization however, in each novel emphasis is placed on different areas of the concept and level of reality. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* examines how self-actualization comes as a result of dramatic life events that allow understanding and acceptance of true self-identity. The message of Rachel's death and Greg's psychological change is grounded in realism. *Kafka on the Shore* demonstrates how reaching self-actualization is determined by an introspection-causing experience where perception of self is transformed. Kafka overcomes his instability through an abstract experience where he faces himself. These novels allow the audience to gain understanding of the human condition and relate the fictional stories to their own lives by applying the principle message of self-actualization being an universally achievable state.