



Illness, Isolation, and Acceptance: A Psychological Reading of Emotional Responses in A. J. Betts's *Zac & Mia*

¹S. Deepika, ²Dr. A.D. Sudha

¹PhD Research Scholar (Part-Time) Post Graduate and Research Centre of English G.T.N Arts College, Dindigul

²Associate Professor Post Graduate and Research Centre of English G.T.N Arts College, Dindigul

Abstract: Serious illnesses and literature are interrelated because literary narratives express illness, suffering, loss, and death from diverse psychological and social perspectives. Serious illness in young adults may not only be associated with health issues but also influence identity, interpersonal relations, independence, and life perspectives. In this respect, the purpose of the current study is to investigate the five emotional responses, such as denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance based on the model of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in the novel of A. J. Betts, *Zac & Mia* (2013). The research is qualitative and uses the method of textual analysis. The data used for the research include purposefully chosen dialogues, narrative descriptions, characters' reactions and events connected with the experiences of *Zac and Mia*. The results reveal that all five types of emotions described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross are evident in the experiences of the two characters but are not presented in a definite sequence. Zac is more concerned with illness and uncertainty via information, statistics, and rationalization, while Mia's responses are mostly connected with bodily changes and relational, emotional and identity concerns. Moreover, the findings also illustrate the effects of isolation on psychological problems while emphasizing that interpersonal interaction is important for emotional comfort. The findings also indicate that acceptance is an evolving process and not a destination. The study demonstrates that *Zac & Mia* engages with Kübler-Ross's five-response framework while presenting illness-related emotional experiences as individual, overlapping, and context-dependent.

Keywords: A. J. Betts, *Zac & Mia*, cancer, emotional responses, Kübler-Ross, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance

Introduction

Serious illness is not only a medical but a psychological, social, and transformative experience that can change an individual's perception of self, body, identity, relationships, and the future. For young people, the experience of illness can be particularly disruptive as it can interrupt education, friendships, independence, and expectations about adult life. Cancer and other life-threatening illnesses can therefore produce psychological loss that extends beyond death to the loss of health, bodily autonomy, social connection, identity, and imagined futures (Frank 1-6). Literary representations of illness are important in examining these experiences as they allow emotional responses to illness to be examined through the perspectives, relationships, and struggles of characters.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* provides one of the most influential frameworks for examining emotional responses to terminal illness. Based on her work with patients facing death, Kübler-Ross identifies five major responses: denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross 31-112). Although the model is useful for examining how individuals respond to serious illness, uncertainty, and mortality, it should not be assumed that all individuals go through the five stages. The later introduction to the 40th-anniversary edition emphasises the nature of the model as a heuristic tool, while Kübler-Ross's own discussion shows that emotional responses can overlap, recur, or remain incomplete (Kellehear viii-ix; Kübler-Ross 214). Subsequent scholarship has also questioned fixed interpretations of stage theories and has emphasised the complexity and variability of responses to loss and illness (Corr 69-83; Maciejewski et al. 716-23). Kübler-Ross's model can



therefore be used productively as an interpretive model without assuming that humans have a universal chronological pattern of emotional response.

A. J. Betts's *Zac & Mia* (2013) presents an experience such as those of two seventeen-year-old cancer patients, Zac Meier and Mia Phillips. Zac is undergoing treatment for leukaemia and remains isolated in a hospital room as he prepares for a bone marrow transplant, while Mia is admitted to the adjoining room with osteosarcoma (Betts chs. 1, 3). Though a wall physically separates them, communication creates a relationship that progresses from curiosity and companionship into emotional dependency and mutual support. As the narrative progresses, both characters confront different forms of loss and uncertainty, such as medical treatment, bodily transformation, social and familial difficulties, the death of another patient, and the possibility of relapse (Betts chs. 22-36). The novel therefore presents cancer as an experience that affects not only the body but the characters' identities, relationships, emotional stability, and expectations for the future.

The experience of isolation is particularly significant in *Zac & Mia*. Zac's hospital treatment separates him from ordinary social life, while Mia experiences isolation through illness, bodily change, and familial and social difficulties. Initially, their physical separation represents the loneliness of hospitalisation, but the same separation becomes the foundation for their relationship. Zac's experience demonstrates the psychological burden of prolonged isolation, while his communication with Mia provides an alternative form of connection in that isolation (Betts 50). The novel therefore presents isolation as a complex experience that can intensify emotional suffering while also presenting unexpected opportunities for companionship and support.

Accordingly, this study examines how *Zac & Mia* represents the five responses identified by Kübler-Ross while also questioning a rigid interpretation of the model. It also addresses three central questions: 1) how Zac's and Mia's emotional trajectories enact, overlap with, or depart from Kübler-Ross's five responses; 2) how physical, social, and emotional isolation influence their experiences of illness and psychological loss; and 3) how the novel's representation of acceptance as an ongoing and relational process complicates the stage model. Sorhie (2023) The study argues that *Zac & Mia* does not represent emotional responses to serious illness as a fixed progression toward acceptance but as fluid, overlapping, and recurring experiences shaped by uncertainty, isolation, relationships, bodily change, and individual circumstances. In this way, Betts's novel engages with Kübler-Ross's framework, while also humanising and complicating it through the individual experiences of *Zac and Mia*.

Analysis and Discussion

In A.J. Betts's *Zac & Mia*, the experiences of the psychological impacts of illness, uncertainty, isolation, and mortality of two adolescents are presented. Illness is depicted not simply as a physical state, but as the experience of awareness of death and how it influences identity, relationships, emotions, and the future perspective. Experiences of *Zac and Mia* can be considered with the help of the Kübler-Ross model of the emotional response of people in the process of dying. According to Kübler-Ross, such reactions as denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance can be identified. Nevertheless, in the novel by Betts, these stages are presented in a different way, where the emotional states coexist and repeat depending on the new situation. Sapuh and Das (2024) This corresponds with the later interpretation of Kübler-Ross's model, when these stages were defined as a heuristic framework rather than a fixed progression.

The analysis thus is concentrated on the identification of these five responses in the novel and their representation through the experiences of both characters. Special attention is paid to the influence of illness, isolation, changes of body, relationships, and uncertainty on the emotional responses of the adolescents.

Denial and Isolation

Denial and isolation form one of the crucial emotional reactions to disease in *Zac & Mia*. In this book, denial is not viewed as an inability to accept the existence of one's disease. It becomes evident through emotional



withdrawal, seclusion, avoidance of mortality, and efforts made to psychologically distance oneself from the reality of cancer.

One of the best illustrations of denial is seen when Zac communicates with Mia, who is in the hospital room with him:

“just isolation. Enough to make you crazy” (Betts 50).

The quotation is used in the context where *Zac and Mia* converse at night time in the course of their treatment. The term "isolation" used by Zac carries a great significance since the hospital setting keeps him apart from normal socializing. "Make you crazy" means the mental effects of long isolation. Hence, Zac's isolation is not only physical but also emotional since it influences his perception of normality.

The quotation reflects one more important feature of Betts' portrayal of illness – isolation does not always imply total silence. Zac communicates with Mia via the Internet and this communication acts as a tool which reduces his feeling of isolation. This conversation via Internet creates some emotional link between two people who share similar experiences of illness. Neelakandan (2023) Therefore, isolation is complicated in the novel by the ability to keep companionship with someone despite the lack of any physical interaction.

Zac tries to distance himself from uncertainty and ambiguity by focusing on the medical data and statistics. His frequent concern with the survival rate provides him with an illusion of control over an uncertain future. His use of statistics can be viewed as another way of psychological distancing: instead of dealing with death from an emotional perspective, he turns it into numbers which seem measurable and manageable. One clear example is when he talks about the chances of his survival being fifty-five per cent. Therefore, Zac's reactions can be seen as manifestations of Kübler-Ross's notion of denial, especially psychological distancing and management of the situation. It is consistent with Kübler-Ross's statement that denial does not have to be complete and permanent but can be partial and temporary.

Anger

Anger emerges in *Zac & Mia* primarily through frustration with illness, treatment, physical limitation, uncertainty, and the loss of control over one's own body. Mia particularly experiences anger as she confronts the consequences of her treatment and disability. Her anger is not directed toward one specific individual; instead, it reflects frustration with circumstances that she cannot control.

A significant example occurs when Mia resists the medical procedure being proposed to her:

“No,” ... “Try more.” (Betts 64).

This quote is used in the medical context where Mia faces the possibility of a procedure that will change her body forever. This repeated refusal of Mia can be understood as her rejection of the idea of submitting to this medical situation. The phrase "try more" is especially significant here as the responsibility of trying to come up with another option is put on the shoulders of the medical staff. Hence, Mia's refusal might be understood as an expression of anger and an attempt to reclaim control over her own body. Her body became the subject of medical manipulation, while the decision on the course of her treatment became completely beyond her control. This kind of resistance gave her a temporary sense of empowerment.

As a result, Betts does not simply view anger as an outburst of emotions but as a reaction to being powerless. Mia's anger is related to the fear of changing her body, frustration with being ill, and attempts to preserve one's identity despite all difficulties. Kübler-Ross similarly characterises anger as a reaction that might arise due to increasing awareness of the effect of the illness on one's life. Another distinguishing feature of the book is the An important feature of the novel is that anger also intersects with other emotional states. Mia's anger is sometimes



accompanied by fear, sadness, frustration, and insecurity. Therefore, the novel supports the understanding that emotional responses to illness cannot always be separated into independent categories.

Bargaining

Bargaining in *Zac & Mia* can be interpreted through Zac's attempts to manage uncertainty by relying on medical probabilities, imagined alternatives, and survival calculations. Unlike the conventional form of bargaining described by Kübler-Ross, which may involve negotiating with God or fate, Zac's response is expressed primarily through medical information and statistical reasoning (Kübler-Ross 66–68).

Zac's fixation on survival statistics provides a significant example:

"Fifty-five per cent." (Betts 136).

The statement represents Zac's chances of living for five years without any relapse. From the perspective of Zac's reliance on these chances, it is possible to speak about attempts to make the uncertainty of life predictable through some calculations (Betts 136). When life can be reduced to numbers, the future becomes more calculable. Therefore, this reaction can be considered an indirect way of bargaining rather than bargaining with death or with any kind of deity. At the same time, the novel demonstrates the limits of such strategies since Mia recognises the fallacy of the certainty of Zac's statistics, since probability cannot guarantee an individual result (Betts 136).

According to Kübler-Ross, bargaining is a way of changing an unwanted reality or postponing it (Kübler-Ross 66–68). In this sense, in Betts' novel, this mechanism can be seen in Zac's bargaining with uncertainties with the help of statistics and medicine as psychological tools. Knowledge does not help to eliminate fear but gives a person the feeling of being in control. Thus, *Zac & Mia* presents bargaining in an indirect, contemporary form in which probability becomes a means of coping with an uncertain future.

Depression

Depression represents one of the most emotionally intense dimensions of illness in *Zac & Mia*. Betts associates depression not only with sadness but also with loneliness, self-doubt, emotional exhaustion, relationship insecurity, and the fear of losing one's future.

Mia's emotional deterioration becomes particularly evident when she reflects on her relationship with Zac:

"I bottomed out. I was sad." (Betts 188).

This quote takes place when Mia is mentally stressed due to Zac's indifference and starts wondering whether she has lost the love and support of this man. The term "bottomed out" implies that her mental state is at rock bottom and cannot be considered usual. This depression is aggravated by uncertainty and loneliness.

Additionally, the story illustrates the fact that the emotional problems of Mia are associated with the new perception of her self-image. She questions whether she is wanted, loved, worthy of somebody else's love. Consequently, this illness impacts not only her health state but also her identity and social well-being. It should be noted that unlike many other authors Betts portrays the depression as an active phenomenon, not an idleness. To distract herself from negative feelings, Mia keeps herself busy and plants a tree. Physical activity becomes the way of translating mental distress into practical actions. Thus, depression and its management may go together.

This approach fits well with the Kübler-Ross view of depression and, in particular, the emotional loss caused by terminal illness. The model distinguishes between forms of depression associated with actual losses and those associated with anticipated losses. Mia's experience incorporates both: she experiences present physical and emotional losses while also confronting the possible loss of relationships, normal adolescence, bodily independence, and future possibilities. Therefore, depression in *Zac & Mia* is not presented simply as sadness. It



is a multidimensional response to the disruption of identity, relationships, bodily autonomy, and imagined future life.

Acceptance

Acceptance in *Zac & Mia* is more than just an ability to get used to being ill. For Betts, acceptance is a process of becoming able to accept the uncertainty and live with circumstances which cannot always be controlled. Such an approach correlates with the perspective of Kübler-Ross according to whom acceptance is understanding reality instead of happiness or recovery (Kübler-Ross 91–93). In regard to Zac, acceptance can be seen in his shifting attitudes towards survival. At first, Zac is dependent on statistical data to make uncertainty manageable (Betts 136). However, with the development of his relationships with Mia and engagement with the world beyond medical probabilities, he demonstrates a growing willingness to accept uncertainty. As for the latter, his thoughts, “*It gives me hope, in a way*” (Betts 229), show that he starts seeing meaning and hope in the face of an uncertain future.

Similarly, for Mia, acceptance is related to the changing attitude towards her body and identity. Her physical changes were associated with loss and disruption, but she started gaining an identity beyond illness and change (Betts chs. 27, 36). Thus, acceptance does not require returning to her former identity but involves adapting to altered circumstances. Overall, *Zac & Mia* present acceptance as an ongoing process of psychological adjustment. For both characters, it involves living with uncertainty, adapting to change, and reconstructing a meaningful sense of self while acknowledging that difficult emotions may remain.

Major Findings

The analysis of A.J. Betts’s *Zac & Mia* using the model provided by Kübler-Ross results in a number of important conclusions. Firstly, all five types of responses – denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – can be recognized in the experiences of the main characters in the book; however, they do not appear as a definite order or sequence of events. On the contrary, the characters switch between various states, depending on the situation regarding their condition, emotions, and relationships.

Secondly, isolation becomes an important aspect of disease that includes not only physical but also social and emotional separation from others. At the same time, the book shows that relationships can help to overcome the negative consequences of isolation.

Thirdly, the comparative analysis reveals the differences in coping strategies used by the two main characters. While Zac uses rationalization, statistical thinking and information for overcoming uncertainty, Mia is more concerned about her physical transformation, her relationships, emotions, and her own identity.

Finally, acceptance is represented as an ongoing process of psychological accommodation rather than a definitive endpoint. It involves acknowledging uncertainty, adapting to bodily and personal changes, and reconstructing a meaningful sense of self while maintaining significant relationships.

Conclusion

This paper analyses A. J. Betts’ *Zac & Mia* within the context of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s theory of emotional responses to dying, which includes denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. It proves that the five responses are reflected in the experiences of *Zac and Mia* but not in terms of the predetermined sequence of events but rather as a combination of emotional responses dependent on certain changes in the medical, social and personal spheres of their lives. Moreover, isolation appears to be an important part of illness since, on the one hand, it leads to the appearance of psychological problems and, on the other hand, creates the potential for the formation of meaningful connections between people. The responses of *Zac and Mia* to their illness are different: Zac prefers to cope with uncertainty using information and statistical data, and Mia’s



experiences have more to do with body transformation, relationships, emotional vulnerability and identity. Acceptance is therefore revealed not as an apathetic response and an absence of suffering but as a process of adjustment to changes. Overall, *Zac & Mia* demonstrates the usefulness of Kübler-Ross's five-response framework while highlighting the individual and context-dependent nature of emotional responses to serious illness.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- [1] Betts, A. J. *Zac & Mia*. HarperTrophy Canada, 2014. E-book. Originally published by Text Publishing, 2013.
- [2] Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*. 40th anniversary ed., Routledge, 2009.

Secondary Sources

- [1] Avis, Kate Anne, Margaret Stroebe, and Henk Schut. "Stages of Grief Portrayed on the Internet: A Systematic Analysis and Critical Appraisal." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2021, article 772696. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.772696>.
- [2] Bernau, John A. "The Institutionalization of Kübler-Ross's Five-Stage Model of Death and Dying." *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying*, vol. 90, no. 1, 2024, pp. 120–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228221098893>.
- [3] Chien, Chia-Chi, and Ya-Huei Wang. "The Dynamics of Hope in Unkrich and Molina's *Coco*." *k@ta: A Biannual Publication on the Study of Language and Literature*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2020, pp. 79–83. <https://doi.org/10.9744/kata.22.2.79-83>.
- [4] Corr, Charles A. "Coping with Dying: Lessons That We Should and Should Not Learn from the Work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross." *Death Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1993, pp. 69–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481189308252605>.
- [5] Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. U of Chicago P, 1995.
- [6] Kellehear, Allan. "Introduction." *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*, by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, 40th anniversary ed., Routledge, 2009, pp. vii–xvii.
- [7] Maciejewski, Paul K., Baohui Zhang, Susan D. Block, and Holly G. Prigerson. "An Empirical Examination of the Stage Theory of Grief." *JAMA*, vol. 297, no. 7, 2007, pp. 716–723. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.297.7.716>.
- [8] Neelakandan, S. (2023). The Subjectivity and Otherness: Negotiating the Difference in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. *ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies*, 1(1), 12–17. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhgyan.v1.i1.2023.7>
- [9] Sapuh, S., & Das, N. (2024). Queering Digital Literature and Digital Well-Being in Jeff Garvin's Symptoms of Being Human. *ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies*, 2(1), 24–28. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhgyan.v2.i1.2024.22>
- [10] Sorhie, K. (2023). The Vulnerability Behind the Terror: An Adlerian Sketch of Agatha Trunchbull from Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. *ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies*, 1(1), 25–31. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhgyan.v1.i1.2023.9>
- [11] Sin, Sia Kok. "Analyzing the Grief of Naomi in the Book of Ruth." *Dunamis: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2022, pp. 621–634. <https://doi.org/10.30648/dun.v6i2.610>.
- [12] Wang, Rong-Rong, and Ya-huei Wang. "Using the Kübler-Ross Model of Grief with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): An Analysis of *Manchester by the Sea*." *Metathesis: Journal of English Language, Literature, and Teaching*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2021, pp. 79–92. <https://doi.org/10.31002/metathesis.v5i1.3700>