



## THE PORTRAYAL OF STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS IN JUDY BLUME'S *DEENIE*

**Dr. Villuri Uma Maheswara Rao**

Lecturer in English, APMS Government Jr. College  
 Anakapalle, Andhra Pradesh, India

### Abstract:

Life and fortune make no discrimination between gender and age when they throw challenges at individuals. Renowned author Judy Blume in *Deenie*, presents a storyline which tells a tale of a thirteen-year-old girl who is unexpectedly caught in a storm of tragedies that are impossible to overcome. The diagnosis of scoliosis brings with it troubles that Deenie doesn't know of, while her mother's dreams of making a model out of her come crashing down. Troubled with the torment of her chronic disease on one hand and her mother's towering ambition to make her a model on the other. Deenie's predicament can only end if she gathers her stoicism and courage together and Judy Blume gifts the teenage girl with an indomitable spirit that braces itself to defeat the struggles and taste victory.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Courage, Disease, Psychology, Struggles, Success, Teenagers

The role of literature in human lives is to accomplish diverse objectives. The most fundamental of them is to inspire through tales that depict gut and gumption. Over the ages, authors have written novels that do exactly that, and compel the reader to find their stoicism and grit in the face of daunting troubles just like the protagonist. Judy Blume's *Deenie* just that by recounting the unseen trouble that strikes Deenie, who, with her immense mental and emotional strength overcomes the physical disability thrust upon her by scoliosis.

By depicting a thirteen-year-old girl as the protagonist and who takes on her disability with a positive attitude, Judy Blume serves her an example to the readers who are going through any kind of troubles themselves. Just as much the story is about the protagonists struggles, it is also about the victory gained over a problem that seemed insurmountable. Furthermore, the pressure of making her mother's dream come true – the success of Deenie in the field of modeling, is an added burden on the teenage girl. She navigates through her problems with whatever inner resources she has and they were enough. The author has depicted a young teen in a very challenging position to convey the message that no hurdle or obstacle is big enough for anyone if they have the wherewithal to take it by the horns.

Before being diagnosed with the curvature of the spine or scoliosis, the dream of a great modeling career that Thelma had of Deenie had already drained the young girl mentally and physically. Her mother's conversations with Deenie mostly revolved around the subject of modeling and though Deenie wasn't very keen on that profession, she felt helpless and crushed under her mother's wish. The psychological struggles that she was in with her mother's wish and conduct, reveal the mental strength of Deenie which cannot be witnessed in a majority of teenagers. For a girl of thirteen to do what she does not like and bear it without complaining speaks of her strength in the face of an ordeal that she knows nothing about. She is just pushed into a situation where leading a normal life is a dream for her and the Milwaukee Brace prohibits her free physical movement causing further agony and anguish. The struggles of Deenie may at first seem to be because of scoliosis, but the invisible ones, that are in her mind, impede her the most in living a life that normal young adults live. Deenie is besieged by physical and mental problems that are caused by circumstances that she has no hold or control over.

Therefore, it is certain that Deenie's characteristics include resoluteness and a spirit that does not succumb under pressure. Yes, she has her moments of weakness but it should not be missed that she is a teenager who has no experience on weathering storms that life threw at her. But what made her so enormously mentally tough? For that we need to know what mental toughness is. To define it,

Mental toughness (MT) has been studied as an important individual difference factor that allows individuals to deal effectively with challenges and to persist under pressure. It is an umbrella term that entails positive psychological resources, which are important across a range of achievement contexts (Clough et al., 2002).



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Furthermore,

it does not only reflect an effective coping mechanism as reaction to stressors (e.g., reappraising stressful situations as opportunities for self-development) but also allows individuals to proactively seek out opportunities for personal growth due to high levels of confidence in one's abilities (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2015).

Consequently, it can be seen that multiple factors are at work synchronously. However, for Deenie that were all working subconsciously because she did not, and was too young to know the workings of consciousness.

As a result, Deenie's efforts of struggle are sheerly subconscious and are for a reason. It must be understood that the aim of any struggle is to achieve a goal that seems difficult to attain. If it were not so, a struggle wouldn't be associated with it. At thirteen years of age, Deenie never had a goal in mind, at least that is what she thought. She was unaware of the truth that the ultimate aim of any struggle is to reach happiness. Judy Blume has brilliantly depicted the situation of Deenie who simply refuses to give up by showing any constant signs of emotional or mental weaknesses, and thereby, giving a show of her fortitude in a situation that is extremely daunting. Also, the thought of, or rather, the deeply embedded fright of failing to meet her mother's expectations, added to her misery.

Interestingly, the very thought of wearing the Milwaukee Brace for four years to correct the curvature of her spine does not instill fear in her. This clearly indicates that physical agony does not frighten an individual as much as psychological fear does. The continuous worry about failing to fulfil her mother's dreams hovers over her mind making her struggle to live a life that is carefree. Thelma loves Deenie with all her heart but does not realize that her expectations are not only weighing down Deenie, but are also causing the young teenager mental agony and distress.

The struggles and challenges of Deenie are subjects of vital importance that need to be looked into greater detail and depth through various perspectives. Before deliberating on them, a fundamental question needs an answer. Why did the author Judy Blume create this plot of a teen who has to face unexpected troubles? The answers to that valid question would be many. But on closer examination, it can be concluded that Judy Blume has penned the novel to infuse a sense of grit and positivity into the readers. The aim is clearly to send a message to the young adult readers to not get deterred by any situation in life and to face it with great gumption like the protagonist. Also, the earlier young adults are given a glimpse about the struggles one has to go through in the face of life's challenges, the better they are prepared emotionally and mentally for any event or incident or situation that may prove intimidating and formidable for them. By doing so, the young adults are infused with confidence to deal with whatever that comes their way. Significantly, Thelma's expectations of her daughter are a reflection of the dreams of a majority of the parents who want their children to excel and make them proud. However, those expectations are absolutely misguided and burden the young adults beyond measure.

To further emphasize the aforementioned facts, the struggles of Deenie can provide ample examples to highlight them. The disease of scoliosis that Deenie suffers from not only makes free physical movement of the patient difficult, it also makes them isolated and crushes their self-confidence. The heavy Milwaukee Braces took their toll on Deenie and further added to her problems. But the manner in which she wades through her struggles with the power of her will showcases her innate trait of being a warrior. With the support of her loved ones around her, Deenie finds cheer in dealing with her situation which would last for four years.

Time and again, Judy Blume reiterates the significance of a tough mental disposition that Deenie possesses. It is highlighted many times throughout the novel through Deenie's words and actions. Those are her tools that she uses to create a struggle against the circumstances that she is in – the disease of scoliosis, her mother's imposition of her will on her, the Milwaukee Brace and the emotional and mental roller-coaster ride. The success against her struggles begins with her display of courage when she asks the doctors questions about her condition in a very cool and collected manner which shows her determination to overcome any situation that the doctor would reveal to her. As a girl of thirteen, she exhibits exemplary mastery over her mind.



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Therefore, it can be said with certitude that the struggle for Deenie began in her mind with a positive attitude and it manifested in her behaviour towards her situations. The support, encouragement, love and warmth she received from the individuals around her helped her to a great extent but it should not be forgotten that ultimately, it depends upon the individual to deal with the problems and is the responsibility of the individual alone to bring themselves to gather their inner positive resources to fight their battle. Deenie, as a young teenager, decided by herself to not get deterred and be patient with her situation.

The author, Judy Blume, has created circumstances for Deenie where it would be easy to assume that she would collapse under the burden of her problems and her mother's expectations. But nothing of that comes to be. Her visits to the hospitals and the measuring of the Milwaukee Brace do not faze her, but instead, make her very confident and resolute inwardly. That is so because she senses that she can overcome this situation. The message here for the readers is loud and clear – so long as you can have faith in yourselves, no matter what the situation, you can overcome it if you have the courage to get what you want. In Deenie's case, she wanted to get rid of her disease and lead a normal life again.

Therefore, Deenie's precarious situation about her present and the future is related to her circumstances and affect her mentally and physically. But she is able to find a silver lining in her troubles. She finds comfort in the fact that she won't have to make a career in modelling as she didn't like it. She began to make plans of becoming an orthopaedic even though her mother persisted with her own desire of making Deenie into a model once she is cured of her disease. The thought that Deenie had of choosing an alternate career, a career of her choice, denotes the shape that she was going to give to her life. Her burning desire to break free from the shackles of expectations of her mother drove her to make plans about her life that were to her own liking. That form of a struggle that is played out in the mind is a step towards her success that she desires.

From considering herself to be unsuccessful in her fights for what she wants to gaining a new confidence, Deenie had experienced both situations. Therefore, it can be said that,

failure can turn into success solely because of the option to try again repeatedly. Determination and focus often increase after experiencing setbacks, especially when you are close to attaining your ambition. You might accomplish your goal on the second attempt or it might take several tries. Even if it feels like it's not working, consider trusting in the process of turning failure into success. It's common to learn more each time you try something, so be willing to take another chance even after experiencing failure (How Failures Lead to Success and Lessons That Can Help You Succeed, 2023).

The achievement of success, as Deenie found out, is not as easy one. As a young teenager, what she defined as happiness, was her success because she is too young to know what distinguishes the two. Her stoicism and inner resources help her to go through her challenges without getting anxious or fearful. Judy Blume makes Deenie go through troubles but she survives them and at the end of the novel she also accepts her situation and takes it in her stride. The very fact that she survived her ordeal speaks of her success.

The patience and endurance that she brings to use and exhibits, is testimony to her strength of will and her desire for success – happiness, freedom and cured of her disease. Just as success can be defined in as many ways as success is achieved, Deenie's path to success was an arduous one in which she was battling a desire to live a normal life of a thirteen-year-old girl. Her entire teenage life was at stake with her having to wear the Milwaukee Brace until she was seventeen. And for any teenager, boy or a girl, teenage is the period when they work hard in their academics or the field of their choice. In Deenie's case, she does not deter, and puts up a brave face to take up the challenges that await her, and beat them to achieve success.

Another aspect that comes to light is the close relation between the struggles and success of Deenie. On broader terms, success without struggles is never a possibility. The mental, emotional and physical challenges that Deenie goes through make her a stronger person by the end of the novel. Not that she was not strong to begin with. The change was that she became more confident and was certain that she would overcome her disease. Also, she seemed to have understood the



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importance of living in the moment. All those changes in her were prompted to what she went through in a very short span of time.

The bridge between struggles and success is the positive traits of an individual's character and Deenie displayed them while she went through her ordeal. It would be pertinent to mention that Deenie was struggling and fighting against her challenges without anyone guiding her what to do and how to approach the afflictions of her body and mind. Yes, she had people around her who made her feel better and cared for, but ultimately, it was her own efforts that she had to trust and rely on. She had to find her own way, through her own good judgement to overcome her mental and physical barriers. And she did that with a spirit of great endurance and enthusiasm which bore her results that any thirteen-year-old girl would be proud of.

Moreover, the connection between a struggle and success is based on the keenness of an individual to achieve their goals. To elaborate further on it,

According to Expectancy Theory, which has now been supported by dozens of studies, motivation is the product of a) how much you personally value your goal, and b) how high your belief is that you can realistically achieve your goals. The first part of the motivation equation is something that is highly individualized, and thus requires a good amount of self awareness. This is where mindfulness — the practice of developing a non-judgemental awareness of the present moment — may come into play (Hanson, 2023).

By that observation, motivation and mindfulness are the two ingredients that are of utmost significance in an individual's character to take them from struggles to success. And Deenie was in possession of those and they had an innate presence in her consciousness. After all, she did what was expected of her in a challenging situation with immense mental and emotional strength that was the source of her will to fightback her fears and doubts that otherwise would engulf her mind and making her helpless and despondent.

Judy Blume has written a novel that makes the readers ponder at length on their own inner strengths and the manner in which they can gather them, in case they are faced with a situation like that of Deenie, or a problem that comes into their lives uninvited which they have to face unexpectedly. Deenie's journey from struggles to success is depicted in a very realistic manner where Judy Blume puts the thirteen-year-old protagonist Deenie under various predicaments and at the same time, makes her emerge victorious from all of them. The message here is loud and clear – no situation is difficult to overcome. That is further emphasized as Deenie is struggling with her situations inside her mind, physically i.e., outwardly and bearing the additional pressure and burden of her mother's wish to make her a successful model.

Deenie is averse to the idea of becoming a model but does not want to break her mother's heart, and hence, she unwillingly goes to auditions at modelling agencies. Her readiness to obey her mother and make her dreams come true shows a character trait of Deenie that can be also viewed in a positive light. Deenie was showing her gratefulness to her mother for all she had done for her, and at the same time she wanted to repay all that her mother had ever done for her by following her dictum. But that was a subconscious unexpressed thought. She was within her rights to refuse to audition but instead, she chose to do her mother's bidding because subconsciously she knew that she had to make her mother happy and she could not let Thelma down after witnessing the efforts she was putting in to get a modelling contract.

Therefore, Deenie was also caught in an ethical and moral situation regarding her mother. However, she sacrifices her own happiness to make her mother's wish come true. That also is a form of struggle that she had to experience and go through. When Deenie, as a novel, is examined with the perspective of struggles of a thirteen-year-old teenager, a wide array of challenges is witnessed in her life which she overcomes through her persistence of struggle within herself. Those struggles were about bringing out her courage, her positive spirit and to remain calm in a situation which she had no control over.





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Her struggles were also against herself – to become a warrior who had to fight the battles against her situation when she had no experience regarding it. More importantly, she did not know whether she would come out victorious. Deenie, had to just go with the flow but with an attitude of great enthusiasm and optimism. Later, she becomes a more confident girl who understands and reads her situation very well to find peace and a renewed strength and energy to love her life again. Additionally, she wins her battles and learns from them. Her endeavour to go back to her usual life before the storm of difficulties hit her, highlights her vigour and passion for a life as a new individual. In a way it's a rebirth of Deenie who surprises herself with the fight she put on against all odds. And by doing so, she achieves a victory over difficulties that seem like blessings in disguise in hindsight.

Ultimately, the success of Deenie is in becoming a person who is stronger than ever before. Judy Blume has defined success in a very novel and correct manner that includes victories in the psychological realm and the physical world. Success,

is a combination of passion and perseverance in an effort to achieve long-term goals. The concept of grit says that without passion, one who perseveres in something has more chance of dealing with burnout. Possessing both passion and perseverance provides people a mental toughness that enables them to persist and succeed in the face of adversity (The Psychology Behind Success, 2023).

By that definition, Deenie was already ingrained with all those qualities and needed a catalyst to depict them. In her case, the disease of scoliosis acted as a catalyst that made her dig deep into her character and bring forth the resources that needed her to overcome her struggles and convert them into a big success. Judy Blume has exhorted the readers of the novel to believe in themselves and their innate strengths. Deenie is thirteen years of age and the author sends out a strong message that age is no barrier to overcome obstacles. In a way, Deenie represents the courage of all young adults who have fought and won the battles of their lives, the kinds of which very few know about.

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