

**PROTAGONIST'S IDENTITY CRISIS IN PAUL
KALANITHI'S NOVEL *WHEN BREATH BECOMES AIR***

A THESIS

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**SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF LITERATURE
UNIVERSITAS ISLAM SUMATERA UTARA
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF *SARJANA SASTRA*
IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim. In the name of **Allah**, the most graceful, the most merciful. I want to thank **Allah** *subhanahu wa ta'ala* for his everlasting love. This thesis can be completed because of His blessings and loves. Also, the writer sends *shalawat* and greetings to our beloved prophet, **Muhammad** *Sallallahu alaihi wassalam*. I thank Him for his guidance and blessings. May we all get his intercession at the end of the day.

In completing this thesis, a lot of people have provided motivation, advice, and support. The writer intended to express her gratitude and appreciation to:

1. This thesis is dedicated to my beloved parents, **Armansyah** and **Warnida**. Their love is very precious and no words can explain it. Their love and patience is my biggest motivation to finish this thesis. I give my deepest gratitude to them.
2. My siblings, sister and brother, **Lira Prima Syahputri** and **Wilki Arbie**. Thank you for your support and love for me.
3. The Dean of Faculty of English Literature, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, **Dr. Purwanto Siwi, S.S, M.A.**
4. The Head of the Department of English Literature, Faculty of Literature, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, **Zulfan Sahri, S.S, M.S.** for his approval of my thesis and his advice and suggestion.
5. My supervisor, **Dr.M. Manugeran, M.A.** Thank you for the meetings, recommendations, advice, and guidance to finish this thesis.

6. All the lecturers, who gave and teach me knowledge in this Faculty of Literature. I learned about so many things and also all the faculty staff, who helped a lot during my year of study.
7. Also, for my dearest friend, **Syaiful Abdi Sinaga, Dani Brata Jaya, Deri Julian, M. Al Hafiz,** and **Hafiz Syahrin**. It is a blessing for having such caring and loving friends in my life. I want to let them know that I love them so much.

In the last word, the writer realized that the writing of this thesis is still a long way from perfection. Therefore, they further invoke suggestions and criticisms that build for perfection and may be useful for all of us. Aamiin.

Medan, 26 March 2023

The Writer

SARWAN HABIB

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A. Paul Kalanithi's Biography

Paul Kalanithi was born in New York on 1 April 1977 but moved with his family to Arizona at the age of 10. He studied at Stanford University and graduated in 2000 with a BA and an MA in English Literature as well as a BSc in human biology. He then decided to switch tracks, securing a master's in the history and philosophy of science and medicine from the University of Cambridge and going on to the Yale School of Medicine. He graduated in 2007 *cum laude*, winning the Lewis H. Nahum Prize for his research on Tourette's syndrome.

It was at this point that Mr. Kalanithi returned to Stanford for the rest of his life, as a resident in neurological surgery and a postdoctoral fellow in neuroscience. He was starting to build a name for himself through publications that won the American Academy of Neurological Surgery's highest award for research when he developed a cough, night sweats, and constant back pain – and in May 2013, although he had never been a smoker, was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer.

Initially despairing and inclined just to prepare for death, Mr. Kalanithi managed to go back to work as chief resident in late 2013 after cancer responded well to treatment. Yet a relapse the following spring led to intensive chemotherapy and a prolonged period in hospital – ending just days before the birth of his daughter, Cady, on 4 July 2014.

In several personal essays in *The New York Times*, *Stanford Medicine*, and elsewhere, Mr. Kalanithi wrote movingly about “travers[ing] the line from doctor to the patient” and discovering he had “the same yearning for the numbers all patients

ask for” because “the path forward would seem obvious if only I knew how many months or years I had left”.

He described the endless well-meaning anecdotes he had received “along the lines of my-friend’s-friend’s-mom’s-friend or my-uncle’s-barber’s-son’s-tennis-partner has this same kind of lung cancer and has been living for 10 years”. He noted that “before my cancer was diagnosed, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. After the diagnosis, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. But now I knew it acutely. He also paid tribute to his infant daughter for the “joy unknown to me in all my prior years” that she had brought him.

B. Paul Kalanithi’s Bibliography

Non-fiction books

1. *When Breath Becomes Air*.

Essays

1. "How Long Have I Got Left?" for The New York Times.
2. "Before I go: Time warps for a young surgeon with metastatic lung cancer" for Stanford Medicine Magazine.
3. "My Last Day as a Surgeon" for The New Yorker.
4. "Terra Incognita: Remembering Sherwin Nuland" for The Paris Review.

C. *When Breath Becomes Air* Novel’s Summary

When Breath Becomes Air is a memoir by Paul Kalanithi. It was published in 2016. Kalanithi tells the story of his battle with cancer while being a practicing neurosurgeon. The book is organized chronologically, following the trajectory of his life from childhood to death, and is laced with deep philosophical thought and

literary prose. His meditations combine the expertise of a professional with the experience of a patient, resulting in a book that communicates extremely profound meaning about life and death.

Kalanithi grew up in Arizona, closely acquainted with nature and moments of solitude. He'd always loved reading and, upon entering college, studied biology and literature. It is during these years that he realizes the need to not only study but to live, to immerse himself in his surroundings. His master's program in English literature proves unfulfilling, and he decides to pursue medical school.

Some of his clearest memories of medical school involve the study of cadavers. At this point, Paul first experiences the duality of practicing medicine. As he continues to learn and grow through his studies, he realizes how he becomes calloused to moments that might otherwise be traumatizing. The body exists as both miraculous and quotidian. He chooses neurosurgery as his concentration.

He marries his girlfriend, Lucy, after medical school and they move to California for their respective residencies. At Stanford, Paul often works a hundred hours per week, and, although the majority of his first year is spent pushing paperwork, he quickly gains responsibility for patients. Having experienced the spectrum of tasks at the hospital, he realizes the potential for good he has during every interaction with his patients. The proper tone during a brief counseling session can influence the patient's entire outlook on his or her illness and recovery. As the years of his residency accumulate, Paul quickly rises to the top of his field, gaining a physical and emotional capacity in his work that qualify him for his dream jobs.

Paul, however, soon begins suffering symptoms that send him to the doctor. He's unsure how to navigate his concern, which only pushes Lucy away from him. They are on the brink of separation when Paul is diagnosed with cancer.

In the years that follow, Paul works to finish his residency while coping with his illness. He pushes himself to continue working in the OR until he has to begin cancer treatment. He chooses a treatment plan—a pill—that is most likely to allow him to continue in his profession. It is during this time that he begins reconstructing what the rest of his life will look like. What if he cannot continue neurosurgery? What if he has one year to live, rather than twenty? He sees the fates of his patients reflected in his own decisions and is forced to ask himself what it is that makes life meaningful. Paul does not want the rest of his life to be spent avoiding his sadness; he wants to work within his limitations, while finding what provides his life with the most meaning. Thus, he and Lucy decide to have a child.

A brief period of wellness sends him back to work in the OR, but it is not long before he receives a CT scan portraying the growth of cancer. He begins chemotherapy—the second treatment plan—the following week. This is when his treatment’s severe side effects begin. He is no longer able to see recovery on the horizon and continues recalibrating how he envisions the rest of his life. Because of this, his relationship with literature deepens, and he decides to prioritize his writing over his need to remain a neurosurgeon. Had he forty years left, he’d have split the time equally between medicine and writing.

Paul is rushed to the ER at almost the exact time of his daughter Cady’s birth. He makes it to Lucy’s side in time, however, lying in a cot next to her in her hospital room. The following eight months are filled with the excitement of the new baby, and Paul experiences profound moments of joy. If there is one thing that he wants his daughter to know, it is that she has made him happier than he’s ever been in his life.

His health, however, is completely deteriorating, and eight months after Cady is born, Paul passes away. Lucy writes the Epilogue of the book, reflecting on the

family's final months with Paul. At the book's close, she recounts how his family and friends decided to celebrate his life, how Paul worked relentlessly on the book through the most grueling stages of cancer, and how he hoped this book would reach and help others.

D. *When Breath Becomes Air* Novel's Characters

The characters of the novel can be seen in the following explanation.

- 1. Paul Kalanithi:** Paul Kalanithi is the main protagonist and narrator of the autobiography. He was in residency in neurological surgery, before he is diagnosed with lung cancer. Paul is married to Lucy, whom he met during his time studying medicine at Yale. He grew up in New York but moved to Arizona when Paul was ten.
- 2. Lucy:** She is Paul's wife, and she has her epilogue in the book, as she is a widow during the time the book was published, as it was published 10 months after Paul's death. Lucy and Paul met at Yale in a medical school. Lucy falls pregnant and Elizabeth Acadia "Cady" is born.
- 3. Emma Hayward:** The doctor initially starts the treatment on Paul. He works together with Emma on his case, as he has a background in the field of medicine. They decide to find the root of his cancer before starting and deciding on a treatment.
- 4. Paul's mother:** She grew up in India before marrying Paul's father. She values education highly and works to make sure that when the family moves from Westchester County in New York to Kingman, Arizona, her sons will have as good an education as before. She finds a college prep reading list for Paul that gives him his love of literature, drives her sons to college prep courses over a

hundred miles away, and works to get the school to offer AP classes. When Paul is diagnosed with cancer, she and the rest of the family also work to support Paul during his various treatments, remaining unwavering sources of comfort and security.

5. **Paul's Father:** A cardiologist and a devout Christian. At first, Paul's father moves his family to Kingman because of the low cost of living, which would allow him to send his sons to college. Eventually, Paul comes to see how respected and trusted his father is by his patients, which inspires Paul to earn that same trust and show that same compassion.
6. **Jeevan:** Paul's younger brother, who comforts him when he is diagnosed and also supports him through treatment.