

Literary Analysis of *Turtles All The Way Down* by John Green

and Connections to the Research on Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

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Introduction

In literature, characters are created to align with the wills of the author, and with that, the direction the author has for their plot and development of the story. In *Turtles All The Way Down* by John Green, Green uses his platform as a writer to convey scientific concepts behind his personal struggles with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). OCD is an anxiety disorder characterized by rumination over obsessive thoughts and the compulsions that ease the intrusive thoughts from continuing. The aim of this literary analysis is to examine *Turtles All The Way Down* from the perspective of psychological sciences.

The Allegory of the Turtle and Rumination

Throughout the book there are examples in which Green uses the idea of a “thought spiral” to describe the main character, Aza Holmes’ thoughts. The thought spiral is a metaphor for the way that her invasive thoughts seem to wrap around her and trap her.

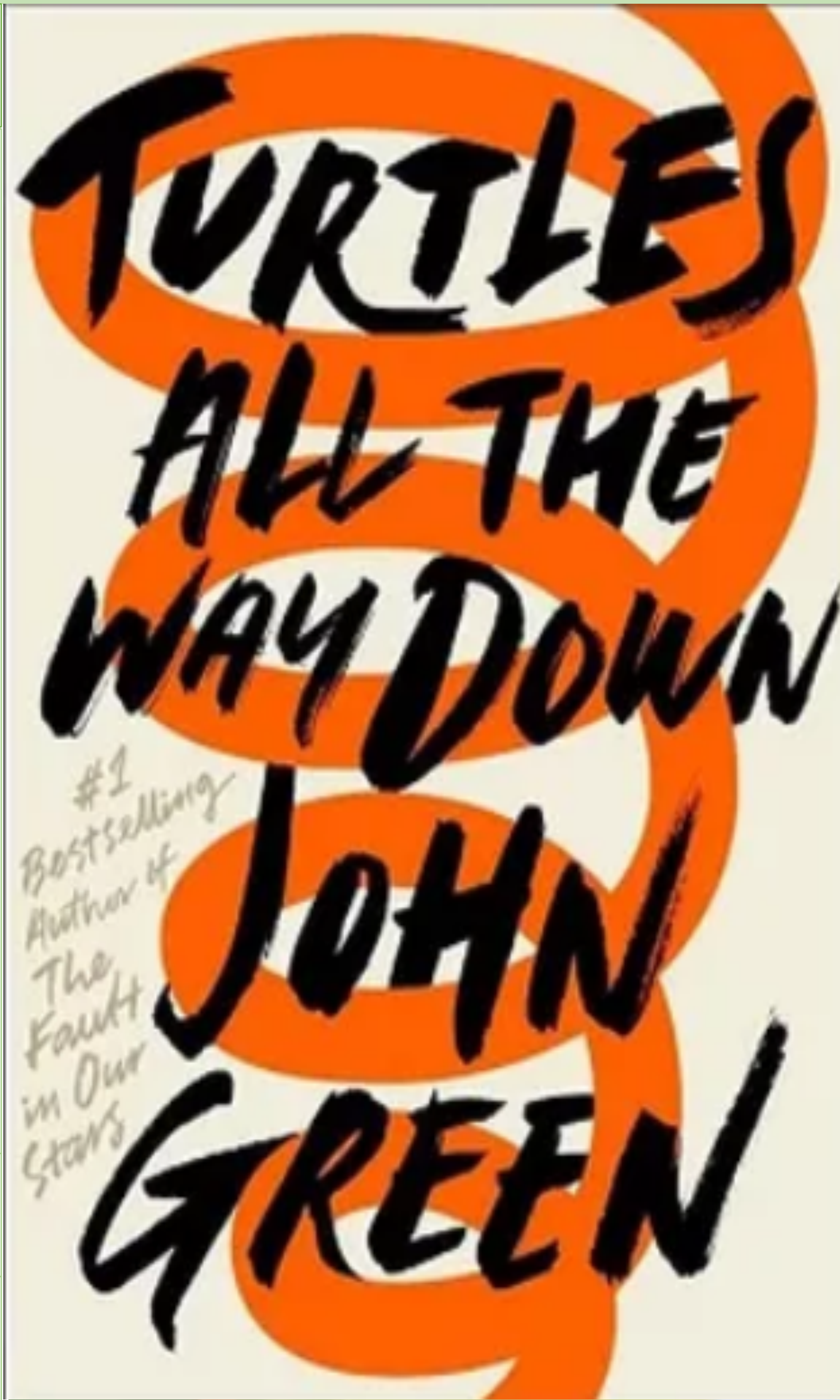
–“I have these thoughts that Dr. Karen Singh calls “intrusives,” but the first time she said it, I heard “invasives” which I like better because, like invasive weeds, these thoughts seem to arrive at my biosphere from some faraway land, and then they spread out of control...The spiral tightens, like that, forever.” (Green, 45-47).

–“I pulled myself to standing. For a moment, I thought I might faint as the pain blazed through me. I grabbed a hold of the IV pole and took a few shuffling steps. I heard my mom stirring. I didn’t care. Pressed the dispenser, rubbed the foam all through my hands. Pressed it again, and shoved a scoop in my mouth.” (Green 229)

–Obsessions and how compulsions seem to quell the intrusive thoughts
–“I felt these little jolts through my arms and legs as my brain whirred through thoughts, trying to figure out how to make this okay.”(Green, 225).

–Rumination and search for an action that will fight the obsessive thoughts
–“It’s getting sucked into a whirlpool that shrinks and shrinks and shrinks your world until you’re just spinning without moving, stuck inside a prison cell that is exactly the size of you, until eventually you realize you’re not actually *in* a prison cell. You are the prison cell.”

–Rumination, intrusive thoughts, World Turtle is a symbol of infinite regression (New York Mirror, 1838)



Treatment of OCD and the Importance of a Social Support System

Throughout the book Aza meets with her therapist, Dr. Singh, to discuss her progress or lack thereof. Usually with OCD, treatment includes Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and exposure and response prevention. For example, Aza’s therapist asks Aza to picture a flickering candle when she practices deep breathing, and that she should control her exhalations so as to not blow out the candle.

– Aza’s only friend, Daisy is usually very understanding of her condition, but Aza finds out that the fanfiction that Daisy writes has a character that seems to emulate some of Aza’s nervousness. This is devastating to Aza, as she now saw herself as a burden to her friend both in real life, and in the situations that her friend creates in her fanfiction. The intensity of the conversation that ensues when Aza confronts Daisy is so intense that they get into a car accident, which itself triggers Aza because it breaks one of the only keepsakes she has from her deceased father.

John Green and Authorial Intent

–John Green, the author of the book has OCD himself, and has said that he experiences similar feelings of thinking that what he’s ingested has been contaminated before it’s been given to him
–John Green states that his struggle with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is similar to that of Aza’s in that he similarly experiences intrusive thoughts that do not seem to quell unless he performs certain tasks in an attempt to silence them (What OCD Is Like (For Me)).

–First attempt at portraying a narrative from the perspective of a female, without any glorification of the “manic pixie dreamgirl” in terms of mental health of the character.

