



THE EXPRESSION OF THE AUTHOR ON HIS MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NOVEL “TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN” BY JOHN GREEN

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ABSTRACT

*This study analyzes the author's expression on his mental illness in the novel *Turtles All The Way Down* (2017) written by John Green. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method. With the expressive theory, by Abrams, the researcher uses it to analyze the expressions of the author that exist in the novel and correlated with his biography. The data were taken from the novel, video interview, and personal vlog of the author. The data analysis techniques are reviewed, described, and then draw conclusions. The results of this study show that there are author's expressions in the novel, which are expressed in the title and some parts in the stories of his novel. The title reflected his experience in his collage which has given him a way to face his mental illness in real life. Some parts of the story in the novel also resemble his real life, especially his mental illness. The expressions obtained in the stories are comforted in terms of mental illness, namely Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), the fear of own thoughts, and anxiety.*

Keywords: *Author, Biography, Expressive, John Green, Mental illness.*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis ekspresi penulis terhadap penyakit mentalnya dalam novel *Turtles All The Way Down* (2017) karya John Green. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif. Dengan teori ekspresif yang dikemukakan Abrams, peneliti menggunakannya untuk menganalisis ekspresi-ekspresi pengarang yang ada dalam novel dan dikorelasikan dengan biografinya. Data diambil dari novel, video wawancara, dan vlog pribadi penulis. Teknik analisis data dikaji, dideskripsikan, dan kemudian ditarik kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa terdapat ekspresi-ekspresi pengarang dalam novelnya, yang tertuang dalam judul dan beberapa bagian dalam cerita novelnya. Judul tersebut mencerminkan pengalamannya saat di bangku kuliah yang memberinya cara menghadapi penyakit mentalnya di kehidupan nyata. Beberapa bagian cerita dalam novel tersebut juga mirip dengan kehidupan asli pengarang, terutama penyakit mentalnya. Ungkapan-ungkapan yang didapat dalam cerita, yaitu dari segi penyakit mental yaitu Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), rasa takut terhadap pikiran sendiri, dan rasa cemas.

Kata Kunci: Pengarang, Biografi, Ekspresif, John Green, Penyakit Jiwa.

A. INTRODUCTION

In literature, there are several types of literary works, namely novels, dramas, poems, and short stories. Literary works are human creations that contain beautiful language with beautiful artistic values. All of those literary works are interconnected with human life. For example in novels, the life problems experienced by the characters in the novel are usually inseparable from real life. To be able to understand about a literary work, the reader is not only by the reading the literary work. The reader must analyze the literary work to understand the explicit or implicit meaning of the literary work (Wardhani, 2019: 2). A novelist may manifest him or herself in his or her masterpiece. Through the novel, an author can express his or her ideas which come from various sources such as his/her own experiences, someone else's experience, or the social conditions at the time the novel was written. Besides that, the novel also presents aspects of human behavior that can be analyzed for scientific research (Kusumawati: 01).

A novel is a literary work consisting of stories from a writer which has intrinsic and extrinsic elements. The novel itself has several intrinsic elements, such as a character. Character is a very important element of a novel because it is the character that supports the story in a novel from beginning to end. In this research, the researcher will focus on the main character and relate it to the author's life in the novel. Apart from the character, which is the part of intrinsic element, researcher will also examine the extrinsic elements. In addition to the character that one of elements which is build the novel from within, readers or critics who want to analyze the novel also have to understand the extrinsic elements related to the novel, such as the background or biography of the author, so that can be analyze the relationship between the author and the character in a novel.

The extrinsic element that will be the focus of this research is the relationship between the author and the main character of a novel. The novel is an inner expression of someone who wants to be conveyed through language by

way of description. This depiction can be in the form of the author's life story, the author's knowledge of life in real life, the author's perception that he or she wants to convey through the work and it can also be the author's imagination that is not related to the reality of life, like the wizard world that is common in children's books. It is through literary works that the author can describe all aspects of human life through the author's expressions, both those that occur in his life directly or are inspired by the lives of other people.

As stated above that literary works are a reflection of the life or sometimes of the author itself. One of the literary works that reflect the author is the novel "Turtles All The Way Down" by John Green. The reason why the researcher choose this novel to analyze because this novel indicated has the same background life with the author. In an interview in the blog (theguardian.com: 2017), John Green (the author) he said that he has a mental illness, namely OCD and although he would continue to do so far the rest of his life. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is often a disabling condition consisting of bothersome intrusive thoughts that elicit a feeling of discomfort. To reduce the anxiety and distress associated with these thoughts, the patient may employ compulsions or rituals. These rituals may be personal and private, or they may involve others participating; the rituals are to compensate for the ego-dystonic feelings of the obsessional thoughts and can cause a significant decline in function (Brock & Hany, 2023). Apart from that, the main problem of Aza (the main character) in OCD is one that Green understands very well. This novel tells about the main character (Aza) who suffers from OCD or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. She has extreme anxiety about bacteria. Aza's unreasonable anxiety is described so well that readers who don't have the same problem will understand what Aza is feeling. She spends a lot of time thinking about whether she really exists. And that she did since childhood. She has a strange way of proving that she is real. This certainly disrupts the pattern of life.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Expressive of Literature

The most important source of expressive theory is the writer as an individual or as a member of a group, and no longer external factors but the writer himself, related to the feelings and desire of the author to produce a literary work. This expressive theory also focuses on the author's biography and the author's psychology as elements to understand the literary work; then one must know the psychology of the author and know all aspects of his biography (Abrams, 2010: 34).

The expressive as an approach is an approach that examines the expression of feelings or the author's temperament (Abrams, 2010:189). So, the expressive approach is an approach that focuses on the efforts of writers or poets to express their expression in a literary work. The expressive approach emphasizes the poet in expressing or pouring out all the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the author when carrying out the process of creating literary works. The author creates it based on its subjectivity alone, some even think it's arbitrary. In fact, expressiveness in question relates to the author's contemplative power in the creative process, so as to produce a work that is good and full of meaning. Expressive critics believe that writers (authors) of literary works are the main elements that give birth to thoughts, perceptions and feelings that are combined in literary works. Critics tend to draw literature based on the smoothness, authenticity, suitability of the author's inner vision/state of mind

2. Character

Character is one of the important intrinsic elements of a literary works, like novel. Character known as a person, identify, or entity of a literary work like novel, whose existence originates from a fictional work or performance. Character is the prime element of human personality. The existence of a character is considered by literary connoisseurs, be it as a spectator, reader, or vice versa. In addition to humans, characters could be animals, plants, aliens, gods, mythical creatures or objects (Paradhan, 2009: 03). There are several types of character, which are as follows: dynamic character, round character, flat character, static character, protagonist character and antagonist character.

3. Literature and Biography

The main cause of the birth of literary works is the creator himself: the author; that is why the description of the personality and life of the author is the oldest and most established method in the study of literature (Wellek & Warren, 2016: 74).

Biography is one of the external elements of a literary work that can be enjoyed because it provides an opportunity to study the personal life of the creative author, and trace his mental, moral and intellectual development. Biography can also be considered as a systematic study of psychology and the creative process of the author himself. When viewed from a biographical perspective, readers can find similarities between the life of the author and a literary work. However, Wellek & Warren (2016, 79-80) stated that there is an indirect relationship, parallels, and similarities between works and their authors.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was analyzed by using the Descriptive qualitative method. By using this method the researcher identifies, describes, and analyzes what are the expressions of John Green's mental illness in his novel "Turtles All The Way Down".

The sources of the data in this research were taken from some vlogs youtube (vlogbrothers, Politics and Prose, School Library Journal, and WTTW), blog website (theguardian.com) and the novel "Turtles All The Way Down" by John Green, published since in 2017, consists of 24 chapters and 223 pages.

The instrument used in this research is note-taking. The researcher read the biography of the author and the novel Turtles All The Way Down. In recording, data that is less relevant to the topic are left out while relevant data is underlined. So that it can help the researcher in analyzing the data

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Findings

1. Title of the Novel

Through a video interview on the WTTW YouTube account on January 13, 2018, Green revealed the reason he chose "Turtles All The Way Down" as the title of his novel. It can be seen below:

“The story goes that this lecturer gives a long lecture about how... the history of the earth and then this... at the end of it this old woman raises her hand and says, “That’s all very well and good, but the truth is that the- earth is a flat plane- resting on the back- of a giant tortoise”. And the lecturer thinking himself very smart says, “Well, what is that turtles standing on,” and then the woman says, - “You don’t understand.- It’s turtles all the way down,” (T: 10.42-11.08)

So, above is the story behind Green's choice of title, namely Turtles All The Way Down. Then the researcher found, the author re-described the story of Turtles All The Way Down in his novel. It showed below:

“That reminds me of a story my mom tells,” Daisy said.

“What story?”

“Okay, so there’s this scientist, and he’s giving a lecture to a huge audience about the history of the earth,

“So he gives his whole presentations about the history of earth and life on it, and then at the end, he asks if there are any questions. An old woman in the back raises her hand, and says, ‘That’s all fine and good, Mr. Scientist, but the truth is, the earth is a flat plane resting on the back of giant turtle.’

“And now the scientist is frustrated, he says, ‘Well, then what is that turtle standing upon?’

“And the old woman says, ‘Sir, you don’t understand It’s turtles all the way down.’” (C21, P189-190).

From the interview and in the novel, the expression of the author was found which he poured into his literary work, namely in the form of the story Turtles All The Way Down which he obtained, he poured it back into his novel.

Furthermore, below, in the same video, Green continues his discussion regarding the *Turtles All The Way Down* story, namely how the story has an effect on:

“In a way when I first the turtles all the way down story, it almost felt like, almost like a spiritual revelation of,” (T: 11.18-11.24)

Based on the title of the novel that has been described, the researcher finds the expression of the author in the title of his novel in *the interview*. About how the story *Turtle All The Way Down*, which he got when he was still in college, gave him a spiritual revelation. How did he always feel like he wasn't himself because of his thoughts that he couldn't control, and always searched for his identity as reflected in Aza Holmes, the main character in the novel which is found in his novel. It can be seen below:

I laughed. “It’s turtles all the way down.”
*“It’s turtles all the way f**king down, Holmesy. You’re trying to find the turtle at the bottom of the pile, but the pile, but that’s not how it works.”*
“Because it’s turtles all the way down,” I said again, feeling something akin to a spiritual revelation. (C21, P190)

If we look back at the *interview* and *the novel* above, the researcher finds the expression of the author in his novel about the effect of the story *Turtles All The Way Down* on him. The story of *Turtle All The Way Down* made John Green, realize that when this spiral thought came, that he was not himself, he would remember the story *Turtle All The Way Down*. The more he went down, the more he found a turtle, as well as what happened to him, the more he searched for his identity, then what he found was still himself.

In *the interview* below, uploaded by WTTW, John Green talks about the way of his thinking, like a spiral, which is the part of the title in the novel behind of the text.

“I remember, trying to express this to my psychologist and my psychologist said, -“You realize that if you.” –just turn around, the spiral also goes “Infinitely outward,” and I was like, “Oh, God.” That’s very metaphorically. Resonant, but it’s not true.” We all know spirals go in one direction: tighter and tighter and tighter – until you die inside. –of the prison of yourself.” (T: 12.31-12.55)

In the interview above, Green explained how his spiraling thoughts made him feel like a prisoner. The picture above, is also a manifestation of how the spiral mind surrounds him, and Green reveals that the picture of the spiral mind is contained in his novel that showed below:

“Drinking hand sanitizer won’t help.”
“But what will help?”
“I feel like a noose is tightening around me and I want out, but struggling only chinch the knot. The spiral just keeps tightening, you know?”

(C21, P182)

In the snippet of the novel above, you can see how Aza explained her spiral thoughts to her psychologist, where those thoughts bound her and she couldn't get out of them. This is in accordance with what Green explained in the interview above, how the spiral mind gets tighter so it can't get out of it, like being imprisoned to death.

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2. *The Author’s Expressions on Mental Illness in the Novel*

Through a vlog personal John Green on the Vlogbrothers YouTube account on July 26, 2017, with the title ‘What OCD Is Like (for me), Green stated that he has mental illness, namely OCD. It showed below:

“So, I have obsessive compulsive disorder which is mostly seen in the popular imagination as being about, like, excessive hand washing, or neatness, or whatever. Because those are things you can see, you know? They're not like the formless, insensate horrors of psychic pain, they're behaviors that you can, like, portray in a movie.” (T: 0.36-0.53)

OCD patients always check things no matter how small, and if they don't do it, they will feel anxious (Wilson, 2001: 8). The following below is the part of Green’s novel, which is an excerpt from Aza's attitude which reflects the behavior of OCD patients (the ‘..’ are the contents of her thoughts). In his novel showed below:

You’re back in your house, on the couch, next to your mom, and then you brain says, ‘Well, but wait. What if your finger is infected? Why not just check? The cafeteria wasn’t exactly the most sanitary place to reopen that wound. And then you were in the river.’ (C5, P42)

In *the video*, there is John Green's statement through his personal YouTube account, which states that he has a mental disorder, namely obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD. So OCD is a mental illness that encourages sufferers to take certain actions repeatedly to reduce anxiety in their minds. As described in Aza's behavior in the novel. Her mind always encourages her to always check and replace her Band-Aid, which is on his knuckles, for fear of infection. It is this excessive fear and anxiety that makes sufferers experience difficulties.

In the same video, Green continues his story about OCD. Green explained how the spiral train of his thought was bothering him so much:

“So, I experience these obsessive thought spirals in which intrusive thoughts—that is, like thoughts I don’t want to have that seem to come from outside of me—sort of hijack my consciousness. Now, everyone has known some version of not being able to choose their thoughts.” (T: 0.56-1.06)

Through what Green says through his videos, about his spiral mind; below is a part of his novel, which deals with the spiraling thoughts that are so disturbing to sufferers, both Green and Aza the main character. in the novel showing:

You return to the couch to watch TV, and for a few or many times, you feel the shivering jolt of the tension easing, the relief of giving in to the lesser angels of your nature.

And then two or five or six hundred minutes pass before you start to wonder, ‘Wait, did I get all the pus out? Was there pus or was that only sweat? If it was pus, you might need to drain the wound again.’

The spiral tightens, like that, forever. (C4, P43)

In his statement above in his video, which is featured in the same video, Green describes how his obsessive thoughts are so intrusive like a spiral that they always seem to take over him. The same thing is experienced by Aza, the main character in page 43 of the novel. She is always controlled by herself to do the same thing even though she hasn't done it for a long time.

On to the video interview on the WTTW YouTube account with the title video *‘The Interview Show / John Green’*, on January 13, 2018; He expressed how scary it was from his inability to choose his own thoughts. It can be seen below:

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“And then it’s not so funny because if you can’t choose what you think about over a long period of time, that really sort of destabilizes what exactly people mean when they talk about you. Like if you’re not responsible for or being able to choose your thoughts, then like are you not possibly a passenger in this consciousness- that you are stuck inside of, -which is like... for me at least somewhat terrifying.” (T: 11.47-2.28)

It was from the interview that Green thinks how scary it is to lose control of your own mind. This is also illustrated by Aza who feels she is not real because of that:

“I don’t follow how that would make you fictional.”

“I mean, I don’t control my thoughts, so they’re not really mine. I don’t decide if I’m sweating or get cancer or C. Diff or whatever, so my body isn’t really mine. I don’t decide any of that-outside forces do. I’m a story they’re telling. I am circumstances.”

She nodded. “Can you apprehend these outside forces?”

“No, I’m not hallucinating,” I said. “It’s like...like, I’m just no sure that I am, strictly speaking, real.” (C13, P130)

Continuing from the video interview and page 130 of the novel, Green feels that he is not real because of his inability to control his own thoughts. In addition, from the novel, the researcher finds outpourings from the main character related to what Green feels, namely how Aza thinks she is just not hers. Because outside forces control it. Like his thoughts made him feel unreal and it was scary to him.

In a video, uploaded by School Library Journal, with the title video ‘*John Green keynote | SLJ Summit 2017*’, on October 14, 2017, John Green explains how the anxiety he sometimes experiences. For example in consuming a food. It can be seen below:

“I'd eaten something that was going to kill me and I couldn't stop worrying about it no matter what I did eventually I developed behaviors to cope with this worry I would only eat certain foods at certain times I would only sit in certain chairs at the cafeteria which were the not sick chairs I would touch this X number of times etc.” (T: 13.54-14.11)

Based on what Green said in the video above, researchers found similarities in what Green experienced with the main character in his novel below:

I felt my stomach begin to work on the sandwich, and even over everybody's talking, I could hear it digesting, all the bacteria chewing the slime of peanut butter-the students inside of me eating at my internal cafeteria. A shiver convulsed through me. (C1, P9)

That is a description of the anxiety that researchers get in Green's novel, which has similarities with what was stated in his interview, regarding his anxiety about what he consumes. Moreover, below is another addition that the researcher found in the novel related to this anxiety. It showed below:

Admittedly, I have some anxiety problems, but I would argue it isn't irrational to be concerned about the fact that you are a skin-encased bacterial colony. (C1, P9)

This data shows how the main character feels about her anxiety about what she consumes, similar to the content of Green's statement in the video above.

B. Discussions

From the finding, can see that, in choosing the title of the novel, namely *Turtles All The Way Down*, the researcher found that there was a personal expression from the author in choosing the title. As John Green said in his video interview, the *Turtles All The Way Down* story that he got in college had a spiritual effect on him. About how a scientist gives an explanation of the history

of this earth and a woman who says that this world is flat, like a turtle's back. Then this scientist asked the woman where the turtle was standing, and the woman replied that this turtle was standing above the other turtles. That's why this story is called Turtles All The Way Down.

Why does this story have a spiritual effect on John Green, just as the scientist asked the woman where the turtle was standing, the answer was still above the other turtles like in the picture beside. This is the same as Green who is always looking for his own self within himself. The more he searches for himself, the only thing he finds is himself, not anyone else. He also describes this in his novel. In chapter 21, pages 189-190. Where, the main character, Aza Holmes, tells her friend that she sometimes feels like she is not herself because of her inability to control herself. Then her friend the main character said that what the main character felt reminded her of the story Turtles All The Way Down. The more she looks for the turtle, it remains a turtle all the way to the bottom, the same as the more the author and the main character search for themselves, they still only find themselves.

As for the spiral description, found on the back of the title text, it has its own meaning for the author and the main character. Which, their thoughts were like a spiral. This means, the further they follow the plot, there will never be an end. The spiral of thoughts will continue to tighten, without end. In accordance with what the researcher showed in the findings section, the researcher found several author expressions contained in his novel, according to the author's own statement.

The first expression that the researcher found was the similarity between the author and the main character in suffering from mental illness, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or OCD.

From some of the video contents shown in the findings, Green directly said that he had a mental illness, such as OCD. In addition, after reviewing the novel, there are similarities with what the main character experienced. In several parts of the novel, a direct depiction of what OCD sufferers feel through the main character is depicted.

Apart from the author's expression of mental illness such as OCD that researchers found in his novel. There is also another expression, which is the fear. The fear in question is the fear suffered by the author regarding his spiral thoughts. How does he feel that there is a monster in his mind who always tells him to do what he doesn't want to do. This fear is also experienced by Aza, the main character in the novel, who feels that her thoughts are always beyond her control.

Anxiety is also suffered by the author and the main character. As in the seminar video uploaded by the School Library Journal, Green conveys his anxiety about every food he consumes. How does his mind always feel anxious about the contents of the food he consumes and the consequences he will get from consuming that food.

Aza also felt this, in the first chapter of the novel. When the main character was in her school cafeteria and eating food, she couldn't stop thinking about the bacteria in her body. The more she tried not to think about it, the more it made her think about it.

All the results of this research are really obtained through Abrams' theory, the work must be true not to the object but, to the human emotion, thus severed from the external world, the object signified by the work, the symbol also as the inner state of author's mind. The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative. In other words, a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events shall be formulated of that particular emotion, such as; when the external facts are present, it is a must to understand what kind of emotion or experience is given (Abrams, 2010: 36).

Looking at the novel, how John Green describes his mental illness is the same as his real life, the author seems to want to make the reader learn from his novel. This was also conveyed by Green in his interview (Good Morning America: 2017), Green hopes that people will understand and get a glimpse of what it's like to live with a mental illness such as OCD, and maybe be able to love someone who has a mental illness or pay more attention to children if they have a mental illness and maintain the relationship between parents and children, as described in a novel about Aza and her mother who always take care of her and give her love.

E. CONCLUSION

The expressive approach defines literary works as expressions, feelings, or imagination that work with the author's thoughts and feelings. As for the conclusion of the research results regarding the analysis of the novel *Turtles All The Way Down* by John Green with this expressive approach, there are several expressions of the author on his mental illness. His expressions include excessive anxiety, fear, being unable to control his thoughts, and the problems he faced as a patient with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder which has been described in his novel. As Green once said in one of his video interviews, the author seems to want his readers to learn from his novel. Judging from his novel, the way John Green describes his mental illness is the same as his real life. Green hopes that reader that has read his novel can feel and understand what mental illness patients like OCD, and can be give love to someone who has it. Also can give more attention and maintain the relationship between parents and their children if they have a mental illness, as seen in his novel about always looking after and providing love between the main character, Aza, and her mother.

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