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**Rising Defense Mechanisms: Excessive Anxiety and OCD behaviors
in John Green the Fault in Our Stars*****A B S T R A C T**

People with Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) experience very regular intrusive thoughts that can cause anxiety and interfere with everyday life. The powerful association between intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors leads to a marked anxiety. Individuals may carry out repetitive behaviors or rituals and become more anxious if they cannot complete them. OCD, thus, was categorized as an anxiety disorder. For this, the present paper will trace the mutual relation between anxiety as a trigger of OCD behaviors in John Green's cancer narrative. The Fault in Our Stars. Green supplies background context on illness narratives to highlight important issues such as the correct and realistic portrayal of cancer, particularly in the lived experience of adolescents. As this study found, the main characters of the novel, Hazel, Augustus, and Isaac experience feelings of excessive anxiety and try to neutralize their anxieties. They use many defense mechanisms such as fixation, rationalization, denial and acting out to calm down their anxieties.

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* هذا البحث مستل من رسالة الماجستير

"Conceptualizing Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: A Psychoanalytic Study of Selected Novels by John Green"

آليات الدفاع المتصاعدة: القلق المفرط وسلوكيات اضطراب الوسواس القهري

في رواية جون جرين "الخطأ في نجومنا"

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الخلاصة

يعاني الأشخاص المصابون باضطراب الوسواس القهري من أفكار تطفلية منتظمة جدًا يمكن أن تسبب القلق وتتداخل مع الحياة اليومية . يؤدي الارتباط القوي بين الأفكار المتطفلة والسلوكيات القهرية إلى قلق ملحوظ . قد يقوم الأفراد بسلوكيات أو طقوس متكررة ويصبحون أكثر قلقًا إذا لم يتمكنوا من إكمالها . وبالتالي، تم تصنيف الوسواس القهري على أنه اضطراب القلق .

ولهذا السبب، ستتتبع الورقة البحثية الحالية العلاقة المتبادلة بين القلق كمحفز لسلوكيات الوسواس القهري في رواية جون جرين عن السرطان، الخطأ في نجومنا. يوفر جرين سياقًا أساسيًا لسرد المرض من أجل تسليط الضوء على قضايا مهمة مثل التصوير الدقيق والواقعي للسرطان، وخاصة في التجربة الحياتية للمراهقين. كما وجدت هذه الدراسة، فإن الشخصيات الرئيسية في الرواية، هيزل وأغسطس وإسحاق، يشعرون بمشاعر القلق المفرط ويحاولون تحييد مخاوفهم، يستخدمون العديد من آليات الدفاع مثل التثبيت والتبرير والإنكار والعمل لتهدئة مخاوفهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوسواس القهري، القلق، جون جرين، الخطأ في نجومنا، آليات الدفاع

1. Introduction

The inclusion of a self-defense mechanism is an integral part inside Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Freud posited that self-defense mechanisms are personalized strategies employed by individuals to manage and mitigate anxiety-induced manifestations. Freud sees defense mechanisms as "tactics developed by ego to cope with the sub consciousness and superego" (Griez, 2015, p. 3). All defense mechanisms have the common characteristic that individuals are completely unaware of their use of such mechanisms, and these mechanisms must somehow change or disregard reality. Defense mechanisms refer to unconscious psychological processes that become triggered in situations that are perceived as frightening or anxiety-provoking. The feeling of threat arising from internal causes, or the inner realm of the ego motivates individuals to seek respite or mitigate its intensity. In this context, defense mechanisms serve as intermediaries between internal emotional conflicts and external sources of pressure (Cooper, 2001, p.7). A defense mechanism is an unconscious psychological mechanism that alleviates anxiety caused by stimuli that are undesirable or potentially detrimental. Defense mechanisms or coping styles are automatic psychological processes that safeguard an individual from anxiety and the awareness of internal or external threats or stresses. Individuals are often oblivious of the operation of these processes. The individual's response to emotional conflicts and internal and external stressors is mediated by defense mechanisms. Depending on the situation and the frequency with which a defense mechanism is employed, defense mechanisms may have either healthy or ill outcomes. They are psychological strategies employed by the unconscious mind to manipulate, deny, or distort reality to defend against anxious emotions and undesirable impulses and to keep one's sense

of self-schema (Coleman, 1994, p. 7). Munn holds that when our ego is unable to meet the demands of reality, we employ defense mechanisms. The unconscious mind employs these psychological strategies to manipulate, deny, or distort reality to keep a socially acceptable self-image. Typically, healthy individuals use these mechanisms throughout their lives. It becomes pathological only when its persistent use results in maladaptive behavior that negatively affects the individual's physical and/or mental health. The purpose of ego defense mechanisms is to safeguard the mind/self/ego from anxiety and/or social sanctions and/or to provide a refuge from a situation with which one cannot currently cope. Defense mechanisms are implicit coping mechanisms that alleviate anxiety caused by threats posed by undesirable impulses (Munn, 1997, p. 34). Psychologists have classified different defense mechanisms in several ways. Some of them put defense mechanisms in ten categories: fixation, denial, projection, reaction formation, regression, repression, formation, fantasy, acting out, displacement, negativism, emotional insulation, undoing and rationalization. These defense mechanisms are learned and designed to tackle self-devaluation, anxiety and hurt and run automatically at habitual levels. These are usually exercised in combination instead of singly and quite often they are combined with task-oriented behavior. They are largely necessary to soften failure, alleviate anxiety and hurt and protect feelings of significance adequacy and worth. Normally, they are adjective reactions but sometimes they seriously interfere with the effective resolution of stress (Ahuja and Batra 1999, p. 3).

2. Literary Analysis of “The Fault in Our Stars”

It is widely acknowledged that there is one way of thinking that consistently differentiates people who suffer from OCD from those normal people who show usual anxiety. Since OCD was categorized as an anxiety disorder, this chapter will trace the mutual relation between anxiety as a trigger of OCD behaviors. People with OCD experience very regular intrusive thoughts that can cause anxiety and interfere with everyday life. Trying to neutralize them sets up a powerful association between intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors leads to a marked anxiety. Individuals may carry out repetitive behaviors or rituals and become more anxious if they cannot complete them. For this, Enright sees that “normal intrusive thoughts are misinterpreted by OCD sufferers as signals of danger to self or others. This misinterpretation leads to intense anxiety which the sufferer seeks to escape by trying to avoid the unwanted thought or neutralize it with compulsive rituals” (Enright 2006, p.12). John Green’s treatment of Young’s Narrative continues in his (2012) *The Fault in Our Stars*. Although many different stories can prove the adolescent experiences, *The Fault in Our Stars* is well-regarded for capturing the adolescent voice, in that, Green has been called “the Teen Whisperer” (Talbot, 2014, p.2). This literary work gives voice to the unique and complex factors confronting an adolescent with a life-limiting illness and lays bare the conflict between an adolescent's fierce desire to become independent and their unmistakable reliance on their family to meet their medical, and even social needs.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

The novel supplies background context on illness narratives to emphasize significant issues, such as the correct and realistic portrayal of cancer, especially in the lived experience of adolescents. When a narrative of illness is a first-person account of a patient's lived experience of illness and its treatment, the text is often privileged as an argentic and

therapeutic work, and its veracity stays uncontested. As Couser notes, works of this kind typically perform the work of “recovering variously dysfunctional bodies from domination by others’ authority and discourse... and thus convert the passive object into active subject” (1997, p. 291). In underscoring because such texts have value, Frank contends that “through their stories, the ill create empathic bonds between themselves and their listeners” (Frank, 1995, p. xii).

3.1. Fixation as a defense mechanism for coping with illness

In *The Fault in Our Stars*, all main characters use defense mechanisms to calm down their anxieties by exercising certain ritual acts excessively. Fixation is notable self-defense mechanism that is used by Hazel Lancaster. Fixation “refers to a persistent focus of the id’s pleasure, seeking for energies” (Hock, 2000, p.44). Fixation occurs when a person develops an obsessive attachment to something because they feel unsafe when doing something new; as a result, they prefer to engage in old routines or innocuous activities from their comfort zones. This mechanism can be activated by a strong feeling of perplexity or vulnerability (Berger, 2004, p.56). Ever since receiving a diagnosis of thyroid cancer, Hazel has diligently engaged in daily reading of the literary work titled “An Imperial Affliction.” Her affinity for the work has developed because of its portrayal of narratives centered around children afflicted with cancer. Hazel has a profound fondness for the central character, Anna, in the literary work, who, akin to Hazel, grapples with the affliction of cancer. In contrast to the other pediatric cancer patients portrayed in the novel, Anna diverges by setting up a charitable organization aimed at generating funds for the eradication of Cholera, rather than directing her philanthropic endeavors towards a cancer-related cause. She calls it “The Anna Foundation for People with Cancer Who Want to Cure Cholera” (Green, 2012, p. 36). Hazel’s preoccupation partly arises from her amazement at the abrupt conclusion of the story, occurring precisely during a phrase. Given the absence of a definitive conclusion in the novel, Hazel is no longer constrained in her imaginative speculation over the later events inside the narrative. The individual in question persistently contemplates the myriad potential outcomes that could befall the other characters within the literary work, including the conjecture that the narrative concludes due to the presumed death of Anna: *An Imperial Affliction* was hands-down my favorite novel, yet I rarely discussed it with anyone. Sometimes a book can instill such a strong conviction in its reader that they feel the world can’t be put back together until every single person on the planet has read it. There are some books, like *An Imperial Affliction*, that you just can’t brag about to your friends and family; they’re too personal and too unique for that. It wasn’t that Peter van Houten’s book was particularly insightful; rather, it was that he seemed to understand me in ways that defied logic. In the same manner that my physical form and mental processes are uniquely my, so too is *An Imperial Affliction* (Green 2012, p.26). When Hazel reads the same book repeatedly, it’s clear that she’s using fixation to cope. This could be a sign of Hazel’s insecurity. People become fixated when they prefer the known and safe aspects of a situation because they fear the unfamiliar. For this added reason, Hazel keeps returning to the same book: “And then I started reading *An Imperial Affliction* for the millionth time... I know it’s a very literary decision and everything and probably part of the reason I love the book so much, but there is something to recommend a story that ends” (Green, 2012, p.30).

3.2. Hazel's Rationalization as a Defense Mechanism for Seeking Normalcy

Hazel also uses rationalization as a defense mechanism to explain away her anxious thoughts and actions. Hazel continually gives more plausible and acceptable excuses for her actions to cover up the true motivations behind them. A human may resort to rationalization as a kind of self-protection when they try to explain away undesirable actions, ideas, or emotions by focusing instead on the conscious, rational explanations for them. A person's sense of security and confidence could be harmed if they internalize these interpretations and motivations. Those who rationalize know, at some level of awareness, that they have made a poor decision. So, they make up an explanation, or explanations, for their actions (Phaneuf, 2016, p.13). Hazel endeavors to supply a logical explanation for her illogical behavior or act in *The Fault in Our Stars*. Hazel, for instance, claims that she attends the support group and allows the nurse to inject her with medication to make her parents content. In reality, Hazel acts this way because, deep in her bones, she still wants to be a healthy teenager who relishes her adolescence and grows into a young woman without lung cancer: "I went to Support Group for the same reason that I had once allowed nurses with a mere eighteen months of graduate education to poison me with exotically named chemicals: I wanted to make my parents happy" (Green, 2012, p. 11). Hazel explains her participation in all these medical procedures, including the administration of drugs and injections, by claiming that her sole motivation is to make her parents happy. She is exerting herself in this manner because, deep down, she longs to have a fit physique and a life that is typical of a teenager. This motivation lies somewhere in the shadowy recesses of her inner personality. As she struggled with intrusive thoughts of causing damage to those around her, she also proved her awareness that her parents will not suffer after her death because she believes she will be forgotten like everyone else. He rationalizes that she is prepared to die, and she expresses gratitude because no one will remember her or the sorrow they endured for her. Fears also exist that her demise will emotionally harm her parents and cause them suffering. Thus, she reflects that: There will come a time, I said, "when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings still being to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this"—I gestured encompassing— "will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that's what everyone else does (Green, 2012, p. 13). Augustus Waters, a 17-year-old former basketball star who lost his leg to osteosarcoma, a type of cancer that affects the bones, is the other primary character of the novel. He lives in Indianapolis with his parents and attends a support group for cancer survivors. He introduces himself at Support Group meeting as follows: "My name is Augustus Waters," he said. "I'm seventeen. I had a little touch of osteosarcoma a year and a half ago, but I'm just here today at Isaac's request" (Green, 2012, p.17). From the first meeting, he falls for Hazel from first sight and thinks that she is the girl that is meant to be. In fact, Augustus is preoccupied with achieving greatness. He is concerned in life as well as death just like Hazel, but his concern comes out of his anxiety of dying without performing a heroic act in life. Augustus is the type

of character who appears traumatized and unable to deal with reality. Extremely disillusioned, he fears he may perish without any remembrance that would save him from oblivion. He declares: "Sometimes I dream that I'm writing a memoir. A memoir would be just the thing to keep me in the hearts and memories of my adoring public" (Green, 2012, p.117). Like Hazel, Augustus adopted the defense mechanisms to calm down his anxiety, about his feeling of oblivion. He obviously adopts the mechanism of denial. Denial according to McLeod is a "refusal to accept reality, thus blocking external events from awareness" (2020, p. 5). This defense mechanism is used when someone cannot handle a situation and it is just too much for his abilities. McLeod adds that "The person may respond by refusing to perceive it or by denying that it exists" (McLeod p. 5). Augustus acts like he is not sick; he likes enjoying life and driving the car like a mad person. He never cares about his bone cancer. He exercises many acts to deal with his anxieties. He travels with Hazel to meet her favorite author despite his health conditions. He counts on his sense of humor to forget his illness.

3.3. Augustus's Cigarette as a Symbol of Control and Denial of Illness

Augustus's cigarette is a very strong manifestation for his denial to his condition as ill person. It is a way for him to metaphorically control his own fate. Putting cigarette in his mouth becomes a ritual by which he can overcome his anxieties. The unlit cigarettes allow him to play with death without dying as a result. It gives him confidence but doesn't change the reality that he has no control over his death. When Hazel got angry at Augustus for putting a cigarette in his mouth, he told her that the cigarette was a metaphor. He explained that having the cigarette in his mouth without smoking gave him power over death cancer: "I don't smoke," he explained, the cigarette dancing in his mouth as he spoke. "But—" "It's a metaphor," I explained. "He puts the killing thing in his mouth but doesn't give it the power to kill him." The stewardess was flummoxed for only a moment. "Well, that metaphor is prohibited on today's flight," she said. Gus nodded and rejoined the cigarette to its pack (Green, 2012, p.97). Hazel was frustrated because cigarettes are a constant reminder of her inability to breathe properly. Despite this, Augustus manages to take her by surprise by revealing that he overrules death. He asserts that the fact that he smokes cigarettes will not have a negative impact on his health because they are not lightened: "They don't kill you unless you light them," he said as Mom arrived at the curb. "And I've never lit one. It's a metaphor, see: You put the killing thing right between your teeth, but you don't give it the power to do its killing" (Green, 2012, p.17).

Maintaining control by not lighting the cigarette despite having it in his mouth for an extended period. Augustus's smoking becomes a metaphor for his attempt to ignore his problems and regain a sense of control. However, Augustus uses the smokes to feel in charge in the face of a variety of worries, and they become a form of control for him beyond only his sickness. As Augustus's cancer progresses and he loses control of his own fate, the number of cigarettes in the narrative gradually decreases. Hazel discovers Augustus at a petrol station shortly before his death, trying to buy cigarettes; he can no longer walk on his own, is incontinent, and has vomited on himself because of his cancer. His current state, along with his failed attempt to buy cigarettes, shows that he has finally given up to his cancer and is no longer able to alter the course of his life. Here, Hazel reflects that "The skin of his abdomen was warm and bright red (Green, 2012, p118). Other characters besides Hazel and Augustus

also have cancer, including Isaac, Lida, and Michael. Isaac, who is 17 years old, has eye cancer. At first glance, he seems to have one glass eye, but eventually, he goes entirely blind. As a result, Monica, his girlfriend, broke her commitment to always be at his side and left him. The end of his relationship highlights one way in which serious illness can complicate a person's coming-of-age experiences. In working through Isaac shares his agony with support group to get relief from his pain: Yeah, said Isaac. "I'm Isaac. I'm seventeen. And it's looking like I must get surgery in a couple weeks, after which I'll be blind. Not to complain or anything because I know a lot of us has it worse, but yeah, I mean, being blind does sort of suck. My girlfriend helps, though. And friends like Augustus." He nodded toward the boy, who now had a name. "So, yeah," Isaac continued. He was looking at his hands, which he'd folded into each other like the top of a tepee. There's nothing you can do about it (Green, 2012, p.10).

4. Isaac's experiences in "The Fault in Our Stars"

The tragedy of Isaac and Monica relationship comes in with the irony of Isaac and Monica's word "always" which soon is shown to be clearly false when Monica breaks up with Isaac and refuses to visit him, unable to cope with his illness. Like Hazel and Augustus, Isaac experiences anxiety. His anxiety comes from his feeling that people consider him as infected person. Acting out is Isaac's way of protecting himself. The goal of the acting-out technique is to help the person set up a balance between their present and their history. He must also undergo the same transitional events that first affected them (Schick, 2011, p. 6). The novel starts with Isaac having one glass eye. He says to the Support group that he will be completely blind because his other eye is damaged by cancer: "And his eyes were the problem. He had some fantastically improbable eye cancer...From what I could gather on the rare occasions when Isaac eye cancer...From what I could gather on the rare occasions when Isaac shared with the group, a recurrence had placed his remaining eye in mortal peril" (Green, 2011, p.10). Here, Isaac pretends that he is satisfied with his condition, but this reflects his state anxiety. He calms down his anxieties by repeating ritual phrases of satisfaction.

Green uses such a mechanism with Isaac to show his fake acceptance of his condition of being completely blind. He even makes jokes about himself when Hazel visits him in the hospital after his surgery. He asked her to lean over to touch her face just like blind people do: "Oh," he said. "Yeah, people keep saying my other senses will improve to compensate, but CLEARLY NOT YET. Hi, Support Group Hazel. Come over here so I can examine your face with my hands and see deeper into your soul than a sighted person ever could" (Green, 2011, p.45). Here, it seems like Isaac is trying to find a place where he can live with his blind eyes, he depends on his sense of humor to feel revealed and comfortable from anxiety state.

5. Conclusion

Anxiety is a negative emotional state marked by false obsessives that need to be calmed down with certain acts and behaviors. John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* is a fiction written in the context of the unpleasant suffering of cancer patients which uncovers the struggle of Hazel, Augustus, and Isaac, who despite being teenagers must undergo serious suffering caused by an attack of harsh, unbearable illness. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, all main characters use defense mechanisms to calm down their anxieties by exercising certain ritual acts excessively.

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