

**“You’re Not the River. You’re the City”:  
Teenage Existentialism through Mental Health and Wealth  
in John Green’s *Turtles All the Way Down***

John Green is no stranger to young adult literature; his latest book, *Turtles All the Way Down*, was published on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017 and is already proving to be a hit with rave reviews. It was no secret that *Turtles All the Way Down* would cover sensitive, difficult topics, a move John Green has practiced in many of his works. Prior to the book’s publication, Green has been transparent in communicating that this novel follows 16-year-old Aza Holmes, a girl struggling with her Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. The theme of mental illness is woven throughout the book beautifully, but readers may not have expected the accompanying theme of material wealth, which is also explored skillfully throughout the novel. Analyzing wealth in both material and abstract ways as it relates to Aza and her romantic partner Davis throughout the text reveals complicated notions of teenage identity building and meaning making through grief, love, loss, and forgiveness.

Through the metaphor of water, *Turtles All the Way Down* explores Aza and Davis’s existential crises: who are they if they are just defined by factors they can’t control? The wealth disparities between Aza and her friends are significant. Aza and Daisy live on one side of the infamous beautiful, yet shallow and polluted, White River, and they traverse to the other side as they try to solve the mystery of Davis’s father’s disappearance. The White River is full of dichotomies: simultaneously a separation and a connection, simultaneously beautiful and polluted, simultaneously useful and useless. As Aza and Davis challenge their definitions of selfhood, they recognize that they, too, can be dichotomies—and even more.

This paper will analyze metaphorical wealth in relation to teenage selfhood and existentialism using a theoretical framework of Gergen’s social construction of self. By thinking about the river as a metaphor for Aza and Davis’s metaphorical wealth, readers can better understand the complicated identity factors at play in *Turtles All the Way Down*.