

SPIRITUAL REALMS IN JOHN GREEN'S *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*

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ABSTRACT

John Green's *Looking for Alaska* analyses the tumultuous journey of adolescence, delving into the visceral aspects of life with a poignancy that is both haunting and profoundly resonant. The analysis of reading builds on the work of reader-response theorists and educators who view literature as a transitional object. The paper focuses on the enigmatic nature of existence, where moments of euphoria and despair intertwine to form the fabric of human lives. It argues that the intangible mystery of the spirit is a viral dynamic in reading. Through the metaphorical lens of a labyrinth this paper analyses the rational thinking required in the spiritual component of reading.

Keywords: Suffering, Labyrinth, Loss, Spirit

Literature is a form of human expression in words. American literature is a broad term that applies to any literature that was written in the region that is now the United States of America. American writing can be broadly split into many different movements that are based both on the time they were written in and on the aesthetic and cultural trends that informed a given piece of literature. Understanding American literature requires a thorough dive into American history and culture, with particular attention paid to the numerous cultures and ethnicities that make up American society today. America's literary tradition is rich and highly varied. It features influences from various parts of the world and it is still evolving today. Some of the famous American Contemporary writers are Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, Stephen Edwin King and Bret Easton Ellis.

John Michael Green is an American author, YouTuber, podcaster, and philanthropist. His books have more than 50 million copies in print worldwide, including *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), which is one of the best-selling books of all time. Green's rapid rise to fame and idiosyncratic voice are credited with creating a major shift in the young adult fiction market. Green is also well known for his work in online video, most notably his YouTube ventures with his brother Hank Green.

Looking for Alaska follows the novel's main character and narrator Miles Halter, or 'Pudge,' to boarding school where he goes to seek a 'great perhaps,' the famous last words of Francois Rabelais. Throughout the 'Before' section of the novel, Miles and his friends Chip

‘The Colonel’ Martin, Alaska Young, and Takumi Hikohito grow very close and the section culminates in Alaska’s death. In the second half of the novel, Miles and his friends work to discover the missing details of the night Alaska died. While struggling to reconcile Alaska’s death, Miles grapples with the last words of Simon Bolivar and the meaning of life, leaving the conclusion to these topics unresolved.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Green includes many details that can be interpreted as having a spiritual/religious connection. Thematically, he includes religion and explores how three world religions address suffering. His novel also addresses questions about the meaning or purpose of life and its contradictions and ambiguities. These questions are shown to be intrinsic to religion, spirituality and humanism. Structurally, he divides his story into two parts, a critical element in his involvement of the reader to make meaning. In the first half of the book, entitled “Before”, the narrator, Miles “Pudge” Halter, sets off to a private boarding school located in the heart of evangelical Christianity — Birmingham, Alabama. Pudge is in search of something he describes as a “Great Perhaps,” (24) and shortly after arriving, he meets the beautiful and troubled Alaska, who is central to the novel’s representation of spirit.

In an early scene Alaska introduces one of the novel’s key themes when she poses the philosophical question that recurs throughout: “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?” (27). More questions that are intrinsic to both religion and the spiritual realms are raised in the World Religions class. Throughout the first half of this novel, Green builds tension and indeterminately foreshadows the crisis that takes place at the narrative’s midpoint — the death of Alaska. In the second half of the novel, entitled “After,” the search for meaning and questions of suffering are no longer merely theoretical. Pudge and his roommate agonise over both her death and their sense of guilt for failing to prevent it. They, and other characters in the story, walk the labyrinthine path of grief and loss until they reach an acceptance of, and insight into, its effect on their lives.

Green describes what he is doing in this novel as “preaching.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to preach means to utter a serious or earnest exhortation, in attempt to give moral or religious advice in a self-righteous, condescending, or obtrusive way. Apart from ‘preaching,’ which has a strong traditional religious connection, Green broadens the representation of religion and the spirit using indeterminacy, a concept first introduced by Wolfgang Iser. Green’s indeterminacy involves the placing of open-ended details within Alaska that invite the reader’s participation in making meaning. In order to focus on matters of religious and spiritual life, Green begins by placing his story in a setting that epitomises fundamentalist religion. Such religion has three areas of concern — belief, conduct and membership. This Christian model asks: What do I believe? How should I

believe? Who am I? The first question is answered with doctrine and dogma, the second one with rules and techniques, and the third with membership requirements that emphasise a personal commitment. Green's way of conveying this particular religious view is not explicit, but rather, indeterminate.

Setting is one of Green's indeterminate details. The geographical location of the school Green chooses for this story allows him to build connections to religion without referencing it directly. Early in the story, the reader is introduced to the stifling heat that one encounters fifteen miles south of Birmingham, where Culver Creek Preparatory School is situated. The heat of the sun "burned through clothes" and made him "fear hellfire" (12). Pudge imagines a conversation with a fellow student in which he jokingly makes reference to the extreme heat: "I wouldn't be used to this heat if I were from Hades" (14). When Pudge's roommate takes him on a tour of the school grounds, he describes the swan in the near-by lake as "the spawn of Satan" (24). Green's language around setting also offers a connection to the conservative Christianity of the southern United States. Ever since the Puritans landed in North America, believing that God had singled them out, an attitude of being separate and apart has prevailed in the history of Christianity in the United States.

The World Religions class is the impetus that leads Pudge to move beyond, or bridge his insistence on finding answers and move slowly towards an acceptance of what seems senseless. Near the end of the novel, Dr. Hyde asks his students to share an example of a Buddhist koan, a riddle that is intended to help one achieve enlightenment. Pudge chooses the following one:

I wrote about this guy Banzan. He was walking through the market one day when he overheard someone ask a butcher for his best piece of meat. The butcher answered, "Everything in my shop is the best. You cannot find a piece of meat that is not the best." Upon hearing this, Banzan realized that there is no best and no worst, that those judgments have no real meaning because there is only what is, and poof he reached enlightenment. (232-233)

Pudge notes that he is not convinced "enlightenment struck like lightning," yet he still longs for enlightenment with regard to his own tragic loss (233). He has not abandoned his search for answers. When Dr. Hyde takes the World Religions class outside, he metaphorically links religion to life and weaves them together. Indeed, Green uses this natural setting to overtly connect hope to both religion and the personal search for an explanation of suffering. Hyde begins by suggesting Muhammad, Jesus and Buddha have taught a message of radical hope. He then brings his students into this territory of religion with the question he chooses for their final exam: "'What is your cause for hope?'" (256). By

doing so, this teacher traverses the divide between the private and the public aspects of religion and enters the territory of the spirit.

In *Looking for Alaska*, spirit is developed in a similar way to religion, indeterminately, with a focus on exploring life's meaning, wrestling with suffering and loss, and seeking connection. Green's representation of spirit expands the modern view that separates it from religion. Early in the novel Pudge announces he is going to boarding school to seek a "Great Perhaps" (24). For him this means leaving his "minor life" in Florida for the great possibilities he imagines can be found at school in Alabama (9). Pudge's inclusion of the names of famous people, like John F. Kennedy, James Joyce, and Humphrey Bogart, who have also attended boarding school, implies that his future holds grandiosity. The realities Pudge encounters at this school, however, contradict his expectation.

The question of suffering is introduced early when we learn the narrator's idea of a "Great Perhaps" is taken from the dying words of poet Francois Rabelais. Dying implicitly raises questions about life's meaning and the suffering it sets in motion. Last words provide room for a meaningful resolution to a life, yet realistically, they can never be conclusively determined. Green builds this idea using the names of famous people, the last words of some, and titles of books, poems, and screenplays. The symbolic effect achieved by these dying words underscores the ambiguities surrounding death. Some of the titles, such as "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Final Days," not only convey finality, but also imply impending loss and suffering (10, 33).

'Suffering' is a word that is used to describe many different experiences, and over time, the root meaning of the word has been lost. As Helen Luke points out, "suffer" comes from the Latin verb '*ferre*' which means 'to bear' or 'to carry.' The first part of the word derives from the Latin prefix 'sub' and means 'under.' Thus, suffering may seem to support whatever is brought to bear on it, a very different interpretation than the one encountered in our world view, which emphasizes weight bearing down on rather than offering a strong foundation for us. Green gradually develops a picture of suffering that captures this root essence. He builds this image gradually. In "Before," suffering is primarily directed to the outward conduct of characters. That changes in "After" as Green indirectly reveals how suffering becomes a support from which a strong spirit can emerge.

That suffering is uncomfortable territory is implied in the phrase "the not restful sleep," included in the first sentence of "After" (165). Mr. Starnes raps on students' doors and tells them "to go to the gym" for an announcement about a terrible accident. When Pudge insists, "We can't start without Alaska," this teacher drops his policeman persona momentarily and cries:

He was crying noiselessly. Tears just rolled from his eyes to his chin and then fell onto his corduroy pants. He stared at [Pudge], but it was not the Look of Doom. His eyes blinking tears down his face, the Eagle looked, for all the world, sorry. (167)

Pudge now realises what has happened without hearing what Mr. Stames has to say, but he is unwilling to believe it. Alaska has been killed in a terrible car accident. Shock is the first response of the student body and in the silence, Pudge thinks, “It’s all my fault” (167). Pudge realises he feels unwell and runs outside to vomit. When he returns, he sees his roommate, who is screaming, “I’m so sorry” over and over. Chip, ‘The Colonel,’ is being comforted by Madame O’Malley, who reassures him that he has nothing about which to be sorry. But Pudge thinks, “If only she knew” (169). Madame O’Malley, like many adults, is quick to respond to the outer behaviour yet fails to understand the complex nature of the agony within this student.

After memorizing the capitals of the countries of the world, the Colonel takes an eighty-two mile walk, during which he memorises the populations of the countries of the world. Pudge reviews the last words of car accident victims including Princess Diana’s, “Oh God, what’s happened?” and James Dean’s, “They’ve got to see us” (171). Fruitless attempts to rationalise this horror are undertaken from such false assurances as “At least it was instant. At least there wasn’t any pain,” to compulsive lists of possible scenarios intended to uncover what really happened (175). All of these keep the sting of grief at a distance.

Green uses the World Religions class to introduce the inescapable truth that the only way out of suffering is to enter fully into it. As Dr. Hyde tells the students, everyone, at some point in their lives, loses their way due to suffering and feels as though they are in a maze. Hyde thereby highlights the universality of suffering. What Hyde also implies is that the journey into suffering is a process that winds, meanders, and confuses. As Pudge, the Colonel, and their close circle of friends take this winding path, they go into the heart of pain. Once there, everything feels different. They discover that suffering and grief have not destroyed or separated them; rather they have strengthened them and their relationship with each other.

Authentic relationship, like suffering, is a process which involves both our external and internal worlds. *Looking for Alaska* offers us a view of the outer and inner landscapes that shape relationship and the challenging path that must be taken to bridge them. The “Before,” and “After” structure of the story provides a way to bridge the two faces of connection. In “Before,” the outer landscape of relationship is the focus. Pudge’s interactions with family and friends mirror the superficiality of social encounters in the public realm. In

“After,” we journey with the narrator into the inner landscape of relating where intimacy takes root.

Pudge’s changing view of, and relationship with, others is marked by his guilt. When the Weekday Warriors, who are mere acquaintances of Alaska, express deep grief about her death, the Colonel becomes angry. Pudge, however, is willing to accept their grief because “everyone else had a better excuse to grieve than we did — after all they hadn’t killed her” (190). Pudge’s relationship with his parents begins to shift during his first telephone conversation with them after Alaska’s death. He realises just how much he needs them to simply pick up the phone. This exchange between Pudge and his parents conveys the reality of the loneliness inherent in the journey into suffering. The path of grief must be travelled alone, yet it also offers the company of others on this same path. The Colonel, Takumi, and Lara have been important parts of Alaska’s circle of friends and remind Pudge he is not alone in his grief:

I realise what Takumi meant the day we’d showered together - I may have kissed her, but I really didn’t have a monopoly on Alaska; the Colonel and I weren’t the only ones who cared about her, and weren’t alone in trying to figure out how she died and why. (232)

When Pudge is finally able to be completely honest with Takumi and Lara about the part he and the Colonel played in Alaska’s accident, he feels even less alone. Pudge’s honesty engenders trust and brings these friends closer. Together they come to realise that an ongoing spiritual relationship with their dead friend is possible through their memories of Alaska.

There is still one vital piece missing in the growing intimacy Pudge has with his friends. Slowly this missing piece emerges. One day Takumi confesses, “We all let her go, really” (218). The vagueness surrounding Takumi’s comment leaves Pudge wondering what it really means. The meaning of this confession only becomes clear after Takumi takes an early departure at the end of school term without saying goodbye to his friends. He leaves a letter explaining his sudden departure. Reading this note, Pudge learns that Takumi also saw Alaska on the night of her death and failed to prevent her from getting into her automobile drunk. Pudge realises that he is not alone in keeping secrets: “There were so many of us who would have to live with things done and things left undone that day” (259). The realisation that all of us make fatal mistakes is the key that intimately connects Pudge to his friend and himself. Vulnerability strengthens rather than weakens Pudge’s relationship with himself and others. This insight bridges Pudge’s internal and external worlds, helps him feel more connected to others, and brings him to an acceptance of life’s unexplainable suffering: “Those awful things are survivable” (262).



In *Looking for Alaska* Green gives us a portrait of the spiritual terrain that bridges the divide between religion and spirit in the twenty-first century world. He creates a broad view of the spiritual domain using indeterminate or subtle details that require the participation of the reader to achieve their meaning. Green's indeterminate style allows him to reveal not only the connections that exist within religion and spirit but also the dichotomies.

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