

Charting Identity In John Green’s “Looking For Alaska”: An Analysis Using Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the development of adolescent identity in Young Adult fiction. The critical lens used is stage five of Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory. John Green’s Looking For Alaska is the model book for the research. The research has been divided into the elements of Identity Versus Role Confusion and Self Clarification, the former involving James E Marcia’s extension of Erikson’s theory through his proposed Identity Status Interview (Marcia, 1966) and the latter utilising Taubenheim’s application of Erikson’s theory to Adolescent Self-clarification in Adolescent Fiction (Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 2003). The paper culminates into a discussion that analyses a more general evaluation of the characters’ coming of age, proving the accuracy of the theory in predicting how adolescent identity will develop in young adult fiction.

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I. Introduction:

Identity is an intricate interplay of individual characteristics, societal influences, and personal experiences, dynamically shaped over time. During adolescence an individual’s perception of himself and his role in society undergo revolutionary changes, resulting in him/her developing an acceptable or a rejected self-image (Taubenheim, 1979), effectively defining their years ahead. Narrating the lives of characters at this vulnerable juncture, young adult fiction often uses common, everyday settings and character personalities as a means of relatability with its audience, often using literature, music and friend groups to portray the development in the characters’ identity. Young Adult fiction delves deeply into adolescent character development, vividly explores elements of Erik Erikson’s defining Psychosocial Theory, portraying characters in the throes of identity and formation (Cart, 2006) and identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1968) and often culminating the narrative through the self-clarification of the characters’ identities or its lack thereof (Taubenheim, 1979). While substantial research has delved into the theme of identity and its manifestation in numerous literary works, there is a dearth of focused analysis on the development of adolescent identity in Young Adult Fiction, especially for John Green’s ‘Looking For Alaska’. This paper aims to address this gap in existing literature, analysing, evaluating and interpreting the almost oxymoronic identity development of the two central characters, Alaska and Miles, in John Green’s Looking For Alaska using elements of stage five of Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory.

II. Literature Review

Concept of Identity in Adolescents

Adolescence stands as one of the most transformative stages in human development. The period is marked not only by physical growth but also by psychological and social transitions. One of the primary tasks of adolescence is the development of a coherent sense of identity (Blyth & Traeger, 1983). As explored by Grotevant and Cooper (1985), familial interactions can play a significant role in shaping this sense of identity. Their research indicates that patterns of interactions within family units can either support or hinder the development of identity exploration during adolescence. The way adolescents perceive their relationship dynamics, especially within their immediate families, can significantly influence their self-concept and subsequently, their identity.

Previous conceptualizations of identity brought up notions of a singular, rational, and confined self—one that possessed agency and autonomy (Alvermann, 2001, p. 678). On the contrary, contemporary postmodern perspectives on identity acknowledge its intricate and diverse nature (Bean, 2001). Profound global transformations, most notably the globalisation of markets, present a formidable challenge to deeply ingrained ideologies and values concerning labour and family (Langhorne, 2001). Identity formation is profoundly impacted by media images of advertising and commerce, which permeate our lives in a world of perpetual upheaval and change.

In another noteworthy study, Brim (1965) presented the concept of adolescent personality as systems of self and others. In this system, identity is shaped not just by one’s perception of the self but also by how one

perceives others and is perceived by them. The interplay between these perceptions offers a complex, multi-dimensional perspective on adolescent identity development, suggesting it's not just an internal process but is significantly influenced by external factors.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory remains a cornerstone in understanding human development across the lifespan. Particularly relevant to the context of adolescence is Erikson's fifth stage, wherein individuals grapple with the crisis of identity versus role confusion (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005). Erikson posited that a successful navigation of this crisis leads to a strong sense of self, while failure results in a weak sense of self and role confusion.

During Erikson's fifth stage, "Sense Identity," the adolescent questions previously established values, learned tasks, and authority figures that were developed and/or respected in the preceding stage and poses the query "Who am I?" The conflict of adolescence is between identity and role diffusion (i.e., deciding whether to change roles to fit different situations or to remain true to oneself). When the adolescent recognises, chooses, accepts, and integrates previously acquired tasks and values from an earlier stage in order to construct a distinct, acceptable image of himself or herself, this conflict is resolved. Failure to fully resolve this conflict may result in challenges for the adolescent in terms of self-clarification, which is considered the zenith of identity. Erikson (1963, p. 261) characterises this phase of existence as disorderly and labels adolescent development a "psychological revolution" during which adolescents are "now preoccupied with how to reconcile the roles and abilities they cultivated earlier with the occupational prototypes of the day and how they appear to others in comparison to how they truly feel" (Taubenheim, 1979).

During the fifth stage, adolescents engage in a process of self-discovery and societal integration, during which they assess their current skill set in relation to the requirements of particular professions. The adolescent now transfers allegiance from the family to the peer group, which assumes the role of the adolescent's authoritative figure and source of validation (Taubenheim, 1979).

Peer groups develop cliques as a means of safeguarding members from the influence of adult authority figures and the societal pressures that they face. Adolescents select individuals and/or groups from the "now scene" to idolise during this period. Precedence among adolescents is placed on their peer group relationships. The young individual becomes entangled in adolescent love at this juncture, wherein the adolescent is seeking an individual who embodies his or her qualities (Taubenheim, 1979).

Hamman and Hendricks (2005) further elaborated on the importance of Erikson's theory in the educational realm, emphasizing that educators equipped with this knowledge can provide more nuanced support to their adolescent students. In another significant application of Erikson's theory, Taubenheim (1979) explored how young adult fiction, when viewed through the lens of psychosocial theory, can offer insights into the identity struggles of its characters. By doing so, literature can serve as a valuable tool, offering adolescents both a reflection of their struggles and potential solutions.

Identity in Young Adult Fiction

The realm of young adult fiction has long been recognized as not merely a genre of entertainment but also a medium that mirrors the complexities of adolescent life (Bean & Moni, 2003). Characters in these novels often navigate challenges that are relatable to young readers, from societal expectations to personal dilemmas. Bean and Moni (2003) delve deep into the role of young adult fiction in developing critical literacy. By exposing readers to diverse narratives, these novels enable adolescents to challenge societal norms, question established beliefs, and in the process, shape their identities.

Young adult literature of the twenty-first century, targeted at persons aged 12 to 20, provides an exceptional perspective on societal dilemmas and conflicts. The primary factors contributing to its allure are the immediate nature of first-person narration and the distinctive perspective provided by the adolescent protagonist (Herz & Gallo, 1996).

Young adult novels offer a conceptual framework for adolescents to navigate through real-life challenges such as racism, pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice, due to the fact that they address topics that are pertinent to this demographic (Bean and Moni, 2003).

Young adult novel characters reflect and struggle with issues that are intimately familiar to the readers' own adolescent experiences (Bean & Rigoni, 2001). Character identity and value concerns lie at the core of each theme (Bean and Moni, 2003).

Taubenheim (1979) further highlights the profound impact of adolescent fiction in aiding identity formation. She posits that by resonating with the characters and their journeys, readers can undergo a process of self-clarification, recognizing and addressing their identity concerns.

The realm of young adult fiction has seen extensive research concerning its portrayal of adolescent identity. Works by authors such as J.K. Rowling, Suzanne Collins, and Stephenie Meyer have been extensively

dissected to understand the nuanced presentation of adolescent struggles, including their quest for identity (Bean & Moni, 2003; Taubenheim, 1979). These novels often mirror the socio-cultural challenges adolescents face in the real world, making them relatable and instrumental in the identity formation process of their readers.

John Green, a contemporary luminary in young adult fiction, has penned several novels that resonate deeply with the adolescent psyche. His works, like "The Fault in Our Stars" and "Paper Towns", have been analyzed for their themes of love, loss, and coming-of-age. However, "Finding Alaska", despite its rich tapestry of characters and profound insights into the adolescent mind, remains relatively underexplored in academic research, especially in terms of its contribution to adolescent identity development.

"Finding Alaska" offers a raw and authentic perspective on the complexities of growing up, the dilemmas of right versus wrong, and the journey to self-discovery. The characters grapple with profound philosophical questions, existential angst, and the challenges of interpersonal relationships, making it a potential treasure trove for analyzing the intricacies of adolescent identity formation.

While several studies have recognized the importance of young adult fiction in shaping and reflecting adolescent identity (Bean & Moni, 2003; Taubenheim, 1979), a discernible gap exists in the literature when it comes to a comprehensive analysis of "Finding Alaska" in this context. This presents an opportunity for researchers to delve into this novel, shedding light on its unique perspective on adolescence and its potential impact on the identity development of its readers.

Background

Experienced in their high school at the Culver Creek boarding school, in Alabama, Miles and Alaska are two juxtaposing identities. At the outset Miles is cocooned inward and Alaska is the "larger than life creative force." But as the days at Culver Creek wear on, John Green expertly explores the depth of adolescent identity, exemplifying the subdued feelings of Alaska through motifs like her religion class and her contemplation of Simon Bolivar's (fictitious) last words, which are emblematic not only of the existential crises that Alaska faces, which she confronts with Miles, but also giving way the philosophical and characteristic coming of age of Miles. As one grows to accept and love himself, the other spirals to her own death.

Analysis

Identity before joining Culver Creek High School (Fourth stage of identity development)

Alaska's background is shrouded in mystery except for the tragic recounting of the death of her mother and a queer anecdote about her most recent summer holiday.

In the chapter *Two days before*, Alaska first informs the readers and Miles of her 'happiest day,' which was a seemingly uneventful day where her mother took her to the zoo, but soon makes it evident why that day was her happiest when she recounts the worst day of her life to be the very next day when her mother died, simultaneously acknowledging the guilt that her inaction to her mother's aneurysm probably killed her, and that her father too, in a fit that he almost instantly disguised, expressed his agony at the same inability of hers.

We understand through these events that Alaska has built an image of herself as somewhat of a "let down," an image that can be observed to have perpetuated throughout Alaska's time at Culver Creek through her lines "God, how many times can I fuck up?." The perpetuation of self-image is an observed trend (Wylie (1979, p. 21), "the bulk of the studies...show no association of age and self-regard scores."

Moreover, we observe that Alaska's character is complex and often contradictory. She is simultaneously drawn to and repelled by the idea of a home, a stable and safe space. This is also shown in her pursuit of reading wherein she loves to read but would rather leave it for later, presently choosing decadent pleasures instead. The culmination of this contradictory and complex character is in the contrast between her content and delivery. Fifty-two days before her death, when Miles confronted Alaska on why she didn't want to go home she said "I'm just scared of ghosts, Pudge. And home is full of them." These lines are metaphoric, evasive, but also non-responsive from the perspective of a concerned friend.

On the other hand, Miles has a much simpler identity during his admission into Culver Creek, that of a gangly junior who went through the motions of high school out of social convention, but rather wanted to seek "a Great Perhaps."

Questioning Previously Established Values

At the beginning we understand that Miles was sent from home with a strict warning stating "No drinking. No cigarettes." However, he still picked up both habits after coming to school. Furthermore, in the early stages of the narrative Miles admits that Alaska's description of Chip Martin and herself as "scholarship kids with a shared interest in booze and mischief" left him worrying that he had joined what his mother called "the wrong crowd" (p. 28). However, his further musing that "for the wrong crowd, they both seemed awfully smart" characterises the first clash between the values that his parents had raised him with and the allure of a group which might bring him closer to his "great perhaps". Miles chooses the later, portraying the element of 'questioning

previously established values' of stage five of Erikson's Psychosocial Theory. Another portrayal of the same clash of values can be seen in the contrast between Miles' dejection at being kicked out of Dr. Hyde's class for looking out the window and his self-righteous agreement with such treatment during the early stages of the narrative as opposed to his nonchalant response "ask me if I give a shit." (p. 188) when he is pulled up for reeking of cigarettes.

This phenomenon of questioning and re-evaluating previously established values deepens as the narrative progresses, including Miles' subscribing staunchly to not ratting after initially feeling that "it seemed a little stupid" (p. 25).

Identity Versus Role Confusion

According to Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, adolescence is marked by a crisis between identity and confusion in life domains, such as gender, and interpersonal roles. Successfully navigating the conflict will result in an ability to stay true to one's self, while failure will lead to confusion and low self-esteem. James E. Marcia extends this idea through his proposed Identity Status Interview (Wooten, 2003) which proposes four possible statuses, based on his findings, that mark adolescents' navigation through the identity versus role confusion stage: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement (Block, 2011).

Identity Diffusion: This refers to a state in which young individuals have not yet undergone an identity crisis and are yet to commit to a particular identity. As they progress through their developmental journey, they may choose to transition towards a state of moratorium and achievement, accept a foreclosed identity, or remain in the diffused state for an extended period.

In terms of Marcia's four statuses, we observe the occurrence of the first stage of identity diffusion upon Miles' admission to his parents before joining Culver Creek that his life, if he were to stay at home would remain uneventful with "the likes of Will and Marie." We observe that whilst Miles has not begun ascending his relationship with Alaska, the death of whom will result in his primary crisis, he has yet committed himself to the identity of an adventurer, one that he resounds with "John F Kennedy, James Joyce, Humphrey Bogart - who went to boarding school". This candid notion of "adventures" is a motif embolization of Miles' coming of age which evolves steadily as his perception of boarding life evolves too.

Alaska displays signs of identity diffusion early in the novel. She is portrayed as someone who is still exploring various interests and hasn't committed to a specific life path. Her inability to commit to a particular future path is evident on Pg 28 as she seems torn between hedonistic and intellectual pursuits when she weighs delaying the reading of her books for "cigarettes to smoke, sex to have, swings to swing on." She seems to be in a state of exploration, demonstrating a lack of a clear commitment to a specific set of values and goals.

Identity Foreclosure: During this stage, young individuals have not yet undergone an identity crisis but have committed to specific beliefs about themselves.

In the initial stages of Miles' time at Culver Creek, when Dr. Hyde kicks him out of his class, he is sorrowful as he reminisces that "my teachers had always been card-carrying members of the Miles Halter Fan Club." Therein we observe Miles at the stage of Identity Foreclosure.

Alaska, similarly, along with the Colonel, is strictly against ratting, as is seen through the Colonel's insistence (p. 25) on portraying ratting as the ultimate sin in school. However, later in the narrative in one of the crises in her life, when Alaska rats out her roommate, we see the crisis causing an identity moratorium, re-evaluating her values and beliefs.

Identity Moratorium: This is a state in which young individuals are undergoing a crisis. They are exploring their identity, but have not committed to any future path, but are rather in the midst of considering their future. Adolescents in moratorium are usually on the path of consolidating their identity.

Miles' primary crisis was experienced through Alaska's death, leaving him to consider all options of his identity, portrayed through his wide-ranging considerations of leaving school, killing himself, and so on. We observe that during this time Miles is on the path to consolidate his identity and has stopped second guessing himself. This is portrayed through the absence of the fear and caution he previously felt whilst partaking in the offences that Alaska, the colonel, he and his group of friends committed.

We observe that Alaska, in response to her crisis wherein she is caught and may get expelled, chooses to re-evaluate her beliefs, and values, and rat her roommate out instead, something considered sacrosanct by her previously. We see that this conflicts Alaska's best friend's, the Colonel's, core belief of never ratting people out (p. 25), creating a conflict in Alaska's perception of her own identity.

Identity Achievement: This stage is for adolescents who have passed through a crisis and have resolved to commit to an identity and gender role. These individuals have parsed identity options and, based on that, have committed to the "specific beliefs and values they hold" (Block, 2011, pg. 78).

Through Miles dealing with the loss of Alaska and the part the Colonel and he played in letting Alaska escape with the car which she crashed and died, we see his final religion paper headed with Simon Bolivar's last words ("how will I ever get out of this labyrinth"), which he had made a deal with Alaska to resolve, is a motif throughout the novel, a physical viewpoint for the reader of Miles' coming of age. Additionally, through the

culmination of the religious paper with a positive outlook in the last chapter, we observe Miles' identity achievement as he goes through a crisis and makes a commitment to "forgive her," culminating into the acceptance of one's own identity and the ability to stay true to one's self (Block, 2011, pg. 782).

We observe that Alaska, after passing through two primary crises in her life, her mother's death and the time she almost got expelled, has developed a negative image of herself, indicated through her lines "God, how many times can I fuck up?." We understand that this is because the beliefs and values she develops upon the crisis (ratting out her roommate instead of getting expelled due to her fear of disappointing her dad again after not being able to save her mother) are those that she regrets. This is evident as she vehemently denies these actions and is aware that her best friend the Colonel would detest her upon discovering her revamped beliefs.

Self Clarification

Citing Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, Taubenheim (1979) states that the resolution of the adolescent's "who am I?" questions his challenging of previously established values, and the resolution of his identity versus role confusion is achieved when he establishes a "clear, acceptable image of his/her own identity" (p. 518) by identifying, selecting, accepting, and integrating "previously learned tasks and established values" (p. 518). According to Taubenheim (1979), a failure in this regard creates "difficulties in self-clarification, the pinnacle of (adolescent) identity."

We see two juxtaposing materialisations of self-clarification in the identity development of Miles and Alaska. While the former truly establishes a clear and acceptable image of his own identity, his struggles for identity culminating successfully in the novel's final monologue. On the other hand, the latter hates herself till the end, materialised through her polar and obscure attitude disallowing her friends from knowing enough to help her, materialised vividly in her words on her last day "God, how many times can I fuck up?."

III. Discussion

Miles

Symbolising Miles' home as an escape from the labyrinth by substituting it with his "small, self-sufficient world," John Green portrays the fearful identity of Miles before joining Culver Creek. He narrates his move to Culver Creek as an attempt to escape such isolation, to face the labyrinth head on in search of a "Great Perhaps." His monologue is a reflection of what he has grown into through this pursuit. Firstly, the lines "I still believe in the Great Perhaps, and I can believe in it in spite of having lost her" (p. 260) show vividly the development of Miles' identity into one who can come to terms with shortcomings and maintain optimism. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these lines with Miles' observation that when Alaska let her die all those years ago, "she collapsed into the enigma of herself" portrays a clarity and transparency polar to Alaska's erratic and shrouded actions.

Secondly, one primary inhibition of Miles about the labyrinth of life was the "fragility of all human life." This fear materialises in his musings about Francois Rabelais' last words of going to "seek a Great Perhaps". Miles responds in a sense of urgency stating "that's why I'm going. So I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a great perhaps." Just before Alaska's death he learns about her mother's death and finally reaches a climax upon Alaska's death, his reflection through his final thesis portrays a development of his acceptance and of him coming to terms with his own identity.

Lastly, Miles is also shown to arrive at a clear, acceptable image of his identity through the lines "I know she forgives me" as he finds optimism in the human endeavour, musing that "we can never be irreparably broken." Through such positivity and transparency in such a vulnerable matter, the reader sees Miles as an individual who has come of age, confident in his perceptions and actions, and clarified of his role and identity.

Alaska

Alaska, as she herself describes, joined Culver Creek as a scholarship kid with an interest in "booze and mischief," and a keen interest in books, sporting her "Life's Library" (p. 28). Alaska was always atypical and erratic, aptly described by Chip Martin "By my count, there are ninety-two girls at this school and every last one of them is less crazy than Alaska." However, unlike Miles, she did not grow out of herself and stayed mysterious, disconcerted and closeted about her worries. She always shrouded her grief, especially that of letting her mother die, in vague stories about the best day of her life being a normal day at the zoo (the day before her mother died). She cited her reluctance to go home during Thanksgiving ("I'm scared of ghosts, Pudge. And home is full of them"), while the categorical reality was that her mother had died during Thanksgiving.

Alaska, pushed into a self-contained grief after her mother's death, often turned suicidal, seen through her lines "Ya'll smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die."

Finally, the last straw in her failure at self-clarification was her actions' conflict with previously established values. Chip Martin ('The Colonel') and Alaska staunchly believed against "ratting," as shown by Chip's words to Miles, "Pretty much the only important thing is never never never never rat." A line which has extensive emphasis for it goes beyond the rule of three.

Through these examples, we understand why Alaska was not acceptive of her own identity, shown through her frustration in the lines "God, how many times can I fuck up?" it is clear that whilst Miles has grown to come to terms with himself and is comfortable with his past, accepting forgiveness for his actions, Alaska is pigeon-holed into her past, until she abruptly dies in the car crash.

IV. Conclusion:

Through stage five and four of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial theory, the journey of adolescent identity development has been thoroughly charted for the characters of Miles and Alaska in John Green's *Looking For Alaska*, particularly in the pivotal fifth stage. The two characters are shown to grapple with previously established values, mirroring Erikson's understanding of the development of adolescent identity. Identity versus role confusion, and their development has culminated into self-clarification or its lack thereof strongly resemble the predictions of Marcia's Identity Status Interview (*Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, May, 2003; *Journal of Reading*, Mar., 1979). The intertwining, and juxtaposing nature of the development of these two adolescents is a compelling reflection of the adaptability of stage five of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial theory in John Green's '*Looking For Alaska*.'

Whilst this research highlights Erikson's theory as a robust framework for analysing adolescent identity in young adult fiction, there is much scope for future research. First is the potential to examine Erikson's theory's adaptability for young adult fiction across diverse cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds, which would bring into preview whether identity struggles are universal or influenced by specific cultural nuances. Additionally, there is also scope for research into the interplay of external socio-economic factors with internal identity formation which could use novels like *Moby Dick* with novels where characters were much better off socio-economically, possibly charting a change in identity development before and after the industrial revolution. I believe these areas and others like them would be great elements to culminate into a more holistic understanding of adolescent identity development

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