

# Religious Implications In John Green's Looking For Alaska

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## Abstract

John Green using metaphor and symbol explores these tensions inherent in the visceral aspect of life in Looking for Alaska. Green's use of metaphorical connections is prominent in his development of the characters who play key roles in his portrayal of spirit. Alaska Young is the primary character metaphor, but Dr. Hyde, the World Religions teacher, also plays a significant role. Both are central to Green's creation of a story that unsettles the binaries that characterize traditional formulations of the spiritual. Alaska and Hyde each provide a metaphorical link to the religious polarity and variety of spiritual views in modern America, as well as to the pain and suffering that are part of every human life. Despite interpreting these issues differently, these characters share common ground, and Green uses them to offer us a picture of the spirit that has a quality.

**Keywords:** Religion, spiritual, human life, pain and suffering.

## Introduction

In Looking for Alaska, Green situates his central character within the stifling, "oppressive" atmosphere of southern Alabama, the heart of evangelical Christianity. This fundamentalist region imposes rigid rules for conduct and morals that counter the freedom to explore meaning, a freedom that is associated with the North. The north/south polarities that divide these two geographical locations mirror the divisions within American spiritual life and between Dr. Hyde and Alaska. The southern United States embraces traditional Protestant Christianity, which came to the United States with the Puritans in the seventeenth century, while the North is aligned with liberal and mainstream religious views. These two regions also capture another binary that is reflected in

Alaska Young and Dr. Hyde. The state of Alaska is the youngest to join the republic of the United States, thereby symbolically representing youth, while Alabama reflects tradition.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Dr. Hyde exemplifies old age and the rigidity of traditional religion in Alabama, whereas Alaska epitomizes youth and the spiritual questioning that is connected to the North. Despite these seeming contradictions, however, these two characters also reveal kindred parallels that broaden this juxtaposition. Together they metaphorically bridge the tensions that have led to the avoidance of anything that might be deemed spiritual in the public domain.

Alaska's invocation of Bolivar implicitly links her to the labyrinth and suffering. The labyrinth symbol does, itself, have a significance that is often missed. In the twenty-first century the meaning of the word "labyrinth" has become skewed because it is often used interchangeably with that of "maze." In fact, these two spiritual symbols are different, yet connected. A labyrinth consists of a single circular, or unicursal, path, while the maze is a network of paths, or multicursal. Each has a clearly marked centre to which the paths lead, and the route into their centres is confusing. Most notably, the maze offers a number of false turns that do not lead to the centre. Ultimately, one can get lost in the maze, unable to find the centre. In contrast, the labyrinth requires only that walkers have faith to stay on its single meandering, albeit confusing, trail in order to reach the core. The circles cause confusion because at times the path seems to be very close to the centre when, in fact, it is actually the opposite. It is the process of navigating into, and out of, the twists and turns of a labyrinth that can bring new insights.

Early in the novel, Pudge overtly connects Alaska and the labyrinth when he points out the similarities between the curves of a labyrinth and those of the beautiful Alaska:

It was right then, between when I asked her about the labyrinth and when she answered me, that I realized the importance of curves, of the thousand places where girls' bodies ease from one place to another, from arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back to the butt to the etc. I'd noticed curves before, of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance. (19)

Despite Pudge's initial connection to the labyrinth, Alaska seems more like the puzzle of a maze. There are many confusing, false turns on the path into her centre. This title character, herself, refuses to engage in the process of wrestling with suffering that the labyrinth invites. She sees this symbol in "either/or" terms and wonders: "Is the labyrinth living or dying?" (19). Alaska lets us know she wants a simple, quick answer to Bolivar's profound question when she says to Pudge: "You figure out what the labyrinth is and how to get out of it and I'll get you laid" (20).

This statement offers a key to her character. Alaska is seeking a quick, easy explanation for suffering that she hopes deconstructing it logically will produce. Discovering meaning in suffering, however, is not a straight path but rather, like the curves of a labyrinth, a slowly

unwinding process into what lies beneath the surface. Unlocking the mystery of Alaska proves to be a meandering process for the narrator. As the chapter following this conversation opens, Pudge is pestering the Colonel with questions about this beautiful girl. His enquiries focus on the surface details of her life, but the fact that he is taping a van Gogh poster to his door as he seeks information about Alaska implies that there is something about her that he is not able to hear. Vincent van Gogh, who cut off his own ear, is associated with self-destructiveness and emotional torment; the presence of his poster in the midst of a conversation about Alaska suggests there is anguish within this young woman. Alaska's contradictions are many. On the one hand she displays "casual malice," as when Pudge goes to her room seeking sympathy after his cruel orientation experience and she responds coldly, "Guess you went for a swim, huh?" (27). On the other, she bubbles with sexual energy, silliness, and intelligence. Pudge captures her inconsistency when he notes:

Maybe she could be mean.. .but the way she talked that first  
night about getting out of the labyrinth - so smart. And the  
way her mouth curled up on the right side all the time, like  
she was preparing to smirk, like she'd mastered the right  
side of the Mona Lisa's smile. ..(31)

The meaning intended by the enigmatic expression on this famous face has been a source of investigation for centuries. By using the Mona Lisa as a comparison for Alaska, Pudge is both idealizing and limiting his understanding of her. What lies below the surface cannot be accessed with the eye. Nonetheless, the inner reality is a vital part of Alaska's being that, in idealizing her, Pudge misses.

Alaska herself both invites, and resists, idealization. As she notes, rudely awakening Pudge from a nap, "I'm unpredictable" (33). She interacts with Pudge in a playful, teasing manner, yet screams at the Colonel when he asks for help with his ironing: "You're not going to impose the patriarchal paradigm on me" (34 italics in original). Her rebelliousness surfaces in the World Religions class after Dr. Hyde ejects Pudge for staring out the window, and it continues in a location Pudge describes as an oasis (39). In fact, the word "oasis" is ambiguous because it is the secret smoking hole used by students. The route to the smoking hole, "not even a path so much as a series of hints," mirrors what lies beneath the surface of smoking (42). When Pudge asks her, "Why do you smoke so damn much?" she replies, "Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die" (44). This is the first overt evidence that Alaska is self-destructive. In an interview about his novel, Green argues that smoking and drinking are signs that his characters are experiencing self-destructive impulses, as so many teenagers do.

In addition, he judges this behaviour according to binary divisions, either good or bad. Alaska, like the youth for whom she is the archetype, knows this binary well. She delivers her observation about this polarity with a lightness that disguises the confusion and pain such a simplistic division creates for times when bad things happen to good people, or even worse, for those times when we ourselves do bad things. The “either/or” binary forces separation and isolation, and is based on a perception system that denies the reality of “both/and.” Both good and bad do exist within the same human being. Nonetheless, the reality is that Mr. Stame’s binary approach is the one youth meet most often in their classrooms and homes.

Green, however, is doing more than this here. Alabama, as the centre of evangelical Christianity, symbolizes the polarity that characterizes the religious and political aspect of twenty-first-century American life. That Alaska, as the archetypal youth, is put in the centre of such a polarized location, far from the freedom from suffering that she longs for, reinforces the tension that inevitably arises when one approaches struggle within a binary framework. Alaska mistakenly believes getting out of the experience of such tension is her only choice.

The binary framework chosen by Alaska and Pudge leaves no room for moral ambiguity, paradox, or inconsistency. When Pudge learns she has violated the one important rule among the students at Culver Creek, to “never never never never never rat,” he is shocked (17). He realizes that Alaska is moody, but her disloyalty is far more unsettling. It is ironic that this violation of Alaska’s is exactly the same as that of which she accuses the Colonel’s girlfriend: “How will stabbing one another in the back help women to rise above patriarchal oppression?” (65). The reality is that human beings, young and old, female, male, and transgender, do betray each other. Another of Alaska’s friends notes that it was her fear of being expelled that prompted her betrayal, and this nudges both him and Pudge to wonder why Alaska is so terrified of being expelled (74). Nonetheless, when Alaska confesses she did ‘rat out’ her roommate, Pudge refuses to accept her inconsistency.

In fact, Alaska’s moral ambiguity intensifies his lack of trust in her. He prefers the Colonel, who, when he was cranky, “at least had a reason” (75). His choice leads him further away from Alaska and metaphorically projects the narrow image of youth held by adults who educate and evaluate them. Adults are unwilling to acknowledge the contradictory nature of human experience, perhaps because of the uncertainty, and therefore, discomfort it imposes.

Symbolically, she lets Pudge know he is not alone in his vulnerability. Alaska goes on to reveal a glimpse of her own fragility when she confesses she chooses not to go home because she is “scared of ghosts and home is full of them” (80). During this holiday period together, Alaska displays more signs of suffering and coping strategies. She introduces Pudge to alcohol, reads Kurt Vonnegut’s book *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) aloud to him, and shares lines from Auden’s poetry. At the same time, however, Alaska also invades the rooms of the Week Day Warriors, whom she despises, in search of anything that might offer her clues for a cruel “prank” that will “hit them

where it hurts” (84). Into this tangle of contradictions Alaska hints at the source of her personal suffering when she implies she may be the source and victim of her life’s misery:

It’s not life or death, the labyrinth. [It’s] suffering. Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you. That’s the problem. Bolivar was talking about the pain, not about the living or dying. How do you get out of the labyrinth of suffering? (82)

Alaska calls her circle of friends together and reveals yet more behind the suffering that lives within her. The “Best Day/Worst Day” drinking game Alaska introduces to her friends captures the source of her pain. This is a competition she improvises to slow down their drinking. In this game all members of the group will share the story of their best, and worst, days and the best storyteller in each category will not have to take a drink. Alaska’s best day was a trip to the zoo with her mother when Alaska was eight years old, a story which strikes her friends as a bit “lame” until they learn what happens next (115).

The worst day for Alaska occurs the day after her best one, when her mother dies from a brain aneurysm. Alaska believes her mother would still be alive if she had not failed to call 911. When Takumi, one of this close circle of friends, points out that she “was just a little kid,” Alaska retorts: “Yeah. I was a little kid. Little kids can dial 911” (119). Nonetheless, Alaska continues to avoid, or deny the impact of this profound incident with her closest friends. Even when the Colonel, who has known her for three years, in a soft voice asks:

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Alaska brushes him off, “It never came up” (120). This is as close as Alaska’s friends get to her suffering and they turn their attention to her outward behaviour, not her wounded spirit. When Pudge points out Alaska’s excessive consumption of alcohol she responds: “Pudge, what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person” (124).

Pudge could not have reached this conclusion without another key character in this novel, Dr. Hyde, the World Religions teacher. In Dr. Hyde, we find a guide for the spiritual aspect of being human within the educational setting. Unlike Alaska, who is caught in the binary of “either/or” thinking, Dr. Hyde challenges our tendency to think and to judge in polarities rather than to struggle with a process-based approach to acquiring wisdom. Hyde’s name captures the essence of non-dualism that characterizes his way of thinking. This appellation symbolically weaves together the inner and outer dimensions of the human being, thereby creating space for the spirit. Hyde is the private self of the infamous Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. That the inner dimension of this

character is prefaced with the formal designation “Doctor,” implies, symbolically, that the private self within the World Religions teacher is also present in the classroom (32).

Most significantly, this name broadens the stereotypical picture of religion, age, and teaching. Hyde is Jekyll’s inner, dark side and, as such, has been kept separate, or apart from the rational world. This appellation joins the inner and outer aspects of Hyde’s character and thereby challenges a representation of religion, age and teaching that keeps them apart. Nonetheless, Dr. Hyde, “the Old Man,” appears to be an archetype for this stage of life, and a counterpoint to Alaska as youth, rather than the wise, caring, complex man that he is (31).

Our first introduction to Dr. Hyde paints a stereotypical picture of old age. It begins with the descriptor “the Old Man,” and the capital letters signify that the portrait being unveiled invites a metaphorical interpretation. What follows is a physical description that highlights the comical perceptions of age. Describing his first impression of this teacher, Pudge notes:

He breathed slowly and with great labor through his wide open mouth. He took tiny steps toward the lectern, his heels not moving much past his toes. The Colonel nudged me and pointed casually to his notebook, which read, The Old Man has one lung, and I did not doubt it. His audible, almost desperate breaths reminded me of my grandfather when he was dying of lung cancer. Barrel-chested and ancient, the Old Man, it seemed to me, might die before he ever reached the podium. (32-33 italics in original)

Dr. Hyde begins the first lecture of his World Religions class by introducing his students to religion within a comparative, rather than a “mono” focus. He makes no reference to the doctrines, creeds, or rules embraced by Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. Instead he suggests all three of these religions address the human search for meaning, and, by implication, so will his class. Further, Hyde introduces the questions that all these faiths address. These are questions that every young person begins to raise in adolescence, and that adults contend with for the remainder of their lives: “What is the nature of being a person? What is the best way to go about being a person? How did we come to be, and what will become of us when we are no longer?” (32). Dr. Hyde is offering a non-dualistic framework of inquiry to his students, rather than a directive one. Such a framework provides room for personal exploration and secures the participation of his students.

During one of Hyde's lectures Pudge turns his attention to what he sees through the classroom window. He knows he is in trouble when he hears this teacher say "Mr. Halter, here I am, straining my lungs for your edification. And yet something out there seems to have caught your fancy in a way that I've been unable to do" (39 italics in original). Dr. Hyde asks Pudge to leave class. On the surface, this teacher seems to succumb to the pedagogical impulse to tell Pudge how to act and think. On a deeper level, however, he is giving Pudge the opportunity to learn from his experience. From the classroom Pudge looks at the "wooded, slow-sloping hill" and, inspired by Dr. Hyde's lecture on the Buddhist concept of interconnection, sees "everything so intricately woven together" that trees and hill seem one (39). When Pudge gets outside, however, "the woods were a totally different creature than from Dr. Hyde's classroom" (41). This is because he is now in the woods - not viewing them from afar.

Despite Hyde's apparent concern with behaviour, he is finding ways to put his students in charge of their own learning. The next day Hyde reinforces Pudge's lesson by drawing his attention to the Buddhist concept of "being present" (50). Hyde continues to find ways to broaden the outreach of religion to include both the personal and public lives of his students Dr. Hyde strives to present religion as a resource that can help his students explore the issues in their lives. Hyde's concern with connecting his subject to the lives of his students is reflected in the topic he poses for the first semester's exam:

What is the most important question human beings must answer? Choose your question wisely, and then examine how Islam, Buddhism and Christianity attempt to answer it.  
(70)

In connecting Jesus with his students, Dr. Hyde makes room for, and connects, theory with the personal. As Pudge says, "Maybe Dr. Hyde's class isn't total bullshit" (82). That Dr. Hyde is succeeding in opening religion to life becomes clear when Pudge, Alaska, and their inner circle of friends gather together and share stories of "their best day" (114). Pudge's account shows evidence that he has embraced Dr. Hyde's message about the Buddhist concept of presence: "Best day of my life was today.. .just sitting here, even if I'm watching the Colonel whittle, or whatever. Whatever. Great day. Today" (115). By bringing theory, life, and questions together in his class, Hyde is moving beyond binaries. He notes: "The questions of religious thought have become, I suspect, personal" (158). In other words, the subject matter they are studying is no longer merely theoretical. The merging of personal and theoretical is central to his final exam, which poses the question Alaska chose for her first semester submission: "How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (158).

Pudge to consider his own thoughts and beliefs about heaven and hell after the death of his friend Alaska. Dr. Hyde achieves something that, I argue, is key to the education of the whole person, and that is trust. He gives his students the room, and permission, to live the questions that arise within them in light of both the material they are studying and the loss they are experiencing. Hyde goes one step further at the end of term when he gives the class their final exam question, asking: "How will you - you personally - ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (215). Recognizing that each of them has experienced "the incontestable fact of suffering" he believes that each of them now has his own view of its path (215). Getting out of suffering is not a possibility. Pudge and his classmates must live through their suffering in order to get past it. He ends this class by reminding his students of the one characteristic shared by each of the three religions, "radical hope" (215). By linking suffering and hope, Hyde implies that they are connected and can co-exist. This is very much a "both/and" approach to suffering that provides room for what seems to be a contradiction.

When Pudge receives a note from Takumi, a fellow student, confessing his part in Alaska's death, he suddenly understands how to get through the labyrinth of suffering: "we had to forgive to survive in the labyrinth" (217). The key word in this epiphany is "in." Pudge is able to forgive Alaska, "his crooked neighbor," despite the fact that she forgot everyone who cared about her in those last moments of her life because she was preoccupied with her past: "When she fucked up, all those years ago, just a little girl terrified into paralysis, she collapsed into the enigma of herself." (218, 219). Pudge realizes that Alaska was unable to allow herself to be fully in the experience of suffering. Dr. Hyde and the World Religions class are central to Pudge's life-changing discovery.

Alaska and Dr. Hyde, are powerful spiritual symbols for our time. They bring the tensions that pervade spirit in both the public and private domains to our attention and provide a way into and through them. Alaska and Hyde also symbolize the weaving together of inner and outer dimensions of being human.

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