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Alina Zabolotico

Augustana College - Rock Island

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Alina Zabolotico

The Rise and Fall of Female Stereotypes in *Looking for Alaska*

ENG_239 Women in Literature

Dr. Gillette

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Short Analytical Essay

I think I am fascinated by female characters that are raw and flawed because these roles are the only ones I have ever been able to understand so completely and unconditionally. In their fears, I saw myself, and in their false smiles and grand charades, I began to understand myself. It was not until I read John Green's *Looking for Alaska* that I began to see the problematic position readers are put in when reading books containing such female characters. *Looking for Alaska* is told in Pudge, the male protagonist's, point of view and it follows the rise and fall of his infatuation with the beautiful, intelligent, passionate, jaded, and self-destructive Alaska Young. Many readers will argue that Alaska is a refreshing and original character that disrupts the traditional perceptions of the ideal woman by calling attention to her realistic qualities and obvious faults. The book shies away from traditional stereotypes such as the Cult of True Womanhood, which asserts that a female is only a true and ideal woman if she is submissive, pure, pious, and domestic. However, despite Alaska's strong character and insightful depiction, her portrayal as the elusive and coveted female consumed with self-hate creates a new ideal female role that may be more destructive to young and impressionable readers than the conventional roles of the Cult of True Womanhood.

On the surface, Alaska's strong and alluring personality is obvious from the onset of her introduction. Upon the first conversation Pudge has with Alaska about the pranks her groups of friends pull at the boarding school, he thinks to himself, "So Chip became the Colonel—the military-style planner of their pranks, and Alaska was ever Alaska, the larger-than-life creative force behind them" (Green 20). Almost immediately after this conversation, Pudge is eager to learn more, remarking that, "The Colonel sat on the couch, judging whether the poster was level and fielding my endless questions about Alaska. *What's her story?*" (Green 21). Readers, much like Pudge, are immediately drawn in, desperate to discover more about the mysterious Alaska Young. However, more than just her larger-than-life persona, the

greatest strength of Alaska's character lies in the realism with which she speaks her mind and the qualities that gradually reveal her character as the novel progresses. These empowering qualities include Alaska's intelligence and love of reading, her passion and understanding of life, her feminist beliefs, and the poor choices she makes that conspicuously illustrate her flaws. In one instance, Pudge asks her, "Have you really read all those books in you room?" and she replies:

Oh God no. I've read maybe a third of 'em. But I'm going *to* read all of them. I call it my life's library. Every summer since I was little, I've gone to garage sales and bought all the books that looked interesting. So I always have something to read. But there is so much to do: cigarettes to smoke, sex to have, swings to swing on. I'll have more time to read when I'm old and boring (Green 20).

This depiction of Alaska explicitly exemplifies her love of reading and gaining knowledge from others' wisdom and shows her appreciation for all that life has to offer, even if it is simple things such as cigarettes, sex, and swings. It is particularly empowering because universally, education has been a right neglected to females while graciously given to males. In turn, the unequal distribution of knowledge has created a social stigma that women are not as competent or intelligent as men. This scene, among others, eradicates the misconception that women cannot, or should not, have the same mental capacities that men have, and instead encourages everyone to embrace what they love and what empowers them.

Moreover, the depiction of Alaska in the aforementioned example calls to question one of the four pillars of the Cult of True Womanhood by deliberately mentioning sex, which consequently shatters any notions that she is pure. If skeptical readers still reject the notion that Alaska is an active participant in sexual escapades, the Colonel further ratifies the point by

telling Pudge that an acquaintance “loves weed more than Alaska loves sex” (Green 46). By creating a free thinking woman who enjoys non-marital and underage sex, Green questions readers’ previous attitudes on women’s sexuality and questions the foundations on which the Cult of True Woman Womanhood was build upon.

Alaska’s positive female role is further established when she questions domesticity as a major institution of the Cult of True Womanhood, which is best exemplified when she divulges her thoughts on the labyrinth she is fixated on escaping. She affirms, “You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you’ll escape it one day and how awesome it will be, and imagining the future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present...No, Jesus, I’m not going to be one of those people who sits around talking about what they’re going to do. I’m just going to do it” (Green 53-54). The way Alaska speaks of actively living her life rather than simply dreaming about it and planning the future without intensions of living it shows her clear disregard for staying confined to a house and playing homemaker, which brings to question a woman’s role in the house, versus outside of it. In correspondence to taking down the preconceived notion founded in The Cult of True Womanhood, that women belong in the home, Alaska’s determination to live her life the way she sees fit and deliberately not asking anyone’s opinion nor permission to do so exemplifies all the ways in which she is not submissive—she refuses to ask others for approval to live her life, and more importantly, she shuts down any and all expectations society may have on how she should think and act. This aspect of Alaska’s character emboldens readers to question the roles society has set in place for them and to break free of the these rigid confines in order to live out their own futures instead of simply dreaming about them.

Alaska’s character also breaks through previous expectations of the ideal woman through her inherent ability to make poor decisions. In one instance, in reference, to her current

boyfriend, the Colonel remarks, “she hasn’t cheated on him, which is a first” (Green 21), and on another occasion, Alaska approaches Pudge, upset at herself for always making mistakes and whimpers, “I try not to be scared, you know? But I still ruin everything. I still fuck up (Green 96). It is the times that Alaska is most imperfect and angry with herself for the choices she makes that she is most relatable to— the times she most resembles a genuine and complicated human being. However, despite being a force to be reckoned with and illustrating the beauty that imperfection can hold, her portrayal as a self-destructive time bomb becomes dangerous when glamourized the way it is in *Looking for Alaska*. The most fascinating facets of her character are her dysfunctional and crippling moments of self-hate, which brings about the question of how John Green is portraying, perhaps even instigating, the positive portrayal of the Cult of Female Invalidism— the notion that women come closer to achieving perfection when they are sick, vulnerable, or nearing death. The Cult of Female Invalidism stereotype in *Looking for Alaska* is propelled in the moments when she breaks down crying, revealing vulnerable pieces of herself and her horrifying history, which serve to show how hopelessly stuck she is in the past, unable to recover. Furthermore, Alaska’s apparent disregard for her life is expressly seen when Pudge asks her why she smokes so quickly. She replies, “Ya’ll smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die” (Green 44). Where this scene should normally raise warning flags and perhaps even a few sirens, it instead manipulates readers into thinking that Alaska’s clear mental instability and unhappiness is sexy, cool, and raw, rather than alarming and dangerous. Moreover, Alaska’s impulsiveness, witnessed throughout various portions of the novel, is what ultimately leads her to commit suicide by driving into the side of a police car (Green 156). However, Pudge glorifies this aspect of Alaska’s character by justifying her actions, as if it somehow excuses the fact that she is harmful to her own self. Pudge muses that “she became impulsive, scared by her own inaction into perpetual action” (Green 120). And

even after Alaska is dead, Pudge and his friends glorify her by playing out a prank that she had planned before her death and do so in honor of her memory. Though such a gesture is touching and a show of good friends, it can also give the impression that committing suicide, or any amount of self-harm, is alright as long as friends are there to glorify it and idolize one's memory as a reward for their suffering.

The last, and perhaps the most subtle way in which John Green breaks down one stereotype only to replace it with another is by juxtaposing Alaska, who is fierce and utterly fascinating with her foil, Lara who is beautiful, soft-spoken, pure, and submissive Romanian immigrant. Lara is technically Pudge's girlfriend, though one would not know it by his fascination with Alaska. In reference to Lara, Pudge recalls, "Lara had always needed to talk for her Parents so maybe she never learned to talk for herself" (Green 118). Because Lara has never learned to speak for herself, it puts her at a disadvantage for speaking her mind or being outspoken, which results in her becoming a quieter and more submissive female role than Alaska. One particular instance in which this is seen is when Pudge throws up on Lara, and she takes it in stride, muttering a simple "Oh," and later accepts to go on a date with him (Green 64). In addition, to Lara's submissiveness, she is also pure, as indicated by the time she and Pudge attempt to have oral sex, and Lara tells him she has never given a blow job. Both being inexperienced and at a loss as to how to proceed, they consult Alaska for help (Green 126-127). In these ways, Lara is Alaska's exact opposite: where Alaska is experienced, Lara is completely Pure; where Alaska is independent and outspoken, Lara is quiet and submissive; where Alaska breaks through traditional female stereotypes, Lara plays right into them.

Pudge's apparent preference for Alaska dismisses traditional female stereotypes of purity and submissiveness while creating a new demand for women who are complex, intelligent, beautiful, jaded, and self-destructive. Pudge's easy dismissal of Lara is undisputed

when he deftly pulls away from her comforting touch after Alaska's death and proceeds to ignore her for two months afterwards. Though Lara is sweet, beautiful, submissive, pure, and mentally stable, she is not enough for Pudge, who longs for the dead and mentally unstable Alaska Young. He once likens her complex character to a hurricane, saying that he was "hopelessly boring and she was endlessly fascinating" and that, "if people were rain, [he] was a drizzle and she was a hurricane" (Green 88). Pudge's musing on his fascination with the hurricane that is Alaska can be a harmful message to girls reading the book, who might begin to think that in order to be fascinating and worthy of attention, they have to be hurricanes driven to self-destruction.

Essentially, though Green is denouncing some types of ideal female stereotypes such as the Cult of True Womanhood, he is encouraging and even propagating others, instilling in readers the alarming idea that women must be just like Alaska: beautiful, smart, independent, outspoken, and mentally unstable in order to be ideal or coveted. The first way in which such portrayal of an idolized female is disheartening is that not all women naturally possess the qualities Alaska does, they are different, and this should be celebrated rather than shamed. Some females are soft spoken and calm by nature, and most women do not possess the ethereal beauty Alaska does. Alaska creates an ideal standard that is impossible for real women to meet. For young and impressionable girls to read about Alaska and perceive her as something to aspire to is frightening. They do not need to be like her to be worthy of love, and despite Pudge claiming otherwise, drizzles can be just as fascinating as hurricanes, despite their stark differences. The second cause of concern arises when readers take into consideration that Alaska committed suicide. She was so haunted by her past, that she was unable to overcome it, and consequently spent the rest of her life thinking she was destined to always be a screw up. Though this undoubtedly is a facet of Alaska which readers can relate to wholeheartedly, as we

all make mistakes, this is not a quality that women should actively be seeking in themselves—they should not be convinced to think they are too weak and haunted by their pasts to overcome them, and that it is ok to harm themselves in order to escape the truth. Through the idolization of a woman who was too weak to accept life in the face of adversity, Green is not instigating a proper and healthy image of womanhood, but in contrast, a very dangerous and negative one. Rather than insinuating that giving up is ok, they should be emboldened to believe in their own strength and ability to overcome even the most insurmountable of challenges. Ultimately, despite Pudge's strong favor of one type of women versus another, reality is not about women achieving one grand ideal versus another. Frankly, women will never fit into any ideal society presets for them—they are far too complex, and because of that, they are entitled to creating their own ideals that do not compare or compete with anyone else's ideal. It is pertinent that both men and women decide for themselves the kind of people they love being, are comfortable being, and that they never let anyone discourage them from being anything less than the ideals they set for themselves.

Works Cited

Green, John. *Looking for Alaska*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.