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## Self-realization in Green's *Looking for Alaska: An Existentialist Critique*

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### Abstract

This research paper explores self-actualization within John Green's novel, "Looking for Alaska," from the existentialist perspective. Existentialism, a philosophical framework, posits that humans must forge their meaning and grapple with rational decision-making in an inherently irrational and meaningless world. Central to this theory is Jean-Paul Sartre's concept that existence precedes essence, emphasizing freedom as the fundamental element that imbues human life with significance. Green's literary works often echo existentialist themes, portraying characters who embark on journeys of self-discovery amidst life's adversities. In "Looking for Alaska," teenage protagonists confront daunting challenges as they navigate the complexities of existence, striving to carve out individual identities in the face of existential uncertainties. Miles pursues the elusive "Great Perhaps," symbolizing a quest for novelty and significance, while Alaska seeks solace in a life of independence and recklessness, grappling with personal traumas. This study employs Sartre's existentialist framework to dissect Green's portrayal of existential themes in "Looking for Alaska," shedding light on the characters' pursuit of self-actualization amidst life's existential quandaries.

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### Introduction

Existentialism is popularly known as a philosophical theory and movement that emerged in the twentieth century in France and Germany. A few leading philosophers, such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, contributed to the essence of existentialism. Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God produced atheistic existentialism and individual freedom. He advocates that humans must become Superman, and individuals must be the architects of their existence without the influence of external forces such as culture, tradition, and religion. In his book *Will to Power (1967)*, Nietzsche states, "The stronger becomes master of the weaker, in so far as the latter cannot assert its degree of independence" (p. 336). Unlike the existentialism of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche introduces the strains of atheistic existentialism in which man's free will and independent role determine the affairs of existence. Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the greatest French thinkers and has made the most significant contribution to existentialism. Sartre's existentialism stresses that existence precedes essence, and absolute freedom can give meaning to human life. In *Existentialism is Humanism (1960)*, Sartre states, "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterward" (p. 03). Man confronts the challenges of existence and determines his identity with free will and subjective power. Only free choice and individual struggle define the status and position of man in society. If humans are stuck in other entities for the meaning of their existence, it leads to bad faith and loss of identity. However, individuals can strive for meaning and achieve self-actualization with free choice and a sense of responsibility.

John Green is a contemporary American novelist whose fiction deals with existentialist themes. The protagonists in his novels are teenagers who struggle for identity and confront the complexities of life. Green is interested in the diverse and intricate personalities of adolescents struggling for meaning. Hays (2018) states that the adolescents in Green's fiction ask big and fundamental questions about suffering, injustice, love, life, and survival. In

his novels, Green presents the existential crises of adolescents bent on exploring their identities. In *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Alaska is stuck in the question of existence throughout the novel. She shuns conventional and orthodox standards and prefers to lead a liberal and reckless life. She ponders over getting rid of life's labyrinth, which signifies her miseries. Hays (2018) notes, "Green's teenagers are deeply thoughtful" (p. 22). In the novel, Miles seeks his identity and the meaning of life. He leaves his home for Culver Creek for personal growth and psychological development. He is obsessed with finding the Great Perhaps. The Great Perhaps means something exceptional and new in his existence, which helps explore his identity and the meaning of life.

### Literature Review

Researchers and reviewers have presented their scholarly ideas on the themes of existentialism. These scholars agree with the principal proclamation of existentialists that individual freedom is the core aim of human existence. Tanzer (2008) states, "Sartre maintains that conscious beings are structured in such a way that their existence precedes their essence, whereas beings that do not possess consciousness are structured in such a way that their essence precedes their existence" (p. 39). Existence precedes essence if individuals strive for freedom without embracing some established ideals or predetermined standards. External factors such as culture, society, tradition, and politics are exempted from defining human identity. Friedrich Nietzsche is an exponent of individual freedom, and his works stress the significance of human will. Martone (2014) declares, "Nietzsche unleashes atheistic thought upon the philosophical world" (p.01). Nietzsche advocates complete freedom for individuals, and his existentialist concepts liberate man from the shackles of conventional bondages. Unlike Sartre, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Kierkegaard presents the ideas of theistic existentialism. Kierkegaard states (1992) that individuals find conventional truth in objectivity and genuine truth in subjectivity. If humans are trapped in worldly obligations and external fears, it deprives them of the blessings of liberty.

Green *Looking for Alaska* (2005) has been the center of interest for different reviewers and scholars as the bold characters bent on confronting the established ideals in society. Green is conscious of the complexities of contemporary adolescents, and he takes an immense interest in revealing the psychological issues and miseries. Dean (2012) comments on *Looking for Alaska* (2005), "The search for meaning and the suffering that life inevitably engenders via death, loss, suicide, and self-destructive choices and actions are features of this book" (p. 13). The novel is not merely about the search for meaning, but it also presents the challenges and agonies in the lives of teenagers. The urge for self-realization is not an easy task, but individuals have to accept pains, anxieties, and destructive choices such as suicide, death, and loss. Like Alaska, Miles is also searching for his identity, leaving his home for a better future and self-discovery. James (2009) states that death and sexuality are presented together in young adult fiction. Alaska is obsessed with her sexual urges, and she even chooses reckless and rash acts to gratify her physical desire. Dean (2012) is of the view, "Alaska is a student with a wild, impulsive nature, but she is also, less obviously, a broken spirit caught in a maze of suffering" (p. 39). The state of suffering results from Green's young characters' impulsive and unconventional choices. In addition, when adolescents experience self-destructive impulses, they use drugs and drinking as a response to the impulses. In Green's fiction, the teenagers hurt themselves without killing themselves to cope with the unfairness of suffering.

Green's characters wrestle with adverse circumstances that intensify their miseries and challenges. Adolescents pass through the difficult phase of self-realization and are primarily concerned with their growth. In this journey, the characters meet the pressure of external factors such as culture, society, politics, and family. Bucher and Hinton (2014) state:

Young adult literature deals with issues, problems, and experiences that contemporary adolescents relate to (family relations, romantic relationships, illness and death, peer pressure, substance abuse, sexual experimentation), and it considers contemporary world perspectives, including cultural, social, and gender diversity, as well as sociocultural and political aspects. (pp. 9-10)

In Green's *Looking for Alaska*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*, the teenagers are stuck in the dilemma of existence. The complexities and challenges make them experienced and committed with time, and they become conscious of their responsibilities. Arianto (2022) believes death signifies a healing power in *Looking for Alaska*. Miles is obsessed with the notion of Alaska after her death, and he transforms himself after her tragic and untimely death. Similarly, Alaska strives to eradicate the trauma of the mother's death from her mind. She struggles with the miseries of her life, and her search for self-discovery continues until she dies.

### Discussion and Analysis

#### Existentialist Quest in *Looking for Alaska* (2005)

John Green presents the existential crises of the teenagers in *Looking for Alaska* (2005). His characters are obsessed with the question of identity and strive to become their fates' architects. From Sartre's existentialist perspective, humans are not dependent on external factors for the meaning of life. Sartre (1960) states, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself is built upon this understanding. Such is the first principle of Existentialism" (p.03). In *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Alaska is stuck in the question of existence, and her sole aim is to establish her identity in society. She believes that life has confronted her with suffering and pains, which have snatched the peace of her mind; therefore, she struggles to get rid of the agonies of existence. It is quite challenging for her to attain the pleasures of life with such a tormented soul. She reveals the dilemma of her existence, "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?" (Green, 2005, p. 19). The labyrinth represents life's miseries and enigma, making life difficult and meaningless. Alaska is bent on giving meaning to her life, and she can make her life meaningful if she can remove her troubles. She indulges in reckless and adventurous acts because she tries to defy the suffering of her existence.

Existentialist characters resort to multiple activities for their self-actualization. In this process, the characters can confront challenges and miseries. In *Looking for Alaska*, Alaska is stuck in the miseries of existence and strives to lead the life of her choice without trouble. In her conversation, she frequently refers to the labyrinth of life. She tells Miles that if he helps her find the labyrinth of life, she will help him in making a relationship, "If there's one thing I can get you, it's a girlfriend. Let's make a deal: You figure out what the labyrinth is and how to get out of it, and I will get you laid", (Green, 2005, p.20). Alaska is conscious that one can not avail the pleasures of existence in a state of anxiety and misery. Therefore, she struggles to attain ease and peace in her life. She indulges in adventurous and reckless acts to distract herself from her traumatic past. Thooyibah (2018) states that the hopelessness of Alaska indicates that she is trying to remove her trauma by accepting responsibilities, self-control, distancing, and avoidance. Her sole aim is to defy the challenges and pains of her existence; for this, she takes risks and accepts challenges.

Freedom is the major theme of existentialism, and the urge for liberty is the main priority of Green's characters. Alaska symbolizes freedom, reflected in her bold and rash acts. Dean (2012) states, "Alaska herself is young and wild like the state for which she is named" (p.38). The state of Alaska has been associated with mystery, thrill, and search for meaning since the publication of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1997), which presents the story of a young man, Chris McCandless, who loses his life in search of his dream. Teenage is the phase of psychological development in which the adolescents are excited to avail the pleasures of existence. Alaska urges for absolute freedom without the pressures of her family and society. When Miles asks her whether she has read all the books in her room, she replies, "I always have something to read. But there is so much to do: cigarette to smoke, sex to have, swing to swing on. I will have more time for reading when I am old and boring" (Green, 2005, p.20). Alaska's remarks reveal her desire for physical gratification and dissipation. She is conscious that one can not enjoy life in old age; therefore, she tries her best to lead an independent life. Green makes his characters familiar with the use of drugs, smoking, and sexuality, and Alaska indulges in these acts.

Sartre's existentialist characters define their fates and identities and do not depend on supernatural and godly powers to shape their destinies. In Sartre's play *The Flies* (1946), Orestes tells Zeus, the king of gods, "You are the king of gods, king of stones and stars, kings of the waves of the sea. But you are not the king of man" (p.117). Orestes's confrontation with Zeus reveals his immense urge for freedom. Alaska is known as a bold and crazy student at her school, and her love of adventures and liberty renders her a distinct position among her peers. She is determined to lead the life of her choice without the support and dependence of men. Nietzsche (2006) states that humans have not learned to surrender. Alaska fights for her rights without surrendering to the patriarchal forces. She strongly opposes if her friends regard women as suitable only for domestic chores. When Miles asks her to iron clothes, she shouts, "You're not going to impose the patriarchal paradigm on me" (Green, 2005, p.34). She is conscious of the patriarchal practices in society which have stereotyped the role of women. Therefore, her struggle is not only for individual freedom, but she also advocates collective liberty for women from the clutches of man-dominant society. In addition, she indulges in drugs, smoking, and sex and leads the life of her choice. Colonel compares her love for sex with Hank's love for weed, "He loves weed like Alaska loves sex" (Green, 2005, p. 46). Colonel is a close and best friend of Alaska, and he knows completely about her habits and choices. If Alaska's character is analyzed from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, it may be explored that Id is dominant in her personality as she is obsessed with her physical gratification.

The search for self-actualization is not a simple and easy process, as individuals have to confront some opposite factors in the search for identity. Alaska believes that she is responsible for the death of her mother as she could not call the doctor on time when her mother was going to die. The sense of nothingness haunts Alaska because she leads a miserable life. The journey for self-actualization can confront individuals with absurdity, nothingness,

despair, and anguish. In Sartre's *Nausea* (1932), the protagonist, Roquentin, is sick of his existence, "I live alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing" (p.14). Roquentin expresses his feelings of alienation and nothingness. Alaska is also stuck in the miseries and complexities of her life, and the entire universe seems gloomy to her. Camus (1990) believes that man is an alien and a stranger in the universe. Alaska is the victim of isolation, and she feels empty after the death of her mother. Once, she was weeping like a child, and Miles wanted to know why her sadness was. When Miles asks her, she replies, "I don't understand why I screw everything up" (Green, 2005, p.95). Her reckless and moody nature creates problems for her; sometimes, she torments her friends with her unpredictable nature. Her moody nature might be the result of the trauma of her mother's death, which agonizes her frequently. Her remarks reveal the deep anxieties of her mind, and she struggles hard to eradicate the miseries of life.

Alaska is stuck in alienation and nothingness, and the trauma of her mother's death has made her life like hell. When Miles asks her, "Why do you smoke so damn much?" she replies, "Y'all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die" (Green, 2005, p.44). Her remarks reveal the deep trauma that agonized her from the time of her mother's death. Sartre advocates freedom with a sense of responsibility and commitment; therefore, she suffers existential responsibility and regards herself as responsible for her mother's death. After the death of her mother, she grapples with pains and trauma, and she feels nothingness and absurdity in her existence. Sartre (1956) states, "Man is a useless passion, and life is absurd" (p. xiii). Her life is meaningless and useless after the tragic death of her mother. Miles and Colonel are mostly anxious about her mysterious and unpredictable nature and cannot comprehend her moody behaviour. They try their best to know why she is stressed and angry, but she always responds mysteriously. When Miles asks her to avoid chain-smoking, she responds, "Pudge, what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person" (Green, 2005, p. 124). She escapes into reckless and self-destructive acts to eradicate her trauma and miseries. Her main aim is to come out of the labyrinth of life, and she feels that life without suffering can lead to her self-realization. Finally, she meets an untimely death in a mysterious car accident, and her death is a tragic shock for Miles and Colonel, her close friends.

In *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Miles also struggles with the identity of his choice, and he is not satisfied with his home's mundane activities and surroundings. He is searching for the Great Perhaps to shape his identity and fulfil his existential needs. Miles quotes the last words of François Rabelais, a poet, "I go to seek a Great Perhaps.' That's why I'm going. So, I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps." (Green, 2005, p.05). The Great Perhaps signifies something new and exceptional in his life that he can not find at home. His desire for a new environment indicates the mentality of Green's characters, who develop curiosity in their minds and are involved in new experiences. Miles imagines how his father enjoyed life at Culver Creek and indulged in lax activities such as drinking and parties. Therefore, he urges for a free and adventurous life at school without parental and social restraints. He is sick of the hectic academic activities at school and expresses his wish for freedom:

I had imagined that life at the Creek would be a bit more exciting than it was—in reality, there'd been more homework than adventure—but if I hadn't imagined it, I would never have gotten to the Creek at all. (Green, 2005, p.54)

He is obsessed with the practical issues of his existence and believes that strict academic activities might deviate him from critical existential thinking. When Dr. Hyde, a religion teacher, asks him to be attentive or leave the class, he instantly leaves. He urges for the life of his choice at the school, and his main concern is to ponder over the questions of his existence.

Miles finds freedom at Culver Creek, which he can not imagine at home. He remained reserved and shy at home, but now he has broken all the restrictions. On Thanksgiving Day, he ditches his parents and spends time with Alaska in the woods. He narrates, "So we lay in the tall grass between the soccer field and the woods, passing the bottle back and forth and tilting our heads up to sip the wine-inducing wine" (Green, 2005, p.81). Here, Miles and Alaska dwell in their imaginary world and fairyland. He feels guilty for ditching his parents on Thanksgiving Day but uses his free choice to hang with Alaska in the woods. Green's teenagers exercise free will and defy the societal bondages that halter their way of freedom. Some tendencies and activities of his characters might be contrary to the conventional ideals, but the adolescents freely indulge in their choices. In "*Literature Is Not a Cold, Dead Place*": *An Interview with John Green*, Barkdoll & Scherff (2008) relate, "Green's characters are real teens who learn, grow, think and change in the authentic atmosphere of a vice-filled boarding school that lends itself to underage drinking, premarital sex and many forms of traditional teenage mischief" (p.67). In *Looking for Alaska* (2005), the boarding school provides a friendly environment to Miles, Alaska, and Colonel. Miles can not indulge in pranks, mischief, and smoking at home, but at boarding school, he finds a liberal environment for such activities.

Existentialist characters are known due to their interests and activities. Miles develops peculiar tendencies at school, which renders him a distinct identity. His interest in reading the biography of Che Guevara indicates that he



loves freedom. He believes that individual freedom can establish one's identity in the society. Laura prepares for English class, and Miles selects the biography of Che Guevara for reading, "I picked up a biography of Argentinian revolutionary Che Guevara—whose face adorned a poster on the wall—that Lara's roommate had on her bookshelf" (Green, 2005, p.128). There are other books, but he chooses to read about the life story of a revolutionary leader who sacrificed his life for freedom. From an existentialist perspective, freedom is a major factor that renders meaning to human existence. Jean-Paul Sartre advocated free choice in his major philosophical works. In Sartre's *No Exist (1944)*, Gracin is obsessed with freedom, "When I chose the hardest path, I made my choice deliberately. A man is what he wills himself to be" (p.25). In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles has different choices for reading, but he selects the biography of a revolutionary leader. He exercises his free will, which makes him different from the rest of his peers. Kazmi (1988) states that freedom is availed when no compulsion or restraints of external powers exist. Green's characters prefer to use their free choice to give meaning to their existence. These characters understand that freedom can not be attained without free choices.

Miles is conscious of the existential responsibility and feels that he and the Colonel are responsible for the death of Alaska because they let her drive in an intoxicated state. In *Existentialism is Humanism (1960)*, Sartre asserts, "Man is condemned to be free. There is no power of 'beautiful passions' which propel men to their actions. We think, rather, that man is responsible for his passions" (p.03). After the death of Alaska, Colonel and Miles are stuck in the feelings of grave guilt and repentance. Miles feels an emptiness in his life, and the feeling of nothingness haunts him after the death of Alaska. He reveals his sorrows, "I knew she was drunk. Upset. Obviously, you don't let someone drive drunk and pissed off. Obviously. And Christ, Miles, what the hell is wrong with you" (Green, 2005, p.140). First, Alaska is only his friend, but he starts loving her with time. Her death is a tormenting experience for him, and the sense of existential responsibility agonizes him repeatedly.

Miles remains reserved and isolated at the school, and his alienation detaches him from his peers. He does not like to spend time with other fellows, and his fellows understand his nature. Colonel and Alaska sometimes ignore him and do not invite him for pranks or other activities. In addition, he is also bullied at school, which creates his disgust for the gatherings of his friends. He narrates, "I hated sports. I hated sports, and I hated people who played them, and I hated people who watched them, I hated people who did not hate people who watched or played them" (Green, 2005, p.45). Miles does not like sports because he does not want to go closer to groups of people. He is conscious of his existential needs, and he believes that the multitude of people can distract him from focusing on the aims of his life. In addition, the bullying has created his distaste for crowds where he can face bullies. He is conscious that he alone can resolve his existential issues, and the crowd of people can distract him from the purpose of his existence. Sartre (1960) states, "We are left alone, without excuse" (p.5). Man is left in isolation in the world, and he resolves his problems alone when it comes to the solution of existential complexities. Miles has left his home and isolated himself from the rest of the people because he wants to settle the issues of his existence.

Miles is conscious of his existential role, and his curiosity makes him interested in different stories and activities. In the search for meaning, individuals are involved in various ways and practices for self-actualization. Miles starts reading about myths and learns that myths play a significant role in life. He reflects, "I learned that myth doesn't mean a lie; it means a traditional story that tells you something about people and their worldview and what they hold sacred" (Green, 2005, p.33). He accepts that myths should not be regarded as false, but they narrate traditional stories and hold some sacred views and ideologies of people. In such traditional stories, there can be some mysterious facts that have formed human culture and belief. Miles leaves his home to learn something new and exceptional, and his obsession with the Great Perhaps develops his interest in different fields. Sartre (1960) believes that man is nothing but what he makes of himself. Miles searches for meaning, and in this quest, he explores the realities of different myths and other practices. His view on myths suggests that traditional stories should not be refuted, but such beliefs play an essential role in human existence.

Miles becomes interested in religion class in *Looking for Alaska (2005)*, and Dr. Hyde raises some fundamental questions. Dr. Hyde practically teaches religion, making his students think about the meaning of existence and the nature of death. He delivers a lecture in the class:

I must talk, and you must listen, for we are engaged here in the most important pursuit in history: the search for meaning. 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? In short: What are the rules of this game, and how might we best play it? (Green, 2005, p.32)

Green's teenagers search for identity, and in this quest, they are concerned with the actual role of man in the world. The search for meaning of existence is the prime aim of Green's characters. In addition, his characters also ponder over the nature of death. Miles tries his best to find the Great Perhaps, and he goes through different

experiences in this search. His interest in religion might be one of the attempts which he carries out to find the Great Perhaps.

Miles is completely transformed towards the end of the novel, and he believes that forgiving is the only quality that can liberate humans from the labyrinth of life. He hopes that Alaska has forgiven him as her mother has forgiven her. He believes that humans are like matter and are recycled in different forms. Teenagers like Alaska can only change shapes, sizes, and manifestations like energy. Optimism is reflected in his words, "We need never be hopeless because we can never be irreparably broken" (Green, 2005, p.220). If life confronts individuals with the hardest trials and tribulations, there can be hope and courage for survival. Hope leads to balance and peace and saves people from frustrations and miseries. In the end, Miles quotes the wonderful and optimistic last words of Thomas Edison, "It's very beautiful over there." (Green, 2005, p.221). Miles has no idea where this beauty is, but he hopes and trusts it exists somewhere. The novel ends with the optimistic remarks of Miles, "I don't know where there is, but I believe it's somewhere, and I hope it's beautiful" (Green, 2005, p.221). People can explore this beauty if they learn to exist with a forgiving and hopeful nature. Sartre (1960) declares that existentialism is optimistic as it creates a sense of freedom and hope in humans. Miles has achieved his self-actualization in the end and learned how to exist with peace in the world.

### Conclusion

Green's characters are primarily obsessed with identity issues, and their urge for self-actualization continues throughout the novels. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles and Alaska grapple with existential issues, striving for growth with utter will and determination. In the quest for existence, Green's teenagers are not dependent on external factors such as culture, politics, society, and tradition. Alaska shuns conventional ideals and indulges in reckless and rash acts because she struggles to eliminate the miseries. Miles is also concerned with the fundamental questions of existence, death, and the life after death. In the journey of self-realization, existentialist characters confront hard challenges and adverse circumstances; however, these characters accept all the trials and tribulations of life. Adolescents in Green's fiction also face challenges but strive to defy all the hardships and difficulties in their ways.

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