

**Space, Emotion, and Adolescent Subjectivity in John Green's
*Looking for Alaska***

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Abstract

The paper explores the relationship between physical environment and emotional experience in John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), with a focus on how institutional spaces shape adolescent subjectivity. The study is undertaken to understand how contemporary Young Adult fiction represents emotions not as isolated internal states, but as experiences closely connected to the spaces characters inhabit. The novel is analysed through the lens of Affect Theory to examine how emotions such as grief, guilt, and confusion emerge through interactions with the boarding school environment. Additionally, Empathy Theory is applied to understand how readers develop emotional connections with the protagonist's journey. The scope of the study is limited to the representation of emotional development within confined institutional settings and their impact on character transformation. The paper argues that physical space functions as an active force in shaping emotional experience and reader engagement in Young Adult fiction.

Keywords: Young Adult fiction, affect theory, empathy, space, emotion

Introduction

Young Adult (YA) fiction has emerged as a significant literary space for exploring the emotional and psychological complexities of adolescence. Unlike traditional narratives that often treat emotions as internal and individualised experiences, contemporary YA fiction frequently situates emotional development within specific physical and social environments. These environments, ranging from

schools and homes to landscapes of movement and confinement play a crucial role in shaping how young characters perceive, process, and respond to their emotional realities. As adolescence is a formative period marked by identity construction, vulnerability, and transformation, the interaction between space and emotion becomes an important area of literary inquiry.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the affective dimensions of literature, recognising that emotions are not merely personal states but are shaped through interactions with surroundings, relationships, and social contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant in the study of YA fiction, where characters often navigate spaces that intensify feelings of belonging, alienation, grief, and self-discovery. Despite this growing interest, limited attention has been given to the role of physical environments as active agents in structuring emotional experience within YA narratives.

John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005) provides a compelling framework for examining this relationship. Set within the confined yet socially dynamic environment of a boarding school, the novel explores themes of friendship, loss, guilt, and the search for meaning. The school functions not merely as a backdrop but as a space that shapes the protagonist's emotional journey, influencing his perceptions, relationships, and responses to traumatic events. The novel's engagement with grief and ambiguity, particularly following Alaska's death, highlights how space can intensify emotional uncertainty and contribute to psychological transformation.

The paper examines how physical space operates as a formative force in shaping emotional experience in *Looking for Alaska*. Drawing on Affect Theory, the study analyses how emotions emerge through the interaction between characters and their environment. Additionally, Empathy Theory is employed to explore how readers are invited to engage emotionally with the protagonist's experiences. By situating emotional development within the boarding school setting, this paper argues that space functions as an active and dynamic element that not only shapes character subjectivity but also enhances reader engagement in contemporary Young Adult fiction.

Literature Review

The study of Young Adult (YA) fiction has gained significant scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly for its engagement with the emotional and psychological dimensions of adolescence. Critics have observed that YA literature provides a unique platform for representing the complexities of identity formation, emotional vulnerability, and transitional experiences. As Trites (2000) argues, YA

novels often depict adolescents negotiating power structures while simultaneously grappling with internal emotional conflicts. This intersection of external environment and internal experience makes YA fiction a fertile ground for analysing the relationship between space and emotion.

Recent literary scholarship has increasingly engaged with Affect Theory to understand how emotions are produced and circulated within texts. Rather than viewing emotions as purely internal or subjective states, Affect Theory emphasises the dynamic interactions between individuals, bodies, and their environments. Scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2004) suggest that emotions are not simply felt but are shaped through contact with objects, spaces, and others, thereby stating the importance of context in emotional experience. In literary studies, this approach allows for a deeper understanding of how settings and environments contribute to the formation of emotional meaning within narratives.

In addition to Affect Theory, Empathy Theory has become central to discussions of reader engagement, particularly in the context of YA fiction. Suzanne Keen (2007) posits that narrative structures and characterisation play a crucial role in eliciting empathetic responses from readers, enabling them to emotionally connect with fictional experiences. YA literature, with its focus on relatable characters and intense emotional situations, is especially effective in fostering such connections. This makes it important to examine not only how emotions are represented within the text but also how they are transmitted to and experienced by readers.

Scholars have also explored the significance of space and place in literary narratives, recognising that environments are not passive backdrops but active elements that influence character behaviour and emotional states. Gaston Bachelard's (1958) work on the poetics of space highlights how intimate spaces shape memory and imagination, while more recent studies have examined how institutional and social environments impact identity and emotional development. However, within the context of contemporary YA fiction, the role of physical space in structuring emotional experience remains underexplored.

Although there is substantial research on adolescence, emotion, and reader response in YA literature, relatively few studies have focused specifically on how physical environments actively shape emotional experiences within these narratives. This gap becomes particularly evident in the analysis of texts like John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, where the boarding school setting plays a crucial role in shaping the protagonist's emotional journey. By bringing together Affect Theory and Empathy Theory, this study seeks to address this gap and contribute to a more

nuanced understanding of how space functions as a dynamic force in the emotional landscape of Young Adult fiction.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on close textual analysis to examine the relationship between physical environment and emotional experience in John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005). The research focuses on interpreting selected passages from the novel in order to understand how the boarding school setting contributes to the development of emotions such as grief, guilt, isolation, and self-discovery.

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by Affect Theory and Empathy Theory. Affect Theory is employed to analyse how emotions are generated through the interaction between characters and their surroundings, emphasising the role of space in shaping emotional responses. This approach enables the study to move beyond viewing emotions as purely internal states and instead consider them as relational and context-dependent. In addition, Empathy Theory is used to explore how narrative techniques and character experiences evoke emotional engagement from readers, allowing them to connect with the protagonist's psychological journey.

The scope of the study is limited to the analysis of the boarding school environment in the novel, particularly in relation to key events that influence the protagonist's emotional transformation. The research does not attempt to provide a comprehensive study of all thematic elements in the text but instead focuses specifically on the interplay between space and emotion. Through this methodological approach, the paper seeks to offer a focused and theoretically grounded interpretation of emotional representation in contemporary Young Adult fiction.

Analysis

Boarding School as Emotional Space

In *Looking for Alaska*, the boarding school environment functions as a significant emotional space that shapes the protagonist's psychological development. The setting of Culver Creek is not merely a backdrop for the narrative but an active force that structures the emotional experiences of the characters. As Miles Halter arrives at the boarding school, he enters a space that is physically confined yet socially dynamic, allowing for new relationships and emotional encounters that were absent in his previous life. This transition from a familiar environment to a new and relatively isolated space marks the beginning of his emotional transformation.

The boarding school setting fosters a sense of both belonging and alienation, creating a complex emotional landscape for the characters. On one hand, the formation of friendships with Alaska, the Colonel, and others provides Miles with a sense of connection and identity. On the other hand, the same environment intensifies feelings of confusion and vulnerability, particularly as the characters engage in risky behaviour and confront existential questions. The spatial limitations of the school—its dormitories, classrooms, and restricted boundaries—contribute to a heightened emotional intensity, as the characters are constantly in close proximity to one another.

From the perspective of Affect Theory, the emotions experienced by Miles are not isolated internal states but are produced through his interactions with the environment and the people within it. The physical space of the boarding school facilitates these interactions, enabling emotions to circulate and intensify. For instance, late-night conversations, shared experiences, and moments of rebellion occur within specific spatial contexts that amplify their emotional significance. These interactions demonstrate how space becomes a medium through which emotions are experienced and expressed.

Furthermore, the boarding school environment plays a crucial role in shaping the reader's emotional engagement with the narrative. Through the lens of Empathy Theory, the detailed depiction of everyday spaces within the school allows readers to immerse themselves in the protagonist's experiences. The familiarity of these spaces, combined with the intensity of the emotions they evoke, encourages readers to form empathetic connections with the characters. As a result, the school setting becomes not only a site of emotional development for the characters but also a key factor in facilitating reader response.

Thus, the boarding school in *Looking for Alaska* operates as a dynamic emotional space that actively shapes both character experience and reader engagement. By situating emotional development within this confined yet socially charged environment, the novel illustrates how space functions as an integral component in the construction of emotional meaning in Young Adult fiction.

Space and Grief after Alaska's Death

The emotional significance of space in *Looking for Alaska* becomes more pronounced following Alaska's death, as the boarding school environment transforms into a site of grief, guilt, and psychological disorientation. The same physical spaces that once fostered friendship and belonging begin to evoke a sense of absence and emotional fragmentation. This shift highlights how space is not fixed in meaning but is continuously reshaped by the emotional experiences associated with it.

After Alaska's death, Miles and his friends struggle to process the sudden loss within the confined environment of the boarding school. The dormitory rooms, previously associated with shared laughter and companionship, become spaces of silence and reflection. Similarly, familiar locations within the campus take on new emotional weight, as memories of Alaska linger in these spaces. The inability of the characters to physically escape the setting intensifies their emotional turmoil, as they are constantly confronted with reminders of the loss. In this sense, the spatial confinement of the school amplifies the experience of grief, making it inescapable and pervasive.

Through the lens of Affect Theory, grief in the novel emerges as a relational experience shaped by both environment and memory. The physical presence of spaces associated with Alaska allows emotions to circulate among the characters, reinforcing their shared sense of guilt and confusion. Miles, in particular, becomes preoccupied with understanding the circumstances of Alaska's death, and this quest is deeply tied to the spaces they once inhabited together. The environment thus functions as a catalyst for emotional repetition, where grief is continually re-experienced through spatial encounters.

Moreover, the transformation of space after Alaska's death also plays a significant role in shaping reader empathy. As readers encounter the same settings through a changed emotional perspective, they are invited to share in the characters' sense of loss and uncertainty. The contrast between the earlier, vibrant depiction of the school and its later, subdued atmosphere enhances the emotional impact of the narrative. Through Empathy Theory, it becomes evident that the reconfiguration of space contributes to a deeper emotional engagement, allowing readers to experience grief not as a distant concept but as an immersive and evolving condition.

Thus, the boarding school setting in the aftermath of Alaska's death functions as an emotionally charged landscape where grief is both intensified and sustained. The novel demonstrates that space is not merely a passive container of events but an active participant in shaping how loss is experienced, remembered, and understood. By linking grief to specific physical environments, *Looking for Alaska* offers a nuanced portrayal of how emotional trauma is embedded within and continually reactivated by space.

Space and Emotional Transformation

In addition to shaping experiences of belonging and grief, the boarding school environment in *Looking for Alaska* plays a crucial role in facilitating the protagonist's emotional transformation. The novel traces Miles's journey from a

relatively detached and idealistic individual to someone who confronts ambiguity, loss, and the complexity of human experience. This transformation is closely tied to his interaction with the spaces within the school, which evolve alongside his emotional state.

At the beginning of the novel, the boarding school represents a space of possibility and reinvention for Miles. It is a departure from his previous life and offers the promise of meaningful experiences, friendships, and self-discovery. However, as the narrative progresses and particularly after Alaska's death, the same environment becomes a space of introspection and existential questioning. The shift in the emotional meaning of the space reflects Miles's internal transformation, as he moves from seeking "a Great Perhaps" to grappling with uncertainty and unresolved questions.

From an affective perspective, this transformation is not solely an internal process but is mediated through Miles's engagement with his surroundings. The spaces he inhabits -classrooms, dormitories, and communal areas serve as sites where emotional experiences are negotiated and reinterpreted. His eventual acceptance of uncertainty and his attempt to find meaning in loss are shaped by his continued presence within these spaces, which hold both memories and emotional residues.

Furthermore, the novel's resolution suggests that space can also function as a site of emotional reconciliation. Although the boarding school remains unchanged in its physical structure, its emotional significance is altered through Miles's evolving perspective. This shift allows both the character and the reader to move towards a form of closure, even in the absence of definitive answers. Through the framework of Empathy Theory, readers are guided through this transformation, experiencing the gradual shift from confusion to acceptance alongside the protagonist.

Thus, *Looking for Alaska* demonstrates that emotional transformation is deeply intertwined with spatial experience. The boarding school environment not only shapes the initial stages of Miles's emotional journey but also plays a vital role in his process of understanding and reconciliation. By portraying space as an evolving emotional landscape, the novel reinforces the idea that environments are integral to the development of emotional meaning in Young Adult fiction.

Conclusion

The study has examined the relationship between physical environment and emotional experience in John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, with particular attention to the role of the boarding school setting in shaping the protagonist's emotional journey. By drawing on Affect Theory and Empathy Theory, the paper has

demonstrated that emotions in the novel are not confined to internal psychological states but are actively produced through interactions with space, memory, and social relationships.

The analysis has shown that the boarding school functions as a dynamic emotional landscape that evolves alongside the narrative. Initially representing a space of possibility and belonging, it gradually transforms into a site of grief, guilt, and introspection following Alaska's death. This shift highlights how physical environments are capable of absorbing and reflecting emotional experiences, thereby influencing how characters process loss and navigate uncertainty. The study further illustrates that the spatial confinement of the school intensifies emotional responses, making grief both inescapable and deeply embedded within the characters' everyday surroundings.

In addition, the paper has emphasised the role of space in shaping reader engagement. Through the application of Empathy Theory, it becomes evident that the detailed depiction of familiar yet emotionally charged environments enables readers to form strong empathetic connections with the protagonist. The transformation of space within the narrative not only mirrors the character's internal development but also guides the reader through a parallel emotional journey.

Ultimately, this study argues that physical space in *Looking for Alaska* operates as an active and integral component in the construction of emotional meaning. By situating emotional development within specific environments, the novel offers a nuanced understanding of how adolescents experience and interpret complex emotions. This perspective contributes to broader discussions in Young Adult literary studies by highlighting the importance of spatial context in shaping both character subjectivity and reader response.

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