



The Same Place That Breaks You, Heals You: Landscape Transformation in Contemporary American Young Adult Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how physical landscapes are transformed emotionally in four contemporary American Young Adult novels that represent the different literary generations - *Looking for Alaska* (John Green, 2005), *All the Bright Places* (Jennifer Niven, 2015), *The Serpent King* (Jeff Zentner, 2016), and *I Am Still Alive* (Kate Alice Marshall, 2018). Based on Sara Ahmed's Affect Theory and Suzanne Keen's Empathy Theory, the research points out that physical landscapes in these novels are not mere passive settings but rather active emotional forces that change from places of happiness and belonging into places of sorrow and trauma, and finally into places of healing and transformation. Using the methods of close reading and comparative textual analysis, this article explored how the very same landscape which accommodates a protagonist's suffering also turns into the place of their healing - thus proving that location and emotion are closely linked in Young Adult fiction. Also, the research indicates that landscape change operates as the main storytelling technique through which writers evoke empathy in their readers. By presenting the emotional topographies of four different locations - institutional wandering rural, and wilderness - this paper



offers a fresh perspective to Young Adult literary criticism by illustrating that the location of a story is emotionally as important as the story itself and the characters involved.

1. Introduction

Place is not just the location where a story happens. In the most deeply emotional works of contemporary Young Adult fiction, place is essentially the mood of a story. The environments young characters explore school campuses, a forgotten town in Indiana, country areas of Tennessee, an isolated Canadian forest are not just the background of their adventures. They live through the events with the young characters: at one time, the landscapes accommodate a grief; at another, they give love; after that, they convey the trauma, and in the end, they lead to the healing. This paper will demonstrate how physical surroundings in recent American Young Adult novels are capable of the highest level of emotional change. Initially, the places offer happiness and hope; after some time, they depict pain; finally, they reflect the emergence of healing and the rediscovery of oneself. It is often the case that a place that causes a young person to break down or suffer can, quite unexpectedly, be the same place that ends up healing them.

This paper analyses four novels whose place in a time is the pinpoint of emotional topographies: *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005), *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven (2015), *The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner (2016), and *I Am Still Alive* by Kate Alice Marshall (2018). The setting for each story is chosen by the author to match exquisitely the character and mood of the protagonist; the landscapes in each novel change, shape and shift in a deep and a very tangible way along the emotional journey of their first encounter with the characters. Hence, these four novels suffice to prove that changing the landscape is not just a side issue in the writing of contemporary American YA fiction but emotion and social are at the heart of it.

In order to decipher this inter-dependence of place and emotions, this paper refers to two theoretical frameworks of a sort that does not change each other: Sara Ahmed's Affect Theory and Suzanne Keen's Theory of Narrative Empathy. Here, the paper only introduces them very shortly to give a map to the analysis; the main body of the paper is the detailed examination of the novels themselves.



2. Theoretical Framework

Sara Ahmed discusses in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) that emotions should not be just seen as internal psychological states, but rather as social and material forces that circulate through bodies, objects, and physical spaces. A major part of Ahmed's theory is her notion of 'sticky emotions' the concept that emotions like grief, shame, and love cling to the surfaces that they continuously touch, thus leaving affective marks that change the emotional character of a place. For example, when a person dies on a highway, the highway becomes sticky with grief. When a young person gets out of poverty through a river town, the town becomes sticky with both the sense of being trapped and the feeling of possibility. Ahmed's theory gives this research a way of talking about why the same physical environment can seem completely different emotionally to a character, depending on the moments in their journey.

Suzanne Keen discusses in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) and *A Theory of Narrative Empathy* (2006) how narrative techniques in fiction produce empathetic responses in readers. She states that the awareness of the fictionality (the reader knows that they are reading a story) paradoxically frees readers from guarded responses, thus allowing readers to emotionally identify with characters on a deeper level. Applying this to landscape, Keen's theory implies that physical portrayals of place are one of the main ways by which writers evoke empathy: a reader who has never been on the edge of a bell tower can experience the fear of a climber going through a crisis by the way Niven describes the place; a reader who has never been stranded in the wilderness can become in Jess's terror and eventual triumph through Marshall's detailed description of the environment. Apart from each other, Ahmed and Keen are frameworks. Both of them are the analytical tools that basically this article's main argument rests on: that in present-day American YA literature, the landscape is not just a text-internal affective space but also a textual reader-empathetic bridge.

3. Four Landscapes, Four Transformations

3.1 *Looking for Alaska* - The Institutional Landscape: Hope, Haunting, and Healing

John Green's *Looking for Alaska* is a story of emotional unfolding that takes place entirely within the Culver Creek boarding school campus, Alabama. When Miles Halter, the protagonist, leaves his isolated life in Florida behind to search for what he terms 'the Great Perhaps', the school campus immediately serves as the backdrop for his hope and sense of belonging. The woods adjacent to the dorms, the creek that flows through the school property, and the fields are the settings for friendship, first



love, and intellectual awakening. Green's description of these places is intentional and warm they are full of the possibility of a connection that Miles has never known before.

The campus emotional reconfiguration is set at the novel's halfway point: Alaska Young's sudden death in a car accident on a dark road. Importantly, Green does not transform the campus only its emotional tone. The woods, which brought happiness, are now scary. The creek, which was a symbol of life, is now sad. Every corner of the campus has taken in the absence of Alaska. Ahmed's idea of sticky emotions is most clearly visible here: sorrow is so deeply imprinted on the landscape that the campus hardly looks like the place that Miles first saw. As Miles reflects, "Nothing was irrevocably broken" and yet everything felt broken, because every place held the memory of her.

However, what is most important in Green's depiction of the landscape is the subsequent event. Miles does not escape. He remains in the harsh environment, and gradually the change being so small at first that it is almost unnoticed the very grounds that were the cause of his downfall begin to be the source of his recovery. The creek is transformed from a symbol of sorrow into one of forgiveness. The woods change from a place of haunting to one of acceptance. Green's main realisation is that the spots which contain our sorrow are also the places, after some time, where our healing is found. The physical surroundings of the Culver Creek school not only observe Miles's changes on an emotional level they even take part in it, first becoming his injury and later his remedy.

3.2 *All the Bright Places* - The Wandering Landscape: Joy, Shrinkage, and Reclamation

Jennifer Niven's novel *All the Bright Places* starts with the two main characters, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, first seeing each other on a ledge of their school bell tower - both of whom are on the verge of ending their lives. The bell tower was very quickly recognised as a location where emotions are so intense that the decision between life and death is balanced. So, with this beginning, Niven created a novel whose emotional structure is so deeply connected with the physical scenery of Indiana that they cannot be separated.

The main part of the story is about Finch and Violet doing a geography project. Their task is to visit the forgotten and overlooked places of Indiana rivers towers parks, swimming holes, and small-town landmarks. For Violet, these wandering landscapes are like the places that trigger the healing process. They grab her attention little by little and get her to feel alive again. Every new spot symbolises a fresh turning point emotionally, a new motive for living. Niven is clear with her point: wandering is survival. When you move in the physical world, you remain linked to it.



However, the novel's most destructive alteration of nature is revealed through the character of Finch. Due to his never diagnosed bipolar disorder that gradually gets worse, his visible surroundings progressively diminish in size from the vast open Indiana fields he and Violet used to roam that eventually become his bedroom, then his closet and lastly the river where he commits suicide. The closet is the most emotionally intense scene of the book that is small, dark and isolating not only physically but also figuratively symbolises the narrowing of Finch's world under the influence of the illness. Niven, very subtly - almost without words, portrays how the space is shrinking around the character, thematically - through the use of negative connotations - in the manner in which the disease makes us perceive all other aspects of our lives as smaller, darker and more confining. 'I want to live,' Finch keeps on saying to himself but the settings of his life are already turning into walls that limit him.

The last change in the setting of the story is Violet's. She traces the locations that Finch had indicated to her after his passing, and she ultimately goes back by herself to the Blue Hole, which is the place for swimming where they had shared their happiest moments together, and also, it's near the river where he died. Violet decides to take a swim in the Blue Hole all by herself, turning a place of loss into a place of life. This physical act of reclaiming - going back to the place that is most strongly associated with sorrow and deciding to live there differently - is Niven's main and most impactful declaration about the transformation of landscapes: the very same water that contains death can also contain life.

3.3 *The Serpent King* - The Rural Landscape: Prison, Grave, and Springboard

Jeff Zentner's *The Serpent King* is likely the most politically charged one among the four books especially when it comes to the depiction of the setting. The plot unfolds in Forrestville, Tennessee a tiny country town named after the founder of the Ku Klux Klan and Zentner immediately reveals through the first lines of the book that this setting is far from being impartial. For Dill Early, whose father is a snake-handling preacher behind bars, Forrestville represents a place filled with the shame that has been passed down through generations. He can't even walk around the town without sensing the history of his family through three generations on his skin. The landscape for him is more of an emotional jail than a physical one.

The three main characters Dill, Travis, and Lydia are encountering the same landscape but in ways so different that it is hard to believe, and such vastly different experiences form the very basis for Zentner's social commentary. Unable to derive any happiness or sense of liberation from the actual rural Tennessee landscape, Travis retreats so much into the imagined worlds of works of fiction that these kids are hardly ever 'out of doors.' Since his real world offers him nothing, his only emotional outlet comes



through fantasies. On the other hand, Lydia sees Forrestville as nothing more than a minor irritation a spot she is stopping briefly on her way to New York and the future she has always envisaged for herself. As Lydia observes, “Some people are born into families that give them roots. Others are given wings.” The same landscape functions as prison, escape hatch, and springboard simultaneously - depending entirely on the social and economic position of the young person inhabiting it.

Travis’s death by the river - being shot while selling firewood, his attempt to struggle for money was the biggest change of landscape in the novel. The river which was his little, courageous hope for a better life turned out to be the place of his death. The landscape that was supposed to be his route to a new life is his tomb. Zentner’s point is crystal clear: for too many young people in the modern America, geography is fate. Where you are born - its poverty, its history, its religion - should not predetermine where you end up. But it does.

Dill’s final breaking free - getting accepted at college, making his song a hit, deciding his own narrative - are the ways the novel's most difficult landscape transformation is represented. Forrestville stays unchanged: it is a town charged with shame and constraints. However, Dill’s attitude towards it changes. He does not eliminate the landscape’s emotional hold; instead, he with Lydia’s help, learns to navigate the landscape rather than be swallowed by it. The rural setting of *The Serpent King* does not change itself - but the emotional stance from which it is experienced does.

3.4 *I Am Still Alive* - The Wilderness Landscape: Enemy, Teacher, and Home

I Am Still Alive by Kate Alice Marshall explores the idea of changing nature through human experience in a very profound way. Jess Cooper, a 16-year-old girl, is deeply hurt when she comes to the isolated Canadian wilderness - first by her mother’s death, then by her own disability due to the same accident, and also by the separation from her father whom she hardly knows. When her father is killed right in front of her and their cabin is set on fire, Jess is completely alone surrounded by a nature that is hostile, indifferent, and cruelly unforgiving. Initially, the wilderness is a total enemy to her.

This actually turns out to be one of the most intense and gripping depictions of the process of change in nature in modern young adult literature. Since she has no one to depend on but herself, Jess is gradually able to understand the wilderness - she becomes familiar with its changes, utilises its resources, and goes so far as to master it. The forest that made her run in fear now shows her how to live. The lake that scared her is now where she gets her food from. Even the cold that stands for danger and death in her mind becomes a weapon that she uses against her father’s murderers. Marshall renders this



transformation through precise, unsentimental prose: “The wilderness doesn’t care if you live or die. That’s why it’s honest,” Jess reflects and, in that honesty, she finds the terms of her own survival.

The single most dramatic moment of landscape transformation in the novel is when Jess digs up her father’s grave to get the ammunition he had hidden there. Grief and survival come together in a single physical place the place of her most profound loss is also the source of her ongoing life. Ahmed’s framework sheds a lot of light on this moment: the grave is full of grief, but Jess doesn’t want it to be only that. She changes it by necessity and bravery into a place of power.

At the end of the novel, the wilderness that was the foe initially turns, oddly enough, into a home or at least the nearest thing to a home that Jess has known. When she is finally rescued and leaves the landscape by plane, she has a sense of parting from a piece of herself. The wilderness has not only been her refuge; it has also been her rebuilding. Marshall’s key point that the harshest terrains create the strongest people cannot be separated from her depiction of landscape transformation: the wilderness does not give Jess anything for free, but whatever she forcibly takes from it becomes a part of her.

4. Comparative Analysis: The Pattern of Landscape Transformation in YA Fiction

Looking at these four books together, one finds a clear and profound trend: to a large extent, physical environments in present-day American Young Adult literature do not stay unchanged. They evolve emotionally, affectively, and narratively in a way directly reflecting the young characters experiences living in them. The transformation of the landscape in all four novels proceeds through a quite similar sequence: initially, the landscape is a place of hope, of belonging, or of potential; it is, through the experience or reminder of trauma loss etc. turned into a place of sorrow, suffering, or imprisonment; finally, the place changes sometimes to a certain degree and sometimes completely into a site of healing, empowerment, or freedom.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about this mode of change is the fact that one does not have to move somewhere else for it to happen. Miles Halter recovers in the very college he attended when Alaska died. Violet Markey takes over again the swimming hole where she and Finch had their last moments. Dill Early gets away from Forrestville although it is still what it has always been. Jess Cooper reshapes her self-image in the same wilderness that nearly ended her life. The external world remains unaltered it is the person’s inner emotional connection to it that changes. Anyway, this is exactly the main point of Ahmed’s idea of sticky emotions: feelings stick to surfaces, and healing is not about getting rid of those emotional remains but the gradual piling up of new ones.



Keen's narrative empathy framework offers a fresh perspective to this pattern. In every book, the authors depict landscapes to not only reveal their characters feelings but also to evoke empathy among the readers. Those who have never lost a close friend, for example, can sense the ghostly presence of Culver Creek campus. Those who have never experienced living in rural poverty can understand the feeling of the suffocation in Forrestville. Those who have never been alone and lost in a wilderness can deeply empathise with the fear and the final victory of Jess during her ordeal. Through landscape, the empathic transfer takes place because in a way, place is universal whereas specific personal experience is not - everyone has been in locations that felt different to them emotionally at different times in their life.

Indeed, the social aspect also plays a big role in the changing landscapes in this set of novels. Each changed environment subtly points to the flaws of current American society in how it deals with its most vulnerable young people. For example, Alaska's 'campus' environment metaphorically stands for a system that fails to recognise her suffering. On the other hand, Niven's ever shrinking 'world' symbolises his mental collapse and the lack of external help (because the world closed in on him). A rural setting for Zentner's story highlights how social systems and geography can limit the life options of working-class youth. The stance that Marshall's wilderness takes is an indictment of a society that not only underestimates young women but also places them in situations where failure is almost inevitable. Therefore, in these novels, the change of the landscape is not only a depiction of the inner feelings but also a critique of the society.

5. Conclusion

This article maintains the thesis that physical landscapes in contemporary American Young Adult fiction are not merely figurative background. They are actually powerful emotional elements features which when touched by a young person's grief, produce trauma, affect the healing process, and spread empathy to some extent among readers. Following the detailed analyses of *Looking for Alaska*, *All the Bright Places*, *The Serpent King*, and *I Am Still Alive*, this study has indicated that a landscape's change of state physically and metaphorically in a literary illustration turns out to be an unfolding pattern of hope, pain, and recovery. One and the same environment that a young individual is devastated by may, over time, turn out to be the familiar Environment in which he or she is restored.

Moreover, through the theoretical underpinnings of Sara Ahmed and Suzanne Keen, the question is answered as to why. On one hand, emotions are likened to being 'sticky' as they attach not only to the human body but also to the physical surfaces that have been the recipients of those emotions as witnesses. On the other hand, writers via their use of the landscape, essentially enable the generation of



empathy, for without this, the reader would not be able to experience the feelings of the characters through the very places that are occupied by them. In unison, these two theoretical frameworks disclose that, in YA literature, the landscape is at once the emotional dimension that is located within the textual world and the empathic link that serves to connect the text with the reader.

What makes this study important is that it introduces a new main analytical category physical landscape in Young Adult literary scholarship that connects affect theory, empathy theory, and YA studies. If we want to catch the ‘emotional trajectories’ of young characters in contemporary American YA fiction, we need to not only understand the events and the characters but also the places and their transformations. Place is not merely the setting where young lives are acted out. It is the very living breathing entity of those lives and Young Adult fiction, probably more than any other literary form, has always recognised this fact.

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