

Treatment Of Selfhood In John Green's *An Abundance Of Katherines*

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ABSTRACT

Green discusses the relationship between a person's given identity and his adopted identity is particularly interesting to him because it illustrates the way that adolescents vacillate between their biological families and their chosen network of friends. In *An Abundance of Katherines* identities being given to adolescents by their peers, and the recipients do not recognize the legitimacy of those assigned identities or accept them as valid. Green represents the fluctuating nature of the adolescent search for identity. This present research focuses the selfhood in *An Abundance of Katherines*.

Keywords: selfhood, adolescent, identity, people.

The adolescent search for identity in *An Abundance of Katherines* takes on an added theme of personal authenticity. Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan experience epiphanies about themselves, about their core natures, as they struggle to reconcile their authentic identities with who they thought they were. As Lindsey and Colin's friendship grows more intimate, Lindsey takes Colin to an out-of-the-way cave she considers to be her secret place since she has never shown it to anyone before; it has been where she goes to hide and think for several years. She and Colin sit in the dark and talk more about themselves. The darkness of the cave and the fact that they have only known each other a short time seems to imbue them with a certain bravery that loosens their lips. Colin asks,

Do you ever wonder whether people would like you more or less if they could see inside you? I mean, I've always felt like the Katherines dump me right when they start to see what I look like from the inside If people could see me the way I see myself—if they could live in my memories—would anyone, anyone, love me? (149).

Colin struggles with feeling like a fraud, like his one identifying characteristic child prodigy is a farce. His confession to Lindsey in the cave is a crack in his façade. He is simultaneously grasping at something authentic and also terrified of the implications of letting someone see his true self. As it turns out, Lindsey has a similar view of herself:

“I’m full of shit. I’m never myself. I’ve got a Southern accent around the oldsters; I’m a nerd for graphs and deep thoughts around you; I’m Miss Bubbly Pretty Princess with [The Other] Colin. I’m nothing. The thing about chameleoning your way through life is that it gets to where nothing is real. *Your* problem is—how did you say it—that you’re not significant?”

“Don’t matter. I don’t matter.” (150)

Her confession reveals the adolescent tendency to feel alone in their struggle toward individuality, to feel as though everyone else has life figured out while they are lost, to feel like no one understands what they are going through. Green explains, “Lindsey’s life feels very performed and she feels this distance between how she thinks of herself and how she acts. . . . And when you acknowledge that there is nothing repulsive or unforgivable or shameful about yourself, it becomes easier to be that authentic person and feel like you’re living a less performed life.” At this point in the novel, Lindsey feels just as inauthentic as Colin, and her self-assessment, intentionally or not, equates personal awareness with a certain complexity, a certain paranoia about one’s purpose. She describes her boyfriend, The Other Colin, as “completely himself” (149) and perfectly fine with it, a quality presented as evidence of his mental simplicity. Hers and Colin’s self-awareness apparently come with complications.

Colin is not finished making unsettling discoveries about himself. His work on his Theorem to predict the outcome of romantic relationships is founded on his assumption that he is a serial Dumpee, and he has a sort of crisis when he cannot make the graph work out for one of his ex-girlfriends, Katherine III, with whom he had a 12-day relationship in the fourth grade. So, he decides simply to call her and ask if there is some detail he is missing. She reveals that *he* had actually broken up with *her*, a fact he has completely forgotten and which further rocks his view of himself. He muses that he has always known two reliable things about himself that he is a child prodigy and a Dumpee. His status as the former has been in recent peril, and his phone call to Katherine III shatters the latter: “Just as almost no true sentence beginning with *I* could be spoken by Lindsey, Colin was watching all the things he’d thought were true about himself, all his *I* sentences, fall away. Suddenly, there was not just one missing piece, but thousands of them” (166).

Colin spends the novel in flux and questioning who he is, and he ultimately needs to face those missing pieces and let them go in order to come out whole on the other side. In the cave, Lindsey reveals her impression that Hassan is “true,” that his personality is easily classified with a dominant characteristic, “hilarious.” She envies his simplicity and clarity. However, Hassan turns out to be more complex than he seems and ends up having his own epiphany about himself and what he sees as his defining characteristic:

“And I’m a not-doer. Like, I’m lazy, but I’m also good at not-doing things
I’m not supposed to do. I never drank or did drugs or hooked up with girls

or beat people up or stole anything. . . . But I've never been a *doer*. I never *did* anything that helped anybody. Even the religious things that involve doing, I don't do. I don't do *zakat* [giving to the poor]. I don't do Ramadan. I'm a total non-doer. I'm just sucking food and water and money out of the world, and all I'm giving back is, 'Hey, I'm really good at nothing. Look at all the bad things I'm not doing! Now I'm going to tell you some jokes!'" (195-196)

Deakin, Brown, and Blasingame observe of Green that "His characters are honest but often lost in the unforgiving social world of youth. . . . Green's characters reflect the teenage search for power in a world that typically usurps and suppresses their effectiveness" (15). As I have established, the majority of Green's teenagers are searching for their identities, but the search does not end with discovery. They must also question their purpose in the larger world.

In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin Singleton's one defining characteristic is that he had won a TV quiz show tournament as a boy and had been labeled a child prodigy. Indeed, the first line of the novel contains the phrase "noted child prodigy Colin Singleton" (3), associating him from the start with his early accomplishments. However, he has not accomplished anything particularly impressive since then and is headed toward an identity crisis as he graduates high school. He is rapidly leaving childhood behind, making it difficult to be a *child* prodigy. He is worried that his super intelligence as a child has not grown up with him and that he is now merely a slightly-smarter-than-average-teenager. As he soaks in his bathtub at the beginning of the novel, he observes that he "looked like a mostly grown person playing at being a kid" (3). He means it literally, but it is also an accurate symbol of his stunted self identity and lack of purpose. In a flashback to an encounter with Katherine XIX, the final Katherine, right after graduation, she confirms the notion of him playing at being a kid:

"You're just—you spend all your time worrying about losing your edge or getting dumped or whatever and you're never for a second grateful. You're the valedictorian. You're going to a great school next year, for free. So maybe you're not a child prodigy. That's *good*. At least you're not a *child* anymore. Or, you're not supposed to be, anyway" (37).

A dominant theme of the novel is the development of an identity that will transition with a person from childhood into adulthood, and in the flashback passage just quoted, Katherine is trying to help Colin recognize the reality of his developmental delay so that he can move past it, but he is not ready. He is unable to grow up, so to speak, because he had not yet had his *institutionalized moratoria* in Gutshot where he finds purpose.

Colin decides that his purpose, what will make him special, is to develop his idea that the progression of all romantic relationships can be mathematically plotted on a graph, given the proper variables. More importantly, once his equation is perfected, he believes that it will

be able to predict the eventual outcome of current and future relationships not just his own but for everyone. The potential for him to be responsible for something so momentous and groundbreaking fills him with inspiration and confidence: “But now Colin would fill his own hole *and* make people stand up and take notice of him. He would stay special, use his talent to do something more interesting and important than anagramming and translating Latin. . . . and he would make the world safer for Dumpees everywhere. *He would matter*” (49). He is convinced that his only chance to matter, to find a momentous purpose for his life beyond childhood, is to accomplish something big and one-of-a-kind. It is not enough for him simply to be good or to follow the expected path. He had been special in childhood, so his only choice is to be special in adulthood, a unique manifestation of Erikson’s role confusion in that it is technically a rejection of his expected role in society.

Lindsey seems to feel the opposite of Colin about having a purpose. She tells him, “Because personally I think mattering is a piss-poor idea. I just want to fly under the radar, because when you start to make yourself into a big deal, that’s when you get shot down. The bigger a deal you are, the worse your life is. Look at, like, the miserable lives of famous people” (94). Her statement has the tone of someone protesting too much and is a little too insistent to be believable. She has the ambition and intelligence to be a doctor she refers to herself as a “paramedic in training” (34) when she is treating Colin after a fall but she is stagnating in her small hometown, working at the family convenience store and making out with her beautiful, vacuous boyfriend.

Like many adolescents facing the looming transition into adulthood, Lindsey is afraid. She is afraid to want something big in case she does not get it. Essentially, she is in a rut and hiding from her purpose when Colin shows up. He is so passionate about pursuing his own purpose, his Theorem, that his ambition is infectious, and since Lindsey is hiding from her own future, she adopts Colin’s as her own. When Colin gets stuck on his Theorem and considers abandoning it, Lindsey asks to take a look at it before he burns the notebook in frustration. Even though she is not anything close to a mathematician, examining Colin’s notes inspires her and awakens an ambition and the beginnings of a purpose she had not known she had:

Looking at your notes, I kept wanting to find a way to improve on your Theorem. I had this total hard-on for fixing it and proving to you that relationships *could* be seen as a pattern. . . . And then the Theorem wouldn’t be yours, it’d be ours, and I could—okay, this sounds retarded. But anyway, I guess I do want to matter a little—to be known outside Gutshot, or I wouldn’t have thought so much about it. Maybe I just want to be big-time without leaving here. (121)

Colin’s focus on his Theorem motivates Lindsey to do something significant with her own life, but her helping him is essentially a way to piggyback onto his ambition instead of finding her own. She eventually comes to a realization about Colin’s need to accomplish

something big, and she admonishes him: “I was thinking about your mattering business. I feel like, like, how you matter is defined by the things that matter to you. You matter as much as the things that matter to you” (200). She is technically speaking to Colin, but her realization seems to be addressed to herself as well, and through her, Green is making a more general comment about the adolescent drive to find a purpose and the self-centeredness which often accompanies it.

Colin eventually has an epiphany that his Theorem will never be able to predict the future because the human variable is too uncertain. This realization inspires him to abandon his Theorem and, more significantly, his obsession with being important, or at least his previously held notions of a worthwhile purpose. In an otherwise mundane moment as Colin, Lindsey, and Hassan get in their car to go to Hardee’s, Colin observes, “Nothing was happening, really, but the moment was thick with mattering” (214).

Colin’s realizations that people, over deeds or things, are what truly matter in the pursuit of a purpose. After they leave Hardee’s, they get on the interstate and decide to just keep driving. Colin’s musings about his new-found identity and purpose offer the final thoughts of the novel:

As the staggered lines rushed past him, he thought about the space between what we remember and what happened, the space between what we predict and what will happen. And in that space, Colin thought, there was room enough to reinvent himself room enough to make himself into something other than a prodigy, to remake his story better and different room enough to be reborn again and again. . . . There was room enough to be anyone—anyone except whom he’d already been, for if Colin had learned one thing from Gutshot, it’s that you can’t stop the future from coming. (214)

This realization marks a significant paradigm shift for Colin; he is still thinking about mattering, but the word means something completely different to him now. As his *institutionalized moratorium* in Gutshot is coming to an end, so is his unhealthy grip on his childhood purpose.

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