TRAUMA, RECOVERY, AND ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS IN STEPHEN CHBOSKY’S THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

An In-Depth Analysis

Abstract
The development of adolescent identity after traumatic experiences is a fragile process. In this essay, I use Stephen Chbosky’s The Perks of Being a Wallflower (1999) to explore how adolescent relationships influence the path to recovery after traumatic experiences. After losing both his friend and aunt, Charlie, the novel’s protagonist, begins to write letters, which form the basis of the book. Recounting his journey to recovery, these letters ultimately reveal that Charlie’s aunt molested him when he was a child—a memory that he represses for years. Despite the importance of writing as a way for Charlie to cope with this traumatic experience, the familial, peer, and romantic relationships (both positive and negative) he describes in his letters also play an integral role in helping him negotiate his trauma. Recovery is a social process, just as adolescent identity is not created in isolation, but rather in combination with surrounding individuals. Therefore, it is crucial not to lift shared responsibility from the shoulders of parents, peers, or caregivers. In this way, Charlie’s story provides an important reminder for adolescents, parents, and medical professionals alike about adolescent development and trauma recovery.

Keywords
young adult literature, trauma, relationships, identity development, epistolary literature, Stephen Chbosky, The Perks of Being a Wallflower
In his epistolary account of his first year in high school, Charlie, the protagonist of Stephen Chbosky’s novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), writes to an anonymous friend about the ups and downs of high school: forming friendships, romances, and family trouble. Throughout the novel, Charlie wrestles with past trauma: his friend’s suicide, his aunt’s death, and repressed memories of being sexually abused by his aunt when he was a child. The questions scholars ponder regarding Chbosky’s novel are: How does so much trauma in one boy’s life affect his emotional and social development, and what causes his eventual maturation and recovery of memories?

Many scholars attribute Charlie’s growth to the therapeutic value of his letter writing. Emily Wasserman (2003) notes, “Charlie uses letter writing to reflect on his own and others’ lives, as well as to recognize and come to terms with his past and its implications for the future” (p. 50). While I agree Charlie’s writing allows for self-reflection, I believe scholars overlook the impact of Charlie’s relationships in both hindering and helping his recovery and development. As a social act, letter writing includes others in Charlie’s recovery process, thereby encouraging participation in his life. Thus, Chbosky’s novel emphasizes the importance of familial, peer, and romantic relationships for adolescent development, urging parents and teenagers alike to recognize the harm in ignoring the need for supportive, healthy relationships.

As Charlie begins to mature and reshape his identity after trauma, his relationships either induce (as in the case of his teacher and friends) or hinder (as in the case of his family) his growth. In this paper, I will be focusing on the relationships that Charlie has with his family members and how they induce his repression and inhibit his growth. Thus, I will begin by discussing Charlie’s traumatic past and hindered development, and then explore the detrimental relationships between Charlie and his family. Finally, I examine the social aspects of letter writing to approach an understanding of Charlie’s recovery as a social process. Through my argument, I show the impact of relationships in adolescent development in Chbosky’s novel. The forging of Charlie’s identity, while crucial, is not solely on his shoulders, but also influenced by his relationships.
After explaining he dreads the holiday season, as it reminds him of his aunt’s death, Charlie describes looking at himself in the mirror and repeating his name until nothing feels real: “And I just open my eyes, and I see nothing. And then I start to breathe really hard trying to see something, but I can’t [. . .] it scares me” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 74). When Charlie confronts his trauma—specifically the guilt he feels for Aunt Helen’s death—it results in panic attacks where he loses sight of himself and fears what he cannot see.

In the end, Chbosky reveals Charlie’s emotions result from his repressed childhood molestation. While Richard McNally argues that “trauma victims can both remember and describe their traumatic past in detail” (author’s emphasis) (Pederson, 2014, p. 338), Chbosky both wrote and set Charlie’s story during the late 1990s, when many cognitive psychologists accepted Cathy Caruth’s theories about trauma, which states: “Trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is

**FIGURE 1.** As a social act, letter writing includes others in Charlie's recovery process, thereby encouraging participation in his life.

**FIGURE 2.** Researcher Rachel Rosen reads and analyzes Charlie’s letters in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky.

The signs of Charlie’s molestation displayed throughout the novel depict the recovery he must undergo to fully develop. The effect of trauma on Charlie’s hindered development becomes clear from his first letter: “I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I’m still trying to figure out how that could be” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 2). Charlie struggles with the notion of “happy” and “sad” or “good” and “bad,” wondering how both can exist simultaneously. His feelings of ambivalence connect with his inability to feel “whole” after his past trauma. After losing his aunt, his “favorite person in the whole world” (my emphasis), Charlie no longer feels “whole,” as his identity was rooted in one abusive person (Chbosky, 1999, p. 5). Throughout the novel, the reader can infer that Charlie’s past influences his present-day, emotional struggles.
When Charlie states, “When I write letters, I spend the next two days thinking about what I figured out in my letters,” he suggests there is reflection in writing about his experiences (Chbosky, 1999, p. 28). However, Balaev (2008) suggests the “talking cure” does not always provide needed support, and rather, “direct contact” may be more beneficial in the recovery process (p. 164). When scholars argue that Charlie’s emotional development and recovery of memories stems mainly from his writing, they inadvertently diminish the importance of relationships in Charlie’s life, placing all the weight of adolescent development in Charlie’s hands. However, for adolescents, as the gap between child and adult experience narrows, social relationships become central. The recovery process after traumatic experiences is challenging for anyone, but particularly for adolescents who navigate the journey alone and unaware of potential support. Literature that focuses on trauma recovery, especially in an adolescent’s life, supports a future in which these topics are no longer taboo.

**RECOVERY AS A SOCIAL PROCESS**

While Charlie’s relationships are crucial for his development and recovery, some scholars argue that Charlie’s letter writing resembles a form of the “talking cure,” using the epistolary form to work through his trauma. When Charlie states, “When I write letters, I spend the next two days thinking about what I figured out in my letters,” he suggests there is reflection in writing about his experiences (Chbosky, 1999, p. 28). However, Balaev (2008) suggests the “talking cure” does not always provide needed support, and rather, “direct contact” may be more beneficial in the recovery process (p. 164). When scholars argue that Charlie’s emotional development and recovery of memories stems mainly from his writing, they inadvertently diminish the importance of relationships in Charlie’s life, placing all the weight of adolescent development in Charlie’s hands. However, for adolescents, as the gap between child and adult experience narrows, social relationships become central.

**FIGURE 3.** Literature that focuses on trauma recovery, especially in an adolescent’s life, supports a future in which these topics are no longer taboo. Photo by Engin Akyurt.
which these topics are no longer taboo. Alison Monaghan (2016) emphasizes the importance of narrative medicine, or “sick-lit,” because reading novels, like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, grants “access [to] the illness experience from a teen’s perspective” (p. 34). An insight into a teen’s perspective on development, trauma recovery, and the challenges of navigating relationships allows readers to empathize with adolescents in their own lives. Furthermore, Charlie’s description of his recovery process through an epistolary format pulls others into the process, both real and fictional, letting them know “they are not alone” (Monaghan, 2016, p. 35). Scholars and readers understand Charlie’s journey differently by looking at his experiences through the lens of his surrounding relationships, rather than just through his writing. While examining Charlie’s development through writing provides insight into his growth, as many scholars have done, a focus on how Charlie’s relationships influence his growth indicates the danger of isolation during recovery. By interpreting Charlie’s story through his relationships, Chbosky’s novel provides education on adolescent development and recovery after trauma for parents, peers, caregivers, and medical professionals alike.

### THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Charlie connects his trauma to his home and family, hindering the trajectory of his recovery. Charlie’s molestation occurred at home, while his aunt lived with his family before she died. The association of his home with his trauma becomes harmful, as Balaev (2008) explains, “A traumatic experience disrupts attachments between self and others […] that are themselves connected to specific environments” (p. 160). For example, when Charlie finally recovers his memories and goes into a state of mental numbness, his parents come home to find him naked, watching television. Charlie reveals, “I realized it [the sexual abuse] happened every Saturday when we would watch television” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 208). After recovering these memories, he returns to the place that most reminds him of the traumatic experience—his family’s living room. Charlie therefore never feels that he can truly connect to his family, physically or emotionally. They hinder his recovery, which becomes clear through their interactions with him.

Charlie internalizes every negative interaction with his family, thus impeding his development. Aurélie Roy (2017) explains the challenge familiar relationships can pose to teenagers’ self-identification: “Teenage protagonists are forced to forge an identity despite the influence of several external forces, such as […] the family” (p. 59). As an adolescent, Charlie must decide how he wishes to navigate life. Despite Charlie’s positive comments regarding his parents and siblings, he still “embodies the role of the outsider in his family,” never quite feeling that he belongs (Dücker, 2017, p. 168). While adolescents long for freedom from overbearing families, Charlie needs support to overcome his traumatic past. Instead of supporting Charlie emotionally after the death of his only friend, his family’s only concern is Charlie’s academic performance: “I get straight A’s now like my sister and that is why they leave me alone” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 5). His family’s disregard for Charlie’s feelings isolates him and drives his moment of vulnerability, the sexual assault, further into his memory.

The relationship Charlie has with his parents provides the physical, but not emotional needs required for Charlie to recover, thereby deepening his repression of traumatic childhood molestation. To recover his memories, Charlie needs to believe in the validity of his own needs and emotions. Yet, Charlie puts these aside in favor of his mother’s expectations: “She wants me to keep working hard, so I’ll get an academic scholarship” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 8). Charlie’s mother has high expectations for her son and knows he struggles psychologically, yet she never has a moment with her son to assess for herself how he feels after starting high school. Charlie notes the scarcity of the word “love” in his house. After his friend Sam expresses her love for him, he writes, “It was the third time since my Aunt Helen died that I heard it from anyone. The other two times were from my mom” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 69). Considering Charlie’s aunt died when he was seven years old, Charlie’s remark suggests that his mother shows minimal affection, while his father shows none. Indeed, his father discourages any form of emotional excuse, stating, “There are other people who have it a lot worse” and “Not everyone has a sob story, Charlie, and even if they do, it’s no excuse” (Chbosky, 1999, pp. 5, 28) In this way, Charlie’s father makes Charlie feel like a burden, and he even calls Charlie’s psychiatric medicine “too expensive,” despite having
college football, and Charlie can’t help but admire him. Charlie, for instance, remarks, “But my older brother was on television, and so far, it has been the highlight of my two weeks in high school” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 9). The feeling, however, is not mutual. After Charlie’s friend commits suicide, Charlie’s brother discourages him from displaying emotions, telling him to stop crying and to “get it out of [his] system before Dad [comes] home” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 3). As Roy (2017) explains, “Charlie is a reflective observer of the people that surround him and attempts to learn from watching how they behave” (p. 62). Because Charlie idolizes his brother, he watches his behavior and learns that feelings signify weakness.

Likewise, Charlie’s sister sets a negative example for how to navigate relationships by encouraging silence and guilt in response to abusive situations. Consequently, Charlie’s guilt and shame surrounding his trauma drive the memories deeper into his unconscious mind. In one instance, Charlie witnesses a boy from school sexually assaulting his girlfriend at a party that his siblings throw during their parents’ absence. Charlie’s sister tells him to stay in his room and not to leave, so when the couple comes in, they ignore Charlie’s presence. After a while, during which Charlie hears the girl say “no” numerous times, his sister comes back into the room, catching the couple in the act. She then blames Charlie for letting it happen, calling him a “pervert” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 31). Charlie is a victim because he did not voluntarily choose to stay there. Rather, he wants to obey his sister who tells him to remain in his room where the sexual assault occurs. However, Charlie now believes he did wrong because of his sister’s accusatory words. Through the interaction with his sister, he learns to remain quiet about abusive encounters. She makes him feel guilty, even though he did not know any better. Guilt and shame, common side effects of sexual assault, tear the victim down, leading them to believe they are at fault. By victim-blaming Charlie, his sister deters him even farther from confronting his memories.

Charlie’s sister encourages silence in abusive relationships because of her guilt and pain associated with her physically abusive boyfriend. In one instance, Charlie witnesses his sister’s boyfriend hit her after she accuses her boyfriend of not standing up for himself when bullied. Charlie’s sister tells Charlie “not to tell mom or dad what happened,” further encouraging silence in abusive...
situations (Chbosky, 1999, p. 11). Charlie’s sister discourages Charlie from standing up for others every time she makes him feel guilty by calling him a “pervert” or telling him to keep quiet (Chbosky, 1999, p. 11). She projects onto Charlie because of her poor coping mechanisms. Just as Charlie calls his abuser, his aunt, his “whole” world, Charlie’s sister says the same of her abuser, her boyfriend: “He’s my whole world” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 25). In the case of Charlie’s sister, Charlie’s parents know the abuse is occurring and strongly discourage identification with her abuser. In response to Charlie’s sister’s assertion that her abuser is her “whole world,” Charlie’s mom scolds, “Don’t ever say that about anyone again” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 25). Charlie’s sister, like Charlie, must understand the danger in identifying so strongly with one’s abuser.

Without a support system at home and with a family that only adds to Charlie’s guilt, Charlie blaming himself for his inability to recover. He misunderstands the importance of familial support and does not hold his family accountable for their actions. Towards the end of the novel, when Charlie’s friends no longer talk to him at school due to an unfortunate incident in which Charlie emotionally hurts his friends, Charlie finds himself in a very dark place, yearning for support. He decides to go to his aunt’s gravesite—seeking solace from the woman who abused him. Charlie spirals as he writes, “I know that I brought this all on myself. I know that I deserve this. I’d do anything not to be this way” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 139). Believing his family finds his feelings invalid and burdensome, Charlie ignores his emotional needs, hindering his development.

**LETTER WRITING AS A SOCIAL PROCESS**

Without familial support, Charlie chooses to convey his feelings and needs in his letter writing and decides to include others in his recovery process. As David Barton and Nigel Hall (2000) suggest, letter writing is a social act, one that resembles “anything but [a] narrow, autonomous literacy accomplishment” (p. 4). In Stephen Chbosky’s epistolary novel, Charlie begins every one of his letters with a date, a salutation (“Dear friend”), and a valediction (“Love always, Charlie”). However, the novel never reveals to whom Charlie writes, and instead, he explains, “I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn’t try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 2). The reader does not know who “she,” “you,” or “that person” is, and Charlie goes as far as to use “different names or generic names because I don’t want you to find me” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 2). While he never reveals the identity of his recipient, Charlie emphasizes that he chose them for a reason: “I just don’t want you to think that I picked your name out of the phone book. It would kill me if you thought that” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 206). Charlie intentionally selects a fellow adolescent from his school because they “sounded like such a good person” and he knows they will personally relate to many of his high school experiences (Chbosky, 1999, p. 206). Even though Charlie claims to have never met the recipient in person, he ends every letter with “Love always,” a very intimate valediction. By sharing his deep feelings and thoughts with someone he’s never personally met, but someone he believes to be a good and upstanding individual, he actively reaches out for help. Charlie understands the value in sharing the hard parts of life with others, and he knows he needs personal connections to fully recover and grow.

Similarly, just as the act of writing is a social process, the content of Charlie’s letters focuses on his relationships and how he feels in relation to others. Indeed, Charlie himself “view[s] the act of writing as a conversation taking place, turning him into an active writer rather than a passive one” (Matos, 2013, p. 94) and providing him with a “new sense of empowerment over his own life that finally forces him into maturity” (Roy, 2017, p. 58). Through the epistolary format, Chbosky indicates the importance of social relationships in recovery from trauma. Charlie’s need for human connection is why he decides to write his letters. When he closes the last letter of the novel before the epilogue, he commemorates the recipient as “the kind of person who would understand how they [letters] were better than a diary because there is communion” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 206). Rather than simply reflecting on his life alone, as one might do in a diary, Charlie decides to include others in his recovery process. He knows that he needs someone to share his thoughts and feelings because they can have an essential impact on his development and recovery.

Charlie’s decision to write letters, therefore, suggests that his recovery is anything but a solitary process, and that
especially for introducing me to the endless research possibilities within the field of young adult literature.

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